



# European-wide Television and the Construction of European Identity. The Case of Euronews

**Andreu Casero**

## **1. Introduction**

The Euronews television channel was created on January 1, 1993, under the auspices of 17 public television stations belonging to the European Union for Radio Broadcasting. Its goal was quite ambitious: to become the audiovisual arm of an emerging Europe. Specifically, this meant that its objective was to build a common European identity amongst the people in the European Union in order to further the integration of the various peoples involved.

Euronews is a satellite television station that broadcasts across Europe and it is headquartered in Lyon, France. It broadcasts primarily news, uses five languages (English, French, German, Italian and Spanish), and has a multinational team of writers. The station broadcasts 20 hours/day. It has between 67 million and 91 million viewers, depending on the source consulted, and can be seen in all of Europe's 36 countries, which proves how important it has become.

This article analyzes the various features that shape this model of European-wide television, given the large number of viewers Euronews has and the major expectations the EU has placed on this project as a means to advance European integration by creating an identity that is shared by member states. In addition, the changes undergone by the channel in only six years of existence make it an interesting object of study. We are clearly dealing with an extraordinarily dynamic phenomenon.

Of all the changes the channel has experienced, the most important was undoubtedly its semiprivatization in April, 1995. The French company Alcatel, a subsidiary of Générale Occidentale, bought 49% of the shares. Since that time Euronews has been owned by two companies: SOCEMIE (the French acronym for Operating Company of the Multilingual European News Channel Euronews), which owns 49% of the shares and which represents the private sector, and SECEMIE (the acronym for the Publishing Company of the European News Channel Euronews), which owns 51% of the shares and which currently consists of 18 government-owned television companies. These 18

companies are: France Television, RAI (Italy), RTVE (Spain), CyBC (Cyprus), ERT (Greece), SSR-SRG (Switzerland), ERTU (Egypt), TMC (Monaco), RTP (Portugal), YLE (Finland), ERTT (Tunisia), RTBF (Belgium), BNT (Bulgaria), CT (Czech Republic), PBS (Malta), RTV (Romania), ENTV (Algeria), and RTVSL (Slovenia).

Our objective in this paper is to establish whether Euronews is contributing to the creation of the abovementioned European identity in its viewers. We will also compare the channel with its American counterpart CNN. We will base our discussion on the work of Philip Schlesinger, Guiseppe Richeri and Marcel Machill, who have analyzed the phenomenon of European-wide television and the construction of a European-wide space for communication.

Richeri (1994) describes European-wide television as “television characterized by the fact that the geopolitical area that it serves is practically a continent, and consequently cross-national, multilingual and multicultural”.

The article is structured as follows. The first section analyzes whether Euronews is an attempt to copy, European-style, the formula of CNN, which is a basic question in evaluating its effectiveness at creating a European identity. The second section studies whether the neutrality in news reporting of the channel is a factor in making its journalism ‘watered-down,’ as has been argued by Philip Schlesinger. The third section analyzes the main obstacles Euronews must overcome if it is to be successful. The conclusions discusses whether Euronews has been able to create or spread a European identity or not, and the consequences of this.

## **2. Is Euronews a European copy of CNN?**

We will start our discussion with the philosophy behind this television news channel. We claim that Euronews has become a European copy of the American news organization CNN, and then go on to discuss the consequences of this development.

Since its beginnings in 1993, Euronews has been conceived of as a European instrument to slow down the hegemony of CNN, which had already begun to spread throughout the Continent. Euronews is a French idea that argues for a defensive function for Euronews, in order to prevent the domination of American culture, of which CNN is a stallwart. This defensive strategy is one of the fundamental philosophical guidelines behind Euronews, as can be seen in the words of Massimo Ficera, reported by Daniel Capella (1993): “We want to produce television for Europeans, just like CNN produces television with an American point of view.” Ficera does not hide his desire to compete with the American organization.

Euronews is thus shaped as an answer to CNN. But as opposed to renovating the format or creating a new format, Euronews is shaped by adapting the CNN format to European tastes, as an answer to the growing American influence on the Continent.

