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Do “we” really matter? An analysis of user motivations for online interaction with public service radio

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Abstract
In public service media (‘PSM’) literature and policy documents, many assumptions are being made about the increasing active relationship users have with the media that they ‘consume’. Moreover, in recent years public broadcasters have adopted a more consumerist logic, often conceptualizing users as consumers and not as citizens. This study aims to bring in a user-centered approach in PSM theory and empirical research. More specifically, we study the motivations and thresholds for people to actually interact with online PSM content, asking questions such as: ‘What drives users to share or comment upon PSM content online?’ and ‘How does these motivations and thresholds relate to their role as citizen?’. To answer these questions, we focus on innovative public service radio formats more specifically, a field that is largely understudied. In the theoretical part, we differentiate between personal, social and altruistic motivations to interact with PSM content. For the empirical part, we conduct 10 focus groups with radio listeners between the age of 15 and 34. In conclusion, we argue that media users are very often aware of their different roles as both consumer and citizen and that the latter is especially manifested in their motivations to share public service radio content.

Key words: public service media; radio; social media; interaction; citizen; Facebook

Introduction
Public broadcasters engage in new media strategies and are progressively offering interactive services to users (Jakubowicz 2010, Lowe 2009). Without empirical verification they, as well as many scholars, assume that “viewers, listeners and users are increasingly moving towards a more active relationship with the media that they consume” (BBC 2007). Audience involvement is framed as the result of technological possibilities and hence, as something that is mainly technologically and not per se user driven (Bardoel 2007: 45). At worst, interaction with audiences is the consequence of mere strategic considerations to legitimize public broadcasters’ role in the digital age (Enli 2008). The actual motivations, thresholds and even benefits for audience members to move from passive recipient to active participant in public service media (hereafter ‘PSM’) are rarely considered (Lunt & Livingstone 2012).
Research on motivations to co-create content online (Stoeckl et al. 2007, Matikainen 2015) or to interact with television formats (Bruun 2014, Syvertsen 2004) nonetheless shows that audiences are not always motivated to interact or co-create in PSM programs (Buckingham 2013, Vanhaeght and Donders 2015). Furthermore, new media strategies can frustrate some users, for instance when they do not receive feedback from producers and/or other users (Couldry et al. 2010). This means that the conflation of producer and audience, often mentioned in media theory and policy is by no means a given, especially not in a PSM context (Carpentier 2009). Moreover, media users are often conceptualised in a quite selective way in media policy as “consumers who select the media offers they like and who avoid the media offers they dislike” (Hasebrink 2012: 60), while it is pivotal to also take into account that users can act as citizens with their own normative ideals and expectations (idem: 70). Against this backdrop, the concept of the ‘implied audience’ (Livingstone 1998) springs to mind, highlighting the discrepancy between the way the audience is perceived in socio-cultural theory and policy and the way the audience actually behaves.

In this article, we study the motivations and thresholds for people to actually interact with online PSM content: ‘What drives or holds them back to share or comment upon this content online?’ and ‘How does these motivations and thresholds relate to users’ role as citizen?’. In studying these questions we do not from the outset accept that more user interaction is per se better. In some instances it might indeed be better to leave users ‘alone’ and not bother them with interactive services. This study brings in a user-centered approach in PSM theory and empirical research. In so doing, it adds to contributions of e.g., Syvertsen (2001, 2004), Bruun (2014) and Hallvard et al. (2016) on the changing relationship between the public broadcaster and the audience in a converging media landscape. It elaborates on actual motivations or the absence thereof of youngsters to interact with content in a specific PSM context. We focus on innovative public service radio formats more specifically, a field that is, in contrast to interactive television formats and content creation online, largely understudied. Furthermore, while public television channels struggle to reach young people, the public radio channels under investigation recently experienced an increase in younger listeners (Raats et al. 2015). This research is thus relevant for public broadcasters as well. In fact, the identification of a large variety of motivations for audience
involvement could be a useful base for a more deliberate PSM strategy towards new media, also attracting a greater diversity of users.

