Media Policymaking and Multistakeholder Involvement: Matching audience, stakeholder and government expectations for public service media in Flanders.
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Abstract
This contribution analyzes government, opposition, public service media (PSM), media stakeholders and audience views regarding the role and remit of PSM in the run-up to and their impact on the renewal of the 2021-2025 management contract between public broadcaster VRT and the Flemish Government. Results show that, despite a shifting media ecosystem and academics and government pushing for fundamental reform, audiences and most stakeholders’ views stick to a centralized, broad and multiplatform public media institution. Moreover, they expect PSM to solve ever more media and societal issues (e.g., fake news) within a shrinking budget. The case illustrates how mature, evidence-based multistakeholderism pushes PSM to meet an increasingly challenging set of expectations, hampers both PSM and government to build a well-balanced, long-term vision of PSM’s role and, instead, pushes them to pursue their own agenda. Lastly, an evidence-based process also suffers from issues of validity of the data.
Introduction

Public service media (hereafter PSM) operate in a rapidly evolving media ecology that offers legacy media new means of content production and dissemination and new ways to reach and relate to audiences. The latter embrace emerging media and new inroads into consuming content. These developments affect various media’s market position, business models and value chains, and (ethical) audience relations management. PSM, in return for public funding, are expected to maintain standards and values that do not fit easily into this new media ecology. Since the 2000s, certainly in the EU and many of its (especially West and North European) member states, policymaking regarding PSM’s position and role in this context has taken place in a governance context characterized by evidence-based policymaking, multistakeholderism, agentization and instrumentation of performance evaluations (Donders & Raats, 2012; Donders, Raats & Van den Bulck, 2018). Pushed by the EU and commercial competitors, evidence-based and multistakeholder policymaking have become part of ‘routine’ negotiations. However, this has been criticized by stakeholders and academics, as we will discuss.

Taking Flanders (the Northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) as a case, this contribution executes a meta-analysis of views of various stakeholders regarding the role and remit of PSM expressed in the run-up to and of their impact on the renewal of the 2021-2025 management contract between Flemish public broadcaster VRT and the Flemish Government. The aim is to identify and analyze views on PSM in contemporary policy discussions and how various stakeholders affected the eventual management
contract and, thus, to discuss strengths and flaws of evidence-based policymaking and multistakeholderism.

Since 2006, Flemish legislation stipulates that the five-yearly management contract negotiations between the Flemish Government and VRT must be preceded by studies of audiences’ views, stakeholder positions and trends in the media market. Analyzing these and government and public stakeholders’ views allows us to answer the following research questions. First, what were the core priorities put forward by the policy actors and stakeholders and what perspectives on PSM do they reflect? Second, what explains differences and commonalities between the different groups? Third, to what extent does the eventual management contract (as a policy document) reflect the various stakeholders’ standpoints? Fourth, what does the case tell us about the policy process, especially the pros and cons of evidence-based multistakeholder policymaking in the field of PSM?

To this end, after this introduction, we develop a two-pronged framework. We build on evolving notions of accountability in PSM policymaking processes, focusing on evidence-based policymaking and multistakeholderism that have become staples in PSM policymaking in many European contexts, including Flanders. We further discuss core perspectives on PSM, including market failure, social responsibility and an ecosystem perspective. Next, we study the policy process leading up to the 2021-2025 management contract between VRT and the Flemish Government, analyzing viewpoints of six groups of actors as expressed in statements and empirical studies. Next, we compare the actor positions and claims to the eventual management contract to assess their impact. Finally, we discuss wider implications including the fruitfulness of evidence-based
multistakeholder policymaking. While limited to a single case, the similarities in policy-making processes and returning paradigmatic perspectives with regards to PSM in EU member states (Donders, 2021) suggest relevance beyond Flanders.

**Multistakeholder and evidence-based policymaking for PSM**

*Trends in PSM policymaking processes*

In many European countries, PSM policymaking, implementation and evaluation have been affected by evolving ideas about policy processes, governance and accountability. Since the 1980s, Western democracies have moved away from ‘hierarchical accountability for inputs […] and legal accountability for processes’ (Heinrich, 2002: 712, quoted in Osege, 2012: 589). The European Union (Hereafter EU), as a regulatory force, affected a move to multi-level governance (Donders, 2012) and, from the 1990s, an interest in issues of governance and accountability (Bovens, 2010). The latter was accompanied by a trend towards *agentization* of powers and activities with policies increasingly formulated and implemented away from government proper (Rhodes, 1997). The New Public Management [hereafter: NPM] doctrine brought entrepreneurial management styles and a business-like orientation to the public sector, considering the public as a client (rather than citizen) and encouraging outsourcing and *contractualization* of relations (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004). Accountability, now, was seen as ‘performance and measurable outcomes rather than procedural correctness and hierarchical compliance’ (Osege, 2012: 589).

