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**The Forgotten Actor in Media Ownership Debates:
Audiences and Their Knowledge of Media Ownership in Flanders**

The characteristics and scope of media concentration are of great concern to media and communication studies, especially in relation to media diversity and pluralism, considered key in democratic societies. However, to date, there have been few analyses of audiences' knowledge of media ownership. This contribution explores the knowledge of media ownership structures and how it relates to media use and socio-demographics amongst a representative online sample of the Flemish population (N=1100). Findings reveal limited knowledge of ownership structures, with significant differences relating to gender, age, education and media consumption. The implications hereof are discussed from a perspective of democratic citizenship, political economy studies, media literacy studies and media literacy programmes, and result in a call for more research into this specific area.

Keywords:

Media concentration, media ownership, knowledge, Flanders, media literacy

**The Forgotten Actor in Media Ownership Debates:
Audiences and Their Knowledge of Media Ownership in Flanders**

Taking Flanders – the Northern Dutch speaking part of Belgium with 6.5 million inhabitants – as a case in point, this contribution studies the knowledge of media ownership structures among a representative sample of adults, as an inroad to discuss (the need for attention to) the ‘forgotten actor’ of the audience in debates about the relationship between ownership and the democratic role of media in society.

In recent decades, the media sector in Flanders, as elsewhere, has witnessed recurring waves of cross-media concentration and the consolidation of corporate power (Iosifidis, 1999; McChesney, 2007; Van den Bulck, 2013). This reached new heights following the current economic climate that puts revenues of media companies under pressure, forcing owners to apply repositioning strategies and efficiency measures to keep businesses viable (Picard and Rimmer, 1999; Martinova and Renneboog, 2008). Recent, high profile Flemish cases include ProSiebenSat.1’s sale in 2011 of SBS channels VT4 and VijfTV to a consortium of Flemish press company Corelio, the owners (Vanhaute and Watte) of production company De Vijver, and Finish magazine company Sanoma (the latter, in turn, in 2014 sold to Telenet, a Flemish distribution company and subsidiary of Liberty Global) (cf. Van den Bulck et al., 2014), and the merger of the press activities of Corelio and Concentra into Het Mediahuis (The Mediahouse) in late 2013.

Media mergers and acquisitions always ignite critical discussions by opinion-makers and academics, creating challenges for media policy-makers, regulators and competition authorities. In Flanders, as elsewhere, such debates typically weigh the advantages of the (dominant) neo-liberal ‘the market will take care of itself’ principle against the apparent inability of the market to guarantee a dynamic, pluralist media landscape (Van den Bulck et

al., 2014). Concerns partly relate to economic issues such as prices or employment, but most claims on both sides are based in the assumed needs and rights of citizens-consumers.

Defenders of Flemish (rather than foreign) media ownership consolidation stress the ‘obvious’ preferences of audiences for ‘home’ media as can be witnessed from the strong position of Flemish public television VRT and commercial groups VMMA and SBS or from the fact that ratings for Flemish programmes far exceed those of foreign import. Critics of concentration instead point to the declining number of ‘voices’ that audiences are confronted with, undermining citizens’ abilities to take an active and well-informed part in democracy.

Surprisingly, while the citizen-consumer figures centrally in these debates, research into audiences’ knowledge of this issue is next to absent. The characteristics and scope of media concentration have been widely researched, either from a political economic point of view, focusing on the actual ownership structures and processes such as concentration (McDonald, 1990; Tunstall, 1977; 2007; d’Haenens and Saeys, 2001), or from a media sociological perspective, studying the actual diversity in media content people are confronted with (Soley, 2002; Gitlin, 2003; Entman, 2006). Within these approaches, media professionals (e.g. Hanitzsch and Mellado, 2011) and media owners and managers (e.g. Doyle, 2002) are invited to participate in surveys and interviews in order to identify their experiences with and reflect on media ownership concentration. However, the awareness and knowledge of audiences – a third and democratically important stakeholder – regarding ownership structures is hardly ever taken into account. In political economy, audiences are discussed mainly in abstract, conceptual terms as citizens, i.e. in their relationship to the state and the way in which the media contribute to or hamper this, or as consumer-commodities, created and subject to control and surveillance by media industries (Smythe, 1977, 2001). Concentration and consolidation, then, are mainly seen to push audiences away from their position as citizens into a position as commodity. To the extent that this is put to the empirical test, this is

based on analyses of (the role and impact of) ratings and audience figures in the context of specific processes in the media industry. With few exceptions (cf. Biltereyst and Meers, 2011), political economic studies make no direct, empirical link between ownership structures and citizens/audiences' knowledge hereof, turning the audience into *the forgotten actor*.

