

6. See the homepage of the media meeting <http://www.medienversammlung.de/> [last visited: 25.04.2005].
7. See http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints/make_complaint.shtml [last visited: 25.04.2005].
8. See <http://www.rte.ie/about/organisation/audiencouncil.html> [last visited: 25.04.2005].
9. See http://www.programmbeschwerde.de/front_content.php [last visited: 25.04.2005].
10. See <http://www.kjm-online.de/public/kjm/> [Stand: 25.4.2005].
11. See the English site of the Danish Media Council http://www.medieraadet.dk/html/gb/media_council_gb.htm [Stand: 25.4.2005].
12. See <http://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv/ifi/guidance/standards/?a=87101> [last visited: 25.04.2005].
13. See the website of the Media Authority NRW <http://www.lfm-nrw.de/index.php3> [last visited: 25.4.2005].
14. See the website of all State Media Authorities <http://www.alm.de/index2.htm> [last visited: 25.04.2005].
15. In the historical process of pillarization associations emerged from different social stratifications of Dutch society. Pillarization is the name for a process that brought about parallel and self-contained groups of religions and weltanschauungs in the 19th century. The successors of the pillars began to use public radio and TV stations to reach their members. The development in the recent years indicates a continuous opening of the already existing pillars for other organizations (Bardoel/van Reenen 2004: 475ff.).
16. The broadcasting associations represent different religious, social or ideological schools of thought. For example, there are tight connections between AVRO and the Conservatives, KRO and NCRV and the Christian Democrats, as well as between VARA and the Social Democrats. For more information see <http://portal.omroep.nl/> [last visited: 25.04.2005].
17. To receive broadcasting time the associations must have at least 300.000 paying members (Section 31 Para.3b Media Act).
18. Ben van Reenen, NOS.
19. See <http://www.csa.fr/index.php> [last visited: 25.04.2005].
20. See the website of the Media Authority: <http://www.cvdm.nl/pages/home.asp?> [last visited: 25.04.2005].
21. See the homepage of NiCAM: <http://www.kijkwijzer.nl/engels/ekijkwijzer.html> [last visited: 25.04.2005].
22. See <http://www.agcom.it> [last visited: 25.04.2005].
23. See <http://www.rrtv.cz/en/> [last visited: 25.04.2005].
24. See http://www.ortt.hu/index_angol.htm [last visited: 25.04.2005].

MEDIA USERS' PARTICIPATION IN EUROPE FROM A CIVIL SOCIETY PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

This book deals with the instruments that have been developed in order to secure the viewers' or, more general, the media users' interests. Most of these instruments refer to the legal and political framework, to the levels of media systems or of ethical rules governing the journalists' work, while the perspective of the viewers themselves is only seldom in the focus of attention. This is surprising, though, since television viewers have got a stake in the media, which serve as a fundamental source of information on political, social and cultural issues, as well as of entertainment, orientation and education. However, viewers in many cases are not recognized and/or acting as stakeholders, they are rather treated and acting as recipients, as consumers and as such as members of specific target groups whose attention to the screen is sold to the advertising industry. According to this understanding the main aspect of viewers' behaviour is whether they switch on or off, whether they select a certain programme or not. As a consequence, there seems to be no reason to claim that the viewers themselves should play a role in public debates on media qualities and in media accountability systems. This chapter will elaborate the opposite view, according to which viewer participation is a necessary element of media accountability systems. Moreover, models of participation which have been developed in several European countries and proved to be successful will be examined. In doing so, the overall results of the European research project which has been described in the introductory chapter of this book, will be analysed with regard to the question of how viewers themselves participate in media governance and in promoting viewers' interests. Yet, prior to the analysis of these forms of participation two conceptual considerations are proposed in order to create a framework for understanding the conditions of viewer participation. In section 1, we will reconstruct the conceptual characteristics of audience research that are linked to

an understanding of viewers as consumers. We argue that this understanding is not sufficient to describe the viewers' role; viewers also have to be regarded as citizens and as human beings who need to be protected against any harm caused by the media. Starting from this enhanced understanding of viewers, in section 2 we will discuss how far viewers can be regarded as civil society actors who meet specific criteria and fulfil specific functions that have been elaborated in the research on civil society.

Against the background of these theoretical considerations an overview of different forms of viewer participation in Europe, as the result of the above mentioned European research project, will be provided in sections 3 and 4. The different forms that have been developed to guarantee and to foster viewer participation are presented and discussed referring to the characteristics of civil society. Whereas most of these forms can be seen as options for participation that are offered to viewers (section 3), section 4 deals with viewer organizations in the sense of self-initiated activities aiming at different more or less concrete objectives. The last section provides a summary and interpretation of the previous steps as well as some proposals for best practice options in fostering viewer participation.

