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Bridging youth 'media egocentrism' and journalistic values: strategies for public service media

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Public service media (PSM) in Europe continues to grapple with redefining its role in a rapidly evolving media landscape, balancing quality and accessibility while striving to engage diverse audiences—including younger and marginalized groups—in an increasingly market-driven environment. This study examines how the Belgian public service media organization, Radio-Télévision Belge de la Communauté Française (RTBF), confronts the challenge of aligning journalistic values with content tailored for a youth audience marked by pronounced 'media egocentrism.' Employing non-participant observation and in-depth interviews with RTBF staff, the research studies the internal processes and professional practices that shape youth-focused programming. Findings reveal that RTBF integrates journalistic principles from the earliest stages of program development, effectively balancing media appeal with news integrity. This approach not only enhances RTBF's credibility among young audiences but also cultivates critical and informed awareness within this demographic.

KEYWORDS

young audiences, RTBF, media egocentrism, journalistic values, EBU

1 Introduction

The future of PSM in Europe depends on its ability to remain a universal, diverse, and independent service, playing a vital role in supporting Europe's creative economy and fostering cultural dialog (Bardoel and d'Haenens, 2008). As non-linear viewing habits grow and competition from commercial platforms intensifies, PSMs have the potential to stand out as trusted and reliable content providers. However, they face increasing pressure to justify their relevance, particularly in light of funding debates and shifting state roles toward concepts like self-regulation (Campos-Freire et al., 2018). In recent decades, technological advancements and internet expansion have profoundly reshaped news and entertainment consumption, particularly among young audiences like Generation Z. These shifts impact not only the content type but also the ways young people interact with and engage in media. Digitization and instant access to information have fostered a 'me'-centered media consumption, where users actively select, personalize, and participate in what they view and share (Jenkins, 2006; Erickson, 2012; Prado, 2017; Costera Meijer, 2023). The digital era presents both significant challenges and unique opportunities for public service media (PSM).

Young audiences have undergone a significant shift in media consumption, transitioning from traditional formats to digital environments and social media platforms (Asseraf and Nyberg-Frankenhaeuser, 2014). According to the Reuters Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2024), the media is facing a 'platform reset', as Generation Z prefers to access news on platforms such as Reels on Instagram, TikTok and Shorts on YouTube, where information is delivered

in short, visually appealing formats that combine entertainment and news. Similarly, the EBU notes that young audiences seek customizable, on-demand content (Newman, 2022), contributing to a decline in linear TV viewing in favor of streaming services and digital platforms (Cortés-Quesada et al., 2022). This trend presents a strategic challenge for public and private media in retaining and engaging younger audiences (Iosifidis, 2019).

The OfCom 2024 Report indicates that young people are continuing the trend for short, easily accessible content and are increasingly relying on 'micro-updates' via social media rather than in-depth, long-form news (OfCom, 2024a). This shift has transformed the narratives in news and entertainment for younger audiences (Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2021), redefining what is understood as information and establishing a new epicentre in the news ecosystem (López-García et al., 2023). Barlovento Comunicación's reports on audiences in Spain also show a trend among young people toward mobile devices and digital environments, rather than traditional media, resulting in fragmented and less linear media consumption (Barlovento Comunicación, 2024).

In Belgium, the television market reflects the country's tripartite media structure, serving the Dutch-, French-, and German-speaking communities. Each linguistic community exhibits distinct consumption patterns, shaped by historical media traditions and regulatory frameworks. According to the Reuters Digital News Report 2024, the Dutch-language market continues to see strong engagement with linear television news, while media consumption in the French-speaking market is shifting toward digital platforms (Newman et al., 2024). This divergence aligns with broader regional media habits: Flanders follows the Northern European tradition of print media and strong public broadcasting, whereas the French-language part of Belgium adheres more to Mediterranean broadcasting trends, characterized by higher engagement with audiovisual media. These differences are particularly evident in public service broadcasting. RTBF remains the most watched, most valued, and most trusted media outlet in the French-speaking region, playing a central role in shaping the information landscape. Findings from the Belgian section of the Digital News Report, along with the RTBF Annual Report 2023, highlight its commitment to fostering connectivity through information, debate, learning, questioning, and entertainment, with the goal of integrating into a highly personalized media world (Newman et al., 2024; RTBF, 2024). At the same time, a generational shift is reshaping audience preferences across all three linguistic communities. Younger viewers prioritize immediacy (Clouet and Lozada, 2023) and demand greater control over their media experiences. They favor platforms that offer interaction and personalization (Budzinski et al., 2021), a feature that traditional public service broadcasters struggle to match. This shift underscores the growing challenge for public service media in maintaining relevance in an increasingly fragmented and algorithm-driven media landscape.

RTBF was chosen as the focus of this study because of its active efforts to engage young audiences in a rapidly changing media environment. As a leading public broadcaster in French-speaking Belgium, RTBF provides an important case for examining how traditional journalistic values are adapted to meet the needs of Generation Z. The media organization has introduced interactive features and new content formats to stay relevant, making it a useful example for analyzing how public media connects with younger audiences. To better understand this relationship—particularly how Generation Z's media egocentrism interacts with RTBF's journalistic values—this study addresses the following research questions:

> **RQ1.** How does RTBF implement its digital and multiplatform content strategy to attract and retain young audiences across different age groups?

> **RQ2.** What challenges does RTBF face in balancing traditional journalistic values with the expectations of young audiences across different age groups?

> **RQ3.** How does RTBF tailor its content to reflect the specific interests and values of young audiences across different age groups?

> **RQ4.** How much control or participation does RTBF believe is appropriate for young people of different age groups in their media consumption?

