

Programming Queerness? PSM Remits, Metarepresentational Discourse, and LGBTQ+ Portrayals

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In research on LGBTQ+ representations in Western European mediascapes, public service media (PSMs) have been identified as key actors in instigating and shaping domestic depictions of sexual and gender differences. However, while public expectations of PSMs—stipulated in *remits*—are often referred to in studies, their implications for LGBTQ+ representation have not been systematically explored. With a critical discourse analysis of the former and present remits ($N = 6$) of the PSMs of Flanders (VRT), the Netherlands (NPO), and Ireland (RTÉ), this study demonstrates how these documents discourage producing queer-themed (fiction) content in favor of programming with “universal appeal.” Simultaneously, it highlights how their pluralism delegitimizes “harmful” portrayals and requires PSMs to actively engage with changing representational norms. This is further entrenched by the expectation for PSMs to consult “relevant stakeholders” when representing minoritized groups. Hence, this article critically maps the “metarepresentational discourses” that LGBTQ+ portrayals in PSM programming emerge from.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ representation, public service media, Western Europe, queer media, critical discourse analysis

Media representation is a key area in gender and sexuality scholarship. Since film, television, and audiovisual content are crucial sites where common assumptions about sexual and gendered differences are reproduced and subverted (Parsemain, 2019), productive interplays have developed between media research and queer studies. While these have long focused on United States media culture (Szulc, 2023; Vanlee, 2019b), their scope has broadened considerably. Considering the persistent popularity of “homegrown” content in today’s transnational mediascape (Havens, 2019), this growing interest in domestic representations is unsurprising. They reflect collisions between global and local discourses on gender and sexuality (Dhaenens, Mediavilla Aboulaoula, & Lion, 2022), creating opportunities to better understand interplays between entertainment media and societal norms on sexual and gendered differences. Thus, alongside work discussing the construction of trans* subjectivity in contemporary American series (e.g., Ferreday, 2022), other studies now address how digital media reconfigure notions of sexual difference in

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Date submitted: 2023-10-03

¹ This study is part of an FWO-funded senior postdoctoral fellowship (Grant No. 12D1223N).

mainland China (Zhao, 2020), demonstrate how *telenovelas*' generic conventions shape mainstream gay and lesbian visibility in Chile (Ramírez, 2020), and explore YouTube's community-building affordances for queer adolescents in South Africa (Andrews, 2021). European media cultures have similarly enjoyed growing interest, with particular attention paid to portrayals of sexual and gendered differences in (fiction) television (e.g., Dhaenens et al., 2022; Kerrigan, 2020; Van Wichelen & Dhoest, 2023a).

The role of public service media (PSMs) punctuates these studies. *Remits*, periodically updated documents outlining general obligations PSMs must observe in a given timeframe (Donders, 2021), are frequently referred to. Historical studies on the inclusion of gay and lesbian characters in Western European mediascapes, for instance, highlight how 1990s PSM remits increasingly emphasized audience diversity, creating favorable conditions for addressing same-sex desire in mainstream programming (e.g., Edwards, 2009; Kerrigan & Vanlee, 2022). Textual analyses of LGBTQ+ portrayals in Western European schedules hint at public mandates to interpret representational strategies, linking formal qualities and narrative choices to PSM missions (e.g., Franklin, 2014; Johnson, 2004; Van Wichelen & Dhoest, 2023a). Similarly, production studies suggest that remits encourage certain ways of dealing with sexual and gender diversity in PSM productions (Vanlee, 2019a; Van Wichelen & Dhoest, 2023b). Conversely, remits are central to how external stakeholders, such as advocacy groups (Dhoest, 2015) or queer media professionals (Kerrigan & O'Brien, 2020), construe PSMs' responsibilities toward the LGBTQ+ community too. However, while various studies *refer* to PSM remits, they are not objects of analysis in their own right. Still, as documents outlining PSM responsibilities for a given timeframe (Donders, 2021), remits are profoundly normative texts that construe "proper" and "improper" modes of representation. Thus, analyzing them highlights how LGBTQ+ portrayals in PSM content are shaped not just by sociocultural assumptions about sexual and gendered differences but also by "metarepresentational" discourses. These do not necessarily naturalize particular ideas about LGBTQ+ lives proper (e.g., heteronormativity), but forward specific assumptions about *portraying* them.

Hence, this study draws on discourse theory (Fairclough, 2013) to analyze previous and present remits of three Western European PSMs—the Flemish *Vlaamse Radio- en Televisiemaatschappij* (VRT), the Irish *Raidió Teilifís Éireann* (RTÉ) and the Dutch *Nederlandse Publieke Omroep* (NPO; $N = 6$)—deconstructing how they imagine their organizations' engagement with sexual and gendered differences. First, the article theorizes the remits' nature and function, focusing specifically on their relation to inclusive representation. Here, it demonstrates how rearticulations of PSM responsibilities through remit renewals not only (re)configure their leeway as market actors but also concretize metarepresentational discourses about diversity in programming. These construe a specific balance between serving broad domestic audiences and catering to specific demographics (Fairclough, 2009), thereby influencing how PSM inclusivity mandates are operationalized in content and scheduling. On this basis, this article examines queer media studies' approach to LGBTQ+ televisibility, signaling its inaptitude to untangle metarepresentational discourse because of its focus on how sociocultural constructions of sexual and gendered difference materialize in specific portrayals. Inverting the field's habitual methodological stance, it understands specific modes of LGBTQ+ televisibility by PSMs (e.g., Daalmans & Ter Horst, 2017; Dhaenens et al., 2022; Van Wichelen & Dhoest, 2023a) as *operationalizations* (Fairclough, 2013) of metarepresentational discourse on portraying diversity. As the analysis demonstrates, by treating such representations as a contextual horizon to deconstruct normative ideas about PSM responsibilities, specific precursors to LGBTQ+ portrayals emerge. Couched in PSMs' overall inclusivity mandate, these do not directly reflect broader discourses on gendered and sexual difference—

although they materialize in individual portrayals (see, for instance, Edwards, 2009; Kerrigan, 2021; Vanlee, Dhaenens, & Van Bauwel, 2020). Rather, they (1) construe commonsensical ways to implement formal expectations PSMs face in terms of engaging the public writ large, (2) navigate shifting popular norms on representational diversity, and (3) ensure key actors' validation of specific portrayals.

