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Home Video in Israel: A Second TV Channel

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declining. 'When you've seen six, you've seen them all', said a video-shop owner. 'It's at the weekend that porn is in greatest demand', a Dublin trader said. 'On Friday night, the place is packed with people looking for blue movies for the week-end'. Comedy and action films, Westerns, romantic films and old movie favourites are also popular.

Regular charges are £2-2.50 a week, though competition is forcing rentals down to £1.50 in places. Outright purchases, which are rare, cost £30-70. There are some 300 high street video rental libraries in the country and an unknown number of backroom and mobile outlets. Average turnover is £200 per outlet per week, representing a total of £60,000 a week with some 40,000 tapes out on hire. Stock levels range from 300 to 5,000 titles. Outlets come and go as undercapitalised traders are undercut in a ruthlessly competitive trade.

But the greatest challenge to the trade is the crackdown on imports of pirated cassettes, mainly showing violence and porn. The Irish Videogram Association, formed by the distributors and the video libraries, has launched a major campaign to prosecute the pirates. Prosecutions are running at the rate of five a month and have won court awards of up to £10,000 in damages and costs. The association is pressing the government to increase the maximum fine from £5 per cassette (up to a total of £100) to £100 per pirated cassette.

Clive Hudson, one of the six main distributors, reckons that half of all the cassettes circulating in Ireland are pirated. About one in five of the pirated versions is hired out by video shops from 'under the counter' to trusted customers. The other four pass from customer to customer through small backroom or mobile operators. As many as seven out of ten of the pirated cassettes are taped off-air; 'even the commercials are left in sometimes'. The rest are brought in through sea and airports in the Republic and over the border from Northern Ireland. Mr A. smuggles in a master tape and passes it to Mr B. who duplicates it and sells the copies to Mr C. who hires them out to the customers.

Despite the campaign against piracy, most legitimate traders believe it is on the increase. They blame the distributors for the delay in importing videos of the new film releases; the distributors, in turn, blame the Hollywood film companies for giving low priority to the Irish market. Often the video is on release in the US before the film reaches Dublin.

The problem was outlined by one video-shop owner: 'I was expecting a cassette of a major new release and decided to offer 100 of my best customers a chance to book it. They laughed at me: only three of them had not already seen the pirated version.' The traders reckon that about 90% of the pirated cassettes are of films not yet released in Ireland.

The picture which emerges in Ireland is of a video sub-culture which has developed rapidly in the past four or five years and which is still on the increase. 'It's like those weeds which spread underground and are all over the place before you know it', said one distributor. 'God knows where it will end.' Another distributor was more far-seeing. 'We've got about another five or six years to make our money', he said. 'After that, it's pay-TV and the video game will be over.'

A SECOND TV CHANNEL?

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Video cassette recorders of all varieties have sprouted in Israel over the past two years. Informed estimates guess that some 25% of households have one. Radical estimates (based on the assumption that several hundreds of thousands of VCR owners have managed to evade the customs authorities) soar to half of all households. The cost of a VCR averages about £1,500 (2-3 months of the average net salary), of which about 50% is tax. The purchase cost of a blank cassette is £12, and pre-recorded cassettes may cost £35 to buy or £5 to rent.

The epidemic proportions of this phenomenon and its ramifications deserve to be analysed against the backdrop of the Israeli media scene. Israel is still a one-channel television nation. In spite of strong recommendations from two national commissions, neither the much-awaited second channel nor the proposed experiments with cable have so far been launched. This means that the Israelis, perhaps alone among Western-oriented nations, still enjoy (or suffer, depending on one's aesthetic and ideological orientations) the shared experience that comes from viewing the same programmes. The commitment of the Israel Broadcasting Authority (a BBC-like body that governs television and five radio channels) to both national culture and democracy assures that a fair share of the programmes (more than half) are locally produced, that ceremonial occasions are appropriately observed, and that the news programmes are regularly embroiled in battles over issues of objectivity.

The technological situation does not promise much relief for pluralists. Over-the-air channels in the region are all but exhausted, although the plans for the installation of the Arab satellite are progressing apace. Cable systems, if they happen, will do a lot for pluralism, but not much for patriotism. Even with the best of intentions, they will radically change the proportion of imported programmes. The quality of such programmes – channels serving minorities of specialised taste notwithstanding – will inevitably be poorer.

A by-product of this situation is that Jordan's English-language television channel has become Israel's second channel. Many areas of the country are able to receive Jordan Television, and the squeamishness over viewing an Arab station is gradually being overcome, especially by hearers of English and readers of Arabic subtitles, as the secret spreads that Jordan broadcasts (the same) American and British programmes. *Dallas* on Jordan Television is one season ahead of *Dallas* in Israel. (And what is so terrible about sharing a second channel with another country, anyway?)

