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Media disruption and the public interest

How private media managers talk about responsibility to society in an era of turmoil

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Abstract

Digitization, new entrants and the disruption of business models prompt concern about the media's societal mission. The article investigates how media managers conceptualize societal responsibility in an era of turmoil. Based on 20 semi-structured interviews with executive managers of private media companies in Norway and Flanders, the study reveals important differences in the definition of the public interest. While Flemish media managers emphasize brand value, Norwegian managers emphasize societal values, such as educating the public. When comparing managers of traditional and newer companies, a third, more straightforward market logic is also elicited, illuminating the vulnerability of traditional values.

Keywords: private media, public interest, media managers, media welfare state, disruption

Introduction

In today's media market, several disruptions are coming together to pose challenges to the existing media, both public and private. The greatest disruption is arguably caused by intensified competition between platforms, channels and distribution models and the concurrent disruption in traditional ways of funding media content. In what we may now coin the traditional model, private media rely on advertising to fund journalism, domestic productions and other content that is beneficial to society, but this model is "jeopardized and expected to critically erode" (Trappel, 2017: 49; see also Collins, 2011). This has important implications not only for private media but also for society, as legacy media serve societal

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functions that new platforms – such as Google, Facebook and Netflix – tend to ignore (Altmeppen et al., 2017a; Moore & Tambini, 2018).

When discussing media disruption and the public interest, the most vocal concerns relate to the fate of public service broadcasting (Ibarra et al., 2015; Iosifidis, 2010; Lowe & Martin, 2014). In defending public broadcasting and the public interest, a negative presumption of private ownership and market regulation has been common both in media policy research and in public debate. Private media have been posed as a negative contrast to public broadcasters, which have been seen to embody public sphere characteristics (e.g. Garnham, 1983). As the business models of traditional media come under significant pressure, however, concerns for the public interest mission(s) of private media are coming more to the forefront. Still, while the societal obligations of public broadcasters have been studied extensively, we know less about how private media companies and their managers define their role in society in an era of change.

The current transformation of the media market has been discussed widely. Based on the same data set as this article, that is, interviews with private media managers in Flanders and Norway, the key challenges for private media in small markets are identified as digitization, internationalization and changing business models (Donders et al., 2018). These disruptions pose problems but also present opportunities for private media. Digitization implies fragmentation and the need for strategies to reach customers in new ways as well as the possibility to exploit contents and brands on new platforms. Internationalization means weaker protection of national media in small markets but also highlight the advantages of local market knowledge. Changing business models mean that advertising is under pressure but also implies an intensified push to create quality and trusted content for which users are willing to pay.

Similar duality is observable with respect to serving the public interest. On the one hand, disruption places the existing media in a vulnerable position in which economic survival must constantly be at the forefront of managers' consciousness. As Doyle (2017: 60) put it, "profit-maximizing motives will at times create overwhelming pressure towards strategies and practices that cut across the public interest". However, disruptive intensity may also prompt re-evaluation of media companies' non-economic goals. A central argument in this article is that market disruption not only promotes change but may also prompt reaffirmation of core values and strategies. Arguably, one implication of the media upheavals in the 1980s and 1990s was the strategic reorientation of the *public* broadcasting companies, which not only sharpened their competitive edge and appealed more directly to customers but also became more conscious about their civic responsibilities and the need to deliver value beyond that of private companies (Enli, 2008; Steemers, 1999; Syvertsen, 1992). One can ask whether similar processes are now taking place in *private* media businesses, as these are challenged by platforms with different legacies and business models. As argued by Altmeppen and colleagues (2017b: 2), "As the Internet corporations entered media markets and began to dominate them, they forced the traditional media to audit their businesses, check their products, and improve their conduct and performance".

This article investigates how the management in private media companies talks about the responsibility to society in the present situation of turmoil. The study is based on interviews with the executive management of private broadcasters, production companies, TV distribution companies, newspaper publishers and online journalism initiatives in Norway and Flanders (a semi-autonomous region in the northern part of Belgium). Information on how managers conceptualize responsibility to society does not document performance or how economic vs non-economic values are prioritized in specific situations, yet conceptualizations are strategically important. Management power is to a large degree communicative and discursive (Greck et al., 2017), and investment in certain values and discourses plays a role when priorities are set and resources allocated. Externally, these discourses are also important; private media are dependent on forging a relationship with the public sphere that extends beyond profit making, and private media are expected to produce public value (Allern & Pollack, 2017; Trappel, 2017). Media managers are essential in this role (Altmeppen et al., 2017a), and the way in which they formulate their societal obligations may have real consequences for sustaining crucial privileges.