PSMs, Remits, and Diverse Representation

PSMs' organizational structures are varied—even within Western Europe (for an overview, see Donders, 2021). While the liberalization wave of the 80s and 90s eroded some functional differences between public and private media—with PSMs now behaving “competitively” on a “media market” (d'Arma, 2018; Sehl, 2023)—categorical distinctions in terms of funding and mission persist (Donders, 2021). Unlike private counterparts, PSMs are (partly) funded with public resources—creating responsibilities to the public, not shareholders. Some receive means through license fees, while others receive direct subsidies. Today, many are also allowed (or expected) to complement their budgets with commercial revenues (Sehl, 2023). While subsidized, however, Western European PSMs are not state broadcasters. They are kept at arms' length to ensure independence from unchecked political interference (Donders, 2021). Hence, most of them are public enterprises funded to fulfill particular functions, usually to *inform*, *educate*, and *entertain* their communities (Mazzone, 2019). Thus, although PSMs operate largely autonomously, they do so within a general framework of obligations and expectations expressed by their legal statutes and periodically updated mission statements (Donders, 2021), distinguishing them from commercial media. While the latter are free to prioritize and pursue profitability by all legal means, PSMs' “market behavior” is governed by publicly defined responsibilities subsumed under their *remit*. This remit simultaneously refers to a fixed mandate—stipulated in bylaws—and evolving missions, expressed through periodic statements or agreements drafted and disclosed at the onset of funding terms (Bardoel & Lowe, 2007).

These periodically renewed documents go by various names—the *Management Agreement*² in the case of the Flemish VRT, the *Concession Policy Plan*³ for the Dutch NPO, or *RTÉ Strategy* in Ireland—and specify PSMs' priorities for a specific timeframe. Because their activities cannot simply be politically dictated, remits' periodical reiteration and specification in writing is no unilateral process. Rather, various stakeholders are involved. To draft these documents, political actors (e.g., competency ministers, political appointees on PSM boards of directors, etc.), PSM management, private media representatives, independent producers, civil society organizations, and (sometimes) academics debate priorities for the upcoming funding period, each attempting to have their interests reflected in the outcome. The intention behind such broad consultations is to tailor the remit maximally to the contingencies of inter/national mediascapes (Donders, 2015). This “multistakeholderist” approach does not make miracles, however, and never guarantees equitable participation (see Donders, Van den Bulck, & Raats, 2019). As Donders et al. (2019) demonstrate in the case of the Flemish VRT, governmental composition and key actors' ideological stances (e.g., competency ministers) facilitate informal lobbying, allowing commercial ambitions to eclipse public interests in terms of PSMs' economic activities. More generally, including private media representatives in remit renewals often results in prioritizing PSM activities that subtly or not-so-subtly benefit their market

² Beheersovereenkomst

³ Concessiebeleidsplan

competitors—ranging from privatizing in-house production capacities (see d’Arma, 2018) to pushing for public/private collaborations on domestic SVOD platforms (see Raats & Evens, 2021).

Given the role of remits in public/private media rivalries, research has emphasized their political economy. However, instances in which PSMs’ mandates and missions are rearticulated do not necessarily reconfigure the balance between industry competitors. Since PSMs in Western Europe are categorically expected to address their communities’ diversity (Bardoel & Lowe, 2007; Mazzone, 2019), remit renewals create opportunities to adapt, accentuate, and specify this requirement, which—in turn shapes the representational strategies PSMs employ. For instance, during negotiations for the Flemish VRT’s 2002–2006 remit, many stakeholders felt that past programming had been insufficiently attentive to sociocultural diversity. Consequently, the final document emphasized the need to spearhead inclusivity and diverse representation and tasked VRT with developing concrete policies to address this deficit (Panis, Paulussen, & Dhoest, 2019). Thus, in 2003, VRT adopted a “Diversity Charter,” created a “Diversity Cell,” and commissioned an annual “Diversity Monitor” conducted by academics to improve its performance (Panis et al., 2019). Stakeholders’ convictions about VRT’s responsibility to trail-blaze an inclusive mediascape produced specific discourses on diversity in the remit, which were, in turn, operationalized in policies and output. Obviously, there is a considerable distance between the organizational measures taken to address a “diversity deficit” and their materialization in representation. However, this example illustrates how remits can (re)shape PSMs’ portrayals of sociocultural reality. This is not to say that this always results in improvement. Some note that at the turn of the century, PSM policies across Western Europe gradually replaced activating multiculturalist discourses with depoliticized “cultural diversity” rhetoric (e.g., Horsti & Hultén, 2011; Malik, 2013). This led to a shift from productions and commissions centered on the needs and demands of minoritized groups—reflected by “niche” content and attention to processes of marginalization—to integrationist logics that emphasize mainstreaming diversity and inclusion across the schedule, thus limiting the space to address the specificities of particular communities (Malik, 2014).

