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Television in El Salvador: Foreign Investment, Loss of Local Control?

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Introduction

The study of television programming in Latin America entails not only the consideration of television programs flows between the United States and Latin American countries, but also the cultural and political implications of this phenomenon. Moreover, communication research in this region has looked at the role of television industries from the perspective of the modernization paradigm, development of new television genres, construction of national identities and discourses, and the social uses of television in people's everyday life.

In this context, this paper examines the recent trends in television programming in Latin America and the specific impact of this process on state-owned and commercial stations in El Salvador. In this sense, this research relies on the analysis of one week of television programming schedules offered by Salvadoran television stations, interviews with television programming directors; and a professor of television at the Central American University (UCA); as well as previous studies that have examined the historical trends and transformations of television programming in El Salvador.

Based on these considerations and the dynamics of globalization of the media industries in Latin America, this paper discusses some cultural implications of television production, foreign programming and economic investments on Salvadoran stations, and the role of the national government and citizens' groups in order to promote new communication policies, regulations, and concrete alternatives for a more democratic and pluralist media system in El Salvador.

Television Programming in Latin America

Latin American television broadcasting is considered to be “one of the most commercially successful, monopolistic and undemocratic industries in the world” (Fox, 1997, p. 1). In terms of television programming, there are at least two main historical periods: the predominant U.S. presence in the region, and the period characterized by the emergence of regional television industries, specifically from Mexico and Brazil. Historically, many Latin American television stations started in association with one of the three main U.S. Television networks: ABC, NBC, and CBS. ABC was the first to invest in CATVN (Central American Television Network) and LATINO (Latin American Television International Network Organization) in Central and South America (Schement & Rogers, 1984). During 1958, Latin American countries spent about \$15 million in U.S. series, and during the 1970s the total of television programming imports reached \$80 million (Bibliowicz, 1979). However, as Schement and Rogers (1984) point out, the direct financial investment of U.S. networks in this region ended during the 1970s. In the specific case of El Salvador, ABC had investments in channels 2 and 4 (Fox, 1997).

During this period, as the study by Nordenstreng and Varis (1974) established, most Latin American nations imported from 10% to 84% of their total television programming (Antola & Rogers, 1984). Most of these programs were of entertainment characteristics; specifically feature films, series, and cartoons. Thus, Latin American commercial stations opted for filling their television program schedules “with low-cost, imported programs mostly from the United States. Television programs were selected and broadcast so as to achieve the largest audience possible, which then was sold to

advertisers” (Schement & Rogers, 1984, p. 313). This situation has been even more critical in small television stations with low budgets and incentives for local television production. Similarly, censorship practices and national government regulations also had affected import/export flows in Latin America; and in some cases, as Antola and Rogers (1984) argue, “these regulations inhibit imports from other Latin American countries and encourage U.S. imports” (p. 198)

In these flows of television programming between Latin American and the United States, Mexico has played the gatekeeper role (Bibliowicz, 1979; Antola & Rogers, 1984). Traditionally, Mexico has been not only the base for language dubbing of U.S. programs, but also the decision of Mexican networks, especially *Televisa*, have influenced on which programs are exported from the U.S. to Latin America (Antola & Rogers, 1984). Nevertheless, the TV decision-makers from Latin America come normally to screening sessions in the U.S. to view the pilot shows and to decide whether or not to buy a specific television program (Antola & Rogers, 1984).

This period of predominantly U.S. imports of television programming has declined in recent years; some scholars consider that this change is related with the increase of regional production especially from *Televisa* in Mexico, and *TV Globo* in Brazil (Schement & Rogers, 1984; Straubhaar & Viscasillas, 1991; Davids, 1997). Consequently, as Davis (1997) emphasizes, “Televisa (Mexico) and TV Globo (Brazil) used the telenovela as their vehicle to replace imported U.S. programming throughout Latin America” (p. 11).

In this respect, Martin Barbero (1993) suggests that: “the mixture of modernity and anachronism, and popular narrative and technology are most apparent in the TV

genre of telenovela, the Latin American style melodrama” (p. 22). Thus, the genre of telenovela should not be analyzed solely as a simple marketing strategy of the largest Latin American media industries, but also as the “specific site of osmosis between cultural matrices and commercial formats” (Martin Barbero, 1993, p. 24). Similarly, Straubhaar and Viscasillas (1991) acknowledge that the creation of telenovelas in Latin America is the product of the interactions between television industries, producers, and audiences.

Besides the genre of telenovela, other Latin American television productions include variety shows, interview programs, music and musical variety, comedies, and games/contests (Straubhaar and Viscasillas, 1991). Nowadays, as Fox and Waisbord (2002) admit, television schedules in most countries offer fewer hours of U.S. programming than in past decades, particularly during prime time” (p. 17). In short, today the two major exporters of television programs to other Latin American countries are Mexico and Brazil. This important change proposes a reconsideration of traditional perspectives of ‘cultural imperialism’ for understanding the media and cultural industries in the region, just as Garcia-Canclini (1995) asserts:

“Although the imperial influence of the metropolitan corporations does not disappear, the enormous power of Televisa, Rede Globo, and other Latin American organisms is changing the structure of our symbolic markets and their interaction with those of the countries of the center” (p. 62).

