

ESA and Television





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Getting ESA into the TV news of its Member States is an important element of the Agency's communication strategy. TV news engages the public in space activities, leading to political support and, ultimately, funding for future programmes. 'ESA TV' is a trusted source of space images and stories for Europe's broadcasters. Space is too good a story not to be part of the news.

ESA and Television News

On 3 September 2006 controllers of ESA's SMART-1 probe confirmed its successful impact with the Moon, at the chosen site near the Lake of Excellence. Some 14 hours later, French broadcaster France 2 opened its flagship evening news show with the story. TF1 and France 3 also covered SMART-1 in their lunchtime and evening news. This is how up to 20 million viewers in France alone saw the tension of mission controllers give way to applause as the impact was confirmed. The audience figures in other ESA Member States were comparable.

Admittedly, ten news items of about 90 seconds each on that day in a major



Member State cannot be compared with the coverage on 21 July 1969 when humans set foot on the Moon for the first time. Mankind followed Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin round-the-clock as the networks provided televised coverage with an intensity no longer seen in today's broadcasting. What they have in common, however, is that television was in 1969 – and still is in 2006 – the only medium able to tell a significant fraction of the population in real time that something important is happening.

Compared to 20 or 30 years ago, ESA has made headway. Throughout the Apollo era and the first Shuttle missions, European space activities were virtually absent from television. Since the 1990s, ESA launches have found their way into the news and, since 2003, have regularly reached cumulative audience figures of more than 200 million across the Member States (see 'Television Monitoring', p 47).

This article outlines why getting into the television news has a prominent place in ESA's communication strategy, what has been done in this area for some 10 years, typical problems encountered when striving to maximise television coverage, and an outlook on the job ahead.

Television and Other Media

Newspapers and radio delivered news to people long before television, and the internet entered our homes at the end of the 20th century with a force similar to that of television in the 1960s. Today, the number of Europeans listening to radio is about the same as those watching television, reading a daily newspaper or browsing the internet.

Television and radio, however, are broadcast media, whereas print and the internet are not. Why is this difference important? A newspaper buyer reads only a small proportion of the articles; the same holds for visitors to internet sites. In contrast, viewers of television news tend to watch every item the broadcaster has chosen to air.

Television, therefore, is much more selective than print and the internet. This is why, despite identical distribution figures, television reaches many more people. Broadcasters are the first to be aware of this and zealously study the news audience figures. The style and content of these programmes are under continuous scrutiny in the effort to attract the best ratings, making it difficult for every story to get into the news. Only stories fulfilling specific criteria will succeed.

Indeed, broadcasting is considered to

be the most important medium for reaching out to 'everybody'. The organisers of tennis tournaments, electoral debates and lottery shows, for example, must ensure they appear on television – above all, on television news.

A few figures illustrate the impact of television. In 2006, the average German spent 30 hours per month on the internet, and three times more in front of the television (for youngsters, the ratio is more like the reverse). However, whereas eight channels accounted for 70% of the television audience in Germany, surfing the internet was distributed among thousands of sites: travel bookings, e-Bay, MSN, personal blogs, movie theatre schedules, and so on, with each site offering possibly thousands of pages.

The internet is not (yet) the medium to carry the news. Although ever more people take news from the internet, they total less than 10% of the viewers of TV news and, more importantly, the type of news they get is of a different nature.

This is why established news media invest heavily in internet news portals to provide viewers or readers with information updated in real-time and with additional content with special appeal to online audiences.

The sites of the main players in the online world indeed feature quite different news than the front pages of established media. A click on the 'most popular' tab in the left column of Google News reveals that internet users make radically different choices than mainstream media.

The internet sites of established media have their finest days when big news is breaking during work hours. On



the day of the London bombings on 7 July 2005, the number of visitors to the BBC News Website equalled the figure for a typical month. But these people were interested in just one story. Every editor of a news portal will confirm that anything beneath the front page gets little or close to zero page views.

24-hour news and night television face a similar dilemma. The millions-of-viewers figures of the main 8 o'clock evening news melt away to tens of thousands, thousands and even hundreds of viewers.

