

Sylvia Szostak

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POLAND'S RETURN TO EUROPE

POLISH TERRESTRIAL BROADCASTERS AND TV FICTION

Sylvia Szostak

Department of Culture, Film and Media
School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies
University of Nottingham
Nottingham, NG7 2RD
United Kingdom

aaxss2@nottingham.ac.uk

Abstract: The changing political sphere in 1989 and the subsequent 2004 European Union accession had a profound impact on Poland's economic, political and social spheres. Both events are considered to have marked Poland's 'return to Europe' and strengthened the relations with its Western neighbours. This article examines the changing patterns of television fiction programming flow in Poland in the post-Soviet era, exploring the impact of those two events on Poland's audiovisual sector. This article therefore assesses whether, and if so – how, this metaphorical 'return to Europe' is manifested on Polish television screens.

Keywords: TV fiction, Poland, importation, Europeanization, programming

The fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 marked the beginning of a transition from authoritarian regimes towards democratic political systems. Following these systemic changes, the television landscapes of Central and Eastern European countries have been rapidly internationalised. 'Europeanisation' became a dominant discourse right from the fall of communism as most post-communist countries wanted to "shed their "Eastern European" identity and to "return to Europe".¹ This article focuses on the history and growth of the Polish TV market to its gradual maturity and increasing self-sufficiency in the post-Soviet era. Through this focus, the article answers the question: how is Poland's return to Europe manifested in the programming strategies of Poland's terrestrial broadcasters in the domain of TV fiction? Exploring the views and perceptions of those working as TV executives at a moment of great change in Polish broadcasting, supported by schedule analysis, this article will reveal that the 'Europeanisation' of Poland's audiovisual sector is more structural than content-related and is reflected in reprising the developments of Western European television markets, but not in the presence of fiction from other European countries on Polish television screens. As we shall see, there is a strong reason to believe that Europe's Western and Eastern peripheries are not that different after all, at least in a media-historical perspective.

¹ Karol Jakubowicz and Miklós Sükösd, 'Twelve Concepts Regarding Media System Evolution and Democratization in Post-Communist Societies' in Karol Jakubowicz and Miklós Sükösd, eds. *Finding the Right Place on the Map: Central and Eastern European Media Change in a Global Perspective*, Intellect, 2008., p. 28.

1 East Versus West in a Historical Perspective

With regard to media systems, European countries have always differed a great deal. There were very different structural conditions under which television emerged as a national institution in post-war European countries, including different political regimes, institutional settings, different economic systems and technological infrastructures. Despite those continuing – and probably unresolvable differences – there are important respects in which the numerous European national media systems can be framed and compared according to the same categories. One such category is the historical perspective. Catherine Johnson (2012) reminds us that “there are a number of different models for understanding the periodic shifts in television history.”² John Ellis (2000), for example, argues that television has developed over three eras: that of scarcity, availability and plenty.³ Ellis’s periodisation was made primarily with Western Europe in mind, but when we look closely at the history of Polish television we find that Ellis’s analytical model works for Poland to an equal extent.

The first channel (Program 1) of what is now the Polish public broadcaster Telewizja Polska (TVP) has been operating since 1952, the same as Italy’s public service channel RAI and that of the Federal Republic of Germany. While in Western Europe television became firmly located within the public service tradition, in Eastern Europe, the institutions of television became part of the state apparatus controlled by the Communist Party, until the revolutions of 1989. For more than 30 years TVP functioned as a state-controlled broadcaster. Despite the profound differences in contexts, for both Western Europe and its Eastern periphery, exemplified here by Poland, the conditions of early broadcasting can be summed up by Ellis’s analytical construction of an era of scarcity, characterised “by a few channels broadcasting for part of the day only.”⁴ In 1952, the first year of TVP’s existence, there were no regular broadcasts but only occasional short programmes, consisting of performances by actors from the theatre and cinema, poets and athletes. The first regular weekly half-hour broadcasts were introduced in 1953 and scheduled to air every Friday at 5pm. At the end of the 1950s, TVP was broadcasting six days a week, but only in the evenings – usually between 5pm or 6pm until 10pm. In 1970 TVP launched its second channel – Program 2 – broadcasting five days a week initially, from around 6pm to a little after 10:30pm. At that time the first channel was already broadcasting seven days a week from between 8 and 10am through to 11pm, usually with two hour-long breaks in broadcasts. In 1974 the second channel extended broadcasts to seven days a week.⁵ By 1980, the first channel was broadcasting up to 17 hours of programming per day, with the second one up to 11 hours per day.⁶

In Western Europe, the era of scarcity lasted until the late 1970s, which heralded a new phase in Western European broadcasting. With developments such as the growth of satellite and cable, the institutional structures of public service television in Europe changed, ushering in an era of availability, where “several channels broadcasting continuously jostled for attention.”⁷ This development introduced a new television culture based on a combination of commercial and public service channels. This restructuring of the broadcasting architecture expanded to the newly opened Eastern and Central European television markets, but only after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For Poland such a turning point came with the creation of Poland’s Broadcasting Act on 29 December 1992, which set up the legal framework for the regulation of the newly introduced dual pluralistic model of media typical for Western countries, where both public and private media co-exist. As a result, privately owned and commercially financed stations were allowed into Poland, and TVP ceased to be a state-controlled broadcaster and was redefined as public service. It took another five years for the licensing process of commercial broadcasters to come to an end, creating a stable television environment in which the three major Polish terrestrial broadcasters – TVP, now a public service broadcaster, and its two commercial competitors, Polsat (launched in 1992 and licensed in 1994) and TVN (launched and licensed in 1997) – began operating. Commercial operators fully came into their own by 1997, when the licensing process came to an end. The era of availability in Poland was therefore fully instituted a decade later than in its Western

² Catherine Johnson, *Branding Television*, Routledge, 2012, p. 6.

³ John Ellis, *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*, I.B. Tauris, 2000.

⁴ Ellis, *Seeing Things*, p. 39.

⁵ RTV. *Radio i Telewizja. Tygodnik*. 2. Warszawa. 1974.

⁶ RTV. *Radio i Telewizja. Tygodnik*. 1-14. Warszawa. 1980.

