

LITTLE DEBATE

Ideological media pluralism and the transition from a pillarized to a commercialized newspaper landscape (Flanders, 1960-2014)

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(Flanders, 1960-2014)

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor in Social Sciences at the
University of Antwerp to be defended by

Daniëlle RAEIJMAEKERS

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Similar to food, people are encouraged to maintain a healthy and balanced media diet. In that sense, like with food, we are constantly being warned about possible risk factors that might cause over/under-consumption of particular viewpoints. For 21st century media consumers, those warnings include media concentration, tabloidization, online echo chambers, fake news, social media algorithms, Russian hackers, etc. One ingredient, however, that is often overlooked when checking the variety on today's media menu, is ideology.

Indeed, when it comes to media diversity and pluralism, there has been little debate on ideology among media scholars in 21st century academia (Downey et al., 2014). For one thing, ideology was said to be finished in Western societies after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. For several scholars, these events symbolized the ultimate triumph of liberal democracy and global neoliberal capitalism and, thus, the end of ideology (e.g., Fukuyama, 1992; Giddens, 1994). They stated that disputes would no longer be decided on the basis of ideology (Right versus Left), but on the basis of rationality (right versus wrong). At the same time, most Western mainstream media have evolved from openly partisan projects to professional-commercialized products (Schudson, 2001). As such, current mainstream media are less and less approached as active ideological actors, but as 'marketplaces of ideas' instead (e.g., Entman & Wildman, 1992). Rather than examining their performance in terms of ideological power and debate, media studies tend to focus on their performance in terms of neutrality, objectivity and bias (Hackett, 1984; Schudson, 2011).

However, recent events such as the presidential elections in the United States (US) and the Brexit referendum in 2016, or the recent financial crisis and the ongoing migration crisis, have shown that society is not at all free from fundamental disagreement. Big ideological debates about the values and organization of our society – be it with regard to the climate, the economy, geopolitics, etc. – still matter.

Moreover, some recent critical media studies (e.g., Carvalho, 2007; Media Reform Coalition, 2016; Phelan, 2014; Raeijmaekers & Maesele, 2014), have shown that mainstream media today still play an active role in steering such ideological debates. Regardless – or because – of their ideals of ‘balanced’ and ‘impartial’ coverage, they are found to advocate a clear ideological position. These are interesting developments, that call for more substantial research on ideology in mediated public debates.

The ambition of this doctoral project is twofold. First, I aim to develop a theoretical and analytical framework to systematically evaluate whether and in what way news media address ideological disagreement. Such kind of media pluralism has rarely been researched so far. Academic debates on media pluralism and democracy are mostly limited to a liberal or deliberative understanding of the role of media, holding the assumption that media should *overcome* (ideological) contestation (cfr. chapter 1). This doctoral project, however, starts from an agonistic democratic approach. It holds the assumption that ideological disputes are *constitutive* of democratic politics and media should therefore act as ‘sites of struggle’. In order to put theory into practice, and allow for a systematic evaluation of ideological debate in media landscapes, an analytical framework of agonistic media pluralism needs to be developed.

Second, using this new analytical framework, I aim to empirically test the level of ideological (i.e., agonistic) media pluralism in Flanders, the northern part of Belgium. More specifically, I want to analyze possible changes in ideological media pluralism with regard to the historic(al) transition from a partisan – ‘pillarized’ – press to a commercialized newspaper market. Compared to many other Western countries or regions, Flemish newspapers have only very gradually cut their ties with socio-political organizations and ideological families, the so-called ‘pillars’ (Van Aelst, 2006). The process started in the 1960s, but it took three decades to arrive at a fully ‘de-pillarized’ newspaper landscape. Remarkably, when it comes to media diversity and pluralism, longitudinal studies on this process of de-pillarization are limited in number (e.g., Distelmans, 1999; Van Aelst, 2006; Beckers et al., 2017). Moreover, they are limited to measuring the (party-political) diversity of actors and topics, not taking into account ideological pluralism. So that is exactly what this doctoral thesis will address: How has the Flemish newspaper landscape been dealing with ideological debate over the past

fifty years, given the transition from a pillarized to a commercialized press? Has there been a change in agonistic media pluralism?

The doctoral thesis consists of three parts. In the first part I expand on the theoretical and analytical framework of agonistic media pluralism. There are four chapters – three theoretical papers and one methodological chapter – preceded by an introduction that explains how they are linked together. The first paper discusses different theoretical and normative assumptions about media, pluralism, and democracy. It distinguishes four approaches to media pluralism/diversity, which lead to different research questions and expectations. The second paper discusses the analytical benchmarks that are used in research on media diversity and pluralism. It points out the limits of the concept of ‘objectivity’ and suggest to benchmark ‘ideology’ and ‘contestation’ instead. The third paper then presents the framework of agonistic media pluralism, which allows to study whether media close or open the space for (ideological) contestation. Finally, the methodological chapter expands on the method (i.e., critical discourse analysis with an element of discourse theory) and the practical steps of the framework of agonistic media pluralism.

The second part of this doctoral thesis addresses my empirical study of the Flemish newspaper landscape. It consists of five chapters – i.e., five cases – and an introduction in which I expand on the (very few) previous longitudinal studies, my empirical choices and my modus operandi. In the subsequent chapters, I analyze the newspaper coverage on five comparable historic events: the Unitary Law (1960), the Egmont Plan (1977), the Global Plan (1993), the Generation Pact (2005), and the coalition agreement of Michel I (2014), respectively.

In the last part I discuss the empirical findings of this doctoral project. I start with comparing the results of the five case studies in terms of diversity and in terms of pluralism. I conclude that over the past half a century, during pivotal moments, the Flemish press has stimulated little (ideological) debate on socio-economic policy. The structural transition from a pillarized to a commercialized newspaper landscape does not appear to be a decisive factor with regard to (this absence of) agonistic media pluralism. Therefore, I look at two other factors that might explain my findings: the

influence of a neoliberal worldview and the journalistic culture of newspapers. I end with suggesting some future research avenues.

To conclude this introduction, I want to suggest some ways for reading this doctoral thesis, anticipating the probability that it will reach people with various backgrounds and objectives. For those interested in philosophical debates on the democratic role and performance of media, I advise to read the three theoretical papers (chapter 1 to 3) and the discussion. For those who want to do some agonistic media pluralism research themselves, I recommend the last theoretical paper (chapter 3), the methodological chapter (chapter 4), and some of the case studies as an example. For those who are interested in the case of Flanders, either from a communication or a historical perspective, I would suggest to have a look at the second part of this project (case 1 to 5), which includes detailed information on both newspapers and socio-economic developments, and the discussion. For those who are in a hurry: you can check the abstracts of the theoretical papers, the conclusions of the case studies, and the discussion. Finally, for those who want to know exactly what I have been doing over the past five years, I advise to read the full thesis.

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PART I: FRAMEWORK

INTRODUCTION

Today, media diversity and pluralism are still a matter of concern. Even after decades of journalistic professionalization and free market media organization, even after the installment of media monitoring authorities and studies that closely watch the growing trend of media concentration (e.g., George, 2007; Vlaamse Regulator voor de Media, 2017), there still are doubts about the diverse and pluralistic nature of mainstream media. For example, recent events like the election of Donald Trump and the Brexit vote have revived the critique that mainstream media serve primarily as a marketing agent of existent social structures and establishment ideas:

“Simply put, a significant proportion of the public feels that powerful people are using the media to push their own political or economic interests, rather than represent ordinary readers or viewers. These feelings are most strongly held by those who are young and by those that earn the least (Newman & Fletcher, 2017).”

Such perceptions of under/overrepresentation call for more empirical studies on media diversity and pluralism. The outcomes of those empirical studies might nonetheless differ, depending on the benchmarks that researchers set and the way they expect media to behave democratically. Therefore, in the first theoretical chapter, I expand on different conceptual and normative assumptions about media, pluralism and democracy. It results in the identification of four approaches to media diversity/pluralism. I conclude that only the critical pluralism approach allows to evaluate whether media over-represent establishment voices and actively argue in favor of the status quo. According to this approach, media landscapes can only be labelled diverse and pluralistic if (i) they represent a broad range of viewpoints – also

marginal voices – and (ii) frame those as part of a legitimate ideological struggle. To operationalize this critical view on media pluralism, however, one needs the right benchmarks. This is the goal of the second theoretical paper, in which I call for analytical concepts that benchmark ideology instead of objectivity. Indeed, the aim is not to analyze media on the extent to which they overcome and neutralize – in fact, camouflage – ideological positions, but on the extent to which they make these ideological positions explicit and debatable. Such an analysis can be conducted by applying the framework of agonistic media pluralism, which is developed and presented in the third theoretical chapter. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a method, the framework analyzes the scope and form of media coverage to determine whether media close or open debates. A media landscape is found to impede debate when it is limited in scope (e.g., only few actors and viewpoints are represented) and/or characterized by a depoliticizing form (e.g., discursive strategies that promote particular standpoints as the only rational, moral or natural ones). In other words, when there is no media diversity and/or media pluralism. Contrarily, a media landscape is found to open debate when there is room for genuine alternatives, and the discourse is either cultivating (i.e., stimulating rational or moral discussion) or politicizing (i.e., stimulating ideological contestation). Finally, the methodological approach and details of the framework are discussed in a fourth chapter.

CHAPTER 1: FOUR THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO MEDIA

PLURALISM

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Abstract

Media pluralism has become a buzzword in public, political, and academic discourses. However, it is generally unclear what is meant by referring to pluralistic media content or how pluralistic media should operate within democratic societies. The goal of this article is to distinguish between different conceptual and normative assumptions about media, pluralism, and democracy that demarcate the limits of analysis on media pluralism. Based on a discussion of three different schools of democracy with their corresponding media roles (the liberal, deliberative, and agonistic democracy schools), we derive two fault lines which allow us to distinguish four approaches to media pluralism. These approaches imply a different interpretation of its meaning and the standards by which it should be researched.

Keywords: affirmative media, critical media, democratic theory, media and democracy, media diversity, media pluralism, media theory

Introduction

In recent years, the notion of ‘pluralism’ has become a reference point in discussions on the functioning of Western media. To begin with, a number of citizen and non-governmental organizations are concerned about the current media climate. In that respect, they aim at both informing the public and stimulating political institutions to undertake action. For example, since 2010, a civic and a journalistic organization (respectively, ‘European Alternatives’ and ‘Alliance Internationale de Journalistes’) have been working on a ‘European Initiative for Media Pluralism’.¹ The non-profit organization nowadays brings together nearly 100 organizations and aims to mobilize 1 million European citizens to sign its online petition on media freedom and pluralism. Because, as they state, ‘the deterioration of media pluralism in Europe is above all a threat to democracy’. Likewise, on a global scale, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) states that ‘media pluralism is essential for providing choice to the public and is fundamental for democratic development’ (Karklins in Mendel, 2013: 7). Moreover, media pluralism has gained prominence not only within public and political debates, but also in debates among academics. A trend that has also been noticed by Broughton-Micova (2012), describing the 2012 Oxford Media Convention on the LSE Media Policy Project blog:

“it was to be expected that the hacking scandal and the events culminating in the Leveson Inquiry would dominate this year’s Oxford Media Convention. However, the key word that emerged from the presentations and discussion was not ethics, or self-regulation, but media pluralism – much desired but as yet rather undefined.”

Indeed, it is remarkable to what extent media pluralism serves as a buzzword or as a decontextualized taken-for-granted concept. It is generally unclear what is meant by referring to pluralistic media content or how pluralistic media should operate within Western democratic societies. Although media metaphors such as ‘marketplaces of

¹ European Initiative For Media Pluralism (<http://www.mediainitiative.eu>).

ideas' or 'public forums' are adopted regularly as democratic benchmarks, the discourse of pluralism underpinning these popular conceptions generally remains unspecified. Questions about the exact meaning and implications of pluralism are neglected in favor of questions about the assumed level of pluralism in a given media landscape. However, as Karppinen (2013) remarks, empirical studies on media pluralism might lead to contradictory outcomes, depending on the perspective one takes. Therefore, there is an urgent need for studies that make media pluralism, as a philosophic-theoretical concept, the object of investigation, before it is made the standard by which other objects, like media landscapes or content, are evaluated. The goal of this chapter is to distinguish between different conceptual and normative assumptions about media, pluralism, and democracy that demarcate the limits of analysis on media pluralism. It aspires to manifest the ever present ideological nature of contrasting empirical benchmarks, and to show how indeed the perspective one takes steers the empirical choices and outcome.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section of this chapter discusses three different interpretations of democracy, which also imply different frameworks for evaluating the role and performance of media: the liberal, deliberative, and agonistic democracy schools. Indeed, the question regarding the relation between media and pluralism, or put differently, the role of media in contributing to a pluralistic public discourse, is a normative question which is directly related to how democracy is interpreted. In a second section, two fault lines are put forward which are derived from this discussion on democratic theory and media roles: the affirmative/critical fault line relates to whether the existing socio-political order is taken as a given or not, while the diversity/ pluralism fault line relates to different dimensions of plurality. These two fault lines allow us to distinguish four approaches to media pluralism, which imply a different interpretation of its meaning and the standards by which it should be researched. These approaches are set out in a third section in terms of both their theoretical assumptions and the specific research questions and analytical benchmarks that characterize them. This chapter concludes by discussing the relevance of these approaches in light of current democratic challenges.

Democratic theory and media roles

Before starting our argument, two matters need to be emphasized. First, we explicitly aim to overcome the so-called fortress journalism syndrome, which refers to an exclusive focus on media instead of society in general (see also Christians et al., 2009). Too often, a (single aspect of) media theory is discussed in the absence of the greater social-theoretical agenda in which the theory is embedded. Since democratic societies and media do not just co-exist in parallel, but rely on each other in a complex relation of interdependency (Trappel et al., 2011), we start with discussing three democratic theories which imply different frameworks for evaluating the role and performance of media: the liberal, deliberative and agonistic democracy models. The liberal model and its basic values still provide a basis for contemporary media policy and media research. However, much of the discussion in academic debates on media and democracy nowadays leans on the framework of deliberative democracy. The agonistic model, lastly, has recently gained prominence within political philosophy, but has only been used sporadically in media studies (Karpinen, 2013). Second, for the sake of conceptual clarity and consistency, we will avoid using the concept of pluralism until we reach that point where the argument we have developed allows us to specify its meaning. Since pluralism generally concerns the question of how to be inclusive regarding the existing plurality of groups and concerns in society, we start by referring to the concept of social heterogeneity instead.

The liberal model

The liberal-aggregative model (mostly abbreviated into the 'liberal model') conceives society as a complex of competing groups and interests, in which power is fragmented and widely diffused. The goal of democratic decision-making in the aggregative model is to decide what leaders, rules, and policies best correspond with the most widely and strongly held preferences (Christians et al., 2009). Political institutes – like parliaments and governments – are eventually entrusted with the task of solving disputes in today's complex, heterogeneous society by means of identifying majority preferences, and transforming these into a widespread consensus. Its starting point is that most people

lack the necessary expertise for the efficient managing of public affairs and, therefore, they have to elect informed and competent elites who will represent their concerns in democratic bodies, like the parliament (Lippmann, 1922; Offe, 2011).

Within this democratic context of representation and public affairs management, the main goals of media are checking on the government and informing and representing the people (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007; Louw, 2005). This third key democratic function of representing the people to authority is deemed as the culmination of the media's mission (Curran, 2002). The liberal model considers media as intermediaries or transmitters between democratic institutes and the public. By representing individuals' divergent needs and views, media inform political elites about disputes, which can subsequently be addressed within political institutes. This corresponds to the monitorial role, as specified by McQuailin's volume *Normative Theories of the Media* (Christians et al., 2009). Performing a monitorial (or representative) role, media commit themselves to the collection, processing, and distribution of all kinds of information on society. This role resonates in the popular metaphors of media as 'mirrors of society' and 'marketplaces of ideas' (Ekron, 2008; Entman and Wildman, 1992). This assumption of media content as a reflection of reality corresponds to the expectation of a mimetic, authentic, and truthful coverage. Such coverage can only be ensured by relying on a set of professional practices, routines, and textual conventions, generally referred to as objectivity, balance, and impartiality (e.g., Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007). Furthermore, liberal scholars traditionally believe these professional journalistic standards to be primarily endangered by governments. Thus, to ensure media's independence, media should be anchored to the free market and operate like commercialized entities (Anand et al., 2007). Consequently, as 'marketplaces of ideas', media respond to consumer choice. Indeed, it is expected that consumers' buying behavior and the enduring competition of other media outlets will stimulate journalists to present their stories in a factual and balanced way, as the audience is only willing to pay for – what they conceive as – 'good' or objective journalism.

The deliberative model

The deliberative democracy model, on the other hand, criticizes liberal theory's expert focus, individual representative character, and its competitive-representative negotiation of social heterogeneity by the majoritarian principle. Deliberative scholars believe a democratic consensus should result from rational communicative practices between 'ordinary' people rather than from formal elitist decision-making processes (Benhabib, 1996; Dewey, 1954; Gutmann and Thompson, 2004; Habermas, 1996). This involves rational debate between citizens over disputes and common problems, leading to a critically informed public opinion that can guide decision-makers in reaching consensus (Dahlberg, 2007b). Consequently, political decision-making is established through new, appropriate procedures that seek to institute equal and free citizen participation. This interpretation is most commonly associated with the work of Habermas (1989, 1996) on the public sphere.²

The deliberative model then considers media as more than *transmitters* of social heterogeneity: media serve as the public sphere's preeminent institution where public consensus is *constructed* (Habermas, 1989; Kleinschmit, 2012). Or, as Poster (1997: 217) claims, 'the media *are* the public sphere'. This implies that media should prominently act as 'public forums' in complex, heterogeneous societies, maintaining public debate in order to solve societal disputes and arrive at public consensus, in addition to mimetically informing authorities about potentially crucial issues (Curran, 2002). This relates to the facilitative role of media, described in *Normative Theories of the Media* as 'helping to develop a shared moral framework for community and society, rather than just looking after individual rights and interests' (Christians et al., 2009: 126). Ideally, this shared moral framework, or public consensus, is reached by rational-critical media debate. According to Habermas (1996: 326), 'agreement on issues and contributions develops only as the result of more or less exhaustive controversy in which proposals, information, and reasons can be more or less rationally dealt with'.

² 'The public sphere can best be described as a network for communication information and points of view' (Habermas, 1996: 360). It is constituted 'wherever and whenever any matter of living together with difference is debated' (Dahlberg, 2005: 112).

The deliberative model thus posits a reflexive, impartial, reasoned exchange of validity claims where only the force of better argument ‘wins out’ (Dahlberg, 2005: 113).

To allow for such a media debate, deliberative scholars prefer more participatory structures to an exclusively professional-commercialized media system. They fear that market-oriented media undermine intelligent and rational debate, as they process information like a commodity – presenting it in a simplified, personalized, and decontextualized form – and address publics as consumers instead of citizens (e.g., Habermas, 1989). Participatory media, on the other hand, explicitly focus on dialogue and interaction with their publics: journalism should be two-way instead of one-way, collective instead of hierarchical, and public instead of professional (Macdonald, 2006; Singer, 2007). Therefore, deliberative media scholars mostly concentrate on the deployment of user-generated content by professional media organizations (e.g., Wardle and Williams, 2010) or on the performance of all kinds of Internet platforms, as the Internet is often expected to challenge passivity and facilitate citizen participation (e.g., Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001; Poster, 1997).

The agonistic model

A second alternative to the liberal model is the agonistic democracy model. This model is not only skeptical about the individualist-competitive instruments of contemporary liberal democracies, but also – and foremost – about the normative post-ideological framework underlying both liberal and deliberative practices (Dahlberg, 2007b; Hands, 2007). It argues that the belief in the possibility of a universal rational or moral consensus misunderstands the heterogeneous nature of society and the essence of democracy: democratic politics cannot, nor could it ever, produce the kind of coherent and unified society that is reconcilable with liberal and deliberative ontology. Mouffe, in particular (2000, 2005, 2013), has argued how antagonism and conflict are constitutive of the social condition: Any form of consensus is always based on acts of exclusion. The labeling of one position as ‘extreme’, and another as ‘moderate’ and the promotion of the latter as the most ‘reasonable’, is highly ideological in that it promotes the status-quo definition of what is ‘extreme’ and ‘moderate’ (Dahlberg,

2007a: 834). It entails the naturalization of dominant power relations and the exclusion of dissident social groups and concerns (Dahlberg, 2005). In other words, the public sphere is interpreted as a battlefield of hegemonic practices which can never be reconciled. Thus, as agonistic scholars consider it not only impossible, but also undesirable, to overcome ideological conflict and dissent, they argue for a political space that transparently manifests existing differences and allows for respectful contestation between clearly differentiated political positions.

Since the agonistic school has only recently gained prominence within political philosophy, little has been written about the role of media. In an interview with media scholars, Mouffe (in Carpentier and Cammaerts, 2006: 974) stated, for instance, that:

“ideally, the role of the media should precisely be to contribute to the creation of agonistic public spaces in which there is the possibility for dissensus to be expressed or different alternatives to be put forward. But on the other hand, the media cannot just create this out of the blue, that is why the main responsibility – for me – still lies with the political parties.”

In other words, within the agonistic model, media serve as fields of ideological contestation to stimulate public and essentially political debate. This function of the media is labeled by Carpentier and Cammaerts (2006) as the ‘increase of pluralism and agonism *through* journalism’. Here, Christians et al. (2009: 126) refer to the radical role of media, which ‘focuses on exposing abuses of power and aims to raise popular consciousness of wrongdoing, inequality, and the potential for change’. It is radical in the sense that such journalism has the potential of mobilizing resistance or protest (Trappel et al., 2011). Thus, for agonistic media scholars, it is crucial that the media space is re-conceptualized as a space of genuine ideological struggle and conflict (Dahlberg, 2007b; Karppinen, 2013; Pepermans and Maesele, 2014; 2015b).

Two fault lines: affirmative/critical & diversity/pluralism

This discussion on democratic theories and corresponding media roles allows us to derive two fault lines, on the basis of which we will be able to distinguish multiple, distinct approaches to media pluralism.

Affirmative/critical fault line

In sum, all three democratic models consider contemporary society as complex and heterogeneous. They are concerned about how social disputes can be processed democratically, both in politics and media. However, there is a clear distinction between democratic theories which aim at overcoming and neutralizing social heterogeneity and disputes to arrive at public consensus (liberal and deliberative models) and those that aim at recognizing social heterogeneity and disputes as constitutive of democratic politics (agonistic model). In line with this distinction, it is expected that media either affirmatively (re)produce this consensus (liberal and deliberative models), or critically question it and stimulate contestation (agonistic model). In other words, the consensus/conflict distinction underlies the contrast between affirmative (also called 'liberal pluralist') and critical media theories.

Affirmative media theories – implicitly or explicitly – understand society as a complex of competing groups of which none is predominant all of the time and, therefore, as relatively fair. In other words, starting from a perception of society as more or less consensual and harmonious, media are expected to support and strengthen existing and emerging social relations (Gurevitch et al., 1982). In that sense, affirmative media theories are characterized by a media-centric approach that takes the existing socio-political order as a given and mainly evaluates the media's role and performance in terms of its representation and (re)production of social (i.e., rational and moral) consensus. This can be achieved in a twofold way: either by mimetically representing existing social concerns and relations through the majoritarian principle (liberal model), or by hosting and facilitating rational-critical citizen debate aiming for the discursive reconciliation of disagreement (deliberative model). Thus, both models aim

to transcend social heterogeneity and disputes, either by professional truthfulness or by public rationalism.

Influenced by Marxist theory, critical media theories explicitly reject the image of a harmonious society in which social heterogeneity and disputes are transformed into a genuine public consensus (e.g., Hall et al., 1978; Murdock and Golding, 2005). Starting from a perception of society as inevitably marked by conflict and asymmetries of power, every social order is considered as the result of hegemonic practices, dominance, and exclusion. Therefore, instead of taking society for granted and adopt a media-centric approach, critical media scholars adopt a society-centric approach. They build upon an informed understanding of a given socio-political order, being concerned with issues of power and inequality, before evaluating the performance of media. For example, Young (2000: 6) puts forward the following question, 'what are the norms and conditions of inclusive democratic communication under circumstances of structural inequality and cultural difference?'. While we could easily transfer the discussion on liberal and deliberative models of democracy to the characterization of affirmative media theories, this is not the case with critical media theories because these cannot be brought down to just the agonistic model, especially since it has only been used sporadically in media studies. More commonly, critical media theorists relate to two schools of thought: the critical political economy or cultural studies school. Despite both addressing issues of media, power, and inequality, they start from a markedly different focus: while the former considers it impossible to objectively cover social heterogeneity and disputes, the latter considers this to be undesirable. In so doing, critical political economy focuses on the structural constraints that limit objective coverage, while cultural studies focuses on cultural and ideological constraints. Consequently, both hold different assumptions about the precise role of media and ideal standards of performance.

Critical political economy

This school shares both the liberal ideal of media as neutral intermediaries or transmitters between democratic institutes and the public, and the corresponding ideal of professional journalists performing according to the standards of objectivity

(Baker, 2007; Davies, 2008; Macdonald, 2006). However, it rejects the consumer choice paradigm of liberal theory for not adequately taking into account the structural influences and pressures that media face, and consequently, for giving rise to the mistaken belief that current media function as undistorted mirrors of society or marketplaces of ideas (Curran, 2002; Ekron, 2008). In that sense, political economy theorists are not critical toward the aims of professional journalism, but toward the organization of media. They claim the potential mistreating of social heterogeneity and disputes by journalists 'has more to do with the organizational imperatives of the corporations which employ them than with abstract ethical principles' (Hackett and Zhao in Macdonald, 2006). Therefore, they refer to contemporary professional-commercialized media as 'cultural industries', seeing them to operate as both similar to and different from other industries (Murdock and Golding, 2005). Like other industries, media organizations serve an economic agenda with the aim of generating profit from selling their product – that is, media content – to both advertisers and consumers. However, in contrast to most industries, media also serve a cultural and/or democratic agenda in producing and circulating images and discourses about society. This duality underlies the general aim of political economy scholars to set out how different ways of financing and organizing media have traceable consequences for journalistic practices and the range of discourses and representations in the public domain. Their research is based upon a concern with the structural characteristics of mass media as linked to political-economic power and inequality within society. As a result, the role and influence of commercialization, and how to counter its negative effects, serves as a central matter. It mostly leads to research that focuses on the contribution of media policies and regulation to the inclusivity and heterogeneity of media coverage.

Cultural studies

In contrast to critical political economy theorists, this school shares not the liberal mirror-ideal nor the deliberative ideal of rational public forums. It rejects both, stating that the ideal of objectivity fosters the (re)production of existing power relations and inequalities. As Hall et al. (1973: 53) argued in their influential study:

“The media do not simply and transparently report events which are ‘naturally’ newsworthy in themselves. ‘News’ is the end-product of a complex process which begins with a systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories.”

Cultural studies scholars thus understand media content not as objective and neutral, but as framed and constructed. This construction entails a highly ideological process: It embodies crucial assumptions about what society is and how it works. In that sense, they refer to media as ‘sites of struggle’ or ‘fields of contestation’ (e.g., Carragee, 1993; Fowler, 1991), and are therefore closely related to the agonistic model and the previously defined radical role of media. Scholars starting from these assumptions thus set out to reveal the media’s role with regard to hegemonic practices and mechanisms of exclusion. They aspire to demonstrate how dominant ideas, values and identities in society are presented as natural, unavoidable, and common sense, or as neutral, truthful, and rational. While dissident ideas, values, and identities, on the other hand, are labeled as irrational or extreme. In other words, media are evaluated on the extent to which they either impede or facilitate democratic debate about alternative ideas, values, and identities in the society. These results are then related either to the role of journalistic practices, routines, and values, to the organization of media (commercial or alternative), or to hegemonic values and interests in a given socio-political context.

Diversity/pluralism fault line

While the affirmative/critical fault line is based on normative considerations, the second fault line is based on conceptual considerations. However, we start by drawing from the different schools of democracy first, before introducing the ontic/ontological distinction which allows us to systematically differentiate between whether social heterogeneity is addressed on an empirical (i.e., diversity) or ideological level (i.e., pluralism).

Even though the liberal and deliberative model essentially expect the same outcome of media processes – that is, to transcend social disputes in democratic societies – they

differ in the extent to which they expect media to incorporate social heterogeneity. One of the main critiques of the deliberative model on its liberal counterpart is that the latter takes preferences as a given: It requires no justification for the preferences themselves, but only seeks to combine these in various ways that are efficient and fair (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004). The deliberative model, on the other hand, claims that individual or group interests and identities are not preformed and often in need of internal clarification. Therefore, it emphasizes the epistemic role of media as an agency of public deliberation and debate, over being nothing more than a process of fair bargaining and the aggregation of pre-existing differences (Karppinen, 2013: 36). Similarly, also the agonistic model expects media content to not just represent, but also reflect on social heterogeneity and disputes. In other words, whereas the liberal model links media pluralism to the expression of pre-existing differences, both the deliberative and the agonistic model link media pluralism to discursive practices (Dahlberg, 2007b).

Here, it is important to clarify that both conceptions of pluralism are valid. They merely concern the distinction between two stages, that is, the expression and formation of opinions (Offe, 2011), which can be linked to the conceptual distinction between 'media diversity' and 'media pluralism'. Notions of media pluralism and media diversity are often used interchangeably in discussions of media performance and policy, and there is some confusion about the distinction, or possible hierarchy, between these concepts. In this respect, Karppinen (2013) assumes an initial conceptual hierarchy whereby media diversity is understood in a more neutral, descriptive sense, and pluralism in a more evaluative sense. The former is about the reflection of fixed differences in a heterogeneous society, whereas the latter refers to the acknowledgment and preference of such differences: 'The notion of media diversity is generally used in a more empirical or tangible meaning, whereas pluralism refers to a more diffuse societal value or an underlying orientation' (Karppinen, 2007: 9–10). In that sense, he links the concept of media diversity to descriptive empirical research and media pluralism to normative theoretical analyses.

Even though Karppinen acknowledges that both pluralism and diversity are often used normatively as well as descriptively, he deliberately decides to mainly use the term media pluralism. We, on the other hand, claim that the distinction between pluralism and diversity is extremely relevant for both a theoretical and empirical reflection on media and democracy, as they underlie different perceptions of plurality. For instance, it helps to clarify the differences between the liberal and deliberative model. In that sense, claiming the analytical value of using both concepts, it is essential to go beyond an initial conceptual hierarchy and present a systematic conceptual distinction. Hereto, we prefer to use the Heideggerian terms ‘ontic’ and ‘ontological’³ (Heidegger, 1962: 12). While ‘ontic’ refers to a matter of ‘existence’ (what *is*), ‘ontological’ refers to ‘existential’ understanding (*about* what is and *about* what *should be*). In other words, ‘ontic’ refers to an empirical level, whereas ‘ontological’ refers to an ideological level. This ontic/ontological distinction allows us to understand the contrast between ‘diversity’ and ‘pluralism’ as the difference between two dimensions of plurality. On the one hand, ‘diversity’ has to be located on the ontic dimension of the social, as it regards mere physical or empirical differences, such as the range of identities and concerns (differences *within* society). On the other hand, ‘pluralism’ has to be located on the ontological dimension of the social: It regards ideological differences, such as discursive practices and strategies in the (re)production of identities and concerns (differences *about* society). In other words, the concept of diversity then refers to a pre-fixed and empirical observable social variety, while the concept of pluralism refers to a contingent and discursively embedded ideological variety.

Lastly, within media theory and analysis, the difference between diversity and pluralism also resides within the distinction between ‘media selection’ and ‘media presentation’, in terms of the distinction between *what* is covered and *how* it is covered. Or in the words of Hall et al. (1978: 57): ‘the media define for the majority of the population *what* significant events are taking place, but, also, they offer powerful

³ This rather abstract philosophical distinction has already been used in both political philosophy and media theory to clarify the analytical concepts of ‘the political’ (contrasted to ‘politics’) and ‘mediality’ (contrasted to ‘media’). See Mouffe (2005) and Marchart (2011), respectively.

interpretations of *how* to understand these events'. Similarly, Fowler (1991: 22-23) claims that:

“imbalance of access results in partiality, not only in what assertions and attitudes are reported – a matter of content – but also in how they are reported – a matter of form or style, and therefore, I would claim, of ideological perspective.”

Moreover, in their writings about media bias, both Street (2001: 18, 23) and Groeling (2013: 134) differentiate between processes of selection and processes of interpretation, referring to either *what* is covered or the *character* of the coverage. It brings Groeling to identifying two categories of bias: the category 'selection bias', referring to a distorted *sample* of reality, and the category 'presentation bias', addressing a distorted *view* of reality. In sum, these authors differentiate between a social heterogeneity that physically exists and serves as a selection source for media, and a discursive heterogeneity on society within media content, essentially but unintentionally referring to media diversity and media pluralism, respectively.

Finally, it should be clear that relying on either an ontic or ontological concept leads toward different research approaches: while the former relates to an approach that is merely descriptive and simply assumes the prior existence of particular identities and concerns, the latter relates to a discursive approach, dealing with both the representation of these identities and concerns, and their discursive constitution.

Four approaches to media pluralism

This leads us to distinguish four different approaches to media pluralism, which can be illustrated by a two-dimensional framework based on the fault lines affirmative/critical and diversity/pluralism (Figure 1). Each of these approaches implies a different conceptual and normative interpretation of media, pluralism, and democracy in general, and media pluralism in specific. These approaches are subsequently set out in

terms of both their conceptual and normative assumptions and the specific research questions and analytical benchmarks that characterize them. Indeed, these different assumptions explain why different studies on media pluralism have different expectations, ask different questions, and lead to different outcomes. For example, as Karpinen (2013: 4) notes, ‘increasing competition in the media market can lead to more diverse media content or to further homogenization, depending on the perspective one takes’.

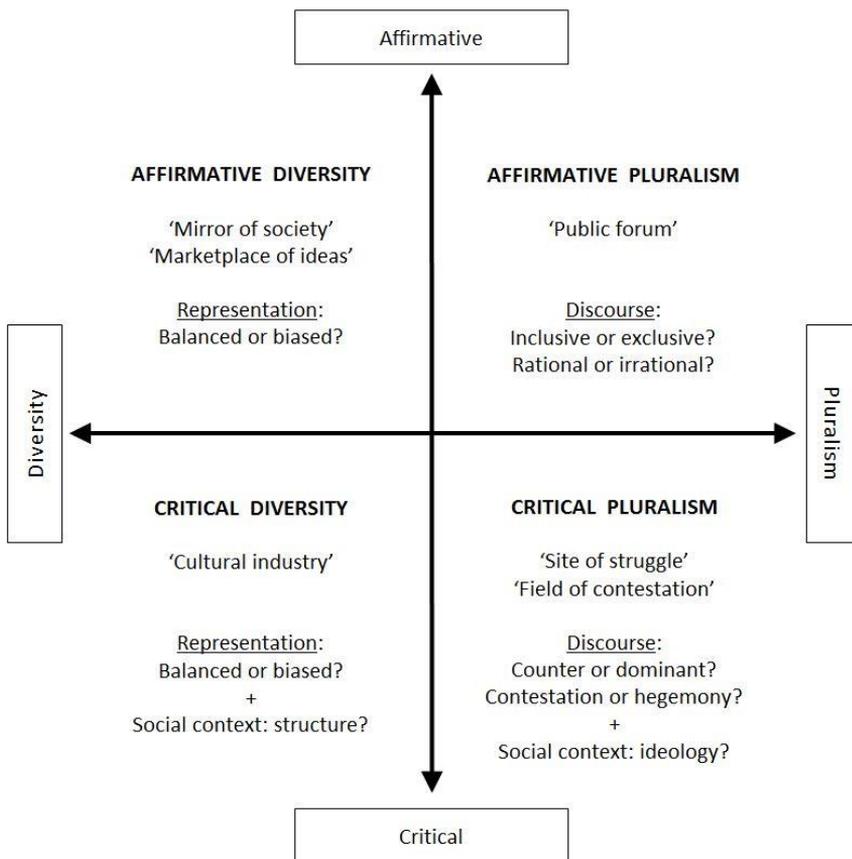


Figure 1: Four approaches to media pluralism

Affirmative diversity

Media pluralism interpreted as ‘affirmative diversity’ is represented by the metaphors of media as ‘mirrors of society’ and ‘marketplaces of ideas’ and draws on the liberal-

aggregative school of democratic theory. Conceptually, it relates to ‘diversity’ as it expects media to truthfully reflect the existing social heterogeneity. Normatively, the metaphor and underlying theory affirm a consensual notion of society, since the existing social heterogeneity of society is put forward as an ultimate benchmark to which media need to live up to. Moreover, in light of the fault lines, the metaphor holds specific assumptions regarding ideal media practices: To ensure a mimetic representation of social diversity, media practices should be evaluated on the extent to which they abide by the professional guidelines of objectivity, balance, and impartiality, and are responsive to the market.

Research starting from the affirmative diversity-approach is concerned about a balanced media representation of social diversity, for instance, in terms of actors, issues, and viewpoints. Scholars examine the existence and nature of possible imperfections in current media content, mostly addressed as ‘media bias’. In particular, they are concerned about a distorted *sample* of reality (e.g., Lin et al., 2011: ‘regardless of a positive or negative stance towards an entity, an imbalanced quantity in coverage is itself a form of bias’). A well-known subfield is research on ‘partisan media bias’ (e.g., Groseclose and Milyo, 2005). In American studies on partisan media bias, the classic aim that media should strictly reflect social reality can be found in the implicit or explicit definition of fair coverage as the equal treatment of the two parties (Groeling, 2013: 143), which comes down to a 50/50 coverage or a coverage that is in line with the number of seats each party possesses.

Affirmative pluralism

Media pluralism interpreted as ‘affirmative pluralism’ is represented by the metaphor of media as ‘public forums’ and draws on the deliberative school of democratic theory. Conceptually, it addresses the notion of ‘pluralism’. In that sense, it contrasts with the mirror-metaphor, since media are not just expected to transmit social diversity, but play an active role in the discursive formation of identities and concerns in general. Normatively, the metaphor and underlying theory affirmatively acknowledge and reproduce a consensual notion of society, since critical-rational debate between free

and equal citizens, facilitated by media, allows us to overcome divergent viewpoints. Moreover, in practice, deliberative scholars believe media debates can only overcome social disputes and achieve public consensus if they build upon rational arguments and are characterized by participatory structures.

Research starting from the affirmative pluralism-approach focuses both on the diversity of identities and concerns – mostly addressed as ‘inclusivity’ – and on the ways different identities and concerns are discursively portrayed. In that sense, concerns about quantity and ratio are complemented with concerns about quality. ‘What we have to assess is what is being said and how’ (Ruiz et al., 2011: 465). Within affirmative pluralism- research, ‘quality’ has been linked to the use of arguments and rationality, among other requirements of ‘good debate’, like reaching consensus. ‘These attitudes require behaviors that adhere to a rational and ethical protocol for conversation; the discursive ethics proposed by Habermas offers a solid normative grounding’ (Ruiz et al., 2011: 466). Furthermore, different deliberative media studies look at media characteristics that either stimulate or impede a rational, qualitative debate. Nowadays, with the rise of the internet as an interactive space, an increasing number of scholars asserts the (ir)relevance of the internet for the facilitation of deliberation and the overcoming of social differences, by sampling for different blogs, commentary sections, online discussion forums, and so on (e.g., Wright and Street, 2007; Zhang et al., 2013).

Critical diversity

Inspired by the school of critical political economy, media pluralism interpreted as ‘critical diversity’ is illustrated by the metaphor of media as ‘cultural industries’. Conceptually, it follows the ideal of media as mirrors: It focuses on the neutral and truthful representation of pre-existing social diversity. However, normatively, it believes that society is characterized by structural inequalities – mostly economic – and that these inequalities negatively influence media representation. Moreover, concerned about structural constraints, political economy theorists argue for media regulation. Restrictions on the commercial organization of media organizations,

together with professional journalistic guidelines, must contribute to an objective representation of social heterogeneity and disputes.

Studies starting from a critical diversity-approach are like those inspired by the mirror-metaphor, also concerned about a balanced media representation of social diversity. However, instead of focusing solely on media content, their concern lays mainly with the commercial interests and mechanisms of media organizations and the routines of media practitioners, and how these determine the level of diversity within media coverage. Clearly, the research field is divided because of the unlimited range of structural characteristics. For example, regarding ownership, research can focus on ownership concentration (e.g., Hanretty, 2014), the agenda of owners (e.g., Anand et al., 2007), ownership structures (e.g., Yanich, 2010), or ownership limits (e.g., Horwitz, 2005). Apart from ownership, there are also examples of a focus on other structural characteristics such as the role of advertisers (e.g., Ellman and Germano, 2009) or more general studies including multiple variables (e.g., Valcke et al., 2009; Woods, 2007). Moreover, notwithstanding the large amount of empirical critical diversity-studies, results on the effects of structural characteristics on media content are often contradictory and ambiguous (Horwitz, 2005).

Critical pluralism

Inspired by both cultural studies and the agonistic school of democratic theory, the critical pluralism-approach is represented by the metaphor of media as 'sites of struggle' or 'fields of contestation'. Conceptually, the metaphor relates to the notion of 'pluralism': It is concerned with the discursive contestation of ideological viewpoints. Normatively, it believes society is marked by hegemonic ideological assumptions, which are either reproduced by or addressed and contested in media representation. To counter the often widespread hegemonic preferences in the commercial media market, this approach often looks to radical or alternative media for stimulating democratic debate.

Similar to the affirmative pluralism-approach, the critical pluralism-approach not only looks at the diversity of identities and concerns, but also at their discursive portrayal, and is therefore also concerned with the quality of the debate. However, quality is not linked to rationalism and consensus, but to ideological conflict, contestation, and dissent. 'Whereas deliberative research focuses on the amount and character of deliberation taking place within media coverage, the research question reorients to focus on contestation within and between discourse' (Dahlberg, 2007a: 838). In other words, critical pluralism-research is concerned about the performance of media in terms of the range of discourses – with a focus on the presence of counter-dominant discourses – and the mediated construction or presentation of these discourses, in terms of their discursive (de)legitimation (Phelan, 2007; Philo, 1995; Thetela, 2001). Furthermore, studies look at media characteristics that either stimulate or impede a democratic debate, distinguishing between whether an issue is framed as an ideological debate involving key political choices between genuine alternatives, or to the contrary, as a (predefined consensual) matter about which debate is counterproductive (Maesele, 2013; Maesele, 2015a; Raeijmaekers and Maesele, 2014).

Discussion

In this chapter, we have made media pluralism the object of investigation as a philosophic- theoretical concept, by distinguishing between different conceptual and normative assumptions about media, pluralism, and democracy. This resulted in the identification of four approaches to media pluralism about which we have showed how the perspective one takes steers the empirical choices and outcome, and consequently, revealed the ever present ideological nature of contrasting empirical benchmarks. However, we have neglected as yet to cross the bridge from this philosophic-theoretical exercise to the 'reality' of the 21st century socio-political context of Western democratic societies.

Since the last decades of the previous century, Western countries have all incorporated the liberal-aggregative model, in its political form of liberal democracy and economic form of global neoliberal capitalism, as the dominant form of governance. Often, it is even claimed to be the only 'right' form of governance (e.g., Offe, 2011: 447). However, so far, the 21st century has been rather ground-shaking for liberal democracies all over the world, politically, economically, socially, as well as ecologically. The global financial-economic crisis since 2008 in particular, with its numerous ramifications such as the massive unemployment numbers in some Southern European countries, has resulted not only in heavily contested austerity policies all over Europe and beyond, but also in a questioning of the neoliberal capitalist model as such. In combination with a rising distrust in parliamentary democracy for addressing existing problems, protest movements have come forward in many Western countries, such as the Indignados and Occupy movements. These multiple crises present us with tremendous democratic challenges.

To be able to address these democratic challenges, and the role of neoliberal principles in Western liberal democracies (e.g., marketization, privatization, deregulation, and liberalization) in specific, it is imperative to make them subject of a broad democratic debate. However, a number of political philosophers have characterized our era as 'postpolitical' or 'post-democratic', implying that ideological debate has been abandoned in favor of a 'de-politicized' technocratic management of social, economic, and ecological issues within the framework of an 'inevitable' hegemonic neoliberal project and global market forces (Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 1998; Žižek, 1999). This process of depoliticization has not resulted in the disappearance of ideological conflict in democratic societies, but in its rationalization and moralization: instead of a struggle between 'right and left', we are faced with a struggle between 'right and wrong', turning anyone who disagrees with this neoliberal consensus into a fundamentalist, traditionalist, or blind radical (Mouffe, 2005).

To allow a broad democratic debate on neoliberal principles, there is an urgent need for the contestation of these principles in multiple arenas. From our analysis, only the critical pluralism-approach comes forward as able to evaluate public discourse, and

media discourses in specific, on the extent to which a democratic debate on these principles is encouraged, with a legitimate expression of dissensus and different alternatives. The affirmative diversity and pluralism-approaches are unqualified in this respect, since a normative post-ideological framework underlies both approaches, and media are evaluated in terms of overcoming and neutralizing ideological conflict. The critical diversity approach on the other hand focuses not on ideological pluralism, but on the distorted representation of social diversity. Finally, this would imply that in light of current democratic challenges, it is imperative for communication scholars not only to acknowledge the agonistic school of democracy as a legitimate alternative to the liberal and deliberative schools, but also increasingly develop analytical frameworks based on its normative assumptions.

CHAPTER 2: BEYOND THE ANALYTICAL CONCEPT OF OBJECTIVITY

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Abstract

This chapter starts from the observation that the concept of objectivity, along with its twin sentries 'balance' and 'impartiality', is generally regarded as a cornerstone of journalism and, consequently, of journalism research. The aim of this chapter is to show that the analytical ideal of objectivity, instead of enabling, in fact inhibits media pluralism research. The first section focuses on unveiling the ideological nature of this ideal by relating it both socio-historically and analytically to a post-ideological and consensual understanding of society. Since we find this ideal only allowing for the evaluation of journalism *within* the limits of social consensus (pluralism 'within the box'), the second section seeks for alternative analytical concepts to evaluate journalism *about* and *beyond* the limits of social consensus (pluralism 'outside the box'). To illustrate the difference between both approaches, the popular concept of partisan media bias is juxtaposed to the alternative framework of de/politicization.

Keywords: consensus, hegemony, ideology, journalism studies, media pluralism, objectivity

Introduction

“If American journalism were a religion, as it has been called from time to time, its supreme deity would be ‘objectivity’. The high priests of journalism worship ‘objectivity’. (Mindich, 1998)”

As journalism has turned more professionalized over the last decades, the concept of ‘objectivity’ became significantly enshrined within media policies, newsroom routines, and journalism education.¹ The general idea behind the ideal of objectivity is that if journalists depersonalize and rationalize their practices and work according to routines in line with this ideal, they end up with the unbiased truth and a more or less mimetic representation of society. According to Schudson (2001), contemporary notions of objectivity can be dated back to the 1920s, when American journalists started to see themselves as an occupational community: ‘At this point [...] the objectivity norm became a fully formulated occupational ideal, part of a professional project or mission’ (pp. 161–162). Moreover, it ‘seemed a natural and progressive ideology for an aspiring occupational group at a moment when science was good, efficiency was cherished, and increasingly prominent elites judged partisanship a vestige of the tribal 19th century’ (Schudson, 2001: 162–163). Almost a century later, the value of objectivity is regarded as a cornerstone of journalism and ‘with no doubt the most sacred belief held among journalists worldwide’ (Nordenstreng, 1995: 115). It appears in relation with journalistic aims for facts, truth, and reality, which Zelizer (2004) calls the ‘journalistic god-terms’. These god-terms guide journalists in dealing with a number of issues and, most importantly, in how to arrive at an unbiased, socially diverse, and pluralistic public discourse. The chorus of pleas for diversity and pluralism in journalism is louder

¹ Compared to Europe, the ideal of objectivity has traditionally been more explicitly articulated within American journalism. According to Schudson (2011), “‘objectivity’ as a professional value in American journalism was already occupied in Europe by a self-understanding among journalists that they were high literary creators and cosmopolitan political thinkers’ (p78). So, although more implicitly, the objectivity norm can also be considered to be a cornerstone of European journalism – and of other journalistic cultures (e.g., Hafez, 2002). Furthermore, the ideal of objectivity has been instituted differently in press and broadcasting: whereas it has *gradually* become the norm in press coverage through changes in the *professional* culture of journalists, it was rather *quickly* turned into a *legal* obligation for broadcasting services (Curran, 2002).

and better orchestrated than ever before, and journalists today regard both as inevitable and desirable features of modern democracy (Deuze, 2005). In that sense, the ideal of objectivity sets a number of ethical guidelines, like ‘getting both sides of the story’ and ‘not favoring one side over the other’. These two guidelines are often operationalized into two essential components of objectivity: ‘balance’ and ‘impartiality’ (or ‘neutrality’). Given the widespread use of objectivity as a journalistic guideline, it is ‘not surprisingly then, academics have also adopted bias and objectivity as organizing concepts in many studies of journalism’ (Hackett, 1984: 230). Especially regarding pluralism and diversity, objectivity has become a cornerstone of studies on journalism as well: ‘Many critics of the media assume that there is a perfectly objective or fair way to represent each event in the world’ (Schudson, 2011: 27). Concerned with the extent to which journalistic representations mirror social diversity and pluralism, the primary objective of studies on objectivity is to compare the features of news output with concomitant features in reality (Van Zoonen, 1994).

Contrary to these popular assumptions however, the aim of this chapter is to show that analytical ideals of objectivity, balance, and impartiality, instead of enabling, in fact inhibit media pluralism research. Drawing from a diverse and disparate literature, we will demonstrate how the ideal of objectivity not only reflects and shapes a particular *assumed* social consensus (on specific socio-political issues) but also incorporates a genuine belief in social consensus *in itself* (as an ideological ideal). In this way, this chapter manifests the consequent limits of objectivity as an analytical concept.²

² The objectivity norm has been criticized many times before. Both Carpentier and Trioen (2010) and Skovsgaard et al. (2013) state these critical discourses differ on two levels. First, on a normative level, the attack on the objectivity norm is triple flanked: on the first flank, journalists are blamed for not meeting the requirements of the objectivity norm; on the second flank, critics write off objectivity as an illusion; and on the third flank, the objectivity norm is considered to be undesirable (Skovsgaard et al., 2013). Similarly, Carpentier and Trioen (2010) refer to Lichtenberg (2005) to distinguish three different claims regarding journalistic objectivity: ‘journalism *isn’t* objective’, ‘journalism *cannot* be objective’, and ‘journalism *shouldn’t* be objective’. This article can be situated within the third category. Second, on a conceptual level, a difference should be made between objectivity as a moral ideal and objectivity as a pragmatic and practical tool (Skovsgaard et al., 2013). In other words, between objectivity as a norm within journalistic ideology, and objectivity as embedded in journalistic practices (Carpentier and Trioen, 2010). This article focuses on the former.

The first section of this chapter is dedicated to unveiling the ideological nature of the ideal of objectivity. Initially, we ‘zoom out’ by looking at the socio-historical context in which this ideal gained prominence. In doing so, we observe a recurrent association between its popularity in media and journalism studies on one hand and the broader belief in a post-ideological and consensual understanding of society on the other. Contrarily, the notion is found to be criticized when ideology is ‘rediscovered’ and social consensus is interpreted as the product of hegemony. This observation is based on an analysis which includes the end-of-ideology thesis of both the present conjuncture (starting with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989) and the 1950s and 1960s. Hence, the postideological thesis *as such* is found to accompany objectivity-driven journalism studies, regardless of the political project it entails (i.e., social democracy or neoliberalism). Subsequently, we ‘zoom in’ by looking at the terminology of this ideal and, more specifically, its counterparts ‘balance’ and ‘impartiality’. We argue how these concepts are grounded in an understanding of society as post-ideological and consensual and, therefore, as characterized by hegemony and exclusion.

The second section of the chapter makes the contribution of formulating an alternative vocabulary that does enable media pluralism research beyond the limits of this ideal. Since the use of objectivity as an analytical ideal only allows for journalism – and its evaluation – *within* the limits of social consensus (pluralism ‘within the box’), it is argued how alternative analytical concepts need to allow for the evaluation of journalism *about* and *beyond* the limits of social consensus (pluralism ‘outside the box’). In other words, we need to move from a conceptualization that premises social consensus to an approach that acknowledges ideological contestation. To illustrate the difference between both approaches to pluralism and to provide a clear-cut example of the latter, the popular analytical concept of partisan media bias is juxtaposed to the alternative framework of de/politicization.