Since the early 2000s, this coincided with shifts towards multistakeholder and evidence-based policymaking, also in the field of media and PSM. Multistakeholderism
refers to systematic inclusion in government decisions of those affected by. It assumes that systematic inclusion of those affected by government policies in defining problems, collecting data and identifying possible solutions, results in more responsive, sustainable and, thus, democratic policymaking (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004, Donders, Raats & Van den Bulck, 2018). We use the term ‘mature multistakeholderism’ to refer to a cyclical multistakeholder process where returning stakeholders benefit from policy (process) learning. Evidence-based approaches, in principle, include empirical data to ‘insulate the media policy-making and regulatory domains from the partisan politics and “biased” opinions that surround them’ (Freedman, 2006: 918). This should ensure policymaking based on facts, if not facts alone.

These developments have been observed in European PSM policymaking, including the Flemish which we describe below. Several media policy scholars considered early cases of multistakeholderism as a positive move towards inclusive policymaking (Donders, 2012), reflecting original enthusiasm in global communication/internet governance (Padovani and Pavan, 2011). Critics demonstrated that multistakeholderism does not mean all stakeholders have a say in or impact on PSM policymaking (Donders & Raats, 2012; Donders, Raats & Van den Bulck, 2018) and that the ideal of multistakeholderism could be applauded, yet existing strategies for its implementation in practice are much less convincing, as demonstrated in criticism and discussions with regards to global internet governance (e.g., Hill, 2014, Hoffman, 2016). Evidence-based policymaking similarly has been criticized for overestimating the quality and neutrality of data and the rationality of dealing with data (e.g., Freedman, 2006) and for its instrumental rationality that ‘erodes the normative basis of policy-making and
undermines the capacity for “appropriate” practice’ (Sanderson, 2006: 331). Importantly, a focus on multistakeholderism and evidence-based policymaking should not obliterate the relevance of continued path dependencies (Torfing, 2009) in PSM policymaking, which has also been observed (e.g., Donders, Raats & Van den Bulck, 2018).

The fora that PSM is to render account to and in the instruments of control and accountability now are organized within a competition framework, befitting NPM ideals that the market can provide diverse and high-quality services, that government intervention should decrease because it disturbs and distorts (media) markets, and that the role of public-funded media organizations must be defined and monitored more transparently. This is reflected in the growth in accountability and performance instruments to determine levels of performance (Leys, 2001; Elstein 2004; Donders, 2012).

**PSM policymaking in Flanders**

The policymaking process in Flanders regarding VRT’s organization, funding and remit has followed the trends discussed above. In the 1990s, relationships between the state and broadcaster - a public institution, run as a public service, accountable to government and to ‘licensed participants’ (Jakubowicz, 2003: 148 - were redefined through the introduction of a management contract, to be renewed every five years. The scope of the remit confirmed VRT’s responsibility to educate, inform and entertain. The first contract (1997-2001) introduced performance indicators based on viewing figures. Subsequent contracts added appreciation figures and quality standards (2002-2006), reinforced the cultural remit (2007-2011), specified the digital remit (2012-2016) and prioritized

Following a 2004 complaint from commercial players against aspects of VRT’s public funding, the European Commission requested the Flemish Government to formalize the management contract renewal procedures and to explicitly solicit stakeholder views. Ever since, the Flemish Media Bill prescribes a multistakeholder evidence-based procedure whereby the Flemish Media Council (policy advisor to the media minister, comprising of independent experts and representatives of main stakeholders) initiates a policy advice by commissioning research into citizens’ and wider stakeholders’ views on the future role of VRT. The consultations are carried out by independents that bid to a tender coordinated by the Flemish Department of Culture, Youth and Media. The studies inform the Council’s advice that is communicated to the Flemish Government and Parliament and that guides the media minister in the contract negotiations with VRT.