⁷ Ellis, *Seeing Things*, p. 39.

counterparts, where the advent of private television happened throughout the 1980s: for example in France in 1982 and Greece in 1989.

This expansion of broadcasting services was intensified in what Ellis calls the third era – the era of plenty, when a variety of technologies, vastly increased viewers' choices, introducing the new phenomenon of television on demand, as well as interactive television, and, as Catherine Johnson notes, "the old model of broadcasting came under threat."⁸ The digital, interactive new media began to profoundly influence Western European media at the end of the 1990s. Similar industrial realignments occurred in Poland, yet again with significant delay. Digitalisation and convergence began to have ramifications for the entire Polish media system in the late 2000s but their full potential is yet to be realised. For Poland – where convergence became a delayed development phase of the Polish broadcasting scene – the more traditional approach remains predominant, as the "living room only viewer"⁹ is still very much the essential concept for the discussion of television. While in 2010 exposure to the broadcasting flow in Poland grew to 245 minutes per day,¹⁰ watching television online was reported by only 21% of respondents.¹¹ The broadcasting flow was not threatened by DVR devices either, which allow the users to record linear television and then playback – timeshift – this content whenever or however they please. Because timeshifting recorders were still a technological novelty, only 7.3% of Polish households were equipped with such devices in 2010.¹² Considering the media market advances in Western Europe and the US, Anglo-American academics may think that broadcasting flow is dead but it is alive and well in Poland, where convergence is becoming an important market paradigm but with a significant delay.¹³

This rough sketch of the main changes that occurred in the Polish television landscape between 1989 and 2011 supports Karol Jakubowicz and Miklós Sükösd's (2012) statement that post-communist societies' media systems "faced, and partly performed or became subjected to" the same historical processes that occurred in Western Europe but "in an extremely compressed, short period of time."¹⁴ Despite the very different landscape of post-Soviet broadcasting in Poland, the histories of Western and Eastern Europe seem to follow very similar paths of development. The essential line of direction for the development of the Polish television market has been much the same as in Western European countries, with the only difference being that the stages are not temporally the same. Those parallels in the media-historical perspective have had profound consequences for the programming of TV fiction in Poland: they created the same market forces in Poland that have governed TV fiction programming in Western Europe. As we shall see, Poland's TV fiction programming experienced similar challenges and thus followed similar patterns of change. In many ways this is not surprising, considering that the changes facing each industry – Poland's and that of its Western counterparts – were analogous.

2 Delayed 'Dallasification'

Jérôme Bourdon (2011) claims that "until the Eighties, American exporters repeatedly complained about the reluctance of European stations to buy American fare, or their decisions to purchase small quantities or only parts of long-running series."¹⁵ The initial context of television's development in Western Europe – due to its emphasis on public service

⁸ Johnson, *ibid.*, p. 7.

⁹ Amanda D. Lotz, *The Television will be revolutionized*, New York UP, p. 243.

¹⁰ 'Polacy w 2010 spędzili więcej czasu przed telewizorem,' *Wirtualne Media*, 4 January 2011, <http://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/artykul/polacy-w-2010-spedzili-wiecej-czasu-przed-telewizorem>

¹¹ 'Komunikat z badań: Korzystanie z komputerów i Internetu,' *Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej*, June 2010, http://eregion.wzp.pl/var/cms_files/obszary_wykresy/si/2011/korzystanie_z_komputerow_i_internetu_CBOS.pdf

¹² 'Nielsen Audience Measurement będzie mierzyć PVR,' *Wirtualne Media*, 19 October 2010, <http://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/artykul/nielsen-audience-measurement-bedzie-mierzyc-pvr>

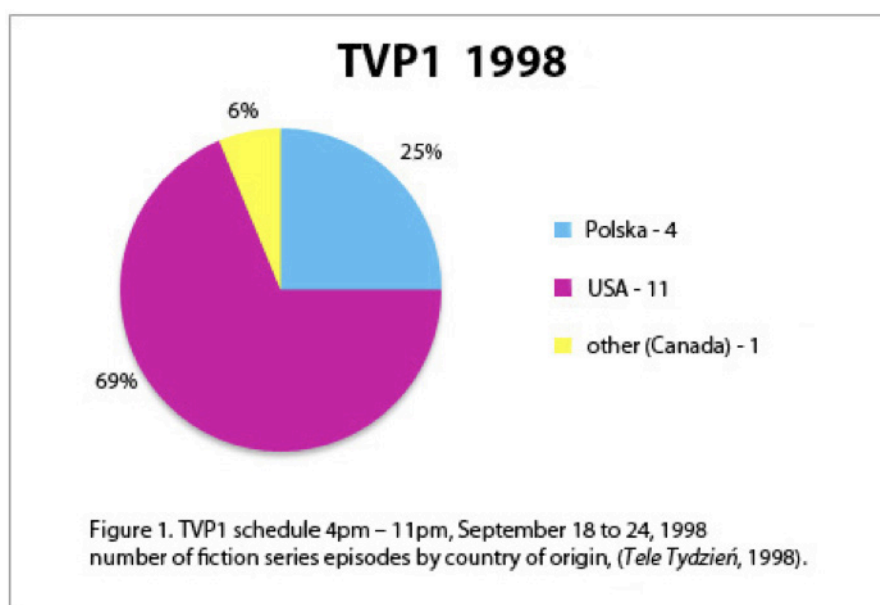
¹³ For contemporary approaches to the broadcasting flow see Michael Kackman, et al., eds., *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence*, Routledge, 2011.

¹⁴ Jakubowicz and Sükösd, 'Twelve Concepts,' *op cit.*, p. 16.