Before starting our argument, it is important to emphasize that our understanding of ideology does not lean toward what Thompson (1990) has called the ‘critical’ conceptions (e.g., classical Marxist interpretations), but toward the more ‘neutral’

conceptions (e.g., post-foundationalist interpretations). The former interpret ideology in terms of a distortion of the truth, aligned with the interests of the dominant groups in society. In this case, ideology is always misleading, illusory, or one-sided. We, however, find ourselves among the ‘neutral’ conceptions, which state that there is no such thing as absolute truth and believe that any representation of the world is always contingent. In that case, ideology is inherent to making sense of the world and to the construction of social identities in terms of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ (e.g., Howarth, 2000; Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). Moreover, it is not only used by dominant groups in their defense of the status quo but also necessary to subordinate groups in their struggle against the social order (Thompson, 1990). Ideological constructions only become problematic when they are no longer recognized as such but are naturalized as taken-for-granted truths. Resultantly, they are shielded from democratic discussion and contestation.

The ideological nature of objectivity

In this first section, we aim to show how the ideal of objectivity is linked to ideological assumptions about society and media. To this end, we follow a twofold approach. We start by zooming out and investigating the relation between the prominence of this ideal in journalism studies and specific socio-historical shifts, before zooming in and scrutinizing its terminology. Both approaches demonstrate that the ideal of objectivity is rooted within a particular worldview.

Socio-historical context: the popularity of objectivity

Interestingly, the ideal of objectivity has been criticized most substantively in the 1970s and 1980s (Hackett, 1984; Hall et al., 1978; Hartley, 1982; Van den Berg and Van der Veer, 1986; Verstraeten, 1980). In that sense, it is relevant to look at the broader sociohistorical context in which this ideal has either prospered or been criticized. Hall (1982), for instance, was the first to interpret a shift from mainstream to critical media

studies in the 1970s as part of a larger societal shift from a belief in ‘the end of ideology’ to the ‘rediscovery of ideology’ (p59).

The end-of-ideology thesis arose in the 1950s and 1960s, with a chorus of voices in Europe and the United States (e.g., Bell, 1968 [1960]; Lipset, 1968 [1960]) proclaiming and celebrating the intellectual de-vitalization of ideology in the organization of society (Jacoby, 1999). According to Waxman (1968: 5), the theorists who supported this thesis held two basic premises: the absence of ideological politics in modern industrial society and a positive value-judgment about this reality. More specifically, they stated that the old passions of Left and Right were spent and had lost their meaning in favor of a consensus on advanced capitalism, in the appearance of the Welfare State. The following quote by one of its most well-known spokesmen illustrates how this thesis was exactly interpreted in 1960:

“In the Western world, therefore, there is today a rough consensus among intellectuals on political issues: the acceptance of a Welfare State; the desirability of decentralized power; a system of mixed economy and of political pluralism. In that sense, too, the ideological age has ended. (Bell, 1968 [1960]: 99)”

This post-ideological understanding of society was backed by the credentials of social science, and vice versa. With no fundamental conflicts of value left, studies of society could now fully pursue the aspiration of objectivity and being pragmatic. Scholars were found to take a positivist stance, assuming the existence of an independent reality which can be accessed through the method of scientific enquiry. They preferred ‘how to’ questions – questions of quantification – over value questions – the so-called soft questions (Novak, 1968). According to Hall (1982: 61), such a positivist social scientific model put forward as a starting point for journalism studies the idea of media as non-ideological and their messages as empty linguistic constructs. Indeed, influenced by classic liberal theory and the idea of media as the Fourth estate, a new academic orthodoxy arose which stated that post-war news media had only very limited power (Curran, 2002). Resultantly, ‘the methods of coding and processing a vast corpus of

messages in an objective and empirically-verifiable way (content analysis) were vastly sophisticated and refined'. Academics focused first and foremost on manifest journalistic content. On the other hand, 'conceptually, the media message as a symbolic sign vehicle or a structured discourse, with its own internal structuration and complexity, remained theoretically wholly undeveloped' (Hall, 1982: 61).

However, the end-of-ideology thesis took a beating at the end of the 1960s and, most prominently, in the 1970s and 1980s (Jacoby, 1999). These were decades that seemed to be characterized by the proliferation of ideologies – civil rights movements, black power, feminism, and so on – under the label of a New Left: 'The existence of a "New Left" struggling with the intellectual and organizational problems of non-revolutionary radicalism indicates that ideology has not ended' (Haber, 1968: 195). Consequently, the former social consensus – on the Welfare State – was no longer treated as a reality, but as the product of hegemony (Haber, 1968; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985): 'A rosier picture was never painted. And, perhaps, neither a more misleading one' (Hodges, 1968 [1967]: 373). Over the years, the ideological nature of the social consensus on the Welfare State was more and more recognized. Or, as Hall (1982: 63) describes it:

"[Social order was no longer] expressively revealed in the spontaneous 'agreement to agree on fundamentals' of the vast majority [...]. Social order now looked like a rather different proposition. It entailed the enforcement of social, political and legal discipline. It was articulated to that what existed: to the given dispositions of class, power and authority: to the established institutions of society. This recognition radically problematized the whole notion of 'consensus'."

In these times of the 'rediscovery of ideology', the field of journalism studies changed as well. No longer were news media believed to be simply reflective mirrors of an already achieved consensus, but instead they were considered to reproduce those very definitions of the situation which favored and legitimated the existing structure of things. Resultantly, 'a whole new conception of the symbolic practices through which this process of signification was sustained intervened in the innocent garden of

“content analysis” (Hall, 1982: 64). Now, the message had to be analyzed, ‘not in terms of its manifest “message,” but in terms of its ideological structuration’ (Hall, 1982: 64). In that sense, a positivist stance was left in favor of a constructivist approach which was oriented toward the encompassing role of ideology in fundamentally shaping news content, values and practices³ (Van Dijk, 2009). Consequently, the question was no longer *if* social consensus was reflected, but *how* and *why*. In that sense, ‘the utility of bias and objectivity as conceptual tools in the analysis of the media’s ideological functioning [was] increasingly called into question’ (Hackett, 1984: 230). Although the question of media objectivity continued to inspire research and debate, media scholars were increasingly drawing on terms such as ‘hegemony’ and ‘common sense’, which were reflective of the ‘Gramsci boom’ in social science and journalism studies (Sassoon, 1988). In sum, the media critique of the 1970s and 1980s on the concept of objectivity can be understood as part of a larger social paradigm shift from a ‘neutral’ post-ideological understanding of society to the questioning of social consensus and the rediscovery of ideology.

Interestingly, a similar social paradigm shift has taken place during the most recent decades. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the end-of-ideology thesis has revived (Jacoby, 1999), although this time not in the appearance of a social-democratic consensus but as a neoliberal one. For many, this event symbolized the ultimate triumph of Western capitalism over Eastern communism. For instance, it inspired Fukuyama to write his much debated article *Have we reached the end of history?* (1989), which resulted in his (in)famous book *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992). In both writings, Fukuyama claims the exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism. Therefore, the fall of the Berlin Wall ‘is not just the end of the Cold War [...], but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government’ (Fukuyama, 1989: 2). According to Fukuyama, and many others besides him, Western societies have again overcome fundamental

³ Here, it is crucial to state that not all constructivist research has a critical orientation. For example, within media framing research, the analytical concept of frames might be reduced to mere story topics, attributes, or issue positions. In that case, scholars do not pay attention and/or question the ideological origin and implications of frames (Maesele, 2010).

ideological left–right conflicts and have found a new social consensus in the neoliberal project, symbolized by Margaret Thatcher’s well-known ‘There is no alternative’ slogan. As ideology had no more role to play, conflicts could be resolved in a rational way, either by the market or by experts. Remarkably, despite youth protest movements such as the so-called antiglobalization movement in the late 1990s, or the Occupy and Indignados movements a decade later, the assumptions of neoliberalism have remained largely undisputed in mainstream public discourse in the West.

Nonetheless, in academia, a number of critical scholars – labeled as difference democrats (e.g., Young, 1996), radical democrats (e.g., Honig, 1993), agonistic democrats (e.g., Mouffe, 2005, 2013), and so on – have been found to identify and criticize this (neoliberal) consensus as an ideological and hegemonic practice. They claim that what is happening today is not the disappearance of ideological conflict – that is, the arrival of public consensus – but the rationalization and moralization of conflict in liberal democratic societies. In place of a struggle between ‘right and left’, we are faced with a struggle between ‘right and wrong’, turning anyone who disagrees with the neoliberal consensus into a fundamentalist, traditionalist, or blind radical (Mouffe, 2005). In that sense, they argue that every consensus is always at least partially the result of ideological domination and exclusion (Dahlberg, 2007a).

However, within the fields of media and journalism studies, and with regard to the concept of objectivity more specifically, the recent and ongoing ‘rediscovery of ideology’ has not yet had a major impact. In this regard, a recent paper speculates⁴ about why ‘ideology critique of the sort Hall advocated all but disappeared’, without any signs of revival despite the present conjuncture with ‘new heights of depredation in the neoliberal order’ (Downey et al., 2014: 2). In line with a general continuing belief in social consensus, social science continues to adopt a positivistic scholarly paradigm, relying on notions of truth, fact, and objectivity (Jones, 2013). Regarding journalism

⁴ Following Duggan (2003), the authors interpret the lack of ideology critique as a consequence of a general retreat of left-wing perspectives in academia. They see this political retrenchment accommodated in academic research through the rise and current predominance of a type of identity-based politics which negates questions about capitalism and economic inequality (Downey et al., 2014).

studies on pluralism, this paradigm again underlies the mainstream approach of content analysis, which is not only primarily descriptive and characterized by its supposed systematic, scientific objectivity but also mainly concerned with paying attention to manifest content and with asking quantitative questions about how far journalistic representations mirror social actuality (Taylor and Willis, 1999).

Analytical concepts: the terminology of objectivity

The influence of a post-ideological worldview on the popularity of the ideal of objectivity has already been suggested by previous academics, like Hall. However, this chapter aims to take the argument one step further by arguing how a post-ideological worldview – with a deep belief in social consensus – also resides within the terminology of the objectivity norm.

Balance and impartiality are generally considered as the central components of this ideal (Entman, 1989; Hackett, 1984; Verstraeten, 1980; Westerståhl, 1983⁵ in Carpentier, 2005). Respectively, the concepts refer to processes of selection and processes of interpretation, to what/who is covered and the character of that coverage. The balance norm refers to an equal – or inclusive, fair, harmonious – coverage of different identities and concerns in society: ‘Balance requires that reports present the views of legitimate spokespersons of the conflicting sides in any significant dispute, and provide both sides with roughly equivalent attention’ (Entman, 1989: 30). The opponent of balance, that is, selection bias, then refers to a distorted sample of reality. For example, Lin et al. (2011) state that ‘regardless of a positive or negative stance towards an entity, an imbalanced quantity in coverage is itself a form of bias’ (p4). By making balance a norm for objective journalistic coverage, the underlying assumption then is that society – as ultimate benchmark for a mimetic media representation – is balanced as well. A society that is relatively equal and harmonious

⁵ Actually, Westerståhl (1983 in Carpentier, 2005) has identified six components of objectivity: he distinguishes two basic dimensions of objectivity: factuality and impartiality. Both consist of two components. Factuality’s components are relevance and truth(fulness) and impartiality’s components are balance and neutrality. However, we choose to focus on ‘balance’ and ‘neutrality’ (renamed as ‘impartiality’) because these are recurring concepts in both traditional and critical literature on media objectivity and pluralism.

is exactly the sort of society that the post-ideological thesis proclaims: '[it] represents society as if there are no major cultural or economic breaks, no major conflicts of interests between classes and groups; whatever disagreements exist, it is said, there are legitimate and institutionalized means for expressing and reconciling them' (Hall et al., 1978: 55). Thus, it is believed that although society is characterized by competition and conflict, a harmonious society is possible because all parties are considered to be reasonable. The balance norm aims for this reasonable harmony and therefore relates to a broader basic framework of agreement or consensus. Indeed, '[t]he bread and butter of news is conflict, violence, rivalry and disagreement. But for all these negatives to be newsworthy, a prior assumption of the "underlying" consensus to which they are a threat must be at work' (Hartley, 1982: 83). In other words, while the bread and butter of news might be conflict, its basic ingredient is consensus. In sum, by starting from a representation of society as if there are no major insurmountable conflicts of interest, the notion of balance premises a relatively harmonious and consensual society.

Second, the notion of impartiality refers to a detached or factual dealing with contrasting claims, frames, interpretations, and problem definitions. This means that journalists refrain from ideological or emotional judgment or value-laden reporting and only use facts and rational arguments to build their story (Entman, 1989; Schudson, 2001). It is contrasted with the notion of presentation bias, which refers to a distorted view of reality. For example, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2006) argue that in essence every news article is based on the same set of underlying facts, 'yet by selective omission, choice of words, and varying credibility ascribed to the primary source, each conveys a radically different impression of what actually happened' (p281). Again, such an idealization of impartial journalistic coverage reflects a post-ideological view of society, in which detached procedures and rational debate are essential for social consensus. For people to agree upon social decisions, they have to move beyond passions and emotions. Either conflicting interests and values are reconciled by experts through technical knowledge and impartial procedures (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1994) or by citizens who engage in rational debate over common problems, resulting in a critically informed public opinion that can guide decision-

makers in reaching consensus (Benhabib, 1996; Habermas, 1996). Such postideological ideals of resolving conflicts in a rational way reside within the ideal functioning of news media and the benchmark of neutral coverage. Journalism – as ‘mirror’ of social debate or as ‘public forum’ for social debate – is expected to adapt to this kind of impartial discourse in order to allow for further social consensus. In sum, the concepts of balance and impartiality clearly reflect the condition of a relative social equality between individuals and groups (and between and within regions), which implies that roughly similar material and immaterial opportunities and means are enjoyed by each and every individual.

However, critical media scholars, both in the 1970s–1980s and more recently, have pointed at the ideological implications of blindly adopting the concepts of objectivity (e.g., Carpentier and Cammaerts, 2006; Dahlberg, 2005, 2007a; Hackett, 1984; Hall et al., 1978; Hartley, 1982; Taylor and Willis, 1999; Van den Berg and Van der Veer, 1986; Verstraeten, 1980). First, these authors argue how the consensual logic of balance and impartiality is applied in a context of power asymmetries and structural inequalities, which is hardly ever adequately recognized by journalists and scholars who use the concepts. Second, these latter also neglect the fact that all framing of meaning – including what it means to be objective, balanced, or impartial – necessarily creates and reproduces exclusion:

“As a discourse, both social scientists and journalists aren’t just directing inquires. They ontologically define what constitutes the objects of study (and what doesn’t), how these objects will be studied (and how not), what it means to know them (or not), and what will be seen as valuable (and what will not). (Jones, 2013: 6)”

Balance and impartiality cannot be regarded as ‘neutral’ or ‘universal’ concepts since they are interpreted in terms of an assumed consensus about which identities and concerns are relevant or acceptable to the public interest. These norms imply a construction of the news in terms of dominant groups and beliefs, excluding those that are ‘outside’ the established social consensus:

“In other words, it involves a struggle for cultural domination, for hegemony. This struggle leads to a differentiation between the dominant discourses that achieve authoritative status and subordinate discourses that are marginalized or even silenced [...]. So consensus over the boundaries of discourse, and any consensus resulting from deliberations within these boundaries, is always intertwined with asymmetrical power relations and a struggle for domination. (Dahlberg, 2007a: 835)”

In that sense, balance and impartiality, as counterparts of the widely adopted notion of objectivity, create and reproduce particular inside/outside assumptions: the former regarding which identities and concerns are legitimate/illegitimate to participate in social debates, the latter regarding which forms of communication are legitimate/illegitimate to persuade others of those positions. Indeed, the balance norm refers to giving space to various sides of a debate as long as they are reasonable. Inevitably, the identification of ‘reasonable’ positions also implies the identification of ‘extreme’ positions: ‘Groups outside the consensus are seen as deviant and marginal, be they skinheads or strikers’ (Hartley, 1982: 83). However, this naming of one position as ‘irrational’ or ‘extreme’ and another as ‘reasonable’ or ‘neutral’ is highly ideological in that it promotes the status quo definition of what is irrational or extreme and what is reasonable and neutral (Dahlberg, 2007b). Similarly, the impartiality norm favors a particular ‘legitimate’ form of communication, namely, ‘one that encourages representational accuracy, logical coherence, and a dispassionate contestation of opinion’ (Dahlberg, 2005: 113). In essence, this comes down to Western high-culture masculine communication (Young, 1996). Consequently, participants whose naturalized modes of communication are closer to what is deemed legitimate will be advantaged over those who hold other styles of communication, the so-called tittle-tattle in the margins or passionate individual expressions without much value (Cammaerts, 2009; Dahlberg, 2007a): ‘The reasonableness can be used to exclude the “irrational” (for example, “emotional” women or the “loony left”), producing a “reason- based” debate that reaches conclusions that are conveniently congenial to “civilized” people’ (Curran, 2002: 237). In that way, a frontier is drawn between

legitimate and illegitimate forms of discourse, thereby excluding particular worldviews. So, also the impartiality norm is considered to be highly ideological.

In conclusion, the terminology of objectivity both reflects and shapes an assumed social consensus. Or as Fowler (1991) expresses it, ‘from a broader perspective, [news] reflects, and in return shapes, the prevailing values of a society in a particular historical context’ (p222).

Toward an alternative analytical vocabulary

By now, we have demonstrated that the notion of objectivity is rooted within a paradigm of social consensus, both socio-historically and analytically. Thus, the analysis of news media is taking place within a broader basic framework of consensus and within the conventional understandings⁶ of society: ‘It is not the vast pluralistic range of voices which the media are sometimes held to represent, but a range *within certain distinct ideological limits*’ (Hall et al., 1978: 59). In that sense, we can state that the ideal of objectivity only allows for evaluating pluralism ‘within the box’, that is, *within* the limits of existing social consensus. We start this paragraph by illustrating this using the popular concept of partisan media bias. Subsequently, we begin with a search for alternative analytical concepts that allow to evaluate journalism *about* and *beyond* the limits of social consensus (i.e., pluralism ‘outside the box’). Since this implies moving from a conceptualization that premises social consensus to an approach that acknowledges ideological contestation, both in terms of its scope and form, the framework of de/politicization is put forward as a potential alternative.

⁶ Dahlberg (2007a: 840) formulates this as follows: ‘Certainly, bringing difference together through the mass media may promote social stability. However, these media support social stability not because they provide for democratic debate but because, as shown by decades of critical media research, they draw societal voices into largely homogeneous communicative spaces bound by dominant discourse.’

From pluralism ‘within the box’ ...

Although journalism research these days primarily starts from a post-ideological understanding of society, the notion of ideology is not absent in positivist empirical studies. Mostly, it is analyzed as ‘ideological bias’ or ‘partisan bias’ since ‘[i]t is partisan bias in the news which has attracted the most public interest and attention’ (D’Alessio and Allen, 2000: 134). The partisan media bias approach is characterized by quantitative content analyses into the extent of unbalanced and partisan political coverage, which is operationalized as the varying levels of attention for specific politicians, political parties, or policy positions in specific news outlets (Groeling, 2013; Groseclose and Milyo, 2005). However, such an approach allows media researchers to only gain insights about pluralism ‘within the box’. To start with, the partisan bias approach adopts a limited understanding of ‘ideology’: it explicitly focuses on politicians, political parties, and exclusively politically driven issues, that is, the field of institutional politics. Quite revealing in this regard is the following motivation by D’Alessio and Allen (2000) in a paper reporting on a meta-analysis of studies on partisan media bias: ‘Unlike opinions on the nature of the economy, where it would appear that there is a large preference among Americans for capitalism rather than communism, opinions on political matters are widely divergent’ (p134). Not only does this imply that the economy is excluded as a ‘political matter’ but also that the benchmark for evaluating the level of ideological pluralism in news coverage is dependent on the ideological divergence between political parties. Moreover, this latter category is generally restricted to those parties with most parliamentary seats. For example, in American studies on partisan media bias, the classic aim that news media should strictly reflect the outcome of social consensus can be found in the implicit or explicit definition of fair coverage as the equal treatment of Republicans and Democrats, which comes down to a 50/50 coverage or a coverage that is in line with the number of seats each party possesses:

“Although no one expects there to be no biased statements in 100% of reports, a 50-50 breakdown of them would be indicative of a deliberate attempt to

achieve balance, and thus deviations from the 50-50 pattern would arguably be an indication of bias of some kind. (Groeling, 2013: 143)”

Clearly, the notion of partisan bias is rooted within a framework of objectivity and social consensus: pluralism is not interpreted as a matter of conflicting values, norms, and political preferences vis-a-vis a given social and political order, but about the disagreements which are allowed *within* that given social and political order. Or, to put it simply, about those issues that Democrats and Republicans choose to disagree about. In other words, since the analytical concept of partisan media bias excludes those matters where there is ideological convergence between both parties (say, global neoliberal capitalism and American imperialism), it only allows for evaluating pluralism ‘within the box’, that is, *within* the limits of existing social consensus. In the end, such an approach to media pluralism does not appropriately take into account the democratic role of news media (definitely not in times of global economic and geopolitical crisis, like we are experiencing since the start of the financial–economic crisis in 2008). It does not allow for a genuine democratic debate among citizens as ideological issues are monopolized by politics and political parties and framed within the status quo. Therefore, it is imperative to evaluate the level of media debate using a conceptual framework that allows for pluralism ‘outside the box’.

... to pluralism ‘outside the box’

The objectivity benchmark should not only be challenged because of the ideological limits it sets, but foremost because of the fact that these limits are not perceived as such. Rules of objectivity reflect and shape an assumed social consensus about a hegemonic ideological project, while simultaneously disguising or camouflaging its ideological character. This is most problematic since ideology is at its strongest when it is no longer defined and perceived as such, when its assumptions and preferences appear evident and logical, that is, hegemonic or depoliticized (Atton, 2002; Maesele, 2013). Therefore, ‘no longer objectivity can be taken as the opposite of ideology in the media, if indeed the forms and rhetoric of objectivity help to reproduce dominant political frameworks’ (Hackett, 1984: 253). In that sense, we are urgently in need of

news analysis about and beyond the limits of objectivity and social consensus, that is, for pluralism ‘outside the box’. Clearly, such a shift in journalism studies requires breaking with traditional assumptions and approaches. As Downey et al. (2014) argue, ‘[...] if ideology critique is going to have any purchase, if it is to change hearts and minds in the field, then a more fully worked-out theoretical and methodological approach will be necessary’ (p6). Therefore, we choose to make this exercise both regarding specific assumptions about society (normative assumptions) and how these are operationalized toward journalism (analytical concepts).

First, regarding normative assumptions, we have shown that the notion of media objectivity is rooted within a belief in ideological harmony – ‘the end of ideology’ – and the ideal of social consensus. However, such an understanding of society does not recognize the irrefutable presence of the ideological limits to a consensus and, more specifically, the involved mechanisms of exclusion: ‘There is always an “outside” to discourse, a set of meanings, practices, identities and social relations, which is defined by exclusion and against which discursive boundaries are drawn’ (Dahlberg, 2007a: 835). Obviously, the recognition of such an ‘outside’ is essential to arrive at and evaluate pluralism ‘outside the box’. If we accept that society is inevitably marked by conflict and asymmetries of power and that every social order is the result of hegemonic practices, dominance, and exclusion, then this implies that we need to start from a framework with ideological hegemony (instead of harmony) and contestation (instead of consensus) as basic concepts. Following such an interpretation, consensus is perceived as the temporary result of a provisional hegemony, which, from a perspective of pluralist democratic politics, is – and must be – continuously questioned (Mouffe, 2005). Contestation⁷, on the other hand, refers to how we can only speak of

⁷ However, inevitably, we are faced with questions such as ‘is there not a point at which healthy diversity turns into unhealthy dissonance?’ (McLennan, 1995 in Karppinen, 2007: 12). Certainly, not all viewpoints should be respected, specifically those that refuse to accept the existence of other differences and the pluralization of lifestyles (Dahlberg, 2007a: 833). In line with this thinking, Mouffe (2005, 2013) introduces the notion of ‘conflictual consensus’. She acknowledges that dissensus is with no doubt necessary, but it must always be accompanied by a certain level of consensus. Consensus is needed on the ‘ethico-political’ values that are at the basis of liberal democracy and its constitutive institutions – like liberty, equality, and fraternity – but there will always be disagreement concerning the meaning of these values and the way they should be implemented (Mouffe, 2013: 8).

pluralism when there is a confrontation between clearly differentiated ideological positions.

Second, regarding analytical concepts, it is necessary to replace the widely adopted benchmark of objectivity with the identification of ideology in order to reflect on media pluralism ‘outside the box’: ‘In any theory which seeks to explain both the monopoly of power and the diffusion of consent, the question of the place and role of ideology becomes absolutely pivotal’ (Hall, 1982: 86). Journalism should not be evaluated on the extent it leaves out – thus, camouflages – ideological positions, but on the extent to which it makes these ideological positions explicit: ‘It is important for audiences to be shown that there are different views; people should not be told “this is *the* correct interpretation”; there are always different interpretations’ (Mouffe in Carpentier and Cammaerts, 2006: 973). Therefore, the notion of objectivity and its counterparts ‘balance’ and ‘impartiality’ should be reconsidered in favor of a terminology that benchmarks ideological contestation. Indeed, to change dominant modes of thinking, we are in need of an alternative analytical vocabulary: a new language outside the confines of the old paradigm is precisely the way to break boundaries and shape new understandings (Jones, 2013).

Only a small number of scholars have recently been found to start from the concepts of ideology and contestation in their analysis of pluralism in news reporting, regarding both the range of positions in media debates and particular modes of communication (e.g., Dahlberg, 2005, 2007a; Phelan, 2007). Although these studies provide valuable theoretical insights, they often lack a systematic methodological framework for news research. To encourage a genuine shift in journalism research to pluralism ‘outside the box’, we put forward our recent work on de/politicization as a well-developed analytical tool for investigating news discourse⁸ (Maesele, 2015c; Maesele et al.,

⁸ It concerns a ‘multiperspectival approach’ (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002), combining elements of both discourse theory (DT) and critical discourse analysis (CDA). Although we share DT’s political–philosophical framework on the role of ideology, conflict, and democracy in society (e.g., Mouffe), we lean more toward CDA’s view on discourse and social construction. In general, DT holds a rather radical form of social constructivism: it rejects any distinction between linguistic and material practices and emphasizes how phenomena or objects can only acquire meaning within a discourse (Carpentier and Cammaerts, 2006; Phelan and Dahlberg, 2011).

2015; Pepermans and Maesele, 2014; Raeijmaekers and Maesele, 2014). In its attempt to rethink the evaluation of journalistic practices to account for whether these are found to either encourage or impede a broad democratic and pluralist debate on specific social issues, this work focuses on ideological contestation in news coverage, both in terms of its scope and form. On one hand, a concern about the scope of ideological contestation critically questions the balance norm, as it makes clear that what is at stake is the confrontation of differentiated ideological positions (or the absence of it). For each respective social issue, this requires the identification of the range of positions with regard to the relevant ideological conflicts that underlie the issue. Hence, the concept of ideological ‘fault lines’ is introduced as a heuristic tool, representing a struggle between competing analyses about what constitutes progress with regard to specific political–ideological categories (Carvalho, 2007). For instance, in their work on genetically modified food, the relevant two fault lines concerned the techno–environmental (i.e., the role of science and technology in nature and society) and economic fault line (i.e., the role of the market in society). In their work on the Belgian government formation, the latter fault line was found relevant in addition to the ethnic–linguistic fault line (i.e., the relationship between regional and federal levels of government). On the other hand, a concern about the form and articulation of contestation critically questions the impartiality norm. By focusing on which specific ideological preferences are either politicized or depoliticized, this framework acknowledges and allows to reveal the strategies of inclusion and exclusion at work. Processes of depoliticization are qualified as impeding democratic–ideological debate since these refer to discursive strategies which distinguish legitimate from illegitimate actors and demands, based on the assumption of an existing moral or rational consensus. Instead of considering ‘rational’ or ‘moral’ argumentation as a neutral – and therefore the only legitimate – mode of communication, it is understood as a

Thus, it sees all social reality as discursive. CDA, on the other hand, understands semiotic practices such as language and images as different from – but dialectically related to – other social practices (Phelan and Dahlberg, 2011; Wodak and Meyer, 2009). Consequently, it believes that discourses not only (re-)shape social relations and events but are also shaped by society. Such a mild form of social constructivism explicitly acknowledges the social/political/ cultural context in which discourses operate. In that sense, CDA’s discursive approach perfectly fits our analytical framework, as we aim to reveal how news coverage simultaneously reflects and constructs (an assumed consensus about) a particular social order.

particular discursive strategy to shift the site of struggle from ideological contestation between alternative futures to a struggle between 'rational' and 'irrational' (mostly interpreted as 'scientific' and 'unscientific', or 'economic' and 'uneconomic') or between 'good' and 'evil'. This is qualified as impeding democratic debate since it stigmatizes certain actors and demands as enemies of an existing consensus and, in so doing, acts in the service of concealing rather than revealing what is stake. On the other hand, processes of politicization are qualified as encouraging democratic–ideological debate. Instead of amplifying a moral or rational consensus, these refer to discursive strategies which reveal conflicting assumptions, values, and interests underlying conflicting positions. Relating these to alternative worldviews creates the discursive space for a broad, pluralist democratic debate between these worldviews, and as a result, about and beyond the limits of social consensus, thus, for pluralism 'outside the box'. Politicization then refers to a logic of contestation, while depoliticization refers to a logic of consensus. Regarding the analyses of news coverage on (1) genetically modified food and (2) the Belgian government formation, democratic–ideological debate was found to be restricted or even absent in mainstream, commercialized newspapers: the outlets predominantly made use of depoliticizing discursive strategies to present particular projects and reforms as inevitable and natural developments.

Despite these examples, there is still an urgent need for further theorization and empirical testing of this 'outside the box'-framework. As Hall (1982) already mentioned in the 1980s, 'the critical paradigm is by no means fully developed; nor is it in all respects theoretically secure. Extensive empirical work is required to demonstrate the adequacy of its explanatory terms, and to refine, elaborate and develop its infant insights' (p88). Remarkably, not much has changed in the last three decades, despite the enormous democratic challenges of our times, not in the least the financial–economic crisis and its ramifications since 2008 and the events in the Arab World. In this regard, we sincerely hope this chapter serves as a wake-up call.

CHAPTER 3: THE FRAMEWORK OF AGONISTIC MEDIA

PLURALISM

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Abstract

Mainstream news media have been criticized for serving as marketing agents of establishment ideas and elite voices. In response, this chapter introduces an analytical framework of agonistic media pluralism that enables an evaluation of media discourse on whether it opens or closes the space for a democratic debate about and beyond established social structures and ways of life. Theoretically, this framework draws from post-foundational political thought, agonistic democratic theory, and post-politics. Methodologically, it consists of a critical discourse analysis that combines four levels of analysis: the ideological conflict underlying a social issue, the scope and form of media discourse, the ideological culture of a media outlet, and the level of agonistic pluralism in a media landscape. Special attention is paid to how particular discursive strategies either open (i.e., cultivate or politicize) or close (i.e., depoliticize) a debate. It concludes by sketching some future research avenues.

Keywords: agonistic pluralism, depoliticization, ideology, media discourse, media pluralism, news, politicization, post-politics

Introduction

Already in 1970, the singer-songwriter Rodriguez sang, ‘Opened the window to listen to the news, but all I heard was the establishment’s blues’. At this juncture in time, it is quite a common practice to express dissatisfaction with how issues and events are represented in and by media. Professional-commercialized news media, generally referred to as ‘the mainstream media’, are being criticized from both the Left and the Right. On the Left, a traditional concern has been the role of mainstream media discourse in the consolidation of the hegemony of the neoliberal project (e.g., Hall et al., 2013; Phelan, 2014). For example, in the context of the global financial–economic crisis, mainstream news media in Europe have been criticized for failing to put forward any other responses than austerity (e.g., Schifferes et al., 2017). More recently, on the Far Right, it has become custom among politicians such as Donald Trump (United States) or Marine Le Pen (France) to refer to mainstream news media as ‘fake news’ and as the ‘dishonest’ and ‘liberal’ media who are simply ‘mouthpieces of the establishment’. Similarly, the German Islamophobic movement Pegida has repopularized the term ‘Lügenpresse’ from the Nazi propaganda handbook. In other words, mainstream news media have been characterized as echo chambers of establishment ideas and elite voices. Rather than contributing to a pluralistic public space that promotes and facilitates public scrutiny, discussion, and reflection about (alternatives to) established societal structures and ways of life, these examples illustrate how media are perceived to serve as marketing agents of the establishment instead. Thus, despite the professionalization of (Western) news media over the last decades, and the anchoring of journalistic norms and values such as objectivity, balance, and impartiality across newsrooms, there is a widespread feeling that only particular ideas and voices are (fairly) represented.

This context calls on media scholars to provide the tools for analyzing media discourse on the extent to which it indeed impedes or facilitates debate about the established social and political order. The aim of this chapter is to answer this call by putting forward an analytical framework of agonistic media pluralism. This framework combines an extensive engagement with contemporary debates in political philosophy

and democratic theory – and more particularly agonistic democratic theory – with rigorous social–scientific research into media practices and products. Furthermore, it builds on our previous work in two ways. First, in two recent conceptual papers, we argued that both liberal and deliberative notions of media pluralism (Raeijmaekers and Maesele, 2015a), as well as the analytical ideal of ‘objectivity’ (in tandem with ‘balance’ and ‘impartiality’; Raeijmaekers and Maesele, 2015b), fail to reveal the ways in which media discourse opens/closes a debate *about* and *beyond* established social structures and ways of life. Indeed, what this requires is an agonistic approach that premises, rather than overcomes or neutralizes, ideological contestation. Second, in a series of empirical case studies (e.g., Maesele et al., 2017; Pepermans and Maesele, 2014), we have found the analytical concepts of depoliticization and politicization to serve this objective well. The framework that has been developed on the basis of these previous studies will be laid out in this chapter, both in theoretical and methodological terms.

In the first part, we explain how the above account of the establishment blues ruling the airwaves relates to what in political philosophy has been interpreted as a post-political zeitgeist, that is, the idea that there is no alternative to the established social and political order. Subsequently, we rely on Mouffe’s concept of agonistic pluralism for understanding which discursive mechanisms are responsible for this process of depoliticization. In the second part of the chapter, we translate these discursive mechanisms into ready-made empirical tools for an analytical framework that allows us to evaluate media discourse on whether it opens or closes the space for a democratic debate on status quo ideological preferences, or put differently, for agonistic media pluralism. In the discussion, we conclude by sketching some future research avenues. More particularly, we discuss how this framework can be put to work in terms of establishing the extent of agonistic media pluralism in 21st-century media landscapes, both with regard to mainstream, professional-commercialized news media and potential alternative spaces, such as alternative/radical news platforms, news satire, or popular television culture in general.

From post-politics to agonistic pluralism

Post-politics and depoliticization

The idea that (mediated) public discourse in this current juncture is characterized first and foremost by the establishment blues, and that moreover, there is a lack of mainstream channels for challenging these status quo ideas and discourses, has been confirmed by a number of political philosophers who have identified the existence of a post-political zeitgeist (e.g., Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 1995; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014; Žižek, 2002). This refers to how the existent stage in economico-political development has come to be perceived as the inevitable framework within which to manage all public affairs, that is, the common sense claim that there is no (ideological) alternative (to neoliberal globalization and the liberal–capitalist order). Put differently, how potential alternatives to the established societal structures and ways of life are generally put forward as beyond reasonable doubt. In that sense, the aim of democratic politics has come to be defined in terms of consensus and conciliation, and as a result, as overcoming conflict and contestation. Such a view is sustained by the belief in the potentiality of a universal rational consensus, with experts reconciling conflicting interests and values through technocratic management, ‘objective’ procedures and technical knowledge (Maesele, 2015b; Mouffe, 2005; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). It refers to how politicians from centre left to centre right have come to define their policies as a matter of ‘good governance’ rather than an expression of ideological preferences. This post-ideological imagery gained traction especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall and came to be known as thirdway centrist politics, that is, the idea that ‘[t]he market and state should now work together [...] in a new entrepreneurial spirit to guarantee better economic *and* social outcomes’ (Phelan, 2014: 51, emphasis in the original; see also Hall, 2011). The result, however, was that ‘[m]arket and state were “reconciled,” but in a fashion that privileged the former and neoliberalized the latter’ (Phelan, 2014: 53). In this regard, Phelan argues how today’s hegemonic ideological formation has taken the form of an ideologically and politically disinterested project, grounded as it were in a practical ethics and concerned only with economic efficiency and productivity, rather than with any

political or ideological principles. In substance, however, the entrenchment of neoliberal political rationality has been ever growing. This ‘post-political condition’ has been demonstrated in case studies on social, economic, environmental, and journalistic matters (e.g., Goeminne, 2010; Gregory, 2006; Phelan, 2014; Pickering, 2001; Swyngedouw, 2010; Wodak, 2011).

These analyses have their origins in post-foundational political theory (Marchart, 2007; Wingenbach, 2011). Post-foundationalism argues that any established social order (i.e., ‘hegemony’) is always shaped by particular ideological conceptions that demarcate the possibilities and limits of everyday practice. These political foundations¹ can always be contested and transformed, because of their inherent contingent and historical nature. However, when their contingent and historical nature is concealed or misrecognized, and there is an attempt to establish a *final* foundation, then we speak of depoliticization. Depoliticization concerns not only the concealment of those particular politico-ideological values, perspectives and choices that underlie a social order and shape its politics, but also – and more importantly – the misrecognition of the fact that *any* social order is *always* the provisional product and expression of a particular configuration of power relations. Indeed, once society’s ideological nature has been made invisible, the established social order comes to be defined in terms of necessity and fate. In that sense, postpolitics refers to a particular kind of depoliticization, one that applies to the current juncture in the West. A recent example in this regard has been the general delegitimization in mainstream media reporting of Jeremy Corbyn – from the conservative press over the public broadcaster *BBC* to the progressive *The Guardian* – who was elected as Leader of Britain’s Labour Party on a platform that explicitly defied neoliberalism (Cammaerts et al., 2016; Media Reform Coalition, 2016). Ultimately, the misrecognition of society’s political foundations and the construction of an ultimate consensus serve to conceal the possibility of a radically different society. The subsequent question is how exactly to operationalize this

¹ In this respect, the literature generally distinguishes between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’, with the former referring to the practices of everyday politics and the latter to society’s ontological dimensions. The argument is that the political serves as a foundation to politics by setting the parameters and defining the bounds of conceivable political practices. In the case of depoliticization, the difference between politics and the political is collapsed.

depoliticizing process of *concealment* and *misrecognition*? How can we *recognize* misrecognition and *reveal* concealment?

Agonistic pluralism

Political philosopher Mouffe (2000, 2005, 2013) provides an answer with her work on agonistic pluralism, and more particularly, her argument about how particular discursive mechanisms of depoliticization are responsible for the lack of agonistic pluralism today. She argues how agonistic pluralism can only be achieved when democratic debate meets the following two conditions. First, it should take place within a framework of what she calls a ‘conflictual consensus’ (Mouffe, 2013: 7): while consensus is needed on liberal democracy’s institutions, an agonistic struggle is needed on the meaning and implementation of the values of liberty and equality that underpin them. A struggle is agonistic when it concerns a discursive confrontation between adversaries (i.e., ‘us’ versus ‘them’) who, despite fighting each other’s interpretation of these values, accept each other’s legitimacy to fight for the victory of their interpretation. In other words, agonistic pluralism holds respectful contestation as a key value. Second, this adversarial us/them struggle needs to be defined in political terms. It implies that, in a context of agonistic pluralism, democratic debate entails a confrontation between clearly differentiated political positions based on opposing ideological projects between which a rational reconciliation is impossible (only defeat or victory). This relates to her ontological starting point that there is no rational solution to the ineradicable conflictual dimension of social relations, which, moreover, she puts forward as constitutive of democratic politics and agonistic pluralism.

In the depoliticizing context of post-politics, however, these conditions for agonistic pluralism are unfulfilled. Mouffe (2005) predominantly takes aim against how, in the discursive process of achieving consensus, the us/them discrimination is no longer defined in political terms, but in rationalist and/or moralist terms. This displaces the agonistic struggle between ‘left and right’ to a struggle between ‘right and wrong’, either in terms of ‘rational versus irrational’ or ‘good versus evil’. This is problematic, since it keeps political conflicts from taking an agonistic form. Instead, they take an

antagonistic form, and adversaries become enemies, defined as traditionalists, blind radicals, fundamentalists, and so on. In doing so, a discourse is created which justifies the exclusion of particular demands from public debate on the basis of being 'too extreme', concealing the politico-ideological nature of every frontier drawn between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. In other words, these rationalistic and moralistic terms operate as discursive mechanisms of exclusion, shielding particular demands or a particular framework from contestation, and resultantly, closing democratic discussion. This can either pertain to a micro level, claiming that particular choices or policy strategies are beyond dispute, or to a macro level, claiming that there is no (ideological) alternative to the existent social and political order. This displacement from a political to a rationalist or moralist level is what Mouffe defines as depoliticization, that is a discursive logic that draws a political frontier while denying its political character and, in doing so, transforms the political from a matter of ideological contestation and political position to a matter of administration, dialogue, and expert knowledge, on the one hand, or moral condemnation and self-idealization, on the other.

To challenge this discursive logic of depoliticization, and (re)open debate, Mouffe argues for (re)defining the us/them discrimination in political terms. This requires (politicizing) discourses that reveal the mechanisms of exclusion at work in depoliticizing discourses, thereby opening up particular demands or a particular framework to political contestation and democratic discussion and, consequently, the space for transformative social change. In this process, a shift takes place from the post-politics of consensus to agonistic democratic debate. Today, this implies, for example, challenging neoliberal political rationality by making its influence in public discourse visible and by offering people alternative political rationalities, based on an agonistic struggle among adversaries.

Depoliticization and agonistic pluralism in media and communication studies

In media and communication studies, the concept of ‘depoliticization’ has been used only sporadically, and in those cases, it was approached either as a form of governmental (e.g., Bingham, 2013; Ekecrantz, 1988; Wei, 1996) or societal depoliticization (e.g., Djerf- Pierre et al., 2014; Koffman et al., 2015; Reifová, 2015), rather than as a discursive form (an exceptional case has been Ylönen et al., 2015). The concept of ‘agonistic pluralism’ has increasingly been put to work this last decade to understand and evaluate social interaction on the Internet (for a more theoretical elaboration, see Dahlberg, 2007a), either with regard to social media platforms such as Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, or YouTube (e.g., McCosker, 2014; Svensson, 2015; van Zoonen et al., 2011) or blogs (e.g., Warner and Neville-Shepard, 2011). Karppinen (2007, 2013), on the other hand, has focused on how to integrate this notion into media policy research. Until today, there has been no attempt (to our knowledge) at developing a framework for systematically analyzing media discourse in such a way as to come to conclusions on the state of (agonistic) pluralism in particular media landscapes.

A framework of agonistic media pluralism

In this section, we explain how we have translated Mouffe’s arguments into a framework of agonistic media pluralism. This framework allows for a systematic and empirical analysis of the extent to which particular media discourses facilitate an agonistic democratic debate about (alternatives to) established societal structures and ways of life. Although it is applicable to mediated public discourse in general, we focus on news discourse in particular.

This framework evaluates mediated debates on three levels. Above all, the key aim is to draw conclusions on the extent of *agonistic pluralism* in a specific media landscape

(during a specific moment in time and on a specific social issue). However, to be able to say something about a specific media landscape, we must first look at the relevant news media outlets and establish their *ideological cultures* (cf. *infra*). In order to identify the ideological culture of selected media outlets, a considerable number of media ‘texts’ are evaluated in terms of *scope* (with a particular focus on the present ideological preferences) and *form* (with a particular focus on discursive strategies that are used to de/politicize and close/open debate). So, chronologically, this framework evaluates (1) selected media discourses, of (2) relevant media outlets, in (3) a particular media landscape. However, when it comes to agonistic media pluralism, one must avoid a media-centric approach: media debates not only construct but also reflect a particular political/social/ cultural context. Therefore, an in-depth understanding of the social issue at stake is vital. More specifically, it is indispensable to determine the politico-ideological conflict(s) underlying (debates about) a social issue. As a result, the framework we propose consists of four levels of analysis.²

Social issue: Ideological fault lines

First, to make the underlying clashing positions and radically different ways of looking at an issue tangible, we introduce the concept of ‘fault lines’. Ideological fault lines represent a struggle between competing analyses about what constitutes progress with regard to particular politico-ideological categories, such as the economy or nature (see also: Carvalho, 2007). For example, the ‘socio-economic fault line’ involves competing perspectives regarding economic progress, for instance, with regard to the intervention of private companies (‘the market’) or public institutions (‘the state’) in different aspects of society (e.g., Maesele et al., 2017; Raeijmaekers and Maesele, 2014). Or, the ‘techno-environmental fault line’ concerns competing interpretations of techno-environmental progress, for instance, with regard to the preferred role of

² This rather detailed introduction to the analysis of agonistic media pluralism must not be seen as a ‘step-by-step’ directory. To begin with, it does not concern a strict linear process: to develop a full understanding of each level, steps forward and jumps backwards are essential. Thus, the four steps must be seen as accumulative to each other. Neither does it operate as a strict ‘check-the-box’ manual. It has been developed to help determining the ‘validity’ – that is, ‘coherence’ and ‘fruitfulness’ – and ‘transparency’ (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 125–126) of future analyses on agonistic media pluralism.

science and technology in nature (e.g., Maesele, 2015a; Pepermans, 2015). It is important to emphasize that a fault line should be seen as a continuum that represents different directions of travel (instead of end points), and on which the differences are matters of degree.

The subsequent question is how to identify the relevant fault lines – with the potential positions and preferences – of a selected social issue. This is a matter of both deductive and inductive practices. On one hand, a number of fault lines appear to play an important role in many social issues (e.g., the socio-economic fault line). A first identification and definition of the relevant fault lines thus comes from reading previous empirical studies or theoretical/historical reflections on the selected (or a related) social issue. On the other hand, the exact operation of each fault line is case specific (and time-sensitive) and only becomes clear during the analysis itself: the positions and preferences on each fault line are rearticulated in line with the specific social issue at stake. Moreover, during the analysis, new relevant fault lines might be distinguished, or it might become clear whether/how particular fault lines are related. Once the relevant ideological fault lines and preferences are identified, it is time to examine the scope and form of these preferences in media discourse.

Media discourse: Scope and form

Two analytical aspects are key to the level and nature of contestation in media debates, that is, the scope and form of discourse.³ Regarding the ‘scope of media discourse’, we are concerned with whether different sides of (a debate on) a social issue are addressed. Regarding the ‘form of media discourse’, we are concerned about the way these different sides are portrayed. In other words, we look at not only what is present in the media coverage but also how it is presented.

³ This distinction between scope and form is similar to our own theoretical differentiation between ‘diversity’ and ‘pluralism’ (Raeijmaekers and Maesele, 2015a), and to distinctions by other critical scholars that share our assumptions on media, pluralism, and democracy. Dahlberg (2007: 836), for example, has differentiated between the ‘extent’ (i.e., the range of positions) and ‘form’ (i.e., rhetoric) of discursive contestation. Similarly, Carvalho (2008: 169) refers to this distinction in terms of ‘selection’ and ‘composition’, and Murdock and Golding (2005: 75) to ‘the range of discourses’ and how these ‘are handled within the text’.

For this ‘textual’ analysis of scope and form, qualitative content analytical methods are preferred over quantitative methods, since the latter generally aim at identifying the frequency of predefined thematic categorizations (often referred to as ‘frames’) or positive/ negative evaluations of particular identities and concerns. First and foremost, such quantitative methods are less suitable for this framework as the analysis of media discourse would be limited to prior-identified preferences and constructions, causing a potential loss of valuable information for the identification of the case-specific and timesensitive ideological culture of a particular media outlet. Furthermore, quantitative analyses generally fail to reveal processes of power and ideology in the construction of meaning (Jones, 2013). Of the many qualitative content analytical methods at our disposal, critical discourse analysis (CDA) has proven to be most efficient in establishing ideological cultures in previous research.⁴ With its focus on the relationship between discourse and specific social/political/cultural contexts, it adequately serves the objective of revealing the role of discursive strategies in the creation and reproduction of relations of power (see also: Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002).

This particular CDA approach to agonistic media pluralism addresses three textual elements related to the scope of media debates, and three elements related to the form (see also: Carvalho, 2008: 167–171). First, with regard to scope, we look at the presence, prominence, and absence of particular objects (i.e., issues, topics, angles), social actors (i.e., who is the predominant subject, and who gets to define the terms of the debate, i.e. framing power), and viewpoints/preferences (i.e., issue-specific standpoints, and politicoideological aspirations). The analysis of these three elements is not independent from each other, since the analysis of both objects and actors directly informs the determination of (ideological) preferences. For instance, the objects generally point toward the fault line that is being addressed (economy, nature, freedom of speech, etc.). Second, regarding form, we look at layout (page, pictures, size, position, etc.), linguistic strategies (rhetoric, terminology, etc.), and discursive

⁴ In this regard, we are greatly indebted to Carvalho’s earlier work on critical discourse analysis and ideological cultures (2007, 2008).

strategies (i.e., construction of arguments, cf. *infra*). The analysis of discursive strategies is most essential (since these directly inform us about the ideological culture at hand), while layout and linguistic strategies play a secondary role and mainly serve to illustrate the former.⁵ This is why we have excluded layout and linguistic strategies from Figure 1, which visualizes the textual analysis.

To put it in general terms first, media discourse⁶ is found to close democratic debate when an issue or event is presented by relying on mechanisms of exclusion. In that case, the reporting privileges (established) actors and preferences, which are presented in a depoliticized way as the only rational, moral, or natural ones. Resultantly, one course of action is proposed as the only way to move forward. On the other hand, media discourse is found to open democratic debate when an issue is presented by relying on mechanisms of exposure and expansion. Exposure refers to recognizing the existing limitations in scope and form, by identifying particular actors and demands as privileged, and/or discursive strategies as depoliticizing. Expansion then refers to introducing alternative actors and demands. This can happen either in rational or moral terms (i.e., ‘cultivation’) or in politico-ideological terms (i.e., ‘politicization’). As a result, several courses of action are presented as alternative ways to move forward.

⁵ This stands in contrast to more traditional critical discourse analysis (CDA) approaches that focus primarily on discourse-as-language and are characterized by detailed linguistic analysis of actual instances of discourse (see also Jørgensen and Phillips, 2000: 62; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997: 258).

⁶ It is important to clarify whether particular preferences and discursive strategies are authentic to the medium itself (e.g., expressed by journalists) or not (standpoints and strategies from social actors, press agencies, etc.). One can do so by looking at other texts (in other media outlets).

	CLOSE debate	OPEN debate					
	via EXCLUSION	via EXPOSURE	via EXPANSION				
SCOPE Actors, preferences!	Privileging of PARTICULAR (established) voices and demands	Identification of privileged scope	Introduction of ALTERNATIVE (marginal) voices and demands				
FORM Discursive strategies! Positioning De/legitimizing De/naturalizing	DEPOLITICIZATION Constructing 'No valid (political) contestation'	Identification of depoliticized form De-constructing 'No valid (political) contestation'	<table border="0" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center;">CULTIVATION</td> <td style="width: 50%; text-align: center;">POLITICIZATION</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">(Re-)constructing 'valid contestation'</td> <td style="text-align: center;">(Re-)constructing 'valid political contestation'</td> </tr> </table>	CULTIVATION	POLITICIZATION	(Re-)constructing 'valid contestation'	(Re-)constructing 'valid political contestation'
CULTIVATION	POLITICIZATION						
(Re-)constructing 'valid contestation'	(Re-)constructing 'valid political contestation'						

Figure 1: Textual analysis

So, in more detail, a first step is to determine which actors and preferences media discourses promote and/or neglect. To be able to say something about the scope of media debates (e.g., limited or broad), researchers must distinguish whether media texts introduce the same (established)⁷ or allow for alternative (marginal) actors and demands. Debates are found to be closed, when media texts privilege particular (established) actors and preferences. Hypothetically, in the case of austerity policy, it might appear – both from explorations outside media texts and comparisons between media texts – that the government, together with particular economists and European Union (EU) technocrats, has obtained a prominent position, while critique and counter-proposals by affected or protest groups figure only sporadically. However, debates are getting (re)opened when discourses either identify this privilege toward particular (established) voices and demands, or when alternative (marginal) actors and preferences are also presented.

