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Submitted

February 8th, 2019

Approved

May 7th, 2019

© 2019

Communication & Society

ISSN 0214-0039

E ISSN 2386-7876

doi: 10.15581/003.32.4.77-92

www.communication-society.com

2019 – Vol. 32(4)

pp. 77-92

How to cite this article:

Cañedo, A. (2019). *Austerity versus Diversity: the Production of News Content in Televisión del Principado de Asturias*.

Communication & Society, 32(4), 77-92.

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***Austerity versus Diversity: the Production of News Content in Televisión del Principado de Asturias*¹**

Abstract

Televisión del Principado de Asturias (TPA) is a regional public television that has been operating in Spain since 2005 by outsourcing part of its broadcasting activities. From the perspective of the political economy of communication and culture, this article studies the evolution of TPA's outsourcing model, taking into account the production of news content. The time of the analysis extends from the start of its broadcasting to its last tender in this respect, in 2016. Initially, with the goal of promoting the regional audiovisual sector, TPA implemented a contracting model divided into content batches that were allocated to various companies, mostly regional. By doing so, the activities of production were distributed into different territorial areas. However, after the economic crisis of 2008, the confluence of several factors (economic austerity measures, the political change in the regional government and a torrent of lawsuits for illegal transfer of workers) changed the outsourcing model. Currently, the complete activity of production is concentrated on a sole tenderer, which is part of an audiovisual conglomerate at the national level, selected because of proposing the most advantageous economic offer. This has represented a reduction in the diversity of sources of production contracted and the triumph of an economic mind-set over social benefit and public service in the socio-economic contexts of austerity.

Keywords

Regional television, public service broadcasting, audiovisual diversity, outsourced audiovisual production, economic crisis.

1. Introduction

The independent regional public televisions, which in Spanish are called *televisiones autonómicas* according to the State model, have been broadcasting since 1982 and have constituted a decisive step in the decentralisation of television in Spain. Throughout the almost four decades of their history, and despite the fact that the regional context in which each of them was conceived has produced broadcasters with their own characteristics, it is possible to define a common history marked by shared milestones (Albornoz & Cañedo in Marzal, 2015). One of them was the emergence in 1999 of a management model based on partial or total outsourcing of broadcasting activity. The regional television of the Canary Islands inaugurated this management system, which was adopted by all the regional operators that

¹ All in-text citations come from bibliographic sources in Spanish and have been translated by the author.

have followed it (Murcia, Aragon, Extremadura, Balearic Islands and Asturias), with the exception of Castilla-La Mancha television.

Service outsourcing is a model of public-private partnership, since while the provision of the broadcasting service is public, insofar as the public administration is responsible for and guarantees it through² direct management; the development and production of certain services depend on private law entities (Sarabia *et al.*, 2012). Thus, regional televisions contract private companies to carry out a wide range of activities that affect the entire television process. In this sense, characterizing the outsourcing model of public regional televisions is not a simple task since “the models of outsourcing are very diverse and a study would be necessary that is not at all easy to approach (given the opacity of information on this issue) in order to categorize and evaluate them with due rigour” (Fernández Alonso in Nerekan Umaran *et al.*, 2015, p. 247).

The common guideline is related to the contracting procedure for content production, which is established through two modalities: public tenders or non-public production orders. As to which part of the production is outsourced, each case is different. While in most cases complete programming blocks have been awarded, differentiating between informative and non-informative contents (the regional televisions of Canary Islands, Murcia, Aragon and Balearic Islands); in other cases outsourcing is diversified through multiple contracts (the regional television of Asturias).

Relating outsourcing of television content production from public operators to the diversity applied to the audiovisual sector implies analysis focussed on one of the basic components of diversity: diversity of sources³. This article studies the relationship established between regional public television, as a broadcasting source governed by public service objectives, and companies that generate information content, as sources of production. Based on this logic, a balanced externalization is desirable and necessary for the development of the activity of regional televisions since it allows establishing a regional business structure (Miguel de Bustos & Casado del Río in Marzal *et al.*, 2015). This fulfils one of the main objectives of public broadcasting service: the promotion of the regional audiovisual sector. However, this practice entails the risk of an increase in ‘sunflower companies’ (Bustamante, 2002), enterprises characterised by having been created under the protection of regional television, with which they sign contracts that are not transparent and establishing a situation of dependence that prevents the effective consolidation of the audiovisual sector in the region.

Another of the main criticisms of this outsourcing model focuses on the externalization of news content. In spite of the fact that the legislation for regional televisions allows it as long as the editorial control remains in the hands of the regional televisions, several voices have been raised against this practice, with the view that it jeopardizes the effective fulfilment of the objectives of public service (Fernández Alonso, 2002; Sarabia *et al.*, 2012; Francés in Marzal, 2015). The fact that private companies manage the news services of a public operator on the grounds of cost reduction leads to the question “whether, in these cases, public management necessarily involves extra costs or whether, on the contrary, the public administration is contracting companies whose employees work in precarious conditions” (Fernández Alonso in Nerekan Umaran *et al.*, 2015, p. 247).

² Murcia is the only region with a public regional television that adopts an indirect management system in which an outsourced company carries out all the television’s activities.

