

“European Original Fiction”: A National Resource and Different Ways of Self-Representation

Celestino Spada
Universities of Florence and Rome, Italy

Abstract: Original television fiction that has been created at a national and regional level plays a leading role in European countries. This paper presents research on the editorial strategies, cultural indicators, and scheduling of new fiction productions on national television networks in some of Western Europe's major countries during the second half of the 1990s. The reasons behind Western Europe's strategic choices in national television production are related to the recent history of European broadcasting, the present audiovisual landscape of these countries, the role of commercial and public service television companies, and the values of the producers and professionals behind the productions. These factors are today converging towards a greater importance for national television production in Europe.

Résumé: À la télévision, les fictions originales créées aux niveaux nationaux et régionaux jouent un rôle clé dans certains pays européens. Cet article présente des recherches sur les stratégies créatives, les indicateurs culturels, et la programmation de nouvelles productions fictives aux réseaux de télévision nationaux dans quelques-uns des plus grands pays de l'Europe de l'Ouest pendant la seconde moitié des années quatre-vingt-dix. Dans ces pays, les choix stratégiques faits en produisant des émissions nationales ont comme influence: le paysage audiovisuel actuel dans chaque pays; l'histoire récente de la radiodiffusion européenne; le rôle des compagnies de télévision commerciales et publiques; et les valeurs des producteurs et des professionnels qui créent ces émissions. Ces facteurs convergent aujourd'hui pour donner plus d'importance à la production télévisuelle nationale en Europe.

Eurofiction: A European panel

The production of national television programming in Western Europe has been the focus of Eurofiction, a network of five research teams, each operating as an observatory in its own country, based on an agreed upon and homogenous methodological framework. Eurofiction has now been in operation for a five-year period, providing researchers with enough data to study and evaluate television production at the European level. The research teams include: for Italy, G. Bech-

Celestino Spada teaches at the Universities of Florence and Rome. He can be contacted at: Via Silvio Pellico, 24; 00195 Roma, Italy. E-mail: spacel@tiscalinet.it

Canadian Journal of Communication, Vol 27 (2002) 197-207

©2002 Canadian Journal of Communication Corporation

elloni and M. Buonanno, University of Florence (who are also the promoters and co-ordinators of Eurofiction); for France, INA (R. Chaniac, J. P. Jézéquel) and CSA (M. A. Cajuero); for Great Britain, BFI (co-ordinator R. Paterson); for Germany, G. Hallenberger (University of Siegen); and for Spain, a research team co-ordinated by L. Vilches (Universidad Autònoma de Barcelona). These researchers monitor the annual first-run offering of original television fiction on the main national networks in these countries and the results of their data are published by the European Audiovisual Observatory in Strasbourg in its *Statistical Yearbook*. Since 1996, teams of researchers from Russia, Switzerland, Denmark, and the Netherlands have also contributed national surveys.

Eurofiction provides quantitative and, so to say, “personal” data of this fiction, nation by nation. Since 1996 the hours, titles, formats (television movies, miniseries, series, sit-coms, serials, collections), number of episodes, and their time slots in the program schedules of each television station have been recorded. An economic evaluation of the productions offered in 1999, also edited by the European Audiovisual Observatory, has also been conducted.

The Eurofiction data is not merely quantitative, it considers national fiction production within the actual context of overall television communication. Every year about 5,000 first-run hours of original television fiction are offered in the five countries. This production is examined within the context of the total offering of fiction by the same networks—including reruns and imported fiction that are not considered by the Eurofiction survey—which amounts roughly to 50,000 hours. The research also considers the broadcaster’s time slots chosen for original fiction within their schedules: most of the titles are offered in prime time and receive a warm welcome by the audience as indicated by broadcast ratings and shares. The editorial choices of network managers are essential in providing a central role to national programming.

