

# Representing and engaging new target groups

## *The case of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation and Rådebank*

EWA MORSUND

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND POLITICAL SCIENCE, NORWEGIAN UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, NORWAY

### ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the strategies and making of media content for young people at the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK). I discuss public service media's (PSM) role in the production of youth content and how a specific public service broadcaster works to achieve representation for different demographics in their media production. Using the youth drama series *Rådebank* as a case study, I investigate how NRK actively tries to reach young audiences – specifically younger male audiences – through telling stories from certain environments and representing characters in an authentic manner within the public service mandate. The chapter emphasises how NRK differentiates itself from commercial actors and contributes to existing research on youth drama for young adult audiences.

**KEYWORDS:** public service media, *Rådebank*, public service mission, media representation, media production

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## Introduction

Public service media's (PSM) mission is to contribute to "the democratic, cultural, and social objectives of society" (Donders, 2019: 123–124). Guided by its public service remit, PSM does not serve commercial or political interests. PSM organisations' ability to reach younger audiences is important due to their ambitions of universal reach and appeal, including the intention that the content should have value for every member of society. Reaching young adults is important for the institutional future of PSM because many media habits are formed at an early age and retained for decades (Schulz et al., 2019: 15).

In this chapter, I analyse *Rådebank* (Fahre, 2020–2022), a series about young men dealing with mental health issues that aims to portray a specific youth culture in Norway. The show is one of several new youth fiction series from the Norwegian public service broadcaster NRK, and it has been regarded as a success. *Rådebank* was produced following NRK's production of *SKAM* [*Shame*], which ended up as a global phenomenon (K. I. Jensen, 2019), and NRK is often described as a driver in the production of Nordic youth drama series (Hartmann, 2021).

Despite the general sense of success around the NRK youth series, NRK has not achieved its ambition to reach four out of five children and young adults (12–29 years old). The male segment in this age group has been especially challenging for NRK to reach (NRK, 2020a). NRK produced the youth series *Rådebank* to address that gap, specifically trying to reach young male viewers with low levels of formal education. Although targeting a niche group that NRK struggles to communicate with, the series ended up attracting a broad range of audiences in the Nordic countries. This chapter addresses the way NRK formulates its strategies for reaching young audiences and how *Rådebank* represents the culture and identity of a niche target group.

Several scholars have researched Scandinavian television drama and the role of PSM more generally (P. M. Jensen et al., 2016; Redvall, 2013; Sundet, 2017), but less has been written about niche series that find success beyond their intended target group. This chapter contributes to understanding how public broadcasters can work to reach their universal ideal, but also how they position themselves in relation to commercial producers. I ask the following two research questions:

- RQ1. What are NRK's current ambitions and challenges when it comes to reaching young adults, and how are these reflected in the making of *Rådebank*?
- RQ2. What were the discussions about the representation of a specific target group during the commissioning and production of *Rådebank*?

Methodologically, the study relies on an analysis of institutional documents and qualitative interviews with executives working on *Rådebank*. My goal is

to understand the ways in which practitioners reflect upon their work to reach young people, rather than the way the audience experiences being represented or not in PSM content. I hence investigate decisions related to the production and the way the production team worked to reach a specific group.

In the following, I present the chapter's theoretical framework concerning PSM and youth content before outlining my methodological approach. Next, I analyse NRK's approach to producing youth content as well as the specific production strategies for *Rådebank*. In the conclusion, I link these findings to overall questions of how NRK differentiates itself from commercial actors when it comes to the production of media content for young audiences.

## Young people in the public service media context

Young people's media use is a pressing issue for PSM institutions. Recent research shows that young people use social media and global streaming services to a greater extent than the older age groups do (Frees et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2018). In particular, the news consumption of young people has been widely researched (see, e.g., Autenrieth et al., 2021; Slettemeås & Storm-Mathisen, 2018). Research also suggests that young audiences are less likely to subsidise online content (Kammer et al., 2015). These shifts in media use make it challenging for both PSM and private media companies to reach young audiences (Autenrieth et al., 2021; Reiter et al., 2018), but they also create opportunities for new ways of producing and publishing content. An Austrian study has suggested that a clearer distinction should exist between PSM and commercial actors as a way of increasing value for younger audiences (Reiter et al., 2018). In their findings, Reiter and colleagues (2018) found that young audiences generally had high support for PSM, and they emphasised that these young audiences must be taken seriously, not least in order to influence their future media use. According to a report from the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), an essential part of PSM organisations' strategy to reach young audiences is to understand young people (EBU, 2022). This should be done through in-depth studies and reflecting the attitudes, values, tastes, and everyday lives of young people with topics and scenarios they can relate to. The report points to several examples from the fictional world, such as NRK's youth series *17*, and addresses how fiction programmes should aim to be relatable and local in order to distinguish themselves from the output of global producers like Netflix and HBO. Programmes that contain something more than just entertainment have been labelled by Redvall (2016) as "double storytelling", where public service productions aim for stories that are not only entertaining, but also contain ethical and social connotations.