The article consists of four parts. First, we provide an overview of motivations and thresholds for users to interact with public service radio online (meaning liking, commenting or sharing posts and/or engaging in the radio’s initiatives, such as contests online), differentiating between personal, social and altruistic motivations and personal, social and content thresholds. Second, we introduce and contextualize the case studies and elaborate on methodology. The analysis includes 2 case studies in radio of the Flemish public broadcaster VRT (Flanders, the Northern part of Belgium): the online radio strategy of its alternative radio station Studio Brussel (‘Stubru’) and the online radio strategy of its more mainstream radio station MNM (i.e. the websites of the radio stations and their social media pages). This part relies on 10 focus groups with in total 55 radio listeners between the age of 15 and 34, the target group of both stations. As it is a difficult task to grasp people’s motivations in a research context, we adopted projective techniques such as card sorting during the focus groups. In the third part, we present our results according to the three social media mechanisms: liking, commenting and sharing. Finally, in the conclusion, we argue that media users are very often aware of their different roles as both consumer and citizen and that the latter is especially manifested in their motivations to share public service radio content online.

Divergent views on studying motivations in media research

In media policy documents, policy makers and public broadcasters set forth to be as open and ‘public-facing’ as possible (Lunt & Livingstone 2012: 87). While some scholars such as Jakubowicz (2010) and Lowe (2009) are convinced that increasing interaction brings about added value for the audience, others (Mäntymäki 2009; Ytreberg 2009) insist on further research. Audience research remains, however, rare in media policy analysis. This while both audience and PSM researchers emphasize the importance of analyzing audience motivations in order to deal with change and serve distinctive target groups (Bardoel 2007: 45; Nissen 2014: 95). In this part we, first, advance some of the main approaches on studying audience motivations in media studies and, second, focus on motivations and thresholds in a PSM context more specifically.
Before all else, it is important to look at how motivations are defined in media studies. Dahlgren (2012: 96) asserts that “all human action has some sort of intentionality behind it”. Motivations encompass exactly these intentions of behavior (Stoeckl et al: 400). This does not mean that intentions are always the result of reflexive monitoring of action. Giddens (1984: 6), for example, differentiates between reasons as the grounds of actions from motivations as the wants which prompt it. People are not always conscious about what motivates them and even when they are, it remains difficult for them to report on it. This also makes it difficult to capture people’s motivations in a research context.

Uses and gratifications was the first media theory to bring attention to what motivates users to consume media, specifically “based on their own anticipation of what they will receive by doing so” (Lampe et al. 2010). Accordingly, Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974: 510, see also Katz et al. 1973) rather speak of media needs, functions and gratifications than of media motivations in their seminal article about uses and gratifications theory. Contrary to the often heard critique of being individualistic, uses and gratifications theory locates audience motivations in the context of social networks (Livingstone 1997, p. 10). This strand of research, however, fails to capture the whole picture of media motivations as it conceptualises media users only in a selective way as “consumers who select the media offers they like and who avoid the media offers they dislike” (Hasebrink 2012: 60). The fact that users can also act as citizens with their own normative ideals and expectations is disregarded (idem: 61).

More recent media studies have focused especially on the motivations for generating social media content, see for instance Nonnecke et al. (2006), Stoeckl et al. (2007), Lampe et al. (2010) and Matikainen (2015). Most of these authors follow a psychological approach in defining motivations. Matikainen (2015: 44-45) criticizes the lists of motivations that these studies provide as too superficial and individual-focused. While still acknowledging the means of self-presentation social media provide, he argues to also take into consideration the social context in which this occurs. Furthermore, over time, motivations can change as the experience and the media literacy levels of the user grow (Hasebrink & Domeyer 2012). Moreover,
despite previous research on the relationship between social media and citizen engagement (De Zuniga et al. 2014), Matikainen also does not mention how different types of motivations relate to the user as citizen.

Some of the newest studies on motivations and social media, subsequently, seem to focus on one phenomenon in particular: sharing behavior (De Zuniga et al. 2014, Picone et al. 2015). Next to motivations of self-presentation or self-publication, the social component is mentioned as the prime motivator in these studies. Interestingly, the importance of social thresholds comes into play here as well. For instance, if the media user thinks his close community will have no affiliation with the content s/he is about to share, this could become a decisive threshold not to share the content (Picone et al. 2015: 9). These types of reflections reoccur in studies on social television, where the practice of commenting and sharing with friends and strangers is connected to a particular television show (Selva 2016: 160). Public broadcasters struggle with the commercial character of social media platforms such as Facebook in this respect. While the question whether and when public broadcasters should adopt social media is still under debate (Van Dijck and Poell, 2015: 149), there seems to be an agreement on the importance of public broadcasters to be an anchor point for young users on these platforms. Accordingly, the ways in which they employ social media to engage the audience should be distinctive from commercial broadcasters (Hallvard et al. 2016: 103). This brings us to question the motivations to interact with public service media content online more specifically.

