21 The principle of equality in the Dutch media

Leen d'Haenens*

This is the first attempt at applying the *Media for Democracy Monitor* (Trappel & Maniglio, 2009) to the Netherlands. The complete monitoring device comprises nineteen performance indicators in total. The present chapter will only look at the concept of equality and a selection of eight performance indicators linked to it. The bulk of the data, referring to the year 2006 unless otherwise indicated, was collected via desk research. In addition to a variety of publications such as government documents, scholarly articles and websites of the media institutions themselves, we sought to fill any lacunae with complementary information gathered from interviews with media professionals.

21.1 Setting the Scene

From a normative democracy theory perspective, the media ought to deliver various important contributions to a modern democracy: they have an informative function guaranteeing the flow of information (in order to participate properly, citizens need to be informed); they provide a platform (creating a public sphere open to debate); and they act as a controlling watchdog. In any democratic system, it is thus important to analyse if and how the media actually serve the needs of democracy, or in the opposite scenario, if and how the media fail to meet their democratic functions. These three functions are closely connected to three great pillars of democracy—freedom, equality and control—and the ways in which the mass media make use of their freedoms so as to contribute to democracy. Our object of research is therefore not the government and its legal and policy framework but the functioning of the mass media organisations themselves.

Media monitoring has a long tradition and is carried out by various institutions. More than 100 different media monitoring initiatives evaluate media systems, with an emphasis on young democracies or countries in transition (Becker 2007, p. 14). The current *Media for Democracy Monitor* is designed to shed light on the functioning of mass media in established democracies. Applied to the Netherlands, the following research questions are raised:

• Which requirements should the Dutch media meet in order to promote democracy?
• Do the Dutch media actually meet these requirements?

The present chapter only looks into one of the three great pillars of democracy: i.e. the principle of equality and the way this is followed up by the Dutch media currently under investigation. Equality demands that access to the media should be given on a fair basis. Equality calls for an absence of bias in the amount and kind of access available. Or, as

McQuail (1992, p. 67) stated: “If we suppose there to be a ‘right to communicate’, then we also suppose an equal claim for all to hear and be heard.”

The following sections present a selection of eight performance indicators in an effort to find out what the Dutch media can resort to in order to promote equality (various initiatives, controlling bodies, etc.). The first three indicators of equality deal with quantitative external diversity in general and more specifically with the concentration of ownership in the Dutch media. Clearly, should all media be controlled by one single owner, there is but a small chance of having quantitative external diversity in content and opinions. It is, in addition, equally important that the news be able to reach all citizens by means of different formats. The larger the number of formats in which the news is reported, the greater the plurality of the information. Finally, there is a greater chance of achieving equality if part of the media is controlled by minority groups, for minorities within the population at large should also be informed of relevant issues and events in the Netherlands and abroad, possibly in their own language (alternative media). Concretely, the first three indicators of equality look at the degree of media ownership concentration at the regional and national levels as well as at the degree of diagonal ownership concentration. As far as the content of the media is concerned, the media should seek to offer pluralist news coverage, the totality of which presenting the full range of political viewpoints in society. A fourth indicator looks at the degree of diversity of different formats of news presentation. A fifth indicator assesses the functioning of minority and alternative media. It is clear that minority media can contribute to diversity by reflecting differences in society. Ideally all major minorities of a country are served by a variety of special minority / alternative media and are well represented in the mainstream media.

Next to ownership, great impact on equality is to be found with access to the consumers themselves. For equality to be guaranteed, the sixth indicator, i.e. the price of the available public and private news media, must be within the means of the majority of the population, so that people have an equal chance of keeping abreast of the news and information at hand.

Furthermore, equality is better guaranteed if there is a high amount of politically neutral outlets (internal diversity) or a political balance of media organisations (external diversity). The seventh indicator refers to those bodies or institutions which monitor, for instance, the political neutrality of the media.

Finally, equality can lead towards a platform for democratic discourse, reflected in the degree to which citizens participate in the media. The larger the number of (different) citizens who do so, the greater the chance of having a multitude of opinions. So the question arises whether people are often enough given the opportunity to air their own views and reactions to news stories they read or hear. The eighth indicator looks into the degree to which the Dutch media encourage citizens to participate in the production of news.

