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Quality Taste or Tasting Quality?

Excellence in Public Service Media from an Audience Perspective

Irene Costera Meijer

This chapter reports on a study in the Netherlands that compares television quality from an audience point of view with professional perspectives on quality television. While holding on to the concept of ‘quality’ as a normative standard for public service media, the study questions the discrepancy between a common definition of quality television as a particular reputation, a range of genres or a distinguishing sign of ‘good taste’ on the one hand, and on the other the decline in shares and ratings for quality programming, even among the traditional ‘quality audience’ (comprised of the political and cultural elite). The chapter’s objective is to explain this gap.¹ These findings are pertinent to growing concerns about *what constitutes quality* in public service media [PSM]. The first part of the chapter is devoted to analysis of the ‘crisis of quality programming in public service media. The second part seeks answers by approaching the issues discussed from the perspective of audiences.

The quality question in PSM

In professional media circles, the question of quality is commonly framed in conservative terms: quality television is something to be conserved. BBC star reporter and anchor, Jeremy Paxman (2007), compared it with an endangered species: “There is a fight going on for the survival of quality television right across this industry”. He suggested that putting the taste and preferences of audiences in the driver’s seat would be the doom of quality programming. Likewise Michael Kustow, the first Arts Commissioning Editor for Channel 4, pleaded: “A television channel, and its arts and cultural programmes exist to lead tastes and elevate appetites, not simply to reflect the reduced ones of a society of shoppers” (*Independent*, 5 September 2007). Both of these experts consider the increasing pressure to reach large audiences as the major threat to quality television. Even audience research itself has come under suspicion as a culpable agent of decline, as Paxman’s motto illustrates: “Let’s spend less time measuring audiences and more time enlightening them” (*Guardian*, August 24 2007).

In academic circles, the ‘quality question’ is also considered of central importance for public service broadcasting [PSB]. Most scholars have long agreed that quality is its defining feature (Born 2004; Brants and De Bens 2000; Wieten, Murdock and Dahlgren 2000; Corner 1999; Ishikawa 1996; McQuail 1994; Mulgan 1990). Some suggest that quality functions as the “brand name” for public television (Dries and Woltd 1996: 22), although others have pointed out that there is no good reason to reserve the epitome of quality to particular genres or elite tastes (Syvertsen 2004 & 2003; Gripsrud 2001; Schröder 1992; Mulgan 1990). I earlier pleaded for an increasingly encompassing and layered notion of quality within professional media discourse: Quality television by PSM should not only aim to address the audience as citizens but should be inspired to convey experiences of intense enjoyment and deep pleasure as well (Costera Meijer 2001, 2003, 2007 & 2008).

The occasion for the research project that grounds this chapter was a request from VPRO, the Dutch quality broadcaster, to account for why it has been losing viewers (Versluijs 2006a; Versluijs 2006b). Even ‘elites’ seem to be watching less quality TV. As a Dutch television maker in our study worries: “I felt the upper crust had a right to watch television as well, so I never saw it as a serious problem that we catered to the elite instead of a mass audience. I do see it as a problem that today we no longer even manage to reach those viewers”.

The Netherlands are not an exceptional case. Traditional quality genres, in particular PSM news, political current affairs programmes, and high drama, seem less popular with audiences in other countries as well, giving the impression of more people preferring light-hearted talk to profound information and easily digestible entertainment to uplifting education (Norris et al 2003; Holtz-Bach and Norris 2001; Tracey 1998). Especially among people under age 40, there has been a notable turning towards more ‘trivial’ genres including reality TV, sitcoms, soap operas and interactive contests formats such as *Idols* or *Farmer Seeks Wife*. Does declining attendance for quality programming indicate a degeneration in public taste, as several Dutch programme makers suggest, or a change in public taste as others claim? Or is this concern, as various Dutch broadcasting managers have argued, mostly related to the increased number of TV programmes and stations competing for viewers that makes it harder to find the gems?

This chapter provides some answers by focusing on the audiences’ relationship to quality programming in public service media. If excellence in storytelling, information, analysis, education and entertainment is still a distinguishing component of the PSM remit, and that PSM is simultaneously aiming to reach large audiences with quality programming, then it is imperative to understand ‘quality’ from an audience perspective. What kind of quality do they expect from PSM, in which terms do they describe quality, how do they experience quality in television, and what counts as a quality experience? Are media professionals right in their expectancy that putting the audiences’ desires and expectations centre stage will lead automatically to a lowering of quality?

The Quest for Quality project

From November 2005 to March 2007 a group of Dutch students and researchers embarked on a Quest for Quality project. The essential question was whether there is still an audience for quality television, and how such an audience understands quality today. The study approached this concern from three angles: reception, production and content (cf. triangulation in Denzin 1978). We used qualitative and quantitative methods to find answers (see Table 1). The first step was to operationalise the fuzzy concept of 'quality audience' as a relevant profile for PSM. The American concept was of little use because it is so closely linked with a niche market for quality products and hence with mainly commercial interests (Thompson 1996). But traditional understandings in European PSB were also problematic given elitist connotations associated with the conventional definition of quality audience. This study constructed a more encompassing quality audience [QA] profile consisting of 'public intellectuals', 'connoisseurs' of TV or specific genres of television programming, well-educated migrants, socially committed young people, and creative professionals.² This construction recognises audiences' potential leadership role in society.