1. Viewers – not just consumers

In scholarly discussions today it seems to be common sense to understand the audience as "active" (Schenk 2002; Hasebrink 2003). However, this conceptualization merely focuses on the reception process of standardized media offers by selection, interpretation and understanding in contrast to the concept of the "passive" viewer simply exposed to media messages – a concept that is attributed to former eras of media effects research. Although the change of paradigms in research – the shift from perceiving the viewer as easy to manipulate towards an interpreting media user – has been an important step towards a more appropriate understanding of the viewer, the concept of the active media user includes an implicit presupposition: Viewers are exclusively regarded as individuals using the media for their individual needs, as consumers who select the media offers they like and who avoid the media offers they dislike. In consequence, audience research which measures the figures of different kinds of programmes is regarded as an appropriate indicator of what viewers want, so that in debates on media politics the respective figures serve as "the voice of the audience". Effects of this conceptualization of the audience can be observed in debates on media quality where ambivalent roles are attributed to TV viewers. One position, starting from the observation that media offers, which attract the masses are presumed to be of low quality, argues that viewers should not be involved in quality discourses, because they do not seem to look for quality. The opposing view states that extensive audience research is able to reveal the interests of the viewers, who in this way are taken into account by the broadcasters. In this perspective high-audience shares are regarded as the best indicators for high quality. Both positions do not refer to the user as participating in decision processes in media politics, but promote a rather limited perspective of viewers as consumers expressing interests solely via their viewing choices.

The corresponding theoretical basis is the uses and gratifications approach, which postulated that media use can be seen as the maximization of individual gratifications. Approaches that attempt to understand what quality means for recipients, e.g., Greenberg/Busselle (1992, 1994) or Gunter (1997) are theoretically as well as methodologically very much connected with this theory. The central objective is to identify dimensions of gratifications for different media offers. Even in more comprehensive approaches towards models of quality and accountability in the media, e.g., McQuail (1992, 1997) and Schatz/Schulz (1992), users are only taken into account regarding the satisfaction of their individual needs. These needs are usually contrasted with normative criteria extracted from theories on democracy and then taken as contradictory poles of these normative quality criteria. Accordingly, some studies showed that media offers which from a normative perspective are classified as high-quality offers do not usually get high-audience rates (Hasebrink 1997).

In terms of democratic participation, this perception of the audience does not provide a complete picture of the viewer. Transferred into the sphere of political participation this would mean to merely take voting in elections as an expression of the interests of citizens, while crucial criteria for democratic participation, like participation in public debate or sensitivity for the interests of citizens or in this case: viewers in their everyday culture, are ignored.

Critical reflections on the dominating market-oriented view on audiences were presented particularly with the aim of connecting media use closer to the context of lifeworlds (e.g. Ang 1991). Efforts to systematically develop concepts of the audience which include not only viewers' interests as consumers, but also a broader range of participation up to now only exist in (rough) outlines. In the context of a study on instruments for the protection of viewers' interests, Hasebrink (1994) pointed to at least three dimensions of viewers' interests:

1. The viewers as *consumers* have an interest in programme offers that serve their individual needs and preferences. Their role in this respect is the role of a customer. The plainest forms of this case are the pay-per-view offers, but usually audience research measures customer interests by means of the number of contacts of specific offers. This dimension complies with the usual view of the audience as described above.
2. A second dimension of viewers' interests refers to the viewers as owners of rights, respectively as individuals who *need protection and the possibility to defend their rights*. Viewers can become objects of television reporting. As such they need protection against false or offensive statements. In addition they have religious and moral feelings and values and therefore need protection against programmes that violate or exploit these feelings or restrict individual development. The latter point is particularly important for young people and children.
3. The viewers as *citizens*, as members of a democratic society, have an interest that television contributes to the general aims of society, e.g. the prevention of monopolistic power in the media market and of biased news coverage,

guaranteeing the interests of minorities and the promotion of a greater understanding of the issues and problems facing society.

The two latter dimensions are so far not being covered by audience research; in fact, they are rather in opposition to the consumers' dimension. The argument here is that despite the tensions between them, the three dimensions actually go along with each other; i.e., each viewer has specific interests on all three dimensions. Viewers are aware of the contradiction that might exist between their consumer interests and the normative perspective, thus they know from experience that they have to create a personal balance between them.

Regarding media politics and the viewers' role in media accountability these considerations show that it is not sufficient to regard viewers as consumers of television products only. They have to be taken seriously as both human beings who have to be protected against harm and as citizens. This perspective of viewer participation, which goes beyond the actual viewing decisions but regards viewers as participants of a public discourse on media qualities and media accountability, is very close to the concept of civil society. Therefore, in order to provide a conceptual framework for the analysis of viewer participation in Europe, we shall shortly discuss how far viewers can be regarded as civil society actors.

2. Viewers – civil society actors?

Political theories on democratic participation processes link legitimacy of democratic societies with broad inclusion of citizens in political processes, even under circumstances where large parts of society are scarcely organized and have only poor resources (Dahlgren 1995; Marx Ferec et al. 2002). As a continuous, active participation of all citizens in current mass societies seems to be illusive, deliberation turns out to be the accepted mode for participation, i.e., public debate on political decisions. Inclusion in this perspective is realized by a principally open access to public debate for all society members (Gerhards, Neidhardt 1991; Neidhardt 1994). According to this model public spheres are the space for aggregation and articulation of competing interests and as such serve as a means of controlling governance. Decisions of authorities are confronted with the interests of citizens and become an issue of public criticism, meaning that authorities are made accountable for their politics. This mechanism gets all the more reliable as more actors participate in public debate.

