

**"PUBLIC POLICY TOWARDS TV
BROADCASTING IN THE NETHERLANDS"**

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N° 90/62/EP

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Printed at INSEAD
Fontainebleau, France

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June 27, 1990

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1 PUBLIC POLICY TOWARDS TV BROADCASTING IN THE NETHERLANDS

In the Netherlands, broadcasting has always been a public-service monopoly, operated by the NOS.

Air time has been shared among eight broadcasting "associations" which were distinguished along political, social and religious lines, reflecting the traditional **verzuiling** ("pillarisation") of Dutch society. This complex system was intended to promote and protect the rich cultural pluralism of the country. Some view the current broadcast "association" system as an outdated relic from the past, inefficient, not able to compete and alienated from viewer interests. On the other hand, the "association" system might offer the opportunity to realize a multichannel competitive system on a small scale tailored to the size of the Netherlands. It might also offer an opportunity to represent the interests of a diversity of real special-interest viewer segments.

After the entry of RTL-Véronique, competition for audience share has forced the public channels to start rethinking their programme strategies. With the introduction of this entirely advertising funded network, whose programming resembles that of the "associations", the system of undifferentiated licence fee subsidization of public TV has also become debatable.

The discussion of the financing of TV broadcasting, provides the right time to think through the principles of TV programming. Therefore, in this report, the following TV programming aspects are looked at in some detail:

- . programme quality, defined here as the intensity of preference that viewers attach to a programme (Cpt.2)
- . programme variety, the possibility of choice between different general-interest-programmes (Cpt.3), and its relation with programme quality
- . influence of number of channels on quality and variety, possible role of the broadcast "associations" (Cpt.4)
- . influence of a country's size on the obtainable quality and variety level (cpt.5)
- . special-interest-programming, the offering of targeted programmes to smaller segments (Cpt.6)
- . positive externalities such as minority, innovative and locally produced programming (Cpt.7).

Recommendation financing TV broadcasting

Based on the analysis of these TV programming aspects, the following could be recommended:

- . A mixed financing of TV programming through both advertising funding and the allocation of licence fees among all networks and "associations" according to audience shares and liking scores
- . The introduction of new channels based on the weighting of the importance of variety and quality
- . A system with channel sharing "associations" in the role of "editorial staffs" to provide additional variety
- . The subsidization of some specific programme characteristics.

2 QUALITY PROGRAMMING FROM INCREASED COMPETITION AND FROM THE DISTRIBUTION OF LICENCE FEES BASED ON CONSUMER VALUE

Concept of quality

We will here define the "quality" of a programme as the average intensity of preference attached by the viewers (consumer value) to that programme . Quality in this context doesn't address "what is good for the people", so it could be quite far from its traditional, paternalistic meaning.

Of particular interest is the report of the Peacock committee (july 1986), which discusses the funding of TV broadcasting in the UK. Quoting the Peacock committee: " ...if they appear content with a diet of manufactured food, then we can support all sorts of activities designed to enlarge their taste and inform them of the merits of other foods. But if after all these efforts they still make for junk food, that is their privilege in a free society."

The following programmes have higher quality because general audience prefers them: 4 camera versus 1 camera recorded talk shows, local drama versus foreign import, and cup finals versus regional soccer games.

Competition is likely to increase quality.

Without competition a network's audience size will be largely independent of programme quality offered. This results from the fact that total audience is more or less

fixed. To check the influence of programming on total audience, one can look at both the effect of programming changes and the introduction of new channels.

"It is well established that the total television audience at any time of day, allowing for weekday and weekend differences and seasonal factors, changes little: the average deviation of total TV audience (UK) is 5 percent" [Source: Menneer]

"The expansion of programming from 4 or 5 to 22 channels on cable did not do much to increase overall consumption (increase less than 8%)" [Source: Schultz]

After introduction (in Belgium), VTM took 25% of the total audience, but total viewing time remained constant.

Apparently individuals go through two steps: the first being the decision of **whether** or not to watch, and the second step being of **what** to watch !

With competition, providing a higher quality than competing programmes will thus result in a larger audience share (of the fixed total pie). Therefore faced with competition, a network is likely to increase quality if the increase in advertising revenue resulting from a higher audience share is higher than the increase in programme costs.

"In spite of the exceptionally narrow range, however, the qualities of direction and performance (in the US) are high. (...). The news programmes too, are generally of high quality"

"(From the emergence of commercial channels), it has been suggested that RAI has been prompted to "break out of the inertia induced by monopoly" and to respond with some extremely good new programmes." [Source: Peacock]

The optimal quality level will be such that marginal revenues and costs are equal.

