

# Input, practice in favor of quality television

## Gemma Larrègola

- *Input is an International Public Television Screening Conference where programs and trends in television are discussed every year, based on the screening of new and controversial programs. Around 1,000 program-makers analyze the works and discuss the quality and validity of the programs that public television stations offer their audiences. Input is interested in content, audiences and new production methods and has its own philosophy that it combines with practice to determine bases for quality television. Its 25-year history mirrors the history of television itself, focusing on trends and past and present interests that can help plan future directions.*

Input is an International Public Television Screening Conference from around the world which can only be defined by what it is not. It is not a market for programs, a competition, festival, congress or seminar. It is a meeting point for producers, directors, scriptwriters, commissioning editors and other people who could be classified as program-makers.

Within the framework of discussions about quality television, which is not easy to either define or achieve, Input involves thinking about and taking steps to try to define the term and implement it in programming schedules. It centers on television programs as isolated works but also as

consequences of and key factors in the nature of the TV industry.

For 25 years, Input has had the goal of providing people who work in TV with a space where they can exchange experiences, detect and discuss common problems and, within an international framework, find references that can be imported, based on programming philosophy, editorial policies, program-making techniques or criteria for choosing content or programs.

Input brings together works that are innovative in style, approach and content and that challenge traditionally established professional values, generate controversy in their countries of origin because of their style or content, and try to break social, cultural, racial or even financial barriers.

The solid nature of the conference, as vouched for by the fact it has been going for 25 years, is not only based on the programs shown. The way of presenting them is also fundamental: Input shows works and follows them up with a discussion with someone involved (the producer, scriptwriter or director). Inspiration, goals pursued, targets reached, criticism and controversy usually emerge from the screening rooms, where hundreds of professionals with different ideas and experiences share their points of view with the authors of the works. The result is a victory for professionalism and a source of inspiration for new creators. The content of each year's conference is filtered so that, following the filtering process, the leading works of the year distil quality. Subsequent international distribution of these conclusions is one of Input's basic values.

Input knows that television programming is not always digestible but that both hard-to-digest works and those lauded by professionals have to be discussed. This stimulating method that works with a spirit of advancing stages and making positive inroads becomes a formula for defining quality television in practice.

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### Gemma Larrègola

*Professor of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona*

## Qualities of Input programs

Input's function of mirroring television year after year inevitably means that there are not always remarkable or strategically important works. But that does not subtract from the value of the conference. It is usually loyal to trends in broadcasting, which might at first glance seem to weaken it. But these phases of uncertainty usually end up bringing the need to explore issues back into focus, and this is where Input reinforces its value, through its role of providing a space for discussing where public television is at, where it is going and where it should go (and programming quality with it).

What do we understand the term *quality* to mean with regard to public television within this framework? As in other articles about Input, we have referred to the book entitled *Public Television in the Digital Era (La televisió pública a l'era digital)*, in which authors Miquel de Moragas and Emili Prado (2000) say with regard to programming: "There are two possible concepts of public television. According to one, it plays a subsidiary role in the broadcasting system, supplying the programs that private television doesn't make because they interest too few people or are too expensive. According to the other, it has a leading role in the broadcasting system, with programming for the general public, guaranteeing it an extensive penetration share that allows it to meet a broad range of public-service targets". (de Moragas, M. and Prado, E. 2000-371)

Input usually opts for the first option, i.e., the one that the above-mentioned model of public television says is subsidiary: big reports, documentaries, educational programs, etc. These types of works are usually aimed at the minority publics we find seldom find watching prime-time television. They are the sorts of shows where quality is often more easily objectifiable. They are works that are daring in themselves but are singular productions that do not involve planning a strategic line.

Input has never shown many programs that combine quality and big audiences, and neither does television. It is hard to offer programs aimed at a broad and heterogeneous public cultivating all genres and also satisfying minority interests.

Input has reflected the issues that television itself has often lamented, such as, "Why has television supply grown exponentially in recent decades but quality has not

improved?", "Why do ideas continue to be a subsidiary value in the television industry?", "Why is cloning formats the prevailing strategy in stations' editorial policies?" and "Why does public television lose sight of the fact that to a large extent its quality is based on meeting its public service functions?"