> **RQ5.** How do RTBF staff perceive the influence of 'media egocentrism' on the expectations and behaviors of young audiences across different age groups?

These questions aim to explore RTBF's internal perspectives and strategies for engaging a generation that challenges traditional media structures. The study examines how the broadcaster navigates the tension between innovation and journalistic responsibility in public service media.

1.1 Traditional journalistic values: a contextualization in today's media system

In the current European context, journalism faces significant challenges due to the technological revolution and economic pressures. These changes have affected both journalistic practices and traditional professional values, generating a debate on how to adapt to a constantly evolving media environment. O'Sullivan and Heinonen (2008) point out that as the Internet evolves in often unpredictable directions, new questions arise regarding journalistic practices and values, some of which challenge its essential foundations.

The evolution of journalistic values in content creation has been shaped by digital transformation and changes in media consumption. Traditionally, principles such as truthfulness, impartiality, and independence have been the foundation of journalism (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001). However, the emergence of digital platforms and social networks has introduced new dynamics that challenge these values, bringing factors such as immediacy and content personalization (Newman et al., 2024). Reputation, credibility, and accountability are the cornerstone of public audiovisual service governance to sustain and enhance its legitimacy today (Campos-Freire et al., 2018).

In this regard, journalistic values such as excellence, transparency, and reliability are essential to maintaining the credibility of journalists and the content they produce. These values help citizens assess the trustworthiness of the information they consume (Hayes et al., 2007). The EBU (2018) identifies six core values that public service media (PSM) must uphold to empower society: universality, independence,

excellence (boldness), diversity (accessibility), accountability (transparency), and innovation. Meanwhile, RTBF, 2022, the case study of this research, adds reliability and public service to these principles, which its journalists must strictly apply in their journalistic routines and content creation aimed at young audiences. The sustainability of PSM in today's competitive media environment is closely linked to their ability to maintain legitimacy among audiences (Urbániková and Smejkal, 2025). These authors conclude that the public primarily focuses on individual value and, to some extent, social value, while completely neglecting the value of the industry. Likewise, Nielsen, in the report "Old, Educated, and Politically Diverse: The Audience of Public Service News" by the Reuters Institute (Schulz et al., 2019), warns that the challenges faced by public service media are greater than commonly recognized. If they fail to find more compelling and engaging ways to deliver news online, especially to younger people and those with limited formal education, they will ultimately be unable to fulfil their public service mission or justify the public funding they receive.

Journalism in Europe is at a crossroads, where traditional values must adapt to a digital and globalized media environment. Preserving professional autonomy and ethical values is essential to address current and future challenges, ensuring that journalism continues to play its vital role in democratic society (Lauk and Harro-Loi, 2017; Lowe and Stavitsky, 2016; Bastian et al., 2021). In the specific case of public service media, they have had to adapt their fundamental principles to maintain public trust without losing their editorial identity (EBU, 2018). The pressure for virality and audience fragmentation has led to a reconfiguration of journalistic production, where the commitment to public interest must be balanced with the need to attract new generations of information consumers (Newman et al., 2024).

1.2 Belgium's media landscape: navigating linguistic divisions

Belgium's media landscape is shaped by its linguistic, cultural, and economic divisions, resulting in three distinct media ecosystems serving the Dutch-, French-, and German-speaking communities. Each operates its own largely independent media system, with minimal overlap and highly concentrated ownership structures (Van Besien, 2010). This fragmentation limits federal dialog, as media outlets tend to reinforce the political perspectives of their respective communities rather than fostering a shared national debate (Sinardet, 2013). Regulatory approaches also differ, particularly in cross-media ownership and cultural identity protection. The Flemish community enforces stricter regulations, prioritizing public broadcasters and locally produced content with strong cultural value (d'Haenens et al., 2009). In contrast, French-language media integrate more transnational content into their programming. Public service broadcasters play a central role in shaping these media ecosystems. VRT serves the Flemish community, while RTBF leads in the French-speaking region. The German-speaking public broadcaster, Belgischer Rundfunk (BRF), became independent from RTBF in 1977 and has since maintained continuous communication with its community. While BRF serves a smaller audience, its presence reinforces Belgium's tripartite media structure, where public service media remain key players in news and entertainment consumption.

1.3 Media egocentrism in the era of social and video platforms

The rise of platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube has transformed news consumption, making it increasingly fragmented and ephemeral (Kang et al., 2020). These platforms blur the boundaries between news and entertainment, offering quick, visually engaging content tailored to shorter attention spans, particularly among younger audiences (Estrada-García and Gamir-Ríos, 2023; Newman, 2022). This change aligns with Buckingham (2008) concept of the fragmentation of the media experience, as young people are increasingly seeking media personalized to their interests, while at the same time, such content is being offered to them due to the consumption trends of active generations in front of the media. This transformation is driven by the proliferation of mobile devices, social media platforms, and streaming services that provide on-demand access to both news and entertainment. These changes have pulled young audiences away from traditional media, like linear television, toward digital platforms that offer greater autonomy and control over their consumption (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer, 2019). This transition reflects a broader process of identity formation, where young people use their media choices to assert and differentiate themselves (Feixa Pàmpols, 2020).

According to Costera Meijer (2023), a central concept in this shift is 'media egocentrism', which describes how users—particularly young people—focus their media consumption on their own interests and perspectives, rather than engaging with communal or collective media experiences. This trend is amplified by the personalized content recommendations of social media algorithms and video platforms (Fieiras-Ceide et al., 2023a). Users increasingly act as 'curators' of their media consumption, selecting and personalizing content based on what they find relevant or appealing (Rojas-Torrijos et al., 2023). This self-centric approach extends to content creation, with platforms enabling users to produce and share media that reflects their personal experiences and perspectives (Jenkins, 2006). For young audiences, this represents a shift from passive consumption to active participation, where individuals create and disseminate content as a form of self-expression and co-creation (Vaz-Álvarez et al., 2021).