For ESA's communication strategy, television therefore has its place whenever ESA generates headline news with satellite launches and astronaut missions, plus certain science results and technological breakthroughs.

However, television must not be seen in isolation. ESA's broadcast media relations are embedded in the wider context of media activities addressing all media – print, online and broadcast – in a coherent way, delivering to each medium the content best suiting its viewers, readers or users. Well-managed different media mutually amplify coverage of a story from day to day, eventually culminating in major news coverage across all media, as with SMART-1's lunar finale.

Why Space on Television?

There are many areas in society that are poorly covered by television news, or even not at all. Why should 'space' be favoured with coverage?

If political decision-making were an isolated process entirely inside parliamentary debate and government activity, there would indeed be little need for ESA to care about TV coverage of its activities. However, political decision-makers use the media as one platform (others are lobbying and research) to judge a healthy balance among the various policies and political choices favoured by the different components of modern society.

If space were absent from television, it would deprive the space sector of a



route into the political decision-making process in its Member States, and it would ultimately lose opportunities for funding its future programmes. In a nutshell, TV news engages the public in space activities, which in turn leads to political support.

However, the 'beauty contest' for appearing in the news should not be confused with policy-making. The 30-second soundbite delivered by a politician at a party conference or in parliament has little in common with the balanced and elaborated point of view the same politician will develop in policy-making circles. It is the capability to engage the public in a 30-second statement or news item on a complex issue that makes the difference in shaping positive public opinion.

Nobody can expect a Long-Term Plan or all the results from a scientific symposium to feature prominently on television. ESA's capability to simplify complex stories with the potential to make them appear on television is a decisive factor for successful broadcast media relations. Television focuses on human stories, daunting challenges ahead, the next open question, fighting a competitor ... this is why astronauts

and planetary missions are so well-suited to television.

This does not mean that other space activities are condemned to be totally absent. If a story is developed in a way to meet the requirements of television, many areas of spaceflight have the potential to make the news.

However, a single TV appearance is of little use. Despite the selective character of television, making a real impact requires a long-term commitment to serving television with news stories. At ESA, this commitment dates back to the 1990s, when the ESA TV Service was set up.

ESA TV Service – Not a European NASA TV

In the late 1980s, NASA provided several hours per week of NASA TV to Europe via satellite and in some countries fed it into cable networks. Though 'NASA Select' disappeared from Europe many years ago, proposals for a 'European space channel' still abound to provide the aficionado with round-the-clock coverage of space. Actually, there is such an ESA space channel, but it is online – the ESA web Portal puts together news, topical stories, background information,



multimedia content and interactivity under a single roof. Thanks to live streaming, NASA TV is also back in Europe today for those wishing to watch the daily International Space Station Mission Commentary and Shuttle launches.

Without the internet, reaching out to every citizen would be impossible for ESA. So what is ESA TV about, if not televising ESA stories to people?

To understand the role ESA TV plays in Europe's television world, it has to be put into the context of TV news generation, production and exchange. At least 50% of TV news programming on a given day is made up of the same pictures on all national channels – international conflicts, government meetings, disasters – with a voiceover from a journalist and perhaps completed by an interview with an expert or by a piece to camera.

The moving pictures to illustrate the news are exchanged among broadcasters and global news organisations like the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and Reuters. It is on this level that ESA TV comes into play: it is a trusted channel through which newsworthy space images and stories are injected into the global news exchange mechanism. There are two physically distinct means of transport for this process: satellite feeds and video tapes.

Just as ESA publishes hundreds of web stories and dozens of press releases

every year, it releases about 60 'TV Exchanges' every year. A TV Exchange is a story documented by a package of video images lasting typically 15 minutes. Journalists can re-edit the story, insert their own images or sound bites and use the piece on the day of its release or keep it for later.

Every TV Exchange is fed two or three times during one week into 'Europe by Satellite', the satellite news service of the European Commission, and then entered into the ESA video archive from where journalists can request videotape copies or a feed via ftp transfer. A list of more than 2000 contacts is informed via email 24 hours ahead of the release of a new Exchange. All scheduled feeds are listed, along with a content description of the archived tapes, on <http://television.esa.int>

Every new story also enters ESA's web Portal multimedia gallery, where it often illustrates web stories.

