

Quality television and pragmatism

Eva Pujadas

- *The result of extensive research into “quality television”, the aim of this article is to identify the different issue-based references that make up discussions about quality in television. Having identified the issues surrounding quality television, the article then lists the main variables and criteria used to assess it. It emphasizes the difference between understanding the diversity of criteria about quality in television and defending the validity of some TV quality criteria over others. The fact that there are different points of view about quality and different spheres of reference does not mean that all quality assessment criteria are equally valid in a particular historical context and within a certain configuration of the broadcast media in each society.*

Introduction

The content of this article is based on extensive research work carried out as part of a doctoral thesis, the aims of which were to analyze the discussions in many fields that define, situate and establish different assessment variables for “quality television”.

One necessary distinction raised by research work such as this is the difference between understanding that there is a great diversity of discussions about quality in television (depending on different variables that will be set out in this article) and the fact that in particular historical contexts and certain concrete and specific societies and political models of organization, the diversity of criteria about quality in

television is not only not operational but also stops us from understanding the validity criteria of each, i.e., not all definitions that coexist in a particular context about quality television are equally valid. It is in that sense that the ethical perspective, as a point of view that provides criteria based on action (strictly linked to political action) must make it possible to separate naïve comprehension of the diversity of criteria about quality television from the selection needed from a quality point of view, which will necessarily become political and therefore not neutral.

The dissertations and field works of different authors that take part in this and other monographs about quality in television present different ideas, presuppositions and starting points about what quality in television consists of or should consist of. Understanding the motivations and reasons that some authors, groups or institutions believe justify particular notions of quality TV fails to provide any criteria for politicians, assessors, programmers, scriptwriters or television critics about which notions of quality television are more relevant than others for a particular public in a specific cultural and historical context.

This article is structured according to a number of results from research into quality television. Firstly, it establishes that there is a shortfall in maps being made about quality television, i.e., it presents an initial large classification of the issues that dominate discussions about quality TV. This first premise enables us to respond to the question “What do we mean when we talk about ‘quality television?’” As we can see, there are at least four big references when discussing quality television that show that the diversity of notions about quality firstly consists of a diversity of issues. The issues that make up discussions about quality television are: quality of the overall television system, quality programming, quality at the stations and quality of the programs.

Eva Pujadas

Professor of Audiovisual Communication Studies at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra

Discussions about quality television suggest a particular delegation that different subjects make when talking about quality in each identified area. Rarely does television quality depend on the party involved (whether an individual, group or institution) but often refers to other subjects, existing regulations, network production conditions, budgetary shortfalls, etc. That is, quality television usually depends on someone else.

One result of the current work is the statement of the relationship that exists between particular notions of television quality and the exercise of particular professions, i.e., there is extraordinary agreement in content and variables identified about quality TV among the different professional groups involved, including politicians, television station executives, commissioning editors, scriptwriters, technicians (program-makers), etc., above and beyond other differences, such as geographic origin or the ownership of television channels.

This article firstly presents these three major differences that help our understanding of the coexistence of different definitions of television quality and then goes on to look at the difference between understanding the diversity of criteria and defending the validity of some definitions over others. Attention to historical and social contexts, political models, viewers' television cultures and targets and functions attributed to the television industry are some of the factors that can condition the choice of some quality criteria over others. This choice will never be objective or have a universal validity, given that different variables and criteria would be more suitable in other contexts and with other publics, but the fact that it is not objective does not stop it from being an effective way of defining a notion of quality.

1. Areas of discussion about quality television

As mentioned in the introduction, this section identifies the main issues involved in discussions about quality in television. When we talk about "quality television" we are talking about four large issues which also provoke controversy with regard to different notions of quality and establish different variables for assessment.

These issues are, from the broadest in scope to the most specific:

1.1. Television quality as a quality of the television system

Television system refers to the overall system of television, the set of regulations, stations, programming and production practices, etc. There are particular types of discussions about quality in television that refer to the quality of a particular overall system, its regulations, the conditions it offers institutions, stations, producers, etc., for generating quality TV.

There are a great many concepts about television quality of a political bent within this more general area. This is not surprising, as the system of television is the main target of discussion among politicians and the area where they have the most direct authority and power to intervene, certainly more than in the case of programs or programming policies, for example.

The concept of quality TV, understood as the quality of the television system linked to a political arena, includes three broad types of variables. Firstly, there is a notion of television quality expressed in "national" terms, e.g., discussions that identify a leading function of television to be "social foundation" (Lord Reith on the beginning of the BBC), or "national construction" (Carey) in allusion to its role in building communities and forging rituals.