Then, an additional step is to disclose how media texts discursively present these actors and preferences. To be able to say something about the form of media discourse (i.e., impeding or facilitating discussion), we distinguish between a

⁷ A deep understanding of both the social issue at stake and other relevant media discourses is essential to determine – while conducting the analysis – whose voice and which demands can be perceived as established or, contrarily, as marginal.

depoliticizing use of discursive strategies, constructing the idea that there is no valid (political) contestation, and a cultivating or politicizing use of discursive strategies, (re)constructing the idea that there actually is valid (political) contestation. Regarding depoliticization, media discourses impede debate, by eliminating both the possibility of other legitimate claims and the role of ideological assumptions and preferences. In that case, discursive strategies are adopted in such a way that there seems to be 'objective' argumentation (e.g., rational and moral grounds) for shielding particular claims or actions from contestation. Exposing this depoliticizing discursive process is one possibility to (re)open debate. Another possibility is to expand the debate itself by arguing for/against particular preferences in a different way. In this regard, media can opt for either a cultivating discourse or a politicizing discourse. In the case of cultivation, media discourses facilitate debate by (re)introducing the possibility of other claims and actions, still relying on the same 'objective' criteria. In the case of politicization, however, (re)introducing the possibility of alternative preferences goes hand in hand with acknowledging the role of ideological assumptions and preferences. Discursive strategies are used in such a way that being in favor/against particular claims or actions clearly – and legitimately! – has to do with political beliefs, choices, and interests. One could argue that while cultivation just aims at 'growing' more debate by addressing societal contestation, politicization aims at fostering more *ideological* debate by addressing political contestation. In the end, to fulfill the conditions for agonistic pluralism, cultivating debate is a good first step (i.e., creating inclusive, respectful contestation), but politicization must be the aim (i.e., stimulating contestation between clearly differentiated ideological positions and projects).

So far, in our previous empirical case studies, we have been able to recognize three key discursive strategies: positioning, de/legitimization, and de/naturalization. All three contribute to closing (i.e., depoliticizing) or opening (i.e., cultivating/politicizing) debates, but do so at a different intensity, leaving more or less room for interpretation. Whereas strategies of positioning indirectly steer a debate, de/legitimizing strategies directly limit debate, and naturalizing strategies completely dismiss – or, in the case of denaturalization, preserve – debate.

First, strategies of positioning refer to a particular context, which must convince an audience that certain claims and actions are preferable (and others not). Such strategies of positioning steer the debate, encouraging certain demands (while discouraging others). In the case of depoliticization and cultivation, it concerns an 'objective' context: formal political/economic/social relationships, historical 'facts' and 'proof', geographical locations, and so on. These are used to suggest that there are better and worse options (i.e., depoliticization), or that some alternative options are also (or still) well worth considering (i.e., cultivation). For example, in case of a national issue, one might compare to other countries (e.g., comparing Belgium to Germany when it comes to economic policy) or point out an international relationship (e.g., EU agreements) to discourage a particular course of action. Or, a political leader (with a particular proposition) might be positioned against his/her divided followers to undermine his/her authority. Or, on the contrary, one might refer to a similar situation in history (e.g., a previous economic crisis) to encourage certain measures (that are currently widely discouraged). In the case of politicization, however, strategies of positioning refer to a politico-ideological context: dis/encouragement via references to historical ideological developments, relations between sociopolitical groups, and so on. For example, a particular economic measure is discouraged by the argument that a similar decision in the past has led to more competition instead of aspired solidarity, or by linking the proposal to the agenda of a specific political or economic lobby group.

Second, strategies of de/legitimization enforce particular boundaries, on the basis of which certain claims or actions are (un)justified to be part of the debate. In the case of depoliticization and cultivation, it concerns 'foundational' boundaries: the limits of the debate are expressed in terms of rationality, morality, and so on. Depoliticizing discourses introduce those rational or moral criteria to shield particular preferences from contestation (i.e., legitimize) and reject alternative suggestions as 'invalid' (i.e., delegitimize). For example, while preferred actions are promoted as rational (e.g., evidence based, authorized by expert institutions, financially profitable), alternative claims are rejected as irrational (e.g., emotional, ideological/partisan, financially and economically damaging). Or, while favored claims are put forward as morally right (e.g., compassionate, democratic, ethical), alternatives are excluded as morally wrong (e.g., discriminating, undemocratic, inhumane). For instance, regarding

government budgets, austerity politics might be presented as wise and in the best interest of the most vulnerable, while government welfare programs are put forward as outdated and unfair toward the hardworking middle class. Cultivating discourses, however, refer to those rational and moral criteria above all to include (formerly excluded) alternative preferences. For example, the economic proposals of a small civil protest group are labeled as actually intelligent and achievable. Then, in the case of politicization, the inclusion and also exclusion of actors and demands happens on the basis of political boundaries. Although some preferences are delegitimized, it is clear that their rejection has to do with competing political values and interests. For example, a policy proposal, which will lead to more market competition, is explicitly rejected because of its negative effects on highly valued welfare programs.

Third, strategies of de/naturalization ultimately deal with the simple existence of debate on a specific issue: disagreement as such is either completely rejected (i.e., naturalization), or explicitly acknowledged (i.e., denaturalization). More specifically, naturalizing strategies are used to impose the idea of a substantial social 'consensus' on particular claims or actions (e.g., in terms of a natural evolution, inevitable measures, a universal desire, or 'the truth'), emphasizing that there is simply no alternative. For example, cutting down government expenses is presented as inevitable, sustaining economic growth as normal, taking measures that generally benefit the middle class – instead of particularly supporting lower incomes – as neutral. Such naturalizing strategies are keys to the discursive process of depoliticization, since they clearly eliminate the possibility of or need for other (political) interpretations. Cultivation and politicization, however, aim at (re)opening debate. Therefore, strategies of denaturalization are adopted: claims and actions are problematized as selective and contested. In the case of cultivation, denaturalizing strategies are referring to (surmountable) social contestation. For example, a government's economic program is covered in terms of considerable (but solvable) disagreement between individuals or social groups. Or a specific economic measure is linked to a(n) (yet) uncertain outcome. In the case of politicization, denaturalizing strategies refer to (unsurmountable) political contestation, that is, grounding particular claims or actions in terms of incompatible worldviews or ideological projects. For example, a particular

economic policy proposal triggers a reflection about which kind of economic system we should aspire or avoid.

Media outlet: Ideological culture

After evaluating whether selected media discourses close/open debate, we are able to determine the ideological cultures of the media outlets that reproduce these discourses. The concept of ideological cultures has been defined by Carvalho (2007: 239–240) as:

“communities of ideas, values and preferences inside media organizations and in their particular audiences. The term culture points to the socially constructed nature of ideologies. Values and norms are, to some extent, always shared. This does not mean that ideologies are internalized by [each journalist and audience member] in a fixed and uniform way. In the term culture there is room for some pluralism and diversity.”

As is clear from Carvalho’s definition, ideological cultures are not uniform systems of meaning, but are adopted in different ways by particular journalists, often transform over time, and are characterized by inconsistencies. Therefore, in order get a clear understanding of the ideological culture of a media outlet, one should focus on the *recurrent de/* politicization or cultivation of particular preferences. This concerns both a hypertextual (i.e., beyond or above a single media text) and comparative approach (i.e., across media outlets and across time). What matters is the identification of *patterns* regarding both the ideological preferences and discursive strategies in a specific media outlet.

Furthermore, our previous case studies have shown how the ideological culture of a media outlet influences key article types in different degrees. In descending order: editorials, news articles, interviews, and op-eds. This should be interpreted in two ways. First, the editorials and news articles provide the most direct input for discerning a media outlet’s ideological culture (with the articles written by

the leading journalist on the respective social issue upfront).⁸ Second, a certain degree of diversity and pluralism is provided by leaving room for alternative discursive constructions, primarily in the op-ed and interview sections, and more seldom in the news articles and editorials (this is most likely in the case the author is a different journalist than the leading one). For example, while a particular media outlet can consequently advocate government cuts and privatization in its editorials (often manifestly), and in most larger news articles (often latently), alternative ideological references (e.g., claims for government investments, critique on austerity measures) will likely figure in some (shorter) articles and interviews, and on the (remote) opinion pages. In doing so, newspapers (aim to) create a sense of pluralism and diversity at first sight.

Media landscape: Agonistic pluralism

Last, when we compare the ideological cultures of the different media outlets, we can make statements about the level of agonistic pluralism in a media landscape. In theory, there are four possibilities (Figure 2). When the ideological cultures of the selected media outlets are promoting the same (established) preferences and ideological projects, we speak of media uniformity or media conformism. Obviously, when all relevant outlets share similar viewpoints, the media landscape is incapable of encouraging (political) contestation and debate, even when the discourse is based on ideological terms (i.e., politicized). To the contrary, it (re)produces the current ideological hegemony, either latently and seemingly unwittingly (i.e., depoliticized, ‘There Is No Alternative’) or openly and deliberately (i.e., politicized). Furthermore, we speak of media diversity, when the relevant media outlets hold different preferences and viewpoints, but refrain from presenting them in terms of contestation and ideology (i.e., depoliticization). In that case, the media landscape succeeds in reflecting a social variety of preferences, but not in discursively connecting them as part of a

⁸ Generally, this refers to the ‘beat reporter’, that is, the journalist who has been assigned a particular topic (e.g., domestic, foreign, economic, scientific, environmental news).

larger *and* legitimate (political) conflict and democratic debate.⁹ However, when the different outlets present their preferences using a cultivating discourse, the media landscape might contribute to public debate and contestation (but not in terms of insuperable political–ideological disagreements). Last, we can only speak of media pluralism, when the relevant media outlets hold different preferences and ideological positions, and also present them as such. Then, the media landscape is found to (re)produce agonistic contestation: it allows for and stimulates a respectful debate about ever-present political–ideological disagreements.

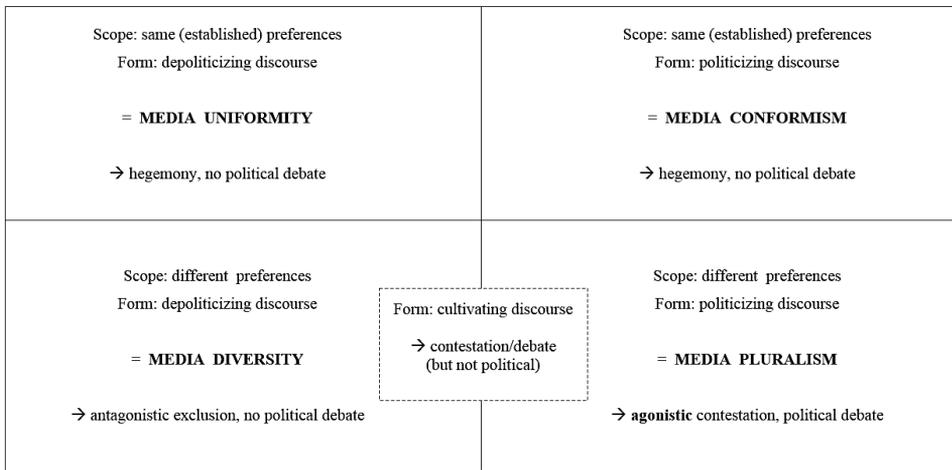


Figure 2: Media landscape

In reality, however, the different ideological cultures never correspond to this ideal typical framework, since this would presume that each selected media outlet makes similar choices with regard to either scope or form. Until now, our previous case studies have revealed that there is always at least one ideological culture based on depoliticized neoliberal preferences. Depending on the selected media outlets, other ideological cultures are found to open the debate by either cultivating or politicizing more social–ecological values. In that case, we conclude that the media landscape is dependent on the latter ideological cultures to achieve a certain degree of media

⁹ In that case, it is fair to speak of polarization. Depoliticizing discursive strategies are used explicitly to stigmatize and exclude particular actors and demands from democratic debate, thereby avoiding antagonistic conflicts to take an agonistic form.

diversity or pluralism, respectively. However, if we focus only on professional-commercialized media (and leave aside alternative, non-profit media), such a (limited) degree of media pluralism has only been found either very recently (in the case of the 2015 elections in Greece and Spain, see Maesele and Raeijmaekers, 2016) or more than two decades ago (see Raeijmaekers and Maesele, 2016). In other words, it appears to be rather exceptional to find ideological cultures based on politicizing discourses in professional-commercialized media, which implies that the role and nature of neoliberal political rationality generally remains concealed or misrecognized, confirming at first sight that the establishment blues indeed rule the airwaves.

Discussion: research agenda

On one hand, this framework holds great potential for establishing the extent of agonistic media pluralism in 21st-century professional-commercialized news media landscapes, while, on the other hand, identifying potential alternative spaces for contributing to agonistic media pluralism.

First, it could be put to work on a supranational level, to reveal and compare the extent of agonistic media pluralism within and between various regions and countries. In this way, ‘pluralism profiles’ could be created on similar issues in multiple countries. For example, by comparing the reporting in national newspapers on specific cases, such as climate change, migration, or the financial–economic crisis. In second instance, this can be broadened, by differentiating in terms of media types, including television or magazines. Eventually, the question then becomes: on which issues do we find what levels of agonistic media pluralism in and between which regions or nations? And do we only find this in the elite newspaper market or also with regard to other media types? Once there are data on any of these questions, then the really interesting questions arise, namely, how can we explain differences and shifts in pluralism? How is this related to characteristics of a specific media market (e.g., a strong public broadcaster), political system (two-party or multiparty system), or the relationship between media and state (state interventionism, censorship, etc.)? Do we find specific media mergers and acquisitions, processes of media concentration and

convergence, influencing the level of pluralism between particular moments in time? What was the role of specific organizations or individuals in specific regions or nations in advocating specific ideological positions? Here one can think of examples as diverse as the organizations involved in the United Nations' climate process (the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change or the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change), social movements such as Indignados or Occupy, politicians such as Thatcher, Clinton, Blair, Schröder, Trump, or Corbyn; political parties such as SYRIZA and Alternative für Deutschland; and so on. Finally, do we find differences according to models of media systems? For instance, the most well-known is Hallin and Mancini's (2004) differentiation in liberal, democratic corporatist, and polarized-pluralist media systems (mainly according to media policy). Does this differentiation hold up with regard to the level of agonistic media pluralism, and if yes, how can these media systems then be characterized in terms of agonistic media pluralism?

Second, in addition to mainstream, professional-commercialized news media, it is increasingly called for to include potential alternative journalistic spaces, such as alternative/ radical news platforms, news satire or even particular products of popular culture. These alternative spaces have in common that they reject the ideal of objectivity as an appropriate professional standard for journalism in today's digital and postmodern era. This ideal is found to fail both in engaging a new generation of news users and in taking into account the unavoidable subjectivity in any search for truth (Baym, 2010; Harbers, 2016; Jones, 2010). In other words, in providing for transparency and reflection about the reporting practice. The (unintended?) consequence is often that these alternative journalistic spaces are characterized by cultivating/politicizing discourses, precisely because of their explicit aim to move beyond any objectivity ideal. With regard to alternative/radical news platforms, the Dutch-language area of Flanders and the Netherlands has been especially well served these last years, with initiatives such as *DeWereldMorgen*, *De Correspondent*, *Mo Magazine*, *Apache*, and so on. (Other more well-known examples are *IndyMedia*, *Huffington Post* from the United States or *Mediapart* from France.) In our empirical case studies, we have been including *DeWereldMorgen* systematically these last years, and time and time again, this news site has been found contributing to agonistic media

pluralism by consistently politicizing the issues at stake. In other words, despite these news sites' often low reach and influence, they are likely to play an indispensable role in facilitating democratic debate. The following questions to be asked then pertain to issues of production and reception. First, how do we find variable editorial practices, variable ways of organization, in terms of ownership, control, and funding, or alternative journalistic values and routines, contributing to these results? Second, how do users understand these 'alternative media' and which role do they play in their media repertoires (are they replacing or supplementing their professional-commercialized counterparts?).

However, we should not make the mistake to only focus on news media. This inevitably reproduces an elite focus, since many people simply do not consume news media, or at least not the ones scholars generally focus on. On the other hand, entertainment media (and popular television culture in general) are more inclusive, with fewer barriers to participate and engage. News satire is a case in point. In that respect, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (and spin-offs such as *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*) is widely believed to have set the global standard for this genre, receiving both critical acclaim and popular success. It has been found to serve as an alternative form of journalism (Jones, 2010) and, moreover, a form that has succeeded in reviving a journalism of critical inquiry, precisely by turning existing journalistic conventions on their head (Baym, 2010). Others have argued how popular culture products, such as *The Wire*, contribute to facilitating democratic debate on particular social issues, by encouraging the sociological imagination (Beer and Burrows, 2010) and by serving as a form of media literacy educator or public pedagogy (Peters, 2013). What would we learn when our framework is systematically applied to establish the extent of (de)politicizing discursive strategies used in series such as *The Wire*, *The Newsroom*, *Game of Thrones*, *House of Cards*, *The Americans*, *Orange is the New Black*, and so on. To what extent would we find these popular culture products contributing to agonistic media pluralism in the mediascapes of the 21st century? How about that, for fascinating future research projects?

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY BEHIND THE FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework of agonistic media pluralism allows for a systematic and transparent evaluation of ideological media pluralism, at a particular place and at a particular time (cfr. chapter 3; Maesele & Raeijmaekers, 2017a). Both the scope and form of media coverage are analyzed to determine whether the ideological culture of particular media outlets primarily closes or opens a debate on the issue at stake. The framework holds great potential for future research on the limits and opportunities of both mainstream and alternative media, both news and entertainment. To support such future research projects, the methodological approach and practical steps of the framework are comprehensively outlined in this chapter.

Method

As already mentioned in chapter 3, qualitative content analytical methods are preferred over quantitative methods to study the scope and form of media texts. Quantitative methods are mostly used to identify the frequency of predefined categorizations or positive/negative evaluations. Such methods would not enable the identification of underlying processes of power and ideology (Jones, 2013), nor would they account for case-specific and time-specific characteristics of media coverage. Of the many qualitative content analytical methods at our disposal, we found critical discourse analysis (CDA) to be most suitable for the analysis of ideological and discursive processes in media coverage. CDA is “characterized by the common interests in de-mystifying ideologies and power through the systematic and retroductable investigation of semiotic data – written, spoken or visual (Wodak & Meyer, 2008: 3)”.

CDA with a little bit of DT

The framework of agonistic media pluralism theoretically builds on post-foundational political thought and, more precisely, the work of Mouffe (2000, 2005, 2013). Using Mouffe as a theoretical and philosophical basis would normally imply using discourse theory (DT) as a method. DT has been developed by Mouffe herself, together with Laclau (e.g., Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). However, as already pointed out above, the framework uses CDA instead. In the following part, I will explain why we chose CDA, but I also admit to using a ‘touch’ of DT.

Although CDA and DT have quite a lot of common ground – they are both rooted in poststructuralist and post-Marxist theory – there are two substantial arguments to prefer CDA over DT for the framework of agonistic media pluralism.

Firstly, an important difference between CDA and DT concerns their ideas on how discourse relates to society. On the one hand, DT believes that all social and natural phenomena only acquire meaning through discourse. As a consequence, these scholars believe social analysis is reducible to the category of discourse (Phelan, 2018).

To be clear, “[t]hat does not mean that nothing but text and talk exist, but, on the contrary, that discourse itself is material (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 19)”. CDA scholars, on the other hand, emphasize the dialectical relationship between discursive and other social practices: discourse does not only shape society, but is also shaped by it (Phelan, 2018; Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007). So, compared to DT, CDA starts from a more mild form of social constructivism and does not understand everything as discourse (Montesano Montessori, 2011; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). From this perspective, CDA evaluates discourse in relation to its socio-historical context and aims to determine “which social agents are more capable than others to create new articulations and why” (Montesano Montessori, 2011: 5, 6). This approach perfectly fits the framework of agonistic media pluralism, which wants to reveal how media content simultaneously reflects and de/constructs (an assumed consensus about) a particular social order.

Secondly, a more practical concern is that Laclau and Mouffe’s DT has remained largely confined to political studies, i.e. the study of politics and the political, and is relatively absent within the realm of media studies (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007: 266). Conversely, CDA has been widely adopted in media studies. According to Carvalho (2008: 162), “CDA is the single most authoritative line of research regarding the [critical] study of media discourse”.

Nonetheless, CDA also has some shortcomings. Firstly, like DT, CDA is not a unified discipline. Due to the underlying poststructuralist assumptions, both approaches are pushed towards “open-ended theoretical frameworks” (Howarth in Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007: 273). As a result, ambiguity often arises regarding (i) the definition of key concepts and (ii) empirical methodological guidelines. One such a key concept is ‘discourse’. We know that discourse is not ‘everything’ (like in DT), but what does it then refer to? According to Wodak and Meyer (2008: 2-3), discourse “means anything from a historical monument, a lieu de mémoire, a policy, a political strategy, narratives in a restricted or broad sense of the term, text, talk, a speech, topic-related conversations, to language per se”. They rightly remark that this causes confusion and might lead to much criticism and misunderstanding. Therefore, they advise researchers to clearly “define their use of the term integrated in their specific

approach”¹. The same ambiguity applies to empirical methods. “[S]tudies in CDA are multifarious, derived from quite different theoretical backgrounds, oriented towards different data and methodologies (Wodak & Meyer, 2008: 5).” Thus, it is advisable for researchers to also clearly outline their theoretical and analytical steps of thinking (e.g., chapter 3).

Secondly, in contrast to DT, CDA is often very linguistic in practice. This is no surprise, since the manifold roots of CDA lie in approaches such as rhetoric, literacy studies and sociolinguistics (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). It makes that CDA is known for its detailed linguistic analyses. However, the framework of agonistic media pluralism aims to transcend the particularities of singular media texts and to look for patterns that expose the political and discursive identity of media outlets (i.e., ideological culture). This calls for a broader empirical approach to discourse, which can be found in DT studies. Indeed, while CDA focusses on “discourse-as-language,” DT looks at “discourse-as-representation” (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007: 277). As a result, DT is found to conduct more general analyses of the articulation of political-ideological identities. Such a comprehensive discursive approach fits better to the framework than CDA’s detailed linguistic approach. As such, the framework of agonistic media pluralism uses CDA with a ‘touch’ of DT. Interestingly, Jørgensen and Phillips (2002: 4) highly recommend such a blending of methods:

“[W]hile the content of the package should form an integrated whole, it is possible to create one’s own package by combining elements from different discourse analytical perspectives and, if appropriate, non-discourse analytical perspectives. Such multiperspectival work is not only permissible but positively valued in most forms of discourse analysis. The view is that different perspectives provide different forms of knowledge about a phenomenon so that, together, they produce a broader understanding. [...] Multiperspectivalism requires that one weighs the approaches up against

¹ In this regard, I join Howarth (2000: 9). He puts forward discourses as historically-specific systems of meaning that form not only political identities, but also social relations by drawing a political frontier between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’.

each other, identifying what kind of (local) knowledge each approach can supply and modifying the approaches in the light of these considerations.”

Of course, the eventual approach needs to be clear and laid out in detail.

The engaged researcher

Choosing CDA as a method means choosing a critical research approach. Critical studies are “oriented towards critiquing and changing society as a whole, in contrast to traditional theory that is oriented solely to understanding or explaining it” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009: 6). Hence, they are preoccupied with the creation, reproduction, and distribution of power² (see also: Phelan, 2018). Not surprisingly then, power, ideology, and hegemony are central and constitutive elements of the CDA approach – although these concepts are used in many different senses (Carvalho, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The aim is “to investigate and analyze power relations in society and to formulate normative perspectives from which a critique of such relations can be made with an eye on the possibilities for social change” (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002: 2).

The critical intention of CDA also means that researchers take a committed or engaged stance and, consequently, have to be aware of their own ideological views and assumptions. Researchers are definitely “not outside the social hierarchy of power and status but are subject to this structure” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009: 7). Therefore, naming oneself ‘critical’ then implies an intention to make your own position, assumptions, research interests and values explicit, and to retain transparent and self-reflective of your own research process (Wodak & Meyer, 2009: 3, 7). In doing so, one should not feel the need to apologize for her/his position and perspective, as “ideological commitment is an explicit agenda of CDA and does not equal analytical distortion” (see further) (Carvalho, 2008: 162). Also from a practical point of view, the CDA researcher is very engaged in his/her study, since CDA is “essentially interpretive

² We understand power from a post-Marxist or Gramscian tradition. That is to say that power is understood by its cultural/ideological dimensions rather than merely economic relations. “[This] decentralization of the class struggle allows incorporating other relevant societal struggles and identities (Torfing in Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007: 271).

work, which is probably not replicable in the same exact terms by other individuals” (Carvalho, 2000: 37). Or, in the words of Jørgensen and Phillips (2002: 22): “the researcher always takes a position in relation to the field of study, and that position plays a part in the determination of what he or she can see and can present as results.”

Such an understanding of research obviously clashes with the idea(l) of the ‘objective’ and ‘neutral’ researcher. Kenis (2015: 22-24), however, convincingly argues that the ideal of a-political or value-free research is not only incorrect – “[...] relations between data and theory are inevitably shaped by paradigms” – but also undesirable:

“[W]hat is considered objective or neutral is often a reflection of the ideas, paradigms or discourses that are hegemonic in a certain period. [...] [T]he more research is presented as neutral, the easier it becomes to use it in order to justify particular hegemonic positions. [...] Democratic values are at stake here: if the underlying issues are made invisible, they are also made uncontestable. [...] The point is that by presenting one’s own position as ‘objective’, underlying values or conflicts are neutralized from the beginning, and political discussion and opposition is foreclosed.”

Therefore, the ideal of objectivity should be reformulated. Nonetheless, the fact that each researcher takes a certain position which determines her/his research does not mean that qualitative interpretive research cannot be evaluated on its reliability and validity. Here, Jørgensen & Phillips (2002: 125-126) put forward a number of requirements³. First, as mentioned above, each researcher should always be open and explicit about the normative beliefs and assumptions s/he starts from in her/his research. Furthermore, the validity of a CDA itself can be determined by focusing on the coherence (i.e., clear argumentation) and fruitfulness (i.e., generating new knowledge) of the analysis. Lastly, transparency in the research results is crucial to enable the reader to judge the researcher’s interpretations.

³ For some clear-cut criteria, see also Bryman (2008: 377-381). Trustworthiness and authenticity are put forward as alternative criteria for evaluating qualitative research.

Practical guide

To provide some more transparency on my own research, but also to support future research on agonistic media pluralism, a practical guide is drawn up. It comprehensively addresses the four levels of analysis – i.e., (1) social issue, (2) media texts, (3) media outlets, and (4) media landscape – and the preparatory step of (0) data selection. It does not function as a strict ‘check-the-box’ manual, but should be understood as a tool to determine the transparency and validity of research on agonistic media pluralism. Also, it should not be seen as a chronological list: to develop a full understanding of each level, steps forward and jumps backwards are essential. Moreover, it works best when the steps are repeated several times. In that sense, it is advisable to have two rounds of analysis: an explorative round and an in-depth round. In the explorative stage, you collect a broad number of media texts during different periods and you start with an open-ended reading. This will give you a feel of what is at stake in your social issue: which fault lines appear to be playing a role, or what are “significant debates, controversies, and silences, and [...] [potential] specifications and amendments to initial research goals and questions (Carvalho, 2008: 166)”? You will get a first impression of the characteristics of the media texts, outlets and landscape. After this broad, open-ended stage follows a more in-depth stage of analysis. You make your final decisions regarding your data selection criteria, conduct a thorough discourse analysis of all media texts, look for patterns to identify the ideological culture of each media outlet, and draw your conclusions regarding the level of pluralism and diversity in the media landscape.

0. Preliminary: data

Choose a particular **social issue** as the topic of your research

Choose a particular **sociopolitical context** for studying your topic

- Where? Region/country
- By whom? Media (mainstream media, alternative media, etc.)

- When? Critical discourse moments (CDMs)

CDMs are periods in which specific happenings – like political events, scientific findings, etc – may challenge ‘established’ views and trigger debate in society (Carvalho 2008: 166). It is interesting to see whether media coverage is affected by these events, both in quantity (e.g., more attention to your topic) and quality (e.g., new perspectives, different discourse?).

Data collection

- Digital press databases, online archives, or search engines: select both productive and selective keywords that allow you to collect a corpus of articles within a specified period of time (cfr. CDMs).
- Manual archive search: when you are studying a very restricted period of time, it is advised to manually scan the physical newspapers in a library archive.

Data selection

- Define strict criteria for determining when an article is sufficiently relevant to be included in your study. For instance, your topic is addressed either in the title, the lead or in half of the article.

1. Social issue

Understanding the fault lines of the underlying ideological debate

- What are the relevant fault lines constituting the social issue at stake?
Fault lines can be identified before (e.g., previous empirical studies or theoretical writings) or during the analysis (e.g., case-specific manifestation).
- Which fault lines are present/prominent/absent in the media texts of specific outlets?
- (How) are these fault lines related?

2. Media texts

(Identification of each text)

- Publication date
- Name of the outlet
- Type of media text: e.g., news article, interview, editorial, opinion piece...
- Author: name + news beat for journalists/occupation for others, or press agency
- Position: newspaper section, page number, page position
- Size

Scope

- **Objects**
 - Which objects (i.e., issues, topics) are present/prominent or absent?
 - (How) do they relate to each other and/or the broader issue?
- **Actors**
 - Which actors are present/prominent or absent?
 - Do they get a passive (i.e., just mentioned) or an active role (i.e., quoted or paraphrased)?
 - Who gets framing power: who succeeds in shaping the meaning of events and the terms of the debate (in title, lead, or article)?
 - Or is it mainly the author speaking? (e.g., journalist, op-ed writer)
- **(Ideological) preferences !**
 - Which issue-specific standpoints are present/prominent/absent?

- Which broader political-ideological preferences – related to the fault line(s) – are implicitly (e.g., through objects, standpoints) or explicitly expressed?
- Whose standpoints/preferences are we talking about (social actors, journalists)? Focus on journalists!

Comparing different media texts might help you to identify (recurring or different) objects, actors, and preferences – and to determine whether it concerns the preferences of a social actor or of the journalist.

Furthermore, the analysis of these three elements is not independent from each other: often, the presence/absence of objects or actors serves as an indicator for the (ideological) preferences. In the end, we are most interested in the (ideological) preferences that journalists have put in their media texts. This will be of great importance to determine the ideological culture of a media outlet.

Form

- **Lay-out**
 - Format: page, size, position...
 - Features: titles, highlighted quotes, pictures...
= ways to give prominence to particular objects/actors/preferences
- **Linguistic strategies**
 - Buzzwords, tone, rhetorical figures, writing style, etc.
 - Whose language is it (social actors, journalist)? Focus on journalists!
- **Discursive strategies !**
 - Which strategies are used to present actors and demands?
Positioning (i.e., referring to a particular context),
de/legitimization (i.e., enforcing particular boundaries), or
de/naturalization (i.e., leaving any/no room for contestation)?
 - Are these strategies used to exclude or to include particular claims and demands?

Do they make use of seemingly ‘objective’ argumentation (e.g., rational or moral grounds) or ideological argumentation?

Generally: ‘objective’ exclusion = *depoliticization*, ‘objective’ inclusion = *cultivation*, ideological in/exclusion = *politicization*.

- While depoliticizing strategies contribute to *closing* debates, cultivating and politicizing strategies contribute to *opening* debates.

Debates can also be opened by *exposing* others’ depoliticizing strategies.

- Whose discursive construction is it (social actor, journalist)?
Focus on journalists!

Comparing different media texts might help you to identify (recurring or different) discursive/linguistic strategies, and to determine who is using them (actor or journalist).

In the end, the analysis of discursive strategies is most essential since these directly inform us about the ideological culture of a media outlet. Layout and linguistic strategies play a secondary role, often offering an extra illustration.

3. Media outlets

Determining the **ideological culture** of each media outlet by focusing on the recurrent de/politicization or cultivation of particular preferences.

= Identification of **patterns** regarding **ideological preferences & discursive strategies**.

Two ways:

- **Hypertextual**: taking into account all analyzed texts of an outlet.

It is normal to find texts with preferences and/or discursive constructions contradictory to the ideological culture of a media outlet; the challenge is to focus on the common practices instead of exceptions.

In the case of newspapers, particular article types are believed to (re)produce the ideological culture of an outlet more consistently than others. Often (but not always!):

- Editorials: explicit reproduction of the outlet's viewpoint
 - News articles: implicit reproduction (e.g., choice of actors, choice of title, etc. → find pattern). Possible differences between journalists (who is the leading journalist on the issue?).
 - Interviews, opinion pieces, columns: room for alternative viewpoints⁴
- **Comparative:** look for differences and similarities, to get a clearer view on the particularities of an ideological culture
 - Across time (CDMs)
 - Across media outlets

4. Media landscape

Determining whether the media landscape is characterized by **(agonistic) media pluralism** – thus, stimulates **ideological debate** – by comparing the ideological cultures of the analyzed media outlets.

⁴ By allowing clashing standpoints in the opinion section, media may guard themselves against potential criticism about a lack of pluralism. Indeed, one may doubt whether this is “illustrative of a real conviction to act as independent, open forums for public debate on the part of the newspapers, [o]r whether they merely represent a form of posturing” (Biltreyst & Van Gompel, 1997: 296-297). Moreover, these (clashing) positions are presented/downgraded as ‘opinions’ instead of ‘facts’. Also, you will probably still find a relation between those opinion voices that appear most regularly and the ideological culture of the outlet.

- Outlets share the **same ideological culture**.

They defend the same preferences, all using...

- depoliticizing discourses = *media uniformity*
- politicizing discourses = *media conformism*

- Outlets have **different ideological cultures**.

They defend different preferences, all using...

- depoliticizing discourses = *media diversity*
- politicizing discourses = ***media pluralism*** = **ideological debate**

They defend different preferences, either using...

- depoliticizing or politicizing/cultivating discourses = **in practice**

Ideally, you find media landscapes that are characterized by a broad range of preferences and solely politicizing discourses (i.e., complete media pluralism). Such media landscapes genuinely stimulate ideological debate.

In practice, however, you probably will find one/some media outlets presenting particular preferences via depoliticizing strategies, and other/s presenting alternative preferences via either cultivating or politicizing strategies.

Depending on the standing (e.g., alternative or mainstream media) and consistency (e.g., depoliticizing strategies as well) of the latter, you can draw conclusions about the **degree of diversity** (i.e., range of preferences) and the **degree of pluralism** (i.e., amount of politicization) in a media landscape.

PART II: ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

Flanders

The newspaper landscape of Flanders, the northern part of Belgium, offers an excellent setting to analyze the scope and form of media discourse with regard to ideological debate (i.e., agonistic media pluralism). It is characterized by a historic(al) evolution: during the second half of the 20th century, the Flemish newspapers have cut their ties with socio-political organizations and ideological families – the so-called ‘pillars’ – and became part of commercial media groups. Compared to many other Western countries or regions, this structural transition had been very gradual in Flanders (Van Aelst, 2006). It took the Flemish press three decades to arrive at a fully ‘de-pillarized’ newspaper landscape. In my longitudinal analysis, I want to examine whether this structural transition has led to changes in agonistic media pluralism.

The process of de-pillarization and commercialization thus refers to the evolution of the Flemish newspaper landscape from a “politicized opinionated press, associated with socio-political institutions, to a commercial press industry,” starting in the 1960s (Biltreyst & Van Gompel, 1999: 77-78). The ties with socio-political organizations were cut, and the audience was no longer targeted on the basis of a common or ideological identity (Biltreyst & Van Gompel, 1999). At the same time, small family businesses were transformed into large enterprises via fusions and participations, to the point that today there are (only) two dominant newspaper groups (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010; van der Burg, 2017). Also with regard to content, a commercial logic was as implemented. In other words, over the last decades, Flemish newspapers

went from being social/ideological *projects* to commercial *products* (Vanspauwen, 2002).

This evolution has been both applauded and criticized (Biltreyst & Van Gompel, 1999; Huyse, 2003; De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010). On the one hand, there is the expectation that it has led to more internal diversity/pluralism – i.e., within the individual newspapers – and to a more critical attitude towards political actors. On the other hand, it is feared that it has led to less external diversity/pluralism – i.e., between different newspapers – and a less critical attitude towards (associated) financial-economic actors. However, in 1997, Biltreyst and Van Gompel (p293) emphasized that actual empirical research was lacking:

“The question remains [...] how these shifts have influenced the opinion forming function of newspapers, their opportunities to set the agenda of public debate, or their discourses and representations of cultural, social and other differences in the public domain. These are difficult but fundamental questions which cannot be answered in a straightforward, simple manner, and for which longitudinal research on the shifts in form, content and social position of newspapers is generally missing.”

Since then, a few longitudinal studies on the evolution of media diversity/pluralism in Flemish newspapers and the process of de-pillarization/commercialization have been published. For example, Distelmans (1999) has examined the “pillarization of the coverage” of four newspapers (i.e., *Volksgazet*, *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, and *Het Volk*) during the government formations of 1958, 1981 and 1995. It concerned a quantitative content analysis in which “‘rankings’ were systematically compared” (p455). He concluded that the newspaper coverage on the government formations of 1958 and 1981 was still clearly pillarized, while “pillarization no longer seemed to play a – decisive – role in 1995” (p477). Furthermore, Van Aelst (2006) has conducted a longitudinal analysis on election coverage in Flemish newspapers, “particularly looking at the extent to which newspapers behaved in a partisan or pillarized way” (p59). He analyzed two newspapers (i.e., *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*) during five elections, which were “randomly picked per decade” (i.e., 1958, 1968, 1974, 1985, and

1999). It concerned a qualitative content analysis, “focusing on front-page news” and on “the way the main political actors were presented in the coverage and on the tone of the reporting” (p57). According to Van Aelst, the election coverage in the newspapers became “more and more balanced, with, by the end of the 1990s, more equal attention for different parties and the disappearance of a clear political preference [...], although more subtle political or personal preferences were sometimes still visible” (p99). Lastly, Beckers et al. (2017) have conducted an empirical study on the “process of homogenization of news content” in nine Flemish newspapers between 1983 and 2013. More specifically, it concerned a quantitative content analysis on the diversity of “news stories (i.e., the real-world events that are selected by journalists and become news)” in 1983, 1993, 2003 and 2013 (p2). They concluded that, in general, the newspapers had *not* become less diverse, but newspapers of the same media group were found to be less diverse than newspapers with different owners (p2).

However, these longitudinal analyses have mainly focused on the *scope* of news coverage (e.g., the absence/presence of objects, actors, or positive/negative standpoints), but barely looked at the *form* of news coverage (e.g., the discursive or linguistic constructions). In other words, they have examined the evolution in diversity, but not so much the evolution in pluralism. Moreover, they have used different interpretations of ‘diversity’. The most recent study of Beckers et al. (2017) was primarily concerned about the economic process of media concentration and did not reflect on political-ideological matters (cfr. chapter 1: critical diversity). Only the variety of news stories has been quantitatively measured. Distelmans (1999) and Van Aelst (2006) were primarily concerned about the process of de-pillarization. In that regard, diversity was given a political dimension. However, both studies only focused on existent party-political actors and/or topics, not on underlying political-ideological positions and views (cfr. chapter 1: affirmative diversity; chapter 2: partisan bias). Such a focus on party-political actors and preferences cannot provide insights on ideological debate and agonistic media pluralism. After all, like newspapers, many established parties have lessened their ideological profiles over the past years, making them less fundamentally different from each other and turning them into so-called ‘catch-all’ or center parties (e.g., De Vos, 2002; Boucké, 2004; Mouffe, 2005). In other words, party-

political differences in coverage cannot guarantee ideological differences. This is confirmed by Distelmans (1999: 477) in his own conclusion:

“The rather direct and specific changes in (party-political) expressions of pillarization [...] only partly coincide with and/or can only indicate more substantial ideological transformations in newspaper coverage. What is fundamental, for example, is that the growing distance between journalism and politics – because of commercialization and de-pillarization in the past years – has been associated with the increasing dissemination of a center-right worldview. More in-depth research on evolutions in the dissemination of ideologies by newspapers, and on the diversity of ideological schemes that are being used, is therefore necessary.”

This doctoral project aims to respond to this call and to tackle these blind spots in empirical research about de-pillarization. Therefore, I will conduct a longitudinal analysis on the scope and form of political-ideological debate in Flemish newspaper coverage (i.e., agonistic media pluralism). Because of its ambitious and explorative nature, the analysis will focus on three newspapers and one issue.

Choices

My longitudinal analysis includes three Flemish newspapers: *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Vooruit* (relaunched as *De Morgen*). It concerns three generalist newspapers – no regional or niche newspapers – which still exist today. *De Standaard* and *De Morgen* are seen as Flanders’ two general quality newspapers, while *Het Laatste Nieuws* is the largest popular newspaper (van der Burg, 2017). At the moment, they belong to two commercial media groups: the former is part of ‘Mediahuis’, the latter two are part of ‘De Persgroep’. In the past, they belonged to different ideological pillars: the Catholic, liberal, and socialist pillar, respectively.

The analysis runs over a period of half a decade. The first case dates back to 1960, when the Flemish newspaper landscape was still clearly pillarized, while the last case takes place in 2014, when the newspaper landscape is without doubt de-pillarized (and substantially concentrated). In total, five comparable cases are being analyzed. All deal with coverage about socio-economic policy reforms. More specifically, I look at the Unitary Law (1960), the Egmont Plan (1977), the Global Plan (1993), the Generation Pact (2005), and the coalition agreement of Michel I (2014). These historic austerity plans led to some of the largest strikes or demonstrations ever experienced in Belgium.

The choice of cases is twofold. On the one hand, I tried to choose for case studies that more or less corresponded with the structural changes in the Flemish newspaper landscape. On the other hand, I made a conscious choice for large socio-economic conflicts. The socio-economic fault line can be considered as one of three traditional fault lines in Belgian society – in addition to the religious and the communitarian fault lines – which “together were responsible for at least 95 percent of the outbursts in national politics” (Deneckere, De Paepe & De Wever, 2012: 5). Moreover, “the focus on wage costs, the government budget, the government deficit, and taxation has become so important throughout the 21st century that the economy has become a dominant factor in policy” (Meynen & Witte, 2016: 422). Indeed, over the last fifty years, the socio-economic fault line has been responsible for some of the largest political debates and social protests in Belgian/Flemish history. Among those are the abovementioned cases^A. In each case, a spectacular number of people took the streets. These protests might already be an indication of clashing (ideological) newspaper coverage; I assume that at least in times of great social dissent, the newspaper landscape will provide a broad (ideological) debate.

^A The cases were selected on the basis of history books that not only discuss past events, but also pay attention to the evolution and dominance of particular worldviews (e.g., Reynebeau, 2009; Brepoels, 2015; De Preter, 2016).

Practicalities

Data

For each case study, two critical discourse moments (CDMs) were selected. CDMs are periods in which specific happenings – like political events, scientific findings, etc – may challenge established views and trigger public debate (Carvalho 2008: 166). It is interesting to see whether media coverage is affected by these events, both in quantity (e.g., more attention to your topic) and quality (e.g., new perspectives, different discourse?). In my longitudinal analysis, the CDMs were limited to a period of three days, providing each case with six days of coverage^B.

The actual selection of the CDMs involved several steps. First, based on historical literature (e.g., Brepoels, 2015), I made a list with potential CDMs for each case. It concerned government announcements, union actions, statements by politicians or social movements, important reports, etc. Second, the list of potential CDMs was tested on the coverage of one newspaper. I looked at the reporting in the lead-up to the event, on the event itself, and in the aftermath. In doing so, I could identify whether and when an event was suitable as CDM for my analysis: was there enough coverage, did it concern a confined debate, were there matters that might disturb the debate, etc.? I then chose two CDMs: one CDM always dealt with the government plan, the other with the public protest. Regarding the latter, coverage on the call to action (mostly including strong argumentation) was often preferred over reporting on the action itself (often disturbed by the specific circumstances; cfr. protest paradigm). Third, the selected CDMs were tested – and sometimes rejected – based on the coverage of the two other newspapers.

After the final selection of the two CDMs, I collected all relevant newspaper reports during these periods by manually flipping through the papers. This was done in the Hendrik Conscience heritage library in Antwerp and the university library of Ghent.

^B Except for the first CDM of the case of 1977, which served as a pilot study and counts much more days. For pragmatic reasons, I decided afterwards to limit the CDMS to three days.

These libraries either provided the newspapers physically, or on microfilm. In the first case, I made photographs of the relevant articles. In the second case, I saved the relevant articles as pdf or jpeg files. A newspaper report was considered relevant when it focused on the specific event, or on a discussion/event closely related to it. In practice: the largest part of the article or the title/lead addressed the topic, or the final conclusion explicitly referred to the event. Letters to the editor and regional coverage were excluded. In total, my longitudinal discourse analysis was based on 783 newspaper reports. More specifically, I collected 120 reports for 1960, 164 for 1977, 188 for 1993, 144 for 2005, and 167 for 2014.

	<i>De Standaard</i>	<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	<i>Vooruit / De Morgen</i>	Total
	320	207	256	783
1960	45	25	50	120
1977	71	47	46	164
1993	72	46	70	188
2005	72	31	41	144
2014	60	58	49	167

As expected, the fewest articles were collected in the case of 1960: at that time, the newspapers were a lot thinner, and the articles very long and often split on different pages (instead of split into two different articles). Furthermore, the cases do not only differ with regard to the amount of data, but also with regard to the kind of data. It was not until the case of 1993, that I started finding interviews, opinion pieces, or columns by/with social actors in the newspapers – at least in the formats that we know of today. In the first two cases, social actors were included in the news coverage in a different way. For example, in 1960, *De Standaard* and especially *Vooruit* published the pamphlets of socio-political organizations. Or, in 1977, *Vooruit* published two external editorials every week, one of which was written by the chairman of the socialist party and the other by the chairman of the socialist union. In 2005, interviews and opinion pieces were published more frequently (although mostly in *De Standaard* and rarely in *Het Laatste Nieuws*). Also, until the case of 1993, journalists were invisible, both literally (i.e., names or initials of journalists were rarely published

underneath articles) and figuratively (i.e., the style of the articles – especially on the government plans – was often rather descriptive). These stylistic changes over time are in line with what scholars have called “the rise of interpretative journalism” and the decline of descriptive coverage (e.g., Soontjes, 2018)^C.

Analysis

After the selection and collection of the data, all news reports were analyzed according to the framework of agonistic media pluralism (cfr. chapter 3 and 4). During this process, many notes were taken, all saved in a comprehensive Excel file. Per case, I have written down the findings of my analysis according to a consistent pattern. I start every case study by explaining the context leading up to the selected event. It concerns (i) changes within the Flemish newspaper landscape and the three selected newspapers^D, and (ii) evolutions in socio-economic thinking/policy. This information should help the reader to understand the specificities of the cases, and to reflect on factors that might have an influence on media pluralism (like I do in the discussion part of this doctoral thesis). Then, I present the analyses of the selected CDMs. Per CDM, I briefly describe the events, provide a detailed overview of the data, and identify patterns regarding the scope and form of the news coverage. These patterns are illustrated by the most pronounced examples^E. Exemptions (e.g., one-time politicization) are only mentioned when it concerns a striking contradiction, or a further determination of the general pattern. I end each CDM with a summary of the findings. After the analysis of the two CDMs, I draw some conclusions on the three newspapers (i.e., ideological culture) and, finally, on the newspaper landscape (i.e.,

^C To be clear: I here refer to the style or format of the coverage, not to the actual content or discourse. As such, ‘interpretative’ must be understood as the counterpart of ‘non-descriptive’, not as the counterpart of ‘neutral’.

^D For particular periods, information about *De Standaard* and *De Morgen* could be obtained from two comprehensive books (i.e., Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005; Vanspauwen, 2002). However, similar literature was not available for other periods or *Het Laatste Nieuws*.

^E When an example is preceded by “i.e.,” it concerns a specific reference. When it is preceded by “e.g.,” it concerns one of many examples. When single quotation marks are used, it concerns a title. When double quotation marks are used, it concerns a citation.

media pluralism and diversity). At the end of each case study, I provide a list of all the analyzed newspaper reports.

For this longitudinal analysis, I use a specific reference system. Instead of including the full reference to a specific news article, I add numbers in superscript^F. These numbers (e.g.: ^{1, 2, 3}) refer to the *exact* articles that illustrate the finding. When the superscripted numbers are put between brackets (e.g.: ^(1, 2, 3)), it concerns *random/extra* articles that prove the finding. It is like the difference between “see” and “see, for example/also”. The subscripted numbers can be consulted in the reference list at the end of each case.

^F During the analysis, letters (e.g.: ^{A, B, C}) are used to refer to footnotes that provide additional information – like this footnote.

CASE 1: PILLARIZED NEWSPAPERS AND THE UNITARY LAW (1960)

Context

Newspaper landscape

Until the 1960s, Belgium – and thus Flanders as well – was a pillarized society. Day-to-day life was organized within the boundaries of various ideologies, or so-called ‘pillars’ (Huyse, 2003: 41-43; Witte & Meynen, 2006: 73, 78). In Belgium, there were three ideological pillars: Catholic, socialist, and liberal (the latter being less developed). Each pillar had its own organizations and movements, like schools, youth and sports associations, hospitals, mutual health organizations, labor unions, political parties, etc. Individuals had to be “equipped within their own circles to find answers for virtually all of their questions and needs” (Huyse, 2003: 123). In other words, the pillar guided its members from the cradle to the grave. The newspapers also operated within this pillarized structure. Each was part of a specific ideological family, and each functioned as a political megaphone (Biltereyst & Van Gompel, 1999; Van Aelst, 2006). With regard to ownership, there were two types of newspapers (Distelmans, 1999: 451; see also Van Aelst, 2006: 50). On the one hand, there were party or union newspapers (e.g., *Vooruit*, the predecessor of *De Morgen*). They had structural ties to political movements (e.g., financial resources, journalists with political mandates). On the other hand, there were the so-called ‘opinion newspapers,’ which had pronounced ideological opinions, but no formal political ties (most were family companies, like *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*). The pillarized press was further characterized by a journalistic culture that regarded opinion expression as its primary duty. Journalists thus made no distinction between news reporting and opinion (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 68, 341; Van Aelst, 2006: 59). Journalists were expected to use their ideologically tinted commentary to shape the opinions of like-minded readers, while challenging

those with opposing opinions. “Polemic was the daily bread of the press (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 341).” Journalists did not believe that they could simply set aside their own opinions (i.e., the opinions of the ideological pillar)^A. “Not only was neutral reporting regarded as inferior journalism, the very possibility of such reporting was open to doubt (Beyens, 2003: 95).” For this reason, they “heavily emphasized the importance of truthfulness in reporting, instead of the absolute truth” (Beyens, 2003: 98).

The Catholic press was able to attract the largest share of Flemish newspaper readers (Biltreyst & Van Gompel, 1999: 67), with *De Standaard* as its flagship. This newspaper was established in 1918. In 1929, it came into the hands of the Catholic Sap family (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 293). Under the banner of the ‘Standaardgroep’, the family established new newspapers (e.g., the popular newspaper *Het Nieuwsblad*) and side activities (e.g., tourism). Son-in-law Albert De Smaele was running the family business on a day-to-day basis. From its beginnings, *De Standaard* had been taking a pro-Flemish and Catholic position and, from 1947 onwards, it also explicitly defended “parliamentary democracy” and “(socially corrected) free-market economics” (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 63). These four principles summarized the newspaper’s basic ideology. “The basic ideology played an extremely important role in the selection of topics that the editors would emphasize” and “the basic ideology was equally kept in mind when taking standpoints” (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 64). If an article was not in accordance with the basic ideology, the reporter would be reprimanded^B. *De Standaard* made no pretenses in this regard to its readers. As was the case in other newspapers, its articles were openly subjective (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 68-80, 341; see also Van Aelst, 2006: 59, 67). The Christian-democratic party CVP was often

^A The fact that a journalist’s standpoint was expected to correspond to the ideological principles of the pillar (and its associated organizations) was not perceived as censure or paternalism: “[a] journalist had freely chosen to work for a newspaper, along with its associated basic ideological principles” (Beyens, 2003: 94, see also: Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 53).