³ According to Napoli (1999), one of the three basic components of media diversity is the diversity of sources (source diversity) and their respective subcategories: diversity of producer owners, diversity of content distributors and diversity of the workforce hired by producers and distributors. Albornoz and García Leiva (2017), for their part, point out that part of the analysis of the diversity of the audiovisual sector involves evaluating to what extent the production, distribution and exhibition/emission capacity of audiovisual content is or is not concentrated in a reduced number of socio-economic agents, and what their characteristics are, that is, whether or not they present different types of ownership, size and geographical origin.

On the positive side, it should be noted that in the context of an economic crisis the outsourcing model reduces structural costs and is more flexible regarding possible dismissals or new hiring of personnel (Miguel de Bustos & Casado del Río in Marzal *et al.*, 2015). This issue is not trivial, since in the context of the European Union, the global economic crisis of 2008 set as a priority the control of the deficit and implementation of austerity measures that had an impact on all public services, including radio and television. In addition, it increased political attacks on these broadcasters and promoted their restructuring through layoffs, in many cases massive ones, fundamental to a neoliberal economic model based on “the gradual, but also often violent, dismantling of public property and its transfer to private hands” (Sarikakis in Marzal *et al.*, 2017, p. 45).

In Spain, regional radio and television stations were not exempt from the application of austerity measures, which mainly resulted in a reduction in the subsidies received. These went down from 945.3 million euros in 2010 to 647 million euros in 2015 (Bustamante, 2017). This, coupled with the decrease in advertising revenues in the context of the crisis meant constant threats to reduce the number of workers by means of a workforce adjustment plan (in Spanish called, EREs –*expedientes de regulación de empleo*–), and publicly legitimized the political intent to privatize and close these televisions (Marzal, 2015; Marzal *et al.*, 2015, 2017; Fernández Alonso, 2017). In 2012, many regional channels –second channels and satellite signals– were closed as a consequence of the drop in funding (Miguel de Bustos & Casado del Río in Marzal *et al.*, 2015). Additionally, in November 2013, the Valencian public television⁴ turned off its signal by unilateral decision of the regional government, which justified the closure on economic grounds because of not being able to assume readmission of more than 1,000 employees dismissed through an ERE that was declared illegal.

Likewise, the economic crisis, on the one hand, led to outsourced activities being concentrated in a small number of production companies, most of which belonged to audiovisual conglomerates at the national level –“with the consequent suffocation of the very weakened regional audiovisual fabric” (Fernández Alonso, 2013, p. 29)–. On the other hand, regional production companies signed temporary alliances with conglomerates, modifying the audiovisual panorama in the regions (Miguel de Bustos & Casado del Río in Marzal *et al.*, 2015).

From the research perspective of the political economy of communication and culture, this article analyses the extent to which the so-called ‘austerity measures’ have affected the outsourcing model for the production of news content in a specific case of public regional television: Televisión del Principado de Asturias (TPA). This television, one of the newest public regional television, has operated in the Principality of Asturias –also called Asturias– since 2005 as one of the management companies of the Ente Público de Comunicación del Principado de Asturias (EPCPA), of which it formed part together with the companies Radio del Principado de Asturias (RPA) and Productora de Programas del Principado de Asturias (PRODA).

The Principality of Asturias is a region with a surface area of 10,604 km² and a little more than one million inhabitants. In economic terms, at the end of 2016, Asturias had a GDP per capita (€20,855) lower than the average for Spain (€24,100), and a lower unemployment rate (14.6% in Asturias compared to 18.6% in Spain). These figures were affected differently by the economic crisis. In 2016 the GDP per capita of Asturias had fallen by 6.63% with respect to 2008, while at the national level this figure fell 3 points more, down to 9.84%. The unemployment rate, which in the period 2008–2016 increased in Spain by 23.65%, experienced

⁴ In 2016, the Valencian Law 6/2016 was approved that created a new regional broadcaster: Corporación Valenciana de Medios de Comunicación. According to these regulations, the new television channel, À Punt, began regular broadcasts on 9 June 2018.

an increase of 46% in Asturias, which, although high, kept the Asturian average below the national figure in 2016.

In this context, the article studies the outsourcing model of the production of news content implemented in TPA, during the period between the start of its broadcasting and the last tender in this respect, in December 2016. This took place after a process of business restructuring of the regional television which currently operates under the name Radiotelevisión del Principado de Asturias (RTPA) as a result of the enactment of a new law (Law of the Principality of Asturias 8/2014). This law includes a requirement to establish a framework mandate and successive programme contracts in which to establish the objectives of the public service broadcasting, considering news services to be fundamental pillar. However, in line with what has happened in the rest of the public televisions in Spain, these key public service instruments have yet to be developed.

As a public service broadcaster, TPA adopts the model of outsourcing part of its activity with a commitment to boosting the audiovisual production fabric in Asturias, traditionally characterised by a high degree of fragmentation and precariousness. In this sense, the commitment to the presence of a diversity of regional content production sources in programming is conceived as one of the pillars of the public service objectives entrusted to the EPCPA, and is considered an element of territorial cohesion. Focusing on the outsourcing of the production of news content, this article poses the question as to whether there is an evolution of the outsourcing model in relation to the socio-political and economic context in which TPA operates and to what extent the economic crisis has affected this model.

