

COMING OUT

Public Broadcasters and Social Responsibility

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Jo Bardoel

bardoel@pscw.uva.nl

Kees Brants

brants@pscw.uva.nl

Lodewijk van Noort

lodewijk.vannoort@student.uva.nl

The Amsterdam School of Communications Research (ASCoR)

University of Amsterdam

Abstract

In the new, competitive media environment in Europe, public broadcasters rethink and often rediscover their social responsibility towards society; if only because (supra-)national policy makers are requiring them to do so. On the basis of a content analysis of policy documents of the public broadcasting organizations in the Netherlands over a period of 40 years, we trace in this paper how they have (re)defined their role in relation to the public interest, to providing diverse, reliable and quality information, and to minorities in a changing society. We thus hope to shed light on the ways in which public broadcasters come to terms with the more market oriented attitudes of subsequent governments and how they 'translate' new regulatory frameworks in their own programme policies.

Introduction

While the public is partly turning its back on them, public service broadcasters in Western Europe still claim state support and a preferential treatment in order to realise an often self-proclaimed and seldom well-defined obligation they are supposed to have towards society. They see themselves as the sole guarantor of quality, diversity and, in the end, democracy itself. Where private stations are in the business of making money, they live by a cultural-pedagogic logic; where the former are entertaining the public, they are after their well being; where they are the embodiment of the Enlightenment ideal, the commercial stations are the doorway sign to a dumbing-down culture, et cetera. The private stations, in their defence, claim to be the real public channels, as they know and give what the public wants. Theirs is truly in the public interest.

Now, while we know this is partly the rhetoric of the new competitive environment in which the two parties smear one another and polish their own performance with such a shine that it is almost blinding reality, the history and characteristics of public broadcasting are indeed paved with a sense of social responsibility and responsiveness. Be it unevenly and often unwritten, as their monopoly status allowed them to take many things for granted. It was considered self evident that their *raison d'être* was built more or less on an obligation towards society in which information, quality, cultural enrichment and independence from state and commerce were some of the key words. In claiming social responsibility they took account of and were accountable to the public. In practice, however, it was through political or administrative institutions that the latter took place.

Since the mid 1980s this self-evidence has been challenged by both changing political beliefs and the introduction of commercial television in Western Europe. Liberalisation and

deregulation have created an atmosphere in which more and more citizens themselves hold these organisations directly responsible for their performance; their public or private status not making much of a difference. At the same time, social ethics are shifting towards more volatile and negotiable norms (Shell and the Brent Spar case have been pivotal here), and the claim of public broadcasters to be the sole guardian of the public interest is being challenged (Brants 1999). Social responsibility thus tends to develop from a relevant policy issue to an asset for both public and private broadcasting organisations.

How have public broadcasters come to terms with these new circumstances and in what ways do they negotiate and articulate their new role *vis à vis* revised government policies? In this study of 40 years policy of public broadcasting in the Netherlands, we hope to show how the organisations have (re)defined their normative duty in the light of their still preferential financial position. This paper reflects a specific stage in a wider research on the question whether public service broadcasters can rightfully claim a monopoly on a quality inspired cultural-pedagogic logic or whether commercial channels (can) perform in a social responsible way too? Before, we looked at the Dutch government's changing broadcasting policy over the years (Bardoel et al. 2000); the next step will be a similar research into the programme policies of the private stations.

Researching a diffuse concept

In spite of claims and counter claims, both the meaning and context of the notion of social responsibility are fairly ambiguous. Sometimes it is referred to in relation to *content*. In that sense information is not merely a commodity, but also a social or 'merit' good (e.g. Picard 1989), which should be accurate, diverse and of high quality (e.g. Broadcasting Research Unit 1985). Another notion of responsibility refers to the media's function for (democratic) *society*: apart from an economic role, media have political and cultural functions, allowing sufficient forums for the expression of opinions and enabling the public to fulfil its role as citizens (e.g. Van Cuilenburg & Slaa 1993; Dahlgren 1995). Finally, social responsibility refers to the *organisational status* of the broadcasters: media ownership is a public trust, where the content producers should be independent from state and market forces but accountable to the public, to avoid a situation of power without responsibility (e.g. Blumler & Hoffmann-Riem 1992; Siune & Hulten 1998).

