

UNESCO report: Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace

Media Policy of the Flemish Community

1. Development of multilingual content and systems

In the Flemish audio-visual media, language barriers have traditionally been dealt with via the subtitling of television programmes. In addition to providing a translation of programmes produced in other languages, subtitling also makes these programmes more accessible to the hearing or visually impaired and disabled.

In accordance with the 2012-2016 Management Agreement, the Flemish Public Broadcaster VRT must increase the percentage of its subtitled Dutch-language programming via teletext page 888 (T888) to 100% for all news and current affairs programmes and to 95% for all other programmes by 2014. In 2013, 94.7% of all Dutch-language programmes and 97.1% of all news and current affairs programmes were subtitled via T888.

In 2013, 83% of the programmes on VTM, the largest commercial television station in Flanders, were fully subtitled between the hours of 1 p.m. and midnight, 38% of which were foreign-language programmes containing open subtitles. On VTM's sister station 2BE, 84% of programmes were fully subtitled between 3 p.m. and midnight, while 94.24% of programmes broadcast by a second sister station, Vitaya, were fully subtitled between 1 p.m. and midnight. For both 2BE and Vitaya, the subtitled programming consisted almost entirely of foreign-language programmes.

2. Facilitating access to networks and services

There are more than 800,000 hearing impaired people and roughly 200,000 visually impaired people living in Flanders. Making television programmes accessible to people with a visual or hearing impairment or disability forms an important part of the Flemish Community's Audiovisual Policy. The decision was made to regulate the accessibility of television programmes by means of obligations and quotas included in Flemish Parliament Acts and regulations, but also by making subsidies available.

At the Flemish level, the legal basis for the quotas and the subsidy mechanism is found in Article 151 of the Flemish Parliament Act of 27 March 2009 on radio and television broadcasting. The Government of Flanders gave its final approval on 14 December 2012 to a decree that includes a timeline and quotas for making radio and television programmes accessible and which regulates the granting of subsidies.

The Government of Flanders Decree of 14 December 2012 does not apply to the Flemish Public Broadcaster VRT. This is because the effect of Article 151, §1 of the Flemish Parliament Act on the Media, which establishes the principle that the VRT must focus on accessibility, forms part of the Management Agreement concluded by the Government of Flanders with the VRT. This Management Agreement sets the strategic and operational attainment targets that the VRT is required to pursue. Supervision of these targets is carried out by the Flemish Regulator for the Media.

Subsidies can be applied for by private (i.e. private and regional) television stations, but not by the VRT. The costs stemming from VRT's accessibility-related obligations, in addition to the obligations themselves, form part of the (subsidy provided for in the) Management Agreement.

With respect to the quotas and the roadmap, the Government of Flanders Decree of 14 December 2012 makes a distinction between large and small private broadcasters: the larger the market share, the greater the number of obligations. The timeline and quotas do not apply to the very smallest of television stations (with a market share of less than 5%) because the cost of subtitling would be too high for these stations relative to their turnover.

In addition to a timeline and quotas, the Government of Flanders Decree of 14 December 2012 also includes the option to grant subsidies to private television stations in order to help them make television services accessible by means of audio description, spoken subtitles, subtitles and Flemish Sign Language. The subsidy mechanism, which is valid for 10 years, but can be extended once this period expires, is consistent with the European Commission Decision of 20 December 2011 on the application of Article 106(2) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union to State aid in the form of public service compensation granted to certain undertakings entrusted with the operation of services of general economic interest.

Part of public broadcaster VRT's mandate is to reach as many Flemings as possible via its programming. This means that it must make its programmes as accessible to people as possible, including to those with hearing and visual impairments. The 2012-2016 Management Agreement contains a number of attainment targets regarding subtitling, spoken subtitling, sign language and audio description:

- For the deaf and hearing impaired, all news broadcasts and 95% of all other programmes will be subtitled via teletext (T888) by 2014 - with the exception of hosting, trailing and commercial communications. The VRT is employing a roadmap for this purpose that contains interim targets and it will provide access to the available subtitles, which can currently be accessed via the Video On Demand service (VOD), on other platforms by the end of 2014.
- For the blind and visually impaired, spoken subtitles have been provided for news broadcasts and audio description has been provided for one fictional series per year since 2012.
- By end of 2012, both the 7 p.m. newscast *Het Journaal* as well as the Ketnet youth newscast *Karrewiet* will be broadcast via the open internet (i.e. free of charge) in Flemish Sign Language (VGT).

In October 2013, the VRT provided subtitles for 96% of all its programmes via the T888 service. This exceeds the 95% target that the VRT is required to attain in accordance with the 2012-2016 Management Agreement. The VRT is also performing quite well in the area of news and current affairs programming. Both *Reyers Laat* and *Volt* have been subtitled since September 2013. This means that 99.05% of all news and current affairs programmes today are subtitled. The Management Agreement requires the VRT to subtitle 100% of its current events programmes by the end of 2014.

According to the Management Agreement, the VRT must provide audio description (AD) for one fictional series per year beginning in 2012. Last year, the VRT broadcast the series *Witse* with optional audio description that digital viewers could activate themselves, but this is not something that blind people can always do unassisted. This problem has since been remedied. On 13 October, the VRT began broadcasting the series *De Ridder* while simultaneously broadcasting it on OP12 with audio description.