Nevertheless a quality equilibrium, based on competition for advertising revenues only, will be suboptimal

At first glance, a competitive audience market financed by advertising would tend to cater to the viewers' needs, because advertising revenues are directly dependent of audience attracted. Attracting an audience is conditional upon offering attractive programmes. But the results are suboptimal for two reasons:

If viewers' and advertisers' interests are conflicting, broadcasters will tend to take in account the needs of the advertisers only. As result "independent programming" is difficult. An example is the possible conflict of interests between advertisers and viewers on programme content, e.g. a programme on the dangers of advertising. The Peacock committee says: "There could be a risk that controversial drama, critical consumer programmes and satirical programmes which challenge conventional attitudes and prejudice would not be supported by advertisers". Also the general public attaches high value to the prohibition of commercialism for some programme categories (no "Coca Cola news").

Furthermore, viewers' might be willing to pay for an even higher quality than offered by purely advertising funded programming. For example, the dubbing of a movie into a country's own language might not be commercially feasible from advertising revenues generated alone, but might be if viewers were willing to pay for it too.

To further increase quality, pay-TV or licence fees or a mixture of these can be used

If the value that viewers attach to the programmes they view, could be "tapped" and transferred to broadcasters, a situation could be created where broadcasters will take viewers' needs in account too. So a further increase in viewer value could be possible if consumers would pay for quality.

The Peacock committee:

" ..under an advertising-supported system, people can only express their preferences either by watching or not watching a particular programme, whereas the value to all viewers is measured by their willingness to pay which measures the intensity of their preference"

"(A pure advertising system) may lead to programmes being shown because they are numerically popular, even though programmes that are less numerically popular but more intensively demanded are not shown"

"British broadcasting should move towards a sophisticated market system based on consumer sovereignty. That is a system which recognizes that viewers and listeners are the best ultimate judges of their own interests, which they can best satisfy if they have the option of purchasing the broadcasting services they acquire from as many alternative sources of supply as possible".

Mixtures of two generic approaches are used in different countries to distribute the value of viewing programmes to broadcasters: Pay-TV and Licence fees.

Possible ways to ask actual viewers to pay for the programmes they watch (Pay-TV),

are meter systems (Greece), subscription (Fr: Canal Plus, NL: Filmnet), or voluntary subscription (US: PBS). Subscription offers viewers the possibility to express their preferences and interests through a system of direct payment. Exclusion of non-payers is possible. Although the technology is available, in the short term costs might make pay-per-channel / pay-per-programme not feasible [Source:Peacock].

Licence fees, though widely used, risk the danger of unfair competition. Licence fees are collected from every owner of a TV-set. For the viewer it is the price he pays for watching TV regardless whether he watches public or private channels. Nevertheless the licence fees are generally distributed to the public networks only, which can create a situation of unfair competition.

A possible suggestion would be to allocate licence fees according to the size of the audience times the liking score

One could suggest simulating the distribution of viewer value by allocating the licence fee budget among all (public and private and foreign) broadcasters for all programmes. The amount given per programme would be dependent on **audience size times liking score**. Advantages are:

- . The licence fee will be a fee for the total value of watching TV (all channels). this makes it reasonable to link the fee to the ownership of a TV-set
- . Viewers' individual preferences (liking scores) are weighted in the allocation of subsidies
- . In case of a lower yearly liking score average, not all the budget will have to be allocated. So the total audience will pay for actual overall audience evaluation
- . Networks are likely to further increase the quality of their programmes until marginal programme costs are equal to marginal advertising revenues plus consumer value
- . Selling audiences to advertisers is still possible, and its value can be fairly weighted to viewer value
- . It will not be necessary to distinguish between public and private broadcasting.

In cases where viewers' and advertisers' interests are conflicting (independent or non commercial programming), this will be expressed in the liking score. Networks will have to weight licence fee income and advertisers' pressure. Both groups' interests will thus be represented.

Possibility of price discrimination. In a licence fee system, those who watch TV less, pay the same amount as those who watch very often. There is no price discrimination based on total viewing time. This is also the case with pay-TV: every individual pays for the possibility to watch and not for actual watching. Only a pay-per-programme system makes payment linked to actual viewing time possible.

3 VARIETY PROGRAMMING RESULTING FROM TRYING TO SERVE DIFFERENT BROAD AUDIENCE SEGMENTS MIGHT WELL BE VERY LIMITED

Variety programming can be defined as providing a choice between different general-interest-programme categories

The Peacock committee states that variety will decrease with competition for advertising funds: " (...) rivalry between two systems even partly dependent on advertising is likely to intensify the ratings war and so reduce the effective range of choice open to viewers and listeners."

