

A Compass to Navigate the Audience? Translating Public Service Values into Measurable Indicators

Robin Riemann 

Department of Communication, Media Business Division, Johannes Gutenberg-University, Mainz, Germany

ABSTRACT

The growing relevance of audience analytics in journalism raises concerns about favoring audience appeal over quality, potentially sidelining professional and organizational values. For Public Service Media (PSM), this poses a particular challenge: their societal remit and legitimacy demand metrics that go beyond commercial logic. Drawing on a conceptual framework integrating legitimacy theory, public value and audience analytics, this paper explores the development and implementation of the *ZDF-Compass*, a proprietary measurement system created by the German PSM organization ZDF. It is based on a qualitative case study comprising seven interviews with key managerial stakeholders involved in the development, supplemented by an analysis of ZDF-published materials and internal documents. Findings show that the *ZDF-Compass* was primarily initiated in response to regulatory requirements. While it aims to capture a broad range of value-related indicators, it places strong emphasis on user perspectives, partly outsourcing content evaluation to audiences. On the editorial level, it anchors performance goals within editorial units, potentially influencing content production and editorial culture. Although the system holds transformative potential for performance evaluation in PSM and beyond, this is limited by the continued dominance of simple usage metrics.

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Introduction

Audience data's ubiquity has elevated it to a superior standard in evaluating the work of journalists. Even within the domain of mostly non-commercial entities, such as Public Service Media (PSM), there is a notable trend to maximize user numbers and appeal. This increasing integration of audience metrics into newsroom routines shapes the selection, production, and distribution of journalistic content (Costera Meijer 2020; Ekström, Ramsälv, and Westlund 2022; Lamot, Paulussen, and van Aelst 2021). They often define the degree to which goals are met and are utilized for PSM's legitimacy narratives (Puppis and Ali 2023). However, this reliance risks prioritizing short-term optimization over the public service remit, potentially compromising the integrity of journalistic

CONTACT Robin Riemann  r.riemann@uni-mainz.de

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standards (Fürst 2020; Tandoc and Thomas 2015). Consequently, easily quantifiable aspects, often commercially driven, may take precedence as objectives, overshadowing other objectives that are more nuanced or challenging to measure, if not altogether impossible to quantify (Collins 2007). This phenomenon, frequently described as “hitting the target but missing the point” within the discourse of public value (Horner, Blaug, and Lekhi 2006; Karmasin 2011), can ultimately lead to failing the public service mission and incite debates regarding the legitimacy of PSM. Living up to the standards of the public remit and integrating them into production processes through evaluation and measurement are crucial for PSM, especially amidst declining acceptance for broadcasting fees and political scrutiny of their legitimacy.

Scholarly discussions on public value highlight measurement as critical: While it is integral to the concept, inadequate measurement poses a threat to public value and its realization (Horner, Blaug, and Lekhi 2006; Neumüller 2011). Similarly, the use of audience analytics often lacks critical reflection and overlooks inherent limitations (Groot Kormelink and Costera Meijer 2018; Steensen, Ferrer-Conill, and Peters 2020). This raises concerns about declining content quality and diversity (Fürst 2020). The commercial bias of many metrics prompts scholars to urge media organizations to emancipate themselves from commercial metrics and develop measurements that reflect their (journalistic) values (Belair-Gagnon, Zamith, and Holton 2020; Cherubini and Nielsen 2016). This shift could help PSM to avoid the so-called neoliberal trap, the uncritical adoption of market-based performance criteria (Puppis and Ali 2023). While research on the operationalization of public value has provided important insights into ex-ante evaluations for PSM services, the ongoing assessment of existing formats in everyday practice has so far remained underexplored, partly because practical approaches are only gradually emerging implementation (Latzl 2011; Rodríguez-Castro and Campos Freire 2023). Despite the demand for value-based measurement, yet the concrete implementation remains unclear. Therefore, the following major research question is posed:

RQ 1: How do Public Service Media translate their organizational objectives into measurable indicators?

However, existing performance measurements, including audience analytics, already hold a firm place in many newsrooms. Beyond the question of implementation, a key issue is how value-oriented measurements and indicators can be integrated with established metrics, which are often commercially driven and focused on audience size (Maggiore 2011; Raats 2023). Since a complete replacement of these existing metrics is unlikely, the central question arises:

RQ 2: How do newly developed measurement systems relate to established (market-oriented) audience metrics?

Since the implementation of value-based measurement systems presents a distinct challenge, their impact at the editorial level requires closer examination. The way such systems are introduced may be decisive for whether and how they are adopted and put into practice. When these new systems are used for evaluation, they have the potential to influence editorial routines, production practices, and journalists themselves. This leads to the third research question:

RQ 3: How are newly developed measurement systems implemented at the editorial level?

To conceptually approach these questions, the next section draws on legitimacy theory to identify which forms of legitimacy can be addressed through proprietary measurement systems. This is followed by a discussion of public value as a normative framework for assessing PSM beyond commercial metrics. Finally, the literature on audience analytics is reviewed to contextualize the role of measurement in relation to legitimacy and public value.

Under Pressure of Justification: Legitimacy in the Context of Public Service Media

Organizations, especially PSM, depend on legitimacy from their various stakeholders to secure their long-term existence in society (Fehlmann 2023; Walgenbach and Meyer 2008). Legitimacy can be defined as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman 1995, 574). Therefore, it provides a promising approach to understanding how PSM attempt to operationalize elements of their public service remit, particularly in light of shifting societal expectations, evolving media usage patterns, and increasing political contestation of their mandate (Puppis and Ali 2023; Rodríguez-Castro and Campos Freire 2023). These institutional transformations can weaken established legitimacy narratives through competing public judgments (Bitektine and Haack 2015).