The Management Agreement requires spoken subtitles (GO) to be available for its news programming beginning in 2012. In principle, the VRT currently provides spoken subtitles for all these programmes via T889 (except for programmes with embedded subtitles).

Het Journaal and *Karrewiet* have been interpreted into Flemish Sign Language (VG) since December of 2012, as set forth in the Management Agreement. These programmes are available via Ketnet.be and Deredactie.be and can also be viewed free of charge via the *NetGemist* and *Ooit Gemist* websites.

For the VRT, digital accessibility also means making as much of the information on its websites as accessible as possible. As such, the design of all its websites will be optimised starting in 2013 to make it possible to read them with the help of screen reading software. This software is capable of reading the text on a computer screen aloud or sending it to a Braille display. This is currently possible for all weather and traffic information, and it will soon also be possible for the electronic programme guide and the playlist information.

The implications of the aforementioned Article 151 of the Flemish Parliament Act on the Media are especially important for the “Vlaamse Media Maatschappij” (VMMa, Flemish Media Company). In addition to its main newscast, the VTM must also subtitle all its other newscasts (in this case the 1 p.m. afternoon newscast and the 5:45 p.m. evening newscast) as well as 90% of its current affairs programmes, such as Telefacts, as from 1 January 2013.

Pursuant to Article 151 of the Flemish Parliament Act on the Media as well as the aforementioned implementing decree, SBS Belgium was also forced to revise its subtitle policy in 2012.

A budget of 474,000 euros was allocated for line item HB0 HH035 3200 in the general expenditure budgets for 2012, 2013 and 2014. In addition to full intervention in the write-down value of the investment cost, these funds are distributed pro rata between the two broadcasters.

The subtitle requirement is also established for the regional television stations in Article 151 of the Flemish Parliament Act on the Media, which states that the regional stations must subtitle their newscasts on weekdays beginning at 8 p.m. Subsidies for subtitles are regulated via cooperation agreements with these regional stations.

The accessibility of websites for the deaf, visually impaired, blind and physically disabled is a tricky problem. Each year, the “Toegankelijkheidsmonitor” (Accessibility Monitor) rates the accessibility of Belgian websites. The websites of the Government of Flanders, to which so much effort has been devoted since 2007, scored notably higher than the average Belgian website, with 63.7% of these sites rated as accessible in 2011-2012.

3. Development of public domain content

The term media intelligence describes the practice of dealing with media and media content in a critical, thoughtful, (self-)aware *and* creative way. In a modern information- and knowledge-based society - which Flanders indeed is - it is crucial to work on improving media intelligence and to focus actively on elevating the media intelligence quotient of Flemish citizens. The task of working on media intelligence is never finished. Media are evolving every day, and due to the ever increasing digitisation of our world, the pace of this change is faster than ever.

In 2012, a baseline measurement was carried out on media intelligence in Flanders. This inventory was aimed at identifying and analysing the organisations and initiatives engaged in the area of media intelligence. At least 222 organisations in Flanders and Brussels are working on media intelligence.

In early 2013, the Media Intelligence Knowledge Centre, known as “Mediawijs.be”, began operations. The main task of the Knowledge Centre is to promote the accumulation and sharing of knowledge among organisations and employees in the broader field of media intelligence, to offer practical support and to work on practical development. The Media Intelligence Knowledge Centre thus proceeded to set up an online knowledge platform that provides access to all sorts of information, knowledge, methodologies and good practices, and which tracks developments in the area of media intelligence and serves as a referral service for end users.

A key partner in media intelligence policy is the public broadcaster. In accordance with its educational mandate, the VRT was assigned the task in its 2012-2016 Management Agreement of contributing to the media intelligence of the citizens of Flanders. More specifically, Ketnet, the channel for children and young people, is working to improve the media intelligence of children by familiarising them with online applications, including social networks, in a safe environment. As required by the Management Agreement, the VRT joined with other stakeholders to formulate an action plan aimed at promoting media intelligence. The VRT is seeking to intensify its cooperation with the Media Intelligence Knowledge Centre, and plans to offer its assistance to the Knowledge Centre’s online knowledge platform, flagship projects and events.

Within the framework of Flemish media intelligence policy, an awareness campaign was launched in spring of 2014 titled “*Da’s toch handig dat internet!*” (Pretty handy, that internet!). The campaign is aimed primarily at elderly people who still have yet to go online. Its goal is to convince them to take the first step towards accessing the internet.

On this point, the following figures for 2014 can be cited from the Flemish Regional Indicators, which is published annually by the Research Centre of the Government of Flanders. Between 2007 and 2013, the percentage of Flemings over the age of 18 who have never made use of a computer or the internet fell from 30% to 26% and from 32% to 24%, respectively. In 2013, 72% of adult Flemings used a computer and 74% used the internet at some point in the preceding three months. The percentage of Flemings who possess moderate to advanced ICT skills has increased sharply of late. A key indicator of media literacy is the range of online applications being used. The percentage of internet users who make use of between 9 and 13 online applications out of a group of 13 proposed applications rose from 9% in 2007 to 18% in 2013. The percentage of the population that follows the news online via the internet rose sharply between 2007 and 2013. Almost 2 out of 3 Flemings used the internet to contact the government in 2013.

4. Reaffirming the equitable balance between the interests of rights holders and the public interest

5. Final comments