Why does audience participation in public service media matter?

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Introduction
Public Service Broadcasting in Western Europe has a long history and a short past. The long history takes us back to a period when PSBs were monopoly broadcasters and contributed to national reconstruction and the development of welfare liberalism in the 1940s and 1950s. In the UK there has been an extended period of diversification in the media system from the 1950s introduction of commercial broadcasters (albeit with strong PSB obligations) to increasing diversity as channels proliferated, including innovations in the purposes and funding of PSB such as Channel 4 and more recently the changing media environment of digital and global media. Nevertheless, the BBC remains a strong broadcaster with over 30% of the market and still funded by the licence fee which underwrites political and financial independence (Scannell 2005). Whilst change has been incremental in the UK purposes, funding model, governance and regulation of PSBs has been the subject of contestation. The PSB regime VRT in Flanders, the Northern and Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, is smaller than the BBC and is funded by direct government subsidies instead of a licence fee. It was only in 1989 that the VRT was challenged by a commercial broadcaster (VTM). Since then a proliferation of channels emerged, but the focus on local content remained, as players like Netflix do not seem to get a hold on the Flemish media market. VRT maintains a market share of no less than 40%. Yet, similar to other Western public broadcasters, VRT had to deal with severe budget cuts recently. This coincided with questions on the core tasks and distinctiveness of the VRT offer, causing VRT to sharpen the focus on the distinctiveness and public value of its offer in the newest management contract (VRT and the Flemish Government 2015). In this paper we compare recent challenges to the public purposes of PSB/PSM in the UK and Belgium with a particular focus on the relationship between public media and democratic values (Gurevitch and Blumler, 1990).

Traditionally, public service media, alongside a free press are understood as enabling and enhancing democracy in a number of ways consonant with their remit to inform, educate and entertain and reflected in their core purposes. Christsen et al (2009: 123) suggest that journalism in general plays four key roles in democracy: monitorial; collaborative; radical; and facilitative. The facilitative role incorporates encouraging participation, providing citizens with a voice in the public space and enabling deliberation as part of civic virtue (Scannell 2005, Thorsen 2013: 119). We can identify three phases in which traditional public service media monitored and collaborated with democratic government representing changes in democratic politics (National reconstruction and the welfare state; the politics of difference and contemporary, complex, pluralism). In these different moments role of the media in enhancing democracy has different emphases (from consensus, to identity politics and rights through participation to deliberation across lines of social and cultural difference). The transition we are particularly interested in here is that from a focus on participation, voice and the politics of difference to that of deliberation and political engagement (Dahlgren, 2009). Of course this does not imply a linear history of phases as the traditions of national unification and welfare, the problem of political participation and the emergence of deliberation and public accountability are layered onto each other in the purposes of public service media perhaps being given emphasis at different times. The recognition of the role of media in participation is well documented. For example, McNair et al. (2002) advanced the term ‘public access broadcasting’ to emphasize how audience members participate in political and societal debates through participating in a TV studio debate or a radio phone-in program (see also Lowe 2008 and Enli 2008). The move from public service broadcasting (‘PSB’) to public service media (‘PSM’) and the presence of public broadcasters online, not only increased the platforms for expressing opinions, it also enhanced the opportunities for users to create and share content themselves (Lowe 2009; Iosifidis, 2011: 628-629). This led to an argumentation in PSM theory and policy to encourage audience participation in the production and distribution of PSM content (Carlsson 2013: 125; Jakubowicz 2007: 42-44), relating it to objectives of diversity, creativity, media literacy and so on (Temple 2013, Trappel 2014). At
the same time, it is also increasingly expected of public broadcasters to adhere to a participatory logic themselves and aim for more equitable participation of the audience in their organization (Council of Europe, 2009: 46).