The extensive, externalized process should not obliterate the reality that this is also a political process. Starting point and ultimate benchmark of any PSM policymaking is the coalition agreement that is negotiated by all parties of the coalition government and that is the cornerstone of Flemish politics during a particular legislature. This is followed by a policy brief of the Media Minister at the start of the legislature, detailing the priorities for the coming period. After the process of research and council advice towards the VRT management contract renewal is completed, decision making follows a trajectory in the Flemish parliament where one or (usually) more hearings are devoted to the topic. Typically, the researchers that conducted the studies, the chair of the Flemish
Media Council and several stakeholders are invited. All this serves as a preliminary to the negotiations between the Media Minister and VRT that result in the management contract. This needs final coalition government approval, a process characterized by horse trading (Van den Bulck & Donders, 2014).

The process has been in place since the first 1997-2001 contract negotiations, so it is fair to assume that policymaking with regards to VRT takes place in a mature multistakeholder evidence-based decision-making process. Since all involved parties are very familiar with the process, the most recent negotiations towards the 2021-2025 management contract are a fruitful case to study the advantages and disadvantages, the pitfalls and opportunities of evidence-based multistakeholderism in PSM policymaking.

A framework for analysis of viewpoints on PSM in Flanders

To analyze the decision-making process and compare the various positions to the policy outcome (the new management contract), we focus on available documents. For every step in the process, key documents were identified: the coalition agreement, the Media Minister’s policy brief, the parliamentary resolutions of the ruling and oppositional parties respectively, the reports of audience survey and stakeholder consultations, the Flemish Media Council’s advice, and the actual management contract. Different from previous rounds, VRT - considered a stakeholder - provided no official position statement but submitted a lengthy vision statement for the stakeholder inquiry. The collected documents served as the main data for our study. We agree with Freedman’s (2006) warning to avoid over-rationalizing policy documents as they contain an amount of window-dressing and symbolism. Policy documents are not a rational reflection of the
entire policy process, nor is the relationship between communicated policy input and actual policy output a rational process (Dunn, 2017; Puppis et al. 2018). Policy negotiations are complex, conflicting, characterized by media policy silences and non-decision-making, bartering, package deals and, thus, seldom the rational outcome of different viewpoints and interests listed by all actors involved. Moreover, documents do not reflect all opinions, only the ones voiced officially. However, in the case of VRT’s management contract negotiations, most stakeholder groups’ opinions are involved and consultations are highly inclusive in terms of participating. Previous evidence (Donders, Raats & Van den Bulck, 2018) confirms that most stakeholders take the consultations serious.

In her analysis of scholarly and policy positions on the role and position of PSM, Donders (2012) distinguishes between social responsibility and market failure perspectives. The social responsibility framework encompasses the bulk perspectives in scholarly writing on PSM, with authors supporting existing centralized PSM organizations, advocating for strong public support and for broad, holistic offerings that appeal to all audiences. In a multiplatform world, audience universality implies the all audiences across all platforms. Core values like diversity, universality, quality and trust are remain valid, yet authors suggest radical changes in the ways PSM translate the remit into services and programmes. According to social responsibility perspectives, therefore, PSM need to be as large in financing and as broad in remit as required in a democratic society.

Market failure perspectives start from more liberal economic views on the role of media, considering audiences as capable of making rational choices about the
programmes and services they want. Defenders of this perspective advocate to limit the public service mission to programmes and services that are considered of high public importance but are not sustainable in a market environment (news, documentary, arts and culture, scripted). In areas where the market successfully delivers programmes and services, they prescribe a limited role for public broadcasters (e.g., Elstein, 2004). As digitization has significantly multiplied content outlets, supporters of the market failure perspective see less legitimacy for a strong online public broadcaster.

Although presented in absolutes, research shows that media policy, in practice, encompasses combinations of both perspectives (Donders, 2012). In that regard, Wauters & Raats (2018) emphasized the growing importance of a third, ecosystem perspective. This combines market failure arguments, predominantly related to the sustainability of domestic original programming and the economic importance of PSM, to support a strong, well-funded and holistic public broadcaster, i.e., a social responsibility perspective (Barwise and Picard, 2014; Raats & Jensen, 2020).

