The Social Construction of Spanish Public Television: The Role and Function of TVE in a Multiplatform Environment

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In light of significant transformations in the television marketplace, audiences are getting progressively disconnected from public service media (PSM) and switching their time and attention to multiplatform companies instead. This study explores how potential audiences socially construct Spanish public television and how these perceptions are shaped by citizens' expectations toward multiplatform media companies. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 46 Spanish adults, our study shows that the social construction of Televisión Española (TVE) is influenced by positive and negative perceptions of its structure, content output, and pass performance, in what we theorize as the foundation of an *inconsistent public television*. We also show that audiences' perceptions of multiplatform media companies largely condition citizens' views on TVE, in a context where public opinion knowledge toward PSM content is largely blurred, especially among young adults. This study contributes to the growing discussions on the need for adaptation of PSM, arguing that the new multiplatform entrants transform not only viewers' needs and wants, but also their expectations, attitudes, and perceptions toward the role of PSM in democratic societies.

Keywords: public service media, TVE, multi-platform, public television, public service media, Spanish television

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Date submitted: 2020-12-18

Despite the traditional function of public service media (PSM) in contributing to the democratic and cultural objectives of society (Donders, 2019), the challenges they face are progressively growing (Lestón-Huerta, Goyanes, & Mazza, 2021; Sehl, Cornia, Graves, & Nielsen, 2019; van Dijck & Poell, 2015). According to extant research, such disruptions include a great array of structural, political, and economic problems (Larrondo, Domingo, Erdal, Masip, & Van den Bulck, 2016; Martin & Yurukoglu, 2017; Połońska & Beckett, 2019). In particular, existing research has extensively documented political interventions becoming a growing concern in many public television services (Demeter & Goyanes, 2020), with special emphasis on the Spanish case (Goyanes, Vaz-Álvarez, Campos-Freire, & Demeter, 2020; Soengas, Elías, & López-Cepeda, 2018).

Moreover, a voluminous amount of research highlights the financial constraints faced by most public television services and the growing multiplatform competence that limits, and potentially obscures, their audience reach (Larrondo, Domingo, Erdal, Masip, & Van den Bulck, 2016; Polónska & Beckett, 2019; Sørensen, 2016). In this turbulent context, in which financial struggles and emergent multiplatform media companies disrupt traditional expectations toward public service media (Donders, 2019), two central questions for the future of such entities remain unanswered: How do citizens perceive and socially construct PSM in a multiplatform environment? And, perhaps even more important for the related literature, how are public television services—in our case, TVE—shaped by audiences' expectations, attitudes, and perceptions toward multiplatform media companies?

Public television plays a crucial role in shaping an informed society (Humprecht, 2019). As typically portrayed by extant research, its mission is to provide a universal and democratic mass media service, fostering civic values while ensuring that citizens have access to verified and diverse information (Martin & Yurukoglu, 2017). Examining the role of PSM in a multiplatform scenario is thus relevant for several reasons. First, as a wide array of multiplatform media companies enter the television marketplace, it is crucial to understand public opinion views on the role of TVE. Second, the adaptation of public entities to the new needs, wants, and expectations regarding on-demand content of multiplatform media companies needs to be examined further; investigation has been limited despite their potential influence in transforming the normative functions of PSM. Third, and finally, as traditional audiences of public entities, TVE in particular, decline or stagnate, audience insights on how to ameliorate their content output seem essential, especially in the case of young adults, who ultimately will be the viewers in the future.

Based on in-depth interviews with 46 Spanish television viewers, this study provides a better understanding of the role of public service media in a multiplatform environment. Specifically, this study moves beyond previous research by showing how Spanish citizens socially construct TVE and how such an interpretation is conditioned by audiences' perceptions of multiplatform companies. Our theoretical intervention lies in the conceptualization of audiences' construction of TVE as *inconsistent public television*, in which a number of positive and negative features associated with its structure, content output, and pass performance permeate its morphology. Finally, we argue that TVE's technological innovation and development are constrained by audiences' traditional mindset, in a context in which audiences' needs and wants generally mismatch with traditional normative considerations of PSM.

The Position of Public Service Media in a Multiplatform Scenario

Recently, the emergence of new communication technologies and media platforms has largely affected both the operations of legacy media and audiences' news consumption patterns (Antunovic, Parsons, & Cooke, 2018; Hermida, 2010). Public media are increasingly competing with new media entrepreneurs and platforms that disrupt their traditional strategies of content production and their long-lasting relationship with audiences (Brevini, 2013; Mosco, 2009). Accordingly, a number of professional observers and media scholars alike have suggested that public service media may need to (re)think their corporate strategies and their position vis-à-vis new commercial competitors, such as Netflix, HBO, and Amazon Prime (Debrett, 2009; Donders, 2019; Hanretty, 2011).

