INTRODUCTION

The larger doctoral project of which this paper is part of, deals with some questions about the future of European public service broadcasting (PSB). Since the 1980s, this future has been the subject of much debate in all European countries and many public broadcasting institutions underwent major changes and reforms to deal with increasing competition. The current and possible future discussion about PSB centres around three main issues: legitimacy, role or mission and funding. There has certainly been a shift in some of the traditional rationales for public broadcasting. As the audiovisual media have evolved, so too have the arguments in favour of public broadcasting changed. And this question will become even more prominent as television might be facing its biggest technological change yet. If digital television is changing the nature of the medium (as some authors proclaim), the question arises if it doesn’t change the nature of television corporations as well, and thus of public television (and in extension broadcasting) corporations. Immediately, another major issue pops up: what role can/will/should public broadcasting play in the future audiovisual, or should we say multimedia, environment. Is digitalisation an opportunity for public broadcasters to find a new (and perhaps lasting) remit or is it more a threat to some traditional rationales for public broadcasting? Finally, if public broadcasting indeed has a part to play in the future, how will we keep funding it? Will commercial funding become even more important for public broadcasters, as it already is in many countries?

These questions will be addressed eventually, but first some basic data are required about the current state of public broadcasting in Europe. Much research has been done about programming on public radio and television: how it differs from private broadcasters’ programming, how it changed over the years. Much has been written about the roles public broadcasters should or could play, about their importance in the past and their significance in the (digital?) future. Strangely enough, though, the actual official, legally established missions and tasks of public broadcasting rarely come to the fore, certainly not in a comparative way. The absence of legally established mission statements in many studies about PSB can be partially explained by the relative newness

1 I would like to acknowledge my fellow-members of the Short Lake Think Tank for their continuous support, feedback and coffee.
of this phenomenon. A former deputy director-general of the BBC, Oliver Whitley, said in 1974: “Neither the broadcasting organization nor the public in this country really know what the objectives of the broadcasting organizations are supposed to be, because these objectives have never been properly and officially defined (…) If you reflect that broadcasting is the medium which everyone nowadays seems to regard as chief public-impression former, is it not very strange, indeed rather alarming, that Parliament, which decides who should provide these uniquely influential services, apparently has nothing of practical significance to say about their main purposes?” (Cited in: Burns, 1977: 56). This illustrates perfectly how much attention was paid in the past to determining tasks for public broadcasting corporations. And we should observe that in Britain, several successive Committees did define the mission of the BBC in more detail than Whitley suggests. In most European countries public broadcasters had little more than a general mission to offer information, education, culture and entertainment with only a few specified tasks added, usually concerning the informative task of public broadcasting (e.g. impartial and/or balanced information). But when private broadcasting emerged and subsequently many public broadcasters had a crisis on their hands, the question was finally asked what should be the task of public broadcasting. Defining broadcasters’ roles, therefore, is a relative new phenomenon that emerged after the liberalisation era of the 1980s.

In recent years, official mission statements have been increasingly important in the EU’s debate on public service broadcasting. In November 2001, the European Commission issued a statement on public funding of broadcasting. The Commission (2001: 5) accepts the special treatment given by governments to PSB institution, since “there is no other service that at the same time has access to such a wide sector of the population, provides it with so much information and content, and by doing so conveys and influences both individual and public opinion”. Although the Commission recognizes the importance of public service broadcasting, it is also aware of the adverse effect it may have on ‘fair’ competition within the broadcasting market. Government support can, therefore, only be justified when several conditions are met, such as transparancy in budget allocation, a strict division between public service and non-public service activities and a clear official definition of what the mission of public service broadcasting is in each Member State. The States are free (at least to a large extent) in defining the missions of their public broadcasting corporations, but it is clear that the Commission will not settle for missions marred by vagueness and ambiguity, as has often been the case in the past.

A comparative study of PSB mission statements gives us an idea of the ambitions public broadcasters have or legislators attribute to them, of what separates public from private broadcasting – at least in theory. Mission statements can not be discarded since they articulate the true, perhaps ideal, nature of public service broadcasting and act as a beacon that public broadcasters can aim for. Granted, the answer to the question what public broadcasters are supposed to strive for, is not in the least sufficient to determine the place of public broadcasters within society. And ignoring the official mission statements would not at all be undeserved, since the reality of what public broadcasters are actually doing can be quite different from what the legislators want them to do. Another reason to study official mission statements is given to us by Foster when he addresses the issue of public broadcasters’ efficiency. Foster (1992: 27) says: “In the
absence of clear objectives and responsibilities, it is difficult for governments to
determine whether or not public broadcasters are performing effectively. Likewise, it is
difficult for broadcasters to demonstrate they are meeting their side of a bargain in the
absence of any specific agreement between them and the government”. A study of PSB-
mission statements, therefore, seems a crucial element in determining public
broadcaster’s efficiency.

