

Parallel Session 15: Science on TV and radio: quality, quantity and new trends

SCIENCE AND SOCIETY IN EUROPEAN TV DRAMA

Matteo Merzagora^{1,2} and Andrew Millington³

¹*CNRS Images/media (now CNRS Images), 27 rue Paul Bert, F-94204 Ivry-sur-Seine CEDEX*

Tel. +33 (0)1 49604194, Fax +33 (0)1 49604156, E-mail: merzagora@ivry.cnrs.fr

²*Innovations in the Communication of Science Group, SISSA, via Beirut 2.4, 34014 ITALY, Phone: +39-040-3787462 Fax: +39-040-3787528, E-mail: merzagora@libero.it*

³*OMNI Communications Ltd., Suite 37 Chancel House, Neasden Lane, London, NW10 2TU, UK, Fax. +44 (0)1865 820533, pawsomni@globalnet.co.uk*

Abstract

Main results are presented of a research carried on by the EuroPAWS network within a EU funded project (ASSEND). The best TV drama, TV films series and serial involving science and technology were identified and presented in purposely organised festivals. Grants for the development of scripts involving science and technology were awarded. An action research activity involved in depth analysis of the scripts and TV Dramas, analysis of round table discussions and semi-structured interviews with writers, directors, producers and broadcasters.

Keywords: public awareness of science, films and TV drama

Text

Introduction: the drama channel of science communication

TV drama can be both a strategic point of observation for understanding public attitudes toward science and technology, and a strategic point of action to promote the dissemination of scientific culture. We can identify at least five elements supporting this claim.

1. TV dramas address a large and undifferentiated audience. It is unlikely that people will chose to watch a TV drama *because* of the science in it, but they could *appreciate* it for its scientific content: drama has great potential to reach an audience not already sensitised to scientific topics.
2. Science communication increasingly concerns conflicts, controversies, the impact of science on society, etc.: it cannot be confined to the contents of scientific research alone. Any drama deals with conflicts and emotions and is necessarily set in a social environment. Thus many elements that have to be attained with much effort in non-fiction

science communication programmes are *intrinsic* in the language of fiction.

3. The valorisation of non-expert knowledge is an increasingly important aspect of the democratic process and is hardly taken into account in TV news, documentary and reportage. It is on the contrary easily attainable in a drama, where the main characters are often people with whom the public can identify.
4. A better understanding of the points of view of successful TV authors (who needs to understand the public to please them with their work) and producers and broadcasters (who needs to understand the public to sell their work), can be extremely useful for understanding public awareness of science.
5. As public debate needs to take place in the social environment, it is important to understand how scientific content is moulded in the public mind after entering the social arena. Thus scientists must learn the principles of the social environment that will help them correctly to judge the impact of their work on public opinion. TV drama - where the scientific content will inevitably be immersed in a social context – can be helpful in understanding how that topic is perceived.

Methods

ASSEND, Associating science and technology in European TV Drama, was a 2 years project financed by the European Commission *Science and society* programme, ended in December 2003. It included several actions: organisation of festivals and round tables, grants for the development of scripts involving science and technology, award to the best recent TV drama. Details can be found on the EuroPAWS web site (<http://www.europaws.org>).

A full report describing the details of the research can be obtained from the authors of this paper. In synthesis, 63 scripts from 71 writers applying for a grant were analysed in details, and a subset of writers interviewed on the origin of their ideas and their relationships with the scientific community. An survey of TV drama produced in the period 1999-2003 was also performed, 9 and 11 films were selected for screening in Paris within the *Rencontres Internationales de l'Audiovisuel Scientifique Images et Science* in 2001 and 2003. These were analysed in details and writers, producers and broadcasters were interviewed to highlight the underlying motivations and choices leading to the productions.

New idea grants: results

The largest proportion of proposals came from the UK (48%), France (17%) and Italy (10%). Over one third of the writers were women. 50% came from the TV world, but a non-negligible 23% had their main professional activity in science. Proposals concerning engineering related stories were the larger group (24%), followed by medicine and biotechnology. 43% of the stories were set in the past, 34% in the present, and 23% in the future. It is interesting to underline how the vision of science strongly depends on the epochs in which the story is set. In historical biographies, the scientist is mostly seen as a positive hero fighting against a blind establishment for the benefit of humankind; in the future, science and technology is mostly seen as a threat:

the scientist is often a well motivated person loosing control over his work; when stories are set in the present, science and technology is more frequently a tool for solving (forensic) or, conversely, determining practical problems (e.g. environmental catastrophes).

A short summary of the interviews with the authors cannot render the complexity of each of their point of view. We shall highlight here that a) the large majority do not consider the need to respect scientific details as a limit on their creativity, but rather as an enriching challenge; b) a general reluctance was found for those authors with no scientific background, in interacting with the scientific community, although considering it as a potential to nurture their creativity.

Science and TV Drama Festivals: results.

20 dramas with a strong scientific plot were analysed, following a 2 years long survey and selection. Plots, general data and analysis of the films are detailed on the EuroPAWS web site. Four main approaches can be identified: historical reconstruction, perspective scenarios, ethical issues, forensic.

It is worth mentioning the two films awarded with a MIDAS prize. *Les enfants du miracle* (France 2) narrates the story of the first in-vitro fertilisation in France. The author choosed to carefully respect the scientific content, while being completely free in inventing the personal life of the characters. *Virus au paradis* (France 2) astonishingly anticipated the SARS and avian flew emergencies, by presenting an epidemic spread by migratory birds and the risk management actions to stop it. This film demonstrated the potential of TV drama of covering or anticipating the news.

All professionals interviewed recognised the need for very careful documentation as a key for successful productions.