The research techniques used in this study are, on the one hand, documentary analysis (bibliography, legislation, public and non-public documentation on TPA contracts, sector databases, and newspaper archives) and, at the same time, in-depth interviews with key stakeholders (EPCPA managers and workers, contracted companies, and sector representatives). The interviews carried out during 2018 with the three general directors of the regional public broadcaster –José Ramón Pérez Ornia (2005-2011), Juan José Guerenabarrena (2011) and Antonio Virgili (2012-2019)– are noteworthy for their documentary value. These personal interviews constitute a valuable contribution toward a reliable and trail-blazing reconstruction of the history of Asturian regional television.

The article is structured into three main parts. Firstly, a brief description is given of the outsourcing model implemented in TPA, emphasising the production of news content. The three different stages identified in relation to the provision of news content by external companies are detailed below. Moreover, the so-called ‘crisis of illegal transfer of workers’ is analysed in depth because it is considered a turning point in the process of externalization of news contents and for the future of Asturian public television. Finally, the main findings of the research are noted.

2. The outsourcing model in TPA

TPA is a regional public television that contracts the development of part of the traditional activities of a broadcaster with external companies, following the model implemented by the majority of the Spanish public regional televisions that have emerged since 1999. Not only part of the broadcasted content production is outsourced, but so are other key services of enterprise activity such as commercial management, legal advice, advertising, development of computer applications, and technical maintenance. To this end, the two contracting models mentioned above are applied: non-public direct orders and public tenders⁵. The latter form has been used by TPA since the end of 2008, three years after the beginning of the activities of the EPCPA and its companies. The delay in moving from a pattern of non-public direct

⁵ Information on public tenders offered by EPCPA and its societies is available at: <http://corporativo.rtpa.es/procedimientos-historico> [Accessed on 18 November 2018].

contracting to a pattern of public offer was related to the special interest that the first management team of the EPCPA had in having control over the companies contracted, in its support for the pledged dynamisation of the Asturian audiovisual sector.

This responds, on the one hand, to the desire of TPA to be an example of boosting and generating employment in the Asturian region, since this model enables “a margin for small companies, for autonomous work and for creativity in a way that is fully functional to the traditional system” (Zallo, 1992, p. 17). In addition, in reference to the production of content, outsourcing is especially positive for mitigating inexperience in the management of their own public media, the business atomisation and the economic uncertainty of the Asturian audiovisual sector (Cañedo, 2018). Furthermore, the context of the crisis in the public broadcasting service in which TPA was created (Bustamante, 2006; Marzal *et al.*, 2015), justifies the choice for an operating model that requires less fixed labour costs and avoids large economic outlays for technical equipment and infrastructure.

Table 1: TPA: Budgets approved by the regional parliament of the Principality of Asturias, 2006-2017 (in euros).

Year	Budget		
	Operating	Capital	Total
2006	16,981,542	829,103	17,810,645
2007	17,672,320	915,714	18,588,034
2008	b.c.*	b.c.*	b.c.*
2009	29,027,933	1,087,924	30,115,857
2010	28,749,417	1,825,254	30,574,671
2011	29,337,177	2,735,156	32,072,333
2012	b.c.*	b.c.*	b.c.*
2013	20,462,325	482,000	20,944,325
2014	b.c.*	b.c.*	b.c.*
2015	19,280,220	392,000	19,672,220
2016	b.c.*	b.c.*	b.c.*
2017**	21,829,855	639,000	22,468,855

Notes: *b.c. = budget carry-over. **The 2017 budgets already take into account the restructuring of TPA as regards the whole of the activity carried out by RTPA.

Source: Own elaboration on the basis of the General Budgets of the Principality of Asturias 2006-2017.

Defining the operating budget and a minimum number of employees were two of the main discussion points when developing the EPCPA. As Pérez Ornia (personal interview, 2018) points out, there was initial limit of 60-70 workers to be recruited that was very narrow, even if only for the newsroom. Moreover, it was also a budget limit of 17 million euros that didn't cover 17 hours per day for programming, or even 8 hours. Thus, it is no coincidence that, during the analysed period, the budgets of TPA remain the lowest ones of all the public regional televisions associated in the Federation of Regional Radio and Television Organizations (*Federación de Organismos de Radio y Televisión Autonómicos* - FORTA), which highlights the economic weakness of this television company from its inception.

This fact is decisive if the high degree of dependence on the regional subsidy is taken into account, since both the income from TPA's business activity and advertising revenues are minimal (Cañedo, 2018). However, analysis of the TPA budgets allows us to identify two stages: one of continuous growth from 2006 to 2012, in which the initial limit of 17 million euros is doubled as a result of political commitment and good audiences; and another one of drastic budgetary reduction justified by the measures to contain expenditure as of 2013 (EPCPA, 2010).