Secondly, quality television is spoken of as a discussion that refers to a physical space, where quality is compared to the fact that programming is produced in the same territory in which it is broadcast. This type of discussion includes the identification of quality as that which is "our own". Quality is identified as "domestic production", "our own language", "our issue", "our stars or presenters", "our own resources", etc. where products that belongs to us are defined exclusively in terms of physical territory.

Thirdly, quality television is referred to as that which identifies and allows a democratic political system to be improved, .e.g., in terms of the systems that facilitate the representation of different social groups, the political development of citizens, the establishment of guarantees in the way television operates, the distance established with respect to the government, viewer participation and the way television stations exercise responsibility with respect to their public. In this sense, the role carried out by the ICEA in Canada is significant, as summed up in the slogan *No Canadianization without Democratization* that goes beyond

the previous philosophy which furnished quality with the attributes that were one's own to focus more on content. The democratization of the media is interpreted as "establishing guarantees to prevent favoritism or discrimination in favor of particular groups or individuals, developing relationships between broadcast managers and the public; increasing public participation in decision-making and promoting a greater critical awareness and responsibility on the part of media organizations."

With regard to overall television systems, there is another type of discussion that interprets quality television in economic terms, whereby quality is compared to competition, profitability and the generation of wealth in the same terms as in any other industry where financial return is required. This discussion is concerned with television not being too expensive and being able to compete on the television market in good conditions (relationship between price, content and expectations of the audience involved). Some authors date this notion of television quality to the 1980s, with what was considered to be the arrival of the culture industry (see Raboy). One example was the concept of quality set out in a report prepared by Margaret Thatcher's government in 1988 entitled *Competition, Choice and Quality*, which said that opening the market and introducing new television stations would lead to greater competition among stations and therefore better quality programs. This is a concept of quality as the result of applying particular economic policies where, indirectly, the professional sector that takes the initiative in providing TV quality is identified, i.e., politicians in market deregulation and private initiative in the development of business initiatives.

1.2. Television quality as a quality of programming

The concept of programming generally refers to the programs available in a system, i.e., all the stations that viewers could normally see in their homes and to the programming schedule each television station designs. This section concerns the notions of quality linked to the first concept, while the second is included in the section on station quality.

Discussions about programming quality generally agree on two points:

- Quality programming affects overall programming, i.e., it

does not depend on the presence of particular genres or programs.

- Quality programming basically refers to programming policy. This is not a redundancy, given that the emphasis is on program broadcasting schedules. For example, a British Research Unit (BRU) study on quality television found that quality programming offered a diversity of choice, a broad range of issues and levels of treatment and "programming based not on following policies to build maximum audiences at all times but a schedule that sought to offer opportunities in good times to the maximum number of tastes and interests possible". In terms of quality programming, it found that "decisions are based more on administrative policies than production ones". This is an appreciation that introduces areas of added and different responsibility to those where the question of "quality programming" is usually raised, in the sense that quality programming is an issue that affects a station's programming department as well as its production department.

With regard to discussions about programming quality, there are references to quality in political terms, similar to the references made in discussions about the quality of particular television systems. For example, we can talk about quality programming as that which enriches the social or cultural network of the country where the programs are broadcast, i.e., programming that fosters cultural identity or national awareness. This acceptance is particularly significant in countries where geographical proximity to another country with a strong cultural and linguistic influence emphasizes the protection of one's own culture from different points of view, such as in Canada.

There are similar references to the balance between domestic and foreign production as a criterion that indicates quality programming. For example, Lasagni and Richeri found that "a main purpose of the television system should be to promote and sustain Italian programs in order to defend Italian culture against foreign programming, especially from the United States, which is considered to be excessive".

Finally, discussions about programming quality also refer to other areas of responsibility, i.e., TV stations or programs. Programming quality is related to the professionalism of the people who work at the stations and the existence of quality programs, which produce a type of delegation of

responsibility in making quality programming at lower levels (stations and programs).

There is also a significant number of discussions comparing programming quality to diversity. When talking about programming diversity, it is important to mention the prevalence of the economic perspective which considers the value of diversity to mean the existence of a greater number of stations, i.e., opening the television market up to private initiative as a way of generating quality. Studies that looked at practical cases found that the entry of new television stations did not automatically guarantee greater diversity in programming, because the advertising industry tends to support stations that apply a programming policy in line with repeating successful programs rather than experimenting with new program formats.

