

New Directions for Public Broadcasting in Flanders and the Netherlands

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Is public broadcasting an outdated concept? Looking at the discussions which have been taking place on this theme in the Netherlands and Belgium over the past fifteen years one would not immediately give an affirmative answer. In general one could say that there is still strong support for public broadcasting in both countries. Taking into consideration the enormous commercial pressures on the media market the market shares of public broadcasting are still relatively high in both countries. And in the Netherlands still more than three million people belong to a broadcasting association.

But if you look at the discussions in politics, newspapers and periodicals on the renewal of finance for public broadcasting (which has been put into effect in Flanders in 2006 and is due in the Netherlands in 2008) then at times the end seems near. One even hears arguments for public broadcasting to be abolished, on the grounds that such an institution cannot hold its own or maintain its distinctive character in the constantly shifting media landscape.

Such debates nowadays are principally about commerce and technology. The traditional concern over the quality of media content appears to have worn off. There is less and less concern about financial considerations taking priority over cultural and programming matters, because it is clear as daylight that commercial broadcasting supplies a huge demand. Moreover, with the developments in computer, broadcasting and telephonic techniques the power to decide the time at which, and the form in which, media content is consumed no longer lies with the producers of broadcasts but with the consumers. In addition, technology of all kinds determines the convergence of composition, selection, design and presentation of media content. The classic differences between, for instance, newspapers and broadcasting, are being blurred or indeed will probably disappear altogether. Under the influence of these two factors public broadcasting may well get the short end of the stick.

A glance at the development of the discussion on broadcasting in the longer term in both countries will show to what extent this may be true.

From monopoly to competition

Ever since broadcasting was introduced in the nineteen twenties there has been constant tension between the advocates of commercial and public broadcasting. It is salutary to remember that all over the world broadcasting began as a result of commercial attempts to use and develop a new technology. But whereas confidence in the market as the regulating mechanism for broadcasting remained strong in the United States, in Europe that confidence quickly evaporated. All kinds of regulation came into existence, resulting in public broadcasting systems which differed very considerably from country to country.

An important factor in this process was the scarcity of broadcasting frequencies. The consequence was that radio could reach virtually the whole population through just a few channels. For instance, following international agreements in 1929 the Netherlands and Belgium were each allowed two radio frequencies. This technological limitation stimulated the idea that broadcasting could have such a powerful influence on the whole nation that some measure of control by the community was needed. In the years between the wars the idea was widely held that the influence of commerce on national culture could only have dire consequences. For commerce was clearly not interested in fostering culture or in forming pluriform opinions; it was only interested in making money. Commerce would therefore only try to reach groups most favourable for this purpose; minority groups or those with less financial resources would be left out in the cold. Consequently broadcasting of real, public, distinction would have to be provided by people driven by the desire to provide high-quality programmes for the whole population.

In Britain a broadcasting organisation for 'public service' was established in 1922, which would have the sole right to produce programmes subject to the provisions of a Royal Charter. The BBC would eventually develop into the ideal type of organisation for public service broadcasting, and would be widely imitated. For example, in Belgium the Belgian

National Institute for Radio-broadcasting (NIR) was given the monopoly on transmissions in 1930. In the Netherlands transmission time was granted to broadcasting associations that, according to broadcasting regulation, were considered 'to meet the cultural and religious needs of the population, and therefore could automatically be considered to be of general benefit.' The political idea was that the sum total of these broadcasting associations would reflect the whole of Dutch culture.

Public service broadcasting organisations of this nature (the term 'public broadcasting' only came into general use outside Britain in the nineteen nineties) always had to deal with attempts to break their monopoly. To achieve this principle arguments were advanced, emphasising the importance of freedom of expression in a pluriform media system. But there were also practical arguments, such as the stimulus to economic growth that would result from airtime advertising and the rigidity of programming of public broadcasting. Following this criticism in Britain a second, commercial broadcasting cluster alongside the BBC. Was introduced in 1954 In the Netherlands the similar threatened to happen when powerful commercial lobbies appeared in the sixties. Fierce political support for the public organisations prohibited the introduction of commercial competition. Instead the broadcasting system was opened to new broadcast associations in 1967. The Broadcasting Act that came into force in that year also required more co-operation among the broadcasting associations and made advertising possible through a new public organisation: the Radio and Television Advertising Foundation (STER). In Belgium the emphasis in discussion on broadcasting was still on the influence of the various regions and cultural communities on the 'national' broadcasting organisation, renamed in 1960 as BRT/RTBF.

