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Tim Rats presenter: *Does the public interest matter for companies in the media sector? A comparative analysis of experiences in Flanders and Norway* EC16-0758

Panel: Does the Public Interest Matter for Companies in the Media Sector? A Comparative Analysis of Experiences in Flanders and Norway EC16-0756A

Scientific research has elaborated quite extensively on the role of public broadcasters or, in more contemporary speech, public service media providers in society. Their specific position in democracy and superiority to market models of media provision is subject of influential work done by scholars such as Michael Tracey (1998), Nicholas Garnham (2000) and various RIPE edited collections, edited by Lowe. Concepts like public interest and public value, albeit the latter criticized for being overly managerial in nature (Moe and Van den Bulck, 2014), are often used in debates on the uniqueness of public service media. In a similar vein, many books and articles about the evolution of media policies and markets in Europe talk about a lessening importance of the public interest in developing media policies (Van Cuilenburg and McQuail, 2003; Van den Bulck and Donders, 2014) and some scholars even allege that a capitalist organization of media markets is incapable of working to the benefit of the citizen and society at large (McChesney, 2014). Others have counterargued saying that liberalization of media has, notably in smaller markets, been moulded to fit within historical, political, social, economic and cultural contexts on the one hand and to reconcile goals of profit maximization and economic growth with important aspirations regarding national identity, cultural production and national language. Syversten et al. (2014) illustrate such a specific situation exists in Scandinavian countries and dub the mixed situation – i.e. combining a liberalized market with the ambition to realize public interest objectives – the “media welfare state”. Against this background, we aim to analyze whether and to what extent the public interest, public value or, even more abstract, non-economic values play a role, not so much in government policies, but rather in media companies’ strategy development. Semi-structured stakeholder interviews (for an elaboration of methodology see Raats et al., 2015) will be conducted in both Flanders and Norway in Spring 2016. Stakeholders included are private broadcasters, television production companies, television distribution companies, public broadcaster(s), newspaper publishers and emerging online journalism initiatives. Interviews will also consider the actual and desirable role respondents assign to government policy in terms of co-shaping (or not) media markets. Flanders and Norway are selected for various reasons. Both are small media markets with limited audiences

(6,5 million and x million inhabitants respectively), can be considered a small language area (hence, also limited export potential), have a strong public broadcaster and local private media companies, and a high GDP. There are also notable differences in terms of market structure and the public funding of the public broadcasters VRT and NRK (with the latter receiving considerably more public funding). These similarities and differences make Flanders and Norway interesting case studies. This paper aims to fill a void in media studies research, which has quite extensively studied public broadcasters' strategies and motivations (e.g., Donders, 2012), but has neglected to empirically investigate how private media companies conceive of their role in media markets and society.

Co Authors

Donders, K.(1)*[karen.donders@vub.ac.be];Raats, T.(1)[tim.raats@vub.ac.be];Syvertsen, T.(2)[trine.syvertsen@media.uio.no];Enli, G.(2)[gunn.enli@media.uio.no];

Co Authors Institutes

(1)Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Communication Sciences, Brussels, Belgium;(2)University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway;