

Behind the Broadcasting: Gen Z creators on encoding, public value, and Dutch public media

An analysis of institutional constraints, creative agency, and public value according to Generation Z employees at VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA

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Abstract:

This thesis explores how a new generation of media professionals at Dutch public broadcasters BNNVARA and VPRO-HUMAN encode their political and ideological values into content, while working within institutional constraints of longstanding organisation. As public broadcasting continues to play a key role in shaping societal narratives, understanding how young creators navigate issues of creative agency, diversity, audience reception, and public value becomes increasingly relevant. Especially amid a rapidly evolving media landscape and deepening structural inequalities within the industry. The central research question guiding this study is: *How does a new generation of public media makers encode their ideological and political visions into content while working within the frameworks of BNNVARA and VPRO-HUMAN?* Four sub-questions structure the analysis, focusing on: (1) creative agency and institutional structures, (2) diversity and meritocracy, (3) audience interpretation and encoding, and (4) the operationalization of public value.

Grounded in Hall's (1980, p. 51-61) encoding/decoding model, and Moore's (1995, p. 27-56) Public Value Theory, this study applies a qualitative methodology based on ten semi-structured interviews with early-career employees across editorial, production, and creative roles. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns related to institutional influence, identity politics, and audience negotiation. Findings show that young public media professionals often enter the field with strong political and social motivations, viewing public broadcasting as an outlet for meaningful storytelling and systemic critique. Many consistently pitch content surrounding issues such as climate justice, racism, and gender identity, thus encoding ideological meaning into their work. At the same time, their ability to express these views is mediated by institutional hierarchies, budget constraints, and editorial gatekeeping. These challenges are heightened by the €156 million in funding cuts facing the Public Broadcasting Organisation.

Participants also reported tensions around generational differences. While often positioned as digitally handy and trend-aware, younger employees felt pressure to deliver creative innovation without the corresponding authority. Diversity and meritocracy were similarly double-edged: while inclusion was valued symbolically, structural inequality persists.

Audience engagement emerged as a particularly complicated development. Participants were highly conscious of how political content might be received, especially in the algorithmic and polarizing climate of social media. Many adjusted tone, framing, or narrative to avoid backlash or misinterpretation, demonstrating active encoding strategies under pressure. Despite this, there remained a strong commitment to public value ideals, even when they conflicted with engagement metrics or institutional obligations.

This study concludes that young professionals are simultaneously constrained and empowered within public broadcasting. However, their success is uneven, shaped by external funding pressures, internal politics, and broader shifts in how media audiences engage with meaning.

By showcasing the perspectives of Gen Z creators within public service institutions, this thesis contributes to ongoing debates about democratic media, institutional transformation, and the future of public broadcasting in an era of ideological polarization and digital developments.

KEYWORDS: Public Broadcasting, Generation Z, Creative Agency, Encoding/Decoding, Public Value Theory

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1. Introduction

From television screens to Instagram feeds, public broadcast plays an important role in shaping the stories, values, and cultural norms that define our societies. On these varying platforms, including television, radio, cinema, and increasingly, social media, influence is held over societal perceptions on what is considered normal and acceptable. One might argue that the role of younger generations is particularly important, as they are not just consumers but also creators of media, and are therefore shaping society both as citizens and as mediamakers. Their perceptions, so heavily influenced by the media they engage with, will influence their attitudes, values, and eventually, their actions. Apart from the at-home content creators, the perspectives of young media professionals are crucial, as they might reach bigger platforms and may therefore shape the direction of public discourse and cultural representation. However, despite their importance, young professionals in the media industry might encounter barriers due to its hierarchical and exclusive nature, which may hinder their ability to fully contribute and be heard. This thesis will analyze young mediamakers and their experiences surrounding their political and ideological beliefs, and how they feel that these are portrayed in the media they contribute to, particularly while navigating the media systems that are already in place. Ten interviews with young media makers in the Netherlands were conducted, analysed and discussed for the purpose of this research.

The Netherlands presents a favorable environment for conducting this research, due to its unique public broadcasting system, which is financed by the government but functions as an independent administrative body (Fei Lung, 2021). Founded in the 1920's and taking its current shape over the course of the last 100 years, the Nederlandse Publieke Omroep (NPO) is a broadcasting system currently consisting of 10 channels (Fei Lung, 2021). The Dutch public broadcasting system has long been shaped by a unique cultural and institutional legacy. Rooted in the post-war system of “*verzuiling*” (pillarisation), Dutch public media has traditionally served as a mirror of the nation's ideological, religious, and socio-political divisions (Hagedoorn, 2016, p. 197).

Each broadcaster historically represented a distinct societal group, producing content tailored to the values and norms of their respective audiences (Hagedoorn, 2016, p. 197). Two channels, the NOS and the NTR are meant to simply convey news and education in a neutral manner, or to create informative programs on art, culture, youth and education (Fei Lung, 2021). The remaining 8 channels have different target audiences, political backgrounds, and content shapes. The variety in this system is often a hot political debate, questioned by current politicians (Slomp, 2024, paragraph 1). As the radical right party PVV believes it to be “a complete waste of money that should be removed entirely”, other, more progressive parties find that the format needs to be adjusted for future sustainability, but should remain a staple of Dutch society (Slomp, 2024, paragraph 2). While broader Dutch society has largely moved beyond pillarisation, its historical impact remains visible in the public broadcasting landscape. The early ideological pillars, Protestant, Catholic, socialist, and liberal,

were not merely societal identities, but deeply ingrained structures that governed schooling, health care, and media (Hagedoorn, 2016, p. 197). As a result, Dutch broadcasting evolved into a model where various groups were given individual broadcasting time under a shared platform (Vermeer & Kormelink, 2024, p. 96-97). This framework created a varied but fragmented media landscape in which representation of identity was deeply rooted (Vermeer & Kormelink, 2024, p. 96-97). Broadcasters are still legally required to represent a certain group, but the ideology behind it has softened. The identities of the channels are now more value driven, such as humanism, environmentalism, education, or youth culture.

To start a new public broadcasting organization in the Netherlands, an aspiring broadcaster must have at least 50,000 paying members and demonstrate that it offers added value by targeting different audiences or producing distinct content compared to existing broadcasters (Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 2023). This grants them temporary recognition, allowing them to air programs on the public broadcasting system. In 2022, a new broadcaster, ZWART (Dutch word for Black) entered the framework, in order to create more inclusive programmes with other perspectives, in which underrepresented stories and makers can gain platform (Omroep Zwart, 2025). On the side of the political spectrum, ON!, a broadcaster self-identifying as radically right-wing, also entered the framework. (Hinke, 2024)

Due to ongoing budget cuts and structural limitations imposed on the public broadcasting system, many broadcasting organizations have undergone mergers, making the historical distinctions between individual channels less visible. These mergers typically occur between broadcasters with shared ideological convictions or overlapping target audiences, though this is not a necessity. Certain organisations have merged completely, whereas others consider themselves more as “collaborative” in order to remain autonomous in content creation, while still reaping the benefits offered by the government when merging. Despite diminishing governmental investment and the merging, traces of the original pillarization structure remain evident within the system. However, the future of Dutch public broadcasting remains uncertain amid continued financial constraints and organizational restructuring. Table 1 provides an overview of the various broadcasting organizations, their ideological affiliations, and membership numbers as of 2021.

Table 1. Broadcasters in 2021

Name	Status	Ideology or Target Audience	Members (2021)
AVROTROS – PowNed	Collaborative broadcaster	AVROTROS: Liberal PowNed: Youth, rightwing	373.000
MAX-WNL	Collaborative broadcaster	MAX: Seniors WNL: Rightwing, conservatives	468.000
VPRO-HUMAN	Collaborative broadcaster	VPRO: Left wing progressive HUMAN: Humanistic	364.000
BNNVARA	Independent broadcaster	Equal opportunity	407.000
KRO-NCRV	Independent broadcaster	Christian	405.000
EO	Independent broadcaster	Orthodox-Protestant	320.000
ON!	Aspiring broadcaster	Radical right wing	55.000
ZWART	Aspiring broadcaster	Inclusivity	58.000
NOS	Task broadcaster	News, current affairs, sport	Not applicable
NTR	Task broadcaster	Culture, education, society	Not applicable
Ster	Other	Advertising	Not applicable

Note. Adapted from *Welke omroepen zijn er?*, by Rijksoverheid, 2025

<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/media-en-publieke-omroep/vraag-en-antwoord/welke-omroepen>

This thesis focuses on the Dutch public broadcasting channels BNNVARA and VPRO-HUMAN. These channels were selected due to their explicit self-identification as progressive, just, righteous, and informative media platforms (“Missie En Identiteit - BNNVARA,” n.d.; “Organisatie,” n.d.) This makes them particularly relevant to the present study, which seeks to examine whether young people perceive their progressive beliefs as being represented and acknowledged within these institutional frameworks.

The historical origins of these broadcasters differ significantly. BNNVARA originated from two separate entities: BNN and VARA. BNN, originally an acronym for “Bart’s News Network,” was established in 1997 by presenter Bart de Graaff, with the aim of producing youth-oriented television targeting audiences between the ages of 13 and 35 (*Over BNN*, 2017). In contrast, VARA, short for “Vereeniging van Arbeiders Radio Amateurs” (Association of Labourers Radio Amateurs), was founded in 1925 as a media outlet representing socialist and labourer oriented perspectives (“Geschiedenis BNNVARA - BNNVARA,” n.d.) Over the decades, VARA evolved into a prominent platform for emancipatory ideals and became one of the major pillars of Dutch public broadcasting, particularly after the normalisation of television in the 1950s (Veerman, 2016). In response to governmental pressure in 2011 to reduce the number of public broadcasters to eight, mergers were pushed as a strategy for survival (Scheltema, 2015, p. 16). As a result, BNN and VARA officially merged on January 1, 2014, forming BNNVARA as a unified media organization (Jaarverslag BNNVARA, 2018).

VPRO and HUMAN also have distinct origins. VPRO was founded in 1926 as the “Vrijzinnig Protestantsche Radio Omroep” (Liberal Protestant Radio Broadcasting), and originally served a religious audience (Veerman, 2016). However, during the cultural shifts of the 1960s, VPRO underwent a transformation, distancing itself from its religious roots and embracing countercultural and progressive perspectives, including the broadcasting of influential “flower power” content (Veerman, 2016). This repositioning solidified its identity as one of the most progressive voices within the Dutch public media landscape (Veerman, 2016). HUMAN, officially established in 1989 as the Humanistische Omroep Stichting (Humanist Broadcasting Foundation), originated from the Humanistisch Verbond, a humanist association grounded in the belief that individuals bear responsibility for themselves and others, as well as for society and the environment at large (*Over HUMAN*, 2025). Unlike BNNVARA, VPRO and HUMAN did not fully merge, but instead started a strategic partnership. During the wave of consolidation in 2013, the Dutch cabinet offered significant incentives to encourage broadcaster mergers, including a €10 million bonus, guaranteed existence until 2021, and increased prime-time airtime (van Keken & Ramaer, 2023). Despite these offers,

VPRO initially resisted such institutional alignment. However, in 2022, VPRO-HUMAN formally identified itself as a collaborative broadcaster (see Table 1) in order to benefit from these government incentives (van Keken & Ramaer, 2023). According to VPRO's 2022 annual financial plan, both VPRO and HUMAN continue to produce their own distinct content, but as a joint broadcaster, they receive greater funding to sustain high-quality media production (Jaarplan VPRO, 2022, p. 2–3).

Comparing the Dutch system to other public broadcasting models highlights its unique challenges due to its complex history. For instance, the BBC in the United Kingdom operates under a more centralized model with a royal framework, while the American PBS is heavily decentralized and dependent on local stations and donations (“Copy of Royal Charter for the Continuance of the British Broadcasting Corporation,” 2016, p. 6; *Frequently Asked Questions About Support*, 2025). In contrast, the Dutch model requires continuous negotiation between the independent broadcasters under the NPO umbrella. This can be considered a strength, as the Dutch system allowed for a variety of voices, but also as a weakness, as the amount of independent organizations involved can make it complicated to coordinate.

The field of Dutch journalism and broadcasting is continuing to undergo rapid changes. It was announced in March 2025 that the public broadcasters are facing political and financial pressures, including €156 million budget cuts from the cabinet at that time (BNNVARA, 2025). These cuts threaten independence, and therefore the ability to act as guardians of democratic values, one of the things the progressive channels take pride in. On the other hand, societal expectations around diversity and inclusion have been pushing media institutions to represent the complicated Dutch society better. Unfortunately, in recent years, public discourse has become increasingly polarized, and the role of media, media representation and which stories get platformed are more scrutinized than ever (Rabb et al., 2023, p.2). In the Netherlands, particularly topics such as climate change and gender are very polarised, and are discussed in extreme lengths, as both proponents and opponents of these issues experience them as existential threats (Universiteit van Amsterdam 2022, paragraph 2) Amid these tensions, young media professionals are entering the field with new ideals, generational perspectives, and a strong sense of personal and political values. Yet, their ability to influence institutional narratives is shaped by existing hierarchies, editorial norms, and working within the financial frameworks of public broadcasting.

The digitalization and platformisation of media are another aspect of pressures as well as opportunities for content creators. Social media, streaming platforms, and algorithms have fragmented audiences and changed the metrics of success from “Kijk Cijfers” (which translates to viewing numbers, but is in this thesis referred to as “Ratings”) to online measurements, such as likes, clicks and shares. Young media makers today are digital natives, fluent on these platforms, and often expected to navigate both traditional editorial responsibilities as well as digital branding strategies. Within organizations like VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA, this duality can create tensions between institutional goals and personal creative agency. This shifting environment places young media

makers in a complicated position. They are expected to bring fresh perspectives and connect with younger, more diverse audiences, while operating within a shifting context. In many ways, they are seen as cultural translators, bridging the gap between traditional broadcasting norms and contemporary societal discourses. Their position raises important questions about agency, power, and innovation in media production.

Furthermore, their situation is worsened by generational differences and expectations. Younger media makers enter a workforce with their own values, shaped by movements such as climate change, anti-racism, and gender equality. These values might clash with the established priorities, or risk assessments, of senior editorial leadership.

Despite an abundance of academic attention to media ethics, media diversity, changes in media landscape and public service broadcasting, there is a notable gap in research focusing on the lived experiences of young professionals within these institutions. Furthermore, much of the literature tends to focus on larger international media institutions, such as the aforementioned BBC in the UK or PBS in the United States. The perceptions of young Dutch media makers, in particular those aligning themselves with the progressive channels VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA, remains underexplored.

