

# MEDIA PLURALISM AND GENRE DIVERSITY IN TV SERIES: CHANGES IN CROATIAN TELEVISION CULTURE FROM 2003 TO 2018

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**ABSTRACT** *In the early 21st century, the Croatian television system changed radically, bringing major shifts in television culture. This study analyses the period from 2003 to 2018, focusing on genre diversity, audience education, and the origin of popular television series. Based on secondary statistical analysis of Nielsen ratings for adult audiences, the study examines the ten most-watched titles per season, with additional insights from a broader Top 20 list. The findings show tectonic shifts in genre distribution, cultural orientation, and the legitimization of popular series. Genre diversity has been replaced by a concentration of telenovelas. Western productions have lost their primacy; Turkish series now dominate, Eastern titles are displacing domestic ones, and popular series have become lowbrow.*

## KEYWORDS

TELEVISION SERIES, TELEVISION CULTURE, GENRE, TELEVISION PREFERENCES, CULTURAL CAPITAL

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Television audiences differ in cultural tastes, shaped by social background and linked to broader sets of affinities and interests (Bourdieu, 1984). These tastes are formed within specific media systems, through engagement with particular content and genres (McQuail, 2010, p. 430). Media choices become sources of meaning and pleasure (Fiske, 2001, p. 1), influencing the formation of taste, identity, and values (Bignell, 2000). On this basis, *television cultures* (Fiske, 2001) emerge “as patterns of ideas and practices tied to specific forms of mediated communication, which shape processes of meaning formation across instances of production, reception, and use” (Mihelj & Huxtable, 2018, p. 28). In analyses of television cultures, audience tastes and preferences are considered key elements (Mihelj & Huxtable, 2018), and *genre* serves as a cultural indicator (Peruško & Čuvalo, 2014). Genre *popularity* reflects characteristics of the media system (Bilić, 2011) that shape media culture. Understanding these dynamics is crucial to assessing how media systems shape cultural expression and foster social cohesion.

It is therefore relevant to examine whether transformations in the television system correspond to shifts in audience preferences and, more broadly, to developments in media culture. Croatia provides an illustrative case. In the early 21st century, its television system evolved from a (monopolistic) “old television” system to a (pluralistic) “new era” (Roller, 2014). The landscape of *popular television* also changed significantly (Havens et al., 2012). Commercial channels were introduced, and access to foreign pay-TV increased steadily – both technologically and linguistically (Ipsos et al., 2014; Lotz, 2018). Subscription video-on-demand (SVoD) services also emerged (Tryon, 2015). Linear television remains dominant, with 40% of the population watching during prime time (MKM, 2022), yet nearly half of the population is not subscribed to pay-TV (HAKOM, 2022). This positions terrestrial viewers as the most cohesive audience segment (Ipsos et al., 2014). At the same time, TV series have become one of the most widespread and favoured forms of global popular culture, mediating ideologies and social concerns (Esquenazi, 2013). Production and popularity continue to grow (Chalaby, 2023). In Croatia, series have become central in the ratings race (Panjeta, 2014; Premec, 2013). This study thus explores whether and how these structural changes in television have shaped viewing preferences and cultural taste, thereby contributing to the transformation of television culture. The analysis focuses on national terrestrial channels, the most popular and universally accessible media platforms across all social groups. It aims to investigate diachronic trends in the most-watched series genres, with particular focus on genre diversity. Additionally, the study examines popular series genres in relation to two indicators: the educational structure of audiences (cultural legitimacy; Karuza Podgorelec, 2023) and the origin of production (cultural influence; Pušnik & Starc, 2008).

<sup>1</sup> The research presented in this article is part of a broader study conducted for the author's doctoral dissertation, which analysed 22 popular TV series genres in Croatia, focusing on their genre-specific features, audience ratings, and sociodemographic profiles.

## FICTIONAL GENRES IN THE STUDY OF TELEVISION CULTURE

In a study of popular culture, Cawelti introduces the concept of “formula” (comparable to genre conventions; Fiske, 2001, p. 109). For Cawelti (1977, p. 7), this concept “is useful primarily as a means of making historical and cultural inferences about the collective fantasies shared by large groups of people and of identifying differences in these fantasies from one culture or period to another.” Closely tied to specific cultural and historical contexts, formulas typically exhibit a limited repertoire of plots, characters, iconography, and settings that reflect the values and tensions of the societies that sustain them (Cawelti, 1977). Similarly, each fictional genre depicts a particular world and set of topics (Creeber, 2015). Fictional genres are dynamic cultural categories that combine three discursive practices: *definition* (main conventions), *interpretation* (meaning and influence), and *evaluation* (cultural value), each constitutive of the genre itself (Mittell, 2004, p. 16).

Media cultures “are decisively shaped by genre structures” (Ritzer, 2021, p. 1). In television, generic conventions “are a prime way of both understanding and constructing” the producer-audience-text relationship (Fiske, 2001, p. 109). Genre functions as a complex “set of expectations” (Leutrat, 1973, as cited in Neale, 1980, p. 51) and as a discursive act with distinct roles in reception, economics, and production (Neale, 1980, pp. 50-52). While fictional television genres reflect cultural attitudes, preoccupations, and values, they are also shaped by market dynamics. Broadcasters and sellers act as “the gatekeepers of national television” and “cultural intermediaries,” mediating between producers and viewers, and between transnational and national cultures (Kuipers, 2012, p. 582). Transformations in the production, distribution, and reception of fictional genres are therefore interrelated variables within the broader shifts in television and popular culture (Lotz, 2018; Lotz & Lobato, 2023; Mittell, 2004; Thompson & Mittell, 2020).