Motivations in a public service media context
Public broadcasters should serve the audience as citizens (see for example, Syvertsen 2004; BBC 2007). One of their main tasks is to inform voters in a truthful, objective and credible way about different opinions in society and the choices citizens can make (Council of Europe 2009: 5). Over the years, public broadcasters have adopted a more consumerist logic to attract large audiences as a result of the increasing competition of commercial broadcasters. That is why Hasebrink (2012) underscores the need to consider audiences as both consumers and citizens at the same time. According to him, public broadcasters have to reconsider their audiences as “members of a democratic society who have an interest to have the media contribute to the general
aims of society, e.g. [...] the promotion of a greater understanding of the issues and problems facing society” (Hasebrink 2012: 62).

To discuss motivations to interact with PSM content online more specifically, we choose to differentiate between personal, social and altruistic motivations (a categorization inspired on Markman 2011 and Nov 2007). Given the limited motivation research in a PSM context, and with an eye on developing a sound framework of criteria for the analysis, we also took into consideration studies on motivations (e.g., Elster 2006, Lampe et al. 2010, Markman 2011, Matikainen 2015) to interact with online content in general.

Personal motivations to interact with PSM content mostly refer to the user’s passion or interest for something (Syvertsen 2004: 373). In other words, users will become more motivated to be involved in an online discussion forum of a public television or radio program if this relates to their own life or discusses a subject matter which is meaningful to them (Buckingham 2013, Hasebrink & Domeyer 2012). Evidently, also information- and entertainment-driven motivations will be maximal when the topic is of interest for the user (Van Dijck 2009: 50). In this case, the motivation to seek extra documentation or stories on PSM websites about television or radio programs will increase. Also the possibility to receive attention, to tell a story or to express an opinion online or on air are conceived as important motivations in itself (Bruun 2014: 11; Markman 2011), as well as the prospect of winning a prize (Syvertsen 2004). Most of these audience motivations to interact with PSM content online are not new, though. They are similar to what the audience has been motivating to engage in linear public radio and television programs all along (Syvertsen 2001). Yet, the ability for self-actualization, i.e. to show they have the knowledge, creativity and confidence to disagree with certain posts, seems to be a motivation which is mentioned in relation to the online strategy of PSM formats in particular. Interaction and co-creation possibilities on online PSM websites allow users to gain creative media literacy skills more strongly than before (Buckingham 2013: 122). Also, the ability to express one’s creativity online evokes feelings of personal competence and autonomy; you can do something of your own free will that demonstrates your knowledge on a given topic (Bruun 2014: 11).
Furthermore, when users receive recognition for these contributions from other users, this can enhance their social status in an online community, which can also contribute to their social identity (Bruns 2008: 29, 85; Matikainen 2015: 44). This relates to the second category of ‘social motivations’. In general, it is assumed that individuals use media exactly “to connect or disconnect themselves with different kinds of others” (Katz, Gurevitch & Haas as cited in Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch 1974: 510). Historically, media, whether print, radio or television, have maintained this social connection between members of the audience, constructing so-called ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1983: 137, Klein 2009). The social motivations to interact with online media more specifically are to achieve a sense of belonging to a group, a need which is mostly articulated by youngsters, and to receive social support and advice (Cordeiro et al. 2014: 103-104, Lampe et al. 2010, Nonnecke et al. 2006). This is not different from the social motivations to interact with online content of PSM (Bruun 2014; Matikainen 2015: 41). For social media in particular, the ability to share personal interests with family, friends and colleagues is mentioned as the social motivation par excellence (Bruns 2008: p. 244, Syvertsen 2004, Van Dijck 2009).