In this regard, one cannot talk about NRK's success with youth fiction without mentioning *Shame*, an online drama where the story unfolded daily through video clips, social media posts, and chat messages (Sundet, 2020,

2021). *Shame* hit the global stage with an English-language version in the US and several European countries making their own versions of the Norwegian teen drama (Bronson, 2016; NTB, 2017). In the aftermath of *Shame*, a growing body of literature on teen series has addressed the global expansion, transmedia storytelling, and key production factors related to both characters and distribution strategies (Andersen & Sundet, 2019; Christensen, 2018; Stollfuß, 2021; Sundet, 2020, 2021). *Shame* was intended to reach 16-year-old girls but ended up transcending age groups and genders. The series was produced within a public service production culture and was based on the assumption that “teens would become better prepared to master difficulties in their own life by working through realistic scenarios through representation” (Sundet, 2020: 83).

Media representation of youth, especially in news media, has been given a significant amount of attention (see, e.g., Bernier, 2011; Lepianka, 2015; Levinsen & Wien, 2011). Less attention has been accorded to the ways young people are represented in fictional media formats. This chapter contributes with new insights into NRK’s strategies for fiction production while addressing issues of media representation and why it matters.

## Theoretical framework

Media representations of youth have been studied for more than 60 years (see, e.g., Stensaas, 1961). The concept of media representation refers to the ways various groups or individuals are presented in media (Levinsen & Wien, 2011). Research regarding media representation often deals with questions of gender, age, race, sex, or religion, but in this chapter, I use media representation theory to analyse the way in which a particular niche group was represented in a PSM production.

Media representation is related to the concept of identity, which can briefly be defined as the characteristics, affiliations, and social roles a person or a group give themselves (Martinussen, 2001: 320). According to Gripsrud (2015: 16–17), one can distinguish between two main types of identity: social or collective identity and personal identity. The two are closely related but not quite the same. Social identity is based on the ways other people perceive us, as well as the various social or collective contexts of which we are a part. Our personal identity distinguishes us from other people and makes our emotions and experiences special. We might find personal identity is difficult to define, not least when we are young (Gripsrud, 2015: 17). Giddens (1991) claimed self-identity might be regarded as a reflexive project, where the media can be seen as reference points. According to these researchers, the media play a role in the way individuals develop, and the media can also construct or reproduce stereotypical identities. Stereotypical representations simplify and exaggerate differences by presenting groups as “us” and “them”

(Aalberg & Elvestad, 2012: 115). The way role models and stereotypes are constructed in the media affects the way we see ourselves and connect with other people. In this chapter, I aim to investigate how NRK thinks about issues of identity and representation when producing youth drama and how this specifically influenced the production of *Rådebank*.

## Data and methods

Empirically, this chapter builds on institutional documents from NRK and qualitative interviews with key executives involved in the production of *Rådebank*. The documents used in this chapter include institutional documents describing NRK's strategies, actions, goals, and obligations. These include NRK's public annual reports that describe the ways it fulfilled its public mission during the previous year as well as its "audience strategy" (internal document), describing strategies and challenges for the forthcoming years. Furthermore, this study relies on working documents from *Rådebank*, which address missions and strategies.

There are several advantages to performing document analysis. Compared with other sources, documents are stable, and they can be stored and copied (Karppinen & Moe, 2019), which gives the method high transparency. Documents are also an efficient data source compared with, for instance, observation (Bowen, 2009), but a number of issues arise when using documents. In practice, all industry documents are framed from a certain perspective, often addressing only one of all the possible courses of action and containing elements of self-representation (Karppinen & Moe, 2019). Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 137) emphasised that all documents must be seen as social products: products that are created in a specific context, by specific people and under a set of circumstances. Therefore, it is important to take motives and contexts that are induced in the production of the documents and interpret them in the light of who has produced them.

