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Taking the public seriously: three models of responsiveness in media and journalism

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Media and journalists have an uneasy relationship with their public. They are there for them, but not so much to listen as to speak to – to inform them about what goes on in society, the facts and figures, backgrounds and opinions they deem relevant, interesting, in the public interest or exciting for people to know. Journalists feel slightly uncomfortable when the public respond, especially with criticism of their performance. When their professional roles, reliability and integrity are called into doubt, journalists are often more self-referential (listening to their colleagues) than responsive (listening to their audiences); even when they are aware that more than a third (37 percent) of the European public tend not to trust television and almost half (48 percent) feel equally negative about the press (Eurobarometer 67, 2007). At the same time, journalists need their public, if only to survive in a competitive media market, a fact of which managers and owners may be more acutely aware.

The ambiguity of this relationship between journalists and public has recently increased and been put to the test by at least four – interrelated and mutually reinforcing – developments: two inside and two outside the direct realm of journalism. In the first place, with increasing competition between and commercialization within media, and decreasing loyalty and changing news consumption patterns of their audiences, a shift can be noted from a supply to a demand market in communication (Van Cuilenburg, 1998). Media no longer decide exclusively what the public should read, watch or listen to based on what the former think the latter need as democratic citizens. Rather, the assumed wishes and desires of the public have become more decisive for what the media provide. Consequently, the selection of news (what is relevant and important?) could well be based more on market considerations, of what sells and is attractive for the public, than on in the public interest.

Second, a number of technological developments, usually connected to the internet, have created new opportunities for interaction, consultation and communication, and thus for the demand side of the media market. The rise of the social networking and user-generated content sites of Web 2.0 has given the public virtually unlimited access to an enormous variety of information and people, like-minded or not. At the same time, Web 2.0 has given the media an opportunity structure to connect with the public, as well as put pressure on them to do so. Moreover, the interactive and communicative possibilities of new technologies have blurred the traditional distinction between sender and receiver and potentially limited the gap between journalist and public. Members of the public can now be journalists and vice versa, and both can be each other's source.

Third, with disappearing voter loyalty at elections, decreasing party membership and internal political debate, a lack of ideological bonding, of low voter turn out and declining public trust in the integrity and capabilities of political authorities, a more general shift has been observed from a traditional party democracy to an audience democracy. Where once the political party was the dominant actor, the party programme the leading principle, and authority the virtue politicians strived for and legitimized their politics with, personalities have become more important than the party, performance and polls more than the programme, and authenticity more than authority (Manin, 1997). In such a democracy, charisma, trust and empathy become preconditions for successful politics. This trend coincides with, and triggers, populist tendencies, both in politics and in the media. Expressing anti-establishment sentiments and siding with the ordinary public – characteristic of populist appeals – can have a definite media attraction, especially when packaged with strong words and extreme views. Populist characteristics of audience-democracy happily live together with the more demand-driven tendencies in media markets.

Fourth, in many a liberal democracy, substantial parts of the public are beginning to challenge the Enlightenment ideal of representational and rational discourse and to demand a voice as the *vox populi*. Traditionally, both public communication and political communication are more for than with, let alone by, the people. In reality TV-programmes like *Big Brother*, and more recently via YouTube, MySpace, etc., the populace have found a platform to express indignation, to be angry, emotional and irrational, to bring up gut feelings and the life- and other issues they worry about. On the one hand, we now see the *vox populi* taken increasingly seriously by media, government and political parties in an attempt to close the gap of legitimacy and trust with a volatile public (Brants, 2008). But on the other hand, the socio-political elite are uncertain and ambivalent about the people's voice entering domains traditionally open only to them. In a thinly disguised outcry of disgust, Dutch political scientist Jos de Beus complained in a newspaper article that the tattooed class has taken over the public domain (*NRC Handelsblad*, 20 October

2006). The ambivalence challenges the roles politicians and journalists play and regard as fitting for their relationship with the public. At the same time, taking account of the public has opened the eyes of many a journalist, socialized in the ivory tower of the *trustee* model where a cultural pedagogic logic reigns (Schudson, 1999)

The consequences of these trends and changes for communication have been captured under different headings, but with the same meaning: a development from a citizen-centric to a more consumer-oriented model of news (Hallin, 2000), to a market logic in mass communication (Staney, 2007) or to market-driven journalism (McManus, 1994). All refer to news selection and journalistic styles being predominantly, or even exclusively, dependent on what sells. In this article we argue for a more diverse picture of how media and journalists come to terms with the public in a socio-political environment in flux, that has emerged in the past two decades. The argument is based on data from the Netherlands, but may well hold for other liberal democracies with competitive media markets, changing media-political parallelism and performance, and volatile publics. From an overview of the issues raised about journalism and the public in newspapers and professional media in the Netherlands, we distil three models of responsiveness, each of which will be illustrated and tested in an exploratory way with an ideal-typical case. Taking the public seriously or more to their heart might well sit ill with the journalist's role as an independent, professional news provider. Finally, we raise the question of how media and journalists come to terms with these conflicting values and experiences, and attempt an empirical answer based on our case studies.