The same thing holds for video. Video is also a kind of second channel, offering choice to those who feel that choice is needed, or, more exactly, to those who feel that choice must be offered simultaneously rather than sequentially, and that it must be offered on the tube itself rather than via other arts and activities. Thus, the popularity of video in Israel – over and above the usually rapid diffusion of technological innovation in Israel – has something to do with the ostensible diversity of choice which it represents.

The most important cultural implication of the video boom is surely the change in the ratio of local to imported material. Rather than the 50% of imported material on Israeli television, the proportion of imported video material is probably 95%. Several successful Israeli films have been recorded, and certain very popular entertainers are now featured on cassettes. But this is a mere drop in the bucket. Foreign films and American and English TV programmes are the major focus of demand. Pornography exists, but it is by no means a major factor in the market. The pirating that characterised the early months is also thought to have subsided along with the decline of the (illegal) mushroom cable systems that featured such material.

An interesting exception to this rule is the blossoming of miniature cable networks on several large housing estates and in the collective settlements. Some 50 Kibbutzim are said to be wired for cable or to have strategically placed VCR sets offering an alternative to Israeli broadcasts. The potential for original production was soon discovered and recently the federation of Kibbutzim has given official support to the proposal to establish both central and dispersed production facilities. A few Kibbutzim are experimenting with a video edition of their newsletters and bulletin boards.

It has been suggested that the interest in these organised efforts to provide alternative video fare reflects a desire, in the audience, for a certain degree of authority and guidance in the making of choices, even if these are rather local and disconnected from the centre of society. In the absence of such paternalism, however, most Israeli viewers are thrown back on their own choices, although even these are limited by the available supply.

Video lending libraries are extremely popular. Subscribers sign up for a certain number of tapes per month and share the tapes with friends who subscribe, in turn, to other libraries. Video has given a boost to more 'group viewing' as well, recalling the early days of television broadcasting when two million people gathered around the first 50,000 sets.

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ITALY

THE FOOTBALL FACTOR

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I do not know what kind of impact the Royal Wedding of 1981 had on British sales of video cassette recorders, although I recall being told by friends in London recently that had it not been for that event I would not have enjoyed the opportunity of admiring the Betamax which was now sitting on a bookshelf in their living-room. I do know however that up to 1981 there were only about 60,000 VCRs in the whole of Italy and it was only thanks to the World Soccer Championship that sales increased substantially in 1982. Today (summer 1983) approximately 200,000 Italian families own a video recorder and the number is expected to total about 250,000 by the end of the year.

It is a surprisingly low figure when one compares it to those of other European countries. And yet, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, home video is becoming an increasingly popular thing in Italy. Recently, I counted at least ten magazines devoted to home video on a newspaper kiosk in a Roman piazza, which would seem quite a lot for such a small market. Maybe all these publications simply reflect the general expectation that home video is bound to boom in Italy as it has elsewhere. Experts say the much anticipated boom is just around the corner, and you can see families wandering around in hifi shops enquiring about video recorders and comparing prices.

But shop owners complain that so far the mountain has given birth to a mouse. Some blame the additional 16% tax that the government introduced in December 1982, which brought sales down to almost zero in the first two months of 1983. However, a 16% tax in a country where prices are going up daily should not be a decisive factor. One should look rather at buyers' motivations – which in Italy are still relatively weak or, at best, uncertain, in spite of the widespread interest in home video. It is not inconceivable that in the long run home computers and video games will do better, notwithstanding the fact that they are more expensive. So, why are video recorders doing so poorly?

The almost unanimous opinion here singles out private television as the crucial factor. It is assumed that the taping of a film is the main incentive for buying video recorders. Then, the reasoning goes, why should people need a recorder when RAI (Italy's state television) and the main private networks broadcast an average of about 30 to 40 films (including serials) every day? I suppose it works like drinking. If you like wine and you can get drunk on it every night without paying for it, why buy bottles just for the pleasure of storing them away? With so many films on television, the need for a personal video film library is hardly worth its cost.

Some would reverse the argument and say that the sheer size of the offer should act as an incentive. With so many movies broadcast every day, Italians miss most of them since they can only watch one at a time – hence a recorder would help them to miss less. But apparently this is not so. After all, time is limited. When one spends hours in front of the television set watching movies, there is hardly any time left for playing with cassettes.

Top quality home video recorders cost about L2-2.5 million (£850-1,065). However in discount stores you can buy a video recorder (Sony, JVC, Nordmende, among others) for about L1.5 million (£640) or slightly less, and even for about L1 million (Grundig, Hitachi,