In the related literature, different discussions regarding the normative considerations of PSM have flourished in recent years. In the multiplatform era, PSM can serve the public interest in many ways (Debrett, 2009). While the classical PSM principles may be shifting, "they continue to validate public service institutions as the best positioned to deliver independent news and current affairs content, to contribute cultural and programming diversity, and to service national conversations about identity" (Debrett, 2009, p. 823). However, E. N. Martin (2021) notes that most PSM platforms are facing fundamental challenges related not only to their economic structure, but also to their mission and values. Germane to this, E. N. Martin (2021) highlights the loss of direct access to the audience due to the emergence of commercial intermediaries, which fundamentally undermine essential services such as local news and educational content. At the same time, the consolidated global platforms' success shows an existing demand for local content that will be satisfied primarily by national television providers (Lobato, 2019).

The solutions to the challenges raised by the inevitable competition with commercial media should be adapted to new distribution strategies (Prado, 2015). Moreover, based on the results of their study on PSM managers' perceptions of the changing media environment within a multiplatform scenario, Lowe and Maijanen (2019) suggest that the construction of a more appealing identity for PSM should be a crucial mission for media managers. Notwithstanding, although it is well acknowledged that the future of PSM in a multiplatform environment may depend on its ability to build stronger relationships with audiences, especially the younger generation (Lowe & Maijanen, 2019), PSM's current efforts seem to be insufficient to attract their attention (Donders, 2019).

Our study discusses the engagement of PSM in this changing media environment. Specifically, our analysis contributes to the existing literature on the slow pace of changing public media models (Chan-Olmsted & Kim, 2002 by examining how audiences assess TVE's operations, how they perceive its ongoing efforts to comply with the digital evolution (Ramsey, 2017), and their expectations in the context of platform multiplicity.

RTVE in a Multiplatform Environment

In its early years, the Spanish public broadcaster served as a propaganda tool during the Spanish Civil War, and this function of RTVE (since 2007, part of the Corporation of RTVE-CRTVE) as a partisan tool remained prevalent during the Franco dictatorship (Gutiérrez, 2012). For many observers, this lack of independence was arguably one of the main historical burdens (García-de-Madariaga, Navarro-Moreno, &

Olmo-López, 2019; López-Cepeda, 2012)—a fact that has inevitably affected its performance ever since. To address this problem, in 2017, regulatory reform was introduced, according to which the governance of the public entity should be elected by an open public competition. However, difficulties in finding a strong political consensus have hindered the process, and the current managing bodies have been recently constituted according to partisan interests (Bustamante, 2021).

This lack of independence has not prevented RTVE from becoming one of the main broadcasters in Spain, even after the entry of commercial media companies in the 1990s. Its main competitors were two large private television groups that operated free-to-air (A3Media and Mediaset), creating an oligopolistic market that provided open and free media content (Campos-Freire, 2013). Germane to this, pay TV has historically played a secondary role in terms of both reach and market penetration (Artero, Herrero, & Tabernero, 2005). However, this situation has dramatically changed with the entry of over-the-top (OTT) platforms, which are redefining the roles of existing agents by changing the habits of viewers, subscribers, and advertisers (García-Leiva, 2019).

According to Capapé (2020), services in the Spanish television market have risen multifold since 2015, especially with the arrival of international production companies and OTT platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, HBO, and Disney+. According to some observers, the Spanish television market is in a period of consolidation (García-Leiva, 2020), in which transnational platforms offer extensive catalogs, mostly in entertainment, combining hegemonic American contents and coproductions with inland companies. Recent scholarship suggests that the main consequence of this strategy is the configuration of a market dominated by these companies, which increasingly challenge the traditional equilibrium between free-to-air and pay TV (Arjona, 2021). In this turbulent context, traditional private broadcasters have launched their own services— A3Media by means of Atresplayer, and Mediaset with Mitele—both based on a freemium business model.

At the audience level, audiovisual consumption through paid online platforms reached half of Spanish households with Internet access in mid-2020, with a significant increase in subscriptions to the mentioned OTTs (Comisión Nacional de los Mercados y la Competencia, 2020). According to recent data, the number of people using any of the subscription-based streaming services exceeds 23 million, representing 57% of all Spanish consumers (Barlovento, 2020); Netflix and Amazon Prime Video are the two leading services (Asociación para la Investigación de Medios de Comunicación, 2021), although Disney+ is the fastest growing platform (Geca, 2021).

