PUBLIC SERVICE TELEVISION’S DIFFERENT WAYS OF DEALING WITH A CHANGED MEDIA LANDSCAPE: A COMPARISON OF PRE-ELECTION PROGRAM FORMATS ON DUTCH-SPEAKING AND FRENCH-SPEAKING BELGIAN PUBLIC TELEVISION

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Abstract: Under the influence of a changing international media landscape, political programming on public service television has changed considerably since the beginning of the 1990s. Political television debates and interviews increasingly take place within hybrid program formats, in which traditional stylistic boundaries are challenged. This article focuses on the Belgian example and analyses how two Belgian public service broadcasters, the Dutch-speaking Vlaamse Radio-En Televisieomroep (VRT) and the French-speaking Radio-Télévision Belge de la Communauté française (RTBF), covered the 2009 European and regional election campaign in terms of presentation and format strategies. Using a qualitative format analysis, the article identifies a number of similarities and differences at the levels of (1) program formats, (2) representation of the public and (3) the role of television journalists. Whilst both public service broadcasters produced their 2009 pre-election broadcasts in modern formats, the VRT election programs were more strongly formatted in terms of alternation, fragmentation and use of pre-produced materials than the RTBF programs which were predominantly based on rather traditional debate formats.

Keywords: Political television journalism; Political broadcast talk; Election programming; Public service broadcasting; Program formats; Belgium

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In Europe, the forms and styles of political television talk have changed substantially since the beginning of the 1990s. Processes of deregulation, privatisation and commercialisation have given rise to stringent program formats, contents and journalistic styles to attract new and broader audiences (e.g. Humphreys, 1996; Karvonen, 2009; Talbot, 2007; Tolson, 2006). Public service broadcasters have increasingly felt the need to take viewing figures and political and economic imperatives into account in their programming policies. The changes in the environment not only made way for entirely new popular television genres, the more classic genres such as news and political television programs have also changed considerably. This re-orientation provoked important societal and academic discussions on the role and legitimacy of contemporary public service broadcasting and political television journalism (e.g. Collins, 1998; Dahlgren, 1995; Franklin, 1997; Harrison and Wessels, 2009; Humphreys, 1996).

European public service broadcasters’ responses to this changed context differed and resulted in a variety of new programming strategies (Collins, 1998; Humphreys, 1996). In this respect, Belgium is an interesting case, because its two national public service broadcasters, the Dutch-speaking Vlaamse Radio- en Televisieomroep (Flemish Radio and Television broadcaster, VRT) and the French-speaking Radio-Télévision Belge de la Communauté française (Belgian Radio-Television of the French Community, RTBF) responded differently to the challenges they faced. While the French-speaking RTBF has largely adhered to traditional public broadcaster values, the Dutch-speaking VRT has adopted a more market-oriented, competitive media logic (d’Haenens et al., 2009; Van den Bulck and Sinardet, 2007). In this article, we look at whether and how these different answers to a changing media environment are reflected in the broadcasters’ approach to political television programming. More specifically, we analyse VRT’s and RTBF’s coverage of the 2009 European and regional elections. Electoral broadcasts occupied a large share in the programming schedules of both public service broadcasters, but were met with remarkably different perceptions of Flemish and French-speaking social actors. While in Flanders, members of the audience as well as journalists and other opinion makers publically aired several worries about the public television’s election programs on the programs’ websites and in newspapers – criticising the tight formatting, lack of in-depth elaboration, over-active role of the journalists and celebration of form at the expense of content – such critical voices were heard less often in Belgium’s French Community.

In this article, we focus on whether these different perceptions reflect different approaches on the part of VRT and RTBF by analysing how the broadcasters structured, presented and performed the 2009 pre-election broadcasts. Special attention is given to similarities and differences in journalists’ roles in the program formats and in the programs’ presentational style, studio setting and involvement of the public. We will start by providing a brief sketch of the contextual specificities underlying the two Belgian public service broadcasters’ positions and will then discuss the evolutions in the genre of political television programming and the peculiarities of political television talk. The qualitative format analysis probes the most important results regarding the broadcasters’ election programs, especially in terms of (1) program formats; (2) representation of the public; and (3) journalists’ roles. The article concludes by relating these three levels to each other and by reflecting on their implications for the legitimacy of public service broadcasting and contemporary journalism.