It takes a long time to build confidence with broadcast media and the reputation as a reliable and trusted news-provider.

Pitfalls on the Way into the News

In addition to strict technical constraints on format, packaging and delivery methods, the true difficulty in placing space stories in TV news lies in the fact that the television media have a specific view of what makes a story worthy of using, and when and how this happens. The space community is not

alone in having a different view on this. All company executives and politicians want to get on television at the very moment they have success stories to tell; and they also want the cameras turned off in the event of problems.

Unfortunately, TV viewers consider nothing more boring than 'corporate success' stories. An athlete winning a race or breaking a record will make it onto the news. The athlete's story is not only one of success but also of the drama of possible failure, of frustration in the fight against fatigue or a strong competitor. It is this aspect of the success that TV viewers want to know more about.

Without drama, ideally focusing on a human effort, a space story will not make it very far. This is why ESA astronaut missions always attract such high media attention.

If there is no drama, a story must at least have a strong forward-looking element. Today's news are followed by tomorrow's and so on. Stories without the potential to be another news story tomorrow are less attractive to the media than if they have at least an angle pointing towards the future. Many satellite launches attract media attention because the drama of a possible launch failure can be combined with the promise of exciting scientific discovery or benefits.

However, these requirements do not mean a story should be invented – its characters must always be real and the facts correct and complete. The trustworthiness of a news source is rapidly eroded if its output turns out to be biased or loaded with spin.

Also, although news is inherently international in nature, its delivery is largely a national business. The ratings of the CNN International, BBC World and EuroNews pan-European cable news channels are at best a few percent of their national terrestrial counterparts. Also, internet news delivery is focusing increasingly on national, regional or even local stories. Most international stories without a national angle will therefore miss the news.

Television Monitoring

Two different figures can be used to measure television coverage: the total number of viewers ('ratings'), and the number of times a story is mentioned in different news shows.

Ratings are suitable if only a handful of news shows picks up a story. When many programmes cover it, the number of times this has happened is even more useful, because the ratings of a news programme on a given day also depend on other factors: the number of important stories that day, whether other TV networks show a blockbuster movie at the same time, and even the weather. How many times a given story has found its way onto television is a better measure than total audience figures (to obtain these, it is always possible to multiply the number of times the story was in the news by the average rating figures). This is why all the figures given here refer to the numbers of TV news programmes covering an event.

Since 1999, ESA has measured these figures for its main events – satellite launches, manned missions and orbit insertions plus some press conferences. For all of these, news coverage by the 38 major TV networks in seven ESA Member States (D, F, I, UK, E, NL, B) is screened over 1–2 weeks, plus the pan-European CNN, BBC World and EuroNews.

Whenever the targeted event features in a TV news show, a 'hit' is added into a database, along with some 'event data' on the TV channel, the date and time of the

broadcast, etc. More than 7000 hits have been registered in the last 7 years, corresponding to a total audience of several billion viewers (in the larger Member States, a news show on a main network is always good for a million viewers, and more often for 2 or even 3 million).

These data are used to analyse whether ESA has increased its TV coverage in recent years. Between June 2003 and April 2006, ESA had the privilege of eight main events linked to planetary missions: the launches of Mars Express, SMART-1, Rosetta, Venus Express, and the arrival at their destinations of Mars Express, Venus Express and Huygens. They had much in common, notably in terms of television: all were equally good stories in all Member States, all occurred either on a fixed date or within a relatively short launch window, and all benefited from a similar approach to broadcast media relations, including media events at many different sites across Europe. So the monitoring data provide a good sample to identify any common trend over time. For this analysis, only mainstream (terrestrial) broadcasters were taken into account, not 24-hour news because of their lower ratings.