In a context of budget reduction, the items intended to cover non-fixed operating costs are necessarily smaller. Balancing budgets without damaging TPA's activity was highly complicated and was achieved by reducing the resources allocated to contracted suppliers. Therefore, the main cut affected the budget line of '*aprovisionamientos*' –supplies–, which is the one intended for the production of contents, both informative and non-informative. This budget line was halved between 2012 and 2013. Furthermore, taking into account that in the analysed period the number of TPA signals increased from one to three –with the launch of the second channel, *A8* (26-05-2007) and a third channel for simulcast broadcasting in high definition, *A9HD* (27-03-2010)–, the budget reduction directly affects fulfilment of the public service because it hinders the development of independent and diverse programming for each of the signals.

3. The outsourcing model for news content in TPA

3.1. *First stage, 2005-2008: non-public direct orders*

Since the beginning of TPA's activities, the production of news content was conceived as a 'trimedia' newsroom. Under this system, a pioneering one in the Spanish public regional television system, television employees generate simultaneous content for television, radio and a digital medium. TPA designs a head newsroom and a series of outsourced correspondent offices. Thus, unlike the rest of the regional televisions, which outsourced the production of contents to a single supplier, TPA proposed a batch contracting model established around nine points of origin for the information: eight of them located in Asturias and one in Madrid.

The head newsroom is located in Gijón (population 273,422 in 2016) and seven correspondent offices are located in the main population centres of Asturias: Oviedo, Avilés, Mieres, Langreo, Cangas de Onís, Cangas del Narcea and Navia. All of them were connected to the head newsroom to broadcast in real time and enable live news connections. It is precisely live connections that are one of the hallmarks of TPA because of its first general director, Pérez Ornia, who had already opted for this type of news content when he was in charge of Telemadrid (Albornoz, 2002). Thus, live connections determined the location of the different correspondent offices, since the production is more complex in a territory such as Asturias where its orographic characteristics make technical coverage difficult.

During 2005-2008, a period in which all outsourcing contracting was carried out by direct order, a freelance journalist and ten companies were contracted for news content production of TPA. Of these companies, nine of them were Asturian and three had local digital terrestrial television (DTT) licences. In this way, the initial double purpose of promoting the Asturian audiovisual sector and collaborating with local televisions as providers of news content was achieved (Pérez Ornia in JGPA, 2005). This strategy would allow the development of collaborative synergies in both directions in a context in which local television operators were characterised by their instability, which was intensified after the readjustment of the television map with the implementation of DTT and the end of analogue broadcasts in 2010 (Cañedo, 2018).

Figure 1: TPA: Network of news content production units in Asturias, 2005-2008.

Source: Own elaboration.

El Comercio TV, a company owned by Grupo Vocento (publisher of one of the main Asturian daily newspapers, *El Comercio*), was one of these contracted suppliers. This company was entrusted with the tasks of coordinating the Asturian news correspondent offices, with the exception of Oviedo's. El Comercio TV was authorized to subcontract other companies for the production of local news in each of the geographical points (Perez Ornia in JGPA, 2006). In this regard, in 2006, contracts were signed with Margen Videoproducciones, La Chalga Producciones, Idola Media, Ten con Ten, Enfoque Visual and Centro Emisor de Occidente as well as with the freelance journalist Martín García Alas (EPCPA, 2006). For its part, the coordination of the correspondent office of the Asturian capital city, Oviedo, became the responsibility of another historic Asturian company, Videoimagen, while the coordination of Madrid was given to Telefónica Audiovisual Services (TSA), belonging to Telefónica Group, whose headquarters is located in Madrid and is a provider of other regional televisions. In addition, the ENG camera operators's contract was awarded to Tabú, although in 2007 the enterprise Enfoque Visual replaced it. In the same year, the outsourcing contracts with the previous companies were renewed and another Asturian company was added as a supplier, La Jingo Comunicación.

From the point of view of audiovisual diversity, this distribution confirms an effective contribution to the diversity of sources since content production is not concentrated in a small number of agents. And, in turn, these agents present differences in size and geographical origin. Nevertheless, all the companies contracted are privately owned for profit, which presents a degree of homogeneity in the absence of other types of entities, such as public or non-profit companies.

In this period, in which TPA's annual budget did not exceed 20 million euros, around nine million euros were invested in outsourcing the production of news services⁶, of which only 7.2% were contracted with non-Asturian economic capital. This attests to an unquestionable commitment to boosting regional companies. Proof of this is that in 2007 the number of workers from outsourced suppliers exceeded the number of workers in the TPA's workforce: while 57 people were part of TPA's head newsroom, 71 workers worked in correspondent offices (EPCPA, 2007).

In addition, in this first stage, and until October 2010, sports contents were included in the TPA News running order without opening differentiation. Moreover, all live broadcasts were part of the organization chart of the news production. The responsibility for producing the sports programme and the live broadcasts lies with Asturmedia by direct order. This

⁶ These data do not include contracts with Asturmedia for the production of sports content.

company was set up *ex profeso* at the end of 2005 by Editorial Prensa Ibérica and Mediapro Group to provide contents for Asturian television. Although its head office is located in Oviedo and is therefore considered an Asturian enterprise, Asturmedia is the typical case of a company created with capital from outside the region in the shadow of regional television.

3.2. *Second stage, 2009-2012: multiple batches public tender*

The duration of the contracts signed in 2007 with outsourced companies was extended to 2008. That year, the first public tender took place for the provision of the news production structured into different geographic and activity batches. The Asturian territory was divided into eight areas according to the location of the main population centres. These areas coincided with the distribution by correspondent offices used in the previous period (Figure 1). To these batches were added five more regarding specific contents, three of them for news content production for television⁷.

