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Platform Imaginaries and Dutch Public Service Media

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Abstract

Over the past decade, public service media (PSM) have increasingly distributed content through digital platforms, most prominently YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. This article explores how this process of platformization, the integration of digital platforms in PSM, affects the public service remit of promoting key public values, such as universality, independence, and diversity. Specifically, it interrogates how Dutch PSM imagine platforms and their users, as well as how these imaginaries affect online public service strategies. The starting point is the notion of *platform imaginaries*: the ways in which social actors understand and organize their activities in relation to platform algorithms, interfaces, data infrastructures, moderation procedures, business models, user practices, and audiences. The analysis of these imaginaries builds on key public service policy documents and 15 interviews with employees from the NPO (Nederlandse Publieke Omroep; the governing body), the broadcasting associations, SKO (audience measurement service), and the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. Our analysis of these materials shows that the online strategies of Dutch PSM are guided by three imaginations of platforms as (a) intermediaries that function on the basis of specific “laws,” (b) places where new audiences reside, and (c) powerful corporations that largely operate beyond the national sphere of influence. These platform imaginaries consist of a complex of interrelated observations, arguments, ideas, and practices, which are generally accepted and partly contested. The main bone of contention is how platform audiences should be seen. It has been difficult to reconcile competing ideas about audiences and, consequently, about the role of PSM in a platform environment, as broadcasters and policy makers lack the necessary (aggregate) data to determine how the media landscape is exactly changing and what the best public service response is. The conclusion of the article proposes a number of steps to resolve this deadlock.

Keywords

PSM, platforms, imaginary, public values

Introduction

Over the past decade, the rise of digital platforms has radically changed the media landscape in which public service media (PSM) operate and try to realize key public values. Within this new landscape, PSM are increasingly competing for attention with social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook, and video and audio streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Spotify, and Apple Music. Paradoxically, they do so by increasingly distributing content through these digital platforms, most prominently YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (Sehl et al., 2016). This article explores how this process of platformization, the integration of digital platforms in PSM, affects the public service remit of promoting key public values, such as universality, diversity, independence, and innovation. This inquiry is pursued in the light of growing concerns over the tension between digital platforms and democratic public communication (van Dijck et al., 2018). Platforms have been found to

give rise to new hierarchies in public communication, shaping user interaction in correspondence with their business interests rather than crucial public values (W. L. Bennett & Livingstone, 2018; Bucher, 2018; Fuchs, 2017; Gillespie, 2018).

Historically, PSM have played an important role in fostering democracy, diversity, and social cohesion. Unlike commercial mass media, they are explicitly tasked with promoting these values, ideally independent from economic and political power. This raises the question of how PSM are adapting to the challenges of platformization? By addressing this question, we hope to shed light on how public service

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interventions in the media landscape can contribute to the functioning of democratic societies in the age of platforms. Most research on PSM, we find, has been too inward-looking. It has explored whether and how PSM build on the affordances of digital platforms in terms of participation, cross-media dissemination, and personalization, while trying to maintain the legitimacy of their “brand” and delivering content that is as diverse and universal as within the broadcast system. With this article we want to shift the focus from the performance of PSM in terms of particular criteria to how PSM are positioning themselves in relation to the development of platforms, which is rapidly changing the media environment.

Pursuing this research, we analyze the dynamic interplay between PSM and platforms. Through their techno-commercial infrastructures, platforms curate how cultural content becomes visible, is shared, and consumed. In turn, PSM and policy makers develop specific understandings of platforms and their audiences, which we conceptualize as “platform imaginaries.” These imaginaries are important to tease out, as they inform how policy makers and PSM use platforms. The article examines how this dynamic plays out in the Netherlands. The Dutch public broadcasting system constitutes an interesting case for two main reasons: its commitment to public values and its distinct model with built-in pluriformity and competition. Multiple broadcasting associations, reflecting different societal convictions and groups, are governed by the Dutch Foundation for Public Broadcasting (Nederlandse Publieke Omroep [NPO]). In Dutch media law, the NPO has been tasked with coordination and collaboration among these associations, creating a unified public service brand. It is between these layers that different perspectives on the promises and perils of digital platforms emerge. These perspectives are embedded in the multiple hierarchies and spheres that constitute the Dutch public service landscape creating constant frictions. From an academic standpoint, these frictions are valuable in thinking through public values in the age of commercial platforms. Given the variety of perspectives on and approaches to digital platforms, this case study allows us to examine the different ways in which platformization confronts important public values. The Dutch system can be understood as a large laboratory for public service experiments with platformization. These experiments are not just important for the future of PSM, but more generally for the future of democratic public communication in a platform environment.

Researching PSM in the Platform Age

While hybrid arrangements and confrontations between commercial and public broadcasting have existed for a long-time (Moe, 2013; Syvertsen, 2003), platformization requires a fundamental rethinking of the public service mission (van Dijck & Poell, 2015). As is increasingly clear, the rise of platforms is transforming the economics, infrastructure, and

governance of cultural production and exchange (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). How can public democratic values be promoted in this environment? And what kinds of public services and types of content are required? In response to the development of commercial platforms, a number of scholars have proposed that PSM should create online alternatives. Murdock (2005) has, for instance, argued for the creation of a “digital commons,” whereas Andrejevic (2013) wants to “broaden the scope of public service beyond content production and distribution to include social media, search and other information-sorting and communication utilities” (p. 123). Similar proposals have been advanced by Fuchs (2015, 2018). Although such grand visions are inspiring, they do not provide insight in how PSM relate to digital platforms in *practice*.

How PSM Use Platforms

For such insights, we need to turn to the many studies that explore why and how PSM use digital platforms. A first strand of research has questioned to what extent PSM build on the participatory affordances of social media. This has produced a series of mixed observations. Some studies suggest that the use of social media by PSM indeed enables new forms of public participation, but simultaneously generates concerns over accuracy, balance and perceived bias (Belair-Gagnon, 2015; Flew, 2011; Meyer & Zempter, 2018). Other scholars, by contrast, have found that public participation through social media remains limited, as professional journalists are reluctant to engage with users beyond preformulated boundaries (Larsson et al., 2017; Stollfuß, 2018; Vanhaeght & Donders, 2016). While these studies produce different observations, they all agree that it is in principle a good idea to employ social media to enhance public participation.

It is, however, very much the question how “participation” as pursued through commercial platforms relates to the values at the core of the public service mission. And vice versa, it is not self-evident that by enhancing public participation, PSM can make a vital contribution to democratic communication in a platform environment. Moreover, we can question whether the participatory ideal is still as important for PSM as it was a few years ago. In the public discourse on social media, the notion of participation certainly does not feature as prominently anymore as it did in the past. Thus, rather than investigating whether PSM are drawing on the participatory affordances of social media, we examine what role “participation” plays in PSM’s *understanding* of digital platforms and their publics and we reflect on the *implications* for the public service remit in a platform environment.

A second strand of research explores how digital platforms are used to reach new types of audiences. These studies show that PSM are under growing pressure to employ platforms to extend their audience reach, as social media and

smartphones are becoming central to media consumption (Sehl et al., 2016, p. 5). Examining platform distribution strategies, scholars have questioned how these affect the integrity of the public service brand, as well as the diversity, trustworthiness, and universality of public service content (Doyle, 2010; Iosifidis, 2011; Johnson, 2013; Sørensen, 2014; Steiner et al., 2019). Of particular concern is the impact of platform personalization algorithms, which appear to sit in tension with core public service values, such as diversity and universality (van Es, 2017). For Murdock (2018), digital entities like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are eroding culture of citizenship by “relentlessly addressing users in their role as consumers rather than citizens, and by deploying user data for commercial rather than social purposes” (p. 48). It is not surprising then that calls have been made for the development of “public service algorithms” that seek to expand the horizons of viewers through serendipity, exposing them to content that they might not necessarily choose themselves (J. Bennett, 2018; Van den Bulck & Moe, 2018).

Taken together these studies examine whether PSM can fulfill their remit through platforms, as they have done within the traditional broadcasting system. Although it seems logical to expect the same type of service online, one can question whether diversity, universality, and other public values can and need to be promoted in a similar way on platforms. Digital platforms are not just new channels through which public service content can be distributed; they profoundly reshape the larger media landscape in which PSM operate and in which particular public values need to be realized. It is in the light of this transformation that the public service remit needs to be rethought. How can public democratic values be promoted in this environment? And what kinds of public services and types of content are required?

Platform Imaginaries

Pursuing this inquiry, we build on the notion of the “imaginary,” which refers to the ways in which social actors understand, envision, and orient themselves toward a particular phenomenon. This, in turn, informs how we act in relation to it. Taylor (2004, p. 25) points out that this relationship is one of dynamic interplay. Practices reveal and inform the underlying norms and ideals carried by the imaginary.

Important in exploring how PSM relate to platforms is the concept of “imagined audiences,” which refers to the “mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating” (Litt, 2012, p. 331). Evidently, there is often a discrepancy between the actual and imagined audience, but the latter is nevertheless crucial as it informs how we communicate (Litt & Hargittai, 2016). Within the context of PSM, the imagined audience on platforms informs what kind of public service content is produced and distributed through particular social media platforms. *Who* do PSM employees think they are communicating with when they are posting to

YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter? As Ang (1991) noted in the early 1990s, public broadcasters seek to develop a different type of relationship with their audience than their commercial counterparts. Regardless, she found that they came to rely on *similar* ways of knowing the audience as commercial parties, namely audience measurement. Thus, a vital question is how PSM perceive and value platform metrics in developing ideas about platform audiences.

Directly related to the imagined audience is the concept of the “algorithmic imaginary,” which refers to how people imagine an algorithm and its workings (Bucher, 2017). When social media creators are interested in making their content visible to audiences, their understanding of the algorithm influences their use of the platform (Bishop, 2019; Petre et al., 2019). Similar ideas have been advanced about data and data analytics, conceptualized through the notion of the “data imaginary” (Beer, 2018). In pursuit of professionalism, Uricchio (2018) argues, data have come to mean the same thing in both commercial and public settings and that public institutions such as PSM have trouble envisioning more creative and critical alternatives.

Combining these ideas, we would like to propose the notion of the “platform imaginary,” which refers not only to how users imagine platform audiences, algorithms, and data, but also the wide variety of other elements that constitute the platform experience. Thus, we define *platform imaginaries as the ways in which social actors understand and organize their activities in relation to platform algorithms, interfaces, data infrastructures, moderation procedures, business models, user practices, and audiences*. Platform imaginaries, as this article shows, shape how PSM produce and distribute content for particular digital platforms, as well as how these media understand their own role in relation to platforms.

Examining the Platformization of Dutch PSM

To gain insight into how PSM understand and organize their activities in relation to platforms, the Dutch public service system presents a particularly interesting case because of its pluralist character and strong commitment to public democratic values. The Dutch Media Act of 2008 states that public media should contribute to the democratic, social, and cultural needs of society and its reception should be freely available for a broad and diverse audience. They are tasked with the creation of content for the purposes of information, culture, and education. These are guided by the following public values:¹

Independent: content is produced free from commercial influences

Trustworthy: the delivered information is trustworthy

Pluriform: content reflects different views and/or philosophies of life in society

Diverse: content contributes to the reflection/representation of different population groups

With impact: content contributes to social cohesion, quality of democracy and society, cultural participation and/or the development of individual users

Engaged: content is made from an explicit societal and/or cultural engagement

Authentic: content is original or concerns real and relatable situations and people

Headstrong: content differs from common takes and perspectives. (NPO, 2015, Our translation)

With such values in mind, it is argued that PSM, free from commercial pressures, are essential for the functioning of a healthy democracy.

The pluralism of the Dutch system becomes immediately evident, when looking at its organizational structure. In this system, the public service mission is advanced by two types of broadcasters: membership-based associations and task-based associations. There are currently six member-based broadcasting associations—BNNVARA, AVROTROS, EO, KRO-NCRV, MAX, and VPRO—and three aspiring associations—HUMAN, WNL, and PowNed—each representing different political or religious streams of Dutch society. And there are two task-based associations—The NOS and NTR—which operate without members and focus, respectively, on news and information, education, and culture. Together these different types of associations make programs for three main television channels—NPO1, NPO2, and NPO3—five radio channels, and a number of theme channels.

To add further complexity to this organizational structure, the different associations are governed by the NPO. The role of the NPO is to administer public service broadcasting, create cohesion among broadcasters, and distribute airtime and budget (Mediawet, 2008). This division of labor between broadcasting associations and the NPO is highly significant as it is the source of much tension and partially explains the divergent views on platform strategies. Whereas the former wants to operate as networked organizations, the latter has developed policies that favor a centralized online environment. Finally, these struggles are played out under the oversight of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), which every 5 years closes a Performance Agreement with the NPO. This agreement stipulates the qualitative and quantitative goals for the public media offering, public involvement, and audience reach of the PSM. The NPO and broadcasting associations have to abide by this agreement, as they are funded through tax money. Other than membership fees they cannot generate their own revenue, as the advertising income on public television and radio flows to the Ministry of OCW.