Here, black-box algorithms take center stage for young audiences on social media. These algorithms are opaque processes in which users are unaware of the internal workings that determine the results. On digital platforms, these algorithms personalize the content displayed, significantly impacting young audiences, especially those of young audiences. By interacting with media filtered through these algorithms, young people may become trapped in filter bubbles or reinforce cognitive biases, without being aware of the processes underlying these decisions (Hagar and Diakopoulos, 2023). Reviglio and Agosti (2020) already said years earlier that it is very important to decentralize control of social media, to ensure democratic oversight that mitigates the 'algorithmic sovereignty' of content that generates a cyclical consumption of the same ideas and, for the most part, of a single piece of entertainment content.

The implications of this shift are significant. Media egocentrism fosters fragmentation, grouping young people into niches centered on specific interests, often isolating them from diverse viewpoints or alternative content. This reinforces the 'media self', where users take center stage in their digital experience, exercising control over their consumption (Costera Meijer, 2023). As a result, media consumption

increasingly prioritizes personal gratification and interaction with tailored content over sustained engagement with broader, more general topics (Cheng and Li, 2024). The gratification of content through a feedback loop based on likes, comments, and shares causes the user to only see algorithmic content tailored to their consumption preferences, shaped by their interactions with the content they engage with on social media (Boesman et al., 2021). This transition highlights the dual-edged nature of digital platforms: while they empower users to shape their media experiences, they also risk limiting exposure to diverse perspectives, undermining the potential for shared media communities.

1.4 New dynamics of youth news consumption and media egocentrism

Youth news consumption has undergone a profound transformation in recent years, driven by the rise of social and video platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube (Newman et al., 2024). Traditional media, like television, has lost its dominance as the primary news source, replaced by websites, apps, and social platforms. For instance, more than half of UK adults now access news via platforms like Facebook and YouTube, and for 88% of 16–24-year-olds, social media is the main source of information (OfCom, 2024b). Studies on young audiences and news consumption argue that news consumption is influenced by both daily habits and, increasingly, incidental exposure (Boczkowski et al., 2018). This trend is reflected in Belgium, where reports indicate a shift toward platforms such as Instagram, TikTok –above all between 13 and 24 years old–, YouTube and Twitch, especially among younger audiences, who follow figures featuring content of interest that they feel represents them (Denecker and Van Damme, 2024; Imec.digimeter, 2024).

Social platforms have radically altered the flow of news, mixing entertainment with information and redefining the way content circulates. TikTok has gained popularity as a news source for younger users, especially in regions such as Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia. However, in Europe and the United States, its growth is tempered by concerns about data security and geopolitical issues (López-de-Ayala et al., 2020). Meanwhile, platform strategies such as proprietary formats and algorithmic recommendations have disrupted traditional media by retaining users within their ecosystems, reducing traffic to mainstream news media (Bonini Baldini et al., 2021). This shift reflects deeper changes in the dynamics of media consumption. It is the implementation of the 'digital first' strategy, which implies that media organizations prioritize the creation and distribution of content on digital platforms over traditional media. This approach responds to changes in consumption habits, especially among younger audiences, who prefer to access content via the Internet and mobile devices, something that Robotham (2021) relates when he talks about the 'external forces' that come into play in these new communication dynamics and which the media must adapt to by adopting.

The landscape of public service media has been transformed by social media, which has shifted the traditional one-to-many broadcasting model toward a many-to-many interaction framework. Social media platforms enable audiences—particularly younger generations—to engage with content in more dynamic ways, fostering greater user control over what they consume. This transition allows for more segmented and specialized content experiences, where

algorithms personalize recommendations according to individual preferences. While this enhances accessibility, it also raises concerns about content diversity, particularly in terms of exposure to a broad range of perspectives and information sources. The personalization of media consumption can lead to 'filter bubbles' (Möller, 2021), creating homogenous information environments that increase polarization and reinforce 'media egocentrism.' In this context, users prioritize content aligned with their own beliefs and interests, sometimes repeatedly engaging with the same narratives without considering alternative perspectives. Though the 'filter bubble' concept has been debated and nuanced through terms such as algorithmic personalization, echo chambers, and content fragmentation, its effects remain particularly relevant for younger audiences, as their content consumption patterns can contribute to self-reinforcing biases and polarized worldviews.

Young audiences approach news consumption through three key stages: routine surveillance, incidental consumption, and directed consumption, each shaped by different forms of media use (Antunovic et al., 2018). These behaviors reflect distinct news consumption patterns, ranging from minimalists and traditionalists to omnivores and online-focused users (Geers, 2020). These patterns demonstrate how media egocentrism drives young people's preferences for specific content types. The implications of these trends are significant. Addressing these challenges requires understanding the complex interplay of personalization, platform strategies, and user behaviors. Promoting algorithmic designs that prioritize content diversity could help counteract media egocentrism and foster a more informed and less polarized youth audience (Machado Lunardi et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2021).

1.5 Public service media's relationship with young audiences

The expansion of new media platforms presents both challenges and advantages for young audiences, as they provide unprecedented access to information and entertainment, facilitating connection with a global community and learning about their environment (Ortega-Mohedano and Marcos-Ramos, 2023). Within this framework, public service media have a public value mission toward young audiences, giving them their place and space within the media ecosystem of their broadcasters.