The three perspectives present different views on various aspects of the PSM remit and operations. Based on a mapping of all relevant dimensions, as adopted from Donders (2012) and further developed in stakeholder consultations, we first identified policy ‘domains’ regarding the role and position of PSM.¹ We then prioritized domains that all actor groups commented on. Accordingly, the analyzed topics can be grouped in three categories:

¹ The VRT stakeholder inquiry (2019), was designed around seven ‘C’s’: ‘core’ (views on news, culture, education, diversity and identity, production), ‘cross-media’ (role of PSM online, technology neutral definition of that role), ‘corporate’ (VRT’s internal organization), ‘collaboration’ (VRT partnerships), ‘checks and balances’ (VRT’s relationship to competitors, potential market disruptions), ‘cost and commercial offer’ (VRT financing of VRT (public and commercial) and ‘control and command’ (transparency, regulatory oversight, accountability).
1. Content: culture, education, news and entertainment
2. Audiences, universality and reach
3. Multiplatform and online presence

For the purpose of this article, we present viewpoints of 6 actors groups: (i) government/governance stakeholders (i.e., the Flemish Government and Media Minister), (ii) the political opposition (whose views were voiced in Flemish parliament through a resolution), (iii) the audience (probed in an audience consultation commissioned by the Flemish Media Council), actors with a specific stake in the outcome of the negotiations, grouped into (iv) commercial competitors and (v) cultural, educational and civil society organizations (both represented in the stakeholder consultation commissioned by the Flemish Media Council), and (vi) VRT (based on a priority vision statement in preparation of the negotiations). Below, we discuss different actor perspectives based on a close reading of the collected documents.

Results: Views on VRT’s role in the digital media ecosystem

The Government’s perspective

The Government Agreement between the Flemish coalition partners (Flemish Nationalists NV-A, Christian Democrats CD&V and Liberals Open VLD), completed on September 30, 2019, lays down the policy priorities for the 2019-2024 legislature (Vlaamse Regering, 2019). It represents a compromise between the priorities of the coalition parties on all competences of the Flemish Government, including media.
Usually, it highlights those priorities for media where change is desired. This explains the emphasis on specific aspects rather than the entirety of VRT’s structure, funding and mission.

VRT is included in the planned efforts of the Flemish Government, pushed by the Flemish nationalist coalition partner, to strengthen Flemish identity: ‘It is essential that we can experience Flemish identity freely and unencumbered, amongst others through shared symbols. Against this background we will ask a group of experts to scientifically set up a canon of [...] Flemish history and culture [...] VRT, too, contributes to Flemish culture’. (Vlaams Regering, 2019: 17, authors’ translation). Further on, the document elaborates:

More than ever, VRT must focus on its public character and strengthening the Flemish identity. [...] VRT attaches the utmost importance to the Dutch standard language and expresses this in its offer. It makes every effort to cooperate with broadcasters from other countries and regions, especially the Netherlands. (135, authors’ translation)

The reference to the Netherlands has roots in the Flemish nationalist ‘Groot-Nederlandse Gedachte’ that sees a brighter future for Flanders by disconnecting from Belgium and seeking connection with The Netherlands (Wils, 2005).

The Government Agreement furthermore voices concerns of private news media players, especially regarding VRT’s online news remit.
VRT news website differs from the websites of the private news media and only focuses on the audiovisual offer. Written text only serves to support the audiovisual (short informative reporting and no long reads).

(136, authors’ translation)

Here, the Flemish Government follows a strict market failure approach, advocating for a VRT news remit supporting the market rather than the democratic need for broad access to quality and diverse news. The market failure rhetoric is somewhat compensated by references in the Agreement to distinctive ‘quality entertainment’. However, again, it expects VRT to act different from market players. Market players’ interests are also present in the Government’s expectation that VRT strengthens the wider Flemish media market but, simultaneously, acts in a ‘restrained’ manner, echoing the commercial competitors’ discourse that VRT cannot disturb the ‘level playing field’ (Van den Bulck & Donders, 2014). The Agreement also refers to engaging VRT in developing a cross-media audience measurement system and in targeting wide audiences and young Flemings. It emphasizes: ‘VRT must evolve further towards a modern, slim and effective media organization that offers quality content’ (135, authors’ translation), a reference to budget cuts.

Most controversial in the Government Agreement was the strict emphasis on impartiality and the ‘highest standards of neutrality’ in all VRT programmes, to be monitored more closely (135). Most likely, this resulted from the outcome of the elections with a distinct increase in radical right voters, which led to criticism of VRT’s supposed under-representations of these voices: ‘Flanders is characterized by a diverse
ideological landscape. It is important that VRT pays attention to this and includes this diversity in its offer’ (135). In sum, the Agreement stand out in its emphasis on symbolism and harsh language (‘monitored more closely’, ‘thorough internal and external quality control and reporting’).