The principle of equality with its abovementioned indicators has been assessed on the following theoretical sample of Dutch news media and their performance during the year 2006, unless otherwise indicated:

Print media: De Telegraaf (largest nation-wide newspaper), NRC Handelsblad (evening paper, one of the Dutch quality papers), Het Parool (regional paper with a nation-wide reach), Elsevier (largest newsmagazine), De Gelderlander (regional daily),
21.2 Indicator one: Media concentration at the regional level

This first indicator of equality measures the degree of concentration in the market of Dutch regional printed and audio-visual media. It is obvious that if the bulk of the media are controlled by a small number of big players, this may result, although not necessarily, in unequal and therefore biased access to points of view and sources. Equality and diversity are concepts that go hand in hand, or in Denis McQuail's (1992, p. 143) words: "equality also presupposes diversity (and vice versa), since diversity is a relativising concept, opposing any claim to dominance or to cultural superiority. In a pluralistic society, all groups should have equal rights, if not equal status.” It is important, therefore, to have a look at the ownership structures in regional and national media. Our basic assumption is that equality and diversity of access are more likely to be achieved if concentration is lower, since this implies that a larger number of players have access to the market. It is particularly in the market of regional dailies that we find the highest degree of concentration. This suggests that ‘equality’ or equal access to ideas and sources is less evident in the printed media at the regional level. In a situation of only one daily per province being available, the chance of different channels made available through which separate voices, groups and interests can be heard (i.e. diversity as access, see also McQuail, 1992, p. 144) is smaller.

21.2.1 Newspapers

Concentration of ownership of newspapers is greater at the regional than at the national level. One important reason is that many regional dailies are mainly distributed in one province only (Commissariaat voor de Media [CvdM / Media Authority], 2007, p. 42). The figures for 2007 reveal that the market of dailies (both national and regional) is controlled by just three large publishers in nearly all provinces of the country, viz. Telegraaf Media Groep, Koninklijke Wegener and NDC. The Telegraaf Media Groep is dominant in North Holland, with 60% of the market of dailies in that province. Wegener has a share of more than 50% in four provinces. NDC has a share of some 60% in the provinces of Groningen, Friesland and Drenthe (CvdM, 2007, p. 40). The province where concentration is most marked is Limburg, where Mecom controls nearly 80% of the market (Stimuleringsfonds voor de Pers [Netherlands Press Fund], 2008). In recent years concentration in the market of regional dailies has increased.

21.2.2 Television

In the market of regional public television, concentration is much less marked than in that of regional dailies. In the provinces of Groningen and Friesland regional channels
had 3.8% and 3.3%, respectively, in 2007 (CvdM, 2008c), and these are also the highest market shares of regional television channels.

21.2.3 Radio

The number of regional radio stations is larger than that of regional television channels. This particular market is therefore larger and reaches more listeners than the television market. Here too we find that the market shares of the regional radio stations were largest in the provinces of Groningen and Friesland in 2007 (CvdM, 2007, p. 52).

21.3 Indicator two: Media concentration at the national level

The Media Authority has since 2001 been in charge of monitoring concentration and plurality in the media, both at the national and the regional level. The underlying assumption is that concentration in the media may jeopardize the plurality of the media landscape. In the Monitor Mediaconcentraties, or Media monitor (available both in print and online), the Media Authority reports annually on the situation in the Dutch media market. The Media monitor collects up-to-date information on ownership shifts and market shares of dailies, magazines, television, radio and content providers on the Internet. It also includes data on the advertising market and on the distribution market for television, radio and the Internet. In 2007 the Media monitor was institutionalised by the Provisional Act on Media Concentrations. Article 8 of the Act directs the Media Authority to investigate developments with regard to concentrations and financial-economic conditions in the national and international media markets and to outline the effects on plurality and independence of the dissemination of information. The Media Authority’s annual report is submitted to the Minister for Education, Culture and Science. The Media Authority also advises the Nederlandse Mededingingsautoriteit [Nma / Dutch agency for competition] on the appraisal of any intended mergers and takeovers in the Dutch media market.

21.3.1 Daily newspapers

The above-mentioned Provisional Act on media concentrations became effective on June 13, 2007 (CvdM, 2007, p. 15). It stipulates that publishers and media groups must not control more than 35% of the newspaper market and not more than 90% of the aggregate of the three markets (television, radio, newspapers, i.e. 90% of 300%). That percentage also applies to a company operating in just two of the markets concerned. In 2006, no company exceeded the maximum market share of 35%. The Telegraaf Media Groep is the largest in the market of newspapers, with 30.1% of the market. Koninklijke Wegener and PCM rank second and third, with 18.1% and 14.9%, respectively. This means that the three largest players own nearly two thirds of the market of national newspapers. AD Nieuwsmedia, Metro Holland and NDC / VBK own 11.1%, 9.9% and 5.5%, respectively. All these figures bear on the market of newspapers, ‘newspapers’ here meaning all papers published at least five times a week, regardless of whether they are of a general or a specialised nature and regardless of whether they are available for free or not.
21.3.2 Television

The Dutch television market is controlled by three large players: the public broadcaster NPO, RTL Nederland and SBS Nederland. The Netherlands has chosen for a unique public broadcasting system, commonly characterised as pillarisation and grounded on the principle of external diversity (Lijphart, 1975). In this system, broadcasting was left to social movements that had already established their own organisations in politics, education, health care, culture and leisure (Bardoel, 2008; Van der Haak & Van Snippenburg, 2001). Since the liberal bourgeoisie dominated the state apparatus until the introduction of general elections at the beginning of 20th century, three social groups, the orthodox Protestants, the Roman Catholics and the social-democrats, considered themselves underprivileged. They all hoped to gain from this pillarisation process that provided for a weak state and a strong civil society. The ideological foundation for this strategy is to be traced back to the Calvinist and Catholic social ideologies, which can be labeled respectively as ‘cultural sovereignty’ and ‘subsidiarity’ (the latter concept has obtained wider usage more recently in the context of European integration).