In this context, RTVE's multiplatform commitment was boosted from 2008 onward, following the BBC's digital transformation model. Within this framework, RTVE developed its on-demand content catalog, RTVE Á la Carte, offering content from its radio (RNE) and television (TVE) services (Medina-Laverón & Ojer-Goñi, 2011). In 2011, RTVE redesigned its on-demand offer, self-defined as "the largest on-demand project in the Spanish-speaking world" (RTVE Communication [RTVE], 2011, para. 1), based on three main ambitions: (1) to increase the quantity and quality of available content (including archives), (2) to offer multiscreen options, and (3) to make its content more user-friendly and shareable on social media. In 2017, RTVE launched PlayZ, an exclusive digital catalog that offers diverse programs and transmedia content to younger audiences. Recent data from RTVE's report suggest that PlayZ had already exceeded the historical record of more than 100 million views on its different platforms by May 2020 (RTVE, 2020).

In relation to the challenges faced by RTVE, extant research has systematically documented two historical concerns: its lack of credibility (García-de-Madariaga et al., 2019; Goyanes, Vaz-Álvarez, & Demeter, 2020) and the growing disconnection of young audiences (Azurmendi, 2018; Guerrero, 2018; Izquierdo-Castillo & Miguel-De-Bustos, 2021; Navarro Robles & Vázquez-Barrio, 2020). Although it has been documented that entertainment programs may improve audience rates, some observers suggest that the tabloidization of PSM raises several concerns regarding its public service mission (García de Madariaga, Broullón-Lozano, & Lamuedra Graván, 2016).

Overall, prior research has noted that RTVE strategies to energize the audience's share are focusing on multiplatform consumption and activating social media reach. However, it is still unclear how these efforts merge with RTVE's PSM role and transfer into the public. Beyond statistical data on viewership trends, there is scattered evidence on how the audience perceives RTVE's efforts in the context of multiplatform competition. Accordingly, we pose two interrelated research questions that underscore the social construction of TVE and the efforts of the Spanish public television (as assessed by public opinion) to enhance its competitiveness in a transforming media market.

RQ1:   *How do citizens make sense of and socially construct TVE in a multiplatform environment?*

RQ2:   *How are TVE's efforts to raise its visibility in a multiplatform environment perceived by the audience?*

Methodology

Data for the study come from in-depth face-to-face interviews with 46 Spanish citizens. The data collection strategy was based on the combination of the snowball sampling technique ($N = 26$) and personal interviews in public places ($N = 20$). For the snowball sampling, we asked participants to provide the names of three distant contacts to be interviewed, noting that these potential participants should be diverse in their gender, age, and economic status. We listed the names of potential candidates and contacted them randomly (see Goyanes & Demeter, 2020, for further explanation). In both the personal interviews and in the snowball sampling, two research assistants collected and transcribed the interviews. Table 1 provides sample characteristics. We created a purposive sample, maximizing the variety of potential participants. Consequently, we included diverse respondents who reflect the Spanish census in terms of age, working/unemployment status, and gender.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics.

Sociodemographics	Sample (%)	Spanish Census
Age (range = 18–65)		Range (0–86.1)
18–29	21.7	10.3
30–49	39.1	37.9
50–65	39.1	37.9
Female	50	50.9
Education		Range (0%–100%)
High school or less	39.1	39.9
Some college	21.7	22.9
College degree or more	39.1	37.2
Employment status		Range (0–100%)
Working	84.8	86.22
Unemployment	15.2	13.78

In addition, we included respondents from different urban and rural areas, paying special attention to their economic status and place of residence (initial demographic data for gender, age, income, education, and race were provided by all respondents after the interview). The demographic data are intended to maximize the diversity of the interviews conducted, in the hope of providing a more nuanced understanding of the research questions posed based on such differences. The sample consists of participants from the majority of Spanish regions, including Galicia, Madrid, Cataluña, País Vasco, Andalucía, Valencia, and Murcia. The interviews were conducted in May/June (snowball sampling) and July/August (personal interviews, right after the Spanish lockdown). The different profiles in terms of television interest, news consumption patterns, and demographics enable us to reach data saturation at 28–30 interviews. Data saturation is reached when there is enough information to replicate the study when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained, and when further coding is no longer feasible. To reensure this, we included 16 more interviews, which provided more robust findings and backed empirical evidence.

