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“The national institution of equilibrium”

The Swiss Broadcasting Corporation, or SRG as it is known in German, is extremely popular and its radio and TV programmes are highly regarded in Switzerland. The mandate and political control of SRG, seen as an identity-shaping institution for generations, are the subject of fierce debate. By Hanspeter Spörri

The media influence thoughts and feelings and evoke mental images and moods that become part of our memories, fusing with personal experiences and shaping how we see eras in retrospect. When I was allowed to spend the night in my grandparents' living room in the early 1960s, I would wake up to a world of sputniks, summits and nuclear bomb tests when my grandmother switched on the radio at six in the morning and Radio Beromünster began broadcasting. From my bed I watched the “magic eye” come to life: two green compartments opened up and became lighter and lighter before forming a circle. This indicated that the station was properly tuned in. I was unable to explain it at the time, but the magic eye seemed to pierce the dawn in the room and look directly into my childish dreams and nightmares.

These were tense times. The Second World War was still fresh in the memory of the adults. Many had also lived through the First World War and most feared the outbreak of a third, perhaps final, war. During the Cuban Missile Crisis in autumn 1962, the family gathered at 6.15 a.m. to listen to the news bulletin from the Swiss National News Agency (De peschenagentur). I can still hear the solemn-sounding voice.

The radio also shaped our outlook on the world with its evening broadcast “Echo der Zeit”. Heiner Gautschy, with his distinctive voice, read the news and reported on Kennedy's proclamation that the USA would land a man on the moon in less than ten years, on the Soviet missile bases found on

Cuba and on the sea blockade imposed by the USA. The family regarded these reports as objective despite their being highly emotive and, as a result, even more powerful than the TV images of that time. Many Swiss people shared their shock at the assassination of the US President on 22 November 1963 with Gautschy.

Intellectual aristocrat appointed head of SRG

The media report on contradictory facts and different viewpoints, conflicts and clashes of interest in the same way today as they did then. They explore events through analysis or comment and they compete for attention, circulation and audience figures. They are therefore sometimes exposed to severe criticism themselves. In Switzerland, this is particularly true of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation, which was founded in 1931 as the “Schweizerische Rundpruchgesell-

schaft”. SRG, often labelled a state broadcaster by critics, is actually an association currently made up of 20,000 members from all linguistic regions. Anyone can join its various regional companies. These are the trustees for 18 radio and eight TV stations. With over 6,000 employees, SRG is by far the largest electronic media firm in Switzerland.

Roger de Weck has been the head of the corporation since the start of 2011. The new Director General used to be a journalist and editor-in-chief at the “Tagesanzeiger” newspaper in Zurich and the “Zeit” publication in Hamburg. De Weck, who comes from an aristocratic Fribourg family of bankers, has taken clear stands in recent years as a columnist with the “Sonntagszeitung”. He opposed the initiative to ban minarets and never concealed his support for closer ties between Switzerland and the European Union. “It is not in the interests of small and medium-sized countries to make the nation the



A family in front of their radio – a photograph from 1936

measure of all things”, he wrote several days before his appointment as SRG Director General. Supporters of the nationalist-conservative camp, in particular representatives of the Swiss People’s Party (SVP), subsequently saw this as a declaration of war.

Two new heads

De Weck’s appointment also came as a surprise to media analysts. Prior to his appointment, he was not even treated as a potential candidate publicly. It was expected that somebody with business management experience would be thrust into the high-profile position – the SRG Director General is also responsible for the planning and implementation of savings measures.

Rudolf Matter took up his position as Director of SRF, the subsidiary for German-speaking Switzerland, at the same time as de Weck. He too has a journalistic background. Matter has been branded a “super director” because he is responsible for both radio and television. SRG’s radio and television companies were merged at the start of the year as part of a convergence process.

Matter’s predecessor as head of television, Ingrid Deltenre, did not have any journalistic experience. She was constantly criticised, and not always unjustly, for focusing too heavily on viewing figures and for allowing SRG’s channels to become too lightweight and similar to German commercial private

broadcasters. Matter wants to set a different tone. He says that he will also accept a slight drop in audience figures, that relevance rather than sensationalism will take priority, citing as an example the issues featured on “Arena”, the primarily political debate show broadcast every Friday.

Schawinski’s talk show

However, Matter has caused a sensation of his own by appointing Roger Schawinski, the media entrepreneur, one-time pirate radio operator and founder of “Radio 24”, as the presenter of a new talk show. The 65-year-old, who created and produced the consumer show “Kassensturz” on Swiss TV in the 1970s, turned the Swiss media landscape upside down around 1980 with his illegal private radio station, whose transmission equipment was located on a 3000-metre-high mountain in Italy, and forced the licensing of local radio that was financed by advertising. In recent years, he has positioned himself as a vehement critic of SRG and its monopoly on national television. He conducted a private war with de Weck’s predecessor, Armin Walpen, a rough-and-ready man from Valais, who was seen as a power monger. Commenting on Schawinski’s appointment, Matter said: “A prodigal son is returning home.”