The stern language was toned down in the policy brief of the Media Minister, Mr. Benjamin Dalle (2019), developed in the first months in his position. He provides a more positive interpretation of the Government Agreement regarding VRT:

VRT has an important role in the Flemish Coalition Agreement. The Flemish Government recognizes the importance of an effective and efficient public broadcaster […][VRT] is an example and reference point for other players in many ways […] [VRT] also strengthens the private media sector. That is why I want to work in dialogue with the public broadcaster on a management agreement that prepares VRT for a new media world. (1, authors’ translation)

The positive tone extends to an emphasis on a ‘future proof’ (26) VRT in terms of digital opportunities and innovation (27) and of reaching youngsters. However, like the Government, Dalle expects VRT’s online news provision to avoid market distortion for other media players (26).

Dalle confirms the government’s intention to create a ‘slim’ (28) VRT and to interpret VRT’s role not in its own right but within the media ecosystem, referencing collaborations. Most notable, the Media Minister follows commercial
players’ demands that VRT participates in the (then being development) joint Flemish streaming service: ‘Since VRT has the largest catalog of Flemish quality fiction productions, we ask VRT to participate in this project based on a profitable business plan’ (21, authors’ translation).

While confirming VRT’s role in providing a wide range of programmes (universality of content), including entertainment (26), the text emphasizes (a more nuanced but still troubling definition of) neutrality, suggesting a problematic situation while reiterating efforts already made by VRT:

[VRT content must be characterized by] respect for pluralism (the VRT offers a wide range of opinions on its news website and in its programmes) and the achievement of the highest standards of neutrality in all public broadcasting programmes. This means that impartiality, independence and autonomy of the editors are essential. A thorough internal and external quality control and reporting must monitor this (26, authors’ translation).

The parliamentary resolution of the government coalition parties launched in June 2020 following a series of parliamentary hearings with media stakeholders. This text is fully in line with the Government Agreement and Media Minister’s policy brief and emphasizes market partnerships, distinctiveness, Flemish identity and restrictions on unlimited cross-media expansion.
The opposition’s perspective

A second parliamentary resolution was adopted by the oppositional parties (Greens and Socialist party ‘Vooruit’) (Flemish Parliament, 2020b) and was presented following the stakeholder inquiry and parliamentary hearings. Interestingly (and unsurprisingly), this resolution echoes concerns voiced by stakeholders in the Parliamentary hearings and stakeholder inquiry. The resolution calls for a strong, holistic and broadly defined public broadcaster that is not limited in its information or online remit (i.e., no restrictions on the VOD platform); that prioritizes public remit over commercial and market-logic, and that caters for niche audiences (esp. ethnic-cultural diversity), young audiences, and hearing impaired. It emphasizes the importance of education and media literacy and strong ties with education, cultural organizations and independent producers. Regarding news, the resolution calls for additional funding in ‘crisis times’ (referencing COVID-19) and considers independence a prerequisite for pluralism. Both (coalition and opposition) parliamentary resolutions reflect the viewpoints and differences between the above-mentioned market failure and social responsibility perspectives. Both resolutions have traces of an ecosystem perspective but to varying degrees.

The stakeholders’ perspective

The stakeholder inquiry, mandated by the Flemish Media bill, captures the broad range of stakeholders across the media and creative industries, civil society, educational institutions, and cultural organizations in Flanders. A total of 146 stakeholders responded in a written statement, focus group consultation or face-to-face interview. While not all stakeholders could be included (some did not participate for various reasons) and only
official viewpoints are voiced, the consultation captures the main attitudes towards PSM as a societal project and towards VRT’s position in the Flemish media market and society.