Not surprisingly, there is lots of debate within this complex organizational structure on how PSM should relate to platforms and how platforms should be understood from a public service perspective. Moreover, the various stakeholders are frequently clashing in practice as well. The broadcasting associations are developing their own platform strategies in a bottom-up fashion, while the NPO are trying to establish a comprehensive platform policy framework top-down.

Interviews

To gain insight in these struggles and related platform imaginations, we interviewed representatives from each of the above-mentioned stakeholders. Specifically, we sought out those individuals that are directly involved in how social media platforms are used within the context of Dutch PSM. Between March 2018 and February 2019, we conducted long-form, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with 15 employees from the NPO (strategy and policy and audience research department), member- and task-based broadcasters (editors and heads of digital strategy), Stichting KijkOnderzoek (audience measurement service focused on Dutch PSM), and the Ministry of OCW. The goal was to capture a wide range of perspectives on digital platforms and the platform strategies of PSM in the Netherlands. To surface these perspectives, we conducted semi-structured interviews. We created a topic guide with several questions about how the interviewee saw the characteristics and audiences of different social media platforms. Using these questions as a starting point, we asked follow-up questions on certain themes and responses, particularly related to the use of digital platforms. The interview sessions lasted on average 60 min. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The transcriptions were subsequently read several times, segments of interest tagged, and central recurrent themes identified (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The analysis focused on how the interviewees understood and incorporated social media platforms in their daily practices and how this pertained to their public task. Portions of the interviews have been translated for citation purposes.

Aside from the interviews, key public policy documents on social media and Dutch PSM were reviewed. These include (a) the Dutch Media Act of 2008, which stipulated the requirements for commercial and public broadcasters in the Netherlands; (b) the *Concessiebeleidsplan 2016–2020*, a policy document that outlines the NPO ambitions and goals for their given license period; (c) *Voor Alle(s) Publiek* (College van Omroepen, 2015), the plans presented by the NPO board of directors for the current license period; and (d) *Beleidslijn platformselectie* (NPO, 2013), a document in which the NPO board of directors outline the conditions under which social media can be used by broadcasters. These documents help to clarify the position of the various stakeholders on platformization. In combination with the interviews, they allow us to explore how Dutch PSM perceive of and organize their

activities around platforms, as well as how they relate these activities to the public values they seek to promote.

Analysis

Three crucial issues emerged in our analysis of these materials. Starting with daily practice, the first issue concerns how PSM adapt to the affordances of digital platforms. Subsequently, the interviews touched on the more fundamental question whether it is a good idea for PSM to use commercial platforms in the first place, or whether they should focus on remaining independent. The third issue pertained to whether and how PSM have a role to play in countering the potentially negative impact of platformization on the media landscape and democratic society at large. Discussing these issues, the interviewees invoked particular imaginations of platforms, as (a) intermediaries that function on the basis of specific “laws,” (b) places where new audiences reside, and (c) powerful corporations that largely operate beyond the national sphere of influence. These ideas strongly resonate with what is expressed in policy documents, as well as in discussions at various PSM stakeholder workshops in the Netherlands over the past years.²

The Laws of the Platform

First, it should be observed that PSM, like other content producers, strategically select and adapt their content for platform distribution (Bucher, 2018; Duffy, 2017; Nieborg & Poell, 2018). The Dutch public service broadcasters consider what stories they want to share and what platforms to select for distributing specific content. All our interviewees maintained that they adapt their content to fit particular platforms, abiding by what one interviewee termed “the laws of the platform.” In 2015, this strategy was clearly preferred by the Association of Broadcasters (College van Omroepen, 2015):

We opt for an up-to-date and diverse online distribution strategy, in which we select for each type of content the best outlet. Mildly polarizing programs fit well on a platform like YouTube, whereas content that provokes discussion and interaction, such as current affairs programs and talk shows, are more suitable for Facebook. Drama may best be distributed through a paid video-on-demand (VOD) channel. (p. 11, Our translation)

In other words, the broadcasters are imagining platforms as intermediaries with specific characteristics or “laws.” The interviews and this document underscore how they perceive YouTube as primarily a broadcast platform, rather than one for maintaining a community and triggering audience participation. It is not popular among journalistic programs because it is considered to have a strong audiovisual focus and predominantly a repository function, making it less suitable for engagement with an audience around unfolding news topics. Facebook, by contrast, is primarily seen as a

tool for building a community and stimulating participation albeit catering to a relatively older audience. By and large Twitter is embraced by broadcasters for its “live” character, the ability to have conversations about unfolding events.