In the first instance, the contracts, which amounted to almost 1.3 million euros, were divided among six companies for seven areas of which five were already providing these services for TPA. In a second round of bidding, two of these enterprises, Videoimagen and Enfoque Visual, were allocated the batches that had not been initially awarded and that were set in territories where two of the three local companies with a DTT license operated, Centro Emisor de Occidente and La Chalga Producciones. In addition, another batch was tendered to cover the news content of eastern Asturias that was awarded to El Comercio TV (EPCPA, 2009).

In 2009, a wave of public tenders began and lasted until 2012. In the middle of that year, the production of the news contents generated in Madrid and of other Asturian special thematic contents were put up for tender. The awarding of both batches went to companies that had been carrying out these activities since the beginning of the regular broadcasting of TPA: TSA and El Comercio TV, worth 285,500 euros and 297,000 euros, respectively and with an initial duration of one year extendable to three. Thus, the outsourced news content production was structured into ten correspondent offices.

In addition, “in order to improve Production Area resources and bearing in mind that the needs of news are growing” (EPCPA, 2009, p. 87), auxiliary production services from the Broadcasting Management –Dirección de Antena y Contenidos– and the News and Sports Management –Dirección de Informativos y Deportes– were also awarded for a value of 358,200 euros. As in the previous cases, this award, which required carrying out activities in the TPA facilities in Gijón, was granted to the company that had been performing the service, Teletemas, for a period of one year extendable to three years.

At the end of 2009, the contracting of the ENG camera operators was put up for tender, which also went to the company that had been operating the service, Enfoque Audiovisual, for an amount of 244,300 euros. In this case, unlike the previous ones, the contract was signed for one year, renewable for only another one.

All in all, the total volume of the tender for news coverage in 2009 amounted to 2.3 million euros⁸, of which 87.7% went to Asturian companies. In terms of the diversity of content production sources, the enterprises that joined the list of suppliers after the 2009 awards were all Asturian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). This, in accordance with the previous stage, reflects the interest in boosting employment in the region. In this sense, in 2009, the number of workers in the news services was 122 (six fewer than in 2007): 51 workers belonging to the TPA’s workforce and 71 to outsourced companies (EPCPA, 2009). This data

⁷ The remaining two are the batch that offers the production of meteorological information content and the production of news content for the digital newspaper, awarded respectively to the recently created Asturian companies, Sotavento and Proygest (Producción y Gestión de Medios, S.L.).

⁸ Due to the impossibility of accessing the data, this calculation does not include the value of the contracts awarded for the vacant batches in file o8/38 TPA or the lot awarded outside the file to El Comercio TV.

shows a notable reduction in the volume of workers in the TPA's workforce during the period 2007–2009, as opposed to the stability of the number of workers in outsourced companies, which reveals the importance of the latter.

During 2010, the news content production contracts awarded in 2009 were renewed. Moreover, two new tenders were held for the supply of special thematic content: Teletemas won the first one (amounting to 139,825 euros) and Videoimagen was allocated the second one (amounting to 108,500 euros). In both cases, TPA entrusted again the production of news contents to Asturian SMEs with which it was already working.

At the end of the year, the volume of workers was higher than the previous year, a total of 128, the same as in 2007. Of these workers, 46 belonged to the TPA's workforce and 82 to outsourced companies. Once again, the data show a negative conclusion for the stability of TPA's workforce, which decreased by 19.3% in the 2007–2010 period, while the number of workers in the contracted companies increased. Thus, in this period, characterised by a constant increase in the activity budgets, the outsourcing model of TPA's news contents led to an increase in the number of workers in the outsourced companies instead of boosting the stability of its own workforce.

On the other hand, although there is economic investment in a variety of Asturian SMEs –some historical and others recently created but domiciled in Asturias–, the situation shows the high dependence on external companies for the effective fulfilment of the public television service, which could pose a risk. Although these workers respond to direct orders from TPA and even work in the headquarters of the regional television, they are hired by third parties, ultimately responsible for their working conditions. In this sense, the 'crisis of illegal transfer of workers' that was unleashed in this period bears witness to this. Its development was decisively influenced by two events that marked the future of TPA from 2011. On the one hand, austerity measures were approved to contain regional public expenditure, so that the budgets of all Asturian public companies were reduced. On the other hand, Foro Asturias Ciudadanos (FAC), a new political party with right-wing ideology, took over the regional government after an electoral campaign in which its candidates had already expressed their interest in the privatisation of the regional broadcaster.

In October 2011, under the management of the second director of the EPCPA, Juan José Guerenabarrena, the government of FAC agreed to a restriction of credit to public entities amounting to 156 million euros in order to meet deficit targets. As a result, TPA lost more than one third of its previously allocated budget. The unilateral and illegal decision to cancel economic transfers previously approved by the plenary session of Asturian parliament meant that TPA could not afford the payments to suppliers. This, in a context of a continuous increase in the volume of workers from outsourced companies, in parallel with a decrease in the TPA's workforce, was the breeding ground for the 'crisis of illegal transfer of workers'. This crisis was triggered by lawsuits from several of the workers from the suppliers who had stopped receiving their salaries in this context.