Input has usually chosen to support safe values, and documentaries have been its maximum standard when it comes to talking about quality. A mirror is a mirror, and that is the view television stations have taken in many cases, ensuring minimum standards of quality in news programs and especially in documentaries and big reports.

However, Input has sporadically impacted on this background and involved a challenge for professionals. It has shown works that initially caused controversy but were later classified as turning points in the evolutionary line of programming schedules. These are works that, even though they are inserted within the most overused and abused programming trends, have been able to show that genres such as game shows, entertainment and infotainment can, when they warrant it, be considered quality productions.

## Works, controversy and evolution

Looking back over the history of Input and the works shown, we can see that this annual display of television productions and interests has featured the trends that were emerging at each different time in the history of television. There have been works that were important because of their contribution to the development of new trends. These are works that marked a turning point in the very history of the conference and showed the benefit of ongoing work and assiduousness. More than a thousand people attend the conference each year to see what has been made and what is happening in public television, making it possible to manage and/or conjecture the line of the evolution of television content and its treatment.

Do the works generate controversy? Not always, but often. Evolution? Some works are key to understanding it, including:

***Come on down and out (Channel 4. Great Britain. 1993)***  
**Director: Patricia Pearson**

**Executive producer: John Willis**

This was undoubtedly one of the most hotly debated works shown at Input, starting off with a warm reception that gradually turned bitter. The program followed the activities of a number of unfortunate homeless people, who were paraded before a public who, displaying unlimited morbidity, laughed at their sad situation. A single mother, a ruined businessman and an unemployed youth who didn't know how to escape from his situation were the three people willing to have their social humiliation - which passes practically unnoticed by people in the street - filmed by the cameras that made their misfortune the star vehicle for attracting maximum prime-time audiences. The three people justify their lifestyles in public and compete for one of three prizes the program offers: a magnificent bungalow, an apartment or some camping gear.

The camping gear was the prize the young man won in the episode shown at Input '94. Tele-humiliation had reached its nadir.

As it turned out, the contestants were actors and the whole program was pure fiction. However, this was only revealed to the audience during a public debate the following day and the experiment, which achieved the highest ratings in the 12 years that Channel 4 had going at the time, was proof of the "virtues" of a genre of programs that, although it had emerged, did not have a label at the time but which today, much more used to consuming them, we would call a *reality*

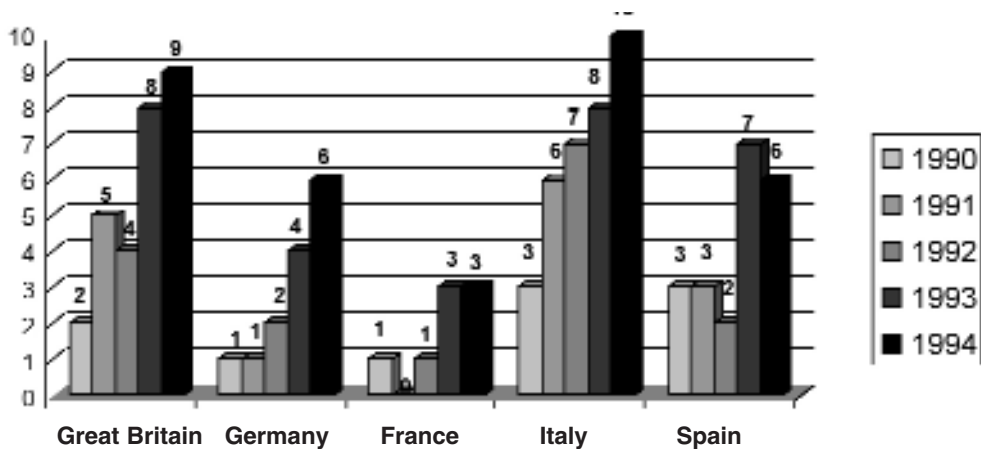
show, part of the *infotainment* macro-genre. In 1993, infotainment had already been a feature of European programming for a number of years. Many reasons have been given to explain the emergence of this new type of programming, e.g., the economic difficulties many channels had experienced when the public television system changed to the new panorama of mixed programming and led to the advertising cake being spread among many parties; the fact that TV stations had extended their broadcasting schedules with only tiny budgets; making programs with minimal investment; wanting to make TV stars out of "just anyone", bringing us closer to the rawness of the misfortune of losers, etc.

