

# ONTOGENESIS OF CLEAR IMAGE: CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION AND FILM PROGRAMMING ON RADIO TELEVISION OF SERBIA IN THE DIGITAL AGE FROM AN EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the transformation of television production, specifically focusing on film programming within the digital environment from an editorial perspective at Radio Television of Serbia (RTS). The study delves into the transition from traditional analog broadcasting, where a single film was aired once a week, often a western, to the complexities of modern digital television production, which incorporates advanced organizational and technical skills, as well as the integration of contemporary technologies in program realization. The research highlights the increasing importance of editorial work in creating diverse and engaging content that caters to various demographic groups, with a special focus on the responsibilities of editors in shaping program quality and audience engagement. As television production has evolved into a leading creative sector, it now encompasses a wide range of genres, multimedia content, and interactive media, reflecting significant changes in both cultural and organizational strategies within the media landscape. The paper also explores the impact of globalization, technological advancements, and changing cultural policies on the development of national public service broadcasters like RTS. It discusses how these institutions have adapted to the challenges posed by a rapidly changing media environment, such as the increasing demand for efficiency, the expansion of content, and the inclusion of marginalized social groups in the programming. Through the examination of editorial practices in contemporary film programming, this work aims to offer insights into the evolving role of editorial decisions in shaping television content, as well as their contribution to the broader cultural and educational objectives of public broadcasting in the digital age.

**Keywords:** Television production, editorial work, digital environment, film programming, organizational development, cultural policy, public service broadcasting, audience engagement, multimedia content, digital broadcasting, media evolution, programming strategy, editorial creativity, technological advancements.

## Introduction

Radio Televizija Srbije (RTS), as the oldest and most influential television station in Serbia, represents a key institution in the history of the country's media landscape. With its long-standing tradition, RTS has maintained a loyal audience and continues to hold a dominant position in overall viewership, even as the digital age has reshaped media consumption habits. However, the changing dynamics of the broadcasting industry, marked by the rise of cable channels and on-demand streaming platforms, have also influenced the prominence of traditional television programming, particularly film content. Research indicates that RTS's film programming, once central to its identity, no longer holds the same level of significance in determining ratings as it did during the tenure of former film program editors Robert Nemeček (2004–2007) and Ivan Karl (2007–2013).

The editorial shifts during this period are intrinsically linked to the leadership of the late Aleksandar Tijanić, whose mandate as the general director (2004–2013) oversaw the transition of RTS from a public enterprise to a public media service. This transformation, which entailed significant technical and

organizational changes, coincided with a broader media environment shaped by digital advancements. The 2007–2011 period, often referred to as the third "golden era" of RTS, was marked by the digitalization process, the renovation of technical infrastructure, and the restoration of cultural landmarks such as the Avala Tower. These changes facilitated the expansion of RTS's reach and enhanced its capacity to deliver content that met international standards, as evidenced by Serbia's successful hosting of the Eurovision Song Contest in 2008. This achievement symbolized RTS's ability to maintain its competitive edge in a rapidly changing media environment, aligning with global trends while retaining its cultural and national identity.

At the heart of RTS's programming success during this era was its film content, which saw a significant increase in viewership. This was especially evident during Nemeček's tenure, when the station enjoyed higher production budgets and greater programming flexibility. Nemeček, drawing from his prior experiences at TV Pink and TV Politika, curated a film schedule that emphasized popular cinema, which resonated with a broad audience. While RTS was never a network focused exclusively on films, it became synonymous with high-quality movie programming that appealed to a diverse viewership.

In contrast, Ivan Karl's tenure as editor came at a time when RTS faced financial constraints, as the country experienced a decline in the collection of mandatory television subscriptions. Despite these challenges, Karl's editorial approach sought to revive and enhance RTS's film programming by reconnecting it to the rich tradition of TV Belgrade, particularly under the leadership of Nebojša Đukelić. This return to familiar formats such as *Letnji bioskop* (Summer Cinema), *Zimski bioskop* (Winter Cinema), *Oskarovci* (Oscar Winners), and *Festove premijere* (Festival Premieres), alongside the introduction of new cycles such as *Festival Festival*, reflected a strategic effort to maintain the station's prominence in a competitive media landscape. (Bjelica, 2007)

The years 2008–2012 marked the peak of RTS's film viewership, with iconic films like *Con Air* and the domestic comedy *Druga Žikina Dinastija* achieving unprecedented ratings, with viewerships reaching 18.9% and 26%, respectively. Bjelica (2007) emphasizes that public broadcasters play a key role in shaping the film industry and television, as they produce content that serves the interests of a wide audience, rather than just commercial objectives. In the context of Serbia, public broadcasters face the challenge of maintaining content quality in the digital environment.