Our semistructured interviews lasted between 30 and 70 minutes and were digitally recorded with respondents' consent. In total, 39 hours of recorded interviews were analyzed. The interview guide addressed three topic areas. The first and introductory one inquired about participants' general TV consumption. Questions addressed participants' perceptions about their total time ingesting TV and typical time schedules, their views on and motivations to watch their favorite channels and TV programs, and their perceptions about the evolution of their TV consumption in recent years. The second part, which focused on the role of TVE in the current multiplatform scenario, inquired about participants' daily TV diet, paying special attention to the increasing or decreasing role of TVE in such multiplatform consumption.

We inquired about the role of new technologies (i.e., tablets or smartphones) in shaping respondents' TV consumption and the typical patterns of consumption through these technologies. In this second topic area, we also aimed to understand our respondents' perceptions on ongoing innovation strategies of TVE, looking at respondents' assessments of content quality. Finally, we inquired about our respondents' multiplatform consumption using popular platforms such as Movistar Plus, Netflix, HBO, or Amazon Prime, addressing their role in shaping participants' amount of TV consumption. Finally, the third

part focused on respondents' views on how their TVE consumption might be increased. This last part inquired about the differences between TVE and multiplatform companies, the main motivations and reasons for their evaluation (and potential divergences), and envisioned strategies to foster TVE consumption among Spaniards in this scenario.

The interviews (and personal notes taken during the personal conversations) were recorded and later transcribed verbatim by two research assistants. To identify, analyze, and report patterns (i.e., themes) within data, we executed a thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations. The data analysis was therefore structured into six different phases: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing these themes, defining these themes, and drafting the study. Finally, the different codes and themes that emerged from the data were discussed with two independent scholars (both assistant professors focused on qualitative research) to refine our conceptualizations and themes. These discussions foster our understanding of the empirical data and help us summarize our research contribution.

Results

Linear and Multiplatform Consumption: Preferred Channels and Programs

According to our evidence, respondents' linear television consumption has been declining, especially in the case of TVE. In many instances, TVE consumption is so negligible that it precluded many of our respondents from having an informed opinion regarding its quality. In all cases, these respondents are younger than 30 years of age. "I would not know how to value it because I barely watch TVE," Sandra, a young hairdresser from Castellón, blatantly stated. Similarly, Fernando, a sophomore in his early 20s from Madrid, said he cannot provide an informed assessment of TVE because he has not consumed it for a long time. Overall, this approach seems to be prevalent in young adults, suggesting that the new Spanish generations of television viewers hold a blurred construction of TVE because of their lack of consumption.

What appeared to be prevalent in young adults was, however, challenged by citizens in their 40s and 50s, especially users interested in reality shows, specific series, and live programs. In this regard, Marina, a ballerina from Barcelona, said her TVE consumption has risen recently as a result of new reality shows such as *Operación Triunfo* (Cruz, Mainat, & Mainat, 2001–present)[1] and *Maestros de la Costura* (Rey & Rivas, 2018–present).[2] She added that she also watches events related to Spanish culture and cinema, especially the live coverage of *Los Premios Goya*.[3] When asked about the typical technologies for television consumption, most respondents stated that they consumed TVE linearly, and they acknowledged that their use of new technologies (such as tablets or smartphones) to watch their preferred programs is very limited.

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[1] *Operación Triunfo* is a talent show that aims to find the country's next solo singing sensation.

[2] *Maestros de la Costura* is a talent show that aims to find the best dressmaker/tailor in Spain.

[3] *Los Premios Goya* is Spain's main annual film award given by the Spanish Academy of Motion Pictures and Arts.

All our respondents acknowledged consuming linear television on a daily basis. However, the amount of their consumption typically hinged on two fundamental factors: their free time and the interest triggered by the programs. Beyond these factors, our respondents typically described their TV consumption as little or limited, even though most of them reported watching TV for at least two hours per day. "My TV consumption is very limited, I would say, I only watch it two or three hours at most," a female in her 40s from Madrid reported. Echoing her views, a senior architect in his 50s from Valencia said his consumption of television was very little, as "he only consumes three hours per day," mostly after having lunch and before going to bed. As a matter of fact, the gap between respondents' perceptions and evaluations of their television consumption hinged on individual cognitive factors. However, it seems surprising that many interviewees considered two or three hours of consumption to be a short or limited period.