To address this topic, this thesis adopts a qualitative methodology, using semi-structured interviews with ten young journalists working at VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA. These interviews were designed to capture the participants' views on creative autonomy, meaning making in their content, navigating audience engagement, and institutional constraints. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their role within the public broadcasting narrative, their creative liberties and limitations, their audience engagement and values within the organisation.

The concept of "narrative encoding" serves as a central analytical tool in this study. It refers to the process by which media professionals embed particular meanings, values, and assumptions into the content they produce. Rooted in Hall's (1980, pp. 51-61) encoding/decoding model, with its concept of narrative encoding, emphasizes how institutional barriers, cultural norms and expectations, and individual beliefs come together and influence the creation of media content.

This research focuses on the experiences of young media makers within the Dutch public broadcasting system, specifically examining how they navigate institutional structures, editorial norms, and societal expectations. In particular, it centers on BNNVARA and VPRO-HUMAN, two progressive, left-leaning broadcasters, because their ideological missions provide a unique context to explore whether and how the values of young media professionals align with those of these organizations.

It will investigate these themes further by aiming to answer the research question: *How does a new generation of public media makers encode their ideological and political visions into content while working within the frameworks of BNNVARA and VPRO HUMAN?*

To address this, the study will also address the following sub-research questions derived from the literature:

- a. How do institutional structures affect the creative agency of young public media professionals?
- b. How do young employees experience and respond to diversity and meritocracy within public broadcasting?
- c. How do young media makers consider audience interpretation when expressing ideological views in their work?
- d. How do young professionals define and pursue public value through their media production?

Together, these questions guide a nuanced exploration of the tensions and possibilities involved in contemporary public media production by emerging professionals.

This holds scientific relevance as it addresses the relevant and contemporary cross section of the changing media landscapes and youth political expression within the context of public service broadcasting. By focusing on the experiences of young media makers operating within ideologically progressive institutions such as BNNVARA and VPRO HUMAN, the study provides empirical insight into how emerging professionals navigate the tension between institutional constraints and personal values. It contributes to scholarly discussions on creative labour, editorial autonomy, and representational politics, particularly in an era marked by increasing political polarization and heightened scrutiny of media institutions. Furthermore, by foregrounding the perspectives of a new generation, the research expands theoretical understandings of how ideological content is negotiated and encoded within public media frameworks, offering a valuable perspective on how to examine the evolving role of public broadcasting in democratic societies.

The findings of this research may help demonstrate that public broadcasting is not an outdated or redundant model, but rather a dynamic and evolving space that requires investment to remain inclusive, innovative, and socially responsive. Moreover, this research aims to emphasize the ongoing importance of a well-funded and independent public broadcasting system in a healthy democracy. As the Dutch government considers substantial budget cuts to public media, it is important to recognize the irreplaceable role these institutions play. Not just as content producers, but as platforms for engagement on civic topics, minority voices, and critical reflection on societal and global developments. By showcasing the voices of young professionals working within progressive public broadcasters like BNNVARA and VPRO-HUMAN, this study rejects the notion of the NPO being a financial burden, and advocates for the preservation and strengthening of public media as a democratic cornerstone.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Introduction

Public broadcasting plays a crucial role in shaping societal narratives through its content, which can reflect cultural values and pressing social issues. However, the process of cultural production is not neutral. It is often influenced by structural inequalities, particularly along the lines of race, gender, and class, that restrict opportunities for diverse voices within the media industry (Brook et al., 2020, p. 20). This becomes especially relevant as a new generation of public media professionals enters the workforce of institutions like NPO's progressive channels, VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA. These young professionals face the double challenge of creating content that aligns with their own ideological and political beliefs, while also working within established institutional frameworks.

This thesis aims to investigate the question: *How does a new generation of public media makers encode their ideological and political visions into content while working within the frameworks of BNNVARA and VPRO-HUMAN?* To achieve this, four sub-questions, regarding creative agency within the institutional context, diversity and meritocracy in media production, audience interpretations and encoding, and public value in the created content have been created. In order to address these concepts accordingly, the theoretical framework has been divided into four sections that inform and expand on each sub-question based on the literature.

First, the concept of creative agency is examined in relation to the sub-question: *How do institutional structures affect the creative agency of young public media professionals?* This section will explore how institutional structures influence the creative agency of young public media professionals, particularly those from "Generation Z", which will be further defined in the following sections. Drawing on research about Gen Z's values and workplace expectations, as well as studies on media industry precarity, the framework will examine how factors such as organizational hierarchies, job insecurity, and exclusionary practices constrain or enable creative autonomy. It will also consider the contradictions between meritocratic narratives and systemic inequalities influencing early media careers.

Second, the theme of diversity and meritocracy is explored under the sub-question: *How do young employees experience and respond to diversity and meritocracy within public broadcasting?* This section will address the sub-question by examining how young employees experience and respond to diversity and meritocracy within public broadcasting. Drawing on existing literature, it will explore how structural inequalities based on class, race, and gender limit access to creative industries and challenge the legitimacy of meritocratic ideals. It will discuss how diversity initiatives are well-intended but often leave much to be desired, and how young professionals, particularly from marginalized backgrounds, must navigate contradictory expectations. The section highlights how

dominant ideologies and institutional cultures can undermine genuine inclusion, shaping both the opportunities and creative agency available to emerging media professionals.

Third, the framework considers Stuart Hall and the theory of encoding and decoding (1980, p. 51-61), in order to address the sub-question: *How do young media makers consider audience interpretation when expressing ideological views in their work?* This section will address this by exploring how young media makers consider audience interpretation when expressing ideological views in their work, using Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory as a central framework. It will examine how these creators operate within institutional constraints while attempting to embed personal and political values into content. This section will also highlight how the changing digital environments and audience interactions force young professionals to navigate varying audience reactions. Ultimately, it shows how these creators negotiate pressures while striving to challenge dominant narratives through culturally engaged and politically conscious media production.

Finally, this framework draws on public value theory, particularly Moore's (1995, pp. 27-56) conception of public value, to address the question: *How do young professionals define and pursue public value through their media production?* It addresses this sub-question by examining how young professionals define and pursue public value through their media production within the evolving media landscape. Drawing on Public Value Theory (Moore, 1995, pp. 27-56), it explores how public broadcasters like VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA balance institutional obligations with changing audience expectations. It considers how engagement is being redefined from passive viewership to interactive participation, and how young media makers must navigate algorithmic pressures and innovative platforms while upholding democratic, inclusive, and socially impactful values, often in tension with the algorithms and their inconsistent measures of meaningful audience interaction.

In conclusion, this theoretical framework situates the experiences of young public media professionals at the intersection of institutional power, identity politics, audience engagement, and normative ideals of public service. By drawing on theories of creative labor, diversity and meritocracy, audience reception, and public value, it provides a multidimensional lens through which to understand how these emerging media makers embed their ideological and political visions within the constraints and opportunities of public broadcasting. This framework lays the foundation for analyzing the complex negotiations involved in contemporary cultural production, and how a new generation strives to reshape public media from within.

2.2 Creative Agency in Institutional Constraints

The creative agency of young public media professionals is profoundly shaped by institutional structures that govern access and advancement within the media industry. As Generation Z (born from 1997 onwards) enters the workforce, they bring with them a distinct set of characteristics shaped by

digital development, global crises, and changing social values (Bińczynski et al., 2023, p.1). However, while they possess high levels of digital fluency and express a desire for autonomy, flexibility, and ethical alignment in their careers, the institutional frameworks within public media often undermine or constrain their ability to fully exercise creative agency (Bińczynski et al., 2023, pp. 2-3).

Gen Z's upbringing in a digitally connected world sets them apart from previous generations. Their orientation toward technology has shaped not only how they communicate and consume content but also how they perceive and participate in the workplace. Studies have found that this generation prioritizes individual development and sustainable work-life integration (Bińczynski et al., 2023, p. 2-4). They expect their employers to reflect their social and ethical ideals and to provide opportunities for personal growth, as well as digital freedom (Bińczynski et al., 2023, p. 2-4). Racolta-Paina and Irini (2021, p. 79) highlight that the success of organisations in managing Gen Z employees is directly linked to their understanding and openness toward these values. Their findings from Romanian organisations reveal that when leadership fails to adapt, young workers struggle to feel motivated or integrated (Racolta-Paina and Irini, 2021, p. 79). These generational expectations challenge rigid institutional norms within public media organisations, where traditional hierarchical structures and traditional content strategies are often the norm.

These generational differences are broader transformations are one of many changes in the media transforming media landscape, driven by digitalisation. Shifting from traditional to digital platforms is changing long standing production models and revenue flows. Alzub (2023, p. 41) notes that this disruption has led to declining job stability, with young media professionals increasingly pushed into freelance or project-based roles. These conditions demand not only creative capabilities but also marketing skills and a keen understanding of shifting audience behaviours. As Schouerte et al. (2020, pp. 264-265) argue, TV firms are under pressure to develop new strategic models that respond to digital consumption trends. While such innovation presents opportunities for creative expression, it also imposes significant burdens on early-career professionals, who must often navigate these transitions without institutional support or long-term experience.

Donders et al. (2017, p. 89-90) further emphasize how small-market media managers are grappling with the pressures of global competition and the need to establish direct audience relationships. This modern environment prioritises platform optimisation over traditional journalistic or creative autonomy, further limiting the freedom of young professionals to experiment or innovate. At the same time, the blurring of lines between professional and amateur media production has introduced new challenges, including increased misinformation and a greater need for ethical and digital literacy (Alzub, 2023, p. 41). These responsibilities of digital developments expertise are often delegated to younger staff, who are presumed to be more tech-savvy, but are often excluded from decision-making processes and leadership roles. This disconnect between responsibility and authority is a limiting factor for creative agency, expecting young professionals to manage complicated, high-stake tasks, without the adequate experience or support.

The uncertainty of creative labour, especially within the context of post-pandemic economic restructuring and political instability, further exacerbates these challenges. Isa et al. (2024 p. 1583) and Tran et al. (2025, p. 8) explore the experiences of Gen Z creatives in environments marked by uncertainty and competitive pressures. These studies reveal a widespread pattern of job-hopping, burnout, existentialism, and disillusionment among young media workers, who often enter the industry with high expectations for meaningful work but find themselves in unstable and exploitative conditions. For many, the constant pressure to remain visible, upskill, and perform across multiple domains, while also managing personal branding and online presence, creates an emotionally taxing experience that stifles creativity. The resulting conditions mirror what Isa et al. (2024, p. 1583) identify as an emerging form of career unpredictability, in which traditional milestones and secure roles have been replaced by fluid, often precarious arrangements that offer little in terms of long-term professional growth.

Structural barriers to creative agency are particularly pronounced during the transition from education to employment. Arnold and O'Brien (2022, pp. 26-27) examine this transitional phase in the Irish media context, where young professionals encounter a system characterised by exclusion and inequality. Their research reveals how newcomers are often expected to engage in unpaid or underpaid affective labour, work that requires emotional performance and enthusiasm, as a means of making themselves desirable to employers. This "hope labour" is a common, institutional expectation that young creatives must prove their commitment and passion before being guaranteed financial compensation, or future employment (Arnold and O'Brien, 2022, p. 26-27). Furthermore, Arnold and O'Brien (2022, p. 26) document how access to media careers is often restricted by nepotism, poorly paid internships, and geographic centralisation, all of which disproportionately disadvantaged individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The result is a media workforce that remains socially exclusive, despite outward narratives of diversity and inclusion.

What is particularly striking in Arnold and O'Brien's (2022, pp. 28-29) findings is the contradictory narrative young professionals construct about their experiences. While they acknowledge systemic unfairness, such as the importance of "who you know" or being expected to work for free, they also frame their own career progress in meritocratic terms, emphasising personal traits like resilience and networking ability. This paradox reflects broader cultural tensions between Western individualism and structural inequality, wherein institutional barriers are recognised but ultimately downplayed in favour of self-discipline and assertiveness (Brook, O'Brien, & Taylor, 2021, p. 39-40). For public media institutions, this poses a serious challenge: by failing to recognise and dismantle these structural inequalities, they risk perpetuating a system in which only the most socially and economically advantaged individuals are able to fully realise their creativity. Taken together, these findings paint a complicated picture of the institutional constraints facing young public media professionals today. While Generation Z enters the field with a strong ethical compass and a desire for meaningful work, their creative agency is often compromised by outdated institutional models, and

unequal access to opportunities. Institutional structures, ranging from organisational hierarchies to exploitative internships and exclusionary recruitment continue to shape who gets to create, under what conditions, and with what level of influence. Addressing these issues requires more than individual resilience. It demands a systemic rethinking of how public media supports and empowers its newest professionals.

2.3 Meritocracy & Diversity in Media

Building on the ideological and institutional dynamics explored above, it is also essential to examine how structural inequalities shape access to and success within the media industry itself. While young media makers may challenge dominant narratives through their creative labour, their ability to enter and thrive in the industry is often constrained by systemic barriers as well societal complications in obtaining employment. Further barriers can be related to class, race, and gender. These challenges are not limited to representation in content, but are deeply embedded in the production structures of media institutions, raising critical questions about the persistence of meritocracy myths within supposedly progressive cultural sectors. According to Brook et al. (2020, p. 26), culture is not simply a collection of artistic works, but also a system of symbols, signs, and practices that contribute to shaping the social world. However, cultural production is far from meritocratic. In fact, it is known for its institutional inequality, where race, gender, and class significantly influence who gains access to creative industries and who becomes successful within them (Brook et al., 2020, p. 20). Data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) in the UK from 2019 highlights that individuals from working-class backgrounds remain underrepresented in creative fields, while those from managerial and professional origins dominate the most powerful roles (Brook et al., 2020, p. 61-71). These disparities persist due to a risk-averse industry, relying on established networks and connections rather than merit- or talent-based evaluations. The persistence of structural inequalities means that young employees entering public broadcasting professions must still navigate a system shaped by bias. While institutions like VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA have public value obligations, young employees might encounter industry norms that prioritize certain voices and perspectives, limiting them from feeling represented in the narrative they are contributing to. This might express itself in the underrepresentation of marginalized groups.

The myth of meritocracy continues based on these inequalities. Tolkin (2023, p. 2-4) shows an example of how non-political media, such as sports, can be a reinforcement for people to believe in meritocracy, as success is being presented as the outcome of individual efforts and talents. His study shows that greater exposure to sports media is associated with stronger beliefs that success is determined by hard work and that competition is inherently fair. This attitude may also be reproduced in other cultural domains such as film, television, or music. The alignment between entertainment

media and meritocratic narratives helps sustain the illusion of fairness in industries that are, structurally, exclusive.