Although public broadcasters are adapting to the affordances of particular platforms, we found that they are certainly not naïve about the technology and political economy of these media. A concern that several broadcasters shared was how algorithmic curation affects the visibility of content. They explained how simple algorithmic tweaks affect the user traffic to their content. As one person maintained,

The Catch 22 of social media platforms is dependency. The fact that you can lose 10-15% reach because they changed their algorithms is very bad. We don’t have influence on this. We have to cope with the means we have. Everyone has to.

Strikingly, while the interviewed broadcasters displayed a critical awareness of the tension between platform algorithms and the value of *independence*, their main concern was the impact that this had on their audience reach. The question how platform algorithms privilege particular types of content and undermine the ability of PSM to highlight a diverse set of societal perspectives, another important public value, was not mentioned.

We encountered a similar relatively narrow focus, when the broadcasters brought up concerns over context collapse in terms of having content remain recognizable as being made by the public broadcaster. The more fundamental process underlying these concerns is what has been called “unbundling” (Carr, 2008). Platforms like YouTube break up the “bundle” of content, audiences, and advertising, as traditionally delivered to audiences in the form of, for example, a newspaper or television channel. Unbundled content is redistributed through social media sharing and recommendation algorithms (Van Dijck et al., 2018). This process also threatens *external pluriformity*, which is a key public value that can only be accomplished by stringing content together into discernible sequences. Concerns about this threat were articulated from the side of the NPO, but not by the broadcasters. As one NPO policymaker explained, public broadcasting needs to be considered as a whole, rather than consisting of individual pieces of content. Popular programs can spark viewers’ interest in other types of programs: “On NPO Start you can use *De Wereld Draait Door* [a hit talk show] to guide viewers to other NPO programs. What remains when you try to do this on YouTube?” We see how different concerns over public values emerge between the stakeholders.

Taken together, although public broadcasters imagine platforms as techno-commercial intermediaries that sit in tension with key public values, they simultaneously find it hard to look beyond their immediate strategic interests. This ambiguous approach is directly informed by how they imagine platform audiences, as well as understand their own mission in an online environment.

Bonding With the New Generation

In line with popular ideas about social media, Dutch broadcasters imagine digital platforms as places where they can connect and interact with audiences. This was clearly expressed in 2015, when the Dutch broadcasting associations maintained in a collective statement:

It is increasingly important that you create a meaningful relationship with your audience. And to be able to do that, the internet, YouTube and the various social media are indispensable for the public broadcaster as an extension of the regular supply channels. Not only for marketing purposes as an appetizer for the main channels, but by considering the new social networks as the place par excellence where society itself shapes and initiates debate. (p. 10)

In this vision, platforms are a necessary element in pursuing the public service remit, primarily understood in terms of audience engagement and reach. In their efforts to reach general and diverse audiences, as required by the Dutch government, public broadcasters are predisposed to use platforms to connect with online audiences, especially with young viewers. Two connected myths about the viewing habits of young people underpin this imaginary. The first myth concerns the death of television and the second the success of “social.” Strikingly, the urgency felt by the interviewed broadcasters to be present on social media was fueled by observing the media consumption habits of their children. On several occasions such personal experiences were shared with us to explain the need to employ social media platforms. The broadcasters feared that PSM, by not being present on these platforms, will miss out on bonding with the new generation. As one interviewee emphasized, PSM need to “broadcast where the public is.”

Underpinning the need of PSM to reach large and diverse audiences is the value of *universality*. As Van den Bulck and Moe (2018) argue, in correspondence with this value “PSM must provide a range of programmes that inform, inspire, entertain and appeal to the diverse interests of the young and the old, the higher and less educated, across the community” (p. 877). The goal is to enable an “informed citizenry” and a nation with a “shared cultural background and identity” (Van den Bulck & Moe, 2018: 877). The question is how these objectives, which stem from the broadcasting era, are translated to digital platforms. This is far from straightforward, as platformization leads to a fragmentation of content, focusing the attention on the performance of individual content items, rather on a set or “bundle” of programs (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Consequently, the value of universality tends to be primarily translated to platforms as audience reach.

