

Off Public Service Brands and Enhanced Content: The VRT's Cultural Delta Project and the move to Branded Public Service Media

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Introduction

Taking the 'Cultural Delta Project' of Flemish/Belgian Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) VRT as a case in point, this contribution analyses the branding exercise involved in the transition of VRT from PSB to Public Service Media (PSM). Building on the strength and loyalty of VRT brands, the Cultural Delta Project seeks to create cultural breadth and depth by making available extra (archival and new) information, and by engaging the cultural sector (information provision) and the audience to participate (UGC options similar to YouTube/MySpace) through an open structure combining internet and other digital applications.

The paper first traces the genesis of the Cultural Delta Project as an answer to, on the one hand, the renewed pressure on PSB to promote culture - once the backbone of its objectives - and, on the other hand, questions about the legitimate role of PSB in a digital interactive cross- and multimedia environment. Next, delving into the 'roots' of marketing in Flemish PSB, the conception and presentation of the Cultural Delta Project is analysed as a prime exercise in Public Service branding. Eventually, these findings are evaluated in a wider international context. Methodologically desk research (overview of the literature, policy document analysis, Audience data regarding information retrieval and UGC) is combined with in-depth interviews (with PSB executives, producers and other people involved in the project, stakeholders from the field of culture).

Our case study tries to add another piece to the puzzle that is the future of PSB, as it touches on several of the key discussions regarding PSB today and tomorrow: the challenge of incorporating new media into an 'old media' institution (convergence) in a world dominated by the ideology of pull media; the search for a balance between the continued stress on non-commercialism and the growing importance in PSB of marketing techniques; and the survival of one of the core PSB objective of cultural production in a media world dominated by viewing figures and entertainment

From back bone to tails end: culture in a changing PSB environment

Culture - traditionally interpreted as a range of high cultural expressions – was once at the heart of PSB's identity all over Europe (Grisprud, 1998; Robins & Webster, 1985; Scannell & Cardiff, 1991). This is no different in the case of the Flemish PSB. Well into the 1980s, it had a strong tradition of producing and broadcasting an array of high cultural programmes, embedded in a wider cultural-educational logic (cf. Van den Bulck, 2001). At the same time these programmes were a bone of contention between PSB and different stakeholders within and outside of the institution. The artistic world always demanded more attention for high culture while showing disdain for what it considered to be essentially a popular medium. Large parts of the audience, in turn, criticised the cultural 'overload' and patronising attitude demanding more popular entertainment (cf. Van den Bulck, 2000, 2001).

Like elsewhere in Europe, the arrival of commercial competitors in the late 1980's led to changes in Flemish PSB's charter, structure and general organisation.¹ This was accompanied by a shift from a cultural-educational to a commercial-competitive logic with bench marks based on viewing figures (cf. Van der Borght, 2007). As a result, both in policy and programming, culture lost out to popular entertainment, compensated by the odd imported documentary (Van den Bulck & Sinardet, 2005). This was (and is) lamented by the cultural sector - if less so by the general public – and used by commercial competitors and political stakeholders to accuse PSB of failing to fulfil its remit, a reason to question the mixed financing, scope and even existence of PSB (Van den Bulck, 2008). Particularly after the appointment in 2004 of a media minister that strongly favours the promotion of Flemish culture, the pressure mounted, forcing VRT to reconsider its priorities.

These pressures coincided with discussion regarding the future of PSB in a digital media landscape. As elsewhere in Europe (cf. d'Haenens & Bink, 2001; Galparin, 2004; Kim 2001; Lawson-Borders, 2006; Steemers, 1998), by the early years of 2000, digitisation and convergence reached enough momentum to dominate discussions regarding the state and future of PSB. Focussing on the necessity and (financial and ideological) desirability for PSB to jump on (or even pull) the digital bandwagon, old discussions were introduced in a new, digital discourse. What is the exact and legitimate place and role of PSB amidst this digital (multi)media frenzy? (cf. Jacubowicz, 2006). Is it time for PSB to take the lead and turn into Public Service Media (PSM) (or should it be left to the market? Can core PSB values - seemingly lost in the 1990s move from a cultural-educational to an economic-competitive logic - be reintroduced in a digital way, fit to serve contemporary audiences or do new commercial services and UGC render PSB obsolete? These questions are very prominent and pertinent in the case of the Flemish PSB's Cultural Delta Project.

