

## **Mixed methods, bifocal vision: Combining quantitative and qualitative data to assess public service performance**

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### **Summary:**

This article discusses the qualitative and quantitative public consultations used to prepare management contracts between Flemish government and public broadcaster VRT in 2005 and 2010. Reviewing the methodological set-up of each research, their respective strengths and weaknesses, and comparing the findings they generated, the article explores the consequences of methodological choices and the partial views of reality each method generates. Subsequently, the combination of quantitative and qualitative is discussed, each approach enabling an overcoming of some of the other's limitations, with particular attention to the potential policy uses of such multimethod approach.

**Key words:** public broadcasting; public consultation; survey; open questions.

In the contemporary mediascape, public service media have the clearest and most explicit duty to serve the public at large; yet they are less directly controlled by their audience appeal (through ratings and advertising revenue) than their commercial competitors. Nevertheless across Europe, traditional paternalism ('father knows best') has made way for an audience-oriented approach, not only keeping track of audience responses but also assessing the 'performance' of public broadcasters in relation to their public service remit. While ratings are often part of this assessment, checking whether public broadcasters reach a broad cross-section of the population, less quantifiable criteria are equally used to control whether public service values are respected. Whereas broadcasting market research is primarily quantitative, qualitative methods are also used to assess these aspects, in particular to hear the opinion of stakeholders, including the public. While this qualitative corrective is welcome, it is important to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. As I argue below, only a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods may

allow to adequately grasp the patterns and complexities of audience expectations and evaluations.

This article takes a closer look at the Flemish (north Belgian, Dutch-language) case, where the two last ‘management contracts’ between Flemish government and the public broadcaster VRT were preceded by a qualitative and a quantitative population survey respectively. Comparing the findings of qualitative and quantitative research, what can we learn about their respective strengths and limitations? And how to combine their strengths in future research? This reflection is not abstract but also (partly) personal. As a researcher with a clear preference for – and more experience in – qualitative audience research, I was supervising the last, predominantly quantitative population survey. This research was assigned to us by the Flemish government, which provided a clear framework and expectations as well as the necessary funding.<sup>1</sup> While I am familiar with quantitative surveys, I am also critical of their tendency to make ‘invisible’ and seemingly objective interventions in the reality they study, be it in the selection of participants, in the construction of questionnaires or in the analysis of data. At the same time, I am becoming increasingly frustrated with the limitations of qualitative research, in particular its tendency to (implicitly) generalise on the basis of very limited evidence. While this is not a narrative about methodological conversion, the process did make me more personally aware of the interventions in all kinds of research, and it strengthened my conviction that mixed method research, in particular the combination of quantitative and qualitative research, may be the best way forward.

### **Measuring public service audience evaluations and expectations: quantitative or qualitative?**

After struggles to reinvent itself in the liberalised television landscape of the early 1990s, from the late 1990s the Flemish public broadcaster VRT became particularly successful, leading the market in both television and radio. From 1997, five year management contracts with the Flemish government defined performance indicators, including minimum targets for audience reach (Saeys, 2007). While these have forced the VRT to focus on broad audience appeal, one of the side-effects was a strong ‘commercial’ turn in the late 1990s, which led to growing criticism on the lack of public values (Van den Bulck and Sinardet, 2007). Subsequent management contracts, therefore, increasingly included and specified other criteria such as quality, diversity and innovation. Moreover, different stakeholders were involved in the debate on the tasks and performance of the public broadcaster, including ‘the public’ itself.

Although there is no space here to go deeply into the broader context, it should be clear that this is not an isolated case. The debate about and redefinition of Flemish public service broadcasting is part of a broader European tendency of deregulation followed by re-regulation. Commercial competition, evolving relations with government, changing funding policies, as well as technical and social innovations have reshuffled the public broadcaster’s

