Under Pressure? An analysis of the impact of European State aid policy on public service broadcasting.

Marginalisation or revival as public service media?

In this PhD Karen Donders investigates whether and how the European Commission has affected Member States’ regulation and policy for public broadcasting organisations on the basis of EU State aid rules. Three questions are at the core of this research. Firstly, which topics, priorities and trends can be identified in the European Commission’s policies? Secondly, is State aid policy in the area of public service broadcasting resulting in a marginalisation of public broadcasters’ activities or is it, on the contrary, furthering good governance principles and a sustainable public service media project? Thirdly, what will be the foreseeable future effects of European State aid policy on public service broadcasting?

Overall, scholars in the field of communication sciences, public broadcasters and Member States’ ministries of media fear the European Commission’s interventions. Private broadcasters and, increasingly so, publishers feel the Commission’s intervention is not fargoing enough. After over 15 years of State aid intervention in the field of public service broadcasting, this PhD challenges the dominant observation that State aid policy damages the holistic public broadcasting project that is well entrenched in Western Europe (so far) and argues that the application of the State aid rules has furthered public interest objectives. In fact, the dynamics underlying Commission investigations into the funding of public broadcasting organisations and the closure thereof – even though based on a competition rationale – fosters the emergence of a sustainable public service media project.

The PhD consists of five main building blocks. It, firstly, contextualises the evolutions public broadcasters have gone through and defines what is meant by ‘public service media’. Secondly, the legal framework within which the European Commission can tackle Member States’ public broadcasting policy is assessed. Thirdly, the Commission’s policies are analysed from a historical angle and a more detailed thematic perspective (focusing on all decisions of the European Commission in this area). Fourthly, for both Germany and Flanders the regulation and policy for public service broadcasting before and after European Commission involvement is scrutinised and evaluated. Finally, some conclusions with regard to the research argument are presented and a number of policy recommendations presented.