

New Uses for Old Needs in the Diaspora: Watching Basque Television in Latin America¹

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Abstract

The transformations occurring in the communications media are resulting in the emergence of new uses amongst diasporic and migratory groups. An example of this is found in satellite television, which makes the regular, domestic consumption of television from their country of origin possible for people belonging to these groups. This use creates new situations within an old phenomenon: the cultural and identity reproduction of diasporic communities through, or as the result of, different practices.

In this paper we analyse how persons of Basque origin in Latin America use Basque satellite television, as well as the relationship of the uses of this medium with other practices and with identity construction. Based on our fieldwork, we defend the thesis that while satellite television generates new situations, these can be better understood in the light of what has happened historically in the reproduction of the culture and identity of diasporic communities.

Keywords

Television / transnational / social practices / identity / diaspora / Basque migrants

Profile

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Introduction

In recent years we have witnessed an significant increase in the number of publications on the uses of television broadcasts from their country of origin among different immigrant and diasporic communities throughout the world. This increase is not only related to the increase in transborder television broadcasts via satellite but also to the growth of global migration flows, and at the same time it responds to a greater interest in some of the cultural processes linked to globalisation. In particular, those related to the changes in the national space of communication, which for more than a century has acted as an agent of nationalisation and cultural standardization within each territory. In the age of satellite and Internet, the opening of the national space of communication beyond territorial borders brings into the open issues such as transnationalism, meaning the spread of the sense of national community outside the territory of the state. And, parallel to this, there is a growth of certain resources, to a level never known before, for the reproduction of the culture and identity of different ethnic groups far from their places of origin, in particular in the richest countries of the world.¹

The increase of research works on this issue, most of them with an empirical character, makes necessary a certain clarification of concepts, a task in which works such as the recently published *The Media of Diaspora*, edited by Karim H. Karim, can be very helpful (Karim 2003). In one of the chapters of this book, A. Askoy and K. Robins call into question the utility of terms like community, identity and diaspora, which have been traditionally used to explain the national imaginary and might not be so useful in explaining the difference that satellite television makes to the experience of diasporas (Askoy and Robins 2003, p. 104). It is precisely the question of the difference that satellite television is making to diasporas that we address in this article. We will use a case study for that purpose: the Basque diaspora in Latin America.

A common characteristic of many of the empirical studies in this field is that they usually deal with cases of groups of relatively recent migration. We should note that by

“relatively recent” we mean the first two generations of migrants. That is the case of some of the most studied cases, such as the migrants from Turkey and Northern Africa in the countries of the European Union. It is also the case of some of the works on immigrant groups in the United States or in Australia. In our research on the Basque diaspora in Latin America, we have instead had the opportunity to observe not only the use made of satellite television by immigrants and their children, but also its use by members of a long term diaspora; that is to say, how the third, fourth or even fifth generation of descendents of Basque ancestors, feel themselves to be Basque and watch Basque satellite television. From this observation we conclude that the uses of this medium must be understood in a wider context of the practises that inhabitants of the diaspora realise in order to maintain their group identity and to connect themselves with the collective. These practises are likewise conditioned by the history and characteristics of the diaspora.

In the following article we analyse the novelties that the uses of satellite television bring to an old phenomenon: the reproduction of identity in the diaspora. With this aim we observe the relationship between uses and other practises, as well as difference in uses depending on the social and historical context of each diasporic group. We also defend the utility of concepts used to explain the national imaginary (like identity, community and diaspora itself) for understanding some phenomena linked to transborder television, at least when used in their proper context. Finally, we state that, in cases such as ours, it could be more fitting to talk about transborder rather than transnational television, since the borders traversed by broadcasts targeting diasporas are not those of the national community, but those of the state territory.

Historical context: the Basque diaspora in Latin America

In order to conduct our research we needed to know not only the characteristics of Canal Vasco (the satellite broadcast of the Basque public television for Latin America), but also the opinions, habits and experiences of its users. To this end we decided to choose a sample from two different Latin American countries: Venezuela and Argentina. The reasons for choosing these two countries have to do with the different profiles of the Basque immigrants and their descendants in each of them. From the very start of our research it was clear that what is usually defined as the Basque diaspora is far from being a homogeneous group, as can be observed in the history of Basque migrations and in the present lives of their descendents. Basque migration to America started five centuries ago, with the colonization of