However, Karl Lüönd of the “Tagesanzeiger”, who is seen as the grand old man



Roger de Weck, SRG Director General since January 2011

of Swiss journalism, believes that de Weck and Matter’s sensational appointment of Schawinski has embarrassingly sent out the “wrong signal”. To pronounce this often “poorly prepared and obscenely aggressive egotist” as “Switzerland’s finest interviewer” is an affront to SRG employees. Allowing him to return to much-berated SRG shows “poor instinct” for which there is no reasonable explanation. Lüönd then poses a venomous question: “Does this figure represent a new form of nepotism at SRG?”

This may also be interpreted as a tit-for-tat response as, shortly beforehand, Schawinski had accused Lüönd of being in his paymaster’s pocket, having been commissioned by Blocher’s Ems-Chemie to write a favourable company history in book form which was published in “Weltwoche” as an advance publication without any reference to the contractual relationship. However, Lüönd’s accusation of nepotism refers to a pre-existing close relationship between de Weck, Schawinski and Matter, who once lived or worked in Berlin at the same time and apparently became friends.

The SVP, the party with the largest share of the vote, issued an ironic press release on the matter. It said that with the “purchase” of Roger Schawinski a long-standing critic of state TV had been silenced with licence payers’ money



“Unter uns gesagt” on 4 March 1978 with Federal Councillor Kurt Furgler (r) and author Max Frisch became legendary. The presenter was Heiner Gautschy.



Rudolf Matter, Director of SRF

and a figure who clearly expresses what he thinks of the nation's best-supported party, that is to say not a lot, had been appointed as the new political presenter. The SVP therefore demanded: "To ensure that having a presenter with such strong political views does not constantly violate the licence in the area of diversity and neutrality, Swiss television should now invite an SVP representative as a guest on all Schawinski's talk shows to balance the scales."

Cultural battle over "Arena"

Like de Weck, Matter has also wasted no time in antagonising the nationalist-conservative camp, in particular the SVP. The main reason is his criticism of "Arena", German-speaking Switzerland's leading political debate show. According to Matter, more time has been dedicated to confrontation between left and right – in other words, between the Social Democratic Party (SP) and the Swiss People's Party (SVP) – than has been objectively justifiable. He is calling for the show to also cover alternative, solution-oriented viewpoints because solutions to complex political issues in Parliament have often been found through the involvement of the centre parties.

At the end of 2009, the "NZZ am Sonntag" calculated that the SVP had in fact been invited onto "Arena" more often than any other party. SVP representatives appeared precisely 29 times as main guests in 2009; in addition, there were three appearances by the ultraconservative former EDU National Councillor, Christian Waber, who belonged to the SVP faction for a period. And Roger Köppel, editor-in-chief of "Weltwoche", which largely represents SVP views, was invited on three times. The other parties lag behind by some margin: the SP provided 22 "Arena" guests, the FDP 18, the

CVP 17 and the Greens six. The politician who received the most invitations was Christoph Blocher, former Federal Councillor and father figure of the SVP. He alone made five appearances on the show. The presenter, Reto Brennwald, was also continually reproached for a lack of distance from the SVP, even within television circles.

The SVP and its strategist, Blocher, therefore found an ideal platform in "Arena". They won popularity not in spite of the "state broadcaster", which they constantly criticised, but very probably because of SRG's stations. However, Brennwald has now been replaced as presenter.

Where does Switzerland's strength lie?

The SVP has made radical demands concerning the future of SRG. It is calling for "a drastic cut in the range of stations within ten years, with strict restrictions on this public service and a limit to one radio and TV station per linguistic region in addition to corresponding licence fee reductions". "Weltwoche" is supporting its SVP friends with a campaign against left-leaning SRG, denouncing, in typical fashion, the "antidemocratic roots of Roger de Weck", whose devout Catholic family still supports a form of rule that despises and disenfranchises the people. Previous generations obeyed Rome, today's worships Brussels, it continues.

"Who will stop Roger de Weck?" asks editor-in-chief Roger Köppel in one of his "Weltwoche" editorials. He says that Switzerland's strength lies in "open debate and the exchange and assertion of opinions". He claims that de Weck and Matter, the radio and television director appointed by him, want to prevent a "robust political contest" and are "focusing on staging a contrived harmony that does not exist in real Switzerland".

Roger de Weck has not picked up the gauntlet and has refrained from becoming directly involved in the new cultural battle. In an interview with the NZZ, he said: "Our task is to reflect political affairs and not to shape them. SRG journalists should convey polarisation objectively and not add to it for the sake of sensationalism." De Weck sees SRG as "a national institution of equilibrium". He feels that the secret to Switzerland's success is its consideration for minority opinion and constant efforts to achieve a balance of interests. He says that SRG embodies this spirit. Its associative structure assures that it remains independent and not controlled by

political parties, as is the case with Germany's public service broadcaster, "saying nothing of Sarkozy and Berlusconi". De Weck also highlights the "Swiss solidarity" exemplified by SRG. Without this neither French-speaking Switzerland nor Ticino would have radio and TV stations on an equal footing with those in German-speaking Switzerland. Of the CHF 462 generated annually by the licence fee, CHF 202 goes to French, Italian and Romansh-speaking Switzerland.