This interpretation of the public service remit and imagination of platform audiences as the new generation is by no means uncontested. Research conducted by the NPO in 2018 concluded that linear television remains highly relevant for reaching younger generations. Ramsey (2018) arrived at a

similar conclusion in his research on BBC Three. He debunks the idea that television in the United Kingdom is no longer watched by a young audience. While less people overall watch linear television, this decline is far more gradual than previously anticipated. In addition, the amount of public television consumption on social media is contested. In our interviews with the NPO, policy makers and audience researchers claimed that social media effectively play a relatively small role in adding to total consumption. The capacity to reach new audiences through these media is yet to be proven. They maintain that social media success stories tend to be anecdotal and lack empirical backing.

Underlying the skepticism of the NPO is a different vision of how the public service mission needs to be pursued in the online environment. The NPO especially emphasizes the public service values of *independence* and *reliability*, which they find can best be accomplished through its own online spaces. As an employee of the NPO explained,

At the moment we find it very important that we have our own space online, in view of public values [. . .] Having an independent, non-commercial space, where you are not bound to unknown algorithms and where you have insight into the data. If you have a video clip up on YouTube you (often) cannot determine what the user will see after watching it. We think that the context you can offer as a public broadcaster is also important online and you should not ignore it.

In correspondence with this vision, the NPO has stipulated that YouTube and others social media can only be used by PSM as promotional instruments rather than as distribution channels (NPO, 2015, p. 39). Furthermore, it specified that on-demand viewing should happen on the VOD platform NPO Start and not on commercial platforms. These policies are laid out by NPO in a document on platform selection, which states that broadcasters can only upload 5 min of promotional material per episode on social media.³ Not surprisingly, these regulations have been criticized by the broadcasters who call it a rigid and conservative approach. Accordingly, some have ignored the NPO policy, uploading longer segments and even entire episodes to social media, as well as developing web-only content.

So far it has been difficult to resolve the struggle between broadcasters and NPO. This is not only due to competing visions and platform imaginaries, but it also points to a problem of measurement. The precise role and impact of social media has been difficult to chart. This is partly the result of the organizational structure of Dutch PSM and partly the result of limited access to social media data. Not all broadcasting associations centrally organize social media data collection, with some associations leaving data collection in the hands of the editorial teams of particular programs. Those that have social media coordinators are reluctant to share their analytics with other broadcasters and the NPO. The fragmentation of data collection is reinforced by social media corporations, which only provide metrics on the performance

of individual items/channels and not on the overall market share of broadcasters or the NPO. As Napoli (2013) has pointed out social metrics are unable to “provide a generalizable representation of the television viewing population as a whole” (p. 15).

Moreover, digital platforms each have their own definition of what counts as a “view” and how to understand its worth in relation to traditional ratings (van Es, 2019). There is no consensus on what counts as valuable engagement (Napoli, 2011). NPO’s audience research department has conducted exploratory talks with the broadcasters about relevant metrics to chart on social media platforms. As we learned from the interviews, the NPO and broadcasters have opted to focus on *reach*, *community*, and *engagement*, but they had to define these metrics per platform because of different platform affordances and available data. Thus, rather than being constrained by their pursuit of “professionalism,” as theorized by Uricchio, we observe a struggle over the meaning of platform data. These data are certainly imagined as vital indications of online success, but it is not altogether clear what data to pay attention to, how to evaluate the data from different platforms in relation to each other, and how to compare these data with other audience measurements.

In sum, the Dutch case reveals the complex situation in which PSM find themselves in the age of platforms. In light of the growing impact of large commercial platforms on public communication, it appears crucial for PSM to maintain their independence and stake out their own online domain. From this perspective, as represented by the NPO, platforms are seen to be in tension with key public values. However, a major problem with this strategy is that it potentially marginalizes PSM, if viewers migrate en masse to platforms. Operating under the assumption that such a transition is indeed taking place, public broadcasters have increased the content distributed through platforms. In this vision, platforms are seen as necessary, since this is where crucial (young) segments of the audience are. Yet, it is not altogether clear whether this audience imaginary corresponds with reality. Are viewers effectively migrating from linear television to platforms and can PSM reach them there? A major challenge in confronting these conundrums is that the necessary data are missing to take informed decisions. Consequently, public broadcasters and policy makers find it difficult to reach consensus on how to develop a coherent public service strategy in relation to platforms. In the absence of such a consensus, PSM become increasingly entangled with platforms, as broadcasters and program makers continue to distribute vital content through social media.