These recent transformations in Latin America include not only television programming flows, but also technological, legal, political, distribution of media content, economic, and financial considerations (Fox & Waisbord, 2002). During the 1980s, as Fox and Waisbord observe, “the region’s media have experiences perhaps the biggest transformation in the past half century” (p. 6). Moreover, these changes have taken place

within a dynamic of liberalization, privatization, and deregulation of the Latin American media systems. Nonetheless, the process of globalization and the prevalence of media market forces have not made “the state and domestic politics less relevant but have brought them one again to the forefront” (Fox & Waisbord, 2002, p. 6).

The current structure of television industries in this region, according to Fox and Waisbord (2002), can be characterized in three different levels: large producers and exporters, medium-size producers, and modest-size producers and no exporters. Brazil, Mexico, and Venezuela fit the first category. Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Peru would be considered medium-size producers with few exports of television programs. The third category includes Bolivia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Uruguay, and the countries in Central America. Furthermore, within each country there have been some changes of the dominant television corporations. This is the case in Mexico where *TV Azteca* –created from the privatization of two channels- had diminished the traditional hegemony of *Televisa*, and has expanded its investments in other television stations, especially in Central and South America (Davis, 1999).

Another crucial development in Latin American broadcasting is the introduction of cable and satellite television; however, these options are still concentrated for upper and middle class populations (Fox & Waisbord, 2002). The satellite providers include: *BrasilSat*, Mexico’s *Morelos*, *Intelsat*, *PanAmSat*, Argentina’s *NahuelSat* (Davis, 1999; Fox & Waisbord, 2002). Furthermore, there are two regional satellite services: *Galaxy Latin America* and *Sky Latin America* (Fox & Waisbord, 2002). In this way, cable and satellite television has provided new possibilities for multinational joint ventures between Latin American and U.S. corporations, as well as the strength of U.S. cable programmers

in the region such as Discovery, ESPN, FOX, HBO, MTV, TNT and Nickelodeon (Davis, 1999; Fox & Waisbord, 2002). For instance, in 1998 MTV had 7 million subscribers in Latin American, and Nickelodeon approximately 4 million subscribers (Davis, 1999).

This new context of Latin America television industries suggests that the analysis of television programming requires the consideration of regional and geolinguistic monopolies, regional and transnational capital and forms of ownership, development of new television genres and formats, and the domestic political control and regulations of media industries (Sinclair, 1999; Fox & Waisbord, 2002). In summary, as Fox and Waisbord (2002) acknowledges:

“The main trends in Latin American media have been the formation of multimedia corporations; the decline of family-owned companies; the articulation between local, regional and international capital; the intensification of cross-regional trade of investment and content; and the increase in the production and export of television programming” (p. 8-9).

Television in El Salvador

The history of television in El Salvador began on September 7, 1956 with the preliminary tests of television broadcastings, and on December 13, 1958 the first commercial channel YSU-TV-4 was officially inaugurated (Silva, 1985). On the other hand, during the 1960s the Salvadoran government promoted a national educational reform and the implementation of an educational broadcasting system. As a consequence, on February 1969 the first television channel owned by the government was launched. This initiative used channels 8 and 10 for providing instructional television programs,

specifically TV-classes for students in different levels of curriculum (Mayo, Hornik, & McAnany, 1976).

Nowadays, El Salvador, with a population of approximately 6 million people has 13 private television stations and one state-owned station. Channels 2, 4, and 6 constitute the *Telecorporacion Salvadorena (TCS)* –which is the main historical commercial monopoly of television in the country-. Channel 10 is the state-owned station, which is administered by the *Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y el Arte (CONCULTURA)* ascribed to the Ministry of Education. Channels 12, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23 and 33 are commercial stations established in recent years. In addition, channels 8, 25 and 57 are religious stations administered by Catholic and Christian Evangelical organizations. Furthermore, there are different regional and local cable television providers –in the capital this service is controlled by *AMNET-*, and satellite television programming offered by *Direct TV*.

Although the data about introduction and adoption of radio and television in El Salvador is incomplete, the World Culture Report (2000) prepared by UNESCO established some cultural indicators for the country. Table 1 presents the details of the available statistics for El Salvador.

Table 1
Cultural activities and trends: Radio and Television

Country	Radios per thousand people	Radios per thousand people	Annual rate of change (%)	Television per thousand people	Television per thousand people	Annual rate of change (%)	Cultural radio programmes (% of total programmes)	Cultural television programmes (% of total of programmes)
	1980	1997	1980/97	1980	1997	1980/97	1989-94	1989-94
El Salvador	338	465	2.5	65	---	---	8.0	15.0

Source: World Culture Report (2000), UNESCO.