This is of little interest to the SVP, which is attempting to repress SRG and working hard to strengthen its influence over the media and editorial offices. Following a change of ownership, the "Basler Zeitung" recently fell into its sphere of influence and the once left-liberal "Weltwoche" went over to the nationalist-conservative camp some years ago following several changes of ownership with unclear financial ties.

Decades of conflict

The current wrangling in media politics about the definition and scope of public service broadcasting is taking place at a time already marked by major upheaval. In place of the magic eye on yesteryear's radio set, today there are user interfaces, serving as access portals to a vast number of communication and distribution channels, social networks and communities. Countless magic eyes are now looking directly into our private domain.

"The use of the media is changing rapidly and radically", Rudolf Matter told the specialist media publication "Edito" prior to his appointment. He said: "The reach of radio and television is diminishing. We are seeing rapid growth in multimedia." There can be no doubt that Matter is also thinking of expanding the online services of radio and TV. This is angering the President of the Association of Swiss Media, the former Association of Newspaper Publishers. Hanspeter Lebrument, publisher and chairman of the Board of Directors of Südostschweiz-Medien-gruppe AG in Chur, is calling for an online advertising ban for SRG, arguing that "online is the future of private media". The SVP does not regard Internet services as within the public service remit either. Indeed Blocher's party goes even further. It is calling for SRG to surrender frequencies and radio stations that do not provide a public service, such as special-interest stations, to the private sector.

Two partially overlapping lines of conflict can be identified in the media industry. On the one hand, there is a struggle over the distribution of advertising revenues and the division of roles for individual media between private media companies and SRG. Compromise solutions have always been found in the past because the media companies as well had no interest in the complete liberalisation and privatisation of electronic media – this would also have meant new international competition. On the other hand, there is debate over the journalistic quality and political orientation of electronic media, in other words the political control of SRG. These conflicts are exacerbated by the egos at management level in the media companies. Journalistic and publishing heavyweights, such as Roger Schawinski, Roger Köppel, Frank A. Meyer, SVP National Councillor Christoph Mörgeli and president of newspaper publishers Hanspeter Lebrument, write venomously and often express themselves in a self-opinionated and self-righteous way.

A look at history shows that the conflict of economic interests between publishing companies and SRG – mainly funded by the licence fee (currently CHF 1.1 billion a year) – has always existed. Radio is having a seriously detrimental impact on the interests of the press, wrote the Association of Newspaper Publishers at the beginning of the 1930s

in correspondence with the supervisory authority of the day, the Telegraph Directorate. The publishers believed that radio news should remain just “a supplement to the daily newspaper to prepare for and encourage” the reading of newspapers. The Swiss National News Agency, which produced the news for Swiss radio until the 1960s, was also a member of the Association of Newspaper Publishers. At the start of the Second World War, the NZZ wrote: “The press forms opinion in the democratic state (...) The shorter and more concise radio news is, the more it contributes to maintaining spiritual and political equilibrium.” (*)

Suspected of being leftist

The political conflict has been fought from the outset with varying degrees of intensity depending on the overall political situation. The Association of Swiss Television and Radio, formed in January 1974 and also known as the “Hofer Club”, set itself the task of “tackling the misuse of the television and radio monopoly in terms of information and programme policy”, as it was no longer acceptable that “the media monopoly influences large sections of the population ideologically in a way that not everyone recognises and defames our economic and social system, often severely, through a one-sided selection of news and clearly left-leaning programmes without any reply”. (*)

“Weltwoche” recently presented a similar argument, claiming that the majority of employees at Swiss TV were left-wing. It called for all SRG employees to declare any party membership. However, even “Weltwoche” conceded that most of SRF’s reports were of excellent quality. It said: “The question is whether appropriate attention is given to balance for a monopoly broadcaster. SRF has the power to set the agenda in the nation and determines the political debate.”

It sounds as though there is a hint of resignation among the critics. It is difficult to get the better of SRG. It does its job well, especially in view of the diverse and contradictory requirements of the public. SRG programmes are popular. In republican Switzerland, television stars take on the role performed by the royals in the UK. With love affairs, children and fashion, they gladly provide daily material for the gossip columns and commuter papers. The German Swiss public used SRF’s services for 14.4 hours a week on average in 2010, so before the merger. In television, it occupied 32.6 percent of market share. Its dominance was even greater in radio with 61.7 percent of all listeners tuning into an SRF station. And SRF is aware of its value. Its homepage says that it is “deeply rooted in society” and serves the public with its diverse and high-quality programmes. That is difficult to argue with.

(*) Quotes from: Radio und Fernsehen in der Schweiz, Verlag hier + jetzt, 2000, Baden.



For the political parties, the show “Arena” is the ideal stage for self-promotion and is criticised or praised accordingly. On 16 May 2008, Federal Councillor Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf took on Christoph Blocher