At an organizational level, Konrad et al. (2021, p. 2180-2183) describe the “diversity-meritocracy paradox,” wherein efforts to promote inclusion for marginalized groups can be perceived by dominant groups as a threat to meritocratic fairness. This can exemplify itself as e.g., white people perceiving it as unfair that initiatives are being made to employ more people of colour. This paradox is particularly relevant in media institutions, where both diversity and meritocracy are often publicly promoted, yet rarely practiced in the workforce. If organisations fail to make efforts in both values, they may end up reinforcing the status quo rather than challenging it.

This disconnect between diversity goals and actual practices is also mirrored in Dutch sports media. Research by van Sterkenburg et al. (2021, pp. 42-43) reveals how professionals within Dutch sports media largely fail to see racial and ethnic diversity as a pressing issue, despite acknowledging the lack of diversity in their organizations. Many respondents viewed journalistic objectivity as a means against bias, leading to very limited self-reflection on the use of stereotypes, or exclusionary practices. In practice, racialized recruitment policies persist, often operating within predominantly white, male networks and contributing to symbolic rather than substantive diversity initiatives (Van Sterkenburg et al., 2021, p. 42). The study highlights how decision-makers, who are typically white and male, play a central role in maintaining this status quo and are reluctant to initiate meaningful discussions or structural change. Furthermore, minority journalists often bear the “burden of representation,” expected to cover issues related to race and ethnicity while simultaneously conforming to dominant journalistic norms. This entrenched invisibility and marginalization within media organizations reinforces the need for structural reform and more inclusive editorial practices, if diversity in media representation is to have real impact (van Sterkenburg et al., 2021, pp. 32-33). Through successful media representation, potential negative public perception could perhaps be changed.

Regarding on-screen media representation, however, new media platforms such as streaming services like Netflix have played an increasingly visible role in broadening media representation, by giving a platform to creators such as Ava DuVernay or Shonda Rhimes (Lamont, 2023, p. 65). These creators have created television with marginalised groups in the center, demonstrating how shifts in media structures can challenge traditional institutions (Lamont, 2023, p. 65). Media representation of diverse demographics can influence a societal narrative, and the lack of visibility in media representation can reinforce societal stereotypes and hierarchies, contributing to social and economic disparities within underrepresented communities (Lamont, 2023, p. 8). By clinging to a narrative of meritocracy, a deeper structural inequality is being denied, attributing success to individual efforts, and ignoring barriers that disadvantage groups based on gender, race and class (Lamont, 2023, p. 9).

Together, these studies show how the media can both reflect and reproduce flawed meritocratic ideologies. While the sector claims to value talent and innovation, in practice it tends to lean towards those who already possess social capital and industry access, thereby reinforcing existing social hierarchies, rather than offering fair competition.

2.4 Stuart Hall's Model of Encoding and Decoding

Stuart Hall's theories of encoding/decoding, moral panic, and hegemony provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the evolving role of media institutions and creators in today's digital media environment. Hall's (1980, pp. 51-61) encoding/decoding model outlines how media producers encode messages using dominant cultural codes, shaped by institutional ideologies and structural limitations. These messages are not received passively. According to Hall (1980, pp. 51-61), audiences actively decode them based on individual cultural, social, and experiential frameworks. Hall identifies three decoding positions: dominant (hegemonic), negotiated, and oppositional. The dominant position aligns with the intended meaning; the negotiated position partially accepts and partially challenges it; and the oppositional position rejects it entirely. This model not only underscores the active role of audiences in meaning-making but also highlights the embeddedness of media production within broader power structures. As Hall (1980, pp. 51-61) notes, media producers bear responsibility for how the knowledge they construct circulates in society, particularly within public-facing institutions like broadcasters.

Public broadcasters in the Netherlands, such as VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA, operate within frameworks of public accountability, democratic representation, and inclusivity. However, they are also shaped by institutional histories, editorial traditions, paying members, and political or economic constraints that can limit the range of content they are able to produce. These limitations are particularly consequential for young professionals working within such organisations, as individuals who are not only content creators encoding messages for public consumption but also part of an audience increasingly attuned to questions of representation, power, and equity. As a result, they have a dual role: they work within the institution while also trying to express their own personal and political beliefs through their work. Many of them adopt negotiated positions, working for public service goals while attempting to create content with personal or political values that reflect their generational, cultural, or social identities.

This tension becomes even more pronounced within the context of digitalisation and the decentralisation of media power. Hall's earlier work on moral panics (Hall et al., 1978, p. 4-28) conceptualised panic as a top-down mechanism by which institutional actors, "primary definers" such as politicians and mainstream media, constructed crises to reinforce dominant ideologies. These moral

panics were orchestrated, aimed at mobilising public sentiment to legitimise hegemonic interventions. However, as Ingraham and Reeves (2016, p. 457) argue, the contemporary media landscape has altered the dynamics of panic production. In the age of social media, moral regulation has become increasingly decentralised and interactive. Any user of the platform can now be at the forefront of moral based content, using platforms such as TikTok or Instagram to publicly shame, call out, “cancel” or pressure individuals and institutions. These moral panics are not organized in a traditional way, but instead appear as scattered and overlapping reactions. Ingraham and Reeves (2016, p. 457) refer to these reactions as “panic fragments”, which are predominantly driven by widespread anxieties about identity, representation, or political issues like climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. Online shaming, in this view, serves as a form of symbolic political action that provides temporary feelings of empowerment but ultimately leaves existing institutional structures unchallenged. This has direct consequences for media creators working in public broadcasting. For young employees at institutions like VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA, the encoding process is no longer confined to traditional editorial workflows. It is increasingly shaped by the pressures of potential online backlash, emotional audience responses, and algorithmically-driven visibility. The boundaries between audience and producer have blurred, and moral authority is now distributed across volatile digital communities.

These dynamics compound the representational challenges already faced by young, often marginalised media professionals. Molina-Guzmán’s (2016, p. 439) analysis of the #OscarsSoWhite campaign provides a useful parallel. She describes the “Hollywood paradox,” in which visible gains in diversity on-screen coexist with persistent structural inequalities behind the scenes (Molina-Guzmán, 2016, p. 439). Although market demands and demographic shifts have led to some representational progress, cultural industries remain dominated by elite gatekeepers who frame diversity as economically expedient rather than ideologically necessary. As Molina-Guzmán (2016, p. 443-445) notes, media institutions use discourses of exceptionalism and profitability to mask their failure to redistribute power or decision-making authority. This critique is equally relevant to the Dutch context. Despite branding themselves as inclusive, institutions like the NPO are often to reflect the full diversity of Dutch society in their internal structures and production practices.

Modern creators engage in a form of ideological negotiation: aligning in part with the mission of public broadcasting while pushing for deeper structural inclusion and cultural legitimacy. By incorporating their own social positions into the encoding process, these creators challenge the dominant codes of meaning that have historically defined public media, often anticipating oppositional or negotiated readings by audiences who themselves operate within fragmented and emotionally charged online environments.

The Dutch public broadcasting system stands at a crossroads. The decentralisation of moral authority, the increase of intervening online audiences, and the evolving expectations around representation mean that the institutional model of public service media must adapt, or risk irrelevance. At the heart of this adaptation are the young media makers whose cultural labour is often

invisible. Recognising and supporting their role is vital for sustaining the democratic and inclusive potential of public broadcasting in the Netherlands. The combined insights of Hall (1980, pp. 51-61), Ingraham and Reeves (2016, p. 457), and Molina-Guzmán (2016, pp. 439-445) make clear that this is not just a technical or aesthetic challenge, but a deeply political one, about who gets to define the public, who gets to speak for it, and who is held accountable when its values are contested.

2.5 Public value and Audience Engagement

Public Value Theory, as conceptualized by Moore (1995, pp. 27–56), serves as a crucial lens through which to assess the role and responsibilities of public broadcasters in this evolving media landscape. Unlike commercial entities driven primarily by market demands and profit motives, public broadcasters such as VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA are tasked with generating societal value, as mentioned above. Meynhardt et al. (2017, p. 138) illustrate how this framework has been applied to institutions like the BBC, where public value became a strategic priority, guiding programming decisions based on societal impact rather than commercial performance.

While Moore's (1995, pp. 27–56) theory offers a useful lens for understanding the mission of public broadcasting, it largely emphasizes managerial responsibility and institutional strategy. For the purposes of this research, however, public value is interpreted more broadly, as being rooted in the inclusion and representation of marginalized communities and contributing to a more equal society. For Gen Z creators, public value is not only about upholding democratic ideals, but also about ensuring that diverse voices are made visible and meaningfully engaged with in media narratives. This interpretation of public value might conflict with industry metrics of success, which prioritize things such as audience size and engagement rates, and increasingly, algorithmic performance. This could potentially be at the expense of long-term social and cultural impact.

Audience engagement has transitioned from passive reception to active participation. Traditional media, with its one-way communication model and structured content distribution once dominated the public's media experience. However, as Mugil and Kenzie (2025, p. 4-6) argue, the emergence of new media, such as social platforms, streaming services, and interactive content, has radically transformed how audiences interact with media content. These platforms not only enable dialogue between content creators and audiences, but also empower users to curate, like or dislike, comment on, and share content, blurring the lines between creators and consumers. This shift in content consumption has improved personalization and relevance, but it has also raised concerns about echo chambers, the spread of misinformation, and a decline in editorial oversight, as previously mentioned.

This shift requires a relationship reevaluation of engagement itself. Chalm-Olmsted (2018, p. 11-15) argues that engagement goes beyond simple viewership or audience size, but involves

cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. Based on qualitative data from in-depth interviews, Chalm-Olmsted (2018, p. 15-19) finds that engagement is most commonly identified and measured through observable behaviours, through likes, shares, comments, and other digital interactions, but is rarely assessed in a conceptually consistent way. This creates challenges for public broadcasters who want to uphold their public value commitments while operating on platforms that emphasize quantitative metrics over meaningful content.

As public broadcasters adapt to this evolving landscape, it is crucial for them to understand and implement engagement strategies that uphold public value, while confronting the challenges brought by commercial interests and algorithmic developments. This balance is both a strategic priority as well as an ethical obligation.

2.6 Conclusion

This theoretical framework aimed to combine four interrelated themes, namely creative agency, diversity and meritocracy, the encoding/decoding model, and public value, to form a cohesive lens through which to investigate how young public media professionals encode their ideological and political visions into content. Each theme addresses a separate yet overlapping section of the institutional and cultural landscape young professionals navigate, offering a multifaceted understanding of their experiences in the workforce.

The first theme of creative agency placed the participants within the structural conditions of public broadcasting, where their ability to create is shaped by job opportunities and other economic constraints. The themes of diversity and meritocracy further contextualise their agency by questioning how social inequalities and symbolic inclusion practices affect access to these institutions even further. This is especially relevant when examining the internal contradictions of progressive organizations like BNNVARA and VPRO-HUMAN, which promote inclusion but may still face internal barriers.

Continuing, Stuart Hall's (1980, p. 51-61) theory of encoding and decoding bridges individual expression and institutional output by showcasing the complicated nature of meaning-making in media. It allows this study to consider how young professionals not only encode values into content, but also how they anticipate and respond to audience interpretations in a divided and polarized, interactive media environment. Finally, Public Value Theory provides a framework with which to assess how these professionals understand their roles within a broader democratic context, and how they define success in their positions, beyond metrics, through concepts such as impact, representation, and societal change.

Together, these theories create an integrated framework that is both conceptually rich and analytically practical. They reflect tensions of the research question: the negotiation between personal ideology and institutional constraint, the desire for inclusivity, and the complexities of balancing

creative freedom and public accountability. By drawing from diverse yet complementary bodies of literature, this framework equips the study to explore not only how young media makers encode their beliefs, but why, under what conditions, and to what extent, thereby allowing for a deep and nuanced response to the central research question.

3. Research Method

Qualitative research was chosen for this study to explore the complex and subjective experiences of young employees navigating their roles within VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather rich, detailed data to gain unique insights on the perspectives of the participants, while still remaining investigative autonomy (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p.1360). Thematic analysis (TA) was selected to identify and interpret patterns of meaning across the dataset, offering both descriptive and interpretive insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006, pp. 16-23). TA's theoretical flexibility and accessibility make it particularly well-suited for research of this nature. Both the use of semi-structured interviews and the thematic analysis process will be elaborated on in subsequent chapters.

3.1 Choice of method

This study relies on ten semi-structured interviews as its primary data collection method, chosen for their effectiveness in qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews allow for a nuanced exploration of participants' perspectives, emotions, and social realities, while simultaneously allowing for natural conversation about challenges and expectations (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021, p.1360). The approach revealed many detailed insights into how young employees interpret and navigate their work environments within VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA, and their experiences with institutional constraints, creative autonomy, and relationship with the audience. This interview format allowed for structured yet flexible conversations when speaking to the participants, as well as allowing comparability across interviews while still accommodating each interview to the uniqueness of each participant. See Appendix C for the full interview guide.

For data analysis, inductive thematic analysis was employed (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pp. 16-23). This method was selected due to its strength in identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets. TA offers a systematic approach to coding and theme development, while remaining flexible enough to incorporate unexpected insights emerging from the data. By adopting an inductive approach, themes were derived directly from the data rather than being imposed by preconceived theoretical categories, which ensured that the analysis remained grounded in participants' own narratives. This will be elaborated on further in the chapter.

In summary, qualitative semi-structured interviews combined with inductive thematic analysis provide the most appropriate and rigorous means to address the research question. This approach balances the need for depth, flexibility, and systematic analysis in investigating the complex and situated experiences of young employees at VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA. All interviews were

conducted in Dutch. All quotes used in the analysis section and coding tables (see Appendix A) were translated by the researcher.

3.2 Sampling

This study employed purposive sampling as its primary sampling strategy. This approach is defined as selecting participants who meet specific, pre-established criteria, relevant to the research questions (Etikan et al., 2016, pp. 2-3). Purposive sampling was applied in order to ensure that the participants were directly relevant to the focus of this research: young employees within the public broadcasting organizations VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA, who actively engage with the negotiation of their professional roles in encoding narratives aligned with their personal values. The criteria for inclusion were carefully defined as follows: (1) participants had to be current employees of either BNNVARA or VPRO-HUMAN, preferably occupying creative or content-related positions where they have an active role in content production or editorial decisions, and (2) participants needed to be between the ages of 20 and 30, reflecting the study's specific interest in younger professionals who have recently entered the media workforce and are likely to face unique challenges in aligning their values with institutional narratives. In practice, all interviewees fell within a narrower age range of 25 to 29, positioning them firmly within the intended demographic and ensuring a focus on a group that could mostly identify as "Gen Z"

The recruitment process aimed to reach participants beyond the researcher's personal network to minimize bias and enhance the credibility of the study. Participants were recruited primarily through direct messaging LinkedIn and Instagram. Additionally, one contact was established through an email referral provided by a university lecturer. This recruitment strategy allowed access to a diverse pool of participants. See Appendix B for a sample of the text that was forwarded to potential participants on LinkedIn and Instagram.