This view of Euronews creates a major problem, namely, using television to create a cross-European identity. Theoretically one of the main objectives of Euronews since its very beginnings has been to create a common European identity by complementing the new services of each country. This was to provide the audience with a European-wide view of news events from around the world and thus consecrate a single identity for everyone in the European Union. Several analysts believed that this goal was very important in order to achieve European integration, as a way to resolve two problems. On the one hand, there are problems in achieving the political union of the various states in the EU, and, on the other there is a lack of information and cross-relationships among the member states. There still is no formula to encourage closer ties among Europeans of different nationalities, which is the process that would lead to a strong common identity to offset national feelings. Consequently, creating a common European identity becomes essential for Europe's political and economic integration.

Euronews was charged with two functions according to Richeri (1994): one, to contribute to political and cultural integration of Europe, and two, to ensure that the hegemony of CNN in Europe did go unchallenged. One of its objectives, therefore, is constructive in nature (create a European identity) whereas the other is destructive (defend Europe's culture from CNN by creating a competitor to block its growing influence). The result is a confusing situation, because it is difficult to be constructive and destructive at the same time; generally speaking, one must first destroy in order to then build something new. The constructive objective of Euronews loses out in this situation, as the destructive objective has always had priority. The main goal of the European station has been to compete with CNN on CNN's terms, i.e. by adopting the same format, and the goal of creating a European identity has received little attention.

The resources needed to compete with CNN are many, and the fact that they have been used to compete with the Americans means that they have not been used to create a shared identity, a goal which also would have entailed very significant resources. In addition, the semiprivatization of Euronews, which was necessary for the channel's economic survival, tipped the scales even further towards the channel's competitive nature, as commercial considerations took priority.

We can therefore state that the theory that Europe must defend itself against an invasion of American cultural values on television, which is the starting point for all attempts to create a European-wide television service, has significant consequences for the ability of Euronews to shape a shared European identity. Its defensive attitude with respect to CNN has resulted in a very minor role for its constructive aspects. The prevalence of an anti-CNN philosophy has seriously compromised its ability to create a European identity which could help to further integration as well as help people to understand the workings of the UE better, so that they might have a more positive attitude towards the future as they abandon their own national feelings.

### **3. Neutrality in Euronews' News Reporting Becomes "Watered-down" Journalism**

The second criticism of Euronews is related to its news formula, and especially to one of the characteristics of its formula: its neutrality in reporting the news. The channel adopts a distant, neutral tone for all news items. One reason for this is that Euronews is broadcast to several countries at the same time. Each one of those countries has its own culture, which may or may not coincide with that of its neighbor. To avoid potential problems arising from cultural differences, Euronews adopts an extremely neutral tone for its news reports. By preferring prudence as opposed to risking hurting the feelings of a particular group, the channel avoids problems.

This approach, which in principle would seem reasonable, has quite negative effects on the audiovisual product presented to viewers. Neutrality becomes an attempt to reduce the differences that exist between countries. As Giuseppe Richeri (1994) points out, what happens is that the differences are eliminated. Neutrality entails a certain tone and the use of careful language; it seems as if the reporters were more concerned with their own good image and with not arousing the ire of certain viewers than with introducing shades of meaning into the reports. The language and presentation of the news thus becomes monotonous, boring and tiresome for viewers. This problem is even worse when the report involves a conflict between two European Union countries. Each word seems to be measured in order to not offend anyone, which results in an artificial-sounding report. It reminds one more of a legal treatise than of a news report.

This style of news reporting is quite different from that envisioned by the first director of the channel, Massimo Ficera, who in Capçalera (1993) stated that it was his intention to make serious but not boring television. To achieve this, he pointed out that only news and not entertainment would be used. The problem is that the dividing line between serious and boring contents is often so fine that the audience is unable to identify which is which. In the viewer's opinion, serious and boring often go hand in hand.

