

## **Report: Viewers panel news and current affairs 2003 Mira Media – The Netherlands**

### **1 INTRODUCTION**

Over the course of the last few decades, the Netherlands has become a multicultural society. A society in which groups of different ethno-cultural origin often live with each other - and sometimes aside each other. Media fulfil an important role in how this society functions. Media are carriers of culture and a means of identification: they offer the viewer recognition and acknowledgement. The media provide a platform for discussion and for the dialogue between different population groups. They bind people together and can make a positive contribution to a democratic, multicultural society.

The media and their audiences, however, are interdependent. When new programmes are produced, the interaction with the audience and the ways in which it can influence the programme become ever more important, both in terms of ratings and the broadcasters' accountability for programmatic achievements. This makes it necessary to provide media professionals with skills with which they can bring about this interaction. Considering the development of society and the composition of viewers groups, these skills should include an intercultural component.

On the other hand, intercultural, critical media behaviour is essential for the audience to be able to influence the media successfully. Consumers should be informed about possibilities and strategies to influence the media. Moreover, they must understand what role the media play in influencing and bringing about perceptions, hypes and opinions. Eventually that understanding must lead them to act: to react to programmes and to want to take part in the decision-making of advisory bodies and programme councils.

Mira Media wants to contribute to the empowerment of media consumers, both those from ethnic minority groups and ethnic-Dutch viewers and listeners. Therefore it started developing the Viewers Panel in 2003.

The Viewers Panel is a group of media consumers, which evaluates a genre of TV programmes according to a set of multicultural quality criteria developed by Mira Media. The intention is for a different programme genre to be evaluated every year by a Viewers Panel. The panel takes place in the fall, when the year's new programming starts, and is intensively guided and instructed by a project team of the unit Programming of Mira Media.

The results of the Viewers Panel provide an insight into the representation of the multicultural society in television programmes. Moreover, the results give an impression of how (young) media consumers evaluate that representation. The primary aim of the project, however, is to develop an assessment tool for the audience to evaluate programmes with concerning their multicultural character. Such a viewers' assessment tool will get the discussion going among media consumers about media content and the availability of alternative programmes and the way the public is influenced by the media. Furthermore, it can serve as an evaluation tool for programme makers to undertake more in the ways of (self)monitoring regarding the multicultural character of programmes.

The Viewers Panel *News and Current Affairs 2003* is intended as a pilot, for what is to be a series of similar Viewers Panels. Between 20 October and 16 November 2003, panel members analysed items from four news and current affairs programmes: NOS News (20:00), RTL4 News, NOVA and Barend & Van Dorp. All in all, 80 items were covered by the analysis.

This is the report on the first Viewers Panel. In Chapter two, you will find a brief summary of the research and an overview of the conclusions. Chapter three provides an account of the methodology and the choices that were made in the development of the questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of four parts: general questions, questions about journalistic quality, questions referring to portrayal issues and questions about the viewer's personal opinion. In chapter four, the results are analysed for each part.

## 2 SUMMARY

The Viewers Panel *News and Current Affairs 2003* was a pilot and served three objectives:

1. to explore to what extent the set-up of this activity contributes to the critical media behaviour of media consumers;
2. to investigate to what extent this questionnaire can be used to collect qualitative data that is usable for programme makers, and
3. to research in which way the multicultural society is portrayed in items of the selected news and current affairs programmes.

### Critical media behaviour

The questionnaire and the participation in the Viewers Panel were shown to contribute to critical media behaviour. The panel members who participated are aware of the elements that are important in evaluating an item and capable of articulating their opinion.

The Viewers Panel consisted of a group of highly committed and critical young people. Different ethnic groups were represented in the panel. There was a balanced proportion of men and women. The level of education of the panel members, however, was above average.

This group had a clear image about how the media works. In as far as this concerned the portrayal of the multicultural society, that image was distinctly negative at the start of the project. The media parrot each other when it comes to problems and difficulties that involve ethnic minority groups, ethnic minority groups are not heard enough in the media and there is too little knowledge about the cultures and social position of these groups. Those statements could not always be substantiated equally well.

The questionnaire therefore included questions of observation. These forced the panel members to watch closely when viewing an item. There were only a few questions about personal impressions and judgements in which the respondent could bring in issues of (social and/or cultural) context. Moreover, the answers to these questions had to be illustrated. Thus, panel members could less easily make subjective, unfounded assertions.

During the concluding meeting it turned out that the panel members felt confirmed in their negative judgement on the media. Over half of those present indicated on the evaluation form that the representation of ethnic minorities and the multicultural society was more negative than they had thought. The ethnically Dutch panel members and those who at the starting meeting had had moderate opinions were disappointed in the media. Furthermore, at the concluding meeting all the panel members turned out to be able to indicate very clearly what effect some images and statements had had on them.

### Usability of the data

The data that were collected with this questionnaire offer a clear view of the multicultural society as it is represented in the items that were analysed. Of course, the results only concern the items that were analysed and not the entire programme or the genre of news and current affairs as a whole. The statements in this report are thus by necessity limited in their scope. Nevertheless it is possible to distil a tendency, an underlying system, from the results of this Viewers Panel. After all, when it comes to questions of representation, the issue is not about the respective incidents, but about the pattern in which the incident in question occurs.