Public service media are implementing various strategies to attract young audiences, such as the use of transmedia narratives and the integration of social networks (Iosifidis, 2007). However, they face significant challenges, including the need to redefine their mission in the digital environment and clearly communicate their benefits. The key to success lies in adapting content to young people's interests while maintaining the journalistic quality that characterizes these media.

RTBF upholds core journalistic values that emphasize quality in a rapidly changing media landscape characterized by hyper-reactivity, errors, sensationalism, and diminished rigor, all of which erode audience trust. This commitment is exemplified by the position articulated by the Director of RTBF.info, who underscores RTBF's dedication to maintaining credibility and rigor as a foundation for reinforcing public trust in an era dominated by speed and sensationalism. RTBF's commitment to credibility and journalistic rigor also addresses the challenge posed by the media egocentrism

prevalent among younger audiences, who frequently favor content tailored to their personal interests and perspectives. In this context, RTBF faces the dual task of providing information that meets the demand for personalization while simultaneously broadening young people's perspectives. By delivering pluralistic journalism, RTBF encourages young audiences to engage with diverse viewpoints and trust sources that extend beyond their immediate preferences.

Furthermore, countries such as Spain (RTVE), the United Kingdom (BBC), France (France Télévision), and Sweden (SWR) have found transmedia informative and entertainment content to be a first step in reaching these audiences. Young people prefer content that can be viewed across multiple platforms while also allowing them to comment and participate in decisions about future content via social media (Azurmendi, 2018; Robotham, 2021).

In Germany, public television has integrated social media into its strategies, creating platforms such as funk, which seek to increase young people's engagement through content tailored to their interests (Stollfuß, 2019). A similar approach is taken by VRT, RTBF's counterpart in the Flemish region of Belgium, which informs young adolescents aged 13 to 17 daily through Instagram via @nws.nws.nws (Hendrickx, 2021). Switzerland and Austria follow the same connected and social trend, responding to young audiences' demands for more connectivity and fast, personalized content through mobile devices (Autenrieth et al., 2021; Reiter et al., 2018). *Focus groups* on current adolescent issues, *talk shows*, and fiction series addressing social concerns relevant to this generation have also become essential content for attracting young audiences on RTVE and RTP. Portuguese television has the added feature of broadcasting live gaming sessions, which has successfully engaged young Portuguese audiences through Twitch (Fieiras-Ceide et al., 2023b).

Meanwhile, RTVE (Eguzkitza et al., 2023), BBC, DR, and ERT (Karadimitriou and Papathanassopoulos, 2024) seek a direct connection with young audiences through on-demand OTT platforms. Choosing when and where to watch content is a priority for young people. However, both studies conclude that without a clear strategy and well-defined public service objectives for online offerings, young audiences' interest declines, eventually rendering the media irrelevant.

After reviewing some successful cases of public service media engagement with young audiences, these broadcasters follow two strategies to connect with them, mimetic isomorphism, adopting best practices from other public service media, and tight coupling, adapting closely to their audience (Sehl and Cornia, 2021). While digital-native media are more successful in attracting young people, public service media combine external references and their own identity to fulfil their mission, striving to meet the demands of a generation that is not particularly loyal to public service media content.

2 Methodology

2.1 Research objectives

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore how Generation Z's 'media egocentrism' intersects with RTBF's traditional journalistic values in French-speaking Belgium. The main goal is to analyze how RTBF navigates the challenge of balancing its journalistic

principles with the preferences of a young, self-directed audience. Using non-participant observation and in-depth interviews with RTBF staff, the study focuses on three key areas:

1. RTBF's strategies for engaging with young audiences and addressing their expectations for participation and control.
2. The challenges faced by RTBF staff in adapting traditional journalistic values to meet these expectations.
3. The extent to which RTBF's content reflects and represents the interests and values of young Belgians.

2.2 Research techniques and methods

2.2.1 Non-participant observation

This study examines not only RTBF's linear television news production but also its content creation for digital platforms, reflecting the evolving ways in which young audiences engage with media. By analyzing both traditional and digital formats, we gain insight into how RTBF adapts its journalistic values to meet the expectations of younger viewers across multiple platforms. To better understand RTBF's approach, a two-week non-participant observation was conducted in the newsrooms of its *Nouvelles Générations* department, which is responsible for producing content for young audiences. This method allowed for an in-depth analysis of both editorial processes and the narrative and aesthetic strategies used to capture young viewers' attention (Riba-Campos, 2017). The observation focused on identifying elements of 'media egocentrism,' such as the integration of interactive platforms, the selection of themes and characters relevant to young audiences, and techniques aimed at fostering audience engagement.

The study covered three key programs that cater to different age groups within RTBF's *Nouvelles Générations* division. *Les Niouzz*, targeting children aged 7 to 11, was observed at RTBF's headquarters in Liège from March 18 to March 22, 2024. In Brussels, the study focused on *Mise à Jour*, designed for teenagers aged 12 to 16, and *TARMAC*, which primarily targets 17- to 25-year-olds but has been increasingly integrating content for the 12–16 age range. These programs were chosen because they represent RTBF's structured approach to engaging young audiences at different developmental stages. RTBF categorizes viewers under 7 as children, who have access to a separate linear and online channel, while those over 25 are considered young adults who transition to mainstream news and entertainment via RTBF's regular channels and TIPIK, a platform positioned between youth-oriented and general French-speaking Belgian audiences.