Relevant here is that remits do not just reflect a compromise between various stakeholders about how PSMs must engage the *market*. They also articulate normative “metarepresentational” discourses. These construe specific interpretations of PSMs’ responsibilities in terms of portraying sociocultural reality and naturalizing specific operationalizations (Fairclough, 2013) in activities and output. While categorically expected to address diversity in their communities, renewed remits construe (Fairclough, 2009) particular lenses to interpret this obligation. For instance, Horsti and Hultén (2011) demonstrate how legal statutes have required Finnish and Swedish PSMs to account for ethnic and cultural minorities in their programming strategies since the 20th century, and how they continue to nominally observe this demand in the 21st. However, where discourses on sociocultural differences in earlier remits were construed around minoritized audiences, later documents abandoned multiculturalist audience constructions in favor of “cultural diversity” logics that locate “diversity” and “difference” in general-interest programming. Thus, although a “serve all” principle remained central to discursive constructions of PSM responsibilities, explicit demands for minority-oriented content turned into vague requirements on ensuring diversity in catch-all content (Horsti & Hultén, 2011, p. 222–223).

This does not mean that these dynamics consistently dilute outspoken demands into depoliticized, implicit expectations. As the example of the Flemish VRT (*supra*; Panis et al., 2019)—and others like it (e.g.,

Koeman, Peeters, & d'Haenens, 2007)—demonstrate, remit renewals can also produce “diversity targets” and monitoring instruments, remedying how certain forms of sociocultural difference are addressed in PSM programming. While introducing quotas concerning on-screen women, ethnic or cultural minorities, and people with disabilities can produce problematic outcomes too—like a simplistic “checkbox” approach to inclusivity (Dhoest, 2015)—it does illustrate how remits can single out specific areas on which PSM representational practices should focus in a given period. Thus, both examples of the dilution (Horsti & Hultén, 2011; Malik, 2014) and intensification (Koeman et al., 2007; Panis et al., 2019) of approaches to inclusive representation demonstrate how particular constructions of “diversity” in remits produce specific operationalizations of such discourses in PSM practices and programming.

PSM Remits and Analyzing Normative Discourse on LGBTQ+ Representation

Although PSM remits articulate normative discourses on representing minority groups and sociocultural differences, they rarely construe explicit directives on what inclusive portrayals *look like*. A cursory glance at the documents analyzed here demonstrates that the LGBTQ+ community is hardly mentioned in RTÉ, VRT, and NPO's former or present remits. However, this does not mean that they are free from normative discourses on portrayals of sexual and gender differences. Furthermore, existing scholarship on queer media shows that the logics governing LGBTQ+ imagery in popular media are not always marked as such.

The invisibility of sexual and gender differences from media and media policy can and has been taken to signal its erasure (Chambers, 2009), showing how absence can in and of itself perpetuate homo- and transphobic logics. Concerning queer media representation, the notion of “symbolic annihilation” (see Gross, 2001) is often used to critique how sexual and gender minorities lacking mainstream visibility reinforce societal marginalization. For instance, the discretion of nonbinary characters in contemporary fiction series casually reiterates that trans* people identify as the “opposite”⁴ gender, marginalizing those whose subjectivity troubles dichotomous gender categorization as such (see Villegas Simón, Sánchez Soriano, & Ventura, 2023). Clearly, symbolic annihilation is useful for understanding commonplace LGBTQ+ representational practices in popular media. However, even though it speaks to operationalizations of discourse (e.g., homophobia) in representation (e.g., the absence of mainstream LGBTQ+ televisibility), it does not really work the other way around. Although no remit analyzed here prioritizes gender and sexuality when discussing “diversity,” RTÉ, VRT, and NPO's schedules regularly represent the LGBTQ+ community and have done so since the 1990s (Vanlee, 2019b). From introducing gay men and lesbian women to primetime offerings (see Kerrigan & Vanlee, 2022) to the contemporary presence of LGBTQ+ characters in fiction series (Dhoest, 2015; Van Haelter, Dhaenens, & Van Bauwel, 2022)—including for young audiences (see Van Wichelen & Dhoest, 2023a)—PSMs clearly continue to include representations of sexual and gender diversity, despite ongoing issues about how these portrayals are handled. Symbolic annihilation is just one concept applicable to LGBTQ+ representation in popular media. Other relevant interpretative tools have also been developed—such as Cavalcante's (2015) notion of *anxious displacements* or applications of Sedgwick's epistemology of the closet (1990) to media representation, such as Joyrich's (2001) seminal work on linear

⁴ The use of “opposite” gender here is not meant to enfranchise binary gender conceptions; rather, it seeks to evoke the hegemonic discourses this representational practice feeds into.

television or Shacklock's (2023) recent discussion of how algorithmic SVOD categorizations co-constitute "queer" representation. However, like symbolic annihilation, these concepts are useful for understanding these *portrayals* and are less readily applicable to metarepresentational discourse.

Queer media scholarship has not only pursued textual research interested in deconstructing "finalized" representations, however. Under the moniker "queer production studies" (see Martin, 2018), scholars have dealt with industry logics and practices shaping portrayals of sexual and gender differences in popular media. These do not take representations as their object, but the industry mechanisms that produce them. Analyzing network documentation combined with in-depth interviews, Ng (2013) discusses how gay-oriented United States commercial network *Logo's* programming shifts reflected consumerist constructions of gay men and heterosexual women. And exploring how Flemish media professionals introduce LGBTQ+ themes to children's content, Van Wichelen and Dhoest's (2023b) interviews show how commercial media actors and PSM staff construe sexual and gender diversity differently. Such examples show that queer media scholarship increasingly addresses extratextual dimensions, focusing on networks, channels, and media professionals' attitudes toward portraying sexual and gender differences. Here again, the focus is on *explicit* LGBTQ+-related discourses: In directly questioning media actors on their considerations when addressing LGBTQ+ people and subjects, queer production studies seek to understand the "machinations of queer authorship" and the "maneuvers of networks and their engagement with queerness and queer content" (Martin, 2018, p. 4).