Yet, in policy debates little attention is given to either one of these articulations of public participation. Here, the focus still mainly seems to be going to discussions on the independence and market impact of public broadcasters, as also illustrated in the new White Paper of the BBC (2016) and the newest management of the VRT (2015). Although very important, these debates draw attention away from discussions on public participation and give the illusion that these type of questions have already been handled. Nothing could be further from the truth, given that research has shown that the implementation of audience participation is highly problematic for public broadcasters. Although often mentioned as a buzzword, participation is rarely defined or pondered upon in their policy and strategy documents (Carpentier 2011: 70, Vanhaeght & Donders 2015a). As a result, in practice, participation is often used in ways that is most convenient for the PSM producers themselves. For example, it is implemented to reinforce users’ loyalty or to get a better grip on their content preferences, rather than it is spurred with an eye on achieving audience empowerment or societal goals (Garcia-Aviles, 2012: 432, Syvertsen 2004: 375). In so doing, PSM organizations compromise basic public values, as they remain focused on their own interests (Palokangas and Lowe 2010). We could say they are ‘PSM-centered’ rather than ‘society-centered’.

Hence, what is lacking is a clear vision on audience participation within PSM companies and broadcasters and how it can relate to societal purposes such as audience empowerment, media literacy, creativity and so on. Therefore, in this paper we attempt to go back to the original meanings and ideas behind the concept of participation in general and media participation in particular. What does participation and media participation mean, why is it important for democracy and its citizens and is more participation always better? To answer these questions, we draw upon sociological and political theories of what constitutes participation, different understandings on how participation is mediated, and different models of democracy. We thus bring in and apply reflections from outside PSM literature to cope with the challenges of audience participation in PSM. We maintain that is necessary as PSM literature is, like PSM practice, often PSM-centered, primarily arguing for the enduring existence of public broadcasters as an end in itself. In this we also engage with the debates in political theory concerning the limits of participation and the potential of deliberation (Dahlgren, 2009; Christians et al., 2009)

The paper consists of four parts. In the first part, we concretize the challenges of audience participation in PSM by looking at how audience participation and engagement objectives are formulated in policy documents of BBC (United Kingdom) and VRT (Flanders, Northern part of Belgium). As such, we wanted to compare the approach towards audience participation of a better funded with a smaller public broadcaster, including their main policy and strategy documents for the period 2004-2016 (reflecting the critical years of transition from PSB to PSM). In the second part, we conceptualise participation in general, and public service media participation more specifically, looking at political and sociological theories. Subsequently, in the third part we look at different models of democratic theory to explain the relation of participation with democracy, its importance and whether or not more participation is always better. We transpose these reflections to the challenges of audience participation in PSM. In the last part, we argue why the principle of autonomy should be the anchor point for public broadcasters in dealing with audience participation and how this principle should always have priority over any objective of creating unrestrained participation.
1. Audience participation and engagement as formulated in policy documents of BBC and VRT

**BBC**

In this section the Charter conditions for the BBC that have been in force for the past ten years will be contrasted with the proposals for the new charter period of 2017 for the next eleven years as laid out in the Government White Paper.

Under the existing Charter and Agreement the BBC was recognized as having six public purposes:

- Sustaining citizenship and civil society
- Promoting education and learning
- Stimulating creativity and cultural excellence
- Representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities
- Bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK
- Delivering to the public the benefit of emerging communications technologies and services

The first of these relates to the civic republican role of the BBC as a public service broadcaster: Sustaining Citizenship and civil society.

This purpose was defined as having the following priorities:

1. Provide independent journalism of the highest quality.
2. Engage a wide audience in news, current affairs and other topical issues.
3. Encourage conversation and debate about news, current affairs and topical issues.
4. Build greater understanding of the parliamentary process and political institutions governing the UK.
5. Enable audiences to access, understand and interact with different types of media.

These priorities map onto the different ways in which media can be understood as enhancing and enabling democracy –

These purposes have been reinforced in the White Paper for Charter renewal – reinforced by additional obligations for public engagement by the BBC itself:

“Given how crucial it is to understand how well the BBC delivers for the UK as a whole, the government wants this engagement to become better, more flexible and driven by real need. Under the new model of governance the primary responsibility for this will fall squarely on the BBC’s board. The government expects the BBC to do much more to engage audiences. This is not the kind of activity where government can be prescriptive and it would not be right to impose analogue solutions for a digital age. But this only makes the duty on the board stronger – it must actively develop its own approach to make sure audience and citizen engagement informs its decision-making. This means that the BBC will need to spend a considerable amount of time and effort understanding and reaching out to people in all parts of Britain so that it can shape its services to create the greatest public value, focusing on engagement with the public as citizens as well as consumers. It will be able to build on some of the foundations that the Trust has laid in this area. Complementing the existing outreach programmes with new digital tools should allow the BBC to do this even more effectively than has been possible to date. It will also need to understand the views and citizen/consumer interests of its international audiences (White Paper, p 61).
These new obligations related to public engagement reinforce the idea of the BBC having a responsibility to enhance civil society and civic culture and also introduce the idea that this needs to be complemented by enhanced public engagement in the BBC itself. The White Paper mirrors the criticisms in the Clementi report of the use of Audience Councils by the BBC Trust and seeks to encourage the BBC to enhance its public engagements and to make this the responsibility of the BBC Board rather than the regulator. Linking these new public engagement obligations to the retention of the public purpose of Sustaining Citizenship and civil society. This combination proposes that the BBC should create the conditions of possibility for public deliberation and to enhance its own deliberative engagement with publics.