Towards more responsive journalism

It sometimes seems as if media institutions and professional journalists have always been the subject of criticism and contention, particularly by politicians but also in the public eye. It may be, however, that memory is playing tricks on us. In a variation of an old Chinese saying: the strainer of the past only lets the rain through. Indeed, in a descriptive content analysis of issues raised in the public and professional debate about media and their performance in the Netherlands we found a more varied picture of topics, issues and anxieties, with shifting perceptions and differences in salience and tone. The analysis covers a period of 20 years, from 1987 (two years before the introduction of commercial television) to 2007, in the monthly magazine of the journalists' trade union (*De Journalist*) and in a quality newspaper (*NRC Handelsblad*). The picture that emerges is of an issue agenda in two phases, the first focusing more on developments in the structure of media institutions and their possible consequences, the second highlighting specific events concerning media and journalistic performance and what to do about them. During the 1990s, we see increasing articulation of anxieties about the

number of media mergers in the press sector and decreasing circulation figures of newspapers, and more generally about 'de-reading', administrative and organizational problems within public broadcasting and the emergence of a dual system from 1989 onwards. The issues raised in connection with these structural developments are about competition and its possible effects on the diversity and quality of media content, and less about what this means for the public as citizens or consumers. The debate is on the consequences of the public's changing habits of media consumption for the media, rather than what media changes mean for the public. There is an implicit worry about young people being less loyal and committed to specific media, about their 'media hopping' behaviour and their tendency to consume media in different forms (online) at their own leisure and pleasure. Where previously media-use in the Netherlands was guided by the integrating socio-political and religious principles of *pillarization*, individualization and a more instrumental orientation towards immediate gratification now seem to lead media consumers, especially the young, to ask: 'What's in it for me?'

From the turn of the century onwards, the anxiety about structural developments does not disappear, but the content analysis shows that it is increasingly overtaken by, or driven in the direction of, comments about media-performance. It is an event-driven picture, beginning with a carefully planned but off-the-cuff remark by Queen Beatrix over drinks with a group of journalists. She complained about the media portrayal of members of her family, asserting that journalistic performance in some, if not most media was increasingly 'governed by untruth'. Criticism by politicians, especially after an election lost, is not an uncommon feature in the Netherlands, but this royal comment seemed to function as a general battle cry. Members of the government, parliamentarians from different parties, members of the judiciary, of the police, all lamented that media had become too powerful, interpretative, biased, pack-driven and hype-focused, with increasing competition leading to sensational and 'drama journalism'. Slowly, members of the public, albeit in *NRC Handelsblad* usually the voice of the elite, also joined the chorus.

The appearance of Pim Fortuyn in 2001 (and his dramatic disappearance in 2002) added an extra impulse to the spate of criticism. According to this populist former Marxist professor, journalists and politicians belonged to the same establishment, a class ignorant of feelings and unresponsive to complaints in society, far, far away from 'real people' and what drives and moves them (e.g. Wansink, 2004). His death, six days before the 2002 elections, and the remarkable success of his party, even with its figurehead dead, triggered a debate on whether the media had contributed to a climate in which the murder of Fortuyn was possible. His success and the public outcry and accusations at his funeral – a public event similar to that of Princess Diana in the UK – forced politicians and media to rethink their role and position. Fortuyn and his opinions became exemplary of what substantial parts of the public apparently felt and sympathized with. How had the media missed the national sentiment, the anxieties and anger of the *vox populi*?