So even here, remits' scarce explication of sexual and gender differences troubles the default analytic of queer media studies. Although their importance has been established (e.g., Johnson, 2004; Kerrigan, 2020; Vanlee, 2019b; Van Wichelen & Dhoest, 2023a), their disjuncture from representation as a material reality requires another methodological approach. As constructions of sexual and gender differences are largely absent *in* the remits themselves, known aspects of LGBTQ+ representation in Western European PSM provide the context to better understand the normative metarepresentational discourses they are predicated on. Where queer media studies generally use tools like discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2013), content analysis (Mayring, 2004), or textual analysis (Creeber, 2006) to relate specific representations to broader socio-political contexts (e.g., Cavalcante, 2015; Chambers, 2009; Dhaenens et al., 2022), the present study inverts this approach.

The idea is not to depart from discourses on sexual and gendered differences (e.g., heteronormativity—see Chambers, 2009; queer subversion—see Dhaenens, 2014) to make sense of portrayals by, but to unpack metarepresentational discourses from critical insights into concrete representations. Evidently, this means that understanding how normative discourses on inclusive representation in PSM remits shape LGBTQ+ televisibility requires familiarity with corresponding portrayals. Without a well-informed sense of how a PSM organization addresses gender variance in human interest programming or includes different sexual identities in series—taking two random examples—one cannot grasp how LGBTQ+ representations emerge from discrete discourses on diversity and inclusion remits articulate. This study's empirical focus on the former and present remits⁵ of RTÉ (*RTÉ Strategy 2015–2019*;

⁵ When drafting this manuscript, RTÉ still operated under its 2019–2022 remit, and its renewal ("Statement of Strategy 2024–2028") remained pending during revisions.

2018–2022), NPO (*Concession Policy Plan 2016–2020; 2022–2026*), and VRT (*Management Agreement 2016–2020; 2021–2025*) reflects this need. The past decade's LGBTQ+ televisibility in Ireland (see Kerrigan, 2021, 2020; Kerrigan & O'Brien, 2020; Kerrigan & Vanlee, 2022), the Netherlands (see Copier, 2022; Daalmans & Ter Horst, 2017; Vanlee, 2019b), and Flanders (see Dhaenens et al., 2022; Dhoest, 2015; Van Haelter et al., 2022; Vanlee et al., 2020) has been studied more extensively than elsewhere in Europe. This provides critical insights into the qualities and traits of relevant LGBTQ+ portrayals and offers a sense of commonplace representational strategies that the remits have informed. And as all are modestly sized markets (Cuelenaere & Joye, 2024), it is feasible to get an overall sense of how sexual and gendered differences are dealt with in their respective PSMs' schedules, too.

So LGBTQ+ portrayals by the PSM organizations under discussion here—both those studied before (see Daalmans & Ter Horst, 2017; Dhaenens et al., 2022; Dhoest, 2015; Kerrigan & Vanlee, 2022; Van Wichelen & Dhoest, 2023a) and their LGBTQ+ representations more broadly—offer the wider context against which particular normative discourses on representation can be untangled. The focus is not on explicit demands for the “unmarked” inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters in PSM fiction series (see Vanlee, 2019b), the overall lack of stereotypical or stigmatizing imagery of sexual and gender minorities in PSM schedules (see Daalmans & Ter Horst, 2017; Kerrigan & Vanlee, 2022), the explicit discussion of queer themes in PSM information and current affairs programming (see Kerrigan, 2021, 2020), or the growing space for queer representation in online PSM programming (see Dhaenens et al., 2022). Rather, it departs from these observations to better understand how metarepresentational discourses in remits construe normative frameworks in which such portrayals are natural and self-evident ways for PSMs to operationalize their commitment to inclusivity.

Strategic Universalism and the Casualization/Explication of Queerness

Because remits articulate PSMs' overall mandate over prolonged periods (generally between four and six years), they rarely construe applied imaginaries of “inclusive representation.” Beyond formulating general expectations for VRT, NPO and RTÉ to mind the diversity of their communities, there is a lack of specific demands about the screen presence of marginalized groups. Although remits practically contemplate programming, they invariably predicate it on national audience constructions. NPO's aim for 2022–2026 is to “reach and connect as many *Dutch* people as possible by attending to personal and social value” (NPO, 2021, p. 3), whereas RTÉ should “enrich *Irish* life with content that challenges, educates and entertains” (RTÉ, 2017, p. 2). PSMs have long served to foster national identity (see Steemers, 2016), and NPO, VRT, and RTÉ's remits consider bolstering connections with and among the domestic audience writ large their primary concern. PSMs must “stimulate national culture” and “promote national consciousness” in an “increasingly global media environment” (VRT, 2020, p. 5). Thus, their schedules should emulate their national viewership's immediate, everyday environments, in which the tangibility of the local is routinely juxtaposed with indistinct “international media culture.” For instance, faced with an “internationalizing media landscape marked by individualized consumption, [. . .] it is VRT's mission to ensure a solid connection with local reality and among its people” (VRT, 2020, p. 16). With this language, remits forward nationally defined, locally embedded audiences as PSM's horizon and stresses a primordial need to provide them with recognizable, socioculturally proximate content.