Access to the newsroom was negotiated with the editor-in-chief of *Nouvelles Générations* three months before the research began. The agreement allowed a researcher to observe daily work routines without intervening in the editorial process. The researcher documented the workflows, the content strategies aligned with RTBF's core journalistic values (RTBF, 2022), and notable events that arose during the observation period. Non-participant observation was chosen to ensure an objective analysis of work processes and newsroom dynamics, avoiding any influence on professional interactions or editorial decisions. This approach provided a detailed and impartial view of how RTBF tailors its content—both linear and digital—to

Professional role	Date and place of the interview
Producer of *Les Niouzz*	18 March 2024, Liège (Belgium)
General manager of RTBF	10 April 2024, Brussels (Belgium)
Director of RTBF.info	
Editor-in-chief of *Nouvelles Générations*	11 April 2024, Brussels (Belgium)
Head and creator of TARMAC	
Director of RTBF *Gaming*	26 April 2024, Brussels (Belgium)
Social media manager TARMAC	
Editor and presenter of *Mise à Jour*	
Editor and presenter of *Mise à Jour*	

reflect the media habits and preferences of younger audiences in Belgium.

2.2.2 In-depth interviews

In this study, we conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with RTBF staff to explore their perspectives on the network's strategies for engaging young audiences across various age groups. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of roles and viewpoints related to youth-oriented content. The interviews examined perceptions of the quality and relevance of RTBF's content for young viewers, as well as how effectively the programming reflects the interests and values of different youth demographics. We also discussed the strategies employed to encourage interaction and provide young audiences with greater control over content. Additionally, the interviews addressed the expectations and challenges involved in adapting traditional journalistic values, such as objectivity and accountability, to appeal to various youth segments. The composition of the interview sample was as follows (Table 1).

All interviews were recorded with the informed consent of participants and transcribed for thematic analysis. This method enabled the identification of patterns and variations in staff perceptions of RTBF's efforts to adapt to the values and preferences of different youth demographics.

3 Results

The findings from the interview study reveal that RTBF's journalistic approach is anchored in the core values outlined in Valeurs Éditoriales de l'Info et Règlements d'Ordre Intérieur Relatif au Traitement de l'Informationnelle et à la Déontologie du Personnel (RTBF, 2022), a document obtained during one of the newsroom observations. These values—reliability, independence, transparency, diversity, boldness, public service, and accessibility—form the foundation of RTBF's editorial practices. They reflect the organization's commitment to ethical and rigorous journalism while aligning with the European Broadcasting Union's public service values (EBU, 2018).

Interviewees highlighted that in response to the evolving media habits of young audiences, RTBF has developed five interconnected strategies to maintain relevance. These strategies focus on adapting content to digital consumption habits, fostering personalization and audience proximity, navigating algorithm-driven platforms, encouraging

audience migration to proprietary platforms, and promoting critical thinking and media literacy. The interviews suggest that these efforts are essential for balancing journalistic integrity with the shifting expectations of younger viewers, who increasingly consume news in fragmented, interactive, and algorithmically curated environments.

3.1 Evolution of consumption and adaptation of content

Recognizing the shift in teenagers' media consumption toward digital platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, RTBF has implemented a 'digital first' strategy, prioritizing creating content specifically designed for digital spaces to align with the preferences and behaviors of young audiences. By focusing on digital platforms, RTBF aims to engage younger viewers more effectively, acknowledging the importance of meeting them where they are most active. The General Manager of RTBF underscores the importance of this shift, highlighting that digital platforms are now the primary point of contact for young audiences. Consequently, RTBF invests heavily in these platforms to establish a connection with this demographic. This strategic prioritization ensures RTBF's presence in the digital environments where young people engage daily, leveraging the immediacy and popularity of social media to remain competitive in a media landscape dominated by these platforms.

Building on this perspective, the Editor-in-Chief of *Nouvelles Générations* acknowledges that the key challenge lies in transitioning young audiences from social networks to RTBF's own digital platforms while maintaining their engagement. Social media thus serves as both a recruitment tool and a stepping stone for fostering deeper audience connections. This 'digital first' strategy is also reflected in the approach of *Les Niouzz*, which prioritizes social media formats in its production process. While the program airs on linear television, its production focuses first on creating content suitable for platforms like TikTok and YouTube Shorts. Observational data highlights how *Les Niouzz* has adapted to the short-form video format, producing brief capsules designed to engage younger audiences aged 7–11, who typically have shorter attention spans.

RTBF's commitment to serving the under-25 demographic is evident in its focus on digital adaptation while maintaining its mission to inform, educate, and entertain. The Media Department, established in 2018, plays a pivotal role in this transformation by overseeing the adaptation of content and the creation of digital products for social media and RTBF's platforms. This adaptation includes offerings such as *Les Niouzz*'s TV content tailored for social networks, *Mise à Jour*'s exclusive content for Instagram and TikTok, and TARMAC's transmedia and hybrid digital content, which stands out as the flagship initiative targeting younger audiences.

Further illustrating RTBF's adaptive efforts, the Director of RTBF. info emphasizes the TARMAC at School initiative, where podcasts are recorded in secondary schools, fostering direct engagement with 17–18-year-olds. Observations reveal that this format encourages active participation, allowing teenagers to discuss cultural, political, and social topics in a manner aligned with their linguistic and cultural environment. This project highlights the importance of understanding young people's usage patterns and interests, as emphasized by the Head of TARMAC. Through these efforts, RTBF demonstrates a dynamic approach to adapting content for

digital-native audiences while upholding its mission of delivering meaningful and accessible information.

The adaptation of content is further evident in RTBF's strategic use of social media platforms, where programs such as *Les Niouzz*, *Mise à Jour*, and TARMAC maintain a strong presence. Platforms like Snapchat, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitch are pivotal in ensuring that Generation Z feels represented. RTBF tailors content specifically for each network, creating exclusive formats that resonate with the platform's unique audience. For instance, TARMAC features a twice-weekly news section published as a slider on Instagram, alongside its *IZI News* program, which delivers information in Reel format for Instagram and TikTok. This program targets young audiences aged 17–25 and addresses topics of interest, with new content released every Tuesday and Thursday.