Following participatory liberal theory, the role of civil society is to identify upcoming problems (Barber 1984; Dahlgren 1995) and to introduce them into the political system. Beyond the important aspect of inclusion, the deliberative model of democracy emphasises further central criteria, such as proximity to the so-called "lifeworld", and ideal requirements for public debate such as respect, fairness and rationality (Habermas 1992; Gutmann/Thompson 1996). Habermas introduced the important element of communication into deliberative theories. He stated that only by consideration of communication processes the logic of functioning and reproduction of modern societies will be understood correctly. With the concept of

the "public sphere" Habermas directed attention to the mutual exchange of authority and citizens. Without a public sphere the interests of civil society actors can not be accomplished. While public sphere can be characterized as the link between authority and citizens, civil society is the link between individuals and public sphere. Regarding the regulation of the production and distribution of media supply, accountability is also (or should be) realized through critical public surveillance (Mitchell et al. 1994). Following the principle of comprehensive participation in the processes of media politics, media users – being at the periphery of power – also have to be part of the debates on relevant decisions. However, the audience in contrast to the established actors of political and economic spheres is hardly organized and has poor resources, so that in this respect it is a typical civil society actor. As outlined in current theories on democracy, these scarcely organized actors at the periphery of society have specific competencies regarding "problem-sensitivity" (i.e., high sensitivity for concerns and interests of viewers). The advantages of these civil society actors are that they are less oriented towards gaining or staying in power and that they are quite close to the everyday practices of ordinary people, to the various different lifeworlds.

The implementation of viewers' interests needs presence in the public sphere. Regarding the question of how this presence and noticeable articulation of viewers' interests can be fostered, communitarian approaches assume that viewers' interests can be articulated and represented best by more or less formal associations (Newton 2001). All forms of organizations starting with punctual collective activities, informal networks and citizen initiatives on specific issues up to powerful NGOs can help to raise public attention for civil society interests, in this case for media users. Civil society actors are able to articulate latent or new risks, to place them on the public agenda and thus to make them an urgent issue that has to be dealt with by politics, regulators and media companies (Heming 2000, 67ff.). Thus, despite being scarcely organized and lacking resources, viewers' interests can become powerful forces when viewers and their organizations succeed in raising public attention and support for their objectives.

In summary, civil society in the media sphere can be characterized as an audience constellation, which is discursive, independent, pluralistic, bound to lifeworlds and oriented towards the common welfare. With these characteristics, civil society has got a special sensitivity for problems and concerns of viewers and can articulate them in the public sphere and introduce them into the political process (Dahlgren 1995). In this respect viewers' organizations can be of special importance as they cover the different characteristics of civil society actors. With this theoretical framework in mind, the current situation of the viewers' role as a civil society actor in Europe will be laid out in the following.

3. Options provided for viewer participation in Europe

Throughout Europe several ways of viewer participation can be observed. According to the study on the instruments that have been developed in 29 European countries in order to secure and foster the interests of viewers (see the introductory chapter of

this volume), we will firstly deal with models of viewer participation that are not self-initiated but made available through politics, regulators or media companies themselves (section 3). Secondly, we will deal with the viewer organizations that represent the core types of civil society actors (section 4).

3.1. Representation in controlling bodies

In some countries different societal groups are represented in controlling bodies of public service broadcasters and regulatory authorities (for this model see also the contributions of Baldi and Holznagel&Jungfleisch in this volume). This is the case e.g. in Austria, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland. By participating in the bodies of these institutions the representatives of different groups communicate their perspectives particularly in the fields of viewers' protection and citizens' interests and exert influence on the realization of their interests in the programmes of the respective broadcasters or the decisions of the regulatory authority. An example is the system of member organizations of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation, SRG Idée Suisse. The company is an association of member organizations that are open to everyone interested, this means that every citizen could potentially engage in these member organizations. A similar system can be found in the Netherlands: The public service broadcaster NOS is based on associations that emerged from different social groups (like religious groups, political parties or educational institutions, etc.). The respective associations are very much interested in high numbers of members as this is directly translated into the amount of broadcasting time for each association. The chances for participation are twofold: members can defend their interests directly in the general meetings as well as indirectly via representatives in the bodies of NOS. A problem of this model turns out to be the double role of the members and their representatives; they act as stakeholders towards the company and at the same time as representatives of the company towards the public. Another problem of this model seems to be that the respective broadcasters or authorities are more likely to reject complaints or other initiatives by single viewers as illegitimate – referring to the fact that the public is sufficiently represented through these bodies. In general, there is a trend towards decreasing the influence of the viewers and their representatives in this model; as with growing competition on the market, the management gains autonomy.