After the introduction of commercial television in the Netherlands, due to the new EU Directive ‘Television without Frontiers’, in 1989, the Dutch government had to ‘re-invent’ its broadcasting policy in the 1990s. In a first response, commercial broadcasting via cable was legalised, but public broadcasting had to be defined for the long term as well. Nowadays, three large parties dominate the Dutch television market. Dutch commercial television is owned by foreign companies enjoying minimum programme obligations (Machet, Pertzinidou, & Ward, 2002) other than the provisions of the European Television without Frontiers EC Directive. A total of 19 national channels, ten generalist and operated by the three large groups (public, RTL- and SBS-group) and nine thematic channels operated by other commercial broadcasters, make up the current television market aimed at Dutch viewers.

We will now briefly get into the current trends in (cross medial) concentration of broadcast content suppliers until 2007. Three main television players (C3) control more than 80% of the overall market in 2007. The two main players (C2), the public broadcaster and RTL, make up for 60% of the market, while the first television actor (C1), the public broadcaster, amounts to 35%. The advent of various commercial television channels in the years after 1988 made the concentration level drop. Nevertheless, the television market in the Netherlands is still considerably concentrated.

21.3.3 Radio

The market for radio too was controlled by three large suppliers in 2006: the public broadcaster, Talpa Media and Sky Radio Group. These three largest suppliers own nearly 70% of the market. In other words, the radio market also shows a rather large degree of concentration, which is borne out by the so-called Hirschman-Herfindahl index, indicating a HHI value of 0.19. This index measures the size of the radio actors in relation to the radio industry as an indicator of the amount of competition among them.

The HHI value thus indicates a high degree of concentration among Dutch broadcasting channels. Yet there are more than two large players in each of the three markets. The Media for Democracy Monitor therefore concludes that the principle of equality, as a pillar of democracy, is not compromised. Only if the national market as a whole would
be controlled by one operator (monopoly) or by two, is there any reason to fear that diversity as access or seen as external diversity is diminished. It should be noted here that the principles of equality of access or diversity as access (or external diversity) are obviously overlapping conceptually (as pointed out also by McQuail, 1992, p. 145).

21.4 Indicator three: Diagonal concentration

This third indicator looks into any traces of diagonal concentration (i.e. across media platforms and across layers of media activity) on the Dutch media market in 2006. Cross-medial concentration occurs in those cases where a content provider or distributor such as a cable operator has a stake in more than one market, for example when a newspaper owner takes an interest in a television channel or a radio station.

A few investors have acquired a greater share in media markets in recent years. Investor companies Permira and Kohlberg Kravis Roberts now have a stake, via Lavena Holding 5GmbH, in the German media group ProSiebenSat.1Media (ProSiebenSat.1Media AG, 2008). The latter took over SBS Broadcasting Group in 2007. Hal Investments (the European branch of the mother company Hal Holding NV; Hal Investments, 2008) is investing in the Nederlandse FD Mediagroep, i.e. in the newspaper market, as the latter is the producer of Het Financieel Dagblad and BNR Nieuwsradio. The European media group Mecom is investing in the Media Groep Limburg and in Koninklijke Wegener NV, with 23.9% of shares (Mecom Group, 2007). Finally, Capital Group now has 25% of the shares in Koninklijke KPN. Mecom is a fairly new investor (CvdM, 2007, p. 19) with shares in two media companies, i.e. Koninklijke Wegener NV and Media Groep Limburg. The latter is entirely controlled by European media group Mecom. Other investors have shares in one media company only.

Cross-medial ownership has spread considerably in recent years, also because it has been facilitated by the greater flexibility of the legal framework. Two examples illustrate this evolution although both ran out of money meanwhile: newspaper holding PCM and commercial broadcaster Talpa collaborating in the website Skoeps.nl, to which people sent short film footage which was thought to have some news value. After thorough screening the footage was put online and could even be sold to third parties. In early May 2008 the site was nevertheless discontinued due to a failing business model. In addition, PCM was also co-operating with KPN, a telecommunications operator, in producing the free daily newspaper DAG (which was discontinued in the autumn of 2008 due to disappointing advertising incomes) as well as news flashes via the Internet and mobile phone. Consequently, two news and information channels disappeared in 2008.