From the eighties onwards the argument of technological scarcity became ever weaker with the development of cable systems, satellite distribution and digital techniques for production and storage. The pressure from the commercial sector to be able to exploit the new opportunities became too strong to resist. In addition, European legislation began to stimulate competition in economic life and the free expression of opinion throughout Europe at large. This clashed more and more with national protectionist mechanisms that weren't able to keep pace with the enormous developments in technology. After an opening had once been made

for so-called 'free radio' in the seventies, commercial competition in television was eventually permitted in Belgium in 1987 (the commercial channel VTM started broadcasting in 1989). In the Netherlands this occurred in the early nineties, after commercial transmissions aimed at the Netherlands from abroad (using the so-called U-turn mechanism) had started in 1989. Since then both countries can formally be said to have a so-called dual system, in which publicly financed broadcasting functions operate alongside a number of commercial companies.

Adaptation and re-orientation in Belgium

At first it seemed that public broadcasting was being wiped out in the dual system. In Belgium in particular BRT and RTBF lost an unprecedentedly large proportion of their listeners and viewers to the commercial broadcasters such as VTM in Flanders and RTL in Wallonia. Just as in the other European countries, this led to a reconsideration of the position and significance of public broadcasting. Should the public broadcaster be satisfied with a role as a supplement to the programmes of commercial broadcasting? This would mean that public broadcasters should only provide prohibitively expensive, but culturally worth-while, productions such as serious drama and art and culture. Or should public broadcasting continue to strive for an all-inclusive place in the media landscape, addressing a broad public by means of a broad programme, just as it had done in the past?

It is noteworthy that Belgium quite quickly opted for the most radical solution. That is probably due to the unprecedented depth of the crisis that BRT found itself in the late 1990s. The 'market share' (the proportion of the public that tuned in to a programme) of the two BRT television channels had fallen in 1993 to a European all-time low of around 20%. Public radio had experienced a similar fall in public appreciation earlier. Belgian broadcasting was regarded all over Europe as the most decrepit vehicle of an outdated concept. If that tide was to be turned there needed to be drastic change. The Flemish Community decided to set firm goals in so-called 'control agreements' as a condition for making public money available. Under strict conditions public broadcasting, which became Flemish Radio and Television

Broadcasting Company (Vlaamse Radio- en Televisie Omroep –VRT) in 1997, could even acquire extra resources by means of advertising.

The Flemish public broadcasters decided on a fundamental restructuring based on market research by the Censydiam agency. That was a revolutionary move, because programming according to public preference had traditionally been seen as capitulating to commerce. Until then those who made programmes had done so only because they themselves considered them interesting, relevant and good. However, the market research showed that, as greater freedom of choice became available, listeners and viewers were increasingly tuning in to those channels that most closely matched their own taste and life-style. If you wanted to reach a particular group it made sense to know exactly what the public expected from broadcasting and what it did with it. For many programme-makers that was anathema, since in future they were forced to subordinate their ideals to the format of a channel. For instance, the format dictated that the same programme would be put out every day at the same time (so-called horizontal programming) in a specific broadcast profile that appealed to a specific group that put the rest of the public off.

This renewal process had started much earlier in radio. On 28 March 1992 BRTN started Radio Donna, which combined light news with a lot of middle-of-the-road music, selected on the basis of market research. With strong horizontal programming the new channel reached a market share of around 10% by the end of 1992. As a result of this success changes were made to other channels. In 2004 the five Flemish public radio channels Radio 1, Radio 2, Radio 3 (Klara, since 2000), Studio Brussel and Radio Donna reached a hitherto unheard-of high with a market share of around 73%.