Regarding civil society criteria the factor closeness to everyday life and interests of viewers depends on the structure of the different groups of citizens represented in the organizations. Nowadays, the representatives in many cases are multi-operatives of the respective groups and have lost the connection with their bases. What should also be mentioned here is that presence in the public sphere is restricted as well, as, for example, some of the respective bodies do not hold their meetings publicly.

3.2. Communication platforms

In some European countries communication platforms for discussions on different issues of media policies have been established. In some cases broadcasters provide such offers for discussion on programmes, in other cases the regulatory authorities

took the initiative to discuss current questions of media development with media users. The latter initiatives refer to both consumer and citizens' interests and to questions of viewers' protection.

The so-called "media assembly" (Medienversammlung)¹ of the regulatory authority for private broadcasting in North-Rhine Westphalia in Germany (LfM), to which viewers, representatives of the media, scientists and politicians are invited (see also the contribution of Holznagel&Jungfleisch in this volume) might serve as an example for this kind of participation. The assembly meets at least every six months and discusses topics like "digital broadcasting" or "new programme genres/formats". The discussions are complemented by Internet panel discussions.

An example of a communication platform initiated by a broadcaster is the Internet forum iCan² of the BBC in the United Kingdom. Among other topics, media users can find information, discuss or initiate a campaign on questions like media ethics, television, advertising, etc.

This kind of viewer participation tends to encourage the articulation of viewer concerns in a direct way and fulfils a central function of civil society control. A disadvantage might be the low level of commitment the initiators accept in this model.

3.3. Complaints procedures

A widespread measure for protecting the viewers' interests in Europe are the different kinds of complaints procedures existing in almost every European country. Among the institutions that provide the possibility to complain, are the broadcasters themselves, regulatory authorities and self-regulatory organs like, for example, press councils. A specific model is the Ombudsman system that is practiced in Sweden. Here the Ombudsman is an independent advocate or moderator, who tries to achieve a clarification in the respective case. In Sweden, most people know this possibility to complain quite well and it is well accepted.

Usually complaints refer to single programme issues and therefore do not get a broader public relevance. Thus, most of the time the procedure and its outcome do not enter the public discussion. An example of how the procedures can be made transparent through publishing the results of the different steps and thereby possibly influencing public discourse can be found on the website of the Estonian Press Council.³

From the civil society perspective this option of viewers' participation reflects a high degree of sensitivity for viewers' concerns. However, the respective cases often do not become public and thus remain on the level of individual interests. This circumstance might also explain why broadcasters often regard people that do complain as grouse, who do not take into account that television is a mass medium. Nevertheless, as a basic right for media users an institutionalized complaints procedure seems to be indispensable. And in as far as they are accomplished by

rules, which secure that the respective cases become public and transparent, they can contribute to civil society discourse and control in media politics.

3.4. Audience research

From the perspective of the broadcasters, viewers' interests are taken into account by their market research. This means consumer interests are in the focus of broadcasters; individual programme preferences in a generalized form become guidelines for programming and advertising presentation. This kind of observance of viewers' interests can be found in every European country, but societal interests of citizens, or the need for viewer protection, are widely disregarded in this perspective. In exceptional cases the audience research of broadcasters include all three levels of viewers' interests – consumer and citizen interests as well as protection needs. The Finnish public service broadcaster YLE conducts surveys, which include extensive parts on the viewers' attitudes towards public service functions, towards different programme offers like children's television, educational and minority programmes or questions on their perception of diversity issues in the programme offer of YLE, since 1997. The participants are asked explicitly to refer not just to their individual consumer interests but to take into account their interests as citizens.⁴ Furthermore these surveys fulfil a civil society function as they are published and may enter public discourse on public service performance. With regard to sensitivity for concerns of viewers these surveys, however, have just a limited effect, since standardized questionnaires do not provide enough space for individual perspectives.

4. Viewer associations

Typical cases for civil society participation in the media sphere are viewer organizations, consumer organizations or citizen initiatives dealing with media-related issues. The general characteristics for civil society actors as outlined in section 2 fully apply to them: They are associations which promote *non-profit aims* related to media development; they are open for citizens from a broad range of societal groups and build on a strong *sensitivity for the concerns* of the viewers; finally they use different means of *public communication* in order to articulate and promote their position in the public discourse.

Across Europe several different kinds of viewer organizations can be found, although in a number of European countries there are no viewer organizations at all. In Austria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Sweden no viewer organizations could be identified. Two remarks should be made on this phenomenon: First, the absence of viewer organizations does not mean that viewer participation is generally low in these countries, other features of the respective media system may ensure participation. Second, although viewer organizations were found in the remaining investigated countries, in some cases their relevance was very low.

In the following, we will have a closer look at the different types of organizations, their aims and motives, types of activities, and their interconnectedness to several

societal groups. Finally, we will provide some considerations on factors that influence the existence and success of viewer organizations.

According to our broad understanding of the term viewer organization, this includes any organization, which pursues one of the following aims: representing viewers' interests and needs; supporting certain media qualities, e.g. diversity or educational content; fighting against problematic content (e.g. violence, advertising). Furthermore, these organizations are independent from regulatory bodies and broadcasters themselves.