The Cultural Delta Project was an attempt to answer both the cultural and digital issue. Indeed, obtaining a mandate in 2007 to create one digital channel with cultural content (Management contract 2007 – 2011), VRT's original plans for a new linear channel were quickly abandoned. Financial reasons as well as a perceived lack of added value to the public, the cultural sector and the media institution fed this decision. Instead, a mixed linear and non-linear system combining multimedia participatory web platforms with digital, enriched radio and television services was and is being developed throughout 2008. The development of the project did not only prove challenging in terms of technological and legal (copy and related rights) issues,

it was also a major exercise in terms of identity building and positioning, i.e. in branding.

Flemish Public Service Branding: A Brief History

PSB branding is a relatively new phenomenon in Flemish broadcasting. Traditionally a ban on advertising and a strong commitment to a cultural-educational logic made Flemish PSB a prototypical cultural institution of the welfare state with an emphasis on non-commercialism, an elitist cultural output and a patronising view of the audience (Van den Bulck, 2001; cf. Scannel & Cardiff, 1991). The arrival of commercial competitors (early 1980s for radio, 1989 for television) and the audience loss that followed, were ignored at first. Later it forced PSB to introduce a commercial-competitive business logic, including a careful but growing stress on market research and marketing techniques in an attempt to position itself in a competitive media landscape and to secure audience loyalty (Saeys, 2007, Van den Bulck & Dhoest, 2007).

The first steps were taken in public service radio in the late 1980. Subject to the onslaught of commercial and community local radio, and fearing the arrival of a national commercial competitor in the near futureⁱⁱ, then head of Radio Piet Van Roe introduced the explicit use of marketing techniques. He coined and propagated the notion of 'His Majesty the Viewer' and, more importantly, introduced the ideas of audience segmentation based on market research and channel identity. A commissioned audience study by Censydiam in 1987 started a process of channel profiling based on the segmentation of all PSB listeners along an expansive – receptive and an extravert – introvert axe and the subsequent identification of core values relating to each segment (Van Roe, 1999). Once PSB radio was allowed to carry advertising (media bill 1990), this segmentation was further encouraged by advertisers in need for clearly defined target audiences. Radio channels were restructured accordingly and obtained a distinct on-air sound, style of music and dj, jingles, jingles and off-air identification cues such as a new name, logo, catch phrase and typical events. In other words Radio branding (cf. Barnard, 2000: 203-207), in Flemish PSB was born.

Television took small and careful steps in that direction in the early 1990s, for instance by employing an advertising agency to design a new logo and in-house style, meant to accentuate the quality of BRT' (Ceuleers, 1999). Yet, it was not until the complete overhaul of the institution in the middle of the 1990s and the introduction of bench marks based on viewing (and appreciation) figures, that the marketing logic, its strategies and jargon started to dominate Flemish PSB, including television.ⁱⁱⁱ A name change from BRTN (Belgian Radio and Television, Dutch broadcasts) to VRT (Flemish Radio and Television) not only symbolised a clean sweep from the old to the new. It was the starting point of a serious branding exercise as the new name/logo stressed the Unique Selling Proposition of the institution: *Flemish* Radio and Television: VRT's brand identity was/is build around a number of core values and actions, summarised in its mission statement. This stipulates what VRT wants to be (top- quality, trustworthy, creative, innovative, guarantor of optimal reach and diversity) and do (inspire, inform, educate, entertain). These values are presented as 'the soul of the VRT brand' (www.vrt.be). Interestingly, while BBC – the

best known Public Service Brand around (Hedges, 2008) – follows a one name branding strategy (Kotler, & Pfoertsch, 2006) for its terrestrial and digital television channels (BBC one, BBC two, BBC three, BBC four...), VRT strongly promotes its different television channels as exclusive and distinctive brands (Procter and Gamble model). TV1 (now Eén) is defined as a broad general interest channel with an identity based on core values such as accessible, relevance, conviviality, family oriented, bringing people into contact with the outside world. The second terrestrial channel is branded as Ketnet (quality children programmes) during the daytime and Canvas in the evening, As a specialist, 'in-depth' channel, the latter's identity is build around notions such as informative, instructive and professional and geared towards 'an important minority of the population who expect their viewing to comprise added value, competence and self-awareness' (Van Roe, 1999: 61).