How could PSM be of particular service to these (future) experts, managers and leaders? The objective was to investigate its dreams, wishes, preferences, criticisms and experiences of current quality programming. We were also interested to identify variance between quality broadcasters' and quality audiences' views of quality programming. Does the quality concept still hold meaning for professionals and viewers? Do audiences agree or disagree with the kinds of content professionals consider to be quality?

Answers were produced in three co-related studies conducted under the author's supervision by 19 student researchers from different Dutch universities, and by 3 junior researchers and 2 senior researchers at the University of Amsterdam. This chapter focuses on the audience study, but also makes use of results in the other studies (production, content) for explanatory context.

The host and main financier of the research project was the Dutch public service quality broadcaster, VPRO, one of the relatively independent public service media associations collaborating closely under the flag of the Netherlands public broadcasting organisation [NPO]. Each organisation represents a different religious, socio-economic or cultural segment of Dutch society. The VRPR was founded by liberal Protestants and has always catered to a political and cultural elite in providing their audience with programs on art, history and contemporary culture (satire, post modern reality television etc.), as well as (self-produced) documentary series.

Table 1. Overview of Quest for Quality research project**Reception**

Large-scale audience survey among 3000 viewers

In-depth interviews with 251 informants age 15+ (from 'quality audience')

Production

In-depth interviews with 59 producers of quality programmes

An extensive survey of the professional views of quality. 211 of all 322 VPRO employees (average 66%, including 83% of the television makers) filled out an elaborate digital survey on programme quality.

Content

A qualitative content analysis of 50 Radio, TV & Internet 'texts' which professionals indicated as of high quality and more than 50 programmes from other national and from foreign broadcasters (SWE, BBC, Arte, Canvas, ARD) that the audience indicated as such.

The categorisation of interviewees is summarised in Table 2. Transcriptions of the interviews were analysed based on an interpretive repertoire analysis (see Wetherell and Potter 1987; Wetherell et al 2001). In each partial study we maximised variation in sex, origin, ethnicity, and age.

Table 2. In-depth interviews with the quality audience

In-depth interviews with people who fit the 'quality audience profile':	Informants
Active supporters of the quality broadcaster (VPRO)	36
Well-educated migrants age 20-35	24
Socially committed young adults age 15-25	45
Creative professionals	8
Opinion leaders	9
Lovers and 'connoisseurs' of 'new media'	9
Lovers & 'connoisseurs' of documentaries & films	30
Lovers & 'connoisseurs' of television	65
Lovers & 'connoisseurs' of radio	25
Total	251

What is quality broadcasting? Discovery in value clustering

Our first aim was to develop understanding of how the quality audience and quality professionals, respectively, characterise quality broadcasting and to compare their understandings for variance. Almost half of the 59 quality makers we interviewed manifest a condescending attitude towards the public. In light of declining ratings for quality programmes this led us to expect big differences in the views of professionals and audiences regarding quality television. We were wrong.

The answers proved close to univocal. Surprisingly, then, the quality audience and the quality professionals described quality broadcasting with very similar terms: Innovative, liberal-minded, creative, distinct, critical, global and progressive. Consider two representative quotes from audience informants:

Jacobien (age 25, assistant programmer): Slightly progressive eh, leftist, creative, slightly intellectualist, I feel, innovative, and, eh, yes, well also a quality name.

Albert (age 62, retired): The values of VPRO are innovation, idiosyncratic and being different from the others.

As it turned out, the professional values of employees of VPRO (see Appendix 1) were similar to the values held by their (intended) audiences.

Moreover, the concept of quality as a 'binding' element was recognised by the audience as the very image of the VPRO – as its reputation and trademark.

Daan (age 42, project manager): When thinking of the VPRO it is not really about its programmes, but rather more about VPRO as a brand, one that I associate with being contrary, unique, progressive, curious, creative, well, uh, and in fact alternative.

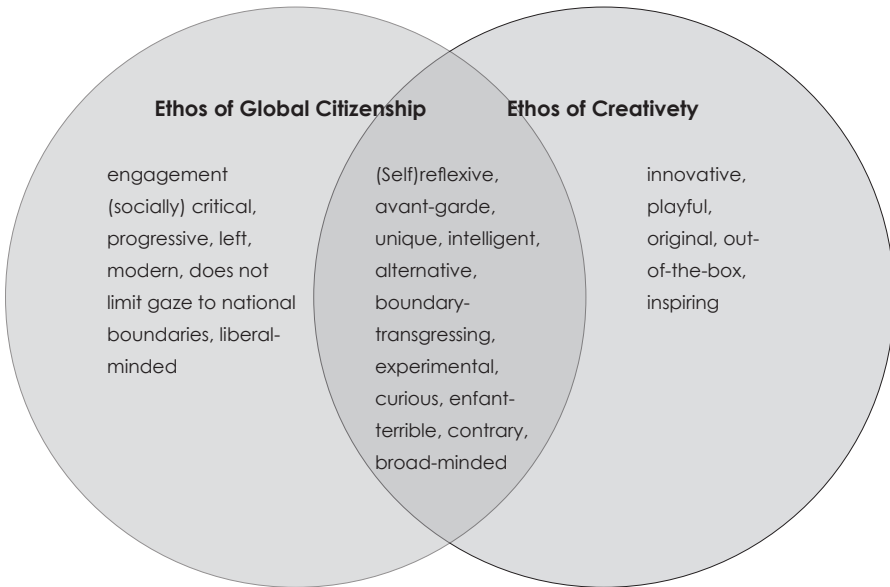
The fundamental character of these features was underlined because they coincided with the values that the informants (both quality makers and quality audience) aspired to in work and personal life. When describing quality broadcasting they frequently drew a connection with who they were or would like to be.