position in the past decades (Brants, 2003). As a response, throughout Europe 'contracts' of all kinds have been established between governments and broadcasters, in order to clarify the rights and duties of public broadcasters (Jakubowicz, 2003). One of the key issues in these contracts and the underlying debates is the choice between a broad or a more limited, complementary public broadcaster (Bardoel and d'Haenens, 2008; Jakubowicz, 2007; Van den Bulck, 2008). Accountability is another key issue, developing strategies to assess and measure public service performance. The more traditional, political conceptualisation of accountability is increasingly complemented with market, public and professional accountability (Bardoel, 2003). In this article, the focus is on public accountability, which implies informing but also involving and asking the opinions of the public. One of the institutionalised tools to do this is 'public consultations', which were organised across Europe from the early 2000s (Baldi and Hasebrink, 2007; Coppens, 2005). In Flanders as elsewhere, this consultation is part of a broader multi-stakeholder consultation (Donders and Raats, 2012).

In Flanders, the first extensive public consultation was done in 2005, preparing the management contract for the period 2007-2011. This consultation was strongly inspired by the British public consultation preceding the renewal of the BBC Charter in 2006, which allowed individuals and organisations to give their opinion on its future role. In Flanders a website was used to allow anyone who wanted to answer three broad, open questions:

1. To what degree does the way in which the VRT fulfils its key tasks correspond to your expectations of a public broadcaster?
2. What constitutes the singularity of public broadcasting within the whole Flemish broadcasting landscape?
3. What emphases should be put in the new management contract between the Flemish Community and the VRT for the period 2007-2011? (Coppens, 2005: 111)<sup>2</sup>

This open consultation was a deliberate choice, both by the Media Council ordering this research, and by the researcher who argued that there was enough quantitative evidence available through ratings and that it was important to hear the 'less satisfied minority' (Coppens, 2005: 111).

The response level was high, with 37 organisations and 1853 individuals participating, but we should remember that this is not a representative sample, so even high numbers do not allow for generalisation. For instance, 82.9% of all respondents were male. Through (qualitative) coding some clear themes and patterns were identified but, as the author himself notes, these cannot be generalised (Coppens, 2005: 123). Nevertheless, the report was criticised for its unrepresentative sample and the limited external validity of its findings (Van Goethem, 2005). As a consequence, the second public consultation was to be representative and the instructions were clear: a quantitative (instead of qualitative) survey with closed (instead of open) questions should be submitted to a representative (instead of self-selected) sample of at least 1,500 Flemings. This makes our research more akin to the

quantitative research on the future of public service broadcasting in the Netherlands by Dake (2004).

This second public consultation was carried out in 2010, leading up to the 2012-2016 management contract. Its aim was to research the vision of the Flemish population on the future role of public broadcasting in Flemish society. Methodologically, some of the weaknesses of the previous consultation were remedied. Although the sample was smaller (1,565 as opposed to 1,853 respondents), it was randomly selected and accurately reflected the Flemish population in terms of gender, age, level of education, social group and province. With some additional statistical weighing, the responses could be generalised to the whole Flemish population which was impossible for the first public consultation. An additional variable to take into account in a survey on media uses and expectations is actual ownership and use of media, in particular the internet. As public service media include internet-based services, the sample approximated the percentage of individuals with a home internet connection in Flanders (about three out of four at the time of research). For practical and economic reasons, the primary method of data gathering was a web-based survey, but to ascertain a fair representation of (often older) people without access to the internet, about one third of the surveys were sent by post. To obtain the right composition of the sample, it was drawn from pre-existing panels of respondents by TNS Media, a commercial company. As the abovementioned characteristics (age, gender etc.) of these respondents were known, through stratified sampling it was possible to quickly and relatively cheaply constitute a balanced sample.

If the aim is to know the opinion about public service broadcasting across the population, the quantitative survey used in the second public consultation seems better suited. Nevertheless, it is worth briefly reflecting on the limitations of this approach. First, although the sample was representative in a number of respects, other possibly relevant variables (such as ethnicity) were not controlled for. Secondly, the use of pre-constituted panels presents some drawbacks as these 'professional respondents' (who regularly participate in research) may routinely and without much interest fill in the questionnaire (van Ossenbruggen et al., 2006) – which, it should be said, is not necessarily the case with purely randomly selected respondents either. Thirdly, such a panel is not necessarily representative of the population at large, because, although they are broadly recruited, they are ultimately self-selected as they have to agree to become a panel member and to participate in the research. This, of course, is a broader problem in any survey and indeed even in qualitative research as only those who want to actually do participate; but in the case of online panel research this leads to a particular problem as samples tend to contain more heavy internet users, fewer older people and fewer ethnic minority members (van Ossenbruggen et al., 2006). Clearly then, self-selection is not only a problem in an 'open' public consultation, although we should add that the degree of selectivity was much smaller in the quantitative consultation.

