

Science and Technology on TV – Four European Countries compared

Science and technology are usually fields of activity which do not manifest themselves conspicuously in the eye of a large public. Scientists and technologists develop new ideas, techniques and products which may exert a profound influence on everyday life, but most people have no idea what they are all about. They may raise false hopes for new medication, cause false fears about technology or automatisisation, and have various other unwanted side-effects.

A negative attitude towards science and technology may also hamper discussions about new developments or technologies. The ultimate success of such developments may hinge on the outcome of these discussions. Both universities and corporations are influenced by the social and cultural infrastructure in which they operate (*Rip* 1988, *Rijntjes* 1990). To promote the so-called public debate, accessible information about what scientists and technicians are and will be up to is an essential prerequisite. Popularisation of science and technology is primarily a matter of the mass media. Television occupies a prominent position in it. Research by the Dutch National Cultural Planning Bureau reveals that most of their respondents show an interest in these subjects, and want to receive information about science and/or technology via television (*Knulst and Van Beek* 1988). Scientists and engineers favour this medium as well (*Willem* 1992).

Recent research for the Foundation for Public Information on Science, Technology and the Humanities (*PWT*) has shown that attention for science and technology on Dutch TV is scanty. The average time devoted to science amounts to less than 4% of the total time available for broadcasting (*Willems* 1991). This inventory primarily focused on scientific research, and only implicitly on technology.

Since acceptance of useful products resulting from scientific research may well be related to their technological implementation, technology became a subject of our subsequent research as well.

Moreover, our previous results could not be compared to those from other European countries. Discussions on the relative merits of TV in different countries have so far been dominated by prejudice. According to some, there is much more attention for science and technology on British TV than is the case in The Netherlands. Others argue against this point of view. To make a meaningful comparison between European countries, it was necessary to make an inventory in a systematic and consistent fashion. This led to the present follow-up study. Due to the above considerations, the Workgroup Popularisation of Sciences from the university of Nijmegen has conducted quantitative research on behalf of the Ministry of Economic Affairs (Dept. of General Technology Policy) addressing the question how much science and technology appears on TV in The Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Great Britain. Such an inventory has not been made before. In some countries (notably *Great Britain*