Confronting Powerful Platform Corporations

This brings us to the overarching issue in the relation of PSM to commercial platforms: Do PSM have a role to play in countering the negative impact of platformization on the media landscape and democratic society at large?

As discussed, both broadcasters and NPO agree that digital platforms actively shape the relationship between PSM and audiences, undermining in the process vital public values. However, they disagree on how to respond to the growing impact of platforms.

On one side of the spectrum, we noticed what can best be described as resignation. Writing about consumer privacy and digital entities, Draper and Turow (2019) have developed the notion of “digital resignation,” the feeling of helplessness and the subsequent inaction of users in the face of behavioral tracking and platform data collection. They argue that this feeling is cultivated by corporate practices. In our research, we observed similar feelings of helplessness and inaction among broadcasters in relation to the rise of platforms. As one broadcaster put it in the interview, “in the short term: you have to be present [on these platforms]. In the long term: we should make sure these are decent platforms where you can safely operate.” Yet, this interviewee, like most others, did not see how PSM are in a position to negotiate with platforms to ensure the realization of key public values. This was seen by most as the responsibility of the European Union (EU). From this perspective, especially articulated by broadcasters, platforms are imagined as powerful entities against which they can do very little.

Over the past years, the EU has indeed started to intervene to safeguard public values. In 2018, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) was launched to protect the rights of EU citizens by imposing restrictions on the use of personal data. And media regulation was introduced that requires streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video to dedicate 30% of their catalog to European content. This is said to “support the cultural diversity of the European audiovisual sector.”⁴ The regulation, which goes into effect in September 2020, also demands that these digital portals fund TV series and movies produced in Europe. A “local” content mandate is equally present in public broadcasting in the Netherlands where 75% of television programs are required to be Dutch original productions. This norm is said to offer broadcasters a means to contribute to social cohesion, community values, and the quality of democracy and society (Rijksoverheid, 2017).

While some look toward the EU for solutions, there are also a number of actors that envision a more active role for PSM. The NPO, for one, cannot be characterized as resigned, as it seeks to create an autonomous online public service domain, which is independent from commercial platforms. This can be described as a strategy of “splendid isolation.” Simultaneously, the NPO realizes that in the development of an online environment it cannot compete with the large sums of money that Google, Facebook, Apple, and Netflix invest in research and development. They remark,

Unfortunately we cannot match that level [of investment], but we do want to get the most out of our investments in innovation. That is why we will collaborate with our EBU colleagues and

local private companies, only if this collaboration doesn't hurt our independence as public provider. (NPO, 2015, p. 40)

The remark shows that although the NPO, like the broadcasters, imagines platforms as powerful entities largely beyond their control, it also underscores the strong commitment of the NPO to independence. They choose to develop an online space despite their competitive disadvantage.

For their VOD platforms, PSM are increasingly developing "public" recommender systems (Sørensen & Hutchinson, 2018). Within the European Broadcasting Union, a group of broadcasters have, for example, collaborated on the development of the PSM recommendation service PEACH (see <https://peach.ebu.io/>). This system has been deployed on the websites of Radio Télévision Suisse (RTS) and Rádio e Televisão de Portugal (RTP) per August 2017. Late 2018, the NPO introduced their homegrown recommendation algorithm for its VOD platform. Upon its launch, Martijn van Dam, NPO board member, proclaimed, "We blow up your filter bubble." Unlike commercial algorithms, which tend to recommend more of the same, users on NPO are nudged to watch more diverse content with "high public value." More specifically, the algorithm recommends content that lies slightly outside of the users' comfort zone, based on previous viewing behavior.

A more radical effort at independence is the PublicSpaces initiative, launched in 2018, in which various public broadcasters (VPRO, BNNVARA, EO) are involved. It is a direct answer to the dependence on commercial social platforms like Facebook, Apple, Microsoft, Google, and Amazon (FAMGA). PublicSpaces describes itself as "a coalition to design a new platform for social interaction, where users are not viewed as exploitable assets or data sources, but as equal partners that share a common public interest."⁵ This initiative hopes to promote the values and principles of: openness, transparency, accountability, autonomy, and user-centricity. They are not necessarily developing their own platform, but they are developing or adopting components that can be used in their own online systems to reach publics. Their first step is to implement an open and decentralized version of Facebook comments, accessible to all. PublicSpaces puts to practice calls by various scholars for the development of online PSM, which include information sorting and communication utilities that can compete with commercial platforms (Andrejevic, 2013; Fuchs, 2018).