The article begins with a discussion of private media and the public interest. Then we move on to the methodology and the clarification of the comparative and analytical framework and subsequently to the empirical analysis, guided by two research questions. The first question concerns *how media managers overall in the two countries define their responsibility to society* in the current situation of turmoil. Which values and concepts do they emphasize when explaining the public interest, and to what degree can we detect reaffirmation of traditional public interest values? The second question relates more specifically to how managers in *different types of media companies* with different legacies voice their responsibility to society. To what extent is there evidence that the value sets of traditional private media companies (press, commercial television and production companies) are shared with newer media companies, such as distributors and online journalism initiatives, or do the later arrivals stand for different values? As new entrants and platforms grow in importance and traditional media occupy a smaller role, this research question will uncover information about the sustainability of legacy media value sets in an altered business environment.

Private media and the public interest

A simple distinction between public and private media is that the former are owned by the state and the latter are owned by corporations, foundations or other non-state entities. In the media policy literature, it is common to distinguish sharply between public and private media, seeing the first as being for the citizens and the second for profit. In their study of corporate media and the public interest, Croteau and Hoynes (2006) distinguished between a market model and a public sphere model as two ideal types with "conflicting logics" (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006: 38-39). While the former model is dominant in liberal societies, state-owned institutions, such as public service broadcasting, have adhered to a public sphere model. In the media policy literature, there has been considerable pessimism about the ability of market-driven media to serve society at large. For example, Kenyon (2014: 386) argued that market-based media alone "cannot be expected to serve audiences well as citizens", because their "orientations have primarily been to advertisers and to audiences as consumers". The scepticism has increased with commercialization and increasing competition. In the 1980s and 1990s, when media markets were liberalized, concerns erupted over the growth of huge media corporations (Alger, 1998), the tabloidization of print journalism (Esser, 1999) and the commercialization and Americanization of television programming (McQuail & Siune, 1986). From the early 2000s, new challenges have included the rise of digital intermediaries (Braun & Gillespie, 2011), fragmentation (Papacharissi, 2002) and the impact of algorithms, the latter epitomized in concepts such as filter bubbles (Parisier, 2011), fake news (Marchi, 2012) and click-driven journalism (Tenenboim & Cohen, 2013).

Despite these concerns, it is important to note that, also in private media and particularly in the press and in commercial television, there is a strong legacy of civic responsibility. As Croteau and Hoynes (2006) pointed out after examining the historical legacy of market vs public sphere models:

> Profit seeking and public service are not either-or propositions. Instead, the civic responsibilities of media have historically been met within the framework of commercial business. This has always included incidents and trends that have put the pursuit of profits above the public interest; still there is a strong history of attempts to balance the two. (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006: 33)

A broad public purpose of private media was, at least until recently, "widely, if not universally, accepted" (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006: 32), involving notions such as diversity, innovation, substance and independence. The authors noted that serving the public interest is usually understood as "a vibrant media system that is open to various points of view and forms of expression" (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006: 69). Beyond general descriptions, however, the definition of the public interest has been contested and subject to diverse interpretations. Croteau and Hoynes were sceptical in defining the public interest as "a rigid and timeless set of guidelines which would not be likely to withstand changing cultural norms or the emergence of new technologies" (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006: 34), instead exploring how public interest expectations are expressed in sources such as legal documents, journalistic codes of ethics and media policy regulations. In many cases, the media are given specific constitutional and legal protection, underscoring their role as a watchdog and interpreter of public issues and events (Greck et al., 2017). In some societies, including the ones under discussion here, the media enjoy substantial privileges, and from these follow more or less explicit societal expectations. In the next section, we discuss how the media's obligations to society are understood in Norway and Flanders and how such expectations change due to disruption as the background for the analysis of the way in which media managers talk about service to society.