To enable a differentiated analysis of PSM’s legitimation strategies, this study draws on Suchman’s (1995) **legitimacy typology** and expands them by introducing an additional regulative dimension. Each type reflects distinct goals and logics relevant for understanding the role of measurement and evaluation in this context. *Pragmatic legitimacy* pertains to an organization’s ability to achieve the desired outcomes in its immediate environment. For PSM, this encompasses both the direct users of its content and stakeholders involved in governance. *Moral legitimacy*, by contrast, encompasses a normative evaluation of an organization’s activities and characteristics based on shared values and a commitment to societal welfare (Scott 1995; Suchman 1995; Suddaby, Bitektine, and Haack 2017). For PSM, this is commonly linked to adherence to the public service remit and core journalistic values such as independence and diversity (Rodríguez-Castro and Campos Freire 2023). *Cognitive legitimacy* involves the perception that an organization is taken for granted or simply necessary. In this case, the organization’s existence is not questioned (Suchman 1995; Suddaby, Bitektine, and Haack 2017). Some PSM may benefit from cognitive legitimacy due to their longstanding tradition, while others may lack this type due to a weaker position in society with their existence being questioned (Bitektine and Haack 2015; Scherer 2011). *Regulative legitimacy* refers to compliance with formal legal frameworks and alignment with regulation (Scott 1995; Suddaby, Bitektine, and Haack 2017). For PSM, this is often a balancing act, as while maximizing audiences (e.g., striving for more clicks) is often perceived as undesirable, it may also be necessary to ensure the accessibility of content (Andersson Schwarz 2016).

This typology is based on the assumption that legitimacy can be understood as property, a view that sees legitimacy as an intangible resource that can be acquired or lost. Since this study adopts an intra-organizational perspective, the typology within the property view serves as analytical foundation. However, other conceptualizations may be

relevant for PSM, too: The legitimacy as process perspective shifts rather focusses on the communicative practices through which legitimacy is continuously constructed (Suddaby, Bitektine, and Haack 2017). Finally, legitimacy can also be seen as perception, rereferring to individual judgments that ultimately aggregate into collective assessments of an organization.

In the context of PSM's legitimacy and its various subtypes, public value and its measurement can serve as important tools for demonstrating performance in relation to the public remit and societal contribution (D'Arma 2018; Gransow 2020).

Demonstrating Contribution to Society: Implementing Public Value

One approach to achieving legitimacy for public organizations is by demonstrating the creation of public value. The concept focuses on organizational actions that contribute to public welfare. It, thereby, opposes alignment of public organizations with market economy principles like in the New Public Management approach, which emphasizes easily measurable KPIs such as average costs (Gonser and Gundlach 2022; Moore 1995). Central to the concept of public value is the idea of opportunity costs, raising the question: What is society willing to (financially) sacrifice for a public service? Therefore, public managers must demonstrate not only the ability to create valuable outcomes but also that these outcomes justify the costs incurred by society (Moore 1995; Neumüller 2011). However, there is no universally accepted definition of public value. While social utility can be identified as a unifying element (Cañedo, Rodríguez-Castro, and López-Cepeda 2022), there is considerable variation in the components used and how strongly they are emphasized. In practice, this often results in the instrumental and generic invocation of public value for legitimacy purposes, as well as in varied measurement approaches (Moe and van den Bulck 2014). In contrast to the original idea of public value, using it solely as a tool for legitimation can lead to a reduced understanding of the license fee as an instrument of industrial policy as well as a top-down management tool, thereby reinforcing rather than resisting the neoliberal discourse (D'Arma 2018; Gransow 2020).

In the context of PSM, public value was initially introduced by the BBC, building on the aspects of *authorization*, *creation* and *measurement*. However, for PSM, seeking *authorization* solely from users or governments may not be desirable. First, because PSM must maintain its independence and institutional autonomy. Second, the public may not always be able to accurately assess its own needs and interests (Collins 2007). Regarding the dimension of *creation*, the BBC defined four output-oriented indicators, Reach, Quality, Impact, and Value for Money, designed to engage audiences both as consumers and as citizens. *Measurement* operationalizes these indicators to approximate whether public value is created efficiently and effectively. However, inadequate measurement may ultimately undermine the credibility of public value. Furthermore, the prioritization of easily quantifiable aspects could risk sidelining socially relevant dimensions that are less amenable to measurement (Collins 2007). Public value has ascended to a significant regulatory criterion for the BBC and other PSM, often replacing other value-related aims such as public interest (Moe and van den Bulck 2014). However, it is also a buzzword whose application is often interpretative and at risk of being overshadowed by other fashionable terms such as "distinctiveness" (D'Arma 2018).

To operationalize public value for the *BBC*, (Mazzucato et al. 2020) distinguish between three dimensions: *individual value*, *societal value*, and *value for the media industry*. *Individual value* includes elements such as trust, personal relevance, and consumer benefit. *Societal value*, encompasses factors like diversity, editorial independence, and the fostering of social cohesion, and is explicitly understood to be more than a mere byproduct of individual value. The *value for the media industry* is reflected in the promotion of talent and innovation, as well as the establishment of industry standards. Measurement is not static but occurs across multiple levels including use, perceptions and behavior. This operationalization reflects many of the goals defined by the European Broadcasting Union, including *universality, independence, excellence, diversity, accountability and innovation* (European Broadcasting Union [EBU] 2019) – which, in similar form, can also be found across numerous PSM organizations in Europe with diversity and independence often seen as top priorities (Cañedo, Rodríguez-Castro, and López-Cepeda 2022). To avoid a reductive focus on usage metrics (Murschetz et al. 2024) propose an operationalization of public value based on five dimensions: *fulfillment of the public mandate, ethical conduct, contribution to quality of life, promotion of social cohesion, and efficient use of resources*. This framework essentially reflects the individual and societal value dimensions from the *BBC* conceptualization, but places greater emphasis on the individual. As a result, public value becomes more tangible and measurable. However, certain dimensions, such as efficient resource use or societal values like social cohesion, may be difficult for individuals to assess directly.