^B There were a few exceptions, like the reporters of the foreign news section Luc Vandeweghe (alias E. Troch) and Leo Picard. They were known for their leftist-liberal positions, which contrasted with the rightist-conservative orientation of the national news reporters (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 54; De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 313).

militantly defended^c, while the socialists and liberals were vilified (due to their respective preferences for state control and anti-clericalism). Instead of just being a passive political observer, *De Standaard* aspired to be an active political actor. “From the very beginning, the newspaper had the explicit intention of influencing [...] the public opinion and the audience, as well as policymakers (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 83).”

Within the Flemish-liberal pillar, the newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* was established in 1888 (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 343-344). The driving force behind the newspaper was Julius Hoste. Later, his son, Julius Hoste Jr., took over and ran the newspaper until his death in 1954. It is interesting to note that, shortly before his death, Hoste Jr. established the foundation ‘Stichting Het Laatste Nieuws’, which had “to ensure that *Het Laatste Nieuws* would continue to follow the same political and philosophical line after his death” (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 346). More specifically, the newspaper was expected to “support, defend, and distribute Flemish, humanistic, and liberal opinions” (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 350). After 1954, the widow and two daughters of Hoste became in charge of the newspaper. They transformed the family business into a joint-stock company, and they purchased shares in another liberal newspaper as well (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 346).

Within the socialist pillar, the newspaper *Vooruit* – the predecessor of *De Morgen* (see later cases) – was established in 1884 in Ghent. It was launched as a propaganda instrument for socialist politicians during elections, but it quickly became the official Flemish mouthpiece of the socialist party (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 358). After World War II, however, *Vooruit* came into competition with its counterpart in Antwerp, *Volksgazet*, and it lost a part of its subscribers (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 359). In the early 1950s, the two newspapers were owned by “the socialist party, unions, cooperatives, and health-insurance funds, united in the [so-called] ‘Collective Action’” (Vanspauwen, 2002:16). In terms of content, *Vooruit* unapologetically presented itself as a party paper and “stubbornly resisted the emerging trend of

^c In the post-War period, *De Standaard* positioned itself within the broad Flemish Catholic movement, but it “had absolutely no ambition to become a party paper [of the CVP]” (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 72). The newspaper did not wish to adopt any guidelines or reporters from the party, and it wished to remain “independent.” Nevertheless, its ties to the CVP were very strong. For example, Premier Eyskens enjoyed the full support of the newspaper (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 135).

independent journalism” (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 360). It “often dogmatically reported on matters relating to the party,” published “a stream of reports and announcements from a wide range of socialist organizations,” and reporters were expected to “shift the news in such a way that no criticism could be launched [against] the socialists” (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 360; Claeys in Van Aelst, 2006: 53).

Socio-economic politics

In the first years following World War II, the Belgian political system turned its full focus on the country’s economic recovery. Successive governments, each having prominent ministry posts for the socialist party BSP, adopted a “dirigistic wage and price policy”(1944-1949) (Brepoels, 2015: 357, 364; Meynen, 2005: 311). Even before such a “recovery policy” could actually be implemented, however, Belgium was able to experience exceptional economic growth between 1945 and 1950. This was called the “Belgian miracle” (Brepoels, 2015: 354; Reynebeau, 2009: 219). Within this atmosphere of prosperity employers’ organizations and unions concluded the first social pact in 1944 (Brepoels, 2015: 350, 363; Meynen, 2005: 321; Reynebeau, 2009: 212, 236; Deneckere, De Paepe & De Wever, 2012: 206). In this pact, workers and employers buried the proverbial social hatchet and made agreements (albeit fragile) concerning various matters, including wages and a social-security system. The pact was symbolic of the professionalization of employment relations: social consultation instead of social conflict; the negotiating table instead of the street. The social role of the union movement was being recognized in this process. Despite the limited circles within which the compromise had been negotiated, and despite criticism emerging from within their own organizations, both employers and unions were committed to the agreement.

Beginning in the 1950s, the Belgian miracle gave way to economic recession and depression (Brepoels, 2015: 382; Reynebeau, 2009: 234). The outdated industry could not stand up to the foreign competition, and both unemployment and public debt increased sharply. This put the existing social pact between employers and unions under pressure (Brepoels, 2015: 382). A renewal with additional agreements became necessary (Brepoels, 2015: 383-384; Meynen, 2005: 323). Within the renewed social

pact, both parties engaged to increase productivity. The employers hoped to strengthen the competitive position of the Belgian economy, while the unions sought to increase employment, as well as wages and social benefits. However, the social tension continued, in part because employers did not keep their promise to convert the increased productivity into greater employment and higher wages (Brepoels, 2015: 384, 396). Around the end of the 1950s, massive strikes broke out once again.

In the 1958 elections, the socialist party was penalized and the Christian Democratic CVP emerged as the absolute winner (Brepoels, 2015: 400; Meynen, 2005: 314). It decided to form a coalition with the liberals. One consequence was that the CVP was forced to adjust its anti-unemployment election proposal, the so-called 'Key plan.' The original design had been heavily influenced by the emerging ideas of Keynesian economics: government incentives and direction were considered essential to economic development (Brepoels, 2015: 400; Meynen, 2005: 314-315; Deneckere, De Paepe & De Wever, 2012: 206). Under pressure from industrial capital, however, the liberal coalition partner was unwilling to accept additional government investments and it assigned priority to budget-cutting measures (Meynen, 2005: 316; Brepoels, 2015: 400). For this reason, the government opted for an austerity program, which took shape from August 1960 onwards. Despite the social tensions at that time, Eyskens was not really worried about union actions (Brepoels, 2015: 399, 402; Reynebeau, 2009: 236). This was because not long before, employers and unions had concluded the first cross-industry agreement, which included formal promises of social peace.

In early November 1960, the Eyskens government submitted the final plan to parliament. The legislative proposal consisted of three components: 'economic expansion,' 'social progress,' and 'financial recovery.' Because each component was likely to be opposed separately by one of the coalition partners or interest groups, Premier Eyskens decided that the voting would be exclusively for the draft as a whole. This is why it was referred to as the 'Unitary Law' (Brepoels, 2015: 402; Reynebeau, 2009: 236; Meynen, 2005: 316). In the plan, the government promised economic growth and employment through governmental support. These economic investments had to be compensated by cuts in social/public expenditures, as well as by additional

taxes. This was unacceptable for the unions (Brepoels, 2005: 403-406; Meynen, 2005: 316). Two weeks after the legislative proposal was announced, the first major work stoppage in protest of the Unitary Law occurred in the Walloon city of Liège. In mid-December 1960, this was followed by a national day of union actions, with work stoppages in virtually all of Wallonia, as well as in several cities in Flanders. Around the Christmas break, when the Unitary Law was being discussed in parliament, Wallonia came to a total standstill and the Flemish cities of Antwerp and Ghent were affected by a strike in all public services.

The strikes reached their greatest scale in early January 1961, with approximately 700,000 people on strike. This would go down in history as the 'Great Strike' or the 'Winter Strike.' The strikes in the winter of 1960-1961 were not characterized solely by their scale, but by their violence as well (Brepoels, 2015: 406; Meynen, 2005: 316). Around the turn of the year, the strikes accelerated, with sabotage actions and confrontations between strikers and the police. This took a heavy toll, with many casualties and ultimately four fatalities. Another characteristic of the Great Strike was its different regionalist impact. The protest against the Unitary Law was much stronger in Wallonia than in Flanders (Meynen, 2005: 317). This can be explained by various elements (see Brepoels, 2015: 409-414; Reynebeau, 2009: 234-235). First, the economic recession was felt much more strongly in the outdated industrial sector of Wallonia than in the new industrial sectors of Flanders. Second, the strike was led by the socialist union, while the leaders of the Christian union stood aside (in part because they had supported the Christian Democratic government in drafting the Unitary Law). This socialist union had traditionally been much stronger in Wallonia, with the Christian union having been stronger in Flanders. Finally, there was a division within the socialist union ABVV itself: from its pronounced anti-capitalist attitude, the Walloon ABVV section was much more strongly committed to the strike than was the case for the Flemish section.

In the short term, the Great Strike had little effect: the Unitary Law was approved on 13 January 1961, after which the union front fell apart (Brepoels, 2015: 407; Reynebeau, 2009: 236). In the medium term, however, it resulted in a shift in policy (Brepoels, 2015: 407; Meynen, 2005: 318). In late January 1961, Eyskens announced

early elections. The socialists and communists, the opposition parties who had been strictly against the Unitary Law and who had supported the strikes, emerged as the biggest winners. From that time on, a succession of Catholic-socialist coalitions outlined the contours of the Keynesian welfare state, reinforced by the economic growth of the 'Golden Sixties' (Brepoels, 2015: 421, 381). The political system increasingly engaged in economic planning, according to the principles of neo-capitalism (Meynen, 2005: 310, 318-319; Brepoels, 2015: 451). The social partners, on their part, became increasingly engaged in social consultation (Meynen, 2005: 307, 322; Brepoels, 2015: 430-431; Reynebeau, 2009: 236-237). The unions believed that improvements should no longer be demanded through harsh actions in the street – which imposed a heavy (financial) toll on the unions – but through consultation at the negotiating table. Fine by the employers, since they also had an interest in disciplined employees. The Great Strike can thus be seen as the final expression of radical-militant conflict syndicalism, which would give way to the model of social harmony.

Analysis

CDM 1: Government presents the Unitary Law (8-10 November)

On 7 November 1960, the Eyskens government announces its austerity program, the so-called 'Unitary Law'. It concerns a five-year plan aimed at 100.000 new jobs and a productivity increase of 4%. The government will pursue the latter by providing subsidies for private investments. These additional expenditures for the economy would be compensated by, on the one hand, cuts in the governmental and social expenditures (e.g., stricter conditions for and tighter control of beneficiaries) and, on the other hand, extra taxes (both direct and indirect).

This analysis focuses on the reporting that appeared in the days following the announcement of the Unitary Law. For a three-day period, every newspaper report

concerning the government plan is selected, yielding a total of 37 newspaper reports. *De Standaard* publishes 16 reports. The vast majority are news articles (14 articles, 1 of which appears on the front page), none with a byline. The newspaper also publishes 1 editorial and 1 analytical piece on the issue, signed by Luc Delafortrie (reporter on social and economic affairs) and A.T. [i.e., Albert Tiberghien, contributor on economic news?] respectively. *Het Laatste Nieuws* publishes 6 newspaper reports on the Unitary Law, all of them news articles without mention of the journalist, and one appearing on the front page. *Vooruit* publishes 15 newspaper reports on the issue. About half (7 in all) are news articles, none mentioning the journalist. Of these articles, 4 appear on the front page. In addition, the newspaper publishes 2 analytical pieces (with no byline) and two editorials (interestingly, written by socialist politicians) on the Unitary Law. Finally, 4 opinion pieces are published in pamphlet form, usually on the front page. These pieces include one speech by *Vooruit* itself and three calls from the socialist union ABVV.

	<i>De Standaard</i>	<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	<i>Vooruit</i>
TOTAL: 37	16	6	15
News articles	14	6	7
→ Front page	→ 1	→ 1	→ 4
Analytical pieces	1	-	2
Editorials	1	-	2
Editorial opinion pieces	-	-	1
Interviews	-	-	-
External opinion pieces	-	-	3
Columns	-	-	-
Cartoons	-	-	-

After the announcement of the Unitary Law, the newspapers write primarily about two matters (i.e., objects)^D. Most reports are either about the legislative proposal as a

^D Nevertheless, many articles are characterized by a hodgepodge of objects (e.g., the language issue, the crisis in the Congo). One important factor contributing to this situation is the tendency of journalists to adopt a highly descriptive style. For example, in the case of the parliamentary sessions, each agenda point and parliamentary question is recorded in chronological order. In

whole^(1, 18, 23), or specifically about the budget measures^(9, 19, 28). These two issues inspire the greatest share of the reporting, although *De Standaard* and *Vooruit* are more ‘inspired’ than is *Het Laatste Nieuws*. For example, *Het Laatste Nieuws* publishes only six articles in the three-day period, less than half the number appearing in *De Standaard* or *Vooruit*. In *Vooruit*, the Unitary Law also appears on the front page more often (see above).

A second difference between the newspapers concerns the actors (i.e., who played the central role and who is assigned framing power?). *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*, on the one hand, nearly exclusively reproduce the government discourse. Not only do they communicate the texts of the Unitary Law in a highly factual and highly detailed manner^(3, 18), they also primarily reproduce the statements of ministers and/or their fellow party members^(1, 8, 17, 19). The liberal coalition partner is of particular interest to *Het Laatste Nieuws*. *Vooruit*, on the other hand, assigns a remarkable amount of framing power to the socialist union ABVV and the socialist opposition party BSP, who both denounce the Unitary Law due to its negative consequences for workers and beneficiaries^(27, 30). The newspaper even seems to operate as a direct campaign platform for the two socialist organizations. For example, the editorials are not written by members of the editorial staff, but by socialist politicians^{24, 31}. In addition, pamphlet-style opinion pieces – often on the front page – allow various socialist union groups to make direct appeals to their militants (e.g., subtitle ‘Call on the personnel’²⁶, headline ‘The ACOD alerts its members’³³).

Corresponding to the difference in actors, the newspapers are found – as is further outlined below – to defend different views on the Unitary Law. While *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* support the legislative proposal and reproduce the discourse of the coalition, *Vooruit* rejects the (planned) policy. All of the newspapers nevertheless adopt a depoliticizing discourse, in which various aspects are presented as ‘necessary’ or ‘irrational’, and which impedes a broad debate. Calls for discussion are highly exceptional (i.e., just one time in *Vooruit*).

that case, the Unitary Law is addressed, but often not until the second half of the article (although the title does refer to it).

Let us start with *Vooruit*, which provides the loudest arguments. On its front page, the newspaper delegitimizes the coalition's proposal with such titles as 'The Unitary Law is a monster'³⁰ and 'ABVV and all centers waging a battle against the unfortunate law of Eyskens'³⁵. The moralizing term "unfortunate law" appears multiple times in the discourse of *Vooruit*⁽³⁶⁾. Also on the front page – more specifically, in the editorial by the socialist party chairman Leo Collard – the criticism of the Unitary Law is naturalized as unanimous, writing that "[t]he country itself is opposed to it"³¹. In the same editorial, Collard uses the Unitary Law as a base for formulating a general critique on the government policy:

*"Finally, we oppose [the Unitary Law], as the entire country has lost faith in Mr. Eyskens, his government, and his [parliamentary] majority. It knows that they are not capable of changing the situation. This has been definitively proven on enough occasions. Mr. Eyskens knows it as well. The only thing that he could still do to serve the country would be to step down and give the voters a chance to speak. This is what democracy prescribes. But Mr. Eyskens is more afraid of this logical and fair action, than he is of any other, whatever it may be. [...] Governments without authority and without confidence are always inclined to take measures that reflect weakness and lack of authority."*³¹

According to Collard, the coalition has proven incapable of "changing the situation" and has demonstrated its incompetence to lead the country (e.g., "without authority and without confidence"). In other words, he delegitimizes the government in terms of deficient knowledge and expertise (i.e., irrational). Its policy would reflect "weakness and lack of authority." Then, he naturalizes the government's resignation – and thus the repeal of the Unitary Law – as the "only" solution, and legitimizes such a decision as "logical," "fair," and democratic. Elsewhere in the newspaper as well, Eyskens and his government are accused of lacking competence and insight: "the questions of journalists [...] were quite inconvenient"²³, and the Unitary Law is "equally vague and unclear throughout"³⁵. Moreover, in the article entitled 'The Liberal Janssens thinks that the proposal should be rejected'³⁴ ⁽³¹⁾, *Vooruit* implies that the coalition has not even succeeded in convincing its own party members. The article positions the government and its Unitary Law against divided followers (e.g., subtitle 'Threat of parliamentary dissolution and a split in the CVP'³⁴). *Vooruit* thus finds a variety of ways in which to prevent any broad debate on the Unitary Law. There is,

however, one exception: the analytical piece entitled ‘Tax offensive of Mr. Eyskens poorly received’³² does invoke debate. It calls into question the coalition’s promises concerning “economic expansion,” “social progress,” and “financial recovery”:

“The official name of the proposal of the Unitary Law is ‘Legislative proposal for economic expansion, social progress, and financial recovery’. [...] Economic expansion? Is it economic expansion when we weaken our competitive position in the common market, substantially reduce purchasing power, and put the brakes on the expansion by irresponsibly increasing duties and taxes? Social progress? Does Mr. Eyskens consider it social progress when the retirement age for civil servants is raised simultaneously with an increase in the personal retirement contribution? Is it social progress when billions are cut in health and disability insurance? Finally, is it financial recovery when new duties unprecedented in our country are imposed in a period of economic upturn and increased productivity [...]?”³²

In the fragment – which serves as the introduction to the analytical piece – the claims of the Unitary Law are presented as questionable (i.e., they are denaturalized). The widely proclaimed government objectives are called into question (e.g., “[i]s it economic expansion when...”); the other side of the decisions is displayed (e.g., “purchasing power will be substantially reduced”). In this way, the analytical piece creates space for uncertainty and disagreement, and thus for a well-founded discussion (i.e., cultivation). This is nevertheless restricted to the introduction. In the rest of the analytical piece, the government policy – and particularly its budget plans (see below) – are simply delegitimized as immoral, such that it is no longer debatable.

In contrast to *Vooruit*, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* defend the government and its Unitary Law. This occurs most explicitly in the editorial ‘Statements are good, realizing them is better’² by Luc Delafortrie, reporter on social and economic affairs at *De Standaard*:

“We could all exercise criticism from our own individual standpoints. But if everyone were to start nibbling at the proposal, there would not be much left over, and the much-needed recovery would not occur. Our community has enough common sense to realize this. We also believe that everyone will agree with the major points of the proposal. If the current administration cannot enforce it, the next one will have to try something along the same lines.”²

Delafortrie states that “everyone will agree with the major points of the proposal” and presents the government plans as inevitable (i.e., “much-needed recovery,” the next administration would have to “try something along the same lines”). Acceptance of the Unitary Law would therefore be a reflection of “common sense.” In other words, he is naturalizing the legislative proposal in his editorial. In the other reporting of *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*, it is interesting to note how the newspapers do not criticize, but purely reproduce the standpoints of the government – which are either expressed by Prime Minister Eyskens, or by official documents. In some cases, the newspapers even promote these statements to bold headlines (or subtitles) on the front page (e.g., ‘The measures that I propose are necessary [...]’¹, ‘In the common interest’¹⁹)^(1, 4, 18). In contrast, criticism of the coalition’s proposal is minimized. It only appears in the margins in the form of political trivia^(8, 9), or it is presented as premature (e.g., “Some [liberal] members may have expressed doubts [...], but in no way were any definitive standpoints adopted”)^{20 (19)}.

Specifically with regard to the budget measures (i.e., the fiscal component of the Unitary Law), *De Standaard* and *Vooruit*^E are particularly likely to adopt opposing standpoints, as is illustrated below. On the one hand, *De Standaard* supports the government austerity plans (but not the new taxes) out of economic concern. On the other hand, *Vooruit* is found to criticize the plan from the perspective of employees (suggesting additional taxes on capital as an alternative). Again – as examples will show below – all of the newspapers argue in terms of (ir)rationality and (im)morality (i.e., depoliticization), thereby discouraging debate. Nonetheless, *Vooruit* does sometimes draw a link to political interests.

To begin with *De Standaard* and, more specifically, the previously mentioned editorial ‘Statements are good, realizing them is better’²:

“[It] has been stated that all of the proposed measures are directed toward the country’s further development. To this end, a five-year plan for economic expansion has been announced. This plan cannot be realized if the messy situation of governmental finances continues, with increased expenditures, too many loans, persistent treasury problems, and incessant losses in various

^E The reporting of *Het Laatste Nieuws* on the budget measures is restricted to purely relaying criticism from social actors, without any journalistic interventions.

sectors. [...] The aforementioned losses must be brought to a halt. It is therefore logical for the legislative proposal to include measures concerning municipalities, health and disability insurance, pensions, and unemployment. [...] If the public understands that such ends can actually be achieved, along with continued economic expansion and without any social regression, it will more readily accept the tax increases.”²

In this opening fragment, journalist Luc Delafortrie equates “the country’s further development” with “economic expansion.” Particular importance is thus assigned to economic growth. However, as argued in the editorial, such economic growth can be achieved only if the government implements cuts (e.g., in health insurance, unemployment, and pensions). The current financial policy is delegitimized (e.g., “messy situation”) due to excessive expenditures (e.g., “increased expenditures” and “incessant losses in various sectors”). The choice for cuts is thus also presented as “self-evident,” “logical,” and even “necessary” – so, it is naturalized. The budget must be in balance. Moreover, as Delafortrie mentions in the conclusion to the paragraph, a strategic aspect is also at play: the effective implementation of sufficient cuts would justify the coalition’s choice for additional taxes. In sum, the editorial supports the budget policy of the Eyskens administration from an accounting and strategic (i.e., rational) perspective. In its general news reporting as well, *De Standaard* expresses little criticism of the budget policy, at least not explicitly^F. Two critiques are expressed, somewhat between the lines. First, the governmental cuts would not (yet) go far enough. There would be ‘Doubts concerning cuts’⁹ and, therefore, ‘Liberal skepticism’⁸. These critical headlines are striking, given that the newspaper usually sticks to highly descriptive, sober headlines^(11, 14). When *De Standaard* expands on the governmental measures for municipalities, we read in the introduction:

“[...] it is always wrong for a state to cut a billion at the expense of the municipalities, which must then find some way to keep their budgets in balance by raising existing municipal taxes or introducing new ones.”³

^F This is partly because the news articles are generally written in a highly descriptive and technical manner. In the analytical piece entitled ‘The new fiscal effort’, the journalist A.T. literally states that, “today, we should stick to the main points. Critical reflection will come later”⁷.

In other words, according to the newspaper, the government is actually shifting the necessary cuts to the municipalities, which will have no other choice than to levy additional taxes (and, in so doing, there will be no cuts at all). The second critique of *De Standaard* has to do with such additional taxes. Its claim: although the government has stated that the measures would be temporary and bearable, the taxes will have a considerable effect, particularly on the economy and companies. This can be derived from an analytical piece by journalist A.T.⁷ Already in the lead, A.T. demonstrates skepticism with regard to the government's tax discourse:

*"These increases [in taxes] are not that bad, according to the explanatory statement. [...] (Sic) But the fiscal effort that is intended to promote economic expansion will cost at least 8–9 billion."*⁷

By simply putting a concrete number on the government measures, A.T. undermines the administration's minimalization. The high figure (i.e., "at least 8–9 billion") should directly show that the tax increases are definitely not to be taken lightly. In a similarly numerical and technical manner, the analytical piece dissects the "major points" of the fiscal policy. The focus is clearly – albeit never explicitly – on "the companies" and the many additional taxes that they are facing. The journalist uses percentages and calculations to create the nearly irrefutable image that companies will have to make many sacrifices. *Het Laatste Nieuws* also reports negatively on the additional taxes. Although the newspaper itself makes no statements on Eyskens' fiscal policy, it does quote a variety of social actors who express criticism of the additional taxes. The article 'First reactions' quotes, in succession, a liberal member of parliament, "a socialist voice" and the Francophone "right-wing CVP newspaper" *La Libre Belgique*²¹⁽¹⁹⁾. Their criticism is summarized in the cross headings: "New taxes are inconvenient", "Useless taxes", 'Unjust taxes'. It thus seems as if everyone is universally (i.e., across party lines) negative with regard to the taxes.

Finally, the newspaper *Vooruit* draws no distinction between the austerity plans and the tax plans of the Eyskens government; it denounces the entire budget policy from the conviction that each measure will affect wage earners and beneficiaries. For example, a pamphlet-style editorial opinion piece, appearing the day after the announcement of the Unitary Law, is entitled 'Where the misconduct of the Eyskens government has brought us'²⁵. It emphasizes two elements: "Billions less

benefits and lower social expenditures” and “10 billion in new taxes”²⁵. Each is followed by a list of new cuts and taxes, respectively. The common denominator is the wallet of the employee and beneficiary:

“These drastic cuts, for which the primary victims will be wage and salary earners, are nevertheless not enough to rescue the government from its precarious position. Despite these curtailments and retrenchments in expenditures and despite a new loan of 16 billion, which it is hoped will yield at least 10 billion, an unprecedented burden of 10 billion in new taxes is being imposed on the population.”²⁵

Like *De Standaard, Vooruit* provides a series of figures (i.e., aforementioned lists) and an accounting logic (i.e., calculation on the new loan) to reinforce its argument. In contrast, however, the heart of its argument concerns the explicit link to “wage and salary earners” (i.e., political positioning). It is in light of their situation that the government measures are denounced (e.g., “misconduct,” “victim,” “unprecedented burden”). Also the editorials argue that the government is targeting the “little man” with its tax measures (in addition to the budget-cutting measures), while sparing the capitalists. For example:

“[T]he share that must be paid by wage earners – the vast majority of users – [will] be greater in comparison to the taxes on the profits of the capitalists and the income of those who are not taxed at the source. Rational reform is impossible under this government, because it is composed of the direct representatives of those who are enjoying numerous privileges due to this situation. It has been scientifically demonstrated that the fiscal system is outdated, anti-social, and anti-economic [...]. [It has also been demonstrated] that wage earners continue to see increases in the share of their income taxes relative to those of other taxpayers, and that the indirect taxes that are now being levied will have a heavier impact on the little ones than it will on the big ones.”²⁴

“Opposed [to the Unitary Law], as the [country] cannot allow having taxpayers to pay, while both trusts and holdings are depositing their capital abroad. Opposed, as the credit retrenchments and tax increases will be primarily placed on the shoulders of the little ones – in other words, the vast majority of the population [...].”³¹

The editorials – written by the socialist politicians Pierre Vermeylen and Leo Collard – identify two socio-political groups that are affected by the government policy (i.e.,

political positioning). The first group consists of “the wage earners,” who are also identified as “the vast majority of users,” “the little ones,” or “the vast majority of the population.” The second group is “the capitalists,” which is also referred to as “those who are not taxed at the source,” “the big ones,” or “trusts and holdings.” Additionally, both pieces state that the former group is being disadvantaged compared to the latter: they have seen their share of taxes “increasing [...] continuously,” “growing” and “weighing more heavily,” which cannot be a coincidence (i.e., given the composition of the coalition). The governmental budget policy is therefore delegitimized, but to such an extent that it appears undebatable. Indeed, the political critique (i.e., against the interests of the workers) is followed by a delegitimization in both moral and rational terms (e.g., against “the little ones,” “rational reform is inconceivable,”)⁽³⁵⁾ and by the rejection of any discussion (i.e., “impossible under this government,” emphasis on “opposed”). Also in the previously mentioned analytical piece³², the budget measures are completely delegitimized. For example: they involve “the greatest political trickery imaginable,” and the government is trying to “milk the population to the limits of the possible, in addition to fooling them”³². Or, in more metaphoric terms: “*Mr. Eyskens has already sheared the innocent sheep who brought him to power as much as he can. Now he literally wants to skin the acquiescent taxpayers*”³². In other words, the governmental measures would be immoral. The question then becomes: which budget policy is actually acceptable (i.e., legitimized)? Although the newspaper never formulates a concrete alternative, its accusations of the government clearly indicate that *Vooruit* advocates additional taxes for and control of capital, instead of taxes and cuts for employees. For example: “[we] cannot allow having taxpayers to pay, while both trusts and holdings are depositing their capital abroad”^{31 (24)}.

In summary: In this first critical discourse moment (CDM 1), we see how the newspapers represent different actors and opposing viewpoints. *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* support the Unitary Law of the Eyskens government. They primarily quote ministers or pro-government politicians, with criticism of the legislative proposal being largely absent. The only (slightly) negative reporting in these two newspapers concerns the additional taxes. In this regard, *De Standaard* appears to write from the standpoint of the employers (“companies”). It promotes cuts, with an eye on economic

growth (i.e., “economic expansion”). In contrast, *Vooruit* is clearly opposed to the Unitary Law and the Eyskens government. Its standpoint corresponds closely to the often-cited socialist opposition, and it is clearly based on the interests of the employees (“wage earners”). With an eye on their situation, *Vooruit* argues against the reduction of government services (i.e., anti-cuts). Instead, a strong government should be guaranteed, not through contributions from “the little ones,” but through taxes on and regulation of capital and the economic “big ones.”

To defend their standpoints, all of the newspapers predominantly make use of depoliticizing strategies, thereby hindering any (ideological) discussion on the socio-economic policy. Concerning the ‘pro-Unitary Law camp’, an editorial of *De Standaard* provides a clear example of depoliticization. In that editorial, the Unitary Law, and specifically the cuts, are presented as necessary (in order to balance the accounts). Furthermore, general criticism of the coalition’s plan is minimized (e.g., in terms of layout), while criticism of the additional taxes is explicitly emphasized (numerically, or in headlines). A depoliticizing discourse also appears in *Vooruit*. The Unitary Law is delegitimized as immoral, and the government as irrational. Criticism of the plan and the government is naturalized as being ubiquitous. Only a few times, *Vooruit* presents the government policy in terms of opposing socio-political interest groups – it would be pro-capital and anti-workers (i.e., political positioning) – after which it is delegitimized again as immoral and irrational, or presented as undebatable.

CDM 2: Parliament discusses and the union reacts (21-23 December)

The parliamentary treatment of the Unitary Law starts on 20 December 1960. They promise to be fiery sessions, given that the socialist opposition party BSP has already adopted an official stance in opposition to the coalition’s plan a month earlier (Brepoels, 2015: 403). Also on 20 December, the socialist union of public services (or, more specifically, ACOD-Municipalities and Provinces) decides to strike “to the finish.” Workers from the private sector – predominantly in Wallonia – spontaneously join the

civil servants. The National ABVV establishment subsequently makes the call general, urging its Walloon and Flemish departments “to take all measures necessary to achieve maximum expansion of the movement.”

This analysis runs from the day after the start of the parliamentary discussions through the day after the appeal for a general strike “to the finish”. For this three-day period, every newspaper report concerning the Unitary Law, the parliamentary discussion concerning the plan, and the union actions against it, is selected. This yields a total of 83 newspaper reports. 29 reports appear in *De Standaard*. The majority are news articles (20 articles, 4 of which are on the front page), none with a byline. In addition, the newspaper publishes 2 editorials by Luc Delafortrie (reporter on social and economic affairs) and Louis De Lentdecker (reporter on domestic affairs), along with 1 editorial opinion piece by political journalist Manu Ruys, and 2 relevant analytical pieces by Delafortrie and A.T.. It also publishes 3 external ‘opinion pieces’ (i.e., a pamphlet by the coalition party CD&V, and announcements from employers and the train company), and 1 cartoon (by in-house cartoonist Pil). *Het Laatste Nieuws* publishes a total of 19 newspaper reports. With the exception of 1 editorial by V.L. [i.e., political journalist Léo Verbist?], all are news articles with no byline (4 of which appear on the front page). *Vooruit* publishes 35 relevant newspaper reports. The majority are news articles (23 in all), with nearly half on the front page. In addition, 1 editorial and 2 analytical pieces appear in the newspaper, all with no mention of the journalist. This is supplemented by 9 ‘external opinion pieces’: pamphlet-style announcements from socialist union departments or the socialist opposition party BSP.

	<i>De Standaard</i>	<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	<i>Vooruit</i>
TOTAL: 83	29	19	35
News articles	20	18	23
→ Front page	→ 4	→ 4	→ 11
Analytical pieces	2	-	1
Editorials	2	1	1
Editorial opinion pieces	1	-	1
Interviews	-	-	-

External opinion pieces	3	-	9
Columns	-	-	-
Cartoons	1	-	-

The reporting is primarily inspired by a single issue (i.e., object): the strikes. However, to a lesser extent, the newspapers also devote attention to the parliamentary debate on the Unitary Law. They subscribe to different opinions, as is illustrated below. I find that *Vooruit* denounces the government proposition – particularly the cuts – while supporting the socialist opposition in parliament (i.e., BSP). In contrast, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* promote the cuts, while having little patience with the socialist criticism. All of the newspapers defend their standpoints in terms of right-versus-wrong (i.e., depoliticization), thereby standing in the way of any broad debate. In the following paragraphs, I give some examples.

To begin with *Vooruit*, which leaves little doubt about its view of the government plans. Instead of referring to it as the ‘Unitary Law’, it often employs negative synonyms or descriptions in titles and introductions. The label “unfortunate law” is used particularly often^(96, 97, 111). In doing so, *Vooruit* links the coalition’s proposal to disastrous (albeit undefined) consequences, thus denouncing it as morally undesirable. It also uses such labels as “degeneration politics”⁸⁶ and “politics of social destruction”⁹², warning of the consequences of the planned cuts. *Vooruit* obviously declares its solidarity with the parliamentary opposition to the government plans. For example, it opts for titles that sanctify the socialist interventions (e.g., ‘Incisive socialist parliamentary questions’¹¹³) and that reject any opposition (i.e., ‘Chairman evades his responsibility’¹⁰⁰). In addition, it assigns framing power only to the socialist members of parliaments. Their arguments are documented to the smallest details, while opposing arguments from the majority parties are absent^{95, 100, 113}. Even outside the walls of the parliament, the socialists are able to count on preferential treatment from *Vooruit*: the party makes the front page for two days in a row. On Thursday, 22 December, it concerns a press conference with BSP Chairman Collard (with regard to the so-called ‘Collective Action’)⁹⁸, and on Friday, 23 December, a kind of pamphlet by the BSP offices¹¹⁰. In both of these front-page pieces, the socialist party is assigned full framing power to delegitimize Eyskens’ policy (e.g., “aftermath of escapades, degradation, and calamity”⁹⁸), and to legitimize the socialist approach (e.g., “clear

policy of general progress⁹⁸) or even naturalize it as the only right choice (e.g., “the choice is thus clear⁹⁸)^(110, 96).

In *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*, the reporting on the parliamentary debates is highly descriptive. The various agenda points are addressed and the parliamentary questions are documented in a detailed, quasi-chronological manner^(43, 48, 67, 72). In most cases, these two newspapers opt for factual headlines (e.g., ‘In the Chamber and the Senate: Opposition seeks to question the Government’⁷²)^(40, 48, 67). They continually note the arguments of both the coalition parties and the socialist opposition^(60, 61, 84). Nevertheless, some formulations betray their lack of support for the socialist parliamentary opposition. With certain (sub)titles, they present the socialist members of parliaments as failures (i.e., ‘Failed adjournment maneuvers of the opposition with regard to the Unitary Law’⁴³), troublemakers (i.e., ‘Socialists create a fuss about the strike’^{60 (73, 77)}), or militants (i.e., ‘Turbulent session in the Senate: Intense incident between union leader Smets and Minister Segers’⁸⁴). In their editorials^{44, 78} and/or editorial opinion pieces⁴⁷, both newspapers reveal skepticism regarding the success and utility of the socialist opposition. For example, Luc Delafortrie of *De Standaard* literally writes that “the socialists are not capable of asserting themselves in parliamentary matters, and their party is highly divided”^{44 (47)}. In *Het Laatste Nieuws*, VI. [i.e., political journalist Léo Verbist?] even labels the socialist criticism as absurd:

“Opposition to the Unitary Law has arisen due to the intended advance deduction on profits from stock market securities, as it is seen as a step in the direction of closer control over properties. On the socialist side, however, the protest is primarily against the announced cuts and the curbing of abuses in the area of social security. However, is the general interest served by tax evasion, the waste of state money, and abuses that will ultimately lead to the collapse of the social security system? The question answers itself. Moreover, we seem to have forgotten that the Unitary Law has an entirely different goal: our country’s economic and financial recovery.”⁷⁸

The editorial fragment shows how *Het Laatste Nieuws* deals with criticism of the Unitary Law in two different ways. First, VI. mentions criticism of the planned stock market taxes and control over holdings. This protest against governmental interventions in the market and capital is not called into question, and it appears self-

evident (and thus legit). The author then mentions the socialist protest against cuts in and inspection of social security. In this case, the criticism is presented as illogical and reckless. It seems as if the socialists themselves have not thought it through (i.e., “[t]he question answers itself”). VI. adds that cuts to and stricter supervision of government expenditures “[serve] the general interest” and – as insinuated in the editorial – ensure “economic and financial recovery.” Proceeding from a preference for budget cuts, he thus delegitimizes the socialist criticism⁶. Briefly stated, the socialist criticism receives no support in either *De Standaard* or *Het Laatste Nieuws*. As a result, it also receives little attention. For example, the press conference of the BSP Chairman Collard only appears in the back of the newspaper^{50, 75}.

The greatest difference between *Vooruit*, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* has to do with their reporting on the strikes. As I show below, the newspapers adopt completely different standpoints. While *Vooruit* expresses its full support for the union protest against the Unitary Law, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* resolutely denounce the actions. In doing so, none of the newspapers really stimulates debate. Only a few times, *Vooruit* gives political meaning to the strikes. There are five ways in which the newspapers either actively encourage or strongly discourage the union actions, which will be explained in the following paragraphs.

First, the publication pattern reveals whether a newspaper is in favor of or opposed to the actions. For example, from 21 December onwards, the front pages of *Vooruit* explode with reports on the strikes (with a focus on the Flemish cities of Ghent and Antwerp)^(86, 97, 108). In addition, page 3 (the first page seen when the newspaper is opened) is always filled with articles on the “strike force”^(92, 103, 116). In contrast, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* do not publish a front-page story on the strike until 22 December^(44, 45, 71, 76). Before that date, few articles on the union actions appear elsewhere in the newspapers as well.

Second, the choice of actors (i.e., those on whom the reporting focuses and those who are assigned framing power) reflects whether the newspapers do or do not

⁶ This preference for cuts is also reflected in an editorial cartoon by Pil, the in-house cartoonist for *De Standaard*⁵⁹. The cartoon entitled ‘A two-horse team was provided!’ laments the fact that the Unitary Law does not pay sufficient attention to cuts. It depicts a carriage being drawn by only one horse (named “taxes”), while the other horse (named “cuts”) remains in the stall.

support the protest. During the wave of strikes, *Vooruit* acts as the mouthpiece for the socialist union ABVV. Nearly every article contains either a direct citation from a union department, or a paraphrase/citation from a speech of a union leader^(87, 103, 108). Moreover, socialist union announcements – often in pamphlet style – are published in full^(90, 100, 104). They consist of compliments (e.g., ‘ABVV thanks the strikers’⁹³) and calls (e.g., ‘ABVV orders expansion of the strike movement’¹⁰⁹) to the union members. In addition to the socialist union, the socialist party BSP receives framing power to legitimize the strikes^{98, 110}. In *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*, these strike-supporting socialist actors receive little (prominent) framing power. The articles in these newspapers primarily address governmental actors or employers’ organizations – i.e., two groups that are opposed to the strike^(42, 85, 49, 71). Both actors advocate measures to prohibit the strikes and to restore the “freedom of labor.” *De Standaard* publishes their similar message side-by-side on the front page on 23 December (i.e., ‘Will the government be strong? Industry demands immediate measures’⁵⁵ and ‘CVP requests resolute government measures’⁵⁶). The newspaper further cites the Christian union ACV, which has instructed its members not to participate in the strikes⁶².

Third, the newspapers defend different views of the role of pressure groups, thus legitimizing or delegitimizing the current strikes against the Unitary Law. In its editorial on Thursday, 23 December, *Vooruit* accuses the coalition of insufficient consultation of the social partners in the decision-making process:

*“Eyskens seeks to impose his Unitary Law, but the working class has said NO. The coalition has set out upon an illegal adventure. The union-employer joint committees were not consulted, and the union advisory councils were not convened. Acquired rights are no longer binding. Blinded by capitalist support, Eyskens thought that his coalition was above the law. He was wrong, and he should consider himself responsible for one of the most gigantic conflicts that our country has ever known.”*¹¹¹

Vooruit emphasizes that Prime Minister Eyskens and his coalition team have deliberately chosen to autonomously outline and submit a legislative proposal, without involving the employers and unions⁽¹¹⁰⁾. This action is explained through the relationship between the government and both socio-political interest groups (i.e., political positioning): there would be strong ties between the coalition and “capitalism,” as well as mutual aversion between the coalition and “the working

class”⁽¹¹⁰⁾. *Vooruit* insinuates that the government has acted autonomously to avoid any criticism and demands of the labor unions. This perceived socio-political injustice leads to a complete delegitimization of the coalition’s actions. They would be “illegal” (i.e., “above the law,” “rights are no longer binding”), over-confident (i.e., “blinded”), and disastrous (i.e., “responsible for one of the most gigantic conflicts”). *Vooruit* leaves no room for debate, stating that the government has no other choice but to capitulate (i.e., “the working class has said NO,” Eyskens “was wrong”). The newspaper makes this exceedingly clear in the leads of large front-page articles. For example: “if Mr. Eyskens persists in his stubbornness, the strike will ultimately involve the whole country”^{108 (97)}. Any initiative to circumvent the strikes (e.g., possible suspensions, police patrols for non-strikers) is delegitimized by *Vooruit* as plain “intimidation,” “threats,” “provocation,” or “pressure”^(86, 91, 116). *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Standaard* claim the exact opposite. According to these newspapers, it is the strikes that are illegitimate, as the unions are encroaching upon the exclusive territory of the political system. In their editorials, they describe the situation as follows:

“The political strikes. A disadvantage for everyone. Abuse of power.’ The strikes that are being staged by the socialist party reflect a disturbing phenomenon. The true goal of these strikes is to collapse the government, dissolve the parliament, and achieve new elections. The power of the unions is actually being directed toward political objectives.”⁷⁸

“Anarchist strikes. Major damage to the country’ [...] NO, the goal of the strike is of a purely political nature. The socialists who are incapable of asserting themselves in parliamentary matters and who are highly divided within their own party (see their conference, which was held on Sunday) are attempting to achieve their objectives by paralyzing governance boards, trains, ports, and factories. [...] [T]heir union is on the loose, driven by a Renard who openly advocates non-legal, anarchist methods.”⁴⁴

According to the two newspapers, the strikes are intended to bring the socialist party to power⁽⁵³⁾. The protest would thus be purely strategic, instead of in sincere defense of employee interests. In other words, they are “political strikes,” and not “union” actions. In this light, the actions are extensively delegitimized as illegal and an abuse of power (i.e., “non-legal,” “anarchist,” “abuse of power”). Briefly stated, they would be democratically unacceptable. For this reason, *De Standaard* – like governmental actors and employers’ organizations – advocates initiatives aimed at restricting the

strikes: “the vast majority of the population would support the government in any public rebuke of the anarchist strikes, in any measures aimed at ensuring public order, and in the attempt to avoid any appearance of tolerance”^{44 (47)}.

Fourth, through their discursive strategies, the newspapers present a different picture of the current actions, thereby encouraging or discouraging future union initiatives. For example, *Vooruit* legitimizes the current actions as an absolute success (e.g., “exceeding their wildest expectations”⁸⁶, “the success of this march is overwhelming”¹⁰³, ‘Strike is successful in all areas’¹⁰⁴)^(95, 97, 99). The newspaper continually writes of a massive following. This is done in headlines, leads, photo captions, and the actual text of the articles. For example: “*Never before has the order to strike been followed as completely as in the current case. [...] Yesterday evening, we observed that the strike is expanding substantially in all areas. It is becoming a true tidal wave*”^{86 (97, 103)}. In addition, *Vooruit* consistently emphasizes how the socialist militants are receiving support from the Christian union members. For example: “Many Christian union members are joining the action”⁸⁶. Or: “[it] has been announced that the Christian union members are also convinced of the need to strike, but are ordered not to participate in any so-called political strike”^{108 (89, 103)}. The newspaper thus positions the members of the two major unions as standing shoulder to shoulder, which suggests a strong support for the protest against the Unitary Law. Moreover, the entire population would be in support of the union protest. This is suggested in an article about the city of Ghent: “[t]wenty-five thousand strikers took to the streets of Ghent, where they are received with sympathy by the entire population”¹⁰³ and “[t]here is a tangible sense that all of these citizens of Ghent are positively inclined toward the militant mass”¹⁰³. *Vooruit* further legitimizes the strikes by referring to the (largely) peaceful course of the actions. For example: “*The officers are taking a preventive approach, and the strikers are understanding. The requests of the officers are being followed without the slightest incident. Everyone stays on the sidewalk, and no one is entering the prohibited zone*”⁸⁷. Any incidents that do occur are either minimized (e.g., “a few clashes did occur”¹⁰⁵) or contrasted with the actions of the police (e.g., “The officers, who were equipped with tear gas, had occupied the station”¹⁰⁸). *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* present an entirely different picture of the union actions. Although both newspapers acknowledge the high turnout for the

strike in certain cities^(45, 71), they emphasize that there were no strikes in other places. They use (sub)titles such as ‘Partial strike of municipal personnel’⁴², ‘No success in Flanders’⁵³, ‘Strike movement stagnates in Antwerp; CCOD resumes work’⁶², ‘Primarily restricted to the socialist unions’⁶⁹, and ‘Many fewer absentees than in January’⁷⁴. Also in the leads of the articles, an image of low participation is created. For example: “in Flanders, strikes were reported only very sporadically”⁵³ and “in Limburg, Bruges, and Tournai, everyone remained on the job, as was also the case in many other Flemish and Walloon cities and towns”^{69 (42, 74)}. In addition, *De Standaard* reports that Christian ACV militants do not at all (and are not allowed to) express solidarity with the socialist union. In several articles, the newspaper either reports that Christian workers have resumed work, or repeats the orders of the Christian union leaders about not striking^(45, 53, 64). One editorial even proposes that “following in the steps of these ACV members [who join the strike]” should be condemned and rebuked as strongly as possible”⁴⁴. The population is also presented as not being in solidarity with the strikers. This is communicated in *De Standaard* (e.g., “the merchants are loudly lamenting that it is ruining their ‘best days’”⁵⁴⁾ ⁽⁴⁴⁾, as well as in *Het Laatste Nieuws* (i.e., ‘students attack picket line’⁷⁴⁾). So, in a variety of ways, the support for the strikes is undermined and the union actions are delegitimized. Both newspapers also delegitimize the motivation of the marchers. On the one hand, this is done in rational terms: the strikers would be uninformed (e.g., “no one seems to know what is actually at stake”⁶²), and their actions would be economically irresponsible (e.g., it “has been established that the damage on the economic level [...] will be considerable”⁴⁷⁾^(76, 78). On the other hand, it is done in moral arguments: the strikers are presented as lazy (e.g., “strikers use the extra day off to take their time decorating their Christmas trees at home”⁵¹⁾ and violent (e.g., it has led “to serious incidents. The lack of fatalities is due solely to the coolness of the police commanders”⁷¹⁾^(53, 69). Or, as written in *De Standaard*: “The socialists are attacking the country both materially and morally”⁴⁴.

Finally, it is interesting to read how *Vooruit* deals with conflicting newspaper reporting on the strikes^h. The newspaper refers primarily to the popular Catholic newspaper *Het Volk*, which writes that the scope of the strikes is limited^{102, 111, 120}. In its own strong wording, *Vooruit* delegitimizes this as fake news:

^h *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* write nothing about the reporting in other newspapers.

“It is a disgrace for a country to have to swallow the guided reporting to which a hated government has resorted. The ‘neutral’ press has been exposed once more. It provides news in a subjective manner, such that people in Wallonia do not know what is happening in Flanders, and vice versa.”¹¹¹

“[Het Volk is] breaking all records with regard to providing false advice and information. Notwithstanding the fact that the strength of the action opposing the unfortunate law is increasing by the hour, Het Volk (the organ of the Christian unionists!) continues to fool its readers. [...] The most ludicrous of all is that Het Volk refers to itself as the ‘Mirror of East Flanders’ – which is shown in the picture. This has led some Christian people to ask mockingly: ‘Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the biggest liar of all?’”¹²⁰

Vooruit accuses *Het Volk* of being a political mouthpiece for the government, while it should be supporting the union militants (i.e., “organ of the Christian unionists!”). This choice for the ‘wrong’ socio-political interests leads to a complete delegitimization of *Het Volk*: its coverage would be “a disgrace for a country,” “subjective,” “false,” and deceitful (e.g., “the biggest liar of all”). As such, the newspaper and its opinions are excluded from any debate on the strikes against the Unitary Law. In contrast, *Vooruit* evaluates its own role as follows:

“Without the socialist press, today’s working class would not be able to obtain a proper overview of the situation. [...] Today, ‘Vooruit’ is standing amongst all workers on the front line. The editorial staff, employees from all regions, and hundreds of comrades for whom the paper is precious, are providing readers with information and explaining the party’s proposals. [...] Together, we are fighting for victory.”¹¹¹

Vooruit profiles itself as an unconditional political mouthpiece for workers and the socialist party. It regards its partiality as self-evident and even necessary, as it is only from such a political-ideological attitude that a “proper overview” can be obtained. Its goal is to “fight for victory”.

In summary: In this second critical discourse moment (CDM 2), we once again see how the newspapers represent different actors and opposing visions. *Vooruit* continues to position itself in strong opposition to the Unitary Law of the Eyskens government, particularly because of the cuts (e.g., “policy of social destruction”). It fully supports the socialist protest – both political and syndical – against the legislative proposal. For

example, it continually ascribes socialist members of parliament and union members with exclusive framing power to denigrate Eyskens' policy. Their interventions in parliament and especially on the streets are perceived as a democratic necessity. In contrast, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* hail the arrival of the Unitary Law, and especially the cuts. They disapprove of the socialist interference in parliament and on the streets. The protest is presented as undemocratic. The most framing power is thus assigned to coalition actors and employers' organizations, which oppose the strikes.

The newspapers defend their opposing standpoints in largely the same manner: they devolve into a depoliticizing discourse (in terms of right-versus-wrong) and leave no room for debate. *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* justify the coalition, its Unitary Law, and its anti-strike measures. They therefore discursively attack the socialist opposition and especially the strikes, which they completely delegitimize. This is done in terms of popularity: the turnout would be limited, and the socialist militants would not be supported by their Christian counterparts or the citizens. In addition, both newspapers delegitimize the strikes in rational terms (e.g., not reasoned), as well as in moral terms (e.g., abuse of power and violence). *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* thus stand in the way of any sympathy for socialist protests, persuading their readers to accept the Unitary Law. In contrast, *Vooruit* delegitimizes the government and legitimizes the union actions. Actions by the Eyskens administration are mostly denounced as immoral: the legislative proposal is systematically referred to as an "unfortunate law," not consulting the unions would be an illegal and disastrous choice, and the anti-strike measures taken by politicians are portrayed as "intimidation". The socialist opposition is mostly legitimized as popular. The turnout would be "massive," with support from both Christian union members and citizens. Briefly stated, the newspaper portrays the protests as a "success." With its reporting, *Vooruit* makes it clear to its readers that opposing the Unitary Law is the only right choice, and that supporting the government is simply wrong. Only a few times, *Vooruit* presents it as a political-ideological matter: choosing the interests of the workers over the interests of the capitalists (i.e., political positioning). However, because of the aforementioned moral de/legitimization, there is no real choice (or debate). Everything that goes against the interests of the workers is strongly denounced (e.g., the "lies" of *Het Volk*).

Conclusion

Newspapers: Ideological cultures

The reporting on the Unitary Law (and the strikes against it) shows that *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* share the same ideological culture. Both newspapers use a depoliticizing discourse to defend liberal standpoints. This is clearly expressed in their support for the Unitary Law, which amounts to an austerity program (Brepoels, 2015). Although these two newspapers are less appreciative of the additional taxes, they praise the budget-cutting measures (i.e., the reduction of government expenditures). The cuts are naturalized: they are not a political choice, but an inevitable and long-expected development, which will promote “the economic and financial recovery.” Consequently, the socialist protests against the Unitary Law – and especially its cuts – are delegitimized as unpopular, irrational, and immoral. Moreover, the union interference is presented as undemocratic. In this way, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* close the (ideological) debate on the Unitary Law.

Vooruit writes about the Unitary Law (and the strikes against it) from the perspective of a different ideological culture: the newspaper denounces liberal measures and defends socialist standpoints, predominantly in a depoliticizing way (with just a few exceptions). It resolutely opposes the Unitary Law, particularly because of the cuts (i.e., the break-down of government services). This “policy of social destruction” is delegitimized as irrational and especially immoral (e.g., “unfortunate law”). The legislative proposal would thus be unacceptable; it appears that no discussion is possible. Consequently, it fully supports the socialist opposition to the Unitary Law, both in parliament and on the street. The newspaper legitimizes the protest as popular, while opposition to the strikes is delegitimized as “intimidation.” Only exceptionally, *Vooruit* gives a political dimension to the matter by linking the protest and the government policy to the interests of two socio-political groups (i.e., “the wage

earners” or “working class” versus “the capitalists”). This, however, does not lead to any (ideological) debate: it only happens a few times, only involves socio-political interests (instead of broader visions or worldviews), and only leads to a further de/legitimization. The result is a sharp us-them distinction, which seems to stimulate polarization instead of discussion (e.g., opposing reporting is put aside as fake news).

Newspaper landscape: Ideological debate

From this analysis of *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Vooruit*, we can conclude that the newspaper debate on the Unitary Law (and the strikes against it) is certainly diverse, but hardly pluralistic. It is diverse, in the sense that *De Standaard/Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Vooruit* consistently represent very different actors and standpoints. It is hardly pluralistic, in the sense that none of the newspapers actually succeeds in opening a (political-ideological) debate on the issue. All three primarily attempt to defend their own standpoints as the only right ones, thereby closing the debate. Also when *Vooruit* exceptionally links the standpoints to socio-political interests (i.e., political positioning), it still speaks of only one ‘right’ view, thereby still impeding and even polarizing any debate. In sum, at the time of the Unitary Law, the newspaper landscape succeeds in providing a platform for a variety of actors and standpoints, but not in promoting a broad (political-ideological) debate on the issue.

References

CDM 1

De Standaard

1. n.a., Regeringsontwerp nog dit jaar afgehandeld, *De Standaard*, 8 November, p1, p6.
2. D., Luc, Verklaringen zijn goed, realizeren is beter, *De Standaard*, 8 November, p1.
3. n.a., Sanering der gemeentefinanciën, *De Standaard*, 8 November, p6.
4. n.a., Sanering van ziekte- en invaliditeitsverzekering, *De Standaard*, 8 November, p6.
5. n.a., Rijksdienst door arbeidsvoorziening met ruime bevoegdheden, *De Standaard*, 8 November, p6.
6. n.a., Administratieve hervorming, *De Standaard*, 8 November, p6.
7. A.T., Ontleding van belastingverhogingen, *De Standaard*, 9 November, p1, p11.
8. n.a., Liberaal skepticisme, *De Standaard*, 9 November, p2.
9. n.a., Twijfel over bezuinigingen, *De Standaard*, 9 November, p2.
10. n.a., CVP-kamerfractie, *De Standaard*, 9 November, p2.
11. n.a., Eyskens voor CVP-frakties, *De Standaard*, 9 November, p2.
12. n.a., Socialisten vragen verzending van eenheidswet naar Raad van State, *De Standaard*, 9 November, p2, p11.
13. n.a., De liberalen en de Eenheidswet, *De Standaard*, 9 November, p11.
14. n.a., Het ACV en de Eenheidswet, *De Standaard*, 10 November, p4.
15. n.a., Ontwerp van Eenheidswet, *De Standaard*, 10 November, p4.
16. n.a., Het ABVV en de Eenheidswet, *De Standaard*, 10 November, p4.

Het Laatste Nieuws

17. n.a., De regering wil de Eenheidswet zo spoedig mogelijk verwezenlijken, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 8 November, p1, p3.
18. n.a., De zeven hoofdstukken van de Eenheidswet, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 8 November, p3.
19. n.a., Liberale groepen samen bijeen, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 8 November, p3.
20. n.a., Ministers verstrekken toelichtingen inzake de Eenheidswet, maar geen enkele groep heeft een blijvend standpunt ingenomen, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 9 November, p4.
21. n.a., Eerste reacties, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 9 November, p4.

22. n.a., De Eenheidswet, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 10 November, p7.

Vooruit

23. n.a., Eyskens tracht zijn Eenheidswet te verdedigen, *Vooruit*, 8 November, p1.
 24. Vermeulen, P., De grote onrechtvaardigheid, *Vooruit*, 8 November, p1.
 25. n.a., Waar het wanbeheer der regering Eyskens ons gebracht heeft, *Vooruit*, 8 November, p1.
 26. n.a., Spoor mannen protesteren tegen Eenheidswet, *Vooruit*, 8 November, p3.
 27. n.a., Vrouwelijke ABVV-militanten in vergadering in Gent, *Vooruit*, 8 November, p3.
 28. n.a., De verhoging van de overdrachttaks, *Vooruit*, 8 November, p3.
 29. n.a., De werkzaamheden van de kamer, *Vooruit*, 8 November, p3.
 30. n.a., Eenheidswet is een monster, *Vooruit*, 9 November, p1, p3.
 31. Collard, L., Het parlement heeft het woord, *Vooruit*, 9 November, p1.
 32. n.a., Belastingoffensief van de h. Eyskens slecht onthaald, *Vooruit*, 9 November, p1, p3.
 33. n.a., De ACOD waarschuwt haar leden, *Vooruit*, 9 November, p1.
 34. n.a., De liberaal Janssens denkt dat ontwerp zou verworpen worden, *Vooruit*, 9 November, p3.
 35. n.a., ABVV en alle centrales binden de strijd aan tegen ongelukswet van Eyskens, *Vooruit*, 10 November, p1, p3.
 36. n.a., Slechte fiskale toestand door minister Van Houtte belicht, *Vooruit*, 10 November, p1, p3.
 37. n.a., De textielarbeiderscentrale van België tegen de "eenheidswet", *Vooruit*, 10 November, p1.

CDM 2

De Standaard

38. A.T., Meervoudig of enkelvoudig stelsel?, *De Standaard*, 21 December, p1, p9.
 39. n.a., Eenheidswet in de Kamer, *De Standaard*, 21 December, p2.
 40. n.a., CVP-kamerfractie bespreekt eenheidswet; Socialistische fracties, *De Standaard*, 21 December, p5.
 41. D. Luc, Konflikt vermeden te worden, *De Standaard*, 21 December, p6.
 42. n.a., Gedeeltelijke staking van gemeentepersoneel, *De Standaard*, 21 December, p7.

43. n.a., Socialistische interpellaties over Afrikaanse politiek, *De Standaard*, 21 December, p10.
44. D. Luc, Anarchistische stakingen, *De Standaard*, 22 December, p1.
45. n.a., Stakingen breiden zich uit, *De Standaard*, 22 December, p1.
46. n.a., Vermoedelijke tramstaking te Antwerpen op Kerstdag, *De Standaard*, 22 December, p1.
47. M.G.R., Dubbele vuurproef voor de regering, *De Standaard*, 22 December, p1, p7.
48. n.a., Woelig debat over Eenheidswet, *De Standaard*, 22 December, p2, p8.
49. n.a., Inbreuk op akkoord sociale programmatie, *De Standaard*, 22 December, p2.
50. n.a., Collard heet Eenheidswet sociale achteruitgang en politiek avontuur, *De Standaard*, 22 December, p5.
51. n.a., Wilde staking bij Antwerpse dokwerkers, *De Standaard*, 22 December, p7.
52. n.a., Pensioenleeftijd voor openbare ambtenaren, *De Standaard*, 22 December, p10.
53. n.a., Staking vrij algemeen in Wallonië, *De Standaard*, 23 December, p1, p8.
54. L.D.L., Stakers bij de kerstboom, *De Standaard*, 23 December, p1, p8.
55. D. Luc, Nijverheid vraagt onmiddellijke maatregelen, *De Standaard*, 23 December, p1, p8.
56. n.a., CVP vraagt kordate regeringsmaatregelen, *De Standaard*, 23 December, p1.
57. n.a., Vitale behoeften aan gas en elektriciteit moeten verzekerd zijn, *De Standaard*, 23 December, p2.
58. n.a., Nieuw pensioenstelsel voor overheidsambtenaren, *De Standaard*, 23 December, p2.
59. Pil, Er was een tweespan voorzien!, *De Standaard*, 23 December, p2.
60. n.a., Socialisten verwekken herrie rond staking, *De Standaard*, 23 December, p6.
61. n.a., Interpellaties over stakingen, *De Standaard*, 23 December, p6.
62. n.a., Stakingsbeweging stagneert te Antwerpen, *De Standaard*, 23 December, p8.
63. T.S. & DPA, PTT werkt nog normaal, *De Standaard*, 23 December, p8.
64. n.a., Transmutatieverbod blokkeert Antwerpse haven, *De Standaard*, 23 December, p8.
65. n.a., Mededeling van de NMBS, *De Standaard*, 23 December, p8.
66. n.a., Soldaten met verlof uit Duitsland, *De Standaard*, 23 December, p8.

Het Laatste Nieuws

67. n.a., Kamer vat bespreking van Eenheidswet aan, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 21 December, p3.
68. n.a., Liberalen voor gebeurlijke zitting volgende week, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 21 December, p3.

69. n.a., Staking als protest tegen de Eenheidswet, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 21 December, p4.
70. n.a., Interpellatie in de Senaat, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 21 December, p4.
71. n.a., Het spoorwegverkeer gedeeltelijk en Antwerpse haven geheel lamgelegd, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 22 December, p1, p3, p7.
72. n.a., Oppositie wil de regering interpellieren, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 22 December, p1, p6.
73. n.a., Woelige zitting van de Kamer, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 22 December, p5.
74. n.a., Stakingsbeweging in het onderwijs, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 22 December, p7.
75. n.a., Het verzet van de socialisten tegen de Eenheidswet, verklaart de h. Collard, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 22 December, p7.
76. n.a., Sluiting van stations in Wallonië veroorzaakt ontreddeiding op het spoor, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 23 December, p1, p4.
77. n.a., Woelige debatten in het parlement, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 23 December, p1.
78. V.L., Een nadeel voor iedereen, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 23 December, p1.
79. n.a., Rumoerig Kamerdebat over stakingen, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 23 December, p3.
80. n.a., De staking, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 23 December, p3.
81. n.a., De toestand op de spoorwegen donderdagavond, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 23 December, p4.
82. Belga, Grote drukte in Rotterdamse haven, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 23 December, p4.
83. n.a., Regering zal vrijheid van arbeid waarborgen, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 23 December, p4.
84. n.a., Bewogen zitting in de Senaat, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 23 December, p5.
85. n.a., Regering laakt "ongeregelde sociale beweging", *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 23 December, p6.

Vooruit

86. n.a., Protestactie tegen Eenheidswet in het ganse land ontketend, *Vooruit*, 21 December, p1.
87. n.a., Gents gemeente-personeel legt solidair het werk neer, *Vooruit*, 21 December, p1, p3.
88. n.a., n.t., *Vooruit*, 21 December, p1.
89. n.a., Ook Antwerpen in het offensief, *Vooruit*, 21 December, p1.
90. n.a., Grote stakersbetoging in het stadscentrum, *Vooruit*, 21 December, p1.
91. n.a., Staking een succes ondanks bedreigingen, *Vooruit*, 21 December, p1.
92. n.a., Een vastberaden en indrukwekkende actie, *Vooruit*, 21 December, p3.
93. n.a., ABVV dankt de stakers, *Vooruit*, 21 December, p3.
94. n.a., De protestactie tegen de Eenheidswet, *Vooruit*, 21 December, p3.

95. n.a., Socialisten eisen eenparig verwerping van Eenheidswet, *Vooruit*, 21 December, p3.
96. n.a., De ongelukswet, *Vooruit*, 21 December, p4.
97. n.a., Protestactie neemt verdere uitbreiding, *Vooruit*, 22 December, p1.
98. n.a., Socialisten zullen zich met alle middelen tegen uitvoering van Eenheidswet verzetten, *Vooruit*, 22 December, p1, p8.
99. n.a., Geen treinen meer te Luik, *Vooruit*, 22 December, p1.
100. n.a., Verdaging van debat over Eenheidswet geweigerd, *Vooruit*, 22 December, p1, p8.
101. n.a., Geen trams op Kerstmis te Antwerpen, *Vooruit*, 22 December, p1.
102. n.a., De katholieke pers over de staking, *Vooruit*, 22 December, p1.
103. n.a., Tweeduizend vijfhonderd stakers doortrokken Gents stadscentrum, *Vooruit*, 22 December, p3.
104. n.a., Actie tegen Eenheidswet, *Vooruit*, 22 December, p3.
105. n.a., Havenarbeid te Antwerpen volledig stilgelegd, *Vooruit*, 22 December, p3.
106. n.a., Toepassingsdatum van Eenheidswet verschoven naar 1 maart, *Vooruit*, 22 December, p3.
107. n.a., Het Nationaal Comité van de Textielarbeiderscentrale van België, *Vooruit*, 22 December, p3.
108. n.a., Staking wordt algemeen, *Vooruit*, 23 December, p1, p3, p9.
109. n.a., ABVV geeft opdracht tot uitbreiding van de stakingsbeweging, *Vooruit*, 23 December, p1.
110. n.a., Actie tegen Eenheidswet volkomen gewettigd, *Vooruit*, 23 December, p1.
111. n.a., "Vooruit" en de strijd tegen de Eenheidswet, *Vooruit*, 23 December, p1.
112. n.a., Veiligheidsmaatregelen rondom het parlement, *Vooruit*, 23 December, p1.
113. n.a., Striemende socialistische interpellaties, *Vooruit*, 23 December, p3, p9.
114. n.a., Heden vrijdag bijeenkomst van de Kamer, *Vooruit*, 23 December, p3.
115. n.a., Aan de personeelsleden van de ministeriële departementen, *Vooruit*, 23 December, p3.
116. n.a., 30.000 arbeiders staan buiten te Gent, *Vooruit*, 23 December, p3, p9.
117. n.a., Nationaal verbond van de socialistische provinciale en gemeenteraadsliden, *Vooruit*, 23 December, p3.
118. n.a., Actie volledig geslaagd in het Antwerpen, *Vooruit*, 23 December, p3.
119. n.a., Spoorwegarbeiders nemen het offensief in het Kortrijkse, *Vooruit*, 23 December, p3.
120. n.a., Het Volk/Gazet van Antwerpen, *Vooruit*, 23 December, p3.

CASE 2: SEMI-PILLARIZED NEWSPAPERS AND THE EGMONT PLAN (1977)

Context

Newspaper landscape

During the 1960s and 1970s, a societal trend toward 'de-pillarization' emerged (Huyse, 2003: 145-146). People had less and less need to spend their entire lives under the shadow of the same pillar. This caused the boundaries between the various pillars to crumble. Very gradually, people opened up to other ideological movements and ideas. It was nevertheless a long process. For the newspapers as well, de-pillarization did not occur immediately and radically. For example, in the early 1960s, the Flemish press underwent a large number of takeovers and mergers, but always involving newspapers from similar ideological pillars (Biltreyst & Van Gompel, 1999: 70-71). Moreover, the newspapers continued to have clear political-ideological profiles. For example, with regard to ownership, "the direct influence of parties on the newspaper landscape [...] seemed tempered, but was actually largely replaced by the influence of other pillar organizations" (Van Aelst, 2006: 52). Furthermore, in 1973, 40% of all journalists were still card-carrying party members (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 221), and newspaper coverage was still influenced by political-ideological attitudes, "albeit less slogan-like" and "at a more latent level" (Van Aelst, 2006: 62; Distelmans, 1999: 477)^A. However, at the same time, newsrooms were also pursuing more "professionalism". They increasingly presented themselves as objective providers of information and

^A Distelmans (1999) and Van Aelst (2006) both conducted longitudinal quantitative content analyses of the extent of pillarization/de-pillarization in the Flemish press. From their results – based on news on coalition formations (Distelmans, 1999) and elections (Van Aelst, 2006) – they conclude that, during the 1970s, "the pillarization of the reporting [...] [was] still unmistakable" and that the press certainly "had not remained on the side-lines when the political battle became heated" (resp. Distelmans, 1999: 477; Van Aelst, 2006: 63).

neutral watchdogs, instead of as political opinion makers (Beyens, 2003: 99; Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 266; Maesele & Ræijmaekers, 2017b: 121). In other words, newspaper journalism increasingly released its opinion-based ideal in favor of an information ideal. In this way, they responded to the wishes of Flemish readers (or at least they appeared to do so), who wanted “an objective and most complete newspaper possible [...] for general information and amusement, but not so much for political ends” (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 180; see also De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 97).

In the mid-1970s, readership numbers nonetheless declined, as well as advertising revenues, due to the general economic crisis (Biltreyst & Van Gompel, 1999: 72). In response, the government launched newspaper subsidies in order “to preserve the diversity in public opinion-forming” (Biltreyst & Van Gompel, 1999: 72). Still, some newspaper titles disappeared, and several newspaper companies went bankrupt (see below: *De Standaard*).

In the 1960s and 1970s, *De Standaard* worked very hard to build its image as an objective quality newspaper. The newspaper adopted a stricter distinction between information and opinion, and it restricted the amount of commentary (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 169). In addition, it aimed to achieve “more pluralism” by presenting the views of a variety of parties (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 174, 205). The newsroom became better organized and better trained (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 250). It was nevertheless a long process. Only in the late 1960s, its commentary pieces became “more moderate” and “more restrained,” with the newspaper explicitly expecting its reporters to be objective (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 264-265). However, at the same time, the reporters were expected to defend the newspaper’s basic ideology: “Flemish, Christian, respect for parliamentary democracy, and for socially corrected market economics” (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 339). As a quality newspaper, *De Standaard* sought to be an active player on the political field and to have bearing on policy (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 342, 250)^B. The fact that the newspaper was able

^B For example, *De Standaard* was said to have “written Tindemans into power” (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 315). Director Albert De Smaele replied the following: “If we supported Tindemans so strongly, it was – as always – because his inclinations were quite close to our own

to show increasing readership figures worked to its advantage (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 188). In May 1976, however, the entire *Standaardgroep* went bankrupt due to reckless and poor management, as well as due to the economic crisis (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 300). A suitable buyer was found in late June, 1976: the ‘Vlaamse Uitgeversmaatschappij’ (VUM) (translated as: Flemish Publishing Company). This brand-new company was “controlled by Flemish companies, banks, and financial groups” (Biltereyst & Van Gompel, 1999: 72). The initiative came from the businessman André Leysen. According to Leysen, the “survival [of *De Standaard*] was very important to Flanders,” and it was “the duty of Flemish entrepreneurs to ensure it,” without damaging “the autonomy of the newsroom” in the process (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 329, 362). With the exception of the dismissal of the leftist-progressive foreign editor E. Troch, the editorial staff did not undergo any fundamental changes in the first years following the takeover, and the newspaper’s basic ideology remained unchanged (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 314; Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 354).

In the 1960s and 1970s, *Het Laatste Nieuws* witnessed a gradual increase in its readership figures. During the crisis of the 1970s, however, sales declined, and new capital was needed (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 347, 351-352). The Hoste publishing company therefore sold up to half of the shares to the Van Thillo banking family. In terms of content, the newspaper adhered to its Flemish, humanistic, and liberal editorial line in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, the newspaper still expressed explicit sympathy for liberal politicians, while sharply criticizing socialism (Van Aelst, 2006: 62-63).

Whereas *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* were able to show relatively favorable readership figures during the 1960s and 1970s, the socialist newspaper *Vooruit* – predecessor of *De Morgen* (see later cases) – was confronted with decreasing sales (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 360). The losses accumulated, and they had to be compensated by additional injections of capital from the socialist movement, governmental support, and donations from readers (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 360). “The practice of the party press [appeared to be] profoundly outdated, as well as

ideas, because he fought for the same objectives, and because we regarded him as competent” (p316).

financially unsustainable (Biltreyst & Van Gompel, 1999: 13)^c. Beginning in 1974, attempts were made to make the newspaper more attractive to advertisers and readers: standpoints should be less party-specific, efforts were directed toward including more regional and human-interest news, and the lay-out was updated (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 360).

Socio-economic politics

In the ‘golden sixties,’ Belgium enjoyed unprecedented economic growth and increases in welfare (Brepoels, 2015: 435-436; Deneckere, De Paepe & De Wever, 2012: 207). The purchasing power rose substantially, and the unemployment rate was near zero. This economic boom was due in part to the Keynesian government policy (Brepoels, 2015: 421, 451-452; Meynen, 2005: 310, 319-320; Reynebeau, 2009: 238; Deneckere, De Paepe & De Wever, 2012: 209). Successive center-left coalitions of Christian democrats and socialists – or “social democrats”^d – chose for an active policy of economics: the economy needed to be guided and corrected. Governmental investments were used to manage economic fluctuations and to expand social facilities. “The state was the cockpit from within which social development could be guided; it was the guardian of the public welfare, to which all private interests were subordinated (Brepoels, 2015: 453)”. In this manner, the government was building a social market economy, the so-called ‘welfare state’ (De Preter, 2016: 359).

The social partners, in their turn, were increasingly relying on consultations (Reynebeau, 2009: 238; Deneckere, De Paepe & De Wever, 2012: 207, 209). The relationship between the two social partners became more institutionalized. The

^c Socialist party newspapers disappeared in the 1970s, not only in Flanders, but throughout Western Europe. This was due to several factors, ranging from poor management and insufficient interest in innovation on the part of the newspapers themselves, to general changes in the structure of daily newspapers and the reading culture (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 363).

^d At that time, an ideological reversal occurred within the socialist party. Traditionally, they had represented the message of a “conflicted class society” and an anti-capitalist attitude. “Modern socialism” or “social democracy,” however, believed in a “harmonious society” and accepted “neo-capitalism” (i.e., “a socially corrected [...] variant of capitalism”) (Brepoels, 2015: 453-454, see also Meynen, 2005: 318-319). In everyday life, the names “socialists” and “social democrats” are often used interchangeably.

employers acknowledged that the working class was entitled to material improvements and, conversely, the labor movement accepted that social progress was linked to realized productivity and thus to economic growth (Brepoels, 2015: 430; Meynen, 2005: 323). They documented this in long-standing labor agreements and general agreements. There was 'social peace', and the number of strikes declined sharply between 1961 and 1969. "At the end of that decade, consensus grew with regard to a Keynesian approach to the structural difficulties and a Fordist [i.e., institutionalized] approach to wage development (Brepoels, 2015: 381)."

In the 1970s, the global economic situation deteriorated and, from 1974 onwards, an economic crisis occurred (Brepoels, 2015: 458-459; De Preter, 2016: 45; Deneckere, De Paepe & De Wever, 2012: 210). Purchasing power decreased, and unemployment rose. The Keynesian governmental policy came under pressure (Meynen, 2005: 337-338; Reynebeau, 2009: 264-265). On the one hand, state expenditures rose explosively: the state invested in financially distressed companies and continually needed to increase its unemployment budget. On the other hand, its income was decreasing: the unemployment had a severe effect on social contributions and tax income. As a result, the government debt kept on increasing.

Between 1974 and 1977, the center-right Tindemans government reversed course by adopting an austerity policy instead of a policy of investment. It opted for a "more orthodox liberal policy" of "wage moderation and heavy cuts in government finances and in the social sector" (Brepoels, 2015: 474, 458; see also Meynen, 2005: 339). In doing so, it responded to the demands of the employers, while challenging the historically acquired rights of the labor movement (Brepoels, 2015: 458, 460; Reynebeau, 2009: 263; Meynen, 2005: 339). The employers argued that the Belgian wage costs and social contributions were disadvantageous to the competitive power of companies and had to be decreased. In other words, they wanted less government intervention. The unions, on the other hand, advocated additional control over economic life (e.g., with regard to tax fraud) and government-led redistribution of labor (without loss of pay). By choosing for an austerity policy, the Tindemans government inevitably clashed with the unions (Meynen, 2005: 339). The resistance was nevertheless limited to the socialist union and the Walloon Christian union. The

Flemish Christian unionists supported the Tindemans administration (Brepoels, 2015: 461).

In February 1977, the Tindemans government launched a new overall austerity program, the so-called ‘Egmont Plan’^E. The plan included “draconian budget-cutting measures in social security, increasing income [through] VAT and solidarity contributions, along with interventions in wage indexation” (Brepoels, 2015: 462). Yet again, a clash with the unions occurred, this time including the Flemish Christian union ACV. Although all unions reacted, their agenda differed: while the Christian union ACV hoped for concessions from the government, the other unions speculated on the fall of the government (Brepoels, 2015: 462). Nevertheless, for the first time since the Great Strike of 1960-1961, a “more or less genuinely common union front” emerged (Meynen, 2005: 340-341). The unions called for strikes on five consecutive Fridays in various provinces and public sectors. Participation in these so-called ‘Friday strikes’ was massive (Brepoels, 2015: 463; Meynen, 2015: 341). In early March 1977, approximately 350,000 strikers were counted.

In the short term, the Friday strikes had little effect (Brepoels, 2015: 463). The Egmont Plan had already been approved on 18 February 1977, and there was no longer any official conversational partner due to the fall of the government on March 9, 1977 – as a result of communitarian disputes. In the medium term, however, the strikes led to a cautious return to Keynesian politics (Brepoels, 2015: 463-466; Meynen, 2005: 342; De Preter, 2016: 57). This was because of several center-left coalitions that were formed beginning in 1977. After three years of right-wing politics – which showed little result in terms of unemployment and purchasing power, but a great deal of social turmoil – the successive center-left governments tried once again to respond to the concerns of the labor movement. Although this led to a decrease in unemployment figures, it also aggravated the budget crisis of the state (i.e., government debt). In the long term, the Belgian political system adopted a neoliberal policy (Meynen, 2005: 349-351; Brepoels, 2015: 459). From the 1980s onwards, successive center-right coalitions under the leadership of the Christian democrat Wilfried Martens (i.e., Martens V – VII) opted for a policy of less government intervention and more free market and individual

^E This should not be confused with the communitarian “Egmont Pact” (1977).

responsibility (Meynen, 2005: 348; De Preter, 2016: 55, 66). They did this in an authoritarian manner: ‘proxies’ were used to by-pass parliament, and social consultations were either ignored or restricted (Brepoels, 2015: 459, 478; Deneckere, De Paepe & De Wever, 2012: 211).

Analysis

CDM 1: In anticipation of the Egmont Conclave (20 January – 12 February)

On 19 January 1977, the Tindemans government announces that it will hold a conclave in mid-February. It hopes to find a solution for (i) the budget deficit and (ii) the sluggish economic growth and employment. Unofficially, the retreat is also intended to bring an end to (iii) tensions existing within and surrounding the current coalition. Various solutions to these problems are proposed in the period leading up to the conclave.

This analysis focuses on the reporting that occurred between the announcement and the start of the conclave. For a period of 3.5 weeks, every newspaper report concerning (possible) government measures and Tindemans’ politics in general is selected^F. This yields a total of 128 newspaper reports. *De Standaard* publishes 54 reports. They include 39 news articles, 17 appearing on the front page. Hardly any of the articles identify the journalist. The newspaper also published 2 relevant analytical pieces (1 by Albert Tiberghien, contributor for fiscal affairs, and 1 by Guido Despiegelaere, reporter on ‘social relations’). In addition, 6 editorials are written on the issue, 1 by Hugo de Ridder (reporter on domestic affairs) and the others by editor-in-chief Manu Ruys. The latter also writes 2 columns. Finally, there are also 4 cartoons by the in-house cartoonist Pil, and 1 opinion piece by Professor Robert Vandeputte. *Het Laatste Nieuws*

^F This CDM originally covered an even longer period (1.5 months). Due to the large amount of data, it was decided to adopt stricter criteria for selection. For example, the policy being discussed must more or less relate to the *entire* community, and not specific sectors, companies, or demographic groups.

publishes a total of 36 relevant newspaper reports. They include 27 news articles, 7 of which appearing on the front page. The few instances in which a journalist is mentioned, it usually concerns Walter Vaerewijck (reporter on ‘social affairs’). In addition, 7 relevant editorials are published, written by various journalists (i.e., Walter Vaerewijck, Léo Verbist, Piet Van Brabant, Leo Siaens, and Jan Bauwens). Finally, political journalist Léo Verbist also writes 1 analytical piece and 1 editorial opinion piece on the issue. *Vooruit* publishes a total of 38 newspaper reports. They include 19 news articles, 13 of which appearing on the front page. The articles bear either the reference “Belga” (13) or no byline (6). The reporting is supplemented by not less than 16 editorials. It is interesting to note that they are not written solely by editor-in-chief Piet De Buyser (8 in total), but also by the socialist union leader Georges Debunne and the socialist party chairman Willy Claes (each with a total of 4). The latter two provide a guest editorial in *Vooruit* each week. Finally, 2 external opinion pieces (by the socialist senator Paul Ghijsbrecht) and 1 cartoon (by Boes) are published.

	<i>De Standaard</i>	<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	<i>Vooruit</i>
TOTAL: 128	54	36	38
News articles	39	27	19
→ Front page	→ 17	→ 7	→ 13
Analytical pieces	2	1	-
Editorials	6	7	16
Editorial opinion pieces	-	1	-
Interviews	-	-	-
External opinion pieces	1	-	2
Columns	2	-	-
Cartoons	4	-	1

In general, it is found that the newspapers mention and/or assign framing power to different actors. For example, the Christian-democratic/liberal ministers and coalition parties receive an large platform in *Het Laatste Nieuws* and especially in *De Standaard*^(8, 43, 66, 81). In contrast, they are cited only minimally in *Vooruit*. This newspaper reports on the events primarily via the socialist opposition party BSP or the socialist union ABVV^(96, 98, 127). For example, this is done through the weekly editorials

by BSP chairman Willy Claes^(95, 106) and ABVV leader Georges Debunne^(91, 112). In *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*, the opposition parties and unions receive very little coverage. It is also interesting to note that each of the newspapers only sporadically mention employers' organizations, and that *De Standaard* assigns considerable framing power to financial-economic experts or institutes^(5, 27), particularly the National Bank^(19, 42).

The first sub-discussion – or 'object' – concerns the budget policy. Reducing the current budget deficit is one of the main goals of the Egmont Conclave. To do so, the government can choose from a range of policy measures, including additional taxes (either direct or indirect) and extra cuts. The newspapers mainly discuss the latter possibility. Two camps emerge, as I will show below: one that argues resolutely in favor of extra cuts (i.e., *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*), and one that is resolutely opposed to cuts (i.e., *Vooruit*). They defend their standpoints primarily in terms of (ir)rationality and (im)morality. Hence, they impede any broad debate on government expenditures (i.e., depoliticization). The budget policy is politicized only occasionally, primarily in *Vooruit*. In the following paragraphs, I give some examples.

De Standaard and *Het Laatste Nieuws* present themselves as proponents of additional cuts and as opponents of new taxes. In other words, both newspapers advocate a smaller government, which restricts itself to a policy of budget cuts. This is very clear in their editorials:

“Several ministers are faced with stacks of extensive files and pleas for government assistance by failing companies. [...] it would be an easy solution to open the state treasury and scatter government support far and wide. However, giving money to beggars and the poor is only a temporary solution, and it seldom resolves anything. A wise man once said that we should not give money or fishing equipment to the poor or to developing countries. Instead, we should teach them how to fish in order to survive.”⁸³

“In this section, there have been warnings against the short-term policies of the successive ministers in charge of the social sector many times before. Whereas building up reserves was a generally accepted objective twenty or so years ago, it has come to be regarded as anti-social in recent years. If a minister found left-over reserves, he would generously use it to implement a popular policy.”²⁴

In the quotations above, extensive government expenditures are criticized, either with regard to economic policy (i.e., first quote) or with regard to social policy (i.e., second quote)^(70, 78). Jan L. Bauwens and Hugo de Ridder – journalists for *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Standaard*, respectively – condemn the intensive investment policy of the current (or previous) coalition. Both delegitimize high expenditures as naive and misguided (e.g., “easy solution,” “seldom resolves anything,” “short-term policy”). In other words, they are delegitimized as irrational. Government cuts, on the other hand, are promoted as the right choice throughout the reporting of both newspapers. For example, *De Standaard* publishes multiple statements from financial-economic experts cautioning the government to limit its expenses^{23, 27, 42}. Their message is underscored by such headlines as ‘Economists advise against recovery measures’²⁷ and ‘Supporting the economic cycle need not cost money’⁴². Moreover, in some reports, cuts even seem inevitable: “budgetary adjustments (read: cuts)”¹ or “[t]he unavoidable cuts could sometimes come across as very unpopular”³. In *De Standaard*, however, it is limited to a few remarkable wordings. In *Het Laatste Nieuws*, the plea for governmental cuts is somewhat more pronounced, particularly in the editorials. For example, in ‘Subtract from an empty barrel’⁷⁸, social affairs reporter Walter Vaerewijck writes:

“If we do not wish for everyone to lack child benefits soon, and if we would like to avoid having insufficient pension reserves in the foreseeable future for those who are currently paying into them, we must reconsider our opinions about budget cuts and redistribution. These are the only possible solutions, because new expenses are out of the question, and because primarily the middle class has been taking the beating over and over. This is particularly true for families in which both the husband and the wife are employed.”⁷⁸

To begin with, Vaerewijck legitimizes budget-cutting measures in moral terms: in his opinion, cuts will guarantee the continuing support of the weakest members of society (i.e., children, retirees)⁽⁸³⁾. He then naturalizes cuts as the “only possible solution” and eliminates the possibility of additional taxes (i.e., “new expenses are out of the question”). In doing so, he –casually and only once – refers to the interests of specific socio-political groups (i.e., “the middle class” and “families in which both the husband and the wife are employed”).

In contrast to *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *Vooruit* presents cuts as problematic and undesirable. In its discourse – which is based largely on the communication of the socialist party and union – the newspaper often warns against “social destruction”^(95, 97, 100, 112). It relates a possible decrease in government expenditures (on social security) to an increase in social inequality, thereby delegitimizing the government’s austerity plans as immoral. In his editorial entitled ‘Social destruction: A fable?’¹⁰⁹, editor-in-chief Piet De Buyser phrases it as follows:

“No, the social destruction that we have been lamenting for years is no fable. It is a reality that can be experienced daily and that has ensured that the poor are becoming poorer while the rich are becoming richer. This alone is sufficient evidence that, for all of this time, the policy of this government has not been social, but anti-social.”¹⁰⁹

De Buyser argues that the gap between rich and poor has increased in recent years, thereby literally delegitimizing the coalition’s policy as “anti-social”⁽¹⁰⁰⁾. In his opinion, this moral criticism is not open to debate (i.e., “reality,” “evidence”). Moreover, as he argues in other editorials, the planned budget-cutting policy of the government is also irrational (e.g., “the coalition has already begun the demolition, but it has yet to find an architect to design the new house”¹⁰⁰) and unpopular (e.g., “a new austerity policy [...] that the population has yet to be persuaded of”⁹⁷). In addition to editor-in-chief Piet De Buyser, the socialist party chairman Claes and the union chairman Debonne accuse the coalition of “social destruction” in their weekly editorials as well^(115, 104, 112). Claes even devotes an entire piece (i.e., entitled ‘Social destruction’¹⁰⁶) to the issue, including the following statements:

“The anti-social offensive that has been causing a great deal of turmoil for several weeks is thus nothing new. It is yet another phase in a policy of social destruction. [...] No one would think of denying that the coalition is in no way fulfilling its legally established obligations with regard to the social security system. [...] In addition to all of this, those who are in need of the greatest protection [...] are being left almost entirely to their own devices.”¹⁰⁶

Like the editor-in-chief De Buyser, Claes delegitimizes the planned cuts in moral terms: the coalition’s budget-cutting policy would be undemocratic (i.e., not fulfilling “legally established obligations”), unhelpful (i.e., those in need of protection are “left to their own devices”), and thus anti-social (i.e., “anti-social offensive,” “social

destruction”)¹¹⁵). However, several times in *Vooruit*, this delegitimization appears to be part of a broader political critique. This can be illustrated with the following quotes of editor-in-chief De Buysse, union leader Debunne, and party chairman Claes, respectively:

“[...] the liberal coalition partner who – despite all of the anti-capitalist statements by Mr. Grootjans – has been all too rough in serving the interests of the monetary powers and the employers, thereby bringing an end to the favorable social climate that once prevailed in this country.”¹¹⁸

“The error that it [i.e., the government] is making has to do with its desire to follow the central financial and employer actors, even to the point of breaking with the workers, thereby placing established social rights in jeopardy without any hesitation [...].”¹¹²

“Moreover, the current conservative coalition was pre-destined to attempt to cure the government finances at the expense of workers and those who most rely on social benefit payments. Hence its policy of social destruction [...].”¹¹⁵

In these fragments, governmental cuts are inseparably linked to political orientation (i.e., political positioning). The government’s “policy of social destruction” would correspond to the capitalist and conservative tendencies of (at least one) of the coalition parties and its commitment to the interests of employers^{91, 104, 106}). It would, to the contrary, clash with the interests of the workers and social beneficiaries. For that reason, it is delegitimized as immoral (e.g., “end to the favorable social climate,” “social destruction”) or as simply wrong (i.e., “error”).

A second sub-discussion concerns the employment policy. Indeed, reducing unemployment (and the associated costs) is another goal of the Egmont Conclave. In this regard, several measures have been proposed in the time leading up to the conclave. For example, the liberal coalition partner would like to tackle individual abuses relating to unemployment benefits (thereby cutting costs). The socialist union, on the other hand, calls for a general reduction of working hours. From the analysis of the news coverage (see below), it appears that the proposals are received in different ways by the papers. While *Het Laatste Nieuws* (and *De Standaard*⁶) argues in favor of

⁶ In *De Standaard*, the employment issue and the employment policy are relatively seldom addressed as objects, at least within the period of analysis.

stricter conditions for unemployment benefits and against reductions in working hours, *Vooruit* does the opposite. In this case as well, all of the newspapers rely primarily on a depoliticizing discourse, thus impeding a broad debate on the employment policy. Only *Vooruit* occasionally ascribes a political dimension to the issue, or introduces an alternative demand.

Let us begin with the reporting on the liberal proposal to restrict unemployment benefit payments. Above all else, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Standaard* confirm the claim that the abuse of unemployment benefits is a major problem. Léo Verbist, political journalist for *Het Laatste Nieuws*, even presents it as a general truth. For example, his editorial includes the following statement: “*Complaints about abuses in the unemployment system have long emerged from all sides. [...] [N]o one can deny that a great many people profit from this, due to the highly generous system of support for unemployed people that was built up in the years of prosperity*”⁵⁶. In *De Standaard*, the claim of abuse is supported with a study conducted by the National Bank¹⁹. The study would prove that “the eagerness of some married unemployed women in searching for jobs [has] declined”¹⁹ and that young people are becoming less likely to “perceive being unemployed as a dishonor”¹⁹. In both of these cases, “the conditions for receiving unemployment benefits”¹⁹ are labelled as a cause. Consequently, Verbist praises the liberal plans in *Het Laatste Nieuws*^H. He legitimizes more stringent conditions for unemployment benefits as long-awaited (i.e., “[t]he coalition has finally resolved to intervene”⁵⁶), moral (e.g., “[t]o guarantee the rightful compensation of the truly unemployed, those who would take advantage of the system should be eliminated”⁵⁶), and rational (i.e., unemployment payments “*benefit the economy due to the fact that they guarantee income and maintain consumption. For this reason, we must prevent this system from being undermined by abuses and*

^H In a more extensive analysis of the data – before it was cut short to fit the dissertation – a similar discursive construction was identified in *De Standaard*. It involved an analytical piece entitled ‘All unemployed people available for the labor market?’ by journalist Guido Despiegelaere on January 14 (and thus before CDM 1). In this piece, the problem of abuse is presented as a general truth (e.g., “We all know of ‘unemployed people who are not truly unemployed’ in our own surroundings”). The adoption of more stringent conditions for unemployment benefits is subsequently legitimized as moral (e.g., the government would no longer be “giving money to parasites; money that should be used to assist poor retirees”). Criticism of the stricter conditions is delegitimized (e.g., “The worst way to start this discussion is to deny the abuses”).

*excessively favorable arrangements*⁵⁶). Any criticism of the liberal proposal is written off as irrational (e.g., “an expression of disturbing short-sightedness”^{56 (60)}).

In *Vooruit*, such criticism is quite prominent. In that newspaper, the liberal plans are presented as part of a “witch hunt”^{94 (63)} and a “reprehensible slander campaign”^{109 (114)}. Editor-in-chief Piet De Buyser “has the sense that one is cheating and that there is an attempt to shift responsibility in regard to unemployment”⁹⁴. Moreover, the claims of abuse are presented as being untrue (e.g., “[t]he RVA has since demonstrated that the abuses are being addressed efficiently”⁹⁴). The planned adoption of more stringent conditions for unemployment benefits is thus delegitimized in moral and rational terms. Nonetheless, in a few reports^{109, 94}, there appears to be a political factor at play as well: the liberal proposal would only address the interests of the employers. Editor-in-chief De Buyser then positions the liberal party as a political-ideological ally of the employers (i.e., political positioning):

*“Is it not interesting to note how – in political terms – the [liberal party] PVV and – in economic terms – the [employers’ organization] VBO have set a true witch hunt in motion with regard to the so-called abuses in the unemployment sector? In this regard, Mr. Grootjans [of the PVV] and Pulinckx [of the VBO] speak the same language: according to these gentlemen, the problem resides not in unemployment, but in the unemployed.”*¹⁰⁹

The stricter unemployment regulations are presented as part of a specific worldview: that it is not the economic system (i.e., unemployment) that should adjust, but the individual (i.e., unemployed person). The liberal coalition party and the employers’ organization would share this political-ideological interpretation, which De Buyser subtly delegitimizes as immoral (i.e., “true witch hunt”) and irrational (i.e., only “so-called” abuses). In response, *Vooruit* tries to launch an alternative abuse claim:

*“The witch hunt has thus been started... For potential fraudsters among the little ones, while the big ones are allowed to cheat the tax authorities out of more 140 billion per year.”*⁹⁴

*“If cuts are needed, they should be sought first in the health-insurance sector, in the unemployment sector if they are flagrant, BUT ALSO, AND ESPECIALLY, IN THE AREA OF FISCAL CORRUPTION.”*⁹⁵

In their editorials, De Buyser and Claes explicitly refer to the existence of an alternative problem: tax fraud⁽¹⁰⁹⁾. Hence, in light of the unemployment discussion, they attempt

to expand the debate with the additional demand of addressing large-scale tax evasion and capital flight.

The (socialist) union also launches a proposal to address the rising unemployment. It suggests to create jobs by reducing the number of working hours in a week⁹³. This would call for a general agreement between employers' organizations and unions, possibly mediated by the government. *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Standaard* are very skeptical about the proposal. According to these newspapers "a reduction in working hours [can] only be the result of economic progress"^{84 (35, 39)}, and cannot be imposed whenever employment is in the tank. It is presented as a misguided demand. Political journalist Léo Verbist makes this abundantly clear in his editorial entitled 'Wonder doctors'⁸⁴ in *Het Laatste Nieuws*. For example:

*"A reduction in working hours would surely have the opposite effect under the current circumstances. This is easily demonstrated. [...] Proposing the reduction of working hours as a means of providing more jobs is as great an error as thinking that more machines cause less employment and that births should be restricted in order to have fewer unemployed people in the future. History has proven the opposite."*⁸⁴

According to Verbist, the reduction of working hours would undoubtedly exacerbate the economic situation (i.e., "surely," "easily demonstrated," "history has proven")⁽⁷⁵⁾. He therefore delegitimizes the union demand as irrational (e.g., "as great an error"). His colleague Walter Vaerewijck also undermines the proposal in his article⁶⁰. With the sub-title 'Government will probably have to make up the difference,' he immediately suggests that the reduction of working hours is not a comprehensive solution and that it would even result in (unwanted) extra government expenditures. In addition, he repeatedly remarks that the claims of the union are unproven. For example: "[t]he ABVV did not carry out any cost estimates," "[the costs] have not been examined, not even within its own circle"⁶⁰. So, once again, the proposal is delegitimized as misguided and irrational. *De Standaard* questions the feasibility of the union proposition as well. The newspaper expresses doubts, not so much with regard to the rationality of the proposal, but with regard to the extent to which it is supported. For example, it positions the unions as divided, and emphasizes the lack of agreement between unions and employers' organizations (e.g., "the standpoints that are now known will lead directly to yet another failed social dialogue next Tuesday, with fresh rancor for all

parties involved”^{35 (28, 51)}). In this way, the reduction of working hours is delegitimized as an unrealistic proposal in both *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Standaard*.

The reporting in *Vooruit* looks rather different. The newspaper presents itself as a major defender of the union proposal: the demand is addressed many times^(91, 93, 103, 117) and strongly argued. For example, this is the case in the editorials of editor-in-chief Piet De Buyser^{102, 108}. De Buyser always starts by presenting the current employment policy of internships and wage moderation (at the request of the employers) as insufficient: “unemployment is even increasing, and in an ever more disturbing manner”^{102 (108)}. He subsequently proposes the reduction of working hours as a legitimate next step: “[u]nder these conditions, would it not be reasonable for the labor movement to demand that the problem of redistributing the available work is brought to the table?”^{108 (102)}. Similarly, in the weekly editorials of union leader Debunne, the reduction of working hours is put forward as a legitimate proposal (e.g., “forced by circumstances and by the fact that no other immediate solutions are available”^{104 (126)}). In that way, both editorialists open a debate on the employment policy. Moreover, they present the union demand as part of a larger political-ideological counter-reaction (e.g., “[t]hat alternative would require a change of course”¹¹²). For example, De Buyser writes the following in his editorial entitled ‘Short working hours’¹⁰²:

“This phenomenon [i.e., the closing of companies] would be the result of economic laws, which – according to the liberal theory would say – we must accept [...] It would nevertheless be wrong to assert that this situation must be accepted with resignation. On the contrary, in an industrialized country like ours, with a high level of development among its population, it should be possible to take reconversion measures and arrive at a policy of full employment, based on economic planning for which the government should be responsible. [...] The unions therefore believe that new resources should be investigated, along with measures including a planned investment policy in which the government should have a large share. They are further of the opinion that a redistribution of the available work should be implemented. This would imply a reduction in working hours.”¹⁰²

This is one of the fragments in *Vooruit* in which the employment policy is inseparably linked to an ideological worldview or political interests (i.e., politicization)^(91, 94, 104, 108). De Buyser distinguishes two views. On the one hand, there is “the liberal theory”. This

view would state that one should not/must not intervene in the economy, instead allowing the market to do its work (i.e., “accept,” “resignation”; see also: “*the liberal doctrine that keeps telling that the economy proceeds along the same course as natural phenomena. Everything will eventually work out on its own*”⁹⁴). In contrast, there is the Keynesian view. This perspective advocates “economic planning” and governmental intervention in the market (see also: “the premier and his ministers should roll up their sleeves in order to fight this social disease with every available means”^{94 (108)}). According to De Buyser, the latter view should definitely be considered (e.g., “should be possible,” “should be investigated”). Yet again, he opens the debate on employment policy. However, as is also the case in the other pieces of De Buyser and Debunne, opposing views are denounced: it concerns a “wrong” theory¹¹², criticism from “those who would complain whether going uphill or downhill”¹⁰², and “there is truly no better way of evading his responsibility”⁹¹. So, although *Vooruit* opens a political-ideological debate with regard to employment policy, it also immediately sets limits to the discussion. Whereas it includes reducing working hours as a legitimate option, it excludes other standpoints as illegitimate.

Finally, in its annual report, the National Bank also addresses the issue of reducing working hours. In this regard, it is interesting to note how the newspapers interpret and present the Bank’s recommendations in different ways, depending upon their own viewpoints. According to *Het Laatste Nieuws*, the National Bank would reject the union proposal as an absolute no-go (i.e., “[t]he Nationale Bank decides that unemployment can be reduced only through measures of an entirely different nature”⁷⁵). In *De Standaard*, the Nationale Bank appears to be making explicit reference to the necessity of “mutual agreement” between unions and employers³⁹. *Vooruit* interprets the recommendations in an entirely different way. According to that newspaper, the Nationale Bank would support the union proposal (i.e., a “reduction [in working hours], organized according to a variety of modalities, but not jeopardizing improvements in productivity, should be continued”¹¹³).

A third sub-discussion addresses “good governance.” Via the Egmont Conclave, the government hopes to demonstrate that it has sufficient strength to complete its legislature. In this regard, both internal (i.e., between the coalition parties) and

external (i.e., between the coalition and the unions) tensions are being covered¹. In the following paragraphs, I demonstrate that *Vooruit*, *De Standaard*, and *Het Laatste Nieuws* again adopt different standpoints. While the first two newspapers express doubts about the coalition's survival, the third remains confident. Only *Vooruit* supports the union opposition. To defend their standpoints, the newspapers draw primarily on a depoliticizing discourse. Very few times, *Het Laatste Nieuws* refers to the ideological background of opponents, but only to further delegitimize their actions.

With regard to the cooperation between the Christian-democratic and liberal coalition partners, criticism echoes in both *Vooruit* and *De Standaard*^J. Both newspapers repeatedly position the coalition parties as being internally divided (e.g., “the mutinous and disarrayed Tindemans team”^{115 (97, 116)}, “the crippled coalition [in] its wheelchair”^{49 (1, 36)}). On this basis, they delegitimize the actions of the coalition (e.g., “the government has not been governing for a long time”⁹⁵, “the coalition is the result of forces that neutralize each other and condemn the cabinet to inaction at the slightest conflict”³⁰). Subsequently, *Vooruit* completely writes off the Tindemans administration (e.g., “a ‘conclave’ that looks more like a negotiation for the ‘the composition’ of a new coalition”¹²⁸). *De Standaard* comes to a similar conclusion (i.e., “it would thus be in the interest of the entire community to form a more homogeneous and courageous majority”^{49 (30)}). The newspaper nevertheless continues to have confidence in Tindemans' capability as the leader of the coalition (e.g., “Premier Tindemans has already faced many difficult challenges”³³). In contrast to *Vooruit* and *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws* emphasizes the cohesion within the current coalition (e.g., “in parliament, the coalition is supported by two strong pillars”⁷³, ‘Majority supports Tindemans until 1978’⁸⁸). Doubts concerning the coalition's survival are delegitimized as irrational or immoral (e.g., “panicky rumors” from “prophets of

¹ Nevertheless, not every “object” is addressed as extensively in each newspaper. For example, *Het Laatste Nieuws* barely or belatedly writes about the external tensions. *De Standaard* – and particularly editor-in-chief Manu Ruys^(49, 30) – devotes a relatively large amount of space to the internal tensions within the coalition.

^J A remarkable finding is that an editorial in *Vooruit* (by the socialist party leader Claes) contains explicit reference to the criticism of *De Standaard*: “Even the newspapers that have provided their nearly unconditional support and affection to the Tindemans team are now admitting it in a barely disguised manner. [...] As printed in block letters in *De Standaard*, the coalition desires a conclave in order to ‘break through its IMMOBILITY.’ It does not get much clearer than that.”⁹⁵

doom”⁷³). Moreover, the newspaper states that an alternative coalition (i.e., one with socialists instead of liberals) is “an illusion”⁷³, and thus not an option. The socialist party BSP is delegitimized as incompetent to govern. For example, in the editorial entitled ‘Messengers of doom’⁷³, political journalist Piet Van Brabant writes:

*“The socialist opposition has thus far only confirmed the impression that it cannot provide any adequate policy for dealing with the consequences of the recession and guaranteeing employment. Its state capitalism and its so-called alternative ‘solutions’ which, time after time, make the government expenditures swell, have even shattered the illusions of many Flemish Christian democrats.”*⁷³

Van Brabant refers to the political-ideological vision of the socialist party (i.e., “state capitalism” with many “government expenditures”). It is, however, not perceived as a legitimate ideological vision. Van Brabant presents it as inadequate (i.e., no viable alternative solutions) and unconvincing (i.e., “shattered the illusions”), which would make the socialist party incompetent^(87, 59). In that way, the ideological reference only serves to further delegitimize the socialist party.