1.3. Television quality as a quality of television stations

The third major issue involved in discussions about television quality is the quality of television stations. Elements used to define TV station quality are fairly heterogeneous, according to the source of the discussion and the forum in which it is formulated. We can identify the following variables that help to define quality, in order of how broad a reference they make to it:

Firstly, there is the discussion about TV station quality in which quality depends on the legal system and specific mandates of stations that define production, programming and internal organization targets. This theory holds that station quality will depend on meeting regulations established by external authorities.

Television programming is the most commonly cited variable determining the quality of a television station. This is not surprising, given that programming is a station's most visible element and the main reason for its existence. Studies that assess the quality of a TV station based on its programming use the following methods:

- One of the most commonly used methods in international studies that compare the quality of different TV stations is the contribution that each station makes to overall programming quality, i.e., how overall programming quality in a particular context is affected by a particular station's programming.

- Another element used to assess the programming quality of a particular station is how successfully it establishes its own identity, i.e., a different and original editorial policy that differentiates it from its competitors and is able to develop a different image in the minds of viewers. A station's quality depends on its ability to use a programming policy to build a particular brand image.

- The balance between in-house and external programming.

- Originality in the distribution of programs for specific publics and in promoting programs.

- The presence of mechanisms to protect less solid programs (such as trailers before or after them).

- Different ways to create new television viewing habits.

There are also quality assessment criteria for TV stations that do not consider stations to be institutions that broadcast programs so much as content producers. The criteria used to assess stations from this point of view are:

- The station's internal structure.

- The professionalism of its workers.

- The degree of freedom and room for maneuver the station allows its workers.

- Innovation both in terms of program production processes and content.

- The presence of new television formats.

Last but not least there are a significant number of discussions about TV station quality based on considering television from a business point of view. The following values are usually used in this discussion:

- The effectiveness of the station, i.e., the relationship between editorial policy targets and results achieved. In particular, the relationship between budgets and audiences and reaching image targets (positioning, standing, reputation, identity, accessibility, etc.).

- The impact of the station, in particular with regard to prime-time programs. The main indicators used are: audience size (in relation to position on the programming schedule and programming averages for each genre), critical reaction, the creation of a "case" that can be picked up and run with by the media and, finally, international awards and recognition obtained (at festivals, critics' choice awards, etc.).

1.4. Television quality as a quality of television programs

Television programs are the area most commonly cited in discussions about television quality. A first large classification of the variables used to define program quality distinguishes between assessment elements external to the television industry (usually in areas such as politics, the economy, ethics, aesthetics or TV criticism) and the use of assessment elements that belong to the programs themselves.

Assessments of TV program quality in areas other than the television industry are closely linked to cultural and social contexts, e.g., an assessment of program quality from the economic perspective compares it to effectiveness, business and/or commercial success or reaching particular audience shares. These variables depend on contexts, the public's consumption habits, television seasons, etc., and are not easily objectifiable with respect to the programs themselves.

Another perspective external to the TV industry used to assess program quality is ethics, which approaches any discussion about quality according to the relationship the programs establish with viewers. This discussion focuses on quality-related variables linked to improved communication flows with audiences, type of consumption, stimulating reflections about topics that affect viewers, the level of trust and faith that viewers have in the programs, etc.

Quality assessments of programs using elements that belong to the programs themselves have a very significant number of variables, assessment parameters and nuances that make it possible to clearly systemize discussions about television program quality. We can easily find a relationship between types of criteria that indicate quality and the exercise of particular professions. That is, the diversity of criteria used to assess program quality not only depends on adopting perspectives that are external or internal to the medium but also the exercise and/or assessment of particular professions involved in program making.

To begin with, it is important to mention an element that the different discussions about quality based on the consideration of internal elements have in common, i.e., the call for in-house assessment criteria that arise from within the medium based on the recognition that television language is different from the languages used in other

disciplines and hence requires the use of quality standards generated within the industry itself. This concerns the need to recognize innovation and experimentation in television language as quality criteria.

Having made this call, there are four broad reference areas with regard to discussions about program quality:

- Television program content. This is never an exclusive criterion in determining program quality but is often used. References to content are sometimes based on mentioning a number of issues, e.g., we can talk about quality programs based on criteria that are missing, such as lack of vulgar language, violent or pornographic scenes or the idea that quality is anything other than avoiding standards. A new aspect with respect to issues as elements that define program quality is the construction of images of masculinity and femininity on TV.