the continent by Europeans. During the Castilian Kingdom's colonisation of America, many Basques arrived in the new colonies together with, and after, Christopher Columbus, most of them as mercenaries, missionaries, sailors and merchants. This status allowed them and their descendants to form part of the ruling elites in the Castilian dominated continent during the colonial period. In the case of Venezuela, it is worth mentioning the *Real Compañía Guipuzcoana de Caracas*, which practically made that territory a Basque overseas province during the XVIII century. That left an important elite of Basque origin in the country. But after the colonial period, the flow of new Basques to Venezuela decreased, and we must go forward as far as the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) to find the roots of the current Basque diaspora in the country. Following this war, Basques started arriving again in Venezuela, this time as political exiles. They entered the country as a result of the agreement between the Venezuelan Government and the former ruling, and by then exiled, Basque Nationalist Party (BNP). This agreement gave the immigration authorities an opportunity to obtain the kind of migrants they were looking for at that time: European whites, Catholics, politically non-leftists and well-respected – due to the presence of Basque family names among the Venezuelan elite. On the other hand, the BNP obtained the option of relocating its affiliates who could not return home after Franco's victory. As a result of this, several thousand refugees and their families settled in Venezuela during the 1940s and 1950s. They formed quite a homogeneous group (political exiles linked to the BNP), who had entered Venezuela with the support of the Government, in possession of a considerable level of formation and training, which allowed them to rapidly gain entry into the upper-middle classes of the society. Like many other war exiles, their hopes were set on remaining in the host country for a short time and after that to return to their homeland. That led them to reproduce some of the political, social and cultural structures they had left behind when leaving the Basque Country. But their hopes started to evaporate as the Spanish dictatorship established itself and, thanks to the new order created during the Cold War, gained international recognition. It was in this context that the basis for the current Basque community in Venezuela was established: a community with a high density of relationships, provided with a definite Basque identity, with a significant level of endogamy and with certain formal and informal structures. It was into this community that the new Basque immigrants who arrived in the country over the next decades - not only for political reasons but also as economic migrants - were integrated.

The roots of the present-day Basque diaspora in Argentina are quite different. After the colonial period, an important flow of Basque migrants started arriving in the land of silver

from the first third of the XIX century onwards, a flow that continued until one hundred years ago. Unlike the Basques who went to Venezuela, those who arrived in Argentina, especially at the beginning of that period, did not find an already established national community, but what we could call a nation-state in the process of construction. Even though independence from Spain was declared in 1816, the fight against the indigenous people for control of the territory lasted until 1880. This means that the very basis for the nation-state (the national territory) was incomplete until that date, and the main reason for attracting immigrants to the country was precisely to conclude the colonization by means of population, and to build a national community among the white people who conquered the territory. Tens of thousands of Basques arrived in Argentina in this context, most of them from a rural environment, and, together with peoples of other ethnic origins, actively integrated themselves in the emerging national society. This kind of integration, however, did not erase their Basque group consciousness, and they created their own diasporic structures. Among these, hotels were of capital importance: they were not only the space in which new arrivals got in touch with settled Basques and gained initial help for their settlement, but also the public space in which, as a / meeting point, Basque people met people of other origins. The hotels were an important point of reference, and the Basque words used to name them (Hotel Euskalduna, Fonda Maritorea and so on) served as an indicator of the presence of Basques, not only for themselves but also for other people. Likewise, during the main flow of immigrants, Basques created their own assistance services for those who needed it (schools and orphanages, homes for the elderly, funds to help people repatriate, and so on). They also founded cultural centres, and, once immigration ceased and the assistance services began to disappear, these remained alive and have helped maintain Basque identity over the generations. Their numbers were later strengthened by the arrival of new immigrants who, in a much lesser number than before, arrived in Argentina over the course of the XX century. At present, due to the long period for which Basque immigration to Argentina lasted, we can find very different statuses among the people who consider themselves Basque. On the one hand, there are those who, like the Basques in Venezuela, were born in the Basque Country and retain family relations with their homeland; on the other hand, there are those who have no other ties to the Basque Country than their family name, but also feel Basque.

As a result of the different histories of Basque migration in the two countries, we speak of a wide range of ways of feeling Basque in the diaspora. In general terms, while in some cases we find people with a strong and definite Basque identity, in other cases we have

those whose Basque identity is somewhat vague. That is why we decided to take two different samples, one in Venezuela and the other in Argentina. In order to contact the samples we used a survey conducted by Canal Vasco itself.² We were not looking for a statistically significant sample, but a qualitatively rich one. The survey had the advantage of identifying a wide range of viewers: from those who make intensive use of Canal Vasco to those who watch it sporadically, and from first-generation immigrants to fifth-generation Basque descendants. It allowed us make a rich qualitative analysis, and avoid one of the problems that studies of diasporas must face, which is the definition of the diaspora itself. In fact, most of the studies about the present Basque diaspora that we know of focus on people engaged in diasporic structures: Basque Centres, diasporic associations, and so on. Among our samples, together with people who are active members of such structures, we have found people who have never been in a Basque Centre or participated in any diasporic activity, and have no links with other people of Basque origin. In this respect, the operative definition of diaspora we have used in our research has much more to do with the original sense of the term “diaspora” itself. That is to say, with the idea of diaspora as people that are scattered, not necessarily linked among themselves or even to their homeland. As we will argue later, one of the new elements that satellite television has brought to the diasporic groups is the possibility of getting in touch with the homeland, especially for those who have no other link. To analyse the practices of reproducing Basque identity in the diaspora, we must take into account not only those who participate in dense diasporic networks but also those who live their Basque identity from the solitude of their homes.