**The changing context of European public service broadcasting**

It is generally acknowledged that in the 1990s a serious change in the television landscape occurred in most Western European countries (see Blumler, 1991; Collins, 1998;
Humphreys, 1996; Tracey, 1998). Previously, national public service broadcasters were the only players in this landscape and enjoyed a monopoly position. However, as processes of deregulation, liberalisation and commercialisation opened the way for other, commercial television stations, public service broadcasters were forced to re-evaluate and re-invent their programming strategies, management structures, traditions and missions (Blumler, 1992). For the first time, public service broadcasters needed to demonstrate an ability to attract and attain broad and diversified audiences. The increased competition in the European broadcasting landscape, and the emphasis on attracting audiences that accompanied it, forced public service broadcasters to try to find a balance between traditional public service values and market-oriented considerations in order to maintain their positions as major players in the television market. Following the advent of commercial broadcasters, European public service broadcasters reacted differently to these fundamental challenges: they took up different positions on the so-called purification-popularisation continuum (Bardoel and d’Haenens, 2008), and took different positions on the continuum between responsible and responsive programming, striking different balances in their programming strategies between what the public needs to know and what the public wants to know (Brants, 2003).

This diversity in the European public service broadcasting landscape is manifestly reflected in Belgium, where the two public service broadcasters responded in different ways to the arrival of commercial television stations. Since the 1960s, Belgium has had two autonomous broadcasters, each connected to one of the two major linguistically defined Communities in Belgium: BRT (later BRTN, and then VRT) for the Flemish Community and RTB (later RTBF) for the French Community. In contrast to other multilingual federal countries, the Belgian public service broadcasters are fully independent of each other and are subject to the audio-visual media regulations and policies of the Communities they serve, which increases possibilities for significant differences between the two (Sinardet et al., 2004).

The first Flemish commercial station VTM (Vlaamse Televisie Maatschappij, Flemish Television Company) was founded in 1989 and provoked a crisis of legitimacy for the strongly politicised Flemish public broadcaster, whose audience ratings dropped drastically, making the need for a profound reformation more acute (Dhoest and Van den Bulck, 2007; Saeyts, 2007). In the French Community, there was a similar evolution. The foundation of the RTL group commercial station RTL-TVI in 1987 preceded a precarious financial situation and period of internal crisis (Bilereyst, 1997; Lentzen and Legros, 1995; Sinardet et al., 2004). While the Belgian public service broadcasters initially clung to their traditional working methods, several years of declining audiences incited them to recognise that to survive in the ever more complex and competitive television market, they needed to revise their organisational structure, programming strategies and policies. Since 1997, VRT and RTBF have concluded management contracts with, respectively, the Flemish Community and French Community governments. These contracts define the tasks of the public broadcasters and fix the level of public funding for a limited number of years (d’Haenens et al., 2009). The terms of these contracts significantly differ in that the management contracts in Flanders are far more centred on performance criteria and concrete measurable objectives than in French-speaking Belgium (Sinardet et al., 2004, p. 7; Van den Bulck and Sinardet, 2007, p. 62).

Without a doubt, this situation has contributed to VRT’s and RTBF’s apparently different institutional developments and accents. While VRT seems to adopt a more market-centred logic and aims at reaching large and diversified audiences, RTBF has been shown to tend towards focusing more on traditional public service values in its organisation, programming and policy (d’Haenens et al., 2009, p. 64; Sinardet et al., 2004; Van den Bulck and
Sinardet, 2007). Although RTBF has also been shown to reflect on its programming and partly modernise its formats (Desterbecq, 2005; Le Paige, 2005; Liesenborghs, 2005; Sepulchre, 2005), the broadcaster is generally seen as “less [of] an entertainment, children’s and general knowledge broadcaster than is the case for VRT” (d’Haenens et al., 2009, p. 65). Van den Bulck and Sinardet (2007, p. 74) refer to a fading of boundaries in VRT’s general programming; in contrast to RTBF, which tends to emphasise provision of information, much of VRT’s programming consists of hybrid program formats such as infotainment and politainment.