A fourth drawback of a quantitative survey as used in the second consultation is related to the restrictions on the respondents' answers through the structured

questionnaire. Both the themes on which and the terms in which they could comment were pre-determined by the researchers. Although we tracked as many relevant themes and issues as possible through an extensive overview of pre-existing sources, including previous government contracts, annual reports of the VRT, press clipping representing public debate and of course the results of the first public consultation, ultimately we had to decide which topics could be included. For the findings to be useful for government, we had to cover different media (television, radio and 'new media', primarily websites and digital content), values (universality, quality, diversity, innovation) and aspects (content, digitization, financing and organisation) of public service broadcasting. Moreover, it was a delicate balancing act to translate every theme into one or a few relatively simple and neutral statements which could be answered using a Likert scale. On the one hand, we wanted to give the respondents sufficient room to give balanced answers, for instance through the use of a seven-point Likert scale from 'completely disagree' to 'completely agree', including a neutral central position. On the other hand, however, we wanted to identify clear priorities, so in some cases we added 'trade off' questions where only two options were possible. Although this allowed us to identify some clear patterns (which are discussed below), it is important to remember how these were constructed. To balance this methodological 'straightjacket', we added an open question at the very end of the survey: 'What do you think the VRT should certainly pay attention to in the next five years?' This allowed respondents to add elements that were not covered in the survey, but also to most unambiguously state what they found was most important among the topics covered in the survey. The answers to this question typically consisted of one or two sentences, which were qualitative analysed by coding each answer (identifying the issues it addressed) and subsequently identifying recurring themes and arguments.

### **Comparing qualitative and quantitative findings**

In order to further explore the implications of the methodological choices mentioned above, in this section the findings of the quantitative survey will be compared to the themes emerging from both the open consultation in 2005 and the open question in the 2010 survey. This comparison discloses strong overall parallels, but it also makes clear how the findings partly depend upon the methods used. Not only the questions asked, but also the answer options provided, 'guide' (not to say 'lead') the respondents and prompt a particular kind of response. One banal but telling consequence of the reliance on open questions became apparent in both the 2005 and the 2010 public consultations. As noted by Coppens (2005) and again by Dhoest et al. (2010), when asked about the VRT in an open question, most respondents explicitly or implicitly (e.g. by referring to particular programmes) refer to television, not radio let alone other, digital media. Television is not only the first thing that comes to mind when talking about the VRT; it is also, at least in the public eye, still the primary task of public broadcasting, whereas policy makers and indeed broadcasters themselves highly prioritise the development of 'new', online applications. This was also confirmed in a trade-off question in the 2010 survey, where 73% thought that the VRT

should primarily focus on its traditional task of making television and radio, as opposed to only 27% who thought that the VRT should focus on technological innovation. At the same time, this points to an important shortcoming of a consultation only using broad, open questions, as many key aspects of contemporary public service media remain uncovered. Based on the open question, most information from the 2010 consultation would be only relevant to television, in particular the first, generalist channel Eén which is mostly referred to.

Rather unexpectedly, in view of the heated and critical debate on public service broadcasting in the public and political arena, the clearest overall finding of the 2010 quantitative survey was the generally positive tone of the answers (Dhoest, 2012). Although the sample comprised not only VRT viewers, listeners and users (as opposed to the ratings which do), for most questions the majority of the respondents was quite satisfied with the current VRT. Even if this survey was not meant as 'market research' and most questions did not set out to evaluate the VRT, they did ask for opinions about current broadcasting priorities, with which most respondents (more or less) agreed. In most cases, adding up the positive side of every scale ('rather agree', 'agree' and 'totally agree' or 'rather important' and 'very important') led to a clear majority. Often, quite a large group (up to one third) took a neutral position, while only a small minority tended to disagree. For instance, when explicitly asked if they find what they like in the current radio or television offer, respectively 67.6 and 72.6% (rather or totally) agree, while only 17.5 and 12.1% (rather or totally) disagree. More generally, most respondents confirmed the importance of the public service values and duties as specified in the management contract.