VRT
VRT does not specify what is exactly meant by public value, for example whether or not it is interpreted in the same way as formulated by the EBU, but the concept is clearly related to the objective of contributing more to a democratic society and realizing greater social impact with regard to their audience members (VRT and Vlaamse Regering 2015, p. 12). This leads us to ask how objectives of fostering participation of audience members in society have been concretized and how VRT adheres to this democratic and participatory logic itself. We looked at policy and strategy documents of the VRT of the last ten years.

1) Participation in society
Enabling participation of audience members in society, has always been a key objective in VRT’s management contracts. Already in the management contracts of 2002-2006 and 2007-2011, VRT asserts to bring an offer in culture, information and entertainment that helps users towards self-development and greater participation in society (VRT and Vlaamse Regering 2006:10). In the management contract of 2012-2016, online interactivity and dialogue are explicitly mentioned as means to stimulate debate about issues of societal concern, and by doing so, fostering greater participation of audience members in society. Yet, interactivity and participation are often deployed interchangeably in this policy text, positioning them both as a means and as an end at the same time. For example, VRT and the Flemish government claim that VRT should further participation through interactivity on relevant platforms on one page (VRT and Vlaamse Regering, 2011: 13), while on a different page stimulating participation is conceived as a means to enhance interactivity on various platforms (idem: 5). The inconsistency in the use of these concepts indicates that the Flemish governement and the VRT are often unclear about what they want to achieve with them and also says a lot about the vagueness of the means advanced to attain participation objectives (Vanhaeght & Donders, 2015a: 17).

In the newest management contract of 2016-2020 (VRT and Vlaamse Regering 2015) the idea of technological neutrality is introduced. Given the rapid changes in the media landscape, it is pointless to formulate tasks for television, radio and/or the internet seperately, according to VRT (p. 9, 16). The same logic can thus be expected for objectives related to participation. Also new, is the first chapter on mission and key values, where especially the link with democracy is being stressed. Whereas in previous management contracts the remit of the VRT was justified by referring shortly to the relevant resolutions of the European Council, the rationale of PSM to better the functioning of democracy is now explained more elaborately. For example by citing the Amsterdam Protocol: “Considering that the system of public broadcasting in the Member States is directly related to the democratic, social and cultural needs of each society and to the need to preserve media pluralism” (p. 5). Evidently, in so doing, VRT wants to emphasize its vital role in society and counter the public debate on its insufficient distinctiveness from commercial broadcasters. This is also apparent in the strategy paper of Flemish Minister of Media Sven Gatz who advances ‘a return to society’ concept, similar to the ‘contribution to society’ concept of the EBU, as primary guideline for VRT to eliminate the superfluous and maintain the essential (Gatz, 2014: 30). Accordingly, throughout the management contract, VRT repeatedly states to encourage media users to
participate in public debate by providing them with impartial, pluralistic and trustworthy information (p. 6, 17, 18). At the same time, this democratic function of VRT is no longer explicitly linked to the new possibilities of the internet, as opposed to the previous management contract (in which, although ambiguously, online interactivity was linked to participation). This is logical if we follow the technological neutrality principle. Nevertheless, further in the management contract the internet is, despite the abovementioned principle, connected to a specific task, namely to the task of bringing personalised content to the media user. VRT introduces a multimedial brand strategy through which “VRT-brands adopt the opportunities of digital media to connect to their media users, by appealing to their personal interests and context and, in so doing, fulfill their public remit better” (p. 25). On a different page the user-friendliness of this brand strategy is also underlined (p. 29). Arguably, it is somewhat odd that in a management contract that aspires to re-emphasize the democratic value of VRT, the potential of the online for public debate is not put forward, while a more media-centric approach on new technologies, i.e. to keep audiences engaged with the VRT brands, is (see also the reflection on media-centric vs. democratic participation of Enli 2008: 107). The only place where a direct relationship between the internet and democracy is set forth is in the section on media literacy. “Given the increasing presence of digital media in everyday life, in the relations between citizen and government, […] being media literate is an important competence for the Flemish media user” (p. 8). In contrast with the multimedial brand strategy, in which the user is addressed in its role as consumer, i.e. as an individual that uses media for his or her individual needs, one appeals to the user’s role as citizen here (Hasebrink 2012: 60).

