

**Resulhan Öztimur**

**'Dumbing Down' as Content Portfolio  
Strategy - A Comparison of Public and  
Private TV Broadcasting in Germany**

**Bachelor Thesis**

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European University of Applied Science, Brühl/Rheinland (EUFH)

**Cologne Business School**

**‘Dumbing Down’ as Content Portfolio  
Strategy**

**A Comparison of Public and Private TV  
Broadcasting in Germany**

**Bachelor’s Thesis**

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**BACHELOR OF ARTS (BA)**

in International Business

with specialization in Media Management

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## **1. Introduction**

"I listened to the entire festivity and I was appalled. There were small television excerpts being offered with some clowns, some nonsense, idiocy, filth, complete filth. This is what is being broadcasted in Germany each day. The directors say that the audience wishes so, as if the audience was a crowd of idiots." On October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2008, German literature critic Marcel Reich Ranicki rejected the German Television Prize honouring him for his lifetime achievement. In front of rolling cameras, Ranicki made his standpoint very clear that he finds the current television landscape rubbish and dull. His words are the result of 25 years of private televisual content development in Germany. Today's media environment has changed drastically. Each day we find more and more TV programmes which are designed for an audience that demands no intellectual work and wants to be entertained. This matter of entertainment has exclusively formed the television networks' programming strategies concerning their content. Consequently, the offer of daily soaps ("GZSZ"), reality TV ("Big Brother", "Dschungelcamp") and game/casting shows ("Deutschland sucht den Superstar") has risen, while the offer of classical formats such as fiction film, documentaries and sophisticated programmes ("Das literarische Quartett") has decreased.

### **1.1. Problem Formulation**

Since the establishment of private broadcasting in 1984, the television offering in Germany has not only changed quantitatively but also qualitatively. Today, we have a range of more than 50 German private TV broadcasters with an enormous variety of programmes. In recent years, we have been experiencing a downward trend of content quality, which is defined as 'dumbing down'. The problem arises that in the battle for ratings, intellectual demand fades into the background of sole entertainment. This approach has evolved into the main content portfolio strategy of private television. But is it only the private broadcasters' blame or are ARD and ZDF also striving for audience ratings in their programming methods? Is television in fact dumbing the culture down or is it making it smarter? Which side triggered the effect of 'dumbing down' – the media or the audience? These questions still remain unanswered. Therefore, this paper intends to analyse the matter of 'dumbing down' as well as the interrelated content portfolio strategy.

## **1.2. Research Question**

This thesis paper will investigate and answer the following research questions:

- RQ1:  
What are the cause and effect of 'dumbing down'?
- RQ2:  
How does 'dumbing down' interrelate with the broadcasting networks' content portfolio strategies?
- RQ3:  
What are the effects of 'dumbing down' on television programming?

## **1.3. Research Objective**

This paper aims to analyse the hypothesis that TV broadcasting networks focus on less intellectual programmes in order to ensure high ratings. In doing so, the null hypothesis that television serves as an educational medium will prospectively be falsified. Further, by comparing public and private TV in Germany, it will be determined whether or not there is a difference in tendencies toward shallow content. It is important to note that the research will only refer to the mainstream analogue television landscape in Germany. Since a broader analysis of both digital and analogue offerings would go beyond the scope of the thesis, it has been decided to focus on the traditional television format.

## **1.4. Methodolgy**

The motivation to write about the television landscape in Germany emerged after listening to literature critic Marcel Reich Ranicki's words at the German Television Prize and later in the thirty-minute discussion with showmaster Thomas Gottschalk on ZDF. Animated by this, the research questions were formulated analysing the interrelation of 'dumbing down' and television content portfolio strategy. After conducting internet research (EBSCO Host and Google Scholar), a collection of articles and books was gathered. Since it was difficult to find literature with a direct link between content