We should mention that we assume that radio and television is still, above all, a national
phenomenon, despite the presence of many international channels and the obvious flow
of television programs throughout the world. Humphreys (1996: 2) argues “media
systems can be expected to vary significantly across countries because politics and
policy have made a difference”. Head (1985: 299) has also linked the role and task of a
(public) broadcaster to the political system in which it is active: “Which function comes
to the fore depends on the short run on intent, treatment, and audience response; in the
long run, it depends on the political context in which the system operates”. And just as a
quick glance at the political systems of the EU Member States would let one think that
they are basically all the same, so do the missions of the public broadcasters in those
same countries look quite similar as well. Only a more in-depth analysis reveals some
striking nuances, which can often be attributed to political or societal differences
between the EU countries.

THE STUDY

The paper at hand presents the preliminary results of a comparative analysis about the
current role of public broadcasting corporations of 14 Member States of the European
Union, Luxembourg being the only EU country without a public broadcasting body.
Such an analysis proved to be far from easy as many obstacles arose.

First and foremost, we face the question of what is a public service broadcaster. Many
broadcasters share that label without sharing many (if indeed any) common
characteristics. The practice of PSB varies considerably. State ownership might be a
common feature, but even this obvious criterion doesn’t fit. Most European public
broadcasters do have a direct ownership link with the State. In the case of Sweden and
Italy, however, the corporations are owned by a State-owned foundation, thus creating
an indirect ownership link. The PSB that always poses problems for non-British media
researchers is of course Channel Four, the only privately owned public service
broadcaster in Europe. Channel 4 also creates problems when looking at funding of
public broadcasters, since it is entirely funded by advertising. Other European PSB’s are
at least partially funded by the government, although there is, again, a great variety in
the level of government funding, ranging from very high percentages of government
funding (e.g. in the UK and Scandinavian countries), over a steady balance between
government and commercial funding (Belgium, France, Netherlands, Austria, Ireland)
to a very low percentage of government funding which is the case in Spain. The level of
regulation is another inadequate criterion, since the very limited regulatory framework
of the Danish public broadcaster TV2 is nowhere near as comprehensive as the BBC’s
Royal Charter or France Télévision’s ‘cahier des charges’. Finally, there are public
service broadcasters on different geographical levels, ranging from national PSB’s over regional ones to even local public broadcasters. For this study, we have only looked at publicly owned (direct or indirect) public service broadcasters at the national level. The regional level was only taken into account in two cases: Belgium and Germany. In the first case we opted for the two main ‘regional’ public broadcasters, since there are no national (i.e. Belgian) public broadcasting corporations. German public broadcasting is also regionally structured, although in a different sense, and operates as a national network of regional public broadcasters. Besides looking at the general mission of both national networks ARD and ZDF, we have also included four regional broadcasters that are part of the national network.

Secondly, there was the language problem, which more or less led to the exclusion of Greece in the data. Since only primary sources were analysed, most texts were analysed in their native language. Luckily, some authorities/corporations provide comprehensive English translations or brief summaries, which proved to be very helpful in the case of Finland. Unfortunately, Greek primary sources on public broadcasting seem only to be available in the Greek language, which excluded the Greek public broadcasting corporations ERT from this analysis. For the sake of intelligibility, we will often quote or refer to the English translations in this paper, even if the original texts were used in the analysis.

A third problem is the fact that statements about broadcasters’ roles are scattered over many texts and documents. In some cases, legal texts are very clear on broadcasters’ missions; in other cases licenses or agreements with the authorities provide the necessary data and sometimes we had to rely on sources from the corporations itself, i.e. their annual reports. It proved to be quite a task to gather as many sources as possible. And the heterogeneity of the sources found, can probably explain some of the differences in the mission statements. Legal texts tend to be more vague than licences and mission statements in annual reports can be an interpretation of a legally defined mission instead of the actual mission.

Also, some broadcasting corporations have very detailed mission statements, others are kept very vague. Hellman (1999: 168-169) noted this before when he compared Finnish and British broadcasting regulations. The YLE Law which regulates the Finnish public broadcaster contains about 17 sections typed out on 2 pages, the BBC, on the other hand, is regulated by both its Royal Charter (25 sections on 9 pages) and its Licence and Agreement (18 sections on 16 pages). Therefore, some public broadcasters feature more prominently in this paper than others, simply because they have more elaborate missions.