"output (in the US) is biased towards what entertains, what pleases immediately, what requires little viewer effort, and what does not strain at the leashes of familiarity and acceptability. There are no arts programmes (..), documentaries are becoming obsolete, current affairs programmes appear only at weekends or in off peak time."

"As to the range of programmes, the pattern differs country by country. In general, the greater the amount of advertising the narrower the range of programming. Those systems most dependent on advertising (such as the US) concentrate primarily on entertainment and cater less for information, the arts and minority interests. Those systems most dependent on income from a licence fee (as in Sweden) on the other hand are less sensitive to mass demand and more ready to cater for minority interests." [Source: Leeds Report]

But in these examples the offering of special-interest-programmes is addressed instead of the offering of a range of different kind of general-interest-programmes. We will analyze here what could increase variety defined as the choice between different general-interest-programmes such as, for example, action drama, sitcoms, movies, comedies, sports, information and news.

People prefer variety

Most viewers appear to watch a broad range of programmes and to appreciate the opportunity to have a choice:

"The most important motive for subscribing to cable TV was the desire to be able to select more programs to one's taste from a more extensive range."

"The available findings suggest that viewers who watch all types of programmes dominate numerically over the selective viewer of entertainment" [Source: Schultz]

"The appetite for a wide range of programmes is consistent across all sectors of the population and does not vary according to age, social class, geographical location or any other demographical variable" [Source: Barnett:Ehrenberg]

But programme variety resulting from trying to serve different segments might well be limited

Why would networks schedule a show when the competitor schedules a movie, why not a movie too ? As total audience is fixed, variety programming cannot be used to increase total audience. **Thus variety programming will be sought after only if it increases audience share, or if it increases liking score.**

If viewer segments would exist, one could use segment preferences to compensate differences in programme attractiveness. In that case, audience share could be increased through scheduling a different programme category (offering variety). For example:

Network I schedules a comedy. Network II has the choice between an action drama or a comedy too. Both are of lower quality. Nevertheless, if Network II schedules the action drama, it might attract that proportion of the total audience that prefers action drama even though it is of lower quality.

In this case the liking score will be higher too. In providing variety, segment preferences for different programme categories are fulfilled. This will increase consumer value.

Thus, the incentive to provide variety depends on the existence of general-interest viewer segments. However viewer segments appear hard to distinguish. Different social classes, men and women, but also age groups (with exception of young children) and members of different broadcast "associations" **all watch not only the full range of programme types but also roughly an equal mix !**

Social classes (UK,1985)

	Light enter.	Light Drama	Films	Sport	Drama etc.	Info	News
ABC1	18%	20%	7%	9%	9%	20%	11%
C2DE	17%	22%	9%	9%	7%	20%	10%

[source: Bigman]

Male/Female (Netherlands,1987)

	Info	Art	Drama	Enter.	Sport	Youth
Man	30%	1%	32%	14%	12%	7%
Woman	32%	1%	34%	15%	6%	8%

[source: KLO]

It could be argued that in a case of limited choice at every given moment of time, everyone is forced to watch the same mix of programme categories. So viewer behaviour could be undifferentiated, although preferences are. Segments might emerge when true choice is offered. US research has tried to quantify the differences in segment preferences between general-interest-programme categories such as action drama, psychological drama, comedies, movies and sports programmes. The characteristics of the eight segments were: male/female, old/young, high/low education. The results indicate than differences in segment preferences can be found, but are far less important than average quality differences between programmes (with an exception of sport programmes) [Source:Rust].

Because broad segment preferences seem less important than programme quality differences, in scheduling strategy, variety programming will not be very important. It will be more important to focus on scheduling the highest quality at prime time (regardless of programme category). Total audience is sharply peaked around prime time, and almost all demographic groups appear to have the same prime time. Furthermore, networks will try to mismatch starting times of programmes, thereby decreasing channel switching and thus effectively limiting programme choice (variety). Research indicates that the attraction of watching a subsequent programme on the same channel is on average three times higher than switching to an already started, higher quality programme on another channel.

Concluding, variety programming as result of competition between networks is expected to be limited.

4 AN INCREASE OF NUMBER OF CHANNELS WILL INCREASE VARIETY BUT MIGHT DECREASE QUALITY

Positive effect of increasing number of channels on variety

Assuming that networks will provide variety within their own schedule to maintain audience flow during the evening, the increase in the number of channels will increase the **probability** of choice (i.e. variety) at any given moment.