Most respondents watched linear television, providing three main motivations: (1) being informed about current events and politics, (2) passing time, and (3) being entertained during their free time. First, many respondents stated that their television consumption was fundamentally focused on news, including the more popular informative services from TVE, Antena3, LaSexta, or Telecinco. Germane to entertainment and passing time, the respondents acknowledged that they mostly relied on series and a popular gossip program, *Sálvame* (Cornejo & Madrid, 2009–present).[4] In the latter case, the interviewees also acknowledged that they consumed it while performing other tasks. As Sonia, a civil servant from Murcia, stated, "I switch on *Sálvame* to disconnect during the afternoon. I usually watch it, while I am doing other things."

Whether for passing time or being informed about current events and politics, our respondents seemed to hold a bias germane to their television consumption. In this regard, recent Spanish market research has shown that one of the most watched television channels in Spain is Telecinco, with *Sálvame* leading in the afternoon space. However, when respondents were asked about their preferred programs and the most watched television broadcasts, especially during afternoons, most referred to cultural channels, programs about geography or history, and genres such as documentaries. "I love the documentaries of La 2,[5] especially those about culture and geography," said Francisco, an electrician from Asturias. Similarly, Sergio, a bartender from Bilbao, indicated that his family loves the History Channel and programs on World War II.

Finally, the vast majority of our respondents acknowledged that their television consumption has changed as a result of the emergence of digital competitors—Netflix, Movistar Plus, and HBO in particular. Because time is a limited resource and watching television is a zero-sum game, when our participants watch one platform, they're not watching its competitor. In this regard, many of the respondents stated that their general use of television was typically restricted to multiplatform media companies. Moreover, many of the respondents reflected on the market competence of the television industry, typically addressing how new players (like those mentioned earlier) disrupt the traditional market share of linear broadcasters. For example, Sara, an industry manager, explained,

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[4] *Sálvame* is a long-running television talk show in which journalists and collaborators discuss the private lives of celebrities. This show is broadcast daily from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

[5] La 2 is a public broadcasting service that mainly broadcasts documentaries and cultural programs.

Now there is more competition, and that is why consumption has declined significantly. Operators like Netflix or HBO offer a wide variety of content and, of course, the option of being able to watch what one wants, determines your consumption.

Making Sense of TVE in a Multiplatform Environment: The Emergence of an Inconsistent Public Television

How citizens understand TVE in the current multiplatform scenario has a significant impact on their cognitive appraisal with regard to the role and output quality of the public entity. There seems to be a lack of consensus regarding the interpretation and social construction of TVE, with both positive and negative perspectives explaining its current situation. We argue that this combination of perspectives and perceptions provides a fertile ground for undermining TVE identity, generating an *inconsistent public television* for which audience evaluations, TVE technological adaptations, corporate strategies, and cultural aspects permeate its challenging social construction. In a nutshell, through the inconsistent public television conceptualization, we emphasize the demand for adaptation of public television services (the Spanish one in particular) to comply with audiences' needs, wants, and expectations in an environment where users individually control and manage their consumption, and multiplatform competence obscures public broadcasters' potential growth.

Most respondents reflected on the main motivations that led them to reduce their TVE consumption, in what we consider the erosion of the TVE audience. Although some of these hindrances (i.e., fixed schedules for free audiences and prime time at 10:30 p.m.) are common to almost all linear television services, PSM or otherwise, they are especially relevant for our case analysis because the younger participants typically ignore the digital alternatives for consuming their favorite programs. These motivations include, above all, (1) perceptions of TVE as an outdated service, (2) fixed schedules for free audiences, and (3) prime time scheduled at 10:30 p.m. Next, we outline their main features.

Perceptions of TVE as an Outdated Service

This section includes respondents' evaluations of the intended target audience of TVE and, consequently, its content output. According to our evidence, many of the participants believe that TVE audience reach has become stagnant as a result of its focus on certain programs targeting the older generations. In general, respondents from a younger age group typically consider TVE to focus on seniors, triggering, in their view, the design and development of outdated content. Marina, a bartender in her 30s from Barcelona, considers this strategy to be particularly evident during the afternoons, when TVE typically broadcasts soap operas; she said, "We, young people, don't watch them. Only the elderly are interested." Likewise, Sonia, a music lover and a young architect from Badajoz, believes that TVE is an "insipid, outdated, and boring" channel, with programs intended for her grandparents. A similar view was expressed by Francisco, a 31-year-old schoolteacher from Madrid, who reflected that TVE mostly broadcasts "old movies or old Spanish cinema that I hate."