We agree with Richeri (1994) in that creating undifferentiated, neutral information about Europe is not a positive development, because it is difficult to interpret and ground in the reality of the context the viewers live in. The differences characteristic of the potential audience of Euronews cannot be ignored. Richeri claims that adopting a neutral tone does not help to eliminate the stereotypes that Europeans have of one another and which make mutual understanding more difficult. Since viewers are unable to see themselves in the reports, Euronews is perceived as being odd. This is the first step in separating the medium from its audience, and a medium without an audience, clearly, makes no sense.

Philip Schlesinger (1996) has also criticized the neutral tone of Euronews, calling the channel's format an example of "watered-down journalism." He argues that in the journalism practiced by Euronews, pictures are far more important than what is said. The news reports broadcast do not have much European content in his view because of language barriers and a lack of financial and human resources. Thus, European audiences clearly prefer their own national news reports as opposed to European-wide reporting, such as that presented by Euronews.

Euronews has carried its neutrality to the point of “watered-down journalism” with which the audience does not identify, because the reports do not relate to their real-life experience. Differences among cultures have been ignored, and in contrast a uniform approach has been used, which has only resulted in the audience’s being unable to relate to the audiovisual product being shown to and for them. In the medium and long terms, the number of viewers may decrease because the programs are increasingly more boring and distant.

#### **4. Obstacles facing Euronews**

Richeri (1994) lists four obstacles facing Euronews: technical, financial, cultural, and linguistic. In his view, these problems do not have a clear solution, at least in the short or medium term, and as a result will have a negative impact on the future of Euronews.

We will first discuss the technical issues. The slow spread of satellite television receivers, which is one of the ways Euronews was broadcast until March, 1999, which the broadcasts were changed to a digital format, prevented large numbers of people from seeing the program. Each individual family had to pay for the installation, and thus many families saw no reason to buy a satellite dish. Further, technical differences among satellites have always made satellite television rather complicated.

The other way to see Euronews was via cable which, with the exception of Germany, was in its initial stages in most European countries. This situation was brought upon by political and technical mistakes, according to Richeri (1994), but could nevertheless be corrected in the upcoming years. We must therefore wait. Access to Euronews is thus constrained by access to a satellite dish or to cable, which means that the channel has a reduced potential audience, especially if we compare it with other channels. This explains why Euronews has had little impact on some groups, such as the Spanish audience.

The second problem is economic in nature, and brings us to the advertising problems that Euronews, and in general all European-wide programming, experiences. It is well-known that advertising is one of the main sources of income for television programming, and Euronews is no exception. The fact that it is aimed at such a widely diverse audience, with large cultural differences, creates problems for advertising. One of the biggest problems is that the number of products sold in more than four European markets with the same brand name and style is very limited at this time. The only cases are those of Coca-Cola, Nike, or some makes of car (Renault, Fiat, etc.) The number is small if they are to finance European-wide broadcasting through advertising. Current differences among the various national markets mean that advertising campaigns, which always depend on market position and competition, are almost impossible to design for Europe as a whole.

In addition, the companies that manage advertising campaigns are usually local, or at



most national, because they are most familiar with their own markets, but this makes cross-country campaign design even more difficult. The net result is that there is little advertising on European-wide networks, which is clearly a limitation for Euronews.

The potential for advertisers on European-wide broadcasting is still considerable if we take into account the fact that the average viewers are upper middle-class, an excellent target group for advertisers. However, the multinational make-up of the audience often means that these people watch little of this type of television.

The initial budget of Euronews was 55,000,000 ECUs. More than half of this amount was supplied by the member television channels, 20% came from government subventions, and it was expected that the remaining 25% would be supplied by advertising. This structure was to last only two years. Financial problems resulted in the sale of 49% of Euronews' shares to the French firm Alcatel Alsthom. The rest of the shares are owned by the participating government channels. The fact that Euronews is semi-private proves that the project has been beset by economic problems. Many critics, such as Schelsinger (1996), discuss the channel's limited human and financial resources. To help offset the small amount of advertising income, some European-wide channels have joined together to attract more advertisers. The results of this joint project, which involves Euronews, Channel 5 and the German channel RTL, are still unknown.