Norwegian and Flemish public interest expectations

With their small markets (6.5 million and 5 million inhabitants, respectively) and limited export potential as small language areas, Flanders and Norway belong to a category of European societies in which comprehensive policy measures have been considered necessary to sustain a national public sphere. Benson and Powers (2011) showed, for example, that both Belgium and Norway have high public spending on the media, not least compared with the US, and spending is accompanied by expectations. Moreover, both societies have been discussed as being democratic corporatist, as defined by Hallin and Mancini, based on characteristics such as a high degree of state intervention and support for strong professional journalism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). However, while the Nordic countries have been seen as prototypical, Belgium is not a clear-cut case and has been placed on the axis between democratic corporatist and polarized pluralist. Later studies in the same tradition have also placed the two societies at some distance from each other. Brüggeman and colleagues (2014) deemed the Nordic countries to be a distinct cluster, with Norway as its prototype, characterized by generous press subsidies and powerful public broadcasting, while Belgium and the Netherlands were placed closer to the Western (liberal) type, characterized by a lower level of public broadcasting support and press subsidies.

The differences elicited in comparative studies are reflected in case studies of media policy. The Nordic media and communication systems have been characterized as a "media welfare state" (Syvertsen et al., 2014), meaning that media policies have been used as instruments to sustain equality and universality. In exchange for substantial privileges, such as press subsidies, VAT exemption, broadcasting licence fee, support for cultural production and special legal protections, there have been cross-party expectations that the Norwegian media will deliver diversity in news and content and high-quality and trustworthy information and strengthen the Norwegian language, culture and identity (Maasø et al., 2007). In addition to being a description of media policy regimes, the concept of a media welfare state has been used to explain broader characteristics, such as journalists' value sets (Ahva et al., 2017), trust in news (Elvestad et al., 2018), practices of public media accountability and autonomy (Benson et al., 2017), journalism as a public good (Allern & Pollack, 2017) and characteristics of cultural journalism (Nørgaard Kristensen & Riegert, 2017). Hence, the civic responsibilities of the media have been seen as integral to their very existence.

Although continuity and consistency exist, the triple challenges of digitization, internationalization and changing business models are influencing the way in which the public expectations of media companies are defined in Norway. At the turn of the century, the authoritative Commission on Freedom of Expression saw commercialization as the biggest problem, arguing that: "A financial logic has entered that originally was less prominent" (Ytringsfrihetskommisjonen, 1999: section 4.3.2).[1] In 2017, commercialization was not raised as a problem; however, in a similar broad commission, the entire media system is seen to be under threat:

> Journalism and the independently edited news- and public affairs media in Norway are in the middle of a historically decisive phase. Momentous structural changes caused by the global competitive situation, technological development and media behaviour mean that there are currently no sustainable business models to finance significant parts of societally important Norwegian journalism. [...] It is the very infrastructure of the democratic public sphere that is under such pressure that there is reason to fear that journalism soon can no longer fulfil its indispensable role. (Mediemangfoldsutvalget, 2017: section 1.1)

In 2018, the state budget proposal reflected these concerns by strengthening the expectations that media companies will be innovative and develop competitive strategies (Kulturdepartementet, 2017). The "archetypical case" in comparative politics is the nation-state or the political subfields within such a state (Gerring, 2013); however, Belgium as a state has no competence to deal with media policies. The language communities are autonomous in domains such as culture, media and sports, and a common Belgian market does not exist; both at the level of ownership and the level of consumption, there is separation between the French-speaking and the Dutch-speaking market (Saeys & Antoine, 2007). Hence, to obtain comparable cases for this analysis, the region of Flanders is chosen rather than the state of Belgium. In Flanders, shifting governments have also supported measures to sustain quality journalism, investment in video games, television drama and documentary series, training in journalism and innovation in the creative industries, yet policy researchers have not characterized these as welfare state measures. Instead, the system has been characterized as a form of "controlled liberalization" (Van den Bulck & Donders, 2014): a liberal system kept in check by some degree of regulation. Studies have further described the media policy system that has evolved in recent years as a "media ecosystem" approach (Raats & Pauwels, 2013). A key characteristic of the ecosystem approach is that public and private media are seen as mutually interdependent. Public broadcasters are valued not only for their public remit but also as an instrument to sustain business models in the private sector through commissioning programmes and sharing content, facilities and platforms (Raats & Donders, 2017). Policy makers promote partnerships because they consider them to be the best way to sustain a strong