These differences in Belgium’s public service broadcasting provide a basis for debates on the role and legitimacy of both of the broadcasters (Van den Bulck and Sinardet, 2007, p. 62). Many of the criticisms met by the two broadcasters are conflicting. VRT’s evolution into a competitive public service broadcaster that focuses on audience maximisation and competition has provoked criticisms about how it distinguishes itself from the commercial broadcasters and the legitimacy of its funding from the Flemish Community. In contrast, RTBF’s more defensive and conservative public service broadcasting concept has resulted in loss of market share to its commercial counterpart RTL-TVI, which also threatens its legitimacy.

**NEWS AND POLITICAL PROGRAMMING: A GENRE IN EVOLUTION**

Since the early 1990s there has been an ongoing transformation from “paleo-television” to “neo-television” (Casetti and Odin, 1990), in which entertainment and superficiality have become ever more present features of television programming. Information provision on public service television has adapted to the changing media landscape by changing its form, style and content in order to attract broader audiences and persuade the public to stay tuned. According to Fetzer and Johansson (2008, n.p.), “political discourse in the media has undergone a process of hybridization”, in which the formal practices of traditional political broadcast talk are increasingly combined with discourse practices that are typical of other forms of broadcast talk such as talk shows (e.g. Hutchby, 2006; Tolson, 2001, 2006). In news and political programs, the content has broadened from purely political coverage and debate to include sports, human interest, hobbies, consumerism, etc. In an attempt to attract wider audiences, these programs are delivered in formats that tend to pay less attention to in-depth content and background reporting, and more attention to the presentation and form of the political discussion – often highlighting conflict and competition (Brants, 1998). The imagined audiences are no longer perceived merely as a group of critical citizens, they are also seen as including consumers requiring good qualitative and appealing content. In the programs that are shown, the extraordinary and the expert opinion have to make way for the stories and testimonies of “ordinary people”, “average Joe”, or “the man in the street” (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). According to Murdock (1999, pp. 14, 15), this celebration of experience and the ordinary can be conceived as “the political economy of populism” and “new commercialism”.

While, generally, most European public service broadcasters have opted for “softer” political and news programs (Kleemans and Vettehen, 2009, p. 235), the (rather limited) literature on political television formats points out that it would be oversimplified to assume that they have all evolved to infotainment and sensationalist program formats. In some countries, such as Greece, the news and political programming on public service television are indeed increasingly characterised by personalisation and modernisation. In others, such as France, however, one can recognise a rather opposite move as public service broadcasters have chosen to return to or maintain the traditional formats in which extended debate and serious news are central (Lits, 2005, p. 18). In Belgium, several studies on the public service
broadcasters’ news programming strategies have shown – in line with the evolutions already mentioned above – that VRT tends to provide softer and more sensational news than RTBF (De Bens and Paulusse, 2005; Kleemans et al., 2008; Sinardet et al., 2004; Van den Bulck and Sinardet, 2007).

THE LEGITIMACY OF POLITICAL TV JOURNALISM

Political television programs have been described as “a key moment in the political news cycle” (McNair, 2000, p. 84) and “a fundamental act of contemporary journalism” (Schudson, 1994, p. 565). However, in the changing environment where information programs increasingly become entertainment products, the legitimacy of journalism is tested. Political journalists operating within political television programs have to cope with the tension between joining the general trend towards what has been called “conversationalisation” (Fairclough, 1995; Fetzer and Weizman, 2006), “informalisation” (Montgomery, 2007), “entertainmentisation” (Kavonen, 2009) and “confrontainment” (Lorenzo-Dus, 2009), on the one hand, and complying with their role as critical political journalists, on the other. This has resulted in a shift from deferential and formal interviews with politicians, to interviewing styles that are often either critical, highly adversarial and conflict-oriented, or informal, with therapeutic and light-hearted discourse styles (Hamo et al., 2010; Neveu, 1999, 2002). In political interviews and television debates, the journalist becomes an ever more active player, holding politicians accountable by assuming not only the role of “tribune of the people”, but also that of “arbiter of truth”, on the basis of which it is seen as legitimate to make far-reaching evaluations of politicians’ utterances (Montgomery, 2007, p. 216). Journalists no longer function merely “as reporters and analysts, but as participants in, and producers of what we all … experience as political reality” (McNair, 2000, p. ix). According to Turner (2005, p. 89), political television and current affairs programs often seek “to use the alibi of journalism’s democratic credentials while delivering a content that most of the time deserves no special protection at all”. The combination of entertainment with political discourse, together with the “marketization” of broadcast journalism (Thussu, 2007, p. 1), and “the further mixing of information with drama, excitement, colour, and human interest in the topics, formats, and styles of most programmes” (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999, p. 218), are often seen as having detrimental effects on the functioning of contemporary broadcast journalism and on the media’s democratic and political role. For others, however, the idea of enhancing citizenship and stimulating political participation and involvement through infotainment genres has democratic potential (e.g. Brants, 1998; Jones, 2005; Street, 1997; van Zoonen, 2005). The result is a branch of literature with divergent viewpoints concerning the possibility of harmonising traditional journalistic and public service broadcasting values with the need to attract broad audiences. In the following, we empirically scrutinise, by means of a qualitative format analysis, how the Belgian public service broadcasters have tried to manage this complex balancing exercise in their 2009 election broadcasts.