As much as 85% of the Sky Radio Group (a broadcaster) is owned by Telegraaf Media Groep (newspapers). In addition, De Persgroep owns 58% of the shares in Het Parool (CvdM, 2007, p. 21).

21.5 Indicator four: Diversity in formats

This indicator applies the principle that the media's performance with regard to democracy will be better if citizens are informed through diverse platforms and formats. Daily newspapers are good at providing more extensive and analytical articles, but a quick update on the latest developments can be more efficiently provided by a website.
Likewise non-subscribers to a newspaper may find the free information that they can get from a website to be a suitable source of news. In other words, news is provided in different formats: in the traditional way for those who do not have access to ICT, and in an electronic form for those who do not wish to subscribe to a newspaper. Along the same lines television and radio channels too can lend greater variety to their programmes by combining long news bulletins with short news flashes.

The following paragraphs describe the formats that the various media types use to provide news to the public. Apart from the range of more traditional news presentations, we will also look into special forms of presentations which may target specific groups (e.g., older people) or adjust their format to the receivers' personal tastes (e.g., customised news).

### 21.5.1 Newspapers

The newspapers included in our selection (*De Telegraaf*, *NRC Handelsblad*, *Het Parool*, *Elsevier*, *De Gelderlander*, *Meppeler Courant* and *De Pers*) virtually all have the same formats in which they provide news. In the main they all rely on the newspaper itself, but they also present news online (even though its quantity and scope is somewhat more limited) and make it available to everyone. Subscribers do not have to pay to read the paper online in its entirety and can also browse through back issues (this option is presented by *De Telegraaf* and *NRC Handelsblad*). *De Telegraaf* was the only paper in our selection which also informed its readers back in 2007 of major news items via an SMS service (to be paid for).

A news website is obviously an interesting alternative for providing readers with frequently updated news. Moreover, it is also convenient for posting quick news updates, sending out newsletters which the reader will find in his or her mailbox once or several times a week. This particular service is supplied by all the paid newspapers in the selection. Another option available thanks to the Internet is the use of RSS news feeds. This web feed format makes it possible to aggregate content from multiple web sources in an RSS reader. This option is offered by, amongst others, *NRC Handelsblad*, *Elsevier*, *De Gelderlander* and *De Pers*. RSS news feeds are available on websites by means of a technical adjustment, the content of the web page being displayed in XML language. RSS news is thought to be a convenient substitute for the mass of newsletters with which a reader's mailbox can be swamped. In general the dailies in our selection still continue to provide news via the traditional paper channels. However, a newspaper's website is an easy additional way to obtain information, also because it enables the reader to use a search function and thus control his or her browsing experience.

### 21.5.2 Television and online media

The Internet is also an alternative way of disseminating audio-visual content. The *NOS* news bulletin, for example, can be viewed on television as well as online. On *Nederland 1* the *NOS* news bulletin is accessible on the hour between 7 AM and 6 PM and subsequently at around 8 PM and at midnight. *Nederland 2* too makes a frequently updated *NOS* bulletin available at regular intervals. *Nederland 3*, finally, broadcasts the bulletin only twice a day; the channel also schedules a bulletin for children and adolescents at regular times.
The NOS website offers the television news bulletins of all hours as well as the radio news bulletins of Radio 1. In addition the reports produced by the television and radio bulletins are also available online. Several digital channels and Radio 1 Live are obtainable online free of charge and without registration being needed. Finally, news items and news reports focusing on major topics, such as the primaries of the US presidential elections, are collected in ‘dossiers’ that can be read online. In all, surfers have a wide choice of information on given topics. Online news coverage comes in several formats: illustrated as well as non-illustrated news articles can be read on the website, live radio can be listened to, the latest news bulletin is available and, finally, the latest NOS bulletin can be viewed in its entirety.

A more traditional way of following the news is that on videotext or teletext. The major news items of the NOS bulletin can be viewed on television via the videotext pages. The NOS website offers the same application online, so that videotext and the news can be consulted via the electronic format as well. Furthermore there is NOS Teletekst mobiel, a more recent mobile application of traditional videotext. On payment, the audience could also receive in 2007 the most important news headlines and up-to-date traffic announcements on their mobile phone. NOS does not have a channel of its own where the latest news can be covered around the clock, but this kind of news channel is available online by the name Journaal24. The website also offers the latest NOS bulletin around the clock, and live coverage of news events (NOS, 2008). NOS thus provides news coverage on a frequent basis and in many different ways.

This also applies to the public broadcaster's commercial rival RTL4. The latter has four news bulletins a day, although they are shorter (5 to 10 minutes) than the NOS bulletins. The commercial operator's focus further entails that news reports are no longer offered via traditional channels only; in addition to the RTL4 website there is RTL-Z, aimed at business people, transmitting both on television on RTL5 during the day and available online.