But although competition through the introduction of new channels will increase quality, a larger number of channels decreases the average quality level

Every new entrant will always attract at least a small share of the total audience. As result the attainable quality level for the others will decrease.

With the number of channels allowed, the government thus defines the quality level of TV programming: very few channels will make broadcasters insensitive to viewers interests, too many will fragment the audience. A very rough estimate indicates that, in the Netherlands, more than three channels will already effect the total programme quality level:

Rough estimate of
Share of population that has to watch the
programme in order to cover the production costs
(assuming 50%-50% advertising and licence fee financing)

Drama (own production)	13%
Entertainment (own production)	9%
News/information (own production)	6%
Foreign import	2%
Population viewing at prime time	30%

The choice whether to support a fourth or fifth channel aiming at the general interest, should be made weighting the importance of average programme quality and of variety offered. For example, there might be a choice between three channels showing own productions, or five, with two showing own productions and the others scheduling imports only.

Opportunities to use broadcast "associations".

The eight "associations" together share two channels. Every evening, each channel is dedicated to one "association". This system can increase both quality and variety:

- If the broadcast "associations" receive advertising income and licence fees according to their own audience shares and liking scores, competition would be increased without increasing the number of channels
- The associations, together having access to more than one channel, can schedule variety between their two channels
- A further advantage of the current channel sharing of the "associations" is the increase of programme variety offered between different days of the week. Programme choice of both imports and own productions is more an art than a science. So, different "editorial staffs", even when all focus on the same general audience's interest, are likely to compose very different programme portfolios.

Nevertheless attention should be given to the danger of complexity costs and foregone economies of scale as a result of networks using less than one full channel. This danger is more apparent in production, purchasing and management than in foregone channel loyalty.

Substantial economies of scale can be achieved in joint production through, for example, co-ownership of equipment and matching of production schedules. Also, the "associations" should avoid fragmenting purchasing power with regard to the buying of foreign imports. Finally, costs could be saved through overhead rationalization.

On the other hand the danger of loss of channel loyalty seems to be limited. If channel loyalty were important, channel sharing of different networks would result in a less clear channel image, thus lower channel loyalty, and thus lower audience share. Nevertheless, what may have been considered loyalty to a channel, may only have represented viewer behaviour in a one- or two-channel environment. Indications of lack of channel loyalty are lack of programme loyalty, the number of channels watched per month and the number of channels zapped through before choosing one programme:

"People seem as likely to prefer another programme next week as to prefer the same"

Repeat viewing for Adults	
Viewers of a programme	100%
Watching TV a week later	48%
Watching same programme then	28%

[Source: Ehrenberg]

Percentage of TV homes watching in one month				
	Belgium	Germany	Holland	Switzerland
1 channel	0	1	0	1
2 channels	2	1	10	2
3 channels	3	3	14	4
4 channels	5	4	19	8
5 channels	17	13	21	10
6 channels	25	17	15	17
7 channels	23	21	8	21
8 channels	9	17	7	13
9 channels	7	6	3	10
10 channels	6	9	2	5
11 channels	1	3	0	5
12+ channels	2	3	0	3

[Source: RSL/Music Box 1986]

"A recent study by TBI's sister publication, Channels, suggests that more than 40% of American viewers look at all or most channels before selecting a programme to watch"

[Source TBI]

As channel loyalty seems limited, there will be no danger of losing audience, when different broadcast "associations" programme different evenings on the same channel.

To increase variety, without losing economies of scale, an organization could be envisioned similar to that of publishing conglomerates offering a range of titles. In that case production, purchasing and management would be centralized and, at the same time, several independent editorial staffs could be housed. Network management would allocate air time to the different editorial staffs, based on performance measures such as segment, or general, audience share and liking scores.

Channel scarcity

To increase competition, space for additional channels might be needed. Unlike most other European countries, in the Netherlands some 75% of households are cabled. So short term channel scarcity doesn't have to be a critical issue.

5 FINALLY THE QUALITY AND VARIETY OBTAINABLE IN A SMALL COUNTRY MIGHT STILL BE QUITE LIMITED.

Licence fee income should represent the total value that viewers attach to watching TV. It is therefore dependent on the number of viewers. So, total advertising revenues **and** total licence fee income are dependent on the size of the total audience. Therefore in big countries a higher quality level can be reached.

Population	Own production	Break-even <u>population</u> share
Wallonia (25% Netherlands)		105%
Netherlands		26%
UK (4x Netherlands)		7%
	(on advertising revenues only)	

As result smaller countries will be more sensitive to the introduction of new channels also.