Some cultural indicators of original European fiction

What does the production of European national fiction have to do with culture and social cohesion? In addition to quantitative and personal data, Eurofiction has collected various cultural indicators of national fiction stories produced in the five countries: time, place, environment, and main characters. Table 1 presents the main features of the fiction stories in France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Spain based on these cultural indicators. As noted, with minor differences in degree and quality, stories mainly happen in the present time, they take place in the same country, and they are generally metropolitan or urban. Marketing motives have pushed towards a mixed or group protagonist, which offers opportunities of projection/identification to different socio-demographic segments of the audience in the same time unit. There has also been a decline in the prevalence of male heroes by the appearance of leading female characters.

While Table 1 shows the data for 1998, these results have been substantially steady over the years. On this basis, we can say that in every European country national television fiction shows mainly contemporary situations and relationships among people living in a context familiar to the viewers, allowing them to

Table 1: General Cultural Indicators for Television Fiction in France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Spain (Eurofiction 1998)

	France	Germany	Italy	U.K.	Spain
Time					
Present	86%	97%	90%	92%	100%
Past	12%	2%	8%	7%	N/A
Mixed/other	2%	1%	2%	1%	N/A
Place					
National	80%	86%	91%	96%	100%
Abroad/International	18%	8%	7%	4%	N/A
Other/n.a.	2%	6%	2%	N/A	N/A
Environment					
Metropolitan	15%	70%	79%	47%	69%
Urban	35%	6%	10%	30%	18%
Rural	41%	13%	4%	19%	8%
Mixed/other	9%	11%	7%	4%	5%
Main Character					
Male	19%	13%	18%	12%	13%
Group m	N/A	3%	N/A	4%	6%
Female	18%	8%	11%	7%	3%
Group f	N/A	7%	N/A	4%	2%
Mixed/choric	63%	68%	71%	72%	76%
Other	N/A	1%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Tot. episodes	612	2,715	378	2,286	1,424

identify themselves with the characters, their problems, hopes, difficulties, suffering, expectations, loves, and so forth. Through these stories (crime, action, comedy, hospital and detective stories, etc.)—which are very successful in terms of prime time audiences in all five countries—artists and producers help viewers reflect and challenge their private and social realities through shared experiences and the building of bridges between individuals (immigrants, drop-outs, sick individuals, old people, poor people, etc.), neighbourhoods, communities, and the world. The positive and the negative (organized crime, racism, anti-Semitism, human trade, and so on) sides of modern society are all brought to light.

Some television programming examples that are successful in various European countries include soap operas like Britain's *Coronation Street* and the *East-Enders* as well as the drama *Inspector Morse*—all well known in English-speaking countries, especially the U.K. The television series *Octopus* is popular in Italy; *Derrick* and the first true Eurofiction success, *Ein fall für Zwei*, *Der Alte*, originate from Germany; *Navarro* and *Julie Lescaut* have gained fame in France; and *Médico de familia* e *Nissaga de poder* are Spanish television success stories.

Research on fiction and, particularly, cultural studies research (conducted, for instance, by Elihu Katz, David Morley, Tamar Liebes, Sonia Livingston, and Horace Newcomb) tell us that these television fiction programs, as well as other forms of storytelling, represent, in every country, themes an audience can relate to in their own contemporary world. Obviously, television programs are not mirrors, but choose certain elements, certain cultural indicators, revising them to suit genre conventions, narrative formulas, and programming styles.

One could ask whether or not national television fiction is building and strengthening national communities in Western Europe, and whether or not sharing television experiences reinforces social cohesion. Unfortunately a “yes” answer would be very weakly supported by our research because the Eurofiction survey is not designed to specifically address this kind of question, and because it is not clear whether there is a connection between people who watch the same programs (or how such a connection might be constituted), even when there is a large television audience base in either case—popular national or foreign fiction. These questions are obviously very difficult to answer. Nevertheless, if culture plays a role in the social fabric of communities and nations, we cannot deny that original (national) television fiction, with its cultural indicators, its prominent presence in program schedules, and its mass communication processes throughout the main European countries, is a primary aspect of this fabric, at least in terms of television scheduling supported by a mass audience.