The first content-level applications of public value emerged in the form of ex-ante tests conducted prior to the introduction or modification of services, often as part of the legal framework. Such Public Value Tests have been implemented in various PSM organizations – for instance, the *BBC* evaluates new services based on its public purposes, such as sustaining citizenship or providing education, alongside a market impact assessment (Neumüller 2011). While the German “Three-Step-Test” does not mention public value, it operationalizes cultural, social, and democratic needs, as well as the impact on media markets and opinion formation, while also taking financial considerations into account (Latzl 2011). In this way, it largely aligns with the operationalizations proposed by Murschetz et al. (2024) and Mazzucato et al. (2020). However, there is neither a standardized procedure for the assessment of new services among PSM, nor do they necessarily circle around public value (Gransow 2020; Moe and van den Bulck 2014). While these tests offer a partially value-based evaluation of potential new services, such assessments are not conducted for existing formats in day-to-day operations. This leaves an evaluative gap that is often filled by commercially driven audience analytics, that often do not account for normative values (Lamot, Paulussen, and van Aelst 2021).

Low Hanging Fruits: Audience Analytics as Performance Measurement

Audience Analytics are systems collecting quantitative data about audience behavior, utilizing metrics such as clicks, scroll depth, or time spent (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016; Petre 2020). In the assessment of content audience analytics have become an industry standard, facilitating a closer integration of audiences into content production (Ekström, Ramsälv, and Westlund 2022). While some scholars assert a more reluctant approach to audience analytics in PSM (Karlsson and Clerwall 2013; Wang 2018), others find little disparity in

their use between commercial media and the PSM analyzed (Lamot, Paulussen, and van Aelst 2021). Despite a widespread perception among journalists of their audience as citizens, the use of audience metrics tends to foster more consumer-oriented audience conceptions (Belair-Gagnon, Zamith, and Holton 2020). Excessive and uncritical reliance on these metrics risks neglecting societal needs by prioritizing popular topics and producing less diverse content in pursuit of user numbers (Tandoc and Thomas 2015). Media professionals are often aware of these criticisms and respond by developing justificatory strategies, such as equating audience metrics with traditional news values or reframing them as democratic feedback, thus masking their commercial underpinnings. Conversely, existing metrics are sometimes adjusted to reflect organizational goals, thereby reversing the usual logic of metric application (Christin and Petre 2020). To emancipate journalism and especially PSM from commercial performance indicators, scholars increasingly advocate for the development of value-specific metrics (Cherubini and Nielsen 2016; Puppis and Ali 2023).

While ex-ante tests incorporating public value indicators are exclusively used to assess new services within PSM's regulatory framework, everyday performance evaluation of PSM content is frequently driven by audience analytics, which are often deeply embedded in editorial production routines. Thus, establishing proprietary measurement systems does not imply starting from scratch, but rather necessitates the strategic integration, adaptation, or potential discontinuation of existing performance evaluation practices. Developing such systems holds the potential to expand legitimacy efforts beyond ex ante evaluations avoiding the "neoliberal trap" (Puppis and Ali 2023). Additionally, it could assist media professionals in better defining professional boundaries and maintaining autonomy.

The Case and Its Background: Architecture of the ZDF-Compass

To provide context for answering the proposed research questions the instrument and its individual layers are first introduced. The development of the *ZDF-Compass* builds on the 4th Amendment to the German Interstate Media Treaty (4. Medienänderungsstaatsvertrag, Doc 8). It requires PSM to submit a report every two years on "the quantity and quality of their existing services". To that end, they must define guidelines that include "the establishment of content-related and formal quality standards as well as standardized processes for their evaluation" (§31, Doc 8). To ensure transparency these guidelines must be made publicly available and reviewed. A second foundational element is the self-commitment statement (ZDF 2023b, Doc 3) published by ZDF in June 2023, which was submitted to the broadcaster's supervisory board. This document outlines how the organization intends to achieve its strategic objectives and fulfill its public service remit. Under the guiding theme "*One ZDF for All*", five goals are defined: providing high-quality content, fostering understanding of the world, representing diverse lived realities, creating space for discourse, and delivering value for the industry and society. These goals closely reflect the previously discussed dimensions of public value outlined by Murschetz et al. (2024) and Mazzucato et al. (2020) while further detailing the societal component.

The *ZDF-Compass* is framed as the organization's central management tool to pursue its strategic goals, for instance the public's acceptance of the content portfolio (ZDF 2022, Doc 4). It is structured into four concentric circles (see Figure 1):

