

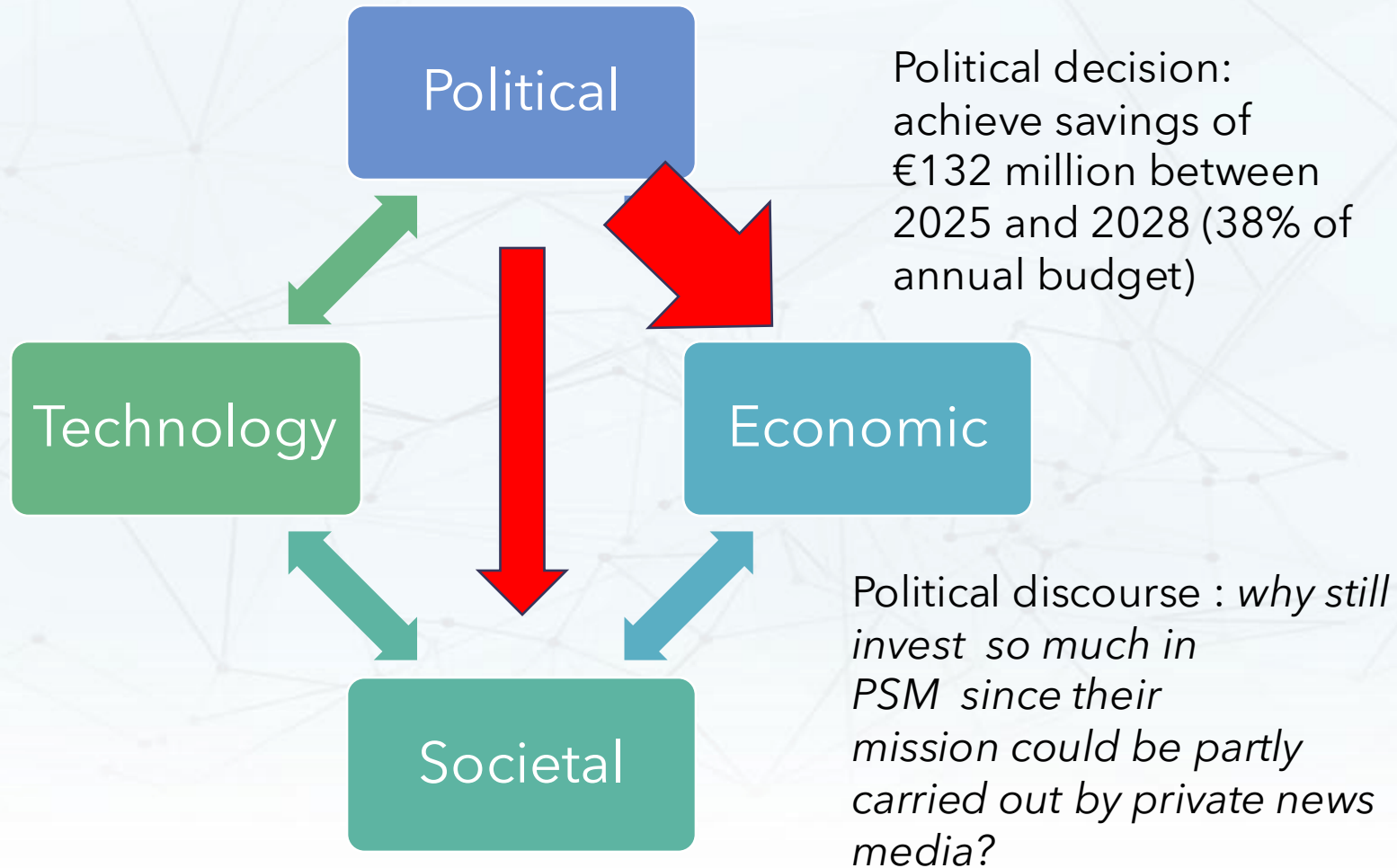
From Datafication to Decision-Making

**The Role of Audience Metrics in a Public
Service Media Organization (RTBF)**

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ECREA Journalism Studies section Conference
April 9, 2026



RTBF : a PSM under (political) pressure



Literature review

- A growing body of research has examined the influence of metrics and analytics on editorial decision-making.
- These tools have now become “normalized” within newsrooms (Lamot & Paulussen, 2019).
- Initial pessimism has given way to a more optimistic outlook (Zamith, 2018).
- Metrics tend to complement journalistic judgment, while at the same time rendering journalists less autonomous in their editorial decisions (Anderson, 2011).
- The influence of metrics varies depending on the cultural and professional context (Christin, 2020).
- The more editors perceive economic benefits from high audience figures, the more likely they are to adjust their decisions to cater to the presumed preferences of the audience (Vu, 2014).

A number of studies have explored the notion of “public service algorithms” (Andersson Schwarz, 2016; Van den Bulck & Moe, 2018; Sørensen, 2020; Sehl & Eder, 2023; Carillon, 2024; Iordache et al., 2025), highlighting the specific normative and institutional challenges associated with data-driven technologies in this sector.