2) Participation in the production and organisation of its own institution

If a public broadcaster wants to encourage the participatory reflex of media users, it seems only logical that a participatory logic also applies to the PSM institution itself. In other words, how open and accountable are public broadcasters to the public? Do they themselves create the conditions for participation? In any case, the Flemish Minister of media seems to have this aspiration for VRT in his strategy document, stating that PSM professionals should be in a continuous dialogue with their users, whom should not only co-produce; but also co-decide upon the PSM content (Gatz 2014: 8, 31). Following other Western-European public broadcasters, VRT is also gradually becoming aware that with the advent of new media the classical one-to-many broadcast model will have to make room for a many-to-many model where users increasingly co-produce and share content with each other (VRT and Vlaamse Regering, 2011: 12). As opposed to the aspirations of the minister and other public broadcasters such as BBC (2004: 19), France Télévisions (2013) and NPO (2014: 41), VRT does not make the explicit promise to place the audience more than ever central in the PSM institution, though. Participation in the organization itself, also termed structural participation (see Carpentier 2011) is not mentioned in the policy and strategy documents of VRT. Emphasis is rather put on creating room for user generated content on their websites and social media pages more in general (VRT and Vlaamse Regering, 2006: 3). A strategy that is mainly successful for its political news shows and radio brands. A very interesting initiative was for example Beltien of Radio 1, where audience members could fill in an online form with their most diverse ideas for a better society, of which the most interesting ones were presented to, and some of them even implemented by, the Flemish Ministers.

Through sharing content on their personal social network sites, the user is also considered an important distributor of PSM content in the most recent management contract (VRT and Vlaamse Regering 2015: 19, 27). It is thus mainly participation in the production and distribution of PSM content that is articulated in VRT policy texts. More specifically, VRT

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1 The Twitter pages of VRT’s political new shows Terzake (50 000 follower) and De Zevende Dag (30 000 followers) and the Facebook page of the alternative radio station Stubru (400 000 likes) succeed in enabling a conversation with a, for the VRT, relatively large amount of people, liking, sharing and commenting upon posts.
promises to set up five participatory projects each year; two with children, two with young people and one with the digitally excluded (VRT and Vlaamse Regering 2011). However, what is exactly meant by ‘participatory’ is far from clear. Case in point is that in the latest management contract the terminology of ‘participatory projects’ is replaced by ‘interactive projects’ without any further explanation (2015: 54). Concrete means to guarantee effective participation of the target groups are also not further specified. As a result, many of these participatory projects fail to meet the objective of truly valuing the views and ideas of the participating target groups. Recent research on *Carte Blanche*, one of the participatory projects for young people, showed that the expert knowledge of the media professionals trumped the insights, expertise, and skills of the participating young people, raising the question: ‘if youth perspectives were of so little value to the production process, why enable participation in the first place?’ (Vanhaeght and Donders 2015b). A more successful initiative in terms of openness towards young people, which is not classified as one of the participatory projects, is the recently created OpenVRT department, that organizes network events and workshops to foster cooperation and community amongst young digital creatives in Flanders (2015: 29).

Overall, there seems to be no deliberate strategy in the policy and strategy texts of VRT on neither participation in society nor participation in the production and organisation of its own institution. When participation is mentioned, there is hardly reflected upon concrete means or necessary conditions to enable it and the vagueness in the use of the concept remains unresolved, also in the newest management contract. Moreover, successful initiatives, like Beltien or OpenVRT seem to be rather coincidental as they are not a result of a deliberative strategy formulated in policy or strategy. As such, there seems to be a clear disconnection between ideas on audience participation in policy and in practice.