According to Hendrickx's (2021) explorative case-study on VRT's popular Instagram channel @nws.nws.nws targeting 13- to 17-year-olds, revealed significant shifts in journalistic practices to engage younger audiences. Similarly, our research on RTBF through non-participant observation and in-depth interviews, indicates comparable changes in work routines. RTBF has shifted from internally determining content for young audiences to actively seeking their input. The producer of *Les Niouzz* emphasizes the importance of understanding each audience's environment, noting that young people's attitudes should inform content creation. To incorporate diverse perspectives and avoid routine, RTBF consistently hires freelancers for its three youth-oriented projects, ensuring fresh insights beyond those of internal journalists. To further strengthen its connection with Generation Z, RTBF has adopted a collaborative approach by engaging freelance journalists who rotate every three months. This dynamic model ensures that the programs are continuously enriched with fresh perspectives and approaches, allowing RTBF to respond to the rapidly changing interests and trends of younger audiences. This strategy not only diversifies viewpoints but also guarantees that programs like *Les Niouzz*, *Mise à Jour*, and TARMAC authentically and accurately represent the realities and interests of young French-speaking Belgian audiences. This flexible and inclusive approach underscores RTBF's commitment to staying relevant and engaging in a competitive digital media landscape.

RTBF's strategy of segmenting content into various brands and programs for different target groups offers clear benefits for young audiences. It allows for personalized, relevant content that fosters emotional connection and engagement. This diversification helps young people find topics of interest, ensuring they stay informed. It also encourages experimentation with new formats, adapting to their consumption habits, such as ephemeral or interactive content. Ultimately, RTBF reaches a broader youth audience, addressing a wider range of informational needs and preferences.

3.2 Personalization and proximity

Young audiences prefer content that aligns with their individual interests and allows them to maintain control over their viewing choices in daily life. RTBF addresses this preference by balancing its journalistic values—transparency, reliability, diversity, and public service—with the goal of responsibly informing and educating young people while personalizing content to meet their needs. Content adaptation is central to RTBF's strategy, as highlighted by interviews

and observations involving its staff. The organization strives to tailor content to young people's consumption preferences (e.g., themes, formats, and platforms), as emphasized by various contributors. However, the Director of RTBF.info insists on upholding core journalistic values such as credibility, rigor, and diversity when creating digital content. These values underpin RTBF's approach to transforming formats and content to match the habits of a generation accustomed to consuming information at its own pace.

Through our interviews and non-participant observation, it became evident that RTBF adapts its thematic focus to include issues directly relevant to young people, such as the environment, gender equality, bullying, and mental health. This approach ensures that young audiences see their realities reflected in the content, fostering stronger connections with the broadcaster. The Editor-in-Chief of *Nouvelles Générations* underscores the importance of making news relevant to Generation Z, emphasizing the need to go beyond headline stories and focus on topics that resonate with their experiences and concerns.

Furthermore, RTBF personalizes its content according to age and platform, with TARMAC emerging as a key example of transmedia adaptation. By providing content across various platforms, TARMAC allows teenagers to engage with information at their convenience while adhering to RTBF's mission to inform, educate, and entertain. This personalized approach aligns with RTBF's public service values, ensuring that the issues addressed are directly relevant to young people's lives and meet their expectations for meaningful and accessible content. This balance of personalization and proximity strengthens RTBF's ability to connect with Generation Z, leveraging tailored themes and formats while maintaining its ethical and educational responsibilities.

According to *Les Niouzz* producer, proximity on social media requires presenters to appear as friends, adopting a tone that is informal, authentic, and relatable—distinctly different from the formal demeanor of traditional television. The narrative style is adapted to create this sense of familiarity and trust, making young audiences feel connected to RTBF presenters as if they are trusted peers or companions. This connection is especially evident in programs like TARMAC's *ixPé*, where streamers engage with gaming audiences in a way that combines professional content delivery with a personal, approachable style. In many of the in-depth interviews conducted, it is said that young viewers not only look up to these presenters and streamers but also expect an interactive and genuine relationship that reflects their digital consumption habits. The producer of *Les Niouzz* summarizes this statement by saying, "the presenter is like your friend telling you something, making the news fun for them." The RTBF's professional also adds that there is a shift between television and social media, where presenters are perfect on linear TV and more natural in Instagram and TikTok videos, which creates a closer and stronger relationship with their young audience. This dual demand for relatability and reliability underscores the importance of tailoring content to meet the emotional and social needs of Generation Z, while maintaining the credibility and professionalism that RTBF represents.

RTBF recognizes that young audiences seek representation and connection through well-known figures who resonate with their identities and experiences. To meet this demand, *Les Niouzz* features three presenters who not only appear on each program but also create tailored content for social media. These presenters adapt their personas based on the age group and topic they are addressing, thus fostering a stronger connection with their audience. Similarly, *Mise à Jour* relies on two presenters who attract viewers aged 12 to 16. In contrast, TARMAC

emphasizes its brand identity as a collective point of connection for young people, while IZI News features notable personalities such as Yveline Leila and Pierre OG Lucas, self-styled 'news anchors,' who serve as representative figures for the platform and the young audiences aged 17 to 25, known and representative in the French-speaking community of Belgium. RTBF further enhances its proximity to young audiences by actively involving them in the content creation process. Programs such as *TARMAC at School* and *Les Niouzz* visit high schools and primary schools biweekly, providing opportunities for young people to discuss topics of interest and contribute to the platform's output. Coverage of music festivals and other youth-centric events similarly reflects RTBF's strategy of integrating young people's voices into its programming. Additionally, RTBF caters to younger audiences' desire for tangible souvenirs by distributing promotional items such as posters from *Les Niouzz* or caps from *Mise à Jour* during school visits, further strengthening their connection to the brand.