The newspapers further report on the tension between the coalition and the unions. *De Standaard* confirms that all unions are protesting against the government policy (e.g., headline ‘Collective union protest’¹⁴, “the collective union front is solid once more”^{14 (34)}), while simultaneously minimizing their opposition (e.g., “*The protest is collective, but the approach differs. [...] There is also no agreement on the collective action*”¹⁴, “*In contrast, according to the liberal union’s judgement, any direct action would be premature*”³⁴). In other words, it positions the various unions as still divided, thereby creating the image of a fragile union front. In addition, *De Standaard* explicitly delegitimizes the union protest. For example, this occurs in the editorial entitled ‘Opposed’²⁰ by editor-in-chief Manu Ruys:

“But this union front should realize that its criticism does not come across as very credible in broader circles, particularly given its exclusively negative leaning. In their press statements, the union leaders have a preference for using the word ‘opposed.’ While one may do so in an acidic manner and the other with a jolly smile, the stubborn Njet remains, along with the persistent threat of ‘actions.’ [...] and when the unions do propose something, it is so utopian (e.g., the dismantling of the social market economy that is functioning everywhere else in free Europe) or so dangerous (e.g., increasing the

withholding taxes to 30%) that it is difficult to take these standpoints seriously.”²⁰

In his editorial, Ruys criticizes both the attitude and the proposals of the unions. First, the unions are presented as anything but constructive. They would deliberately work against the government, regardless of what is being proposed (e.g., “stubborn *Njet*,” “persistent threat”). This is also suggested in the cartoon entitled ‘Coalition and social conversation partners’²⁹ by the in-house cartoonist Pil. In the cartoon, Premier Tindemans appears willing to negotiate (i.e., seated at a table with a proposal in hand), while the unions seem to sabotage every conversation (i.e., they did not show up and simply put a card board with the message “NO”)²⁹. Second, in the editorial fragment, Ruys criticizes two of the unions’ proposals. He labels their standpoints against the market and for more taxes as “utopian” and “dangerous,” and thus irrational. Alternatives to the current socio-economic policy therefore appear to be either non-existent or highly undesirable. In other words, the current model of the “social market economy” is being naturalized. *Het Laatste Nieuws* criticizes the union on the same points. For example, in his editorial, deputy editor-in-chief Leo Siaens complains that “pressure groups” – among which he also counts the unions – “adopt an inflexible attitude, in the hope that the opposing party will break” and “enjoy contesting the political right to decide, purely for the sake of contesting it”^{89 (76)}. In addition, political journalist Léo Verbist delegitimizes the unions’ political-ideological vision and, more specifically, that of the socialist union leader Debunne:

“Editor’s note – Mr. Debunne does not agree with an economy based on free initiative. He would also like to have a different political system. Given that Belgium does not yet have the majority needed to relinquish the political democracy, and that Belgium cannot be an isolated island within a Western market economy, Mr. Debunne will never be able to approve the National Bank’s report.[...]”⁷⁶

This editor’s note appears after union leader Debunne has rejected a report by the National Bank concerning the (future) government policy. Verbist presents Debunne’s criticism as being a matter of ideological interpretations, although illegitimate: they would be undemocratic and isolated. As in *De Standaard*, there does not appear to be any alternative to the current socio-economic policy, and the model of the “Western market economy” is naturalized (and any political discussion is thus immediately

closed). Only *Vooruit* supports the union protest (albeit casually). This is done in the editorials of socialist party chairman Claes^{95,106} and – obviously – union leader Debunne¹¹². Throughout their pleas against the government policy, they label the union opposition as “logical and consistent”⁹⁵, as well as “alert and forceful”^{106 (112)}. They thus legitimize it in rational and moral terms. Further, the general news reporting in *Vooruit* appears to encourage future union actions, through such headlines as ‘Militants from ABVV convene in large numbers in Bruges on February 12’¹⁰⁷, ‘Socialist personnel expresses solidarity with ACOD’¹¹⁹, and ‘ABVV demonstration in Bruges to be followed by other actions’¹²⁰.

In summary: In this first critical discourse moment (CDM 1), we see how the newspapers represent different actors and opposing viewpoints. For example, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* assign framing power to the Christian-democratic and liberal coalition parties, while *Vooruit* serves as a platform for the socialist opposition party and union. Furthermore, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* argue in favor of more cuts and stricter conditions for unemployment benefits, while *Vooruit* is opposed to such measures. Conversely, *Vooruit* is in favor of reducing working hours, while *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* oppose such reductions. *Vooruit* further introduces the demand for more stringent control over tax fraud. Finally, both *De Standaard* and *Vooruit* express doubts concerning the coalition’s survival, while *Het Laatste Nieuws* maintains full confidence in the coalition. Only *Vooruit* supports the union protest against the government policy. *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Standaard* do not understand the criticism, definitely not with regard to the “Western [social] market economy.”

The newspapers are predominantly using depoliticizing strategies, which gives the impression that there is only one right option and discourages (ideological) debate. For example, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Standaard* promote cuts and stricter conditions for unemployment benefits by legitimizing them as rational or moral, or even by naturalizing them as necessary. They write off the union and its demand for less working hours as irrational, and thus illegitimate. Conversely, *Vooruit* delegitimizes cuts and stricter conditions for unemployment benefits as immoral, while legitimizing the reduction of working hours as the only right option. It positions the Tindemans

coalition as being internally divided and therefore incapable of governing. At some points, however, the discussion concerning the government policy is being politicized. Proposals or standpoints are then linked to particular political-ideological beliefs and interests. This is most clear and common in the coverage of *Vooruit*. For example, the newspaper explains the government cuts and stricter conditions for unemployment benefits from the political-ideological orientation of the coalition (i.e., liberal, capitalist, interests of employers). It also introduces an alternative political-ideological view (i.e., social-democratic policy, Keynesianism). An ideological debate, however, is never stimulated, since the government view is always presented as wrong. Similar – although not as frequent – *Het Laatste Nieuws* refers to the ideological background of the socialist party and the union, only to further delegitimize their actions. According to the newspaper, as well as to *De Standaard*, there is no feasible alternative to the current model of the “Western market economy.”

CDM 2: The Egmont Plan and the union actions (14-16 February)

In the night of 12-13 February 1977, the Tindemans government reaches an agreement about a new austerity program, known as the ‘Egmont Plan’. The government seeks to make substantial cuts in its social-security expenditures and to supplement the state treasury with additional (indirect) taxes and contributions. The plan provides the unions the ultimate reason for a collective union counter-offensive. They call for a strike on 5 successive Fridays.

This analysis focuses on the reporting after the realization of the Egmont Plan. For a three-day period, every newspaper report concerning the general government plan^K

^K This CDM was originally part of an extremely extensive case (i.e., covering a 3-month period, with more than 5 CDMs). Due to the large amount of data, it was decided to adopt stricter criteria for selection. From the launch of the Egmont Plan onwards (i.e., February 13, 1977), only articles with regard to general policy measures were collected, and no longer articles about domain-specific measures (e.g., healthcare).

and the union resistance is selected, yielding a total of 36 newspaper reports. *De Standaard* publishes 17 news reports. They include 12 news articles, 7 appearing on the front page. Only 2 of these articles identify the journalist: 1 is signed by Guido Despiegelaere (reporter on ‘social relations’), and 1 is signed by “J.M.B.” Despiegelaere also writes a relevant analytical piece, as does Jan Bohets (reporter on economic affairs). In addition, the newspaper also publishes 2 editorials by editor-in-chief Manu Ruys, and 1 cartoon by in-house cartoonist Pil. *Het Laatste Nieuws* publishes a total of 11 reports. Most (8) are news articles, 3 appearing on the front page. The journalists “GW,” “F.V.O.,” and Léo Verbist each write 1 article (with the rest having no byline). Verbist also writes 1 of a total of 2 analytical pieces, as well as the only editorial. *Vooruit* publishes 8 relevant newspaper reports. They include 5 news articles, all appearing on the front page. One is attributed to the Belga press agency, and the rest have no byline. In addition, editor-in-chief Piet De Buyser writes a daily editorial on the issue (for a total of 3).

	<i>De Standaard</i>	<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	<i>Vooruit</i>
TOTAL: 36	17	11	8
News articles	12	8	5
→ Front page	→ 7	→ 3	→ 5
Analytical pieces	2	2	-
Editorials	2	1	3
Editorial opinion pieces	-	-	-
Interviews	-	-	-
External opinion pieces	-	-	-
Columns	-	-	-
Cartoons	1	-	-

After the conclave and the announcement of the so-called ‘Egmont Plan,’ all of the newspapers react with disappointment, although they emphasize different aspects in their criticism. As I illustrated below, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Standaard* emphasize the drawbacks for businesses, while *Vooruit* focuses on the workers. Whereas *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Standaard* call for a slimmed-down government (i.e., more cuts, fewer taxes), *Vooruit* argues for a stronger government (i.e., more expenditures, more

taxes on capital). This criticism of the Egmont Plan is often of a moral or rational character, and thus depoliticizing. However, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and especially *Vooruit* add a political dimension as well.

The general news reporting on the Egmont Plan is either scarce (as in *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Vooruit*) or rather sober (as in *De Standaard*). Most articles nevertheless reflect a somewhat negative attitude, definitely as more details about the Egmont Plan are announced and interest groups speak out. Examples include headlines (and subtitles) such as ‘Sectors with increased VAT react negatively’¹³⁵ and ‘Largely negative reactions following the coalition conclave’¹⁵³. Furthermore, each newspaper focusses on specific objects or actors in its news reporting. For example, *Het Laatste Nieuws* addresses primarily the budget policy, and particularly the choice for additional (indirect) taxes. The increase in VAT is front page news (i.e., ‘VAT expected to yield an additional 14 billion francs’¹⁴⁶ and ‘VAT and other tax increases take effect on April 1’¹⁴⁹), while employment policy is only discussed on page 4 or 6^(152, 148). In *De Standaard*, both of these objects are treated with equal prominence, although the focus is on a specific actor. The newspaper emphasizes the consequences for businesses by, for example, using (sub)titles such as ‘Industries receive 7.7 billion in fiscal concessions’¹³² and ‘More jobs through SMEs and jobs for the unemployed’¹³³ (139). The few news articles in *Vooruit* are characterized by a focus on the additional taxes (e.g., the front page headline ‘Government conclave: 15 billion in new taxes’¹⁵⁷ (161)) and prominent framing power for the socialist opposition party BSP (i.e., the front page headline ‘BSP office on the Egmont Plan’¹⁶⁰ (157)).

Compared to the news articles, the editorials and analytical pieces more openly express the standpoints of the newspapers. *De Standaard* delegitimizes the Egmont Plan as half-hearted. Its criticism is both rational and moral in character. For example, the analytical pieces question the effectiveness of the government policy^{138, 140}. In these pieces, journalists Guido Despiegelaere and Jan Bohets thoroughly discuss figures, rationales, and formulations within the Egmont Plan, ultimately concluding that the Tindemans government is falling short. They state: “Employment, however, is left to ‘the dynamics of the economy’”¹³⁸ and, “in practice, it is just a last resort that gives not much cause for satisfaction”¹⁴⁰. Furthermore, in his editorials, editor-in-chief Manu Ruys criticizes the motivation behind the Egmont Plan^{131, 142}. According to Ruys,

the government plan is the result of self-interest and compromises, instead of decisiveness and courage:

“Because none of the parties in the coalition believes to benefit from early elections, the government conclave has succeeded in taking a number of measures, which must justify the continued existence of the cabinet. All of the party chairmen were at least able to agree on this point: No crisis that will cause us to lose face. They are hoping for an improvement in the economic cycle and playing the trump card of persistence.”³¹

“In the Egmont palace, however, everyone was sure not to take any measures that would really provoke the labor movement. Far-reaching reforms in the ailing social-security sectors were therefore left on the shelf.”¹⁴²

These two fragments insinuate that the coalition members have acted primarily according to party-strategic interests (i.e., no new elections, no loss of face, no break with the followers)⁽¹⁴⁶⁾. For this reason, the Egmont Plan would lack in strength (i.e., merely “hoping for an improvement,” no “far-reaching reforms”). According to Ruys, it is nevertheless clear what must be done:

“The most pressing thought is that a different coalition would probably also not succeed in restoring the health of this country. Today, indirect taxes are being increased. A more left-leaning cabinet would implement great increases in direct taxes. In neither case would the excesses and abuses be addressed. It could always be worse, but will it ever get better?”¹⁴²

Ruys complains that the socio-economic policy relies too much on taxes, instead of cuts (i.e., addressing “the excesses and abuses”). He presents the choice for cuts as apolitical (i.e., transcending the left-right opposition) and necessary (i.e., “get[ting] better” and “restoring the health of this country”). In other words, he naturalizes a budget-cutting policy as inevitable. From this point of view, he can only be moderately enthusiastic about the Egmont Plan. *Het Laatste Nieuws* also labels the government plan as half-hearted. For example, one analytical piece accuses the plan of being insufficiently developed: “[w]ith the exception of a few elements, the Egmont Plan remains vague and in the realm of intentions,” “[i]t does not contain very many concrete proposals,” “[t]he plan remains equally vague on this point”¹⁵². In the editorial entitled ‘Egmont paper’¹⁵⁰, political journalist Léo Verbist criticizes the plan for not making enough cuts:

“The Egmont Plan also fails to reflect much political courage. The coalition did not dare to address the remarkable abuses with regard to unemployment benefits, and they did not touch any acquired rights, even though everyone knows that the treasury will be empty in a few years.”¹⁵⁰

Like Ruys in *De Standaard*, Verbist naturalizes the necessity of less state expenditures (in the areas of unemployment compensation and other social-security entitlements). He presents it as a general fact (i.e., everyone knows it) and purely a matter of perseverance (i.e., “political courage,” to “dare”). Later in the editorial, however, it turns out that his criticism has an ideological basis:

“No major, innovative impetus can proceed from a policy that continues to rely on the fossilized notion that the economy can be revived only by increasing state expenditures and by more subsidies. This does not reflect much confidence in the creative power of businesses, if they were to be left with more resources through the reduction of fiscal and para-fiscal burdens [...].”¹⁵⁰

Only in this specific fragment, Verbist politicizes the socio-economic policy as a product of particular “notions.” In doing so, he distinguishes between right and wrong notions (i.e., political de/legitimization). For example, the belief in a major role for the government (i.e., “increasing state expenditures and more subsidies”) is written off as a “fossilized notion.” Innovation would only come from increasing market freedom (i.e., “confidence in the creative power of businesses,” reduced burdens). A bit more frequently, the government plan is also politicized in *Vooruit*, particularly in the editorials of editor-in-chief Piet De Buyser^{159, 162, 164}. De Buyser positions the Egmont Plan in relation to two socio-political interest groups (i.e., the workers/employees and the capitalists/employers). He states that the new measures are the fault of “failing capitalism”¹⁵⁹ and are being passed on to “in particular, the workers”¹⁵⁹. In other words, he claims that the government requires more sacrifices from employees than it does from employers. This would be illustrative of a right-wing ideological policy: “the government will simply continue its liberal politics with regard to social and economic issues, without any change”¹⁶⁴. In what follows, however, the Egmont Plan is extensively delegitimized in moral and rational terms. De Buyser denounces it as “a sinister joke” and “a marked card,” as “the only thing that actually mattered was the continuation of the coalition”¹⁶⁴. He also states that “the so-called Egmont Plan does

not have much meat on its bones, the mountain has brought forth a mouse during the conclave,” with few, if any “truly tangible results”^{164 (162)}. Furthermore, De Buyser suggests alternative policy measures. Particularly in het editorial entitled ‘A deeper hole’¹⁵⁹, he argues that the government would better “use government initiatives to provide jobs to the tens of thousands of people who have been abandoned by private companies”¹⁵⁹. Additionally, he points out that, so far, “taxes on the high revenues and profits of large corporations have not been touched”¹⁵⁹. De Buyser thus argues for a stronger government, in terms of more expenditures and more contributions from companies and capital.

After the announcement of the Egmont Plan, the socialist and Christian unions are determined to take action against the Tindemans government. They issue a call to strike on a five successive Fridays (the so-called ‘Friday Strikes’). The newspapers adopt different standpoints on these actions. In the following paragraphs, I will demonstrate how *Vooruit* expresses its full support for the unions’ decision, while *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* are more restrained in their reactions. To make their argument, the newspapers are mostly found to use a depoliticizing discourse, although *Vooruit* also presents the strikes as a political-ideological action in its editorials (i.e., politicization).

All of the newspapers report relatively little on the union opposition: *Het Laatste Nieuws* addresses it in four news articles, and *Vooruit* and *De Standaard* do so in two news articles each, as well as in a few editorial fragments (or a cartoon). Their standpoints can nevertheless be derived from notable selections (with regard to issues and actors) and formulations. For example, *Vooruit* assigns extensive framing power to the socialist union ABVV. The article entitled ‘Massive turn-out in Bruges for the ABVV’ includes a detailed summary of the speeches of the union leaders^{158 (163)}. What is more, the journalist reproduces these statements entirely and without reference in the lead of the article, as if it concerns general observations. Furthermore, in its news reporting, *Vooruit* emphasizes the large scale of the protest. The socialist union leaders are positioned against a strongly engaged constituency (e.g., “seldom have we attended such a powerful manifestation here in Bruges”^{158 (162)}) and as being on the same page as the Christian union (e.g., the repeated use of “both unions”¹⁶³). Little if

any mention is made of the fact that the liberal union is not participating in the strike. Finally, in his editorials, editor-in-chief Piet De Buyser legitimizes the union action as a necessary political counter-reaction^{162, 164}. He links the action to the interests of a particular socio-political group (i.e., “the lives of the workers”^{164 (162)}) and presents it as a catalyst for profound political change:

“The government has been warned: if it continues plodding along this course, such that situation deteriorates by the day, the Egmont Plan and any other plans, which emerged from the conclave like plasters for a wooden leg, will be of no further benefit. In that case, different, more profound changes will be necessary in the government politics, as well as in the economic structures. Moreover – in the wise words by Louis Melis last Saturday at the ABVV day – the workers are no longer willing to wait for Mr. Tindemans to change things...they will do it themselves.”¹⁶²

De Buyser presents the strikes as a political-ideological action (i.e., politicization), in the interests of the workers (i.e., political positioning). However, he leaves no room for debate: the current government and its plan are completely delegitimized as inadequate (e.g., “it continues plodding along”¹⁶²) and immoral (e.g., “situation deteriorates by the day”¹⁶², “stopped speaking the truth”¹⁶⁴). Likewise, the hesitating Christian union is delegitimized as naïve (e.g., “giving a dimension to the Egmont Plan that it does not have”^{164 (162)}) and cowardly (e.g., “a ‘withdrawal’ operation is being prepared”¹⁶⁴).

Het Laatste Nieuws reports on the union strikes only in the form of news articles, which primarily reproduce the discourse of the unions. On the one hand, this gives the socialist and Christian unions – the two participating unions, as well as the largest – the opportunity to express their criticism and unfold their plan^{147, 151}. On the other hand, it allows the small liberal union to provide extensive justification for its decision not to participate¹⁵⁶. For example, the front-page article entitled ‘Egmont Plan faces one-day strikes’¹⁵⁴ opens with the non-participation of the small liberal union. It ends with the possible rancor between the Christian and socialist unions (i.e., “[t]his crack in the ACV-ABVV front could become a rupture [...]”¹⁵⁴). In this way, the feasibility and strength of the strikes are undermined. *De Standaard* also casts doubt (albeit subtly) concerning the union plans. For example, the newspaper refers to the high cost of the strikes in the article entitled ‘More than 100 million in strike payments for the

protest against the administration¹⁴¹, while it had noted in an earlier article that the socialist union ABVV “has cash-flow problems”¹³⁷. In his editorial entitled ‘Heavier mortgage’¹⁴², editor-in-chief Manu Ruys expresses doubts about the utility of the union action: “[i]t will not boost economic activity or cheer up the ministers”¹⁴². He also delegitimizes the protest as “radical” and emotional (i.e., “outraged innkeepers”).

In summary: In this second critical discourse moment (CDM 2), we once again see how the newspapers represent different actors and opposing viewpoints. For example, *De Standaard* focuses on businesses, while *Vooruit* directs its attention toward the workers. Nevertheless, criticism of the Egmont Plan resounds in all three of the newspapers. However, whereas *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Standaard* call for a slimmed-down government, with more cuts and fewer taxes (along with a greater role for businesses), *Vooruit* advocates a stronger government, with more expenditures and more taxes on capital. Despite the wide criticism of the Egmont Plan, only *Vooruit* supports the union opposition.

Again, the newspapers mainly defend their standpoints by using a depoliticizing discourse. All three newspapers create the impression that there is only one right option (i.e., de/legitimization), and a broad debate is never stimulated. *De Standaard* delegitimizes the government plan (and the union opposition) as ineffective, and therefore irrational. It naturalizes more far-reaching cuts as inevitable. *Het Laatste Nieuws* also delegitimizes the government plan as insufficient, and therefore irrational. Only once, its criticism is linked to the government’s ideological viewpoint on the economy. *Vooruit*, on its part, refers a couple of times to the interests of two socio-political groups (i.e., the workers/employees and the capitalists/employers). However, everything that goes against the interests of the workers (i.e., the Egmont Plan and hesitation with regard to the strikes) is immediately delegitimized as immoral or irrational.

Conclusion

Newspapers: Ideological cultures

The reporting on the Egmont Plan (and the union protest against it) shows that *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* share the same ideological culture: they use a predominantly depoliticizing discourse to defend liberal interpretations. Both newspapers call for more cuts, less taxes, and/or more leeway for businesses. In other words, they promote a model of society that includes a smaller government and greater market freedom. This plea often seems disconnected from political choices: it is presented as rational and moral, or even as necessary and inevitable. Only exceptionally, *Het Laatste Nieuws* presents it as a matter of opposing political notions. Both newspapers nevertheless make it clear that there is no political alternative to the current model of the “Western market economy” and/or a slimmed-down government. Actors with other opinions (e.g., the socialist union and socialist opposition party) are delegitimized as irrational. In this way, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* prevent a (political-ideological) debate on the Egmont Plan and the socio-economic policy in general.

Vooruit writes from the perspective of a different ideological culture on the Egmont Plan (and the union protest against it). The newspaper rejects liberal measures and defends Keynesian/social democratic interpretations. It mainly does so in a depoliticizing manner. Even occasional references to particular ideological beliefs (e.g., liberal) or socio-political interests (e.g., workers versus employers) are always followed by an outspoken de/legitimization. Everything that goes against the interests of the workers is denounced as immoral or irrational. More specifically, *Vooruit* takes a stand against government cuts and stricter conditions for unemployment benefits. In contrast, it supports higher taxes on capital and additional control of tax evasion. It legitimizes the controlled reduction of working hours as a logical next step in employment policy, and the union actions as necessary. It calls for a stronger and more active government.

Newspaper landscape: Ideological debate

From this analysis of *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, and *Vooruit*, we can conclude that the newspaper debate on the Egmont Plan (and the union protest against it) is certainly diverse, but hardly pluralistic. It is diverse in the sense that *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, and *Vooruit* consistently represent different actors and standpoints. It is not very pluralistic in the sense that the newspapers are primarily defending their own standpoints and impeding (ideological) debate. Also when *Vooruit* and exceptionally *Het Laatste Nieuws* link particular claims and actions to political-ideological interests or beliefs (i.e., political positioning), they still speak of only one 'right' view. Opposite views are presented as impossible or unacceptable. As such, instead of stimulating a broad debate between different worldviews (i.e., politicization), the newspapers might actually reinforce the boundaries between those worldviews (i.e., polarization). Briefly stated, at the time of the Egmont Plan, the newspaper landscape succeeds in providing a platform for a variety of actors and standpoints, although it does not really succeed in promoting a broad (political-ideological) debate on the issue.

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CDM 2

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162. De Buyser P., Egmont-plan, een lachertje, *Vooruit*, February 15, p3.
163. n.a., Nationale beurtstaking tegen het 'Egmontplan', *Vooruit*, February 16, p1.
164. De Buyser P., Demystifikatie, *Vooruit*, February 16, p3.

CASE 3: DE-PILLARIZED NEWSPAPERS AND THE GLOBAL PLAN (1993)

Context

Newspaper landscape

It was not until the 1990s that a de-pillarized Flemish press emerged. With regard to newspaper ownership, “traditional socio-economic or political organizations” had given way to “financial holding companies and industrial concerns [...] or wealthy (banking) families” (Biltreyst & Van Gompel, 1999: 77, see also De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 59). These changes in ownership usually followed major financial problems and losses (see below: *De Morgen*). Beginning in the 1980s, the Flemish newspapers were continuously confronted by rising costs (Biltreyst & Van Gompel, 1999: 73-75). First, the production process had to be modernized and automated, which required a great deal of capital. Second, reader loyalty disappeared along with the pillars, and newspapers were henceforth forced to invest in marketing and promotional strategies. Third, the economic recession of the early 1990s led to increases in the cost of paper, distribution, and other matters. Moreover, at the same time, the income of many newspapers declined as well. Day-to-day sales stagnated, and advertising revenues had to be shared with a recently launched commercial television channel. As a result, failing newspapers were forced to seek economies of scale and synergies, while prosperous press groups saw the opportunity for further expansion (Biltreyst & Van Gompel, 1999: 76). Various alliances and takeovers ensued, this time across the boundaries of the former pillars (Van Aelst, 2006: 51) (see below: *De Morgen*). Due to these merger trends, the Flemish newspaper sector increasingly developed in the direction of oligopoly (Biltreyst & Van Gompel, 1999: 75).

The process of de-pillarization continued, not only in terms of ownership structure, but also within the journalistic culture. In the eyes of publishers, journalists

were no longer seen as intellectual opinion leaders, but as “salaried content providers” or, in the case of the editors-in-chief, as “content directors” (Vanspauwen, 2002: 215). “Many newspapers abandoned the political barricades, cleared the ideological minefield and withdrew to [the] neutral territory [of] figures; the world of pluses and minuses (Goossens in Vanspauwen, 2002: 212). In 1993, only 6% of all Flemish journalists were still members of any political party (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 221). Most newsrooms aimed for complete impartiality: attempts were made to stop drawing distinctions between political families, with regard to both attention and criticism (Van Aelst, 2006: 56, 63; Distelmans, 1999: 471). Nevertheless, studies would indicate that newspapers continued to treat politicians from the original pillar less harshly (Van Aelst, 2006: 63-64; Distelmans, 1999: 473).

Following the bankruptcy of the Standaardgroep in 1976, *De Standaard* was taken over by the ‘Vlaamse Uitgeversmaatschappij’ (VUM) (see previous case). The newspaper group quickly recovered, becoming the market leader in Flanders, with *De Standaard* as its flagship (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 303). Although the VUM acknowledged the autonomy of the newspaper (see previous case), journalists were hardly involved when it came to changes in the editorial staff, as with the appointment of a new chief editor (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 315). In terms of content, the newspaper continued its efforts to build its image as an objective quality newspaper. During the 1980s and 1990s, the newspaper would decreasingly profile itself as explicitly Christian and/or Flemish (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 354), and the editorial was removed from the front page (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 314). Nevertheless, between the lines and in the opinion pieces, it would still be possible to discern a preference for Christian-democratic actors and ideas (Van Aelst, 2006: 63).

Het Laatste Nieuws was increasingly owned by the Van Thillo banking family. As early as the 1970s, they had acquired shares in the Hoste publishing company (see previous case). In 1990, they bought the remaining shares and changed the name of the publisher to ‘De Persgroep’ (translated as: The Press Group) (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 347). The young, recently graduated Christian Van Thillo became the director of the group (Vanspauwen, 2002: 183). At that time, *Het Laatste Nieuws* had been experiencing declining sales for several years, and Van Thillo wanted to turn

the tide at all costs (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 347; Vanspauwen, 2002: 172, 183). Van Thillo saw the solution in “passion for the reader,” meaning that “journalists should not write what they like to write, but what readers want to read” (Vanspauwen, 2002: 196). In terms of both form and content, the newspaper increasingly adopted a strategy of tabloidization (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 351). Its standpoints remained in close proximity to those of the liberal politicians and organizations, even to the extent that “in the 1990s, *Het Laatste Nieuws* was still one of the more pillarized or partisan-political newspapers” (Van Aelst, 2006: 65).

in the late 1970s, the socialist newspaper *Vooruit* was transformed into *De Morgen*. The direct reason was the bankruptcy of its Antwerp counterpart, *Volksgazet*, in 1978. The Collective Socialist Action (i.e., ‘Socialistische Gemeenschappelijke Actie’ or SGA) – the umbrella association of the most important socialist organizations, like the party, the union, and the health insurance – no longer wished to invest in anything but a collective socialist newspaper (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 363). ‘*De Morgen*’ was chosen as the title, and the editorial approach built on the tradition of *Vooruit*^A. Paul Goossens became the editor-in-chief (Vanspauwen, 2002: 19). He came from *De Standaard* and did not have a socialist label, although he was known for his social engagement and willingness to protest (e.g., student leader in May, 1968; organizer of the journalists’ protest upon the bankruptcy of *De Standaard*). His appointment was a somewhat controversial decision in the late 1970s, as “[t]ransferring from one newspaper to another was like transferring from one ideology to another: it is just not done” (Vanspauwen, 2002: 21). In terms of content, the newspaper needed to display the proper political-ideological image. It needed to be an “open, progressive, and non-partisan newspaper” that defended “democratic socialism” and that “jolted the readers’ conscience” (Vanspauwen, 2002: 25, 28, 101). Despite the newspaper being financially dependent on the socialist movement, “the reporters [would] be able to fulfil their duty to inform and analyze in complete autonomy” (Vanspauwen, 2002: 25, see also De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 364). This promise of impartial reporting was formally established in a protocol. In practice, the newspaper, for example, eliminated announcements of socialist organizations

^A The title ‘*Vooruit*’ was retained for the Ghent region until 1991 (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 364; Biltreyst & Van Gompel, 1999: 77).

from its coverage (Murez in Van Aelst, 2006: 53). *De Morgen* was a well-considered political and editorial project, but it stagnated in commercial terms. A great many socialist readers left, sales decreased, and the losses accumulated (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 364). After several cutbacks, new injections of capital, and the withdrawal of important socialist investors, the socialist party filed for the newspaper's bankruptcy in 1986 (Vanspauwen, 2002: 47, 74, 107; De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 364-366). In 1987, *De Morgen* was re-launched following a crowdfunding campaign (Vanspauwen, 2002: 152; De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 369). The newspaper still profited itself as independent and progressive, although it cut the word "socialism," thereby deliberately breaking with the socialist party^B (Vanspauwen, 2002: 150). Sales continued to decrease, however, and the losses only became greater (Vanspauwen, 2002: 171). Two years after it was re-launched, *De Morgen* was forced to search for a new buyer. In January 1989, the Hoste company – later known as De Persgroep – purchased the shares and debt for the symbolic amount of one franc (Vanspauwen, 2002: 179; De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 370; Biltreyst & Van Gompel, 2010: 73). This made the progressive newspaper part of a liberal group. A foundation was established to guarantee the progressive editorial line and editorial independence (Vanspauwen, 2002: 177; De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 235, 371). Anyway, in the first years following the takeover, the director, Christian Van Thillo, was not very involved with the newspaper. He had absolutely no affinity with *De Morgen*, and the feeling was mutual (Vanspauwen, 2002: 183, 198). This did not mean that *De Morgen* could do whatever it wanted. Since it was launched, several market studies had been conducted, each concluding that, for readers (current and potential), the newspaper "[should] be substantively broader and more objective, less prejudiced and tendentious, less harsh and fanatic, less bitter, less pedantic and pushy..." (Vanspauwen, 2002: 187, 198). A similar study was completed after the takeover by the Hoste company/De Persgroep. However, editor-in-chief Goossens and his staff had taken pride in their nonconformist profile, and they could not be convinced to effect any true journalistic changes (Vanspauwen, 2002: 187, 198). Very little changed with

^B One important reason was that, in the preceding years, "disagreement had arisen between the [socialist party] SP and the newsroom, who wished to chart their own course" (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 366).

regard to sales after the takeover as well: the number of readers continued to decline dramatically (Vanspauwen, 2002: 226; De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 371). The resignation of Paul Goossens in 1992 and the appointment of Piet Piryns as the new chief editor did not turn the tide: the readership figures continued to decline, the rebellious journalistic culture was preserved, and Van Thillo did still not fully support *De Morgen* (Vanspauwen, 2002, 225-226). The shift would not come until 1994, when Yves Desmet became the editor-in-chief (see next case).

Socio-economic politics

In the early 1980s, the Belgian governments – under the leadership of the Christian democrat Wilfried Martens – increasingly opted for a neoliberal policy. Successive center-right coalitions argued that selective cuts in social security, wage moderation, and entrepreneurial freedom were necessary to economic recovery^c (Brepoels, 2015: 589, 475; Meynen, 2005: 350-351). Government interventions, both economic and social, were regarded as unnecessary, or even troublesome (Meynen, 2005: 348; De Preter, 2016: 55). The neoliberal credo came down to more free market and more individual responsibility (De Preter, 2016: 66, 360). This vision was implemented “in an authoritarian manner” through so-called proxies (Meynen, 2005: 308; Reynebeau, 2009: 267), although the government could also rely on (some) public support. For example, people no longer believed in the ideal of the welfare state and the Keynesian recipes: “[i]n the second half of the 1970s, the economic motor started to sputter, and Keynesianism, on which social democracy had closely adhered, was laid in the grave as an economic credo (Brepoels, 2015: 490; see also De Preter, 2016: 305)”^d. In addition, governments were being increasingly “confronted with open obstruction from the side of the employers, who were tired of government interventionism” (Brepoels, 2015:

^c “A remarkably medical terminology was dominant within that rhetoric, which was largely adopted from the ideological offensive of employers organizations in the late 1970s. The situation needed to be sanitized, restored to health (for aspects that were sick), repaired (for aspects that were broken), pruned (for aspects that had died off) and streamlined (for aspects that were too weighty). The economy was sick, and so was the state (Reynebeau, 2009: 266).”

^d The Belgian governments held onto the Keynesian recipes for a relatively long time – even when “they were in full crisis” – because they “proved to be of practical use for the pacification of class conflicts” (Meynen, 2005: 346).

469). In the mid-1980s, neoliberalism geared up once again. For example, the 1985 government agreement explicitly prohibited any further increase in taxes, “which meant that the further improvement of government finances could only be continued with budget cuts” (Brepoels, 2015: 481). The policy did not pay off immediately: the national debt remained enormous, and there was no increase in employment (Brepoels, 2015: 478; De Preter, 2016: 218)^E.

This nevertheless generated relatively little opposition^F, which can be explained by several elements. First, by imposing their own politics or strict boundaries, the governments restricted the space that social partners had for negotiations (Brepoels, 2015: 478; see also Meynen, 2005: 352). They restored the so-called ‘primacy of the political.’ Second, there were frequent threats of unemployment, which forced the unions to accept the employers’ demands instead of their own demands (e.g., flexibilization of labor instead of reductions in working hours) (Brepoels, 2015: 478). Third, the position of the unions was weaker than it had been several years before, due to mutual and internal differences. For example, the union front collapsed after the Christian union ACV chose to support the policy of the Christian-democratic premier Martens for a long time (Brepoels, 2015: 479, 482; Reynebeau, 2009: 266). Moreover, the unions no longer represented a homogeneous group of industrial laborers. Their followers were becoming increasingly diverse, and thus more difficult to mobilize collectively (Brepoels, 2015: 502). Fourth, no voices were raised on the political front: the social democrats could not offer an alternative, and thus no opposition (Brepoels, 2015: 490-91; De Preter, 2016: 359). Particularly after the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991), there was skepticism concerning the possibility and desirability of a socialist or social-democratic alternative. “Due to the failure of authoritarian socialism, the free-market economy was hailed as the new way to salvation and an irrevocable natural law”

^E It was not until the late 1980s that the economic situation gradually became better, as Belgium was able to share in the benefits of a favorable international climate. Unemployment decreased, and the government deficit was reduced (De Preter, 2016: 218). The celebration was nevertheless short-lived. In the early 1990s, the economic situation underwent a serious setback. Not only Belgium, but all of Europe was plagued by recession, in part due to the reunification of Germany (De Preter, 2016: 217, 221; Brepoels, 2015: 520).

^F This was with the exception of two large socialist union mobilizations in 1983 and 1986, which “had very little influence on the policy” (De Preter, 2016: 62; see also Brepoels, 2015: 482, 500).

(Brepoels, 2015: 506; see also De Preter, 2016: 222, 360). Within this context, the social-democratic movement increasingly adopted neoliberal standpoints, albeit with some kind of social corrections (Brepoels, 2015: 459, see also De Preter, 2016: 305)⁶.

When the social democrats – still called ‘socialists’ in everyday life – once again came to power in the late 1980s, they continued along the neoliberal course of cuts and privatization (De Preter, 2016: 228, 267; Meynen, 2005: 385). Successive center-left coalitions adhered to a policy of wage moderation and cuts in social security (Brepoels, 2015: 515-516). Europe can be seen as an important factor. In 1991, concrete agreements were made in Maastricht concerning the transition to a common currency zone (Brepoels, 2015: 516-517; Reynebeau, 2009: 285). The agreements concerned strict budgetary standards for member states desiring to join the union: a country’s budget deficit could not exceed 3%, and the national debt could not exceed 60% of the GDP (De Preter, 2016: 233; Reynebeau, 2009: 285). The so-called ‘Treaty of Maastricht’ eventually entered into force on 1 November 1993. As a result of the treaty, the member states lost some of their own financial and economic autonomy. “The member states were increasingly forced to move in the same direction; a [neo]liberal agenda was pushed through” (De Preter, 2016: 362, 270; see also Brepoels, 2015: 512).

The Dehaene 1 government – the center left coalition of Christian democrats, which had led Belgium from 1992 to 1995 – absolutely wanted to pass the European entrance examination (Brepoels, 2015: 520). Premier Jean-Luc Dehaene hoped to achieve this primarily through a social pact between the unions and the employers’ organizations. In July 1993, the social partners were called on to establish “a new economic and social consensus,” within which employment could be promoted, the competitive power of businesses would be strengthened, and the funding of social security would be guaranteed (Brepoels, 2015: 520). However, the unions and the employers’ organizations did not reach consensus, and in late October 1993, the curtain closed on social consultation (Meynen, 2005: 377). Premier Dehaene subsequently decided to develop his own policy plan. In the hope of influencing the

⁶ In Belgium, the definitive reconciliation with the neoliberal market ideal – conditional on social and ecological corrections – did not occur until around the turn of the millennium, taking the form of the purple coalitions and their “Third Way” (see the following case) (Brepoels, 2015: 512; Reynebeau, 2009: 286; De Preter, 2016: 306).

government decision nonetheless, the union organized a national demonstration in Brussels on 29 October and – after several initial provisions had been leaked – a collective strike day on 15 November (Brepoels, 2015: 520). Without success, as two days later (17 November 1993), the government formally presented its “Global Plan.” The plan included a general wage moderation, cuts to social security, VAT increases, and a reduction in wage costs (De Preter, 2016: 221). This proved unacceptable to the two large unions: the leaders of the Christian ACV rejected the plan immediately, as did the socialist ABVV following criticism from its followers (Brepoels, 2015: 520-521). A series of strikes and demonstrations ensued. On 26 November – so-called ‘Red Friday’ – there even was the largest general strike by the collective union front since 1936 (Brepoels, 2015: 521; Meynen, 2005: 377).

Nevertheless, the Global Plan was approved on 15 December. Thereafter, the union resistance subsided, “[a]s the unions also acknowledged that a social and fiscal price tag was associated to the inevitable introduction of the Euro” (Brepoels, 2015: 521). In the years after the implementation of the Global Plan, the center-left parties initially prospered. For example, the Dehaene government was elected to a second term of office (1996-1999) – with the support of the ACV and the ABVV (Meynen, 2005: 383). In this period, they passed the European entrance examination: the government deficit was reduced to 3% in 1996, and to 2% in 1997 (Reynebeau, 2009: 285; Meynen, 2005: 383)^H. Belgium proved “that it was an obedient student” (Brepoels, 2015: 517). However, partly in response to a series of scandals (i.e., the Agusta affair, the Dutroux case, the dioxin crisis), the voters penalized the coalition of Christian democrats and social democrats in 1999 (Brepoels, 2015: 513). Under the leadership of the liberal Guy Verhofstadt, a coalition of liberals, social democrats and greens emerged. The government set out upon the ‘Third Way’ (see the following case).

^H Belgium was never able to meet the second standard (i.e., reducing the national debt to 60%), although it did try.

Analysis

CDM 1: Government negotiates and union strikes (15-17 November)

In mid-November 1993, the Christian-democratic and socialist coalition parties are still in full negotiation with regard to the necessary socio-economic measures. During these negotiations, several reports are published on the future European macro-economic guidelines. The coalition is also faced with protests from the three unions (i.e., the socialist ABVV, the Christian ACV, and the liberal ACLVB). They organize a (first) collective strike in response to some leaked agreements on Monday, 15 November 1993.

This analysis focuses on the reporting that occurred between the first strike day and the end of the government negotiations. For a three-day period, every newspaper report concerning the possible socio-economic policy of the coalition and the union protest is selected, yielding a total of 62 newspaper reports. *De Standaard* publishes 22 reports. They include 16 news articles, with 4 appearing on the front page. Nearly all of the news articles are written by the newspaper's own editorial staff, mostly by the (political) journalists Pol Van Den Driessche, Guy Tegenbos, and Johan Rasking. The newspaper also publishes 3 editorials written by various members of the editorial staff (i.e., VUM editor-in-chief Lou De Clerck, political journalist Guy Tegenbos, and *De Standaard* editor-in-chief Dirk Achten). Finally, the newspaper publishes 1 opinion piece (by a professor of labor law) and 2 cartoons (by Nagel and Ludo). *Het Laatste Nieuws* publishes 13 relevant newspaper reports. They include 9 news articles (3 of which appear on the front page), most without any byline. There are also 2 editorials (by political/economic journalist Hugo Scheldeman and reporter 'social affairs' Walter Vaerewijck) and 2 cartoons (author unknown). Finally, *De Morgen* publishes 27 newspaper reports. They include 20 news articles, 5 appearing on the front page. Half of the articles have no byline, and the other half are signed by a variety of journalists. Only the names of political/economic journalist Georges Timmerman and political

journalist Frans De Smet appear multiple times. The newspaper also publishes 1 analytical piece and 1 interview (both by Timmerman), 3 editorials (not signed by any specific journalist), 1 cartoon (by Zak) and 1 column (by Paul Goossens, the former editor-in-chief of *De Morgen*).

	<i>De Standaard</i>	<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	<i>De Morgen</i>
TOTAL: 62	22	13	27
News articles	16	9	20
→ Front page	→ 4	→ 3	→ 5
Analytical pieces	-	-	1
Editorials	3	2	3
Editorial opinion pieces	-	-	-
Interviews	-	-	1
External opinion pieces	1	-	-
Columns	-	-	1
Cartoons	2	2	1

The newspapers focus on different aspects (i.e., objects) in their reporting. *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* write equally on the government negotiations and on the union protest, although they write nothing about the newly released European socio-economic reports. In contrast, *De Morgen* reports relatively little about the ongoing coalition talks, but devotes a remarkable amount of attention to the European socio-economic recommendations (which are subsequently linked to the Belgian policy). For example, it addresses the issue in a special ‘Focus’ section. Most of the newspaper’s reports nevertheless concern the union actions.

Regarding the ongoing government negotiations, the newspapers formulate different expectations in different ways. As is illustrated bellow, both *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* are of the opinion that the government should avoid additional taxes (and additional expenditures). They present it as a foregone conclusion, allowing no debate on socio-economic policy (i.e., depoliticization). In contrast, *De Morgen* advocates higher taxes on capital and more government interventions. It draws on the

European reports to legitimize an alternative approach as rational (i.e., cultivation) and to spark an ideological debate (i.e., politicization).

Let us start with *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*. In their editorials, they clearly state what the government should do (*De Standaard*) and what it should not do (*Het Laatste Nieuws*):

There is a broad, if not general consensus on the necessity of restructuring government finances, on the disadvantages of excessive wage costs for companies, on the excessive tax burden on earned income, on the derailed spending of social-security funds, on the dangerous setback of the competitive strength of companies, and on the unemployment rate, which is much too high. Briefly stated, everyone knows of and realizes the severity of the situation and what we will face in the absence of quick and powerful intervention.”⁴

“New expenses will occur; that is certain, particularly in light of the fact that this government, since its beginning, has repeatedly proven its lack of inspiration with regard to concrete cuts and its inventiveness in coming up with new taxes. [...] The government is seeking new income in social security and child benefit, while it is primarily the socialists who are pushing for a capital tax. In this regard, they are forgetting that the major capital holders left this country long ago, and it will be the small savers and retirees who will be most affected.”³⁰

The first fragment is written by the VUM editor-in-chief Lou De Clerck. He provides a summary of the socio-economic problems that are in urgent need of a “remedy”⁽¹⁴⁾. These remedies primarily deal with lower contributions (i.e., lower wage costs and lower taxes on earned income) and lower government expenditures (i.e., “restructuring government finances” and especially the “derailed spending of social-security funds”), all for the purpose of increasing the “competitive power” of companies. In the second fragment, the *Het Laatste Nieuws* journalist Walter Vaerewijck makes a plea against additional contributions. The reporter on social affairs laments the fact that the government is all too eager to reach for new taxes. He is particularly critical of a possible tax on capital. The two journalist thus share an aversion to taxes (and a preference for cuts). They defend this using a depoliticizing discourse. In the first fragment, De Clerck impedes any form of discussion by naturalizing his summary as “a general consensus”: “every knows of and realizes” the

necessity of the measures, given the “severity of the situation.” The second fragment also allows no discussion, as it rules out the possibility of additional taxes. Vaerewijck warns of a lack of insight (i.e., “lack of inspiration,” “forgetting” that there are no longer any big capital holders) and how it would affect the weakest (i.e., “the small savers and retirees”¹). In other words, he delegitimizes additional taxes as both irrational and immoral. *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* would thus like for the Dehaene government to devote its full focus to a budget-cutting policy. It would not get the support of the population unless it makes a confident choice for this “different and better direction”⁴. As they warn in their (other) editorials, a compromise would not do^{4, 21, 26, 30}. The policy plan should be more than “juggling with billions, contributions, taxes” and “a refined cumulative total, a catalogue of measures, either large or small”²¹ (30). The government should demonstrate that it has “perspective” and that it is opting for “clear policies”²¹. Compromises are delegitimized (“running away from serious problems”⁴, “the real bill will be presented later”²⁶ (30)). The determined discourse of *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* is nevertheless restricted to the editorials, and it is not carried through to the general news reporting. With the exception of exclusive framing power for the liberal opposition party VLD – which accuses the government of an “avalanche of new contributions”³⁵ – in *Het Laatste Nieuws*, the news articles provide no evidence of any pronounced standpoint. They are relatively descriptive, with content limited to the strategic position of the various negotiators^(19, 32), the possible title of the policy plan^{8, 20}, or the timeline of the negotiations^(1, 27). Both newspapers do not mind the longer duration of the negotiations (e.g., “[a] somewhat slower agreement is better than a hasty failure, as Premier Jean-Luc Dehaene seems to think”¹ (33)).

In contrast, *De Morgen* delegitimizes the entire course of the negotiations. In several news articles, it states that the negotiations “are dragging on”³⁶ (61) and that they are characterized by a “grim”³⁶ or “surrealistic atmosphere”⁴³. The editorial entitled ‘Balancing acts in Hertoginnedal’⁵³ also positions the negotiations within such an atmosphere (i.e., “Dehaene seems to be creating a ‘surrealistic atmosphere’ in

¹ *Het Laatste Nieuws* refers to “working compatriots,” “small savers,” and “retirees.” These socio-political groups, however, are not connected to specific interests (i.e., political positioning), but primarily to a victim role (i.e., moral delegitimization).

Hertoginnedal”⁵³). *De Morgen* exhibits little confidence in the outcome of the coalition talks, as evidenced in an editorial:

*“Despite the balancing acts that are being played out in the chambers of Hertoginnedal, the coalition has already experienced one painful fall from the tightrope. The effort that is being asked of income from capital in no way balances the sacrifices that are being asked of wage earners. This can be repaired only with strong employment measures. This will ultimately be the touchstone of the global plan.”*⁵³

Referring to a previous government measure – or perhaps to a provision that has been leaked? – the editorial warns of an unbalanced plan, in which wage earners will suffer much more heavily than will capital holders. The editorial thus criticizes the government policy as being contrary to the interests of a specific socio-political group: employees (i.e., political delegitimization). The newspaper does not wish to jump to any conclusions (i.e., no immediate delegitimization), however, and it expresses hope for a “strong” government initiative with regard to employment, which would make the plan acceptable. This can be understood as a call for further debate. In the editorial fragment presented above, it thus seems as if *De Morgen* is advocating higher taxes on capital and more governmental interference in the area of employment. The latter preference could explain the newspaper’s thorough consideration of the European reports and the extensive framing power that it assigns to the European economists^(55, 58, 59). Indeed, they confirm that “a large-scale government initiative with regard to the massive creation of jobs is becoming increasingly unavoidable” and advocate “a colossal investment program at the European scale”⁵⁵. This plea is subsequently defended by *De Morgen* as rationally justified. The newspaper writes of “a coherent and consistent package of bold, practical measures,” compiled by “leading economists”⁵⁷. Moreover, the “report is absolutely required reading for the Belgian ministers who are responsible for our country’s global crisis plan”^{56 (59)}. The choice for a more active government is thus legitimized as rational and essential to the Belgian policy debate (i.e., cultivation). The coalition nevertheless would show little interest in the European recommendations: “[t]he accent is on extensive cuts, and it lacks any reference to recovery”⁶⁰. In the editorial entitled ‘The wrong strategy?’, *De Morgen* delegitimizes this attitude as irrational (i.e., “[i]t remains perplexing that our

government is not starting by getting the European train on the right track and then attaching the Belgian car to it"⁶⁰). It explains what is at stake:

"The proposals of the group of 13 economists appear to be a European variant of Clintonomics: far removed from the neoliberalism and monetarism of Reagan and Thatcher, and a large step back toward the good old recipes of Keynes. [...] In any case, it appears to be a 180-degree turn with regard to the ultra-liberal economic interpretations that have long been recognized at the level of policy."⁵⁷

"[A]mong the leaders of Europe, there are many who think that the recovery of competitive power will suffice to get the continent out of trouble and avert the social misery. Others, however, including Commission President Jacques Delors, think that more is needed – for example, a large-scale recovery program."⁶⁰

The fragments presented above – the first from an analytical piece by political/economic journalist Georges Timmerman and the other from the aforementioned editorial – refer to an ideological turnabout "of 180 degrees." To begin with, they expose the dominance of "neoliberal" or "ultra-liberal economic interpretations" (i.e., exposure). For example, an unshakable faith in "competitive power" would be prominent "among the leaders of Europe." They subsequently identify a counter-movement resembling the recent "Clintonomics" in the United States of America and "the good old recipes of Keynes." The newly published European reports, with their plea for a policy of recovery, is presented as an expression of this¹. *De Morgen* thus politicizes the socio-economic policy as an ideological issue, on which no consensus exists. In that way, it stimulates a political-ideological debate on the matter. Its own preference is clearly for Keynesian alternatives (see above: promoting the European recommendations).

When it comes to the first union actions, the newspapers defend a different standpoint in a different manner. Both *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* want the government to go through with a thorough "restructuring" and, therefore, they undermine the union protest. Some examples in the following paragraphs show that

¹ In this sense, it is interesting to note that *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* do not report on this matter.

they draw on rational or moral argumentation to exclude the union standpoint from the socio-economic debate (i.e., depoliticization). In contrast, *De Morgen* fully supports the union protest. The newspaper presents it as a matter of defending particular interests, and even as part of a larger political-ideological debate (i.e., politicization).