Prioritizing schedules popular with most citizens is rooted in Western European PSMs' historical trajectory (see Donders, 2021; Steemers, 2016). However, "universal" constructions of the target audience also reflect challenges such organizations face today—not just from the growing competition by international SVOD platforms (Raats & Evens, 2021), but from pressures much closer to home too. While competition with private media has been a common fare for PSMs since the 1980s' liberalization wave (see Donders, 2021), neoliberal logics in public administration (see d'Arma, 2018) have synergized with populist charges on PSMs' socio-cultural legitimacy (Holtz-Bacha, 2021). Faced with increased scrutiny about the "efficiency" of public funding and outright rejections of PSM's democratic credibility, remits reflect a sense of "strategic universalism"—premised on maximizing their national reach. Prioritizing schedules that appeal indiscriminately "to all" both appeases neoliberal fixations on "rationalizing" public expenditures (d'Arma, 2018; Van den Bulck & Raats, 2023) and reactionary critiques on PSMs' neglect of "the public interest" (Holtz-Bacha, 2021). Simultaneously, it dissuades them from targeting particular demographics. Although remits sometimes prescribe attention to "younger segments" (e.g., NPO, 2015, p. 42) or highlight the need to serve "world music and arts lovers" (e.g., RTÉ, 2014, p. 8), they never task PSMs with fulfilling specific minorities' needs. While reminiscent of earlier observations about PSM policy shifts from "multiculturalism" to "cultural diversity" (e.g., Horsti & Hultén, 2011; Malik, 2013), strategic universalism materializes in specific LGBTQ+ representations, which do not neatly fit into a devolution from "minority-oriented" to "depoliticized." Rather, construing PSM programming as "something for all" creates specific modes for sexual and gender differences to permeate fiction and information content, respectively.

In terms of scripted content, the "mass appeal imperative" dissuades PSMs from producing—or acquiring—series *focused* on sexual and gender differences. In the United States, narrowcasting practices (Becker, 2006) and cable offerings (Chambers, 2009) created pathways for queer-coded series—like *The L Word* (Chaiken, Lam, Golin, & Kennar, 2004–2009) or *Pose* (Murphy, Falchuk, & Canals, 2018–2021)—in the mainstream. But at NPO, RTÉ or VRT—or other Western European PSMs, for that matter—series similarly premised on LGBTQ+ communities and cultures are largely absent from schedules. Aside from recent Web series like coming-of-age dramedy *ANNE+* (Van Bommel, De Swaan, & Bouwmeester, 2018–2020) hosted on NPO channel BNNVARA's online video player (Copier, 2022) or the Flemish lesbian-themed *Roomies* (Sarkozi, 2022), similarly available on demand via VRT MAX, LGBTQ+ televisibility at Western European PSMs has been and continues to be predicated on characters featured in larger, diverse casts (Vanlee, 2019b). While sexual and gendered differences have become axiomatic presences in fiction offerings by RTÉ—evidenced by dramas like *Raw* (Parke, 2008–2013), NPO—reflected by youth series like *SpangaS* (De Levita & Nijenhuis, 2007–2022) and VRT—demonstrated by a tragicomedy like *Bevergem* (De Schryver, 2015), it mostly happens "discretely." Many (today, most) PSM series include LGBTQ+ characters and storylines. However, they invariably do so as one societally relevant topic, among others. Strategic universalism does not exactly *discourage* portrayals of sexual and gender differences. Rather, as a metarepresentational discourse, it endorses casualization. LGBTQ+ themes are commonsensical topics for subplots, individual arcs, and character design, but avoided as fiction productions' thematic identity. *Arcadia* (Perquy, 2023), a prestigious sci-fi coproduction between VRT and NPO, exemplifies how remits' underlying strategic universalism materializes as a casualization of queerness. Framed in a retro-futuristic dystopian narrative, the first episode of *Arcadia* is set during the engagement party of the two female leads and devotes ample attention to their relationship throughout the series. Simultaneously, other characters portray stories concerning dis/ability, age and class difference. In doing so, *Arcadia* accommodates the transversal

expectation for NPO and VRT to produce and schedule content inclusive of marginalized sociocultural groups without sacrificing “mass appeal.” Strategic universalism stimulates PSMs to produce fiction series *with* LGBTQ+ characters, but dissuades them from making scripted content *about* them.

A cursory glance at VRT, RTÉ and NPO’s former and present schedules shows that this does not apply to non-scripted content. Insofar as remits’ normative orientations inhibit PSMs from allocating fiction budgets to LGBTQ+ themed productions, sexuality and gender were and remain prominent topics for information and current affairs programming. From Web-based initiatives like RTÉ’s *Queer History Lessons* (2021), in which comedian Shane Daniel Byrne discusses various aspects of Irish and global LGBTQ+ culture in short clips—to documentary productions like VRT’s *Sarah in Genderland* (Canvas, 2022)—exploring contemporary dimensions of gender—or human interest series such as *Hij, Zij, Hen* (NPO3, 2022)—which follows several trans* people’s daily lives; remits’ construction of national audiences writ large as PSMs’ primary beneficiary does not inhibit the production, commissioning and scheduling of content focused explicitly on sexual and gendered difference. VRT and RTÉ’s remits construe them as serving “all Flemish viewers” or “each Irish audience member,” solidifying “universal” constructions of their corresponding communities. However, this does not hamper the introduction of queer topics to actuality and information programming, as earlier examples demonstrate.

