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Swiss media landscape in transition

Switzerland is caught in the middle of a geographic zone where a great number of powerful radio and television stations are competing for attention. In most households, 50 or more TV programmes and over 100 radio programmes are available via cable or satellite. The "public service" SBC, the Swiss radio and television company to which SRI belongs, operates in an increasingly diverse media landscape.

The Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) has been in existence since 1931. It was founded a good ten years after the creation of the first radio studios as the "Radio Service" for the whole of Switzerland. From the very beginning, it had to exercise a bracketing function which was very important for federalistic Switzerland.

The SBC is a private organisation and is, therefore, not a state institution. As a public service business it does not pursue a policy of profit. In accordance with the Federal Law on Radio and Television, it must produce and broadcast radio and television programmes in the country's four languages and in doing so take cultural and ethnic diversity into account. The SBC is the umbrella organisation for the whole of Switzerland for regional radio and television company units which operate with a high degree of autonomy for their specific audiences and markets. Even the radio and television service of the Rhaeto-Romanic region of Switzerland has enjoyed an increase in self-determination.

Each regional company unit has its own individual infrastructure: radio studios in Berne, Basle, Zurich, Aarau, Lucerne, Chur, St. Gall, Lausanne, Geneva and Lugano; television studios in Zurich, Geneva and Lugano; Swiss Radio International and the Cable Radio Network (Digit Superradio) in Berne. As the latest addition, the fourth Swiss TV channel

"S-Plus" (now "Schweiz 4" [Switzerland 4]) joined this vast SBC family in the autumn of 1993. Altogether about 4,800 permanent and 900 freelance employees annually produce over 100,000 hours of programmes. 75% of SBC's financing comes from licence fees and from television advertising.

Private radio and TV

In Switzerland there are currently about 40 private local radio and just over a dozen private local television stations. For those stations, which in accordance with the law have to be financed first and foremost by advertising revenue, little Switzerland with its linguistic and cultural diversity presents a difficult terrain. In comparison with neighbouring countries, the Swiss markets are of such modest dimensions that elec-

tronic media financed purely by revenue from advertising can survive only in large urban areas.

Since 1993, SBC has been operating on the basis of a new charter. It allows partnerships with private programme promoters. SBC's partners (primarily large publishers such as Ringier, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Tages-Anzeiger) may contribute specially produced programmes, in particular financial and cultural broadcasts, to the overall service of the recently created 4th television channel "Switzerland 4".

Swiss radio-TV on the international plane

Swiss radio and television has always been international. The medium-wave transmitters of Beromünster, Sottens and Monte Ceneri had barely commenced to operate when they were used by a wide audience throughout Europe. Even today, expatriates in Germany, France and Italy tune in daily to the Swiss medium waves. Switzerland is among those countries which introduced a special foreign programme on

shortwave relatively early on. Today, however, border-crossing medium-wave and intercontinental shortwave broadcasts alone impress no one. In the age of satellites, perfect sound and picture quality and the increasingly efficient telecommunications services, Switzerland must bring new, original and attractive methods into play in order to be taken seriously both at home and abroad.

Satellite presence is on the increase

The Federal Law on Radio and Television is still an inadequate basis for SBC to play a role on the highly competitive international scene. It does provide for an external radio service partly subsidised by the state (SRI has its own licence!) but it leaves international television largely to private initiative.

Despite the legal deficiencies, in recent years SBC has established – in part with financial support by the state – an effective Swiss television presence abroad. To reach German-speaking Europe, it has a share in the satellite programme 3Sat. It contributes to TV5, a French-speaking satellite programme which can be received in Europe, North America, Africa and (soon) Asia. With contributions from Switzerland's Italian-speaking television station, it supplies the satellite programme, RAISAT, which will shortly reach practically all continents. It is represented – and not least with contributions from the modest TV service of SRI – on "Euronews" and numerous other TV networks.

W. Fankhauser,
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SRI's Future Role

SRI is quickly changing from a traditional international radio station into a modern Swiss media organisation, disseminating its services worldwide via shortwave, satellite, cable and other broadcasters. It will remain the only Swiss radio outlet which makes Switzerland accessible in its entirety to an international public. Even in Europe, especially in central and eastern Europe, it will be able to play a valuable role in Switzerland's foreign relations. One of its main tasks will be to be available for the Swiss abroad; no other media and no other programme fulfils their requirements and responds to their particular situation. SRI will promote the image of Switzerland with new services and efficient methods of dissemination and it will, not least thanks to partnerships, contribute more effectively than ever to dialogue between nations in the spirit of an open-minded and cooperative Switzerland. This development is conditional upon a solid financial basis on which competitive programmes as well as appropriate means of dissemination can be planned and realised.