To start, *De Standaard* exhibits little understanding of/sympathy for the strike action throughout the entire line. Most importantly, it does not see the utility of the union interference. In their editorials, political journalists Guy Tegenbos and VUM editor-in-chief Lou De Clerck wonder out loud: “Does this strike really have a point?”⁴ and “Why did the union leaders consider the strike necessary?”¹⁴ Both editorialists see but one explanation: the unions simply want to see their own agenda realized (e.g., “in order to be able to say later that some decisions were reached only as a result of the union pressure”^{14 (4)}). In this manner, the union protest is delegitimized as a matter of self-interest, and thus immoral. Moreover, the employers’ organizations would also be guilty of this crime. Both social partners would have proven “incapable of breaking down the walls and reaching across their opposing interests and demands to search for solutions that are aimed at the general interest”^{4 (14)}. The interference of these and other interest groups is written off as counter-productive:

“It all comes across as so incomprehensible. Behind closed doors, everyone agrees that, without a comprehensive approach to the problems, [...] Belgium [will] become not only the sick, but especially the crippled member of Europe.”⁴

“There is a real danger that the pursuit of all balances for which marches and strikes are organized is keeping the government from the true objectives and preventing it from realizing them sufficiently. If this occurs, it will once again have to come knocking – with the same catastrophic scenarios.”¹⁴

The two editorialists create a dramatic context in order to persuade the reader of the disadvantage – and even the danger – of interest groups that protest, like the unions. They speak of “catastrophic scenarios” or use the metaphor of “crippled member,” if the government would be impeded in “a comprehensive approach to the problems” and its “true objectives.” In this way, both editorialists once again delegitimize the protest actions as immoral (i.e., irresponsible), and they appear to do this in order to strengthen their earlier pleas for “necessary coalition measures” (see above). In other

words, in order to strengthen the image of consensus on the socio-economic policy, union (or other) opposition is presented as illegitimate. That *De Standaard* does not support the union protest is also evident in its descriptions of the first strike day. Both the editorials and the news articles create an image of a failed day of action. First, the two large unions are portrayed as struggling with “internal division”⁴. For example, journalist Johan Rasking begins his long article with the message that “a great many sectoral ABVV representatives and company delegates implied that they are not very happy with ‘the lack of support and cooperation’ from their ACV colleagues”². Second, the scale of the strike is minimized: “*the strike movement hardly affected any small and medium-sized enterprises (SME); [...] This puts the success of the strike in perspective, if we consider that 97% of all companies are a SME*”^{6 (5, 7, 13)}. In other words, “[t]he union protest remained quiet”⁵, and “[t]he country was not in an uproar”¹⁴. Third, the impact of the strike is underrated. For example, the day after the strike, the front-page headline reads ‘Union protest fails to derail the government; conclave on the crisis is drawing to a close’^{5 (14)}. A cartoon is also published, depicting the government approaching the unions’ attack (illustrated as a battering ram) on the policy plan (illustrated as a castle gate) full of confidence (with the quotation, “don’t worry, the gate is firmly anchored in the pillars”)¹⁵. Even in the financial section, the union protest is presented as a waste of time: “*[t]he Belgian financial markets were only momentarily impressed by the strike action of the collective union front. Near the end of the day, the hope that the coalition would soon complete its crisis plan was playing a more prominent role*”¹². Briefly stated, *De Standaard* positions the unions as internally divided, isolated, and insignificant for the coalition talks. In this manner, it creates a context in which it would be illogical to support the unions’ interference and demands.

At first, *Het Laatste Nieuws* does appear to be responsive to the union protest. In his editorial entitled ‘Pressure from the street,’ journalist Walter Vaerewijck (reporter on social affairs) writes the following with regard to the additional taxes that had been predicted (see above):

“New contributions will be asked; that is certain. [...] The unions are also well aware of this and, despite [Prime Minister] Dehaene’s statements, they know that pressure from the street does indeed have an influence on various

*partners in the coalition. The unions have a legitimate fear that working compatriots will be cut to the quick several times. The coalition is, after all, looking for new income [...].*³⁰

Vaerewijck literally legitimizes the criticism of the unions (i.e., “[t]he unions have a legitimate fear”), at least with regard to additional taxes (i.e., “new contributions,” “new income”)⁽²⁸⁾. The unions’ decision to carry out the action, however, receives less support. In the editorial entitled ‘Global improvisation’²⁶ by Hugo Scheldeman, the choice is delegitimized as follows:

*“It [i.e., the strike] could be enough to reduce the ‘global plan’ to political improvisation – half-hearted and one-sided concession measures. If it stays like this, the real bill will be presented later [...].”*²⁶

Like the editorialists of *De Standaard*, Scheldeman presents the union opposition as counter-productive for the policy (e.g., “improvisation,” “half-hearted” measures). He sketches a bleak image of the future (i.e., “the real bill will be presented later”), if the unions continue their protest. He also proceeds from the assumption that certain measures are inevitable – including cuts (see above) – and he therefore delegitimizes the union action as damaging. *Het Laatste Nieuws* does not only lament the potential damage to the political policy, but also and even more, the direct damage to economic life. This is done in the news articles that describe the course of the strike^{23, 28}. These articles do not minimize the action (as in *De Standaard*), but rather stress the trouble for companies and non-strikers. For example, the headlines include ‘Strike could impede start of working week’²³ and ‘Strikes throughout the country; Actions primarily in regional transport and in many private companies; civil servants had the day off’²⁸. In this regard, the newspaper draws attention toward an alternative – “ingenious” – action in a chemical company: instead of striking, the employees have remained on the job. Instead of their salaries, however, they have received strike pay²⁸. The newspaper points out the advantages: “Given that no employer contributions are paid [...] this method causes the state to experience losses. [...] If it is copied, the public will henceforth suffer less from strike actions”²⁸. It would kill two birds with one stone: less inconvenience due to the strike (i.e., “suffer less”) and less income for the government (i.e., “the state [to] experience losses”). With the exception of this specific example, however, *Het Laatste Nieuws* does not support the strike.

This makes *De Morgen* the only newspaper to stand firmly behind the union protest. For example, the unions are often assigned framing power^(38, 40, 44). They make full use of this framing power in order to (i) express fundamental criticism of the government plans, (ii) to describe union interference as necessary for the political policy, and (iii) to portray the first strike day as a major success. For example, they claim that “the employers, the liberal professions and the financial groups only ‘gain’ at the expense of the working population”^{42 (38)}, “[t]he political system does not [have] the option: with or without the pressure groups”^{40 (38)}, and “the non-strikers [could be] counted on the fingers of one hand”^{47 (44, 46)}. These three matters are also reflected in *De Morgen’s* own discourse. First, the newspaper shares the criticism that the coalition’s plans will primarily affect workers and benefit recipients:

“The turmoil of the collective union front is understandable. Several austerity operations have already been conducted since the coalition took power. [...] In response to the wishes of industries and businesses, wages and social achievements have simply been called into question – without anything in return. One might take to the streets for less.”⁵³

The fragment – taken from the editorial entitled ‘Balancing acts in Hertoginnedal’⁵³ – states that the current government is primarily advocating the interests of employers, which results in an extensive austerity policy. This would make the policy unbalanced with respect to employees and their interests (i.e., “without anything in return”), justifying the strike (e.g., “take to the streets for less”). The union protest is thus legitimated as a matter of socio-political interest advocacy (i.e., political legitimization), in order to shift – not immediately reject – the government plans (i.e., something “in return”). Moreover, it appears to be part of a larger political-ideological struggle:

“Everyone is now aware of the fact that, for years, the business world has been making increasingly strong attempts throughout the EC in order to turn back the social clock [...]. [Some employers] are primarily interested in increasing the competitiveness of their companies, purely to improve their profit prospects, and not to defend employment, let alone expand it. This is an extremely short-term vision that proceeds exclusively from the interest of the company. [...] It is thus good for the world of employees to speak up for a change.”³⁷

“The climate is clearly unfavorable for the unions. The various ministers – including some socialists – keep on insisting on the lack of competitiveness that is plaguing Belgian companies. [...]. The reduction of wage costs is then easily suggested. It is considered only logical that there is no guarantee of employment being offered in exchange. Those who would dare to ask that question are immediately branded as irresponsible – why not subversive as well?”⁵³

In these two fragments – the first from the editorial entitled ‘Impetus for a new vision’³⁷ and the second from ‘Balancing acts in Hertoginnedal’⁵³ – the writers complain about how socio-economic policy is dominated by the demand for more competitiveness (e.g., “throughout the EC,” “various ministers – including some socialists”). Economic competition and lower wage costs, with a view to higher profits, would be regarded as necessary or inevitable (e.g., “keep on insisting”). The editorials in *De Morgen* undermine this naturalization in several ways. First, they identify the demand for more competitiveness as a partisan vision, driven by the interests of employers (e.g., “the business world has been making [...] attempts,” “purely to improve their profit prospects”). They also identify another vision: that of “employee circles” who are striving for more employment and social protection. In this way, the newspaper presents socio-economic policy as a political struggle/consideration between a variety of worldviews and interests (i.e., politicization). In addition, it exposes the discursive mechanism with which a political debate on the various viewpoints is impeded (i.e., exposure). It identifies a “climate” in which criticism [on the part of employees] is completely delegitimized as “irresponsible” and even “subversive,” while the focus on greater competition is naturalized as “only logical.” To counter this, the editorial fragments call the viewpoints of employers into question. The plea for competition is criticized as ill-considered (i.e., “an extremely short-term vision”), selfish (i.e., “proceeds exclusively from the interest of the company”), and anti-social (i.e., “to turn back the social clock”). Finally, initiatives that open up debate, such as the strikes, are applauded^K (i.e., “good [...] to speak up for a change” and “dare to ask that question”). Second, *De Morgen* presents the union opposition not as

^K Only the weekly column by Paul Goossens – the former chief editor of *De Morgen* – expresses strong criticism of the strikes⁶². Goossens warns that the union actions pose a realistic danger for the socialist coalition parties, which have traditionally defended the interests of employees. According to Goossens, the unions should support the coalition and its plans, simply to prevent the liberals from coming to power in Belgium for a long time.

disadvantageous to political decision-making (see *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*), but as an essential element of the process. For example, the newspaper responds to the statement of Prime Minister Dehaene that “the country is governed by the coalition, and not by the street,” with the comment that “the first selective national strike of the ABVV, the ACV, and the ACLVB yesterday [has] made it clear that the government will have to give due consideration to this same ‘street.’”⁴⁵ In this regard, the newspaper publishes a remarkable article on the possible violation of the right to strike (i.e., ‘Domo Strikers: “We were intimidated”’⁵⁰). Third, *De Morgen* describes the first strike day as highly successful. It publishes a series of short articles that position the strikers as a large, high-impact group (e.g., headlines such as ‘Antwerp: Dress rehearsal’⁴⁷ and ‘Strike could be felt everywhere’⁵¹).

In summary: In this first critical discourse moment (CDM 1), we see how the newspapers (re)present different standpoints. With regard to the socio-economic government policy, the editorials in *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* issue a clear argument against any new form of taxes. *De Standaard* also opposes additional government expenditures and refers to the importance of competitive companies. In contrast, *De Morgen* appears to be trying to safeguard the interests of employees. It devotes all of its reporting to defending an alternative policy of government intervention and taxes on capital (i.e., Keynesian economics). In this regard, it pays considerable attention to the European recommendations and assigns framing power to the economists involved. With regard to the union actions against the government policy, *De Standaard* proves an absolute opponent, arguing that union interference would undermine the desired policy (of budget cuts). *Het Laatste Nieuws* is of the same opinion. Nevertheless – given the newspaper’s own aversion to taxes – it does identify (at least in part) with the strikers’ criticism. *De Morgen* is the only newspaper to stand firmly behind the union protest and to assign extensive framing power to the strikers. The newspaper supports the strikes based on its preference for an alternative policy and employee interests.

The newspapers draw on a variety of discursive strategies to defend their standpoints. *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* always use depoliticizing strategies, such that it seems as if there is only one option, and any (ideological) debate is

discouraged. For example, they reject a policy involving additional taxes by delegitimizing it as irrational or immoral, and/or by naturalizing a budget-cutting policy as inevitable. In this regard, the union protest (against cuts) is written off as illegitimate (e.g., counter-productive, harmful, or insignificant). In contrast, *De Morgen* repeatedly uses politicizing or cultivating strategies that stimulate political awareness and/or debate. In light of the European reports and the union protest, it presents socio-economic policy as a political contest between various visions and interests. It always identifies the dominant approach (i.e., the neoliberal demand for more economic competitiveness, to the advantage of employers) and points out an alternative (i.e., Keynesian government intervention, to the advantage of employees). It also demonstrates how this alternative vision is currently excluded from the political debate (i.e., exposure), and/or legitimizes it as rational and worthy of consideration (i.e., cultivation and political legitimization).

CDM 2: The Global Plan and the union dilemma (18-20 November)

On Wednesday, 17 November 1993, the Dehaene government states that it has reached an agreement and submits its 'Global Plan' to parliament. From that time on, more and more details on the planned government measures are being released. These measures create discussion, not only in parliament (i.e., between different parties) but also on the street (i.e., between the different unions). There is disagreement between the two large unions (i.e., the Christian ACV and the socialist ABVV), as well as within the ABVV (i.e., the leaders and the base) concerning the acceptability of the government measures and the continuation of the strikes. On Friday, 19 November 1993, the decision is made: the union actions will proceed.

This analysis focuses on the reporting that occurred between the announcement of the Global Plan and the union decision. For a three-day period, every newspaper report concerning the government measures and the union judgment is selected, yielding a total of 126 newspaper reports. *De Standaard* publishes 50 of them, including 39 news

articles (6 appearing on the front page). Most of the news articles are written by the newspaper's own editorial staff, especially economic journalist Johan Rasking and political journalist Luc Neuckermans. There also appear 3 analytical pieces (by 'LS', Christophe Boval, and economic journalist Stefaan Michielsens), along with 3 editorials (2 by editor-in-chief Dirk Achten, and 1 by political journalist Guy Tegenbos), 2 editorial opinion pieces (both by 'chief economics' Jan Bohets), and 3 cartoons (2 by Nagel and 1 by Ludo). After the announcement of the plan, *Het Laatste Nieuws* publishes 33 newspaper reports. They include 28 news articles, with 4 appearing on the front page. Aside from the fact that only a minority of the articles contain bylines, reporter 'social affairs' Walter Vaerewijck and 'B.C.' appear to be the leading journalists. The former also writes 3 editorials. Finally, there are 2 cartoons (by an unknown cartoonist). *De Morgen* publishes 43 newspaper reports. They include 37 news articles, 4 of which appear on the front page. Most of the articles are written by the newspaper's own editorial staff, with political journalists Frans De Smet, Bart Brinckman, and Karl van den Broeck as leading writers. Furthermore, there appears 1 analytical piece (by Paul Verbraeken), along with 3 editorials (not signed by any specific journalist), 1 external opinion piece (a fragment of an interview with Tony Vandeputte of the employers' organization VBO), and 1 cartoon/comic article on the crisis (by Zak and others).

	<i>De Standaard</i>	<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	<i>De Morgen</i>
TOTAL: 126	50	33	43
News articles	39	28	37
→ Front page	→ 6	→ 4	→ 4
Analytical pieces	3	-	1
Editorials	3	3	3
Editorial opinion pieces	2	-	-
Interviews	-	-	-
External opinion pieces	-	-	1
Columns	-	-	-
Cartoons	3	2	1

Once again, I establish that the newspapers focus on different aspects (i.e., objects)^L. For example, the coalition agreement dominates the reporting in *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*. The former is particularly ‘thorough’ in this regard, writing about nearly all of the measures and the parliamentary debates. The latter focusses on one measure in particular: child benefits (see below). Both of these newspapers report only sporadically – and thus to a relatively limited extent – on (possible) new union actions. Of course, *De Morgen* also reports on the announcement and details of the Global Plan. It nevertheless seems most interested in the dilemma of the unions (in which “the true debate on the global crisis plan takes [...] place”¹⁷⁶).

The newspapers evaluate the Global Plan in different ways. The previous analysis (CDM 1) showed that *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* adopt the same standpoint with regard to socio-economic policies: the government should tax less (and cut more). Also in this analysis (see below), the two newspapers share this viewpoint. Nevertheless, they evaluate the government program differently. While *De Standaard* is moderately enthusiastic about the “crisis plan” and naturalizes the general direction of the plan, *Het Laatste Nieuws* delegitimizes specific measures of the “global tax plan” as immoral or irrational. *De Morgen* positions the plan as unfair with regard to a specific socio-political group: employees. Its argument is not ideological, but largely of an accounting and technical character. From this angle, it notes that it could and should be done differently (i.e., cultivation).

As stated above, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* share the same expectations of the plan (i.e., no additional taxes, more cuts – see CDM 1). Once the Global Plan is introduced, however, they arrive at a different evaluation. This is reflected in their choice of actors. *De Standaard* devotes substantial space to the (semi-)positive discourse of two types of actors: it assigns framing power to coalition actors (particularly premier Dehaene) and to financial-economic actors (e.g., self-employed people and economic experts). First, a few coalition members are assigned extensive framing power to defend the Global Plan as the best possible outcome for the revival

^L A general observation: the newspapers pay little or only very sporadic attention to the European project, which nevertheless imposes the standard of 3% for the budget deficit, thereby steering national policy in a specific direction.

of the economy. The coalition members in question are the Christian-democratic minister of labor⁹⁹, the socialist vice-premier^{101 (98)}, and especially Premier Dehaene^{63, 74, 78}. The latter receives high praise from *De Standaard*, including in a half-page portrait⁹¹. The first minister is depicted as extremely gifted (e.g., “Dehaene always thinks two steps ahead of everyone else”^{91 (82)}) and extremely committed (e.g., “a fighter”^{82 (91, 96)}). Second, extensive framing power is also assigned to financial-economic actors, ranging from the stock market^{65, 86, 112} and employers’ organizations^{94, 98} to economic experts⁸⁹. They are moderately positive. On the one hand, they are pleased by the fact that a policy plan exists (e.g., “[t]he pure fact that the government has reached an agreement was enough to make the markets optimistic”^{65 (94, 89)}). On the other hand, they do not think that the government measures go far enough (e.g., “smells like a political compromise”^{89, 94, 98}). Whereas *De Standaard* primarily includes the voices of positive actors, *Het Laatste Nieuws* pays the most attention to the criticism of the liberal opposition party VLD^{121, 142, 133}. The liberal party complains that the government measures are excessively focused on taxes instead of on cuts (e.g., “[t]he plan will mean paying, paying, and yet again paying”¹²¹, “the government administration remains untouched”¹⁴²). This would make it disadvantageous for citizens and companies (e.g., “a bold attack on the citizen”¹²¹, it promotes “further capital flight”¹⁴²).

The two newspapers also differ in their own discourse on the Global Plan. The standpoint and argumentation of *De Standaard* resemble that of the financial-economic actors. On the one hand, the newspaper recognizes that the plan is a first (and necessary) step in the right direction. On the other hand, it laments the fact that the governments has not gone further (i.e., still too few cuts and too many taxes). Let us start with its positive notes on the Global Plan. The day after the plan was announced, the newspaper publishes a large front-page article with the headline ‘Crisis plan eases economic difficulties’⁶³ and the following lead:

*“It [i.e., the crisis plan] intervenes in the three major difficulties facing the Belgian economy – unemployment, wage costs for companies, and the costs of social security – with a package of measures that includes a few timid steps toward reform.”*⁶³

The coalition agreement is presented as a good thing for the Belgian economy. In addition to lowering taxes for companies, it would also reduce the expenditures of the state. It concerns “timid reforms.” With regard to the (modest) government cuts, political journalist Guy Tegenbos writes an article with the headline ‘Straitjacket for health insurance provides opportunity for principles’⁷². In this article, Tegenbos takes satisfaction in noting that “[t]he government [outlines] an entire series of principles – some of which are quite good and that have been waiting to be realized for years” – in order to tame the “galloping expenditures” of the public health system. He legitimizes the brake on public health expenses as a logical and long-expected change. It thus seems a rational decision. The journalist ‘LS’ defends the government cuts as humane, and thus morally acceptable (e.g., “a quick scan of the cuts shows that a family with a modest income is relatively well spared”⁸⁰). The government would have heeded “[t]he call for effort-sharing among all population groups” and, for example, “has imposed a restraint on self-employed people as well”⁹⁰. Therefore, Tegenbos opens his editorial entitled ‘The people are grumbling’ with the statement that “Belgians today feel more strongly attacked than is actually the case”⁹⁵. Furthermore, with regard to the tax reductions, *De Standaard* is full of praise about the fact that wage costs are being addressed. The taxes that Belgian companies must pay on wages are said to be a lot higher than they are in other countries. In this respect, the newspaper repeatedly refers to the “handicap” of the Belgian economy^{63, 71, 83}. It therefore welcomes the government plans, for example in the news article ‘Wage moderation provides more breathing room for companies’ by economic journalist Johan Rasking^{71 (82, 83, 63)}:

“Earlier this year, the social partners admitted it unanimously through the Central Economic Council: the competitive power of Belgian companies is in very poor condition. The Dehaene government adopted this statement: the wage costs in our country are much higher than they are in our most important trade partners (our neighboring countries), we must do something about this handicap.”⁷¹

This is one of the examples in which the high wage costs are presented as a “handicap,” and thus as troublesome (see also: “no healthy company [would] now even think of hiring anyone”⁸²). The necessity of intervention appears beyond question (“unanimous,” see also: “least controversial”⁸²). The coalition decision is thus legitimized as a welcome relief (e.g., headline ‘[...] more breathing room,’ see also:

“justifiable interventions, to relax and relieve”⁸²). These aspects, and the fact that the government has actually arrived at a “crisis plan” lead *De Standaard* to label the coalition agreement as inevitable. For example, political journalist Guy Tegenbos and editor-in-chief Dirk Achten write the following in their respective editorials:

*“In essence, only the current crisis plan, possibly with amendments, offers a way out.”*⁹⁵

*“One could tinker with implementation decrees and temper the harshness here and there for purposes of appeasement and reconciliation. Nevertheless, Dehaene and his team simply cannot bury the crisis plan as such. That road is closed, completely.”*¹⁰⁸

This does not mean, however, that *De Standaard* has no criticism of the plan. The newspaper denounces that the plan does not include even more cuts and that the tax freeze is not universal. In other words, the government should have gone even further. Regarding the cuts in government expenditures, the newspaper writes the following:

*“[T]he weakest point is still social security. Of course, some things are going to change. Nevertheless, there will be no general expenditure standards for the entire system [...]. This plan [only] includes seeds for reform. We must keep waiting for the actual reform. [...] [I]t has not become the ultimate plan that will keep us safe for many years to come. Those reforms are yet to come. That’s a shame.”*⁸²

In this fragment – from the editorial by chief editor Dirk Achten – the government measures are delegitimized as merely short-term solutions^(108, 109). Achten advocates a general ceiling on expenditures in social security. Only then would there be true progress. Far-reaching government cuts are thus naturalized as necessary, as in the opinion piece of ‘chief economics’ Jan Bohets:

*“The reduction of the government deficit is an absolute necessity. It is equally essential to limit future growth in social-security expenditures to a pace that will be sustainable until far into the next century.”*⁸³

According to Bohets, it is an “absolute necessity” to bring government finances in order and, in this regard, it is “essential” to limit its expenditures (in the area of social security)^(68, 108). There would be no alternative to preserve the social-security system. Elsewhere, Bohets refers to such curbing of government deficits and expenditures as

“political virtue”¹⁰⁹. Second, *De Standaard* criticizes the additional taxes of the Global Plan. Although the government may have reduced the taxes for companies, it has raised those on capital in the form of a wealth tax. In the ‘Economy & Finance’ section, economic journalist Stefaan Michielsens warns of the consequences in an analytical piece entitled ‘Tax pressure makes it tough for the real estate market’⁹⁷. He outlines a disastrous image of a real estate market that is already in trouble and for which the situation will now only get worse (e.g., the government plan “threatens to exacerbate the malaise on the real estate market;” it “will certainly not benefit the market for existing housing, which is already in the doldrums”⁹⁷). Editor-in-chief Dirk Achten and ‘chief economics’ Jan Bohets, however, put the additional tax into perspective (e.g., “no fiscal bloodbath”⁸², “should be seen in the right light”⁸³, “absolutely not unfortunate”⁸³). They nevertheless warn of a capital flight: “people who have saved some money are getting the impression that they should invest it as far as possible out of sight of tax authorities”⁸², “[i]t is possible to create a psychological climate for a new capital flight”⁸³.

Like *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws* also has a problem with the additional taxes contained in the Global Plan. For that reason, it completely delegitimizes the coalition agreement. The newspaper does not focus on the negative consequences for big capital, but on those that will affect individual citizens/consumers. For example, the day after the plan was announced, reporter ‘social affairs’ Walter Vaerewijck writes the editorial entitled ‘The user pays’¹¹⁴:

“What Tax Prime Minister Dehaene announced yesterday is not a social plan, but a glorified budget operation that is only to the short-term benefit of the treasury. Nevertheless, it was only this past June that the CVP conference decided to issue a tax break. The chairman at that time is now the budget minister, and his fellow party member is the prime minister. [...] Although [they] did not raise the direct taxes this time, all Belgians will be left with much less hard-earned income to spend.”¹¹⁴

Vaerewijck delegitimizes the measures of “Tax Prime Minister Dehaene” and his ministers in two ways. First, they are presented as short-sighted measures that will not lead to any long-term progress. They would constitute nothing more than “a glorified budget operation,” and thus not a rational policy. Second, it seems as if the coalition has made a selfish choice: the government has sought to save itself (“the treasury”) at

the expense of the citizens (“the hard-earned income [of] all Belgians”), thereby breaking a promise (the “decided [...] tax break”). The government is thus presented as acting primarily out of self-interest. Furthermore, in its general news reporting, *Het Laatste Nieuws* emphasizes the many new taxes, excise duties, and levies. For example, the following headlines appear in the wake of the coalition agreement: ‘Gregorius Plan: High costs for vague jobs’¹¹³, ‘Higher excise duties and wealth tax’¹¹⁶, ‘Adjustments in levies affect small savers’¹²⁸, ‘Apartment at the seaside more expensive’¹³⁵, and ‘The Global Plan: the bill’¹⁴⁰. Most of the articles do not identify any journalist, and their style is quite dry and technical: numbers and tables are used to display the tax increases. The only remarkable language usage appears in the articles signed by Vaerewijck: the Global Plan – as the coalition itself refers to it – is being renamed “the Global Tax Plan”^{124, 125, 138}. In addition, *Het Laatste Nieuws* publishes a remarkable number of articles on social security and, more specifically, the measure that links child benefits to income^(115, 126, 131). Although this could be seen as a budget-cutting measure (i.e., lower payments for higher wages), the newspaper firmly presents it as an additional tax. For example, the leading journalist ‘B.C.’ uses remarkable tax jargon (e.g., “the National Office of Child Benefits for Employees will have to play the role of taxman,” as it will have to “calculate the ‘child assessments’ next year”¹²⁶). He further criticizes the government decision as illogical (e.g., “what about this system is still relevant?”^{126 (123)}) and unfair (e.g., “child benefits are a right that has little to do with the parents’ income”¹²⁶, see also: ‘Child benefits as a status symbol’¹³¹). This dual criticism resounds even more loudly in the editorial entitled ‘Child tax’¹³⁹. In this editorial, Walter Vaerewijck states that the government “is creating a disastrous amount of bureaucracy” and expresses doubts concerning “whether the fiscalization of child benefits is even legally permissible”¹³⁹. Moreover, the measure would “create poor versus rich children” and even “rip apart old wounds for many parents.” Specifically, he refers to “married people who have had to give up all hope of offspring for medical reasons, as well as parents who have lost a child in the endless series of weekend accidents”¹³⁹. Vaerewijck thus delegitimizes the government measure in strong rational and, primarily, moral terms. It should be clear that the citizen/consumer will reject the “Global Tax Plan.” Moreover, as the newspaper warns in its first editorial, the plan will indirectly affect companies as well:

“The continuing increase of tax pressure nevertheless has major repercussions for our economy, as it discourages consumption. Production only makes sense only if there is consumption as well.”¹¹⁴

In other words, with its tax measures, the Dehaene government would affect both the demand side (i.e., “consumption”) and the supply side (i.e., “production”) of the economy. In this light, *Het Laatste Nieuws* completely rejects the government plan.

Finally, *De Morgen* also expresses negative views concerning the Global Plan. Instead of presenting its criticism in terms of individual citizens/consumers (and producers) versus the government, however, it presents it in terms of socio-political groups: employees/workers versus employers/capital (i.e., political delegitimization). This is expressed most strongly in the editorial entitled ‘Massive job creation is the only way for this crisis plan to make sense’¹⁵⁹:

“[Premier Dehaene is attempting] to defend his crisis plan as a balanced compromise between conflicting interests. No one could have failed to notice, however, that for 1994, employees will be expected to make sacrifices amounting to 100 billion, as compared to sacrifices of only about 29 billion on the part of capital and real-estate holders: a ratio of at least three to one. Speaking of balance.”¹⁵⁹

In the editorial, the government policy is explicitly presented as a consideration of “conflicting interests,” with employees on one side and capital holders on the other. According to *De Morgen*, the interests of both socio-political groups should ideally be served equally, such that there is a “balanced compromise.” In reality, however, the employees lose, as demonstrated using an accounting discourse and a few clear figures. “Speaking of balance,” therefore sounds cynical. A similar message is contained in the analytical piece entitled ‘Once again, a global plan for part of the population’¹⁸⁸ by Paul Verbraeken. In his analysis, Verbraeken repeats and reinforces the editorial’s accounting argument (i.e., “[u]pon closer examination, this still appears to be an optimistic estimate”¹⁸⁸). His explanation is technical: because the policy is shaped at two levels, it is expected to limit government expenditures while reinforcing economic competitive power. This is because the expenditure policy is subject to European regulations (i.e., “the target standard of 3%”¹⁸⁸), but the economic policy is not:

“[Lacking] a white paper on economic growth and employment at the European level, the various governments are taking a variety of measures in a diffuse manner, aiming to optimize the position of their ‘own’ industry within the international competitive arena. The Belgian government is doing this as well, with a global plan that allocates room for improving the competitive power of companies.”¹⁸⁸

In this, Verbraeken seems to argue for overall European rules when it comes to (socio-)economic policy^M. The previously mentioned editorial also calls for more European interference: “if the EC [i.e., European Community] does not quickly unveil a highly ambitious plan for new jobs, this crisis plan will indeed be reduced to a budgetary operation of limited duration”¹⁵⁹. The editorial and analytical piece in *De Morgen* thus present the government policy as unfair to a specific socio-political group, the employees (i.e., political delegitimization), but make clear that there is room for improvement and, thus, for debate. It concerns, however, a technical debate (i.e., cultivation). The news articles in *De Morgen* are also characterized by an accounting and technical discourse. In these articles, the link between the government policy and the interests of employees is made only sporadically (i.e., political positioning)^N. One example is when political journalist Frans De Smet writes about the measures aimed at encouraging part-time work:

“Part-time work will be encouraged through measures including the ‘actualization’ of labor legislation – ‘while safeguarding the social protection of employees.’ Although this promise is repeated elsewhere as well, a reading of the government texts reveals that flexibility actually does assume an easing of social protection.”¹⁴⁹

In this fragment, De Smet uncovers the actual meanings of the abstract terms “actualization” and “flexibility” (i.e., exposure). He concretizes them as decreased social protection for employees (implying that the measure will have a negative effect)⁽¹⁴⁷⁾. It is further interesting to note how the journalist Georges Timmerman

^M Verbraeken nevertheless cautions that “[a]nyone who has been able to review the preliminary draft of the [European] white paper at least knows that the capital holders will not be the ones to come under fire in the financing of the ‘economic recovery’ and employment.”¹⁸⁸

^N Most of the articles are highly descriptive. Many lack explicit judgements of the government policy, either from social actors (whose reactions are bundled^(160, 161, 162)) or from the newspaper itself.

delegitimizes the wealth tax – which is nevertheless a socialist victory. He laments that the major players remain unaffected (i.e., “adventurous investors who take risks [are being] rewarded”¹⁵³) and only the small fish are targeted (i.e., “slumlords, unimaginative savers and lazy investors are screwed”¹⁵³). Timmerman thus accuses the administration [of] “steering savers in the direction of risk capital”¹⁵³. *De Morgen* only praises the government when it exceptionally takes measures that actually do benefit employees. For example, Timmerman labels the decision to link reductions in wage-cost for employers to more business audits by unions as “a small step forward [...] in the direction of greater economic democracy”¹⁵⁰. So, in its news reporting as well, *De Morgen* positions the policy measures relative to a specific socio-political group: employees. Depending on the dis/advantages that employees will experience, the newspaper de/legitimizes the government policy (mostly in moral terms, not so much in political terms).

After the announcement of the Global Plan, the union front appears to separate into two camps: those who initially accept the Global Plan and would like to suspend the actions (i.e., the leaders of the socialist union ABVV), and those who reject the plan and continue the strikes (i.e., the Christian union and the base of the ABVV). The ABVV establishment ultimately joins those in favor of the strikes. All of the newspapers are nevertheless opposed to additional union actions, as I will illustrate below. To this end, they adopt a similar discourse, in which they position the unions extensively and explicitly as being (internally) divided, and they delegitimize the persistent strikes as irrational. In all of the newspapers, there thus appears to be only one right option (i.e., to end the actions) and the debate is being limited (i.e., depoliticization). Nevertheless, their similar discourse holds different objectives: the implementation of the current budget-cutting policy (i.e., *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*) versus the survival of an alternative investment policy (i.e., *De Morgen*).

To start, all of the newspapers report extensively on the cracks in the union front. A great deal is written about the clash between the ACV and the ABVV^(75, 124, 161), as well as about the opposition between the leaders and the members within the ABVV.^(88, 125, 168) *De Standaard* presents the current disagreement between the ACV and the ABVV as part of a larger, structural problem within the unions. For example,

journalist Johan Rasking adds the following explanation (i.e., note from the editor) to his article:

“For the second time in only a few weeks, the two large unions are adopting totally different standpoints. When the ABVV walked away from the negotiations on a social pact, the ACV wanted to continue talking. Only the socialist union protested. Later, the collective [union] front recovered and, last Monday, the ACV and the ABVV jointly organized the first protest strike. Now the ABVV is calling off further actions, while the ACV keeps going.”⁷⁵

Rasking’s note is intended to demonstrate that the discord between the two unions is a recurring problem⁽⁹⁵⁾. He outlines an image of an on-again/off-again relationship, thereby implicitly delegitimizing the union front as unprofessional. This would undermine the strike actions, as he states in other articles: “To complete the confusion, the two large unions are still quibbling about the support that they will provide to each other’s actions”¹⁰⁰, “the strike plan for next week [looks] somewhat confusing [...]”⁸⁷. This image of confusion is also adopted by *Het Laatste Nieuws*. For example: “[e]ven the spokesmen for the various unions admitted on Thursday that the situation is currently very confused”¹²⁴, and “[o]n Monday, the most chaotic strike action that has ever been organized will begin in our country”^{138 (139, 141)}. While *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* write on the impasse and chaos within/throughout the entire union landscape, *De Morgen* writes primarily from the perspective of the socialist union ABVV. This is immediately evident in the many quotations of ABVV members and leaders^(168, 169, 180) - O. Furthermore, it continually positions the leaders of the ABVV as subordinate, both to its own members^(168, 176) and to the Christian union ACV^(170, 177). For example, the ABVV establishment is being “shoved kicking and screaming in the direction of strikes by its followers”¹⁸¹, and “the ABVV has no choice but to follow the ACV, given its minority position [in Flanders]”¹⁷⁹. The ABVV establishment is finding itself in a strategically perilous position:

“The establishment had no choice but to follow its own members [...]. The atmosphere was tense. All of the leaders were expected to acknowledge that they had under-estimated the strength of their members. The national office called on the members of the ABVV to follow the ACV. Informally, it was

^o In *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*, the unions hardly get any framing power to explain their standpoints.

acknowledged that this would not repair the damage. Indeed, the hesitation on Wednesday evening had caused a great deal of union credit to be lost in favor of the Christian union.”¹⁷⁹

According to *De Morgen*, the ABVV establishment is now condemned to crisis management on two levels. First, it needs to repair the broken relationship with its followers (e.g., “the deafening grassroots protest”¹⁶⁷, “the snowball of dissatisfaction with the mild attitude of ‘Brussels’”¹⁶⁸). Second, it needs to profile itself appropriately in relation to its competitor/colleague ACV (e.g., “everyone is referring to the ‘tactical blunder’ of the national ABVV leaders in clearing the way for the ACV”¹⁶⁸, “the ACV is now watching the desperation of the ABVV from the sidelines”¹⁶⁶). Like the other newspapers, *De Morgen* argues that this internal competition between the unions does not benefit the action: “[o]ne is deathly afraid of a strike competition, with each union separately seeking to profile itself as the most militant”¹⁷⁷, with “a snowball effect on strikes”^{170 (177)}. In this regard, the actions of the Christian union ACV are delegitimized. For example, the editorial entitled ‘Dangerous union rivalry’ presents the ACV as irrational (i.e., it has adopted a “peculiar objective,” and it is “actually [thrashing] at random”^{183 (177)}) and immoral (i.e., it is striking “to save face and, primarily, to position itself as better than the ABVV”^{183 (170)}).

In fact, all three of the newspapers delegitimize any continuation of the strike actions whatsoever – whether by the ACV or by the ABVV. All three present such a continuation as poorly considered and counter-productive, and thus as irrational:

“The tragedy for the strikers is also that a rejection of the crisis plan, or the fall of the government, result in nothing but catastrophe for them: the further decline of competitive power and employment, a financial collapse in social security, months-long political and social (and thus also economic and monetary) instability, and perhaps even a liberal government. Essentially, only the current crisis plan, possibly with amendments, offers a way out.”^{95 (101, 104)}

“Should the harsh and ongoing strikes cause the Dehaene government to stumble, it could lead to early elections. According to the polls, it would be impossible to form a new coalition without the VLD. This party would also have to implement heavy restructuring measures. The SP and the ABVV realize that this would result in the destruction of many of their own sacred cows. The union is currently cornered.”¹²⁹

“The political balances are so subtle that the slightest change could cause the entire plan to fall apart. This would result in a political crisis, elections, and a new majority, along with a plan that would be even more distasteful for the unions. The unions are thus facing an exceptionally difficult, if not tragic choice.”^{168 (177, 169)}

The choice to strike or not to strike is reduced to a strategic choice in all three of the editorial fragments – from *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, and *De Morgen*, respectively. At times, it appears to be choice between cholera and the plague (i.e., “catastrophe,” “caught,” “tragic choice”). Nevertheless, all of the newspapers emphasize that further strikes, which could lead to the rejection of the Global Plan and/or the fall of the Dehaene government, is the least desirable option. They link the continuation of the actions to a virtually inevitable electoral victory for the liberal party, whose program is completely contrary to the union interests (“would result in the destruction of many of their own sacred cows,” “a plan that would be even more distasteful for the unions”). In all of the newspapers, therefore, calling off the union actions appears to be the only logical choice. Nevertheless, the newspapers have a different agenda. For example, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* associate a halt to the strikes with the necessity and inevitability of the current (budget-cutting) policy. In contrast, *De Morgen* opposes the strikes in order to preserve the possibility of an alternative (social-democratic investment) policy. For example, in the editorial entitled ‘Dangerous union rivalry,’ the newspaper cautions against an attitude that “would place the union organization itself in jeopardy” and that would leave “the Right and the employers [...] discretely laughing up their sleeves”¹⁸³.

In summary: In this second critical discourse moment (CDM 2), we see how the newspapers express different standpoints, despite holding the same socio-economic preferences. Or, they express a similar standpoint, despite holding opposing preferences. *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* both prefer a budget-cutting policy to a tax policy. However, while *Het Laatste Nieuws* adopts this preference as an absolute condition, it is of relative importance to *De Standaard*. This is quite clear in their reporting on the Global Plan. *Het Laatste Nieuws* completely rejects the coalition agreement due to the additional taxes, as they would have highly negative consequences for consumers/citizens and producers/companies. Although *De*

Standaard is also critical of the additional costs (and insufficient cuts), it does support the government plan. The mere fact that the government has reached an agreement at all and that they are taking the first baby steps in the right direction (i.e., lower costs for companies and lower government expenditures) is of primary importance to *De Standaard*. In addition, *De Morgen* largely rejects the Global Plan due to the many advantages for employers and capital (e.g., greater competitive power) in contrast to the many sacrifices on the part of employees (e.g., less public support). It hopes that a European policy will be able to even out this situation. It nevertheless sees no benefit from further union actions. Following the announcement of the Global Plan, it appears that all of the newspapers would like for the strikes to be called off. Their arguments, however, serve different goals. While *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* want to prevent the retraction of the current budget-cutting measures, *De Morgen* wants to guarantee the survival of an alternative investment (i.e., anti-austerity) policy.

Although the newspapers initially adopt different discursive strategies to defend their standpoints, their eventual discourse on the union actions is remarkably similar. Using a depoliticizing discourse, they all present the suspension of the strike actions as the only logical choice, and they discourage further (political) debate. First, the unions are positioned as strongly divided within and among themselves, which forms a negative context for actions. In addition, any continuation of the actions is explicitly delegitimized as irrational. Also with regards to the government policy, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* impede any political-ideological debate. *De Standaard* naturalizes the “crisis plan” as a crucial and necessary first step in the direction of (hopefully even more) government cuts and tax reductions. *Het Laatste Nieuws*, in its turn, delegitimizes the Global Plan as completely unacceptable due to new irrational and immoral taxes. Lastly, *De Morgen* presents and criticizes the government plan in light of a specific socio-political group: employees (i.e., political positioning and political delegitimization). The delegitimization itself builds on accounting and technical arguments, used to state that things could and should be done differently (i.e., cultivation). In the general news reporting, the government measures are being de/legitimized depending on the dis/advantages that employees will experience, although mostly in moral terms (i.e., depoliticization).

Conclusion

Newspapers: Ideological cultures

The reporting on (the union protest against) the Global Plan shows that *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* share the same ideological culture. Both of these newspapers use a depoliticizing discourse to defend neoliberal interpretations. They are opposed to new taxes (and persistent government expenditures). Both call for less government interference, to the benefit of companies and their competitive power. It seems like their argument seems to exist independently of political choices: fewer taxes and more cuts are presented as rational and moral, or even as necessary and inevitable. It appears as if there is only one right option. Actors or actions that stand in the way of such a policy of fewer taxes and/or more cuts are de-legitimized (e.g., the strikes). In this way, both of these newspapers impede any (political) debate on socio-economic policy. It is nevertheless interesting to note the difference in the amount of importance that the two newspapers attach to the absence of cuts (i.e., hierarchy of values). While *De Standaard* adopts a pragmatic stance in this regard (i.e., attaching more importance to the existence of a coalition agreement), *Het Laatste Nieuws* sees it as being of fundamental importance (therefore expressing sympathy for certain union criticisms and rejecting the Global Plan).

De Morgen writes on (the protest against) the Global Plan from the perspective of a different ideological culture: the newspaper defends social-democratic measures. To this end, it uses both a depoliticizing and – quite often – politicizing discourse. With a view to the interests of employees, it calls for more government intervention and more contributions from big capital and companies. In other words, it defends the existence (or preservation) of a strong and active government. It initially attempts to open an ideological debate on the desired socio-economic policy. It identifies the dominant approach as a specific ideological vision (i.e., neoliberalism and employer interests) and reveals the discourse that ensures the dominance of this vision (i.e., exposure). Moreover, it introduces/legitimizes an alternative vision (i.e., Keynesianism and employee interests), such that ideological discussion seems relevant again. After the

government announcement, *De Morgen* delegitimizes both the Global plan and the union actions. While the technical criticism on the government plan is linked to the socio-political interests of the employees (i.e., politicization), the suspension of the strikes is merely presented as a logical and strategic choice (i.e., depoliticization). In the general news coverage, the government plan is also evaluated in moral terms (i.e., depoliticization).

Newspaper landscape: Ideological debate

From this analysis of *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen*, we can conclude that the newspaper debate on the Global Plan (and the union protest against it) is mainly diverse, but not very pluralistic. It is relatively diverse, in the sense that *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen* represent different standpoints (of different actors). Following the announcement of the Global Plan, however, all three of these newspapers do support a suspension of the union actions. It is not very pluralistic, as the newspapers do little or nothing to stimulate (ideological) debate on socio-economic policy. The standpoints are often isolated as right/wrong or inevitable decisions. Only *De Morgen* initially attempts to open a political-ideological debate on the desirable socio-economic policy (although it discontinues these efforts after the announcement of the Global Plan, mostly regarding the union actions). Briefly stated, at the time of the Global Plan, the newspaper landscape often presents opposing standpoints, although it seldom encourages any broad (political-ideological) debate.

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CASE 4: DE-PILLARIZED NEWSPAPERS AND THE GENERATION PACT (2005)

Context

Newspaper landscape

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the Flemish newspaper landscape was transforming more and more into an oligopoly due to new mergers and takeovers (Biltreyst & Van Gompel, 1999: 75; De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 275). The remaining newspaper groups had become large multimedia companies, and newspapers had become – slightly profitable – commercial products (Biltreyst & Van Gompel, 1999: 75; De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 90; van der Burg, 2017: 63). From 1995 onwards, there was no longer any newspaper in the hands of a party or union, and only 4% of all journalists were still members of any political party (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 98, 221). Structurally, the Flemish newspaper landscape had been de-pillarized and turned into a concentrated newspaper market. This kind of political emancipation would also show in the newspaper coverage: newspapers would devote equal attention to various parties, in addition to publishing critical reports on their former political “friends” (Van Aelst, 2006: 109; De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 251).

According to some, the de-pillarization of the daily press has been a positive development, as “journalists [can] now adopt a more independent stance with regard to political parties, thus allowing them to fulfil their role as political watchdogs more than had been the case in the past” (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 98). Nevertheless, critical remarks are made as well. One line of criticism – which has not yet been much investigated – argues that, due to “the weakened ideological profile” and “the commercialization of the daily newspaper press and the ‘dictatorship’ of the circulation figures,” newspapers are increasingly seeking “the greatest common denominator in their reporting, [...] discouraging controversy and political division” (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 368). In other words, the newspapers are criticized for

“having an insufficiently pronounced profile and looking too much alike” (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2010: 369). The “open polarization” that had long characterized the press would no longer occur (Distelmans, 1999: 477). A second line of criticism holds that commercial pressure has led to the tabloidization of the reporting in both popular and quality newspapers. Hard political news would have been replaced by political trivialities, sensation, or the private lives of politicians (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 251). A third line of criticism holds that the de-pillarization and commercialization of the press has made journalists even more dependent on political sources, thereby impeding the coveted watchdog function. For example, “‘scoops’ were given to ‘befriended’ journalists and were ‘refused’ to critical journalists” (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 366). Moreover, De Bens and Raeymaeckers (2010: 98) remark that, nowadays, “it might be easier to attack politicians than to attack the financial-economic sector with which the daily newspaper sector is closely intertwined.”

For a long time, *De Standaard* was regarded as the only generalist quality newspaper in Flanders (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 310). In the late 1990s, however, it faced competition from the rapidly growing *De Morgen* (see below) (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 310, 317). *De Standaard* replied with refreshing its content, so its readership would grow again. More specifically, the editor-in-chief Peter Vandermeersch sought “to couple an increase in the quality, reliability, and independence with a broader accessibility of the newspaper” (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 354-355). This renewal operation entailed the elimination of the AVV/VVK logo, which had been a symbol of the newspaper’s Flemish and Christian profile^{A, B}. Before that, the editorial had already been relocated from the front page to the opinion pages (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 359). *De Standaard* thus profiled itself even more strongly as an impartial, neutral newspaper. This was consistent with a societal trend of “de-idolization,” but it also had practical utility, as the ever-expanding and increasingly diverse editorial staff had made it more difficult to monitor the newspaper’s

^A “All for Flanders, Flanders for Christ” (abbreviated in Dutch to AVV/VVK) was a well-known slogan of the Flemish movement. The logo had graced the front page of *De Standaard* for more than 80 years (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2005: 313).

^B The other two pillars of the newspaper’s basic ideology – the defense of “parliamentary democracy” and “free economics” – remained unchanged (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 354).

ideological line (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 355). Furthermore, the newspaper opted for more popular reporting or so-called 'infotainment' (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 310, 251). This occurred to such an extent that some journalists (mostly older) questioned whether the newsroom was still autonomous and independent of the marketing department: "If one builds an editorial structure that is constantly confronted with market principles, sales figures, and promotional resources, one will surely get a different type of newspaper (De Ridder in Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005: 363).

Beginning in 1996, *Het Laatste Nieuws* clearly distanced itself from the liberal party – whose politicians were treated much more harshly^c – although it did adhere to a liberal mindset (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 350-351). Furthermore, also during the 1990s, the newspaper developed increasingly into "a true boulevard newspaper" in terms of both content and form (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 151, 351). Sensational and human-interest news became its trademark, leading to further increases in sales.

From 1994 onwards, both the editors and the owner of *De Morgen* changed direction. First, Director Christian Van Thillo of De Persgroep set aside his "emotional aversion to *De Morgen*" and approached the newspaper as a business challenge (Vanspauwen, 2002: 248, 251). Second, Yves Desmet became the chief editor of the newspaper. For years, Desmet had worked with great dedication as a reporter of *De Morgen* under the lead of Paul Goossens. In 1991, however, he made the transition to the commercially successful weekly *Humo* (Vanspauwen, 2002: 210). Upon his return to the *De Morgen* in 1994, he no longer saw the newspaper as a purely societal project, but equally as a commercial product (Vanspauwen, 2002: 319, 267-268, 257). Van Thillo and Desmet could agree with each other on this point. In terms of ideas, Desmet had "shifted from a militant left-wing position in a leftist-liberal direction, which entailed the acceptance of the free market" (Vanspauwen, 2002: 250). This was also the direction in which he wished to have *De Morgen* develop. He sought to remove the "socialist" label for good and to create a quality newspaper for the "first de-pillarized

^c However, according to a study by Van Aelst (2006: 64) – investigating pillarization in relation to political parties and politicians –, *Het Laatste Nieuws* might have seen "largely impartial" in its general news coverage, its editorials still reflected a "clear color" In 1999. "In comparison to *De Standaard*," the newspaper could "be regarded as still more partial" (Van Aelst, 2006: 67). A few years later, in 2003, there were "remarkably few indications [left] that media reporting was shaped by party-based logics" (Van Aelst, 2006: 131).

generation in Flanders” (Vanspauwen, 2002: 267, 262). Readers would be allowed to form their own opinions based on independent and critical – though generally progressive – information and analysis^D. There needed to be a stricter separation between facts and commentary, the editorial was being relocated to the opinion page, and the opinion page needed to represent a more diverse array of opinions (Vanspauwen, 2002: 258, 270). In addition, *De Morgen* would profile itself as pro-democratic (“instead of pro-left and anti-right”), humanistic (i.e., “humans as individuals are being regarded as more important than the major ideologies”) and involved (“in major societal issues, like human rights and environmental pollution”) (Vanspauwen, 2002: 258-259). The changes at *De Morgen* were not in vain. In the span of four years, sales doubled, and *De Morgen* had entered competition with the quality newspaper *De Standaard* (Vanspauwen, 2002: 277, 311). The changes nevertheless brought criticism as well: some perceived that the newspaper was engaging in “emo-journalism” and tabloid journalism (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 373; Vanspauwen, 2002: 272). Yves Desmet was the general editor-in-chief of *De Morgen* from 1994 to 2000. Between 2000 and 2005, he served as the political editor-in-chief (with Rudy Collier as general editor-in-chief). In March 2005, Desmet returned to the position of general editor-in-chief.

Socio-economic politics

Around the turn of the millennium, Belgium was governed by so-called ‘purple’ coalitions, headed by the liberal Guy Verhofstadt (1999-2007). These exceptional coalitions between neoliberals (blue) and social democrats (red) rested upon the shared ideal of the ‘active welfare state.’ The active welfare state was expected to replace the traditional welfare state. The traditional model of the welfare state was directed toward providing a safety net for every social risk, but it came under financial pressure (Brepoels, 2015: 544). The only solution appeared to be large-scale activation: more employment would generate more income (i.e., social-security contributions)

^D In practice, this meant that *De Morgen* adopted a milder attitude with regard to Christian-democratic and liberal parties, and a more critical stance towards the socialist party and the labor unions (Vanspauwen, 2002: 258, 263, 267).

and lower expenditures (i.e., unemployment payments). This accounting logic was adopted both by liberals and social democrats. The liberals embraced the cost reductions for employers and the flexibilization of the labor market, while the socialists hoped to reduce the welfare gap between active and inactive individuals (Brepoels, 2015: 545; Meynen, 2005: 408; Reynebeau, 2009: 286). Moreover, calls for keeping more people employed for longer were also emerging from Europe (Meynen, 2005: 404; De Preter, 2016: 226, 295). In practice, the government was expected to ensure jobs for citizens, and citizens were obligated to take these job opportunities or they would be punished with sanctions (De Preter, 2016: 307).

The active welfare state was the – relatively late – Belgian version of the Third Way (Brepoels, 2015: 512; Deneckere, De Paepe & De Wever, 2012: 212; De Preter, 2016: 306-307). This “middle ground” between neoliberalism (i.e., free market) and socialism/Keynesian economics (i.e., social policy) linked social rights explicitly to obligations (Deneckere, De Paepe & De Wever, 2012: 212; De Preter, 2016: 306). Individuals were assigned greater responsibility, the market was granted greater freedom, and the role of the government was reduced. “In this sense, from a socialist perspective, the active welfare state can be seen as an ideological step backwards” (Brepoels, 2015: 545)^E.