From the beginning of TPA's broadcasting, many of the workers from the outsourced companies carried out their work in the facilities of the regional television under the orders of its directors. This situation occurred with the connivance of all the parties involved (TPA, supplier companies and workers), since the outsourcing model implemented resulted in many of the suppliers not directly executing the task for which they were contracted: it was TPA that did so through the direct use of the workers of those companies. Both circumstances are understood as illegal transfer of workers according to the Spanish Workers Statute⁹.

⁹ As Article 43.2 of the Workers' Statute (Spain) states, "it is understood that the illegal transfer of workers is incurred when any of the following circumstances take place: the object of service contracts between companies is limited to the mere provision of services by the workers of the assignor company for the transferee company, or that the transferor company lacks its own stable activity or organisation, or does not have the means necessary to carry out

Being aware of the illegal situation in which TPA had been operating, since 2008 the general management of the EPCPA considered “alternative models” of outsourcing. In fact, in 2010, a tripartite commission composed of members of the Directorate General, the Board of Directors and the trade unions was set up to study a reform of the current model. However, the unexpected and drastic budget reduction in 2011, together with the resulting economic suffocation of TPA and its suppliers, brought this situation to a head before a solution could be found.

In view of both the high number of lawsuits from the workers and the public criticism of the management model, in 2012 a ‘Protocol for Actions in Outsourced Hiring’ was approved under the management of the third director of the EPCPA, Antonio Virgili. This protocol was aimed at eliminating possible situations of illegal transfer of workers in the outsourcing of services (EPCPA, 2012). Even so, the ‘crisis of illegal transfer of workers’ extended up to the period 2011–2014 and its figures include 200 trials, 69 plaintiffs and more than 50 judgments against the EPCPA and its societies. In the case of TPA, all judgements affected workers of companies contracted to produce news content.

3.3. *Third stage, 2013-2017: single batch public tender*

In line with the hiring policy set out in the protocol, shortly before the end of 2012, the FAC representatives on the Board of Directors urged Virgili to refrain from signing new contracts and from extending existing ones until the Board decided on the measures to be taken “to regularise contractual relations with external service providers, in order to avoid or minimise the risk of declaration of illegal transfer of workers” (FAC, 2012). Faced with this situation, Virgili himself decided not to extend the contracts. This resulted in the dismissal of workers who provided services for outsourcing companies contracted by the regional television on the 31 of December, 2012: Enfoque Visual, Idola Media, Videoimagen and Ten con Ten, among others (Rodríguez, 2013).

At the same time, a tender was announced for the production of news contents that brought together all the service in a single batch for the first time, following the pattern of the rest of the public regional televisions of the outsourced model. Given that the announcement was made public on the same day that the contracts with the previous companies ended, until April 2013 the TPA News content was produced with TPA’s workforce and two direct order contracts with TSA (Madrid) and El Comercio TV (Asturias).

The change from a tendering model of multiple geographic batches, which allowed the hiring of several SMEs in Asturias, to a tender of a single batch, with greater technical and economic requirements for interested companies, meant that the former suppliers could not apply for the tender. The new hiring conditions were proposed with the aim of generating greater economic savings, in line with the reduction in the budget and in regional public spending, but also seeking to prevent future illegal transfers of workers.

In order to apply for the single batch tender, some former suppliers were integrated into temporary joint ventures with non-regional audiovisual conglomerates. Such were the cases of Enfoque Visual and Videoimagen that allied with Grupo Secuoya (owner of Central Broadcaster Media, the company in charge of the news content production of the Balearic regional television, IB3, and manager of the Murcian television, RTRM); Sport and News that joined Grupo Mediapro through its subsidiary Molinare; and Cronistar, from Oviedo, which was associated with Grupo Eurostar. El Comercio TV, part of Grupo Vocento, was the only Asturian company to enter the bid by itself.

In addition, as expected, large non-regional audiovisual conglomerates with a presence in other public regional televisions competed: Vértice 360 joined the audiovisual company

its activity, or does not exercise the functions inherent to its status as an employer” (author’s own translation from Spanish).

Zebra, with whom it already had shares to produce news content on Televisión Canaria; and Telefónica joined Chip Audiovisual (Grupo Prisa), responsible for the production of news content on Aragón Televisión. For its part, VAV Compañía de Producciones, a company with offices in Madrid, Merida and Lisbon, competed alone.

The tender was resolved in March 2013 in favour of VAV for a period of nine months, and the contract was formalized for a value of 662,222.24 euros, a quantity much lower than those of previous periods. The arguments justifying the award to this company were based on an economic nature. It was considered that its offer was the most advantageous one not only because it was the most economical but also because it offered the best value for money in the service (EPCPA, 2013).

The main consequence of the policy adopted by the EPCPA in a socio-economic context of austerity is the transition from a mind-set of social benefit to an economic one that no longer had the promotion of the regional audiovisual industry as a priority. The new single batch tendering model not only reduces the number of suppliers (production sources), but also hinders the presence of local SMEs. In this sense, the adoption of this outsourcing model, existing in the rest of the public regional televisions that outsource the production of contents, underlines the threat to the diversity of the audiovisual sector since it favours concentration in a single large-sized company that is privately owned and which operates at the national level.