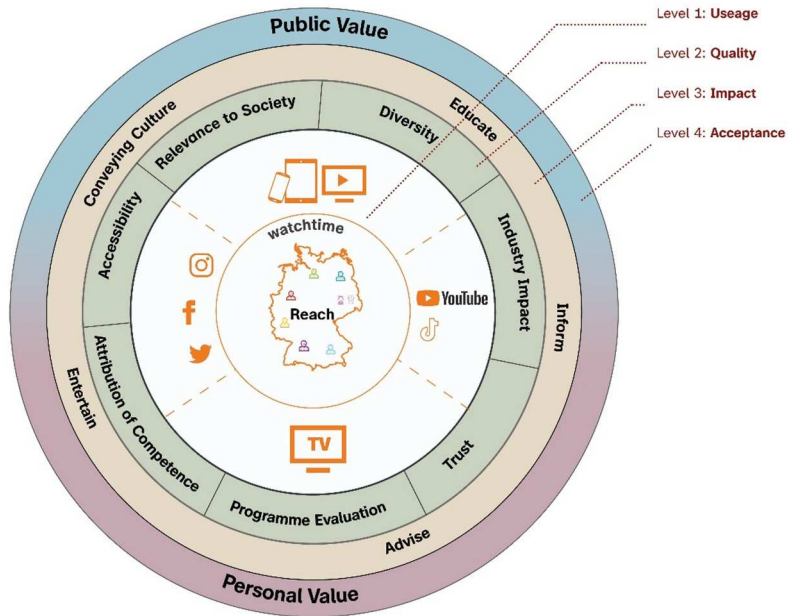


Figure 1. The ZDF-Compass and its levels (ZDF 2023a, Doc 6).

1. **The first circle** captures the usage of content as *conditio sine qua non*. This reflects the perspective of Murschetz et al. (2024), who argue that public value can only emerge if content is known and actually used. Central metrics include viewing volume as the central metric, reach, social media data, and market share.
2. **The second circle** is designed to assess content quality. The indicators include diversity, societal relevance, credibility, accessibility, industry impact, program evaluation, and attribution of competence – thus covering primarily societal and sector-specific dimensions. It is intended to safeguard journalistic independence and diligence standards (ZDF 2023a, Doc 6). However, in its measurement it largely relies on user evaluations
3. **The third circle** contains indicators aimed at measuring the impact of ZDF content on users as outlined in the public remit (§ 26, Doc 8). It is assumed that the preceding circles – usage and perception of quality – lead to this impact. Specifically, it evaluates whether content informs, entertains, educates, gives advice for daily life, or promotes culture.
4. **The fourth circle** evaluates acceptance of the broadcasting fee – and with it the existence of ZDF -, taking into account both perceived individual value and broader societal value. The monthly broadcasting fee is 18,63 Euro per household and the share of ZDF is 4,69 Euro.

To operationalize these indicators, the self-commitment statement identifies various data sources, including usage metrics, quantitative and qualitative surveys, data from external providers, as well as the creation of an internal survey panel (ZDF 2023d,

Table 1. Overview of the ZDF-Compass: analytical layers, indicators, and data sources.

Level	Indicator	Operationalization	Data sources
Level 1: Usage	Watchtime	Total viewing time across all users	Internal, external providers, social media analytics, surveys
	Reach	Number of people reached, regardless of how long they engaged with the content	Internal, external providers, social media analytics, surveys
	Viewing engagement	Average number of individuals who watched an entire unit of content (for TV and streaming)	Internal
	Market share	Proportion of ZDF content consumption relative to total market usage over a specific timeframe	External providers, social media platform analytics
	Views and average duration	Number of times a video content item was started and average time users spent watching	Internal, external providers and social media analytics
	Interactions	Number of user reactions to a post, such as comments and shares	Social media analytics
	Conversions	Number of views in the ZDFmediathek (streaming service) that originate from external platforms	Internal
	Content communities	ZDF-internal target group system based on video consumption behavior and the sociodemographic characteristics	External provider
Level 2: Quality	Relevance to society	Presence in public debates, media resonance, number of collaborations with civil society institutions, and recognition through awards	Own media monitoring tool, documentation of partnerships, award databases
	Accessibility	Barrier-free content, promotion of diverse content	Program statistics, case studies, algorithm audits, qualitative studies
	Trust	The public regards PSM and ZDF as a credible source of information, including trust in news brands and general media trust	Survey data, Scientific studies, Journalism Trust Initiative
	Diversity	Public perception of diversity in programming + on- and off-screen diversity	Survey data, internal diversity monitoring, contributor statistics
	Industry impact	Contribution to journalistic standards, innovation, reputation in the creative industries, promotion of young talent, and support for sustainable production	Journalism Trust Initiative, creative industry study, internal monitoring of talent programs and sustainable production initiatives
	Attribution of competence	Assessment of program development, perceived strengths in key genres (information and education), and its overall reputation	Survey (external provider)
	Program evaluation	The public rates ZDF brands and programs positively, perceives usage motives as fulfilled, and attributes personal impact to content	Surveys, social media resonance, qualitative studies, test screenings, use of own panel
Level 3: Impact	Educate	Agreement levels regarding "learning," "understanding connections," "empathizing with others' perspectives," and "encouragement to reflect further on a topic"	Survey (external provider) and own panel
	Conveying culture	Agreement levels concerning "fostering a sense of community," "portraying cultural life," "addressing values and beliefs," and "encouraging conversations about personally relevant topics"	Survey (external provider) and own panel
	Advise	Agreement levels on statements such as "inspiration for everyday life," "representation of real-life"	Survey (external provider) and own panel

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Level	Indicator	Operationalization	Data sources
		experiences," "empathy with others," and "feeling that one's own concerns are taken seriously."	
	Inform	Agreement levels regarding "Reliable information," "Important topics for me," "Forming my own opinion," and "Understanding the world better"	Survey (external provider) and own panel
	Entertain	Agreement levels on topics such as "Entertainment," "Relaxation," "Excitement," and "Community and belonging"	Survey (external provider) and own panel
Level 4:	Personal value	Agreement levels with statements that time spent with ZDF is well invested, its content is discussed and recommended within one's personal environment	Surveys (external providers)
Acceptance	Public Value	Agreement levels with statements regarding social cohesion, public service uniqueness and important content for society	Surveys (external providers)
	Acceptance of the broadcasting fee	Level of agreement to pay the ZDF share of the broadcasting fee, currently €4.69, due to the societal and personal value. ZDF is recognized for transparent and responsible handling of funds	Survey (external provider)

Doc 5) for audience feedback (ZDF 2023b, Doc 3). The following table provides an overview of the indicators used within the four levels of the *ZDF-Compass*, detailing the corresponding measurement approaches and data sources Table 1.