We interviewed 66 people in total, 19 of them in Venezuela and the rest in Argentina. Some were individual in-depth interviews, and some group interviews. All of the Venezuelan sample were first or second-generation Basques, that is to say, born in the Basque Country or born in Venezuela of Basque parents. The variability of the Argentinean sample is much higher: 6 were first, 15 second, 12 third, 9 fourth and one was fifth-generation. Among these, if we consider their grandparents’ ethnic origin, 60 per cent were Basque, and 40 per cent had other European and Argentinean origins. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using qualitative research software.³

About Canal Vasco

Canal Vasco is the channel broadcast by Basque public television (EiTB) towards Latin America. EiTB currently broadcasts two Free-To-Air (FTA) channels in the Basque

Country (one of them in the Basque language and the other in Spanish⁴). There are two other channels targeting Basques outside the country, both of them broadcast by satellite: ETBSat, towards Spain and Europe, and Canal Vasco, towards Latin America. The international diffusion is completed by the use of Internet.

Both satellite broadcasts are FTA, which means that viewers do not have to pay any monthly fee in order to obtain the signal. They only have to install the proper equipment (a dish antenna and a receiver) in their homes. Since they are non-encrypted channels, many cable-operators in Latin America pick up the signal and include it in their basic or premium packages, in most cases without informing EiTb. This is an important means for the spread of the channel in the sub-continent. Argentina, for instance, has the third highest rate of penetration by cable television in the world (52 % of households), after Canada with 72 % and the United States with 64 % (López Alonso and Rey Lennon 2001). It is estimated that in this country more than 200 cable companies include Canal Vasco in their packages, thus carrying it into more than two million households all over the country.

The schedule of Canal Vasco consists of a 24 hour daily broadcast, on the basis of a 12 hour program that is repeated twice. Except for a couple of programs specifically targeting the diaspora, and due to the restrictions on the broadcasting rights for other programs, almost all of the content proceeds from EiTb's own productions that are broadcast in the Basque Country. Some are from the store of old programs for domestic consumption, while others, such as newscasts and sport events, are broadcast at the same time as they are shown in the Basque Country. The main language is Spanish, 86 %, and the rest is in Basque, mostly with Spanish subtitles. By genre, news is the most important, accounting for 31 % of the content, followed by magazines, 27 %, and sports, 12 %. It is to be noted that there are very few programs for kids, only 2 %.

Main findings of the research: the different uses of Canal Vasco in the diaspora

The efforts and practices for maintaining group identity among Basque diaspora members are as old as that diaspora itself. Among the bibliography on this issue we would draw attention to the book by Douglass and Bilbao, a classic work on how Basques in America have reproduced their group identity since the very beginnings of colonization (Douglass and Bilbao 1975). That is why to better understand the uses of Canal Vasco we must first consider that such uses are inserted into other practices related to the reproduction of the diasporic group itself. Likewise, we must consider how the possibility of a link to the

Basque Country through satellite television is revealing a new dimension of an old phenomenon, that is, the maintenance of diasporic identity.

Attitudes towards Basque identity among diasporic people

Collective identity is, by definition, a shared identity. Nevertheless, sharing a common identity does not mean that all of the people involved feel and experience it in the same way. With respect to Basque identity, this is evident in the Basque Country itself: what does “to be Basque” mean, and what implications does it have for the lives of the people? The range of different responses we could give to this question becomes even wider if we consider it in the context of diaspora, where the relationship to the reference group has a great degree of variation. As explained, the samples used in this research come from different countries in which the histories of Basque migrations have been quite different. Thus we have encountered very different experiences of what “feeling Basque” means. Some of these tell us about a very definite and strong identity, as in the case of Basques in Venezuela: when speaking in terms of “us” and “ours”, they are usually speaking about Basques in general, and sometimes about “Basques in Venezuela”, as a sub-group of the main community of Basque people. Within the sample we interviewed, there are no strong Venezuelan identity feelings, and they distinguish firmly between diasporic Basques and Venezuelans. Generally speaking, they have a high degree of contact with the Basque Country: it is the birthplace of some of them, and all have been there at some time. They have relatives there, and keep up a relationship with them, often by travelling there during holidays. They practise an intensive community life in Venezuela, in particular in Caracas, where most of the people we interviewed live. The Basque Centre in this city is a club in which most of them participate, mainly at week-ends, and where they meet together around typically Basque habits: to watch and practise pilota or handball (a very popular Basque sport), play cards, have a drink, perform Basque dances, watch Canal Vasco and so on. Proceeding from an original exiled group who laid the foundations for the subsequent Basque community, they share a common nationalist discourse, which they or their parents brought into exile with them, and which has been reproduced over decades. This nationalist discourse is very much present when it comes to defining what Basqueness means and should be, not only in political but also in cultural terms: who is Basque and who is not; what is Basque and what is not; and so on. Generally speaking, people who experience their Basque identity in this way expect Canal Vasco to confirm and feed the image of Basqueness they previously held. This brings them to use its contents, mainly, for the preservation of their firmly-rooted Basque identity. In the same way,

they feel very disappointed when the image that Canal Vasco gives of the present-day Basque Country does not coincide with the image they have retained about the country they or their parents left decades ago. It must be mentioned that this is the same disappointment that they feel when they travel to the Basque Country and find it “largely changed”, as a result of the cultural changes that have occurred from the Civil War to the present.

