

WHY SAY NO TO «NO BILLAG» ON MARCH 4, 2018

Let me make a very clear point about the impending vote on the “No Billag” initiative. It seems to me that progressive and leftist citizens like myself are having a hard time maintaining credibility when we try to have people understand that voting in favor of the initiative will effectively have a negative influence on the democratic process in our country. And let me explain why: The situation as it presents itself today is one in which the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation contributes to a major degree to the sociopolitical discourse that is so essential to the Swiss citizen—be it through quality reporting and analysis or through its variety of more or less serious productions. Like most domestic media, it too is of course biased towards the German, English and American worldviews. Nonetheless, it guarantees access to this significant pool of information throughout all corners of Switzerland through the vital redistribution of the fees collected on its behalf to its four regional corporations—one in each linguistic area—working in support of peripheral regions, minorities and the disabled.

By effectively pushing the SRG SSR (alongside many other regional networks) off a cliff in the event this initiative prevails, we hollow out a market share worth over one billion Swiss francs in the information sector, which will then inevitably be ingested by the mechanisms of that same neoliberalism which was caught in gross error ten years ago and has basically been hobbling along thanks to patchwork policymaking ever since the crisis. Some fundamental issues right there have still not been resolved and have done nothing but antagonize us and spark radicalism everywhere with nasty disagreements even on questions like the humanitarian crisis, where decisions are being made on whether helping our brothers and sisters in dire need is economically sustainable or not—now how disgusting is that?

So what does all this have to do with democracy? Well, let me remind you that the political sphere is not the problem here: In Switzerland our system of direct democracy works great, it is held dear by everyone, we make use of it and the resulting dialogue has been as effective as always. The problem, rather, is that decade after decade the democratic process has been increasingly alienated from the economic sphere. Let’s make a little thought experiment: What company in its right mind would attribute one equally weighted vote to each and everyone of its employees in decision-making processes? As of now, this remains an absurd model: Legal frameworks regulating how companies should work and interact are thus diametrically opposed to the democratic principle, the principle by which the common intent of the majority ultimately governs. And this is exactly the reason why, in my opinion, the information sector including the internet (!) must be protected from vested and partisan interests by remaining within the realm of public governance, especially so in a tiny country of 8.4 million.

Having gotten this off my chest and having cast my vote against the initiative just the other day, I also strongly support the view that the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation needs some kind of restructuring and I have one suggestion to make in this regard being both a performer and an author: The contribution of SRG SSR to the cultural diversity and its support for indigenous artists is fundamental, yet still highly asymmetrical: In 2016 its radio broadcasters SRF, RTS, RSI, RTR have aired Jazz music for a combined 10'111 hours—that's the good news (Programmstatistik Radio 2016, SRG SSR). On the other hand, the percentage of Swiss artists being aired admittedly reaches a mere 20% of the total, which is in fact a lot better than what the private sector has to offer at 10%, but still is nowhere near the reality of our live scene, in which clubs and festivals feature Swiss artists in well around 50% of their live events (Taschenstatistik Kultur in der Schweiz 2017, BAK).

To be clear, the remuneration I get from my professional musical activity in conjunction with TV and radio programs dependent on the so called "Billag fee" has been a consistent part of my income as a freelancer, contributing to what others might call a "thirteenth salary". There is no way private networks taking over could compensate for this loss of both stylistic diversity and airplay. And—what's more—I believe that, in the context of a reform, Swiss artists and culture professionals in general should actually make an effort to push the broadcasting of their music to levels that are in sync with the reality of the live scene.

The statistics state that Swiss households spend more than ten billion annually on culture, which is around four times the amount of public subsidies that go into it. Yet 35% of the population believe that their financial means are a constraint to their participation in cultural activities. This actually shows what potential there is for expanding and diversifying cultural offers through increased subsidies: Dismantling the SRG SSR in this sense would be a highly deteriorating move.

Nolan

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