

# DIALOGUE WITH JAVIER MARZAL

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INTERVIEW BY  
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Javier Marzal is Chair of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising at Universitat Jaume I de Castellón. He has dedicated much of his extensive research activity to studies of local television. He has edited several anthologies on the subject, such as *The Public Television Crisis The RTVV Case and The Challenges of a New System of Governance*, *Regional Public Television in Spain in the 21st Century New Scenarios after the Closure of RTVV*, and *Los medios de comunicación públicos de proximidad en Europa. RTVV y la crisis de las televisiones públicas* (“Local Public Media in Europe RTVV and the Public Television Crisis”), as well as authoring numerous articles, book chapters and other publications. He has also been a speaker at the Commission of Communication Experts

from Valencian Universities, responsible for the report “*Bases para la renovación del espacio comunicativo valenciano y la restitución del servicio público de radiotelevisión*” (“Bases for the renewal of the Valencian communications sector and reinstatement of the public broadcasting service”).

**A** How do you think local television programming should engage with politics?

**M** Without a doubt, in a very different way from how it does at present, and from how it has tended to do it in recent decades. I think that local television needs to engage with politics; it is absolutely inevitable. All of us, as citizens, consume local news; we’re hugely interested in what is hap-

pening in our most immediate environment. Politics has very obvious effects on the local level, so it would seem logical that local TV programming needs to engage with politics. But it is crucial that the political authorities respect professional activity in the local communications sector. It is essential that politicians avoid governmentalising local media. And it is also very important that local private media outlets, local radio and television, do not turn into the acritical mouthpiece for local companies, business groups or corporations that buy their advertising or media services.

**A** *Do you think local television programming is necessary? And fiction in particular?*

**M** Local TV is absolutely necessary. It is a basic service, indispensable and inalienable, which we must demand of government authorities, and which should be expanded, because it is a reflection of our society and is also a tool for economic, social and cultural development. This is a question that has been studied by numerous specialists, and there is no room for doubt about it. In fact, big corporations like Netflix and Amazon are developing productions outside their places of origin, with the development of local projects, especially for target audiences with cultural realities very different from the American reality. And local fiction series are also essential for better connecting audiences in each region. This has been common knowledge for some time now.

**A** *Are there policies for genuine promotion of self-production of local programming on public television networks? Could such policies exist without political interests that determine content and ideologise it?*

**M** The contemporary reality is not very encouraging, because we have to recognise that local media in Spain does not have the maturity that would be expected this far into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Among public television networks there is a perceivable resistance to innovation, to experimentation with new formats and genres. And, in general, governments are not aware of the importance that public media outlets have, at the national level and in the communications sector at the local level (region, district, municipality, etc.). In a country like Spain, the development of public media is heavily influenced by the political powers of the day. It has yet to be understood that there cannot be a healthy development of public media, or of private media, without political independence and economic and financial autonomy. In the context of public media, the development of local formats and content can only happen through innovation. The development of policies

to promote new audiovisual content and formats should be channelled through the least-politicised institutions possible. In my opinion, this could be done through the establishment of independent audiovisual councils (regional or national) that would propose communications policy. Total de-governmentalisation or depoliticisation is by definition impossible; it doesn't even exist in countries as advanced as Denmark, Japan or Canada. But it is important to create mechanisms and take the necessary precautions to prevent this.

**A** *What relationship do you think local television producers should have with the languages of the regions where they are based?*

**M** Local television broadcasters and media outlets, especially public ones, are created precisely with two objectives. In the case of regions where there are minority languages, as in the case of the Valencian Community, the Basque Country, Galicia or Catalonia, public media outlets have a mission to protect and promote the use of those minority languages. The second objective is to promote the local audiovisual sector and, by extension, to develop the cultural and creative industries of the region. People often tend to forget that the existence of minority languages is a cultural asset for the development of the knowledge economy; in other words, minority languages have a huge economic potential.

**A** *A lot has been said about the influence of TV3 on the Catalan independence movement; from your perspective, to what extent is local television in Spain contaminated by indoctrination?*

**M** To intolerable levels, unfortunately. And sadly, Catalonia is no exception. In my opinion, the independence movement is set on a path leading nowhere, as is Spanish nationalism, which has been incapable of responding adequately to many legitimate demands of the Catalan people. But I personally believe that the indoctrination of Catalan public media outlets is no greater than what may exist on RTVE [Spain's national public broadcaster] or on other regional public broadcasters. This surge in government control of public media needs to end the quality of our democracy is at stake.

**A** *Ideally, what positive qualities do you think local fiction programming should have?*

**M** In my view, local fiction programming, like local news, entertainment or educational and cultural programming, needs to be clearly connected to the political, social and cultural reality of the region. But this does not mean that

it should be absolutely “localist” it is important to aspire to producing content in a region that is “exportable” to other regions and cultural contexts, thereby facilitating intercultural dialogue, a very important matter in the world in which we live today.

Thus, and to this end, local fiction programming, in the context of public broadcasting, should be based on innovation, seeking new ways of engaging different audiences.

**A** *The new television station in the Valencian Community, À Punt, wants to promote transmedia fiction. Does this have the potential to renew or enhance the potential of local fiction programming?*

**M** It most certainly should. À Punt, the new public media platform, which integrates radio and television broadcasting and the management of a multimedia platform, has to begin with a clear transmedia mission, which makes it an exceptional case in the Spanish and international communications sector.

**A** *Do local television networks in Spain have a future in a context controlled by big media groups?*

**M** In my view, precisely because we are suffering from a severely imbalanced media environment due to the existence of a duopoly that dominates all press, radio and television production, local television networks and media outlets have a promising future ahead of them. There is abundant evidence that audiences are losing interest in what is currently on offer, because it is rather poor and repetitive. There is room for the development of local media outlets, at the level of municipalities and comarcas (districts), to meet a demand that right now is not being covered by the big media giants. In regions like the Valencian Community, it is evident that the local communications sector has seen very limited development, not only in the private sphere but especially in the area of community radio and television stations and in the municipal context.

**A** *Is a model where there are only regional public channels a good thing?*

**M** Of course, regional public channels should not be the only option. However, if we analyse the current radio, television and press options in Spain, we can confirm that public channels are clearly in the minority. And the existing private options are in the hands of a few; as I mentioned, we have a duopoly (Artresmedia and Mediaset) that dominates virtually all current production. Quality media options (and here I also

include entertainment) are only possible when there is a wide offer, and healthy competition between operators and companies, public and private. For the communications system to achieve a certain maturity, and to be competitive, there need to be regulators like audiovisual councils, at the regional and national levels, to oversee the effective development of public and private media production. I am convinced that the role of audiovisual councils is absolutely indispensable, as demonstrated by the activity conducted by such regulatory bodies in the most advanced countries in the world. In Spain, there is still a lot of work to be done in this respect.