Other people, on the contrary, do not have such a definite Basque identity, even if they feel themselves Basque. As mentioned before, the first migrant waves from the Basque Country after colonisation arrived in Argentina in the first half of the XIX century, and the flow continued for one century. Many of those who arrived during the XIX century did not bring with them any nationalist discourse, not only because they were not political refugees but also because the formulation of Basque nationalism in political terms did not take place until the end of the century in the Spanish part of the country, and later in the French part (the migrants came from both parts). So nationalist discourse, even if it has not been absent from the Basque community in Argentina, did not have the same strength that it had in the definitions of Basqueness of the Venezuelan diaspora. Apart from that, the migrants who arrived in Argentina became integrated as a constitutive part of Argentinean society, and mixed with people of other ethnic origins over generations. In the meantime, the links to their homeland were disappearing, as were the web of social relations among Basque descendants. Consequently, we can find a wider range of attitudes towards Basque identity among the Argentinean sample than among the Venezuelan one. As an example, when speaking to the interviewer in terms of “us” and “ours”, they are usually talking about Argentineans in general, while at other times they are referring to “Basques in Argentina”.

Argentinean Basques generally have fewer ties to the Basque Country than Venezuelan Basques. In our sample, many of them have never visited it, even if the journey has become a dream for all of them. Some have no relation with people living there and no known relatives in the homeland, even if they have tried to restore the lost link (to which end they make increasing use of the Internet). More significantly, some of them have no relations with other people of Basque origin in Argentina. But all of them feel themselves in some way Basques. This kind of identity is more open and more vague than the one we found in Venezuela, and sometimes it becomes hard even to define it.

Jorge Ramírez, for example, has a grandfather from the Basque Country. This was his maternal grandfather, so he currently has the Basque family name in the second position, after

the Castilian family name of his father. Jorge has no ties to the Basque Country today, nor with other Basques in Argentina. When asked about his identity feelings, the response was as follows:

Q-Jorge, do you feel yourself to be Basque?

A-No, I don't, because my surname is Ramírez. But inside , I do.

Q-What does 'inside ' mean?

A-I don't know, I don't know what I am, but... I have the temperament and... you know, it is hard to say but I feel like I have more blood from my mum than from my dad... I'm telling you that I don't feel Basque because I don't have anything... even the surname. But I have my memories, and that is crazy, to have your memories and not to feel Basque...

Q-Do you feel more Basque than Gallego?⁵

A-Yes, sure, they call me Gallego because of my surname, but...

In these cases, as in others, we find a Basque identity in the process of construction. It is not so well-defined at the beginning, but strong enough to encourage the use of Canal Vasco and for identification with the people who appear on the screen. In these cases people use this channel not to preserve a previously well-defined image of Basqueness, but as a resource for its construction. This implies different expectations about Canal Vasco and different uses of the television contents, as we will see in the following paragraphs.

The different uses of Canal Vasco: preserving versus constructing Basqueness

From our samples, we can say that the attitude of preserving Basque identity appears mainly among Basque migrants from the first two generations: it is clearly dominant among those who were born in the Basque Country, but it can be observed among second-generation migrants as well. We have not found such an attitude among descendents of later generations. In order to make clearer what we understand by a preserving attitude, we can say that some first and second-generation migrants from our samples feel a kind of disjuncture in their lives. They live in one country but consider themselves from another. They feel that a part of themselves is in the host country, while the other part is in the homeland. Of course, this sort of feeling has much to do with symbolism, because the means they can use to "be" in a country that is thousands of kilometres away are merely symbolic. There are many practises that can help in satisfying this feeling, such as joining the Basque Centre, meeting other Basques, maintaining ties with relatives and friends in the homeland, visiting it, and so on.⁶

The symbolic experiences provided by the use of Canal Vasco help them in maintaining this feeling as well. Thus we should not be surprised when we hear expressions like “when I watch Canal Vasco I feel I am at home”, very commonly mentioned among people from this group.

In this context, they try to feed and reproduce the “Basque Country” and “Basqueness”, as previously defined, in quite a rigid manner. It does not matter for our work whether or not the images they have about current Basque society are accurate. What is important here is the fact that within this imaginary, “difference” is one of the constitutive elements of Basqueness. As we know, every culture sometimes needs to differentiate itself from other cultures, by selecting those of its elements that establish the difference between itself and the others. Those differential elements thus become a primordial basis for the definition of the culture and the group that owns it (Lotman 1979). In this context, a clear distinction is declared between what is Basque and what is not Basque, of what is “ours” and what is not. Practises and symbols are then put in separated boxes, according to the criteria used for the definition of Basqueness. In our case, these criteria are based, to a large extent, on the nationalist discourse that has survived among a large part of the Basque community in Venezuela. This discourse originated during the time of the Spanish Civil War and was reproduced during the course of a long exile, which many experienced as an extended post-war period. Here the definitions of Basqueness have much to do with the ideology of the traditional nationalism of the beginning of the XX century, including not only cultural, but also political and moral values.