3.2.1 Sample

The final sample consisted of ten participants (N=10), of whom seven identified as women and three as men, reflecting gender diversity within the group. The sample also represented both target organizations, with six employees from BNNVARA and four from VPRO-HUMAN, enabling comparative insights across these institutions. Regarding data collection mode, the majority of interviews (N=7) were conducted online due to practical considerations, two interviews were held in public spaces, and one participant was interviewed at their own home. These varied locations and

settings contributed to a flexible and participant-centered data collection process.

This sampling strategy and sample composition were well-suited to the study's goals, providing rich, relevant, and diverse perspectives. By applying purposive sampling and recruiting beyond personal networks, the study adheres to qualitative research standards for rigor, trustworthiness, and ethical participant selection.

Table.2 - Participant information

Participant	Organisation	Function
Participant 1	BNNVARA	Producer
Participant 2	VPRO	Concept Developer
Participant 3	BNNVARA	Podcast creator
Participant 4	BNNVARA	Editor & Camjo
Participant 5	BNNVARA	Academy Member
Participant A	VPRO	Editor and researcher
Participant B	BNNVARA	Editor and Online creator
Participant C	HUMAN	Editor
Participant D	BNNVARA	Editor
Participant E	VPRO	Editor and Online editor

3.3 Operationalisation

This study's theoretical framework informed the design of semi-structured interviews with young media professionals at BNNVARA and VPRO-HUMAN, with the aim of addressing the research question: *How does a new generation of public media makers encode their ideological and political visions into content while working within the frameworks of BNNVARA and VPRO-HUMAN?*

By drawing on literature concerning generational differences, digital developments, structural inequality, and public value, four key themes were developed: (1) creative liberty and limitations in their function, (2) diversity at the organisation both on and off screen, (3) Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, and (4) Public Value Theory in relation to professional practice.

The framework's emphasis on Gen Z's values including diversity, autonomy, and digital fluency (Lamont, 2023, p. 65) guided questions on potential generational differences or identity they felt in relation to institutional cultures. Participants were asked about their motivations, the alignment or friction between personal and organisational values, and their sense of creative agency within their employment. Digitalisation and its effects on media work as discussed by Ingraham and Reeves (2016, p. 457) shaped questions based on encoding and editing content, audience interpretation, and navigating the audience reactions. Participants were invited to reflect on how they respond to audience feedback and handle pressures from online audiences, all of which increasingly influence how ideological content is produced and received.

The literature also highlights structural inequalities and precarity in creative industries (Brook et al., 2020, p. 20; Lamont, 2023, p. 65; van Sterkenburg et al., 2021, p. 42). Interview questions asked participants' experiences related to access to opportunities, perceptions of fairness, and how intersecting factors such as class, race, gender, and location impact their careers.

Stuart Hall's (1980, p. 51-61) encoding/decoding model was central in exploring participants' roles as ideological agents. Questions focused on how they encode meaning into their content, anticipate audience interpretations, and reconcile institutional goals with personal or political values. This focus helped illuminate how young professionals engage with meaning-making in ways that are reflective of their identities, as well as allowed within their function in the organisation.

Finally, Public Value Theory (Moore, 1995, p. 27-56; Meynhardt et al., 2017, p. 183) framed questions about how participants define and pursue socially relevant content. Given public broadcasters' commitments to inclusivity and democracy, interview prompts examined how participants measure meaningful engagement, balance editorial values with digital metrics, and see their contribution to the public sphere.

The interviews began with introductory conversation and background questions, followed by the core themes. All participants were informed of the research purpose and procedure, assured of anonymity, and gave verbal consent to be recorded. Interviews concluded with space for elaboration

or questions from participants, allowing for flexibility and depth. In sum, the operationalisation enabled systematic exploration of how young professionals negotiate ideology, identity, and public value in public broadcasting contexts.

3.3.1 Central themes

Each abovementioned theme was translated into a set of open-ended, non-technical questions, and were merged into fitting the participants specific function, programme or broadcasting channel during the interviews. This allowed the participants the freedom to articulate their views, while keeping the discussion in line with the research focus.

3.3.1.1 Creative liberty and limitations

The first theme was addressed immediately after participants had shared some background information about themselves, what their function consisted of, and what their daily tasks included. This was mostly a natural transition into speaking about creative liberty and freedom, as most participants worked in a creative function. This section consisted of questions such as “*Do you ever feel creatively limited in your function?*” allowing the participants to elaborate on their experience. Based on their answers in this section, more questions could follow about the creativity in their functions and the limiting factors, or lack thereof. Based on the answer and situation, questions could also be asked about creative liberty or empowerment within their field, and whether they perceived institutional trust in making creative decisions. The theme is grounded in literature on Generation Z in the creative workforce, which highlights their desire for autonomy, alignment with ethical values, and meaningful work (Bińczynski et al., 2023, p. 10; McKee-Ryan, 2021, p. 116-117). Public broadcasters like VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA operate as cultural platforms, yet young creators must navigate institutional constraints such as budget cuts, hierarchical decision-making, or limited trust in junior staff. The interview questions were thus designed to elicit insights into how these professionals combine creative ambitions with organizational boundaries, offering a generational perspective on creative labor in public media.. The theme and questions in this section were closely tied to the sub-question: *How do institutional structures affect the creative agency of young public media professionals?*

3.3.1.2 Diversity at the organisation, both on and off camera

This theme explores how young professionals experience and respond to diversity and meritocracy within public broadcasting, addressing the sub-question: *How do young employees experience and respond to diversity and meritocracy within public broadcasting?* Participants were asked questions like “*Do you feel certain narratives are prioritized over others?*” and “*How do you experience diversity and representation within your channel or the content you work on?*” to prompt reflection on inclusion, privilege, and institutional culture.

Grounded in critical literature on cultural production as a site of inequality (Brook et al., 2020, p. 18; Van Sterkenburg et al., 2021, p. 42), this theme considers how race, class, and gender shape access to creative roles. Despite their progressive image, public broadcasters like VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA still operate within structures that can marginalize underrepresented voices through risk-averse hiring. This section of the interview sought to understand how young workers perceive and navigate these dynamics, and whether they feel empowered to influence inclusive representation both behind the scenes and in on-screen content.

3.3.1.3 Stuart Hall’s Encoding and Decoding model

The third interview theme investigates how young media makers consider audience interpretation when expressing ideological views in their work, addressing the sub-question: *How do young media makers consider audience interpretation when expressing ideological views in their work?* This theme is grounded in Stuart Hall’s (1980, pp. 51-61) encoding/decoding model, which frames media production as a process where meanings are encoded by producers and decoded, sometimes differently, by audiences. Given that most participants worked in creative roles at ideologically progressive public broadcasters such as BNNVARA and VPRO-HUMAN, their awareness of this dynamic was central to understanding how political and social messages are constructed and received.

Participants were first asked whether they were familiar with Hall’s model; when necessary, a brief explanation was provided to ensure shared understanding. They were then invited to reflect on questions such as, “*To what extent are you conscious of audience interpretation when creating content?*” and “*Have you ever been surprised by how audiences reacted to your work?*” These questions were designed to explore how participants negotiate the potential gap between intended meaning and audience reception, especially in politically or socially charged productions.

This theme is relevant in the context of public broadcasting, as young creatives must balance institutional expectations, such as editorial policies, audience demographics, or political sensitivities, with their own ideological commitments. Their dual perspectives as both content creators and critically aware viewers allow for a reflexive understanding of how meaning is shaped in public discourse. In focusing on this theme, the interviews offer insight into how these professionals

strategically embed values in their work while remaining aware of the interpretative agency of the audience.

3.3.1.4 Public Value theory

The final theme focused on understanding how young professionals define and pursue public value through their media production, directly addressing the final sub-question: *How do young professionals define and pursue public value through their media production?* This section was grounded in Moore's (1995, pp. 27-56) Public Value Theory, which positions public service institutions, such as VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA, as actors tasked with delivering societal benefit rather than maximizing profit. Unlike commercial entities, public broadcasters are expected to promote democratic discourse, particularly within the Dutch historical context of pillarisation, making this theme crucial for understanding how young employees conceptualize and contribute to these goals in practice.

Literature on Public Value Theory highlights how public broadcasters must constantly navigate political, technological, and institutional pressures while striving to maintain their societal mission (Meynhardt et al., 2017, p. 138). For young professionals operating within such organizations, this might mean compromising on creative freedom and expression in order to meet the institutional expectations. Exploring how they engage with these dynamics offers insight into how public value is interpreted and enacted at the ground level of production.

Interview questions in this theme included prompts such as: "*What is the overarching goal of the content you create?*", "*How would you define public value in your work?*", and "*Has there ever been an instance where you saw societal impact as a direct result of your work?*" These questions were designed to elicit reflections on both abstract principles and concrete experiences. Participants were encouraged to share examples where their work contributed to public awareness, social impact, or civic engagement, revealing how they perceive the role of media in fostering collective benefit.

This theme was essential to include, as it bridges individual creative practice with institutional values and broader societal outcomes. By capturing how young employees internalize, challenge, or reinterpret the mission of public broadcasting, this section helps build a comprehensive understanding of how public value is not only defined in theory but actively pursued in daily media production.

3.4 Method of Analysis

3.4.1 Method of analysis

An inductive thematic analysis approach was chosen as it allows for the identification of patterns in how participants make sense of their roles in encoding public broadcasting narratives. This approach was especially suitable for analysing semi-structured interview data, where the aim is to understand meaning-making processes of the participants. This approach was chosen because it shows patterns in the data set, and this is useful for summarising features and unexpected insights. The analyses produced are likely to answer the research question. The six phases, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 16-23) were followed:

1. Familiarisation with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing Themes
5. Defining and naming the themes
6. Producing the report

The analysis was conducted in a structured manner, guided by a close engagement with the data and facilitated by the use of Atlas.ti software.

3.4.2 Justification of Method of Analysis

This approach was adopted to allow themes to emerge directly from the data rather than being imposed on the theoretical framework. This was important given the intention to remain grounded in the voices and meanings constructed by participants themselves. Although the interviews were guided by theoretically informed topics (e.g., diversity, creative autonomy, public value), the analysis remained open to unexpected findings, allowing for insights beyond the expectation of the initial themes. This allowed for a nuanced understanding of the interplay between the institutional, situational and personal factors in the narratives of the participants.

Overall, inductive thematic analysis was appropriate for this study's goals of capturing both shared and diverse perspectives among young media professionals, and for maintaining methodological flexibility while ensuring analytic rigour.

3.4.3 Analysis

TA was used to systematically interpret the interview data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006, pp. 16-23) six-step approach. All interviews were conducted by the same researcher, who took notes during each session and later transcribed the recordings, either via MS Teams' transcription tool or TurboScribe, depending on the interview location and software. Transcripts were manually reviewed and edited for accuracy, and early observations were documented during the familiarisation stage. See Appendix D for all transcripts.

Initial coding was conducted inductively using open coding in Atlas.ti, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data rather than applying pre-existing categories. After two full rounds of coding, 44 distinct codes were identified, capturing repeated ideas, expressions, and experiences across participants. These codes were then grouped into preliminary thematic clusters using Atlas.ti's code group function, with memos added to explore relationships between codes and emerging patterns.

Themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal consistency and alignment with the overarching research question. This iterative process resulted in five final themes: (1) Diversity, (2) Working Conditions, (3) Stuart Hall and Audience Interaction, (4) Overarching Goals, and (5) Changing Media Landscapes. Fifteen sub themes were identified within these, including topics such as creative agency, public value, decoding strategies, and workplace diversity.

The final phase involved selecting representative excerpts from the data to illustrate each theme in the results section. See Appendix A for a full table of codes and example quotations. Attention was paid not only to recurring narratives but also to outlier cases, particularly where participants had opposing views on sensitive topics such as diversity or institutional goals. This process allowed for a rich, nuanced understanding of how young media professionals at BNNVARA and VPRO-HUMAN negotiate their roles within a dynamic public broadcasting context.

Table 3. Main themes and explanation

Theme	Description
Working Conditions	Refers to participants' experiences of their employment environment, including workplace culture, team dynamics, inclusion, and organizational structure.
Stuart Hall and Audience Engagement	Covers reflections on encoding/decoding processes and how participants perceive or

	respond to audience interpretations of their content.
Diversity	Includes insights on diversity in hiring, workplace representation, and how identity is reflected in media content.
Overarching Goals	Captures both the institutional missions of BNNVARA and VPRO-HUMAN and the personal goals and values of participants.
Changing Media Landscapes	Addresses the impact of digital transformation, platformisation, and evolving audience metrics on participants' work.

Table 4. Main Themes and Subthemes

Main Theme	Subtheme
Working Conditions	Structural constraints Workfloor dynamics Creative agency Career development,
Stuart Hall and Audience Engagement	Encoding and political messaging Navigating decoding Ratings and audience feedback Generational differences audiences,
Diversity	Organizational diversity Homogeneity of mindset and background
Overarching Goals	Institutional goals Individuals goals Public value and impacts,

3.3.2 Atlas.TI

The coding and thematic development process was supported by the qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti. All interview transcripts were imported into the software, and initial codes were highlighted using the software tools. Atlas.ti facilitated the organisation and clustering of codes and the construction of thematic networks.

3.3.3 Ethics

This study followed ethical research practices throughout its design and execution. Prior to each interview, participants were fully informed about the purpose, scope, and structure of the research. They were explicitly told how their responses would be used and assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their contributions. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants, including permission to record and transcribe the interviews. Participants were made aware that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence. To ensure privacy, all interview data was anonymised, and personally identifiable information was removed from transcripts. Data was stored securely and accessed only by the researcher.

Given the personal nature of the questions, especially regarding workplace experiences, beliefs, and perceived institutional constraints, particular care was taken to create a safe and respectful interview environment. The researcher maintained a neutral and non-judgmental stance during all interviews and allowed participants to skip questions or elaborate freely, according to their comfort level.