**Challenges of audience participation in PSM**

The challenges of audience participation in PSM seem to occur at two levels: 1) many objectives related to audience participation remain media-centric and do not emphasize enough the relation between audience participation and democratic objectives and 2) the PSM institutions do not not adhere to a participatory logic themselves. In other words, they merely consider themselves of facilitators of audience participation but not as participatory actor themselves.

At the moment both at BBC and VRT, it seems to be the public broadcaster itself, and not the potential contribution to society that takes center stage with regards to audience participation. Gunn Sara Enli argues in her article on audience participation in PSM that public broadcasters should recognize that “audience activity is more than a strategy for connecting with their audience and gaining legitimacy” (2008: 111). Accordingly, what is lacking is a clear vision on audience participation within PSM companies and broadcasters and how it can relate to societal purposes such as audience empowerment, media literacy, creativity and so on. Or as Mark Andrejevic emphasized in his article on ‘Critical Media Studies 2.0’; “[…] critical media studies is not interested in media for their own sake, but for society’s sake”. Therefore, in this next part, we attempt to go back to the original meanings and ideas behind the concept of participation in general and media participation in particular. What does participation and media participation mean, why is it important for democracy and its citizens and is more participation always better? To answer these questions, we draw upon sociological and political theories of what constitutes participation, different understandings on how participation is mediated, and different models of democracy.

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2 See for example in the latest management contract the use of interaction on page 54, the use of co-creation on pages 29 and 56, and the use of participation on pages 18, 29, 54 and 56.
2. **Back to basics: What does participation and media participation mean?**

What does participation and media participation mean? To answer these questions, we draw upon sociological and political theories of what constitutes participation and different understandings on how participation is mediated (see also Carpentier 2014).

**Defining participation**

Evidently, there are many definitions of participation (Dahlgren 2013, Held 2006). In the sociological approach participation is broadly defined as “taking part in social processes” (Carpentier 2016: 71). As such, numerous practices are labelled participatory; doing sports, visiting the museum and even exercising consumer choices (idem: 72). In this approach emphasis is sometimes placed on the ability to access otherwise closed social processes, such as in this definition of Adam Fish: “Participation, as I am discussing it, refers to amateurs having the competencies or access to engage with otherwise closed socio-technical systems […]” (2013: 373-374). Working in the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), Javier Lezaun, Noortje Marres and Manuel Tironi adopt a similar definition but add the necessary components of creativity and innovation: “[Participation is when] lay or amateur audiences are invited to engage with technical, scientific or aesthetic matters that used to be the preserve of experts and to do so in an explicitly creative or innovative fashion” (2016: 2). In these definitions, participation coincides with access, competencies and engagement.

The political approach, on the other hand, differentiates participation from such concepts and advances a much more restrictive definition of participation (Arnstein 1969, Pateman 1970). According to these scholars, confusion exists between participation and its conditions of possibility. They argue against the overuse of the term participation. Peter Dahlgren (2009), for example, asserts that engagement, i.e. “the feeling of being invited, committed and/or empowered”, is a crucial precondition for participation to take place, and is thus not the same as participation itself. Nico Carpentier (2011) differentiates access, interaction and participation from each other in his ‘AIP’ (Access-Interaction-Participation) model. The main difference between participation and access and interaction according to his model is participation’s specific relation to power. While access and interaction can come with different power relationships, participation requires the potential presence of power imbalance (Carpentier et al. 2014: 125). Following on this further, participation is defined as the equalization of power relations between privileged and non-privileged actors in decision-making processes (Carpentier 2011, Carpentier et al. 2014). As such, participation as a concept is always linked to democracy and its ideal-types of power sharing. For this definition Carpentier borrows inspiration from Carole Pateman’s seminal work on *Participation and Democratic Theory*; i.e. her focus on the equalization of power in decision-making, and Sherry Arnstein’s *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*; i.e. her focus on the specific relation between participation and power. Peter Dahlgren follows this approach but speaks more in terms of power sharing (Dahlgren 2013: 28): “Participation is ultimately about power sharing, and if this is structurally absent or systematically undermined, than whatever is being called participation must be seen with the utmost skepticism, or indeed labeled fraudulent”.