The third obstacle limiting the development of Euronews is cultural in nature. As Richeri (1994) suggests, the viewing habits vary considerably from country to country, especially when southern Europe is compared with northern Europe. This results in a different time for prime time, depending on the country. For example, in southern Europe, many people go home for lunch and the number of women who stay at home is greater than in northern Europe. This means that the mid-day period is much more important in southern Europe than it is in northern Europe.

Evening prime time suffers from the same problem. In northern Europe, where days are shorter and people tend to go to bed earlier, prime time begins around 7 p.m., whereas in southern Europe it starts around 9 p.m. Marcel Machill (1997) also has pointed out that the differences between the north and south also affect journalistic styles. For example, the difference between British and Spanish styles of journalism means that a single model will not satisfy both audiences. As Richeri (1994) notes, it is practically impossible to organize slots into which viewing habits from the north and the south all fit. Only topic-oriented and repetitious programming can please all viewers.

The last of the four obstacles facing Euronews is language-based. According to Machill (1997), the use of five languages has the following effects: there is a difference of times at which the news is broadcast, there are differences in the structure of the news (the same news item is written several times), a single reporter cannot present all the news, and at times the information being presented and what is on the screen do not coincide. This, in turn, makes the priority of Euronews the images as opposed to the

news contents, which Schlesinger (1996) considers to be a negative factor and one of the reasons why the reports seem “watered-down.” The language problem is another cause of this type of journalism.

Richeri (1994), while referring to European-wide broadcasting in general, states that the law of least possible effort makes audiences prefer programs in their native language. This effects Euronews to a lesser extent because it broadcasts in five languages, but channels that broadcast in a single language, which is usually English, cannot overcome language bias. Richeri’s view is that only specialized channels, such as those dealing with music or sports, are in a position to overcome language barriers in a way that is acceptable technically and financially, as well as in terms of the audience.

## **5. Conclusions: Euronews and the creation of a shared European identity**

As we saw at the outset of this paper, the defensive approach taken by Euronews in order to counteract the impact of American culture with CNN has failed to create a shared European consciousness. As Philip Schlesinger (1996) notes, the need for a European communicative space has been defended defensively; there is European cultural identity vs. Americanization. Schlesinger states that the official European position is that Americanization is a threat to European culture and as a result the French idea of creating a shared European culture through television and cinema as a defense has triumphed. The constructive features of Euronews, those that would actually create European identity, lose out to the cultural war against the American aggressor. This is one of the mistakes that Euronews has made in its attempt to create a common European identity.

Authors like Marcel Machill (1997) point out that Euronews has been unable to generate European topics that reach out to viewers, not only from a technical but also from a sociological point of view. The topics do not concern or affect viewers enough to arouse their interest. This leads us to believe that Euronews does not report about Europe, a comment which has been made by many. The topics relating to the construction of Europe are not iconic, lack images and are complicated and difficult to transmit to an audience as well. What there is to see about the European Union and its process of construction is often bothersome to viewers because it is usually based on monotonous meetings with politicians. European identity is deemed boring, complex, and difficult to understand. The result is that Euronews has provided a more negative than positive view of Europe. Machill (1977) states that Euronews has helped a process of European disintegration as opposed to integration. The inability to report in an innovative, original fashion about European topics is yet another failure to create a shared European identity.

Euronews has also failed in its attempt to construct European identity because of a lack of support from governmental institutions. This led to semiprivatization only two years after the channel was created. The presence of private owners shortly after creation creates serious doubts about the European Union’s political will to create a pan-

European communicative space.

Joan Majó (1998) claims that the process of constructing European political unity and the development of European television channels go hand-in-hand. When the European Parliament and Commission have real political power, European channels of information will be essential, and at the same time they will be able to count on the right institutional foundations to develop properly. We may thus conclude that it is hard to imagine European-wide television without strong political institutions. This gap in political power is being covered, for better or worse, by private firms. Schlesinger (1996) comments that there are currently more attempts to create European-wide communication media with private money than with government funding.