### Telenovela

All globally popular drama and comedy genres originated in the West, unlike the soap opera, which includes two distinct genres: the Western soap opera (hereinafter “soap”) and the telenovela, its non-Western counterpart (Artz, 2015; Creeber, 2015; Havens, 2005, p. 271). The soap opera is defined by a slow, serialised structure focused on dialogue, rumour, and the personal sphere, expressed through sentimental melodrama and schematic emotions (Allen, 1985; Geraghty, 1981). Influenced by the American daytime soap, the telenovela emerged in 1950s Latin America and has since undergone multiple local adaptations (Abu-Lughod, 2008; Allen, 1995; Artz, 2015; Panjeta, 2014). While soaps revolve around “a large community of interrelated characters” (Allen, 1995, p. 18), telenovelas typically present a “highly personalised” story “about romance and success” (Artz, 2015, p. 194), often driven by a desire for wealth. Their melodramatic tensions are based on sharp contrasts between the rich and corrupt and the poor and virtuous (Abu-Lughod, 2008, p. 203). In doing so, they construct a culturally specific and predictable repertoire of class-based, moralistic, and ideological polarisations (Martín-Barbero, 1993, pp. 134–137). Unsurprisingly, the genre has been continually adapted to reflect shifting social dynamics and varying cultural and national contexts (Lopez, 1995, p. 261).

It is also important to note certain terminological variations within the telenovela genre. While “telenovela” is often used as a general label, it most commonly refers to the Latin American version. Other variants are typically referred to by country of origin or local terms (Allen, 1995; Artz, 2015). The Turkish variant, for instance, is called both “Turkish telenovela” (Gül, 2021, p. 20; Panjeta, 2014) and “dizi” (Acosta-Alzuru, 2021; Gül, 2021). This hybrid mixes Latin American telenovela, the American prime-time soap, and the Arabic “musalsal”, characterised by strong melodrama (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013; Panjeta, 2014). The Turkish telenovela retains melodrama and romantic tropes but incorporates enhanced production values, greater character complexity, and an aesthetic closer to Western sensibilities (Acosta-Alzuru, 2021; Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013; Panjeta, 2014). Nonetheless, despite increased production investment, all subtypes of the soap opera – including both the Latin American and Turkish telenovela – remain low in cultural value (Acosta-Alzuru, 2021, pp. 2-3; Mittell, 2020, pp. 15-16). In this article, the term “telenovela” is used as a general designation for the genre as a whole, while specific local variants are identified by their country of origin.

## TELEVISION SERIES IN CROATIA: A DIACHRONIC OVERVIEW

### Monopolistic Television System

Television in Croatia developed over decades while the country was part of Yugoslavia, within a pop-cultural sphere which Vučetić (2018) describes as “Coca-Cola socialism” – a hybrid of Western popular culture and Yugoslav socialist ideology. The media system operated as a monopoly (Peruško & Čuvalo, 2014), and Western series were already highly popular by the 1960s (Vučetić, 2018). Between 1960 and 1990, imports made up 65.3% of all series broadcast, with 83.0% of those originating from the West (Mihelj & Huxtable, 2018, pp. 181-182, 186). Television aimed to entertain a broad audience while upholding cultural value. Daily soaps were neither produced nor acquired (Mihelj & Huxtable, 2018), and American prime-time soaps aired selectively (Vučetić, 2018).<sup>2</sup> This process of Westernisation intensified over time. Croatia’s television – Televizija Zagreb, part of Yugoslav Radiotelevision – played a key role, keeping pace with Western pop-cultural trends and popularising high-quality American series and films through innovations like the *Programme Plus* marathon (Pokrajac, 2018, pp. 40-42). Editors also supported domestic series aligned with Western aesthetics and cultural value (e.g., Miroščenko, 2013).

Yugoslavia produced more dramas and comedies than expected for its relatively small economy. Domestic TV drama was seen as a major achievement of Yugoslav broadcasting. Still, Western series were perceived as more “memorable” and carried an “aura of superior quality” (Mihelj & Huxtable, 2018, pp. 181-182, 198-199). Television served as a window into a longed-for modernity, offering a Western formula of aesthetics, leisure, freedom, democracy, and prosperity – promoting a polished, Western-style middle class and the value of cultural capital (Pušnik & Starc, 2008, p. 784). Cultural imports often served “as a

<sup>2</sup> In this article, “prime-time” is defined as the period between approximately 7:00 p.m. and 10:30 p.m. (see MKM, 2022). Prime-time series sometimes extend beyond this slot into adjacent parts of the day. A narrower term than prime-time, the expression “key evening slot” refers to the most-watched period of the evening, following the main evening news, approximately between 8:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m.

substitute for what was not there in the really existing life of society" (Tomić-Koludrović & Petrić, 2007, p. 18). By the late 1980s, niche channels in the U.S. spurred the development of complex series (Lotz, 2018), which Croatian audiences embraced. The trend continued in post-socialist Croatia. Latin American telenovelas became popular daytime fare, while prime-time featured diverse genres. In the 2003/2004 season, when Nielsen began peoplemeter-based measurement, titles such as *Band of Brothers*, *Spooks*, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, *Sex and the City*, and *Gilmore Girls* were among the top ten most-watched (Nielsen, personal communication, December 7, 2020). This suggests that Croatian audiences remained receptive to and appreciative of Western television aesthetics.

### Pluralistic Television System

At the beginning of the 21st century, the liberal pluralist paradigm gained ascendancy in media policy (Peruško, 2013b). The broader sociocultural context in which changes to the television system took place is captured by the concept of a "mixed society" (see Bilić, 2012; Primorac, 2014), developed by Tomić-Koludrović and Petrić (2007). Croatia is culturally diverse, encompassing Central European and Mediterranean identities, as well as a Balkan one associated with areas formerly under Ottoman rule. This complexity is expressed in a locally specific dual model of mentality, symbolising tensions between democratic and patriarchal-authoritarian principles. In terms of values, post-socialist and post-war Croatia is shaped by the co-existence of first ("simple," "industrial") and second ("reflexive," "post-industrial") modernity, which addresses the issues ignored by the first: family roles, individualisation, and cosmopolitanism (see Beck, 1986; Inglehart, 1977). During this period, a process of retraditionalisation emerged, accompanied by tensions between contrasting value-systems. On the one hand, there was a resurgence of traditionalism, cultural closedness, and a renewed proximity to the Balkans (despite its officially negative connotation), which coexisted with state-building and early capitalist values. On the other hand, there was a strong aspiration towards cultural openness and the embrace of "European" – i.e., Western – values associated with second modernity. In this context, mixed personal cultural identities emerged, often internally contradictory and combining diverse relationships between elements of first and second modernity (Tomić-Koludrović & Petrić, 2007). Within this sociocultural landscape, television was increasingly shaped by expectations of commercialisation and market orientation as means to achieve pluralism and diversity (Peruško, 2013b). The first two decades of the 21st century brought four key changes related to television series:

(a) *The loss of public television monopoly.* Nova TV, a commercial generalist channel, was launched in 2000 and achieved its first success by 2003 (Peruško, 2011, p. 64). The generalist channel RTL followed in 2004, while niche channels Doma TV and RTL2 were granted national concessions in 2010 (Peruško, 2011; Roller, 2014). By decade's end, the public broadcaster HRT faced a deepening crisis (Bilić, 2011) and lost its ratings primacy (Peruško, 2011; Roller, 2014).