Julia (age 24, student): I have a warm feeling as regards the VPRO. Differently from any other broadcaster, the VPRO has a clear identity of being socially involved, critical, open-minded, opening up new horizons, while all this is also infused with a good sense of humour. ... *This is also how I live my life. At least so I hope* [emphasis added].

For both producers and audience, the notion of quality represented certain values they felt 'at home with' and were closely related to informants' (aspired) personal 'lifestyle' and professional objectives. These values formed a specific pattern that informants did not attach so much to single programme, site or article, but rather to what can best be described as an *ethos* in Aristotelian terms. Our quality makers and quality audience agreed that a shared range of values offered a sense of direction and a general orientation and attitude in life, professionally as well as personally. Values associated with quality programming are solidly anchored in views that both professionals and viewers consider meaningful and worthy of pursuit, which makes them important as general guiding dimensions (Oppenhuisen 2000; Franzen and Bouwman

1999; Hofstede 1991). The interrelated values could be subsumed under two denominators: an ethos of global citizenship and an ethos of creativity (Figure 1) with a third common subset belonging to both.³

Figure 1. Value clusters resulting from the question 'what is quality broadcasting'?



Note: N= 521 (251 informants fitting the quality audience profile + 59 self-professed makers of 'quality TV' + 211 employees quality broadcaster)

Global citizenship, our informants suggested, represented social involvement and a grooved perspective characterised as an international orientation (cf. Küng 1991). This global orientation is particularly relevant for PSM, which almost as a rule takes a national perspective as the point of departure. Our informants instead expressed a *global* orientation as an integral part of personal identity. This consciously *chosen* identity emphasises affinity with humankind more generally than national or regional identities. This is in line with Dower (2000: 3) who wrote “namely that we have rights and duties qua humans to one another which are not the same as the rights and duties of citizens of a particular political community”.

For most second or third generation migrants, global citizenship was especially self-evident. They felt at home in more than one country and often used more than two or three different (inter) national media.

Meriam (32 jaar, Ph.D. student): ‘Black women, women with head scarfs, white men (...) My intimate circle of friends looks like that. When I go out, it is like that..’

Global citizenship could, however, also relate to a much less socially inspired, cosmopolitan *lifestyle*, as especially embraced by the younger segment of globe-trotters and by internationally orientated business people. The audience for quality programming would like PSM to cater to an ethos of global citizenship, referring to the moral attitude of being a global citizen and to the knowledge and expertise that enables one to practice this attitude.

The QA similarly emphasised the importance of an ethos of creativity, underscoring the importance of having a creative attitude with the knowledge and ability to live and think playfully – to be ‘out-of-the-box’ (cf. “play ethic” in Kane 2004). This quality profile mirrors research results from Rolf Jensen (1999) and Richard Florida (2002).

Individuals with higher education degrees, often working in the creative sector show much involvement in social problems, developments, and issues of meaning at work and in the private sphere.

Rudy (25 jaar, student): ‘Creativity is for me the *schwung* that everybody gives to his or her living) environment.’

Florida (2002) defines creativity as the fundamental spirit or character of contemporary Western culture. The ability to create meaningful new forms and to constantly renew and improve is essential in today’s economy.

Thus, we found that in the Netherlands the quality audience, the quality broadcaster and quality makers share a general global and creative ethos, and agreeing at some fundamental level on central values in life and work. It then becomes all the more incomprehensible as to why the quality audience is turning away from quality programmes. What explains the gap between collectively held (media) values and actual media behaviours? If quality still counts for PSM, then what characteristics of quality programming need development for PSM to attract large audiences for this instead of a small niche? We devoted considerable research to unravelling this riddle.

The gap between media values and media use

According to our research, six aspects go some distance in explaining the gap between media values and media behaviours. The rest of the chapter summarises these findings.

1. *The role of genre*

The first aspect explaining the gap between values and behaviours is linked to the notion of genre. When asked their opinions on quality media, users and makers alike associated quality closely with certain ‘exclusive’ genres that don’t generally attract a large audience.⁴ An earlier study by Wober (cited in Leggatt 1996a: 75-80) is instructive. He asked 3000 viewers which programmes

had quality and the response was unambiguous: informative programmes received the highest score, followed by drama and, at the bottom, light entertainment. Yet, when Wober asked respondents to describe ‘quality television’, 27% replied that it should be ‘entertaining’ and ‘enjoyable’. References to ‘informative’ and ‘educational’ came in a distant second with 12%. Similarly, in our study asking viewers’ opinions on quality elicited answers indicating a set of criteria associated with ‘serious genres’. Only when our respondents were invited to describe their *experience* of quality instead of opinion about that did the *impact* of quality media enter the picture. Emphasising the experience of quality – the feelings, emotions and taste it arouses – turned out to have far more explanatory potential as to their viewing behaviour than canvassing people’s opinions about it, and pointed to a different kind of programming described next.