Despite these problems, we have managed to analyse dozens of official documents and compare mission statements and tasks of the following public broadcasting institutions (or in some cases, as in Germany and the Netherlands, the partnership of different regional or ideological public corporations).
Austria
- Österreichischen Rundfunk (ÖRF): radio and television

Belgium
- Vlaamse Radio- en Televisie-omroep (VRT) for the Dutch-speaking Community: radio and television
- Radio-Télévision Belge de la Communauté Française (RTBF) for the French-speaking Community: radio and television

Denmark
- Danmarks Radio (DR): radio and television
- TV2 Danmark: television

Finland
- Yleisradio (YLE): radio and television

France
- France Télévision: television
- Radio France: radio

Germany
- ARD (Das Erste) and Zweites Deutches Fernsehen (ZDF) and 4 of the ‘Landesrundfunkanstalten’ (regional public broadcasting corporations) that are part of the ARD-network:
  - Mitteldeutschen Rundfunk (MDR): radio and television
  - Norddeutscher Rundfunk (NDR): radio and television
  - Sender Freies Berlin (SFB): radio and television
  - Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR): radio and television

Ireland
- Radio Telefís Éireann (RTE): radio and television

Italy
- Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI): radio and television

Netherlands
- Landelijke Publieke Omroep and most of the licence holders that are part of its network: AVRO, BNN, EO, KRO, NCRV, NOS, NPS, TROS, VARA and VPRO: radio and television

Portugal
- Radiotelevisão Portuguesa (RTP): television
- Radiodifusão Portuguesa (RDP): radio

Spain
- Radio Televisión Española (RTVE): radio and television

Sweden
- Sveriges Television (SVT): television
- Sveriges Radio (SR): radio

United Kingdom
- British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC): radio and television
RESULTS OF THE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

General Remarks

Before discussing the results of the comparative analysis of broadcasters’ mission, it is useful to make some general remarks. A study of documents is hardly sufficient to draw conclusions about the level of freedom a broadcaster enjoys determining its own mission, but what does strike is the concreteness and comprehensiveness of the legally established tasks of some public broadcasters. One might conclude that public broadcasters with detailed legal tasks enjoy a rather limited amount of freedom since they have to operate within such a narrow and concrete framework. The Belgian VRT, for example, has an extensive 4-year agreement with the local government consisting of many, very specific requirements. However, the VRT has, to some extent, established this framework itself. The licence is negotiated with the Minister of Economy and Media and approved by Parliament, but in essence written by the public corporation itself. Thus, a detailed mission does not necessarily mean that the manoeuvring space of the corporation is limited. Public broadcasters who seemingly have a rather limited mission, and thus more freedom to operate are the corporations in Finland, Denmark, Spain or Italy. In the first two cases, we might be inclined to attribute a certain level of freedom to the public broadcaster, but that would not be the case with the latter two. It is well known that the Italian RAI enjoys very little freedom but is indeed very politicised. The overall mission is probably kept limited to allow the political parties – who have more or less divided the three television channels among themselves – to exert more influence on their respective channels. In other words, not legally determining a clearly defined role can be a sign of relative freedom for the public broadcaster, but it can also be a way for politicians to exert even more influence on the corporation.

The requirements of the aforementioned VRT bring us to another point: quantifying tasks. Most public broadcasters have quota of some sorts to meet, usually in the production area (e.g. a share of regional production: 1/3 for the BBC, 55% for SVT). In many cases there are quota for certain program genres. In the Netherlands, for example, 35 per cent of all airtime must be spent on information and education and 25 per cent on culture and arts. Entertainment programs can only make up 25 per cent of any of the public television or radio channel’s output. Another example of such quota can be found in Portugal, where the RTP must spend at least 26 hours of annual television time on theatre, opera or dance. Similar requirements can be found all over Europe. Audience quota, however, are very rare. The Dutch legislator postulates a television share for the public broadcaster of 40 per cent provided the level of competition remains the same. This percentage is not legally binding. The VRT, however, does have to strive to a certain number of listeners and viewers for certain program genres. Moreover, if the VRT does not meet these quantitative criteria, it risks losing its annual 4 per cent raise of government funding. These audience figures are therefore more than just optional targets, but indeed legally binding criteria. With its cultural programs on television, for example, the Flemish public broadcaster must reach weekly 15 per cent of Flemish households; with its educational TV-programs it must reach at least 10 per cent weekly. As a result of that, cultural programs usually deal mostly with popular culture (even
travel shows are taken into account as ‘cultural’ programs) and educational programs as such do not exist anymore, but are replaced by informative and even entertaining programs that contain certain educational elements.

**Democracy**

Public broadcasters are usually awarded certain tasks to reinforce or safeguard the nation’s democracy. In most cases, only a simple reference that the public broadcaster has a role to play within a democratic, pluralistic society suffices, but many legislators have specified certain societal tasks for their public broadcasters. The democratic function is the prime function for the German public broadcasting institutions. In a decision of 1986, the German Constitutional Court spoke of “die essentiellen Funktionen des Rundfunks für die demokratische Ordnung ebenso wie für das kulturelle Leben in der Bundesrepublik” [the essential function of broadcasting for the democratic order as well as for the cultural life in the Federation] (ARD, 2000). Another German feature is the obligation for the public broadcasters to reinforce or even create social cohesion, a sense of togetherness within the country. This task was incorporated into the mission statements of public broadcasters after the Reunification of Germany in 1990.