Today marketing has become a core aspect of the Flemish PSB institution.^{iv} The market strategy department takes up a prominent place in its organigram. VRT, like other PSB (cf. Hoynes, 2008), has several good reasons for doing so. First, in an increasingly competitive and multimedia environment, PSB needs to build a strong and steady relationship with its audiences. With trust being one of the key issues in brand loyalty (Schmidt & Ludlow, 2002), maintaining a consequential brand identity is pivotal. Economically, second, a strong brand image can attract interesting third parties (commercial advertising on radio, non-commercial advertising and sponsors on television). Branding helps to present PSB as a valuable commodity for sale to potential sponsors and advertisers, with the promise not only of guaranteed audience reach (as in the case of general interest channels) but also of 'the high esteem for the PSB brand rubbing off on the companies that have the foresight to support PSB' (Hoynes, 2003: 127). There is also a political interest in marketing itself by exploiting its brands. It can help to win continued government and public support for PSB, in a day and age when PSB's legitimacy is questioned in the context of digitalisation (cf. supra). While economically branding attracts funds, politically branding can convince tax payers and their political representatives that PSB is first and foremost about core values no other media outlets provide (not competing for better audience ratings but competing for better programmes). The latter is a two edges sword though as for many stakeholders the commercial connotation associated with marketing and branding goes against PSB's core values. In other words, the brand image not necessarily fits the brand identity.

Branding Culture (so far, this part is only based on desk research, additional information from interviews planned second part of september)

VRT, digital convergence and cultural brand identity

The Cultural Delta Project originated in a search to position VRT both with regards the criticism of a lack of attention to culture and the heavy attacks of competing and political stakeholders questioning the desirability for PSB to venture into the world of new and digital linear and non-linear media services. In a move to make cultural articulation and attention to the cultural arena once again a core aspect of VRT's brand image, then CEO Tony Mary strategically pronounced 2005 as the 'Cultural Year for PSB' (Mary, 2006). This is accompanied by an ambitious and much publicised plan geared towards more and varied provision of cultural content. A three tiered system is developed to ensure: cultural items in general programmes, cultural

programmes on regular channels and digital channel/platforms specifically dedicated to culture (VRT, 2005: 27-8). The latter is not in the least inspired by the need for PSB for a legitimate stand in negotiations regarding the role of PSB in digitisation and digital convergence (cf. Van den Bulck, 2008). Throughout these negotiations, VRT connects itself - both rhetorically (VRT, 2005, 2007; Mary, 2006) and by means of several events (e.g. Media Tomorrow Conference in 2006) - irrevocably with digitisation, thus continuously staking the legitimacy hereof. Its green paper on 'The Evolution of VRT toward Digital PSB' (2005) draws heavily upon the inevitability and necessity of digitisation in general and for PSB in particular (TD). The message is clear: digitisation and convergence are a fact and VRT must lead the way (VRT, 2005: 7). Digital convergence is seen/presented as the ultimate way to better serve the audience, not just through the potential increase in viewer autonomy (interactivity) and choice (more channels) but through better quality, including more cultural content. A proposed EITA (VITA) plan entails Enriched content, Interactivity, Thematic channels and Audio visual archive (VRT, 2005: 20).

Meet Ann and Frank, the new cross media cultural consumers

The original plan to develop one digital cultural channel was abandoned quite quickly (Couvreur, 2007). It was felt that 'culture' covers too wide a range and variety of articulations, genres, high and popular culture, unable to fit into one linear channel with one distinct identity. This was accompanied by audience studies into new media use (cf. Nulens, en Bauwens, 2005), analysing the ways in which new and digital media (can) influence cultural participation by creating opportunities for widening, deepening and renewing the audience for cultural experiences. The aim therefore was to bring culture to the audience in a more contemporary and efficient way (Couvreur, 2007; Vlaams Parlement, 2008). These resulted in the creation of two cross media cultural consumer profiles, 'Ann' and 'Frank', one leaning towards 'high' cultural and the other more towards popular cultural tastes and preferences (Couvreur, 2008a – **schedule to be included**). To accommodate both, it was decided to develop user-oriented cross media platforms including: *enriched television* (extra information or alternative programming to be decided by the digital viewer); *enriched radio* : (extra audio streams for different musical genres, break out of the linear live radio for extra content, combining different cultural items of the different PSB brands); *a multimedia and interactive web platform*: providing extra information in terms of data, audio and video; ability for media users to post their own material (UGC such as blogs, potcasts) and to personalise the platform; a 'things you might also be interested in' system in cooperation with the cultural sector.