As such, this positive response should not be surprising as the VRT is market leader in radio and television, but it is significant as it does present a contrast with public debate which tends to question some of the options taken by public broadcasting, and in particular with the findings of the qualitative public consultation. The larger part of the 2005 report discussed points of criticism which (one assumes) corresponds to the predominant tone of the answers to the open questions. Although one could argue that the negative response in 2005 was partly due to the unrepresentative sample possibly containing a disproportionate number of critics of the VRT, and that the more positive response in the 2010 survey might be due to the improvements made in the past five years, I would argue that this difference in tone was at least partly due to the different method used. Indeed, analysing the responses to the 2010 open question, the negative tone and many of the themes and criticisms issuing from the 2005 report reappeared. Although quite a few stated that the VRT should continue what it was doing, which they were happy with, the majority of the respondents focused on one or a few clear points of criticism which led to a more critical tone than in the survey results. Different elements could explain this pattern. Regarding the quantitative survey, the positive answers could be partly due to an 'acquiescence' bias or the tendency of respondents to give similar, positive answers when responding to a list of items (Bryman, 2004). Regarding the open questions, the negative tone could be partly due to the possibility they offer to 'unburden one's heart' and to get one's voice heard about

issues the respondents strongly care about. Whatever the reasons, the quantitative and qualitative data collected from the same respondents in 2010 are quite different as to their overall tone.

One striking example of this mechanism is 'culture', which was an important theme in the 2005 consultation and about which there were a lot of complaints, many respondents asking for more culture (Coppens, 2005: 128). As a consequence, one of the recommendations of this consultation was to ask for more cultural content (ibid: 145). Consequently, the VRT set up new cultural policies and increased its cultural offer. Therefore, it could come as no surprise that the quantitative findings of the 2010 consultation show a general satisfaction regarding the amount of cultural content on radio (57.3%) and television (59%), more respondents actually asking for less (respectively 33.5 and 28.3%) rather than more cultural content. However, two comments come to mind. On the one hand, in the 2005 consultation 'only' 326 respondents asked for more culture (referring, as mentioned above, mostly to television), a proportion of about 17%, which is not that much more than the 12.7% asking for more culture on television in the 2010 survey, particularly when taking into account the methodological comments on the 2005 sample. However, in the 2005 qualitative analysis this point came much more to the fore as this 'minority' was quite outspoken, not unlike public debate where the cultural sector was (and is) quite vociferous in its criticism on public broadcasting. On the other hand, culture does actually remain a theme in the 2010 open question, where some respondents do indeed still ask for more culture and criticize the lack of and superficial approach to cultural programming. In short: at least part of the variation is due to the change in method.

The above example shows how, in qualitative research, a small but vociferous group presenting a similar argument may grab the attention of the researcher, particularly if he/she is already attuned to the argument through broader social debate. In this way, unwittingly, the qualitative researcher may 'broadcast' minority opinions which may go unnoticed in quantitative research. Quantitative analysis allows us to put this into perspective by clearly disclosing the prevalence of certain opinions, as opposed to the implicit and imprecise estimations of quantity in qualitative research (Bryman, 2004: 444). Moreover, if it is based on a representative sample, quantitative research may correct the implicit assumptions of representativeness (e.g. for a category of people, in this case 'the Flemings') inherent in much qualitative research (Höijer, 2008). This is not to say that quantitative research is, always let alone only, useful as a corrective to qualitative findings, but it certainly is one of its possible roles as will be developed below.