If we transpose this definition to a media context, pressing the red button of interactive television, commenting upon online newspaper articles or posting an opinion on the website of the city council is thus not participation per se (Dahlgren 2009: 28, Carpentier 2015: 24). Whether or not it is, depends on the level of co-deciding or power sharing actually granted to the participants. Hence, this more restrictive definition of the political studies perspective could help to resolve the ambiguous use of the concept of participation in policy documents of public broadcasters and adopt a more genuine approach to audience participation in practice. In the previous part we discovered that at the moment in PSM policy, but also in

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1 Parameters to further operationalize these definitions are developed in the works of Horowitz and Napoli (2014) and in a recent article of Carpentier himself (2016).
PSM literature, a very broad definition, closely relating to the sociological approach, of participation is adopted, equating participation with access and online interaction (Brevini 2013, Iosifidis 2011). This broad definition of participation led to a problematic and often media-centered use of participation by public broadcasters in practice, insufficiently linking it to democratic objectives. So, given that a more restricted and multi-level approach on participation in PSM is desirable, we choose to adopt the political studies approach over the sociological approach to define audience participation in PSM. In the context of these challenges with audience participation in PSM, the political studies approach has advantages in terms of clarity in definition and the more detailed exposure of power relations. Moreover, the political studies approach is better apt to analyse the link between participation in the media and democracy (see the reflection on trans-field participation below).

*Defining participation in a (public service) media context*

Following the political studies approach, we define participation in PSM as the ways and means for audience members (i.e. non-professionals) to be structurally involved in public broadcasters’ concept design, production and strategy formulations (Lowe 2008: 38). As such, participation in PSM inextricably presupposes an ideal type of power sharing between audience members and media experts (inspired on Carpentier 2011: 130 and Dahlgren 2013: 28), clearly setting it apart from other concepts such as access and interaction (see above). We differentiate content-related participation, participation in the production of PSM content from structural participation, which is focused on participation at the organizational level of the public broadcaster (Carpentier 2011: 312).

Interestingly, the political studies approach calls participation through a particular field in another field ‘trans-field participation’ (Carpentier 2016: 78). Accordingly, if we transpose this to a media context, participation in the field of media can facilitate participation in the field of society. Hence, the link is made between participation *in* the media and participation *through* the media in society (Carpentier 2011, Wasko and Mosco 1992). Whereas participation in the media entails powersharing between media professionals and audience members, participation through the media enables audience members to voice their opinion in the public sphere and by doing so potentially impact on political decision making (Lowe 2008: 31). One must be wary, however, not to automatically assume a causal relationship between these two, considering that “giving voice may not affect real decision-making and power relations in society, but only give the illusion of participation” (Livingstone and Lunt 1996: 175).

If we acknowledge this link between participation in and participation through media, it is a logical implication that public broadcasters, like we have said before, ought to enable participation in their production and organisation to foster participation in society (see also point 1). This idea of a media company as an actor that also adheres to a participatory logic itself and not merely as a facilitator, is not new and has been very evident in theories on community media (Janowski 2003, Lunt & Livingstone 2012). Community media go further than public access media and produce an “overall programming package that reflects, represents, and involves members of the community” (Jankowski 2003: 7). They enable citizens to participate in local media production, so they can learn the necessary civic attitudes to participate in other fields of society. In so doing, societal groups that are misrepresented or disadvantaged can strengthen their internal an external identity, fostering integration and, potentially, social change (Carpentier, Lie & Servaes 2001: 6, 20; Dickens et al. 2014). Also in theories on media literacy this importance of allowing the public into the media production process is being stressed. Critical media literacy, i.e. the ability to critically assess the social, economic and institutional contexts of media companies (Buckingham 2003: 38) is, for example, considered to be picked up best hands-on, when people actually participate in the media production process themselves (Buckingham 2003: 82; Livingstone

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4 See Vanhaeght and Donders 2015b for an operationalization of audience participation in the production of PSM.
One critical precondition is that there has to be room for critical reflection during the production process, though, as one does not want to fall into the trap of merely allowing participation for its own sake (Buckingham 2003: 84).