2. *The empowerment of the viewer*

For a long time, listeners and viewers of media have been collectively called ‘the’ audience or ‘target group’. Both concepts assume a transmission model of communication, sendings from an active source to a passive target, as well as a great deal of internal coherence. Yet, people no longer play by the rules of the sender-receiver model. They refuse to wait patiently for what a channel or programme offers and start surfing as soon as the programme fails to hold their attention. They no longer have any inherent reverence for either the programme or its creators. Their changing relations with media have a technological foundation that has revolutionised the old one-way flow between broadcaster and audience. The introduction of a plethora of personal control technologies have increasingly enabled the “empowerment of the individual” (Boswijk et al 2005: 45; Rutten, Leurdijk and Frissen 2005: 7; De Jong 2005: 124; Uricchio 2004). This representative quote illustrates how some media users creatively circumvent the station-directed vertical logic.

Gijs (age 52, commercial manager): I just downloaded a series from the internet, 24. And I downloaded all episodes and also watched them all. But not on TV; I just waited until the whole series was broadcasted in America, after which I downloaded them all so that I can watch them whenever I want to. And not just one fifty-minute episode, but for two hours if I feel like it, and, yes, then I watch three episodes in a row, without any commercials.

For broadcasters the effect of the media user’s emancipation is that the classic top-down pattern they deployed to reach audiences no longer applies. A new horizontal, user-directed, and communication-oriented logic is needed (Uricchio 2004). Offering important and relevant content is no longer a sufficient precondition for watching, as our informants emphasised. Getting pleasure out of looking is just as important. The audience wants to be *enticed*.

Gerard (age 54, actor/director): Being seduced again by that old VPRO élan and being able to rave about its programming is something I quite miss.

Julia (age 24, student): Its programmes hardly stir up my imagination anymore. I do *not* watch them, or with little pleasure and I hate that. ... That warm feeling, it is still there. But where am I left with my warm feeling if it is increasingly frustrated by what I see?

This 'quality audience' is communicating in terms that reflect Tim O'Reilly's (2005) 'television 2.0' language. Instead of obediently waiting to be served, today's audience is actively searching for quality programming and finding it in (sometimes) unexpected places – i.e. in commercial broadcasting and 'light entertainment'. They further assume that ideally television programmes go along with their needs and everyday rituals, rather than vice versa. For example, a well-educated multimedia literate TV-watcher was annoyed by the unavailability of a worldwide 'TIVO system' that would open television programmes for everybody, everywhere, and anytime.

Arjan (30, journalist): I find it extremely annoying that some crowd in Hilversum [the media capital of the Netherlands] decides for me that a series which is broadcasted now in the US will be available in the Netherlands in two years. I'm prepared to pay extra for it. But that seems impossible most of the time. Well sorry, but in that case I'll arrange something myself!

To the broadcaster such statements might at first be taken to reflect an attitude of I want it 'all for nothing' mentality. But media-users actually did seem willing to pay for extra services (e.g. no commercials, viewing-on-demand, etc.). Of course at the moment the PSM organisation of broadcasting, and the business models in use, prevent charging extra for services in most cases.

3. Producing quality: Inspiration, not elevation; reciprocity, not paternalism

The joint force of technological change and postmodern culture is fundamentally reshaping relations between and among media organisations, programme makers and their many publics (Deuze 2007; Drok 2007; Deuze 2005; Harrison and Wessels 2005; Gillmor 2004; Spigel and Olsson 2004). In response to technological developments, our informants have become much more self-aware. Affordable and easy-to-use video and audio technology, together with higher disposable income, allow them to be more than consumers; they are increasingly producers of text, sound and image – an identity some are calling 'producers', a term that combines producer and user (Bowman and Willis 2003). Our informants want media to *inspire* them to achieve *their own* personal and professional goals.

Sylvia (age 27, consultant): I would like to cut a piece from one programme and glue it to a piece from another and make my own thing from it.

Although they expect this creative ethos from all media, a quality broadcaster must excel here. Although quality audiences want to deploy and explore their creativity and global citizenship *together with* media makers⁵, they felt the quality broadcaster continue to approach them as ‘the Other’, as a ‘target group’, or as a mass audience. VPRO was accused of not being able to handle creative initiatives from its audience. Members of a virtual community who explicitly used the quality broadcasters’ name, calling themselves Happy VPRO, complained about the lack of interest among programme makers in their audiovisual productions. Although they met and uploaded their audiovisual productions and ideas at a website connected to the quality broadcaster [<http://www.happyvpro.nl/>], they felt ignored.