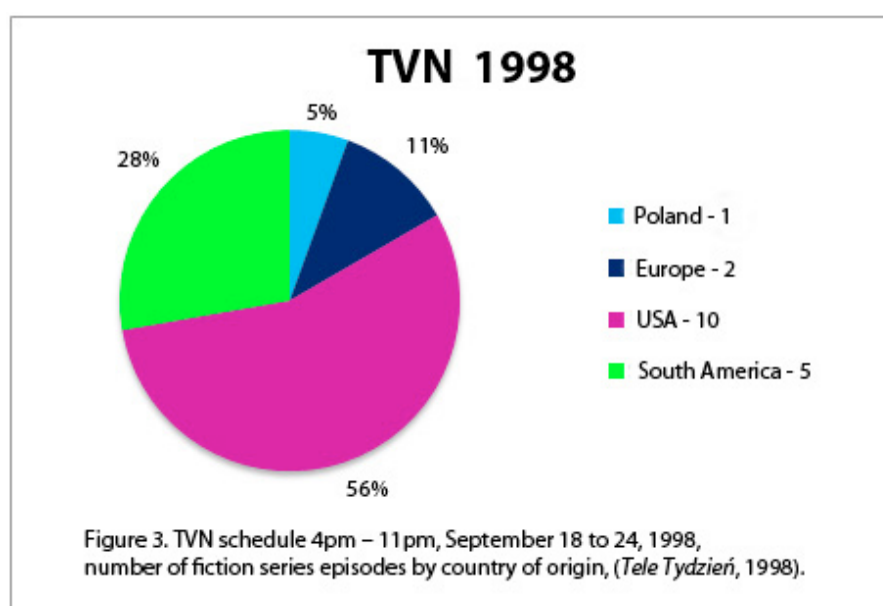
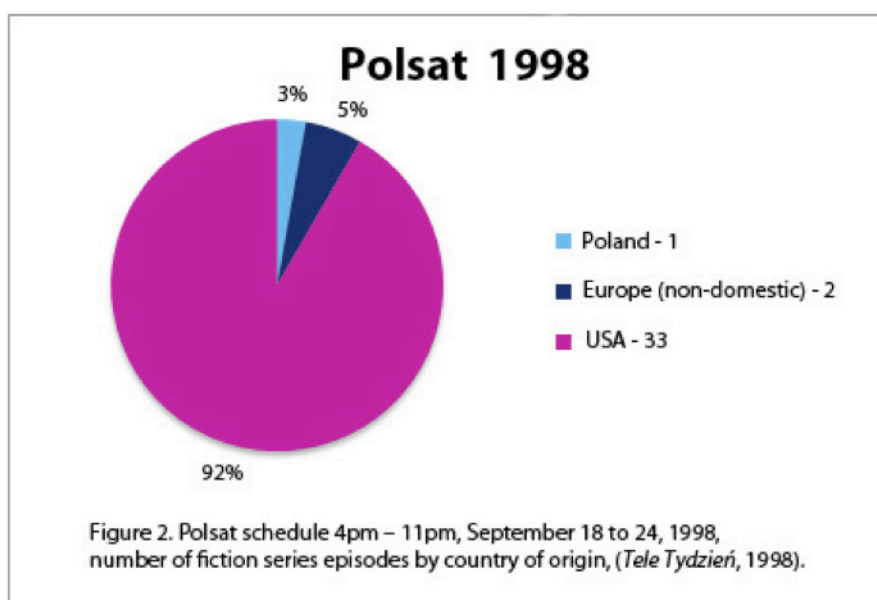
¹⁵ Jérôme Bourdon, 'Imperialism, Self-Inflicted? On the Americanizations of Television in Europe' in William Uricchio, ed., *We Europeans?: Media, Representations, Identities, Intellect*, 2011, p. 95.

values – was certainly unfavourable to American imports. But the emergence of cable and satellite television over the 1980s brought about an increase in transmission time that had to be filled without excessive cost. As a result, a vast amount of programming was bought from the American market primarily by commercial channels in order to serve large European audiences. Bourdon is convinced that the restructuring of the broadcasting market in Western Europe during the 1980s “gave a chance to American exporters to add Europe to their list of conquered territories.”¹⁶

With a decade long time lag, this development expanded to the newly opened Eastern and Central European television markets, where American programming in the pre-1989 era was present to a limited extent. The Polish broadcasting market, previously under Soviet coercion and thus fairly hostile to Western imports, began to rely heavily on imported audiovisual product only after 1989. In a sample week of autumn 1998, only a few months after the end of the licensing period when the television market emerged in the form in which it remains today, Poland's three terrestrial free-to-air broadcasters – public service TVP1 and its two commercial counterparts, TVN and Polsat - were all reliant on American product in the domain of fiction. The following graphs demonstrate the importance of American programming in the autumn 1998 broadcast schedule, which represents high season in Poland, when the competition for viewers is intense and all three terrestrial broadcasters programme their strongest content.



¹⁶ Ibid., p. 104.



This reliance on American programming in Poland in the 1990s is unsurprising as a similar influx had occurred in Western European countries a decade earlier and was a consequence of similar market forces. As a result of the dramatic changes of the TV landscape after 1989, the broadcast hours of the existing state broadcaster were extended: in 1991 for example both channels of TVP were broadcasting from 7 or 8am to after 11pm,¹⁷ but soon after that broadcasting time on the first channel was extended to an unprecedented 22 hours per day, and later the same occurred on the second channel. Additionally, new commercial networks became available to the Polish viewers in two licensing processes, in 1994 and 1997. The most immediate consequence of this transformation was an urgent need to fill the schedules with quantity of volume television. Anna Kozanecka, Head of Film Acquisitions and Programming at the commercial broadcaster Polsat, claims that

¹⁷ *Radio i Telewizja*, 1991, Warszawa, 1-29.

Polsat's struggle to produce fiction programming in 1990s was to a great extent influenced by financial constraints. We need not forget that Polsat started up as Poland's first commercial broadcaster, and was forced to function within limited resources for several years after its inception. The lack of domestic drama in that period was not conditioned by the issues of popularity or demand, but simply the financial paradigm. The financial concern was that in that period the difference in financial cost of producing an episode in-house and importing one from abroad was dramatic, especially when you consider the lack of independent producers, as the independent sector did not develop until later. The only producer at the time was the public broadcaster but TVP was producing shows for their own schedules. That was the basic problem.¹⁸

The lack of industrial infrastructure, inappropriate models for production, the lack of trained personnel and the high launch and start-up costs of the new channels and their initial unprofitability kept Poland's broadcasters from producing enough local and national product to cope with the programming demand that arose in the 1990s. As a result, both the public broadcaster and the new commercial players were in need of programming. As this heightened need for programming could not be met domestically through indigenous production in the early phase of the market transformation, Poland encountered a predicament symptomatic of emerging and infant TV markets, namely the need to turn to importation in order to fill slots. Historically, channels within these markets have turned to the US as a source of cheap fiction that ensured high ratings.¹⁹ For the new Polish commercial broadcasters, as was the case with Western European ones in an earlier decade, buying US series was a cheaper way to fill large amounts of transmission time and was likely to generate new audiences and profits quickly.²⁰ With extensive libraries, well-established distribution networks, and a supreme marketing machine, American companies were well suited to profit enormously from these changes in the Polish TV market. Due to the reliance of Polish terrestrial broadcasters on almost exclusively American programming in the domain of fiction, the Polish market in the second half of the 1990s can be suitably described by the metaphor of 'Dallasification'²¹ – a term coined by Els de Bens (1992) and colleagues to describe the condition of Western European television cultures in the 1980s.