3.3.4 Credibility

To ensure the credibility of this research, several methodological strategies were employed. First, purposive sampling was used to recruit participants directly relevant to the research aim, thereby ensuring a focused and contextually grounded dataset (Etikan et al., 2016, pp. 2-3). Efforts were made to recruit participants beyond the researcher's personal network to minimize selection bias. Second, all interviews were conducted in Dutch by the same researcher to maintain consistency and avoid language barriers, and participants were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences, allowing

for rich, in-depth data. The use of inductive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006, pp. 16-23) six-phase approach, allowed themes to emerge directly from the data rather than being pre-imposed, enhancing the trustworthiness. Atlas.ti software was used to systematically code and organize data, ensuring transparency and traceability of the analysis process. Verbal, informed consent, assurances of anonymity, and the right to withdraw were provided to all participants, fostering an ethical and open research environment. Finally, findings were supported by direct quotes and attention was paid to conflicting cases, reinforcing a nuanced and honest representation of participants' perspectives.

4. Analysis

4.1 Themes derived from the data

After the analysis, five main themes, fifteen subthemes, 44 codes and 502 quotations were derived from the data as patterns for young employees of BNNVARA and VPRO-HUMAN.

4.1.1 Working Conditions

The first theme that was derived from the data is surrounding the working conditions that the employees mentioned. Overwhelmingly positive, the employees mostly reported feeling welcomed, comfortable and happy at their workplace. However, they did report dealing with structural constraints, and mentioned several workfloor dynamics that need to be addressed.

This theme also includes working conditions such as creative agency and opportunities for career expansion, all of which will be elaborated on in the sub themes below.

4.1.1.1 Structural constraints

The first subtheme concerns the structural constraints experienced by participants. While most expressed gratitude and satisfaction regarding their current positions, several limitations arise when discussing their roles. A frequently quoted issue was budget restrictions and the upcoming continuing budget cuts. As noted earlier, in March 2025, during the initial stages of this research, the NPO faced significant financial reductions, amounting to over €150 million in cuts to be implemented before 2027 (Redactie BNNVARA, 2025). According to participants, these reductions will mean internal evaluations by individual channels to determine which programs will continue receiving funding, and which need to be discontinued. Additionally, one participant emphasized that funding decisions for new programming are ultimately made by the NPO itself, highlighting a further constraint on creative development. In particular, proposals for innovative, alternative, or simply “different” content must meet exceptionally high standards to be considered for support. As one participant explained, only proposals with exceptionally strong pitches are likely to receive research budgets, underscoring the difficulty of securing resources for new or unconventional projects. These insights collectively show how institutional decisions and financial limitations constrain the creative possibilities available to young professionals within the public broadcasting landscape.

“Space for new talent is definitely shrinking, especially if you have an alternative perspective. Because ultimately it's the NPO that decides which projects get money, and which ones don't. So if you want to do something truly innovative and new, you have to have a pretty incredible pitch, or you'll just never ever get your budget.” - Participant E

Another frequently mentioned constraint of young employees is the placement of senior editors, a position held by older, more experienced media makers. While participants generally described respectful or collegial relationships with the senior figures, they also acknowledged that these individuals serve as the ultimate gatekeepers in editorial decision-making processes. As a result, when young employees propose innovative content, its realisation is dependent on the approval of senior editors, somewhat limiting the creative agency.

“Most people in those positions are pretty old school, and not so open to young people with new ways of storytelling. It doesn’t really matter how good your idea is - if the guys from the department above you don’t like it, then that’s it.” - Participant 5

One participant suggested that the presence of senior editors on every project could be reconsidered, arguing that while senior editorial oversight is valuable, its involvement in all aspects of production may limit innovation and undermine the trust placed in younger professionals. The participant felt that this structure can unintentionally age the content and restrict the creative autonomy of emerging media makers. This aligns with the findings of Bińczynski et al. (2023, p. 2-4), who found that Gen Z employees have a high expectation of creative and digital freedom within their work environment. The editorial limitations being bothersome and limiting feelings of creative autonomy, are in line with the Generation Z’s broader expectations of flexibility and individual expression in the workplace.

4.1.1.2 Workfloor Dynamics

Furthermore, the workfloor dynamics in BNNVARA and VPRO-HUMAN were discussed frequently by the participants. The BNNVARA employees especially showed great enthusiasm about their position, conveying a real sense of pride to be working for a progressive and mostly young organisation. At BNNVARA, most participants reported working primarily alongside peers of a similar age, which created a sense of mutual understanding and alignment in values and perspectives among colleagues. The target audience of BNNVARA was generally perceived by participants as younger, and the notion of producing content by and for a younger demographic strongly resonated with many of them. However, variations emerged depending on the specific editorial teams participants were part of.

Furthermore, several participants reflected on how institutional structures shaped their ability to express political or ideological values in their work. One participant working on a news-focused program described the requirement to remain politically neutral as a limiting factor, particularly on issues they felt personally invested in, such as climate change or the Trump administration. This

illustrates a clear structural constraint: the journalistic norm of objectivity restricts the creative agency of young professionals who may wish to engage more explicitly with political or value driven content.

Conversely, other participants described how working in a progressive environment had shaped and influenced their personal values, referring to lifestyle changes such as choosing vegan lunches or becoming more aware of the environmental costs of travel. While these examples reflect a form of value alignment, they also suggest a redirection of political expression away from core content creation and into symbolic or behavioural acts within the workplace. This raises important questions about how and where ideological commitments are permitted to surface in public media organizations. Together, these examples highlight that institutional norms, whether rooted in professional neutrality or organizational culture, can both limit as well as redirect the creative agency of young media professionals.

4.1.1.3 Creative Agency

These broader reflections on institutional influence naturally lead into participants' more direct assessments of their own creative agency. The participants were asked about their creative agency within their positions, and to what extent they felt both limited as well as empowered creatively by their companies in their function. The participants were very divided on this topic, as the answer was very related to their function, the content they contributed to, and the rest of their editorial team. Most participants in creative roles generally reported a strong sense of creative autonomy, and at times even experiencing heightened expectations to contribute original ideas due to their position or age. When asked if they ever felt creatively limited, one participant from VPRO-HUMAN answered experiencing pressure to be the most creative, as they are the youngest member of the team, and are therefore expected to know best. This is in line with the findings of Schouerte et al. (2020, p. 264-265), Alzub (2023, p. 41) and Ingraham and Reeves (2016, p. 457) who mention the pressures young journalists experience as older generations look at them to understand the media trends and creative developments. Fortunately, the participants also reported that, despite having been in this role for only four months, they felt highly valued and that their contributions were taken seriously by the team. Others expressed similar feelings of creative empowerment, and freedom to experiment. The creative limitations identified were primarily associated with the previously mentioned budget constraints, resistance from senior editors, and external considerations, such as the need to exercise caution in the program's statements regarding public companies to mitigate potential legal risks.

Furthermore, particularly within BNNVARA, it was stated that societal value and messaging is important in the content created, and it can't solely have an entertainment or humorous purpose. These findings resonate strongly with the broader literature on Generation Z's evolving workplace values and motivations. Vasilyeva et al. (2020, p. 1022) showcase that Gen Z expressed a clear desire

for creative freedom, room for experimentation, and being taken seriously regardless of their relatively short tenure. The fact that many participants felt empowered to express ideas and contribute meaningfully to content production indicates a workplace environment that aligns with Gen Z's preference for autonomy and developmental opportunity.

Similarly, Bińczynski et al. (2023, p. 5-10) identify three key motivational drivers among Gen Z workers, individual growth, alignment with organizational values, and sustainability of work-life boundaries. These themes are also evident in the data collected in this study. Participants' appreciation for being listened to and respected within their editorial teams speaks directly to their need for environments that support personal development and psychological safety. Moreover, the emphasis on meaningful content creation, particularly among those working at BNNVARA, where societal messaging and purpose-driven content are prioritized, reflects Gen Z's desire to work within organizations whose values resonate with their own. The preference for value-aligned work over purely entertainment-focused content underscores the importance of organizational mission as a key motivator. The tension between creative autonomy and external constraints, whether institutional, legal, or financial, further illustrates the challenges Gen Z professionals face in achieving the balance between empowerment and structure. Budget limitations and editorial gatekeeping represent the boundaries within which creativity must be negotiated. These constraints reflect what both Vasilyeva et al. (2020, p. 1020-1022) and Bińczynski et al. (2023, p.3) observe: that while Gen Z seeks freedom and flexibility, organizational systems must evolve to accommodate these needs without sacrificing professional standards or legal safeguards.

Taken together, the accounts of the participants in this study support and deepen the findings of Vasilyeva et al. (2020) and Bińczynski et al. (2023), illustrating how Gen Z's workplace motivations manifest specifically in the context of the media and creative industries. They highlight the importance of cultivating environments where young professionals are not only empowered creatively but also supported in ways that reflect their broader generational values, namely purpose, growth, and balance.

These findings illustrate that institutional structures significantly shape the creative agency of young public media professionals by simultaneously enabling and constraining their creative autonomy. While organizational environments often empower Gen Z employees to contribute original ideas and experiment, which aligns with their generational values of autonomy, structural factors such as budget limitations, editorial hierarchies, and legal considerations impose clear boundaries on their creative expression. Thus, institutional frameworks mediate the balance between creative freedom and necessary constraints, influencing how young professionals navigate and enact their agency within public media contexts.

4.1.1.4 Career Development

Regarding career development within the media industry, many participants highlighted the significant challenges associated with finding and securing employment in the field. The majority emphasized that without access to appropriate connections, internships, or traineeships, entry into the industry would have been near impossible. In light of the March 2025 budget cuts, several participants expressed concerns about job stability, noting that some colleagues were employed on unstable, short-term contracts. These findings align with existing literature, which identifies unstable employment conditions, short-term contracts, funding shortages, and overall job insecurity as major barriers to confidently entering the media sector (Isa et al., 2024, p. 1583; Tran et al., 2025, p. 6; Alzub, 2023, p. 41). Multiple respondents described the industry as a difficult environment for young creators to enter, echoing Arnold and O'Brien's (2022, p. 26) characterization of the media sector as a "closed shop" for emerging professionals. Some participants even reported initial regrets regarding their pursuit of journalism education, due to early perceptions of limited job prospects.

Although all participants in this study ultimately secured positions within the field, these accounts raise important questions about the extent to which potential talent may have deterred or been excluded from the industry due to employment barriers. Nevertheless, once established within the sector, most participants expressed considerable enthusiasm for their roles and highlighted the substantial skills and knowledge they had acquired, including practical competencies such as editing and critical perspectives gained through engagement with journalistic programming.

"I am looking at the world a lot more critically now ... I used to think that someone was well informed, just because they were on a talk show. Now I've learned that that's definitely not always the case" - Participant 3

Several participants also articulated themes of existential concern, expressing anxiety about both the future of their careers and the broader socio-political and environmental trajectory of the world. Some reported feelings of dissonance or futility in producing media content they perceived as trivial, particularly in light of pressing global issues. This sentiment aligns with broader trends observed among Generation Z professionals, who often enter the workforce with heightened awareness of global crises and a strong desire for purposeful, meaningful work. Such reflections underscore the generational tension between professional aspirations and the perceived urgency of contributing to societal change. Overall, the participants were mostly very satisfied with their position, and expressed being more than happy to continue working in this field, or even in their current position. More than one participant expressed their current function being their dream job.

4.1.2 Stuart Hall and Audience Interaction

The following interview theme surrounded Stuart Hall's theory on encoding and decoding. All participants stated that they took the audience reaction to their content in account while creating it, though to varying degrees. The political nature of the broadcasting channels was discussed, with multiple of the participants working for politically based content. Furthermore, the ratings and audience feedback were addressed during this section. A further theme that emerged during this topic was the generational differences, both on the creator and the audience side. All subthemes will be elaborated on below.

This theme directly informs subquestion 3 by illustrating how young media professionals navigate the relationship between content creation (encoding) and audience interpretation (decoding). The findings reflect how institutional values, audience expectations, and intergenerational dynamics shape communicative intent and reception, thereby offering insight into how public media professionals engage with their audiences within ideologically and demographically diverse contexts.

4.1.2.1 Encoding and Political Messaging

When asked about the encoding of their content, all participants claimed that they (or their team) were extremely aware of audience perception when creating their content. As the channels identify as either progressive or left wing, most participants expressed that they felt the need to convey a certain message with their content. Whether this message is about highlighting a story about the less privileged, or explaining what is happening politically in a more accessible way, most participants entered the business of media in the hope to make content that might make a difference. Employees from both channels mentioned the broadcasters having a left wing signature, and that the content created usually falls in line with the ideals of the channels. Overall though, participants from both channels tried their best to put their truth in their content, for as far as this was possible within the restraints of their jobs and programmes. The code "viewer oriented mindset" was applied across several participants too, and was applied every time a participant mentioned caring about the perspective of the viewer before the show was even aired:

"From the people who think differently, so that you also let multiple perspectives be heard , which actually happens quite often, there really is a lot of thought put into: what will the viewers think of this? Will it cause any trouble? How can we contain it in advance?" -

Participant 1

4.1.2.2 Navigating Decoding

When asked about decoding and audience reactions to their content, most participants described getting mixed reactions to almost everything that's being posted online. Especially with the internet, getting the general public's opinion back on the content is very immediate and visible. Participants stated that in general, the audience knows what kind of channels they are watching, and most likely what the standpoints of the programs are; generally progressive and left wing. But, multiple participants mentioned that because of the left-winged nature of the channels and their chosen topics, a lot of online "drag" happens at every showing. This may be something to get used to for new creators, but it was classified by the participants as ultimately part of the job. However, occasionally, a complete audience misinterpretation of the content can occur and it can be pretty upsetting for the journalists involved:

"We were trying to make a neutral episode on transgender care, it was a research on transgender protocol. But then Forum voor Democratie (an extreme right party in the Netherlands) jumped on it, and the right loved it. Our journalists ended up on transphobic websites and such - that was really intense for everyone". (Participant B)

After having had misinterpretations and online backlash, anxiety about audience interpretation can arise before publishing any new content.

This section directly addresses the subquestion: *How do young media makers consider audience interpretation when expressing ideological views in their work?* The findings show that young media professionals are extremely aware of how their content is likely to be received, especially in digital environments where audience reactions are interactive and emotionally charged. Participants consistently noted that their content, which is usually produced with ideological frameworks, is consistently subject to online backlash.

A recurring theme was the phenomenon of being "dragged" online, a term used by participants to describe a form of public shaming or aggressive criticism, particularly on social media platforms. This is consistent with the findings of Ingraham and Reeves (2016, p. 457), who state that the digital developments and interactive nature of these technologies contribute to an online culture of constant shaming, criticising, and "dragging". In this context, "drag" refers to the hostile online backlash that creators face when their content is met with disagreement, ridicule, and ideological opposition. This criticism can range from harsh commentary and ridicule to coordinated attacks by individuals or groups who interpret the content through opposing political or cultural lenses, such as in the example of the episode on transgender care.