This shortcoming in media ownership research might be motivated by a range of issues, including the impression that audiences are simply unaware or ignorant of media structures and ownership. This suggests that it should be a relevant issue for the field of media literacy that investigates users' understandings of media. Indeed, in recent years, several authors have argued that media literacy programmes should include as objectives the awareness and knowledge of ownership and financial structures of media organizations, in order for media users to be able to critically interpret biases and distortion in media texts within a changing media landscape (e.g. Kellner and Share, 2005; Oxtrand, 2009; Ashley, Poepsel and Willis, 2010). So far, however, empirical testing of these theoretical suggestions has been limited in quantity and scope and suffers from a range of shortcomings: they are limited to experiments, to children and adolescents, they pay insufficient attention to socio-demographic characteristics and media use and, finally, they test awareness rather than knowledge (cf. Bryman, 2008; Dennis, 2004).

As a result, shockingly little is known about the general public's knowledge of the structures behind the media they are confronted with. To help bridge this gap in existing research, this contribution provides an empirical study that aims to answer two research questions: RQ1: To what extent do people have knowledge of media ownership structures in their community? In other words, are individuals able to link a media brand to the media company that owns it?; and RQ2: To what extent is knowledge of media ownership structures mediated by media use and socio-demographics? In other words, how do socio-demographic variables and media use influence knowledge levels? These questions are dealt with by means

of a survey with an online, representative sample of the Flemish population. After explaining the methodological set-up, the key results are presented, showing low levels of knowledge, moderated by media use and socio-demographics including gender, age and educational level. These results are subsequently discussed in light of key questions posed in political economy as well as in media literacy studies and programmes, concluding with a call for a future research agenda in this regard.

Research design

To answer the research questions, an online survey looking into people's media use and knowledge of media ownership structures was conducted in January 2013. A sample of 1.100 Flemish respondents was drawn from an existing panel database (through Belgian market research company iVOX) of more than 100.000 registrants, frequently used in other commercial and scientific studies. The database's size allowed for a relatively representative sample of the Flemish population, acknowledging self-selection issues typical of online surveys, i.e. people originally needed to register for this database, had to decide to participate in the current survey, and the database excludes people not active online (Bryman, 2008).

The questionnaire contained thirteen multiple choice questions investigating respondents' knowledge of media ownership structures. A mix of media outlets was chosen, including newspaper, magazine, radio and television brands, spread over different (commercial) media groups. What is more, media outlets, companies and brands were selected that could be expected to be known because they have been around for a long time (e.g. all print brands), reach considerable sections of the audience (e.g. radio station Q-music), and/or received quite a bit of media attention (e.g. the much publicised launch of television channel VIER after the change in owners in 2011 (cf. *supra*)). Respondents were thus asked to link four newspapers (*De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *De Morgen*, *Gazet van Antwerpen*)

and three magazines (*Dag Allemaal*, *Trends Magazine*, *P-Magazine*) to the correct media group (with De Persgroep, Sanoma, Concentra, Corelio, Think Media, Roularta and ‘I do not know’ as possible answers). For the audio-visual outlets (television stations *VIER* and *Acht*, and radio station *Q-Music*) respondents could opt for one of five answers (VRT, VMMA, Concentra, Woestijvis/Sanoma/Corelio, ‘I do not know’). Finally, respondents had to name the CEO of three media groups or brands (De Persgroep, *VIER* and Telenet), each time selecting from five possible answers (Christian Van Thillo, Thomas Leysen, Patrick Tillieux, Duco Sickinghe, ‘I do not know’). Given the online context of the survey, some respondents may have searched the web to answer the question, yet they were encouraged to answer spontaneously.

Background variables included media use and the socio-demographic variables gender, age and educational level. Media use was measured using general questions, including whether the participant had used different media (television, radio, written press, and online news) the day before and, if so, for how many minutes. With regards to socio-demographics: participants’ gender distribution was 48.8% male and 50.2% female; their age ranged from 18 to 90 years, with a mean age of 47,2 ($SD = 15,4$). Comparison to official population figures of the Flemish government (Studiedienst van de Vlaamse Regering 2010) indicates that the age distribution of the sample is fairly representative, except for a slight overrepresentation of the 50-54 cohort, and a slight underrepresentation of the 35-39 cohort. Analyses include univariate analyses and linear regressions.

Results

To answer the first research question, respondents were asked to link media outlets to the media group these belong to. Table 1 shows the results.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Looking at newspapers, for each title roughly half of the respondents (varying from 46.8 to 59.2 percent) indicates to have no idea of the media company behind it. De Persgroep's newspapers *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen* can be linked most correctly, with respectively 38.7 and 30.6 percent of respondents indicating the right answer. Strikingly, De Persgroep is also the most often given incorrect answer for *De Standaard* (Corelio) and *Gazet van Antwerpen* (Concentra) which are linked to De Persgroep almost as often as to its correct owner. It appears that respondents consider De Persgroep as the main newspaper publisher, and hence link any newspaper to the company.