According to this report, El Salvador ranks in the top countries with cultural television programs: 15 % of the total television programs broadcasted from 1989 to 1994. Although this data reveals some important considerations about the role of Channel 10 –the state-owned station- as educative and cultural channel, this fact requires to take into consideration not only the quality of these programmes, but also the characteristics of cultural programming and the political situation in El Salvador during the 1990s.

El Salvador experienced a civil war from 1980 until 1992 when the conflict was solved through Peace Accords between the government and the FMLN –Farabundo Marti National Front-. As a consequence of this war, more than 70,000 people were killed, and thousands of Salvadoran migrated especially to the United States, fleeing from this context of terror and structural violence. Equally, these conditions affected the possibilities of freedom of expression and the constitution of pluralistic radio and television stations. In this context, several newspapers and radio stations faced different forms of governmental censorship and violent attacks by paramilitary organizations. After the Peace Agreements in 1992, the government provided licenses for broadcasting to the radio stations operated by the FMLN –*Radio Farabundo*, and *Radio Venceremos*-. In the same way, other community radio stations started a long process of political struggles in order to obtain the licenses for broadcasting at the local and national levels.

In the realm of television, the TCS –channels 2, 4 and 6- owned by Boris Esersky constitutes the main media monopoly in the country. Just as Rockwell and Janus (2002) argue “Esersky is a media *caudillo*, whose government connections shaped the current Salvadoran broadcast spectrum and kept forces disloyal to the government from buying ad space with most Salvadoran broadcasters” (p. 56). The TCS has programming

alliances with *Televisa* and receives the first priority for buying the most important sport events through its membership with the OTI –Iberoamerican Television Organization- The TCS also has segmented the programming of its three channels: channel 2 specializes in telenovelas and game shows; channel 4 relies primarily on sports and cartoons; and channel 6 devotes more time to movies and music events. In addition, it is estimated that these three channels of the TCS captured approximately 90 % of television audience in El Salvador (Rockwell & Janus, 2002).

On the other hand, in 1996 the wave of Mexican corporation investments in Central America hit El Salvador, specifically the recent established channel 12. In this way, the broadcasting Mexican firm *TV Azteca* bought 75% of the shares of Salvadoran Channel 12 (Bolgar, 1996). Similarly, *TV Azteca* bought 35% of the shares of Costa Rican channel 4, and Angel Gonzalez –a Mexican national- acquired Guatemalan television channels 4, 11, and 13 (Rockwell & Janus, 2002). In this context, Rockwell and Janus (2001) assert that the entry of *TV Azteca* in El Salvador “closed off media outlets to opposition voices, displacing the one Salvadoran broadcaster that had provided airtime to viewpoints that were critical of the government” (p. 500). In this respect, one critical and pluralistic program in channel 12 has been the morning interview *La Entrevista* hosted by the journalist Mauricio Funes. Nowadays, channel 12 basically broadcasts telenovelas and entertainment programs produced by *TV Azteca*.

During the 1990s, the private channel 21 was established in El Salvador, which some years later constituted the *Megavision Group* –including channels 15, 19, and 21-. This new group of television stations developed different alliances with transnational television networks. In this sense, Ana Martinez –Programming Director of the

Megavision Group- reports that in 1999 this group established a programming alliance with MTV and Nickelodeon, and in 2000 with the Hispanic network *Telemundo*. As a result of these agreements, the *Megavision Group* decided to orient channel 15 to a complete programming of MTV, and channel 19 to the programming of Nickelodeon. Moreover, the *Megavision Group* began in the year 2000 another alliance with *TV Chile*, which intended to provide an alternative to the U.S. and Mexican television programming. Thus, channel 21 integrates primarily television programs from *TV Chile*, and *Telemundo* offered by satellite services, and few local programs. In this agreement the *Megavision Group* has the freedom to select the programs they are interested in according to the time schedules (Ana Martinez, personal communication, 2002). On the whole, the alliances of Salvadoran television stations with transnational corporations have implied not only the re-organization of television programming, but also had impacted on the development of new technological equipment for the stations. However, the future of digital television in El Salvador is still a long term challenge for most television stations.

Television programming in El Salvador

Silva (1985) conducted a historical analysis of commercial television programming in El Salvador from 1962 to 1983, specifically the programming schedules of channel 4. Silva (1985) founded that most of the programming was of poor quality, foreign, and irregular. Furthermore, this study revealed that almost 90% of the television programs were foreign, especially from the United States, Mexico, Venezuela and

Argentina. Table 2 summarizes three historical period of the development of television programming in channel 4, which reveals how the national programs have been reduced over time while foreign programs have increased.

*Table 2
Comparison of national and foreign television programmes in channel 4, El Salvador*

Year	National programming (total hours)	Percent	Foreign programming (total hours)	Percent	Total Hours
1962	744.50	34.4%	1413.10	65.6%	2158.00
1970	351.30	10.5%	2974.30	89.5%	3326.00
1980	346.30	8.8%	3576.00	91.2%	3922.00

Source (Silva, 1985, pp. 171 & 173).