Viewed with this attitude the contents on Canal Vasco are classified according to their accuracy with respect to the ideal of Basqueness. Among contents considered as “our culture”, the most commonly mentioned are folklore (dances, music), fiestas, landscapes of the homeland, news from the Basque Country (undoubtedly including the weather), “our style of life”, and sports, in particular Basque traditional sports like weightlifting, wood chopping, rowing or handball (rather than currently more popular games like soccer). On the other hand, programs involving gossip, talk-shows, quiz programs, soap operas and what some consider non-Basque sports are among the contents mentioned in the “the culture of others” category. This way of classifying the contents of Canal Vasco according to such a criteria of Basqueness is very common among people who share a strong sense of Basque identity.

On the other hand, for those who are not so much preserving but constructing their Basque identity, we have already shown that some live their identification with their ancestors' homeland in quite a vague way. Sometimes, the surname and the memory of stories heard at home during childhood are the only remains of their Basqueness; in many cases, these elements are even found in a state of rivalry with surnames and stories from other origins, because of the ethnically mixed nature of their family background. Viewing Canal Vasco with this attitude has much to do with the discovery of a country about which viewers did not previously know very much. That is why, unlike those who have a previously defined image of the homeland, these viewers sit in front of the screen with an open mind, ready to pick up all that the television tells them about their imagined but unknown homeland. Paradoxically, this open mind allows them to accept more easily some of the changes that have occurred in the Basque Country in recent decades, in comparison with those who, due to their more stereotyped and firmly held point of view, have developed a quite nostalgic memory about the country they or their parents left. This is not to say that they receive a more accurate image of the present reality of the Basque Country, among other reasons because this would mean that Canal Vasco reflects this society as it is, and not as they encode it, and it is well known that television does not reflect reality itself, but a concrete discourse about it (Hall 1980, p. 131). What this indicates is that these viewers have a more positive attitude towards Canal Vasco, which allows them to update their imaginary of the country of their ancestors in the sense that Marisca Milikowski proposes when she explores satellite television as a means of "de-ethnicization" for diasporic groups (Milikowski 2000, p. 445).

In these cases, and as far as our sample of Canal Vasco viewers is concerned, the use of this channel has increased their interest in the Basque Country, or encouraged them to recover some of their childhood memories. In a metaphoric sense, we could say that Basqueness was, among some people, like a seed awaiting the appropriate conditions of light and humidity to germinate, and Canal Vasco has provided them with just such conditions. Not all the seeds germinate, and only a few of the germinated seeds grow to become a healthy plant. Once germinated they will need much more than some sunlight and a few rain drops if they are to grow: they will need an increasing amount of nutrients for that. From what we have seen among our interviewees, some of them, encouraged by the use of Canal Vasco, have started developing other interests and other practises that could result in the construction of a Basque identity: seeking further information about the Basque Country, looking for other people of Basque origin or for descendants of the relatives of their ancestors who stayed in the

homeland, attending meetings and activities in the organisations of the diaspora, and so on. We will have to carry out diachronic research in order to know what happens with these processes in the future, something we have not yet done. At the time we conducted the interviews (spring 2002) satellite broadcasting of EiTb had been taking place for no more than 4 years, so there was not sufficient ground for carrying out such research at that time. That is why we are not in a position to conclude that there will be a reinforcement of Basque identity in the long term as a result of the use of Canal Vasco in these cases. But the evidence suggests that in some cases this use could activate some processes that would otherwise have remained inactive.

One of the most interesting uses we found among these viewers is what we might designate as digital experience. To explain this briefly, we can say that satellite television offers viewers the illusion of being in touch with people and places they have never encountered before. That is one of the roles played by media in the construction of imagined communities that is not based on face-to-face relations but on mediated ones (Calhoun 1991, p. 110). That is to say, watching television is an opportunity to engage with the imagined community by means of identifying oneself with the symbols and other mediating elements that represent the group. The map of the country (for example in the weather news), its flag, folklore, political organisations, president, heroes, etcetera, are elements that often appear on the television and provide viewers with the basis for an identification with the community, when the viewer watches them in terms of “that’s our country”, “that’s our president” and so on. From the viewpoint of the viewers who live in the Basque Country, those symbolic and abstract elements complement their concrete experience of the community (or its territory), and has more to do with the people, places or events that they experience in their everyday life. It is through such a combination of concretely experienced elements and symbols representing the whole group that we imagine our community. On the other hand, from the viewpoint of those who live abroad and have no other contact with the group than television, symbols can be acquired in different ways (among them television), but joining the concrete experience of the group is much more complicated, where such a possibility even exists. What Craig Calhoun calls the simulation of real concrete relations by television makes its appearance here. Some people in the diaspora have not met many other people from the community in their lives, and may never have been to the reference country. But they can use the television as a way of simulating that kind of experience.