21.5.3 Radio

Radio 1 is the public broadcaster's news and sports station, on the air around the clock. During the morning and evening peak hours and at lunchtime as well, news bulletins are quite extensive, with background information and comment. Those who missed Radio 1 broadcasts can listen to them on the station's website free of charge.

A comparison with BNR Nieuwsradio is worthwhile. BNR Nieuwsradio is also a radio station providing news, background and comment around the clock, but has a limited range, being active mainly in the ‘Randstad’, the large conurbation in the heart of the Netherlands around Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht and The Hague. The station has a large number of correspondents abroad and editorial staff in the whole country, each focusing on a particular kind of news (politics, sports, general news) (BNR, 2008).

21.5.4 Web media

If people want to read the latest online news updates, they can go the websites of NOS, RTL and the national newspapers. Apart from these three sources, there is also the Dutch website Nu.nl, which has a variety of general news items, stock exchange news, sports and Internet news, book reviews and showbiz gossip. The site works with some
five collaborators. On the whole it brings the same facts and items as the professional news sites mentioned above and in this sense the reporting of Nu.nl does not add to the websites of the large media.

It will be clear from the brief survey above that Dutch citizens continue to be informed by means of the traditional channels. However, the Internet has in recent years grown into an important tool with which the regular news media can reach the citizen, particularly in order to provide quick news updates. There are of course other channels as well, including videotext on mobile phone, but for the time being they are not very common. There are in the Netherlands no other forms of news distribution, which means that a news channel such as CNN has not yet come into being, although it does exist in an online version (Journaal 24).

21.6 Indicator Five: Alternative Media

As far as their representative function is concerned, the media should, ideally speaking, be the mirror of society (Koeman, d’Haenens & Peeters, 2007). Equality, both in terms of reflection and access, then, also means that all groups in society should be given equal opportunity of participating in media forums. Or, as Denis McQuail (1992, p. 144) puts it: “Pluralistic media are expected to represent the prevailing differences of culture, opinion and social conditions of the population as a whole.” There are actually a small number of foundations and bureaus in the Netherlands which see to it that diversity in the media exists and is encouraged.

One such organisation is Mira Media, a center of information and advice in the field of media in a multicultural society (Mira Media, 2008). Mira Media monitors diversity in the Dutch media and the impact of the media on society. It participates in a wide range of projects (in the Netherlands, in Europe and globally) aiming to involve ethnic minorities in the production of media. One of these projects is Mediaspora. The ultimate goal is to stimulate the participation of ethnic minorities and refugees in the media (Mira Media, 2008). To this end a portal site has been set up (www.wereldjournalisten.nl) featuring an extensive range of news reports written by journalists with a background as members of the ethnic minorities or as refugees. Another project is the digital magazine Ex Ponto, with articles about ethnic minorities and refugees. Finally, journalists with an ethnic minority background give courses to aspiring journalists in order to provide them with the knowledge and skills they need to become familiar with the world of refugees and ethnic minorities, thus enabling them to engage in in-depth investigative journalism.

Ex Ponto and Mediaspora are but two of some ten projects that Mira Media supports. All these projects are rooted, to a greater or lesser extent, in the wish to advise, to train and to help members of the ethnic minorities who seek a career in journalistic work. As such the idea is also to increase their knowledge of ethnic minorities and refugees, so that reporting about these groups can be made more balanced, objective and comprehensive.

We also briefly focus on the particular function of the Nederlandse Programmatichting [NPS, Dutch Programme Foundation], as part of the public broadcasting system, given its specific mission and target audience. NPS produces television and radio programmes most of which target the public at large (Het Klokhuis, Sesamstraat), but is obliged by the Media Act to devote 40% of its programmes to the needs of specific
minority groups. For television NPS produces soaps, news and humorous programmes in which Dutch people of foreign origin participate. The news programmes are available in Moroccan and Turkish on a few radio stations (e.g., Radio 5).

There are furthermore various broadcasting associations, parts of the public broadcasting system, which focus on ethnic minority groups. Examples are the Dutch Muslim Broadcasting Station, the Dutch Islamic Broadcaster, the Organisation Hindu Broadcaster and the Buddhist Broadcasting Foundation. In the days of the home-network model (i.e. before September 2006), many of these broadcasting associations aired their programmes on Nederland 1. Today there is a new programming model, in which Nederland 2 is the television channel for opinion programmes and debate, the channel airing philosophical programmes based on religious convictions. Radio 5 has the same function: its week-end programmes target first-generation members of the ethnic minorities by means of programmes in their own language (Radio 5, 2008). Next there is the Stichting Multiculturele Televisie Nederland [MTNL] with information, cultural items and a forum for debate, broadcasting in the ‘Randstad’. However, since 2008 the situation is still such that the mainstream media cannot be said to be a perfect mirror of the multicultural reality in the Netherlands, and since the bulk of the programmes for ethnic minorities reaches its audience only via local programmes, the Internet is a good solution. Still, online access to a larger target group can only be achieved on condition that the target group actually has online access.

