

## Review

### **Jaap Willems and Winfried Goepfert (eds.), *Science and the power of TV*, VU University press and Da Vinci Institute, Amsterdam, 2006**

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We live in a period where new media develops at amazing speed: the case of Youtube, becoming in few months one of the most visited website in the world, or the incredibly fast diffusion of audio and video podcasting, or the acquired relevance and authoritativeness of blogs in the dissemination of scientific information, are paradigmatic. Yet, there is little doubt that old media such as traditional television remain a reference for the largest sector of the population. Indeed, all surveys show that when dealing with scientific information, television remains the most relevant medium by a large majority of European (although in eastern Europe, due to a more trustful reputation, radio has also a particularly relevant position, and the internet is gaining favour among younger audiences).

The book *Science and the power of TV* is based on a simple but unavoidable consideration: TV is still an important medium for science communication, so scientists should learn how to use it at best, and science communication researchers should multiply the efforts to monitor it and understand it. The aim is not to provide guidelines, but to draw a state of the art of the studies on the subject, and offer relevant examples that could help understand the many challenges, opportunities and difficulties of bringing science subject on the television screen.

The assumption stated by the editors that “television programmes on science are hard to find” could lead to a very lengthy discussion on a) what defines a television programme as “about science” and b) what is the density of science programmes that will allow to say that science on television is easy to find. Indeed, agreeing or not to the fact that, as we believe, in recent years there has been an amazing increase in the amount of hours of scientific programming, in particular in the US televisions, but also in Europe, depends on a number of definitions: how many of the documentaries shown on the Discovery Channel or on National Geographic Channel can be defined as scientific? Can we consider the increased attention to climate change issues or to genetics in current television news as an increase of attention for science? Shall the success of series such as *CSI*, *RIS*, *Silent witness*, *ER*, *Doctor House*, etc. be counted as an increased interest of the public for science topics? Can we state that the tendency of embedding scientific information in history oriented programmes (such as *Pompeii* or *Seven wonders of the industrial world* in the UK, or the recent works of Piero and Alberto Angela in Italy) implies renouncing to call science by its name, or on the contrary it should be interpreted as a way of enlarging the audience for science?

Answers to these questions are non trivial and always open to debate. *Science and the power of TV* does not address them directly, leaving the task to the individual essays: indeed, a major difficulty in presenting science and television as a theme is the amazing complexity of the landscape, and the great diversity among countries, television networks, television genres, etc. A deep, comprehensive survey of what actually goes on television at European level do not exist, and is probably too difficult a task to be seriously achieved. This limitation is reflected in the book. Most case studies based on particular stories are very convincing (such as the engaging account of bad experiences in Aids therapy reporting, by Rob van Hattum of VPRO television), and so are studies focusing on a specific, well defined data set (such as the two, separate researches comparing science in television news at European level, presented by Suzanne de Cheveigné of Cnrs, France, and by Bienvenido Leon of University of Navarra), or on specific genres (such as TV drama and fictional programmes, analysed by Merzagora, Millington and Scandola of ICS-SISSA and the EuroPAWS network, or children programmes, discussed by Cees Koolstra, of University of Amsterdam, or again documentary as a multimedia spectacles, which Jose van Dijck of University of Amsterdam chose to discuss focusing on two outstanding, concrete examples,

*Walking with dinosaurs* and *The Elegant Universe*). On the contrary, attempts to draw general conclusions, to establish categories, or to classify television programming appear weaker, as they necessarily move too far away from the specific object - that is, what the publics actually see on their television screens - therefore somehow stereotyping both television and their viewers.

The limitation of the book of being a collection of essays that do not arise from a common efforts or project (such as a conference or a collaboration), is nevertheless largely compensated by the variety of viewpoints (contributors are both scholars and practitioners, coming from eight different European countries) and of the topics treated: indeed, the book chooses to explore the motivation of both scientists for appearing on television and of the public for watching scientists on television (the topic is addressed directly by Jaap Willems and Betteke van Ruler in their essay entitled “why people watch TV?”), it looks at non-obvious genres like TV drama; it discuss the complex relationship between entertainment, information and education on television (David Robinson of Open University discuss the challenges of educational television, while Winfried Goepfert of the Freie Universitat Berlin attempts to classify the TV formats for science as entertainment); it focuses on one of the more critical theme concerning science in a mass media, that is its influence on perceived risk and the raising of excessive or false expectations (in particular in the concluding contribution of Jan M. Gutteling and Margot Kuttschreuter of the University of Twente, Enschede).

*Science and the power of TV* is thus warmly welcomed as a very useful survey on the state of the art of analysis of public communication of science and technology through television: a similar milestone was needed since a long time, and it will be very useful in helping researchers to locate specific, focused studies within the bigger picture. The lack of a stronger, unifying discussion, the presence of non strictly up-to-date researches, or a certain lack of homogeneity, can therefore be read in positive terms, as a hope that other studies will be stimulated by this book, connecting researchers with different observation points, and involving practitioners of all television genres in a collaborative effort to derive solid, general conclusions without loosing the grip to the actual, specific programmes.