In particular, public annual reports such as NRK's can be labelled as political communication, as they are often used to convince politicians and the public that the agency in question (in this case NRK, as a publicly funded broadcaster) has fulfilled its public mission in a satisfying manner. The eagerness to present NRK in a positive way may prevent the broadcaster from revealing failures that can affect both financial support and the possibilities to expand services. According to Caldwell (2008), television studies must see industrial texts for what they are, which is not simply a product of political economy but also rich objects for analysis. Industrial textual practices matter to media scholars, he said, because these practices provide insights into the ways modern multimedia companies function at three levels: internally, industrially, and publicly (Caldwell, 2008: 123–124). Among other things, these practices can work to "rebrand" companies in terms of reaching niche

audiences, using new technology, and adapting to the current media environment. Excerpts from these documents quoted in this chapter that were not originally in English have been translated.

In addition to document analysis, three semistructured expert interviews were conducted. Expert interviews are a fruitful way to generate expert knowledge. These informants can be regarded as exclusive due to their role and the knowledge they have about the specific broadcaster and production studied here (Bruun, 2016). However, the term expert knowledge can be vague. Therefore, Van Audenhove and Donders (2019) have divided expert knowledge into different types of interviews: exploratory interviews (to uncover technical knowledge and develop hypotheses), systematising interviews (to gain expert knowledge in a comprehensive and systematic way), and explanatory interviews (to acquire subjective knowledge and explanations). Some of the interviews touch upon all three categories, but particular attention was paid to subjective knowledge as well as expert knowledge related to the making of *Rådebank*.

I sought expert knowledge from three informants:

- Linn-Jeanethe Kyed, creator of *Rådebank* (“series creator”), interviewed on 25 October 2021. Kyed works mainly as a screenwriter for film but also for television series. In the production of *Rådebank*, she worked with developing the main idea for the series and was a part of the production team.
- Melike Kaveh (“executive producer”), interviewed on 23 November 2021. Kaveh produces fiction series at NRK and worked with developing and approving the cast, screenplay, and distribution of *Rådebank*. She thus worked with *Rådebank*’s external production team from preproduction to the launching of series.
- Iacob Christian Prebensen (“NRK analyst”), interviewed on 5 January 2022. Prebensen analyses viewing habits at NRK and contributed with data on how *Rådebank* reached various audience segments in Norway.

I conducted the interviews in Norwegian via Zoom, and then transcribed and analysed them thematically with an emphasis on the subjective knowledge and self-reflexivity of the informant, especially regarding reflections, choices, strategies, and the production process in relation to NRK and *Rådebank*. All the interviews and citations from documents have been translated from Norwegian to English. The translated quotes were sent to the informants for approval and the informants gave permission for the use of internal documents in this chapter. In the analysis, I refer to the professional occupation of the informants rather than their names.

## The case: *Rådebank*

*Rådebank* is a Norwegian drama series with three seasons, produced by Fenomen Film for NRK P3. The meaning of the word “rådebank” is a loud knocking sound in a car engine, and the series is set in Bø, Telemark in a rånemilieu. The term “râne” means driving around aimlessly in a car as a leisure activity, according to the Norwegian dictionary (Språkrådet, n.d.). An English translation could be “cruising”, but råning also has a cultural meaning. A person who engages in råning is called a rånar. Key themes in the series are cars, partying, and love, but as presented at an industry event, the main purpose of the series was to tell stories about young men’s mental health (Mediedager, 2021). *Rådebank* was inspired by a quote from Tove Gundersen, secretary-general of the Norwegian Council for Mental Health: “What if more men could talk about living completely ordinary lives, how to deal with financial uncertainty, heartbreak, or finding one’s place? [translated]” (as cited in Brandvoll, 2021). In the first season, the main theme is heartbreak, while the second season revolves around the suicide of one of the characters. Suicide was initially meant to be the theme of the first season, but it was considered too harsh, so the first season was made to build up and to get to know the characters and prepare the audience for the second season. The third season revolves around finding one’s place in society. *Rådebank* aired in several countries – among them Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Russia – after its Norwegian premiere.

*Rådebank*’s content, preproduction stages, and production are further discussed in the analysis below.