These numbers, unparalleled in contemporary media, underscore the station's historical role as the leader in Serbian film broadcasting. However, by 2024, the landscape has shifted, with RTS facing a more fragmented audience base due to the diversification of content delivery platforms and viewing habits.

This study examines the evolution of RTS's film programming from its peak in the late 2000s to its current state in 2024, analyzing the challenges and strategies employed by RTS in adapting to the digital age. The research focuses on the editorial decisions of Nemeček and Karl, the impact of digitalization on film content, and the broader implications of these changes for RTS's role in the cultural and media landscape of Serbia. The analysis will also explore how RTS navigates the intersection of tradition and innovation in an era where the global shift towards on-demand content threatens the relevance of linear television broadcasting. In doing so, this paper aims to contribute to the academic discourse on the evolution of public service broadcasters in the digital era, offering insights into how such institutions balance cultural preservation with the demands of technological and audience-driven change.

### **Transition to Digital Television: Technical and Organizational Transformation**

The digitization of RTS, as part of the broader transformation of Serbia's media landscape, began in the late 2000s. This process, which involved upgrading technical capacities, introducing digital channels, and renovating infrastructure such as the Avala Tower, allowed RTS to compete with global trends in television production. The digital era opened new opportunities for the production, distribution, and display of film content. However, this technical transformation was not enough for RTS to maintain the same dominant

position in film production that it had before the digital revolution. The digital transformation of television brings significant technical and editorial evolution, which changes how content is created and distributed. DigiTV describes this as one of the greatest challenges for media organizations in contemporary society. During the digitalization process, editors must adapt their practices to meet the needs of new technologies and audience expectations. (DigiTV, 2020).

### **Editorial Strategy of Robert Nemeček: High Standards in Film Production**

During the editorial leadership of Robert Nemeček (2004–2007), RTS's film program experienced its golden era, with film production and broadcasting becoming a central part of the editorial concept. Nemeček had significant resources and a wide range of time slots at his disposal, which allowed him to create a rich and diverse film program. Under his leadership, RTS's film program featured the most famous Hollywood titles, as well as European and domestic films, creating a program that appealed to a broad audience.

However, despite this success, Nemeček adapted the film program to his personal preferences for specific genres and themes, which did not always align with the social and cultural changes occurring in Serbia at the time. During his tenure, RTS became the center for screening film premieres and specialized programs but still did not focus its offerings on exclusive and specifically selected film programs, as some other specialized channels did.

Jovanović explores the challenges faced by the media industry in Serbia in the era of digitalization, emphasizing how the transition from analog to digital broadcasting requires a fundamental adaptation in infrastructure and programming strategies. This transformation process significantly impacts editorial work, particularly in balancing innovation with the preservation of traditional values." (Jovanović M., 2013)

### **Editorial Strategy of Ivan Karl: Maintaining Tradition and Adapting to New Circumstances**

The period of Ivan Karl's editorial leadership (2007–2013) coincided with a time when financial difficulties began to affect RTS, and subscription revenue was declining. During this period, RTS's film program began to adjust to new economic conditions and the decreasing availability of production budgets. Ivan Karl worked to preserve the tradition and standards set by Nemeček, reintroducing some of the most popular formats, such as Summer Cinema, Winter Cinema, and Oscar Winners. Additionally, during his tenure, RTS hosted and broadcast popular series like "Prison Break" and "Desperate Housewives," and the film cycle "Half a Century of Bond" marked the fiftieth anniversary of the most famous film franchise of all time. (Službeni sajt RTS-a, 2007-2020)

Ivan Karl's editorial strategy focused on balancing the preservation of popular formats with adapting to new market conditions. Karl's task was to offer content that was widely accepted, while also balancing the declining financial stability and maintaining viewership, which was not easy to achieve in an era of reduced budgets and competition from cable channels.

### **Challenges in the Digital Age: Viewership and Editorial Decisions**

During the 2000s and early 2010s, RTS (Radio Television of Serbia) maintained a prominent role in Serbia's television landscape, particularly through its film programming, which attracted significant viewership. However, as the digital era advanced, with the rise of new media platforms, streaming services, and specialized cable channels, RTS's influence began to wane. This shift brought with it an increasing fragmentation of the television market, as more niche genres, such as film, culture, and documentaries, found

dedicated spaces on various platforms. This development created greater competition for viewers, forcing traditional broadcasters like RTS to re-evaluate their programming strategies. A key question arose: how did editorial decisions regarding RTS's film programming influence its viewership during this digital transformation?