Within these democratic tasks, there are frequent references to the audience as a voter. A listener and/or viewer should be able to get the kind of information that should enable him to make an informed and conscious choice in times of elections. In other words, public broadcasting must contribute to the creation of a critical and pluralist public opinion, as is stated explicitly in the mission statements of Dutch, German, Italian, Swedish, Finnish and British public broadcasting corporations. Sveriges Television describes its main task as: “to scrutinize authorities, organizations and private firms which exert influence over policy affecting the citizenry” (SVT, 1999a).

Other democratic tasks are:

- Respect for human dignity is required as well in most countries. This seems to be a relatively new mission though, which popped up only recently after some excesses of private broadcasters became visible for all (‘reality’ shows, etc.). Respect for human dignity is now an important part of the missions of public broadcasters in French-speaking Belgium, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Austria and Ireland.

- Promoting the integration of immigrants within society is explicitly mentioned in the mission statement of France Télévision. In other countries, as well, there is a mention of promoting a multicultural society. Especially in those countries where extreme-right parties are active (such as Belgium or Italy), the public broadcaster is called in to help build a society that is tolerant towards ethnic minorities.

- Equality of the sexes is something the Dutch, German and Spanish public broadcasters should contribute to through equal representation of men and women. In Italy, the RAI is explicitly asked to broadcast items about feminism.

- The Germans, who are very elaborate in determining the democratic function of their public broadcasting system, also require their broadcasting corporations to promote peace and justice and explicitly mention a ban on glorifying the war.
Independence

It goes without saying that public broadcasters need to be free from political or commercial interfering. Strangely enough, however, few legislators or authorities mention this explicitly in the mission statements of public broadcasters. For public broadcasters in the Netherlands, Portugal, Denmark and Sweden, this is a central element within their mission statements. Programming on Danmarks Radio should first and for all be “independent of economic and political special interests” (Danmarks Radio, 2000). It seems that legislators and/or public broadcasters in other European countries either take such a requirement for granted or feel that public broadcasters do not need to be independent from economic or political forces.

At this point it would be good to look at the funding of the public broadcasters analysed in this paper. With the exception of the BBC, YLE, DR, SVT, SR and RDP, all public broadcasters are to some extent dependent on advertising. In most countries, advertising on public broadcasting was introduced in the 1960s as a “particularly attractive source of income for the public broadcasters since it was an ‘invisible’ burden on the viewer” (Humphreys, 1996: 126). Allowing public broadcasters to seek commercial funding compensated rising costs. As long as the public corporations held their monopolies and the demand for advertising time remained bigger than the supply, public broadcasters managed to keep advertisers at a safe distance. It can not be argued that advertising-based public broadcasters, such as in Germany or the Netherlands, produced lower quality products than the ‘pure’ PSB-institutions in Belgium or Scandinavia. It might even have helped to keep the politicians at a safer distance. With increasing competition since the 1980s, however, the issue of complete independence from advertisers and sponsors is no longer straightforward, as public broadcasters try to appease both the audience as the advertisers. The question must be addressed whether commercially funded public broadcasters are indeed completely independent from economic forces, just as the question is frequently raised whether government-funded public broadcasters can be totally independent from politicians, despite built-in safety measures to keep either at arm’s length.

Universality and diversity

The principle of universality is still a main feature in the missions of European broadcasters. Universality means that everyone should have access to the radio and/or television programs of the public broadcasting corporation, which can mean several things. First of all, there’s geographic universality, which means that even the people in remote and scarcely populated areas should receive the same service as everyone else. Such a quality is, of course, much more emphasized in a large, scarcely populated country like Finland or Sweden or in a geographically challenged country as Austria. In Finland, certainly, one of the major elements in the mission of the YLE is “the provision of comprehensive broadcasting services for all citizens under equal conditions” (YLE, 2000). In small, densely populated (and densely cabled) countries such as Belgium or the Netherlands, geographical universality seems no issue at all. In the latter type of countries there is hardly any difference between the reach of public and private broadcasters. In Belgium, for example, private broadcasters only transmit through cable, but since more than 95 per cent of Belgian homes watches television through cable, penetration of private and public broadcasting is more or less the same. In difficult
countries with mountainous regions or far-away areas, private broadcasters might not want to make the huge investment of getting through to everyone, in which case geographical universality of public broadcasting makes sense. A special, more political kind of geographical universality, is found in Ireland where the RTE must be available “to the whole community on the island of Ireland” (i.e. including Northern Ireland), according to the new 2001 Broadcasting Act.