Lastly, altruistic motivations go beyond personal and social motivations. It are motivations encompassing humanitarian concerns for the welfare of others, for example to give someone online advice on a certain topic without the intention of receiving personal benefit from this (Batson et al. 1981: 290; Elster 2006; Nov 2007: 62). This also includes ideologically-driven motivations to make a difference in society more in general (Markman 2011, Matikainen 2015: 41). Given the remit of public broadcasters to sustain citizenship and civil society (BBC 2007) these type of motivations are particularly interesting in a PSM context (see also Lowe 2009). Some scholars (Carpentier 2011, Hasebrink 2012) have questioned whether such motivations are actually encouraged by the online strategy of public broadcasters, though. Purely altruistic motivations are seldom and mostly user actions are driven by a combination of personal, social and altruistic motivations.

**Thresholds in a public service media context**

Of course, the behavior of users is not only dependent on motivations, but also on the factors that hold users back. Again there is not simply one threshold for users to interact with PSM content; there are several. In parallel with the categorization of
motivations, the thresholds to interact online in a PSM context can be divided into personal and social thresholds. Personal thresholds to engage in the online strategy of public broadcasters are that users feel the action is not worth their time, that they are shy or that their action would not make a difference (Couldry et al. 2010: 124, Nonnecke et al. 2006: 14). This also relates to social thresholds. Because, as we have seen for sharing behavior, the user will not share the content if s/he thinks his/her close community will have no affiliation with it. Related to the personal threshold of being shy is also the risk of losing face in front of other users (Bruun 2014: p. 18).

Moreover, especially younger users sometimes think it is not cool to engage in activities online or they are afraid about negative perceptions held by the general audience about active contributors (Livingstone et al. 2005: 15). The third type of thresholds are content thresholds. Users are reluctant to interact when they have no knowledge about the topic or when they have nothing to comment on the subject that has not been commented before (Nonnecke et al. 2006: 14). Research has also proven that engagement is discouraged when the call is perceived as too broad (Heise et al. 2014: 424). So, for example, when different experiences on G-sports are asked, there will be more incoming comments when the question is addressed to sport teachers who work with disabled children more specifically than when the question is addressed to the audience in general.

To sum up, motivations and thresholds of the audience to interact online with media content, and public service media content in particular, are diversified and difficult to grasp in a research context. In the next part, we select two public service radio cases to study in-depth why audience members want to interact with online public service content in the first place and which meanings they give to these interactions.

**Methodological approach**

**Cases**

To investigate the motivations and thresholds for online interaction with PSM content, we selected cases in radio given that, more than television, radio has always been the medium of interaction with the audience. Since its very beginning, radio gave ‘average Joes’ the opportunity to voice their opinion. Radio phone-in debates, although subject to selection procedures, have always been considered to be more accessible than TV studio debates (McNair et al. 2002: 418, Scannell 1989).
Furthermore, research has shown that the perceived distance between radio listeners and radio content is closer than is the case for television given the immediate and interpersonal nature of the former (Rubin and Step 2000: 636). As a result, radio has a lot of similarities with the online. It is thus interesting to investigate how radio channels have incorporated interactive new media strategies and whether or not this happens more ‘naturally’ than the inclusion of interactivity in television programs which is often perceived as an artificial add-on (Vanhaeght & Donders 2015). Furthermore, until now, innovative public service radio formats have largely been understudied, in contrast to interactive television formats and content creation online (Bruun 2014, Selva 2016, Matikainen 2015).

Interestingly, while public television channels are still struggling to reach young people, public radio channels have experienced an increase in younger listeners recently (Raats et al. 2015). The radio station’s branding strategy is important here, given that young people strongly seem to identify themselves with a community of listeners that often not only listens to the same type of music, but also shares the same sort of life style (Cordeiro 2012: 494). That is why in order to obtain a richness in data, we chose to study not one, but two radio channels that target young people, so we can also uncover differences in branding strategy and target group (Cordeiro 2012: 494).