In 2006 the foundation Mira Media researched printed media aimed at ethnic minorities (Bink, 2006). It turns out that some 100 newspapers are available to ethnic minorities in the Netherlands. They mainly focus on information about the Netherlands but also deal with issues in the different countries of origin. Turks and Antilleans (from the Dutch Antilles or West Indies) have a great choice of magazines (most of which are free) which are distributed via ethnic entrepreneurs, mosques or information centres. There are furthermore magazines focusing on topics such as lifestyle and culture. They are available through subscription or sales points (Mira Media, 2008). Finally, there is a smaller group of non-commercial magazines which inform their readers of specific topics: for example Al Nisa (monthly magazine with news about Muslim women in the Netherlands), Kzieje (magazine for young people of African, Surinam and Antillean origins) and Magazin (for Turkish youngsters). The groups mentioned here are ethnic-cultural groups which are still hard to reach via newspapers. Few of them are interested in a subscription to one of these magazines, even though the prices are below average (about €4).

On a regular basis the Monitor Diversiteit [Diversity Monitor] checks the degree to which the Dutch public and commercial broadcasters give a well-balanced representation of diverse groups in society (Koeman, d’Haenens & Peeters, 2006). The Monitor examines whether men and women, the young and the older generation and the native population and ethnic minorities are portrayed in a fair and just manner, i.e. in accordance with their status and relationship in society. The 2005 results reveal that the Dutch media in that year achieved a good measure of diversity but that this did not yet amount to a fair representation of Dutch society. The older generations and ethnic minorities were not given their rightful place on television, i.e. not proportionate with their numbers in the overall population. Moreover, it became clear that particular groups were usually portrayed in a stereotypical manner.
Finally, we must also mention financial initiatives that provide subsidies, the aim of which is to promote diversity in the media. One example is the Stimuleringsfonds voor de Pers [Press Fund]. The Fund subsidises information media (printed and online) which can prove that they contribute to enhancing plurality in the media landscape, for instance by reaching out specifically to ethnic minorities. This fairly extensive survey shows that there is, within all media types, a market for numerically significant ethnocultural groups. The media doing so are chiefly newspapers and magazines, but also television and radio programmes address that audience, especially in the public broadcasting system.

21.7 Indicator six: Price of public and commercial news media

Access to public and private news media is possible at a relatively low cost for an average Dutch family, considering that the country ranks among the richest of Western Europe (cf. €27,696 GDP or $38,500 per capita in 2006).

Annual subscription of a quality daily newspaper (NRC Handelsblad) €305
Annual subscription of a weekly newsmagazine (Elsevier) €210
Annual subscription of broadband access (20Mb) €290
Annual subscription of cable TV (some 30 channels) €180
Annual tax for public broadcasting (radio +TV) (as part of taxes) €100
TOTAL €1,085

The average sum (i.e. numerous less expensive packages are on offer) spent on basic news media per year, as shown above, amounts to some 4% of the total income per capita. This seems to be a fairly moderate price. We should note also that newspapers offer several alternatives, such as subscriptions for students, week-end subscriptions and web subscriptions. The same goes for magazines. Prices of internet access and cable TV also have decreased very fast (see internetten.nl and totaalwijzer.nl on which to compare prices) especially thanks to ‘triple-play’ packages (internet + fixed telephone + cable TV). The average package presently (July 2009) amounts to €52.10 per month (plus installation and activation costs), depending on the speed of the connection and the number of TV channels received.

21.8 Indicator seven: Instruments for monitoring content

In view of the principle of equality, it is worth checking whether a given country’s media system has a body or an instrument which assesses the context for and / or the nature of reporting in the news and information media on a regular basis. The following sections describe a few monitoring organisations of this kind in the Netherlands. The Commissariaat voor de Media [Media Authority] is the watchdog of Dutch national and local broadcasters, both for financial matters and for content. With regard to monitoring content, the Media Authority carries out randomised checks; the focus is usually on the kind of programmes that are susceptible to infringements to the Media Act regulation: sponsored programmes, infotainment and new programmes.

In 2006 the Media monitor analysed the Dutch newspapers and their regional or local news coverage between 1987 and 2006, comparing five different features and their
Equality in Dutch media

Evolution between 1987 and 2006. The features concerned are typical characteristics of newspapers, such as the number of publishers, titles, core papers and editions. The position of news items in the local papers was analysed (front page, supra-regional, regional) as well as the number and the share of pages devoted to regional items and the number of local news items per day. Finally, the number of items dealing with small villages was also examined (CvdM, 2008a).