Methodological Approach

To investigate how PSM navigate the translation of their organizational goals into measurable metrics and its implications for media production, this study employs a case study approach of the *ZDF-Compass*. ZDF is one of the three German Public Service Media entities with an operating budget of about 2.6 bn Euros in 2025 (ZDF 2025). It is mainly funded by a monthly household fee. *The ZDF-Compass* was selected for its revelatory potential in exploring how PSM-specific values can be operationalized through measurement (Belair-Gagnon, Zamith, and Holton 2020; Cherubini and Nielsen 2016; Yin 2009). In this context, an in-depth investigation of a single case appeared particularly promising for analyzing the underlying motivations and design of such an instrument, as well as its potential influence on production processes.

Within this case study, qualitative expert interviews served as the primary source and were complemented by a document analysis of both internal and publicly available material. This triangulation offered insight into how the instrument is conceptualized, legitimized, and operationalized in practice. Access to this knowledge was limited to select managerial positions. To broaden the scope of perspectives, the interview sample also included one external expert engaged in the development process and one representative from ZDF's spin-off channel *FUNK* for younger audiences, resulting in a total of seven interviews, four conducted in person and three virtually. The interviews

were carried out between February and April 2024, lasting between 53 and 101 min. They followed a semi-structured guide with three thematic blocks: goals of the *ZDF-Compass* (RQ 1), its dimensions and operationalization (RQ2), and its practical application (RQ 3). To encourage open responses, all interviews were pseudonymized, identifying participants only by their roles within the organization. Table 2 provides an overview of the interviewees' roles and their areas of activity within the organization.

To contextualize the development of the instrument, both public documents and internal documents shared during the interviews were also analyzed. Table 3 presents an overview of the documents related to the *ZDF-Compass*.

To approach the research questions the analysis combined descriptive elements (first-order information), such as interview statements offering insights into the structure of the *ZDF-Compass*, with overarching themes concerning legitimation strategies and public value references (second-order themes) (Gioia 2004; Langley and Abdallah 2011). To establish a basis for answering how PSM translate their organizational objectives into measurable indicators (RQ1), the analysis featured categories drawn from the literature review. In particular, the various types of legitimacy as well as indicators of public value using previous operationalizations and measurement attempts were employed. Key categories included the measurement of both of individual and societal value using indicators such as universality and diversity (Collins 2007; Raats 2023; Suddaby, Bitektine, and Haack 2017). Furthermore, patterns of audience analytics use and reflections on their use within the organization were scrutinized to enable a comparison with the new measurement system (RQ2) (Lamot and Paulussen 2020). To address the question

Table 2. Interview participants.

Code	Affiliation	Gender	Tasks
Int 1	Senior Vice President programming	male	Program planning, distribution, budget control, media research
Int 2	Deputy Head of central tasks	male	Project manager <i>ZDF-Compass</i> , project manager self-commitment statement
Int 3	Consultant ZDF Broadcasting and Administration Board	male	Management of research projects for boards, mediation between external experts and boards
Int 4	Head of central tasks – Program planning	male	HR management, IT management, portfolio management
Int 5	Team Lead audience measurement and data science	male	Media research, survey and data management, system architecture
Int 6	Deputy program management – young audiences	male	Portfolio management, budget management
Int 7	External Expert media quality	female	Advisory function for the Broadcasting Board

Table 3. Documents used for the analysis.

Code	Document type	Availability
Doc 1	Presentation for the broadcasting board	internal
Doc 2	Performance indicators of the <i>ZDF-Compass</i>	internal
Doc 3	Self-commitment statement of the broadcasting board (ZDF 2023b)	public
Doc 4	Press release <i>ZDF-Compass</i> (ZDF 2022)	public
Doc 5	Press release <i>ZDF panel "mitreden"</i> (ZDF 2023d)	public
Doc 6	Explanation <i>ZDF-Compass</i> (ZDF 2023a)	public
Doc 7	Presentation on the strategy of <i>ZDF-Compass</i>	internal
Doc 8	Interstate Media Treaty (4. Medienänderungsstaatsvertrag)	public
Doc 9	Press release <i>self-commitment statement</i> (ZDF 2023c)	public

of implementation (RQ3), categories related to the managerial approach to the instrument and process aspects were analyzed, also drawing from insights gained in the analysis the other two research questions. Each category was assigned a distinct coding rule. The iterative coding process in MaxQDA yielded 1.646 coded segments, with many segments receiving multiple codes. Category-specific summaries across all interviews and documents were created. Lastly, relationships between categories were analyzed for intersections, which were subsequently assessed for plausibility. These connections were then used to uncover overarching strategic approaches to legitimacy and the integration of public value aspects.

The analysis was conducted during an ongoing phase of developing the *ZDF-Compass*. This enabled valuable real-time insights into the processes, avoiding ex-post rationalization and a success bias. The internal reasoning and communication with stakeholders were prominent patterns. However, the potential impact on production within and outside the organization (RQ2 and RQ3) can only be estimated based on interviews and documents, as the final outcome of a ready-to-use instrument was not yet available in the research phase.