In many countries there are different varieties of consumer organizations. Some of these, particularly in Northern Europe, built up substantial memberships and reach huge audiences with their publications, which provide tests on a wide range of consumer goods and services (see also Mitchell/Blumler 1994: 233). In some cases these tests include media or television, e.g. with regard to consumer electronics or new technical systems like set-top boxes for digital television. Occasionally, these organizations also comment on actual issues in media politics.

4.1. Main objectives

In our research, we identified the following aims and motives of viewer organizations in Europe:

- General representation of viewers' interests
- Protecting family/children/youth interests
- Defending pluralism and diversity
- Ensuring gender interests
- Safeguarding religious values

a) General representation of viewers' interests

Probably the most prominent example of a viewer organization aiming to represent viewers' and listeners' interests in general is the "Voice of the Listener and Viewer (VLV)" in the United Kingdom. Founded in 1983 in response to the threat to turn BBC Radio 4 into an all news and current affairs network, VLV today is a key lobbying organization in the UK, "because it has one of the largest memberships, is well organised and produces high quality research analyses, and maintains a high reputation with government" (Collins, Sujon 2005: 318). As far as membership is concerned VLV with its 2,500 individual members is comparatively small.

In Spain, we find a large number of mostly regional viewer organizations, some of them with the general aim to defend the rights of the viewers: The "Association of Television Viewers and Radio Listeners" (ATR) (founded in 1985) encourages self-regulation as well as audience participation in broadcasting companies. The "Association of Users of Communication" (AUC)⁵ (founded in 1980) is dedicated to "defend the interests of citizens as users of mass media, receivers of the messages disseminated by them and possible 'targets' of their content" (Lacalle 2005: 259). The association has over 10,000 members. Even bigger, as it is a national

association is the "Spectators Forum" with more than 150,000 members. Created in 2002 by a group of viewers who wanted to exercise their rights for freedom of expression towards the media, their aims today are to facilitate access to information for viewers, to defend television viewers' rights, to promote channel self-regulation and to award programmes of high quality. As a consequence of the multitude of viewer organizations in Spain a "Federation of Television Viewers and Radio Listeners Associations" (FIATYR) was established in 1987 by seventeen associations from Spain and Portugal. In Portugal we found two viewer organizations aiming to protect the rights and interests of media consumers: ACMedia, the Portuguese Association of Media Consumers (founded in 1986) and ATV, the Television Viewers' Association (established in 1991).

The general approach to viewer participation is often linked with a strong support for public service principles in broadcasting, for example, the Finnish organization Pro Yleisö⁶ (Pro Public), founded in 2003, seeks to foster media quality and formulates the objective to strengthen public service broadcasting. A very active and widespread viewer organization acting in favour of a democratic dialogue and to abet public service functions in the media is the Danish "Arbejdernes Radio og Fjernsynsforbund"⁷ (ARF). ARF has 30,000 members and 150 local clubs. Further examples are the Swiss Arbus⁸ (founded in 1930 as a workers organization, formerly with the task to build and spread radio receivers) and the French association "Les Pieds dans le PAF"⁹ (PAF: Paysage Audiovisuel Français).

b) Protection of family/children/youth' interests

Some viewer or consumer organizations dedicate their activities to a specific thematic focus. Many associations have been founded by activists who are concerned about the protection of children and young people and want to support parents and families in general. Examples of these kinds of organizations are the Belgian "Gezinsbond"¹⁰ and the "Ligues des Familles"¹¹ in Flanders and Wallonia with the same roots in 1920. They are large organizations with 300,000 and 80,000 members, respectively, with the main objective to defend the interests of families in all spheres of society. As far as television programming is concerned, they focus on objectives like the protection of minors, promotion of diversity, regulation of advertising, etc. In France the biggest of all associations for the protection of TV viewers' interests is the "Collectif Interassociatif Enfance Média" (CIEM). Founded in 2002 it brings together several associations with the aim to protect young viewers' rights by bringing together parents, educators and associations. This group contains associations with relatively different tendencies and, therefore, common activities sometime prove to be difficult. Although these associations are rather active and engaged, they are still, to a large extent, unknown among the general public. The same problem prevails for the Association for the Protection of Television Viewers (APTV) in Greece, which was established in 1996. This organization has got the objective to protect viewers, especially minors, from violence and porn shows, vulgar programming like reality shows, etc. Until now, APTV seems to be rather unknown, which might be explained by the lack of funding for publicity campaigns.

Examples of viewer associations that successfully combine the aims of protecting families and minors with the task to reach the public through information campaigns are the Italian parents' movement MOIGE¹² and the Norwegian associations "Familie & Medier" (F&M) and "BarneVakten"¹³. What is especially noteworthy in the case of MOIGE, founded in 1997, is the TV Watchdog to monitor TV schedules, while F&M, founded in the 1980s, among others actively employs the media to reach Norwegians with information and commentaries. Another example in this area is the organization Associated Television Viewers of Catalunya¹⁴ (TAC, founded 1985) in Spain, a group of parents who were worried about growing aggression and negative consequences of competition between the different television channels. With 15,000 members the association today acts as a bridge between the audience and the television stations.

