

Zeitschrift:	Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber:	Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band:	21 (1994)
Heft:	4
Artikel:	No to private television with foreign participation : homeland protection or far-sightedness?
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DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906779

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Download PDF: 23.02.2026

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No to private television with foreign participation

Homeland protection or far-sightedness?

A quarrel about a single hour of private television is dividing the Swiss media world. A true melodrama made in Switzerland.

At the end of April, the Federal Council refused to give a license to the so-called "RTL-Fenster". This means that the four publishers – Basler Zeitung, Curti Medien, Luzerner Zeitung and Tages-Anzeiger – cannot proceed with their planned one hour of

René Lenzin

television over the frequency of the German-Luxembourg commercial station. Not a decision of world-shaking importance, you might think, if it were not for the strange phenomena surrounding it.

Failed projects

After private radio made inroads in the monopoly of the Swiss Radio and Television Corporation (SRG) in the 1980s, calls for private television to be extended to Switzerland became ever louder. But the European Business Channel which was announced with such pomp and circumstance did not last long, since Swiss business people turned out to prefer the good old Neue Zürcher Zeitung to spending their mornings digesting the latest economic trends in front of a television screen. The "Tell-TV" project of SRG's arch-enemy, Margrith Trappe, fared even worse. Studios were equipped and staff were hired, but financial collapse came even before the first broadcast.

So the score was two federal licences, two flops. Media Minister Adolf Ogi – a declared friend of extending market economics to the media – suddenly found himself in a tight spot. His only course was to force "S Plus", SRG's fourth channel, to act as in-house competition. But this was done without giving it the resources and programme independence which Ogi had in mind. In these circumstances, private television programme suppliers refused to play, so viewing figures and advertising income remained in the doldrums.

And into the breach stepped RTL, which was in any case the most successful foreign station in German-speaking Switzerland. The aim was to make a fresh start. The limit put on programming time and the backing of this flourishing media empire promised financial success, while the four publishing houses would guarantee Swiss quality. So it was a project very dangerous for those who – for a variety of reasons – cherished the SRG monopoly or else had their own irons in the fire.

Strange alliances

The result was a series of the most fantastic scenes imaginable at the media's vanity fair. Roger Schawinski, the former radio pirate and passionate devotee of media freedom, suddenly started pleading for a Swiss solution. This meant that he was seconding the otherwise harshly criticised SRG in its highly sophisticated survival strategy against "RTL-Fenster". Frank A. Meyer, a journalist and member of Ringier's top management, a man accustomed to not exactly squeamish tabloid scandal-mongering, suddenly spied a threat to Swiss culture. (Could it perhaps be that this anti-RTL campaign had something to do with joint television projects on the part of Schawinski and Ringier?) And then the French speakers – supposed to be so open to the world – turned overnight into homeland protectors because they feared a loss of advertising revenue coming from SRG's German-language channel.

The other side included high-minded people, such as Roger de Weck, editor-in-chief of the Tages-Anzeiger. Their ambition was to produce top-quality television, and this precisely on a commercial network reputed to be among the most superficial in Europe. The four publishers kept insisting that RTL was up to no harm and that "RTL-Fenster" would be very helpful to SRG in the long run: on the one hand competition would liven up business, and on the other television would finally get its share of the advertising revenue in Switzerland which it already has on the international scene.

The Federal Council had found it extremely difficult to come to a deci-

sion, said its spokesman after the No to RTL Schweiz AG had been announced. It was rumoured that two federal councillors, accused of having close contacts with Ringier, had put up a particularly strong fight against the licence. However this may be, the government has come out in favour of a "Swiss road" in the form of a revitalised and even more dynamic "S Plus". It is inviting all publishing houses in the country to take part in order to pump up the fourth SRG channel with a sufficient volume of private television programming. But hardly anybody really believes in the venture – and this in spite of (or perhaps because of?) the sudden departure of director Roy Oppenheim.

Skirmishing continues. But one person who does not much care is RTL head Helmut Thoma. For if he thinks it worthwhile he is going to penetrate the Swiss market anyway. If necessary, he can do it from Luxembourg and without Swiss participation. ■

Press round-up

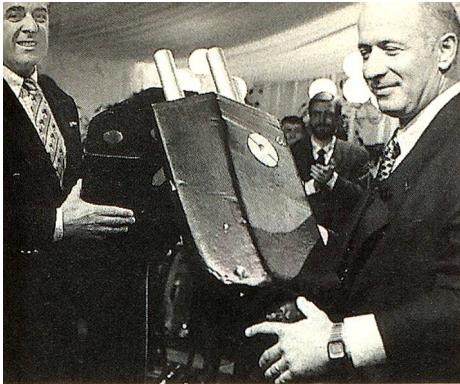
The decision by the Federal Council not to grant a television licence to "RTL-Fenster" was widely commented on – in a way which unmistakably reflected newspaper ownership. Here is a small selection of opinions.