A few controversial television programmes had already been taking 'the ordinary man's dissatisfaction with powerful bureaucracies' into account. In *Breekijzer* (*Crowbar*), the programme's presenter was described as a 'modern Robin Hood' fighting for the unfortunate and less powerful (*NRC Handelsblad*, 3 February 1998). In another programme, a crime reporter (who made an unsuccessful attempt to establish his own populist political party after the death of Fortuyn) took upon himself the role of moral entrepreneur, fighting the cause of victims of crime and miscarriages of justice. These programmes seemed to be about and for the 'silent majority', those ignored by the political and media elite. But after Fortuyn's murder, the editor-in-chief of public TV's news (*NOS Journaal*) wrote an internal memorandum also urging that attention be refocused 'from the state to the street' (Laroës, 2002). And newspaper editors debated publicly how and why they had lost the trust of the public and what to do about it (*NRC Handelsblad*, 23 September 2003). All concluded that the media had a serious problem of trust. At the same time they felt uncomfortable with the idea of letting 'the people' speak. While it may be desirable to hear the voice of the ordinary man, columnist Elsbeth Etty had written a year before, 'it should not be published without checking first' (*NRC Handelsblad*, 15 June 2002).

The apparent gap between the public and the media after 2000 and the increasing criticism from self-assured citizens compelled media and journalists to reconsider their professional performance and their relationship with the public. While politicians urged media to be more accountable – two government advisory commissions proposed specific regulatory measures after concluding that, over the years, media had become increasingly powerful without being accountable in any way, apart from readers being able to stop their subscriptions (RMO, 2003; ROB, 2003) – our content analysis indicates that the media themselves were hesitant and defensive. They feared and resisted institutionalized forms of accountability. To fill the gap and restore trust with the public, they discussed and introduced more responsive measures to take the public's interests and needs into account. These measures were often not only seen as an answer to the public's mistrust of media performance in the first decade of the 21st century, but also to the structural economic problems media had been facing since the 1990s.

Increasing awareness of, and uncertainty about, the public have triggered different kinds of responsiveness. Indeed from the content analysis we deduced three – sometimes competing, at other times overlapping – forms of taking the public into account, strengthened by the developments sketched in the introduction. In a grounded-theory process of induction, repeatedly confronting the cycle of data-gathering, analysis and reflection with our theoretical starting points, we came up with a categorization of three ideal-typical models of responsiveness. Media and journalists differ as to why and how they are responsive, and what they want from interaction with their public: there is a professional response to a more demanding public, a more commercial response to a volatile consumer and a response reflecting the more populist discourse (see Table 1).

Three models of responsiveness

In what could be called *civic responsiveness*, media try to develop forms of listening to and connecting with the public, putting their agenda first and thus entering the terrain of public journalism where the focus is less on the traditional news values of negativity, conflict and scandal, and more on the possible range of solutions to perceived problems (cf. Rosen, 1991). The starting point is to get away from those sensational news values and back to the old value of being socially responsible, and so to bridge the gap with the public. Although topics covered are predominantly economic and political, it is not so much the socio-political elite that set the tone, but the connection and overlap between the public's agenda and theirs. Members of the public are addressed as citizens, empowered by the media's now-relevant news angle and journalistic performance to hold their own in a complex and socio-economically unequal risk society. Ways of connecting with the public can be manifold, but are typified by their iterative character, by learning through interaction. The informative and cognitive style of journalistic presentation is reflected in internet sites that are informative, debate-oriented and function as a source of input for journalists. Potentially, their weblogs create transparency and accountability.

In this new style of civic responsiveness, the dissatisfaction of and solutions proposed by the Hutchins Commission – that after the Second World War had proposed a new, more responsible journalism in the US – resonate as much as the anxieties and propositions of the American public journalism movement in the 1990s. Both responded to commercialization of the media and its effect on news values, styles of reporting and market-driven editorial choices. It is a responsiveness based on a sense of co-responsibility for the well-being of the socio-political system and the democratic process, in which media identify more with the public good than with what the public is interested in or would enjoy. It partly returns to the *trustee* model of the cultural-pedagogic logic, in which the public is informed about what they should know as citizens in order to participate rationally in a democracy. Where it differs is in its starting point: the public's social agenda: and in its less paternalistic horizontal approach: public and media should learn from each other. Examples are some local newspapers in the Netherlands that have set up interactive online 'village squares', where readers discuss the coverage of potential news items with journalists.