Fixed Schedules for Free Audiences

"What is the point of a fixed schedule when you can watch other digital channels at your most convenient time?" Pedro asked rhetorically. This view, endorsed by most of our young respondents,

highlights the challenging role of public entities in a multiplatform scenario. According to our findings, most participants consume a variety of channels, whether to be informed about public affairs and politics (as is the case especially for linear television), or for entertainment (mostly through multiplatform companies). The difference between multiplatform companies and TVE is that such multiplatform consumption is self-selected and therefore on-demand, which typically implies the individual selection of a time schedule. Sara, a car dealer from Zamora, reflected on the TVE schedule as follows, in what can be considered a summary of participants' perspectives:

> I think that on TVE, they are still a bit subjugated by the most emotional aspect of television, which is, "We are going to broadcast this program at 9 and it is at 9." I believe that Netflix and all other new platforms continue to win because what young people want is to watch the program when they want to, not when the channels decide.

Prime Time at 10:30 p.m.

One of the most common reasons that respondents do not watch TVE is the scheduled prime time; according to many respondents, this time is "too late" to make their television consumption compatible with their work and family responsibilities. As a result, they must find a good trade-off between their desired television consumption and their obligations; in most cases, respondents typically favor their family and work responsibilities. In addition, some other respondents believe that the late prime time precludes them from watching the entire program, so they typically do not even start watching it. Conversely, many of the respondents (the same people who had negatively appraised the content output and the role of TVE in Spanish society) also provided promising perceptions of TVE; they reflected on the main features that underpin their TVE consumption, in what we see as the brilliance of TVE management and content output: (1) television without commercials, (2) quality of content and informative services, (3) adaptation to new technologies.

Television Without Commercials

Our evidence demonstrates that the most promising feature underpinning the consumption of TVE, beyond the quality of some of its content, is the paucity of commercials. This positive difference of the public entity from commercial broadcasters turns the public service into a regular space to watch films or entertainment programs. However, the absence of commercials may also account for the poor financial state of the entity, which in turns affects the quantity and quality of productions. A public television service without commercials also entails breaking the time delay, as most of the interesting content is offered during the prime time. "It is very attractive for the spectator to conclude a film at 11:45 p.m. This can only be achieved if there are no commercials during the transmission," Alba, a senior secretary, stated.

Quality of Content and Informative Services

Although many of the participants believe that the content output of TVE is outdated and the informative services are generally politicized, many others said that some programs are "worth watching" (P29). For instance, Pepa, a taxi driver from Madrid, believes that TVE has revitalized its prime time with new reality shows, especially the maintenance of what she considers the most popular Spanish television

series, *Cuéntame* (Bernardeau, 2001–present).[6] In addition, other respondents, such as Fernando and Sergio, believe that the public entity has the best informative services in Spain and are "really attached and connected to Spanish reality" (P4).

Adaptation to New Technologies

Many of our respondents positively appraised the adaptation of TVE to different forms of television consumption and the new digital technologies that enable it, tablets and smartphones in particular. For example, Lucía, a secretary from Murcia, believes that the manner in which TVE has adapted and updated its content to the new multiplatform scenario "is quite good." When asked about the primary reasons for such a claim, she cited instances when she had to watch or look for some programs on the platform and found that it was very intuitive and easy.

However, many other respondents believe that, despite TVE's efforts, the corporation falls short in advertising its multiplatform initiatives. Our evidence shows that, surprisingly, some respondents are not even aware that TVE has adapted its content output to accommodate new digital technologies and provides most of its programs digitally and on-demand. This indicates that users can consume their preferred programs at their chosen time and through their most convenient device (television, smartphone, or tablet); however, they are unaware of it. "To be honest, I do not know if I can watch *Operación Triunfo* on-demand," an industry worker in his 30s acknowledged.

The Role of Multiplatform Media Companies and Strategies for Increasing TVE Consumption Among Spaniards

When interpreting the position of TVE in the multiplatform scenario, some of the respondents first alluded to the public nature of the entity and problematized its aims and functions. According to some participants, the public roots of PSM and its role in fostering democratic values prevent it from strong commercialization and market orientation, which in turn affect audience rates. According to Celsa, a bartender from Santiago,

> TVE is a public entity. In my opinion, private media companies have more chances to set their strategies than a public corporation. Public television is typically more regulated and controlled. This has a significant impact on its content output and, thus, potential consumption.

Many respondents endorsed this view, suggesting that most of the participants were fully aware of the intended role of public television in democratic societies.

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[6] *Cuéntame* is a prime-time television drama series that has been broadcast on TVE since 2001. It relates the experiences of a middle-class family, the Alcántaras, during the last years of Franco's dictatorship and the Spanish transition to democracy.