Television followed the example of radio. Research in 1995 showed that the television-viewing public could be divided into six life-style groups: TV addicts, zappers, family viewers, active explorers, spontaneous epicureans and those seeking ‘added value’. VRT took the unusual decision to cease to include the first two groups among their priorities. In their overriding need for simple amusement these groups were exceptionally well provided for by commercial broadcasting. This meant that around 25% of the Flemish population would no longer be served by public broadcasting. That appeared to be a fundamental breach

of the idea that public services ought to be for everyone. But on the other hand: why should public broadcasting continue with the unwinnable battle of competition? A clear choice in programming meant that VRT would now be able to devote itself much better to satisfying the requirements of the remaining 75%. To this end the two channels were once more radically reprogrammed. From then on TV-1 aimed at the active explorers, the spontaneous epicureans and the family viewers in a schedule intended to provide 'warmth and relaxation'. The second network (Canvas) was to concern itself with information and depth. Because people did not want to abandon youth as a target group Canvas' daytime programming would be aimed exclusively at young people. The separate name 'Ketnet' was developed for this purpose.

This strategy, which resulted in sometimes drastic alterations in form and content at programme level, proved successful. In 2005 public broadcasting's market share was back up to 36%, 27% of which was attributable to TV-1. The additional advantage was that certain programmes, such as VRT-News, seemed to be much better regarded and understood than before. In an open letter of 15 May 2006 to the Flemish Government the top man at VRT, Tony Mary, could announce with pride that 'Today VRT is one of the most efficient, most innovative and highest quality broadcasters in Europe.'

It is true that the new VRT strategy caused repeated discussions to flare up with the commercial media concerns, who complained of tampering with competition. For wasn't advertising and making programmes according to format the preserve of commercial broadcasting? The commercial SBS applied great political pressure to be allowed to take over the popular Radio Donna and to restrict VRT's scope for advertising. The VMMA Group which among other things runs VTM even threatened to sell this crown jewel to a foreign partner on the grounds that, as a Flemish enterprise, its commercial potential was unduly restricted by the public regulations.

The question now – at the end of 2006 - is, how long the politicians will tolerate these seriously strained relations in the media market. In any case Minister Geert Bourgeois publically declared that the Flemish Community opts resolutely for 'a strong, high-quality public broadcasting system' as a guarantee of 'an open, respectful and tolerant Flanders.'

This reformulation of public broadcasting is a bit ironic because precisely Public Broadcasting is the subject of a rather disrespectful and intolerant debate.

Maybe Minister Bourgeois himself is partly responsible for this, because the Flemish government has drawn the financial reins unpleasantly tight for VRT. According to the Control Agreement 2008-2011 the public funding of VRT will be no more than 63% of VRT-budget in 2011, as opposed to 67% in 2006. But the solution minister Bourgeois proposed for these hidden budget cuts (VRT must extract resources from the market 'to carry out its Public Duty'), is at the same time coupled with all kinds of political interference. As an example, in September 2006 the politically composed VRT Governing Body prohibited the directors to sell previews of the popular police series *Flikken* to the commercial digital channel Belgacom-TV. According to director Tony Mary, who was dismissed at the end of 2006, this was at the instigation of minister Bourgeois, who did indeed openly encourage marketing activities on the part of VRT but was allegedly concerned with 'a new politicising of public broadcasting'.

Adaptation and re-orientation in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands the re-orientation differed in intensity and form. The reason for this was that the Broadcasting Act of 1967 had already given rise to a good deal of internal commercialisation of public broadcasting, which was known in the seventies and eighties as 'dumbing down'. That was further encouraged by the increasing funds advertising made available to public broadcasting. For instance, this extra income enabled public broadcasting to keep the broadcasting rights for the most popular football matches and major sporting events. In Belgium these had almost immediately fallen prey to commercial broadcasting. Even before the start of commercial television in 1988 their considerable financial resources had persuaded public broadcasting to take the strategic decision of setting up a third television network, to give greater potential for flexible programming.

None the less, public broadcasting experienced a fall in its audience figures. In 1990 its market share was still 75%, five years later 45%, and again ten years later 36%. The

competition also grew strongly. In 2005 alongside the three public television channels there were seven commercial channels available, grouped in three companies: RTL, SBS and Talpa. In addition they were joined by innumerable channels aimed at sub-groups via cable and satellite, some free, some paid for by viewers by means of a decoder.