Let us see what Maria Jesus tells us about her likes on Canal Vasco. She was born in Argentina of a Spanish mother and a Basque father. Her husband is not of Basque origin, and she has never been to the Basque Country, even if she has always dreamed of doing so. She has had some contact by post with her relatives in her father's birthplace, but during recent years this has become increasingly sporadic. She has no relations with other Basques in Argentina, and we interviewed her on the day of her first visit to the Basque Centre . But she declares herself to be an intensive viewer of Canal Vasco. When asked about the contents she likes most, she answered as follows:

A-You may laugh at me, but I watch cycling.

Q-Why should I do that?

A-Oh, I watch cycling not because I like sport –actually I don't, especially not cycling. But they go through the places, and that is what I want to watch. Some other people may have had the opportunity to go there, but I have not, so I dream about it. So I watch the race and sit down, and sometimes I stay there all the time it lasts, and I look at it, and look at it again... how the camera goes on when they arrive somewhere... I really love it.

It is the concrete places of the Basque Country that Maria Jesus wants to watch, not those with a great symbolic value, such as the highest mountain or the archetypical village. In a way similar to the digital experience of places, Maria Jesus talks to us about her experience of people through the television. She watched a program from a theatre in the Basque Country, in commemoration of the 700th anniversary of the foundation of Bilbao. She asserts: “I watched the whole program, although it was in the small hours. But I watched it, and I couldn't believe it! I looked again and again at the people sitting in the dress circle, and inside I was thinking ‘some of them might be a relative of mine, they really might be!’ It is the same thing when they show people on the street”. It should be noted that this sort of digital experience, that is to say, the illusion of experiencing what is perceived not as the symbolic but as the real Basque Country through television, is one of the most appreciated uses of Canal Vasco among those who have not had the opportunity to experience it in another way. Obviously, we should add that this kind of experience is itself symbolic, even if it is experienced as “being more real” than abstract concepts like maps and stereotyped landscapes, or important figures like presidents.

The availability of the materials for the construction of identity and the new placement of the individual

Another change that the uses of satellite television may be bringing to the reproduction of identity in the diaspora concerns the availability of the materials for that purpose. As historical research about the Basque diaspora and other diasporic groups has made clear, displaced communities have historically fed their group identity by obtaining new ideas, news, innovations and changes proceeding from their homeland. This process might take place later than the changes occurring in their country of origin, but in the long term they do take place, at least while the migration flows continue. The history of the Basque community in Argentina, for instance, shows us how the new migrants brought with them, as part of their symbolic baggage, new elements that were adopted by the diasporic community: the arrival of nationalist ideology and the changes it provoked in the structures of the Basque community are a clear example of this. Thus, the loss of the Old Laws (the Fueros) in the Basque Country after the war in 1876 was immediately followed by the foundation of the first Basque Centres in Latin America, which had a pre-nationalist but political significance. Similar changes and the adoption of new elements occurred during the development of Basque nationalism in the homeland, or after the arrival of exiles escaping from the fascist regime in Spain. In all these cases, the arrival of new migrants was the most important way – but not the only one - for updating news about the Basque Country, and for adopting new patterns. But when immigration flows decreased, so did the arrival of new materials for the development of the community. At the same time, the needs which had given rise to the first structures of the community (mainly those which had to do with attending to the needs of the migrants, like the hotels) diminished. As a result of this, the Basque Centres changed their significance, and increasingly became spaces for the symbolic reproduction of the Basque community. Basque language courses, the performance of traditional plays and other arts, and other such activities placed the reproduction of group symbols in the first place, instead of attending to the material needs of immigrants, or even the political function they had served before. Because of their importance for those who had access to these centres, mainly in the principal cities of Argentina from the early XX century onwards, the past started displacing the present in the symbolic material available for that reproduction, since there were no more new arrivals who could contribute current elements. Obviously, we are talking in terms of trends, since the flow of information from the Basque Country to the communities abroad, if lower than in the core times of immigration, has never stopped. At present, however, the flow of information is

higher than it has ever been before, thanks to the new technologies. With the result that nowadays the main subjects of conversation around the tables in the Basque Centres are no longer the past but the present of the homeland: they talk about the latest news they have heard in the afternoon newscast. In this way, the present is displacing the past in the materials used by the members of the diaspora in the process of the continuing construction of the discourse of Basqueness. The symbolic materials with which this discourse is being constructed are not only the stories from the family, the ancient symbols, and so on; they are increasingly the same issues that feature among the concerns and conversations of Basques in the Basque Country. Since they have just seen the same newscast at the same time, people living on the other side of the Atlantic have seen and share the same agenda. In that way, the Basque Country still continues to connote the past from the point of view of the diaspora. But, increasingly, it is becoming the present. In some cases, such as those of people who are thinking of emigrating-returning there, it might even become the future.