A rather long-standing and active viewer organization in this field is the Italian AIART¹⁵, which was founded in 1953. This association has got a relatively small number of members, but a broad national diffusion in 15 regions and 43 provinces. AIART addresses families in particular with the aim to enforce media competence and to protect minors.

An interesting and, as far as we have seen, unique case is the Spanish Association of Young Television Viewers (AJT),¹⁶ which argues against censorship and defends young people's rights; in doing this they criticize the actions taken by other viewer organizations, since they believe that the best answer to disliked programmes is to simply not watch them. This association is different from the other associations that primarily focus on family or children's interests, because the members are involved with the protection of minors but defend their own rights as citizens and consumers.

c) Defending pluralism and diversity

Another group of organizations focuses on objectives related to pluralism, diversity, and freedom of information. Here, we have one of the very few examples of a small media-related, non-governmental organization in Central and Eastern Europe: The association "Media with the human face",¹⁷ founded 1996 in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, tries to strengthen the civic relationships in Bulgaria, in order to find solutions to concrete social problems and to establish a dialogue between authorities and citizens. The influence of this organization seems to be limited to the regional sphere.

In France we find two small and newly established associations with the aim to promote free and pluralist information: l'Observatoire français des Médias¹⁸ (founded in 2003) was created by professional newscasters, academics and media consumers and today has around 300 members. The association Acrimed¹⁹ (Action Critique Médias, founded in 1995) holds the same goals.

Another example is the co-operative body "Mira Media"²⁰ in the Netherlands, founded in 1986 by the major national migrant organizations in the Netherlands. The aims of Mira Media are to achieve more diversity and pluralism in the audio-visual and interactive media, to ensure that viewers learn to take a critical approach

to media output and to improve the knowledge needed to work in the media; that is, Mira Media's approach is an educational one focussed on the viewers on the one hand and journalists on the other.

d) Ensuring gender interests

Not a classical viewer organization, but an interesting initiative that reaches a lot of viewers is Zorra²¹ in Flanders. This project, which was started in 1996, serves as a watchdog with regard to gender questions, particularly in advertising.

e) Safeguarding religious values

In Denmark a viewer organization with 40,000 members, "Kirke & Medier"²² (KLF), focuses particularly on the representation of Christian topics in the media (predominantly in radio and TV). The main target group for their activities are the viewers, who can find a lot of information, for example, on the website of KLF. The previously mentioned Norwegian viewers' association "Familie & Medier" also holds the furthering of quality programming based on religious values as one of their main objectives.

4.2. Types of activities

The viewer organizations presented above show plenty of activities targeted at various groups of society. A general function that several viewer organizations fulfil is critical *media monitoring*; to act as a TV watchdog, in general, like the Osservatorio TV in Italy run by CODACONS,²³ or with a focus on specific issues like Zorra in Flanders which deals with gender questions. An interesting initiative in this regard is the association of different groups in the Collectif Interassociatif Enfance Média (CIEM) in France, which established a monitoring network for the protection of young viewers.

In several organizations the monitoring is complemented by *research*. This includes either conducting various individual studies or providing a study service like the Flemish Family League, which elaborates dossiers on broadcasting policy. The Italian AIART regularly carries out national surveys on viewers' habits and behaviour.

With regard to the aim of giving viewers a voice in media politics, several organizations do a lot of *lobbying* as well, as they represent the viewers in media councils and communicate their perspectives to the public via press releases and publications. Probably the most successful organization in the field of political lobbying is the British VLV, as it acts in a well-organized manner and maintains a high reputation and effective links with both government and broadcasters. Another example of the efficient representation of viewers' interests is the Flemish Gezinsbond, which represents viewers in the Flemish media council.

Some organizations initiate and foster public discourse on various issues of media politics by arranging *public debates*, *seminars* and *workshops*, like, for example, the "Grands Entretiens", organized by the Ligue des Familles in Wallonia.

Another important field of activity is to *represent viewers' interests within the media companies themselves*. Some organizations stay in close contact with the broadcasters or are represented in the boards of TV companies. The Swiss viewers' organization Arbus is an example for long-term representation of viewers in public service broadcasting boards, even though the influence of the board within the company has been decreasing in recent years.

Several viewer organizations are more oriented towards the viewers as the target group of their activities, they provide, for example, *complaints services* by collecting complaints and forwarding them to the broadcasters. Different ways of communicating this service can be observed: some offer hotlines with toll-free numbers and/or e-mail addresses or the classical way via mail. The Spanish TAC acts in this way as a bridge between viewers and television stations, reporting complaints, suggestions, and opinions of viewers to the station directors. The Gezinsbond in Belgium offers a similar "Consumer service" where member families can get (legal and practical) advice and help in formulating complaints.