The two case studies included in our analysis, Stubru and MNM, are two radio channels of the Flemish public broadcaster VRT (Flanders, the Northern part of Belgium) that both target the age group of 15-34. We look at their online strategy more specifically, i.e. their online website and their social media pages. While Stubru brands itself as a more alternative radio channel focusing on key genres such as rock, alternative pop and indie, MNM plays more mainstream music such as poprock, dancepop and R’n’B. Accordingly, there is also a difference in profile between the listeners/users of these two. Stubru listeners/users are mostly higher educated and active information seekers. MNM, on the other hand, reaches an audience from a more diverse socio-economic background that mainly wants to listen to hit music (VRT & Vlaamse Regering 2015: 59-60).
**Methods**

To investigate what makes users interact with public service radio content online and what holds them back, we first wanted to know how they evaluate online strategies of the public radio channels more in general and what they mean to them in their day-to-day lives. To this end, we conducted 10 focus groups with 55 radio listeners between the age of 15 and 34 (the target group of both stations), 5 about radio channel Stubru and 5 about MNM. We chose for this method, given that focus groups are particularly useful to uncover motivations of users and their reasoning behind taking part in certain actions (Slocum 2003: 97, 98). Initially, the focus groups were planned with 8 to 10 participants each, but after two focus groups, we noticed that focus groups of 4 to 6 respondents created a better setting to really go in-depth about their motivations.

The radio listeners were selected through an online call on the Facebook pages and websites of the radio stations. Thereby it was explicitly mentioned that the research was not conducted by the public radio channel itself. We deliberately placed the call on Facebook and not on Twitter, given that research has shown that Facebook reaches a more diversified audience (Hargittai and Litt, 2012). As much as possible, we aimed to differentiate participants’ in terms of age, social background, gender and residence to attain richness in data (Slocum 2003: 99). We did not strive for representativeness. The names of the participants were anonymized. Although targeting both the same age group, MNM reaches on average more younger users than Stubru (VRT Studiedienst, 2016). That is one of the reasons why, as indicated in the table, less older respondents showed up for the MNM focus groups than for the ones on Stubru.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Woman</th>
<th>Man</th>
<th>Woman</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15-21</td>
<td>Louise (16)</td>
<td>Dylan (16)</td>
<td>Helen (17)</td>
<td>Brecht (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emma (21)</td>
<td>Bruno (17)</td>
<td>Lucie (17)</td>
<td>Matthias (17)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Natalie (21)</td>
<td>Wouter (17)</td>
<td>Katrien (18)</td>
<td>Diego (17)</td>
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<td>Joshua (17)</td>
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<td>Yannick (18)</td>
<td>Inge (19)</td>
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<td>Simon (21)</td>
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<td>Tomas (20)</td>
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During the focus groups, it was the users’ own understanding we wanted to follow, we did not want to impose any of the theoretical categorizations on them (Couldry et al. 2010: xv, Picone et al 2015: 45). We did, however, consider the abovementioned categories found in theory to make sure that we developed diversified questions, not overfocusing on one category, such as, for example: “What are your favorite topics to comment upon (content thresholds)” and “Is it important that you can interact with family/friends/other users during the format (social motivations). At the same time, we aspired to maintain the approach as open as possible. For this reason, neither did we incite a normative discussion on what practices seemed valuable, nor did we explicitly talk about the difference between public and commercial radio channels. The prime focus was on how the different types of interactions were meaningful for the users themselves. For the same reason, when analyzing our data, we adopted the open approach of a thematic-network analysis, allowing us to disclose meanings and motivations that were given beyond the categorizations found in theory (Attride-Stirling 2001: 388).

Moreover, as it is a difficult task to grasp people’s motivations in a research context we adopted projective techniques such as a card sorting and a ranking exercise.
Projective techniques are tasks given to respondents, designed to deepen the nature of the discussions (Baelden et al. 2014). For the first card sorting exercise each respondent received three post-its; one with ‘like’, one with ‘comment’ and one with ‘share’ written on. Screenshots of different Facebookposts of the respective public radio channel and commercial radio channels hung on one wall of the room. Subsequently, we asked the participants which posts they would like, which they would share and which they would comment upon. For the second projective technique, which was a ranking exercise, we asked the participants to turn to the other wall. Here hung screenshots from webinitiatives of the respective public radio channel and commercial radio channels that urge the user to do something, e.g. to upload a photo, to take part in a charity initiative, to share a story on the website, to participate in a competition, to call the radio station to state an opinion, etc. The participants needed to rank these screenshots with post-its numbered from 1 to 10 from the initiative they would prefer to engage in the most to the initiative they would prefer to engage in the least. Afterwards they also received three green and three red post-its on which they needed to write three things that motivate them to take part in a certain initiative and three things that hold them back. The screenshots in both card sorting exercises were diversified along the lines of the categories found in theory. Not the actual output of these exercises mattered the most, but the reasoning of the participants behind this ranking and sorting. In other words, these techniques allowed us to ask the respondents why they ranked/sorted the screenshots in a certain manner (De Meulenaere et al 2015). The interview protocol together with the instructions for the projective techniques can be found in annex.