Though responsibility (as obligation to the public) is often used interchangeably and confusingly with ‘responsiveness’ (as taking account of the public), it is clearly a normative notion somewhat linked to ‘the public interest’. It is grounded in a belief in the malleability of society, the changeability of human nature and the establishment of the ideals of Enlightenment. It assumes that broadcast media are instrumental to social orientations of citizens and to social cohesion in society. And the state, as responsible for public policy, is seen as in the end benevolent and acting in that public interest; at least, that is the dominant belief in a consensual democracy like the Netherlands (and probably less so in adversarial democracies such as the UK).

The main reason for its ambiguity can be explained by the roots of the notion not being found in theory but in communication practice and policy (Hellman 1999: 58). The most relevant documents do not stem from academic research but from policy advisory commissions like the Hutchins commission in the US (1947) and the British Royal Commission on the Press (1977). Consequently the concept tends to be practical, oriented towards problem solving and, because of its political nature, contested and negotiable. As a result, the definitions differ from country to country and clearly reflect national media policies (cf. McQuail 1992). Its origin lies in policies for a traditionally market driven press which apparently ‘irresponsible’ behaviour needed (self)regulation. In a situation of channel scarcity for broadcasting, where government interference was considered inevitable, legitimisation for a public policy was not really necessary.

Since the 1970s, interfering in public broadcasting and giving the organisations a financial prerogative and a specific role ‘in the public interest’ began to need legitimacy. Originally it took a more ritualistic form: the public monopoly was not seriously contested but an open government had to legitimise its prescriptive regulations. With the introduction of commercial television and the changed policy environment the EC Directive ‘Television without Frontiers’ introduced, both conspicuously in the year 1989, interference and preferential treatment needed a more deliberate strategic policy and legitimacy. While old paternalistic imperatives were not taken for granted anymore, the preferred position of the public broadcasters put them under an obligation. Their role and duty had to be named, their social responsibility operationalised, as phenomena often only get a name when they are seen as problematic. At the same time, being socially responsible became an asset in the discursive struggle between public and private broadcasters.

How to trace a concept that in its origin was mostly implicit and thus possibly invisible in documents? We will follow a more or less inductive approach by, first, reconstructing the evolution of the concept as it can be traced in the policy documents of the public broadcasters and, second, by comparing this with the development we found with the government policies. We will use the concept in a sensitising way, open and ill-defined at the beginning of the research, serving as a general guideline for analysing the policy documents, and gradually getting a more empirically based content (Blumer 1969).

Following this grounded theory approach, the first phase is *explorative*, composing a comprehensive list of social responsibility (SR) norms stemming from academic research and various policy notions. As we followed the same procedure when analysing government policy, we did have a list of keywords in order to find notions of SR-norms in the policy documents of the public broadcasters. With this list, the content of these documents were analysed for the appearance of notions of social responsibility. Every 'text on paper' was transformed into a digital document, in order to be able to trace all the social responsibility norms more easily (via the *word count* function in MS Word). Each of the SR-terms found in the text was highlighted if the context proved to be relevant, and counted in a Microsoft Excel table. On the basis of the word count a table was created for each of the three periods with the absolute frequency values of all the SR-norms detected in the policy documents. Subsequently these values were categorized by the three categories – media content requirements, role of media in/for society and organisational status - we defined earlier on.

In the second, *reflective*, phase the various concepts were linked to a more general background by categorising the complete list of SR-norms in order to position them within a theoretical framework and to search for general tendencies in the development of social responsibility in the policies of the broadcasting organisations. In the final *interpretative* phase, the use of social responsibility norms in the relevant documents was analysed and interpreted as to their saliency, their range and diversity, to potential shifts in emphasis and discourse over time, and compared to the changing norms and categories that we found in analysing the government's policy documents.

The case of the Netherlands

Compared to its beginning in the 1950s, the TV broadcasting system in the Netherlands has seen some dramatic organisational changes. During, what can be called, the *old public order*,

society was characterised by religious and ideological *pillars*, more or less homogenous societal streams which structured the social order from cradle to grave and from political party to media and voluntary organisations. Up into the 1960s the broadcasting system both reflected and reinforced the existing social and political order, with journalists performing a platform function for the elites of the different pillars, informing the rank and file as well as creating consensus and stability (Brants & McQuail 1997, Bardoel 1997). The organisation of the broadcasting system in this period (1955-1980) is characterised by non-commercialism, representation of the *pillarised* structure and - from the end of the 1960s and marked by the 1967 Broadcasting Act - controlled access for new broadcasting institutions. The organisations' most relevant policy documents studied for this period are two memoranda, one on a proposed *Law on Broadcasting Regulation* (1966) and one on the *Principles for a Joint Programme* (1969).