Europe 1980–90: The end of the public service monopoly and the arrival of commercial broadcasting

Although we should be cautious when considering the cultural role of television fiction featuring original content in Europe, we should also be conscious of the present situation of mass culture in these countries, which has been impacted by the great transformation of broadcasting over the past 20 years. During this period, the public service monopoly came to an end and commercial broadcasting was born. As commercial broadcasting grew, it caused a series of social crises. Internally, it broke up a consistency of systems that were genetically linked to national identity, culture, memory, mission, and language.

The more channels that became available meant fewer national programs with original content were used. A gap ensued that was filled with products acquired on the international market. It is well known that to buy costs far less than to produce and that having fewer costs puts broadcasters in a better position to deal with the increasing demand for programs. In every national market—which in Europe pertains to linguistic markets—a structural imbalance occurred.

Italy 1970–90: The audiovisual Far West and a European laboratory of commercial broadcasting

Italy has been a pioneer of commercial broadcasting because its public service monopoly was dissolved in the late 1970s. The Italian data highlight the settling of commercial networks and the transformation of the entire system (see Table 2). The data shows two television groups, one public (Rai), one private (Fininvest/

Table 2: Original Programs and Acquisitions in the Transmission of Public and Commercial Networks in Italy, 1990 and 1998 (in hours)

	1990		1998	
	Rai*	Fininvest	Rai*	Mediaset
Original programs				
News/Information**	2,862	1,882	4,623	5,676
Programs** (entertainment, game shows, music, magazines, drama, theatre, youth and children's programs, religion, education)	6,194	4,624	9,725	5,136
Italian fiction, films, cartoons	182	161	644	1,255
Sport	2,100	929	2,072	532
Teleselling				455
Total original programs	10,348	7,596	17,064	13,057
Total acquisitions (film, TV movies, TV fiction, cartoons, etc.)	5,674	13,358	6,991	13,223
Total transmission	18,377	20,954	26,006	26,280

Note: Reruns are included.

* Advertising and promos are not included in Rai data

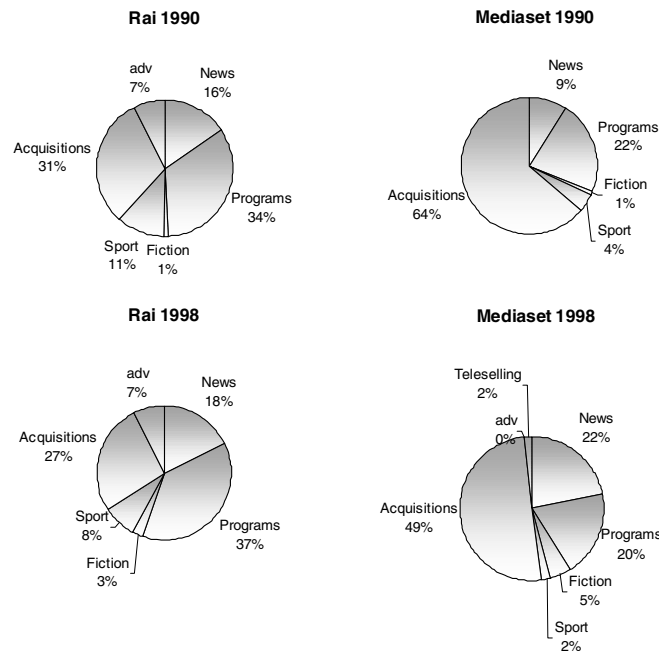
**The two groups adopt different criteria to class programs of these macro-genres

Sources: Rai, Fininvest-Mediaset, Osservatorio della fiction italiana (OFI) Il Campo

Mediaset), with three channels each, offering low-cost programs of drama, entertainment, and narrative genres that prevailed throughout 1990. In-house productions included a growing amount of talk shows, game shows, and new programs marked by the blurring of traditional television genres into new entertainment formats (like the magazine program called *Contentitore* [container]), which characterized the flow of day-time programming. These two groups made foreign programming purchases that included mostly feature films and long serials, which were offered at every hour of the day and night. Other programming acquisitions included cartoons for children and young people. (Note: data are comprehensive of reruns and, for commercial networks, of advertising and promos too, which are not considered for public service channels.)