Listening to the demands and needs of the public can also take the form of *strategic responsiveness*. Here the motive is not so much social as commercial and market-driven, not so much bridging the gap as persuading the public, binding them as consumers to the product on offer. No means of doing so are avoided, as long as they attract and arouse the public. The commercial nature of this type of responsiveness 'invites' consumers with the kind of human

TABLE 1
Responsiveness of media and journalism

Type Characteristic	Civic	Strategic	Empathic
Motive	Social responsibility	Commercial	Moral crusade
Aim vis-a-vis the public	Bridging	Binding	Bonding
Kind of topics covered	Socio-economic and political	Emotional/entertaining human interest	Victims of power/bureaucracy
Public addressed as	Citizen	Consumer	One of us
Public's involvement via	Iterative information and discussion sites, journalists' weblogs	Electronic polls, studio audience, vox pop interviews	Informative, discussion, social networking sites
Presentational style	Informative/cognitive	Entertaining/sensational	Partisan/populist

interest stories that supposedly attract them, with sensational, entertaining and life issues and topics that touch them emotionally, or amuse, excite or frighten them. Characteristic of strategic responsiveness is the range of binding styles and means: making the public part of the programme, as involved bystanders or as experienced experts; bringing the man in the street to the studio; *vox pop* interviews; electronic polls that are not so much about political topics, but about celebrities, historical figures, the nation's heritage, identity. Internet sites aim less at bringing the public together or communicating with them, and more at bringing them or their wishes to the programme. Viewers are invited to send in their stories and video clips.

One would expect this strategic responsiveness to be characteristic of commercial TV stations that, basically, make programmes 'to sell eyeballs to advertisers', as most of their CEOs will admit. However, in a competitive media market the public media also have to consider the saleability of their commodities to an emotionally engaged audience. The BBC News' style of reporting murders and disasters, for example, seems to have changed from factual and distanced cool to involved warmth, in which journalists report in funereal tones and flowery language about relatives mourning *loved ones* or whole nations in *grief*, and *floral tributes* to victims who the public have taken to their heart. Increasingly, audience research, as a way of finding out what interests viewers, readers and listeners, is part of the marketing approach of publishing and journalism (Stanyer, 2007: 106ff). In public broadcasting and in profit-pressured newspapers, growing audience orientation can, however, also be read positively as an indication of taking the public seriously. Generally, a

shift from a supply to a demand market can be interpreted both as an incentive to base editorial decisions more on audience research and as a power shift benefiting the informational desires of the audience (Brants, 2007).

Finally, we see forms of *empathic responsiveness*, in which journalists act as moral entrepreneurs, crusaders even, siding with a public that traditionally has had no voice in the media or that finds itself in a situation against their own will. These journalists perform as caretaker/advocate of the victims of public authorities, the downtrodden social losers. They bond with the voiceless and their sympathizers. The latter are addressed as involved members of the public, one of us against the powerful, the establishment or the bureaucratic Leviathan, or as people who at least recognize and acknowledge the issue. The journalist speaks on behalf of one group against another, in an often excited and angry tone and style that are involved, populist and partisan. The internet is used for further bonding and social networking, but also for providing extra information as a means of empowering the powerless.

Without its anti-establishment and populist tone, empathic responsiveness in principle builds on the remit of many a public broadcaster. Consumer and other service programmes that were part and parcel of the public service output, not only had a moral and pedagogical undertone, but were also aimed at the victims of bureaucracy and of capitalism run wild. In the new-style empathic responsiveness, that traditional remit is combined with the anxieties of the risk society, the unease about globalization and multiculturalism, and the populist 'uprising' against the political, economic and cultural elites in many European countries. In some instances, media have fought for a specific cause and even launched campaigns on particular issues (e.g. miscarriages of justice in the Netherlands; paedophiles and asylum seekers in the UK).

Three case studies

It is not our intention to test these hypothetical models for their relative saliency and generalizability with an analysis of a random or otherwise systematic selection of cases. We merely want to look at three examples in the Netherlands in which journalists and media have explicitly emphasized their (re-)linking with the public, and see where they fit the models and where not. This allows for a more exploratory and inductive approach, using the models as sensitizing concepts and the cases as a way of making sense of their validity and usefulness. A multi-method approach was used for the analysis, with the characteristics presented in Table 1 providing the structure and questions for our research. The study commenced with an analysis of all available documents and a content analysis, followed by interviews. The semi-structured interviews were based on a topic list, following the model and the results of the document and content analysis. Yvonne Zonderop, originator of the Social Agenda, was interviewed for *de Volkskrant*, editor-in-chief Marc van der Ree for *Hart van*

Nederland and editor-in-chief Erik Hogenboom for *PremTime*. Document analysis and interviews were used to discover motive and aim, and provided additional background information. A descriptive content analysis was used to locate the topics, how the public was addressed, the ways and means by which the public was involved, and the presentational style. During the interviews, the respondents were confronted with our findings, in order to contrast the philosophy, content and style in their own case with the professional norms of independent journalism.