So-called rubbish television was already popular and would become socially repudiated but really greatly consumed.

The permissible limits for these types of programs was undoubtedly one of the most stimulating discussions held at Input. All the attendees agreed that upholding ethical principles was a key point in the good qualitative evaluation of programs.

In 1998, the docu-game show *Expedition: Robinson* was presented in Stuttgart. This program had all the necessary ingredients to make it a successful formula: it was a reality program, it could be serialized and it included a game-show component. Forming yet again part of the purest type of infotainment, this program would be the starting point for

**Europe, Evolution of Infoshows, 1990-1994 (%)**



Source: Euromonitor

one of the most successful types of programming today. When it was shown at Input it was an experiment that had been successful, and had had consequences off screen. One of the expelled contestants committed suicide and the event was talked about in the press. Audiences speculated on the lives of the protagonists and identified with the different cast members.

***Expedition: Robinson (Sweden. 1997)***

***Produced by: SVT, STRIX, PLANET 24***

***Producer: Mikael Hylin***

A group of 16 men and women undergo physical training for a number of months and are then taken to an uninhabited tropical island. This is the stage on which, divided into two groups, the contestants compete with few resources to survive, isolated from the world but surrounded by cameras that record all their movements and turn the natural paradise into one giant TV set. This formula was particularly ironic because it involved a living environment that depends on solidarity but instead demanded maximum competition, promoting individualism to the maximum in the battle to win substantial financial prizes.

One contestant was expelled from the show every week and had to leave the island. The contestants would vote while facing the camera but with their backs to the other players and would explain which colleague they wanted to expel and the reason why.

Today, these questions, identifications and psychological speculation have become the norm in programming schedules, generating successful programs and spin-offs that accompany them and turn them into a macro program that pervades whole schedules.

The need to discuss quality both within Input and outside it has been shown by this new type of programming.

An alternative to this type of work are programs such as docu-soaps, which are also based on the essence of infotainment. Revolving around exploiting personal stories to portray different environments and issues and also making use of the attraction of serialization, docu-soaps have in some cases been quality programs within the framework of the infotainment macro genre, which is overly tainted by programs that exploit poor taste and only aim to attract audiences and have led to too many professionals refusing to accept the label for their programs. It seems that

everything has been tarred with the brush of the “lowest” qualities of the genre. However, ability can lift even what has appeared to have fallen into complete disgrace out of the mud.

In this sense, Input has bet on different types of programs and featured works such as those by Francesc Escribano and Joan Úbeda: *Ciutadans* (Montreal '94), *Les coses com són* (Mexico '96) and *Vides Privades* (Stuttgart '98).

These programs marked “the appearance of a trend towards the progressive transferal of points of information to infotainment, which has to be interpreted as a sign of modernization of information when the growth of infotainment is due to genres that conserve a news basis. This is the case of docu-type programs. We are currently witnessing the re-evaluation of the docu-drama and the solid value of the docu-soap, as well as the growing prevalence of docu-series. The latter continues to expand the repertoire of topics it covers to include social issues, history, science, health, the rich and famous, criminal vigilance, tourism and domestic affairs,” (Euromonitor: 2002).

## **Some key causes**

### **Young audiences**

The distance between television and young audiences is well known in the evolution of the history of television and the general tonic has been a very limited supply of programming for this public. Paradoxically, young audiences are one of the main targets of TV stations' marketing analysts, as they have considerable consumption power. Conventionally, when a channel devotes time to young audiences, it aims to attract them through escapist programming, i.e., video clips or American series and sitcoms. Input has intentionally taken this target group greatly into account. Sometimes it has been present in the content, often in terms of authorship and sometimes young audiences are the targets of the works.