The fact that public broadcasting still scored a market share of 36.1% in 2005 might actually be called a substantial achievement, not least because there was not really any unanimous public broadcasting system in the Netherlands. Indeed the very term ‘public broadcasting’ had to be dreamed up in the early nineties to demonstrate the necessary unity. But that failed to hide the fact public broadcasting was built around autonomous broadcasting associations and a general organisation (the NOS) that operated within strictly neutral rules and regulations. The internal pillarisation of broadcasting made co-operation and the development of a joint strategy considerably more difficult. But not impossible. Already in the early nineties the profiles of the five radio channels were stream-lined and the influence of so-called network co-ordinators gradually increased in television also. They monitored and encouraged a clear profile on the part of their channel, a process that brought them into daily conflict with the programme-making broadcasting associations since the latter were primarily interested in their own recognisability.

The public discussions on the broadcasting system turned into a fundamental discussion of the position of the associations in relation to more centrally driven collegiate bodies, like the NOS, the Board of Governors and the directors of the separate channels. The government considered central control to be of great strategic importance but the broadcasting associations represented a very large part of the Dutch population and the preservation of this public participation could not simply be denied. On the other hand, membership of the broadcasting associations, which had been growing constantly since 1965, was gradually falling off (see table 1). In that respect the defection of public association Veronica to commercial broadcasting in September 1995 was a blood-letting, because more than a million subscribers to *Veronica Magazine* could still be counted within the public system as members of a broadcasting association. But quite apart from that there was absolutely no doubt that the membership of all broadcasting companies was falling significantly.

Table 1: Membership figures for public broadcasting and the Dutch population 1965-2005

Year	Membership figures for all public broadcasting	Dutch population	Percentage of members of broadcasting companies in relation to population
1965	2,103,081	12,212,000	17.2
1970	2,712,916	12,958,000	20.9
1975	3,294,128	13,599,000	24.2
1980	3,890,028	14,091,000	27.6
1985	4,446,352	14,454,000	30.8
1990	4,900,871	14,893,000	32.9
1995	5,043,533	15,424,000	32.7
2000	3,893,000	15,760,000	24.7
2005	3,257,015	16,306,000	20.0

Source: Jaarverslagen omroepverenigingen, NOS Documentatie en Bibliotheek, Commissariaat voor de Media; Cebuco, HOI/Instituut voor Media Auditing

Nonetheless, it cannot be said that public broadcasting companies are totally marginal. Therefore the government used indirect means to achieve greater unity in public broadcasting. The granted greater powers to a central Board of Governors, that was appointed by the government itself. In 2000 a ‘concession grants system’ was also established, following the Belgian example. The concession grant was given for ten years to

public broadcasting as such and not to the private associations (who nevertheless received a certain broadcasting guarantee). With the abolition of the broadcasting licence fee in 2000 public grants to the broadcasting budget became a matter for political deliberation, as was particularly apparent when the Balkenende cabinets imposed new cuts on public broadcasting nearly every year from 2002 on.

The general aims laid down by government could be adjusted by means of a regular visitation. The first visitation, completed in 2004 by the Rinnooy Kan Committee, concluded that with better co-operation public broadcasting had been reasonably successful in retaining a dominant position in the market. But they also concluded that the sum was less than the separate parts. Apparently the co-operation was not visible enough for a public that primarily wanted to identify with a particular channel's profile. The tug of war in Hilversum had led to network profiles being created from combining broadcasting association programmes. Thus on Nederland-1 AVRO, KRO and NCRV co-operated with a few small, specifically religious and philosophical broadcasting companies to attract a primarily older audience. On Nederland-2 TROS, BNN, the NOS and the EO aimed to provide a broad range of programmes with a lot of sport and entertainment. On Nederland-3 VARA, VPRO and NPS served a generally better-educated public in high need for information and so-called quality programmes.