While in the 1990s Poland's television screens were flooded with American product, in Western Europe the development of programming took a new direction, namely a shift away from importing US shows towards domestic production.²² Research by the Eurofiction project published in 2000 lists a sample week of fiction by national origin in spring 1998 and indicates that prime time in Western Europe is of national origin and no longer dominated by American imports.²³ When Poland's TV sector began to develop and mature, it caught up with the European preference towards domestic production. The reliance on US programming in Poland, just as in Western Europe, was also a short-lived phenomenon.

3 Return to the Local Broadcast Culture

American shows started losing prominence in the Polish prime-time schedules in the mid-2000s, giving way to domestic TV fiction in the most prominent positions on Polish TV screens. Anna Kozanecka from Polsat recognises the changing status of American drama on Polish TV screens:

¹⁸ Anna Kozanecka (Head of Film Acquisitions and Programming at Polsat) in discussion with the author, January 2012.

¹⁹ Muriel G. Cantor and Joel M. Cantor, 'American Television In the International Marketplace,' *Communication Research*, 13, 1986, 511.

²⁰ Paul Rixon, *American Television on British Screens: A Story of Cultural Interaction*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 87.

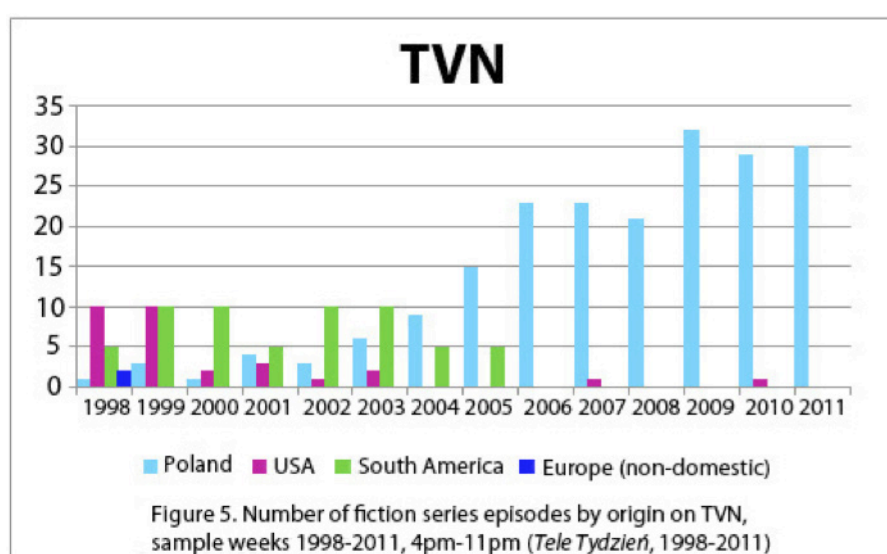
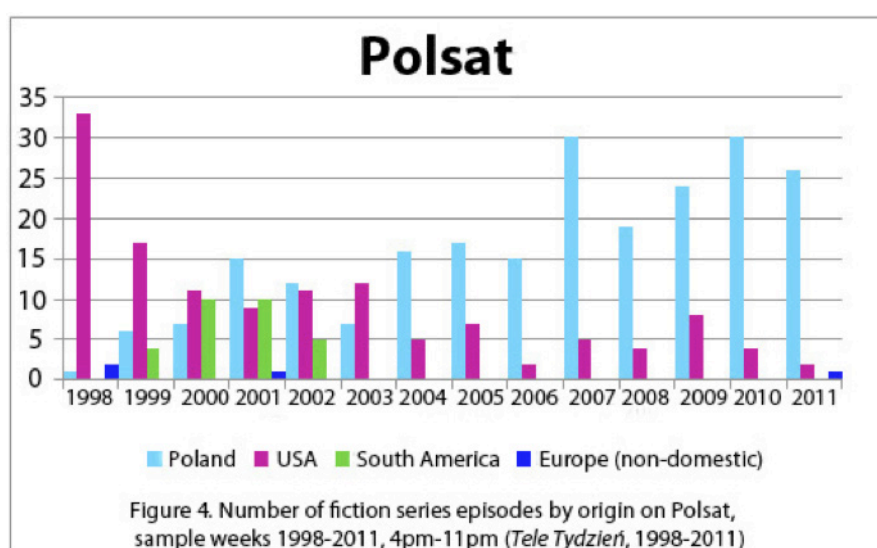
²¹ Els De Bens, Mary Kelly and Marit Bakke, 'Television Content: Dallasification of Culture?', in K. Siune and W. Truettzschler, eds., *Dynamics of Media Politics*, Sage, 1992, pp. 73-100.

²² Milly Buonanno, ed, *Shifting Landscapes: Television Fiction In Europe*, University of Luton Press, 1999.