A Euromonitor report in 2002 found that “television is tending to move closer to young audiences and is doing so through the use of macro genres other than

those usually classified as 'youth' programming. Reality shows, for example, have led to common ground between youths and other audiences. The latest generation of reality shows, i.e., music contests, have cemented this connection. It remains to be seen whether some type of regularity will emerge from this or whether it is simply a phenomenon." It also found that, "reality shows confirm the trend towards television programs that are more able to attract inter-generational publics". (EUROMONITOR:2002)

The youth presence we found in key Input works were as follows:

***Out for love, be back shortly (Israel, 1997)***

**Director, scriptwriter and producer: Dan Katzir.**

This documentary is an intimate, autobiographical work in which Katzir, camera in hand, relates the story of his love for Iris, a girl who leaves to do military service. The story takes place in a daily reality full of fear and hatred, while Katzir struggles to find love. The informational basis of the work – a real historical documentary – revolves around the inclusion of the years in which Prime Minister Rabin was working towards achieving peace. The documentary includes the different attempts on his life and his assassination in 1995. With humor and love, Dan Katzir also reveals his own family history, including the fact that his father, an internationally renowned scientist, was assassinated in 1992. The rawness of the details of the diary in which this historic fragment appears are tempered by the footage of a grandmother who does not want to appear on the camera that Katzir has strapped to his back for a year of his life.

This young filmmaker, who is an encouragement to others like him, has had other works shown at Input in which young people play a leading role.

Fictional works include ones that portray and alert us to situations set to become increasingly common in society and that try to break away from the classical dosage of morality featured in more conventional made-for-TV films.

***White lies (Canada, 1999)***

This tells the true story of a girl who became a member of a neo-Nazi group over the Internet. It raised questions such as whether it was a call against racism, a warning against

sects, whether the producers were trying to get a rise out of young people or whether it was a symptom of the purest form of sensationalism.

The reactions of young people in hermetic situations have also been presented in other formats:

***Living with the enemy (UK. BBC, 1999)***

**Director: Simon Davies**

The Community Programme Unit of the BBC presented this entertaining program centering on the contrast between philosophical principles and lifestyles. It sought out very different types of people and prepared them to have their prejudices tested. For one week, the people on the show had to live with their ideological enemies. This work was aimed at identifying the audience with people who represent different lifestyles.

Tele-series have included one from the educational channel of South Africa's SABC showing the daily life of a high-school student in a poor black township.

***Yizo, Yizo (South Africa. SABC 3, 2000)***

**Producer: Angus Gibson**

**Director and scriptwriter: Teboho Mahlatsi**

The producers of this program called it an educational dramatic fiction and used the slogan "we tell it like it is". *Yizo, Yizo* means *reality* in Zulu, and this was a crude reality exposing the drugs, under-age sex, rape, exacerbated violence and vengeance that were the daily grind in this social sphere. Showing it like it was and highlighting the dangers involved was the formula chosen to act as a warning and, through the use of shaming images, help change the conduct of people who identified with the events and characters shown.

**Technology that favors content**

Another area Input is interested in is technology. Knowing how a documentary, report or fictional work was made is interesting for people who work in television. Being able to see how the technology available at a particular time was used has made it possible to witness gradual changes, for example, from heavy cameras to lightweight dv-cameras. Looking at the evolutionary process and technical quality has made it possible to detect works in which technological

experimentation led to a “different” concept of how content is treated. What happens if we make a home video camera available so that anyone can grab his or her minute of glory? What can we close in on if we hide a camera in our pocket? What other technologies can we use to implement our production habits and/or provoke trends towards new types of content?

For example, videoconferences were used in the following work to create a particular essence of a program and provide it with a discourse that made it different.

***Vis a vis: beyond the veil (USA, 98)***

***Producers and directors:***

***Steve Lawrence and Kim Spencer***

***Scriptwriter: Steve Lawrence***

This work is interesting both for its technical aspects and story and centers on a conversation between two women. The first is an Iranian from Teheran and the second is an American from Virginia. The women are both high-school teachers and use a digital video link-up to chat about their lives, cultures, families, professions and things in general. Although they raise issues such as the US military presence in the Persian Gulf, topics that affect human beings everywhere prevail.

**History: yesterday, today, now**

Treatments for a forgotten yesterday or a yesterday that was not dealt with. What interests us today and what is being made now? What is the social environment that interests us? How are social events portrayed? History can be researched and refer to television. Obligations, station requirements, prestige for good documentaries, etc. History has provided many works which, in the framework of Input, have clearly been able to be classified as works of quality.