Hester (age 40, shoe designer): At first the intention was to sell [our work] to the VPRO, but after some time it became clear that the VPRO was not really waiting for it, that the VPRO viewed Happy in fact as a little odd, not quite knowing what to do with it.

The producers expected the broadcaster to be interested in them, but the professional TV makers did not seem to take this initiative seriously and never showed any interest in this particular audience.

Hester continues: ‘While we all had something like: aren’t they simply looking to the people that are in it? (...) [HappyVPRO] is of course like a pond brimming with talents, where you can fish for talented individuals.’

Thus, our informants expected a quality broadcaster to constitute a creative *community* together with its ‘audience’, to provide a forum, context and meeting place (cf. Van den Boomen 2003). Quality based on global citizenship and creativity as guiding principles was something they fashioned themselves, not something to which they merely wanted to be ‘exposed’ as the product of someone else’s imagination. Instead of reproducing the conventional professional criteria of TV success, such as peer review by media professionals, attention from politicians and positive reviews in newspapers, this audience insists on the delightfulness, *usability* and communicative character of programmes.

Sylvia (age 27, consultant): ‘One should make sure that things circulate. It is not so much that things end up in the newspapers, because we do not want things to be merely talked about. Instead, we want people to do something personal with what is offered to them, to literally be creative and do something with the material. Or that it becomes a topic of conversation or a means to bring people together. There is so much one can do with a program one has

made, and this potential should be mined. In this respect, I would rather say: make sure programming represents more value to society.

As people with a creative and a global ethos, our informants are looking for special stories – the kinds that touch them emotionally and broaden their horizons, that change the logic of cause and effect, and that reformulate social problems or break with familiar thought patterns and barriers in humorous and playful ways. Generally speaking (there were exceptions) the quality broadcaster still thought that thorough and reliable information was enough to capture this group's attention. Yet, these people want to be surprised, to be exposed to unknown worlds and realities, and to be nurtured with new ideas and perspectives (Florida 2002; Jensen 1999).

If PSM wantz to stay in touch with their users, the traditional remit of elevating the public should be replaced with the goal of inspiring people and profiting from their knowledge and abilities. After all, quality plays an intrinsic role in their lives and is not only found 'out there' among broadcasters.

4. The compassionate turn in taste

Individuals who have a higher education and work in the creative sector tend to show more involvement with social problems, developments, and issues of meaning at work and in the private sphere (Florida 2002; Jensen 1999). Unlike in much of the previous century, however, such interests do not inherently mean that people are attracted to one specific political ideology (Franke and Verhagen 2005; Piët ,2003). The compassionate turn in taste ties in with the cultural aim of public broadcasters to contribute to social cohesion by creating a 'we-feeling' – not by excluding others, but by bridging gaps between them (Lowe and Jauert 2005). Yet, many informants were bothered by the elitist or judgmental attitude on all 'that is middleclass or commercial', which in their view typified many quality programmes. They disliked the 'snobbish' use of quality because – in the apt words of Judith Shklar (1984) – it made inequality hurt. Informants commented for instance on the highbrow attitude towards a particular talk show (aired by a commercial broadcaster) that often used self-made business men as experts on economic topics.

Marten (age 34, project manager): You notice it in the leftist self-congratulatory attitude of some people that they simply do not want to have anything to do with the Hans van Breukhovens of this world . While these same people also see themselves simply as people who work hard and enjoy what they achieve through their hard work. I often notice there is no empathy for that.

The customary 'critical' tone of voice in quality programmes too often suggested sour, superseded, prejudiced and a too easy professional stance, unjustifiably disguised as 'critical thinking' and a 'progressive' worldview (De Wolff 2005).

Erik (age 26, student): At times I feel the VPRO is a little, well, as if it is a kind of, as if everything is wooden there. Well, how to put it, it is as if the VPRO only employs sour vegetarians.

True criticism was valued however by a large group of informants if it were embedded in a more curious atmosphere and grounded in a professional attitude of ‘empathetic’ thinking and feeling – one that was taking account of the social-psychological and historical context, social conditions and cultural habits of ‘others’. Criticism for the sake of criticising was not valued; the quality audience was keen to encourage a shift from an emphasis on a critical and detached done to an emphasis on curiosity and understanding.

Murat (age 28, lawyer): Instead of merely running a book into the ground, you should make people interested in it, enthuse them!

The functions professionals wish their programmes to fulfil for their audience form an obstruction in this respect (see Appendix 1.) Programme makers are significantly more negatively disposed towards shocking, giving pleasure, envisioning the good life and consolation, all functions the audience very much appreciates.

5. The distinctive force of quality: good taste or tasting good?

A large part of the quality-loving audience describes itself as a ‘community’. In light of our findings the notion of a ‘taste community’ is preferred over Herbert Gans’ (1999: 180) notion of taste publics or taste cultures because of the (virtual) sense of communality and collectiveness expressed by our informants. Paradoxically, however, changing and fluid media use supports the emancipation of the *individual*. What kind of ‘community of individuals’ feels bound by media quality and what kind of quality connects such a community? Our research found a minority that still thinks of this as ‘good taste’, but a clear majority that rejects the traditional view to instead embrace a view that privileges ‘tasting good’.