Thus, where strategic universalism mostly materializes in fiction content that features—but does not focus on—LGBTQ+ people (or any other minoritized group, for that matter), it simultaneously construes *explications* of queerness as a topic relevant to audiences at large. While NPO, RTÉ, and VRT try to avoid their series being seen as being “about” LGBTQ+ people, they keenly produce content that “explains” sexual and gendered differences to broader audiences. On the one hand, this readiness has clear historical roots. Even before the 2000s, sexual and gendered differences had become legitimate topics for NPO, RTÉ, and VRT information programming, providing viewers with nuanced perspectives on same-sex desire and gender variance (see Kerrigan & Vanlee, 2022; Vanlee, 2019b). But equally so, it reflects the metarepresentational orientations of their contemporary remits. Faced with categorical demands for “inclusive programming” articulated through universalist discourses prioritizing “the audience at large,” devoting nonfiction programming to sexual and gender differences is simultaneously “diverse” and “topical.” As LGBTQ+–related topics have become increasingly prominent in Western Europe over the past decade (see Paternotte, 2018), PSM content addressing these themes fulfills inclusivity mandates while passing as “general interest” content too. For instance, Páraic Kerrigan’s (2021) research on contemporary RTÉ programming demonstrates how the 2015 Irish *Marriage Equality Referendum* and *Gender Recognition Act* produced a notable uptick in LGBTQ+–focused documentary productions—some of which are quite critical of legal accomplishments’ ambiguous outcomes (pp. 56–59). Thus, strategic universalism effectively ensures that the increasing visibility of LGBTQ+ people and issues in the public sphere solidifies their presence in PSMs’ nonfiction schedules—at times even creating mainstream spaces for counterhegemonic sentiments.

Normative Pluralism and Representational Responsiveness

This necessarily means that the broader socio-cultural attention to minority-related topics consistently troubles homogenous audience constructions. Thus, even though RTÉ, NPO, and VRT’s remits never demand explicit attention for target demographics in their audiences, they must simultaneously

acknowledge the national public's diversity. For instance, while RTÉ's present remit (i.e., 2018–2022) expects it to address "all Irish citizens," it also claims that "the population of Ireland has changed significantly over the two past decades," which "will necessitate a change in RTÉ's content and output" (RTÉ, 2017, p. 35). Similarly, NPO should pursue the widest possible reach among Dutch viewers (NPO, 2015, p. 5). However, it must also be mindful of the fact that these "increasingly form part of flexible networks and loose-knit communities (. . .) which are diffuse, diverse and temporary" (NPO, 2015, p. 42). When not envisioning PSMs' general mission to their wider community, but construing that community itself, RTÉ, NPO and VRT's remits change universalist conceptions of a homogenous national audience for outspoken but unspecified imaginaries of difference. For instance, VRT's remit for the 2020–2025 term includes a section titled "A Changing Society" (VRT, 2020, pp. 9–10), which describes how Flanders is today composed of increasingly diverse individuals. This section covers topics ranging from the impact of COVID-19 on their attitudes to the growing number of Flemings with diasporic backgrounds (VRT, 2020, p. 9). Likewise, the societal context for NPO's activities is described as fundamentally diverse and fragmented across a multitude of differences—including class, ethnicity, gender, and religion (NPO, 2021, p. 7). That both discussions of contemporary shifts in Flemish and Dutch society conclude by reiterating the need for the PSM to transcend these differences and maximally connect "all people in the Netherlands" (NPO 2021, p. 7) and "strengthen the shared reality and communality of the Flemish population" (VRT, 2020, p. 10) highlights how remits reflect an "order of discourse" (Fairclough, 2013). Strategic universalism serves as a macro-level metarepresentational discourse that shapes *when* and *where* LGBTQ+ people and themes feature in PSM programming. However, *how* these representations look and feel draws on normative imaginaries of un/acceptable ways to portray minorities and marginalized communities.

These are expressively pluralistic, articulating an "applied" metarepresentational discourse that reconciles universalist constructions of PSMs' core mission with the need to acknowledge contemporary societies' fundamental diversity. Rather than clearly defining PSMs' responsibilities toward marginalized demographics, remits construe schedules as responsive to the vast sociocultural diversity of contemporary audiences and respectful of a wide range of opinions (Tongue, 2010). Ostensibly, this approach reflects the depoliticized "cultural diversity" framework that others rightfully critique (e.g., Malik, 2013). Reiterating platitudes on audiences' heterogeneity and the need to treat difference with respect when remits address representation in a more concrete sense certainly risks that PSMs neglect structural inequalities in favor of mere "visibility politics" (Chambers, 2009). Furthermore, the mechanisms outlined in the remits to safeguard pluralism in PSM programming suggest as much. For instance, RTÉ's current remit (2018–2022) requires measuring "on-air inclusion" (RTÉ, 2017, p. 35), whereas systematic monitoring of diversity in programming has been introduced at VRT and NPO more than a decade ago (see Panis et al., 2019). Although expectations like these entrench attention for diversity in periodical PSM performance assessments, they also construe the mere presence of particular minority groups in their programming as sufficiently "inclusive." Forwarding numerical presence as a valid proxy for inclusivity hardly stimulates programming that deals explicitly with sensitive topics of inequality and marginalization (Malik, 2013). Such critiques are not unwarranted. However, the vague and noncommittal constructions of what diversity and inclusion imply in representational practice represent only one side of the pluralist discourse in PSM remits.