Findings

The findings are structured along the three research questions: First, the development process of the *ZDF-Compass* is examined to understand how organizational values are translated into measurable indicators (RQ1). Second, the operationalization of the instrument and resulting tensions between commercial and value-based indicators are analyzed (RQ2). Finally, the initial implementation of the instrument within editorial units is explored (RQ3).

Setting the Course: Mission and Momentum Behind the ZDF-Compass

The legal requirements can be identified as the primary motivation for developing the *ZDF-Compass*. Its main addressee is the Television Council, which monitors the objectives outlined in the self-commitment statement. However, technical motivations also emerged, for instance, the desire to consolidate measurement methods, surveys, and data sources across various organizational units into a single instrument. From a managerial perspective, it serves as a set of rules – externally and internally – the whole organization commits to. This standard potentially streamlines controlling processes and facilitates setting target agreements with editorial units. These agreements commit to measurable indicators which are evaluated after a certain period of time, providing orientation while also avoiding that units pick favorable metrics for their evaluation.

The danger is that if you only look, but don't look in a directed way, then you can of course cherry pick the number that has just developed positively. But if that doesn't correspond to the goal, then (...). So, that's why we need agreements and clarification of objectives and then also an evaluation. (Int 1, Senior Vice President programming)

Moreover, the wish for a more coherent and strategically guided portfolio management represents a dominant motivation. The *ZDF-Compass* is viewed as a tool to move away from the traditional focus on linear market shares. In this way, it not only addresses

moral and regulative legitimacy in relation to the Television Council but also fosters internal legitimacy within the organization by initiating discussions about the values *ZDF* aims to represent as a whole. Participants emphasize transparency as a central goal, striving for both regulatory legitimacy and internal clarity by applying the *ZDF-Compass* to provide orientation about each format's purpose in the organization and establish a shared commitment to mission-driven goals. This evaluation pattern can also be observed in the youth-focused PSM platform *FUNK*, where formats face regular reviews to decide on their role in the portfolio.

User-Focused Operationalization: Aligning the Compass Needle

Processes to develop the instrument involved establishing a task force charged with translating the requirements outlined in the self-commitment statement into elements of the *ZDF-Compass*. This included conducting an inventory of existing data sources adopting prevalent market standards, particularly in the area of usage metrics (first circle). For the quality dimension, insights were sought from other European PSMs like the *BBC*, the Dutch *NPO*, and the Swiss *SRG*. Additionally, perspectives from various editorial units and other in-house stakeholders were considered. Academic expertise was also brought in, with three external scholars commissioned to advise the broadcasting board on fictional programming, survey methodology, and media quality measurement. Despite the inclusion of a wide range of perspectives, final authority over the *ZDF-Compass* criteria remained with *ZDF*'s management, highlighting that, for all its value-based ambitions, it also functions as a strategic portfolio management tool.

In the end that is a strategic management process, because that is a determination, a decision that you can't necessarily just deduce, but is also a definition. (Int 2, Deputy Head of central tasks)

For the **first circle** focusing on usage, most data were readily available and already commonly used in internal evaluation processes, including views, market share, viewing time, and conversions into *ZDF*'s own streaming service. Interviews revealed clear prioritization patterns: watchtime and reach across all distribution channels were deliberately selected as the central usage metrics, while other indicators, such as follower counts, although still tracked, were assigned a secondary role. This was also justified by the intention to reduce complexity and avoid overloading the instrument, which was perceived as a potential barrier to its effective implementation.

For the operationalization of **quality (second circle)**, *ZDF* relies on existing measurements and surveys, particularly those addressing credibility and diversity. Program evaluations, trust, and perceived competence are primarily based on user surveys. In contrast, the category of industry impact is captured through indicators such as support for emerging talent, sustainable production measures (e.g., green shooting), and external certification by the Journalism Trust Initiative (Doc 3). An especially interesting aspect is the treatment of societal relevance, which is situated in the quality dimension (**second circle**) and operationalized through resonance analyses, awards, and collaborations with civil society. In contrast, within the acceptance dimension (**fourth circle**), this relevance is measured from the perspective of individual users. Regarding diversity, both on-screen and off-screen diversity are considered. Various measurement systems, some

based on artificial intelligence, are used to capture gender ratios in production. However, experts noted that the broader context in which gender and diversity are portrayed on screen remains insufficiently addressed. Both the impact and acceptance dimensions (**third and fourth circle**) are primarily operationalized through the users' point of view. As a result, it becomes less important whether content is considered educational from a journalistic or scientific standpoint; what matters instead is whether users agree with statements like "ZDF helps me better understand the world".

In contrast to its domestic competitor *ARD*, which relies more heavily on content analyses and the operationalization of journalistic standards, *ZDF* managers opted for a clearly user-focused approach in their measurement system, emphasizing individual public value. While this user orientation is most evident in the usage and impact circle, it also extends to the quality and acceptance circles. This prioritization of user perspectives is viewed critically by some experts in terms of validity, as certain aspects of quality and their societal impact may not always be accurately assessed from an individual standpoint. However, managers argue that focusing on the user perspective is essential for fostering acceptance and for avoiding excessive alignment with competitors.

That's what makes it globally attractive, because then you don't squint: What is *ARD* doing? That's totally not the issue then. It's really not about what's on the market, it's about what the user wants, so it has a brutal user perspective, the compass. (Int 3, Consultant *ZDF* boards)

Reordering Priorities: From Editorial to Audience-Centered Evaluation

While the *ZDF-Compass* unites a variety of measurement criteria, not all are necessarily complementary. In practice, this requires prioritization, both across and within the instrument's dimensions. However, this prioritization is explicitly applied only within the usage dimension (first circle): watch time and reach are designated as central usage metrics across the board, while other indicators are considered less relevant. Although the *ZDF-Compass* incorporates a broad range of value-based indicators and thus creates a counterweight to market-driven evaluation, it remains unclear how these criteria are weighted against each other. As a result, the relationship between established and newly introduced metrics remains largely unresolved, particularly at the organizational level (RQ 2). Therefore, this study further explores their integration at the editorial format level.