Although most participants acknowledged that audience members are generally aware of the political leanings of their respective broadcasting channels, they also emphasized that the progressive

nature of the content makes it a frequent target for backlash. However, some of the more jarring online experiences, such as the reactions to the transgender care episode, can be emotionally taxing and contribute to a growing anxiety among creators about how their work might be received or misread before it is even published.

It is therefore fair to state that based on the participants' data, audience interpretation is not a passive afterthought, but a central concern in the creative process. Young media makers must constantly balance their ideological intentions with an awareness of potential misreadings, politicized responses, and the psychological toll of potential online backlash. This dynamic reflects Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, highlighting the disjuncture that can occur between the intended message and its reception, and emphasizing the strategic, reflective role young professionals play in navigating public discourse.

4.1.2.3 Ratings and Audience Feedback

The participants were also asked to what extent ratings were influencing their work, which differed a lot per participant and the program they worked for. Some participants claimed that ratings were a crucial part of their job, and defined success through reaching large audience numbers, both online or on the network, while others claimed to not be worried about ratings and engagement. Some participants mentioned being the designated young person in the editorial team, meaning they are often responsible for the online leg of the work, and therefore the online ratings of their show. But due to the interactive nature of a lot of the media shared on the internet, immediate feedback from commenters is much more easy to be applied.

“We recently had an email with someone commenting about our podcast, that they never know what to expect because every episode is so different. That's something we really think about, like, okay, maybe we can take a moment at the start of every episode to clarify what you're going to be hearing about”. (Participant 3)

Negative feedback also gets taken seriously and makes some of the participants reevaluate their working methods. In particular, if the participants had made content that turned out to be factually incorrect, or offensive in an unintended way, content was likely to be altered or removed.

4.1.2.4 Generational Differences Audiences

Finally, a subtheme frequently mentioned when discussing keeping audiences in mind during creation, was the shift in audience generations. As both VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA are traditionally TV channels, participants mentioned that older employees struggled letting go of

traditional media platforms, as mentioned above. But also within the audiences, things are changing. Multiple participants worked on shows that they considered to be for an older audience, from people over forty up until the very elderly. Struggling to capture a younger audience for the content created is a problem mentioned by several of the participants, once again related to older senior editors, leading to media platforms that are not as popular among younger audiences. Frustration was expressed in relation to the senior editors refusal to move with the times, as new media platforms are ultimately the way to capture younger audiences. Several young media makers noted that despite their efforts to introduce or advocate for new formats, such as short form content on TikTok, these ideas were often dismissed or undervalued by more traditional decision-makers. This generational disconnect within editorial teams not only created tensions in the creative process but also, according to participants, might contribute to the failure of attracting younger audiences. As a result, some expressed a sense of creative stagnation and concern that the relevance of their work was being undermined by editors of the older generation. They emphasized that embracing newer media platforms and formats is not just a matter of trend-following, but essential for maintaining public media's relevance and accessibility to younger generations, the audience that was consistently mentioned as being hardest to reach.

4.1.3 Diversity

The topic of diversity was addressed based on the findings by Van Sterkenburg et al. (2021, p. 32-43), Konrad et al. (2021, pp.2180-2183) and Lamont (2023, p. 65). Participants were asked directly about diversity both on and off camera, and if they ever experienced or saw any discrimination in the workfield. The answers of the participants led to the following two subthemes, which will be elaborated on below. This section contributes directly to answering subquestion 2: *How do young employees experience and respond to diversity and meritocracy within public broadcasting?* The participants' reflections shed light on how diversity is perceived and practiced within public broadcasting institutions. Their experiences provide insight into the degree to which diversity initiatives are genuinely embedded in workplace culture, versus treated as symbolic. Moreover, participants' responses illustrate how notions of meritocracy intersect with diversity, particularly in how opportunities are distributed, whose voices are amplified, and whether inclusive representation is prioritized in practice. Through this lens, the section offers a nuanced view of how young professionals navigate and respond to the tensions between idealized merit-based advancement and the structural realities of inequality and underrepresentation in the media landscape.

4.1.3.1 Organizational Diversity

The first subtheme is derived from the answers surrounding diversity on the work floor. Perspectives on this varied a bit across participants, who mostly had a similar background profile, namely white, university educated, and native Dutch. In general, the overarching sentiment related to diversity on the workforce was that the channels were trying their best to diversify, but that it can be complicated to hire as the pool to choose from tends to be mostly people with a similar background.

This differs from the existing literature, as both Konrad et al. (2021, p. 2180-2183) and Van Sterkenburg et al. (2021, p. 42) found that the organisations might not realise the problem. The organisations studied in this thesis appear to have a different approach, perhaps not being quite as diverse as necessary just yet, but at a minimum acknowledging and regretting this reality. More than one participant expressed this perception of the hiring pool not being very diverse. The participants making these observations were, notably, higher educated, Dutch white men, fitting the exact profile described by most participants as being the most commonly hired employee. The perception of it being hard to find diverse people to hire was contested by some of the other participants, believing that there had simply not been enough investment in looking for employees of a diverse background. One participant commented specifically that the channels were simply not trying hard enough. This is contradicting Konrad et al. (2021, p. 2180-2183) and the notion of the “diversity-meritocracy paradox” in which the inclusion of marginalised groups might threaten the dominating population, because in this case, the participants stating this fell mostly in the dominant group. In the case of BNNVARA and VPRO-HUMAN, not one participant expressed the feeling that diversity would disadvantage them in any way, and only highlighted the benefits of having a variety of perspectives.

Furthermore, on camera, most participants agreed that the channels were trying their best to get different perspectives, stories and people from varying backgrounds. Though it was mentioned that there is still a lot to improve, the general sentiment was that the intentions were there. However, on the workforce itself, this is presented less. One participant answered that there was definitely less diversity behind the scenes than on TV, after being asked about what the diversity was like on the workforce. This aligns with the findings of Molina-Guzmán (2016, p.439), describing the “Hollywood Paradox”, in which on screen diversity is being furthered, while the behind-the-scenes productions stay stagnant. Though the Dutch public system is vastly different from the American commercial one, it is notable that the publicly funded, progressive organisations cope with similar diversity struggles.

Another participant noted that there are a lot of people working who have a very comparable profile, and that that tends to create television and documentaries from a similar angle. One participant shared their experiences after getting hired for a programme that was quite openly about hiring for diversity, and that the expectations that were promised weren’t always met.

“If you’re being told, you’re gonna be allowed to do things differently, we want to actively change the culture, you expect that if you then say for example ‘hey, this is what happened in my editorial team, I didn’t like it’ that they take it seriously, or agree with you. But pretty often people just react like, oh yeah, that’s just how things go here.” (Participant C)

Despite the lack of general diversity, all participants felt included and taken seriously without their current positions, and like they added something to both the content they created and the channels as a whole. Lamont’s (2023, p. 23) findings were mirrored by the participants, suggesting that insufficient media representation of diverse demographics reinforce societal stereotypes and power imbalances, and continue social and economic inequalities in marginalized communities. The importance of diverse perspectives in media was stressed by multiple participants:

“I definitely feel like an outsider in a lot of places... and I think that that’s what I bring to the table in my editorial work as well. Just the fact that I’m quick to think, who are we overlooking in this conversation? That’s what diversity adds” (Participant C).

These findings suggest that while public broadcasting institutions may be moving in the right direction, deeper investment in inclusive practices, such as beyond surface-level representation, is needed to create genuine meritocracy and equal participation for young professionals of all backgrounds.

4.1.3.2 Homogeneity of mindset and background

When asked if certain perspectives gained priority over others, participants overwhelmingly mentioned left wing, progressive ideologies as a perspective that was prioritized. One participant mentioned the blatant political conviction of BNNVARA, saying:

“When PVV (Dutch extreme right party) won the most votes, there was an email from BNNVARA going to every employee about how much they regretted this development. When I mean, if you read that and you voted for Wilders (PVV party leader) then you might not feel so welcome in this company. So sometimes emails like that get criticised.” (Participant 1)

However, participants also addressed that these organisations are very open about their political ideologies, and that the purpose of these channels is to inform, perhaps even convince, viewers of similar ideologies. It was speculated that most applicants for positions at these companies are aware of the ideals, and agree with them. This does lead to a generally shared mindset by the employees within the channels, although none of the participants mentioned this in a negative sense.

A noticeable similarity in all the participants was their educational background. Nine out of ten participants had a university background, and seven out of ten had done a programme related to journalism or media. This falls in line with what was described as the most commonly seen profile in this work environment, namely Dutch people who studied at either HBO or university level. This is similar to the findings of Brook et al (2020, p. 61, 71) who found that working-class backgrounds are less represented in the workforce, while those with higher education are more likely to be found in powerful positions within media. One participant commented on their academic background being one of the most unifying factors in the work environment:

“In some ways, I feel like I’m checking a lot of diversity boxes, as I’m a person of colour, I’m a woman, and I’m gay. But at the same time, looking at academic backgrounds, I’m a lot like all the other academics that work here. So yeah, I sometimes feel like those two broadcasters are still kind of a bit of the same old thing. And I actually feel like I fit into that quite well.” (Participant C)

However, this participant also mentioned that, unlike other places where they had worked or gone to school, there was less of the “burden of representation” as mentioned by Van Sterkenburg et al. (2021, pp. 32-33).

“At university, people sometimes wanted to hear what I had to say, just because I am ‘diverse’. I always felt really uncomfortable with that, especially since I’m not a naturally outspoken person. I didn’t necessarily want to be the spokesperson for every diversity issue. I’m just here to learn something!” (Participant C).

The participant further expressed that this was no issue at their current position within their organisation.

“Thankfully I don’t experience that here. I don’t feel like they hired me because of my background, as some type of diversity hire. So despite the editorial team not being the most diverse, I feel taken very seriously. I don’t feel reduced to my background.” (Participant C).

Another theme that arose when mentioning diversity, was the theme of employees coming from the Randstad. The Randstad is defined as being the four provinces in the West of the Netherlands, namely Noord-Holland, Zuid-Holland, Utrecht en Flevoland (*Regio Randstad*, 2024). It contains the four biggest cities in the Netherlands, and most importantly, the capital Amsterdam. It was mentioned across four of the participants as being one of the factors on the workfloor that created a monotonous mindset, as some of the employees are struggling to empathize with viewers from

outside the Randstad. A certain self-evident morale is common among many workers who have very similar backgrounds, according to one participant. There being structural inequalities based on geography was also raised by Arnold and O'Brian (2022, p. 27). On the workfloor, the difference in background, even from within the Netherlands, tends to get picked up on as well.

“We had an intern who basically came from the countryside... and yeah, he definitely got bullied... well not really bullied, teased with that a little bit. So I can imagine that he didn't experience it as completely inclusive.” (Participant D)

However, recent findings from a comprehensive SCP (Social and Cultural Planning Office) report challenge the assumption that the Randstad-versus-rest divide is a significant driver of social inequality. The SCP study analyzed seventy regions, including provinces and municipality types, concluding that while regional differences do exist, they are generally minor (*Ongelijkheid Zit in Je Sociale Klasse, Niet in Je Woonplaats*, 2025). Crucially, the SCP report emphasizes that individuals' life perspectives and societal beliefs correlate much more strongly with social class than with geographic location (*Ongelijkheid Zit in Je Sociale Klasse, Niet in Je Woonplaats*, 2025). Factors such as experienced discrimination, well-being, media usage, political orientation, and social discontent are more deeply rooted in class position than place of residence.

This nuanced understanding complicates the participants' narratives, suggesting that while geographic homogeneity on the workfloor may influence cultural and professional outlooks, the deeper structural inequalities impacting diversity and representation are more related to class-based disparities rather than simply, regional origins. Therefore, efforts to address diversity within public broadcasting must account for intersectional socio-economic factors beyond geographical background to more effectively capture the breadth of lived experiences across Dutch society.

4.1.4 Overarching Goals

This next theme, framed by Public Value theory (Moore, 1995, p. 27-56), contributes significantly to answering the research questions by illuminating the relationship between institutional structures, creative agency, and audience interpretation. By investigating participants' perceptions of their channels' overarching goals and their personal motivations this section directly addresses the subquestion: *How do young professionals define and pursue public value through their media production?*

Furthermore, participants' reflections on what public value means to them and examples of societal impact provide insight into how young media makers consider audience interpretation when expressing ideological views, thereby informing the second subquestion: *How do young media makers consider audience interpretation when expressing ideological views in their work?* This analysis helps to understand how institutional intentions and ideologies guide content creation and how awareness of public value negotiates between creators' ideological intentions and audience reception.

4.1.4.1 Institutional Goals

When asked about the general goals of their institutions, the overarching sentiment of both channels, according to the participants, was to inform the viewers of the perspectives of others. Highlighting voices of the less privileged, using their platforms to contribute to the greater good, and hopefully, teaching something to someone in a way that changes their mind. One participant admitted that they initially joined the industry from a more comedic angle, but through their work with BNNVARA learned to appreciate the societal benefit of television as well.

“I really learned, sure, we want to make people laugh. That’s important and that will always be a part of my work. But my core messages were jokes, instead of thinking about what I really want to convey with this content - what’s the goal, what do I want to put out there? What do I really want?” (Participant 5)

Telling the truth, making a difference, and highlighting subjects that are impactful to society were other themes that were brought up a lot in this section of the interviews:

“Before this, I worked for a marketing company that was very commercial. And then I thought, I’m just selling a bunch of stuff I wouldn’t even buy myself, that is adding nothing valuable to the world. I realised I really want to add something. And at the public broadcasting channels, I can really add something that makes a difference.” (Participant B)

It must be mentioned that in this, there was a slight difference in the channels themselves, as BNNVARA is more likely to approach its content from an activist perspective, and VPRO-HUMAN participants took a slight step back, not wanting to convince their viewer, but more so inform. One VPRO-HUMAN employee mentioned feeling as if VPRO-HUMAN was more likely to inform, and leave the decision for the viewer, whereas BNNVARA has a more directive approach in its content, aiming to convince the viewer of certain perspectives.

4.1.4.2 Individual Goals of Participants

The individual goals of the participants largely correlated with those of the broadcasting channels, as they mostly joined the channels of choice based on their own political and ideological beliefs. The ideologies and beliefs they mentioned as being important to them were in line with those mentioned in previous literature, such as social justice movements, economic uncertainty, and climate change (McKee-Ryan, 2021, p. 116-117 ; Bińczynski et al., 2023, pp. 1-4) Multiple participants saw both broadcasters, despite only being employed by one of them, as employers that are in line with their beliefs and that these are the broadcasters they would be most comfortable working for. Multiple participants expressed what their own main topics of interest are, and that the broadcasting channels are mostly accommodating in highlighting topics that are important to the employees.