Good taste

Apart from a quality ethos, our informants share specific tastes, or more to the point a specific discourse about quality. A minority of our informants but a majority of the media makers use ‘quality’ as a common term to express an exclusive sensibility for ‘good taste’. According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1979/1984), good taste is not purely an aesthetic issue but characterises the knowledge and attitude, or the cultural capital, of an elite with which someone grows up and with which he can distinguish himself from the other.

Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between

the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed (ibid: 6)

In the formation of a sense for quality, education plays a major role according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990). On reflection, many an informant realised their weekly dose of *Villa Achterwerk*, the well-known and decade-old slightly absurdist VPRO kids programme they used to watch, had that function:

Jessica (age 24, student): And *that* is TV education. This simply determines your TV taste. Your parents like it, so you like it as well. This is how it goes, isn't it?!

As Hibbel and Ter Bogt (2000) argued, there are combinations of taste preferences that signify social and cultural distinction. By watching a quality broadcaster and reading a quality newspaper people give expression to a certain elitist identity (De Wolff 2005). The visible display of these papers, guides or memberships is crucial for some people because it gives them 'distinction'. The next quote typifies that insight:

Vicky (age 25, graduate student): When I was young, my media use was strongly influenced by my parents. They read the *Volkskrant*, were member of the VPRO, had a subscription to the VPRO-guide, watched the programming of the VPRO, and disliked the commercial stations. This also ties in with that I went to a Montessori school, played field hockey, learned to play the flute, did classical ballet, and took drawing lessons. I was a typical VPRO-kid: Sundays I watched *Villa Achterwerk* while ignoring *Telekids* [popular commercial children's programme] altogether.

Some informants experience this sense of affinity in taste as a sense of exclusiveness, as an expression of elite membership, of being different from the others (i.e., the masses). In these cases the binding force of quality is formed by an elitist taste profile that refers to a specific good taste for television.

Hester (age 40, shoe designer): it has to do with, you know, that you are a certain kind of people; that you are *different* than the common denominator. And this has to do with a preference for the VPRO and a particular lifestyle [emphasis added].

Janneke (age 39, welfare mother): Chances that you share interests are quite large. ... Generally, the people that visit [Happy] are more educated than average: often people from the culture sector, and a little more creative. So they are interested in culture, in music, books, theatre. This is nice and interesting.

When using the discourse of 'distinction', quality taste functions as a noun, as a form of cultural capital.

Tasting good

As Olivier and Fridman (2001) suggested, elites no longer form cohesive and tightly bounded status groups or classes but rather more diffuse networks of well-educated and geographically mobile professionals and upper managers. The ability to manipulate a diversity of cultural symbols has become a crucial resource in social interaction. “Knowledge of the cultural codes appropriate in various social milieus and the ability to culture-switch according to circumstances became more useful than knowledge of a restricted range of high culture symbols” (ibid: 5).

From this perspective, it is not surprising that for a much larger group of viewers quality was not centred around ‘good taste’ but on ‘tasting good’. Their concern with ‘shared taste’ was not about something that excludes others but rather on that which binds people *through* a common set of *experiences*. ‘Tasting’ is a matter of trying out, experiencing and enjoying (Mol 2007). In this line of thought ‘quality’ can’t be confined to particular media, genres, cultural capital or communities. Instead of being a noun or brand, taste functions as a verb referring to an activity. Tasting quality arouses all the senses, not only those that are intellectually cognitive ones. According to Johnson (2005) today’s viewers take pleasure in handling more informative levels simultaneously. The taste community felt that many programmes could benefit from a higher pace and a more ‘layered’ structure.

Julia (24, student): For instance, at DWDD a Moroccan artist who paints and who has an exposition in the Cobra Museum, also made a painting about Allah. People dislike that immensely and they take offense ... Yes, and all the time the paintings are the main subject, but in the mean time it’s about the dichotomy of natives and non-natives, white and black, *whatever they may be*. It is about the place of art in our society, about what an artist can or cannot say. It is about decency, about the limits thereof. Again, a small item, but loaded with content.

In a similar vein Sylvana pleads for the presentation of art in art programmes not as some bit of information or object of interest, but rather in a way that allows viewers to be emotionally moved by its artfulness:

Sylvana (age 27, innovation coach): EXPERIENCE, feeling, [A story] that fits in one’s personal world. Not, people like art and thus we broadcast everything about dance, art and painting and where that happens. No, you did not get it. I also love art, but don’t tell me about the latest dance performance or theatre play. That does not move me on a *personal level*.

Within a discourse of ‘tasting quality’ the act of enjoying is not conceived as unreflective personal consumption of popular culture, as it functions in the elite discourse on quality, but rather as a layered form of worthwhile, intellectually reflected appreciation that is emotional, sensual and aesthetic as well as cogni-

tive (cf. Peterson and Kern 1996). ‘Quality enjoyment’ is fundamentally open to all tastes, genres and media. This tasting group also has rules, however. This getting pleasure from and talk about the quality of a wide spectrum of cultural products (‘high and low’) should rely on actual use and real experience rather than, as Kuipers (2001) concluded about the elite, on opinions, norms, values or views of respected third parties.