Silva (1985) also reports that the genre of telenovela was introduced in the television programming of channel 4 in 1964; these were produced in Mexico, Venezuela and Argentina. In addition, during the 1980s there was an important emergence of telenovelas oriented towards infantile and young audiences. Silva (1985) concludes in her study that channel 4 “is neither interested in the cultural needs of the population nor oriented to the training of its technical personnel, which could achieve a better development of this medium” (p. 147). Furthermore, Silva (1985) suggests the need for studying why the telenovelas have been allocated within the prime time, and what are the cultural consequences of this genre in the Salvadoran audiences.

In order to understand the evolution of specific genres in the programming of channel 4, Silva (1985) also evaluated the amount of hours devoted to specific genres. Table 3 presents the first five television genres from 1962 to 1980.

Table 3
Principal five television genres in the programming of channel 4, El Salvador

1962	Total of hours	1970	Total of hours	1980	Total of hours
1. Series	552.45	1. Series	867.30	1. Cartoons	874.10
2. News	249.55	2. Features films	675.20	2. Sports	773.50
3. Cartoons	249.30	3. Telenovelas	544.40	3. Telenovelas	543.40
4. Feature films	228.00	4. Cartoons	440.15	4. Feature films	540.15
5. Documentaries	147.15	5. Sports	237.50	5. Series	327.10

Source: (Silva, 1985)

In a similar fashion, another study of television programming in Panama, Costa Rica and El Salvador during the 1980s founded that local production, and regional exchanges of television programs were very limited in these nations. Moreover, this research reported that these countries imported approximately 80-90 percent of their programming, especially from the United States and Mexico (Davis, 1997).

In contrast, channel 10 –the station-owned by the Salvadoran government- does not provide a very different picture of television programming in El Salvador. In this respect, Pineda (2000) points out that more that 80% of channel 10 programming is imported, particularly documentaries donated by governmental institutions, especially from China, Germany, and the United States. National programs constituted the other 20% of the programming with emphasis in culture, education, and national sport events. According to Choto, Quinteros, Rivera, and Villatoro (1996) there was a significant decrease of local programs in channel 10 due to political decisions and institutional instability during the years of the civil war. In the same way, the lack of maintenance of

the equipment and the financial cuts aggravated the conditions for local television production.

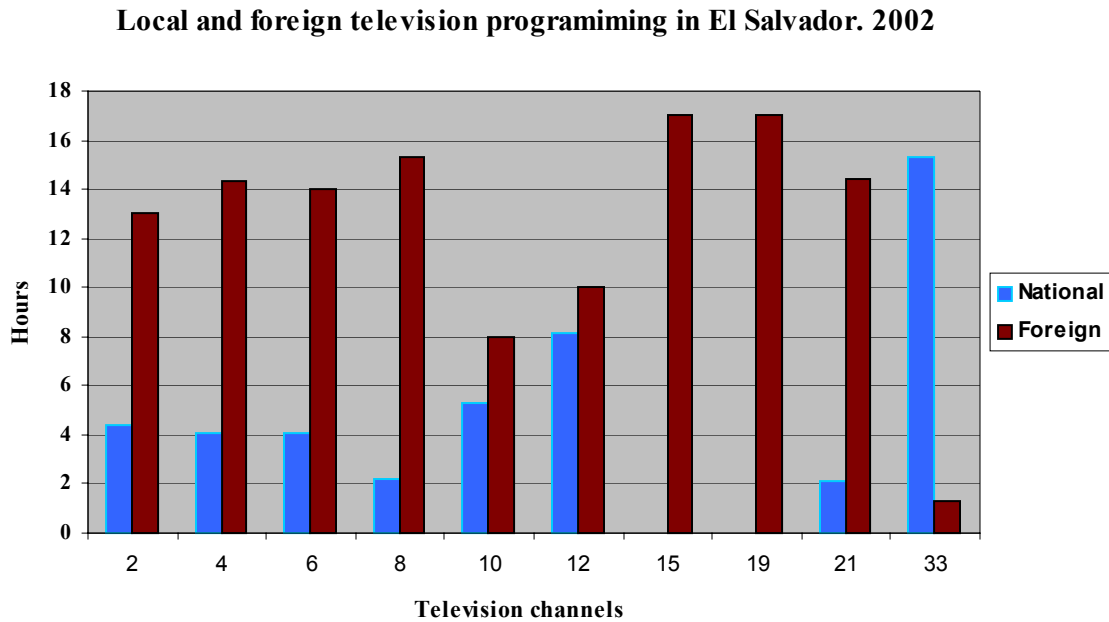
In this context, this paper examines the conditions of television programming in El Salvador today, and discusses some economic, cultural, and political implications of this programming and corporative alliances with transnational media corporations. This study examined one week of television schedules offered by ten Salvadoran stations during the month of December, 2002. This analysis identified the total of hours that each channel devotes to national and foreign programs, and at the same time, evaluates the genres and national origin of the programs broadcasted during prime time in El Salvador. Thus, the crucial question is: are there important changes in the local and foreign television programming from the findings during the 1980s, and how transnational investments of regional corporations are reshaping the features of the television system in El Salvador?