The public's interest: de Volkskrant's Social Agenda

In 2005, the second largest national newspaper in the Netherlands, *de Volkskrant*, started experimenting with a Social Agenda, in which the opportunity and characteristics of internet combined with a focus on the burning issues of society would allow for multiple effects. Public involvement would increase by placing the public agenda at the centre of selecting issues and using the interactive capacity of the internet. In line with the principles of public journalism, the focus would not only be on describing the problems and ills of society, but particularly on the possible range and attainability of solutions. The leading principle for the initiator was Karl Popper's adage: 'Optimism is a moral duty.'

The year-long project was set up in several phases. During the first, a panel of academics composed a list of 21 problems that was published in the newspaper and on its website. Readers were then asked to assign priority to these issues and to add new ones. Thousands of readers scored the proposed issues and hundreds added topics of their own. A group of readers and scientists selected 7 from an initial list of 39, and academic specialists were then asked to write articles about the problems and put forward ideas on how to deal with them. They ranged from: 'How can we combine well-being with economic growth?' and 'How can the underclass be emancipated, to how can we become an integrated society? In the beginning, the articles failed to encourage readers to react. Few responded, probably because of the high academic level, according to the initiator. When *de Volkskrant* organized live debates throughout the country, however, this attracted substantial audiences (in Amsterdam alone 400 readers turned up to discuss the theme of citizenship).

Following the relative success, the Social Agenda was repeated a year later, focusing on issues of spatial and urban planning. This time, the project was less academic and more journalistic. More than 10,000 readers reacted and contributed to 25 issues. Seven selected problems were then covered by journalists, according to the norms of research journalism and the principles of hearing both sides. More than in the first project, there was ample space for public discussion, in which thousands participated, although the complexity of the issues attracted more experts than ordinary members of the public. A new project about the economic agenda is expected to change that,

but the idea remains the same: 'to discuss pressing issues and jointly contribute to identifying solutions'.

Although reader participation was central to the project, it was more solution-oriented, with ideas to which the public could contribute. The newspaper functioned as a platform and moderator for dialogue, aimed less at empowerment of readers than enthusing them and getting them involved. As the initiator explained, most *Volkscrant* readers are already involved, as they tend to have an above-average education and are often employed in the social sector. They have less need of bridging a gap. Instead, the newspaper tried to combine the insights of scientists, journalists and citizens, and enable a link between problem and solution: the newspaper as a 'breeding-place' for solutions rather than as a playing field for social experiments.

De Volkscrant's Social Agenda clearly fulfils some of the characteristics of civic responsibility that we outlined above: a sense of social responsibility, putting the public's agenda first, readers addressed as citizens, the iterative character of website and live discussions, transparency in selection and choice of topics, and an informative style. In other respects it does not: there is no bridging or empowerment, no journalist weblogs, and the public's agenda does not seem to consist of the life issues of readers or their voiced agenda of urgency, but of what involved intellectuals see as pressing social issues. This reflects the elite character of both newspaper and readers: both intellectually and in the way they express themselves, these involved citizens do not reflect the average newspaper reader. But there is a strategic undertone in the Social Agenda too. It was also the result of more prosaic factors: the editors' realization that newspapers and their relationship with the public is changing, and the fact that the initiator had been asked to set up a new opinion and debate supplement and happened to be an internet enthusiast. At the same time, there was the perception that such projects do not raise the circulation of a newspaper; they cost money and do not attract advertisers. So, after all, the civic motive and tone dominated.

The consumer's emotions: SBS' Heart of the Netherlands

After RTL4, SBS6 is the second commercial channel in the Netherlands. The station wants to be 'close to the people', with 'surprising news programmes that are emotionally charged'. Following in the footsteps of more viewer-focused US local TV-news, SBS started *Hart van Nederland* ('Heart of the Netherlands') in 1995. It was intended as a radical change from the traditional news format in which the journalist selects and constructs the news. Here, what occupies and pleases the public emotionally would decide the journalistic agenda. As the editor-in-chief now says: 'We felt there was a need in society, and at the same time it was a niche in the market.'

Twice each evening *Hart van Nederland* brings news about the Netherlands which is close to the viewer's home and heart. Seven or eight human interest stories reflect a well-chosen balance of crime, accidents and fires, health and affective amusement, like the eleven newborn kittens portrayed as if they form a cats' soccer team. So, according to the editor-in-chief, people can go to bed feeling good, not only thinking about bad things happening around us. Foreign news items are anathema and political items few and far between, the programme always focuses, on and is set in, an individual's story. The interview with an expert has been replaced by the 'expert of experience', the *vox pop* that is asked to express opinions and, particularly, feelings. *Hart* is not the US car-chasing kind of news programme, but a mix of tears and smiles, the large and small, and always the personal things that affect people's daily lives. Whether positive or negative, all items express the emotions of victims, of pleased individuals, of the *vox populi*. The emotional aspect is also present in the presentational style. The setting, with two women standing instead of men sitting, is aimed at decreasing the distance between anchors and the public. They use expressive language, showing and transmitting their emotional or amused involvement, both tickling and binding their audience. Music and film add to the drama.