This recognition of the primacy of *tasting over taste* creates a breeding ground for virtual communities. A good example is the VPRO music site 3voor12, a virtual platform for music lovers. This community does not share the same taste in music, but recognises among each member the true interests, openness, and curiosity that characterises the ethos of the omnivore, the always curious lover of new tastes, genres and preferences (Virtanen 2005; Peterson 1992).

Joop (age 23, student): Yes... yes, I think that I feel connected to the people who are attracted by it; perhaps because of the same ideas, or rather, *having the same attitude*. And that is a combination of curiosity and going slightly beyond the superficial in the area of music. It really appeals to me very much [emphasis added].

6. *From snobbish distinction to celebrating the omnivore*

Our ‘tasting’ group of informants suggests a sixth explanation for the gap between people’s views on quality and their viewing behaviour: the strongly reduced appeal of the traditional social elite frame of distinction, which still too often functions as the natural angle for quality television, quality makers and managers.

Marten (age 34, project manager): And yes, now and then you notice that exclusionary attitude: we are the cultural elite, we know how things should be, and we know what to read. And this image crops up very strongly, very soon.

In this ‘elitist’ frame, popular among many television critics including the aforementioned Jeremy Paxman (BBC) and Channel 4’s Michael Kustow, it is still the mission of an elite to elevate and enlighten the masses. That frame of reference was criticised, in particular, by well-educated viewers with a migrant background. They were even less attracted to the contemporary programming of quality TV than their ‘native’ counterparts. Quite often, they even felt offended. If migrants finally appear on television, it is often in the context of problems.

Salman (25 years, press officer): “A good example is *Rondom Tien* (quality talk show on current affairs). Last week, it dealt once again with the ‘allochtone’ problems, young people, blah, blah. And then the presenter asked a Moroccan woman who was invited what she thought about ‘integration’ blahdiblah. That word integration, another stinker. And then she answered,

'bad'. And they asked her to give an example. 'That I'm sitting right here', she answered. Why are you inviting me only when this kind of issues come up? I also have two children, last week the item was school canteens, and I am never asked to comment on that.' Well you had to see the face of the presenter. He stood perplexed and did not know what to answer."

Migrants also expected a quality broadcaster to take transnational identities seriously. It ought to replace traditional national orientations characteristic of mainstream media with a genuine global orientation, not only in its choice of subjects and topics but also in its way of framing them (cf. Hartley 2008; Hafez 2007; Höijer 2007; Barker 1999). The severe criticism of migrants points to a potential gap between global citizenship as a set of core values and cosmopolitanism as a popular lifestyle and taste among a white elite. Although many documentaries on international topics were broadcast by the VPRO, they still tended to be motivated by white curiosity or elite concerns (Shohat and Stam 1993). Moreover, the perspectives of migrants (mind the plural!) was rarely given serious attention, in the view of respondents, apart from matters related to their 'own' particular culture which also tended to be approached in a one-dimensional way, for instance with little sense of humour and as little place for diversity among views of migrants.

This audience criticism should be viewed as a plea for a situated and contextualised form of television quality in which every one's colour and cultural background (including white and liberal), and even the elites' culture, norms, and values, are grounded in a context of their own instead of taken as self-evident (cf. Saranovitz 2005; Shohat and Stam 1993; Haraway 1991).

Conclusion: The proof of the pudding is in the eating

I started this chapter by taking seriously the discourse on quality by TV makers like Paxman and Kustow. In order for quality TV to survive, they plead for a clear and unremitting focus on content with notably less attention on audiences, whose tastes they actually consider a liability to quality programming. The research reported here suggests otherwise: If quality television by Public Service Media is to survive, the primary attention should be given to the tasting experiences of audiences. The rationale is that audiences, in particular those who fit the 'quality audience profile' which is to say future leaders, managers and the creative class, are actively and impatiently searching for excellence in satisfying audiovisual experiences.

The first conclusion is reassuring for the makers of quality programmes. Quality experience is attached to particular core values of global citizenship and creativity, which serve as guiding dimensions for people's professional and personal lives. The audience for quality programming shares this fundamental framework with the makers of quality television. The remainder of our conclusions, save the last one, are more challenging than reassuring, at least

to the extent that a reader wants to hold tightly to historic traditions in quality TV programming.

Second, then, while (too) many programme makers assume that more attention to audiences will result in a trivialisation, the audience for quality is less likely to settle for what has been understood as ‘quality content’ and demands a quality experience. This demand is for artful programmes rather than programmes about art. The audience for quality programmes won’t put up with programmes that only inform about politics and politicians; they want television that addresses and hails them as *active* citizens. For that reason, the ethos of global citizenship and the ethos of creativity should amount to more than a proclamation of views or values in an organisation’s mission statement. It must refer directly to its praxis, a *performance* of its values in every programme, in every choice of content and every form, in every programme maker’s way of working. To reach a larger audience quality standards need not go down – they must go *up*. The proof of quality is in the tasting.