(b) *The localisation of Pay TV channels.* By the end of the first decade, foreign series on niche Pay TV channels were translated, and audience fragmentation began. Despite diminishing language barriers, these channels gained viewership slowly, and none

achieved notable ratings (Nielsen, 2013, pp. 36-37). This trend persisted (AEM, n.d.). Pay TV penetration rose from 39.1% in 2011 to 50.4% in 2018, and 52% in 2022 (HAKOM, 2011, 2019, 2022).

(c) *Exclusive SVoD series.* Distribution of exclusive foreign (mainly Western) series via SVoD platforms began in 2013 (Tryon, 2015), attracting younger and more educated audiences (Karuza Podgorelec, 2020). These series were rarely localised throughout the 2010s. By 2018, only 18% of adults aged 18-60 watched SVoD (Ipsos, 2019), rising to 42% by 2023 (Ipsos, 2023).

(d) *New evening scheduling design of commercial channels.* Scheduling design is central to programme policy (Prado et al., 2020, p. 1). In 2004/2005, before the evening news, HRT broadcast the first domestic soap opera – the telenovela *Villa Maria* (Vujnović, 2008) – and continued broadcasting telenovelas in that slot until 2010. Commercial broadcasters soon adopted the practice (Zajović, 2014). However, from 2009 onward, they aired telenovelas daily *in key evening slots* after the evening news (see Premec, 2013), and, encouraged by the popularity of Turkish titles, sometimes scheduled two back-to-back (Panjeta, 2014). This model is typical for non-Western markets like Latin America (Creeber, 2015), but rare in the West, where these slots are reserved for mainstream drama and comedy (Jordan, 2007; Prado et al., 2020). Under this model, shorter-form genres like drama and comedy were largely abandoned, as daily rotation proved unsustainable. Domestic comedic telenovelas filled the need for humorous content (Creeber, 2008; Pavlić, 2014). Alongside telenovela premieres on generalist channels, niche channels offered reruns of long-running dramas and sitcoms in the same key evening slot rhythm. As commercial broadcasters overtook HRT in ratings (Peruško, 2011; Roller, 2014), scripted series became increasingly marginalised in HRT's evening schedule.

From 2003 to 2018, these four changes were gradually introduced and became entrenched. In the first five years, the era of public television dominance and scarcity of soaps gradually ended. New commercial channels gained their first ratings successes, while foreign niche channels remained marginal due to language barriers. In the next five years, commercial channels began broadcasting telenovelas daily in key evening slots, while foreign niche Pay TV channels started translating series and attracted a segment of the local audience. Terrestrial niche channels focused on series content also received broadcasting licences. The third five-year period was marked by the consolidation of the telenovela's presence on commercial channels and the growing global production of more complex series designed for VoD platforms, which began attracting Croatian viewers. During this phase, the availability of translated series on foreign Pay TV channels further expanded, consolidating that mode of viewership. This fifteen-year period forms the focus of this study. The hypothesis is structured as follows:

*Hypothesis:* Between 2003 and 2018, on terrestrial channels with national licences, the genre distribution of popular series shifted such that genre diversity gave way to the telenovela as the dominant genre.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

A secondary statistical analysis was conducted on longitudinal television ratings data from 2003 to 2018, provided by Nielsen and based on a representative sample of the Croatian population aged 18 and over (see Peruško, 2011; Roller, 2014). The analysis focused on the average minute rating percentage (AMR%) of prime-time series, defined as the percentage of individuals in the measured sample who were watching a given series. Data were organised into broadcast seasons running from 1 September to 31 August of the following year. The term "title" refers to any series aired during a given season. If a series was rerun or broadcast over multiple seasons, it was treated as a separate title for each season. Only titles with a minimum of four episodes were included. The key indicator of audience ratings was the AMR% per title, which formed the basis for constructing audience rankings (Top lists). For telenovelas, AMR% per episode was also calculated to ensure a more precise measure, given the considerable variation in episode counts per title. Country-of-origin data were obtained from Nielsen. For classification purposes, the study applied Huntington's (2011, pp. 27-30) categorisation, according to which Western countries comprise Western Christian Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand. Croatia was treated as a neutral case, and all other countries were categorised as non-Western. In the case of co-productions, the country of the leading producer was recorded. The channels analysed included HTV1, HTV2, Nova TV, Doma TV, RTL, and RTL2.

Statistical analysis was conducted for the following groups: (a) the total adult population sample (Total); (b) sample with primary education or less (PE); (c) sample with secondary education (SE); and (d) sample with higher education (HE).

For each season, the twenty most-watched series titles were ranked within the Total sample (Top 20 Total list), as well as within each educational subgroup (Top 20 PE, Top 20 SE, and Top 20 HE). Each Top 20 list was further divided into two sublists of ten titles: Top 10 and Top 11–20. The Top 10 Total list served as the primary basis for evaluating the hypothesis. In the next stage of analysis, all selected titles were classified by genre in accordance with television genre theory (e.g., Creeber, 2004, 2015; Mittell, 2004). For each title, the following variables were recorded: AMR% in the Total sample, AMR% within each educational group, genre, country of origin, and number of episodes (as an indicator of exposure to the genre).

Drawing on insights into the transformation of the television system, the examined period was divided into three five-year intervals: the Initial Phase (seasons 2003/2004 to 2007/2008), the Transition Phase (2008/2009 to 2012/2013), and the Consolidation Phase (2013/2014 to 2017/2018). These intervals were then compared. The hypothesis was tested by comparing the Top 10 most-watched series during the Initial and Consolidation Phases and by examining two specific claims: (a) that during the Initial Phase, no single genre accounted for more than 40% of the titles, indicating genre diversity; and (b) that during the Consolidation Phase, over 60% of the titles belonged to the telenovela genre, suggesting that the telenovela emerged as the dominant genre.