## Analysis: Public service media and young audiences

The first part of the following analysis focuses on the first research question about NRK’s ambitions and challenges for reaching young adults, and how these are reflected in the making of *Rådebank*. This part of the analysis seeks to illuminate NRK’s strategies for reaching younger audiences in the current media landscape. I also discuss elements that can be regarded as peculiar to NRK in comparison with many commercial actors because of the broadcaster’s public service remit.

The second part of the analysis addresses the second research question, focusing on the issue of representing a specific target group in *Rådebank*. The stages from idea to distribution will be the focus, including measures that NRK and the producers used from the research stage to the production and distribution stages of *Rådebank*.

## **NRK and the youth mission**

As a publicly funded broadcaster, the station's overall public mission leads to NRK's production of youth content. In the mission statement, Paragraph 21 states that "NRK should strive for high quality, diversity, and innovation. NRK's offer should have diversity in themes and genre. NRK's offer must appeal to all age-groups" (NRK, 2019b). In Paragraph 22, the "youth mission" is further described: "We must promote children's rights to freedom of speech and information and shield them from harmful forms of content" (NRK, 2019b). The mission also includes regularly making Norwegian television shows for young people.

## **The young and uneducated**

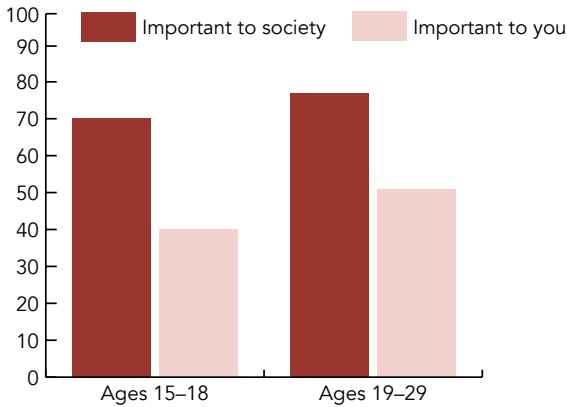
Discussing challenges related to serving its public service mission and maintaining its strong position with the audience, NRK (2021b: 4) addresses some main priority areas. These include taking advantage of NRK's unique position, reaching a younger audience, providing more content for children and young people, building a position that makes NRK's productions appealing, increasing loyalty, and being the best on their own platform.

According to numbers from 2020, 89 per cent of the Norwegian population older than 12 years old uses one of NRK's services daily (NRK, 2021a). Even though the use is high in the overall population, people have different relationships with the broadcaster. Therefore, the population is divided into audience segments according to life stages, demographics, media usage, level of education, urban or rural residence, and whether children live in the home (NRK, 2020b). NRK upholds a strong position in the Norwegian population, especially when it comes to the segment of the population older than 50 and with a higher education. The younger part of the population and the less educated, however, are more difficult for the broadcaster to reach (NRK, 2020b: 5; 2021b: 5). The same tendencies can be seen among other European broadcasters, where the PSM audience is described as "old, educated and politically diverse" (Schulz et al., 2019).

NRK has the ambition to reach four out of five children and young adults (12–29 years old), but the male audience in this age group has been especially challenging to reach. These ambitions have led NRK to prioritise targeting children and young men 12–29 years old (NRK, 2020a). In the audience strategy, NRK (2021b: 5) stresses the importance of reflecting society as a whole: "The diversity in Norway must be reflected in everything we do – or else we don't reflect a modern Norway".



**FIGURE 6.1** The perceived importance of NRK, by age (per cent)



Source: NRK, 2021b

The answers reflected in Figure 6.1 are based on a survey conducted by NRK, and the numbers are from the first quarter of 2021 (NRK, 2021b: 6). The first question asked whether the respondents believed NRK was important to society and the second whether NRK was important to them personally.

Around 70 per cent in the two age categories believed that NRK is important to society, whereas less than half or half of the others believed that NRK is important to *them*. These statistics do not explain *why* this is the case, but they illustrate how adolescents and young adults are aware of NRK and acknowledge its position in society, but at the same time do not see NRK as personally interesting or useful. This finding corresponds to findings in other European countries, where young audiences value PSM as important to society but do not see particular personal value or relevance in it (Autenrieth et al., 2021; Reiter et al., 2018). Trying to produce fiction that feels relevant to young people can be one way to improve these numbers.