To conclude, the development process of the *ZDF-Compass* is shaped by multiple types of legitimacy. It begins with regulative legitimacy (fulfilling legal requirements) and moral legitimacy, reflected in the commitment to providing high-quality content. A second major driver is the pursuit of pragmatic legitimacy, most clearly demonstrated by the dominant user focus. The interviews reveal that this perspective is deeply embedded in the setup of measurement criteria, particularly in the operationalization of the impact dimension in the third circle. While the organizational perspective naturally adopts a process-oriented view of gaining legitimacy, it becomes evident that managers increasingly embrace a perception-based understanding. In doing so, they move away from long-standing internal bench-marks for quality, placing greater trust in user evaluations instead.

I think that was the biggest culture shock of all, because in the past the understanding of a public service provider – I don't want to hold everyone responsible, but it's still partly the case

now – was more along the lines of: “Well, if we do this, then it’s already quality [...].” (Int 3, Consultant ZDF boards)

Regarding public value, authorization elements frequently involve the public or the broadcasting board, with the value component perceived as a hygiene factor inherent to the organization’s DNA. However, measurement plays a dominant role, fostering internal legitimacy by operationalizing constructs that were previously open to interpretation by journalist and other media professionals. Thus, the instrument strengthens individual public value frames, with societal value still a part but largely contingent on users’ perceptions (Doc 2).

Translating the ZDF-Compass to the Format Level

The *ZDF-Compass* serves as a tool for assessing the organization at a macro level, with a strong focus on how users evaluate certain indicators and how these evaluations may evolve over time. As such, it holds relevance not only for the *ZDF* broadcasting council and managers, but also as a potential tool for responding to criticism from political actors or commercial competitors. However, its scope is limited to drawing conclusions about the organization as a whole since it is too broad in scope to be used for assessing individual formats in detail. To address this, the *ZDF-Compass* is extended to the level of individual programs, referred to as the *Format-Compass*. While this extension is still in the planning phase and has only been tested in a limited number of editorial units, RQ3 can only be partially addressed at this stage. However, the strategic rationale behind the *Format-Compass* and the anticipated challenges in its implementation already provide valuable insights into the potential role and impact of a proprietary metric system at the editorial level. The goal of the pilot phase was to select initial formats for trial evaluations, aiming to assign individual performance objectives, such as whether a format is intended to inform or to entertain (third circle). These objectives are negotiated between management and editorial teams and are intended to serve as a shared point of reference and orientation.

The aim of this is not that we want to restrict the editorial team, but on the contrary: we want to give the editorial teams secure guard rails where they can say: this is my domain, where I can develop freely and courageously and try things. (Int 4, Head of central tasks)

From a portfolio management perspective, the aim is to create clarity about a format’s purpose, strategic orientation, and contribution to brand perception: In a first step, formats are clustered and assigned goals on the usage and impact dimensions (**first and third circle**). Formats are expected to define in advance whether their primary mission is to inform, educate, entertain, convey culture, or offer practical advice (**third circle**). They are also required to formulate a mission statement that outlines their objectives and target audience(s), and to select usage metrics accordingly. This reflects a consistent effort to avoid arbitrariness in goal-setting and to prevent instrumentalization of select metrics.

In the pilot phase of the *Format-Compass*, the quality dimension is deliberately excluded, both to reduce complexity and due to a lack of available data. This creates an evaluation gap, particularly for politically oriented formats, which prioritize societal value and rely on indicators that are more difficult to quantify and collected less

frequently. This omission limits the scope of the *Format-Compass* from a public value perspective and underscores the continued dominance of readily available usage data, even though the quality dimension is intended to be included in future iterations. Fundamentally, the instrument holds the potential to break away from commercial metrics and to establish an evaluation system that safeguards organizational and editorial standards. However, the relative ease of accessing usage metrics compared to quality and impact indicators, which typically require more time and resources to obtain, poses the risk that usage data will be disproportionately weighted. Consequently, the *Format-Compass* may ultimately fall short of its potential, and journalists could be tempted to continue relying primarily on quantitative usage metrics simply because they are more accessible. Regarding RQ 2 the findings therefore indicate a strong retention of existing metric systems, particularly those focused on easily measurable usage figures.

But, of course, they will and you can't lie to yourself about that, the conversations will be: "Our show didn't perform today. Didn't get good numbers. We have to change something." [...] This is a common practice that we already have here. That will happen. (Int 4, Head of central tasks)

From a public value perspective, the *Format-Compass* seeks to foster discussions about the values and standards individual formats aim to fulfill, particularly in defining which aspects of the public remit they intend to address. At the same time, the instrument places strong emphasis on the measurement aspect of the public value concept. Thus, this approach also introduces tensions: journalistic expectations may collide with the requirement to set concrete goals and submit to performance evaluation. Moreover, journalists might find the user-centric approach to quality assessment problematic, fearing it could undermine journalistic autonomy. Yet, this potential conflict is consciously accepted by those responsible for the instrument, as defining goals is considered a central priority of the instrument.