More generally, comparing the answers to the 2010 open question and the issues discussed in the 2005 report, quite a few parallels come to the fore, despite the different sample and probably because of the similar method. For instance, in both cases the respondents were generally happy with the amount of information programmes offered. However, the quantitative survey offers the opportunity to further explore such patterns. Thus, while the open questions in both consultations indicate that a significant group wanted more sports on TV and another group wanted less of it, the quantitative analysis

indicates that there were actually more respondents who wanted less (31.1%) than more (16.2%) sports on TV, and that this (unsurprisingly) correlates with the respondents' gender. Taking this one step further, while the qualitative analysis of such a large amount of open questions only allows us to identify recurring themes and discourses, the quantitative analysis of the survey results allows us to more deeply explore variations and their correlations in the population. For instance, further analysis of the data indicated that the respondents constitute four clusters, one of which (about 20% of the respondents) expects a focus on educational, informative and cultural content.<sup>3</sup> This cluster contains relatively more men and highly educated respondents, and it is primarily members from this group of people who are asking for more culture in the open questions and in public debate (see Dhoest et al., 2012).

### **Quantitative problems, qualitative solutions**

While quantitative analysis does present some clear advantages, particularly when one wants to generate findings about a broad population, there are some shortcomings qualitative research can remedy. First of all, it can very simply help to track issues not covered in the questionnaire. For instance, in the 2010 consultation a voice that was most clearly heard through the open question was that of elderly audiences complaining about the lack of understandability, the (late) scheduling of some programmes and about sexual and violent content. Such specific concerns of particular groups are hard to detect in the quantitative survey, where more general questions were asked, applicable to the whole population.

Another advantage of qualitative data is that they may give a deeper understanding and even explanation of patterns found in quantitative research. One such issue was related to the neutrality of news and information programmes. The quantitative survey disclosed that information was considered as the most important programme category (followed by entertainment, not culture or education) and that 75% considered it to be 'important' or 'very important' that all the different opinions in society were covered. The responses to the open question confirmed this, many stressing the importance of neutrality and objectivity. In addition, however, it became clear that many were actually dissatisfied, particularly from the right side of the political spectrum. Quite a few indicated that the VRT was left-wing, not paying enough attention to the (extreme) right and Flemish nationalism. This criticism was also heard in the 2005 consultation, but as Coppens indicates, this may also be partly due to the extreme right party Vlaams Belang mobilising its members to participate in the consultation and to protest (Coppens, 2005: 132). So while the survey shows us how many Flemings think neutrality is important, the open question explains why this is so and also discloses discontent about neutrality.

While the qualitative findings often allow us to better understand the quantitative findings, at other times they add little specification, but even then they may be indicative. For instance, in the 2010 survey 'quality' was identified as a core public service value in different guises and it was also one of the most-mentioned expectations in the open

question. At the same time, most respondents were unable to specify what quality actually implied, a tendency also noted by Coppens (2005). The fact that they remained vague is perhaps frustrating for researchers and policy-makers, but it is also telling. On the one hand, 'quality' is part of a broad and widespread discourse about public service broadcasting, also stressing its 'distinctive nature'. Respondents were clearly aware of this discourse and they partly repeated it in their answers to the open question. On the other hand, the vagueness of their answers indicated that they did not have a clear or very strong personal opinion about it. More generally, by using a representative sample (also for the 'open', qualitative question), the 2010 consultation was able to give voice to the silent majority of the population, which is quite happy with or at least not particularly bothered by public service broadcasting and does not have strong, specific opinions about it. This makes for a much more tempered – albeit sometimes pedestrian – view on a topic like this which is so charged with controversy in public debate.

### **Towards mixed methods?**

To summarise the above, we could state that open questions have the advantage of letting respondents answer 'in their own words', but the disadvantage is that some strong voices and discursive themes tend to get disproportionate attention. This confirms the importance of a random and representative sample, at least when the research aim is to chart opinions across the population. While the overall tone, in our survey data, was quite positive and supportive of the public broadcasting objectives and results, in the open question particular points of criticism were more salient.