### Tools for reaching adolescents and young adults

Most users come to NRK directly through NRK's own platforms, but another way is through social media, where the target groups are teenagers (12–18) and young adults (19–29) (NRK, 2021a). NRK's plan is to depend less on social media, reducing the number of NRK accounts and publishing less content (NRK, 2021b). Another tool for reaching a younger audience is implementing search engine optimisation as a way to rank higher in search engine results. Search engines, such as Google, are one of the main ways people discover content online. 7 per cent of the visitors on the NRK website ([www.nrk.no](http://www.nrk.no)) come from search engines; therefore, NRK sees great potential in enhancing these numbers. The aim is to increase the number of daily visits from search engines by 50 per cent, which is viewed as a simple way to bring users to the website (NRK, 2021a: 15).

One objective is to bring young people to NRK's website, but another is to build loyalty and foster repeat visits. To ensure further growth and increase loyalty among the population, NRK wishes to "create content so that the 17-year-old feels at home – because when we reach young people we reach a broader audience" (NRK, 2021b: 13). A part of this overall goal is to write and speak "in the language of a 17-year-old". This should be reflected in sources, pictures, videos, graphics, and formats in the content on NRK's website (NRK, 2021b: 13).

The ambitions and challenges for reaching the young and less educated part of the population are connected to the great competition from global media companies (Frees et al., 2019). One explanation for these challenges may also be that NRK does not provide this group with enough personal value. As tools to reach young people, NRK uses social media and search optimisation, but to increase loyalty and build user habits, they need to reflect *them* in PSM content (see, e.g., Sundet, 2020). This is what NRK tried to do in *Rådebank*, where there were many discussions about how to best appeal to young audiences and represent young men – who are rarely present in NRK output – in a new and different way.

## **From pitching original ideas to matching these to the public service mission**

The idea for *Rådebank* was initiated by the production company Fenomen Film. The company wanted to make a drama series following people in a rånemilieu. In the original idea, the drama series was supposed to be based on a true confrontation that happened between the mayor and the rånemilieu in the city of Notodden some years ago.

The conflict was that the mayor wanted to pedestrianise the main street, something the råners opposed. It quickly escalated, and one of the råners ended up in jail. The clash was supposed to be the backdrop of a comedy series scheduled to be pitched to the commercial television channel TVNorge, but the series creator explained in her interview that she was reluctant to produce entertainment on the topic:

While he [the producer of *Rådebank*] was introducing the first idea, I got the impression that they were making a comedy, and I noticed that in the way they were talking and the way they showed me pictures that they were saying, "Ha-ha, look at those stupid people".

TVNorge was looking for a production that would gain a decent number of viewers to be a part of their focus on light entertainment and comedy, and the premise for producing a series about the rånemilieu at TVNorge was making fun of its members. As a commercial company, TVNorge is dependent on maintaining market share and it does not have a clearly stated societal

mission as in the public service remit. Thus, they were not concerned about portraying the *rånemilieu* in a truthful manner. Similarly, at the early stages of development, the production company Fenomen Film was not worried about stereotyping the people in the *rånemilieu* by exaggerating their characteristics and emphasising a gulf between them and other groups of society (Aalberg & Elvestad, 2012). By doing so, the series would have reproduced current stereotypes that already exist in the media and the public eye.

The series creator stated in her interview that she had the impression that both the broadcaster and the production company were mocking the characters:

It's always like that. [...] They make so many movies where they present their preconceived notions about the *rånemilieu* because they live in a village and don't have higher education and they are a group of coarse men who just mess around. I remember them differently. I remember them as boys that took care of each other and boys that struggled.

The series creator wanted to move away from this, but it was hard when pitching the original idea. However, discussions gradually focused more on not making a stereotypical comedy, but rather a more serious series with a message that might be better suited for NRK. In this way, the development moved from what can be regarded as its initial approach – which would have represented the *rånemilieu* in a stereotypical way in terms of the concept of social identity (Gripsrud, 2015) – to presenting an internalised way of perceiving the *rånemilieu*.

Pitching new ideas and series to NRK is a balancing act between coming up with a good idea and offering something to enhance the public service mission. An interesting television drama is not enough, it must also be a production that can meet the objectives of the public service mission. Therefore, when *Rådebank* was later pitched to NRK, the NRK team looked for a way the series could help them fulfil their public mission. According to the NRK executive producer,

*Rådebank* had several of the things that we were missing in our portfolio. For instance, the theme of mental health, it was a series from a small town, it was about a milieu that we didn't really know that much about, and it was something to reach the boys with our public service content.