Next to, and together with, the local and emotional touch, *Hart* aims at being accessible, acting as a social antenna, stimulating viewer participation, including action-journalism and taking the public's view-point, when they are at loggerheads with bureaucracy and the powers that be. In that sense, the programme aims at more than the consumer, although philosophy and reality are further apart. The dividing line between binding with the public as consumers and bonding with them, taking their side as citizens, is a thin and blurred one. This also shows in *Hart*'s so-called *Tiplijn*, where the viewer can mail or phone the programme with ideas about items, photos and videos. Only just over 10 percent of the items originate from this tip line, and it is rarely advertised in the programme (neither is the website). It is a news source (albeit, with one story out of 10 tips, a rather limited one) and an empathic undertone resonates in the choice of viewers' items. Close-up and personal stories predominate, ranging from 'your neighbour's daughter who suffers from a serious illness the insurance won't pay for' or the 'children's' playground in your village that is suddenly closed', to the 'actuality of a large fire or a serious accident'.

Hart van Nederland, more than *de Volkskrant*'s Social Agenda, mixes elements of strategic, civic and empathic responsiveness. It is strategic in its choice of topics, in its ultimately commercial motive, presentational style, consumer focus and *vox pop* interviews. But it is also civic in attempting to break with traditional news values and in starting from the public's agenda, albeit their emotional agenda. It is empathic in its bonding, populism and victim-focus. At the same time, it is surprisingly old-fashioned in that it

seems to ignore the interactive potential of the internet. This might well reflect the limits of responsiveness, where listening to the public ends and journalistic choice and focus begins.

The populi's voice: PremTime's moral crusade

Watching public broadcaster NPS's multicultural TV-programme *PremTime*, one is immediately struck by the sometimes agitated and always involved tone of presenter Prem Radhakishun, and the social and emotional issues he is tackling. Here is someone who, as the programme propagates, 'travels around to locate problems and solve them wherever possible'. It is an 'informative TV-programme which tests the quality of our society' and its makers clearly identify with those who are on the losing side.

PremTime started in 2003, in a turbulent climate in which a populist politician and an outspoken filmmaker and columnist had been killed within the space of two years. Both had had strong opinions about multicultural societies and it seemed as if the Netherlands had changed from a tolerant and consensual society into a xenophobic and adversarial one. It was within this climate that public broadcaster NPS started the programme, as an involved service to get multiculturalism in all its facets on the public agenda with a layer of consumer interest. Presented by Surinamese former lawyer Prem Radhakishun, and later together with Jalal Bouzamour of Moroccan origin, the consumer character of the programme gave way to the more political: siding with the social underclass, in trouble with and fighting 'the authorities'. The programme wanted to raise the urgency of specific problems, using for its approach the aforementioned *Breekijzer (Crowbar)* as its example.

Through the presenter's very personal approach – he shows his anger, emotions, amusement and sympathies – and letting the ordinary man speak, *PremTime* starts from the individual problem, in most cases a multicultural issue of non-native Dutch citizens living in the Netherlands, but also problems of the white underclass. They range from illegal immigrants not receiving medical care and (Moroccan and Dutch) people in debt being prosecuted for growing illegal drugs in their attic, to mothers losing authority over their children and fights between neighbours. The case is unravelled through a detailed analysis of the problem, not only letting the victims express their anxieties, but also others involved voice their anger. Obviously, taking the victim seriously is carefully balanced with the 'other side of the truth'. If no public authority is available, Prem takes that role upon himself, confronting victims with their possible laziness, aggression or share in the guilt. However, his tone becomes slightly ironic, as if to say: 'I understand but I have to ask.'

The programme is not only about contestation, although emotions can run high. As with *de Volkskrant's* Social Agenda, it is solution oriented, but by confronting the bureaucratic organization, the representative of public

authority, with the problem, Prem's ideas and possible solutions. He hammers on to reach or at least to envisage a solution. For the establishment there is no getting away from this 'Black Crowbar', as some have called him. If no solution is reached, he asks viewers to mail their opinions or side with one of the parties. However, this is never followed up in the programme and given only limited space on the website itself.