Flemish media sector and safeguard the production of domestic content (Caudron et al., 2014; Jennes & Pierson, 2013). The management contract negotiated by the public broadcaster VRT (Vlaamse Radio- en Televisieomroep) and the Government has increasingly referred to market development; nonetheless, this has not acted as a substitute for its public remit. Instead, the remit has emphasized even more strongly the obligation to produce independent, high-quality information, education and diversity in an age of disruption (VRT, 2016). Aside from the management contract, media policy makers in recent years have encouraged private media players to collaborate and agree on exploring new revenue models, especially in the light of the problem of ad skipping, which has increased significantly over the past years and placed distributors and broadcasters in direct opposition to each other (Econopolis, 2018; Raats & Wauters, 2018). Interestingly, public interest characteristics and market objectives go hand in hand in these efforts, as the emphasis on protecting Flemish players is aligned with sustaining original, high-quality and diverse Flemish productions.

As show by this brief review, there are many similarities between the conceptions of what it entails to serve society. In both cases, there is a combination of aims that concerns content and quality and economic objectives. Nevertheless, as noted, there is a stronger emphasis on societal values in the Norwegian policy documents, while the Flemish agenda is defined as protectionist and market driven to a larger degree.

Methodology: Qualitative interviews with private media managers

The study is based on 20 semi-structured, qualitative interviews with private media managers at the CEO and top management level.[2] A risk that is often mentioned in elite interviewing is that questions are answered primarily with "corporate talk", glossing over differences and problems. As Harvey (2011: 438) pointed out, "many political and business elites receive extensive media training about how to avoid answering questions"; hence, media managers are well versed in responding to questions strategically. In this case, the point of interviewing media managers is not to reveal important factual information or "backstage" versions of the company's strategies but to collect evidence of how media managers reflect openly, yet also strategically, on the media's role in society. Generally, little research has been conducted on how managers conceptualize public values, and most studies have taken place in larger countries (Altmeppen et al., 2017a).

As noted, media managers are important actors in terms of conceptualizing and discursively defining what it means to serve the public interest. Management power, to a large degree, is communicative and discursive (Greck et al., 2017), and investment in certain values and discourses plays a role when priorities are set and resources allocated. A vital responsibility of the management is to take care of the non-economic as well as the economic functions of media companies (Albarran & Moellinger, 2017), including securing legitimacy. Legitimacy is vital for the survival of any business, and loss of legitimacy may lead to problems in securing a continuous flow of resources and support from stakeholders, including policy makers. Like the public interest, legitimacy is a social construct, which is not determined once for all (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006) but dependent on discursive and relation-building investments.

In addition to comparing two societies, this study compares managers of media companies with different legacies. Care was taken to perform a systematic selection to obtain interviews with similar respondents in each case (Herzog & Ali, 2015) and to sample media companies that are relevant to the research questions. Five types of companies were included, reflecting different legacies. The first type is publishers, traditional media companies with a long history. The sample includes members of the top management of the two largest publishers in each context (*Schibsted* and *Amedia* in Norway; *Mediahuis* and *De Persgroep* in Flanders). Next are the commercial television companies that emerged in the wave of disruption in the 1980s and 1990s. Specifically, we have included the two dominant commercial television companies (*TV2* and *TvNorge* in Norway; *Medialaan* and *SBS* in Flanders). Along with commercial television, production companies have been flourishing. In both countries, the production companies interviewed included a subsidiary of *Warner* in addition to *Mastiff,* which is part of *Zodiak*, in Norway and *De Chinezen*, a mid-size Flemish producer.