portfolio strategies and today's culture, the research was split into both separate topics. The next step was to arrange the articles into their particular themes such as programming strategies, quality of the media, programme genres and analyses, TV viewers conduct and finally academic as well as scientific research papers. However, the process of collecting relevant literature turned out to be continuous throughout the completion of the thesis. Afterwards, the theoretical framework was set in order to tackle the issues and problems. It was decided to use the BCG Matrix and the Customer Satisfaction Model from Kano. For the purpose of analysing the viewers' responses to current TV news programming, a survey was conducted by the author. Further information about the online survey will be employed in the appendix. Also, in order to conclude the thesis and to contrast public and private television programming, a case study was undertaken based on the research of Yin (2002). Here, the author analyses and compares the programme portfolios of ZDF and RTL in order to assume the profitability of the various genres. Lastly, the attempt to obtain expert interviews with the network RTL failed because the Vice President of Strategic Program Planning felt that the title of the thesis displayed a "wholesale condemnation of private television".

## **1.5. Thesis Organisation**

In the organization of the Bachelor's Thesis, the general problems as well as the research questions were formulated in order to establish a central basis for the upcoming research. The methodology depicts the approach that has been complied with in tackling the problem. Chapter 2 employs a list of terms and definitions for the purpose of clarifying technical knowledge that is relevant in the course of the thesis. Chapter 3 reviews the literature that served as a fundamental information source. In chapter 4, the theoretical framework is explained. There, the models of the Boston Consulting Group (BCG Matrix) and of Kano (Customer Satisfaction Model) are clarified serving as a basis for later applications. The fifth chapter analyses the term 'dumbing down' and allocates various attributes to it so as to undertake a health check of various programmes from the main German networks ARD, ZDF, RTL, Sat.1 and ProSieben. Chapter 6 deals with the roles of the receiver and the sender of the medium, respectively the society and the television networks, in an attempt to determine the sources of 'dumbing down'. There, the population of Germany is

depicted and an analysis of its programme choices is determined. The second subchapter comprises the networks' objectives and mission statements (as stated on the networks' web pages) for the purpose of understanding their motivations for television programming. After presenting a historical snapshot of television content, the current landscape is illustrated in order to identify the interrelated strategies. Chapter 7 contains a survey conducted by the author. Here, the author investigated the subject of quality and its meaning within the context of television. Further, he employs the results of the online survey regarding the audience's satisfaction with current news programmes. Chapter 8 is the case study which uses the comparative example of ZDF and RTL. After determining their programme portfolios and allocating the genres to the BCG Matrix, the tendencies towards content of both networks are analysed. Chapter 9 summarizes the findings of the previous chapters followed by the conclusion drawn from the research.



## **2. Terms and Definitions**

This chapter will define and explain the technical terms with reference to the subject of television programming. The following definitions are listed in alphabetical order.

### **Audience Flow**

The term 'audience flow' conceives *"audience members as flowing from one program to the next"* (Eastman and Ferguson 2006: 15).

### **Broadcasting**

*"Spreading a modulated electromagnetic signal over a large area by means of a transmitting antenna"* (Eastman and Ferguson 2006: 412).

### **Daypart**

*"A period of two or more hours, considered to be a strategic unit in program schedules"* (Eastman and Ferguson 2006: 416).

### **Dual System**

*"Das Modell des dualen Rundfunks, in dem öffentlich-rechtliche und private kommerzielle sowie nicht-kommerzielle Rundfunkanbieter in unterschiedlicher Trägerschaft nebeneinander existieren"* [The model of dual broadcasting, in which public and privately commercial as well as non-commercial broadcasting providers coexist in different operations] (Roßnagel and Strothmann 2004: 16).

### **Documentary**

*"A program that records actual events and real people"* (Eastman and Ferguson 2006: 416).

### **Drama**

*"A prime-time series program format, usually one hour long, contrasting with situation comedy. It includes action-adventure, crime, and doctor shows; adult soaps; and other dramatic forms"* (Eastman and Ferguson 2006: 417).