***Prime-time war (Great Britain/Israel, 1997-1998)***

***Producer: Melanie Anstey***

***Director: Noam Shalev***

This documentary features two cameramen (Israeli Alon Bernstein and Palestinian Jimmy Michael) who work for Associated Press and the BBC. Their job is to get the pictures that will be used to open the prime-time news

bulletins of their respective channels. The film has intimate touches based on the daily lives of the two reporters, who appear to be completely impassive to the events that surround them and live entirely for getting the best shots. The film is set in the last year of the peace process in the Arab-Israeli conflict and shows the two men covering atrocities on a daily basis.

War is also the focus of a work that caused a lot of debate:

***Cry free-town***

***(Insight News TV, SBS/SCR, Channel 4, CNN1. 2000)***

***Producer: Elizabeth Ground***

***Director: Ron McCullagh***

***Journalist: Sorius Samura***

While civil war was raging in Sierra Leone in 1999, the western media chose to focus their coverage on the conflict in Kosovo. According to the program-maker of this work, “Nobody covered this war”. Sorius Samura was the only journalist who risked his life to film the raw and extremely moving images of this documentary by feigning solidarity with the soldiers.

Death and sadistic torture are shown objectively. The audience cannot remain impassive in the face of these images filmed up-close. The war in Sierra Leone was a real event, even if it wasn’t shown in the media.

Tone can also be used to show a story in a different light. It is important to bear in mind the capacity for distortion that this can involve. The following work highlights possible dangers of interpretation and shows a respect for audiences’ abilities.

***Human remains (Locomotion Films. USA, 1998)***

***Producer, director and scriptwriter: Jay Rosenblatt***

This work is an assembly of archival footage of biographical fragments and the personal diaries of five 20th-century dictators: Hitler, Franco, Stalin, Mussolini and Mao. It presents isolated fragments and anecdotes from their lives, focusing not so much on their role in history as their private lives. It demystifies them and brings them closer to today’s citizens. Mussolini kept two lions, Franco liked to sit on the sofa with his wife and watch TV, Hitler was a keen fan of pornography and, like Mao, had only one testicle. The humorous tone of the work captures audiences while



positioning the important historic events the men were involved in within the area of irony.

Freshness and modernization do not have to be at odds with news accuracy. An interesting work in this sense is:

***Sacrificio: Who betrayed Che Guevara? (Sweden, 2000)***

***Producer: SVT/HTMO Media Network***

***Directors: Erik Gandini and Tarik Saleh***

This work takes a new look at history with rap music in the form of a video clip. The program-makers – two men in their early 20s who have not had Che as a generational myth – use testimony from Ciro Bustos, considered to be responsible for Che's death, to look at how he died and discover many things about the events that surrounded his death. The authors' youth helps make the work an audacious, forceful, unusual and modern story.

## **Mininput**

Input is an international event that includes other, smaller events at a local level. The Input organization favors the redistribution of the works presented each year in national spheres.

Mininput events are organized in accordance with the Input model. They bring discussions to the point of view of local program-makers and extend the opportunity to contribute to reflections on quality television to a wider public interested in reviewing production attitudes that favor television based on reflection.

A Mininput conference has been held in Barcelona each November since 1994. It is currently organized by the Pompeu Fabra University, the Autonomous University of Barcelona, Televisió de Catalunya, TVE and BTV.

## **Input archives: a quality warehouse**

The works that have been shown at Input over the past 25 years are physically stored in the library of the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona. The works can be accessed for a number of different analyses, including studies and reviews and for discovering ideas and ways of making programs. These are just some of the possibilities opened

up by access to this archive of 25 years of television history, based on organized and regular meetings that work towards achieving quality television. Accessing the archives makes it possible to redraw and reinterpret this history based on each person's interests, without forgetting that quality television is probably in everybody's interest.

## **Notes**

1. *EUROMONITOR* is a permanent observatory of television in Europe that has been operating since 1989 and was created by a group of European researchers (Paolo Baldi, Ian Connell, Claus Dieter Rath and Emili Prado) at the request of the VQPT service of RAI. Until 1995, its coordination base was located in Geneva, after which it moved to the Autonomous University of Barcelona, where it operates under the direction of Emili Prado. The team at the central offices includes professors Matilde Delgado, Núria Garcia and Gemma Larrègola as well as researchers. *EUROMONITOR* prepares regular reports for leading television operators in Europe and the United States, as well as scientific publications and academic seminars. It also holds programming workshops with industry and advises regulatory authorities.

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