Hotlines, chat rooms and other means of communication are used as well for a general service to provide *information* to the viewers and a discussion forum. Most of the viewer organizations run websites with information on complaints procedures, regulatory questions, etc. and provide feedback options. Some of these sites also provide a forum for discussions, like Zorra in Belgium or Barnevakten in Norway.

Another kind of service several viewer organizations provide are *radio and TV guides* online as well as offline. Some of these magazines give orientation concerning the quality of programmes, some specifically focus on programmes for children and young people and rate/certify them. For example, the Catalan TAC offers information and commentaries on the current or upcoming TV programmes both on its website and through a print magazine.

Some organizations want to enhance *media education and media literacy* and organize seminars or projects on this behalf. Organizations that initiate seminars and public discussion are Kansan Radioliiton and Pro Yleisö in Finland, as well as Barnevakten in Norway and FYATIR in Spain.

An interesting instrument to try to encourage quality programming is used by several organizations in Europe through *awards or prizes* for "best" or "worst" programmes. The French association Les Pieds dans le PAF, for instance, appoints the "Golden Zap award" for the worst TV programmes, while TAC and the Spectators Forum in Spain have awards for the best quality TV programmes.

Even more practical ways to improve quality in the media are chosen by some associations that organize *seminars with journalists* or engage themselves in the *production of TV programmes* such as, for example, the Bulgarian Media with a human face, that produces programmes for viewers, whose interests are not met by the media, e.g. handicapped people or ethnic minorities.

An important aspect of the organizations' activities is *networking* between different kinds of organisations as well as on the local, regional and national level. Some national viewers' organizations have a regional or even local basis as they are organized in local clubs. This is the case for AIART in Italy with groups in 15 regions and 43 provinces as well as for the Arbejdernes Radio og Fjernsynsforbund in Denmark with 150 local clubs and Kirke & Medier in Denmark, which is organized in local clubs as well. Through networking at least two advantages are gained: a very close connection to the citizens and a simple way of getting publicity. Another example is the Ligue des Familles in Wallonia. As European integration and globalization proceed, international connections become important for viewer organizations as well. That is also why the VLV initiated the European Alliance of Listener and Viewer Associations (EURALVA), with six members at present, which comments European media policy and encourages public service broadcasting. Another way to increase the influence in the public by networking is to develop a multitude of connections with other social groups and organizations, like teachers or journalists organizations, universities, etc. In addition, regular events with viewers, broadcasters, etc. in councils or public debates ensure a constant exchange of opinions.

Crucial for the presence in the public sphere are obviously the *channels of communication* developed by the organizations, with elaborated websites or helpful TV guides being important instruments to achieve presence. A professional PR department and good connections to the media are important as well.

5. Conclusions

5.1. Viewer participation across Europe

The overview of viewer organizations in Europe provides a colourful map of different kinds of activities advancing the viewers' interests. On this map there are several empty spots, i.e. countries with no independent organizations in this field. This is the case for most of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, indicating that in the so-called transformation countries the civil society sector is still in a developing stage. Furthermore, these countries have only a weak tradition of the public service concept of broadcasting and its core idea of accountability. So that instead of a flourishing civil society sector, broadcasting systems in CEE suffer from a two-fold pressure: On the one hand, compared to western traditions, there is still a strong influence of the state; on the other hand, since 1990, commercialization has been the dominant trend, which is in many cases dominated by western media conglomerates. Thus, in these countries, a lot of support is needed to encourage small civil society initiatives to gradually develop public attention for the needs and interests of the viewers.

Among the remaining countries we find one group which is characterized by quite developed accountability systems and a strong position of public broadcasting organizations and almost no activities of independent viewer organizations (e.g. Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Sweden). One reason might be that these

countries have a particularly strong welfare state tradition, and the respective motto "the state cares for you" might have shaped the viewers' attitude that it is not themselves who have to care for their needs and interests. However, due to the current social changes and the changing paradigms of media regulation ("from government to governance"), it becomes more and more evident even in these societies that there is a need for new and independent civil society actors which represent the viewers' interests.

Another group of countries, most of the southern European countries, is characterized by poorly developed accountability systems and – compared to the previous group – a weak position of public service broadcasting. People in these countries have taken the initiative quite early and founded quite a number of independent organizations. The efficiency of these activities is hard to evaluate; however, the actual situation of public broadcasting and quality programming in most of these countries points to the fact that the activities of these organizations are still very important.

Finally, with regard to viewer activities and accountability systems, the UK seems to be in quite a unique position. This position is characterized by highly elaborated accountability systems and, at the same time, well-organized and influential viewer organizations. Even though a lesson learned from many comparative projects is that it is hard to transfer "best practice" models from one country to another, in this case, with regard to viewer participation, many European initiatives can learn from the British examples.

5.2. Viewer participation as civil society activity

First of all, at this point it should be noted that some of the organizations although very active are unknown in the broad public.