In this context, what are multiplatform companies doing to boost their consumption rates before TVE? According to respondents' perspectives, two different strategies—at the level of content and the level of technology—are displayed. First, at the level of content, most of the respondents acknowledged that multiplatform companies are creating a "great series with great marketing campaigns and very good publicity" (P12). Alba, a secretary from A Coruña, underscored the need to create "leading series" that understands users' needs and wants, and that turns multiplatform companies into key players in the television market. Additionally, according to some of the participants, these multiplatform companies also bring innovation to the structure, topics, and, especially, the duration of the series they design. For instance, Magdalena, an unemployed schoolteacher from Santander, believes that series such as *Sex Education* (Nunn, 2019–present) and *Mandalorian* (Favreau, Filoni, Kennedy, & Wilson 2019–present) are drawing a great deal of attention because they are structured in short episodes of 30–40 minutes. In contrast, she believes that TVE is still adhering to traditional formats, providing the example of *El Ministerio del Tiempo* (Olivares & Olivares, 2015–present),[7] which is an hour and 10 minutes.

Second, at the level of technology, most of the interviewees referred to two previously outlined features of multiplatform companies: content on-demand and free time schedules for content consumption. Regarding the former, a majority of respondents believe that the most salient difference between multiplatform companies and TVE is the almost unlimited content repertoire or catalogs for self-selection. Roberto said,

> In media platforms, you watch what you want. For instance, I love science fiction series.
> Platform users look for something specific. To watch news, you consume linear television.
> If you want to watch a particular film, you consume Netflix or Amazon.

This also suggests that platform users can watch the selected content on the schedule desired: "I can watch the series at any moment and in any language," Sandra stated. This does not imply that TVE users cannot do the same, but many of our respondents, as we previously mentioned, ignore it; for example, David, a maintenance manager from Burgos, does not know that he can watch his favorite TVE series at 4 p.m.

When asked about the main strategies for increasing TVE audience, many of the respondents referred to a paradigm shift in the content production of the PSM entity and its target. According to our findings, many respondents believe that TVE production must have more and diverse content in general. Ángel explained,

> I think TVE first has to create more content. I think TVE has no content. It has good information services, but it needs to produce new and attractive material. Now I believe they introduced *Killing Eve*, which I think is available on Netflix, and this is something that really works, in my view. Cuatro has done the same with *Mandalorian*, and I think this strategy works,

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[7] *El Ministerio del Tiempo* is a Spanish fantasy-genre and historical fiction television series.

In line with this thought, many respondents also believe that TVE should invest more in international productions, particularly films, and produce more national series that capture young adults' attention. Although TVE is obligated by law to invest in European productions, many respondents do not think that such efforts are enough. Considering the nuances of this perspective, many other participants believe that the corporation's challenging economic conditions preclude such economic efforts. For instance, Víctor, a car mechanic from Badajoz, believes that TVE has a limited budget, and it is very difficult for TVE managers to produce interesting television programming as a result. This evidence, along with a great deal of data accumulated throughout our study, suggests that the respondents are fully aware of the financial state of both the entity and the country, reinforcing the TVE audience's views that content output is a result of budget constraints.

Emphasizing the idea of a target change, many of the respondents believe that TVE should take into account young audiences when creating and designing their content. According to our evidence, the vast majority of young participants believe that TVE's content output is aimed at older citizens, limiting their potential consumption. Interestingly, for many respondents, this strategy is even legitimate, given that Spain has an aging population. However, as many respondents believe, and Sergio succinctly summarizes, "TVE content output has to be diverse. They have to create content for all ages and not just for the older generation. Young people have different expectations, and I have to say that TVE content is not entertaining whatsoever." Other respondents provided similar feedback, suggesting that for many, TVE is increasingly boring and insipid. Sergio noted, "TVE content is for older people . . . it is not content that adapts to different age ranges. Far from it. It is not diverse. I consider it very monotonous."

Discussion and Conclusions

Our study analyzed the social construction of TVE in a multiplatform scenario. As Debrett (2009) suggested, Western public televisions are in a state of constant transition toward an unknown terrain (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2008) in which they have to compete with multiplatform media companies for audiences' time and attention (Bennett, 2008; D'Arma, 2010; Ramsey, 2017). In particular, extant research has largely documented the manyfold challenges TVE faces related to its identity, sociotechnological adaptation, and governance (Goyanes, Vaz-Álvarez, & Demeter, 2020; Soengas et al., 2018). Drawing on 46 in-depth face-to-face interviews with Spanish media viewers, we offer four contributions to the research tradition that examine the changing role of PSM in a multiplatform scenario (Donders, 2019; Lowe & Maijanen, 2019).