NRK thus looked for a series that could give value to society (NRK, 2021a). Moreover, the series was an opportunity to reach and reflect a group of people who were rarely represented in NRK content and who traditionally did not engage with it.

After receiving the basic idea for the series, NRK financed the creators to do research on the *rånemilieu* to ensure the series would move beyond the stereotypical notions of the *råners* and their lives and be marked by their input in several ways.

## Researching the target group

At NRK's request, the team researched the milieu in Notodden. The research process followed in the footsteps of the *Shame* production, which had devoted a significant amount of research to identifying a specific target audience (Andersen & Sundet, 2019; Redvall, 2018; Sundet, 2020). This research method in media production hinges on giving something of value to an audience based on their needs (Redvall, 2018). According to Redvall (2018: 157), asking young people about their dreams, their language, and everyday problems might help producers avoid clichés and stereotypes.

However, *Rådebank* was an external production, while *Shame* was produced internally at NRK. In the NRK system, the extensive research was highly valued as a way of taking the young audience seriously (Redvall, 2018), but this is not a research method generally used by commercial producers. *Shame* also came from a long line of work on teen drama from NRK and was inspired by NRK's comprehensive knowledge of the target group (K. I. Jensen, 2019; Redvall, 2018; Sundet, 2021).

The research on *Rådebank* was done to obtain correct references and make an authentic presentation of the chosen target group: "It's about putting aside your own theories and entering an environment with an open mind, talking to the teenagers and trying to make something based on that", the executive producer explained during her interview. The plot and themes of *Rådebank* emerged from the research stage, she continued:

Authenticity is so important. They will see through it quickly if we don't take the target group seriously or underestimate them. Even though they are young, they demand quality and are used to watching expensive productions.

This also reflects aspirations in NRK's (2021b) report on the importance of creating relatable and authentic content to reach younger audiences. In other words, the research phase was a way to avoid stereotyping and create an authentic representation of the *rånemilieu*.

The external production team interviewed students at various high schools to ask them what they thought about *rånere*. None of the respondents were part of the environment and none seemed to know anything about it, according to the series creator:

The answers we got were pretty similar, nothing juicy, and I guess we thought that the milieu didn't exist anymore. But then the production team met a guy who was smoking a cigarette in his car. He was sceptical and said that he did not want the milieu to be portrayed as a space for drunk people who partied, and he ensured us that that was not the real picture of how it was. He told us that we should drive to Bø [a small municipality next to Notodden] and wait at the gas station to find and talk to them.

After this, the production team continued to knock on car doors to meet more people from the *rånemilieu*. At first, it was difficult to gain access and get them to talk, but after a while, the production team managed to gain their trust: “They started testing our knowledge on cars, and I tried to convince them to trust us. We had to promise to take them seriously”, the series creator explained. When the locals connected with the production team, the young people began to trust them and share their experiences from everyday life. Eventually, the production team gained access to Snapchat groups and a closed Facebook group, where people would post videos of what they ate and did in their free time as well as videos of them driving. Sometimes the videos even showed them driving too fast or flirting with the law. The series creator described it as like being “a fly on the wall”:

In one of the videos, we could see a person that smashed a car window because he had trouble with his girlfriend. And the boys talking to us told us to look around, as there were many broken windows in Bø.

In this way, the production team got access to quite detailed knowledge about the *rånemilieu*, which was helpful in moving beyond a stereotypical portrayal of this environment.

### **Creating the mission statement**

After conducting extensive research, the production team in Fenomen Film – along with a team from NRK – organised several workshops. In this part of the production process, it was important to know what they wanted to make and why. To clarify what the production team wanted to achieve with *Rådebank*, a mission statement was created. The mission was to show the consequences of not talking about your mental health, and *Rådebank* illustrates a worst-case scenario with the suicide of one of the characters in Season 2 (NRK, 2021c). Overall, the plan was to create episodes based on real stories from the *rånemilieu*. Nevertheless, according to the executive producer, viewers should be left with no doubts about it being a fictional series:

We do a lot of research when it comes to reaching boys with our content and what we do know is that it is important to be a bit edgier with the boys and show the real things that happen when you are young.