“My own interest is mostly in public health and healthcare. So for example, we’ll make something about pesticides, and how the research around it is actually incorrect. And there’s a bunch of people who live in areas where there are lots of pesticides, and they all get cancer. These are topics that really interest me” (Participant B).

4.1.4.3 Public value and impact

When asked about the public value in their work, and what it means to them, the participants gave mostly similar answers. The most commonly mentioned theme was surrounding informing the public of things they might not be aware of.

“I like to think of our show as showing people that, “there’s a whole world out there”, you know. Maybe that’s sappy. But if you look at the situation in Gaza, you can tell that people care, because they are watching the genocide happen in real time. But there’s also a genocide happening in Sudan, and you hear nothing about it. But it’s clear people would care if they knew” (Participant E).

Furthermore, platforming minority groups or issues that would have otherwise remained voiceless is another overarching goal that was mentioned by most participants. Conducting good research and giving a platform to these issues are intended for things to be able to change. Furthermore, stimulating discourse and remaining a strong voice against dominating, right wing culture was another frequently mentioned sentiment:

“We’re kinda living in a... It’s not really a BNNVARA era, to put it like that. With conservative movements, right-wing dominance. I suppose I see the -Public Value you called it? - as a way to keep highlighting the other side, and to keep showing them the progressive sound” (Participant D)

The participants were also asked to give an example of when they felt that their work really did make a direct societal impact. Their answers varied from getting direct positive comments, from individuals who felt that their lives were changed through this content:

“We’ll get people saying, ‘because of your show I became super inspired to learn more about sustainability, I started studying biology’, or people saying ‘I became a forester because of you.’ Things like that are so fun to hear back” (Participant 4).

To facilitate larger societal discussions, such as their tweet being quoted in the Dutch parliament, or highlighting perspectives that had not yet previously been addressed:

“After October 7th, we were some of the first to try and highlight the Palestinian perspective, which was really something that wasn’t being done much in the media discourse yet. We got a lot of drag for that, but still.” (Participant D).

4.1.5 Changing Media Landscapes

This final theme emerges from the participants’ responses, based on topics that became evident through their mentions across the dataset. Many participants expressed that television is a declining medium, noting that their work was undeniably impacted by this shift. Most participants are engaged with the online editorial teams, often interacting directly with viewers on social media and incorporating their feedback. Additionally, participants frequently highlighted the growing importance of short-form content, such as Instagram Reels and TikTok videos, typically characterized by videos under two minutes in length. Based on these observations and related developments, two sub-themes were identified for further analysis, elaborated on below.

This theme contributes to answering the subquestion: *How do young professionals define and pursue public value through their media production?* It will do so by demonstrating how participants adapt their content strategies to evolving media consumption habits. As traditional television declines, young professionals increasingly turn to online platforms and short-form content to reach and engage their audiences more effectively, their use of formats like Instagram Reels and TikTok reflects a redefinition of public value: one that prioritizes accessibility, responsiveness, and cultural relevance. By interacting directly with viewers and integrating audience feedback into their production processes, participants illustrate a dynamic and participatory approach to creating public value that aligns with the digital media landscape and the viewing habits of younger, more diverse audiences.

4.1.5.1 Shifting Viewer Engagement

One thing almost all participants mentioned was the shift in recent years of viewer engagement, driven largely by the rise of online media as a competitor to traditional network television. Participants acknowledged their own reduced engagement with network television, and suggested that for the networks to stay relevant, they would require transition to online platforms. This transition is mostly happening, as most of the television content is now also accessible through digital channels, which is a development strongly supported by the participants. The aforementioned challenge to attract a younger audience is closely tied to this, given that traditional television is no longer the primary source of entertainment for most younger generations (Meynhardt et al., 2017, p. 138). Additionally, the interactive nature of social media created another critical factor, as feedback on content is more immediate and direct compared to network television. This is in line with the findings of Mugil and Kenzie (2025, p. 4-5) in which they discuss the immediate feedback of audience and creators, and the blurred lines of those roles. Participants noted that this aforementioned “drag” has become a normal aspect of their job to encounter constant negative feedback of their content, regardless of the topic:

“Sometimes you’ll put something on a platform and people clearly only watch the first 10 seconds and then form their opinion. And you’re just thinking, if you had made the effort to watch the entire minute, you wouldn’t be saying all this rude stuff. Especially on TikTok, because sometimes the videos get to an audience that enjoys responding without it meaning anything.” (Participant 4).

A few participants mentioned the internet and its harsh comments can be one of the downsides of the job, and something that requires getting used to at first.

4.1.5.2 Different Media Formats

The decline in network television engagement can be largely attributed to the rise of new digital platforms. In addition to TikTok, participants frequently mentioned social media platforms such as Instagram as well as digital content formats like podcasts and YouTube videos as competitors for audience attention. This is in line with the findings of Chalm-Olmsted (2018, p. 13-19), who stated that these observable behaviours such as likes and shares are changing the way an audience engages with content. The participants were strongly aware of this shift, and also worked with short-form content as a means to engage with the younger audiences. Few participants were directly involved with creating and managing the online content associated with their television programmes. This was mentioned as to occasionally create tension with the editor-in-chiefs, or older generation employees, as they tend to be unfamiliar with the formats and dislike the general brevity of the content in this way.

“I do lots of things with our social media now, which my team from the tv world is still pretty unnerved by. When I started working there, it looked like the clock had been standing still for the last ten years.” - (Participant B).

This is consistent with the claims of Bińczynski et al. (2023, p. 3-4), who stated that generations prior to Gen Z are less comfortable with this technology, as Gen Z can identify as “digital natives”. However, participants expressed ambivalent feelings regarding the changes in media, particularly the editing techniques used in short-form content, noting a tension between the tactics applied for viewer attention, and the integrity of the original material. This is in line with the findings of Isa et al. (2024, p. 1583) and Tran et al. (2025, p. 6), who stated that young creatives, particularly those from Generation Z, are navigating emotional exhaustion, job instability, and evolving career expectations in the increasingly competitive digital environment.

“When we make short videos for TikTok and Instagram, it’s important to start those with a banger. Like, if there’s a man crying in our video, I’m gonna make sure the video starts with that. That sounds terrible, but then you know people are gonna keep watching. Yeah, it’s full of tricks like that.” - (Participant B).

Aside from the media world shifting to online social media platforms, some participants also had the job of exploring alternative media formats in their function. Experimenting with even more interactive and modern media formats, such as interactive livestreams, video game formats and AI.

Almost all participants who had a function that involved being responsible for online output had the freedom to experiment with what works for this new time, and what doesn't. Others mentioned experimenting with forms of engagement, such as an Instagram newsletter, that did not really take off.

Although the older generation of media makers does seem to be a bit fearful of the changes in media engagement and new content forms, both channels are clearly investing in innovation and trying to keep up with the times, even if nobody really understands this new era of media completely yet. In addition to the broader shift toward social media platforms, several participants described responsibilities that included exploring alternative and emerging media formats. These included interactive livestreams, video game-inspired content, and the integration of artificial intelligence, reflecting the evolving nature of media engagement. Other participants, who were tasked with managing the online output, reported a degree of creative autonomy, allowing them to experiment with content strategies and formats. Examples ranged from successful initiatives to less "viral" ideas, such as Instagram newsletters that failed to capture a large audience. Additionally, the algorithm on TikTok and Instagram reels was frequently mentioned as an unpredictable variable:

"Yeah, the TikTok algorithm is definitely still a bit of a crazy whirlwind. Sometimes you make something that you think is, let's say, not boring but maybe not the most interesting and then that suddenly has 1000 views more than the things you did think were cool" (Participant 4)

While there is some protest from older generations of media professionals, there was a generally shared recognition from both channels that there was a lot of active investing in innovation. Despite uncertainties surrounding the future of media, it became apparent that moving with the times and experimenting with new platforms and formats are necessary to remain relevant in the increasingly digital media landscape.

5. Discussion

This thesis set out to explore the question: *How does a new generation of public media makers encode their ideological and political visions into content while working within the frameworks of BNNVARA and VPRO-HUMAN?* Through ten in-depth interviews with early-career media professionals, this study has discovered the nuanced ways in which these young makers balance personal beliefs with institutional expectations, offering valuable insights into generational dynamics, structural constraints, and the evolving purpose of public broadcasting in the Netherlands.

The findings show that participants entered public broadcasting with strong ideologies, ranging from climate activism to anti-racism, gender equality, and democratic participation. Many saw institutions like VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA as the few remaining platforms where political engagement through storytelling was not only allowed, but expected. In this way, their work reflects Stuart Hall's (1980, p. 51-61) encoding/decoding model, where young producers do not passively reproduce dominant meanings but attempt to encode political and ideological codes within their content. For example, several participants recounted stories in which they successfully pitched programming ideas highlighting underrepresented perspectives or themes of social justice.

However, Hall's encoding/decoding model also illuminates the structural tensions at hand. While encoding ideologically motivated content, young professionals often had to navigate institutional gatekeeping and editorial conservatism, as well as increasingly scarce financial resources. The budget cuts announced for the NPO, totaling €156 million within the next two years, have not only deepened financial uncertainty, but also narrowed room for experimentation and hiring new talent. These constraints shape the encoded message of the content long before it reaches any audience, blurring the line between creative autonomy and institutional regulations.

Moore's Public Value Theory (1995, p. 27-56) offered another lens to interpret these dynamics. Participants consistently described their work as motivated by a desire to contribute to the public greater good, both by sparking democratic dialogue, or by representing marginalised communities.

On a societal level, the findings illustrate how generational change is reshaping not only the content of public media, but also the dynamics in the workforce. Participants often found themselves positioned as "the voice of the future," tasked with making media more inclusive and digitally fluent, while simultaneously constrained by hierarchical structures and senior-editors. Their experiences mirror wider patterns in the creative industries, where meritocratic ideals are often undermined by structural inequality, as reviewed in the literature.

Furthermore, this study highlights the role of audience interpretation and digital audiences in shaping encoding strategies. Participants were acutely aware of how ideological content might be received, especially in the polarized online environments of the modern day. Young professionals are

engaged in a complicated balance: encoding meaning that aligns with their values, anticipating reception, and adjusting for visibility, safety and mental health.

Theoretical Implications

This research contributes to media theory by extending Hall's encoding/decoding model beyond audience reception and into the production cultures of young, ideologically driven creators within public institutions, in a contemporary setting. It highlights how these producers engage in encoding, and how they navigate their way through crafting content with a strong awareness of potential audience interpretations, online backlash, and institutional framing. Additionally, the study operationalizes Moore's concept of public value by showing how it is not only relevant in managerial positions but also through its reinterpretation by a new generation of media professionals. For these creators, public value is tied to inclusion and representation, often in tension with financial support, job security, and editorial constraints. Finally, the research adds a generational perspective to literature on institutional power, illustrating how Gen Z professionals are expected to bring innovation and diversity while navigating hierarchical structures and limited creative autonomy. Together, these contributions call for a renewed understanding of media production as a space where values, power, and generational identities intersect.

Societal Implications

Public broadcasting remains a key site of cultural influence. As media systems across Europe face increasing political pressure and economic cuts, the role of young professionals in shaping socially responsive and democratically valuable media becomes increasingly important. This study shows that while youth can act as a progressive force within public institutions, their impact is dependent on whether those institutions are willing to develop not only their content but also their internal structures. Without structural, internal change, including more diverse leadership and editorial trust, young media makers risk being reduced to symbolic figures in an otherwise archaic, unmoved system.

5.1 Limitations

While this study offers valuable insight into the perspectives of young public media professionals, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. First, the sample was limited to ten participants from only two broadcasters. Although these organisations are ideologically aligned with the research goals, the findings may not be fully generalizable to all NPO-affiliated institutions or to commercial media environments. Additionally, the participants self-selected into the study, which may

have introduced bias toward individuals with stronger opinions or more confidence in articulating institutional critiques. Furthermore, interviews were conducted in Dutch and translated by the researcher, which may have introduced subtle shifts in meaning. Moreover, all but one of the participants were university educated, which may create a bias toward more institutionally privileged voices, potentially overlooking the perspectives of young media workers from vocational or non-academic backgrounds who may face different barriers to entry or institutional inequality.

Finally, one notable limitation was the absence of discussion around artificial intelligence (AI) and generation in media production. This theme was also not included in the original interview guide, reflecting a blind spot in the design of the study. As generative AI tools rapidly enter creative workflows, their potential to reshape or even replace creative roles is increasingly relevant to media professionals. The fact that participants did not raise this issue suggests a possible disconnect between emerging technological shifts and day-to-day awareness in public broadcasting. As such, this study cannot account for how AI may be impacting creative agency or future career imaginaries.

5.2 Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies could expand the sample size and include a broader array of public and commercial broadcasters to explore whether similar tensions and opportunities exist across the sector. Longitudinal research tracking the career progression of young media professionals could offer insight into how institutional power is accumulated (or resisted) over time. Furthermore, comparative research across national public broadcasting systems could illuminate how different models (e.g., the BBC, PBS) affect young creators' ability to encode ideological content. Moreover, future work could investigate the audience side of the encoding/decoding process, focusing on how diverse publics actually interpret, challenge, or embrace politically charged content produced by Gen Z creators in public media. Finally, as mentioned above, AI was notably absent from both the interview data and the research design, representing a significant gap in the study. Subsequent research could explore how young public media professionals perceive, engage with, and respond to AI technologies, and what impact these tools may have on creative content creators in an increasingly automated media landscape.