The *transitional period* (1980-1990) is characterised best as a time of defence, preserving and protecting the public monopoly of the existing broadcasting system. Following the rapid development of new transmission technologies in an already heavily cabled country, the first cracks in the system became visible. The mix of satellite and cable, and the possibilities this opened up (and were still refused) to national private investors, could no longer hold off foreign commercial institutions. They were not hindered by national regulations they had to comply with. The government responded with a White Paper (1983) and a new Media Act (1987), designed to maintain the existing system. The broadcasting organisations' most relevant policy documents studied for this period are the *Comments on the Government's Media Memorandum* (1984) and a memorandum on *Future Policy for Dutch Broadcasting* (1989).

At the end of the 1980s and early 1990s a *new dual order* was formed in which commercial broadcasters were admitted to the delicately balanced Dutch system. The number of national television channels rose from 2 in 1987 to more than 10 at the turn of the century, only 3 of which were public. With the audience fragmenting over the different channels, the audience share of the public channels dropped considerably, from approximately 80 percent in 1988 to a mere 38 percent in 1996 (Bakker & Scholten 1997). The government papers and acts reflect the changing situation and no longer staunchly defend the public system per se. The three most relevant memoranda of the public broadcasters studied for this period are all answers to the future public broadcasting order in a changed media environment: a *Differentiated Order* (1991), *The Power of Pluralism* (1996) and *Making a Difference* (2000).

Research on the government's policies in these three periods concluded three concurrent tendencies (Bardoel et al. 2000: 95ff). First, an increase was observed in the saliency and diversity of SR-norms used in the various policy documents, with a notable concern for national identity, European culture, quality and independence of the system. Second, we concluded a growing refinement of SR-norm specifications, with a stricter adherence to programme diversity and allocation of airtime to nationally produced programmes. Finally, with the coming of the new dual order, the government papers showed a further increase and refinement of the social responsibility concept in light of social and economic changes affecting public broadcasting. These three tendencies reflected in fact four changes and emphases in government policy: a discourse moving away from political arguments to cultural motives; a focus away from collectivism towards individualism; from an ambiguous to a positive assessment of economic forces, and; attention turning from purely national to also minority cultures.

Do we see these changes reflected in programme policies too, or do the public broadcasters negotiate and articulate their own discourse and problem definition?

Results

To begin with, we try to picture the development of social responsibility in the policy documents of the public broadcasters: what keywords, possible synonyms and related operationalisations we see, and how their saliency has changed over time (see table 1). We notice here a number of developments. Firstly, there is an increase of notions: from 40 in the old public order (period I), via 53 in the transition period (II), to 74 under the new dual order (period III). Even if we take into account that in the same period the size of policy documents increased as well, the growth in diversity is significant (see also table 2 – in appendix – which gives the numerical importance of the norms). This stronger elaboration and explicitness of these norms by the public broadcasters over time can be interpreted as a growing awareness of their social responsibility role.

Table 1 around here

Secondly, we see that certain notions remain present over time, while others disappear or, in some instances, reappear. Several traditional roles media are expected to play for

individuals in society – information, education and entertainment – are present in all three periods. So are the content requirements (comprehensive programming, diversity, balance, independence, culture, art, objectivity, equality), which form not only the most elaborate list but also reflect the anxiety we see in politics over the potential ideological power of the medium. Certain social goals to be reached (transparency, freedom of speech, and more in general: democracy) and social sectors that should recognise themselves in the programming (access, forum, religion, identity, minority groups) are also constant over time.

What disappears are notions like non-discrimination, public order, continuity or, only in the transition period, representativity, security, opinion, authenticity, integrity. This can either be a question of self evidence of the notion or declining importance in a society which becomes more volatile and depillarised. New since the transition period are notions which reflect a mixture of responsiveness to audiences (public evaluation, preferences, accountability, access), awareness of a beginning competition (attractiveness, quality, reach, audience maximisation) and emphasising the importance and quality of their existing functions (social cohesion, craftsmanship, non-commerciality, independence, creativity).