The analysis shows that the coverage increased by 55% between the first four events (Mars Express, SMART-1 and Rosetta launches, Mars Express arrival) and the second four (Cassini-Huygens Saturn orbit insertion, Huygens landing, Venus Express launch & arrival). It can therefore be said that, in 3 years, ESA's TV coverage for comparable events increased by some 50%.

Also, the events interested broadcasters roughly equally across all Member States.

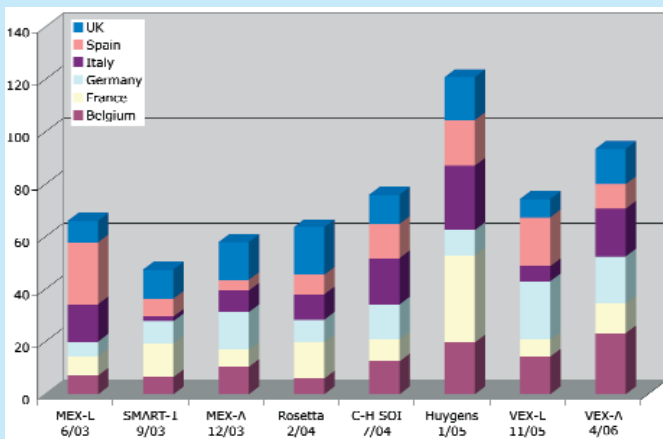
Is this increase reflected by less comparable events during that period? These were the launches of Integral, Envisat and MSG-1 in 2002–2003, and of CryoSat, SSETI Express and GIOVE-A in 2005, European observations of NASA's Deep Impact comet strike in 2005, and SMART-1's lunar end in 2006 (which was excluded from the list of planetary missions as atypical since only ESOC hosted an event and media relations began only the week before).

The analysis shows they were not of equal interest to TV media in all Member States: Italy and France took most notice, and Belgium least. And there was clearly an increase in interest from the 2002–2003 period to 2005–2006.

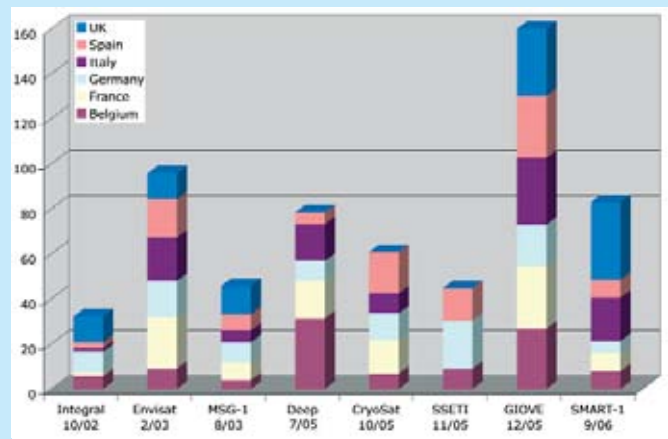
The launches in 2002–2003 were of major ESA projects, whereas the European observations of Deep Impact and the launch of SSETI Express in 2005 had lower significance for the Agency. Nonetheless, they attracted comparable TV coverage.

Overall, ESA succeeded in the last 5 years in increasing the TV coverage for its main events, and in catching opportunities that were unused in the past for additional coverage.

Continued TV monitoring is helping to formulate a strategy to maintain this achievement and to identify areas where coverage can be expanded.



The distribution of 'hits' (mentions in news programmes) among six Member States for eight events. The figures have been 'normalised' to allow for the fact that some countries have more news programmes than others. A general increase with time is evident; the sum for the first four events is 235, compared to 365 for the second four – an increase of 55%. A: arrival; C-H SOI: Cassini-Huygens Saturn Orbit Insertion; L: launch; MEX: Mars Express; VEX: Venus Express



The normalised hit totals for a more disparate range of events. Although less evident than in the first graph, there was an increase in interest between 2002–2003 and 2005–2006



Above all, newsrooms and journalists must know when a new story is coming, whether it carries a national angle or not. ESA has a two-pronged approach for this information provision.