Magazines are even less often linked to the correct media group and roughly 2 out of 3 respondents (percentages from 59.0 to 68.3 percent) indicate 'I do not know'. For *Dag Allemaal* and *P-Magazine* the incorrect answer Sanoma is selected more often than the respective correct answers, indicating that Sanoma is regarded as the main magazine publisher.

The number of correct answers improves somewhat for selected audiovisual media brands. Television station *VIER* and radio station *Q-Music* are generally linked correctly, with less respondents indicating an incorrect group or 'I do not know'. Digital television station *Acht*, however, is not easily linked correctly to Concentra.

Looking at the ability to name the correct media companies behind brands, 52.3 percent of the respondents can only correctly link two or less out of all ten brands to the right company. Only 11.6 percent can link six or more and only 0.6 percent is able to link all ten.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Respondents' ability to link the right CEO to a media company is even poorer, as table 2 illustrates: 73.8 of the respondents could not link at least one of the three CEO's to the right company.

To answer the second research question, regression analyses with socio-demographics and media-use as background variables were conducted. The dependent variables were the sum of correct answers regarding newspapers, magazines, radio & television, CEO's and a general sum, respectively.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

The results in table three shows that, gender wise, men and women are equally capable of (not) correctly naming media companies that own the printed press (newspapers and magazines). For audiovisual media and CEO's, men have significantly higher scores. Older respondents are generally more capable of naming CEO's and newspaper and magazine owners. For radio and television, however, younger respondents were able to link more of the audiovisual brands correctly. Finally, higher educated respondents are overall better able to correctly link a higher amount of media brands to respective media groups.

Table 3 further shows that – with some variations between the different regression analyses – respondents are able to link more media brands correctly if they listened to the radio or read print media the day before and in some cases the amount of time spent reading newspapers and/or magazines is significant. No relationships with television or online media use can be observed.

Discussion and conclusion

In general, the findings reveal a very limited knowledge of media ownership structures. With the exception of two audio-visual media brands (*VIER*, *Q-Music*), a vast majority of people indicated to not know which media companies the presented outlets belonged to. However, results suggest that people are aware of the market leader in a media branch, linking all newspapers, correctly or incorrectly, to De Persgroep and all magazines to Sanoma, the market leaders at the time. This may imply that people are aware that Flemish media are controlled by a limited number of media groups, but cannot link particular outlets to specific owners. The fact that some media outlets (*VIER*, *Q-Music*) are linked correctly more often than others, may be explained by characteristics of the media groups and the Flemish media landscape in general: a media company's market shares, cross-media strategies (e.g. VMMA active in television, radio, books etc.) and recent newsworthiness (e.g. acquisition of the SBS station *VIER*) may affect its salience in peoples' minds.

The study further showed some significant differences relating to gender, age, education and patterns of media consumption among respondents. The observation that older respondents were better at linking press media to the correct company and younger respondents at linking audio-visual media, could be related to different media environments and use that various age cohorts grew up with. The observation that knowledge of media ownership is related to radio and press consumption rather than to watching television, can be explained, either, by the fact that the former two media types are more news driven than television, or, by the fact that television is the most consumed medium – 93.7 percent of respondents indicated to have watched television the day before – and hence establishes little difference between respondents.

This leaves us with the 'so what' question? Does the observed lack of knowledge of media structures of the average Fleming raise issues for the position of the citizen-consumer in contemporary media landscapes, for the fields of political economy and media literacy

studies, and for media policy and media education programmes? First, from a perspective of democratic citizenship, while knowledge in itself does not constitute critical media literacy, the lack of insight into ownership and structures behind the media people consume daily raises concerns for their position as stakeholders and actors in the media arena. From a consumer-commodity perspective, it leaves them vulnerable to the economic goals and mechanisms of media industries and reinforces their position as ‘victims’ of industrial processes working towards continued commodification, processes they not only have little power over but apparently also little knowledge of. From a citizen perspective, the lack of knowledge of media structures hampers them not just in understanding the diminishing socio-cultural use value of media (as the existence of a plurality of voices and discourses is under threat from converging newsrooms and media companies), but also in finding ways to maximize their consumption of a plurality of voices and discourses. Simply put: what is the point of trying to read two different newspapers or combine newspaper reading with watching television news if these outlets share newsrooms and content as part of the same media conglomerate?