These three reasons (defensive attitude vis-a-vis CNN, inability to transmit the process of European construction in pictures, and little institutional support) have made Euronews incapable of accomplishing the goal of constructing a shared European identity that would help to further integration within the Union.

We may now make a few comments about the future of European-wide channels and the possibilities of creating a European communicative space that would be capable of handling these initiatives. We agree with Schesinger (1996) in that such a communicative space is contradictory in nature, since the creation of a European identity will always be faced by strong national resistance as well as Americanization. Richeri (1994) also points to the problems of national reticence, and suggests two reasons for why viewers prefer national channels that broadcast in their native language as opposed to the European-wide channels. First, viewers identify with the language and the culture, especially in terms of “least effort”, in which a viewer thinks of television as a means of entertainment and not as a medium in which one must decode a foreign language. Viewers therefore prefer to see television in their own language. Richeri also notes that national channels invest more money on programming and resources than the European-wide channels, which often experience financial difficulties. National channels often offer more interesting programming to viewers.

The sum of these two factors is that viewers prefer nationally based channels. European-wide channels are thus doomed to trying to capture small, fragmented audiences. In the case of Euronews, the profile of the average viewer is someone from the upper middle to upper class, precisely the type of person who watches the least amount of television.

European-wide channels are relegated to an area that the national channels are not interested in. The dominance of the nationally based channels is too great at present to conceive of a European communicative space able to take on the construction of a European identity. This means that in the medium to long term, projects for European-wide channels are likely to fail. European-wide television will have to be content with its marginal role, at least for the foreseeable future.



Schlesinger (1996) states that there is no European market as such but rather just a series of national markets and as such the big television produces are mainly concerned with reinforcing their positions within their own national markets. Language and cultural differences are the main reasons for the failure to create European-wide satellite television. Cultural manifestations that are the least national in nature, such as music and sports, are the most likely candidates for a successful European-wide project.

Richeri (1994), on the other hand, suggests that regional television is the best way to create a European identity. European-wide channels are unable to eliminate the stereotypes that differ from country to country, nor are they able to help Europeans get to know one another. Consequently, a European-wide space is not the best place to create European identity; rather, that should be left to national channels that could encourage their public to change their set of values. By changing their point of view, nationally based channels could situate the European movement in a central position. Richeri claims that an interpretation from the standpoint of each country is necessary in order to understand the European Union. Viewers could thus see European problems from a local perspective and understand the facts better, as they would be related to their own immediate context. The European Union would be seen as a body that is close to them and one that affects the daily lives of residents in the member states.

Richeri (1994) also points out that news should not be concentrated in only one European-wide channel, which is precisely what the Union does with Euronews. As opposed to this, Richeri claims that the news should be chosen and reported differently on each national, regional, or local channel.

Majó (1998) also believes that it will be difficult to attain a public European-wide television station because the process of political union has stagnated. In his opinion there are two obstacles facing this sort of television project. First, the fact that public television is government-owned runs counter to the dominant practice in the sector. Second, the European Parliament's control over public television is compromised by national governments' reluctance to hand more power over to the Union. Majó (1998) suggests that European-wide television could be an initiative of the European Union for Radio Broadcasting and a blend of Euronews and Eurovision. This would allow simultaneous broadcasting of programs, news reports and events throughout Europe. This has only been successful to date with sports programming, but the same formula could be used in other fields as well.

We have seen that some authors are more optimistic than others with regards to the future of European-wide television. Some, like Majó (1998), believe that it can be successful as long as there is increased political support, whereas others believe that regional channels are a better way to create a shared identity (cf. Richeri (1994)). It seems clear that Schlesinger's observation that one of the characteristics of modern Europe that stands out the most is the rise of national identities, and as a result the future of European-wide communication is quite unsure. He notes that regardless of errors committed in the past, the attempt to create a framework to explain the news from a European perspective is bound to continue as long as the European Union keeps

on developing as a way of political organization, whether as a federation or a confederation. As long as the process of integration exists, the issue of collective representation on the European level will arise and some means for political communication will be required. Communicating Europeanness will continue to be an item on the agenda.

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