Thornham and Press explore the profound impact of digital television on audience consumption patterns. They highlight that the digital age has altered the media landscape in two significant ways: technologically and strategically. The technological advancements have revolutionized how content is delivered and consumed, while the strategic shift pertains to how content creators, particularly editors, must adjust to these new dynamics. Editors are no longer just responsible for curating content but must also manage the evolving relationship between viewers and the media they consume. Digital platforms have not only introduced new modes of viewing, such as on-demand and mobile viewing, but have also led to more interactive audience behavior, making it imperative for editors to engage audiences in new ways. According to Thornham and Press, editors in the digital age must rethink their editorial decisions, ensuring that content is both adaptable and engaging to a more fragmented and diverse audience. (Thornham, H., & Press, A., 2009)

Jenkins, in his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, extends this argument by examining the concept of media convergence—where old and new forms of media intersect and create new patterns of content production and consumption. Jenkins contends that the blending of traditional television, the internet, and mobile platforms has given rise to a more participatory culture. (Jenkins, H., 2006).

Audiences no longer passively consume content; they are active participants who engage with content across multiple platforms. This convergence requires editors to rethink not only the content they produce but also how they interact with their audiences. In the context of RTS, this would mean adapting to the demands of a more tech-savvy and platform-diverse audience. Jenkins argues that this shift calls for editors to create content that is flexible and transmedia-friendly, allowing for a seamless viewing experience across different devices and formats. Furthermore, editors must be prepared for an audience that has access to a much broader range of content options, making it essential to build loyalty and maintain relevance in an increasingly competitive landscape.

The challenges posed by the digital age are thus multifaceted. Editors working in traditional broadcasting institutions like RTS must navigate technological advancements, shifting audience expectations, and the pressures of competing with digital-native platforms. The impact of digitalization is not just about improving broadcast quality or technical infrastructure; it's about adopting a new mindset that embraces interactivity, responsiveness, and adaptability. The editorial decisions made in response to these challenges will play a crucial role in determining the future success of RTS's film programming and its ability to connect with a modern, dynamic audience.

## Competition

The business of television consists of conceiving programs and providing an opportunity for viewers to watch these programs. As the supply chain illustrates, it covers a range of separate businesses that come into focus in the era of convergence among contemporary technologies. The uncertainty of organizations within the television industry regarding their positioning in the market has led to various strategies and a series of shifting alliances. For example: TV B92 is the only channel that airs movies during prime time, while TV PINK has developed its own special movie channels based on the themes of the films (Pink Action Movies, Pink Romantic Movies, Pink Science Fiction, etc.), and TV PRVA has moved its movie programming to TV PLUS.

"Van Zoonen, in 'Digital Television: A Critical Introduction,' discusses how digital television is reshaping the media landscape, particularly with regard to changes in content production and distribution. She emphasizes that the digital era allows for greater accessibility and flexibility of content, but also introduces new editorial challenges in terms of program selection and curation." (Zoonen, L. Van, 2018)

There are many cable movie channels, ranging from pay channels like HBO to free cable channels such as FOX MOVIES, CINEMANIA, TV 1000, and CINESTAR.

On a daily basis in Serbia, if all available channels are counted, viewers can watch about 100 movies on television. The new era brings new conditions regarding network passage, as technological advancements have led to a direct connection between TV stations and consumers, viewers, and subscription-based access management systems, allowing only those who have paid for a subscription to view the corresponding signal.

The conventional movie program is gradually dying out. Despite the modern age and digital signal, which further facilitates programming, unfortunately, we are left with an unattractive selection of films.

Improvement of societal norms and the value system, in order to maintain good communication within Serbia's public service, would be an ethically and socially responsible task. This would help minimize the negative impacts of all demands on the public service, not just for the curation of film programs but also for the management as a whole.

Channels that target a broad audience, such as Prva, Pink, and B-92, might survive for some time. However, their ability to attract a large number of viewers and offer premiere drama series in prime time, as well as occasionally broadcast high-budget Hollywood classics, might begin to decrease over time, given the rise of specialized services that subscribers of cable operators are willing to pay for.