Stakeholder viewpoints could be mapped into two large groups, echoing the social responsibility and market failure perspectives on public media described above. One group of stakeholders (journalist guild, cultural institutions, educational players, civil society) argue in favour of an holistic public broadcaster, a broadly defined remit and a strong online presence. These stakeholders tend to argue against government cutbacks and in favour of continued support to fulfil the democratic needs. Other players, mostly those operating in the media market and directly dependent on or competing with VRT activities in specific domains, tend to argue against VRT taking up a broad role. The argument varies according to the stakeholder’s market segment: independent producers support a holistic range of genres but prioritize television over online; publisher criticize the extent of VRT’s online news offerings; private broadcasters want VRT to refrain from online advertisement, sports rights and exclusivity deals with screen talent. These players do not necessarily favour a smaller PSM, given its economic importance and role as partner in the ecosystem. In Flanders, private players typically consider VRT a ‘frenemy’, rarely showing public support for a small, niche public broadcaster. Likewise, supportive ‘public stakeholders’ in the first group do not automatically defend all VRT activities and are critical of VRT’s commitments regarding news, culture, diversity and education. For example, private and public stakeholders criticized VRT’s appeals to the largest possible audience as ‘too commercial’ or VRT as ‘too aggressive’ in negotiations.
Both groups have certain views in common: they set out from their own activities, reiterate concerns from previous stakeholder inquiries and recognize VRT as ‘enabler’, ‘lever’ in society and the market, supporting the latter referencing VRT’s budget, staff and public funding, all considered larger than their own. Most players expect collaboration, a repeat from previous enquiries that resulted in several partnership commitments being included in previous contracts (Raats & Donders, 2017, Wauters & Donders, 2018). This time, stakeholders emphasized more meaningful, long-term and structural collaborations with VRT. Compared to previous rounds, all stakeholders were more critical towards VRT and seem to expect more. VRT’s mission is clearly equated with the challenges that societies and markets face: fake news and misinformation, failing inclusiveness, increasing polarization, pressure on markets and domestic content. This is reflected in demands for VRT to be a ‘community’ builder, societal connecter. They emphasize the importance of VRT’s role with regards to news: contextualization, nuance, depth, and accessible and appealing to different segments of society. Several organizations across sectors similarly elaborated on the need for a more diverse, more inclusive VRT, considering current efforts insufficient. Organizations called attention to ‘vulnerable’ audience groups, including people with learning disabilities, economic disadvantages, migration backgrounds and young people.

**The public broadcaster’s perspective**

The most elaborate response to the stakeholder inquiry came from VRT. The document calls for continuation rather than drastic change. It defends a broadly defined, technologically neutral and independent public broadcaster, referencing its own market
research for support. Changing societies and the platformization and internationalization of media industries are presented to illustrate the continued and increased need for a strong public broadcaster, similar to other PSM’s contemporary discourse (Donders, 2021). The document follows the government’s emphasis on Flemish culture and language but ties it to the need for a more diverse VRT. The latter is one of the few explicit areas of change in the document, besides a more far-reaching digital transition and more ambitious audience reach strategy with explicit focus on socially vulnerable audiences, amongst others through improving literacy amongst specific target groups.

*The audience perspective*

The audience survey, mandated by the Flemish Media bill, was conducted amongst a representative sample of 1500 Flemings (Indiville, 2019), combining returning questions from previous surveys for longer-term comparisons with new questions deemed relevant by the Department of Culture, Youth and Media and the Flemish Media Council.

While the stakeholder survey suggests a certain marginalization of VRT’s educational and cultural mission in favour of news and information, the audience by no means questions any of the core missions of the VRT. Information, education, culture and entertainment all score high to very high on importance. This confirms results from previous audience surveys and the overall 8.1/10 score for perceived importance of VRT in the Flemish media landscape. Flemish audiences expect a broad public broadcaster, in which entertainment has its place. However, like some of the cultural and educational stakeholders, they expect VRT to distinguish itself from commercial players by providing
entertainment that has added inspiring, informative or educational value, especially
entertainment aimed at children.

VRT’s role in providing news and information is considered very important, with
audiences expressing high relevance of objective and neutral news and current affairs, in
line with government and stakeholder expectations. Beyond this general concern, like
various stakeholders, the audience attaches great importance to VRT’s role in helping to
recognize, detect and disprove fake news (not polled explicitly in previous surveys). They
see investigative journalism as a means to this end, giving it higher importance than in
previous surveys. While the government and certain stakeholders aim to restrict VRT
news provision across all platforms, the audience survey showed that respondents who
regularly use VRT news products, generally consult more different news websites, \textit{de
facto} undermining the argument that VRT’s free online news disturbs the level playing
field. A large majority expect VRT’s news and information to be available free of charge.