**Results**

The results of the focus groups largely confirm the abovementioned categories of motivations and thresholds derived from previous research. Rather than to simply list the evidence found in the focus groups for each and every category, we highlight those reflections of the users that bring nuance and add complexity to the categorization. Also, while not imposed during the focus group, some of the reflections made, referred implicitly to the mission of a public service radio channel, or more precisely to what users think a public radio channel should provide in terms of online interaction. While we included both the websites and the social media pages of the radio channels into the research, the participants in the focus groups were more
interested in the latter. This can be explained by the fact that most young users not any longer surf directly to the websites of the radio channels. They surf to social media pages where they see a post of the radio channel and only end up on the website after a click-through, or as Marie said “Even when I’m bored I don’t think about going to the Stubru-website, but sometimes I see a post on Facebook and than I click on it”. Furthermore, Stubru is aware of this tendency (visitors of its site dropped almost 20 percent in 2015), and decided to focus even more on it social media content (VRT, annual report 2015). For these reasons, we also discuss our results according to the three main Facebook mechanisms: like, share and comment.

**Like posts that are ‘worthy’ of their time**

Often mentioned personal thresholds to interact with the public service radio channels are being shy (Natalie, Klara) and privacy concerns (Brecht, Joke, Tessa, Frederic, Guus, Maïsha, Sofie, Tomas Mats, Natalie). The most debated threshold to comment or share posts of public service radio channels was however social. Similar to the findings of Livingstone et al. (2005, see above), users in our focus groups were afraid to come across as ‘too active users’ on Facebook. Most focus group participants also had a negative perception about this type of users:

“People that have no life, sit in front of their computer all day and react to anything they come across without thinking twice”¹ (Tessa)

“People who are checking their cellphone all the time. I don’t want to become like that.” (Natalie)

The interaction between the participants, one of the advantages in a focus group was also interesting in this regard. For example, the discussions between Koen and Sofie (see below) about the social desirability of posting pictures on Facebook showed that there was disagreement on whether and when to call an active user an attention seeker:

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¹ All the quotes in this article were translated from Dutch into English by the researcher.
“When you go to the cinema and you see people in front of you taking pictures; attention seekers” (Koen)

“Not necessarily, sometimes you want to keep your friends up to date” (Sofie)

“Still, they mainly want attention” (Koen)

“If it bothers you, you can always scroll it away” (Sofie)

In terms of content thresholds, users are becoming increasingly frustrated by posts that are, after reading or watching them, conceived as a waste of time. With the information overload there is so much interesting and entertaining content online to choose from that young people are very cautious about making the right decision what to devote their time to. In this regard, Bruun adopts Schrøder’s concept of perceived worthwhileness to describe, “the fundamental psychological, social and practical qualities users might look for, both consciously and unconsciously” (2014: 11). In other words, did the user perceive the action as worthwhile?

“After reading an article of MNM, I often think, what have I actually learnt from this? And then, I often regret reading it in the first place” (Sofie)

“Like the three minute movie clips of Linde [presenter of Stubru] acting silly in the Stubru offices. Afterwards I always wonder: ‘what did I just watch?’ , and that is a feeling I really hate, knowing I could have spent my time watching a more funny video” (Brecht)

A similar frustration occurs when users notice that after commenting on a call nothing happens with their input. Or when the effort for participating in a contest is not worth the reward. The public radio channels could anticipate on this by being explicit about what they are going to do with the users’ input and how users can potentially benefit from this. Remarkably, this dissatisfaction was more often expressed in the MNM focus groups than in the one on Stubru. A probable explanation for this could be that MNM started later with their online and social media strategy and is still more in the experimentation phase.
Comment on thought-provoking topics they have specific knowledge on