The television channels included in the sample are: channel 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 15, 19, 21, and 33. In average each station transmits 17.24 hours of programming per day, which represents a total of 172.4 hours/day of programming through these ten stations. Thus, these ten television stations broadcast an average of 1206.8 hours of programming during one given week.

During weekdays, the total of local television programs in these channels is of 61, which represents 46.05 hours (27%) of the total programming. In contrast, during the same days there were 169 foreign programs, which comprise 124.4 hours (73%) of the total programming. On the other hand, during the weekends the amount of local production diminished considerably. Thus, on Saturday there were 23 local programs

(20.35 hours), which represent 10.15% of the total programming whereas the foreign programs were 163 (180 hours), which involves 89.85% of the total television programming. Likewise, on Sundays there were 35 local programs (31.5 hours), which comprise 18.2% of the total programming; and 134 foreign programs (141.05 hours), which represents 81.8% of the total television programming. In summary, if we add these results in terms of hours of television broadcasting, the percentage of local or national programmes is about **18.01%**, and **81.9%** of foreign television programs in a given week in the Salvadoran television. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of total of hours during each weekday of local and foreign programmes in each of the ten channels analyzed.

Figure 1

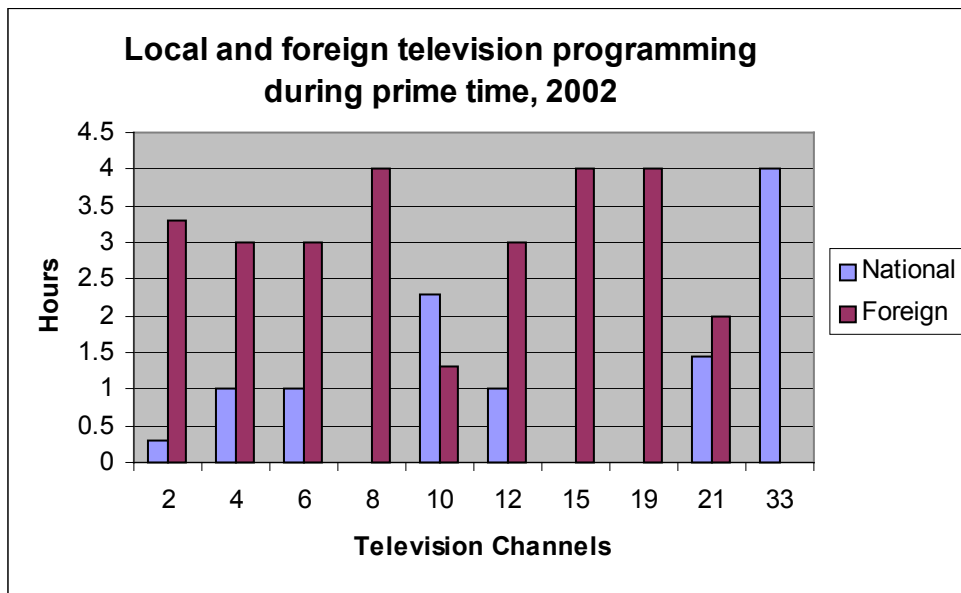


As this figure shows, there are different patterns of television programming among specific channels. The TCS (2, 4, and 6) channels basically share the national or local produced programs, which are specifically news and interview programs during morning hours. Channel 8, administered by a Catholic organization, has few local programs and more imported programs. Channel 10, the state-owned station, produces a significant amount of programs and imported about 8 hours of television programming per day. Channel 12 devotes almost 8 hours per day to local programs especially news and interviews formats; however, this amount of hours involves the repetition of the same programs during the night. Channels 15 and 19, owned by the *Megavision Group*, exclusively have foreign programming, specifically MTV and Nickelodeon programming respectively. The other channel of this group, channel 21, also has few local produced programmes and more imported programming. Finally, channel 33, which is administered by the private Technological University, is the television channel that produces more local programs: especially news, interviews, musical, and talk shows. Nevertheless, this amount of hours of national programmes includes the repetition of the same programmes at different hours of the day.

In terms of television programming during prime time -7 p.m. to 11 p.m.- the balance between national, regional and U.S. programming reveals the following results in these ten television stations: 11.05 hours (28%) of prime time during a weekday include national programmes, whereas 28 hours (72%) include foreign programming. Within the national production the most common formats are national news (7), interviews programs (3), and talk shows (2). On the other hand, the most prevalent foreign formats are series (12), cartoons (8) and telenovelas (6). The distribution of these foreign programs is

concentrated in the following way: The United States (57.2%), Mexico (14.28%), Brazil (7.14%), Colombia (7.14%), Hispanic networks -such as *Telemundo* and *Univision*- (7.14%), and other (7.14%). Undoubtedly, the fact that channels 15 and 19 transmit exclusively programming from the U.S. increases the proportion of these programs in the current Salvadoran television programming during prime time. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of national and foreign total of hours during prime time in each television station analyzed.