But the continuing drop in market shares and the ever-increasing competition could only lead to fundamental choices being made. In 2005 the authoritative Academic Council for Government Policy (*Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid* – WWR) published a preparatory policy study in which it spoke of 'a congealed, if not frozen, system that to a considerable extent has lost touch with a changing society.' Younger viewers in particular were ignoring public broadcast programmes in vast numbers. The Council's central recommendation was to aim public broadcasting more at certain functions that the market apparently could not cater for, or not adequately, but that were cherished by society as a whole for their contribution to democracy, pluriformity of opinion forming and cultural quality. That meant going down a route that Flemish public broadcasting had long since

embarked on: public broadcasting has no broad mission to reach every conceivable group, but only missions not adequately guaranteed by the free market.

The ideas proposed by the WWR were almost immediately translated by the State Secretary for Media Issues into practical policy. That had become more urgent because of the rapidly falling income from advertising. At the end of 2004 the new television channel, Talpa, had acquired the rights to the national football competition and the opening of this channel in August 2005 resulted in a further loss in market share for public broadcasting. The government, which was in no mind to compensate for the fall in income through extra public funding, then proposed a radical change in strategy. From 2008, under the guidance of a much more powerful Board of Governors, public broadcasting should concentrate on news (to be provided by the NOS), opinion, the arts, culture and education (to be provided by broadcasting associations and other social organisations.) Cuts would inevitably lead to the loss of programme titles and even of an entire broadcasting association. The NPS, a broadcaster without members that had split from the NOS in 1996 to specialise in art, culture and information, was to disappear after 2008. Such drastic plans even led to a broadcasting strike by programme-makers in November 2005, but much of the tension was defused by the approaching elections in which a win for the broadcasting-friendly PvdA (Labour Party) was predicted. The fall of the Balkenende cabinet in May 2006 made it difficult to see whether, or in what form, the plans for broadcasting could be moved forward.

Now much more depended on what the Board of Governors for public broadcasting could bring into practice. The Board had in fact already changed tactics in favour of a compulsory programming strategy that would subordinate the interests of broadcasting companies to central programme management. They had sought advice on this from their colleagues of the Flemish VRT with their successful marketing strategy. The dotty old lady of European broadcasting had thus become an exporter of the most innovative ideas on programming. The programming model for Dutch public broadcasting that was introduced in September 2006 closely resembled that of Flanders. The broadcasting organisations would lose forever their permanent right to a 'home' television network. From then on channels were programmed according to the same life-styles as Flemish television channels were founded on, although

the Netherlands would have to retain three public channels. The first network became a family channel aimed at ‘social cohesion, social experiences, respect and cordiality’. The second network was to be primarily ‘participatory, socially engaged, meaningful, providing depth and stimulus.’ Finally, the third network would need to be ‘young, innovative, surprising, wayward, dynamic and full of curiosity.’ And all that on substantially less money, because in the next few years income from advertising is expected to drop by around 100 million euros.

The future

The recent broadcasting history of Flanders and the Netherlands confirms the trends that are to be seen everywhere in Western democracies. In almost all countries a liberal media system dominates, in which ever-increasing freedom of choice on the part of consumers (viewers, listeners, internet users) is forcing providers to make enormous changes. Old political considerations which protected certain content (for instance the preservation of cultural identity or continuing representation of minority groups) seem to play an ever-diminishing role, and some would even go so far as to say this role is played out.

Three important developments are responsible for this. The first is that technology has made possible a strongly increasing commercial interest in media. A second development is closely related to this. Due to heightened competition there is talk of a move from *broadcasting* to *narrowcasting*, that is to say that broadcasting companies will have to serve the needs of ever smaller groups of the public, some of them with very specific requirements, instead of the entire population. The third development is that through internet technology and the digitalising of television these same small subsections of the public can consume their own media at times that suit them. ‘Media on demand’ requires not only a re-orientation in programming practice but also massive investment in technology.