Each season of *Rådebank* addresses young men’s encounters with difficult challenges in life, and part of the mission is to give them tools to respond to these challenges and explain why dealing with feelings can be difficult (NRK, 2021c). According to the series creator,

the mission statement really helped us choose what stories we wanted to tell, and that suicide was the absolute worst thing that could happen if they don’t deal with challenges in life. It was scary, but it is also a part of the public service mission to help these men and tell them what they can do.

Finding a clear core mission statement was thus an important part of the process of moving into production. And after the production of the series, discussions of how to best promote and position the series continued in terms of the right platforms to use in order to reach young audiences.

### **The distribution of *Rådebank***

The final stage of the process was to launch and distribute *Rådebank*. To reach its main target group, NRK tried to share relatable, funny, or exciting clips through internal and external platforms. In addition, they shared interviews with the actors and the production team on the radio and in the general press. In contrast to other series for young audiences produced by NRK, the use of social media was mainly for promotional reasons and not to increase participation or create new content (Stollfuß, 2021). But there was a clear sense that certain choices needed to be made in order “to create a balance between the needs of the target group and the rest of the audience” (NRK, 2019a), as stated in the promotional strategy document for the first season of the series.

For instance, the show has a unique title that was meant to target adolescents interested in cars, according to the series creator:

It was tempting to just use the mission statement; here is a series about mental health and young men, but then we wouldn't have reached our target group, especially when we are trying to reach a group where it is taboo to talk about feelings.

Instead, the promotional tagline for the first season became, “this is a series for you who enjoy burgers and cars”. The series creator asserted that – based on knowledge from audience ratings and respondents in the target group – this was just enough to “get away with” a series about men and mental health:

I don't believe that we would have reached them if we had promoted the series for what it was. We didn't lie, we just told them what they got in addition to everything else. That was probably the smartest thing we did.

The first season premiered in March 2020, and all the episodes were released in a single day. The first season is about the character GT, who struggles to move on with his life after a breakup, while in the second season, one of the main characters commits suicide (NRK, 2021c). As discussed earlier, the original plan from Fenomen Film was to have the “suicide story” as the main theme of Season 1, but NRK considered it too difficult and harsh to start off with a suicide, so they decided to wait until the second season – although at that point it was not decided whether there was going to be a second season.

The series creator explained that the precondition for creating the second season was an average of 250,000 viewers per episode: “It was quite nerve-racking because we all knew that the second season would revolve around

the suicide of one of the main characters, and without high enough ratings, the story would never be told”. The first season had a rough start, but the numbers increased after audiences beyond the target group discovered the programme, the executive producer explained. And, the series creator stated: “Even though I was nervous about waiting with the suicide story, I do believe it was the right decision. It gave the viewers a softer transition to the suicide in the second season, and they came more prepared”.

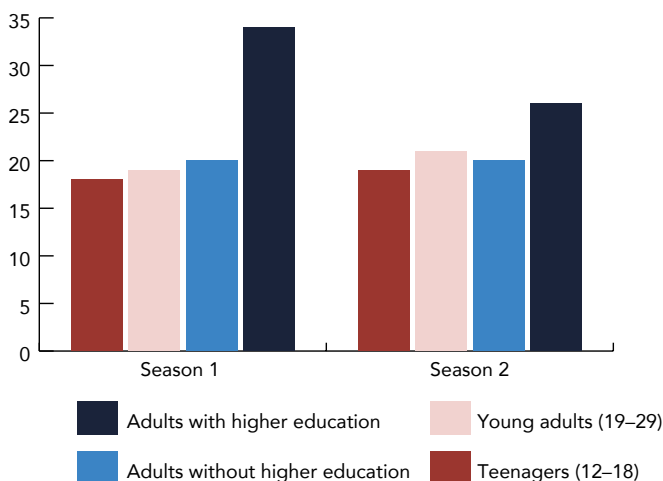
In promoting the second season, the first three episodes were released first, and the remaining episodes distributed a few days later. The suicide in the second season created a great deal of attention, but the production team refused to use the suicide as “clickbait” to get good ratings. This was, according to their promotion strategy, something the audience should see for themselves (NRK, 2021c). According to the NRK analyst,

it did take a bit of time before the audience discovered *Rådebank*, but then the first season got a viewer boost after the launch of the second season. It was clear that the hype from the second season inspired people to watch Season 1.