The share of films, television fiction, and cartoons in commercial networks amounts to more than 60% of the average programming offered on the three channels, one of which offered nearly 90% of these genres. This programming roughly emulates the homogenous and global network model that was successful in Europe during this time frame, their formats and communication structures similar, if not identical.

Over the years, while this network model was collecting advertising resources and audience, the commercial networks were offering a greater amount of original programs. In every country, the "domestication" (as it was called) of schedules was being carried out. Figure 1 shows how both public and private broadcasting networks enlarged their original programming transmissions during the 1990s. Both Rai and Mediaset increased their original programs (with a lot of

Figure 1: Program Offerings of Rai and Mediaset, 1990 and 1998

reruns and many doubts about the classification of certain programs), and the share of acquisitions was reduced in the program offerings of commercial networks.

Europe 1980–90: A continental market for American films and television fiction

The data in Table 3 indicate how much, on the whole, the offering of European television networks (both old and new) was depending on the import of audiovisual products by the end of the 1990s. The data, from 1997, was compiled by the European Audiovisual Observatory and covers 99 television channels in the European Union countries. If considered as a unit, the broadcasting of television fiction in Western Europe in 1997 seems to be a continental market for U.S. serial programming and, in Southern Europe countries, for Brazilian programming.

In every European national market, these “global” productions are confronted by “local” productions, which are mainly national or, as they say, domestic. So domestic in fact that it is rare for a successful national fiction program to succeed in other European countries. Intra-Europe trade of fictional programs shows very low figures although no research has been conducted to date as to why domestic fiction does not succeed in other European countries.

Table 4 shows the 1997 market share data for national and U.S. films in the European Union (EUR 15). It seems clear that in every European country the

national film production industry has a market to conquer: its own, both at the box offices and on television screens. These statistics make us appreciate why it is very important that numerous high-quality attractive original television fiction programs are made available in European countries every year and that strategies of offering them to the large television audiences are in place.

Table 3: Country of Origin of Television Fiction Acquisitions on 99 Television Networks in the European Union, 1997

European Countries and Co-productions	%	Extra-Europe Countries	%
France	2.3	USA	71.3
Germany	1.6	Canada	1.7
Great Britain	5.0	Japan	0.7
Italy	1.0	Australia/New Zealand	3.1
Other Europeans	1.6	Others	1.6
European co-productions	4.4	Origin not identified	3.3
Co-productions EU/Rest of the World	2.0		
International co-productions	0.4		
Total	18.3	Total	81.7

Table 4: Market Shares of National and U.S. Films in the European Union Admissions, 1997 (EUR 15)

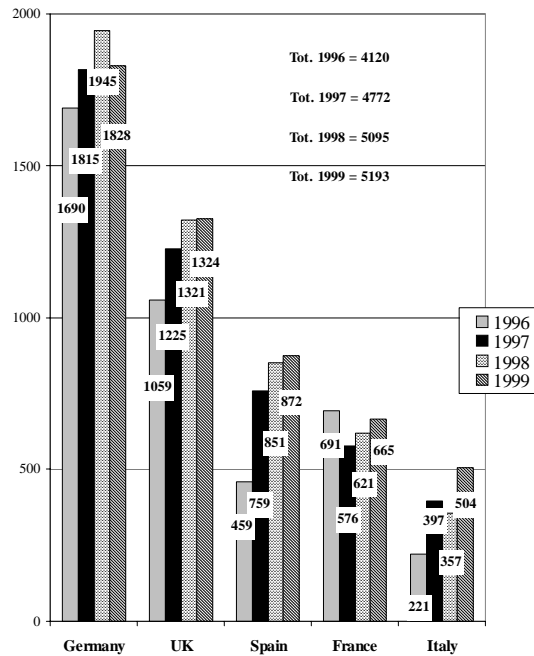
Country of Production	%
United States	63.5
France	8.9
United Kingdom	4.4
Germany	3.2
Italy	1.9
Other Europeans	1.6
Rest of the World	1.3
Co-productions United States–Europe	6.9
Co-productions Europe–Europe	3.9
Co-productions Europe–Rest of the World	0.2
Total	95.8