Figure 2



It is interesting to observe that channel 33 has exclusively national programs during prime time, and channel 10 includes more local programs than imported series. In this respect, the Programming Director of channel 10 Israel Rivera argues that they intend to allocate in this segment educative and cultural programs related with certain subjects such as Physics, Chemistry, English, and specific series about historical events (Personal

communication, 2002). Even though channel 10 does not produce national news programs, they concentrate on cultural and educative productions. According to the channel 10 broadcasting report for the month of October, 2002: the national production of this station included 186.05 hours (43.6 % of the total programming) of educative, sports, infantile, musical, and cultural programs. On the other hand, the foreign programs broadcasted in this channel included 240.45 hours (56.4 %) of different genres, primarily educative and infantile programs (Israel Rivera, personal communication, 2002). This data coincide with the results of this study, which reflects a relative balance of national and foreign programs in channel 10. Nevertheless, it is important to reflect about some implications of the current situation of television programming in El Salvador.

Implications of television programming in El Salvador

The implications of the current television programming in El Salvador entails five principal considerations: the possibilities for local or national programs, the incidence of cable and satellite television, the re-consideration of audience research, the development of pluralistic programs of opinion and debate, and the integration of governmental regulations and social demands for better quality of the Salvadoran media system.

First, it is evident that television stations in El Salvador are still heavy importers of foreign television programmes (about 81.9%), especially from the United States and Mexico. Even though some channels produce important quantity of local programmes, these are primarily devoted to news and interviews, and other formats that rely on low-budgets of production such as game contests and musical programmes. Israel Rivera

considers that channel 10 has increased in recent years its television production; however, he estimates that for some programmes such as documentaries they do not have adequate professionals and financial support. In this sense, channel 10 intended to establish some forms of cooperation with the Central American University (UCA), but there were no concrete results for partnership of co-production (Personal communication, 2002). The development of this idea may generate in the future new possibilities for local television production. In fact, there are at least six universities in El Salvador that offer the degree in communication and journalism, which can provide important technical and human support for quality television production.

In relation to local television programming, Carlos Corado –professor of television at the UCA- emphasizes that the problem is not only the lack of economic support for new programs, but also the control exercised by the national government over the public channels of expression. In this way, he argues that the current Salvadoran government is afraid of local programs, specifically if these programs are critical to its actions and policies. Thus, he estimates that the government only supports and promotes programs with characteristics of entertainment (Personal communication, 2002). On the other hand, the *Megavision Group* Programming Director Ana Martinez declares that the lack of national production is related with the inadequacy of the governmental institutions for promoting Salvadoran artists. Subsequently, she points out that the governmental institution devoted to promoted culture –CONCULTURA- is oriented towards different artistic expressions such as painting and literature, but not to radio and television productions (Personal communication, 2002).

To summarize, the concern for more local or national television programmes require the integration of different sectors, particularly the participation of television stations, universities, cultural organizations, international organizations, and the critical role of the government as supporter of cultural and communicative policies.

Second, the incidence of cable and satellite television programming in El Salvador is still in its early stages; consequently, most television stations do not see it as an imminent competition for their programming. Ana Martinez and Carlos Corado coincide that cable and satellite services are very limited in El Salvador; thus, these services are still very expensive for most people. Martinez also comments that the subscribers to cable television in San Salvador –the capital of the country- might be approximately 50,000. Likewise, Corado argues that since the majority of the population cannot afford this service, the owners of the television stations just re-transmit the same programs of cable television (Personal communication, 2002). This is at least the cases of channel 15, and 19 that broadcast exclusively the programming of MTV and Nickelodeon cable channels. On the other hand, the Programming Director of channel 10 Israel Rivera complains about the lack of regulation for local cable providers, particularly he comments that some people protest to the station because channel 10 is not include in the channels carried by some local cable providers. In this sense, he wonders why there is no regulation for these providers of cable programming (Personal communication, 2002).

A survey conducted by *Fama y Rivera Media* in December 2002, in the metropolitan area of San Salvador, reports that the top five cable channels preferred are: HBO (37.4%), Fox Kids (4%), TV Sur (3.6%), ESPN (3.5%), and MTV (3.5%). In terms of genres, the most attractive for the audience are: Feature films (58.7%), Infantile

programmes (15.2%), Sports (14.2%), Music Videos (3.1%), and educative programmes (2.4%). (La Prensa Grafica, December 9, 2002). In contrast, the expansion of satellite television programming in El Salvador is still incipient, but in the future can present, as Davis (1999) suggest, “new opportunities for media corporations, reversing the flow of international programming and changing the nature of international advertising, with cultural implications at all stages” (p. 58). Nevertheless, the crucial question is how this process of globalization of television strength transnational media corporations, and how different social actors as audiences “interact with the multiple international symbolic offers on the basis of their own positions” (Garcia Canclini, 1995, p. 266).

