[CH] Federal Council report on public-service electronic media

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On 17 June 2016 the Federal Council published a much awaited report on the public-service electronic media. The report will be discussed in the Federal Parliament in the autumn, in a particularly tense political climate as the Swiss broadcasting company (Société Suisse de Radiodiffusion et Télévision - SSR) is being severely criticised regarding its funding and its mission as a public-service broadcaster.

The report begins by analysing the evolution of the audiovisual public service and the offer and consumption of electronic media in Switzerland. It also presents the technological, economic, legal, and financial framework in which the SSR and the private radio and television broadcasters operate. The Federal Council noted in particular that the public service has to face major challenges and substantial changes due to the digitisation and structural change affecting the media. Also, the Swiss market is too small for it to be possible to use only income from advertising to fund the production of television programmes and to meet the requirements of a quality public service. The Federal Council therefore was of the view that a licence fee remains essential if the economic and political independence of the public service in Switzerland is to be preserved.

The SSR currently receives most of the amount raised by the licence fee; the private broadcasters each receive approximately 4 to 6 per cent of the total. According to the Federal Council, it is essential for the SSR to be large enough to enable Switzerland to have the advantage of a quality audiovisual offer, capable of standing up to competition from foreign channels. Although audiences appreciate the SSR’s own programmes, the proportion of the programmes it broadcasts that are produced by foreign television channels exceeds 60 per cent. Furthermore, a large number of foreign channels broadcast advertising directed at the Swiss market, accounting for 40 per cent of commercial revenue for television.

The report goes on to present the future guidelines the Federal Council intends to provide to the public audiovisual service. The Council believes that Switzerland, as a plurilingual and socially and culturally diverse country, cannot be without a public service financed by a licence fee, and that high-performance electronic media are indeed essential to encourage understanding, cohesion, and exchanges

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between the linguistic regions and the different communities in the country. The Federal Council also believes that the current model, with one large national undertaking (SSR) and a number of private regional broadcasters, is best able to meet the future demands of a quality public service. According to the report, the advantages of this system are greater than the economic inconveniences of a market distorted by the presence of one major national broadcaster. The Federal Council also advocates maintaining a mixed funding model, combining a licence fee and commercial advertising. This system is to the advantage of the SSR (70 per cent funded by the licence fee) and to those private broadcasters which hold a concession. Despite stricter requirements, the report nevertheless excludes any increase in the SSR's budget.

The Federal Council nevertheless believes that this model should be adapted to suit the digital environment. In particular, it would like the SSR to attract a larger audience of young people, who are moving away from traditional media in favour of offerings available on the Internet. This is a major challenge for the public service, which is supposed to be directed at the population as a whole and ought to be present wherever the public is to be found. The SSR should therefore propose offers which are relevant to young people in terms of content and modes of consumption. The Federal Council would also like the SSR to devote at least half the product of the licence fee to information; independent, quality information is essential for the smooth running of a democratic constitutional State, as it ensures the free formation of opinions and of the people's will. In this respect, the Federal Council believes that the SSR plays an essential role in performing the public-service mandate, more particularly because it reflects Switzerland's particularities.

According to the report, culture and sport ought to remain the SSR's central activities. The Federal Council also feels, however, that the SSR should revise its practices with regard to purchasing formats and foreign series, in order to accentuate the difference between its programmes and the offers put forward by the private broadcasters. Such a differentiation was indeed considered to be an important factor in the acceptance and legitimation of the public service.

Ultimately, the Federal Council wants the current legislation on radio and television to include electronic media. According to the report, independent regulation of broadcasting vectors is essential if online offerings are to be fully incorporated in the audiovisual public service.

Rapport d'analyse de la définition et des prestations du service public de la SSR compte tenu de la position et de la fonction des médias électroniques privés

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Report analysing the definition and services of the public service provided by the SSR in the light of the position and function of private electronic media

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