Next, we interviewed four respondents from media distributors. Some of these also have a long legacy but a much shorter legacy as media companies and no strong editorial tradition. The distributors include the two telecommunication incumbents, *Telenor Broadcast* and *Proximus*, in addition to the competitors *Get* in Norway and *Telenet* in Flanders. The telecommunications incumbents are still majority state owned but with considerable private ownership. Finally, we included respondents from four online journalism initiatives, that is, newer, smaller companies. The online journalism initiatives selected vary in ownership and structure. In Norway, *Agenda Magazine* is attached to a think tank with ties to trade unions, while *Harvest* is an independent venture centred on nature and environmental reportage. In Flanders, *Apache.be* and *Newsmonkey* both grew out of a felt need in the media landscape, *Apache* for critical progressive news and *Newsmonkey* to appeal to younger audiences.

The interviewers followed the same interview protocol, with a shared English version, translated into Dutch and Norwegian. Although a few questions were adapted to the national context, the wording of the questions was similar in the two cases, holding our own hypotheses “at arm’s length” (Rathbun, 2008: 696). The interviews were conducted in the spring and autumn of 2016, transcribed and subjected to a thematic analysis.

Analysis: Media managers, disruption and the public interest

Managers in both markets described a range of strategies to handle the challenges of disruption, both economic and non-economic. In this article, the focus is on non-economic strategies, and the first research question pertains to whether we can see a reaffirmation of private media's responsibility to society in the current situation. Based on the analysis above, we expect managers in the Norwegian case to be more vocal about responsibilities to society beyond profit making, corresponding to a greater emphasis on such factors in the expectations towards the media.

The managers interviewed were quick to note that companies in all countries must deal with similar issues and that the way in which companies respond to challenges, both economic and non-economic, depend on the company set-up. As noted by two publishers:

> I think editors in Western Europe work the same way. But I think that the structure and the shareholding make up a big difference. (Flemish publisher)

> I do not think there are any major fundamental differences between Norway and countries outside Scandinavia. We solve things differently and prioritize a little differently, but in terms of how we think about press freedom and commercially we have many of the same beliefs. (Norwegian publisher)

However, when asked more specifically about societal responsibilities, managers in both societies highlighted context-specific elements. In both countries, respondents pointed out issues of smallness, an active media policy, support for domestic content and the influence from public service broadcasting as factors influencing strategy. The increasing vulnerability of business models implies that the funding of domestic content is jeopardized, and the respondents particularly emphasized the cost of news operations. One Flemish broadcaster stated, “we do not make profit on any local programming”, and one Norwegian broadcaster described how a quality news operation became impossible to sustain. Still, managers in both cases described the constant pressure to keep up investments to sustain domestic content and referred to the production of quality domestic content as a core societal responsibility.

Beyond issues of smallness and domestic content, the answers from legacy media managers varied. In this first section, we are first interested in the traditional types of legacy media, that is, publishers, commercial television and production companies, and the values that managers invoke when describing non-economic responsibilities.

In Norway, the media managers were ready and willing to talk at length about their non-economic strategies, using distinct civic responsibility terminology. For example, the manager interviewed from Norway's largest publishing house included an obligation to “educate” when asked about obligations to society:

> We have an important role in educating people, because we are so dominant, and offer people news from where they belong. We try to take social responsibility and to fill the role as best we can. It is something we think about and spend lots of time on.

The second-largest publisher similarly described the public sphere element as being of high priority; serving the public interest, he said, is “embedded in everything we do”, formally and informally. When talking about how media should serve society, he invoked the historical role of newspapers:

> Newspapers were established to act as a positive force in society. We see it in the ongoing editorial work where important societal issues are raised, illuminated, and often resolved. In addition, we have taken responsibility for language and culture.

The tendency to speak about the public interest as something that extends beyond the brand also applies to commercial television in Norway; for example, the CEO of one company expressed dedication to spending money on programmes that “have a socially useful function beyond to entertain”. Managers of both commercial television companies in Norway also tended to include softer formats, such as consumer programmes and docudramas, when they explicated service to society, arguing that these were essential for challenging stereotypes or power structures.

For Flemish private media management, talking about service to society meant talking about the brand value of their products. The respondents distanced themselves from broader societal values; instead, they saw service to society as something that is intrinsic to the media product. One broadcaster responded: “We only make programmes in the interest of our customers and if it’s creative, not only because it has a higher societal aim”. A manager from a different broadcaster echoed: “This is the result of a choice to monitor your brand and to send an authentic message to your viewer”. In the publishing sector, with an even stronger legacy as media companies, managers spoke about responsibility to society in similar terms. One Flemish publisher answered, “The brand is more important than the social responsibility”, while another echoed that the desire to serve the public interest depends on the brand. In addition, this publisher alluded to a situation in which talking about the public interest was a defensive measure: “More in response to something. If there is debate.”