One month after the start of its activities for TPA, the company VAV went into bankruptcy, which did not prevent the regional television from extending the contract for 2014, justifying the effective performance of the service (Virgili in JGPA, 2013). Despite the positive view offered by the management of TPA on the service provided by VAV, criticism was constant during the period in which it provided news content: the company was accused of deceiving its employees, violating the labour agreement and even carrying out dismissals for political reasons¹⁰. In this climate, the relationship between VAV and TPA, which could have been extended for up to three years, ended in December 2014.

This situation led to the holding of a new public tender for a single lot. On this occasion, Grupo Secuoya, Zebrastur-Grupo Mediapro and Videoreport-Factoría Plural submitted their proposals. The contract was awarded to this last temporary joint venture for a value of 926,000 euros and an execution period of one year extendable to another. As in 2013, the resolution of the tender corresponded to the most economically advantageous offer. Again, the lower cost was the determining factor in awarding the tender. It should be noted that at the time of winning the tender, Videoreport-Factoría Plural was also awarded the management of the ENG equipment service for Telemadrid's news services. In addition, through this contract, Grupo Tres60, the main shareholder of Videoreport since 2013, and Grupo Heraldo de Aragón, the main shareholder of Factoría Plural and Chip Audiovisual, the company that had competed for the previous tender, became part of the suppliers of TPA in their second attempt.

The provision of news content by Videoreport-Factoría Plural was extended until the end of 2016, when, as a result of a new tender, the contract was formalized with a new temporary joint venture participated in by Videoreport (75%) and Cronistar (25%), a company headquartered in Oviedo. This tender, to which four proposals were submitted, was resolved, like the previous ones, "because it was the most economically advantageous offer," for a value of 1,174,800 euros per year.

However, during the period 2013-2017, the economic investment in the outsourced production of news content was much lower than in the previous stage and scarcely benefited companies based in Asturias. Although the last successful bidder has its head office in Oviedo,

¹⁰ More information at: <http://fesasturiasugt.blogspot.com.es/2014/10/convocatoria-de-concentracion-contrael.html> and <http://www.tutele.net/forotpa/tag/vav/> [Accessed on 1 March 2018].

it is majority owned by a non-regional company. Moreover, in a context of economic austerity, the number of sources of content production is lower than in the first stage and the presence of regional companies is negligible compared to the preponderance of large audiovisual conglomerates that operate at a national level. The diversity of production sources, therefore, is undoubtedly smaller.

4. Conclusions

A close look at the first years of broadcasting of TPA allows us to distinguish three stages in the outsourcing model of news content production. At each stage, there are differences in the contracting model implemented, the designed structure of the outsourcing (correspondent offices), the nature of the companies contracted and the economic investments made. In terms of diversity of the production sources, each of the stages has defining characteristics. A first stage based on a political-cultural mind-set that develops a regional production fabric through the direct contracting of various regional companies. A second stage, in which this mind-set is maintained, but a clear step is taken towards the transparency of the model of outsourcing of news content assumed by TPA when bidding publicly for tenders. Nevertheless, their design makes it possible to keep a large part of the supplier companies from the first stage contracted. Finally, a third stage marked by austerity measures, in which there is a shift from a political-cultural mind-set to a mind-set in which economic criteria prevail. This stage signifies the end of bolstering the local audiovisual industry and a high number of supplier by the signing a single contract with an operator at the national level.

Table 2: TPA: Outsourcing of News content production (2005-2017).

Stage	Contracting model	Outsourcing	Suppliers	Investment (approx., in euros)	Characterization (in terms of Diversity)
2005-2008	Non-public direct orders	Head newsroom and correspondent offices	- 9 Asturian SMEs - 1 Asturian freelance worker - 1 non-regional company (Madrid correspondent office)	9,000,000	- Opacity in management - Political-cultural logic - Development of a regional production fabric (capillarity) - Diversity of local sources
2009-2012	Public tender - 6 tendering	Head newsroom, correspondent offices y thematic batches	- 8 Asturian SMEs - 1 non-regional company (Madrid correspondent office)	12,000,000	- Transparency in management - Political-cultural logic - Diversity of local sources
2013-2017	Public tender - 3 tendering	Head newsroom and single supplier	- 1 large non-regional company (provider of other regional TVs)	5,000,000	- Transparency in management - Economic logic - Single non-regional provider

Source: Own elaboration.

The first stage (2005–2008) presents a peculiarity with respect to the model of outsourcing established in the rest of regional televisions, since it is characterised by contracting through non-public direct orders with various local SMEs. Thus, as opposed to hiring a single supplier, a greater variety of production sources located in different geographical points of Asturias is chosen. This is done with the idea of distributing the economic investment among different regional companies and fulfilling the objective of boosting and promoting the development of the audiovisual production fabric. Moreover, this strategy represents an effective

contribution to the diversity in the audiovisual sector in terms of the range of production sources.

