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The fourth TV channel, S4

Television and national cohesion

A comfortable leisure activity, a destroyer of peace within one's own four walls, an indispensable elixir: all this and much more is represented by television worldwide. In Switzerland it is also an instrument of national cohesion.

The Federal Council's mandate to the Swiss Radio and Television Corporation (SRG) is quite clear. Programmes must be produced which take into account the linguistic and regional communities in our country,

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must provide objective information and must contribute to forging a national identity. These are indeed ambitious objectives. In order to be able to satisfy such high demands the SRG has at its disposal four television channels which can be received across the country.

Three of these are regional: SF DRS in German-speaking Switzerland, TSR in French-speaking Switzerland and TSI in Ticino. The fourth channel, Schweiz 4, after much huffing and puffing is still a bone of contention at the highest level of the SRG. Its ex-director, Dario Robbiani from Ticino, claimed a bridging function between Swiss cultures for "his" channel, while those at the top of the SRG wanted to play the regionalisation card and insisted that the fourth channel concentrate on the German-speaking part. Let's go back to the beginning.

From S Plus to S4

Initially, the fourth country-wide TV channel was used only to broadcast sports events. But four years ago – under the name of S Plus – it was given a comprehensive range and the coveted

target of the youth audience. The result was a giant flop. The number of viewers was so small that the experiment was ended after less than a year.

Out of the ruins of S Plus the S4 channel was started in March 1995. The intention of those responsible was that it should be primarily a "federal" broadcaster. The fact that a representative of a linguistic minority was selected to head it strengthened the idea of a programme accessible to all Swiss. It would transmit something of the French-speaking spirit into Zurich living rooms and the sparkle of Ticino into the hearts of people living along Lake Geneva.

But all this was illusion! Right from the beginning many-people thought

that S4 should be conceived mainly for the Swiss-German market. It

was in this demand that the seeds of the quarrel which recently broke out must be found. And the fact that the new channel was the result of cooperation between a public body and private producers also played a part in the conflict between idealism and realism, i.e. between heart and purse. "Presse-TV", a publishing pool made up of Ringier, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Basler Zeitung and German production company DCTP, always had the Swiss-German market most in view because of its population density

and consequent attraction for advertisers.

Dario Robbiani was able to announce with satisfaction that the viewing figures had already this year reached the 4% mark aimed for in 1997, but the SRG financial guardians looked at the costs involved with a jaundiced eye, since annual expenditure of Sfr. 50 million was matched by only Sfr. 2 million income. Behind the open hand the question was being very seriously asked whether such expenditure was reasonable.

Change of course demanded

An answer which could not be misunderstood was provided by a confidential paper pleading for a change of course. SRG management, Swiss-German television and the publishing pool were unanimous in their desire for a regionalisation of S4. But Robbiani was not prepared to take this in silence. The result was that he was accused of "indiscretion" by discussing the confidential SRG paper in public, leading to his dismissal without notice.

What happens next? SRG has assured Ticino and French-speaking Switzerland that for them little will change. But in German-speaking Switzerland Schweiz 4 will be turned into a channel which supplements SF DRS. Its aim will be to attract new segments of viewers, returning to the target of children and young people, thus attracting more advertising. The new structure of the second German-language channel will include, besides its own productions, television and feature films and game shows. Cooperation with the private "Presse-TV" will be continued, but it is not yet known quite what the conditions will be.

One thing is certain, however: even national cohesion has its price. ■