The respondents from production companies similarly diverged in the two countries. For the Flemish *De Chinezen*, a production company that mostly produces content for the public broadcaster VRT, social responsibility is “in our genes” and means adhering to professional ethics: “You always should respect your fellow human being […], we always set out from the idea that every human being has a story”. In contrast, the respondents from the Norwegian companies emphasized a responsibility for raising standards, for example in this statement from the CEO of *Mastiff*:

> I feel we have a responsibility for making people more aware of their choices: why we consume television. We try to make people smarter. There is a huge responsibility that I believe we take seriously through a variety of programmes.

For the two production companies, the implication is that Norwegian media are comparatively more "serious" than those in comparable countries. The production sector has become highly internationalized, and domestic companies have to a large degree become part of international conglomerates. Still, the manager from *Mastiff* argued that there is higher consciousness about the public interest in the Norwegian division than in the rest of the company: "I feel that we are looked upon as strange and different – very respectable and not very commercial". A similar point was made by the executive of Warner Bros in Norway, who explained that partners in the US and the UK regard the Norwegian division as more "serious": "In Norway, we have a management which is a bit different, and which has a bit of the old-fashioned NRK-culture in a way".

The characteristics most often mentioned by Norwegian respondents when asked to explain the distinct media culture are typical Nordic model features: "good, stable democracies, with a long tradition of press freedom and freedom of speech" (*TvNorge*), an inclusive welfare state, "which implies that many can participate in what society has to offer" (*Amedia*), and strong labour relations, a less hierarchical corporate culture and decent working conditions (*Mastiff*). In contrast, questions related to what makes the Flemish market distinct in a globalized media environment invoked answers pointing to the market dynamics and quality of the products rather than the underlying cultural and political characteristics. Flemish players pointed to what they considered to be the high value of domestic content (both in written press and on television) "given the restricted financial capacity". The high volume of production, the intense competition in the market and the role of the public broadcaster VRT and *Medialaan* as pioneers and standard setters explained why they see Flemish content as being of comparatively higher quality. One Flemish broadcaster stated that "we are a very high-quality market, we have an incredible quality for such a small region", while the respondent from the other Flemish broadcaster pointed to the high investments in content and argued: "Honestly I think we live a bit above our standards in Flanders".

The differences between Norway and Flanders in this case reflect the differences between a media welfare state and the media ecosystem vocabulary, manifested in a contrast between a public value and a brand value conceptualization of the public interest. A public value vocabulary implies that the value of journalism and the content are discussed in terms that extend beyond products, assuming responsibility for what serves society at large (Allern & Pollack, 2017; Trappel, 2017). A brand value approach is more tied to the distinctiveness of media products and serving quality to domestic audiences. However, as Siegert and Hangartner argued (2017: 214), media branding is not only "a clever differentiation strategy" but also, implicitly or explicitly, reflects "a well-grounded value set". They cited research stating that brand values matter; for example, having a quality news brand value set "increases the chance to produce hard news as well as critical distance" (Siegert & Hangartner, 2017: 218). Nevertheless, there is a contrast to the way in which Norwegian managers reaffirmed their service to society, which is more akin to a public sphere logic (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006): private managers in this context retained an emphasis on diversity and raising standards in the face of massive transformations.

Do newer media companies share the same values?

The second research question relates more specifically to how managers with different legacies voice their responsibility to society. To what degree is there evidence that the value sets of traditional private media companies are shared with newer media companies, such as distributors and online journalism initiatives? As new entrants and platforms grow in importance, the aim is to gain an insight into the sustainability of legacy media value sets in an altered business environment.