The third element is the re-consideration of television audience research from the perspective of cultural competencies. In this sense, Martin Barbero (1993) suggests that these cultural competencies run “across classes as a result of different styles of formal education, also impact uses of television, as do ethnic groups and regions, local dialectics, and the urban *mestizajes*” (p. 25). In other words, the crucial point is to evaluate how people interpret, re-interpret, and relate their uses of television with their everyday life. In this context, it is important to study how Salvadorans evaluate and re-interpret the nature of television programs offered by television stations. Do they prefer more local or national programs, regional –from Latin America- or U.S. television programming? What are the differences of television use among different social classes, education levels, regions of the country, gender, and age groups in El Salvador?

The three persons interviewed in this study coincide in the fact that there is no television audience research in El Salvador. Israel Rivera considers that the foreign programming affects “our identity, this programming that is coming affect us negatively,

but all countries operates in the same way” (Personal communication, 2002). Likewise, Ana Martinez declares that they do not trust on the institution in charge of conducting the media audience ratings in the country; consequently, they intend to do their own evaluation of people’s perceptions of the television programming offered by channels 15, 19, and 21 (Personal communication, 2002). On the other hand, Carlos Corado points out that television programming has helped to make a clear differentiation among social classes. Thus, he emphasizes “the upper classes do not see local channels, only the low social class remains watching local television stations; the only program that all Salvadorans watch is national news” (Personal communication, 2002).

In similar way, Straubhaar and Viscasillas (1991) argue that television programming options and interpretations are related with Bourdieu’s notion of cultural choices divided by social classes, education, family background, and cultural capital that enable them to prefer and understand specific symbolic products. In the study about reception of telenovelas in the Dominican Republic, Straubhaar and Viscasillas (1991) found that when national television programs were not available, “these audiences tend to prefer cultural products which are as close to their own culture as possible, usually from relatively nearby within the Latin American region” (p. 1).

Equally, other studies refer to the role of audience studies in terms of investigating how the structures of communication policies intertwine with social practices of media consumption and symbolic negotiations (Raboy, Proulx, & Welters, 2001). All in all, there is a fundamental need of media audience research in El Salvador that enables us the mapping of different practices of media consumption, negotiation, and

interrelations with larger social and political practices of communication (Raboy et al., 2001).

Fourth, the evaluation of television programming in El Salvador reflects the importance of journalistic formats, especially the programs of public opinion and debate. As a result of the civil war in El Salvador and radical ideological confrontations among different sectors of society, the exercise of freedom of expression is still a great challenge in this country. The characteristics of the military conflict provided basis for the development of alternative forms of journalism such as news programs and panel interviews, specifically channel 10 was a pioneer in this effort. In this respect, Israel Rivera estimates that these programs made people to identify channel 10 with politics. This happened especially during the Duarte administration in the late 1980s, but now they intend to project an image of this channel as cultural and educative (Personal communication, 2002).

Some years later, channel 12 established a professional and critical news program, as well as panel interview program, which gave the possibility of participation to social actors excluded from the channels of the TCS (2, 4, and 6). After the war, other new spaces of expression were opened; however, as Carlos Corado comments, “now it is difficult because of the monopolistic situation of the media, and the editorial control in television stations” (Personal communication, 2002). From the ten television stations analyzed in this study, six stations have news and interviews programs; nonetheless, the ideological plurality of the social sectors represented in these programmes is very limited. This situation is particularly evident in the channels of the TCS, which also are the channels with larger geographical coverage in El Salvador.

Meanwhile, the incursion of Mexican investment in channel 12, specifically *TV Azteca*, generated different concerns about the critical editorial policy of this television station. At the beginning, the representatives of this Mexican corporation promised not to influence the news and interview programs' content; however, this situation has changed in recent years. Although the government has not directly exercised censorship over this channel, as Rockwell and Janus (2002) assert, "Governments across the region (Central America) have found necessary to control the media through economic tactics, like advertising boycotts, to neutralize broadcasters" (p. 65). Since the government in El Salvador is a crucial actor in terms of advertising client, this kind of advertising boycott has been oriented towards channel 12 and some radio stations as a way of keeping away these critical voices in the media.

The turning point of this situation just happened on March 25, 2003, when the Director of channel 12, Alejandro Gonzalez, notified that the program "*Sin Censura*" –a editorial segment of the news program hosted by Mauricio Funes- was going off the air. Although Gonzalez denied that this decision responded to pressures of the government and private corporations, Funes insists that the government influenced this decision. Even more, Funes declared in an interview published on April 3, 2003, by the newspaper *El Diario de Hoy* that the president of El Salvador –Francisco Flores- has called his Mexican colleague Fox in order to persuade the *TV Azteca* president Ricardo Salinas in order to shut the program *Sin Censura*. Undoubtedly, this case illustrates the ways in which the current government understand and "promotes" the freedom of expression in El Salvador. Thus, as Rockwell and Janus (2002) conclude, the Mexican investments in channel 12 "merely wiped out small, alternative voices in the system" (p. 58). Moreover,

it seems that this situation is happening not only in El Salvador, but also in other countries in Central America. Therefore, the interrelations between transnational and local media corporations with the national government might imply loss of local control, primarily for critical voices of social organizations and citizens' groups engaged in the struggles for freedom of expression in the public sphere.