## RESULTS

### Top 10 Total

In the Initial Phase, ten genres were represented on the Top 10 Total list. Two soap opera genres accounted for 18% of the titles (soap: 10%, telenovela: 8%). Six drama genres accounted for 48% of the titles (with crime alone making up 30%), while two comedy genres made up 34% (sitcom: 32%). In the Transition Phase, eight genres were represented. Compared to the Initial Phase, the share of soap opera titles rose to 48%, with telenovelas alone rising to 46%. At the same time, the share of drama titles dropped to 16%, and the number of represented drama genres fell to four. The share of comedy titles increased slightly, reaching 36%. In the Consolidation Phase, six genres appeared on the list. Telenovela remained the only represented soap opera genre, accounting for 74% of the titles. The decline in drama genres that began in the Transition Phase continued – dropping to three genres and a 10% share – while comedy fell to 16%.

From the Initial Phase to the Consolidation Phase, the share of Western titles (predominantly dramas) decreased from 56% to 10%, while the share of non-Western titles increased from 2% to 70%. From the Transition Phase to the Consolidation Phase, the share of Turkish titles (exclusively telenovelas) rose from 32% to 58%. Titles from the former Yugoslavia were mostly sitcoms from Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose share increased from 2% in the Initial Phase to 12% in the Consolidation Phase. As non-Western titles gained prominence, the share of Croatian titles fell from 42% in the Initial Phase to 20% in the Consolidation Phase (see Table 1).

Table 1. Top 10 Total: Percentage of Titles (%) by Genre and Country of Origin Across Three Phases

Genres	Initial Phase		Transition Phase		Consolidation Phase	
	Titles (%)	Origin of titles (%)	Titles	Origin of titles (%)	Titles	Origin of titles (%)
<b>Soap opera</b>	18		48		74	
Telenovela	8	HR 8	46	HR 14 TR 32	74	HR 12 TR 58 ES 2 IT 2
Soap	10	IT 8 USA 2	2	IT 2	0	
<b>Drama</b>	48		16		10	
Crime	30	USA 16 UK 4 CA 6 AT 2 DE 2	10	USA 10	4	IT 4
Action-adventure	6	USA 4 UK 2	2	DE 2	2	USA 2



Genres	Initial Phase		Transition Phase		Consolidation Phase	
	Titles (%)	Origin of titles (%)	Titles	Origin of titles (%)	Titles	Origin of titles (%)
War	2	USA 2	0		0	
History	4	HR 4	0		0	
SF	4	USA 4	2	USA 2	0	
Soap drama <sup>3</sup>	2	USA 2	2	RS 2	0	
TV musical	0		0		4	HR 4
<b>Comedy</b>	34		36		16	
Sitcom	32	HR 28 SAD 2 BiH 2	30	HR 20 BiH 10	14	HR 2 BiH 12
Milieu comedy-drama <sup>4</sup>	2	HR 2	4	HR 4	2	HR 2
Romcom	0		2	HR 2	0	

Legend: AT = Austria; BiH = Bosnia and Hercegovina; CA = Canada; DE = Germany; ES = Spain; HR = Croatia; IT = Italy; USA = United States; RS = Serbia; TR = Turkey; UK = United Kingdom.

Soap opera ratings on the Top 10 Total list in the Initial Phase were 18.90% AMR but dropped to 12.85% in the Consolidation Phase. This decline coincided with a significant increase in the number of telenovela episodes on the list – from 685 in the Initial Phase to 2,734 in the Transition Phase and 3,005 in the Consolidation Phase. The rating gap between viewers with primary education or less (PE) and those with higher education (HE) was substantial, as telenovelas have always been considered a lowbrow genre, and it widened over time: from 10.11 percentage points in the Initial Phase, to 11.97 in the Transition Phase, and 15.86 in the Consolidation Phase (based on episode-level AMR%).

Drama AMR% peaked in the Initial Phase at 17.55%, when drama genres were most widely represented. Among secondary (SE) and HE groups, drama consistently outperformed both soap operas and comedies. In the Transition Phase, drama remained the top-rated genre for SE and HE audiences, with 10.65% AMR. In the Consolidation Phase, drama reached 11.34% AMR, though its audience base shifted. Only two crime dramas remained on the Top 10 list – both European hybrids incorporating telenovela conventions and appealing primarily to PE viewers. Middlebrow Western detective series (see Jenner, 2022), previously popular among SE and HE viewers, had virtually disappeared. Similarly, the domestic TV musical adopted telenovela tropes and attracted mainly PE audiences (e.g., *Stella*).

<sup>3</sup> "Soap drama" is a relatively recent genre within the drama genre group. It may be understood as drama in the narrower sense, although it can incorporate certain themes from soap operas and comedic codes. It deals with major and meaningful issues through the lens of an individual's personal life (Creeber, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> "Milieu comedy-drama" is the operational term for a local genre within the comedy genre group. It includes series of higher cultural value, such as *Crno-bijeli svijet*, *Prosjaci i sinovi*, *Velo misto*, *Grlom u jagode*, and others. Through a blend of comedy and drama, these series vividly portray specific mentalities, local environments, and historical periods. They are perceived as authentic, multi-layered depictions of a given local milieu and feature a broad spectrum of archetypal characters emerging from 'our environment'.

Comedy achieved the most balanced ratings across educational groups, but disparities widened over time. Sitcoms increasingly acquired a lowbrow profile. The rating gap between PE and HE viewers grew from 4.62 percentage points in the Initial Phase, to 6.74 in the Transition Phase, and 9.70 in the Consolidation Phase. The Consolidation Phase Top 10 was dominated by a BiH sitcom, and the humour in most Croatian sitcoms likewise appealed most to PE viewers. Only one Western sitcom appeared on the list (*Sex and the City*, Initial Phase), attracting mainly HE viewers (Total: 15.12%; PE: 13.02%; SE: 15.93%; HE: 17.31% AMR). In contrast, the underrepresented milieu comedy-drama – represented solely by *Crno-bijeli svijet* in the Consolidation Phase – was most popular among HE viewers (Total: 12.40%; PE: 8.25%; SE: 12.88%; HE: 17.68% AMR). See Table 2 for detailed AMR% values across all educational subgroups and phases.