While the answers from legacy media managers differed between Norway and Flanders, newer media companies spoke in more similar terms across borders. For distributors and online journalism initiatives, the new media environment constitutes even greater opportunities, and they generally perceive their tasks as exploiting new market opportunities to serve the audiences better. The distributors all defined social responsibility in terms of securing quality infrastructure that in turn produces value creation for individuals and society. As expressed by managers from *Get* and *Telenet*, respectively:

> We are among the companies that have invested the most in infrastructure in Norway, which have given Norway one of the best high-speed broadband networks in the world. This is an important social responsibility, which leads to value creation.

> We have been delivering quality for broadband infrastructure for many years, especially in Flanders and Belgium. The speed of our infrastructure is among the highest in Europe. We create added value for society. The whole economy today is based on a very good telecom infrastructure, and we really took care of it.

When asked about societal responsibilities that extend beyond infrastructure, some differences emerged between the companies. A respondent from the Norwegian *Telenor Broadcast*, Norway's telecom incumbent, explicitly distanced himself, saying that "We shall not glorify ourselves too much for we are a commercial actor". *Get*, on the other hand, pointed explicitly to a commitment to non-economic values in content as well:

> We feel a responsibility to provide a wide range of content in various categories. Within news, in debate, in culture, in documentary, from different

> countries and continents, so the customer can choose it. It is a responsibility that goes beyond maximizing profit.

Here the distributor reflected similar values to legacy media in Norway. Similarly, one Flemish distributor indicated that the brand value and ecosystem conception is more prevalent in Flanders:

> The Flemish media market and media users are far ahead compared to many other countries. There is no other country where distribution, broadcasting and production cooperate as closely as in Flanders.

The respondents from online journalism also showed a mix of legacy media and other conceptualizations of the public interest. This is not surprising, since we selected these respondents to represent a variety of new media managers. On the one hand, some managers from online journalism initiatives showed a strong commitment to societal values in the sense that they wanted to expand the existing sphere and exceed what is served by legacy media. As a rule, they were critical of the way in which legacy media serve society. All four initiatives have staff members who have worked previously with traditional newspapers and see their role as countering with other types of content, exploiting the opportunities in the digital media landscape.

In Norway, the journalism initiatives *Agenda Magasin* and *Harvest* both see their role as expanding the public sphere. *Agenda Magasin* described its public responsibilities as "placing political issues on the agenda and forcing politicians to think along bigger lines", whereas the manager of *Harvest* said that they are "trying to make more people interested in the big questions of our time, which are not necessarily popular on Facebook", aiming to "raise awareness", especially of environmental issues. These two latter initiatives both distanced themselves from the way in which legacy media serve their audiences. For example, the respondent from Harvest was alone among the Norwegian respondents in downplaying the differences between Norwegian and international media, stating "The speeches are the same, whether you go to SKUP [Norwegian journalism conference] or a similar conference in Boston". The editor of *Agenda Magasin* reported that Norwegian and Swedish media are more serious than newspapers in the south of the continent; however, they are rapidly becoming less critical and trivial: "the media in Scandinavia are betraying their societal mission".

In Flanders, Apache grew out of a need for progressive news and *Newsmonkey* for a broad appeal to younger audiences. Of all our respondents, the Belgian *Newsmonkey* is the outlet that takes a clear market view of what the public interest means. It views itself as being better equipped to see what audiences really want, because it obtains more data on audience behaviour:

> *Newsmonkey* grew out of a frustration of legacy media not being able to connect with their audiences anymore. Consumer behaviour has changed so

drastically that the ways in which audiences, and especially young people, consume news have also changed drastically.

To *Newsmonkey*, the advantage of the new media environment is that "everything has become measurable". When asked whether the popular approach and top 10-lists were a method to encourage young audiences to read other articles, the manager disagreed: "We do not 'need' to provide this to lure audiences; it's just what these new audiences want". Hence, *Newsmonkey* did not talk about quality and brand value but a more straightforward market conception of giving people what they want.

This part gives a mixed answer to the question of whether the traditional values of legacy media are being sustained. On the one hand, new media companies want to serve the public interest better than legacy media while invoking the same key values. However, we also see a more straightforward market approach whereby neither brand value nor public sphere value is important, only giving the audiences "what they want".