Overall, focus group participants mainly comment on the website or Facebook posts of the public service radio channels when the topic at hand is a matter close to their heart; i.e. a topic in which they have great interest and, most of the time, also know a lot about. Sofie, for instance, stated that she is encouraged to comment when something wrong is posted about the elections in Myanmar, a topic she cares about. Similarly, Brecht explained he once commented on an opinion piece that contained incorrect information about the effects of tax reduction, a subject matter he was studying for an economic course at that time. Moreover, respondent Seppe added that people who do not have knowledge on the topic should abstain from commenting as “they are often making a fool out of themselves”. The radio channels could anticipate on this by making their calls for interaction more specific. This was a suggestion made by some of the respondents themselves (Kirsten, Sofie, Tom and Vincent), which validates the findings of earlier research (see above). The ability for self-actualization of the use, i.e. to show they have the knowledge and the confidence to disagree with certain posts, seems to be a motivating factor here. Selva (2016: 167) speaks in this regard also about the “real-time fact-checking” function of online media that becomes increasingly apparent during broadcast shows.

While political topics trigger some users to comment more, others are reluctant to comment on political subject matters. Myriam and Marie (although in different focus groups) both explained that it depends on whether or not there is a public consensus about the topic. When there is no consensus or even polarization, respondents seem more reluctant to comment. Marie, elucidates further: “the refugee crisis is something on which opinions differ greatly, even within my own circle of family and friends, but everyone agrees that the massacre at Charlie Hebdo was dreadful. I would more easily post something about Charlie Hebdo”.

The most striking difference between the focus groups about the mainstream radio channel MNM and the more alternative one Stubru was the request for more thought-provoking topics. Most of the participants of the Stubru focus groups asserted that it was not really the task of Stubru to bring thought-provoking content online. Klaas, for example, argued convincingly “music-related content is and should remain their core business”. The participants of the MNM focus groups, on the other hand, expressed a
need for more thought-provoking content with an edge, or like Steve said: “most of the posts are superficial and when there is a more political post, it is so politically correct that it becomes boring” and “MNM seems to miss some type of personality in this regard”. Also Helen would appreciate MNM taking a stand on something once in a while. Manon agreed, “as long as MNM brings both sides of a story”. What is noticeable here, is that the remit of public broadcasters to be impartial at all times could in fact discourage public interest and debate on the topics they cover.

The participants of the Stubru focusgroups, on the contrary, did not express the need for more thought-provoking socio-political content on the radio channel’s website or social media pages. This while we expected the opposite, i.e. that Stubru listeners would in fact desire more of such content than MNM listeners, given that Stubru is contentwise a more alternative and edgy radio channel than MNM (see above). This rather contradictory result could be explained by two factors. First, Stubru already brings more socially critical content than MNM, leaving Stubru listeners simply with less need to receive even more of such content. Second, the difference in profile between Stubru and MNM users comes to the foreground here. Stubru users will need less guidance in such topics from their radio channel, given that they are in general more active information seekers already (VRT & Vlaamse Regering 2015: 59-60). This is exemplified by the fact that Stubru listeners Lien, Klaas, Valérie, Wim, Emma, Marie, Tom, Brecht and Simon explicitly stated that if they want to find more critical news content, they know which more specific news websites to surf to.

*Share posts that are funny and socially relevant at the same time*

Participants are motivated to share posts of the public radio channels on Facebook when they are funny and socially relevant at the same time. Brecht called this sharing something with a ‘double aim’: “Sometimes you want to express an opinion online but without it coming across as overly serious or political. In this case a funny clip or article can help to secretly bring attention to this issue”. Marie explained: “Some people will get it, others won’t, what matters is that nobody is annoyed by a boring post”, which again illustrates the social threshold for users not to post anything when it is of no interest for their community. Although not using the explicit term, Tom also adhered to this principle when sharing content. During the first post-it exercise, he stated: “I would share this post [a satirical clip on sexism in Flanders], because while
it is funny, it also raises questions about sexism. In general, I don’t share a lot, but when I share something it has to go beyond my own interests, it has to be socially relevant”. Thus, remarkably, users are altruistically motivated especially when it comes to sharing content. This was apparent in both the focus groups on Stubru and MNM. Indeed, Koen, Helen, Bram, Sofie, Maïsha, Zoë and Frederic are inclined to share posts about socially relevant themes such as racism (Koen, Helen), poverty (Bram, Sofie), war (Maïsha), disease (Zoë), and climate change (Frederic), saying “People have to be aware of this” (Bram), “People have to see this” (Koen), and “People have to realise the sincerity of this problem” (Maïsha). Interestingly, they share these posts not only with their friends and family on Facebook, but with the general Facebook audience. These actions are however not purely altruistically driven, given that the respondents clearly cared about coming across as funny and not too serious. So also here rather a combination of personal (to receive attention), social (to achieve a certain status in a group) and altruistic motivations is at play.