Alongside changes in genre distribution, there was also a moderate decline in overall AMR% on the Top 10 Total list – dropping from 15.47% in the Initial Phase to 12.41% in the Consolidation Phase. However, this decline was not uniform across educational groups. AMR% increased among PE viewers (from 16.77% to 19.04%) but declined sharply among HE viewers (from 13.84% to 6.58%) and moderately among SE viewers (from 14.87% to 10.62%).

Over time, the number of episodes per season doubled – from 360 in the Initial Phase, to 675 in the Transition Phase, and 768 in the Consolidation Phase. This growth was primarily driven by the expansion of telenovelas and, in the Consolidation Phase, by the introduction of daily rebroadcasts of the BiH sitcom *Lud, zburjen, normalan* in key evening slots, matching the daily scheduling pattern of telenovelas (148 episodes per season).

### Top 11-20 Total

This section analyses the less-watched Top 11–20 list, ranked by AMR%, revealing distinct patterns in genre distribution and audience structure. On this less-watched list, crime series dominate, followed by sitcoms and telenovelas. However, the crime genre – which was more popular among SE and HE viewers – showed a marked decline in share (from 52% in the Initial Phase to 24% in the Consolidation Phase). Sitcoms increased modestly, from 14% in the Initial Phase to 20% in the Consolidation Phase, while telenovelas rose from 14% in the Transition Phase to 22% in the Consolidation Phase. Western titles (mostly dramas) declined sharply – from 80% in the Initial Phase to 32% in the Consolidation Phase. Non-Western titles were absent in the Initial Phase but made up 26% of the titles in the Consolidation Phase. The share of domestic titles rose from 20% in the Initial Phase to 42% in the Consolidation Phase, as many of these dropped out of the Top 10 and into this lower-rated tier.

The overall rating of this list declined more steeply than for the Top 10 (Initial Phase: 10.36%, Transition Phase: 8.13%, Consolidation Phase: 5.99% AMR). Ratings became increasingly concentrated around telenovelas from the Top 10 list and the higher-ranked titles in the 11–20 range, where sitcoms and telenovelas popular among PE viewers predominated. In the Consolidation Phase, the number of episodes rose (Initial Phase:

**Table 2. Top 10 Total: Average Minute Ratings (AMR%) by Genre and Educational Subgroup Across Phases**

Genre	Initial Phase			Transition Phase			Consolidation Phase					
	Total	PE	SE	HE	Total	PE	SE	HE	Total	PE	SE	HE
<i>Soap opera</i>	18.90	23.69	14.88	15.63	12.60	18.06	9.47	9.40	12.85	20.55	10.65	6.57
Soap	16.04	20.56	13.27	14.76	10.38	15.36	6.97	9.64	-	-	-	-
Telenovela	21.75	26.81	16.49	16.49	14.82	20.76	11.96	9.16	12.85	20.55	10.65	6.57
Telenovela per episode	21.65	26.56	16.45	16.45	15.26	21.59	12.35	9.62	13.72	22.64	11.24	6.78
<i>Drama</i>	17.55	17.43	17.78	17.10	10.65	9.04	11.61	11.45	11.34	14.78	10.95	5.89
Action-adventure	13.93	12.74	15.11	12.59	9.35	8.98	9.87	8.37	8.46	10.43	8.82	4.09
Crime	12.49	11.50	13.40	11.71	10.81	8.21	11.83	14.19	11.38	13.25	11.85	6.81
History	31.28	36.10	28.40	29.71	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
War	21.45	21.71	21.94	19.04	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
SF	12.70	9.76	14.67	13.18	10.35	7.21	12.04	12.64	-	-	-	-
Soap drama	13.46	12.75	13.14	16.39	12.09	11.74	12.71	10.61	-	-	-	-
TV musical	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	14.19	20.65	12.17	6.78
<i>Comedy</i>	13.29	14.74	12.55	12.28	12.53	12.30	11.05	10.50	11.55	11.63	11.25	11.49
Millieu comedy-drama	11.38	12.00	10.88	11.70	10.93	12.80	9.91	9.59	12.40	8.25	12.88	17.68
Romcom	-	-	-	-	11.84	13.72	10.64	11.22	-	-	-	-
Sitcom	15.20	17.48	14.22	12.86	14.12	17.42	12.61	10.68	10.42	15.00	9.61	5.30

271; Transition Phase: 270; Consolidation Phase: 412). This increase resulted not only from the inclusion of soap operas but also from the practice of daily reruns of long-running detective series in weekday prime-time slots. For instance, in the 2017/2018 season, 353 episodes of *Navy CIS* and 160 episodes of *The Mentalist* were included on the list, although *The Mentalist* had been listed with 116 episodes in a previous season. Similar practices applied to Western middlebrow sitcoms which, although not included on the list, followed similar scheduling patterns. For genre and country-of-origin shares, see Table 3; for genre ratings, see Table 4.

Table 3. Top 11-20 Total: Share (%) of Titles by Genre and Country of Origin Across Phases

Genres	Initial Phase		Transition Phase		Consolidation Phase	
	Titles (%)	Origin of titles (%)	Titles	Origin of titles (%)	Titles	Origin of titles (%)
<b>Soap opera</b>	6		14		24	
Telenovela	0		14	HR 2 TR 6 IND 2 RS 4	22	HR 10 TR 12
Soap	6	HR 4 IT 2	0		2	HR 2
<b>Drama</b>	78		68		42	
Crime	52	USA 32 HR 4 D 14 UK 2	40	USA 36 HR 2 UK 2	24	USA 10 UK 10 AUS 2 HR 2
Action-adventure	8	USA 6 D 2	0		2	USA 2
911 (rescue series)	6	USA 6	0		0	
Hospital drama	6	USA 6	6	USA 6	2	USA 2
History	2	HR 2	6	DE 2 HR 2 USA 2	3	TR 2 HR 2 IT 2
Soap drama	2	SAD 2	10	USA 6 HR 2 SRB 2	2	SRB 2
Costume drama	0		2	UK 2	2	AUS 2
Horror	0		2	USA 2	0	
Documentary drama	0		2	HR 2	2	HR 2
SF	2	SAD 2	0		0	
Political drama	0		0		2	HR 2



Genres	Initial Phase		Transition Phase		Consolidation Phase	
	Titles (%)	Origin of titles (%)	Titles	Origin of titles (%)	Titles	Origin of titles (%)
<b>Comedy</b>	16		18		34	
Sitcom	14	HR 8 UK 6	14	HR 14	20	HR 12 BiH 8
Milieu comedy-drama	2	HR 2	2	HR 2	10	HR 10
Mockumentary	0		2	HR 2	0	
Sketch comedy	0		0	HR	4	UK 2 SRB 2

*Legend:* AT = Austria; AU = Australia; BiH = Bosnia and Hercegovina; DE = Germany; HR = Croatia; IN = India; IT = Italy; USA = United States; RS = Serbia; TR = Turkey; UK = United Kingdom.

