

Analysis of the radio program of SRG SSR: French-speaking Switzerland 2021

Summary

Dr. Sonja Glaab-Seuken (LINK) and Professor Dr. Andreas Vlašić (Medien Institut)

The Swiss Federal Act on Radio and Television (RTVA) and the license issued to the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SRG SSR) serve as a mandate for SRG SSR. The responsibilities assigned to SRG SSR include providing comprehensive, diverse and factual news coverage, fostering Swiss culture and promoting a dialogue among the different regions and language communities of Switzerland. The Federal Office of Communications (OFCOM) regularly commissions external specialists to review how SRG SSR is carrying out its performance mandate. This radio program analysis examines how SRG SSR implemented its mandate in its western Switzerland radio programs in 2021.

Study methodology

The SRG SSR radio program analysis was conducted on the basis of the methodologies of quantitative content analysis used in communication studies. The focal points of the analysis were drawn from the **performance indicators** defined by the broadcasting act and the license. They included the percentage of airtime devoted to information, thematic diversity, diversity of opinion, diversity of journalistic formats used as well as regional references.

The sample is made up of the program content broadcast on each of the four RTS radio stations analyzed on seven sample days in the period between 5:00 a.m. and midnight. The sample days were selected at random as an artificial week.

Table: Methodological key data of the SRG SSR radio program analysis 2021

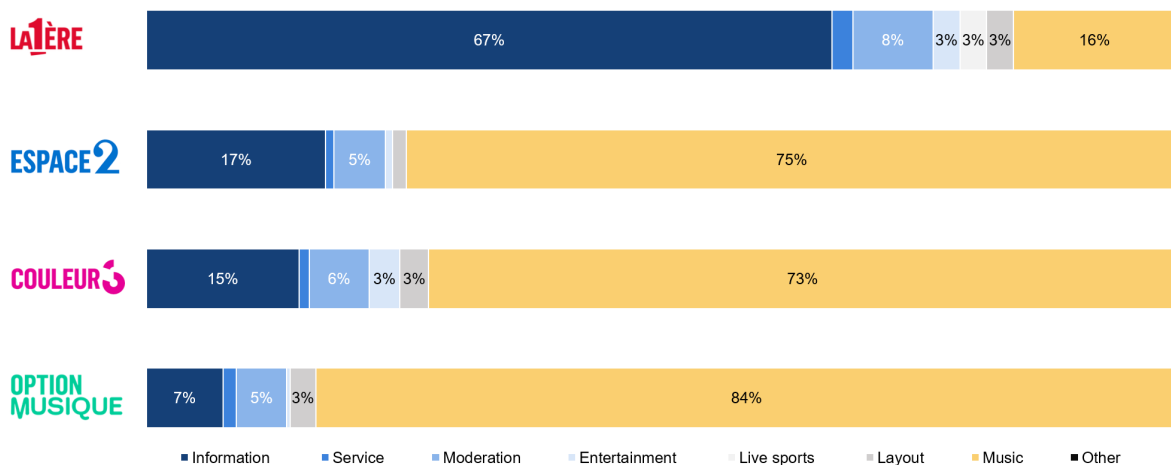
Methodology	Quantitative content analysis
Analyzed stations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- La Première- Espace 2- Couleur 3- Option Musique
Random sample	An artificial week (Mon.-Sun.), from 5 a.m. to midnight each day Analyzed programming hours per station: 133 Total analyzed programming hours: 532
	Number of tracks analyzed on music sample date: 711

Results

The **program performance** of the RTS radio stations has remained **largely unchanged** over time. However, one key metric showed a downward trend: The **average information content** in RTS programs has declined by 2 percentage points since 2018 and is now at 27 percent. This decline can be traced to changes in two RTS programs: Option Musique saw a slight decrease in information coverage, and Espace 2 saw a significant decrease. The cultural station reduced its information coverage by 9 percentage points and increased its music content. This re-orientation is likely associated with the recently restructured programming of Espace 2, but also fits seamlessly with the observation of the 2018 analysis, which found that the station’s information content already declined considerably between 2015 and 2018.

Figure: Program structure

Basis: Total airtime, random sample 2021, Mon.-Sun. 5 a.m. to midnight



According to its broadcasting license, SRG SSR radio stations must provide information “in particular about political, economic, societal, cultural and social contexts”.¹ These **subject areas** are covered in the RTS programs to an extremely high degree (88%). Compared to the results from 2018, these “hard topics” even hold an increasing share. There is a strong emphasis on the areas of culture, society and politics; on the other hand, economic issues are rather rarely addressed. With regard to the selection of topics, changes can once again be seen with Espace 2: Its previously strong emphasis placed on cultural topics has decreased significantly. As a result, the station has lost its former top position among SRG radio programs: Espace 2 now broadcasts a (slightly) smaller percentage of cultural topics than its German-language counterpart SRF 2 Kultur, but still slightly more than the Italian-language culture station Rete 2.