At the same time that the object, the Basque Country, is being displaced from the past to the present, we can talk about a displacement of the individual as well. In fact, the only attitudes that are permitted towards the past are those of contemplation and symbolic reproduction. But in handling the present, the individual is allowed to participate in it. Thus, if for the diaspora the Basque Country is more than merely the past, and if it is a reality that can be participated in because it is the present, then the individual can become active in relation to it. Thus the possibility of receiving everyday information from the Basque Country puts the individual in another place, insofar as it allows him or her to act in order to participate in it. This brings us, as we will see in the following paragraphs, to another use of Canal Vasco.

Pride in being Basque and the defence of Basqueness

As a result of the troubled political period, which has put the Basque Country on the front pages of the media in recent decades as the battle ground of a violent conflict, the images that certain Spanish media and news services have been spreading throughout Latin America have become a cause of concern for many Basque people in the diaspora. It is a common belief among these people that Basques are fairly well-considered in Latin America in general. The stereotype of the Basque as being honest, hard working, enterprising, responsible, discreet, independent, people of their word, and so on, has travelled with the migrants all over Latin America for centuries. The question is not whether or not other people in the continent see the Basques that way, nor is it whether they fulfil such high expectations

or not. The issue is that Basques in the diaspora believe that they are so considered, and there is a common fear among them of how the non-stop recurrence of news in which Basques in general are shown as involved in the use of violence could erode such a positive image - in particular among their neighbours in the host country, who may have no other information about the reality of the political conflict than that offered by the media. They thus feel the need to confront what they consider to be misinformation in order to restore not only the image that Basques in general have supposedly had for a long time, but also their own image. This brings them to act as ambassadors of the Basque Country before their friends and neighbours, and, of course, the material that Canal Vasco provides them with (both information and analysis) becomes of high interest in this respect. At the same time, when acting as defenders of the “proper” image of Basques, they become increasingly involved in the imagined community. Even in those cases where there was previously a lack of interest in Basque politics, which was considered as distant and incomprehensible and a cause of division among people, the possibility of accessing everyday information has encouraged their interest in this issue, and brought them, in some cases, to an attitude of defence of the group against what is considered as a threat.

Together with the defence of the group against negative stereotypes, the inhabitants of the diaspora find other materials to sustain not only the older, positive images of the Basques, but also to help create new images among the people of the host country. Thus the Basque Country is now presented, in Canal Vasco, as a different country from the poor land their grandparents left one century ago, or the devastated country their parents remembered from the Spanish Civil War. It appears now, on the screen of this channel, as a European and prosperous country, whose way of life could be considered as tranquil and fairly happy. It could of course sound astonishing to those who live in the country itself, but from the point of view of those who live in a context of economic and social crisis in places like Argentina, with a long tradition of considering themselves to be the Europeans of Latin America, and with no better information about the reality of current Basque society than the news from Canal Vasco, it may not be so strange. The fact that this channel can be received in millions of Argentinean households by cable, and that its contents are mostly in Spanish and thus understandable by the general public of the country, encourages the people of the diaspora to promote it among their neighbours, and to show their pride in being Basque.

This idea leads us to stress the importance of the social context in which viewers use Canal Vasco. In the case of Argentina, it was the context of a devastating economic and

political crisis, which had not only placed millions of Argentines in a hard situation, but had also called into question the very illusion of a future for everyone.⁷ By then, the crisis had progressed a long way and even if we do not have accurate information about the real figures of emigration in recent years, there was a common belief that lots of people were looking for a way to leave the country, as the impressive book by Diego Melamed, *Irse*, shows (Melamed 2002). We cannot omit this context if we are to understand the uses that descendants of Basque immigrants make of Canal Vasco. It would be incorrect to think that by using this channel they are trying to get closer to the Basque Country just in case they should decide to emigrate-return to the birthplace of their ancestors. Against this belief we must bear in mind that the revival of the structures of the Basque diaspora in Argentina predates the current crisis, as the foundation of new Basque Centres and the re-foundation of old ones from the 1980's onwards (half of the 85 currently existing) testifies. But it must be remembered that in such a context, self-identification with a group which is believed to be in an enviable position is easier than identification with, let's say, other more stigmatised groups. Among many other factors, this is something to bear in mind if we want to understand why people with a mixture of ethnic origins in their family are more likely to feel some referents to be closer than others, or even why people who have a very vague feeling of being Basque start watching Canal Vasco, and cultivating such an identity.

Conclusion

If we compare the uses of satellite television with other practices among Basque diasporic groups in the past, there is no doubt that several similarities will be found since they respond to the same kind of needs. Basically, the need to maintain ties with the country and the culture they come from, which is not only a matter of nostalgia but also a way to integrate themselves in the host society by means of the material support and solidarity that their ethnic community could provide, as well as by means of the symbolic empowerment that self-identification with an imagined community could offer them. In this sense, we can compare some of the current uses of Canal Vasco with the functions that Basque hotels fulfilled during the core years of immigration in Argentina. These hotels were, on the one hand, the meeting point for the older and more recent immigrants, providing the former with news and memories about the homeland and the latter with affective and material support for their integration. On the other hand, being a public space, they were the place in which Basques met other Argentinean people, thus facilitating their integration in the host society through