Next there is the Nederlandse Nieuwsmonitor [Dutch News Monitor], which content analyses newspaper articles focusing on a specific topic, for example which politician was most often discussed in the media in the period under review. These analyses are always quantitative. The Nederlandse Nieuwsmonitor was set up by the Dutch government and its activities are chiefly funded by the Stimuleringsfonds voor de Pers [Press Fund]. The Monitor's website (www.nieuwsmonitor.net/index_en.html) offers the results of a few studies (summaries as well as complete texts). The organisation has designed three different monitoring tools, each suitable for a specific content (general, events and issues). First, there is the Continuous Monitor, focusing on general characteristics of national newspapers, a few regional newspapers and a few newscasts. These general characteristics bear on the topics dealt with, the genre of news, the sources used, the politicians most often cited with regard to specific issues, etc. Again the idea is to check whether plurality in news coverage by the printed media is guaranteed. Secondly, the Event Monitor analyses issues, affairs, topics, revelations or scandals that the Dutch media focus on. An important starting-point for the Event Monitor is compliance with journalistic criteria, i.e. criteria laid down by journalism itself. The Event Monitor investigates the nature of news coverage in the media: is a news item reliable, factual and well-founded? The media can turn out to play negative roles, i.e. they sometimes accuse and condemn. Content analyses are used to find out whether these roles occur in news coverage, for example whether a news story passes judgment even before all the facts are known. The third monitoring instrument is the Issue Monitor, which, as its name indicates, follows up one or more issues that can be expected to play a major role in the public debate for some time to come. The coverage of these issues is studied over a longer period and it thus becomes possible to trace any shifts in the public debate on a given issue and perhaps to link those shifts to specific events. One example is the coverage of criminality in the Dutch printed media.

Yet a monitor may also have its drawbacks. When the Nederlandse Nieuwsmonitor came onto the scene, it was hailed as an instrument for making news reporting in the Netherlands more transparent (Villa Media, 2008). The aim of the Nieuwsmonitor is the collection of empirical data about news reporting, which may in turn serve as fuel for a debate on the quality of the media under review. In 2008, three years after the Nieuwsmonitor was launched, the instrument itself does not prove to be a model of transparency: the monitor is in place and carries out its task, but does not adequately pass the information on to other parties interested. Moreover, the results have but a limited scope and the television news bulletin has not been included in the investigation.

In the Netherlands there is also a monitoring body for analysing media content before that content is shown to the public, with special focus on the protection of young viewers. At the request of the Dutch government, which wished to advise parents, Nederlands Instituut voor de Classificatie van Audiovisuele Media [NICAM / Institute for the classification of audio-visual media] developed Kijkwijzer (Viewing advisor), which is a co-regulating classification warning parents of the presence in audio-visual
programmes of images that could possibly be harmful. A number of pictograms inform parents from which age programmes are suitable for children or not (e.g., images showing drug abuse, sex, violence, etc.). The Kijkwijzer does not, however, advise on the quality and the degree of complexity of the programmes concerned. In other words, in the view of the Kijkwijzer programmes may be suitable for children younger than twelve in that they do not show harmful images, but the content of the programme may still be too difficult or complex for them. The Kijkwijzer classification is popular in the Netherlands and is applied to practically all television programmes, films and DVD's. As far as games are concerned a very similar system is used, viz. PEGI (Pan European Game Information). In early 2004 the Kijkwijzer was evaluated for the first time. The operation and the effectiveness of the classification were praised, but at the same time it was said that there was room for improvement (NICAM / Kijkwijzer, 2008). The supervision of the practical implementation of the Kijkwijzer is entrusted to the Media Authority, which examines the operation of the system at regular intervals. NICAM also has an eye for the way the consumer can use the Kijkwijzer. If people do not agree with the allocation of particular pictograms to particular films or programmes, they can lodge a complaint. An independent complaints commission within NICAM will then deal with the matter. If the complaint proves to be founded, the offender can be punished; the penalties range from a warning to a fine amounting to €135,000 (NICAM / Kijkwijzer, 2008).

In all, our analysis shows that the Netherlands boasts quite a range of content monitors. The Nederlandse Nieuwsmonitor, introduced as a government initiative, looks into news items and reports produced in the media. By contrast, the Kijkwijzer, likewise set up by request of the government, is a preventive tool.

21.9 Indicator eight: Readers and participation

This final indicator of equality is intended to examine the extent to which the media selected are open to news input from the citizens (other than letters to the editor). We will look into the projects, if any, that the printed and audio-visual media have devised to encourage this kind of participation. Also, an attempt will be made to outline the actual use of the potential for participation.

21.9.1 Newspapers

From the presentation of the various media selected it will be clear that a number of newspapers have taken initiatives to involve their readers in the production of the newspaper. The three newspapers that do so in an active manner are De Telegraaf, NRC Handelsblad, and Het Parool.