The programme tries to involve the public with the victims of bureaucracy, not necessarily to sympathize with them but to understand them. In that sense, it takes a partisan approach; but the public is ambivalently addressed: as 'one of us' and as the outsider who should know what happens on the other side of the fence. That approach, of course, guarantees a wider audience; the programme is certainly successful beyond the group it reports about. Direct involvement, however, appears to be limited to the (equally engaging and unengaged) request to mail opinions. The forum on the website is not very active and the editor-in-chief admitted that the discussions often have no added value.

In many ways, *PremTime* fits our notion of empathic responsiveness. There is both binding and bonding with the victims of bureaucracy as well as with the public. The individual problem, functioning in *Hart van Nederland* as a condensed symbol for the poor man's pains, becomes political in *PremTime* and, implicitly, extends into its meaning as a wider social issue. The presenter evolves from a caretaker/advocate to a moral crusader for those ignored or maltreated by public authority. In its anti-establishment tone and attitude, and in siding with the underclass, the programme is also clearly populist.¹ On the other hand, its interactive character is minimal and it tries to reach a wider audience than the limited 'one of us'. In its solution orientation and through systematically presenting two sides of a story, there is an element of empowerment which rings the bell of civic responsiveness as well.

Professional norms and moral dilemmas

Seeing all these different motives, practices and styles of responsiveness, the question of how this relates to journalistic professionalism needs to be answered. How do these media and journalists come to terms with the desire and pressure to take the public more and more into account on the one hand and, on the other, potentially conflicting journalistic norms like independence and objectivity and their routine professional experience?

Hallin and Mancini (2004: 35ff) distinguish three closely related dimensions of professionalism that are relevant in this respect. *Autonomy* is usually seen as central to professionalism, and refers to independence from internal (owners) and external (advertisers, political interests) pressures. The public can exert relative external pressure, when people threatens to cancel subscriptions and thus affect the livelihood of the journalist, demands access

to editors or attention to the issues raised by them. *Professional norms* refers to a set of norms shared by the profession, written and unwritten codes that steer daily practice: the duty to protect confidential sources, objectivity, balance and neutrality, separation between advertising and editorial content, between facts and opinions, and the obligation to hear both sides of a story or argument. The final dimension of professionalism that Hallin and Mancini mention is the notion that professions are oriented towards an *ethic of public service*. This refers less to serving the public directly and more to the adoption of an ideology of journalism as a 'public trust'. Media are expected to provide the kind of information that is a public good and good for the public: in the public interest and not necessarily what the public is interested in. How do the journalists in three cases deal with these professional norms and values?

All three interviewees hold that being responsive to the public and providing them with a platform in no way threatens their autonomy as news makers, truth finders or social constructors of meaning. They hinted at an implicit ethic of public service, particularly with *de Volkskrant's* Social Agenda and *PremTime*, but that did not exclude paying attention to what the public is interested in. In fact, doing what the public is *not* interested in reeks of the old public service paternalism and contradicts the principle of responsiveness. It is about time, all three emphasize, that the public is taken seriously and their voice heard. Independence is guaranteed by the journalists' professionalism, attitude and the existence of an editorial statute that protects them against commercial influence (notably put forward by the editor of commercial SBS6). Any form of partisanship in siding with the public, as in the case of *PremTime*, is not seen as a goal in itself but as a means of confronting the public more intensely with the ills of society.

However, the interviewees reveal some ambiguity about coming to terms with the public as professionals. Taking the public as a starting point, locating the burning issues, bringing them out into the open and – in the case of *PremTime* and *Hart van Nederland* – adding an emotional layer, are all part of a new, more sensitized style of journalism. For all three however, the reports that follow – containing unbiased, objective presentation of information, and giving both sides of complex issues – are protected by traditional norms of professionalism. Viewers and readers never have the final say. It is as if the public and their agenda have primacy in the first part of the news process, but still journalists and their professional norms and agenda in the second.

Conclusion

There is a public out there. It sounds obvious for communication media, but for a long time most journalists have felt uncomfortable and ambivalent with that reality. However, taking the public seriously now looks like becoming the

new dogma in a competitive media world inhabited by an increasingly self-assured public. That volatile public's trust has to be won or won back. For a long time, trust in the media was self evident, a non-issue, because journalists were expected and perceived to be responsible and reliable. Now mistrust is the issue, and responsiveness is seen and used as the means of reversing the situation. Journalists have to, and do come out of their ivory tower, which until recently rested on the trustee model and professional self-referentiality.