Typical is the statement in the memorandum *The Power of Pluralism* that

“it is self evident that both public and commercial broadcasters have an influence and a function in society. However, there are several reasons that the social function of public broadcasting should be fulfilled by public radio and television.”

The reasons being its guarantee for

- reliable, independent, journalistically and professionally assembled and selected information;
- the provision of all programme types and constant quality;
- functioning as an anchor for social identity, cultural unity and individuality, and;
- being anchored in society. “

The new dual order sees new content requirements (accuracy, truth, factuality, fairness), new worries (privacy, innovation, decency, responsible programming, cultural integration). Especially decency seems remarkable in a country most severely hit by the so-called sexual revolution; in the governmental policy documents this notion disappeared conspicuously with the old public order.

Finally, we take a closer look at the three categories distinguished before, to see whether we can refine the trends and the saliency we have detected (see table 3). The distinction between social responsibility referring to *content, media's role for society* or *the organisational status* of the broadcasters was applied to the different norms we found in the

total summary. Because all policy documents are different in size, the table puts together the total of relative values for each of the three periods.

Table 3 around here

The table clearly shows that during the most recent new dual order the SR-norm density (the norms as a percentage of the total number of words) in policy documents is much higher than during the transitional period or the old public order. It is remarkable though that the SR-norm density during the old public order was higher than in the transitional period, but this might have been caused by the strong liberalization and so-called ‘no nonsense’ policies of the 1980s.

Focusing next on each category (concentration on content, society or organization), we notice interestingly an increase of attention (the relative percentage of each of the norms) for both *media content* and *role for society* at the expense of *organizations*. In all three periods the norms focusing on the role of the broadcaster for society dominate (from 36 percent in the old public order to 66 percent in the new dual order). For the content requirements, with the exception of equality in programming and diversity (quality) the norms only came up after the first period, which seems surprising if one considers ‘content’ to lie at the heart of the public function of broadcasting. At the same time, this typifies the Netherlands, where the structure of external pluralism is enough to guarantee quality of programme content.

Discussion

The first conclusion of this research is that the number, variety and frequency of social responsibility norms in policy documents of public broadcasters have increased dramatically over time. Most SR-requirements just did not exist in the old public order, but were introduced in the transitional period or, even more so, became only very recently part and parcel of the new dual order. It clearly indicates that the legitimization of public broadcasters has become more overt, explicit and elaborate over time. The sheer rise of the length of policy documents underlines this and seems a reflection of the development of the public broadcasting system from a more introvert attitude in a situation of monopoly to a more extravert approach in the most recent period. Public broadcasters had to come out.

Comparing the vocabulary of the policy discourses of the government, in an earlier phase of this project, and that of public broadcasters, it becomes evident that both use very much the same language in their discourse. Only a few SR-norms (non-evaluative programme content, interesting content, hierarchy/public responsibility, selfregulation/independence and equality/access to audience) are used only in government documents and not in broadcasters documents. The same cannot be said when we look at the three general characteristics. Though there is also a decline in attention to *organizational status* and a growing emphasis on *media content* and *media's role for society*, in the new dual order the government's attention for organizational responsibility norms still forms more than 50 percent of all the norms mentioned in their policy documents (see table 4).

Table 4 around here

However, the number of references to the institutional requirements and arrangements that organized the external pluralism of the 'pillarised' public broadcasting system in the Netherlands did decrease in the recent period in both the governmental and the broadcasting documents. For the broadcasters it is another indication of a shift from an internal to an external orientation of public broadcasters, and more attention for media performance in terms of content or output. It seems that they are eager to follow the policy trends, especially in the most recent period. The legitimacy for (non-) policing seems to do the same: from an implicit, via a more ritualistic to a mere strategic function for policy. On the basis of this, a more specific periodisation of the characteristics of social responsibility in governmental and broadcasting organizations' policy can now be given (see table 5). To be sure about this, however, more qualitative and contextual research is needed.