The journalistic sector in particular will certainly struggle with this format compass and the definition of objectives. Yes, but that's also the right thing to do. And that's exactly what we need. We need this friction at this point. (Int 4, Head of central tasks)

Potential Impact on Content Production

In answering RQ 3 and summarizing the preceding findings, the implementation of the *Format-Compass* not only challenges long-standing traditions of performance evaluation within the organization but also carries the potential to reshape content production and influence those involved in content creation. Its strong user focus in operationalization combined with a clear emphasis on goal-setting enables ongoing performance evaluation. This reflects an internalization of pragmatic legitimacy, where audience acceptance becomes the paramount objective. While the *Format-Compass* holds potential to structure to performance assessment, it may also create incentives to tailor content more closely to audience preferences, which may risk deprioritizing broader societal objectives. Moreover, underperformance may result in the discontinuation of formats.

There are also areas that will be losing out. That's quite clear. Then you have to consider whether you still need this program or this product. (Int 3, Consultant ZDF boards)

At the same time, those involved in the project emphasize a willingness to revise goals and indicators if needed. In this respect, and in line with RQ 3, the *Format-Compass* holds potential not only for evaluating existing formats but also for influencing their strategic orientation and approach to audience engagement.

Conclusion & Discussion

The widespread use of audience analytics in journalism and media production, including Public Service Media, has raised concerns among scholars regarding its potential to drive less original content and prioritize audience appeal over other considerations ((Cherubini and Nielsen 2016; Fürst 2020). In the broader legitimacy discourse, aligning with purely market-driven metrics poses a significant risk for PSM: it forces them into a competitive space where, structurally, they are unlikely to prevail (Raats 2023). By examining the implementation process of the *ZDF-Compass*, this study aimed to move the discussion on proprietary measurement systems and the role of public value forwards.

The results can be distilled into four key findings: First, the development of the *ZDF-Compass* was primarily triggered by anticipated changes in the legal framework, rather than grounded in normative considerations or in the desire to counterbalance commercial metrics. This underscores patterns of regulative legitimacy. Second, while the instrument provides a wealth of indicators, their operationalization largely focusses on users: This reflects a move toward pragmatic legitimacy, in which audience satisfaction and target group resonance become primary goals. Despite this emphasis on users, the dissemination of high-quality content remains a major mission and moral responsibility, indicating a blend of regulative, moral, and pragmatic legitimacy. Notably, pragmatic legitimacy creates a stronger emphasis on audience approval that may, at times, conflict with internal standards or journalistic values. This reflects an important aspect in gaining legitimacy: While legitimacy is built through internal processes, the strong user orientation also incorporates and anticipates legitimacy as perception (Fehlmann 2023; Suddaby, Bitektine, and Haack 2017). It further reveals a gradual relinquishing of exclusive authority over content evaluation. Third, the *ZDF-Compass* holds a strategic function in portfolio management. Editorial units must now commit to specific goals derived from the overarching indicators, aiming to prevent arbitrary evaluations. These goal-setting processes potentially enhance the instrument's influence over editorial decision-making, potentially affecting content development and the continuation of formats. Fourth, despite its broad framework and ambitious design, the instrument faces limitations in practice. Resource-intensive indicators, particularly those in the quality and impact dimensions, are difficult to implement, while usage data remain readily available and prioritized. The absence of explicit weighting between dimensions increases the likelihood that traditional metrics will continue to dominate. This trend is reinforced by the initial exclusion of the quality dimension from the *Format-Compass*, limiting the potential of the tool to fully realize public value objectives.

To answer the central question of whether the *ZDF-Compass* provides a viable solution or pathway beyond performance evaluations solely based on commercial metrics, the findings suggest that the deliberate engagement with organizational values and the attempt to make these values measurable represents an innovative and promising approach. In this regard, the quality and impact dimensions stand out as they challenge traditional methods of program evaluation and may contribute to building legitimacy.

While the instrument holds the potential to counteract the so-called “neoliberal trap”, its strong user orientation also makes editorial units susceptible to fluctuating audience sentiments. Moreover, the continued dominance of quantitative usage metrics remains evident. Their displacement appears unlikely (and perhaps undesirable) since they provide many media professionals with important orientation markers. Instead, measurement practices need to be diversified and to engage formats with their own values, the measurability of those values, and the inherent limitations of quantification.

Limitations and Outlook

The conceptual framework combining legitimacy types with elements of public value and literature on audience analytics provided a fruitful approach for analyzing proprietary approaches to performance evaluation. However, this study faces several limitations. First, while the single-case study approach enabled in-depth insights into the development and strategic rationale behind a proprietary measurement system, it limits the generalizability of the findings. The *ZDF-Compass* itself may not be directly transferable to other PSM, let alone commercial media, not least because the PSM-specific legal framework led to its development. Nonetheless, the underlying process of translating organizational values and aims into measurable indicators holds industry-wide relevance. The user focus and individualized goal-setting are likely relevant to many media organizations, although such systems are resource-intensive and may not be feasible for smaller outlets. Second, the *ZDF-Compass* was still in the pilot phase at the time of research. This makes it difficult to assess its actual impact on editorial practices as well as the public legitimacy discourse. It remains open whether the instrument will serve as a genuine steering mechanism or primarily as a symbolic tool of accountability. Third, the interview sample mainly reflects the managerial and expert level, offering limited insight into how editorial staff experience and engage with the tool in everyday workflows. A more comprehensive picture would require further research among journalists themselves. Moving forward, incorporating other organizational settings could facilitate comparisons of different approaches on how to retain or recapture editorial and organizational autonomy in evaluating performance and content – also beyond the journalistic domain. Finally, a fundamental question remains: To what extent can instruments like the *ZDF-Compass* not only make internal values more measurable but also translate these values into quality content?

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in <https://seafilerlp.net/d/8b69635cf2964e07bc01/>

ORCID

Robin Riemann  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8417-1389>

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