Absent positive demands on representational and organizational diversity are mirrored by negative injunctions of "discriminatory" or "stigmatizing" media practices (Donders, 2021). For instance, VRT's remits

consistently underscore that the organization “resists any form of discrimination, racism and other harmful practices in its programming, internal organization and collaboration with third parties” (VRT, 2020, p. 18). Comparable passages in other remits demonstrate that while PSMs are not explicitly required to portray particular groups “positively,” they are unambiguously prohibited from representing them “negatively.” This speaks from both older and contemporary examples of LGBTQ+ representation by the PSMs analyzed here as well. Possible exceptions notwithstanding, sources of LGBTQ+ portrayals by NPO, RTÉ, and VRT suggest that each has carefully avoided stereotypical imagery (e.g., Borghs, 2016; Kerrigan, 2021; Vanlee, 2019a). Representations articulating hetero-, homo-, and cisnormative assumptions aside, their post-1990s track record is characterized by depictions that downplay rather than explicate the “difference” of LGBTQ+ people. Gay couples in Irish soap operas, trans* teens in Dutch young adult dramas, or queer twenty-somethings in Flemish Web series were never only “different”—and much less have they featured as just a punchline. Thus, as much as the centrality of pluralism as the normative framework for PSM remits avoids explicit requirements on how productions should portray sexual and gender minority groups, it also dissuades representational practices that are popularly deemed problematic, offensive, or harmful.

As this demands attention to shifting norms on signifying sociocultural difference, this supposes that PSMs actively position themselves in societal debates. Thus, pluralism construes responsiveness as a precondition for inclusive programming and predicates “commendable” PSM portrayals on adopting popular expectations about diverse representation. For instance, by explicitly addressing the international and domestic indignation following the murder of George Floyd (NPO, 2021, p. 7), NPO’s present remit positions it amid contemporary discussions on racial inequalities, naturalizing attention for the needs and demands they articulate. Similarly, RTÉ’s remit observes that “recent social changes have increased awareness of religious diversity, sexual orientation and gender diversity” and that the organization must “authentically reflect modern Irish society” (RTÉ, 2017, p. 35). Formulations like these construe PSMs’ inclusion and diversity priorities as more than just a numbers game. They imply conscious positioning vis-à-vis popular debates about power relations and inequities in society. This, in turn, invites identifying which representational practices are challenged and why—ultimately producing appropriate reconfigurations of their representational practices. Hence, where normative pluralism never stipulates how PSMs must portray particular minority groups, it encourages them to pursue active positions in and reflections on shifting societal attitudes on issues related to difference and inequality. Accordingly, open and supportive gay and lesbian characters in 1990s Flemish and Irish soaps surfaced at a time of unprecedented public attention for same-sex rights in both regions (Kerrigan & Vanlee, 2022), whereas the growing presence of trans* characters in contemporary VRT programming coincided with a wider mainstream acknowledgement of the binary gender conceptions’ limitations (Van Haelter et al., 2022). Regardless of problematic assumptions that might still shape these portrayals, they do indicate how PSMs are imagined not only as mindful of the increasing emancipation of particular groups but also as attentive to normative discourses on their representation.

Stakeholder Particularism and Cocreating Queerness

Imaginaries of PSMs as “responsive” are further buttressed by construing stakeholder involvement as a crucial pathway to achieving their pluralistic mission. Immediately following a paragraph on the many sociocultural differences that characterize contemporary Irish society, RTÉ’s remit indicates that its inclusion

strategy was developed by “extensively engaging stakeholders, staff and external diversity specialists” (RTÉ, 2017, p. 35), considering ad hoc engagements with relevant third parties a key strategy for the 2018–2022 remit term (RTÉ, 2017, p. 35). Similarly, NPO (e.g., NPO, 2021, p. 8) and VRT (e.g., VRT, 2020, p. 17) are expected to solicit civil society organizations, advocacy groups, and academics to ensure that they have the necessary expertise to adequately deal with representational issues.

Accordingly, the vague open-endedness remits use to describe inclusion and diverse representation is consistently complemented with the self-evidence of consulting and involving relevant stakeholders. PSMs do not face rigid demands on how bisexuality ought to be addressed in programming for the remit term, or what exactly constitutes “transphobic” portrayals. However, civil society organizations and activists are offered clear pathways to weigh in on PSM representational practices. Recent and historical examples of PSM LGBTQ+ representation demonstrate how this receptivity can both be tactically employed by LGBTQ+ advocates and foster proactive logics among PSMs seeking out input and expertise. For instance, Ireland has a documented history of LGBTQ+ media activism, and organizations have and continue to seize on RTÉ’s public identity as open to advocates’ input (Kerrigan, 2021; Kerrigan & Vanlee, 2022). When the decision was made to introduce a prominent trans* character to VRT’s daily soap opera *Thuis* (Enghien et al., 1995–), the production team involved the trans* expertise center Transgender Infopunt to develop the role and storyline (Vanlee et al., 2020). Instances like these demonstrate how remits’ insistence that “proper” representation cannot rely on “internal” expertise alone materializes in PSMs welcoming and actively seeking out individuals or groups to express their views. Alongside pluralism’s “negative directive”—which dissuade RTÉ, VRT, and NPO from perpetuating constructions of the LGBTQ+ community as stereotyping, stigmatizing, or otherwise harmful—the self-evidence of drawing on the expertise and critical knowledge held by advocates, civil society organizations, and academics further stimulates PSMs to actively pursue representational practices perceived as commendable.