FORMAT ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL TELEVISION TALK

Given its public character, political broadcast talk is “a communicative interaction between those participating in discussion, interview, game show or whatever and, at the same time, is designed to be heard by absent audiences” (Scannell, 1991, p. 1). Consequently, participants in political broadcast talk are engaged in two kinds of interaction (Burger, 2005; Fetzer, 2000; Fetzer and Johansson, 2007; Scannell, 1991): (1) a first-frame interaction in which the emphasis is on direct interaction between journalists and politicians, “communication réciproque” (mutual interaction) (Burger, 2005, p. 56); and (2) a second-frame interaction in which the engagement between journalists/politicians and the “over-
hearing audience” is central, “communication unilatérale” (one-way interaction) (Burger, 2005, p. 56). At the level of the first-frame interactions, conversation analysts have studied how journalists and politicians render their interactions, roles and identities relevant at the local level (e.g. Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Emmertsen, 2007; Greatbatch, 1988).

While the interactions between journalists and politicians are an important factor in this study, they are not our core focus. Political television debates, together with dynamic interpersonal interactions, are also about editing procedures, format considerations and visuals, which result in a particular staging or “mise-en-scène” (Charaudeau and Ghiglione, 1997). This study focuses specifically on the format and contextual setting in which the studio interactions take place. Within the broad field of media studies, format-related aspects of television have received remarkably little attention. According to Hansen et al. (1998, pp. 190-191), this is due to the taken-for-grantedness of the visual dimensions in analyses of media texts, and the traditional emphasis on language and interaction. In order to map the format strategies used by the public broadcasters in their coverage of the 2009 regional and European elections, the present study analyses the mise-en-scènes of the debates. Since the methodology of format analysis and genre analysis of (political) television programs is still in its infancy (Hansen et al., 1998) and firm guidelines and working methods have yet to be established, we developed our own analytical framework to examine the Belgian public service broadcasters’ election coverage. The corpus consists of all VRT and RTBF election programs broadcast in the three weeks prior to the 2009 elections: Vlaanderen 09 (Flanders 09, one broadcast), Europa 09 (Europe 09, one broadcast), Het Groot Debat 09 (The Great Debate 09, one broadcast), De Stemming 09 (The Vote 09, one broadcast), TerZakte 09 (To the Point 09, a series of 15 broadcasts) and Het Kopstukkendebat 09 (The Leading Figures Debate 2009, one broadcast) on VRT; and Huis Clos (In Camera, six broadcasts), Duel à la Une (Headline’s Duel, 18 broadcasts), Répondez @ Leurs Questions (Answer Their Questions, four broadcasts), Mise au Point (Clarification, two broadcasts) and Le Grand Débat des Présidents (The Great Leaders’ Debate, one broadcast) on RTBF.

These pre-election broadcasts are analysed in terms of participants, setting, program structure, positioning, topics, use of technology and the use of pre-produced materials (see figure 1). Our main focus is on presentation strategies and format features, rather than on the more technical elements such as camera positions, take lengths, editing processes, and lighting. Overall, three factors appear to be crucial for a comparison of VRT’s and RTBF’s election programs: (1) debate formats and the use of pre-produced materials; (2) the representation of the public; and (3) the role of political television journalists. An in-depth analysis of each of these factors provides a better understanding of the complexities and specificities characterising the political television debates on VRT and RTBF.