At other times, references to program content are based not on the definition of issues but rather "content type". This can include the importance of the issue to the viewer, i.e., proximity or realism, such as soap operas like *East Enders* as quality references, as they try to get people to think about their relationships and the problems around them (race relations, adolescents and their parents, helping the elderly, etc.). Realism can also be one of the values that define content type, innovation in issues, non-trivialization, emphasis on controversy (defined as a feature that refers to a type of program that tries to get a commitment between the conflict of real-life ideas or that proposes alternative ways of seeing the world or some part of it, or which raises political and social questions for discussion) and finally, originality in treatment.

- TV program formats. References to formats are more specific and involve a series of elements that generally affect different program-making tasks. We can distinguish between a series of variables that define quality and refer to features of the program's script (e.g., narrative structure, the construction of characters or plots) and other variables that refer to more technical and formal aspects, such as type of lighting, floor plans or sets.

References to narrative structure and the construction of characters are a common element in analyses carried out by TV critics or scriptwriters, who have a lot of experience in how programs work and are made. Other elements these groups mention are intertextuality, self-reflection and

memory: the first two are literary concepts that refer to the way in which texts or programs incorporate previous texts (from the same series or stylistic nods to other mediums, such as the cinema or music, or reality itself).

References to quality in the more technical sense identify variables such as sound, music, photography, lighting, direction, casting, acting, wardrobe, make-up, editing, technical quality, special effects, design and sets. These elements are identified with program quality in discussions by program-makers and other people linked to making content.

- The inter-relationship between format and content, i.e., artistry, which refers to how the two concepts are mutually affected in the broadcast message.

- Genre-based references. It is possible to identify two major types of discussions about television quality linked to genre: discussions that assess program quality by how well it meets its generic function, i.e., if the news function is to inform, it assesses how far this target is met, and discussions that assess program quality according to how hard it is to pigeonhole a program into a genre-based category. These are discussions about programs that break, cross or change genres.

The different references and variables identified in discussions about quality television suggest there is a wide variety of issues and notions of quality. Many references can be explained by the very sphere of action of each group holding the discussion. For example, it is easy to see that the quality references politicians use are especially concerned with the general objectives of broadcasting systems and the definition of station mandates, including the defense/promotion of what is considered “our own” (language, culture, traditions, communities) in any area (stations, programming and programs). We can also see why discussions by program-makers and private television executives measure quality in terms of achieving profit, high audience ratings, product sales, publicity obtained in other media, etc. Scriptwriters on the other hand consider program quality to be based on whether there are particular structural features, such as narrative complexity, the superposition of plots or psychological construction of characters, while technicians define quality in terms of the elements used in program-making.

2. Quality television and pragmatism

Linking particular variables in quality television to the exercise of certain professions and spheres of reference helps us understand the diversity of notions that exist as the fruit of different types of socialization and work spheres where different individuals and/or groups perform their jobs. It is not necessarily a perverse notion that each (individuals and/or group) should defend a “biased” concept of quality in television according to the perspective from which they tackle their task in relation to television. On the contrary, uniformity in the interpretation of quality in television in discussions involving different social sectors (politicians, program-makers, producers and audiences) would have little credibility in that probably at least one group would adopt the perspective and ways of considering the medium of another, another more powerful group or a group more able to impose and legitimize its notion of *quality*.

However, understanding the diversity of ways to interpret, define and measure television quality could easily become an obstacle for parties who, from a practical point of view, have to take decisions to promote and foster a particular television model in each area identified in this article (television system, programming policy, stations and programs).

This article would like to emphasize that the difference between the diversity of criteria for interpreting quality in television and the validity of the different definitions and variables proposed is a fundamental one because it affects two different spheres which, in practice, tend to be confused. These spheres are the sphere of the thinker, analyst, philosopher or man of science and the sphere of the politician, executor, assessor or man of action.

It is one thing to identify issues, establish variables, build types, understand the motivations of the different ways of making interpretations, establish links between the reasons expressed and social, professional or personal situations of individuals, establish relationships with other disciplines and areas of knowledge, etc. and another thing to attribute different degrees of validity to each variable and definition proposed, choosing one out of the possible definitions and raising it to the status of the only one, making it objectifiable and introducing it into the sphere of what is legitimate and defensible and identifying it with the target to meet or practice to follow.