Interaction is a cornerstone of RTBF's approach to engaging young audiences. The General Manager highlights that allowing young people to express their opinions and participate in the programming process is essential for building proximity and fostering loyalty. By creating spaces where youth can actively contribute, RTBF reinforces its journalistic values of diversity and inclusion while delivering messages that resonate. The Editor-in-Chief of *Nouvelles Générations* emphasizes the importance of relatable presenters and carefully crafted narratives to deliver impactful, meaningful information to young audiences. Through these efforts, RTBF ensures its content remains relevant, engaging, and representative of the experiences of French-speaking Belgian youth.

3.3 Algorithms and changing trends for young audiences

RTBF faces a significant challenge on social media: engaging a generation characterized by youth media egocentrism, where personalized, self-driven content dominates. In an algorithm-driven landscape that prioritizes viral entertainment over educational content, RTBF has adapted its strategy to remain relevant while upholding its public service mission. The broadcaster's 'digital first' approach emphasizes short-form formats, topics of personal interest to young audiences, and an accessible tone. By leveraging platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, RTBF creates content that, according to in-depth interviews, employees believe resonates with the preferences of Generation Z. This strategy allows young audiences to feel a sense of ownership over the content while ensuring they are exposed to rigorous, verified information. This balance between personalization and educational values is central to RTBF's mission.

RTBF recognizes the constraints imposed by algorithms that often limit the reach of news content. The General Manager highlights the need to adapt formats to these algorithms, ensuring the content remains appealing while fulfilling the broadcaster's mission to inform and educate. The same interviewee explains that "the TikTok algorithm in 2021 worked for them when they launched a new news offering aimed at teenagers, where they had a good score initially. However, a year later, the score started to drop significantly. This meant that RTBF had to change the format again to start increasing views from their young audience due to the algorithm." By selecting timely, relevant issues and presenting them through visually impactful and concise formats, RTBF

maintains its relevance on platforms that prioritize brevity. This approach, as noted by the Director of RTBF.info, underscores the importance of short versions of programs in sustaining engagement and visibility in an increasingly competitive digital media environment. Through these efforts, RTBF effectively navigates the challenges of modern media consumption, offering content that aligns with the preferences of Generation Z while adhering to its core journalistic values.

In addition, RTBF fosters youth engagement by incorporating polls and questions into its social media posts. This interactive approach not only strengthens connections with its audience but also enhances the visibility of its content within algorithm-driven platforms. The Editor-in-Chief of *Nouvelles Générations* highlights that increased interaction from younger users directly contributes to greater content reach and improves RTBF's individual positioning in the personalized algorithms of social networks. By leveraging these interactive tools, RTBF successfully balances its public service mission with the demands of social media platforms. This strategy allows RTBF to achieve visibility and relevance among younger audiences while upholding its core journalistic values. In doing so, RTBF effectively navigates the challenges posed by youth media egocentrism, ensuring that its content remains both engaging and aligned with its educational and informational goals.

3.4 Challenge in migrating to proprietary platforms

RTBF faces challenges in encouraging young audiences to transition from social networks like TikTok and Instagram to its proprietary digital platform, Auvio. Launched on April 13, 2016, Auvio offers live and on-demand access to RTBF's TV, radio, news, and sports content, aiming to align with current media consumption trends across various devices. Social media environments, which prioritize immediacy and virality, are deeply embedded in the habits of young users. Migrating these audiences to Auvio, where RTBF can provide a more comprehensive and controlled news experience, demands a carefully designed strategy. The General Manager acknowledges that the greatest challenge lies in motivating young people to move from social media to RTBF's digital platforms. To address this, RTBF has invested in creating exclusive, personalized content for Auvio that underscores the truthfulness, depth, and credibility characteristic of public service media. This strategy also includes reinforcing RTBF's brand identity in ways that appeal to younger audiences. RTBF understands the importance of strengthening its brand identity with labeled and relevant content for its young audiences to attract and retain them on its platform, as it allows the organization to connect more deeply with a public that values authenticity, innovation, and interaction. By focusing on a solid and appealing brand identity, RTBF can not only capture the attention of young people but also foster a continuous and loyal relationship through its own platform, Auvio. This, in turn, can strengthen its position in an increasingly competitive media landscape, where audiences seek content that resonates with their interests and values.

To compete with the instant gratification offered by social networks, RTBF is transforming the user experience on Auvio. This includes integrating interactive features and agile formats that align with the consumption preferences of Generation Z. Additionally, RTBF fosters a sense of community on its platform by encouraging

youth participation, ensuring that young users view the content as relevant and personally significant. The Editor-in-Chief of *Nouvelles Générations* emphasizes that the success of this migration depends on RTBF's ability to connect with young people's interests and consumption styles while maintaining the informational rigor that defines its public service mission. By balancing personalization and control with journalistic quality, RTBF invites young audiences to explore its proprietary platforms. This approach offers content that transcends the limitations of social media, ensuring that RTBF remains relevant and effective in engaging with younger generations.

3.5 Promoting critical thinking and media literacy

RTBF emphasizes the importance of fostering critical thinking and encouraging a diversity of perspectives among young audiences as part of its public service mission. The Director of RTBF Gaming highlights the need to include topics related to democracy and plurality of opinions, stressing that young people must learn to listen to and respect differing viewpoints, even when they disagree. This approach promotes empathy and critical thinking, directly counteracting the self-centered consumption habits often seen among younger audiences.