Table 5. Periodisation of social responsibility in broadcasting policy

	<i>Old public order</i> 1960-1980	<i>Transition period</i> 1980-1990	<i>New dual order</i> 1990-2000
Government policy emphasis	Organisation	Organisation	Organisation/Role for society
Broadcasters policy emphasis	Organisation	Organisation/Role for society	Content / Role for society
Policy legitimacy	Implicit	Ritualistic	Strategic

Finally, also in the policy documents of the public broadcasters we notice a stronger emphasis on public responsibility – the rising star in our search, from 16 via 46 to 184 references – more stress on program content requirements and on the cultural tasks of public broadcasters, and much more attention for the position of minorities of different kinds. The more positive assessment of economic forces and a focus towards individualism, which we found in government policy documents, was practically absent in policy texts of public broadcasters now. The first is not surprising in a competitive media market, the second seems to reflect the ambiguity public broadcasters have in combining a role towards audiences as individuals and as socially cohesive groups.

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Table 1. SR norms 1960-2000	I	II	III
<i>SR-Norms</i>			
access to audience (3) <i>access to citizens</i>	v	v	v
representativity (organizational)	v	v	v
Forum / communication between groups	v		v
Public responsibility	v	v	v
Comprehensive programming	v	v	v
public interest	v	v	
Religion	v	v	v
independence (government)	v	v	v
local/regional identity	v	v	v
Diversity (quality) <i>public responsibility</i>	v	v	v
News	v	v	v
Education	v	v	v
National identity	v	v	v
Autonomy	v	v	v
Availability	v	v	v
Entertainment	v	v	v
Balance (programming)	v	v	v
Culture	v	v	v
Diversity (quality) <i>programme supply</i>	v	v	v
Representativity	v		v
Information	v	v	v
public sphere	v	v	v
Art	v	v	v
Transparency	v	v	v
Freedom of speech	v	v	v
Objectivity (programming)	v	v	v
Security (state)	v		v
Continuity	v		
Non discrimination	v		
public order	v		
Minority groups/ sub cultural groups	v	v	v
Politics	v	v	v
Access to audience (2) <i>access to media</i>	v	v	v
right of reply	v	v	
Equality (programming)	v	v	v
Democracy	v	v	v
Opinion	v		v
Authenticity	v		v
Integrity	v		v
objectiveness (access to audience)	v		
public evaluation		v	v

Quality		v	v
reach		v	
audience maximisation		v	v
representation of audience interests		v	
audience optimisation		v	v
audience preferences		v	v
Attractiveness		v	v
Objectivity (content)		v	v
Communication within groups/Social Cohesion		v	v
Craftmanship		v	v
Non-commercial programming		v	v
access to audience (2) <i>access to citizens</i>		v	v
independence (econ. forces)		v	v
access to knowledge		v	v
social vealus		v	v
accountability (3)		v	v
access to audience (1) <i>access to citizens</i>		v	v
policy consistency		v	
Ideology		v	v
Access to audience (1) <i>access to media</i>		v	v
Creativity		v	v
balance (public vs. commercial)		v	
Choice			v
Reliability			v
privacy			v
information selection			v
innovation			v
accountability (4)			v
Accuracy			v
decency			v
information processing			v
accountability (2)			v
Comprehensibility			v
openness (access to audience)			v
responsible programming			v
Truth			v
accountability (1)			v
cultural integration			v
equality (access of audience) <i>access to media</i>			v
Factuality			v
fairness (access to audience)			v
Fairness (content)			v
universal service (access of audience)			v

Table 2. Number of SR norms	I	II	III
<i>SR-Norms</i>			
access to audience (3) <i>aces to citizens</i>	140	113	61
representativity (organizational)	35	18	13
Forum / communication between groups	17		5
Public responsibility	16	46	184
Comprehensive programming	14	13	14
public interest	12	5	
Religion	11	8	29
independence (government)	9	14	6
local/regional identity	7	42	31
Diversity (quality) <i>public responsibility</i>	7	11	83
News	6	27	99
Education	6	24	79
National identity	6	10	92
Autonomy	6	9	5
Availability	6	1	10
Entertainment	5	6	53
Balance (programming)	5	1	40
Culture	4	53	101
Diversity (quality) <i>programme supply</i>	4	12	157
Representativity	4		13
Information	3	21	125
public sphere	3	7	28
Art	2	10	67
Transparency	2	6	22
Freedom of speech	2	4	2
Objectivity (programming)	2	1	2
Security (state)	2		1
Continuity	2		
Non discrimination	2		
public order	2		
Minority groups/ sub cultural groups	1	29	124
Politics	1	6	10
Access to audience (2) <i>aces to media</i>	1	6	7
right of reply	1	6	
Equality (programming)	1	1	5
Democracy	1	1	1
Opinion	1		12
Authenticity	1		10
Integrity	1		4
objectiveness (access to audience)	1		
public evaluation		46	4
Quality		16	78
Reach		11	
audience maximization		9	5
representation of audience interests		7	
audience optimization		6	9
audience preferences		5	61
Attractiveness		5	36
Objectivity (content)		5	33
Communication within groups/Social Cohesion		4	33
Craftmanship		4	17
Non-commercial programming		4	1
access to audience (2) <i>aces to citizens</i>		3	82
independence (econ. forces)		3	3
aces to knowledge		2	38
social vealus		2	30
accountability (3)		2	6
access to audience (1) <i>aces to citizens</i>		2	5
policy consistency		2	
Ideology		1	24
Access to audience (1) <i>aces to media</i>		1	21
Creativity		1	7
balance (public vs. commercial)		1	
Choice			39
Reliability			12

