

Hot Spot

Impetus Towards Innovation of Public Broadcasting

Geert van de Wetering

Editorial – December 31, 2007

'Tell me something I don't know.' That was the subtitle of the proposal Bregtje van der Haak, programme maker at the vpro, submitted to the Dutch Public Broadcasting Authority's Executive Board. Surprise me. Move me. And above all, inspire me with new ideas and passionate people. This brief forms the core of the initiative that since this January has borne the name Hot Spot and is set to run into 2008. After an intensive preparation process in which Bregtje van der Haak called in the assistance of Martijn de Waal and myself, the outlines of the project became discernible. Hot Spot is an informal, creative club for programme makers at all Dutch public broadcasters, which organizes regular gatherings at alternating locations. The aim is to come up with new ideas and to exchange thoughts, with an eye towards the future. Evenings are organized around a central theme, during which new technologies are discussed, social trends are examined and useful ideas are derived from such disciplines as fashion, design and the visual arts for application in public media. The evenings consist of presentations and discussions. Guests, well-known and unknown, speak about their own work and their ideas, often about a work in progress. Sneak previews, pilots and rushes are screened, but also websites and Power Point presentations.

The gatherings aim to provide an impetus to a 'public television culture', a television culture that is genuinely 'public', with a genuinely democratic significance and not based on ratings. Thinking about public broadcasting is too tied to money, power, structures and organization models. This is not conducive to the creativity of programme makers, who are the capital of the public broadcasting system. Creativity thrives in an open atmosphere, exchanges of thoughts and a continuous supply of new, inspiring ideas. For the future of public broadcasting, it is imperative to make room for innovations. And thus for a conversation about the profession. What do we want to make? Why? For whom?

These questions were the focus of the two Hot Spot evenings we organized prior to the summer of 2007. The first, entitled 'The Art Show', had as its premise the beauty of the original idea. Those in attendance were able to learn about innovative ideas and meet people who either come up with new ideas themselves or analyse and assess these ideas. Speakers included Gary Carter, chief creative officer with Fremantle Media, a large international media production company. He discussed the sense and the nonsense of searching for 'the next big thing'.

Tom Himpe, a London advertising executive, gave a presentation on 'guerilla advertising' – alternative, clandestine and original ways of hawking a product. This is significant not only for companies producing consumer goods, but also for programme makers, who in a constantly expanding media universe have to continually reposition themselves in order to attract the attention of the viewer or listener.

As part of the theme week 'Wij zijn de baas' ('We're the boss'), about the importance of democracy (October 2007), a second Hot Spot was organized around the question of how,

as a public broadcaster, to generate a meaningful public debate using the latest technological advances. The essence of a democracy, after all, is that a free and public discussion is possible, one that actually contributes to the development of a society. To this end a number of guests were invited to develop ideas in collaboration with the programme makers on shaping this public debate. The guests included coordinators of popular weblogs on politics, artists, media philosophers, engineers and gaming developers.

During the Picnic cross-media week, a major Hot Spot event took place, concerning virtual worlds. A programme was put together in association with the Submarine production company on the opportunities that games and virtual worlds such as Second Life present to programme makers in addressing a new audience and in finding new forms for telling stories.

Future Hot Spot gatherings will focus on themes such as civic journalism, new narrative forms and ethnic diversity.

In addition to organizing these evenings, Hot Spot aims to establish short- or long-term alliances with various partners. These might be cultural institutions, platforms for new media, festivals, like Picnic, Nieuw Akademia, Submarine, all of which concentrate on organizing cross-media projects, but it might also be a magazine, for example. Indeed, this issue of *Open* is one such example.

Open No. 13 focuses on the question of how the 'public programme' is changing as a result of the effects of globalization and the digital age. This supplement zeroes in on the question of how public media are responding to new, more informal and individually oriented communication technologies, mobile media, media formats and media strategies. It attempts to bring these sometimes rather abstract developments back to the level of actual practice: what do these shifts signify for the programme maker? How should he or she relate to an audience that does not swallow everything docilely, how can he or she use the audience to positively influence his or her programme?

In his column, Dingeman Kuilman, director of the Premisela Foundation, a platform for Dutch design, compares two ways of using television: as a medium that records (the *camera obscura*) and as a medium that creates (the *lanterna magica*). In his view, television has become too much a medium that merely records the world around us. He wonders why current programmes are so lacking in creative content.

That programme makers must do better is without question. That they should be given more room to manoeuvre by courageous managers is equally clear. But will they then also get the critique they need? Many programme makers denounce the reviews of their broadcasts in daily and weekly newspapers. Not because these are purely negative, but because they often demonstrate so little insight into television and radio. Critics limit themselves primarily to what is said or done by whom in which programme. A solid analysis of how a programme is structured, how it is edited or how it is experienced is lacking.

This last point is discussed in the article by scientific researchers Irene Costera Meijer (media studies) and Maarten Reesink (television sciences), both at the University of Amsterdam. Their content analysis shows that television critics are very one-sided in their approach: they pay little attention to the commercial broadcasters and disproportionate attention to journalistic and cultural programmes. Most articles consist of strictly personal opinions that virtually relate solely to the content of the programming on offer. There is little or no attention for the aesthetics or the impact of television programmes. According to Costera Meijer and Reesink, critics should therefore develop an experience-oriented vocabulary in order to assess programmes differently.

But of course it all starts with the maker. It is he or she who needs to undergo a change in mentality. Whereas traditional programme makers mainly want to inform their audience, 'new' makers primarily want to communicate with their audience. Media philosopher Bas Könning cannot emphasize this new role often enough. In the interview in this issue he says, 'People today are far less satisfied with the status quo. And that is the result of the huge expansion of the supply and the flows of information. The user/viewer/listener is no longer dependent on you – it's the other way round. Far worse than that, the world can discuss you without you. That is something many programme makers are having trouble getting used to.' If you have a new idea for a programme, start your own blog immediately. That is Könning's imperative advice. Provide access to the process of genesis and you create not only your future audience, but there is a significant likelihood that you will explore new paths as a result of suggestions from the readers of your blog. So it's a two-way street.

That was in fact the experience of the radio play writer Bert Kommerij. He was, as he puts it, 'booted onto the internet' by the broadcaster for which he works. TheRVU commissioned him to conduct research into the question of how people take control of their lives. And how they keep it. And what role the internet plays in this. For this supplement, he submitted the visual contribution *Flick Radio – Makes my world feel real*. This contribution is based on the 'worklog' www.flickradio.nl. In it he is steadily reducing the difference between script and blog. He turns himself into a character and gives his new digital friends a voice. The end result will be a radio play (music and sound design by Marco Raaphorst) and an accompanying internet film, made with Flickr-photos complete with captions (editing by Pepijn Kortbeek).

Through the contributions in this supplement, we hope to provide a clearer picture of the shifts in media production, distribution and consumption. Although the processes upon which these shifts are based are often complex in nature, this does not mean that the efforts you have to make as a programme maker are enormous. The key is primarily a change in attitude toward the audience. The audience is no longer an anonymous receptor – the audience talks back and thinks along. The public itself is a producer as well. As a programmer, you can turn this to your advantage.

Geert van de Wetering (NL) is a journalist and programme maker. He worked for six years for VPRO Television, where he was the creator and producer of such programmes as *Nachtpodium* and *Picabia*. He has also written for the *De Volkskrant* newspaper and many magazines. He currently works as a freelance journalist and director.

Tags

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