Universality has a much broader sense as well. It can also mean that every listener or viewer should see his own personal tastes, to some extent, reflected in the public broadcasters’ programming. This is seen as crucial by all public broadcasters who like to emphasize their role as catering for everyone’s tastes and interests. Lars Molin, a former SVT director, has said that the Swedish public broadcaster should be “a forum for both politics and high religion, the monarchy, stamp collecting and eroticism” (SVT, 1999a).

This brings us to another common feature of all public broadcasters’ missions: diversity. All public broadcasters vow to offer a wide range of programs, including news and current affairs, education, culture and entertainment. Diversity is also promised in terms of regional and/or linguistic diversity, where applied. In most countries the public broadcaster has to dedicate part of its airtime to the regions of the nation or to minority language programming. This is the case, for example, in countries like Sweden, Finland or France.

**Quality**

Quality seems to be somewhat of a magic word in public broadcasters’ missions. All European public broadcasters – and indeed most private broadcasters as well – aspire to bring quality, although in some cases the ‘quality’-demand is not at the forefront of broadcasters’ goals, but features somewhere in the background. This is the case in Germany, Finland and Spain, probably not because quality is considered less important but because it’s a rather useless term unless further specified. In most cases there is no further description of what quality is or could be. In other cases this is specified in terms of certain minimal technical standards or in terms of professionalism and creativity, almost equally vague concepts. In the Netherlands, quality is a combination of craftsmanship and ‘respect for everyone’.

In Dutch-speaking Belgium and in Italy, public broadcasters are asked to develop methods to measure quality. The VRT does already measure and report merit ratings (scores from 0 to 10 awarded electronically to programs by members of the audience measurement panel), but this is hardly a good indicator for quality.

**Innovation**

The public broadcasters that were included in the analysis have to be innovative in their programs, either by seeking new talent or by experimenting with new program genres and formats. Innovation might be the biggest challenge a public broadcaster can face if it means stirring the audience, bringing it in touch with new experiences, creating new tastes and interests instead of simply following established tastes and interests. Such an ambitious purpose is set for public broadcasting corporations in the Netherlands, the UK, Sweden and Finland.
The other public broadcasters lack such an ambition or at least it is not mentioned in their mission statements.

Information

All public broadcasters are first of all required to supply comprehensive, accurate and impartial news and information. That is considered to be the prime task of European public broadcasters. In the Netherlands, Germany and the UK, it is emphasized that the public broadcaster should function as a guide in the increasing availability of information sources. Public broadcasters have to disseminate all opinions on all topics, but in most countries certain opinions are explicitly forbidden, such as racism, xenophobia, denying the holocaust, sexism or any form of discriminatory opinion.

The objectivity and impartiality of news and information is one of the public broadcasters’ central tasks. The German public broadcaster, for example, should be a ‘Glaubwürdigkeitsinsel’, an island of credibility. Other European public broadcasters have very similar tasks.

The importance of parliamentary reporting is underlined in the UK, Austria and Ireland, in the last case for both the national and the European Parliament. And also noticeable in the mission statements of the Swedish and German public broadcasters is the requirement to check and, if possible, double check the information before it is aired. Another Swedish stipulation tells the public television company to be cautious with showing violence in news programs.

A rather unique requirement concerning information can be found in the agreement between the Flemish (Dutch-speaking Belgium) government and the public broadcasting corporation VRT. According to one of the articles, the VRT must ensure a daily reach of 1.5 million viewers for its television news and current affairs programs. Amidst all different stipulations we have found concerning a broadcaster’s informative role, only once did we come across audience quota for news programs. Whether this is a good way to ensure adequate news reporting is very debatable.

Culture

There is a striking difference in the role a public broadcaster should play within a broader language policy. In some countries the preservation of the national language is greatly emphasized within the mission of public broadcasters, especially in the case of smaller languages, such as in Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Ireland (for the Irish language). In France, Italy, Spain and Portugal, this is emphasized as well and supplemented with an international touch. Public broadcasters in these countries also have the task to spread the native language around the world by cooperating with foreign stations that broadcast in the same language. The Portuguese RTP, for example, has established intensive contacts with Portugal’s former African colonies where the Portuguese language is being pushed aside in favour of other languages (especially English and native languages) and where the Portuguese public broadcaster hopes to contribute to the preservation of the use of Portuguese in countries such as Angola or Mozambique. Language references are either not present or figure somewhere in the background in the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria or the Netherlands. Another aspect of language is the accurate use of language which is explicitly mentioned in the
mission statements of the Swedish and Flemish (Dutch-speaking Belgium) public broadcasting corporations.
The relation with other cultural industries is another aspect that separates one public broadcaster from another. In Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy and Austria there is hardly any mention of the other cultural industries within the mission statements of public broadcasters. In France, Portugal, Ireland, Sweden, Finland and Denmark, the relationships with other cultural industries, and especially with the local movie industry for television and the local music industry for radio, is an element of the broadcasters’ mission, but the most explicit mention is made in the mission statement of the public broadcaster of Spain. The RTVE is asked to support the nation’s movie-, theatre-, music and even fashion industries.