In the first case, the aim is to understand the diversity of social phenomena such as, in this case, the comprehension of everything involved in a particular social category such as that of “quality television”. In the second case, the aim is to choose one particular quality variable over the others. This decision can never be neutral or objective nor should it have to be. The first belongs to the sphere of intellectual or scientific activity and the second, to political activity.

Currently, these two spheres are often confused and scientists are asked to provide proposals involving political solutions wrapped in the halo of objectivity and neutrality in theory found in science and reflection, removed from the immediate interests of practice.

This confusion does not mean that enrichment is not possible from the statistical point of view of scientific analysis, but rather there must be a dialectic communication between know-how and action. By reducing and isolating the element of unpredictability, practical interest and factors that conditions thought, objective knowledge favors rational behavior and increases the possibilities of achieving the purpose the politician proposes, but that knowledge does not free politicians from having to listen. R. Aron says that Weber’s impatience is that of a “man of action who demands from science recognition of the media and consequences [of what?] but who knows first of all that science will not free him from the duty of listening because there are many gods and contradictory values”.

Discussions about quality television should therefore distinguish between understanding the variety of criteria involved that the different parties support and choosing particular criteria which, in a given society in a particular historical context, acquire the range of targets to be promoted in legislation and specific regulations that affect television stations, programming policies and program production. For example, with regard to the television system, it is clear that the definition of television quality should not be the same in a monopoly context as in a multi-channel context with competition between public and private stations; that the interpretation of respect for audiences and

idiosyncrasies in terms of programming policy and the production of programs should not be the same in societies that are more uniform from the cultural and linguistic points of view as in societies with different ethnic and language groups. The knowledge on which social sciences are based (and which science is not social?) provides extraordinarily useful information for politicians who have to formulate proposals, listen to different values and establish policies aimed at achieving particular targets because it allows them to understand the complexity of the social order and the presuppositions involved in each case, but all this knowledge does not free responsible politicians from having to listen, necessarily aware that the choice they make will involve renouncing other options.

Max Weber calls this the ethics of responsibility and the ethics of conviction. The requirements that ethics make on scientists, i.e., neutrality in the social sphere and not dressing political decisions in a cloak of science, goes against the ethics required from politicians, which consist of taking decisions while knowing that entering into politics is to participate in conflicts. The things that are ethically reprehensible in politicians (abstention and confusing politics with neutrality) are ethically commendable in scientists.

The concept of *quality television* is one of the most frequently mentioned concepts in recent discussions about television targets and policies, especially in regard to defining the specificity [??] of public service television. Like the notion of public service (a concept that has led to interpretations so diverse they usually end up not being operational), *quality television* as a category runs the risk of becoming another confusing field of different definitions, variables and interests, unless we can distinguish between diversity and validity, between the “scientific” task and the “political” task. Diversity and the confluence of different disciplines and approaches to a particular category such as quality in television should not be transferred to the field of politics, where scientific neutrality becomes ambiguity and avoidance of the responsibility necessarily involved.

Bibliography

LASAGNI, C.; RICHERI, G. (1996). *Televisione e qualità. La ricerca internazionale. Il dibattito in Italia*. Milán: RAI, VQPT, 143.

PUJADAS, E. (2001). *Els discursos sobre la televisió de qualitat. Àmbits de referència i perspectives d'anàlisi*. Barcelona: Universitat Pompeu Fabra, tesis doctoral defendida en octubre de 2001.

RABOY, M. (2000). *Missed opportunities. The Story of Canada's Broadcasting Policy*. Canadá: McGill-Queen's University Press. ISBN: 07735-0743-4 (portada) y ISBN 0-7735-0775-2 (texto), 1990.

VVAA (1989). *Quality in Television. Programmes, Programme-makers, Systems*. Londres: Broadcasting Research Unit, John Libbey. ISBN: 0-86196-237-0.

VVAA (1996). *Quality Assessment of Television*. Luton: John Libbey Media. ISBN: 0 86020 507 0.

VVAA (1990). *The Question of Quality*. Londres: British Film Institute. ISBN 0-85170-256-2.

VVAA (1988). *Broadcasting in the '90s: Competition, Choice and Quality. The Government's Plans for Broadcasting Legislation*. Londres: informe presentado al Parlamento, noviembre de 1988.

WEBER, M. (1967). *El político y el científico*. 1ª ed. Madrid: Alianza Editorial. ISBN: 84-206-1071-2.