Second, the lack of knowledge found in our survey provides a strong basis to urge political economy studies to embrace in their study programmes this forgotten actor and move beyond the conceptual-theoretical approach of audiences as abstract citizens or the numerical approach to audiences as commodities. It appears there is good ground for a critical political economy to talk to, rather than about, the citizen-consumer, and to develop models that puts them on a par with owners and governments as relevant stakeholders worthy of analysis and better understanding. In other words, a political-economic understanding of the relevance of media ownership for audiences would benefit from including empirical analyses of audiences’ knowledge in their research agenda’s and, on the basis hereof, in their conceptual models.

Third, the results suggest a need for media literacy studies to empirically move away from experiments to methods that enquire after real life knowledge, awareness, skills and experiences of people (cf. Bryman, 2008). It further shows that media literacy studies need to move away from their dominant focus on children and adolescents. To the extent that the results raise concerns, they confirm a need to better understand media literacy levels in adult populations. What is more, while awareness has proven a key issue in media literacy, the results suggest the relevance of studying and understanding the actual knowledge media users have, in this case of media structures.

Finally, the result not only suggest a need to include empirical studies of audiences' knowledge of media structures and processes of ownership, concentration and consolidation in research agenda's but also in media literacy programmes. Some progress in this area has been made. Indeed, Oxstrand's (2009) comparative research of the media literacy policy of international institutions shows that while UNESCO in 2007 just expected media literacy to develop skills for the critical analysis of messages, the 2006 European Charter of Media Literacy and the European Commission (EC) – which has always had a stronger economic embedding – both expected an understanding of how and why media content is produced, including insight into media ownership. Based on our findings and the discussion thereof, we endorse Oxstrand's (2009) suggestions regarding a critical media education that relies on both cultural studies and political economy, and with the latter focusing on the structures and economies of the media, learning to understand that media have commercial interests and implications.

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Table 1. Knowledge of media ownership structures

	Correct answer	Do not know	Most given wrong answer
<i>Newspapers (six possible answers)</i>			
De Standaard (Corelio)	22.7	50.6	De Persgroep (20.2)
Het Laatste Nieuws (De Persgroep)	38.7	46.8	Corelio (5.5)
De Morgen (De Persgroep)	30.6	58.3	Corelio (4.1)
Gazet van Antwerpen (Concentra)	17.2	59.2	De Persgroep (16.2)
<i>Magazines (six possible answers)</i>			
Dag Allemaal (De Persgroep)	12.1	59.0	Sanoma (19.8)
Trends Magazine (Roularta)	21.7	67.3	De Persgroep (3.5)
P-Magazine (Think Media)	6.5	68.3	Sanoma (15.4)
<i>Radio and television ((four possible answers)</i>			
VIER (Woestijnvis/Sanoma/Corelio)	71.5	20.5	VRT (4.6)
Acht (Concentra)	11.1	76.5	Woest./San./Cor. (5.3)
Q-Music (VMMa)	46.2	41.1	VRT (8.9)
N=1100			

Table 2. Knowledge of media groups' CEO's

	Correct answer	Do not know	Most given wrong answer
<i>CEO's (four possible answers)</i>			
CEO De Persgroep (Van Thillo)	19.0	78.4	Leysen (2.1)
CEO VIER (Tillieux)	5.5	89.2	Leysen (2.7)
CEO Telenet (Sickinghe)	19.2	75.1	Leysen (2.4)
N=1100			

Table 3. Regression analyses on knowledge of media ownership structures

	Sum newspapers		Sum magazines		Sum radio & TV		Sum CEO's		Sum general	
	β	t	β	t	β	t	β	t	β	t
Gender (1=male, 2=female)	-.033	-1.124	-.030	-.987	-.157	-5.422***	-.184	-6.430***	-.096	-3.259***
Age	.158	4.999***	.109	3.394***	-.230	-7.419***	.156	5.116***	.024	.754
Educational level	.110	3.522***	.109	3.424***	.088	2.875**	.196	6.502***	.135	4.313***
Watching television	.012	.368	.002	.078	-.002	-.079	.016	.539	.006	.198
Listening to radio	.075	2.294*	.028	.856	.078	2.429*	-.022	-.700	.085	2.600**
Reading press	.081	2.259*	.096	2.625**	.091	2.576*	.052	1.480	.116	3.216***
Reading online news	.005	.145	.019	.543	.046	1.369	.035	1.060	.029	.840
Watching television (time)	-.044	-1.329	-.001	-.039	.051	1.561	.016	.481	-.003	-.095
Listening to radio (time)	-.020	-.595	.029	.871	.011	.327	-.007	-.204	.003	.087
Reading press (time)	.092	2.541*	.037	1.013	.011	.315	.143	4.088***	.069	1.891
Reading online news (time)	.017	.491	.019	.547	.013	.390	.012	.359	.022	.619
Constant		-.144		-.870		9.827		-.281		3.818
R ²		.062		.034		.102		.124		.063

N=1100, Linear regression analysis