The fifth consideration is concern with the issue of integration between governmental media regulations and social demands for pluralistic and quality Salvadoran television. In terms of media regulation, El Salvador does not have defined policies in this matter; in fact, Choto et al. (1996) argue that the lack of a juridical set of rules for media regulation has allowed owners and advertisers to manipulate the television stations. In contrast, the two Programming Directors interviewed referred exclusively to the *Direccion de Espectaculos Publicos* –Public Spectacles Direction-, which is administered by the government in order to classify the content of television programmes according to specific age groups. In this sense, Ana Martinez points out that this institution regulates the language and sexual scenes in television programmes; thus, there are three categories of programs: A (all audiences), B (14 years), C (18 years). Each of these categories must be identified at the beginning of the program and allocated in particular time schedules (Personal communication, 2002). Similarly, Israel Rivera – Programming Director of the state-owned station- considers that they exercise a process of ‘auto-regulation’ about the programmes they broadcast, especially because channel 10 is the educative channel. In this way, they do not receive any type of sanction from the *Direccion de Espectaculos Publicos* (Personal communication, 2002).

Although this aspect of content regulation is highly estimated especially by religious and educative organizations, the role of the government in terms of media regulations and communicative policies is inexistent. On the contrary, as it was mentioned above, nowadays the government do not use authoritarian mechanisms of censorship or repression, but it participates in advertising boycotts and corporative alliances that diminished the practices for freedom of expression (Fox & Waisbord, 2002). Carlos Corado asserts that in El Salvador, the government exercises pressure on the private corporations so that they take out the advertising from a certain radio or television station. Furthermore, he adds, “although we live in a democratic country, the freedom of expression is not in its highest apogee” (Personal communication, 2002).

After some past experiences of media political control and censorship by specific governments in Latin America, the neoconservative discourse now claims that the government has no role to play in communication policies and regulations (Garcia Canclini, 1995; John, 1997). However, the globalization of media corporations and the impact of market forces at the local level pose again the question about the responsibility of the government in terms of national policies of communication and culture, media regulations, and public services (Fox, 1997; Fox & Waisbord, 2002). Particularly in the case of channel 10, which is owned by the state, Choto et al.(1996) contend that this governmental station proposes a very limited conception of television public service; that is, the understanding of culture and education separated from important political and social processes of the country.

Thus, one primary challenge for the government would be the re-conceptualization of this television station, and how channel 10 can move towards a

notion of a public television station. In fact, some years ago the government mentioned the idea of transforming channel 8 –previously owned by the state- as a public television open to different sectors of society. Unfortunately, this was just a possibility and in the end the government sold this frequency to the Catholic organization *Fundacion Agape*. Another possibility for the future of television in El Salvador might be the option of community channels, which already are operating in some Latin American countries. For instance, in Colombia exists approximately seven hundred community television channels (Martin Barbero, 2003). In this respect, Martin Barbero (2003) emphasizes that these channels “express the diversity that social movements have today in their struggle to construct public spaces from which they can express themselves and participate, from the base, in the construction of the country” (p. 103).

Furthermore, governments need to provide a normative framework for regulation and legislation that seek to fulfill social demand. According to Raboy et al. (2001), this idea of social demand implies that “it is necessary to position media users as social actors rather than simply as consumers, as citizens as well as members of particular identity groups” (p. 107). In a similar fashion, Fox and Waisbord (2002) observe the need for participation of civil society in the decision-making process and public access to media organizations. It is impossible to think about a new framework of media regulation without taking into account the cultural and communicative needs of different sectors of society (Herscovici, Bolano, & Mastrini, 1999).

In conclusion, even though the current situation of television in El Salvador presents several limitations, there are some signs of hope for the future. According to a news report of UNESCO (January 23, 2003), the Salvadoran government has requested

UNESCO to help implementing several reforms of media policy and legislation. This effort could sponsor a more democratic media environment respectful not only of the freedom of the press, but also advance the conditions for freedom of expression in El Salvador.

Likewise, UNESCO is working with the Central American University (UCA) in order to establish a Chair in Communication '*Freedom of Expression*', which will constitute a pluralistic forum of research and debate among academics, journalists, media owners, and social organizations. In this sense, the realization of these initiatives can put forward fundamental steps for establishing a new media system, which creatively articulate the economic interests of media organizations with the social and cultural demands of citizens in order to strength participative channels of expression, local processes of decision-making, and democratic practices of communication.

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