¹ SRG Broadcasting License, Art. 6, para. 2.

The long-standing distinctions related to the thematic focus of the language-regional station families are also evident in 2021: As a whole, cultural topics continue to play a significantly greater role in RTS programs than in the German-language SRG programs and a somewhat more important role than in the Italian-language programs. In 2021, economic topics continue to have significantly less attention on RTS stations than on RSI and especially SRF stations.²

The topic analysis included a differentiated evaluation of several **selected thematic aspects**, which are considered particularly relevant within the scope of the license; these comprise the exchange between the Swiss language regions or between different cultures within Switzerland as well as Swiss cultural production. The latter is given at times very large and multifaceted coverage on all stations. Espace 2 reports most extensively on domestic cultural content. However, along with reducing airtime for information content, the station has also reduced the time it devotes to informing the audience about this topic relevant to the broadcasting license. The other individual aspects under evaluation only appear sporadically in RTS programs – as they did in the previous studies.

Although 2021 was less affected by the coronavirus pandemic than the previous year, RTS journalists devoted a relatively large amount of attention to the pandemic and its impact on society, the economy and culture. Almost one tenth of all RTS information content addressed aspects related to the coronavirus crisis. The pandemic was mentioned as a side note in almost another tenth, but it was not the main topic.

In looking at the RTS program in terms of the variety required by the broadcasting license, there are hardly any changes over time in the **variety of topics**: In 2021, RTS stations continue to present their listeners with a wide range of topics in their information content. There is still a strong **variety of actors**, but it has trended downward since 2018. The latter also applies to the **variety of journalistic formats** of RTS programs: Overall, the programs present their information in a slightly less diversified manner than in 2018.

Espace 2, Couleur 3 and especially La Première continue to frequently present their information content in potentially journalistic formats in which contextualization could potentially be provided (that is, not in news or brief reports). These formats, which include studio interviews, on-site reporting or feature stories, make it possible to present information not only as simple facts, but to contextualize and explain the information. The airtime of the first three programs thus includes a greater share of background information. Efforts by the RTS stations to provide their audience with context and guidance³ also include presenting different perspectives and opinions. Different opinions are included by all four stations in only a

² OFCOM 2022, p. 21f.

³ SRG Broadcasting License, Art. 3, para. 2.

very small share of their reporting. On the other hand, different perspectives are presented somewhat more frequently, especially in the first three programs.

International events and topics are central elements in RTS information content. Over time, there has been a slight shift in emphasis towards slightly more (language) regional and national airtime. However, more information of language-regional relevance in 2021 does not necessarily mean more information about other parts of the country: There is hardly any RTS reporting on events in (or related to) **Italian-speaking Switzerland** in 2021 either. **German-speaking Switzerland** appears more frequently than Ticino in RTS station programming, and this applies to both events and geographical content. **Romandy** is the language region that receives the most attention. On station average, slightly more time is spent reporting on events in Romandy than in 2018. Nevertheless, the trend observed in the previous study, which shows the steadily growing importance of Romandy in RTS programs, can only be somewhat confirmed in 2021: On the one hand, a view of the individual stations does not provide a uniform picture (Espace 2 broadcasts even less information about events in Romandy in 2021 than in 2018); on the other hand, there were no changes in the regional references to Romandy.

The latest version of the SRG broadcasting license, which became effective in 2019, prompts SRG SSR to work toward “appropriate [...] **gender representation**.”⁴ The speaking time of men and women on RTS programs is relatively equal: Across all stations, the share of male speakers is 55 percent, with La Première and Option Musique being closest to equal distribution.

According to the license, the content of SRG radio programs must meet high quality standards, including that of professionalism.⁵ A key indicator of journalistic professionalism is the **transparency of sources** used: The journalistic staff discloses who authored the information at the center of their reporting and how they gained access to this source. The analysis indicates that the source transparency of RTS programs has decreased slightly over the course of time. However, it is still high overall.

With the exception of La Première, RTS stations devote most of their airtime to **music**. In terms of the musical focus of the individual programs, there has been little change from the last evaluation in 2018. In 2018, the highest music share was measured for Swiss artists during the RTS daytime program in 2018; this was the highest value since the start of analysing the programs. This share fell again slightly in 2021. However, when interpreting this result, it is important to note that – with the exception of Couleur 3 – the RTS stations play disproportionately more Swiss titles in their evening program than in their daytime program. If the analysis takes into account the entire program on the music sample date (from 5 a.m. to midnight), a very high share – around one-quarter of the tracks played – comes from local artists.

⁴ SRG Broadcasting License, Art. 3, para. 3.

⁵ SRG Broadcasting License, Art. 4 para. 2.

LINK