Third, a well-rounded quality experience demands a different, more horizontal, approach to TV by professionals. Empowered viewers insist on ending the paternalist frame and embracing instead one that is based on an equal standing of makers and audiences together. Instead of an exclusive emphasis on elevation and enlightenment, viewers prefer a form of communication with room for friendship, mutual respect, appreciation, reciprocity and inspiration. Furthermore, the community of *producers* is eager to be engaged in developing concepts and designing formats, repurposing existing content and contributing new content. The service in PSM today is not nearly as much about traditional transmission and increasingly about facilitating robust communication, as argued in Lowe and Bardoel (2007).

Fourth, taste has always been part of the creation of a distinctive group feeling. Yet, our informants take pleasure not in distinguishing themselves from others or in the sharing and exchanging of taste *preferences*, but rather in the sharing and exchanging of taste *experiences*. What counts as quality is changing. The audience for quality in our research is suggesting that Reality and Truth would be better served by a more empathetic, open and curious attitude, accompanied by a an encompassing good-humoured tone. This compassionate turn in taste reflects an accent on inclusion and bridging rather than exclusion and boundaries.

Fifth, this preference for dialogue and compassion over a highbrow, detached tone is rooted in the urgency felt by today’s audience for quality programming that in an ever more complex, multicultural society, a new and truer understanding of the Other and otherness is needed. In the Netherlands as in other European countries with a growing population of migrants, Eurocentrism is no longer a productive assumption when an increasing number of citizens have roots in a wide range of countries, mores, religions and lifestyles. Quality broadcasters need to develop a less Eurocentric approach also because non-migrant viewers are as likely to enjoy the unconventional frame because it caters to their desire for stories that surprise and break with traditional patterns of thought.

Finally, however much the hierarchical, qualitative and moral distinction between public and commercial media is losing ground, within quality tasting discourse the distinction has not in itself become irrelevant. On the level of aspirations and remits, quality makes a difference. For PSM, quality content and quality experience go hand in hand today and should be available for everyone.

On the basis of this extensive audience and production research, I want to suggest the importance of further developing the notion of ‘quality of life’ as a ‘sensitising concept’ for Public Service Media.⁶ The audience that prioritises quality tasting operates not so much on the political ideal of ‘informed and active citizenship’ (cf. Zaller 2003) as on a much broader and more layered notion of ‘quality of life’ (cf. Nussbaum 2000). In their experienced view, media should do more than inform, educate or entertain. Aiming for quality of life is not simply about pleasing the audience or circumventing unpleasantness; quality of life in a media context is about ‘richness’ of content and *worthwhileness* of programmes (cf. Schröder 2005). The ultimate criterion for media quality appears to be the ability of media to truly enrich their lives.

This potential turn in the benchmark of media quality is linked to a more general social tendency reflecting the broader shift from information society to experience society. This compels PSM organisations to think deeply about a fundamental shift in their conceptualisations of media quality in every genre, news included. Media today must impress people; programmes must captivate audiences. Simply filling a function will not take a PSM company very far today. These companies must focus on continually privileging the construction of life-enriching mediated experiences. Quality content and quality experience are essential and inseparable for the public in public service media today.

Notes

Without the investigations of Christa Niekamp, Nikki Timmermans, Robert Adolfsson and the student researchers in the *Magic of Quality* (2007), this chapter could not have been written. Thanks very much to everyone!

Richard Florida’s (2002) concept of a “creative class” covers more or less the same population as the quality audience (QA).

The layered notion of ‘ethos’ comes from Aristotle where it refers to “moral competence”, to one’s moral attitude or disposition to be and behave in a certain way, and the knowledge and expertise to bring that ‘lifestyle’ into practice. There are three categories of ethos for rhetorical practice: *phronesis* – practical skills & wisdom, *arete* – virtue, goodness, and *eunoia* – goodwill towards the audience. Thus in Aristotle’s rhetoric ethos is a layered concept. It’s useful to describe this ethos as a fundamental dimension of our informants’ lives as well as a fundamental dimension in quality broadcasting as specific media praxis. In this study an ethos of global citizenship refers to the moral attitude to be a (global) citizen, and to the knowledge and expertise which enables one to practice such global citizenship. Similarly, the ethos of creativity points to a creative attitude, as well as to the knowledge and ability to live and think playfully and ‘out-of-the-box’. It is important to notice that ethos is

not an inherent quality of the speaker (or in the case of broadcasting, of the programme); rather, it is attributed by the audience.

Apparently this link was so close that TV critics even reproached programme makers in public broadcasting (hypocrites!) if their programmes appealed to a large audience. 'Scoring big' should be left up to commercial broadcasters (Maas 2001).

Unlike the policy of the BBC who adopted creativity as its leading principle by helping 'ordinary' people to raise their media and 'storytelling' skills (BBC, 2004), quality 'producers' did not appreciate this updated version of what they saw as the old 'elevation' concept. They viewed themselves as just as informed, creative and productive as the media makers themselves.

Sensitising concepts provide starting points for building analysis to produce a grounded theory. They can be effective in providing a framework for analyzing empirical data and, ultimately, for developing a deep understanding of social phenomena' Bowen (2006).

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QUALITY TASTE OR TASTING QUALITY?

Appendix 1.

Which function do you as a professional wish your programmes to fulfil for your audience?

Dark grey arrow= significantly negative

Light grey arrow= significantly positive