Privacy			9
information selection			7
Innovation			5
accountability (4)			4
Accuracy			3
Decency			3
information processing			3
accountability (2)			2
Comprehensibility			2
openness (access to audience)			2
responsible programming			2
Truth			2
accountability (1)			1
cultural integration			1
equality (access of audience) <i>access to media</i>			1
Factuality			1
fairness (access to audience)			1
Fairness (content)			1
universal service (access of audience)			1

Table 3. Saliency of SR-norms 1960-2000

SR-NORMS (in %)	<i>Old public order (I)</i>	<i>Transition period (II)</i>	<i>New dual order (III)</i>
Words total	14548	31623	61172
SR-norms total	353	650	2090
SR-norm density (%)	2,43%	2,06%	3,42%
SR density, media content (%)	0,21%	0,19%	0,69%
SR density, role for society (%)	0,87%	1,06%	2,24%
SR density, organizations (%)	1,35%	0,80%	0,48%
Attention to media content (%)	8,50%	9,39%	20,33%
Attention role for society (%)	35,98%	51,69%	65,60%
Attention to organizations (%)	55,52%	38,92%	14,07%
Paragraph total	342	841	2534
Line total	1318	3745	6615
Average of SR-norms per paragraph	1,03	0,77	0,82
Average of SR-norms per line	0,27	0,17	0,32

Explanation:

Words total: *total of words found in the document according to word count function in Microsoft Word.* SR-norms total: *total of SR-norms found in the document.* SR-norm density (%): *proportion between total of SR-norms and total of word.* SR density, media content (%): *proportion between total of SR-norms found within the category Media content requirements and total of words.* SR density, society role (%): *proportion between total of SR-norms found within the category The role of media in/for society and total of word.* SR density, organizations (%): *proportion between total of SR-norms found within the category Organizational status and total of words.* Attention to media content (%): *proportion between total of SR-norms found within the category Media content requirements and total of SR-norms.* Attention to society role (%): *proportion between total of SR-norms found within the category The role of media in/for society and total of SR-norms.* Attention to organizations (%): *proportion between total of SR-norms found within the category Organizational status and total of SR-norms.* Paragraph total: *total of paragraphs in the document according to word count function in Microsoft Word.* Line total: *total of lines in the document according to word count function in Microsoft Word.* Average of SR-norms per paragraph: *proportion between total of SR-norms and total of paragraphs.* Average of SR-norms per line: *proportion between total of SR norms and total of lines.*

Table 4. Saliency of SR-norms in governmental documents

	Old Public Order (I)	Transitional Period (II)	New Dual Order (III)
Words total	30413	50579	90826
SR-norms total	544	758	1656
SR-norm density (%)	1,79%	1,50%	1,82%
SR density, media content (%)	0,07%	0,08%	0,25%
SR density, role for society (%)	0,45%	0,48%	0,64%
SR density, organizations (%)	1,27%	0,94%	0,93%
Attention to media content (%)	3,68%	5,41%	13,65%
Attention to role for society (%)	25,37%	32,19%	35,27%
Attention to organizations (%)	70,96%	62,40%	51,09%
Paragraph total	794	1505	2794
Line total	2374	4994	7982
Average of SR-norms per paragraph	0,69	0,5	0,59
Average of SR-norms per line	0,23	0,15	0,21