3. **Back to basics: What is the role of participation in democracy and why is it important?**

Now we have defined participation in general and in a PSM context, and already explored some of its links to power and democracy, it is time to analyse more in-depth how participation relates to democracy and its citizens. What is the role of participation in democracy? Why is it important and is more participation always better? To answer these questions we go back to different models of democratic theory. We mainly build upon models of participatory and deliberative democracy and also take inspiration from David Held’s conception of ‘democratic autonomy’. Moreover, in the last section we argue why the principle of autonomy should be the anchor point for public broadcasters in dealing with audience participation and how this principle should always have priority over any objective of creating unrestrained participation (Held 2006: 274).

**Participation vs. representation**

A central tension in different models of democratic theory is the tension between participation and representation (Held 1996). Representation is the idea that political leaders are delegated with decision-making powers, while through participation and participatory processes this created power imbalance can be corrected to a certain extent (Carpentier 2016: 80). The two main approaches within republicanism, protective republicanism and developmental republicanism, have a very different view on the balance between these two democratic mechanisms (Held 2006: 35).

Theorists of protective republicanism value participation for its instrumental importance, in general to protect citizens’ aims and their personal liberty, such as protecting them from corruption by politicians (ibidem). Their argument in favor of representation is one of the forerunners for representative government (Held 2006: 41). Participation is conceived in a narrow sense with voting as the prime mechanism to include the public’s input.

Theorists of developmental republicanism, on the other hand, emphasize the intrinsic value of participation for the development of citizens as human beings (Held 2006: 35). Especially in models of participatory democracy, participation is preferred over representation and becomes central. One of the most influential and radical thinkers within this strand was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He was in favor of an active involved citizenry who decides what is best for community in public meetings and is active in the creation of the laws (Held 2006: 45, Pateman 1970). In his eyes, citizens must enjoy political and economic equality in order that nobody can be master of another. Although criticized for being too utopian for modern conditions (idem: 49), Rousseau’s focus on the importance to enlighten people to be and remain their own master will be picked up by many, amongst others by Carole Pateman (1970) in her book on the ‘new theory of participatory democracy’. This focus clearly refers to the principle and ideal of ‘autonomy’.

**The relation between participation and autonomy**

In old and new theories of participatory democracy the relation between participation and autonomy comes to the foreground. For Rousseau the most important function of participation was an educative one, i.e. that people learn to act democratically by

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5 The ‘new’ theory of participatory democracy emerged in the 1970s as a result of the political revolution in the 1960s (Held 2006: 209). Scholars such as Pateman (1970) and Macpherson (1977) called attention to the fact that in most Western legal democracies the concept of participation had been playing only a limited role.

6 Rousseau acknowledges three particular functions of participation for society: an educative function, an integrative function, and a function to enable collective decisions to (not) be accepted as legitimate by individuals (Pateman 1970: 27, see also Behrouzi 2006: 37).
participating in smaller ‘political’ projects where they have the opportunity to exchange opinions, discuss and decide for themselves. Notably, ‘political’ is understood here in a very broad sense as projects that include some type of struggle or antagonism without necessarily having anything to do with the field of politics sensu stricto (Mouffe 2000:101). This is a remarkable difference with the narrow definition of the political in protective republicanism. The argument is thus that through the process of participation in different spheres (media, work, sports, leisure organization) necessary individual attitudes and psychological qualities can be developed to learn an individual to be and remain his own master (Pateman 1970: 42), which, as said before, clearly relates to the idea of autonomy. “Autonomy connotes the capacity of human beings to reason self-consciously, to be self-reflective and to be self-determining” (Held 2006: 263), which, in turn, allows better participation of citizens “in the diverse forms of political affairs that significantly affect them” (Held 2006: 266). As such, through the process of participating and its educative function, people can gain a sense of autonomy, which will most likely result in more, and more reasonable participation in the future. Yet, scholars of participatory democracy seem to focus solely on the former, as the principle of autonomy in relation to more reasonable participation seems to be insufficiently developed in these theories (Held 2006: 266). Or in the words of Held: “while the evidence certainly indicates that we learn to participate by participating, and that participation does help foster – as Rousseau, Wollstonecraft and J.S. Mill all contended – an active citizenry, the evidence is by no means conclusive that increased participation per se will trigger renaissance in deliberation and human development” (2006: 273).

**More participation is not necessarily better**

Critics argue that theories of participatory democracy lack reflections about possible negative impacts, for example when people become frustrated when their voice is not taken into account, and the desired quality of participation.

