[BE] CSA report on the pandemic's impact on the audiovisual sector in French-speaking Belgium

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As elsewhere in Europe, traditional media in French-speaking Belgium saw a sharp rise in audience figures during the health crisis linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. But what other consequences has the crisis had for the audiovisual sector? On 8 May 2020, the *Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel* (the audiovisual regulatory authority for the French-speaking Community of Belgium – CSA) published a report on this subject. The report lists the main challenges and difficulties facing audiovisual media in French-speaking Belgium at the height of the lockdown period. It also describes the various initiatives taken by different stakeholders.

The report, which follows an information request from the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA), attracted the attention of both the press and politicians in French-speaking Belgium. In particular, it was submitted to the Government of the French-speaking Community of Belgium, the political body responsible for issues relating to the audiovisual media in French-speaking Belgium.

Between 15 April and 4 May 2020, the CSA conducted a survey of public and private radio and television stations, regional TV stations and a number of Internet-based video ('Youtubers' and 'vloggers') and television services under its jurisdiction. The respondents were asked to complete an online questionnaire on a voluntary basis, with anonymity guaranteed.

The CSA reports that, at the peak of the crisis, viewing figures were extraordinarily high among audiovisual media in French-speaking Belgium, especially for news programmes. In general terms, the providers indicated that audiences had been 16% to 24% larger than would normally have been the case.

At the same time, the regulator notes some of the difficulties faced by these providers: a drop in advertising revenue, a higher workload for editorial staff coinciding with staff shortages and teleworking, and the interruption of most audiovisual production activities, especially international co-productions. The providers are worried that their financial problems will jeopardise their very survival, which could lead to a reduction in media pluralism. According to the CSA's analysis, the average fall in turnover between March and April 2020 was 66%, while 25% of respondents said they were in financial trouble and had gone

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into debt. News-based television channels have been particularly badly affected. Finally, radio stations that are not yet being broadcast digitally (DAB+) are afraid of making the transition: “69% [of them] are expecting to either delay or simply abandon their digitalisation plans”.

The regulator also reports an increase in interaction between the public and the providers, including information and fact-checking requests, distress calls and complaints. It also notes “a significant rise in the number of repeats”, even though new television formats inspired by the Internet or video conferencing have emerged. Local Internet video producers have also adapted their work, helping to raise awareness of the measures taken by the public authorities to address the health crisis.

As far as programming is concerned, the CSA mentions a serious negative impact on cultural promotion. Television providers have also focused on live broadcasts, fictional and children’s programmes, and continuous learning programmes.

Providers are asking the public authorities for various types of support measures: higher public subsidies; new sources of state aid; the relaxation of legal obligations linked to their own productions; broadcasting and advertising quotas; lower distribution costs; the rescheduling of royalty payments; fiscal measures such as the taxation of ‘GAFAN’ (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Netflix); etc.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the CSA is planning to conduct another evaluation at the end of the health crisis. This would also make it possible to measure the impact of the steps that the public authorities have taken in the meantime.

Impact de la crise sanitaire sur le secteur audiovisuel (Rapport), CSA

https://www.csa.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CSA_sondage_COVID_mai_2020-2.pdf

CSA report on the impact of the health crisis on the audiovisual sector

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