RTBF Gaming, an initiative primarily aimed at young audiences, plays a key role in this effort by offering content related to video games, news, reviews, and live broadcasts of events and competitions. As one of the fastest-growing areas of content consumption, video games have become a dominant form of entertainment and digital socialization. Through RTBF Gaming, the broadcaster not only diversifies its offerings but also adapts to new trends in media consumption, strengthening its connection with an audience increasingly interested in this field. The director of RTBF Gaming integrates these considerations into the content and distribution strategy, ensuring alignment with RTBF's journalistic values.

Observations in the newsroom revealed that critical thinking development is embedded in the editorial decision-making process. The Head of TARMAC underscored the importance of educating young people on how media shapes their perception of the world. Discussions among editorial teams frequently centered on ensuring that content encourages young audiences to reflect on the reliability of sources and the framing of narratives. Editors and producers were observed debating how best to present diverse perspectives within content, often opting for formats that stimulate discussion rather than passive consumption.

This emphasis on media literacy was also apparent in social media strategies. The Social Media Manager of TARMAC highlighted efforts to engage young audiences in conversations about misinformation and bias, reinforcing the need for critical engagement rather than passive acceptance. These observations illustrated that RTBF actively incorporates strategies to encourage media literacy, equipping young audiences with skills to navigate an increasingly complex digital environment.

In summary, RTBF recognizes the importance of fostering dialog and critical thinking among young people, providing them with tools to exchange diverse perspectives and develop as informed citizens. As the Editor-in-Chief of *Nouvelles Générations* succinctly states, the ultimate goal of RTBF's content for Generation Z is to prepare young

audiences to become tomorrow's viewers and internet users who can engage responsibly with media in their future roles as active citizens.

4 Discussion and conclusion

Based on the results of the non-participant observation and in-depth interviews conducted, it can be said that RTBF's strategies for attracting and retaining young audiences showcase its adaptability to the demands of the digital environment. RTBF has shown great flexibility in responding to the demands of the digital environment by diversifying its offerings and adopting interactive formats suited to platforms popular among young people, such as social media and streaming services. Its content segmentation strategy, inclusion of ephemeral formats, and collaboration with influencers and experts on topics of interest to young people, such as video games and current news, allows it to remain relevant in a saturated media ecosystem. Additionally, its commitment to a strong and consistent brand identity in these spaces strengthens its connection with an audience that values immediacy, authenticity, and personalization. By focusing on the informational and entertainment needs of new generations, RTBF ensures continuous presence in their digital lives, fostering loyalty and engagement with its platforms (RQ1).

Acknowledging the evolving consumption habits of Generation Z, RTBF has embraced a 'digital first' approach, prioritizing platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube (RQ1). This strategy enables RTBF to connect with audiences under 25 and establish an early relationship with quality journalism, addressing the research objective concerning engagement with young audiences. Initiatives like *Les Niouzz*, *Mise à Jour*, and TARMAC illustrate RTBF's ability to tailor content to different platforms, reinforcing its image as a trusted source (RQ3).

RTBF faces the challenge of aligning its traditional journalistic values with Generation Z's preference for fast-paced, personalized content. Maintaining credibility in a digital space dominated by viral and often unverified information requires adapting tone and format to make news accessible without compromising rigor. Striking this balance is essential, given that Generation Z favors immediate, interactive formats over lengthy, static content (RQ2, RQ5). RTBF's approach includes addressing youth interests through relevant topics, authentic communication styles, and opportunities for interaction. However, translating this engagement to its proprietary Auvio platform remains a challenge. While RTBF provides exclusive and in-depth content on Auvio, Generation Z perceives a lack of full customization aligned with their personalized expectations, creating a barrier to migration from social media (RQ4).

Youth 'media egocentrism,' characterized by a preference for content tailored to individual interests, presents both challenges and opportunities for RTBF. By offering pluralistic journalism in perspectives, diverse in content, formats, and audiences, and above all trustworthy, RTBF combats information bubbles while broadening the perspectives of young people, fostering critical thinking, and promoting media literacy (RQ5).

RTBF's journalistic values, including plurality, impartiality, and reliability, are integrated into its strategy to engage young audiences. By offering diverse perspectives and content, RTBF aims to provide quality information that fosters critical thinking among young people (RQ2). Additionally, RTBF has adopted a multiplatform approach,

adapting to digital trends to reach younger audiences while maintaining its core ethical principles (RQ1). This strategy seeks to strengthen user trust in a context of highly segmented and dynamic news consumption (RQ3).

In conclusion, RTBF has actively adapted to the digital habits of young audiences while maintaining its public service mission. By addressing the complexities of digital consumption and promoting critical engagement, the broadcaster seeks to remain a relevant and credible source of information. However, as media egocentrism intensifies and algorithm-driven consumption shapes audience behavior, RTBF faces the ongoing challenge of balancing personalization with journalistic integrity.

The case of RTBF illustrates how a public service media organization navigates the transition to a multiplatform environment while upholding fundamental journalistic values. Its efforts to diversify content, integrate digital strategies, and maintain editorial standards reflect broader trends in public service media's response to changing audience expectations. As media fragmentation continues, the capacity of public broadcasters to sustain public trust will likely depend on their ability to balance innovation with their core mission of providing accurate and inclusive information (Costera Meijer, 2023).

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

Ethics statement

Ethical review and approval was not required for the study on human participants in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent from the [patients/ participants OR patients/participants legal guardian/next of kin] was not required to participate in this study in accordance with the national legislation and the institutional requirements.

Author contributions

JP-A: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Ld'H: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that no Generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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