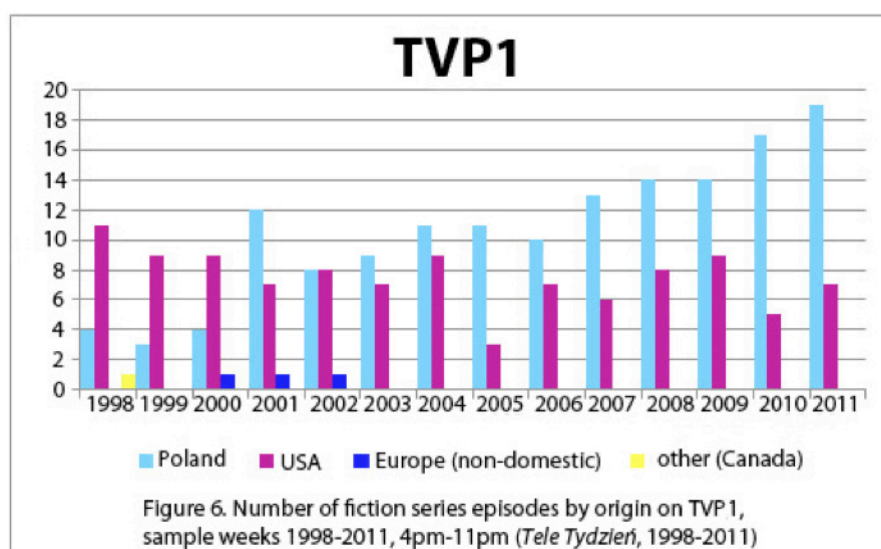
²³ This study examines the growth of fictional television in five major European countries, and explores the implications of fictional television's increase in popularity on those television markets as a whole. Milly Buonanno, ed, *Continuity and Change: Television Fiction in Europe*, University of Luton Press, 2000.

The days of Polish broadcasters fighting over American shows are over. Now everybody is buying them in packages, somewhat reluctantly. There is a changing approach that if the contract is too unfavourable you just walk away. There are more programming options, so you do not feel pressured anymore. Now you would not kill to get an American show.²⁴

Whereas in the 1990s Poland's free-to-air broadcasters were acquiring large packages of programmes, this changed in the 2000s, when the new trends have led to more 'cherry-picking' and a decline in volume output deals with US suppliers. That approach is reflected in the importation strategies of Poland's major players: TV schedule analysis indicates that the early 2000s marked the beginning of a gradual but steady process of change. The three terrestrial broadcasters experienced a significant increase in the number of domestic fiction episodes per week and a drop in American imports.



²⁴ Anna Kozanecka (Head of Film Acquisitions and Programming at Polsat) in discussion with the author, January 2012.



The comparison of data from the broadcast schedules of sample weeks between 1998 and 2011 reveals how in a relatively short space of time, the production of domestic fiction has significantly increased – a trend that continues through to 2011, namely the one of the dominance of domestic fiction over the imported fare in the domain of serialised fiction. For TVP1, TVN and Polsat the 2011 sample week from the September schedule, representing the high season in Poland, demonstrates an overwhelming dominance of local fiction over American product. TVP1 significantly increased its domestic fiction output – from four episodes of domestic fiction in the sample week of 1998 to nineteen in 2011. A similar shift occurred in both of Poland's commercial terrestrial broadcasters. In the sample broadcast week of 2011, out of 29 serialised scripted episodes broadcast by Polsat, as many as 26 were of domestic origin, and only two were American imports. A similar trend is evident on TVN – Poland's second commercial broadcaster, whose entire scripted fiction output in the 2011 sample week (30 episodes) was of domestic origin.

Poland's broadcasters are not unique in their move from importation towards domestic production: it is a successive stage of development and business strategy for the growth of a channel. In the early years, channels turn to imports as there is insufficient domestic production, but in time they generate new audiences and profits enabling them to produce in-house. The case of Poland's commercial broadcasters supports Jeanette Steemers's observation, made with Western Europe in mind, that "American imports have often been important for the introduction of commercial television, but as markets mature and produce more domestic content, American programming is not always necessary to continue the commercial model."²⁵ It remains true for Poland also, as elsewhere in Europe, that as the broadcasting market matures, it will rely less on imports and more on domestic product. Poland in this instance reflects the same trends that occurred in Western European countries in the late 1990s. This trend has worked against all imports, including American fiction series, which "although still plentiful [they] increasingly occupy a more marginalised position in the schedule."²⁶ Steemers claims that "US series are now often restricted to daytime or late-night slots on the main free-to-air channels in Germany, Spain, France and Italy."²⁷ Similarly in Poland, American fiction series have not disappeared completely from the broadcast schedules of Poland's terrestrial broadcasters. Far from it – Poland's major players still buy American drama, simply because they have to as part of the movie packages sold by large distributors. American shows continue to be imported but their status has changed: American drama is migrating to day-time or late-night slots and from the Polish high season in the autumn and spring months onto less competitive winter and summer periods. An additional outlet for American programming became cable channels that entered the Polish market during the 2000s, such as AXN (operating in Poland since 2003), belonging to Sony

²⁵ Jeanette Steemers, *Selling Television: British Television In The Global Marketplace*, BFI, 2004, p. 14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Pictures Television International, Viacom's Comedy Central (since 2006), and two Fox International Channels: Fox Life and Fox (since 2007 and 2010 respectively).

4 American Genres and Polish Domestic Drama

As Poland's production sector develops and becomes more proficient, the Polish television industry is gradually generating more original fiction programming, slowly removing the need for heavy reliance on American scripted programming. Tapio Varis reminds us, however, that "the real social and political impact of imported programmes may be greater than might be inferred from the volume of imported material."²⁸ Despite the maturation of the production capacity and an increasing self-sufficiency in generating original TV fiction content, American programming still plays an important role in shaping Poland's industry and the fiction programming it produces.