Regional and international tasks

The public broadcasters in Dutch-speaking Belgium, Holland, Italy, Spain, Austria, Ireland and Finland have little or no regional tasks, although some of these broadcasters do spend time on reporting on regional issues. In most of these countries, however, there is a network of private and/or public local channels and the public broadcaster is asked not to compete with those in order to give these smaller, local channels a chance to survive. The position of the regions is a point of particular interest in the UK, French-speaking Belgium, France, Germany, Portugal, Denmark and Sweden.

International tasks are there as well, though usually limited to offering some kind of radio world service on behalf of compatriots who live abroad. In the UK, however, the BBC has to do more than that and must operate as an independent news source for all people around the world, British or not. As the BBC (2000) puts it, it should be “a lifeline in countries without other access to independent news”.

References to Europe and European integration are found occasionally, but most strikingly in Italy, where the ultimate aim of public broadcasting is stimulating both the formation of a national, Italian identity as well as stimulating Italy’s integration within Europe (RAI, 2000). And in Sweden, some form of Scandinavian unity is emphasized by asking public broadcasters to fill a considerable part of their airtime with Scandinavian, non-Swedish production. The Danish legislators, however, do not visibly share this concern.

Education

Although a classic task for public broadcasting, the educational aspect of broadcasters’ mission is only superficially worked out in Belgium, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Austria, Ireland and Denmark. In the Netherlands, UK, France, Sweden and Finland, the educational element is much more present, often as a separate educational broadcasting institution (such as the Swedish Utbildningsradio or the Dutch Teleac) or television channel (France 5 in France).

Children and youth

In many cases, only one audience group is specifically mentioned in broadcasters’ missions: children and youth. Many public broadcasters have created a separate TV-channel (in reality a large, fixed time slot on one of the television channels) with a
separate name, identity and director, aimed at under 12’s. Examples are Ketnet (Belgium, VRT), Z@ppelin (Holland) and KiKa (Germany). The older youths often have their own public radio station, such as Studio Brussel (Belgium), P3 (Sweden), Le Mouv’ (France) or 2FM (Ireland).

Digital Bridge

Possibly the most popular new task for public broadcasting is that of bridging the Digital Divide. Public broadcasting can indeed play an important part in familiarizing the audience with new information and communication technologies. All public broadcasters who have recently had a change in their mission statement (either as a result of a change of law or as a result of a new licence or agreement with the government), must strive to function as a Digital Bridge. This is the case in Belgium, the UK, the Netherlands, France, Germany and Italy. In most other countries such a stipulation is on its way.

ANALYSIS

What is Public Service Broadcasting?

“Defining public service broadcasting is not only difficult but impossible, if we want to reduce the concept to a universal and exact formula, like Pythagoras’ theorem” (Nunes, n.d.). This translated quote by RDP-president José Manuel Nunes illustrates perfectly the difficulty in determining what public service broadcasting is. The common feature of public service broadcasting seems to be the ambition to offer a broad range of quality programs to every citizen, with a particular emphasis on reliable and objective information, promoting national and regional cultures, providing some form of education and to support democracy.

All of the above can mean many things, however, and different aspects are emphasized in different countries making it almost impossible to establish a genuine PSB-identity. Most of the differences are easily explained though, like the comprehensiveness of the democratic function of German public broadcasters or the importance of geographic universality in the case of Finland.

Another quote states that: “The public service mandate cannot be captured in any single sentence or slogan. It is far more than a ‘business idea’” (SVT, 1999b). If we look at all the mission statements of the European public broadcasters, one can indeed hardly say that they’re just in it for the money, although some elements of public service broadcasting would definitely appeal to many advertisers and indeed many of the corporations are partially financed by advertising. The commitment to serve all audiences, i.e. both the commercially desirable target groups (young people, up-market audiences,...) and the less attractive ones (e.g. ethnic minorities, small language minorities), can hardly be reconciled with good, profitable business practice. Although Hellman (1999: 256-257) quite rightly states that diversity is more than “a noble effort”, but also a way to keep a substantial part of the audience and thus indeed, to some extent, a business idea: “While it [diversity], on the one hand, fits perfectly with the
performance goal of public broadcasters to balance between the various aspects of the needs of the public is considered to have, on the other hand it also serves as a strategy to meet the audience demand”. Besides diversity, the public broadcasters share other tasks that are seemingly ‘uncommercial’. Geographical universality in countries with remote, scarcely populated areas or areas which are extremely difficult to reach, does not make for a profitable investment either. Subsidizing other cultural industries would be proof of poor business sense, unless there’s money to be made, of course. And equally ‘bad for business’ is the fact that public broadcasting is still considered to be a potential driving force for changes in society. Notice the mention of supporting the integration of immigrants in countries with a worrying presence of extreme-right parties, or the striking presence of feminism within the Italian RAI’s mission statement.