Conclusion

The platformization of cultural production profoundly reshapes the political-cultural field in which PSM have historically tried to intervene to promote public value. This calls for a re-evaluation of the role of these media and a renewal of the public service remit. Our exploration makes clear that public service broadcasters and policy makers are thoroughly aware of the challenges posed by platformization. However,

it is also clear that collectively these actors are not yet able to develop a powerful and coherent public service strategy in response to the dominance of these commercial platforms. On the one hand, the widely perceived need for PSM to maximize their audience reach and to capture young audiences drives broadcasters and program makers to embrace social media. In the process, they adapt their practices to the mechanisms of platforms, undermining their ability to effectively realize some of their key public values. On the other hand, attempts to maintain a clear boundary between PSM and platforms, as well as to establish autonomous online public spaces, are not yet backed by a sufficiently broad coalition. The question mark that hangs over these attempts and initiatives is that they will lead to the marginalization of PSM, as the audiences for linear television erode further. This article has explored how these different perspectives are based on particular platform imaginaries. We have shown how these imaginaries consist of a complex of interrelated observations, arguments, ideas, and practices, which are partly generally accepted and partly contested. In the case of Dutch PSM, the main bone of contention is how platform audiences should be seen. It has been difficult to reconcile competing ideas about audiences and, consequently, about the role of PSM in a platform environment, as broadcasters and policy makers lack the necessary (aggregate) data to determine how the media landscape is exactly changing and what the best public service response is.

To resolve this deadlock, we propose the following steps. First, a concerted effort is needed to gain datafied insights in how the media landscape is transforming and how this affects PSM. We need to move beyond general metrics about numbers of users and views on social media, which in isolation mean relatively little. It is crucial to gain a comparative understanding of the demographics of users of digital platforms and portals and of viewers of linear television, as well as of the amount of time they spend on these media and the types of content they consume. Only by systematically tracking and comparing the use of different media over time can we gain insight in the potential migration from linear television to platforms. This should also provide guidance on whether it makes sense for PSM to distribute content on platforms or to pursue other online strategies.

The second step is to use these insights to develop a comprehensive online public service strategy, supported by relevant stakeholders. To reach a consensus between policymakers, broadcasters, and program makers, it is important to recognize that different platform imaginaries are at play. These imaginaries need to be critically verified and discussed. Moreover, it is crucial to adapt the policy framework to liberate broadcasters and program makers from the constant pressure to maximize audience reach. A simple step in this direction is to destabilize the power of this dominant metric and reward the pursuit of other public values.

Finally, the operationalization of a comprehensive online strategy comes with a number of further challenges. While

the details of such a strategy will need to be determined by the involved actors, we can make a few preliminary observations. Given the many different ways in which citizens consume digital media content, an online public service strategy will need to include the collaboration of a wide variety of actors (van Dijck & Poell, 2015). For one, such a strategy is only effective if accompanied by legislative action to force digital platforms and portals to actively cooperate in the realization of public value (Helberger et al., 2018). It also requires a broadening of the scope of PSM, which cannot be restricted to producing and distributing audiovisual content, but needs to include other types of services, such as independent recommendation systems, fact checking services, and social networking services. These types of services are crucial to have a wider impact and to prevent the marginalization of PSM by platforms. As discussed, such initiatives and legislative interventions are already under way. But PSM should not be alone in defending values that are the cornerstone of well-functioning democratic societies. The challenge is to build a broad coalition between different stakeholders to support public values, informed by systematic (empirical) research.

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Notes

1. This overlaps with the values shared by the members of the European Broadcasting Union (i.e., universality, independence, excellence, diversity, accountability, and innovation).
2. “Public Service Broadcasting in the Platform Society,” workshop at the NPO, Hilversum, The Netherlands, 12 October 2017; “PSB & Public Values in a Digital Age,” Expert Meeting at the University of Utrecht, 15 December 2017; “Real Social Analytics. A New Democratic Metric for the Digital Age,” workshop at the University of Utrecht, 7 June 2019.
3. During the writing of this article, a new policy document on platform selection has gone into effect (per 1 October 2019). It provides broadcasters with more opportunities to distribute content on social media platforms.

4. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20180423IPR02332/audiovisual-media-agreement-reached-on-new-media-services-directive>
5. <https://publicspaces.net/manifesto/>

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