### Lists of Educational Groups

In addition to the Total lists, Top 10 and Top 11-20 lists were also analysed for three educational subgroups: PE, SE and HE. These lists reveal clear differences in genre preferences, country of origin, and ratings. The most pronounced contrasts were observed between the PE and HE lists.

On the Top 10 PE list, a shift occurred from domestic dominance (62% of titles in the Initial Phase) to non-Western dominance (72% in the Consolidation Phase), along with the rise of the telenovela as the dominant genre (80%). The overall AMR% of the PE list increased over time. In contrast, the Top 10 HE list featured the smallest share of non-Western titles (24% in the Transition Phase and 34% in the Consolidation Phase) and the highest share of Western titles (66% in the Initial Phase and 42% in the Consolidation Phase), with drama consistently dominant. This was the only list in which Western titles remained dominant in the Consolidation Phase, and it was the list with the steepest drop in AMR%. The Top 10 SE list also reflects a marked shift: Western titles dominated the Initial Phase (64%), while non-Western titles dominated the Consolidation Phase (68%). Telenovelas overtook drama as the leading genre (see Table 5).

Table 4. Genre Ratings (AMR%) for Top 11-20 Television Programmes by Educational Group Across Phases

Genre	Initial Phase			Transition Phase			Consolidation Phase		
	Total	PE	SE	HE	Total	PE	SE	HE	HE
<b>Soap opera</b>	10.05	13.17	8.84	6.34	8.05	9.47	7.48	5.48	4.15
Soap	10.05	13.17	8.84	6.34	-	-	-	-	4.53
Telenovela	-	-	-	-	8.05	9.74	7.48	5.48	3.76
<b>Drama</b>	10.48	10.28	10.62	10.40	7.97	7.49	8.14	8.31	5.05
Crime	10.51	9.37	11.49	9.71	7.98	6.21	8.92	9.31	5.74
Action-adventure	11.98	10.83	12.56	12.01	-	-	-	-	4.73
911 (rescue series)	9.93	8.01	11.47	9.28	-	-	-	-	-
Hospital drama	9.86	8.54	10.14	12.31	8.84	7.05	9.57	11.03	6.45
Soap drama	11.80	14.27	11.19	8.02	7.97	6.34	8.38	8.86	5.02
History	10.10	11.76	8.25	12.64	7.91	8.12	7.99	6.98	4.56
Costume drama	-	-	-	-	8.45	8.35	7.34	12.63	5.40
Horror	-	-	-	-	7.62	7.27	8.37	5.67	-
Documentary drama	-	-	-	-	7.04	9.09	6.40	3.70	2.12
SF	9.17	9.17	9.26	8.85	-	-	-	-	-
Political drama	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Comedy</b>	10.26	12.08	9.22	9.62	8.84	9.30	8.56	8.67	6.42
Sitcom	9.38	8.94	9.65	9.66	8.58	10.86	7.43	6.58	4.71
Milieu comedy-drama	11.13	15.21	8.79	9.58	9.93	10.86	9.39	9.63	4.80
Mockumentary	-	-	-	-	8.01	6.19	8.87	9.80	5.55
Sketch comedy	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
									3.78
									5.08
									6.84
									5.35
									6.08
									7.75
									7.16
									9.53
									6.64
									5.21
									6.87
									5.74
									6.84
									5.08
									4.71
									4.80
									5.55
									-
									3.78

Table 5. Top Lists of Educational Groups: List Ratings (AMR%), Genre Group Ratings (AMR%) and Shares (%), and Number of Episodes per Season

	Initial Phase	Transition Phase	Consolidation Phase
<b>Top 10 PE</b>			
AMR%			
Top 10 PE	17.44	17.72	19.33
Drama	16.64	10.19	15.64
Comedy	16.46	15.71	16.00
Soap opera	19.99	20.36	20.03
Genres share (%)			
Drama	34	4	10
Comedy	40	48	10
Soap opera	26	48	80
Episodes per season	469	689	807
<b>Top 11-20 PE</b>			
AMR%			
Top 11-20 PE	9.77	8.06	7.38
Drama	9.83	7.74	5.32
Comedy	9.84	7.82	8.26
Soap opera	8.79	8.93	8.24
Genres share (%)			
Drama	86	62	28
Comedy	8	14	46
Soap opera	6	24	26
Episodes per season	220	327	335
<b>Top 10 SE</b>			
AMR%			
Top 10 SE	15.08	12.20	10.68
Drama	14.85	11.08	11.37
Comedy	15.70	12.50	9.78
Soap opera	16.12	12.68	10.81
Genres share (%)			
Drama	60	26	10
Comedy	24	34	18
Soap opera	16	40	72
Episodes per season	348	629	747
<b>Top 11-20 SE</b>			
AMR%			
Top 11-20 SE	10.86	8.39	5.59
Drama	11.19	8.45	5.07
Comedy	10.23	8.38	5.94
Soap opera	9.63	7.91	6.06
Genres share (%)			
Drama	68	70	44