A number of questions turned out not to yield usable information. A concept like 'news value' proved not to have been operationalised sufficiently. The clarification the respondents included about their answers showed that news value and personal interest had been equated: an item about the soccer game Netherlands – Scotland was thus for example not found to have news value. Sometimes the clarification also showed a lack of understanding of the role of the media in the public debate. When Minister Remkes proposed the plan to divide the Netherlands up again into distinct police districts, it was also not found to have news value: "the government comes up with all kinds of plans ...".

Another problem emerged concerning the questions about the relevance of ethnicity in the item. This question was formulated on the basis of the recommendation that ethnicity should only be mentioned if it is relevant to the item. Ethnicity is only relevant if it serves to explain an event. The Viewers Panel, however, proved to be too highly educated and consistently judged ethnicity to be relevant to the social position of a person. Since ethnicity was defined as an inclusive concept in this research (majority group, white Dutchmen have an ethnicity too), this question led to meaningless answers. Nevertheless, on a highly theoretical level of abstraction the panel members are actually right.

On the basis of these results the questionnaire will be adapted for use by subsequent panels. For the most part, however, the data are usable.

### Representation of the multicultural society

#### *a. Attention to the multicultural society*

Of the total of 80 items that were coded, 30 directly concern the multicultural society. These are items for and/or about ethnic minority groups (e.g., start of the Ramadan) and items on subjects that are relevant to the entire society, but specifically focus on the relations between ethnic groups. The number of spokesmen from ethnic minority groups, however, is limited. The proportions range from three ethnic-Dutch to every one ethnic minority group person in NOS News and NOVA to 7:1 in RTL4 News. One new element, however, is that people from minority groups get to speak about all subjects, with the exception of health and health care issues.

One-sidedness was observed in terms of the use of visual material. In a large number of items about the multicultural society, Moroccans are the only visible ethnic group. To a lesser extent they appear alongside other groups. The Dutch minority groups seem to be reduced to only Moroccans.

#### *b. Journalistic quality*

The image the items provide of the multicultural society is one-sided. On the one hand, that is the consequence of selecting the genre of News and Current Affairs, which tends by definition to focus on that which is negative, problematic and out of the ordinary. On the other, the one-sidedness is also the consequence of a lack in knowledge about the different ethnic minority groups. The choice of guests and commentators is therefore limited. Few experts from those groups are invited to comment, and when they are, it is almost always the same persons. Someone who appears often, to the serious annoyance of the panel members, is Ali B. A fair rapper, but in the eyes of the panel members definitely not someone who could represent the Moroccan community, or even the Moroccan youth. The Viewers Panel indicates that in 44 of the 80 selected items (55%), the subject was reported from more than one perspective. In 17 items all perspectives were covered. The presupposition that the perspective of ethnic minorities would be lacking in particular was not confirmed.

There was criticism about the selection of topics, though. It appears to be based mostly on the (presumed) knowledge of the dominant group. Some subjects may be news to the majority population, but have been a focus of attention within the community itself for some time already. An item with such a subject thus does not meet the journalistic criterium of news value, according to the Viewers Panel.

#### *c. Portrayal*

Researching questions of portrayal by means of a questionnaire proved to be problematic on a number of counts. Several questions yielded answers that could not be processed, such as the question about the relevance of ethnicity.

Nevertheless one can come to some substantiated conclusions about representation. Thus, the diversity within ethnic minority groups is hardly ever represented in the items. The ethnic Dutch, on the other hand, were portrayed in varied ways. This lack in variation diminishes the chance that the viewers come to view people from ethnic minority groups as individuals, rather than merely carriers of group characteristics.

Stereotyping proved to be a concept that the panel members had difficulties applying. The answers to this question constituted an inventory of associations with (different) ethnicities, including the Dutch one. It's a disturbing inventory: we find negative, generalised images about (groups of) people in 46 items. In 37 of them, they concern negative associations with Moroccans and/or Muslims. These involve associations with insecurity, crime, religious fundamentalism and deprivation in general.

Moreover, the items do not present a reaction to the negative statements about Moroccans respectively Muslims. In only nine cases they are refuted or contradicted. Apparently they concern generally accepted associations.

The Dutch society was represented as a multicultural one in 36 items. In seven of these cases, the multicultural character of society was portrayed as self-evident. In most cases, the focus was on the problematic aspects of it (13 items) or on the divide in society between 'we and the ethnic Others' (11 items).

*d. Impressions of the panel members*

These results appear to indicate that this Viewers Panel is well informed about the professional demands one can expect news or current affairs programmes to meet. In this sense, the panel members confirm the presupposition that underpins this project: that large groups of media consumers are well able to evaluate media products. In any case this group of young people of above-average education was capable of doing so.

The Viewers Panel furthermore feels that news and current affairs programmes significantly contribute to a negative image of ethnic minority groups and/or the multicultural society. The fact that they covered the genre of News and Current Affairs of course contributed to this judgement. Nevertheless there were also examples of items that were coded that positively contributed to the image of ethnic minority groups. A detailed analysis of the characteristics of these items could provide media professionals with pointers.

If we look at the emotional reaction to an item, it emerges that this is not just linked to the professional aspects of an item, but also with the contents. The Viewers Panel apparently does not just react as critical media consumers, but also as committed citizens and as individuals. The panel members alternate between these roles in interdependent ways, which characterise themselves by a distinct use of words.