recognition by others of their Basque identity. Today, as the Basque immigration flow to Latin America is much lower, so is the need of support for new arrivals. But the need to maintain ties with the homeland of reference and to seek a place in the host society remains alive, and these are some of the gratifications that the uses of Canal Vasco can provide. In fact, the contents of this channel can be seen as similar to the stories and accounts that new immigrants used to bring to the diasporic group. At the same time, the information provided by this channel allows the Basque descendants to appear before the host society with a sort of self-empowerment. This is probably more important in the case of Basques in Latin America than it might be in some other migrant populations, towards which the attitude of the host society is not acceptance but rather underestimation or even stigmatisation; this is usually the case of migrants from poorer countries to the richest ones. But, at least as far as Basques in Argentina are concerned, we should think about the uses of Canal Vasco not only in terms of maintaining the past but also in terms of building the present, by means of the self-empowerment that identification with the Basque group could provide.

It is precisely the uses of satellite television in order to “negotiate” (as this term is employed by some authors) a space in the host society that lead us to consider some novelties in these practises in comparison with traditional ones. We have thus argued that the simultaneity of the reception of news both in the Basque Country and abroad has brought a kind of displacement of the object, since the homeland becomes the present and not only the past, and consequently there is a displacement of the individual as well. As a result of such displacement the individual is allowed to act in order to modify the present, and this makes his or her involvement in the imagined community increasingly deep.

Another of the novelties of the uses of satellite television is the extension of the concept of diaspora, which can be described as the return of this term to its origins. Since satellite television reaches groups as well as individuals, we can say that it opens a way for scattered people who had no other ties to others in their situation to contact the community of reference. Among these people in particular, we have observed that these connections can be of different types, and provide the viewers not only with the main symbols for their identification with the imagined community, but also simulation of real and concrete relations with it through what we have described as digital experience.

We have also tried to show that there are very different uses of satellite television among diasporic groups, as such uses occur in very different contexts. From the conservative

attitude, which seeks the reinforcement of a previously well-defined idea of Basqueness, to the constructive attitude, for which the contents of Canal Vasco are the main source for the reconstruction of what is perceived as an incomplete image of their origin, we can talk of a wide range of uses. Sometimes these uses are common to different contexts, and sometimes they vary according to the specific context. This is an indication of the different ways in which we can understand identity and imagined communities. All of the people interviewed here have in common the feeling of being Basque and identifying themselves with a people which lives thousands of kilometres away, even if they know very few of its members or almost no one. The implications of this feeling for everyday life are as varied as their contexts are, and watching Canal Vasco is practically the only diasporic behaviour that is shared by all of them. But even in the cases in which this practise appeared to be the only consequence of feeling Basque, the data shows us that this practice encourages them to approach Basqueness in different ways. That is why we think that concepts like diaspora, community and identity can be useful in research into the uses of the new media among immigrants, if we understand them as mediated by the historical context and in a dynamic way.

If we use these concepts in that way, we can then accept that satellite broadcasting is helping - at least in some cases of diasporic television - to build imagined national communities beyond the borders of the states. So we can define this more properly as transborder instead of transnational television.

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¹ We will shortly publish an article about the dimensions of this phenomenon (International Communication Gazette, vol. 69). According to our findings more than 90 % of the 47 million people in USA who speak a language other than English at home had access to television broadcasts in their home language.

² The viewers were invited to participate in a draw for a trip to the Basque Country if they sent their name, country and favourite program to Canal Vasco. We selected a sample from all the respondents, and contacted them for an interview.

³For this purpose we used QSR Nud*ist software, which allowed us to analyse the interviews in a deep and constructive way. Since the main goals of our research was not to measure the use of Canal Vasco but to approach the different ways of using it in a more exploratory work, this kind of analysis was very helpful for the construction of new hypothesis about how the new media are promoting changes in the diasporic experience itself.

⁴ According to the most recent data, nearly one third of the population in the Basque Country are Basque-speakers, almost all of them bilinguals (Basque-Spanish or Basque-French). The rest are Spanish or French monolinguals.

⁵ Gallego is the idiomatic term for people of Spanish origin in Argentina, and it usually excludes the Basques: “What was not Spanish was Italian, and (...) it was hard to detect the fine line of demarcation between Spain and Italy in the life of Buenos Aires. It might almost have been said that there were several kinds of Spaniards in Buenos Aires: the Gallego, the Basque and the –the first contributing color and tradition, the second enterprise, and the third solidity.” Sax Bradford, The Battle for Buenos Aires (New York: Harcourt, 1943, p. 307).

⁶ It is clear that we should not consider these practises as a direct way of “feeling Basque” since they are probably realised in order to satisfy more concrete needs linked to social life. What is significant here is that these spaces of relationship are among the spaces where one could expect such social needs to be satisfied, and that the group is reproduced as a result of this.

⁷ It must be noted that the interviews were conducted in spring 2002, in the middle of an economic crisis whose most shocking point was the so-called “corralito”, which had reduced the earnings and the savings of millions of people by up to a quarter six months before.