We postulated three different ways in which media and journalists would take the public seriously, three ways of listening to audiences and introducing a sensitized kind of journalism that is more transparent and interactive. One would be inspired predominantly by a social motive to empower and bridge the gap with the public, another by a commercial motive to attract the public as a consumer, and the third by a moral motive of bonding with the victims of bureaucracy and power. At the same time, we expected that journalists would have to come to terms with the potential conflict between this responsiveness on the one hand and their professional norms of independence on the other.

In applying the model characteristics to three cases we hoped to show the analytical value of the typology in assessing and evaluating news and information media as to their aims, content and styles of responsiveness. An analysis of the three cases indicated that these media are indeed taking the public as a starting point. They fulfil several of the specific distinguishing characteristics of responsiveness. At the same time, they sometimes overlap in their motives, topics covered and mode of address – it is possible to be empathic with a strategic undertone or commercial with a civic motive – while the interactive potential of the internet seems to be peripheral for all three. It is as if the reality of responsive journalism is more stubborn (or creative) than can be captured in mutually exclusive heuristic models.

Along the lines of our models, the three cases differ in their various characteristics, most explicitly in the diversity of topics covered, resulting in different presentational styles and different ways of addressing the public. *De Volkskrant* is predominantly civic in its responsiveness. It touches particularly on the agenda that a social elite deems relevant for society, it points out large societal issues, asks the individual for his opinion and involvement, and uses an informative style. *PremTime* uses the opposite approach, identifying individual cases to symbolize large societal issues through a more empathic style. It touches on the agenda of the underclass and translates it into a wider political agenda. Lastly, *Hart van Nederland* uses an emotional approach, starting from an individual case to point to issues of importance 'in your own backyard'. In its interpretation of strategic responsiveness it probably succeeds best in reaching the underclass.

Whether addressing local or larger issues, the three cases have shown that taking the wishes of the public into account is also a response to changes or problems within society (in the Dutch case, particularly the murders of Pim

Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh), while at the same time more strategic factors appear to play a crucial role: winning back the trust of the public as consumers and as citizens. Already by the 1990s, *Hart van Nederland* had sensed a changing mood, a public desire for a different, more emotional, feel-good sort of news. *PremTime* and *de Volkskrant* responded to a sense of social cynicism, uncertainty and anxiety, but have gone beyond mere reporting about it to postulate possible solutions. Nonetheless, different strategic motives appear to be embedded within all the cases: *Hart van Nederland*, in particular, saw a niche in the TV-news market, *PremTime* responded to a public service obligation to incorporate more multicultural programs and *de Volkskrant*, like many newspapers facing financial difficulties and changing reader patterns, searched for new ways to reposition itself and attract a volatile audience.

Inconveniently, being more responsive also strengthens the ambivalence and discomfort that journalists feel *vis-a-vis* the public. This is reflected in two areas. First, there seems to be some unease at incorporating interactive instruments within journalistic processes. Whether it is unease about opening up to and coming clean with the public, or the unfamiliarity of various types of interactive instruments such as website forums, the cases illustrate that the cultural shift taking place within media organizations is somewhat lagging behind rapid technological advancements. Second, journalists are uncertain in their coming to terms with their own role. When asked, none of the journalists we interviewed felt a contradiction between taking the public into account, as a starting point or even siding with the public, and their neutrality when selecting news. Their professional norms and sense of independence was strong enough to counter any attack, and they guaranteed that, in the end, objective truth finding and not the subjective reality of the public was central. However, our content analysis seems to indicate that responsiveness is relative and more dependent on the stage of the news process than on a principled position.

The three cases show journalists still regard their gatekeeping role as of paramount importance. A dialogue with the public is generated in the first phase of the news production process, when issues are selected and formulated. Here, the audience's contributions are requested and appreciated. In the second phase of the production process, that of news construction and interpretation, the public returns to the receiving end and journalistic principles become important again. These and other ambivalences seem to indicate that responsiveness may still be more a symbolic, philosophically or strategically based principle than a full blown journalistic practice. On the other hand, it is also not merely a mirage existing only in the imagination of media practitioners. The struggle to maintain a balance between journalistic integrity and catering for the wishes of the public characterizes today's journalistic profession. Journalists aspire to be receptive to societal changes and cover issues according to popular demand without sacrificing the principles of autonomy, reliability and objectivity.

Notes

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1. Not in the anti-immigration sense that we find with many neo-populist political parties in Europe, but in its style and anti-authority tone.

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