As a result, RTS, nevertheless, survives and remains the longest-standing national television with a solid brand. However, since there is evidence of inertia among younger viewers, who are less influenced by tradition, it seems that the younger generation will likely opt for a series of separate cable channels to meet their needs.

RTS has a certain advantage over its competitors due to sports events, as sports are considered to be the precursor to all other genres and set viewing records. Additionally, RTS has a significant advantage when it comes to broadcasting international events at the national level, such as the already mentioned Eurovision. The long-term result of this could be higher quality programming as channels begin to compete for viewers, although there is a high risk of a drastic decline in program quality, as a small number of viewers are unable to sustain high-budget productions.

### **The Internet as the Most Dangerous Competitor**

The biggest challenge for media over the past decade, growing stronger day by day, is the influence of modern information technologies. Many television workers fear that the television we know today could disappear in the next twenty years. When it comes to movie programming on television, the internet is becoming a serious competitor. This is because piracy is increasing, and the latest pirated films can be easily found on platforms like Torrent, YouTube, Leptirica, etc.

In the past, pirated movie copies were of unacceptable and poor quality, but today, thanks to advanced technologies, the latest films can be viewed in exceptional quality online. In such cases, when TV stations announce a tender for purchasing films from independent productions, they tend to choose hit movies that are not available on internet portals, and a special clause in the contract stipulates the rights and obligations of both parties. TV stations can purchase broadcasting rights for a film, sometimes even for up to three years.

Therefore, the biggest threat to TV stations is the global network — the internet. Some companies and platforms provide legal streaming services, allowing viewers to watch multimedia content, films, and series

online. Year after year, advertising revenue for TV stations continues to decline. It is estimated that advertisers will soon invest their money primarily in digital and internet platforms.

The internet is consuming the media. Daily and periodical print media have already been overtaken by radio in some ways, and the next target will be television, with films being the sweetest prey. There are already announcements that Hollywood will soon allow viewers to pay a fee to watch films online, simultaneously with their release in theaters.

### **Forming the Film Program on RTS**

When it comes to the movie program on RTS, the film program editor is solely responsible for the content, meaning the selection of films. The key to any television program is the ideas and the team that implements them through their creative efforts. The essence of the editorial role is knowing precisely what should never be included in the program, to protect viewers from bad and vulgar content, because only by doing so do viewers gain trust in the editor, who ultimately benefits the television station the most.

It is a misconception that having the most blockbuster movies in the program is the most important. It is much more important that there are no "waste films" in the program. Movie "waste" repels most viewers from the TV screen, which is unfortunately the most common scenario today. It is a fact that there are films, especially American ones, made for an audience that is not American. Themes like violence, blood, pedophilia, drug addiction, and violent disruptions of the value system are becoming the basic content of films coming from the West.

However, the primary role and duty of the film program editor is to choose films to be shown on television, while respecting the moral codes and traditions of our region. The editor must consider the film's content and their own personal experience before it is broadcast to the public because, unfortunately, a lot of inappropriate content is aired "out of ignorance," especially for the generations who are still shaping their life values.

Televisions have created an alibi for broadcasting trash, hiding behind the phrase "viewers like to see this" and supporting it with ratings, instead of acknowledging how many people were actually not in front of the screen during the airing of such trash because it offends them. A particular problem is the personal preferences of the editor, which can further undermine the programming process by replacing the thesis that viewers want to watch what, in reality, the editor and their inner circle of colleagues and friends want. This happens too often, and such projects typically have poor ratings, but that is no obstacle for certain editors to continue with them since viewers do not have an objective influence on the programming policy.

Film programming on television, especially in the editorial sense, has been cast adrift and left to chance. For example, one program aired a children's film at midnight — "Free Willy" — which is about a whale, but not a killer whale, just a kind-hearted one. The proper time for such a film would be 10 AM. Similarly, I have seen a film like "Cell" about a necrophiliac murderer, airing at 8 AM on a Saturday. On another channel, a film called "Clip," which is a domestic production with festival success but classified as 18+, aired at 10 PM. It should not have been shown before midnight. There are many such inconsistencies on all channels, which indicates that the potential of films is not being treated properly.

Despite everything, the film program on RTS has had over five thousand film slots, ranging from big Hollywood hits, Oscar winners, new Serbian films, to retrospectives of selected filmmakers and showcases of world cinematographies such as German, French, and Chinese.