Again, this is something that we have been observing in Western Europe. Since its very beginnings "American television provided a source of inspiration and sometimes a solution, to specific problems of programme elaboration"²⁹ for broadcasters in different markets. Among them were European professionals who, as Jérôme Bourdon claims, "needed, admired, used, and imported American cultural forms."³⁰ In the early history of television, when there did not exist a regulated market for programme exchanges, "plagiarism was rife."³¹ Most European producers "simply travelled to the States; some visited installations and studios, some simply watched TV, liked an idea, a visual detail, and freely picked it up."³² Bourdon believes that in early television there are many examples of these "American television pilgrimages," but "nowhere as many as in England and Spain."³³ But professionals in other national contexts looked to America for their inspiration as well. As an example Bourdon gives Italian television, whose early history is full of "American examples and sources of inspiration" as well as early German television which had "strong professional links with American networks."³⁴ This reliance on American television as a source of inspiration continued well into the 1980s. Ib Bondebjerg and colleagues claim that even in France, which without doubt has been among the European nations with the strongest cultural opposition to American influence, "fiction production in the 1980s was very much dominated by imported American series and French imitations."³⁵ There is therefore "no question about the enormous influence of American culture (including audiovisual culture) on Europe since 1945."³⁶ Ien Ang claims that this American influence on TV markets nearly everywhere is pronounced as the dissemination of a set of concomitant, heavily institutionalised, specialised practices, which in television "takes the form of a continuous rehashing of relatively constant formats and genres (e.g. the cop show, the sitcom, the soap opera)."³⁷ Similarly Bondebjerg and colleagues claim that what became particularly important for Western European TV cultures were the American genre traditions and that "a new wave of national genre fiction for television developed [in Western Europe] with a clear American genre inspiration combined with national content."³⁸ In Poland the influence of foreign television on the domestic market was limited in the pre-1989 era, although this changed in the post-Soviet period. Similar processes of adaptation and translation began to impact on the shape of Poland's original fiction programming after 1989 and American television became one of the sources of inspiration for Polish television professionals.

As a direct result of the creation of the commercial sector in the late 1990s the competition for viewers became crucial

²⁸ Tapio Varis, 'Global Traffic in Television', *Television Journal of Communication* 24, 1, 1974, 107.

²⁹ Bourdon, 'Imperialism,' *op cit*, p. 96.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 95.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 97.

³² *Ibid*, p. 98.

³³ *Ibid*.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 99.

³⁵ Ib Bondebjerg, et al, 'American Television: Point of Reference or European Nightmare?' in Jonathan Bignell and Andreas Fickers, eds., *A European Television History*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2008, p. 167.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 180.

³⁷ Ien Ang, *Living Room Wars*, Routledge, 1996, p. 154.

³⁸ Bondebjerg, et al, p. 168.

to securing the existence of commercial broadcasters and equally important for the partially advertising-funded public broadcaster TVP. With the maturation of the private sector during the 2000s, the three main terrestrial broadcasters began competing not only with each other, but increasingly with the newly established thematic cable and satellite channels. The cable and satellite sector, including American TV fiction-oriented channels, has been gradually directing Polish audiences away from the terrestrial broadcasters. In 2007 the combined share of the pay-TV channels accounted for 20% of the audience share among adults aged 16-49 and have been on the increase, rising to 24% in 2008, 29% in 2009 and 32% in 2010. In 2010, out of 38 million Poles who had access to television services, 26.6 million had access to the pay-TV offer.³⁹

As the Polish industry plunged into this heightened competition for ratings, the domestic soap operas produced by TVP since the 1990s remain extremely successful and are still able to generate impressive ratings. *Klan* (TVP1, 1997–) the longest running Polish soap opera averaged 7.3 million viewers in 2000. Despite declining audiences, the show still managed to attract a weekly average of 3.1 million viewers in 2011.⁴⁰ *Plebania* (TVP1, 2000-12), another long running domestic soap, demonstrates a similar tendency of declining audiences, from 5.3 million in 2000 to a still remarkable 2.9 million in 2011. Finally, *M jak Miłość* (TVP2, 2000–), Poland's most well-known soap opera, went from 4 million viewers in 2000 to an average of 7.5 million in 2011.⁴¹

The audience for domestic soaps is impressive especially when we consider that in Poland's TV market generating an audience of 3 million viewers is a considerable success for a TV series. Polish soaps tend to fare better with ratings than any other series fiction programming in Poland and have carved out a loyal audience, but what this type of programming fails to do is to attract the advertiser-coveted 16-49 demographic. Domestic soaps produced by the public service broadcaster TVP attract mainly female audiences above the age of 50, from rural areas of Poland and urban areas whose population is below 100,000 residents.⁴² It was not long until the commercial terrestrial broadcasters – Polsat and TVN – began to appeal to an audience segment that was both dissatisfied with TVP's fiction programming and attractive to advertisers, by providing a different viewing experience to that of the studio-based soap operas produced by TVP. TVN's Programming Deputy-Director Bogdan Czaja explains that:

Local drama allows us to attract an audience that is otherwise difficult to reach. Reaching that audience is a very difficult task (...) When we make a TV series for the type of audience that we want to reach [16-49 demographics], we need to compete with those really well-made American shows. For those people the point of reference is not domestic soaps, because soaps do not exist for them: when soaps are broadcast they are at work and even if they are not they would not want to watch that type of show anyway. That type of audience has to have content that can endure comparison with shows like *Friends*, for example, *The Sopranos* or *Desperate Housewives*. Those people know those American shows, they like them and they think: 'now give me a domestic drama, I am willing to watch it but make sure it is better or at least as good as the American shows I know'. Competing with American shows is not an easy thing to do.⁴³

The commercial terrestrial broadcasters, in order to reach the commercial viewers, and prevent the audience from tuning to cable channels and their entertainment offer, began to emulate American exports by producing more American-style drama. The Polish industry needed an efficient recipe for ratings success and American television programmes and their genres were considered to be excellent models for the production of more competitive programmes.

A good example of this trend is the first Polish political fiction drama – *Ekipa* (English title: *Prime Minister*) that was broadcast on commercial broadcaster Polsat in 2007. The story begins when a fictional Prime Minister is manipulated into resignation. The show then focuses on his successor – an effective but idealistic leader – and his staff, who have

³⁹ Łukasz Szewczyk, 'Polska: 26,6 mln widzów płatnej TV,' *Media2.pl*, 23 January 2011, <http://media2.pl/media/73956-Polska-26,6-mln-widzow-platnej-TV.html>

⁴⁰ Daniel Jabłoński (Press Officer at TVP), email message to the author, 11 May 2012.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Bogdan Czaja (Deputy Programming Director at TVN) in discussion with the author, December 2011.

to deal with legislative or political issues, behind-closed-doors negotiations, as well as their personal problems. One of show's creators and directors – Magda Łazarkiewicz – admits that “the direct inspiration for our project was *The West Wing*.”⁴⁴ The show's writers were equally inspired by *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999–2006). When asked whether there were any shows or books that served as a model for writing this show Dominik W. Rettinger said: “Agnieszka Holland and Kasia Adamik [the show's directors and creators] brought from the US several seasons of *The West Wing*. It's a great show and it served as an inspiration for writing the script for the series.”⁴⁵

Another example of the Polish appropriation of American programme culture is *Prawo Agaty* (English title: *True Law*) – the first Polish legal procedural drama which premiered on TVN in March 2012.⁴⁶ The series focuses on Agata Przybysz, a successful lawyer, who loses her prestigious job, seemingly charming boyfriend and her posh flat. The titular character is forced to abandon her old habits and try to build her life and career from scratch. The show combines the strengths of both the serial and episodic format as each of the 15 episodes of season one concentrates on a different legal case, while contributing to a broader narrative arc, often using legal proceedings as plot devices to develop viewers' understanding of the main characters' personal lives.