6 SPECIAL-INTEREST-PROGRAMMING THROUGH SUCCESSFUL TARGETING PROGRAMMES OF PREMIUM VALUE TO DEDICATED SPECIAL-INTEREST VIEWER SEGMENTS

Special-interest-programming should not be confused with providing variety. Variety is the possibility of choice between general-interest-programmes. Special-interest-programming aims at (small) dedicated viewer segments.

Special-interest-programmes come in two flavours: programmes of a special topic, e.g. art programmes, and programmes within a specific context, e.g. Christian talk shows. Because of their specific character these programmes contain a premium value to a dedicated audience. In a situation of channel scarcity, the audience of special-interest-programmes contains a substantial group of "next worst option" viewers. These are "forced" to see something they don't like at all (by definition a special interest programme excludes their interest). An increase of the number of channels will thus decrease the audience share but strongly increase the liking score of special-interest-programmes.

The suggested combination of advertising and licence fee funding has a important benefit with regard to special interest programming: "user trial" will be much higher than in the case of pay-TV.

Minority programmes substantially watched by all viewers

"40 out of 50 million people choose to watch several low-rating programmes on BBC2 each week, for an average of two hours each (10% total viewing time), and well over 30 million dip into channel 4 for an hour or more (5% viewing time)" [source: Ehrenberg]

Information/entertainment viewers (BRD)

"Panel surveys show (in Germany) that viewers who watch a lot of commercial television do not shun the educational programs on public television, very often watching the main news as well as the business and economic news programs" [source: Schultz]

Use of broadcast "associations".

Specific context segments have historically been the basis for the Dutch broadcast system. Some of the "associations" can still be viewed as representing a specific viewer segment. Most "associations" nevertheless, have gradually shifted towards the general taste. Maybe, the Dutch broadcast associations will want to extend from providing general interest variety only to catering special interest viewer segments as well. In that case, segmentation tools will be needed to link consumer needs and viewing behaviour. In this respect broadcasting networks will face the same challenge as other consumer good industries.

The success of special interest programming will be very sensitive to good segment definition and segment preference understanding. The pay-off might be both in terms of high audience liking score and premium advertising value per viewer.

7 MINORITY/EXPERIMENTAL/LOCAL PRODUCED PROGRAMMING THROUGH TARGETED SUBSIDIZATION

Some programmes have significant additional benefits which viewers themselves support, but cannot be provided through a market place. These situations result from the following more or less general characteristics: value of integration, network value and the value of R&D. (The source of the following quotes is Barnett.)

First, there is a cost to society of non integration. Non integration might cause unrest, misunderstanding and lost opportunities. Therefore, programming enhancing integration of

society has an economic benefit to society as a whole. In this respect the following programme characteristics could be subsidized:

- . **Minority programming.** "Programmes should be available for a range of minority groups, whether cultural, demographic or interest. These programmes should not be relegated to the margin of schedules but be easily accessible."
- . **Geographic universality.** "Television programmes, and in particular those of national significance, should be universally available to viewers, including those in topographically awkward regions."
- . **Regional programming.** "Some programming should be available which reflects differences in local character, and ensure that a nation's cultural product is not dominated by one or two centres."

Within society, shared identity, belonging to a group contains value: People attach value to being Dutch, and sharing a common, own language. However, the value of speaking Dutch depends on others speaking Dutch too. To support this so called "network" value the following programme characteristics could be subsidized:

- . **Cultural identification.** "Programmes should reflect and enhance a country's richness and identity, whether it be the transmission of major sports events or the creation of dramatic fiction in recognizable local settings."
- . **Local production.** "The common language should be supported".

Finally, if its costs are not shared but benefits spread easily and freely to other networks, "Research & Development" can't be provided through the marketplace. This would support:

- . **Innovation.** "Programme-makers should sometimes seek to lead, rather than follow audiences tastes. Experimentation should be encouraged, extending the boundaries of popular taste."

Subsidization mechanism

These programme characteristics could be subsidized from a dedicated fund. This fund does not necessarily have to be part of the licence fee income, as these programme characteristics benefit non-viewers as well. A government body might be best fit to allocate money, for the following reasons:

- . Funds will be limited, so conflicts of interest between networks might arise
- . Both public and commercial networks should get the opportunity to apply for

subsidies

- . Finally subsidy criteria should be as clear as possible, but will inevitably be to some extent subjective.

* * *

The Dutch broadcasting scene might provide opportunities to enhance viewer welfare through linking audience evaluation and licence fee income, promoting the introduction of new channels and subsidizing specific programme characteristics. This will change the current number, focus and responsibility of the broadcast "associations" profoundly. Careful evaluation of necessary steps and ideal time path will in that case be necessary.

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