This is not to say that involving stakeholders to co-shape particular LGBTQ+ portrayals cannot produce questionable results. The aforementioned trans* character in *Thuis* (Enghien et al., 1995–) whose development drew on input and feedback of Transgender Infopunt, for instance, was both critiqued by researchers (Vanlee et al., 2020) and trans* audiences alike (Van Haelter et al., 2022) for its perpetuation of “wrong body tropes” and solidifying rather than disrupting gender binarism. Similarly, RTÉ’s facilitation of media activism pursued by LGBTQ+ advocacy groups like the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) does not always inform “queer,” “radical,” or “transgressive” portrayals of sexual and gendered differences. Hoping to maximally seize on opportunities to convince the historically conservative and homonegative Irish population of the “sameness” of gay men and lesbian women, LGBTQ+ organizations consciously advocated overtly heteronormative representational practices well into the 21st century (Kerrigan, 2021). Hoping to counter long-held stereotypes about gender transgression and promiscuity, GLEN and other advocates favored safe, sanitized depictions of gay men and lesbian women that maximally conformed to what counted as “normal” in Irish society at the time (Kerrigan, 2016, 2021). Emulating heteronormality by pushing for LGBTQ+ representations articulated to monogamy and domesticity, the portrayals RTÉ created in collaboration with gay and lesbian advocates carried clear hetero- and homonormative undertones. Nevertheless, the fact that the inclusion of external stakeholders’ opinions on what particular portrayals of LGBTQ+ people ought to look like can and have resulted in portrayals open to justified criticisms does not automatically demonstrate the impropriety of the mechanism in and of itself. As a micro-level

metarepresentational discourse, it materializes in instances of cocreation—further inhibiting PSMs from simply going with whatever intuitive mode of portraying particular LGBTQ+ themes they might see fit and urging them to maximally rely on relevant outsider expertise and opinion. Thus, in effect, remits' deference of concrete notions of "proper" LGBTQ+ portrayals to authoritative stakeholders entrenches PSMs' attention for shifting representational norms at the level of individual productions, stories, and characters.

Conclusion

Clearly, this article's findings do not exactly speak to the specificities of how VRT, NPO, or RTÉ variously portray sexual and gender diversity. They do not establish how (possibly benevolent) homonormative assumptions materialize in gender-conforming and ultimately restrictive gay characters in children's fiction (Van Wichelen & Dhoest, 2023a), nor do they address PSM documentaries' evocation of intersectional challenges LGBTQ+ people continue to face in rural Ireland (see Kerrigan, 2021)—citing just two examples. Compared with the approach of other queer media studies, it has largely glossed over PSM LGBTQ+ representations' reflections of hegemonic and/or subversive discourses on gender and sexuality.

However, by decentering the field's habitual—yet obviously pertinent—questions, this study has sought to highlight how popular mediascapes' portrayals of sexual and gendered differences are also shaped by normative discourses on "proper" representation. While undeniably marked by broader sociocultural imaginaries on gender and sexuality, LGBTQ+ televisibility in Irish, Flemish, and Dutch PSM programming is also an operationalization of specific *metarepresentational discourses*. Insofar as a lesbian kiss in a prestigious historical drama rearticulates the assumed straightness of Irish history (Kerrigan, 2021, p. 55), it simultaneously reconciles RTÉ's universalist take on fiction programming with its categorical commitment to inclusivity. And while the gender conformity of openly gay, lesbian, and trans* characters in Flemish children's series is certainly couched in (well-meant) assimilationist assumptions (Van Wichelen & Dhoest, 2023a), the aim to "minimize otherness" (Van Wichelen & Dhoest, 2023a, p. 126) is in and of itself a materialization of the pluralist logics shaping VRT's approach to concrete representations. That Dutch, Irish, and Flemish PSM programming—particularly informative content—routinely draws on off- and on-screen contributions by LGBTQ+ advocates and stakeholders (Dhoest, 2015; Kerrigan, 2021; Vanlee, 2019b) demonstrates how "the right way" to bring diversity to the small screen is discursively constructed as predicated on the involvement of relevant third parties.

This article's empirical focus on PSM remits clearly produces very explicit examples of the metarepresentational discourses it aims to analyze. Remits endorse specific discourses on PSMs' mission, creating clear material/semiotic linkages (Fairclough, 2013) to the representations they inform. However, this does not mean that only LGBTQ+ portrayals in PSM productions are co-shaped by metarepresentational discourses. Sure, remits create formal diversity demands (Donders, 2021) that require representational "answers," but private media also face normative expectations about "proper" ways to deal with sexuality and gender and must navigate conflicting views about the need for inclusivity in entertainment media. Here, too, specific LGBTQ+ representations simultaneously materialize ideations about sexual and gender differences writ large *and* operationalize assumptions about how they ought to be portrayed. Put more simply: Showing LGBTQ+ lives reveals ideas not only about those lives but also about how to show them.

Thus, what this article is ultimately about is the conviction that representation as a process of cultural signification is reflexive. Today, whom, when, and how to portray are questions explicitly addressed by media organizations and audiences alike. Terminological awkwardness aside, metarepresentational discourse precedes pop-cultural mediation. At a time when popular demand for “diverse stories” guides Netflix’s production and acquisition strategy (see Asmar, Raats, & Van Audenhove, 2023) and PSM organizations conduct focus groups with teenagers on how they feel “realistically portrayed” (Sundet, 2021), textual linkages between representations and their referents are one side of the coin. On its flipside, we face a growing popular awareness of these linkages and the deliberateness they bring to representational practice. The remits examined here are but one clear (and conveniently formal) example of how representing sociocultural difference is today a premeditated activity. As general-purpose documents, they speak little to metarepresentational discourses focused specifically on sexual and gendered differences. However, because of their outspoken normativity, they do open up a space for queer media studies to start approaching LGBTQ+ portrayals as products of normative contemplation about the “right” and “wrong” ways of representing sexual and gendered differences.

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