The advantages and drawbacks of quantitative and qualitative approaches have, of course, been discussed extensively before and elsewhere (for a good overview, see Bryman 2004). Therefore, in this final part of the article, I reflect on the advantages of a mixed method approach, showing how it may make us aware of the shortcomings of each individual approach and allow us to strengthen our findings. While some argue that the ontological and epistemological principles underlying both approaches are radically different – and thus hard to combine – there is another way to look at it. Quantitative, large scale approaches are good at making visible the macro-structures of media use but they do create a sense of determination (audiences predictably varying according to age, gender etc.) and they make for a rather abstract, 'far sighted' view on reality. Qualitative approaches on the contrary, focusing on individual media uses and interpretations, create a sense of audience variation and freedom but they tend to be 'myopic' in not seeing the broader pattern. Combining both approaches helps us to more clearly see the individual differences and motivations underlying aggregate results of quantitative surveys, as well as the socially structured patterns and discourses uniting seemingly individual responses in qualitative research. Viewed in this way, differences between both sets of data are not a problem to be remedied, but rather allow us to see the subject in a different light and to become aware of the necessarily partial and incomplete view generated by each singular approach.

What I propose, in the context of public consultations of PSB, is mixed method or multi-strategy research, where quantitative and qualitative methods are seen as complementary as opposed to the more hierarchical relation implied in triangulation (where one method is used to corroborate the findings of another) or facilitation (where one method is used to help another) (Bryman, 2004: 454). Instead, I think both approaches deserve equal importance, complementing, correcting and also facilitating each-other. More concretely, in this case, the quantitative findings are indispensable for accurately grasping the population's overall attitude towards the public broadcaster as our representative sample also includes the 'silent majority' not heard in public debate. As a result, the general tone is quite moderate and positive, the response to (at least some of) the questions bespeaking contentment or indifference rather than the strong criticism of public broadcasting which is predominant in public and political debate. However, this 'macro', aggregate quantitative view actually hides a great diversity which becomes apparent in the open question. At this 'micro' level, it becomes clear how, for specific users (viewers, listeners) of the VRT, certain values and types of programmes are particularly important. While they are, on the whole, quite pleased with their public broadcaster, they do strongly care about specific issues. Their answers to the open question echo arguments and discourses also present in the public and political debate. In isolation, however, these worried and often critical responses do not accurately represent the general outlook on the VRT. Only by combining both sources of data can we understand the seemingly contradictory combination of praise and criticism. Put succinctly: some people are very critical because they strongly care about public broadcasting.

In future research on Flemish public service media, it would be good to build on those findings. To start, more regular consultations using the same methodologies would be necessary to more systematically track evolving public opinion on the VRT. Despite the attempt made above, it is not self-evident that we should compare findings based on different methods and using different sampling procedures. A replication of the survey, in particular, would generate comparable findings and although the 2010 quantitative survey provided satisfactory results, it should be accompanied by more elaborate qualitative research instead of the limited data gained through the open question. Indeed, the short answers to a single open question did not allow to explore the complexity, inconsistencies and ambivalences of individual views, which normally is an asset of qualitative research. In the future, in-depth-interviews and focus groups as well as more innovative methods may be used to complement the quantitative findings, as exemplified by the elaborate consultations supporting BBC policies (see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/>). However, keeping in mind the budget restrictions of a smaller region such as Flanders, a simple combination of quantitative survey and qualitative in depth interviews may be a good start. Limited qualitative research (for instance a few focus groups) may be done beforehand to track relevant issues and thus to facilitate the survey, but it would be logical to do most of the qualitative research after the survey. Not only would this allow to discuss, further explore and explain some of the patterns identified in the survey; the quantitative survey

could also facilitate the process of sampling. For the interviews, selecting a purposive sample with a varied social background and corresponding to the clusters and profiles identified in the quantitative survey seems advisable, as both sets of data may then be linked. These qualitative data may help us to really understand how actual media users look upon public service media, which vocabularies they use to discuss it, and how their views on different topics are connected and possibly contradictory.