Conclusion

Disruption poses problems as well as presenting opportunities for private media companies. Digitization, internationalization and changing business models alter the financial context for the established media, while new entrants challenge civic responsibilities and ideas of what it means to serve the public interest. However, as argued in this study, change is never one-directional. The presumption in much political and public debate is that new platform-based media threaten traditional media and that all media are moving towards the market-based model. However, there are differences between companies as well as between cultures and societies, and mitigating factors such as media policies remain important in explaining change in other directions (Hallin & Mancini, 2017).

In the theoretical part of the study, we referred to the commonly described opposition between a market and a public sphere logic (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006). This study has demonstrated that both logics are present when managers talk about service to society. In conclusion, we argue that the study reveals three ideal types of talk about societal responsibility in a turbulent era. First, there is a tendency among Norwegian legacy media managers, and some new entrants, to talk in public sphere terms and reaffirm civic responsibilities. Second, there are managers who talk in terms of a straightforward market logic, such as those from the Belgian *Newsmonkey*, who criticize legacy media for not being sufficiently responsive to the market demands. Between them, there is a third type, which we have described as a brand value conception of the public interest. This type of talk is dominant among the established media in Flanders. Here, civic responsibility extends far beyond what is produced by the market, yet this is not a conception of the public interest that invokes broader societal values.

Hence, the question of what happens to public interest values in the light of disruption is a complicated issue, illuminating the need to move beyond simple typologies. Private media can produce public value yet remain profit oriented, while public media can generate economic value. Within the private media universe, a public sphere logic and a brand value logic point to opposite standards of justification, yet they are also intertwined. Both in Flanders and in Norway, there is an emphasis in the private media sector on quality journalism, costly investments in news operations and cross-funding to secure domestic content. Along with Siegert and Hangartner (2017), cited above, we can argue that brand values matter and that aims and goals that reach beyond profit making may well be core elements of a brand.

This study has placed the two cases in media-political settings and investigated the political expectations in the two countries. A key topic in comparative analyses is whether the differences are systematic and, in this case, how they correspond to and deepen the description of Nordic "media welfare states" and Flemish "media ecosystem" policies, respectively. We have shown that privileges and subsidies for private media are still important in both countries but also that the way in which public expectations are talked about vary both in policies and among managers. Although our study is not explicitly about change, our concluding hypothesis is that political privileges and obligations will continue to act as a mitigating factor. Disruption will continue to sharpen the expectations of media companies and influence the way in which they reaffirm their responsibilities: newspapers will clearly emphasize their distinct editorial role in times of fake news; broadcasters will emphasize cultural identity and diversity to counter global influence; and domestic production companies will emphasize local creativity and grassroots programming as an alternative to what the new platforms provide.

Notes

1. All translations from Norwegian and Flemish are made by the authors.
2. The interviews in Norway were conducted by Gunn Enli and Linda Therese Rosenberg. We are grateful to Rosenberg for transcribing the interviews and collecting material. The interviews in Flanders were conducted by Karen Donders and Tim Raats. The authors thank the interviewees for their collaboration.

   Norwegian managers: Didrik Munch (CEO, Schibsted Norway ASA), Are Stokstad (CEO, Amedia), Olav T. Sandnes (CEO, TV2), Harald Strømme (CEO, SBS Discovery Networks Norway), Kathrine Haldorsen (CEO, Mastiff), Odd Arvid Strømstad (CEO, Warner Brothers International Television Production Norway), Joachim Benno and Scott Engebrigtsen (resp. Director of Communications and Corporate Responsibility and Director of Governmental and Regulatory Affairs, Telenor Broadcast), Øyvind Husby (Director of Corporate Affairs, Get), Kjetil Østli (Editor in Chief, Harvest) and Stian Bromark (Editor in Chief Agenda Magasin).

   Flemish managers: Gert Ysebaert (CEO Mediahuis), Christophe Convent (Secretary General De Persgroep), Peter Bossaert and Ben Appel (resp. CEO and Director Business & Legal Affairs Medialaan), Philippe Bonamie (COO SBS), Harald Hauben (CEO De Chinezen), Peter Bouckaert (CEO Eyeworks), Thomas Roukens (Director Regulatory Affairs and Interconnect Telenet), Dirk Lybaert (Chief Corporate Affairs Proximus), Karl Van den Broeck (Editor in Chief Apache) and Wouter Verschelden (CEO Newsmonkeys).

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