Source: European Audiovisual Observatory

1996–99: Eurofiction data

Data collected by Eurofiction during the last four years tracks original television fiction and its airtime. Figure 2 shows the total amount of hours produced and broadcast in five European countries: France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. Each country is significantly different. The main producers are Germany and the United Kingdom. Germany is the largest national community

Figure 2: Television Fiction in Germany, the United Kingdom, Spain, France, and Italy in Hours, 1996–99



Note: If TV Autonòmica is included in the numbers for Spain, the offer comes up to 1,466, which brings the overall European fiction to 5,787 hours.

and linguistic market on the Continent with several commercial channels, large private libraries, and a powerful public regional network. The United Kingdom is the centre of the largest linguistic world market, and the home of many private regional companies and independent film and video producers. Peculiar to Spain are original fiction programs characterized by long serials and a large collection of comedies, which are produced by both the national as well as the regional/national channels. The French and Italian data show the weight of television-movies and miniseries in the total output, as a result of the traditional confrontation between cinema and television, which has led to rules about quotas and to the obligation for the public service and commercial networks to invest part of their revenues in production.

Figure 3 and Figure 4 provide some information about the context for the original fiction offered in the program schedules. These data are the results of a survey of the total fiction programming offered in two sample weeks in 1999. (Over the years we have verified that sample methods are substantially trustworthy.) Over the day, or better of 24 hours, we can see the huge weight of imports and reruns: up to 80%.

Figure 3: Origin of Television Fiction in Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Spain (Sample Week 1999)

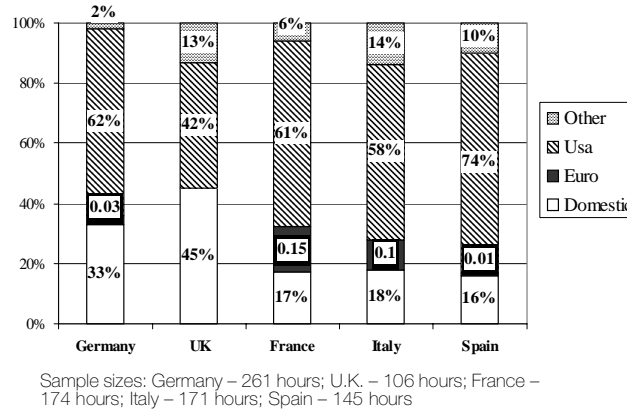


Figure 4: Origin of Television Fiction in Prime Time in Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Spain (Sample Week 1999)

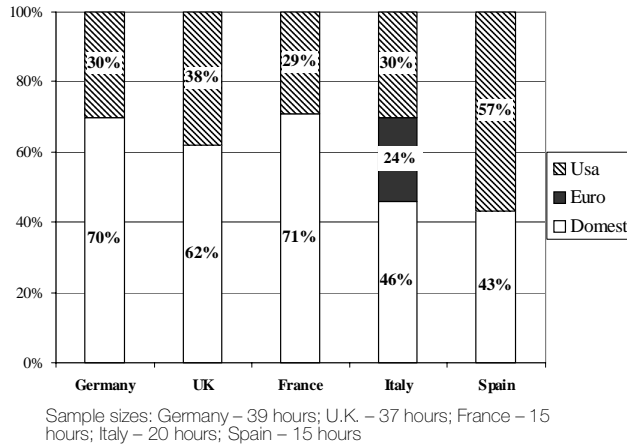
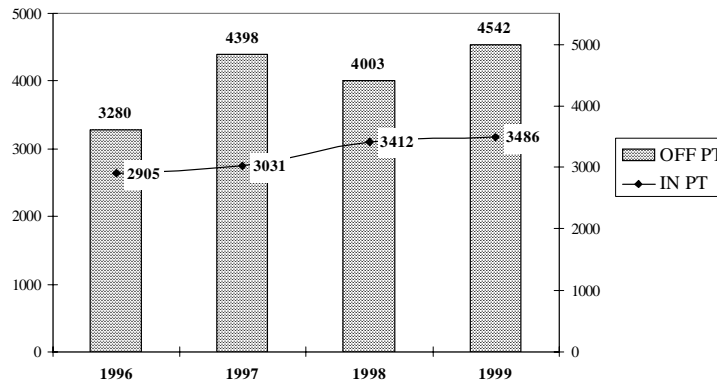