Different from commercial competitors and the government but like cultural and
civil society organisations, the Flemish public expects VRT to make its content available
through all possible channels/platforms, even though much of the audience adheres to
linear radio and television use. Importantly, they recognize both opportunities and threats
of digital innovations and expect VRT to keep them abreast of new technologies and help
them to recognize and deal with the dangers. They expect this media literacy role to
extend beyond children to all media users. Audiences expect VRT to treat carefully using
these new technologies and to protect users’ privacy.

The survey probed Flemings about VRT’s role in Flemish identity, as in previous
surveys. About two-thirds of Flemings (61.8\%) agree that VRT should pay attention to
Flemish history, traditions and customs. Accounting for slight changes in the question wording, this is an increase from the 2015 survey when 55.6% agreed that VRT 'must offer programmes and media that reflect Flemish identity'. In 2019, respondents over 65 more than youngsters agree with the statement. However, about 60% agreed that VRT should use Standard Dutch (AN) – an important symbolic identity issue in Flanders - in all programmes, a decrease from 65.2% in 2015. Older and higher education people agree more with the statement than the younger and less educated.

Questions on diversity and inclusion revealed that nearly three quarters of respondents think VRT content should be accessible to people with visual, auditive and other disabilities. A majority (63.1%), especially of older respondents, feels VRT must pay attention to vulnerable groups in its programmes. However, different from several stakeholders, barely half of audience respondents (51.3%) agree that VRT must include ethnic-cultural minorities in its programmes, while one in five (19.4%) disagrees and almost a quarter (23.4%) has doubts. Women and the higher educated are more in favour.

Policy outcome: A mix of symbolism and multistakeholderism?

In early 2020, VRT and the Flemish government started actual negotiations for the management contract 2021-2025, a strategic roadmap stipulating the public broadcaster’s roles and obligations of VRT for the next five years. Different from e.g., the BBC Charter and Royal Agreement, this contract also highlights VRT’s core challenges and strategic priorities. Importantly, maybe unsurprisingly, VRT has the most significant role in deciding format and tone of the document, while government discussions typically focus
on specific ‘dealbreakers’, usually related a) content investment quota, b) limits to VRT’s market activities, and c) flexibility and ceilings for commercial revenues.

The management contract puts forward six strategic goals, translated into 39 key performance indicators (hereafter: KPIs). More than previous contracts, the document’s rhetoric reveals an emphasis on Flanders and Flemish identity and on societal relevance and impact. However, the rhetorical focus on Flemish identity is not translated into more (severe) content quotas or specific activities. Societal relevance objectives are mentioned throughout and translated into vague KPI’s like ‘showing at least 100 items across all brands where VRT makes a societal impact’ (authors’ translation). Regarding inclusiveness and diversity, VRT must be more ambitious than before, echoing societal and public discussions raised by several organisations in the stakeholder inquiry. This is accompanied by more specific KPI’s for diversity in audience reach, programmes and personnel. The contract also includes specific commitments towards gender, ethnic-cultural diversity and people with disabilities (47) and, compared to previous contracts, more elaborate commitments to make programmes and services more accessible, following outspoken and direct claims of representative organisations in the stakeholder inquiry. Supporting arts and culture is emphasized rhetorically but translated less into KPI’s than in previous management contracts.

The severe tone of the Government Agreement in reference to VRT’s need to improve ‘neutrality’ and its problematic claim that neutrality should be monitored by the government were diluted in the contract: next to a threefold definition of neutrality

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echoing VRT’s own, longer-standing definition of impartiality, it includes a commitment to have VRT’s impartiality monitored annually by independent research to be commissioned by the Flemish Regulator for the Media instead of by VRT, as was the case so far. In line with the stakeholder inquiry and audience survey results, VRT’s role in information and journalism was reaffirmed as pivotal, with additional commitments to attract youngsters and to make news more accessible for ‘hard to reach’ audiences. Contrary to publishers’ demands, VRT’s online news offering is not much curbed: VRT must have 55% (65% by the end of 2025) of its news items on the website and news must have a close association with video and audio content, yet without word limit (as in the French-speaking part of Belgium) nor time limit to remaining online (as in Germany). The only limit on VRT’s online portal VRTNU is that it should refrain from international scripted content in preview (to allow other SVOD players in Flanders to expand catalogues with exclusive content). However, the contract now allows VRTNU to provide on-demand entire seasons (boxsets) of series and its own content. For the first time, the contract stipulates KPI’s for reach and target audience of VRTNU, easy to achieve given the growing attraction of the platform.