RTS also aired the best works of filmmaking giants like Ingmar Bergman, the Czech school, Quentin Tarantino, Jim Jarmusch, Ang Lee, Woody Allen, David Cronenberg, Bernardo Bertolucci, Michael Moore, Luc Besson, Krzysztof Kieslowski, Pedro Almodóvar, and Alfred Hitchcock.

On an annual basis, through thirty series, RTS broadcast quality BBC drama in 2014, new Russian and Italian productions, and popular American franchises. For younger viewers, RTS also dubbed 250 hours of animation from the Disney studios into Serbian and continues its tradition of Winter and Summer cinemas.

RTS is the only public service in the region that has specially dubbed films for the blind and visually impaired, which is highly commendable. RTS regularly covers domestic film festivals (FEST, Kustendorf, Kratki Metar, Sinema City, Vrnjačka Banja, Film Encounters Niš) and international ones (Berlin, Cannes, Venice), and broadcasts the Academy Awards ceremony live. "McQuail, in his work 'Mass Communication Theory,' analyzes the key processes shaping the relationship between media and society, with a particular focus on the impact of digital media on traditional forms of communication. According to him, digitalization allows for greater interactivity and personalization of content, posing new challenges for editors who must balance commercial and public interests." (McQuail, D., 2010)

There is even a section on RTS's website called "Ask the Editor," designed for better communication with their loyal viewers. Despite the digital age and modern technology, RTS's film program continues to have a better rating in comparison to other broadcasters.

## Conclusion

The digital transformation of RTS has posed both technical and organizational challenges, reflecting broader trends in the global media landscape. The shift to digital television in the late 2000s was not merely about upgrading technical infrastructure but also about adapting editorial strategies to the evolving media environment. While the technical improvements, such as the renovation of infrastructure like the Avala Tower and the introduction of digital channels, allowed RTS to remain competitive, they were not enough to preserve the station's dominant position in film production as it had enjoyed before the digital revolution. "Vuković (2015) examines how the digital transformation of television in Serbia brings new challenges, including the adaptation of production teams and editors to new technologies and content formats. He specifically highlights the need for further education for editors to effectively use digital tools and format content that meets the new standards of the audience." (Vuković J., 2015)

Under Robert Nemeček's leadership (2004-2007), RTS's film programming reached its peak, becoming a central element of the station's editorial strategy. Nemeček's substantial financial resources and a wide range of available time slots enabled him to curate a rich and diverse film schedule that included both Hollywood blockbusters and European and domestic films. However, despite this success, Nemeček's editorial choices were sometimes out of step with the rapidly changing societal and cultural dynamics in Serbia. While RTS continued to showcase major film premieres and specialized programs, it struggled to compete with the emerging specialized film channels of the digital era.

In the following period, under Ivan Karl's leadership (2007-2013), RTS faced mounting financial difficulties as subscription revenues declined. Karl's strategy focused on preserving Nemeček's legacy by reintroducing beloved formats such as Summer Cinema, Winter Cinema, and the "Oscar Series." However, the digital age brought increasing competition from cable channels and specialized broadcasters, resulting in a fragmented television market. Karl's challenge was to balance popular content with the new economic and technological realities.

The onset of digitalization further complicated RTS's position within the media landscape. With the rise of new media platforms and the proliferation of niche channels, RTS's dominance in viewer ratings began to wane. The increasing number of specialized TV stations focusing on specific genres, such as film

and culture, further fragmented the market, making it harder for RTS to maintain its previous levels of audience engagement. The editorial decisions made by Nemeček and Karl, while successful in some areas, were not fully adapted to the technological advancements and shifting audience preferences that characterize the digital era.

The challenges faced by RTS reflect a broader global trend: the need for public broadcasters to adapt to a highly competitive, digitalized media environment. RTS, like other public broadcasters, had to balance its role as a cultural institution with the need to remain commercially viable amid budget cuts and growing competition from private and international broadcasters. While RTS managed to retain its relevance by adjusting certain programming formats, the larger challenge of maintaining high viewership and relevance in the face of digital transformation remains ongoing.

In conclusion, the digital era has presented both opportunities and challenges for RTS and other public broadcasters worldwide. The key to future success lies in balancing traditional public service goals with the demands of an increasingly fragmented digital media landscape. RTS must continue to innovate in both technical and editorial strategies, providing unique content that resonates with audiences while exploring new ways to engage viewers in a digital-first world. The future of RTS will depend not only on its ability to adapt to technological changes but also on its capacity to navigate the complex social, cultural, and economic challenges of the modern media environment.

### **Conflict of interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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