The NRK analyst further explained that 30 days after publishing Season 1, *Rådebank* had been seen by 240,000 viewers, whereas Season 2 had over 200,000 in less than a week. He emphasised that it is usually the opposite, where most people watch a series shortly after the episodes are published.

Figure 6.2 shows the average ratings of the first and second season of *Rådebank*. NRK only stores data for the first 30 days after publication, and then a running total; hence, the figure shows total ratings until 16 November.

**FIGURE 6.2** Average ratings for the first and second seasons of *Rådebank* (per cent)



Comments: Data collected 16 November 2021. This is the total rating numbers up to this date.

Ratings were calculated from a representative sample (3,000) of the population in Norway. Ratings in one demographic group were calculated as (sum of minutes / the length of the programme in minutes) / number of people in the demographic group = rating in per cent (as explained by the NRK analyst).

As shown in Figure 6.2, the average ratings from Season 2 are similar to the ratings in Season 1. We can also see that the average rating for all the episodes in both seasons among the hard-to-reach target groups was around 20 per cent. The series also reached audiences in other age groups, according to the analyst: “Demographically, the main trend is that the series reaches across all age groups, but we can see that it is a bit easier to reach the younger groups, people with higher education, and women”. According to the executive producer, “it is easier to reach girls. Overall, our general qualitative insight suggests that we need to customise content for boys”. She continued to explain that girls are often less “picky” when it comes to what programmes they watch, while boys or young men prefer content more adapted to them, such as *Rådebank*.

## Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to investigate NRK’s challenges and ambitions for reaching young people (RQ1) and then investigate the measures that the production team used to try to create an attractive series for young audiences, focusing on a particular niche group in *Rådebank* (RQ2).

According to NRK’s corporate documents, young and less-educated male viewers have been a problematic audience segment to reach. This failure is important due to NRK’s public mission to reflect societal diversity, which implies reflecting all audience segments in its media content. According to its audience strategy (NRK, 2021b), the majority of teenagers and young adults in Norway believe that NRK is vital to society. Still, they do not think NRK is important to *them*. One explanation could be that young people are not always aware when they are consuming PSM content (Reiter et al., 2018), but it could also be because they are not represented or made to feel “at home” by the broadcaster (Andersen & Sundet, 2019). In common with other European broadcasters (Autenrieth et al., 2021; Stollfuß, 2021), NRK uses search optimisation and social media to reach young people and become more visible as a public broadcaster, but as illustrated in this case study, they also think carefully about how to create content that can represent and appeal to certain audiences.

To ensure representation, the production team did thorough research on the *rånemilieu*, and the series was based on real stories and authentic representations of the young men they interviewed in the process. An essential part of this preparation was also targeting the distribution of *Rådebank*



on social media and marketing the series as something that would trigger the interest of young male audiences. However, it is interesting to see that *Rådebank*, which was intended for a particular target audience, reached a broad range of age groups, just as previous teen-drama successes at NRK had done (Sundet, 2021).

*Rådebank* reflects the young, the less educated, and youth living in rural areas, particularly in the *rånemilieu*. Even though the idea of *Rådebank* came from an external production company, it became a PSM production after the idea was pitched to NRK and fitted to their agenda, as documented in the careful research and formulation of the mission statement.

One can ask whether the same effort would have been made for getting to know the *rånemilieu* if the series had been made by a commercial broadcaster. It would definitely have been a very different series if made as a comedy production and likely would have conformed more to people's preconceived and stereotypical notions about the milieu, in contrast to the final drama series. How groups are represented in media can contribute to reproducing values and stereotypes, and media can be reference points to our self-identity (Aalberg & Elvestad, 2012; Gripsrud, 2015). In this way, a series such as *Rådebank* can have a positive impact on both self-identity and the public representation of the *rånemilieu*. As a public broadcaster, NRK has a mission to educate and reflect societal diversity, and the intentions behind *Rådebank* illustrate the many considerations of how to contribute to this endeavor by taking the *rånemilieu* seriously.

This chapter cannot conclude anything about whether *Rådebank* did, in fact, have an impact on how the public perceives the *rånemilieu*, but it illustrates the many discussions and negotiations that currently go into making public service content for young audiences to try to ensure they are taken seriously and offered appealing stories with an authentic feel. But the struggle to reach this demographic – particularly the boys – is far from over.

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