Bogumił Lipski, the show's producer, in the following way describes the preparation for the production of Poland's first legal procedural drama:

In working on this project as point of reference we took other legal dramas as a certain kind of point of departure. I first did a field research, I looked at the shows our competitors were making. Then I looked at the shows of the genre. I watched several of those. I wanted to rely on *Ally McBeal* the least actually, to avoid obvious comparisons. I watched *The Good Wife* because it was the most recent legal drama. I also watched *Harry's Law*, and *Drop Dead Diva*. I watched a couple of episodes of *Boston Legal*, and classic American movies that centre around legal issues, such as *Erin Brockovich* for example. All those shows inspired me and helped me to spot what is important for a legal drama. But it is not that I methodologically analysed every episode of the American drama I watched. Watching it just helped me negotiate my own ideas through watching different things.⁴⁷

Prawo Agaty and *Ekipa* serve as good examples of where an American genre – in this instance a legal drama and a political one – inspire the creation of a domestic series and as a result a new genre enters the Polish television landscape. *Prawo Agaty* and *Ekipa* are not isolated cases of the impact of American genres on the Polish market. In September 2012, the commercial broadcaster TVN premiered its most recent original prime-time drama, *Lekarze* (English title: *Medics*), and thus expanded its programming repertoire with yet another genre.⁴⁸ The show focuses on Alicja Szymańska, a young and ambitious surgeon, who joins the medical staff of a fictional hospital, Copernicus in Toruń, northeast of Poland. The episodes concentrate on different medical cases while developing viewers' engagement in the personal lives of the hospital employees.

⁴⁴ Magda Łazarkiewicz (television director and screenwriter) in discussion with the author, December 2011.

⁴⁵ Dominik W. Rettinger, interview by Beata Kęczkowska, *Ekipa Tom 4*, Agora SA, 2007, 10.

⁴⁶ TVN broadcast Magda M. (2005-07) – a prime time drama set in a legal environment. Magda M. however did not have a narrative structure of a legal procedural, as its narrative was more centred around the drama aspect rather than the legal proceedings. Therefore, I treat *Prawo Agaty* as the first Polish original production to use the generic structure of a legal procedural, where each episode revolves around a different legal case.

⁴⁷ Bogumił Lipski (television producer and director) in discussion with the author, March 2012.

⁴⁸ Medical series are not an entirely unknown genre in Poland. TVP has been producing a medical series ‘*Na Dobrze i Na Złe*’ since 1999. This series however was initially produced as a format adaptation; therefore it cannot be treated as an original Polish medical series. For the purpose of this article I treat ‘*Lekarze*’ as the first original Polish medical drama as it is based on an original concept.



Fig. 7. TVN's medical prime-time drama *Lekarze*. Courtesy of TVN/Piotr Litwic

Dorota Chamczyk, Executive Producer in the TV Drama and Feature Film Production Department at TVN, explained the preparation necessary for producing a new genre, in this instance a medical drama:

Once we decided to produce original medical drama instead of adapting a format, I first monitored what type of drama our competitors were producing. Then I watched all the medical drama out there. Particularly, the American shows such as *E.R.*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *House*, *Private Practice*, and *Nurse Jackie*. But I also watched some British ones, but there are not as many British medical dramas as American ones. I watched them but it was not what I was after. I feel that my biggest inspiration was *Grey's Anatomy*. The formula of this show allows the viewers to familiarise themselves with the characters, get invested in their histories more than just in the episodic structure of medical cases. So I looked at the way the show was edited, the type of set design. I told the people involved in the project, writers included, to watch *Grey's Anatomy* as a type of homework. My intention was never to copy and imitate the show but it was a huge inspiration certainly.⁴⁹

The new market-driven environment and the associated objective of audience maximisation during the 2000s forced Polish industry professionals to push the frontiers of creativity. The examples discussed above make the compelling argument that original Polish television drama is influenced by American genre conventions. In the last decade, the Polish industry has produced a medical drama, a legal procedural drama, and a political drama, whose existence is indebted to the generic impact of the American prime time dramas that include *The West Wing*, *Ally McBeal* (Fox, 1997-2002), *The Good Wife* (CBS, 2009–) and *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC, 2005–2012). Interestingly all those shows have been imported by Poland's broadcasters. TVN broadcast seasons one and two of *The West Wing* in 2000 and 2001. Later the show migrated onto a cable channel belonging to the TVN network – TVN7, where seasons two, three and four were broadcast between 2002 and 2004.⁵⁰ Polsat broadcast *Ally McBeal* between 1998 and 2003 and has been broadcasting *Grey's Anatomy* since 2009. Producing fiction genres similar to those previously imported from America, provides the viewers with a familiar viewing experience to the one they became accustomed to in the 1990s when TV fiction was dominated by imported American product. But, more importantly, this programming strategy is an attempt to compete with cable channels, and their American fiction offer, for Polish audiences – particularly the advertiser-coveted 16-49 demographic. Poland is not unique in this respect, as Western European broadcasters and producers similarly rely on American genres and have for quite a while now.

5 European Programming on Polish TV Screens

The most straightforward way in which the Europeanisation of Poland's television market is manifested is through a

⁴⁹ Dorota Chamczyk (Executive Producer in the TV Drama and Feature Film Production Department at TVN) in discussion with the author, January 2012.