First, we found two inconsistencies between our respondents' perception of their media use and the actual extent and content of their consumption. Regarding the duration of their daily television consumption, all respondents reported watching linear television at least two hours a day, surprisingly considering it to be limited. Although there is an obvious subjectivity in what can be considered "limited," it is meaningful to suggest that consuming a certain type of media for two or three hours a day may not seem like much to those accustomed to a 24-hour online presence. This finding shows that the concept of media consumption should be further elaborated because, as a consequence of the quasi-continuous online flow, respondents' daily routines might not be easily separated into those in which they consume media and those in which they do not.

We also found an apparent contradiction: our respondents claimed to watch cultural channels and documentaries, but, according to recent market research, the most salient afternoon program was actually the gossip program, *Sálvame* (Cornejo & Madrid, 2009–present). This finding can be explained by the well-known social-psychological phenomenon in which interviewees might try to fit into assumed expectations. Because the social value of gossip programs is considered low, they might tend to conceal their true preferences. Alternatively, this discrepancy may also be explained by the fact that our sample overrepresents young adults. Accordingly, it may be that they are less likely to consume gossip programs than the general pool of Spanish media consumers.

Second, our inductive analysis fleshes out the concept of *inconsistent public television* to make sense of public perceptions of PSM, arguing that this sensemaking combines both the positive and negative attitudes toward the institution. First, the values traditionally associated with public television were maintained in the perceptions of some of our respondents, with special emphasis on its informative and educational mission, its traditional technological leadership, and the absence of advertising blocks. Second, in contrast to new television platforms, TVE is also perceived as outdated, boring, and inflexible, precluding many respondents from consumption. We argue that this new multiplatform scenario, in which public interests and individual needs and wants coexist, may blur the audience's normative expectations about the role that PSM platforms play in democratic societies, potentially losing its significance, especially among young adults.

Third, our study identified a gap between the social perception of PSM by different age cohorts. As stated in prior studies (Azurmendi, 2018), we found a severe disconnection between the service provided by TVE and the needs and expectations of younger audiences. For many young respondents, the most salient problem of TVE is the content itself, which is typically perceived as outdated and for the elderly. Even though TVE produces original content for younger audiences and has even created a specific channel for them (PlayZ), our evidence shows that the Spanish PSM failed to build an innovative image and a close relationship with these generations. Moreover, our study found a specific obliviousness regarding the public service role of TVE: Most young individuals hardly mentioned the informative mission of public media, and they mostly emphasized entertainment aspects, especially fictional series.

Our results indicate that the reasons that young audiences are withdrawing from consuming PSM content are, fundamentally, twofold. First, there is a general lack of knowledge about and interest regarding the programs that TVE offers. Second, this knowledge vacuum intensifies their prejudices regarding public television; PSM is seen as old-fashioned and boring compared with the attractive on-demand streaming services. This vicious circle of prejudice makes it very challenging for PSM to connect with new generations. Given the vague connection with youth, TVE's attempts to raise its share by offering multiplatform facilities remain invisible to those who are most prejudiced against it. Members of this group within the new generation do not even attempt to watch TVE content, regardless of the actual conditions and platforms of possible consumption (such as PlayZ).

Fourth, the normative contribution of our study suggests that the information and educational mission of PSM should be reinforced, and high-quality and entertainment programs should also be offered. While the latter guarantees that a wide range of audiences, including younger media viewers, can be involved, the former remains the unique feature of PSM. Our respondents also expressed that the image of TVE as a transparent,

independent institution providing truthful and reliable information has been severely damaged. In line with the findings of other researchers, we advocate that restoring the ideal image of PSM should be a central issue of the agenda (Soengas et al., 2018).

In conclusion, our study contributes to the emerging literature on the changing role of PSM in a multiplatform environment through our qualitative analysis on how media viewers understand TVE. We also discuss audiences' perceptions regarding the efforts of TVE to keep pace with new international media platforms. Based on our findings, we constructed the theoretical concept of TVE as an inconsistent public television service, with reference to its conflicting public image. According to our findings, members of the younger generation in particular seem to be completely detached from PSM, finding it overly different from their favorite new media platforms. Assuming that future generations are the backbone of democracy, the role of PSM in democracy may be at stake if the needs of these youngsters remain unsatisfied.

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