Strategically positioning the Cultural Delta Project

The branding of this multi-layered project proved quite a challenge and was inspired by several arguments. First, the creation of one (new) brand was decided against for the same reasons the idea of a single thematic channel was abandoned: the array of genres, styles and media. It was feared this would result in a potentially vague and fuzzy brand that would have a hard time to build and communicate a strong brand image and loyalty. Second, VRT wanted to avoid the cultural content and its media-users to turn into a cultural ghetto, a position many European PSB oppose to (cf. Meier & Trappel, 2007; Lowe & Bardoel, 2007; d'Haenens en Saeys, 2007). Instead, VRT considers the cultural aspect of its remit as part of its entire make-up, as the above mentioned three tiered system indicates. Third, VRT wants to avoid the discussion regarding the end of universal access (putting culture behind a digital

decoder, possibly for a fee) (cf. Van Cuilenburg & McQuail, 2003: 204, see also Jacobowicz, 2006) that a separate brand might evoke, a discussion that might further question the legitimacy of PSB's venture into new media applications. As a result, VRT opted for a marketing strategy of brand extension (the existing strong brand name can be used as a vehicle for new or modified products);, a cross-media approach starting from the existing and trusted VRT radio and television brands. In other words, the attempt was to work with existing brand strengths.

Branding Culture

To this end, two main VRT brands were elaborated on. Klara stands for KLASsieke RAdio (classical radio) and is the cultural brand of VRT.^v As one of the oldest (formerly Radio 3) and only advertising free radio channel, it is oriented to a broad range of high cultural expressions with a mix of classical music, jazz, world music, live concerts from concert halls and opera houses in Flanders and Europe and programmes on the Arts. The Klara brand is built around an identity based on values such as professional, reliable and stylish, balance and harmony, relevant and current information. Klara presents a Flemish identity and wants to play a leading role in Flemish cultural life. (www.vrt.be). Often contested for its audience reach of only 1,5% of listeners older than 12, the channel has always served as an important legitimisation for the continued existence of PSB and for ventures into more commercial and competitive initiatives (argument of cross-subsidising). As such, Klara is the epitome of high culture on public service radio. This radio brand was already used to venture into the world of print (such as its monthly magazine *Muziek en Woord*) music publishing (the Klara CD-label), events (the classical music KlaraFestival of Flanders, Klara in the Palace and Klara in Town). Now it is further elaborated on with Klara+ (www.vrt.be/cm/klara), a web platform offering extra digital content. It allows the interested listener to step out of a programme and instantly search for different music à la carte or further information from wider cultural content readily on offer.

The other VRT brand that is elaborated on is Canvas, the television channel aimed at an 'important minority of the population who expect their viewing to comprise added value, competence and self-awareness'. The catch word is EMERALD. It stands for Canvas's 6 core values: exciting – most classy – resourceful – alert – layered – daring (also www.vrt.be). The channel is complemented by www.canvas.be, a project similar to the Klara+ project. What is more, the introduction of the digital television channel Canvas+, allows for additional, enriched cultural content, available to everybody with a digital cable subscription by a push of the red button. After experimenting with a monthly rhythm of single projects around live cultural events throughout the spring and summer of 2008 (StuBruPuntUit, March 08, Expo 56 April 08, Koningin Elisabeth Contest for Classical music, June 08, Jazz Middelheim, August 08), the digital channel obtains a more permanent character from 29th September 2008 onwards when regular broadcasts start. The programming of Canvas+ complements that of the existing linear mother channel's informational, scientific, historical and cultural content with more in-depth and additional cultural information. The key term is enriched content.

Discussion: Branding as a way to legitimacy for PSM? (to be elaborated on)

The turn to a marketing paradigm of Flemish PSB has been met with disdain by many of its stakeholders: The cultural sector laments the death of the cultural-education logic, sacrificed at the altar of competition and a business logic. Commercial competitors complain about the lack of a level playing field caused by a PSB that, while relying on a comfortable system of mix public and private financing, has abandoned its cultural and educational aims and objective to compete in the arena of popular programming. They future complain that PSB has given up on its basic premise of universal open access by venturing into new digital media projects. In other words, PSB is seen to fail to live up to its goals and to force private initiatives into an uneven competition. Politicians and civil society, in turn, fear that branding is just the next step to turning public service broadcasting into nothing more than another commercial product to be sold on lucrative markets. These criticisms echo discussions elsewhere in Europe.