**Discussion and conclusion**

_Multistakeholderism: smokescreen or mature policy instrument?_

The Flemish case suggests that, despite a fundamentally changing context in which media operate and academic and government push for fundamental reform, audiences and most stakeholders’ expectations towards PSM remain the same, e.g., as a centralized, holistic

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3 Items on history, culture, science and fact-checking are exempted from this obligation.
PSM. At the same time, audiences, stakeholders and government discourses about the role of VRT are influenced by the context and societal needs at any given time. Fighting ‘fake news’ or protecting audiences’ privacy were not issues in previous rounds. Such emerging concerns can increase the (perceived) need for strong PSM but the new tasks come on top rather than instead of existing ones. As our case shows, VRT is expected to counter fake news and polarization, to ensure local content, creativity and innovation, to protect privacy, next to more cooperation, collaborations and partnerships. This can lead to aberrations as some actors play to the political tune of the day rather than a genuine societal need. Conversely, there are few if any goals, service or content types identified as obsolete, resulting in an ever longer wish list for PSM, as our case illustrates.

Crucially, and despite a continued multistakeholder and evidence-based process, audiences and stakeholders ultimately do not make the choices. Those are left to the government. For one, in the Flemish case, budget cuts were decided before the process began and, thus, formed the primary framework within which all negotiations were to be considered. This left little room to start from an ‘ideal’ model for a future proof VRT. Similarly, VRT’s participation in Flemish VOD Streamz, which would mean a major change to VRT’s operations, was presented as a given in the Government Agreement – indicative of the government tendency to follow the demands of the main commercial media players. Likewise, VRT’s successful maneuvering out of that project happened entirely outside of the contract negotiation process.

That is not to say that the evidence-based multistakeholder set-up in the run up to the new management contract is merely a smokescreen. Politics and symbolism do not preclude impact of stakeholders through the designated process. The analysis shows how,
a mature multistakeholder context where various actors have learned to utilize the model to their advantage. Returning stakeholders in particular work within the window of expectations: rather than declare great ideals or larger-than-life changes, we see success for specific stakeholders using clear messaging and targeted lobbying, using quantitative and ‘experiential’ evidence to build their case. The public broadcaster, too, has learned to stay in control: the eventual management contract shows VRT’s victory in crucial policy decisions.

What view on PSM?

With regards to views on the role of PSM in the media ecosystem and society, results show it is virtually impossible to map the government’s PSM policy in one of the categories: social responsibility, market failure or ecosystem. Rather, we see a social responsibility perspective ‘corrected by market failure’ impediments. The clearest example is the discourse of VRT as ‘market strengthener’: a market failure argument wrapped in an argument of supporting a strong PSM. The result is that truly multiplatform public service ‘media’ (rather than ‘broadcasting’) remains a theoretical construction supported by academics and audiences but not by the media market nor by the government, despite its emphasis on ‘strong’ PSM that have a significant position in the media ecology and with audiences. The third, ecosystem, paradigm is often used rhetorically to hide a market failure view on PSM.

The difficulty in identifying a distinct vision on PSM is related to the policy process. Even in a political climate favourable to PSM and/or to distinct normative standards, multistakeholderism impedes the development of a clear vision, in Flanders
but also in other countries adhering to a similar policy process. Instead, every management contract reflects different, even conflicting concerns as some stakeholders win, some lose. Increasingly, the contract has also become a *political instrument* and the negotiations’ outcome is laden with political symbolism. Essentially, it is a compromise of different visions and interests.

In short, our analysis suggests that these periodical PSM policymaking moments are the externalization of a) the views on PSM of a political elite at a particular moment in time; b) the contextual changes in media ecology (‘fake news’, algorithms, global streaming services) and wider society; and c) de demands of a wide range of stakeholders. While they all impact the outcome, at its core, there have been no fundamental changes in what VRT should stop doing since the first management contracts in 1997. This is, first, because VRT seems to retain considerable negotiation power, possibly because, in the context of mature multistakeholderism, it has learned to deal with the policy process. Second, it suggests a level of path-dependency where historical institutional structures and values dominate current and future behavior and decision. Third, the ever-changing political context seems to allow for little longer-term policy based on vision rather than on political horse-trading and political quick wins. Still, while an ever-growing list of responsibilities within a shrinking budget sets VRT up for failure, its agility and adaptability has ensured a strong record of survival.

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