However, comparatively little attention has been paid to the circulation and use of metrics and analytics within PSM organizations themselves.

RQ: What roles do metrics and analytics play in the decision-making processes of public service media operating under unprecedented pressure on both their missions and resources?

Our research

We consider audience metrics to constitute a “**boundary object**” (*Kammer et al., 2025*). They circulate across different professional groups within a media organization while taking on different meanings depending on the context.

Methodology

Our methodological framework includes three complementary approaches :

- Ethnographic observations
- Analysis of internal documents
- 20 semi-structured interviews with different actors (so far) :
 - Upper management
 - Audience analysts (Research and Foresight department)
 - Editorial managers
 - Journalists

At the management level :

- Metrics function as a performance indicator.
- They serve as a “compass” (Lamot & Paulussen, 2019) during management meetings.
- Audience metrics are a lever (among others) to guide action and make decisions.

*« I do check the TV ratings every day, and I look at the radio ratings when the figures are available – and we obviously take them into account. **If we see that we’re offering content and the audience is just declining, it means we’re not meeting the audience’s expectations.** We need to change tack and adapt our content, or remove it and replace it with something else. » (Management)*

At management level :

Institutional paradox



A public service media must reach
as wide an audience as possible

« *The current management felt it was essential to put the audience at the centre and to ensure a clear understanding of their expectations and habits, **in order to ensure that the overall reach remained as wide as possible.*** » (Management)



Nor is the aim to chase ratings at
any cost, to the detriment of the
public service's remit.

« *Just because a programme isn't going to attract the expected audience figures doesn't necessarily mean it will be cancelled. **If it fulfils its public service remit, it's important to keep it on air.*** »
(Research and Foresight team)

At the editorial level :

- Metrics are ubiquitous within digital teams.
- Editorial teams express an ambivalent stance :
 - The editorial teams are aware of these metrics. Some people are even particularly interested in them.
 - But most journalists keep them at arm's length or put them into perspective.

*« Honestly, for me, [viewership metrics] are absolutely crucial. If you make a video and it's only watched by 500 people, that's not great for the person you interviewed. Given all the work you've put in, it's a bit of a let-down. **But** that doesn't mean the metrics will influence the way I make videos. » (Journalist /1)*

At the editorial level :

- Editorial managers are more likely to take metrics into account (to a certain extent).

*« Metrics are one of the factors we take into account – let's be honest, of course – **but they're not the only one.** Otherwise, we'd be doing what others do, which is essentially just chasing clicks. » (Editorial manager /1)*

At the editorial level :

➤ Metrics can influence « packaging » (Lamot & Paulussen, 2019) :

- Headlines
- Hooks
- Hashtags

*« Hooks are there to save the video from being doomed. If you know there's no way anyone's going to stick around for those first five seconds, even if the video is amazing, it's a waste. Give it a chance to survive too. You know those first five seconds are vital, so **we make the effort to use clickbait at that moment.** And I admit I have few scruples about using a strong punchline or something very teasing, because that's the game. But we're not chasing buzz. » (Editorial manager /1)*

At the editorial level :

A distinction must be made between newsroom actors working for the RTBF website and those working for social media.

1) RTBF website :

- Metrics are more valuable.
- They will influence the story planning.
- They will influence the placement of content on the homepage.
- Even if less popular articles of general interest can be produced and promoted.

At the editorial level :

1) Social media :

- Metrics are less valuable.
- It is more difficult to draw conclusions based on social media metrics because of the « random » nature of the algorithms.

« Often, we have to play by the rules set by an algorithm, a third-party platform. So we are sometimes unfairly penalised for all sorts of things, whether it's language that's a bit too strong – but which is often used in the context of conflicts, and so on. This means we face obstacles being put in our way, unfairly and without explanation from the platforms, because we don't comply with their algorithmic rules, which are, incidentally, very vague. » (Journalist)

At the editorial level :

1) Social media :

*« I have an example: we made a video about carbon monoxide safety – how to protect yourself, and so on. And TikTok’s algorithm interpreted it as promoting suicide. So now that we know that, **we’re careful about how we word things.** » (Editorial manager /1)*

A context of budgetary pressure

For journalists, audience metrics is becoming a cause for concern in the face of potential budget cuts :

*« We're in a situation where, even though we're a public service, no matter how high-quality your videos are, you know that here you're being watched and that your job also depends on the figures. (...) So **there's a question of survival at this level.** » (Journalist)*

*« Because the journalists, too, are worried – in fact, precisely – about our ability to reach the public, and even about our credibility and legitimacy, even within RTBF itself. Especially in today's climate of cost-cutting and having to prioritise things, **it really worries them that our audience metrics are falling** and all that. (...) There's a certain amount of anxiety surrounding it. » (Editorial manager)*