The public broadcasting companies have each reacted in their own way to these three developments. Where VRT focused almost entirely on a new marketing strategy, the Dutch broadcasters invested more in adapting to new technology. Partly due to extra money for

innovation the free repeat-on-request-site *uitzendinggemist.nl* was able to make huge developments. The first digital web channels in Dutch public broadcasting also came into being, on which for 24 hrs a day viewers could watch whole programmes devoted to specific themes such as History, News, Consumers, Documentary, Animals and Nature, Museums and Experimental Music. In that respect Flanders lags behind once more. In November 2006 the start of a Belgian digital channel for culture for example was postponed indefinitely because the VRT found itself in financial difficulties through years of drawing on reserves.

In all cases commercial broadcasting companies have gained considerable ground, because they appear to react more adequate to the need for narrowcasting and media-on-demand. But experience also shows that there really is still an important role for broadcasting companies who don't regard earning money for their share-holders as their principal objective. That view is also wholeheartedly recognised by the most diehard liberal and even by the owners of commercial broadcasting companies. Obviously, there are significant differences in the exact undertakings that can qualify for public finance.

There are two main schools of thought on this. On the one side are the minimalists who will allow public broadcasting only where the market cannot supply the need. These are not only the liberals who see the free market as the solution to all problems and who are supported by commercial media companies who invoke the free trade of goods and services. The breaking up of public broadcasting companies who inhibit competition is also called for by people who for years have been shouting that public broadcasting is a cover for a leftist plot that conceals unpalatable opinions or pushes these opinions into the background. What all these groups are aiming for is public broadcasting that has only marginal, and therefore inexpensive, responsibilities in the area of news, debate, art and culture. Because public broadcasting in general is not allowed to provide entertainment, in this model it should be transformed into a small broadcasting company, making programmes for a relatively small, well-educated élite with above-average earnings. In the USA PBS occupies such a position, though this broadcasting company is kept going not by government funding but by individual donations from interested viewers.

On the other side stand the advocates of a *public service* model. They think that publicly-funded broadcasting should be a major player in the media field. This kind of broadcasting provides a worthwhile and comprehensive programme based on broad public interest (therefore including entertainment and sport). After all, marginalised public broadcasting can certainly not compete with the commercial companies and will therefore be pushed even further to the side where small, mostly rich and well-educated target groups exercise their preferences. The question is whether public broadcasting of this kind can still be considered as 'public'.

It will be evident that the discussions in both the Netherlands and Flanders have shown a clear preference for the *public service* model, but ideas on how such a thing should be designed are somewhat divergent. People in both countries are in agreement as to the core values public broadcasting should aim for: quality, trustworthiness, social engagement and independence. But opinions differ on the question of who should translate these values into actual programmes, on what scale, in what form and with what resources.

That has a good deal to do with how the broadcasting systems have grown up and developed historically. In the Netherlands there was talk of adapting to a changing market much earlier, through the introduction of an open system including public exploitation of advertisements in 1967. So the blow from commercial competition could be absorbed much more gradually than in Belgium, which had a rather rigid, bureaucratic and politicized broadcasting structure. In Belgium, however, quicker and more fundamental choices have been made in the modernisation process in the 1990s. According to many, the Netherlands is failing in this because the strength of the fragmented broadcasting organisation is a hindrance to efficient and radical policy. The question is whether that is really the case. There is no denying for example that Dutch public broadcasting in comparison to other European public broadcasters is forging ahead in the field of multi-media, digitalisation and interactivity.

But that doesn't appear to be helping to turn the negative spiral of market shares however. So confidence in a healthy future among public broadcasting organisations is at the moment greater in Flanders than in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands almost all the public broadcasting associations are looking towards 2008 with great trepidation, for in that year

the initial concession grant is due to be renewed. The outlines of the structure for public broadcasting that State Secretary M. van der Laan has set out for that new period predict a much less pronounced role for the broadcasting associations, with much less money. Her departure in May 2006 and the formation of a new cabinet at the end of 2006 (or in 2007) will probably change little of this, because the Board of Governors will spread the associations' programmes across various channels, thus further damaging their individuality.

Whether such a thing should also be seen as a threat to public broadcasting is, of course, the big question, because the Flemish example clearly shows that the success of this kind of broadcasting in the present age is determined more by recognisable programmes and channels than by recognisable producers. Seen in that light, all the spluttering about organisational structure in Hilversum is really a rear-guard action. That is something they have understood for a long while in Belgium.

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