⁵⁰ Joanna Górka (Public Relations Manager at TVN), email message to author, 15 May 2012.

process of domestic adaptation in the area of policy, where the European Union has become a major actor in shaping the national media regulation. The 2004 EU accession resulted in adaptation to the pressures emanating directly from EU membership, namely joining the European single audiovisual market and concomitant unification with 'Television Without Frontiers,' recently renamed the 'Audiovisual Media Services Directive,' which introduces quotas for European productions. For the major players in the Polish market, this structural adaptation is a symbolic one: programming executives at the terrestrial broadcasters do not feel affected by the EU legal requirements. Kozanecka from Polsat claims:

European quotas do not really matter to any of the terrestrial broadcasters because the required amount of European programming is met by domestic, Polish production. The quota does not differentiate between European non-domestic and Polish, and so the manner in which the audiovisual legislature is formulated, makes it easy to meet its requirements. None of the big players worries about that.⁵¹

It is important for our interest in the European programme trade to point out that, despite the removal of trade barriers among member states in order to protect European cultural products, the 'Television Without Frontiers' directive and its quotas do not contribute to the presence of non-domestic European productions on Polish TV screens. The quota compliance is largely achieved with domestic productions, not non-domestic European product. The graphs on scheduled fiction in this article (see Figure 4, 5 and 6) demonstrate that whilst domestic TV fiction dominates prime time, the percentage of non-domestic European fiction is minimal. It can therefore be argued that EU regulations did not create a significant cultural dialogue between Poland and other European countries that would contribute to European TV exchanges (at least in the domain of serialised fiction) and failed to foster inter-European trade. But this is something we already know: the lack of transnational circulation of European works is a striking characteristic of the Western European media landscapes. Bourdon claims that "there are no European programmes reaching a European audience across the continent or even a sizable part of it."⁵² This observation is certainly true for Poland as well.

6 Conclusion

The theorists of post-communist transformation have already concluded, and rightly so, that the processes governing media transformations in Central and Eastern Europe are imitative and mimetic and involve "deliberate copying of Western European arrangements"⁵³ in the field of policy and structures. What is yet to be researched is how this imitative development impacts on the circulation of TV fiction in the Central European region. As we have seen, there is a reason to believe that the mimetic process does not only involve the structural changes but the programming strategies as well. So where does this leave the 'Europeanisation' of the Polish television market? The transplanting of the structural arrangements from Western Europe to its Eastern periphery created comparable circumstances and market forces in both regions. As a result, Poland's television market faced similar challenges to its Western neighbours, which led to a natural repetition of the same processes of TV fiction programming. Interviews with Polish television executives and the schedule analysis reveal that Poland's metaphorical 'return to Europe' is demonstrated not only by following the structural transformation characteristic of Western European countries but by displaying the same transnational trends in TV fiction programming development. The case of Poland, therefore, suggests that the Central and Eastern region is becoming similar to Western Europe – the only difference being that those changes occur with a slight time lag. The Europeanisation of Poland's TV market is therefore a process of reprising the histories of Western European countries, but there is nothing particularly European about that process. The Europeanisation of the Polish television market is not displayed through the presence of European fiction. But ironically the notable

⁵¹ Anna Kozanecka (Head of Film Acquisitions and Programming at Polsat) in discussion with the author, January 2012.

⁵² Bourdon, 'Imperialism,' *op cit*, p. 93.

⁵³ Denis McQuail, 'Introduction: The Current State of Media Governance in Europe,' in Georgios Terzis, ed, *European Media Governance: National and Regional Dimensions*, Intellect, 2008, p. 25.

weakness of fiction imports from European countries in Poland is another similarity between Poland and Western Europe, where the inter-European programme trade is equally weak as those countries rely on their own programming and American imports.

This comparative attempt has shown, that – in a media perspective – Poland, and quite likely other post-Soviet nations, are part of Europe – a geo-cultural region, which is not based of commonalities of language or culture but is united by a set of media regulations, whose TV markets develop in corresponding ways. The barriers dividing Western Europe and Poland in terms of media development have step by step been levelled in the process of European integration. Certainly, as Roberts G. Picard claims “broadcasting in the EU (...) is definitely not the same across countries.”⁵⁴ Television markets vary considerably across national boundaries in response to the particular historical and socio-cultural contexts in which they are located. But some trends in the programming of television, such as the decreasing reliance on American programming, the importance of domestic fiction and the impact of American genres, can be characterised as European-wide phenomena, where European refers both to the Western and Eastern periphery. Andrea Esser (2007) laments the fact that European national television markets are losing their distinctive local character and are undergoing a process of approximation. She expresses a certain amount of concern about the future of the Central European television markets when she says: “I hope the rapidly developing Central and Eastern European markets do not quickly develop such well-trodden paths as the programme buyers in the old EU countries have established and are reluctant to leave.”⁵⁵ The example of Poland shows that this development is already well under way, at least in some countries of the post-Soviet bloc.

The Polish experience might be distinctive in some ways but the observations made here may also correspond to other broadcasters from the region, as all Central and Eastern European nations went through, to a varying degree, similar processes of TV market restructuring. However, and this is an important point, it would be foolish to deny the differences that surely exist within this region. The availability of this text in an open access online environment can help popularise knowledge on the Central and Eastern European TV markets and invite scholars working on the national TV landscapes of other post-Soviet countries to compare and discuss the possible paths of development in the domain of media and TV fiction programming in the region.

Biography

Sylvia Szostak is a Ph.D. candidate in the University of Nottingham's Department of Culture, Film and Media. Her research examines the impact of international media flows on Polish television in the post-Soviet era, with particular attention to the influence of American television fiction. Her work has also appeared in the edited anthology *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism* (ed. Timothy Havens, Anikó Imre and Kati Lustyik).

⁵⁴ Roberts G. Picard, 'Broadcast Economics, Challenges of Scale, and Country Size' in Gregory Ferrell Lowe and Christian S. Nissen, eds., *Small Among Giants: Television broadcasting in Smaller Countries*, Nordicom, 2011, p. 56.

⁵⁵ Andrea Esser, 'Audiovisual Content in Europe: Transnationalization and Approximation,' *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 15, 2, August 2007, 178.

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