As to De Telegraaf, its website Wat U zegt [WUZ / As You Say] gives citizens a journalistic role by posting messages, photos and video footage about events in their communities. After having registered, a user may make his or her own WUZ page. This WUZ page can be compared with a blog and presents the user's own coverage of what happens in his or her community. The editors of the WUZ website regularly select the most interesting items. They can also cluster all the messages from a particular area or community, so that visitors to the website have an extensive supply of news from their
Equality in Dutch media

own area. Finally, the readers are given the opportunity of replying to the messages and items posted by others.

*Het Parool* lets its readers participate in a more modest fashion. Readers are given the opportunity of sending tips about news items to the paper’s newsroom via the website. Those items which the newsroom deems to be useful or interesting are posted on the website or end up in the newspaper.

*NRC Handelsblad* is the third newspaper in the selection encouraging readership participation. To this end the paper has an *Ik-pagina* [I-page] with a selection of short news stories provided by the readers.

The other newspapers and magazines in our selection have not launched any such initiatives. They do not appear to be very much inclined to involve their readers in determining the content of the newspaper. Nevertheless, editorial staffs in the Netherlands do react in an open manner to feedback and complaints and are willing enough to involve the readers in the life of the newspaper. After all, it cannot be said that readers are not given any chance of participation. The websites of the newspapers (with the exception of *Het Parool*) are open to readers’ comments to articles or to enter upon discussions with each other. This too is a way for newspapers to take account of what their readers have to say, albeit in a modest fashion. The Press Fund supports original online media initiatives which rewrite user-generated content, publishing it in a well-defined area. The Fund also helps in the starting-up period of an operational business model.

21.9.2 Television and radio

The issue of participation also needs to be looked into in the sector of audio-visual media. The public broadcaster *NOS* invites its audience to send announcements to its newsroom and when such an announcement is thought to be interesting enough the newsroom will contact the sender. In addition, the *NOS Headlines* website, which covers the latest news from the Netherlands in a style attractive to a young audience, posts news stories and photo, audio and video material sent in by its public.

*NOS’s* commercial rival uses a similar system. The editorial team of the *RTL* group seeks to provide its audience with as much news as possible and in this sense it is important that the general public too should be given a chance of participating in the process of news coverage. Finally, in radio programmes listeners can take an active part in the discussion of given issues. Radio talk programmes enabling listeners to air their views live in the programme continue to be popular in the Netherlands, witness *Stand.nl*, on *Radio 1*.

This leads us to conclude that so far there have been some modest attempts at audience and readership participation in the form of either participation in the production of news content or participation in the discussion about the news published.

21.10 Concluding Remarks

This first attempt at applying the *Media for Democracy Monitor* to the Netherlands shows that the Dutch media perform well enough. The Dutch media apply the big principle, equality, amongst others in the form of initiatives encouraging the participation of ethnic minorities. Television as well as the printed media present content specifically directed at these groups. However, some initiatives to promote equality as a pillar of
democracy prove to have been less enthusiastically welcomed. One example is the participation of citizens in the reporting of news. Participatory news coverage is important in that it usually produces a great diversity of opinions which are alive in society. The printed media tend to encourage their readership to enter upon the debate, but the audio-visual media are lagging behind. Moreover, it also transpires that media professionals are not very keen on full-fledged participatory news coverage. The reason often cited by media professionals is the quantity of useless comments produced by ‘ignorant’ citizens, such as found in the discussion pages on newspaper websites and also in radio programmes where people sometimes ventilate insulting and inconsiderate criticisms. In light of this, newsmakers argue that it is therefore better to let citizens participate in a more limited and more controllable fashion. One solution may be to make people’s interventions transparent by reducing anonymous speech, as the latter tends to lack credibility.

Notes

1 The formula of the Hirshman-Herfindahl index is

\[ H = \sum_{i=1}^{N} s_i^2 \]

where \( s_i \) is the market share of firm \( i \) in the market, and \( N \) is the number of firms. Thus, in a market with two firms that each have 50 percent market share, the Herfindahl index equals \( 0.5^2 + 0.5^2 = 0.5 \). The (normalised) Herfindahl index ranges from 0 to 1. It is computed as

\[ H^* = \frac{H - 1/N}{1 - 1/N} \]

where \( N \) is the number of firms in the market, and \( H \) is the usual Herfindahl Index.

A \( H^* \) index below 0.1 indicates an unconcentrated index.

A \( H^* \) index between 0.1 to 0.18 indicates moderate concentration.

A \( H^* \) index above 0.18 indicates high concentration

2 Ideally such a monitor exercise should be carried out regularly and compared with other geographical contexts. This endeavour is already undertaken in five European countries and will be published in 2010 by Hampton Press.

References


Equality in Dutch media