In other words, mission statements of European public broadcasters do contain elements that would hardly thrive in a purely business environment and that drive neo-liberal economists insane. Economic concepts as ‘the consumer’ are, rightly or wrongly, absent in public broadcasting institutions’ missions, which creates some discomfort among many economists who think PSB is “at best a vague concept” or “undeniably paternalistic” (Veljanovski, 1989: 17). Public Service Broadcasting is undeniably vague, but not as vague as it used to be: mission statements are getting more and more detailed and comprehensive. As far as the much heard criticism of ‘paternalism’ is concerned, we cannot help but feel that neo-liberal economists are more stuck in the Reithian concept of PSB than the public broadcasters themselves. Anyway, ‘paternalism’ is “at best a vague concept”, isn’t it?

So, what is or could be PSB’s ‘unique selling proposition’?

Geographical universality remains an important rationale in favour of public broadcasting in certain countries, but not in all. Diversity is still high up on the list of public broadcasting’s advantages but for how long? Studies have already shown that diversity is declining among many public broadcasters and digital television has the potential to create a multimedia landscape filled with private, specialised channels for stamp collectors, gospel lovers or weather fanatics, making a public broadcaster offering a broad range of programs rather obsolete – it is a vision we are sceptical about, but nevertheless it is an outcome of digitalisation that should be taken into account. Even if private broadcasters do not start offering specialized channels for minority audiences, there is no guarantee, however, that minority programming will survive on public radio and television, “because audiences have to be found to obtain public support and, even to many professionals to justify time, talent and resources devoted to them despite individual broadcasts having substantial social value” (Wedell & Luckham, 2001: 143).

Digital broadcasting and the subsequent, expected fragmentation of audiences could also pose a problem for that other much cited trademark for public broadcasting: quality. Wedell and Luckham (2001: 18-19) paint the following picture: “One of the few immutable statistics in this field concerns the audience. There is only 100 per cent of it. If the total audience declines and is carved into ever smaller slices by the blandishments of an ever-widening range of programs, the resources available for any one program are bound to decline”. Quality can hardly be taken seriously as a principal raison d’être for public broadcasting anyway, because of the lack of a clear definition of
quality and because private broadcasting strive for quality as well, at least officially. The question whether public broadcasting offers more quality than private broadcasters can only be answered if you define ‘quality’, which can be done in so many ways that the broadcasters concerned can pick the definition that suits them best. A scientist can not settle for a gut feeling that public broadcasting indeed offers superior quality than private broadcasting. On the desirability of emphasizing quality, Keane (1991: 119) writes: “Public service advocates frequently talk about ‘preserving quality programs’ – which normally are defined loosely as polished, stylish and challenging productions. Alas, loose talk of quality is vulnerable to the retort that the concept of quality is riddled with semantic ambiguity (..) The word ‘quality’ has no objective basis, only a plurality of ultimately clashing, contradictory meanings amenable to public manipulation”.

Maybe ‘new’ values will separate public from private broadcasting. Respect for human dignity perhaps, as most European public broadcasters stay away from ‘Big Brother’ and the likes. But then again, there will always be a popular demand for more ‘respectable’ family entertainment which could be offered by private channels as well. Programs like ‘Big Brother’ are usually not aired by the main private broadcasting channels but by smaller upstarts, trying to make a name for themselves. In Holland, it wasn’t RTL4 who started but the much smaller Veronica; in Belgium it’s aired on Kanaal 2 the little brother of the family channel VTM; in Portugal the main commercial competitor SIC didn’t want to have anything to do with ‘Big Brother’ but its smaller rival TVI did; in France a ‘Big Brother’-like show was not shown on the big TF1 but on the modest M6 and in Britain ITV declined the honour in favour of the smaller Channel Four. Our point is that there will always be room (and thus profit) for ‘well-behaved’ private broadcasting, making respect for human dignity not an exclusive trademark of public broadcasting. At this point, it might be interesting to note that mission statements show a tendency to change in line not only with societal evolutions (racism, feminism,...) but also with evolutions in the private broadcasting sector. The further reality-shows go, the more public broadcasters (or their legislators) emphasize respect for human dignity.

Innovation is something which could thrive better in a public broadcasting setting than in a private one. Again, innovation isn’t restricted to public broadcasting. Private broadcasters are no strangers to discovering new talent and experiment with new program formats (‘Big Brother’ again!). Public service broadcasting is a good environment to experiment, making good use of what Foster (1992: 22) called “the right to fail”. Most public broadcasters, though, face financial constraints and can not afford to give their staff that right. Collins (1998: 58) notes a contradiction in this particular aspect of PSB mission statements. Public broadcasters are asked not simply to follow the audience’s tastes, ‘yet their social productivity (and institutional legitimacy) depends on the degree to which their programmes and services are used and valued by viewers and listeners’.