LE NOUVEAU QUOTIDIEN

"The government has recognised the dangers. Sitting on a gold mine, RTL has the resources to strike a deadly blow to our small audio-visual melting pot. Swiss-German television has worn itself out in an excessive competitive struggle. French and Italian language television, which gain part of their livelihood from the advertising revenues of their big sister, have suffered as a result... So the spirit of free competition has been sacrificed on the altar of federal solidarity, the strictly budget-minded vision of the politician".

Neue Zürcher Zeitung

"What the lobby-dominated scene ... led us to expect has now happened: a by no means unanimous, non-transparent ma-



Back in the days when the Swiss television world was at peace: Federal Councillor Adolf Ogi (left), and director Roy Oppenheim the day "S Plus" started transmitting. (Photo: Keystone)

majority decision based not on provable arguments, but on assertions some of which have long since been refuted, on commonplace clichés and – as must unfortunately be supposed – on individual preferences in favour of specific media corporations".

Blick

"The Federal Council's decision... is almost an historic one: for once our government – unlike the habit it used to have – has not judged on the basis of cold legality alone. Yesterday's decision was much more creative. A political course has been set with both heart and mind".

CORRIERE DEL TICINO

"Ogi talked... all the time about 'German RTL' in contrast to the national SRG... His way of commenting on the Federal Council's decision has a very 'nationalistic' tone. When we think that this comes from a source which takes every other opportunity of inviting the people to open up to Europe and the world, we may well ask what sort of psychological consequences it may have".

Luzerner Zeitung

"The refusal of RTL Schweiz will make not a single foreign transmitter and not a single superficial television programme disappear. Instead, advertising money for foreign programmes will continue to be obtained in Switzerland and then taken abroad. That is economic lunacy".

St.Galler Tagblatt

"The publishers behind RTL Schweiz guaranteed that they would go to work with 'journalistic quality'. But who came upon the idea of attributing a 'serious side' to a tabloid paper? It remains unclear how Swiss could have been educated on this channel, which was meant to serve the basic instincts of the public".

SRI News

Short wave will continue to play an important role

Ever since SRI announced its new strategy, summed up by the slogan "Short wave as long as necessary, satellite as soon as possible", we have received advice from all sides warning us against over-hasty withdrawal from short-wave technology. SRI would like to spotlight the facts of the case.

The policy statement "Short wave as long as necessary – satellite as soon as possible" is completely correct and we stand by it. In the nineties, an internationally active Swiss radio service could not possibly afford to stand aside from satellite broadcasting and hope to succeed as an effective means of presenting Switzerland abroad. Nevertheless, emphasising one approach need not preclude the other, and SRI intends both to have its cake and eat it.

It would be inconceivable for SRI to abandon short wave before it can guarantee both stationary and mobile reception of its output. This is particularly important in all those situations where SRI is (virtually) the sole source from which listeners can obtain up-to-date information on Switzer-

land, or get the Swiss viewpoint on world events, or hear a journalist explain the background to crucial votes or elections.

Admittedly, it would be relatively simple and inexpensive for Swiss citizens living elsewhere in Europe to invest in the hardware to switch from short wave to

satellite. However, even here in Europe satellite reception is a very long way from supporting genuine mobile use. In this situation, SRI feels it desirable – and indeed essential – to maintain guaranteed basic coverage via short wave; our promise is to deliver up-to-date information from and about Switzerland at peak listening periods on at least two short-wave frequencies. One broadcasting frequency (6.165 MHz) will be permanent; the other will alternate between 3.985 MHz and 9.535 MHz.

Good marks

At a meeting held in June, Swiss Radio International's Committee of the Public gave excellent marks to the current affairs programmes in German, French, Italian and English for both structure and content. Contributions were up-to-date and delved below the surface. The Committee would like to give priority to this in-depth approach to news coverage as against a multitude of short items. But it would also be glad to see more attention given to events here in Switzerland. «Well made and informative» – this was the verdict given by the Committee on the audio cassettes about federal referendums prepared by SRI for those Swiss Abroad wishing to vote. But it would also be useful to include a clearer view of the positions of the various parties and more information on voting procedure.

Arnold Isler, Chairman of the Committee of the Public

Outside Europe, SRI will use three or four frequencies and back up its Swiss-based transmitters with booster relay stations located closer to the target areas. A powerful new relay station in Montsinéry in French Guyana will go into operation for SRI in summer 1994. This station will significantly improve reception of our programmes in many regions of the world.

For any medium which operates on a world-wide basis, achieving totally faultless reception conditions remains a virtually unattainable ideal. "Blazing a new trail" through the maze of short-wave and, subsequently, satellite frequencies will always be a task that calls for a degree of patience. SRI thanks all its Swiss listeners abroad for the tolerance they have shown in the past and hopes they will sustain this loyalty in the future and also be prepared to offer constructive criticism of our programmes.

Ulrich Kündig, Dir. SRI