The overview of different kinds of activities of European viewer organizations points out how many ways there are to support the three levels of interest previously established in this chapter: consumer or citizens' interests and the protection of viewers. Some associations support complaints, others provide information on high-quality programmes and in this way deal with media consumers' interests. Citizens' interests are represented by some organizations in boards and councils or via lobbying (the government). Many associations have a special focus on the protection of minors and organize monitoring as well as research services. Thus, they build upon a broader understanding of "audience" and "viewers" as is prevalent in common audience research; instead viewers' participation is interpreted as civil society activity. The criteria for civil society activities as outlined in paragraph 3 are met by many of the respective initiatives. They serve as means to achieve a broad sensitivity for the concerns of the viewers – complaints services, seminars, workshops or online forums as well as other feedback options for viewers. They aim at the inclusion of all parts of society in the process of media governance. Furthermore, they promote deliberation, i.e. the public and transparent discourse on all issues of media development.

However, despite the large number of initiatives and activities, the overall impression is that viewers as civil society actors do not play a substantial role in European media systems. Hence, the prevailing perspective is the market model of audiences, which constructs viewers as consumers. In as far as accountability systems include elements of viewer participation, these do not get much attention or are even unknown to large parts of the population. Overall, the consciousness of being a potential actor within the process of media governance is so far rather poorly developed.

5.3. Viewer participation on the European level

Facing similar developments and problems all over Europe with regard to programme offers as well as regulation (see e.g. Dörr 2004) and against the background of European integration, the most important question is whether there are chances for viewer participation at the European level. This might appear risky for two reasons though. First of all, in many countries viewer participation is seen sceptical, and, second of all, participation at the European level in general has to be characterized as deficient. On the one hand, one could argue that precisely in the European arena, with its complex political processes including the powerful representation of national interests by individual member states and supranational media industries, the chances for viewer participation are rather small. On the other hand, it is important to keep in mind that at the European level different attempts to systematically foster discursive forms of political decision-making processes can be found. An example for this is the comparatively discursive and inclusive process of decision-making for the modernization of the "Television without Frontiers" directive with different levels of hearings and pluralistically composed focus groups (see European Commission 2005a, b). The importance of discursive processes of governance can be observed for models of regulated self-regulation or co-regulation, respectively, as investigated in a current European study (initiated by the European Commission, conducted by the Hans Bredow Institute and the Institute for European Media law). Thus, different platforms for civil society actors to represent the audience can be taken into account. Against this background it seems worthwhile to consider the chances of interconnecting and integrating viewers' interests and fostering the development of civil society actors at the European level and in this way introduce the audience perspective into media politics on changing media in Europe. Facing the current challenges of media development, the voice of the viewers cannot be neglected – at least if one is willing to govern media developments based on democratic principles. The need to identify, articulate and promote viewers' interests, even on the European level, goes back to two arguments:

1. There have to be legitimate representatives of viewers' interests on the European level. Almost all actors of the media landscape are being present with European organizations in Brussels, so that they are able to promote their interests in the ongoing political process: public and private broadcasters, journalists, advertisers, cable and satellite companies, producers, etc., all but the viewers.
2. Facing small resources, viewer organizations on the national level need international cooperation in order to increase the efficiency and impact of their activities. The research in different countries has shown that the respective

national initiatives and organizations are quite weak in terms of financing and organizational structures. An increased cooperation on the European level could allow for several advantages, e.g. the exchange of successful activities from other countries, increased knowledge of international activities and the European media politics as well as joint efforts to apply for funding on the international level.

Approaches to promote media users' interests even on the European level could at the same time contribute to the strengthening of civil society participation in Europe. Due to the close link between the role as audience of the media and the role as audience of politics, an increase in the consciousness that there is a need for civil society engagement in the area of media will also affect the respective attitude towards civil society engagement in the process of European integration. A European public sphere can only build upon the common attention to and the common knowledge of the communicative processes currently developing in Europe.

Notes

1. <http://www.medienversammlung.de>
2. <http://www.bbc.uk/dann/ican/>
3. http://asn.org.ee/english/in_general.html
4. See, for example, in annual report 2003: "YLE broadcasts radio and television programmes on a public service basis. These programmes are funded from television fees. How important do you regard the following programmes or functions to YLE's operations as a public service broadcaster in general terms? You may not be interested in some programmes yourself, but you might still like YLE to broadcast them." (<http://www.yle.fi/fbc/annual.shtml>, last access 14.10.2005)
5. www.auc.es
6. www.proyleiso.org
7. www.orfonline.dk
8. www.arbus.ch
9. www.piedsdanslepaf.com
10. www.gezinsbond.be
11. www.liguedesfamilles.be
12. www.genitori.it
13. www.fom.no
14. www.taconline.net
15. www.aiart.org
16. <http://loveneder.fortunecity.com/tombstone/266/ajt>
17. http://bmc.bulmedia.com/en/profiles/Human_Face.htm
18. www.observatoire-medias.info
19. www.acrimed.org
20. www.miramedia.nl
21. www.women.uio.ac.be/zorra
22. <http://www.klf.dk>
23. http://www.codacons.it/osservatorio_tv/osservatorio_tv.asp