Comedy	28	14	30
Soap opera	4	16	26
Episodes per season	277	243	457
<b>Top 10 HE</b>			
AMR%			
Top 10 HE	14.98	11.66	7.60
Drama	14.87	11.42	6.92
Comedy	13.77	11.90	9.07
Soap opera	16.23	12.09	7.94
Genres share (%)			
Drama	58	56	46
Comedy	26	24	12
Soap opera	16	20	42
Episodes per season	321	393	490
<b>Top 11-20 HE</b>			
AMR%			
Top 11-20 HE	10.33	8.04	5.36
Drama	10.24	8.13	5.40
Comedy	10.76	8.21	5.05
Soap opera	-	7.69	5.45
Genres share (%)			
Drama	82	56	60
Comedy	18	20	16
Soap opera	0	24	24
Episodes per season	192	359	396

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The analysis of average minute ratings (AMR%) for prime-time series on national terrestrial channels between 2003 and 2018, based on a representative sample of Croatian adults, reveals major shifts in genre distribution. The genre diversity that characterised the Top 10 Total list in the Initial Phase was gradually replaced by the dominance of a single genre – the telenovela – in the Consolidation Phase. These findings confirm the hypothesis. More broadly, the results indicate tectonic shifts not only in genre composition but also in the cultural orientation and legitimization of universally accessible popular series. These shifts unfolded in parallel with structural transformations in the television system itself.

*Genre diversity and Western dominance in the Initial Phase.* In this phase, ten genres appeared on the Top 10 list. Crime and sitcom – the most popular and enduring genres of Western linear television (Creeber, 2015) – each accounted for about 30% of the titles. As in Western markets (e.g., Stoll, 2021), drama held the largest share; it was also the most genre-diverse category and consisted largely of Western productions. Comedy, the second most prevalent genre group, was primarily represented by domestic series focused on family life and local communities. Soap operas had the smallest overall share,

comprising a roughly equal mix of Western soaps and domestic telenovelas. The share of domestic titles was 42%, and that of Western titles was 56%. These figures closely mirrored the overall ratio between Western and domestic series during socialism, when Croatian television culture was ambitious, transnational, open, and oriented towards the West (Mihelj & Huxtable, 2018).

*Dominance of the telenovela and decline of drama in the Consolidation Phase.* In this phase, only six genres remained on the Top 10 list, with the telenovela overwhelmingly dominant – accounting for 74% of all titles (Turkey: 58%; Croatia: 12%; the West: 4%).<sup>5</sup> As a lowbrow genre focused on romantic and family relationships (Allen, 1995), the telenovela rose to prominence through strategic scheduling in key weekday evening slots on generalist commercial channels, where it was heavily concentrated. This was accompanied by a sharp decline in the presence of middlebrow and highbrow drama and comedy in the same slot – a period marked by a scarcity of both. These shifts were most evident in the trajectory of drama. Its share dropped drastically, and the few remaining titles were predominantly lowbrow. This stands in stark contrast to trends in Western markets, where serial drama has flourished on SVoD platforms (Lotz & Lobato, 2023) while remaining the most watched prime-time genre group on linear TV (e.g., McElroy & Noonan, 2019; TV Series Finale, n.d.). This is especially true of detective series (Creeber, 2015) and other professional dramas (Isani, 2005), which go beyond the private sphere to address social issues (Creeber, 2015). In Croatia, the absence of new prime-time drama left middlebrow – and, to some extent, highbrow – audiences underserved, particularly among viewers disinclined to watch domestic and Turkish telenovelas (Karuza Podgorelec, 2023).

*The decline of comedy and the rise of lowbrow preferences.* The share of comedy on the Top 10 list halved, as domestic titles were increasingly displaced by comedies from Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this shift, the dominant family sitcom took on a distinctly lowbrow profile. A similar pattern appeared on the lower-rated Top 11–20 list: a rising share of non-Western telenovelas and sitcoms, a sharp drop in Western drama and comedy, and waning interest in domestic series that neither followed the telenovela formula nor aligned with lowbrow taste – especially compared to their non-Western counterparts.

*Narrative shifts from public engagement to private sphere.* Under the monopolistic system, domestic series – then limited to drama and comedy – typically blended personal and public themes, ranging from history and politics to professional life. These narratives did not follow soap opera conventions (Mihelj & Huxtable, 2018, pp. 159-161, 165-167). Professional dramas like police procedurals and hospital dramas were imported from the West (Vučetić, 2018). In the early decades of the 21st century, popular terrestrial television gradually abandoned narratives centred on professions and broader social concerns, shifting instead to the private sphere. Unlike Western trends (Creeber, 2004; Prado et al., 2020), Croatian broadcasters relied on a narrow genre and geo-cultural repertoire of low cultural value, tailored to the tastes of those with the lowest cultural capital. This was expressed through two dominant discourses: the telenovela – especially the culturally

<sup>5</sup> Although the telenovela was created as a distinctly non-Western genre, local adaptations also began to develop in Europe by the late 20th century under the influence of the Latin American telenovela, particularly in countries culturally proximate to Latin America (O'Donnell, 1999).

proximate Turkish variant (Karuza Podgorelec, 2023) marked by a simplified, conservative melodrama that fuses glamour with traditional values (Gündüz, 2020; Kaynak, 2015; Panjeta, 2014) – and the local doorstep comedy, including both domestic and ex-Yugoslav productions. In some cases, the two were combined into hybrids (e.g., Pavlič, 2014).

*Educational and platform-based audience stratification.* In the Initial Phase, AMR% for the Top 10 Total list was relatively similar across all educational groups. Over time, however, ratings among the least educated rose, while they declined with rising levels of education – so that by the Consolidation Phase, ratings among the most educated had halved. A similar trend was evident in the Top 11–20 and in all subgroup lists: AMR% fell as education rose and increased among the least educated. This outflow of educated viewers from terrestrial television is clearly linked to the growing availability of series on Pay TV and SVoD. Media digitisation and content abundance have accelerated taste polarisation, with younger and more educated audiences adopting new viewing practices and embracing more complex narratives. Niche channels and SVoD platforms have responded accordingly, tailoring their offerings to these audiences (Lotz, 2018; Lotz & Lobato, 2023). In Croatia, however, this shift progressed more slowly than in Western markets (see HAKOM, 2011, 2019, 2022; Chalaby, 2023 vs. Ipsos, 2019, 2023; Stoll, 2024). Domestic terrestrial channels thus had greater potential to bring together diverse audiences. My findings show that middlebrow and highbrow drama, as well as milieu comedy-drama (a genre of higher cultural value), retained the strongest loyalty among the most educated – even in the Consolidation Phase. This suggests that terrestrial TV had the potential to appeal more broadly – through greater genre diversity and higher-quality content. Lizardo and Skiles (2009) found that linear television consumption among highbrow audiences is closely tied to the level of commercialisation and production quality. In Croatia, an Ipsos survey from the Consolidation Phase – mainly among SE and HE viewers – showed that Turkish telenovelas received the lowest quality ratings. Moreover, 54% of respondents wanted fewer Turkish telenovelas. While 46% expressed a desire for more available channels, 42% were unwilling or unable to pay extra for them, citing economic and other reasons (Ipsos, 2016, pp. 16, 24).