Broadcasting’s cultural function could be a window of opportunity for public broadcasting. Of course, private broadcasters are equally aware of the fact that local productions usually do better than cheap imports. Getting rid of public broadcasting, therefore, would not necessarily lead to a crisis within local broadcasting production. The relationship with other cultural industries could give public broadcasting an edge
over private broadcasting though. Private broadcasters are no strangers to a country’s movie or music industry but naturally they work on a commercial basis, which doesn’t allow co-operation with non-profitable cultural events. Such events could often use the support of public broadcasting, unless of course other authorities are generous enough, which usually isn’t the case. And in light of financial restraints many public broadcasters are experiencing, relations with other equally unprofitable cultural industries are hardly obvious. In many countries the relationship between public broadcasting and other cultural industries has begun to sour.

Education is another way to make a difference for public broadcasting, but the decline of educational programs has been documented enough to realize that public broadcasting isn’t what it used to be.

Information then? Daily news reporting is very similar when comparing public with private broadcasters, but public broadcasting could do a good job explaining and giving sufficient background information, which takes both time and financial resources. Private broadcasters are often not prepared to spend much on more than just news. And there is a need for more than facts alone. Graham and Davies (1992: 186) note that “if individuals are to be genuinely autonomous, it is not sufficient for them merely to receive information (no matter how much and how impartially presented); they must be able to understand it.”

In short, mission statements suggest a greater difference between public and private broadcasters than reality would suggest. Many of public broadcasting’s tasks are also served to some extent by private broadcasters, and other tasks by which public broadcasters could distinguish themselves, are frequently pushed aside.

**CONCLUSION: A future for public service broadcasting?**

A comparative analysis of public broadcasters’ mission statements is no means to make any solid predictions about the future of PSB. Our analysis suggests that many of the public service broadcasters’ tasks could be fulfilled by private broadcasters, and some of them indeed are already being fulfilled by private competitors. If the pre-War governments hadn’t ‘invented’ the concepts of universality, diversity and quality as attributes of Public Service Broadcasting, the market would have soon discovered that these characteristics make perfect business sense. At least to some extent. Surely, it would not be in the interest of a profit-seeking company to serve only part of the population when it could easily reach a larger part of it; and it would be equally unwise to believe that there isn’t a market for quality programs or that people would object to diversity. Any company could make good money out of a universal, diverse and high-quality product or service. What we can say, though, is that the disappearance of public service broadcasting would undoubtedly create ‘gaps’ that cannot or will not be filled by profit-seeking companies. Programming for certain minorities, educational programs and in-depth information would probably be the first victims and should be at the core of PSB mission statements, since this is what potentially separates public broadcasters from private competitors. Paradoxically, we might say that competition has led to
questions and doubts about public broadcasters’ legitimacy and at the same time has increased this legitimacy, because now we know where the market fails. Keane (1991: 77) argues that unlimited competition limits choice rather than expanding it and leads to an underrepresentation of “the opinions of ethnic and regional minorities, gays and lesbians, greens, elderly citizens, socialists and other minorities”.

One could be inclined then to suggest a reduced public service broadcasting to fill the gaps left by the private broadcasters. But it is clear that such a move would bring public broadcasting in a downward spiral of decreasing audience figures and funding. And that is certainly a worry. Public broadcasters need audiences as much as private broadcasters do, but (hopefully) for other reasons. We agree with Collins et al. (2001: 10) when they say “perfect performance of any or all of these mandates is socially useful only in so far as the services in question are not only valued but actually used”. A public service without a public is hardly a future to pursue. A broad concept of Public Service Broadcasting is also needed to maintain the overall quality of the entire broadcasting market, as argued by Søndergaard (2000). McKinsey (1999: 16) reached a similar conclusion after analysing the Swedish broadcasting market. Because of its guaranteed licence fee funding, the SVT was not pressured to reduce the quality and diversity of its programming, despite declining audience figures. But after the initial fall of SVT’s ratings, its share stabilised around 50 percent thus ‘teaching’ private competitors that quality and diversity can generate large audiences and thus profit. As a result the overall quality of the Swedish television system is considered to be high. McKinsey (1999: 18) established a strong correlation between “the distinctiveness of the PSB and the distinctiveness of the commercial broadcasters”. In other words, the presence of a public broadcaster offering quality and diversity, forces its competitors to follow this example or at least keep the quality gap to a minimum, at least, emphasizes McKinsey (1999: 18), “provided a PSB has sufficient share to have influence”. Or in the words of Graham and Davies (1992: 194-195) “public production and public broadcasting is needed for the health of the whole system”.

**CITED REFERENCES**