Indeed, this is not an isolated Flemish media issue. Reference can be made to the BBC, undoubtedly the strongest PSB brand worldwide and one with a global strength rivalling the likes of Disney (Hedges, 2008). While the brand is based on core PSB values such as quality and is praised as 'the best case example of a public broadcaster succeeding in its public service mission', the brand is about more than just preserving PSB values. The economic impact of the BBC on the UK creative economy adds up to a million pound figure (PwC), At the same time, there is criticism that cashing in on its brand image leads to a predominant orientation on the international (rather than the home) television market/audience and the over-emphasis on certain genres (e.g. costume drama at the expense of other PSB genres) that 'sell' well on the international market. Similarly, American PSB's turn to marketing is criticised as a de facto move to commercialism (Hoynes, 2003).

With regards to the latter, the Flemish instance may provide an example to the contrary. While this cultural branding obviously has the added advantage of attracting a certain type of sponsors, the overall aim of the Cultural Delta Project is essentially non-commercial and an indication that marketing and branding techniques do not necessarily lead to a further move away from core PSB values. It also shows that a marketing logic does not necessary coincide with economic objectives. Indeed the techniques are not aimed at financial profit or audience maximisation, but to find a way to increase cultural participation and enthusing audiences for enriched cultural content. Rather than working with commercial partnerships, partnerships are sought with non-profit and government cultural institutions such as the Flemish non-profit cultural organisation cultuurweb.be

Is VRT simply 'using' culture to legitimate its move towards PSM? There is indeed a double movement here: The strength of VRT brands is used to promote culture while, at the same time, culture is used to strengthen the legitimacy of PSB cross-media ventures. As mentioned above, this has led commercial competitors and certain other stakeholders to criticise VRT for abandoning PSB's core characteristic of open access. Yet, to a certain extent this criticism is an ideological reduction of access to its technological aspect, equating it with analogue transmission. It is also a sophism in light of the EU 2012 deadline for the completion of a digital switchover, with The Netherlands having completed the transition by late 2006, the UK starting November 2007, and the Flemish Belgian and Swedish governments setting a 2008 deadline (Insifidis, 2006: 2-4; Hultén, 2007: 218; d'Arma, 2007). The analogue switch-off

renders the traditional notion of open access obsolete. Yet, it heightens the potential relevance of PSB to guarantee *equal access* to media content (digitally or otherwise) in a environment where digitisation and commercialisation stimulate pay-per-view and other forms of mediated access. As such, PSB can help individuals to fashion their 'personal public service' from a variety of traditional and new media extensions such as archive material, online communities, and alert services (cf. Van Cuilenburg and McQuail, 2003; EBU, 2003, Smith & Steemers, 2007).

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ⁱ The history of PSB in Flanders/Belgium is described extensively elsewhere (cf. Van den Bulck, 2000b; Dhoest & Van den Bulck, 2007). Like elsewhere in Europe (see e.g. Østergaard 1997 for an overview), it was set up along the lines of the classic PSB concept. Its monopoly ended with the 1987 cable bill and subsequent introduction of commercial competitor VTM (1989), i.e. relatively late in European perspective (cf. Blumler, 1991, 1992; McQuail & Siune, 1998; Hoffman-Riem, 1996; Siune & Truetzchler, 1992; Tracey, 1998; Van den Bulck, 2000a; Van Gompel, Van den Bulck & Biltereyst, 2002). Unable and even unwilling to react at first, the introduction in the second half of the 1990s of a quinquennially renewable management contract helped PSB to regain a strong position (Bardoel & d'Haenens, 2006).

ⁱⁱ In fact, that did not happen until 2001

ⁱⁱⁱ The overhaul brought about personnel and statutory changes, including a new tradition of appointing external 'business men' rather than broadcasters as head of the institution, further enhancing a business logic (Van der Borcht, 1997).

^{iv} The VRT is obviously not an exception in the world of Public Service Broadcasting. Hoynes (2003) famously describes the turn to a branded PSB in the US and while this involves commercialisation as a primary goal, the European yard stick to which the PSB branding is measured is – not surprisingly – the BBC.

^v Today Flemish public service radio consists of six brands: Radio Vlaanderen Internationaal (world service) Radio 1 (information), Radio 2 (broad, Flemish,), Studio Brussels (young alternative), Radio Donna (popular, 'commercial')^v and Klara (Culture).