**DEBATE FORMATS AND THE USE OF PRE-PRODUCED MATERIALS**

While extensive political debate and discussion of political viewpoints is central in VRT as well as RTBF election programs, there were some important differences as to how debate is presented and performed. Both broadcasters have invested in (supposedly) appealing, modern and tight formats, but whilst the Flemish election programs were characterised by flashy and rapid formats and included alternations of short, sharp debates, the French-speaking election debates were more sober and tended to revolve around extended in-depth debate and elaboration of politicians’ opinions.

The Flemish public service broadcaster’s 2009 election programs favoured alternation and variety. Its pre-election broadcasts consisted of short, studio-based debates, with the same or different combinations of the same politicians taking part. In Het Groot Debat 09, for instance, eight leading politicians were invited to alternate in debates that lasted approxim-
Debate format

Participants
Setting
Program structure
Positioning of the studio audience
Positioning of the politicians
Positioning of the journalists
How topics are introduced
Use of technology
Use of pre-produced format elements

Representation of the public

Role of the studio audience
Representation of the public opinion
and personal expertise
Audience-involvement

Role of the journalists

Role of political journalists in the
overall format
General tasks

**Figure 1:** Overview of the analytical framework

arely ten minutes. The debates were facilitated by two political journalists and consisted of three politicians discussing a specific topic. Following this, other politicians were incited by a third journalist to comment on the debate. In contrast, the emphasis on alternation in *TerZake 09* was based not so much on a series of short debates involving different politicians, as on the presence of an academic expert commentator, pre-arranged and on-screen visualised topics and pre-produced reportages. Three invited politicians debated three or four topics, visualised on-screen and contextualised either by an academic expert who was physically present or by a three-minute pre-produced reportage presenting the opinion of an ‘ordinary citizen’ with a personal affiliation to the topic or of an expert from a relevant societal field. In the other VRT election campaign broadcasts (*De Stemming 09, Europa 09, Vlaanderen 09*), the debates were interspersed with a variety of “eye-catchers” such as musical interventions, expert evaluations, a tribune-test for politicians (figure 2) and a presentation of survey results (figure 3). In other words, while political debate was still the core focus6, the television producers seemed to aim to keep the audience tuned in by avoiding long, extended debates and adding entertainment-like format elements throughout the programs.

RTBF’s programming put a heavier emphasis on extensive and detailed political debate6. Two main format-related differences from the Flemish broadcasts stand out: the absence of a studio audience; and the central position of the politicians’ argumentation. The

**Figure 2:** A tribune-test for a politician in *De Stemming 09*

**Figure 3:** A journalist’s presentation of survey results in *Vlaanderen 09*
absence of a studio audience is discussed later in this article, but important to remark here is that RTBF’s programming was largely produced within a “behind closed doors”-format, designed to stimulate intimate and confessional talk among politicians that is steered and facilitated by one or more political journalists (Amey, 2009). One program, Huis Clos, literally means “behind closed doors” or “in camera”: the program highlighted the centrality of politicians’ views and excluded the journalist from the physical scene, appearing only as a virtual representation (cfr. figure 4 and 5). The face-to-face discussion between two politicians was the centrepiece of the program.

This emphasis on in-depth debate among politicians in RTBF’s election programs contrasts with the more entertainment-like formats of Flemish programming. However, the

Flemish and the French-speaking election programs cannot simply be seen in terms of fast, alternating formats versus extended, classical debate formats. A move to more modern and appealing formats can also be identified in the French-speaking programs. Whereas the VRT programs used appealing – in the sense of supposedly attracting broader audiences – formats by calling upon introductory or transitional intermezzo’s (in the form of expert commentaries, poll result presentations, contextualising and problematising film reports, etc.), RTBF tended to invoke confrontational frames during the actual debate. The debate frame was often centred explicitly on provoking conflict, for instance, by imposing a game-frame (e.g. Duel à la Une, where debate was governed by the rules of the word game Scrabble (figure 6)) or a sports-frame (e.g. Huis Clos, where politicians were allowed to speak for a certain length of time measured by a stopwatch shown on screen (figure 7)).

AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICAL TELEVISION DEBATES: SPECTATOR, PLAYER, OR CITIZEN?
Within public service broadcasting institutions, portraying the public as co-players or performers in television programs has become the norm and can be seen as both an attempt to involve and represent “citizens” in the public sphere, and as a strategy to engage viewers (Enli, 2008; Syvertsen, 2004). As Syvertsen (2004) states somewhat pessimistically, “the main focus is on turning viewers into customers or using participants in order to gain large audiences” (p. 373, emphasis in original). The program formats of the Belgian public service broadcasters prioritise the portrayal of the public in their election programs. Both the Flemish and French-speaking public service broadcasters seem to support a participatory idea of democracy and largely let “people set the agenda” (Strømbæk, 2005, p. 340) for their televised election debates, although with important differences at the levels of representation and involvement. All the VRT election programs had a studio audience whose role was rather passive – one of ‘being there’, of being spectators to the ongoing debates, applauding or laughing when required. The introduction to the program Het Groot Debat 09 made this spectator-role explicit, with the audience welcoming the politicians as if they were boxers or gladiators entering the arena. The host introduces the participating politicians in a theatrical way, then the politicians make their way to the stage, walking between ranks of audience members who offer encouragement in the form of loud applause and handshakes (figure 8).

Only in the one-time episode of Vlaanderen 09 did a journalist address and interview some members of the studio audience who were then allowed to offer their opinion on the topic. In this program, the studio audience acted mainly as “contextualisers” for the subsequent debate, relating what was often a strictly political and pre-arranged topic to their personal experience. This emphasis on accentuating the direct relevance of a topic for people’s everyday lives could be found in most of VRT’s programs, and is possibly used as a way to attract viewers’ attention. The short reportages that set the context for a subsequent debate’s topic (e.g. TerZake 09, Europa 09) often represented laypeople directly affected by or affiliated with the topic. While the role of the studio audience in VRT’s television debates is quite restricted and passive, the “ordinary man” was all the more represented in pre-produced reportages. Many of the VRT debates were preceded by a short (approximately three minutes) filmed report of a real citizen, whose story provides context for the debate. For instance, in an episode of TerZake 09, a debate among three left-wing politicians on early retirement was preceded by a short film report of a 55-year old train conductor who has worked hard all his life and wants to retire (figures 9 and 10). In the ensuing debate, the two journalists used this reportage as the starting point to open the debate and to try to get the politicians to take a position on this man’s situation.

The Flemish 2009 election campaign broadcasts paid ample attention to the ordinary civilian and personal opinion in their formats. This “audience-as-part-of-the-format” frame was far less common in the French-speaking programs; the public was cast in the role of cit-
izens who are expected to participate actively in public debate and set the agenda. With the exception of Répondez @ Leurs Questions, the RTBF programs did not have a studio audience. Also, in contrast to the Flemish election programs in which the topics under discussion were to a large extent pre-planned and decided on by the production team (cf. the on-screen presentation of topics, film reports, expert’s introducing contributions), the viewers of the French-speaking programs were much more directly involved in the interactional and topical development of the broadcasts. In Répondez @ Leurs Questions, which focused entirely on citizen representation, two members of the public were given journalistic status and acted as co-interviewers, actively participating in the studio discussion by asking questions, interrupting the politicians and urging them to take responsibility. In this context, Fetzer and Johansson (2008, n.p.) speak of a “temporarily professional public discourse identity” in which audience members are given the legitimacy to take on the role of a professional interviewer.

However, this role of citizen-as-journalist may not be as valuable or as authentic as it may appear at first sight: the professional political journalist in the program introduces the citizens’ questions and accounts, implying he or she knows what they will say. Whether RTBF’s formats of involvement are, then, more “democratic” than VRT’s more orchestrated ways of involving the public as part of the format, is another matter. The active participation of the audience in the RTBF studio settings, either as co-interviewers or as opinion makers via e-mail, SMS, or phone-ins, may as well be orchestrated and chosen selectively by the journalists to reinforce their own journalistic legitimacy. As will be explored below, the presence and concrete representation of “a” public opinion, in whatever form, can bolster the journalists’ control and position in the interaction since it allows reference to “the people”, “this man”, or “this concrete case” in order to hold the politicians responsible and force them to respond to difficult questions.