For large events like launches and manned missions, an 'advisory document' is sent out a few weeks ahead to the TV newsrooms of all ESA Member States. It includes a story summary and a list of broadcaster opportunities, notably details of the ESA-provided launch transmission, of launch events at ESA Establishments and Member State space agencies, of background video images and a list of interview partners in various languages. The advisory enables a broadcaster to plan ahead for the story and to make the necessary arrangements, for example, for travelling to the launch site or for shooting additional video images covering a particular national angle.

For smaller events, a TV Exchange is released, often together with a web story or a press release. The day before the release, a mailing makes the newsrooms aware of the upcoming story. Written background information and even a preview clip of the Exchange are

featured in the mail so that the journalists have 24 hours to prepare their story, ahead of the official release.

This is mainly because turning a story into TV news is more time-consuming than writing a newspaper article and above all requires video images on the edit machines of the broadcaster. Without planning and sharing this planning information with the broadcast media, even the best story will not make it on air.

Despite careful preparation, a human angle and proactive media relations, not every story make it into the news. In fact, many stories will find just one or two broadcasters to use them. This has to do with the selectivity of TV news as mentioned earlier and with the trend that TV news is focusing increasingly on two complementary types of story: main news stories and soft news. Main news stories cover major international conflicts, issues of national politics, some sports, murder trials, elections, and sometimes ESA launches. Every broadcaster must cover these. Soft news is normally exclusive to a given news programme and tells a story that is more interesting trivia than hard news: the

discovery of a hidden treasure, a crazy world record, a scientific discovery nobody else is aware of – anything with a wow factor.

The Way Ahead

Soft news does not necessarily mean low quality. It is like tabloids and broadsheet newspapers: they address different needs. Just as today's broadsheets are increasingly taking up tabloid content, TV news is becoming more 'popular'.

One way ahead for space stories in TV news is through soft news. Space exploration is fascinating and there are so many facets interesting to people that it is worth the effort to look into these stories. Very often, they will be interesting to regional broadcasters. For example, when a student participates in a parabolic flight or a scientist has published a major paper in *Nature* or *Science*.

A major obstacle to delivering news to regional broadcasters and producers of current affairs programmes is that they often do not have the technical capability to receive satellite feeds but require expensive videotapes in a professional format. ESA always considered that tape duplication and shipment should be paid by the requestor, which *de facto* puts a limit on the distribution of ESA stories.

This is why new ESA footage and an increasing range of archived stories have been made available to broadcasters since February 2007 on a server via FTP transfer. Although 15 minutes of broadcast-quality footage requires 1 GB, this method is rapidly replacing videotape delivery. A full-scale test was run in December 2006 during the STS-116/Celsius mission of Christ



Fuglesang, as Scandinavian broadcasters are particularly advanced in the use of online broadcast resources.

A second axis of development involves 24-hour news broadcasters. Their ratings are relatively low, so where does the interest in 24-hour news stem from? All print and broadcast newsrooms sport banks of TV monitors showing the country's 24-hour news programme, plus possibly EuroNews and CNN. 24-hour news broadcasters have an important role as drivers and multipliers of

news. Just like any news programme, they take up a mix of hard and soft news content. In this capacity, they can reach media that ESA cannot easily, if only because of the sheer number of national and regional print media across Member States.

Since 2000, Italian news broadcaster RAI24 has broadcast a periodic space magazine. Since 2004, EuroNews has had the biweekly SPACE magazine. Both are produced with editorial support by ESA and both focus on space activities and

stories that are not in the spotlight of hard news but have the potential for making it onto television.

The EuroNews stories enter, via the EBU news exchange, the newsrooms of most of Europe's public broadcasters. This is how stories on space law and space tourism found their way to large audiences in 2006. The ratings for the European Commission's 'Futuris' magazine on EuroNews are measured at 15 million, compared with 1.5 million actual viewers for the channel. The multiplication factor for 'space' on EuroNews will be similar.

Television has never been static since its beginnings in Europe at about the same time as the first Sputnik. Neither has space exploration. ESA's strategy towards the world of broadcasting has to evolve with it, because others would fill the gap if European space programmes were absent. Space is too good a story not to be part of the news. 