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Appendix

A: Coding tables

Table 4. Working Conditions

Theme	Subtheme	Codes	Quotations
Working conditions	Structural constraints	Budgeting (22)	<i>“There are big funding cuts coming for the public broadcast, so it’s important your show is seen as valuable; or they can just discontinue it”</i>
		Senior Editor (19)	<i>“In the end everything has to go through the Senior Editor”</i>
		Rules from NPO (9)	<i>‘Ultimately it’s the rules from the NPO that are limiting us’</i>
	Workfloor Dynamics	Trusting young creators (17)	<i>“If young people can run a million subscriber YouTube channel, why wouldn’t they be able to do that for the public broadcast?”</i>
		Older employees (11)	<i>“They’d prefer to keep telling stories in their old fashioned television way”</i>

Younger employees
(17) *“I think BNN VARA is
full of young people,
full of young creators”*

Conflicting Ideals (30) *“Sometimes someone
says they don’t want to
be filmed, and then we
do it anyway.. That’s a
bit hard for me
sometimes”*

Tolerance at BNN
VARA (22) *“Everyone is welcome
and the atmosphere
among each other is
also incredibly good.
Even the presenters,
or no matter what
function you have.
Everyone is actually
equal within BNN
VARA, so that is very
nice”*

Creative Agency	Creative Liberty (24)	<i>“There’s a lot of freedom to experiment with what you’d like to try”</i>
	Creative Limitations (30)	<i>“Ideas get shut down all the time. In the end it’s always dependent on if the person above you likes the idea or not”</i>
Career Development	Difficulty in employment (16)	<i>“It’s a hard world to enter; not a lot of spots and a lot budget cuts”</i>
	Existentialism (4)	<i>“I’ve let go of the idea I can change the world through journalism”</i>
	Learning in the work environment (8)	<i>“I actually became more aware of these values after I started working here”</i>
	Career ambitions (11)	<i>“I just want to keep making cool stuff”</i>

Table 5. Stuart Hall and Audience interaction

Theme	Subtheme	Code	Quotation
Stuart Hall and Audience interaction	Encoding and political messaging	Encoding (26)	<i>“We’re really trying to show something here... And then you just hope someone sees and maybe changes their mind”</i>
		Leftism (18)	<i>“If you’re talking about say, VPRO-HUMAN, you’re talking about something with a left wing signature”</i>
		Activist content (19)	<i>“I see my role as a journalist from an activist perspective”</i>
	Navigating Decoding	Viewer oriented mindset (15)	<i>“But how will people take it? Is always the first question we have to ask”</i>
		Negative Decoding (23)	<i>“It was meant as a neutral, informative show - but the extreme right used to their advantage, and suddenly we contributed to criticism on transgender care”</i>

	Positive Decoding (7)	<i>“We were pretty scared of the reactions, but they were actually mostly great”</i>
	Anxiety about audience reaction (10)	<i>“Sometimes you publish something and you’re just like, guess we’ll see how people like this”</i>
Ratings and Audience Feedback	Ratings (25)	<i>“Yeah, sometimes we need to show the NPO the ratings to prove that we have a right to exist”</i>
	Applying viewer feedback (11)	<i>“We always consider after a bunch of feedback... How should we approach this next time?”</i>
Generational Differences	Attracting a younger audience (13)	<i>“Yeah, how can we attract the younger audience? That’s pretty complicated”</i>
	Older Audience (7)	<i>“If you’re making a show for 60+, they just have different expectations”</i>

Table 6. Diversity

Theme	Subtheme	Code	Quotations
	Organizational Diversity	Diversity - on camera (22)	<i>“It is still a lot of white men here to explain to you how the world works”</i>
		Diversity - work environment (46)	<i>“Content-wise, you’re very focused on themes like diversity and inclusivity, but that’s not always reflected in the workplace itself.”</i>
		Diversity - Investment (18)	<i>“Sometimes, when there’s a job opening, they are very open about looking for a person of colour”</i>
		Diversity - Benefits (8)	<i>“It took me an hour and a half on a normal work day to find someone in the building who speaks Arabic. I don’t think that’s okay”</i>
		Low diversity in journalism (17)	<i>“Certain groups of people are just harder to find in the journalistic pool”</i>
	Homogeneity of	Diversity - Mindset	<i>“I think only about</i>

mindset and background	(25)	<i>2% of BNN VARA has a different opinion on it, most of us agree for sure”</i>
	Journalism or Media background (12)	<i>“If you already know alot about the media, you’re just more likely to get a spot”</i>
	Academic background (9)	<i>“Sometimes I wonder how much of an outsider I really am - I studied at university, just like everyone else here”</i>
	Randstad (9)	<i>“Everyone is from Amsterdam, except me”</i>

Table 7. Overarching Goals

Theme	Subtheme	Codes	Quotations
Overarching goals	Institutional Goals	Overarching goals - BNN VARA (37)	<i>“The progressive value is, to use our voice for those who are less fortunate”</i>
		Overarching goals - VPRO (20)	<i>“We want to stimulate the audience to think for themselves”</i>
	Individual Goals	Personal Ideology (33)	<i>“ I just want to tell the truth”</i>

Public value and
impact

Public value (25)

“I believe a healthy democracy starts with having an informed public, and empowering them to have the conversations needed”

Societal Impact (22)

“Someone cited my Tweet in the Tweede Kamer, which facilitated a debate between them and another minister - that felt like a very direct impact.”

Table 8. Changing Media Landscapes

Theme	Subthemes	Codes	Quotations
Changing media landscapes	Shifting viewer engagement	Low Television engagement (11)	<i>“I don’t even watch tv”</i>
		Social media viewer interactions (22)	<i>“We’re moving towards including our audience in the content we’re making - it’s much more of an interaction now”</i>
	Different Media styles	Short form content (18)	<i>“Online everything needs to be as short and snappy as</i>

*possible - yeah good
luck putting your 40
minute research in one
minute and a half”*

Technological
Advancements (32)

*“I think that’s really a
key point, because I do
believe we really need
to move away from
just broadcasting as a
public broadcaster
and shift towards
something more, yes,
interactive”*

B: Sample of Recruitment Message

Sample 1. Original Dutch Message

Hoi (naam potentiële deelnemer),

Mijn naam is Sophie, en momenteel werk ik op de Erasmus Universiteit aan mijn scriptie over werknemers bij BNN VARA en VPRO-HUMAN. Voor dit onderzoek ben ik op zoek naar mensen tussen die bij deze omroepen werken en mij ongeveer een uurtje willen spreken over hun ervaringen. Mijn onderzoek richt zich op de vraag: *"How do employees of VPRO-HUMAN and BNN VARA negotiate their role in encoding a public broadcasting narrative that aligns with their values?"* - Hiermee wil ik graag meer inzicht krijgen in jullie ervaringen, ambities en eventuele uitdagingen die jullie tegenkomen bij het vormgeven van het publieke omroep verhaal.

Ik zoek nog enkele deelnemers voor deze interviews. Het interview is uiteraard anoniem, en als je het interessant vindt kan ik een exemplaar van het onderzoek en de bevindingen sturen als de scriptie af is.

Zou jij bereid zijn om mee te doen? Dat zou mij heel erg helpen! De interviews zijn uiteraard anoniem en kunnen zowel online als in het echt plaatsvinden - ik ben beschikbaar in Rotterdam, Amsterdam of Utrecht. Het liefst deze en volgende week.

Alvast bedankt en ik kijk uit naar je reactie :)

Sample 2. English Translation of Original Message

Hi (name potential participant),

My name is Sophie, and I'm currently working on my thesis at Erasmus University about employees at BNNVARA and VPRO-HUMAN. For this research, I'm looking for people working at these broadcasters who would be willing to speak with me for about an hour about their experiences.

My research focuses on the question: *"How do employees of VPRO-HUMAN and BNNVARA negotiate their role in encoding a public broadcasting narrative that aligns with their values?"*

Through this, I hope to gain deeper insight into your experiences, ambitions, and any challenges you might face in shaping the public broadcasting narrative.

I'm still looking for a few more participants for these interviews. The interview will of course be anonymous, and if you're interested, I'd be happy to share a copy of the thesis and its findings once it's completed.

Would you be willing to participate? That would really help me! The interviews can take place either online or in person—I'm available in Rotterdam, Amsterdam, or Utrecht. Ideally sometime this or next week.

Thanks in advance, and I look forward to hearing from you :)

C: Interview guide

Interviewgids (Nederlands)

Scriptie onderwerp: *How do young employees of VPRO-HUMAN and BNN VARA negotiate their role in encoding a public broadcasting narrative that aligns with their values?*

A. Introductie & Achtergrondinformatie

Begin met een korte introductie om het gesprek op een ontspannen manier te starten:

1. Kun je je naam en leeftijd vertellen?
 2. Wat is je huidige functie bij VPRO-HUMAN of BNNVARA?
 3. Hoe lang werk je hier (of in de publieke omroep in het algemeen)?
 4. Kun je kort beschrijven aan welk soort content je werkt of waaraan je bijdraagt?
 5. Wat heeft je oorspronkelijk aangetrokken om in de publieke omroep te werken?
-

B. Thema 1: Perceptie van je rol binnen het publieke omroepverhaal

Focus: **Creatieve ruimte, beslissingsbevoegdheid en professionele ambities.**

6. Voel je je weleens creatief beperkt door de institutionele normen?
 7. Draag je bij aan de content waaraan je had gehoopt te werken?
 8. Hoe zie jij je rol in het beïnvloeden van content binnen het kader van de publieke omroep waarden?
 9. Kun je een moment beschrijven waarop je je juist creatief gesterkt voelde door institutionele normen?
 10. Zijn er situaties geweest waarin je je creatief beperkt voelde door de normen van de publieke omroep? Hoe ben je daarmee omgegaan?
 11. In hoeverre sluiten jouw bijdragen aan bij de inhoudelijke doelen die je voor ogen had toen je deze sector binnenkwam?
 12. Welke ambities of idealen heb je voor je carrière in de publieke media, en hoe verhouden die zich tot je huidige rol?
-

C. Thema 2: Media beeldvorming en institutionele ongelijkheid

Focus: **Diversiteit in representatie, meritocratie en gelijke kansen binnen de sector.**

13. Heb je het gevoel dat bepaalde perspectieven voorrang krijgen op andere?
14. Hoe ervaar je de diversiteit van representatie binnen jouw netwerk of de content waaraan je werkt?
15. Ben je barrières tegengekomen in je loopbaan die je toeschrijft aan institutionele ongelijkheid (bijvoorbeeld op basis van afkomst, klasse of gender)?

16. Hoe zie je jouw rol in het versterken of juist uitdagen van dominante narratieven in de content van jouw organisatie?
 17. In hoeverre denk je dat loopbaanontwikkeling binnen jouw organisatie gebaseerd is op verdienste, en hoe speelt ongelijkheid daarin een rol?
 18. Zijn er binnen jouw organisatie mechanismen om diverse stemmen te betrekken bij redactionele keuzes? En hoe effectief zijn die volgens jou?
 19. Kun je een voorbeeld geven van een moment waarop jij of een collega met succes hebt gepleit voor meer inclusieve of representatieve content? Wat waren daarbij de obstakels?
-

D. Thema 3: Encoding/Decoding in de publieke omroep

Focus: **Bewustzijn van publiek interpretatie en betekenisvorming.**

20. Houd je bij het maken van content rekening met hoe het publiek deze zal interpreteren?
 21. Ben je weleens verrast door reacties van het publiek op jouw werk?
 22. In hoeverre beïnvloeden reacties van het publiek jouw toekomstige keuzes of creatieve beslissingen?
 23. Voel je weleens spanning tussen de boodschap die jij wilt overbrengen en hoe je denkt dat het publiek die zal interpreteren?
 24. Hoe nauwkeurig denk je dat jouw bedoelde boodschap wordt opgepikt door verschillende publieksgroepen?
 25. Heb je je content ooit aangepast om mogelijke misinterpretaties te voorkomen? Wat was daarvoor de aanleiding?
 26. In hoeverre beïnvloeden institutionele doelen of publieke opdracht jouw veronderstellingen over wat het publiek uit je content zou moeten halen?
-

E. Thema 4: Public Value Theory in de publieke omroep

Focus: **Bijdrage aan het algemeen belang, maatschappelijke impact en publieke waarde.**

27. Wat is jouw overkoepelende doel in de content die je maakt?
28. Wat betekent 'publieke waarde' voor jou in je werk?
29. Op welke manieren draag je met jouw werk bij aan het algemeen belang of het maatschappelijk welzijn?

- 30. Hoe vind je de balans tussen publieke waarde en het behalen van publiekscijfers of engagement?
 - 31. Ervaar je wel eens spanning tussen het dienen van het publieke belang en het halen van institutionele of redactionele targets?
 - 32. Hoe definieer je succes in je rol?
 - 33. Sluit dat aan bij de idealen van de publieke omroep?
 - 34. Kun je een voorbeeld geven van een project waarbij je het gevoel had dat jouw werk echt impact had op de samenleving of het publieke debat?
-

F. Afsluiting

- 34. Heb je ideeën over hoe publieke omroepen jonge makers beter kunnen ondersteunen?
- 35. Is er nog iets anders dat je wil toevoegen over je ervaring bij de publieke omroep?

D: AI declaration

Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information

Name: Sophie Jacques

Student ID: 591565

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5000

Supervisor Name: Luuc Brans

Date: 27 June 2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- ~~Writing improvements, including~~ grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

☒ I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically ChatGPT and Notebook LM in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

☐ I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: Sophie Jacques

Date of Signature: 27 June 2025

Extent of AI Usage

☒ I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

Ethical and Academic Integrity

☒ I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: Sophie Jacques

Date of Signature: 27 June 2025

E: AI Prompts

Generative AI was used in several sections of this thesis in order to improve its quality and accuracy. Notebook LM was used to create summaries and briefings of literature and to keep these summaries organised, though it is important to note that any information was verified manually before being implemented. ChatGPT was used in various ways, which will be elaborated on below.

AI was **not used** in the coding process.

Due to the inaccuracies associated with ChatGPT's content generation, particularly as a methodological tutor, all information was fact checked before use.

The prompts are divided in different sections based on the separate tasks.

Planning and Preparation of research:

- Proofread this email to potential participants and tell me if it is too informal. Make improvement suggestions
- What is the difference between thematic analysis and grounded theory?
- What is the difference between inductive and deductive coding?
- Which one is more suited for the type of research I'm conducting (brief research explanation)
- Is my interview topic list extensive enough?
- What are some tips for conducting interviews to avoid short answers?
- Find me real and retrievable literature on (X) topic

Post interviews and coding:

- Do these codes make sense?
- I've grouped and structured the codes in these code groups, does that make sense?
- Does this list of codes cover this concept?
- What are the rules for a block quote?
- What needs to be included in the methodology?
- What parts of this methodology section can I cut back on if I want to reduce my word count?

Grammar and writing:

- Do a spell and grammar check on this section
- Give me feedback on the clarity and conciseness of this section
- Is this section consistent in its tense
- Give me feedback on this paragraph

- Fix the formatting of this paragraph but keep the content the same
- How can I say (X) in a more concise way to fit into an academic table
- What is your feedback on this section in order to improve its clarity? Give me the answer in bullet points

Final revision and Formatting

- How do I merge PDFs on Mac
- Alphabetise this for me
- Give me variations of the thesis title (X)
- Can (X) count as one keyword?
- Give me 10 relevant keywords for a research based on (X)
- How do I cite the information in a table?
- Read this thesis and give me feedback on what sections can be improved. Give feedback in bullet points

F: Interview transcripts

See zipfile