Nevertheless, and as mentioned before, in isolation such qualitative research may be misleading. While an open qualitative consultation like the one undertaken in 2005 is useful to track issues that are high on the public's agenda, it is absolutely necessary to control their prevalence across the wider population before policy decisions are being made, to avoid minority opinions to dominate public debate. Certainly in the charged political debate about PSB where many claim to speak for 'the people', it is important to get some idea of the actual constituency such points of view represent. For instance, in spite of the dominant discourse pleading for public broadcasting to distinguish itself from its commercial competitors, it is interesting to note that Flemings massively asked for more humour, both on television (46%) and on radio (40.9%). Only film topped this, more than half of the respondents (51.1%) asking for more of it. These are both categories of entertainment, traditionally associated with commercial broadcasting and not categories any other voice in public debate pleaded for. Similarly, despite the often-heard criticism that public service broadcasting leans too much towards infotainment, most Flemings actually wanted accessible and even entertaining information programmes. When explicitly asked to choose, 62.6% thought the VRT could use a light tone in its information programmes as opposed to 37.4% who thought a serious tone was necessary. While 53.2% thought that information programmes should pay more attention to serious issues such as politics and economics, quite a large group (46.8%) actually thought they should pay more attention to light news and trivia. At least in the eyes of the Flemish public, public broadcasting seems to strike a good balance between its different duties and audiences.

To conclude, it is amply clear that both quantitative and qualitative approaches have their strengths and limitations and that only by combining them may we begin to understand some of the complexity and seeming contradictions in audience expectations and responses to public broadcasting. Some respondents are very attached to it but at the same time very critical. Others are not very bothered by it and are actually quite indifferent. Both the quantitative and the qualitative findings also disclose a huge variation in expectations, which is partly socially structured according to gender, age, education, etc., some groups actually asking the exact opposite of others. A combination of qualitative and quantitative research may help to structure and understand this multiplicity. Ultimately, however, it also discloses the difficulty of the public broadcasting value of universality: with a limited amount of channels and media, it is not possible to please let alone bring together all audiences with their individual tastes and preoccupations. Finding a good balance between different audience expectations as well as between the public and other stakeholders is one of the continuing challenges confronting contemporary public media.

Finally, it is worth considering the potential usefulness for and impact on policy-making of such research. Looking back at the uptake of the results of the 2010 public consultation in policy-making, it is fair to say that the results were used but they did not have a huge or even substantial impact. They were meant to support the advice of the 'Sectorraad Media', an advisory board with university specialists and (primarily) stakeholders, to the minister of media. Therefore, the results of the survey could not be widely spread and publicly debated (although they were 'leaked' to the main Flemish newspaper *De Standaard* during the negotiation of the management contract). Instead, the results of our study were incorporated, together with those of the parallel stakeholder consultation, in a general advice to the minister. Needless to say, as this advice was to be given by a board also containing representatives of private stakeholders/competitors, it was a compromise so only some findings were included (see Van den Bulck and Stevens, 2012; Donders and Raats, 2012). The minister herself also used our findings directly in her policy-making (Lieten, 2010). However, as is often the case with policy-oriented research, each can take from the data what they want. Particularly in quantitative research, it is possible to isolate some findings and numbers and to present them as support for a particular policy. Combining quantitative with qualitative research may not solve this problem, but more elaborate qualitative 'framing' of the findings may make it harder to isolate and therefore possibly misinterpret them. Quantitative findings are more appealing to policy-makers, as they tend to be more clear-cut, but they seem also more prone to strategic (mis)use. Therefore, for future public consultations, a more ample time-frame also allowing for qualitative research and the integration of the findings into a coherent report would be advisable for the view of 'the public' to be more centrally and completely integrated in broadcasting policies.

### **Biographical note:**

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**Notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> This research was executed by Alexander Dhoest (main supervisor), Hilde Van den Bulck and Heidi Vandebosch (co-supervisors) and Myrte Dierckx (research assistant) in 2010. For the full (Dutch-language) report, see Dhoest, Van den Bulck, Vandebosch & Dierckx, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Translation from Dutch by the author.

<sup>3</sup> The TwoStep cluster analysis in SPSS was used, which automatically calculates the optimal amount of clusters. To calculate the clusters, trade off questions about public service values and questions about the relative importance of culture, education, information and entertainment were used, beside the most important socio-demographic variables (gender, age and level of education).