During this period, with a general activity budget of approximately 20 million euros, the high economic investment in Asturias for production of news content stands out, as all the companies contracted have their registered offices in the region, except the one in charge of covering information generated in Madrid (TSA). In addition, there is evidence of the incipient creation of a regional audiovisual productive fabric in parallel with the development of TPA through the constitution of companies, some of them created expressly by non-Asturian capital to support regional television (Asturmedia). In this sense, during this period it can be determined that the outsourcing model is positive for Asturias since the television contracts companies and workers that are listed in the region and contribute economically there.

The second stage (2008–2012) follows the batch-contracting model of the previous stage, although there is a decisive change: for the sake of transparency in the management of the regional broadcaster, the contracting is put up for public tender. However, these tenders confirm the presence of content suppliers from the previous period. The stage begins in an economic boom context, with budget increases of up to 30 million euros. This results, on one hand, in a greater investment in regional companies and the consequent revitalization of the regional audiovisual sector; and, on the other hand, in the increase in workers hired by outsourced companies, to the detriment of the TPA workforce.

However, the austerity measures applied from 2011 and the change of regional government, which endanger the future of TPA and its suppliers, unleashed the so-called ‘crisis of illegal transfer of workers.’ This crisis underlines both the structural problems of the TPA itself and the weakness of the suppliers who are unable to survive without the economic support of the Asturian regional television. Thus, the second stage reveals the negative side of the applied outsourcing model: the economic dependence of the contracted companies confirms that, far from boosting the regional audiovisual sector, a subsistence mind-set on the part of supplier companies had developed. At the same time, the illegal transfer of workers constitutes a violation of labour rights that can hardly be justified in the operating mechanism of public service.

The third stage (2013–2017) is marked by an unfavourable economic context for TPA with budget reductions of up to 30%. Within this framework there is a paradigm shift in the bidding model that reduces contracting to a single batch of production of news content. Accordingly, in a context marked by austerity measures, the production of news content is concentrated in a single company. This fact is justified by the reduction in costs. Not only can it be observed that there are large non-regional communication conglomerates with economic interests in regional television but also that, if these agents are the successful bidders in the tenders only because they offer more competitive prices, the preponderance of an economic mind-set puts at risk the role of regional television as a booster of the regional audiovisual sector. However, after the ‘crisis of illegal transfer of workers,’ it is clear that this change is due not only to an economic issue, but also to the desire to prevent new cases in a territory with a weak and dependent audiovisual sector.

The analysis carried out confirms that outsourcing part of the activities of a television with the aim of articulating a local/regional production fabric can be justified in terms of public service and diversity. However, if, as has happened in Asturias, such outsourcing is carried out without basic procedural protocols that guarantee the effective hiring of workers and avoid situations of dependence on the supplier (most of them hired without advertising), the results are dire in terms of democracy and transparency.

Thus, despite the fact that theoretically the outsourcing model may contribute to promoting the development of a regional audiovisual production fabric, one might ask what the outsourcing of the production of TPA news content has contributed to the Asturian audiovisual sector. Beyond the economic injection received by a series of regional SMEs

during 2007–2012, there is little that can be assessed as positive. The ‘crisis of illegal transfer of workers’ and the impossibility of these SMEs to compete in the public tenders that have taken place since 2013 highlights the difficulties of the TPA to break up the precarious dynamics characterising the Asturian audiovisual sector.

It has also been demonstrated that in territories such as Asturias, with an atomised audiovisual production fabric that operates with a subsistence mind-set and not one of development, the commitment to diversity in the field of television costs money. Accordingly, it has no place in austerity economic contexts in which cost savings are imposed over any other objective. This is an ideal circumstance for the large non-regional communications conglomerates to become the sole suppliers of regional television channels. These companies benefit, either alone or through the constitution of temporary joint ventures, from their high production capacity at a lower cost to participate as content suppliers in public televisions, which are attractive to them because they see them as an important business option.

With a view to the future, it is vital to rethink the outsourcing model of TPA, which must have as its primary objective the redesign of the workforce. The political imposition that establishes a limit on the number of employees must be eliminated, since this number has been shown to be insufficient to carry out the work required by a public regional television and has favoured the coexistence, in inequality of working conditions, of workers hired by outsourced companies and its own workforce. A further recommendation is that the permanent workforce be restructured in order to prioritise the internalisation of all personnel responsible for the production of news content and to favour the externalisation of personnel responsible for carrying out technical or auxiliary activities and services. This ensures that working practices alien to public television do not alter the editorial control of news, a cornerstone of public service broadcasting.

Finally, both the Asturian Parliament and the management of RTPA must comply with the provisions of Law 8/2014 and approve the corresponding framework mandate. This instrument would not only guarantee the budgetary stability of public regional broadcaster, but would also establish the roadmap for the fulfilment of public service objectives. Moreover, through its development in successive programme contracts, it would allow regional production quotas to be defined in order to boost the Asturian audiovisual sector and to protect the diversity of sources. In this way, TPA would promote contracting with regional Asturian companies for the production of contents.

This article is part of the work developed within the framework of the research project ‘Audiovisual Diversity and Online Platforms: Netflix as a case study’ [CSO2017-83539-R], supported by the State Research Agency (AEI), within the National RDI Program Aimed at the Challenges of Society of the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) of the European Union.

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