The role of political journalists

In contemporary political television, the traditional conception of a political television debate in which politicians interact under the moderation and control of a political journalist clearly is no longer the only form. “Ordinary people” and experts, for instance, have been increasingly legitimised to vent their opinions, make evaluations, hold the political field responsible and pose critical questions to politicians (Neveu, 1999, 2002). Of course, this situation has important repercussions for the role, position and legitimacy of the political television journalists working within this context. While, traditionally, it was the exclusive domain of political journalists to ask questions, to charge politicians in front of an overhearing audience, to set the agenda and frame the politician’s contributions, some of this legitimacy has been yielded to laypeople and experts, both of whom have gradually assumed an important actor status. Our analysis shows that format strategies and approaches to audience involvement can have a crucial influence on how political journalists behave,
what they are expected to do and how they address politicians.

As described earlier, the Flemish public service television election programs were more tightly formatted by using alternation, making extended use of pre-produced materials and including non-debate frames than the French-speaking programs. As a result, the journalists hosting the VRT programs needed to be able to deal with these segmented formats and ensure a smooth flow through the use of skilful transitions between the direct studio interactions and the pre-produced format elements. This adds to the complexity of the journalists’ role in the VRT programs since they are responsible both for moderating the debate and questioning the politicians, and for ensuring a smooth “ribbon of broadcasting” (Goffman, 1981, p. 262). In some programs (Europa 09, Het Groot Debat 09, Vlaanderen 09), this complex role-play is managed by dividing roles among several journalists. For instance, one journalist introduces an upcoming pre-produced reportage and another moderates the debate and controls the questions. In the more traditional debate formats on RTBF, there was less need for such a distribution of roles among journalists. The only occasion when they shifted from the debate to other format elements was to introduce questions sent in by viewers, or to switch the focus to a reporter in a call-centre. In one program series (Huis Clos), the role of the journalist was strongly played down: she did not appear in the physical studio setting at all (see figure 5). This physical absence of the journalist seems to point to the broadcaster’s intention to reduce the journalist’s control over the interaction and highlight the face-to-face debate between two politicians. However, although the journalist in this example can no longer steer the debate directly, she can still intervene at any time in the debate.

Both the Flemish and French-speaking political television journalists need to demonstrate their competence as media professionals, and their skill in handling and putting into practice continuously demanding format requirements (see Carpentier, 2005). As Ytreberg (2004, pp. 684-685, emphasis in original) states, the journalist “in many ways is the format” in that he or she needs to put the format requirements into practice in the local development of the program. Although Neveu (1999, pp. 404, 403) claims that this leads to a “delegitimization of political journalists” because “their pretensions to be the translators of the public’s worries and concerns” are considerably weakened certainly makes sense, we are not convinced that this necessarily leads to a loss of power for the journalists (see also De Smedt and Vandenbrande, 2011; Kroon Lundell, 2009, p. 186). In our view, the embodiment of “public opinion” in real people through their representation in film reports, their questions via e-mail, SMS, or phone-ins, or their direct participation in political television debates, opens up possibilities for the journalists to uphold their traditional public service ethos, rather than weakening it. For instance, reference to real people who are visually represented, and to their real life stories when posing a complex question to a politician, reduces the risk that the journalist will be criticised for exceeding the boundaries of neutrality or for being adversarial. The political journalist can hold politicians more directly accountable and press for a direct answer if they can confront them with the case of a real person or by pointing to a member of a physically present audience. This enables the journalists to protect and defend their status as political journalists. On the basis of the present analysis, it would seem that political television journalists are facing a new test, which is to cope with a repartition and revision of traditional political journalist roles while demonstrating their skills as media professionals able to participate in good and appealing television (see De Smedt and Vandenbrande, 2011).
CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article has provided an overview of the presentation and format strategies used by the Belgian public service broadcasters, VRT and RTBF, in their coverage of the 2009 European and regional election campaign. Both broadcasters were shown to have adopted the general international tendencies in election coverage and political broadcasting, such as the incorporation of neo-televisual features and hybrid program formats, in which traditional stylistic boundaries are no longer valid. While the qualitative format analysis showed that both VRT and RTBF made use of modern and supposedly appealing formats for their 2009 pre-election broadcasts, we identified a number of differences at the levels of program formats, representation of the public and the role repertoire of journalists. The analysis showed that flashy formats, fast-paced debate and alternation constituted the core production features of the VRT pre-election programs. In these formats, the public is positioned mostly as a studio audience, as “spectators” at a performance, or as “players” voicing their everyday concerns in short pre-produced reportages. As a result of these demanding format requirements, the journalists hosting the VRT programs are obliged to act as critical political journalists and moderators of the debate, while also demonstrating their skills as competent media professionals, able to make good television programs and effectuate the pre-produced format frames. In the case of RTBF, extended debate, game- or sports-like elements and audience participation played a central role in the formats. As the RTBF programs strongly emphasised political debate and involved the public more actively in the programs’ interactional development, the journalists tended to be facilitators of public debate, allowing the public to vent its concerns directly to the politicians and centralising the politicians’ contributions.