With regards to the former, the unexpected consequences of participation, the critical reflection on the concepts of instrumental and transformative participation of Andrea Cornwall (2008: 271) springs to mind. In a a lot of typologies of participation, we evolve from a more instrumental form of participation, participation as a means to achieve a certain end, to a transformative, more genuine, form of participation where participation is both a means and an end at the same time (see also White 1996 as cited in Cornwall 2008). Cornwall contends that, as such; “typologies of participation carry with them implicit normative assumptions which place these forms of participation along an axis of ‘good’ to ‘bad’” (Cornwall 2008: 270). Although Cornwall acknowledges the usefulness of these typologies, she elucidates the ambiguity of categorizing different forms of participation along these lines, saying that: “Participatory interventions may result in effects that were never envisaged at the outset. The most instrumental variants of participation can provide the spark, in some contexts, that can lead to popular engagement […] Equally, the most transformational intentions can meet a dead end […]” (Cornwall 2008: 274). She illustrates this point clearly in the following example:

“Delegated power over choosing the color of paint for a clinic’s waiting room in the name of ‘patient involvement’ – in the absence of any involvement in decisions on what the clinic actually does – may count for little in transforming power relations. And, at the other end of the scale, even the most nominal forms of participation can give citizens a foot in the door if there has been no constructive engagement with them before. Much depends on the context and on those within it.” (Cornwall 2008:
Moreover, scholars of the more deliberative models of democracy are against increasing participation for its own sake, without assessing the deliberative quality and enhancing the forms of participation. When not implemented under the right conditions, participation can make things worse for particular societal groups, according to deliberative democrats (Held 2006: 232). Offe and Preus for example argue: “there is no positive linear relationship between participation and reasonableness (1999: 167, as cited in Held 2006: 233).

Still, theories on participatory and deliberative democracy are not necessarily opposed to each other. They merely make a different trade-off between participation and deliberation (Coleman et al. 2015: 9). Similar to theories on participatory democracy, theories on deliberative democracy adhere to the principles of developmental republicanism. Both models favor collective decision-making with participation of all those affected by the decision (Trappel 2009: 43). Deliberative models of democracy, however, focus on the conditions of this participatory process, in which “arguments [have to be] offered by and to participants who are committed to the values of rationality and impartiality” (Elster 1998:8 as cited in Trappel 2009: 43). Not participation in itself, but the participatory process of public deliberation of free and equal citizens in the public sphere is central to this model (Habermas 1989). To enhance the quality and forms of participation, participation has to be assessed continuously and conditions such as the enlightened understanding of citizens have to be met.

To sum up, theories on deliberative democracy teach us that, if not implemented under the right conditions, participation does not lead to desirable outcomes per se, raising questions such as which criteria have to be met before implementing participation in specific projects and which objectives do we want to obtain with it, avoiding participation for the sake of participation? As such, deliberative theory becomes a wider applicable mechanism for critical reflection and assessment. So, while deliberative theory itself can be criticized in different ways, it might be very interesting to stop thinking about deliberation as a mere political theory and consider it more as a mechanism for, amongst others, the assessment of public participation. This could then also be transposed to the challenges public broadcasters experience with audience participation. The question remains, then, which objectives and values in particular should guide public broadcasters in this critical assessment of audience participation?

4. Autonomy as a guiding principle for public broadcasters in dealing with participation

- Principle of autonomy guiding point, anchor point for dealing with participation, avoiding participation for its own sake, concept reflects very much civic-republican ideals (Held 2006).
- The principle of autonomy must have priority over any objective of creating unlimited or uncircumscribed participation (Held 2006: 27).
- How do you handle pluralism and values, how do you enhance autonomy in a complex pluralistic society \( \rightarrow \) has not been articulated in the public service broadcasting and media literature. Much of that taken for granted in the original reconfiguration of public broadcasting.

\[7\] The main criticism on the deliberative models of democracy is the exclusion of all communication that is not genuinely deliberative (Vatikiotis 2014: 299). This while it is very necessary to understand the meaning of deliberation under non ideal conditions, given that a rational position wherein one is completely isolated from one’s own desires and interests seems to be unattainable (Held 2006: 241).
• Do public broadcasters address this question of autonomy, people’s autonomy in the political?
• Build into the purposes of public broadcasters: enhance in any way the potential of people to realize themselves as political subjects

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