

From the Advisory Board: Competition, Sovereignty and Cultural Futures in the Streaming Era

By Sarah Baumgartner

“Culture is the ‘factory of dissent,’ which is essential to a pluralistic democracy.”

Culture does more than entertain; it actively produces questioning, criticism and alternative viewpoints that keep democratic societies vibrant. By framing cultural production as a “factory of dissent,” Juliette Prisard highlights how artistic works generate the debate and pluralism needed to challenge dominant narratives, safeguard freedoms and nurture informed citizenship. In the European audiovisual context, this insight underlines the importance of protecting diverse cultural expression from homogenising pressures of global platform capitalism, ensuring that film and media continue to serve as arenas for public scrutiny and democratic participation.

The REBOOT Horizon Europe project brings together scholars, policymakers, industry leaders and civil-society actors to rethink the future of European cinema in the streaming era. Its core premise is that the battle for competitiveness now takes place in the channels of circulation, where a handful of U.S. technology giants control the algorithms, infrastructure and financing that determine which films reach audiences. By exposing the structural asymmetries between global platform capitalism and Europe’s public-service ethos, REBOOT aims to devise policies that preserve cultural sovereignty, democratic participation and ecological responsibility while enabling a vibrant audiovisual market.

The initiative brought together diverse perspectives. As the REBOOT project is coming to a close at the end of January four key contributors - Ufuoma Akpojivi, Rodrigo Gómez, David B. Nieborg, Juliette Prisard and Iris Zappe-Heller - who serve as members of the project’s Advisory Board have shared their assessments and critical reflections on the project’s direction and findings. Each of them highlights a distinct yet complementary challenge facing the European audiovisual sector: the need for a European-run streaming corporation and a redefinition of competition; the threat that AI-driven platforms pose to data, cultural and economic sovereignty; the inseparability of culture, democracy and ecology as pillars of a free and competitive Europe; and the ethical re-balancing of competition toward collaborative, sustainability-focused models. Together, these contributions set the intellectual agenda for REBOOT’s policy proposals, which seek to align regulation, public-service investment and interdisciplinary research with the twin goals of safeguarding Europe’s cultural identity and ensuring its long-term economic resilience.

Rodrigo Gómez reframes the REBOOT debate around circulation rather than production, emphasizing that U.S. streaming platforms now serve as the core distribution infrastructure that determines visibility and financing for audiovisual works across borders. He proposes a European public-service streaming corporation to guarantee discoverability for European works, operate under public-interest governance, and collaborate internationally to build a “mundialized” audiovisual citizenship. Gómez stresses that competitiveness must be redefined as a political-cultural project that couples regulation, investment in circulation infrastructures, and education, rather than simply emulating U.S. industrial models.

Building on this focus on distribution, David B. Nieborg highlights how platform concentration and the rapid spread of generative AI are eroding Europe’s data, cultural, and economic sovereignty. He notes that most leading AI firms are headquartered in the United States or China, a geographic concentration that pressures linguistic diversity and the distinctive cultural ecosystems of European audiovisual production. He calls for trans-national scholarly networks and policy-research initiatives to map platform power, trace AI diffusion, and assess their impact on audiovisual economies.

From there, Juliette Prisard frames culture, democracy, and ecology as an inseparable triptych that must guide Europe’s competitiveness. She describes, as mentioned at the outset, a free, pluralistic cultural sphere as a “factory of dissent” essential for authentic democratic debate, while pointing out that the ecological dimension of culture - stories and images that raise environmental awareness - is largely ignored. She warns that opaque algorithms and platform oligopolies undermine both democratic debate and ecological consciousness, urging a culturally-centric policy response to technological upheaval.

From a Global-South perspective, Ufuoma Akpojivi reconceptualises competition as ethically grounded collaboration rather than destructive rivalry. Drawing on media-technology shifts across Africa, Europe, and the Americas, he suggests that competition must be rebalanced within the ecological space of media and creative industries, promoting partnership to achieve sustainability. His vision calls for a competition ethic that leverages collective strengths to address societal challenges, ensuring the media sector remains viable and socially responsible.

Iris Zappe-Heller concludes by emphasizing that the involvement and empowerment of young people is crucial for the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of the European film industry; without youth audiences and participants, cinema risks losing its role as a shared cultural space and a forum for shaping European values and identities.

Together, these perspectives outline a roadmap that couples targeted regulation, public-service investment and interdisciplinary research to protect Europe's cultural identity while ensuring long-term economic resilience. By aligning technological innovation with democratic values and ecological stewardship, REBOOT aspires to transform Europe's audiovisual sector into a model of responsible, inclusive competitiveness.

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