These differences presumably reflect the specific historical context and evolution of these broadcasters. The fact that RTBF’s election coverage is based more strongly on traditional debate formats than the VRT coverage, reflects the tendency for RTBF to uphold a more traditional conception of public service broadcasting and for VRT to go follow market-related and economic imperatives. To what extent and through which mechanisms the differences between VRT and RTBF election programs effectively are a result of historically developed differences regarding the political and media contexts – including the ideas about what politics is and should be and what role the public broadcaster has to play in it – of Flemish and Francophone Belgium cannot be answered unequivocally on the basis of our analysis. Therefore, a historical analysis would be useful, as it would enable claims about how election programming has evolved over time in terms of format, approach to the public and the roles and expectations of political television journalists.

In academic literature (and in public debate) there has been significant criticism of the developments in current affairs and political programming, denouncing its hybrid formats and its celebration of form at the expense of not only content, but also of good journalism and decent public service broadcasting (e.g. Thussu, 2007; Turner, 2005). The present study has indicated that broadcasters indeed seem to put high value on form and style in their political programming. However, it is by no means clear how this needs to be evaluated in terms of democratic, journalistic and public service broadcasting values. On the one hand, VRT’s heavy reliance on portraying “ordinary people” and RTBF’s strong stimulation of political participation through interactivity can be positively evaluated from a democratic point of view, as politicians are extensively confronted with and held directly accountable through the citizenry’s viewpoints. On the other hand, however, critical questions could be raised about public service broadcasters’ use of stringent program formats for political content, as was particularly the case in VRT’s election broadcasts. In a critical reading, the performed discussions and interactions could be perceived as nothing more
than a semblance of authentic debate, behind which a powerful production team is operating, steering the content and programs’ development through the use of numerous pre-planned and pre-scripted features.

**ENDNOTES**

1. On 7 June 2009, coincidently with the European elections, Belgium held regional elections, i.e. elections for the governments of the Flemish Region and the Flemish Community, the Walloon Region and the French Community, Brussels-Capital Region and the German-speaking Community. While regional issues predominantly overshadowed the public service broadcasters’ pre-election coverage, some debates or programs were explicitly centred on European matters.

2. In 1977, BRF (Belgischer Rundfunk), a public service broadcaster for the much smaller German-speaking Community, was founded. Since this broadcaster is quite marginal in the Belgian audio-visual landscape, we focus only on the broadcasters of the Flemish and French Communities.

3. Belgium, roughly speaking, is divided in three linguistic Communities dealing with so-called ‘personal’ matters (the Dutch-speaking Flemish Community, the French Community and the German-speaking Community) and three Regions dealing with economic matters (the Flemish Region, the Walloon Region and the Brussels-Capital Region). The linguistic Communities are tied to a territory. The Flemish Community has jurisdiction over Flanders and co-jurisdiction with the French Community over Brussels. The French Community has jurisdiction over Wallonia and co-jurisdiction with the Flemish Community over Brussels.

4. The Belgische Radio en Televisieomroep (Belgian Radio and Television broadcaster (BRT)), later Belgische Radio en Televisie Nederlandse uitzendingen (BRTN), and now Vlaamse Radio en Televisieomroep (Flemish Radio and Television broadcaster (VRT)) serves the Flemish Community and Radio-Télévision Belge (Belgian Radio and Television (RTB)), and later Radio-Télévision Belge de la Communauté française (Belgian Radio-Television of the French Community (RTBF)) serves the French Community.

5. A supplementary and limited quantitative analysis shows that in the Flemish election programs, 60.5% of the total broadcasting time is devoted to political debate.

6. The quantitative count shows an average of 92.7% of debate time in the RTBF programs.

7. In some VRT broadcasts, the audience warm-up is portrayed on-screen.

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