Figure 5 shows what is common to the editorial choices of networks of the five countries concerning original television fiction: it is mainly produced for prime time, the potential largest audiences. The economical rationale is clear: the major production costs have to be compensated for by major advertising revenues and/or in major audiences for public services. The importance of original fiction in the editorial choices of public and private networks in every country is evident. It is not surprising that one of the results of such a competition in prime time has been a reduction of available time slots for imported fiction and feature films, even blockbusters.

**Figure 5: Original Television Fiction Episodes
In and Off Prime Time, 1996-99**



Some reasons for the national and regional recovery of television fiction

There are many different reasons for the increased attention to fiction even though entertainment or information programming is ever appealing as low-budget alternatives. These reasons are all convergent.

- There is a great need for a television genre of an original nature, namely fiction, which has the potential to become economically viable because there has been more than a decade of alluvial offerings of purchased series, serials, and television movies which are both inflated and repetitive and aired on the same networks. Original productions, if successful, have the ability to become quality brand names sought after by networks, an economical plus for broadcasters.
- The increased costs of production and acquisitions of blockbusters and successful feature films on the international market are making the production costs of local fiction competitive, particularly low cost sit-coms and serials.
- An audience migration toward pay-television which features popular genres such as sports (notably soccer) intensifies the competition between traditional broadcasters, public and commercial. The production of original fiction, largely targeting female audiences, is an integral part of a defensive strategy aimed at better rooting networks' images with their audiences.
- Resources collected by public or commercial broadcasters and used for original production at a national or a local level, rather than programming purchases on the international market, meets with social, cultural, and political consensus. Most of all, productions created locally are considered a good sign of development versus a merely consumer economy in the audiovisual field.

- The national film industry crisis which is occurring in nearly all European countries makes television production a vital opportunity for authors, directors, actors, and independent producers. The life and future of these professionals who have specific skills and know-how, as well as the existence of technical/production resources, are at stake in the European audiovisual and editorial industries.

Conclusion

Two points must be stressed: the roles of television companies and of institutions. On the basis of the data and reflections submitted above, there are difficulties keeping this paper within the panel framework of "citizen versus consumer." This difficulty lies in the nature and characteristics of fiction products, as cultural indicators have summarily shown us, and from company and editorial strategies.

Today, in every European country, public interest goals with regard to these products are shared and pursued by both public and commercial television channels. Corporate and production problems are common to public service and commercial networks of traditional broadcasting, although this does not mean that there are no differences, even major ones, in editorial choices and in programming offered by public and private channels; but they often do not coincide with the values and alternatives traditionally associated with these adjectives. It is now common practice for "public service" programs to be produced by commercial channels (as in France where Gerard Depardieu's *The Count of Monte Cristo* was funded by TF1). On the other hand, on the same qualitative level, public service channels rarely offer series of such a high quality.

The second point concerns the role of public institutions and of broadcasting laws. It must be stressed that in every European country there is a mixed public/private system of national broadcasting. Therefore, broadcasting rules and public choices are not aimed at just one of the competitors in a field where the stakes are high—the existence of original productions in their own national and linguistic market—and all initiatives have good public consideration if conducted with this objective in mind. In closing, it is enough to remind ourselves that in Great Britain the obligation, for both the BBC and ITV, is to fuel at least 25% of their time slots with programming produced by independent producers, a policy introduced by Mrs. Thatcher in the 1980s. And today in Spain—more precisely in Catalonia—joint ventures are studied and carried out between regional and national public channels and, for example, a European global private group such as the Dutch company Endemol.