This brings us back to Hasebrink’s (2012: 62) assertion to consider audiences, next to consumers, as members of a democratic society who not only have expectations from media, but also increasingly use media themselves to contribute to a “promotion of a greater understanding of the issues and problems facing society”. Furthermore, Hasebrink (2012) goes even further arguing that users are very often aware of their different roles as both consumer and citizen and the contradiction that might exist between these two. In other words, the conflict between their own needs: ‘the interest of the public’, and normative criteria extracted from theories on democracy: ‘the public interest’ (Lunt and Livinstone 2012). This assumption is confirmed by our findings. For instance, when we asked the participants to rank online initiatives of Stubru/MNM in order of preference [Can you rank the screenshots on the wall from the initiative you would prefer to engage in the most to the initiative you would prefer to engage in the least?], some of the participants explicitly asked whether they should rank according to their own preference or in terms of societal relevance:

“But do I have to rank them in terms of self-interest or in terms of contribution to society? It is difficult for me to find a balance between what I like the most and what gives me good karma” (Marie)
“Wait, you mean what I like the most or what I consider the most interesting initiative for Stubru?” (Tom)

“For me as a person or for MNM as a radio channel?” (Koen)

Furthermore, this can also be illustrated by Helen’s consideration whether or not to share a personal story about her experience with homeschooling on the website of MNM: “If I could help other people with that story, I would do it, but I would not share it merely to receive attention”. Moreover, some of the participants, explicitly mentioned the difficult balance act between giving them what they want, and going beyond that, like Lena: “I think it is a difficult balance act between bringing catchy entertainment posts and the more socially relevant posts, and when you post both, not to make the latter the boring ones”. From this we can conclude that the difficult balancing act public broadcasters struggle with, i.e. between serving their audiences as citizens or consumers, is also something that users are struggling with themselves.

Conclusion
The main goal of the study was to determine which motivations and thresholds audience members have when it comes to interacting with PSM online and how these relate to users’ role as citizen. During the focus groups it became apparent that when evaluating their interactions with PSM online, users barely referred to their role as citizen. Only in their motivations to share public service radio content, their role as citizen was manifested. Users namely explicitly stated that they mostly wanted to share content that was socially relevant. From this, we can substantiate Hasebrink’s claim that public broadcasters are still mostly trapped in a consumerist logic rather than they are appealing to users’ role as a consumer and as a citizen at the same time. Remarkably, however, is that the struggle public broadcasters experience in balancing between those two roles, i.e. in giving audiences what they want on the one hand and bringing quality content that goes beyond that on the other, is a struggle that also seems to be present with the users themselves (e.g. Tom’s quote “what I like the most or what I consider the most interesting initiative”). This implies that media users are often aware of their different roles as consumer and citizen, regardless of whether or not they are actually taking up this role in practice. Furthermore the findings of the focus groups also illustrated that users are continuously making trade-offs between
these two roles. The fact that Stubru users are more active information seekers than MNM users – and thus are already gradually adopting this citizen role outside their radio channel – could, for example, explain why MNM users ask for more citizen-related tasks of their radio channel (i.e. demand for more thought-provoking posts), which, however, not always matches MNM’s identity of being a hitradio.

Given that public broadcasters and users both struggle with this balancing act between consumer and citizen, the idea of ‘the mutual benefit in co-creation’ springs to mind. Banks and Deuze (2009: 426) assert that it is interesting to focus on those objectives and motivations of media professionals and media users that are not that different from each other. Considering the remit of a public broadcaster to bring socially relevant content in an attractive manner, it would thus be interesting to anticipate on the fact that users are motivated to share posts about socially relevant themes, specifically when they are funny at the same time.

A limitation of this study is that we were not able to investigate the trade-offs between users’ role as consumer and as citizen in relation to their motivations in-depth. This surely opens up avenues for further research.

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