*Cultural reorientation towards the Balkans.* The share of Western series dropped to 10%, while 70% came from just two countries culturally tied to the Balkans (Švob-Đokić, 2001): Turkey and neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina. The share of domestic titles halved. As in the broader Balkan region – more neutrally referred to as Southeastern Europe (Švob-Đokić, 2001) – where cultural policy is weak, domestic creative industries underdeveloped, and foreign content dominant, commercial broadcasters increasingly turned to soap operas (Primorac, 2014; Zajović, 2014). In Croatia, this marked a shift in the cultural orientation of universally accessible popular series. These shows mediatized the construction of a post-socialist, socio-culturally specific “mixed society,” polarised between traditionalism, cultural closure, and Balkan orientation on the one hand, and openness and alignment with Western values on the other (Tomić-Koludrović & Petrić, 2007). The result is a strong popularisation of traditionalism, closure, Eastward orientation (towards the Balkans), and a narrowing of the ideological spectrum, while earlier tendencies towards cultural openness, Western orientation, and worldview diversity are

being marginalised. In this context, the Turkish telenovela – together with the patriarchal, conservative values it conveys (Gündüz, 2020; Kaynak, 2015) – became the dominant “cultural intermediary” and “taste-maker” (Bourdieu, 1984, pp. 325–326), much as Western drama once was (Mihelj & Huxtable, 2018, p. 181). It became a new benchmark of high-end television (Panjeta, 2014), while viewers with Western or ‘cosmopolitan’ middlebrow and highbrow tastes are increasingly marginalised (Krolo, Tonković & Vozab, 2023).

*Conclusion: genre concentration and paradoxes of media pluralism.* Between 2003 and 2018, Croatian national television underwent a profound shift in genre structure, audience composition, and cultural orientation. Genre diversity declined, and the Turkish telenovela became dominant. Scheduling logic and cultural proximity took precedence over production quality and diversity, leading to the marginalisation of drama and the decline of comedy. Educated viewers gradually abandoned terrestrial television, while commercial broadcasters increasingly targeted less educated audiences with a narrower and lower-value repertoire. Despite technological convergence, Croatian broadcasters did not follow Western production trends. Instead, they adopted programming strategies typical of low-cost, culturally proximate Eastern markets. This shift redefined television aesthetics and value hierarchies, reinforcing a lowbrow mainstream and narrowing the symbolic space of national terrestrial television. Such content concentration stands in direct contrast to the ideals of media diversity. The Croatian case shows that ownership pluralism does not guarantee a “diversity of choice” (Meier & Trappel, 1998, p. 42). Competition alone cannot ensure content diversity or quality – often the reverse is true (Meier & Trappel, 1998, p. 56). Van Cuilenburg (1999, pp. 196–197) describes this “diversity paradox”: competitive markets tend to homogenise content (“more diversity = less diversity”). Our findings support Peruško’s (2013a, pp. 49–51) argument that Western liberal models cannot be simply transposed onto post-socialist systems undergoing rapid change. Aligning democracy with the market does not yield equivalent results in societies with different value systems. Imitative policies may fail to foster the content, aesthetic, and ideological diversity essential to media pluralism and a vibrant television culture (Peruško, 2013b; Peruško & Čuvalo, 2014). The Croatian case also echoes Van Cuilenburg’s (2007) critique of liberal pluralism as a model that overemphasises market logic and quantitative indicators while undervaluing content, cultural meaning, and symbolic power. He contends that genuine pluralism requires both internal diversity and access to symbolic resources necessary for cultural legitimization – conditions especially hard to meet in small or peripheral media systems.

Previous studies on the transformation of the Croatian television system and culture have not examined genre diversity, cultural valuation, or the cultural influence of serial fiction in depth (e.g., Peruško & Čuvalo, 2014; Roller, 2014). As in broader post-socialist media scholarship, television series – and popular television more broadly (Havens et al., 2012) – have remained marginal in academic inquiry. Most studies have focused instead on journalism, democracy, and freedom of expression (Peruško et al., 2022). It is hoped that this study will help bring serial fiction – and other forms of popular television – into sharper focus in future research on the Croatian media system and television culture.

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# MEDIJSKI PLURALIZAM I RAZNOLIKOST ŽANROVA TV SERIJA: PROMJENE U HRVATSKOJ TELEVIZIJSKOJ KULTURI OD 2003. DO 2018. GODINE

Vesna Karuza Podgorelec

**SAŽETAK** Početkom 21. stoljeća hrvatski se televizijski sustav radikalno mijenja, što dovodi do značajnih promjena u televizijskoj kulturi. Ovo istraživanje analizira razdoblje od 2003. do 2018., s fokusom na žanrovsku raznolikost, obrazovnu strukturu publike i podrijetlo popularnih TV serija. Na temelju sekundarne statističke analize gledanosti agencije Nielsen kod odrasle populacije analizira se po deset najgledanijih serija po sezoni, uz dodatne uvide iz šire liste dvadeset najgledanijih naslova. Rezultati pokazuju tektonske promjene u žanrovskoj strukturi, kulturnom usmjerenju i kulturnoj legitimaciji popularnih serija. Žanrovska raznolikost zamijenjena je koncentracijom telenovela. Zapadne produkcije gube primat, dominiraju turske serije, naslovi s Istoka istiskuju domaće naslove, a popularne serije postale su prizemne (engl. lowbrow).

## KLJUČNE RIJEČI

TELEVIZIJSKE SERIJE, TELEVIZIJSKA KULTURA, ŽANR, TELEVIZIJSKE PREFERENCIJE, KULTURNI KAPITAL

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