This led to clashes with the unions (or at least with their hard core). The purple story of activation, flexibilization, and cost reductions did not sound very appealing to them (Brepoels, 2015: 607). Moreover, the government had attempted to prioritize political consultation above social consultation (Brepoels, 2015: 578). Although it was primarily the liberals who wanted a more autonomous government, the socialist coalition partner was also distancing itself from the union. For social democrats – but also Christian democrats – an end had come to the “ideological monopoly” of the labor

^E Social democracy had been under pressure ever since the economic crisis of the late 1970s (De Preter, 2016: 305, 309). Keynesian recipes no longer seemed to be working, and social democrats were increasingly finding inspiration in neoliberalism. The neoliberal influence became even greater after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This is because there did not seem to be any alternative to the (social) market economy (Brepoels, 2015: 506; De Preter, 2016: 222, 309). In Belgium, the definitive reconciliation with the market ideal – with social and ecological corrections – came only around the turn of the millennium, in the form of the purple coalitions and their ‘Third Way’ (Brepoels, 2015: 512; Reynebeau, 2009: 286). In this process, the neoliberal tendency was also expected to become somewhat more moderate, for example in its criticism of the social security (Brepoels, 2015: 543; Deneckere, De Paepe & De Wever, 2012: 212; Meynen, 2005: 417).

movement, which “overly dwelled on the past or on entitlements” (Brepoels, 2015: 598, 607). The purple coalition experienced less resistance from the employers’ organizations, as they shared the core demand to raise the retirement age (Meynen, 2005: 404).

Employment was undoubtedly the most prominent socio-economic challenge facing ‘Purple.’ In contrast, with regard to budgetary matters, the coalitions of socialists and liberals enjoyed a “rose-colored economic situation [that] invited optimism” (Reynebeau, 2009: 300). It was a period in which “the markets made the economy go mad and the wildest dreams seemed possible” (Brepoels, 2015: 541; see also Meynen, 2005: 414; De Preter, 2016: 298). This revival of the world economy was good news for the finances of the Belgian government. In the favorable economic climate, it became easier to balance its budget and realize further decreases in the government debt (Deneckere, De Paepe & De Wever, 2012: 212)^F.

More specifically, Belgium had two (full-fledged) Verhofstadt governments. The first Verhofstadt government (1999-2003) consisted of liberals, social democrats, and greens. Initially, the purple-green coalition had few budgetary concerns: the economic growth figures looked promising, and social-security expenditures seemed to be guaranteed (Brepoels, 2015: 546). The government could thus focus their efforts on planned wage-cost reductions, within the framework of the active welfare state. At the end of the administrative period, however, the activation level had not increased, and unemployment was even higher (Brepoels, 2015: 547). This was because the economic cycle had declined around 2001, and the wage-cost reductions had not been used by companies to create more jobs (Brepoels, 2015: 547; Reynebeau, 2009: 301).

Verhofstadt II (2003-2007) consisted only of liberals and social democrats. One of its most important objectives was to have people working longer. With the end-of-career arrangement, it aimed to suppress the costs of the aging population (Brepoels, 2015: 556; Meynen, 2005: 406-407). The government nevertheless encountered strong resistance from the unions. They “wanted to see the debate

^F Since the European Maastricht Treaty (see 1993 case) – and the subsequent agreements – Belgium had been required to conform to strict budget standards (Brepoels, 2015: 593, 623; De Preter, 2016: 228).

expanded to include the entire career, youth unemployment, the indexing of benefit payments, and the funding of the social-security system” (Brepoels, 2015: 556). This led to a first union demonstration on 21 December 2004. Following a 24-hour strike on 7 October 2005, which had been organized by the socialist union ABVV, the Verhofstadt government partially met a number of demands. Although the purple administration did adhere to the planned increase in age for early retirement benefits, it promised to provide supplemental funding for social security through taxes on capital and to index benefit payments (557). The so-called ‘Generation Pact’ was submitted to parliament as part of the government policy statement on 11 October 2005. However, the expected support from the unions did not emerge; only the employers showed their support. On 18 October, all three unions formally rejected the government plans (558). Their followers “could not overlook the fact that the age for early retirement benefits had been increased to 60 years, and they did not understand that older employees had to work longer, while youth unemployment was reaching a peak” (Brepoels, 2015: 558). The unions decided to hold a collective strike day with demonstrations on 28 October 2005. On that day, 100,000 union militants took to the streets, “but, after the demonstration, no one knew what to do next” (Brepoels, 2015: 559). No one seemed to want the coalition to fall, and the unions received an invitation to “refine” the proposal (559). Parliament ultimately approved the Generation Pact on December, 2005, and the union resistance dissipated during the Christmas break.

After eight years, the purple coalition was able to present historically low unemployment rates and a rapidly growing economy (Brepoels, 2015: 560). Nevertheless, 70% of the new jobs were either subsidized or in the government services, or people had to be satisfied with temporary employment and second-rate jobs (Brepoels, 2015: 559, 560; De Preter, 2016: 348). Moreover, the gap between rich and poor was increasing, and access to social security and living wage was linked to increasingly strict requirements (560, 625). The active welfare state proved to be primarily a right-wing, neoliberal scheme: “[w]hat the government was ‘lavishing’ of benefit payments or living wages had to be earned through individual effort” (Brepoels, 2015: 625; see also Deneckere, De Paepe & De Wever, 2012: 212).

With the elections of 2007, voters brought an end to the purple policy – for a variety of reasons⁶. In the years that followed, Belgium was led by classic tripartite governments consisting of Christian-democratic, social democratic and neoliberal parties (2007-2014). Although all of the government agreements sought to achieve a balance between cuts and new income, in practice, they always came down to (neoliberal) austerity programs “in order to prevent something worse” (Brepoels, 2015: 569). Belgium was not spared from the worldwide financial-economic crisis, and the national debt increased again (Deneckere, De Paepe & De Wever, 2012: 212). As a member of the Eurozone, it was subject to severe (neoliberal) austerity programs with little room for political or social consultation (Brepoels, 2015: 593, 623; De Preter, 2016: 237).

Analysis

CDM 1: The policy statement of Verhofstadt II (11-13 October)

On 11 October 2005, the Verhofstadt II government presents its policy statement for 2006 to parliament. It announces with pride that it has achieved (i) an agreement concerning end-of-career arrangements, (ii) a balanced budget, and (iii) the refinancing of social security. Its definite plan concerning early retirement benefits (i.e., the “Generation Pact”) has already been sent to the social partners the day before. It includes raising the age for the early retirement benefit from 58 years to 60 years. Before reaching a final judgement, the unions would like to submit the plan to their followers. The socialist union ABVV, which has carried out a strike against the government a few days before, is expected to reject the proposal. The response of the

⁶ For example, the French-speaking socialist party was plagued by a series of scandals, while the Flemish socialist party was accused of having become too much of an “establishment party” (Brepoels, 2015: 562). For this reason, the latter opted for the opposition. Within the liberal party VLD, an increasing number of votes emerged for a more right-wing policy (Meynen, 2007: 417). Verhofstadt only shortly led an interim government after the elections.

Christian union ACV, which has negotiated with the government, remains anyone's guess. The employers' organizations seem generally satisfied.

For a three-day period, every newspaper report concerning the policy statement of Verhofstadt II is selected, yielding a total of 101 newspaper reports. 51 relevant reports appear in *De Standaard*. They include 24 news articles, with only 2 appearing on the front page. The news articles are written by a variety of journalists, including Wouter Verschelden, Bart Dobbelaere, Johan Rasking, Steven Samyn, and Isabel Albers. In addition, 11 analytical pieces are published, primarily by political journalists Christof Vanschoubroek and Isabel Albers and economic journalist Luc Coppens. Every day, the newspaper also publishes one editorial on the issue, each written by a different journalist: Guy Tegenbos, Karin De Ruyter, and deputy editor-in-chief Bart Sturtewagen, respectively. Separate from these editorials, political journalist Steven Samyn writes a short opinion piece concerning the policy statement. Additionally, 4 opinion pieces are published (by politicians or academics), as well as 3 interviews (with politicians). Finally, *De Standaard* also publishes 2 columns on the issue (by the journalists Marc Reynebeau and Karel Michiels), and 3 cartoons (by the in-house cartoonist Zaza). *Het Laatste Nieuws* publishes 22 newspaper reports on the Verhofstadt II policy statement. They include 15 news articles (with 2 appearing on the front page), most written by political journalists Jan Segers and Steven Somers and 'chief politics'/commentator Luc Van der Kelen. The newspaper also publishes 3 editorials, all by Luc Van der Kelen. Finally, I count 1 interview (with a communication expert) and 3 cartoons (by Erik Meynen). *De Morgen* publishes 28 relevant newspaper reports. Most are news articles (20 in all, with 3 appearing on the front page). Most are written by Tine Peeters, Gorik Van Holen, Tom Cochez, Fabian Lefevere, and/or Liesbeth Van Impe. The latter two also write 1 or 2 analytical pieces (for a total of 4). Each daily editorial on the policy statement has a different author: 'chief politics' Bart Eeckhout, political journalist Liesbeth Van Impe, and economic journalist Emmanuel Vanbrussel, respectively. Finally, columnist Hugo Camps also devotes 1 piece to the issue.

	<i>De Standaard</i>	<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	<i>De Morgen</i>
TOTAL: 101	51	22	28
News articles	24	15	20
→ Front page	→ 2	→ 2	→ 3
Analytical pieces	11	-	4
Editorials	3	3	3
Editorial opinion pieces	1	-	-
Interviews	3	1	-
External opinion pieces	4	-	-
Columns	2	-	1
Cartoons	3	3	-

With regard to the policy statement of Verhofstadt II, the newspapers report primarily on three matters (i.e., objects)^H: the policy statement as a whole^(20, 52, 84) and, more specifically, the end-of-career measures^(17, 55, 92) and the planned budget measures^(23, 61, 99). These three issues inspire the majority of the newspaper reporting. In light of the first object – i.e., the policy statement as a whole – the alternative policy plan of the opposition party CD&V is discussed as well^(31, 65, 90). In follow-up to the end-of-career measures, the newspapers devote considerable attention to the attitude of the unions as well^(16, 52, 94). With regard to social actors, the newspapers assign framing power primarily to the government and the majority parties (in the form of quotations or paraphrases of the policy text)^(19, 67, 83). This is particularly the case in *De Standaard*^(22, 28, 47). Only a few times, the Christian-democratic opposition party CD&V^(31, 65, 90) and the Christian union ACV^(43, 100) get the opportunity to defend their standpoints. The input of other opposition parties or social partners is limited. Finally, *De Morgen* and *De Standaard* also publish statements from several experts, most of whom express criticism of the policy. In *De Morgen*, this is consistently done in the actual news

^H In passing, journalists also write about healthcare funding (primarily in *De Morgen*^{75, 79, 80}), retirement savings (only in *Het Laatste Nieuws*^{53, 59, 64}), the communal component of the budget measures^(9, 57), Premier Verhofstadt's communication style^(19, 70, 97), and the course of the last coalition negotiations^(5, 78). Although these issues have been analyzed, they are not addressed in this chapter. The reporting is too sporadic or concerns party-political strategy instead of political policy.

articles^(87, 89, 93). In *De Standaard*, it is also done in opinion pieces in the back of the newspaper^(17, 50, 51).

Let us start with the reporting on the policy agreement as a whole. Although all of the newspapers support the coalition agreement, they do not demonstrate a great deal of enthusiasm for it. They simply present it as the only feasible option. With this depoliticizing message, the newspapers impede any broad debate on socio-economic policy.

With regard to the policy statement, the newspaper reporting is often limited to a dry description of the broad outlines or to the communication style of Premier Verhofstadt. Nonetheless, between the lines, all of the newspapers do express a (moderately) positive view on the government agreement⁽⁵²⁾. For example, it is presented as a balanced agreement. “The seventh policy statement of the Verhofstadt government has something for each coalition partner,” writes *De Standaard* in the introduction to a front-page article¹. An editorial in *Het Laatste Nieuws* emphasizes that “the Baby Thatcher of the 1980s [i.e., Premier Verhofstadt] can now support an agreement with the head of a union”⁶⁰. Both newspapers thus position the agreement as a balanced, neutral compromise between right-wing political parties and left-wing parties/organizations¹. The agreement is further presented as reflecting a sense of realism. Both *De Morgen* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* follow the government in its claim that it has acted in a “well-considered” and “down-to-earth” manner^(59, 97). In an editorial in *De Morgen*, journalist Liesbeth Van Impe portrays Verhofstadt II as ‘Older, sadder, wiser’⁸². This is because, with regard to the previous (employment) ambitions of the government, “it all seems a bit more realistic”⁸². In *Het Laatste Nieuws*, journalist Steven Somers also refers to Verhofstadt’s “new common sense” and his “new realism”⁶⁷. The policy statement is thus legitimized as rational¹. Above all else, the newspapers support the policy agreement with the argument that there is simply no

¹ During the government statement in parliament, however, *De Standaard* appears less convinced of the compromise between the majority parties (i.e., the “coalition statement that was only sparingly interrupted with applause”¹⁹) than are *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen* (i.e., “heavy applause in the majority seats”⁶⁷, “the praise of the majority for its government”⁹⁸).

^J The newspapers are nevertheless aware that it is also a communication strategy^(70, 95, 19).

(attractive) alternative. The editorialists of *De Morgen* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* phrase it respectively as follows:

“According to experts, it should have amounted to more, and they are most probably right. Other countries are making more cuts and realizing more savings in order to address the challenges and to preserve our social model. Nevertheless, the amount of bleeding is not the criterion that determines winning or losing. Time must tell whether this will be enough.”⁸²

“Has the government done enough? No, it most certainly has not. Many new agreements will need to be reached. [...] At some point, however, a government must opt for maximum feasibility.”⁶⁰

In the first editorial fragment, Van Impe (*De Morgen*) opens with the concern that the policy agreement is limited (i.e., criticism from experts, comparison to other countries). She nevertheless adds that more extreme measures (i.e., more severe cuts) are morally undesirable (i.e., social bloodbath). This would make the policy agreement of Verhofstadt II the only acceptable option, at least for the time being. In the second fragment, Van der Kelen (*Het Laatste Nieuws*) also acknowledges that, in theory, the socio-economic measures could have gone further, but that, in practice, the administration had opted for “maximum feasibility.” In other words, both newspapers naturalize the policy agreement by stating that, in the current context, no alternative policy would be either possible or desirable. This also applies to the counter-proposal of the opposition party CD&V. Both *De Morgen* and *De Standaard* dismiss their socio-economic note as too little, too late. CD&V would have deliberately announced its proposal late (i.e., only after the negotiations were complete)^{6, 33, 82, 90}, and would have failed to outline a fundamentally different policy:

“It is an illusion that anyone, after two years of reports and committees, could have re-invented the wheel in this debate. The opposition party CD&V has unwittingly provided the best possible proof. [...] [A]s it turns out: if we were to position a coalition partner alongside CD&V to smooth out the roughest edges, we would come very close to what Verhofstadt had to say yesterday.”⁸²

“The high level of ‘prosperity through courage’ in Tuesday’s federal policy statement shrinks the substantive distance between the purple coalition and the Christian-democratic opposition. Premier Verhofstadt says that strength, persistence, and perseverance are needed. [...] In this regard, CD&V considers

that his actions are too slow and not very decisive. There is consensus with regard to the basic information.”⁴⁸

Both editorial fragments – written by Liesbeth Van Impe (*De Morgen*) and Bart Sturtewagen (*De Standaard*) – position the policy plans of the government and of the opposition party along the same line. They argue that there is very little actual difference and that CD&V has thus not provided any alternative viewpoints. Moreover, according to Van Impe, it is an “illusion” to think that any ground-breaking ideas could still emerge.

Within the policy statement, specific attention is paid to end-of-career measures, which are bundled in the so-called ‘Generation Pact’. A particularly large amount is written about the raising of the early retirement age. All of the newspapers stand firmly behind the coalition decision to keep people longer in employment. They defend it as a rational and moral measure, with little room for opposition. The union opposition is thus dismissed in all of the newspapers as divisive and irrational. With such a depoliticizing discourse, the newspapers impede any (political) debate on early retirement.

Relief is expressed in both *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*. *De Standaard* introduces the age increase directly as a “long-awaited” change³. According to *Het Laatste Nieuws*, the Generation Pact provides for a fundamental shift: “[t]he most important aspect for the future is that the many decades of anti-labor trends have now been definitively turned”⁶⁰. The raising of the age for early retirement is also supported by experts, as indicated in *De Standaard* and *De Morgen*. Both newspapers write a long article on a report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)^{11, 77}. This “research organization of the developed countries”¹¹ receives extensive framing power to demonstrate the disadvantages of early retirement. Its problem definition is naturalized (i.e., “down-to-earth observation” that “goes without saying”⁷⁷), as is its conclusion (i.e., “keeping [people] longer in employment is a necessity, as we will all be living longer”¹¹). Both newspapers use the OECD report to legitimize the restriction of early retirement benefits as rational^k. In

^k They nevertheless have different ways of referring back to the current government proposal. On the one hand, *De Morgen* journalist Fabian Lefevere emphasizes the positive comparison

addition, the higher age for early retirement is said to reduce the number of unfair situations. Indeed, at present, there would be a “perverse mechanism [...] in which many will have a higher pension if they retire at 58 than if they keep working until 65”¹¹ (13, 77). In this regard, the higher age for early retirement benefits is being legitimized as a moral measure. Finally, all of the newspapers minimize the heaviness of the government decision^(14, 92, 100). In *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen*, it is mentioned several times that there are “obviously many exceptions”^{53 (55, 60)} after “the unions [...] got a number of concessions”^{74 (100, 86, 4)}. Therefore, the newspapers demonstrate very little sympathy for (potential) union actions against the Generation Pact. All three undermine the criticism by positioning the unions as highly divided. For example: ‘Union war rages’^{29 (43)}, “[t]he two large unions interpret the ‘Generation Pact’ in very different ways”⁶⁸, or “[i]n the meantime, the accusations between the ACV and the ABVV continue to mount”^{94 (100, 86)}. *De Standaard* further presents the socialist union ABVV – which has already started strikes against the government – as rigid and dogmatic, and thus irrational. For example: “for the ABVV, the symbol of early retirement at the age of 60 will surely suffice for a rejection [of the Generation Pact]”⁴ (29, 51). In contrast, the establishment of the Christian union ACV – which has negotiated with the government – is presented as rational: “the ACV, with its more moderate attitude [...] the rational approach of the ACV establishment”^{29 (4)}.

A second policy aspect to receive a particularly large amount of attention is the government budget. It is also the only aspect about which the newspapers express significantly different meanings. *De Standaard*, on the one hand, takes a negative view of two new measures (i.e., the choice for fiscal amnesty, and an additional tax for investment funds). *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen*, on the other hand, express remarkably little criticism, respectively supporting the new tax and the fiscal amnesty. All of the newspapers nevertheless defend their standpoints purely in terms of (ir)rationality and (im)morality, once again impeding any political-ideological debate.

between the OECD report and the Generation Pact (“[t]he recommendations of the OECD are not much different from what the government is trying to do”⁷⁷). On the other hand, *De Standaard* journalist Guy Tegenbos focuses on the deficiencies of the Belgian policy (e.g., “Belgium can take many lessons from it with regard to its end-of-career debate”¹¹), without explicitly mentioning the Generation Pact.

First, *De Standaard* frequently expresses criticism of the announced budget balance. The newspaper reduces it to part of an “obligatory victory bulletin”⁴⁵ and accuses the competent minister (i.e., Vande Lanotte) of laziness. More specifically, the minister is said to rely on one-off windfalls to save the budget, like the sale of public buildings^{8, 27, 35}. Political journalist Isabel Albers resolutely rejects such measures:

“Making up for the lack of structural interventions with ‘one shots,’ is a continuation of the ‘one-off tricks’ with which Vande Lanotte has saved the budget in recent years. [...] Instead of being structural, these interventions are one-off efforts that disguise the true budget situation.”⁸

Albers undermines Vande Lanotte’s budget policy as short-term thinking (i.e., not structural) and deliberately deceptive (i.e., “disguising;” see also: “Vande Lanotte’s magic act”^{8 (35)}). In other words, Albers dismisses it as irrational and immoral. Elsewhere, Vande Lanotte is accused of simply passing the buck with regard to the budget problems. For example: “[t]he next federal government will have an extremely difficult time with the budget”²¹ and “[t]he next team will have to deal with the ‘hot stuff’”^{46 (50)}. *De Standaard* concludes that “the celebratory mood with regard to the balanced budget should be placed in perspective”^{46 (8)}. In contrast, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen* ask hardly any questions with regard to the budget balance. On the contrary, *Het Laatste Nieuws* praises the effort: “Minister Johan Vande Lanotte has once again gotten the job done: the national budget is balanced again in 2006”⁶¹.

Second, *De Standaard* makes an extensive argument against two financial measures. Indeed, the government is hoping to realize additional government income by (i) offering a favorable filing arrangement for former tax evaders and (ii) levying a new tax on some popular investment products⁽³⁷⁾. These measures are heavily criticized by *De Standaard*. Most of all, the newspaper creates the image of an unfair policy: it would penalize “obedient taxpayers” and “small savers” while sparing “fiscal sinners”^{34 (10, 32, 47)}. For example, this is expressed in the analytical piece entitled ‘From red to red-faced’²⁶ by political journalist Isabel Albers, as well as in the editorial entitled ‘Justice in purple’³⁴ by economic journalist Karin De Ruyter:

“Nevertheless, the obedient citizens who have properly paid their taxes look on with perplexity as those who have parked their money abroad are not punished for it. The signal is even more devastating if we consider another

remarkable decision: open-end invest companies and other popular investment products are being taxed more heavily. [...] [I]t is highly probable that this will eventually be passed along to 'the people' – including those with little capital."²⁶

*"What is the conclusion of it all? Fraudsters are kindly and politely requested to go ahead and pay the taxes they owe. If they do not, they will be left alone. Because they know that these people will not pay, they also seek to pass another tax increase for those who cannot escape it anyway. The naughty ones get presents, and the nice ones get the rod. This is the purple interpretation of justice."*³⁴

These two fragments draw a sharp contrast between right (e.g., "obedient citizens") and wrong (e.g., "naughty"), and between powerless (e.g., "cannot escape it anyway") and favored (e.g., "kindly and politely requested"). Proceeding from this opposition, the two journalists dismiss the government policy as unfair. They criticize that the second group is not penalized, while the first group would have to pay the bill. "The purple interpretation of justice," is the cynical conclusion of De Ruyter's editorial. In this way, the two budget measures are delegitimized as immoral. Furthermore, *De Standaard* accuses the administration of breaking promises. The favorable tax declaration arrangement – the so-called "tax amnesty"⁽³⁷⁾ – had already been implemented by the administration a year ago, "with emphasis on the fact that it would be a one-off measure"³⁷. The government's re-use of the measure is delegitimized as deceptive (e.g., "fine promises again retracted and forgotten"^{34 (38)}). Once again, the undertone is cynical, for example: "'second time's the charm', must have been what the government was thinking"^{37 (36)}, an "encore"¹⁰. Finally, *De Standaard* dismisses the measures as poorly considered, and thus irrational. According to the newspaper, the tax amnesty might be unconstitutional¹⁰ and it would probably not generate many returns^{34, 37}, while the tax on investment funds would be underdeveloped³⁹.

In *Het Laatste Nieuws*, the two fiscal measures are also discussed, but not presented as a problem^(54, 63, 73). To the contrary, 'chief politics' Luc Van der Kelen explicitly defends the new tax on popular investment funds – which had originally been a demand of the socialist coalition party – in his editorials^{60, 69}. For example, this occurs in the piece entitled 'A matter of elementary justice'⁶⁹:

“The tax is a logical result of a two-dimensional policy that aims to distribute the tax burden more fairly across ALL income groups – including income from capital – while simultaneously seeking to privilege risk capital relative to dormant capital on saving accounts and other risk-free investments. One must accept the consequences of what one asks for [...]. The only other alternative is making cuts in social security, which would involve cuts for the weakest among us. It is a matter of elementary justice to request a modest contribution from a rentier with a full safe. [...] The costs and benefits should be shared fairly.”⁶⁹

It is interesting to note how Van der Kelen reverses the argumentation of *De Standaard*. For example, he legitimizes the new tax as a moral decision. It is presented as being “elementary justice” and a “more fair” policy. In addition, Van der Kelen presents it as a rational decision (i.e., “logical result,” “consequence;” see also “the decisions fit within a logic”⁶⁰). The tax is also minimized (i.e., “a modest contribution”). Finally, he delegitimizes the “only other alternative” as immoral (i.e., “the weakest among us” as victims), which would make the government decision inevitable⁶⁴. This naturalization is also expressed in the conclusion to his other editorial: “[i]t is one aspect of the new society, which we must learn to live with”⁶⁰.

In its turn, *De Morgen* explicitly defends the tax-amnesty measure, which was originally a demand of the liberal coalition party¹⁰. In two editorials, it adopts the argumentation of the socialist coalition partner, stating that it is a difficult but necessary decision^{76, 82 (74)}. For example, political journalist Liesbeth Van Impe writes the following in her piece entitled ‘Older, sadder, wiser’:

“In this country, the navigators do not have very many tools for changing the course of the tanker. This is also the reason why the socialists, in the middle of the night, eventually decided to accept a new tax amnesty [...]. Whitewashing fraudsters – it’s not pretty, but VAT increases and fiddling with the index would be even worse. There is no such thing as a miracle solution. Even in politics, you have to work with what you have.”⁸²

Van Impe acknowledges that the measure automatically raises a certain element of unfairness (e.g., “it’s not pretty,” see also “caused an upset”⁷⁶). Like *Het Laatste Nieuws*, however, Van Impe argues that there is simply no acceptable alternative (i.e., “even worse,” “work with what you have”). In this way, the tax amnesty is naturalized as inevitable. This is also the message of the editorialist Bart Eeckhout: the government

had to choose for “the much-needed money to close the budget”⁷⁶. The third editorialist, economic journalist Emmanuel Vanbrussel, nonetheless adopts a different standpoint. Like *De Standaard*, he delegitimizes the measure as immoral. According to Vanbrussel, it is “a slap in the face to the obedient family man who does not have any money in Luxembourg,” which “[h]as further damaged the already shaky confidence that the average Joe has in the taxation authority”⁹⁶. With the title ‘The small saver loses,’ Vanbrussel also criticizes the new tax for investment funds. The government is presented as once again acting immorally (e.g., “a disguised hold-up for the small saver”⁹⁶), but also as irrational (e.g., “they have no idea what is happening”⁹⁶). He also expresses this criticism in two prominent articles.^{93, 87}

In summary: In this first critical discourse moment (CDM 1) the newspapers largely defend the same standpoint. In all papers, the government receives framing power its policy is being supported – at least with regard to the policy agreement as a whole and the end-of-career measures. All of the newspapers are (moderately) positive about the coalition agreement that has been reached and the decision to raise the age for early retirement. They express little understanding for the criticism from unions. The only area in which the newspapers differ in their opinions is with regard to the budget measures. On the one hand, *De Standaard* is negative with regard to the “one-off measures,” the “tax amnesty,” and the new tax on investment funds. On the other hand, the government budget policy is accepted and/or defended by *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen* (with the exception of economic journalist Emmanuel Vanbrussel). It is interesting to note that *Het Laatste Nieuws* explicitly defends the choice for an additional tax (i.e., on investment funds – originally a socialist demand), while *De Morgen* supports the favorable arrangement for tax evaders (i.e., tax amnesty – originally a liberal proposal).

To defend their standpoints, all of the newspapers make continual use of depoliticizing strategies, thereby impeding any (political) discussion on the socio-economic policy. In *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen*, the coalition measures are either legitimized as rational or moral, or naturalized as inevitable (due to lack of a solid alternative). A similar discourse can be found in *De Standaard*, except with regard to the budget measures. In that case, the government policy is delegitimized as

irrational and immoral (also by *De Morgen* journalist Emmanuel Vanbrussel). All of the newspapers undermine the union opposition by positioning the unions as sharply divided and/or by delegitimizing the protest as irrational.

CDM 2: Unions reject the Generation Pact (19-21 October)

The decision is reached on 18 October 2005: all of the unions reject the Generation Pact. Even the Christian union ACV, whose leaders had participated in the negotiations on the pact, ultimately turns against the measures. To force the Verhofstadt II government to make adjustments, the unions plan a national demonstration in Brussels on October 28, supported by a 24-hour collective strike. Nevertheless, the government – and particularly Prime Minister Verhofstadt – immediately announce that no re-negotiations of the Generation Pact are possible.

For a three-day period, every newspaper report concerning the union rejection and/or the (end-of-career) government measures is selected, yielding a total of 43 newspaper reports. Of these reports, 21 appear in *De Standaard*. The newspaper publishes 8 news articles (1 of which appears on the front page) and 2 analytical pieces. Most of the articles are written by economic journalist Johan Rasking and political journalist Steven Samyn, with the analyses written by political journalist Isabel Albers and economic journalist Karin De Ruyter. Daily editorials on the issue are published as well, all written by deputy editor-in-chief Bart Sturtewagen. The reporting is supplemented by 1 opinion piece by Rasking, 1 column by political journalist Bart Dobbelaere, and 6 interviews (primarily with politicians). *Het Laatste Nieuws* publishes only 9 relevant reports. This includes 3 news articles (1 on the front page), written by political journalist Jan Segers and 'SC'. In addition, there are 2 editorials, both by 'chief politics'/commentator Luc Van der Kelen, 1 interview (with experts), and 3 cartoons (by in-house cartoonist Erik Meynen). *De Morgen* publishes 13 relevant newspaper reports. They include 6 news articles (1 on the front page), written by various auteurs (including political journalists Fabian Lefevere, Tine Peeters, and Tom Cochez). In

addition, political journalist Filip Rogiers contributes 1 analytical piece, and ‘chief politics’ Bart Eeckhout writes 1 editorial on the issue. Finally, the newspaper publishes 4 interviews (with various actors) and 1 cartoon (by in-house cartoonist Zak).

	<i>De Standaard</i>	<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	<i>De Morgen</i>
TOTAL: 43	21	9	13
News articles	8	3	6
→ Front page	→ 1	→ 1	→ 1
Analytical pieces	2	-	1
Editorials	3	2	1
Editorial opinion pieces	1	-	-
Interviews	6	1	4
External opinion pieces	-	-	-
Columns	1	-	-
Cartoons	-	3	1

The newspaper reporting focusses on two aspects (i.e., objects)¹: the meaning of the Generation Pact^(104, 135) and the union opposition^(102, 126, 133). It is interesting to note that *Het Laatste Nieuws* addresses the Generation Pact in greater detail only once¹²⁴, and instead focuses largely on the union opposition. In *De Morgen*, the discussion on the Generation Pact takes a detour into theoretical employment models^(142, 144). None of the newspapers assigns significant framing power to any particular social actor. Each of the newspapers gives the Christian union ACV, the government, and several experts an (one-off) opportunity to explain their opinions in somewhat greater detail^(103, 107, 125, 129, 138, 139). The contribution of social actors is otherwise restricted to short quotations.

Let us start with the Generation Pact, which once again becomes a topic of discussion in the newspapers in response to the union rejection. This is particularly the case in *De Standaard* and *De Morgen*. These two newspapers examine the opinions of many

¹ In passing, it also addresses the budget measures of Minister Vande Lanotte (only in *De Standaard*^{109, 121}) and the strategy/style of Premier Verhofstadt (only in the cartoons of *Het Laatste Nieuws*^{127, 130, 131}). Although these issues have been analyzed, they are not addressed in this chapter. The reporting is too sporadic and/or concerns party-political strategy instead of political policy.

actors with regard to the government plan. Both proponents^(107, 114, 137, 144) and opponents^(104, 113, 138) get the opportunity to express their views. Nevertheless, the newspapers are absolutely clear about their own position: the Generation Pact should be adopted. They defend the pact as a rational and moral effort, and they naturalize it as a necessary reform. With such a depoliticizing discourse, the newspapers once again impede any (political) debate on the Generation Pact and early retirement. ‘Chief politics’ Bart Eeckhout of *De Morgen*, in particular, makes a heated argument for the plan in his editorial entitled ‘Inevitable’¹³⁴:

“[R]etreating is not an option. The Generation Pact, or any variant thereof, should be implemented – not because it is such a visionary or fantastic plan, but because it is an inevitable and necessary reform. At the very least, it is to the plan’s credit that it avoids a ruthless social bloodbath. Those who nevertheless propose the government plan as such, are acting irresponsibly. The fear is that any delay will only lead to alternatives that will not spare the axe. We need only take a peek at our neighboring countries. [...] [M]ost of us also [acknowledge] that a thorough activation policy offers a better guarantee against social destruction than would a complete standstill.”¹³⁴

Above all else, Eeckhout naturalizes the Generation Pact (e.g., title ‘Inevitable’). He does not allow any discussion; rejection would not be an option. He even literally presents the plan as an “inevitable and necessary reform” about which there would be a widespread consensus (i.e., “most of us”)⁽¹³⁸⁾. In addition, Eeckhout legitimizes the Generation Pact as a moral agreement (i.e., no “social bloodbath”)⁽¹²⁴⁾. He subsequently positions it in contrast to employment policies in neighboring countries, which are presented as being immoral (i.e., “not sparing the axe”). This is intended to demonstrate that there is no acceptable alternative; doing nothing (i.e., “a complete standstill”) is also not an option. ‘Chief politics’ of *Het Laatste Nieuws*, Luc Van der Kelen, comes to the same conclusion: “*The government now has no other choice but to continue [...]. Reneging on the pact is not an option*”¹²⁴. In *De Standaard*, deputy editor-in-chief Bart Sturtewagen expresses the same naturalizing message in his editorials. He refers to the measures in the Generation Pact as “the inevitable”¹⁰⁸, on which there is an “elitist consensus”¹¹⁹. Once again, doing nothing would not be an option: “[i]t is not an acceptable option to make people believe that the ageing of the population will not be as bad as might be expected and that no interventions are

needed”¹⁰⁸. Sturtewagen further promotes the Generation Pact as a moral (e.g., “caring about our social model”¹⁰⁸) and rational (“conclusive reasoning”^{119 (108)}) policy choice. *De Standaard* not only naturalizes the Generation Pact in its editorials, but also in the analytical piece entitled ‘Government has little room for manoeuvre’¹¹¹. Political journalist Isabel Albers argues that “further weakening of the weakened version [is] not an option” and that the purple coalition thus “actually [has] no room for manoeuvre”¹¹¹. In this way, the newspapers close the debate on the Generation Pact and on working more/longer. The only exception is an article in *De Morgen* by journalist Tom Cochez on employment policy in general¹⁴². He acknowledges that there are several possibilities for creating employment and, thus, that discussion exists. More specifically, he writes, “opinions differ widely with regard to the manner in which the higher level of activation should be enforced”¹⁴². He then introduces three models and encourages a theoretical debate (i.e., cultivation). Moreover, he presents it as a political issue (i.e., politicization): it would seem “to be becoming a [competition] between the Scandinavian and the Anglo-Saxon models – a competition between left and right”¹⁴², as he writes in the introduction. At the same time, however, Cochez limits the debate: “with regard to the ultimate goal [i.e., a higher level of activation], there is little discussion”¹⁴². According to his article, there is actually only one choice (e.g., title ‘Everyone is looking to the Scandinavian model’^{142 (144)}).

Given their support for the Generation Pact, it is not surprising that all of the newspapers publish negative reports on the union rejection. They undermine the union opposition as being divided, irrational, or immoral. With such a depoliticizing discourse, the newspapers stand in the way of any (political) debate on early retirement policy and the criticism against it. All of the newspapers quote a variety of actors who delegitimize the union protest^(105, 113, 129, 139, 144). They also undermine the position of the unions in their own discourse. This is done in three ways. First, they position the unions once again as sharply divided. For example, in *De Standaard*, economic journalist Johan Rasking writes the analytical piece entitled ‘Chaos reigns in Union Land’¹²⁰. In this piece, he expresses his doubts concerning the front among de socialist union ABVV and the Christian union ACV:

“Tuesday evening, the national secretariats of the two large unions sat down and smoked the peace pipe with each other. They were not very enthusiastic. It is also still unclear whether the relationship has now been restored. [...] [T]he quarrels between other red and green factions continue to smolder. [...] The same ACV and ABVV members must now join hands to organize a collective day of action. Not everyone will be happy about it [...]”¹²⁰

With the metaphor of the “peace pipe,” Rasking is referring to a recent conflict between the two unions⁽¹¹⁰⁾. He then draws a distinction between the official union position (i.e., joining hands) and the relationship in practice, (i.e., not happy about it, smoldering quarrels). He sketches an image of a persistent divisiveness between the unions, which would undermine the credibility of the proclaimed front. *De Standaard* also writes elsewhere about the persistent struggles^{103, 102} and casts doubt on the sincerity of the union front^{103, 102, 118}. *Het Laatste Nieuws* expresses amazement at the collective character of the action as well (i.e., “as if there had never been a fracture in the union front”¹²⁵). In addition, all of the newspapers point to the internal discord within the Christian union ACV and, more specifically, between the establishment and the members. One example can be found in an analytical piece in *De Morgen* (e.g., “the doubting followers,” “no less distrustful”)¹⁴⁰. Another appears in an editorial in *De Standaard*: “[chairman] Luc Cortebeeck’s authority has been dramatically impaired”¹⁰⁸. Other examples are published in the news reporting of *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*: “the entire day was characterized by an atmosphere of crisis within ACV circles, [a]nd divisiveness was indeed present”^{103 (102)}, “the followers hold a radically different view”¹²³. Second, all of the newspapers delegitimize the union rejection as an irrational decision – particularly in their editorials. It is presented as an emotional reaction. For example: “how gut feelings have also led the ACV away from reason – what some would call ‘common sense’”^{125 (118)}, “in this, the ABVV has responded to a realistic and understandable fear of change”^{134 (119)}. The union rejection is presented as evidence of “short-term thinking”¹²⁴ and as “not the wisest strategy”¹³⁴. The decision is dismissed as counter-productive (e.g., “the unions risk to saw off the branch on which their employees are sitting”^{124 (134)}), or as poorly considered (e.g., “[t]he exact concessions that the unions want from the administration are not at all clear”^{111 (119)}). Moreover, the union establishment is blamed on a lack of leadership capacity. They would have “shown that they are not capable of bringing their followers along in an

innovative vision on our social model”^{119 (108)}, which would indicate that “the union establishment actually has nothing to say”^{128 (124)}. Finally, the editorialists of *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* delegitimize the union action as an immoral action. The unions are presented as evading their responsibility (i.e., “the easiest way is to stand on the side-lines and say no”¹⁰⁸) and acting purely in their own interest (e.g., an extra extended weekend^{124, 128}), while “gambling with the future of their families”¹²⁴.

In summary: In this second critical discourse moment (CDM 2) all of the newspapers defend the same standpoint. Despite the fact that both the proponents and opponents of the Generation Pact are cited, the newspapers leave little room for doubt in their own discourse: the Generation Pact should absolutely not be abandoned. All three defend the core elements of the coalition agreement. Consistent with this standpoint, all three also adopt a negative stance toward the union rejection.

To defend their standpoints, the newspapers make use of depoliticizing strategies, thereby closing any (political) debate on employment policy. On the one hand, they all either legitimize the Generation Pact as a rational or moral effort, or naturalize it as a necessary reform. This rules out any discussion concerning the plan. On the other hand, all of the newspapers undermine the union criticism by positioning the unions as sharply divided and delegitimizing their rejection as irrational or immoral.

Conclusion

Newspapers: Ideological culture

The reporting on the Verhofstadt II policy agreement and, more specifically, the Generation Pact (and its rejection by the unions) shows that *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen* share the same ideological culture. All three defend the ideal of the active welfare state, always drawing on a depoliticizing discourse. The notion of keeping more people employed for longer cannot be discussed. They therefore naturalize the Generation Pact – and the complete policy agreement within which it is

contained – as a necessary step. Union opposition is delegitimized, thereby impeding any discussion.

It is only with regard to the budget measures that the newspapers arrive at differing (value) judgements – again drawing on a depoliticizing discourse. *De Standaard* (and one journalist in *De Morgen*) oppose the so-called lazy and unfair government measures, while *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen* defend the budget policy as necessary. *De Standaard*, however, does not explicitly link its criticism to any alternative ideological vision. Furthermore, it is interesting to note the extent to which *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen* share the same vision in 2005, defending decisions that contravene their earlier ideological profiles (see the previous cases). For example, *Het Laatste Nieuws* does its utmost to justify an additional tax on investments (a socialist demand), while *De Morgen* attempts to convince its readers to support a favorable arrangement for tax evaders (a liberal demand).

Newspaper landscape: Ideological debate

From this analysis of *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen*, we can conclude that the newspaper debate on the Verhofstadt II policy agreement and, in particular, the Generation Pact is hardly diverse and not at all pluralistic. It is not very diverse, in the sense that *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen* adopt largely the same standpoint. This is particularly the case with regard to the end-of-career measures in the Generation Pact – the heart of the social conflict in 2005 – about which the newspapers share the same opinion. It is only with regard to the budget measures that they are somewhat in disagreement (with the remarkable observation that *De Morgen* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* take the same stance). It is not pluralistic, as the newspapers never stimulate (political) debate on the socio-economic policy. The standpoints are always discussed in terms of right/wrong or presented as inevitable. This is particularly the case with regard to the employment policy (i.e., Generation Pact). Briefly stated, at the time of the Verhofstadt II government

statement, the newspaper landscape presents hardly any opposing standpoints and never encourages any broad (political-ideological) debate.

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CASE 5: DE-PILLARIZED NEWSPAPERS AND THE GOVERNMENT

AGREEMENT OF MICHEL I (2014)

Context

Newspaper landscape

Today, all newspapers are owned by commercial media groups (see previous case). Newspapers are no longer regarded as political or societal projects, but as economic products. Above all else, a newspaper should be profitable: “[i]n other words, quality and pluralism no longer constitute primary objectives for the business leaders and owners in the modern media system; they are merely by-products on the way toward profitability” (Deltour, 2009). However, from 2008 onwards, the Flemish newspaper companies were operating at a loss (van der Burg, 2017: 63, 81). Advertising income was stagnating during the economic recession. A first round of cutbacks and reorganizations followed in late 2008. Multiple press companies made staff reductions, including editorial layoffs (Vanheerentals, 2009: 4-5). There was a high level of dissatisfaction amongst journalists. They emphasized the fact that “in years past, all media firms had booked more than ample corporate profits,” and thus that “the financial and economic crisis was being used as an alibi to push through reorganization plans that had been lying around for some time” (resp. Deltour, 2009; Van de Looverbosch, 2009: 4). A second round of cutbacks followed in late 2011, with new editorial layoffs (Deltour & Vanheerentals, 2011: 4). At the same time, more and more synergies were implemented. Since 2005, several takeovers had taken place and, by 2014, the Flemish newspaper market had more or less become a duopoly (van der Burg, 2017: 72, 94). More specifically, in 2005, De Persgroep had acquired half of the shares in the business newspaper *De Tijd* and, in 2013, the other two media groups – i.e., Corelio and Concentra – decided to bundle their activities in the joint venture ‘Mediahuis’ (van der Burg, 2017: 109, 158). Moreover, synergies took also place within the existing media groups. Newspapers of the same group were more systematically

sharing niche reporting and/or editorial services were physically merged (Deltour, 2009). This allowed media groups to cut expenses.

Today, a commercial logic is being applied not only in terms of ownership, but also in terms of content. “Newspapers are following a relatively strict logic: that of the corrected market (Pauli, 2006).” For example, in many newsrooms, click and circulation rate determines what news is and how it should be presented (Van den Bulck & Paulussen, 2012). This promotes the further tabloidization of reporting, as well as the coverage becoming more alike. With regard to the latter issue, Pol Deltour, the national secretary of the professional association for journalists, write the following: “Much more than in the past, we are noticing that newspapers are treating the same news items and that they are also pushing the same buttons in their opinion pieces. [...] More and more, directors and editors-in-chief are seeking the center or, in other words, the average Flemish person (Deltour, 2006; see also Deltour, 2009)”^A. A 2012 survey confirms that Flemish journalists attach a great deal of importance to “reaching the broadest possible audience” (Raeymaeckers et al., 2013: 52-53). In addition, they seek to “provide objective information” at any cost, supplemented by “sufficient analysis and interpretation.” Only a small minority of the journalists surveyed consider it their duty “to spur people on to action and participation,” “to influence public opinion,” or “to be a mouthpiece for certain groups.” As a result – “unconsciously and implicitly” – the news is created through “consensus thinking” and presented “in the form of common sense” (Sinardet, 2006).

De Standaard remains the best-selling generalist quality newspaper in Flanders (van der Burg, 2017: 106). In 2006, the media group to which the newspaper belongs underwent a name change: the ‘Vlaamse Uitgeversmaatschappij’ (VUM, translated as: Flemish Publishing Company) became ‘Corelio’. Again, an explicit reference to the Flemish identity was eliminated “in favor of [building] a more neutral ‘brand’” (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 313). In 2013, upon the merger with the Concentra media

^A A recent longitudinal study on diversity in Flemish newspaper reporting (measured quantitatively at the level of “news stories”) nevertheless identified no general impoverishment of news (Beckers et al., 2017). The researchers did establish that, following takeovers or synergies, newspapers from the same media group tended to resemble each other (see also: van der Burg, 2017: 124).

group, the name was changed to 'Mediahuis' (van der Burg, 2017: 109, 158). It was feared that the merging of the two media groups would affect the freedom of the four involved news outlets. Therefore, an editorial charter was signed in the beginning of 2016. In one specific part of this charter, the so-called 'statement of principle', the newspapers documented their identity and uniqueness (Rasking, 2016: 5). Here, *De Standaard* emphasized its independence: "content-wise, [t]he newsroom is working independently of its owners, advertisers, or other stakeholders. Furthermore, it is not bound to any religious, ideological, economic, or political association or interest group" ('De waarden van 'De Standaard'', 2015). Additionally, "truth-telling" was appointed as its "most important goal," because "reliability is crucial for newspapers". It also claimed that a newspaper must always serve "the general interest". In that regard, it must "stimulate public debate and offer a platform" and must "help to shape the public opinion and strive for a powerful democracy".

Het Laatste Nieuws was found to be the most sold Flemish newspaper (van der Burg, 2017: 57). However, its sales figures could not guarantee job security: in 2008, a number of employees were fired (Deltour, 2009). The management preferred individual layoffs over a – more spectacular – collective layoff. Also, more and more synergies took place between *Het Laatste Nieuws* and other outlets of De Persgroep (see below: *De Morgen*). The newspaper nonetheless hoped to safeguard its identity through the – still active – 'Raad Het Laatste Nieuws vzw' [translated as 'Council of Het Laatste Nieuws']. This non-profit organization existed since the 1950s (then called 'Stichting'). Its mandate was to inspect whether "the newspaper continued to proclaim liberal humanistic beliefs, independent from any political party" (Prevenier, n.d.). Furthermore, new journalists and editors-in-chief needed to be approved by the Council, and (ii) new owners always had to "accept that the [Council] continues to decide on the political direction of the newspaper" (Prevenier, n.d.). Regardless the effectiveness of the Council, Deltour (2006) observed that "*Het Laatste Nieuws* still emphasized right-wing liberal values that could not be found in *De Morgen*".

With Yves Desmet as its editor-in-chief, *De Morgen* had transformed from a social project to a commercial product, that was doing pretty well in terms of readership numbers (see previous case). The successive editors-in-chief continued on this line. However, regardless the growing readership figures, its owner (i.e., De

Persgroep) wanted to get more profit out of *De Morgen*. It planned to further integrate the newspaper into the media group, both physically (i.e., moving from Brussels to the newsroom of *Het Laatste Nieuws* in Kobbegem) and content-wise (e.g., using sports news of *Het Laatste Nieuws*) (Deltour, 2008; Cochez, 2013). These plans caused a lot of dissatisfaction among the journalists, who referred to them as “an attack on the identity of the newspaper, both according to facts and to perception” (Deltour, 2008: 4). In 2008, even before the plans were finalized, De Persgroep decided to save on personnel costs and to fire a number of employees (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010: 374). No less than sixteen journalists – which equaled a quarter of the total editorial staff – were expected to be laid off (Vanheerentals, 2009: 4). After negotiations, the number of fired employees was reduced to ‘only’ thirteen (Vanheerentals, 2009: 5). Their colleagues were furious about the way De Persgroep had handled the layoffs. Former editor-in-chief Yves Desmet nonetheless defended the decision of Van Thillo, ceo of De Persgroep: “[h]e is – and some seem to forget this simple fact – the owner of this squad” (Desmet in Deltour & Vanheerentals, 2009: 5). Desmet returned as the editor-in-chief between 2012 and 2014, and later became lead commentator of the newspaper. On 7 October 2014, *De Morgen* was given a thorough make-over. Two new editors-in-chief were appointed (Lisbeth Imbo and An Goovaerts), and the newspaper got a more outspoken profile. Under the slogan “More Salmon,” the newspaper engaged itself to “a healthy dose of non-conformism,” “like a salmon that goes against the stream” (‘Dit land heeft meer zalm nodig’, 2014). “To give opposites at least a chance. To look at things from another perspective, no matter who’s perspective it ‘originally’ is.”

Socio-economic politics

A worldwide financial-economic crisis broke out in 2008. At first, it affected primarily the banking world. The government had to intervene and save the banks with guarantees, financial injections, or takeovers (Deneckere, De Paepe & De Wever, 2012: 212; Meynen & Witte, 2016: 419). The banking crisis did, however, not lead to the revival of a left-wing/Keynesian policy – in which the government directs the economy – but instead reinforced neoliberal policy programs (De Preter, 2016: 351; Brepoels,

2015: 615). The left once again failed to present a clear alternative and formulate an effective response to the crisis (De Preter, 2016: 310)^B.

The crisis began in the United States, but it struck with the most intensity in Europe. The Eurozone (i.e., the countries with the euro as a common currency) was hit particularly hard. To defuse the crisis, Europe imposed a number of new regulations. In doing so, the EU reinforced its supranational and neoliberal policies^C. Since the realization of the euro, Europe had increasingly begun to intervene in the economic lives of its member states (De Preter, 2016: 298). Successive treaties – e.g., the Maastricht Treaty of 1992; the Stability and Growth Pact of 1997; the Lisbon Strategy of 2000 – had sharply restricted the leeway allowed to national governments and pressure groups (Brepoels, 2015: 612, 623). The measures that took effect following the first euro shock – e.g., the European Semester and the Sixpack in 2011, and the Twopack in 2013 – went even further in eliminating the financial options of the member states. From now on, the European Commission started inspecting the national policy plans and was able to impose fines on member states that did not respect the rules (De Preter, 2016: 237-238, 348; Brepoels, 2015: 623). The European initiatives consistently placed strong emphasis on budgetary discipline, with ‘budget cuts’ as a recurring theme (De Preter, 2016: 351). Eurozone countries experiencing financial difficulties were faced with a heavy wave of austerity programs. In early 2013, however, Europe decided to “be somewhat more relaxed in enforcing the regulations concerning the budgetary discipline” (De Preter, 2016: 349).

In Belgium, the government had to intervene to save banks for the first time in 2008, followed by a second intervention in 2011 (Meynen & Witte, 2016: 419; De Preter, 2016: 344). Each time, this was the duty of Premier Leterme and his tripartite

^B The crisis nevertheless created space for an alternative discourse and system, but the social democrats were not able to respond to it: within the prevailing “polarized society, the Third Way no longer [seemed] an option” (Brepoels, 2015: 616). What did catch on were populist arguments – primarily right-wing, but left-wing as well – in which various groups (ranging from foreigners and the unemployed to the super rich) were identified as being responsible for the crisis (Meynen & Witte, 2016: 417; Brepoels, 2015: 616).

^C European social democrats never succeeded in steering the EU along a left-wing course, even when they controlled the most important policy positions (Brepoels, 2015: 612). In contrast, during the euro crisis, it was a few social democrats who imposed severe austerity programs on troubled member states (p614).

government^D. Support to the financial sector led to another increase in Belgium's national debt (De Preter, 2016: 237, 347). Moreover, the successive governments faced a decline in taxes and an increase in benefit payments (Meynen & Witte, 2016: 420). This was because of increasing lay-offs and rising unemployment beginning in 2010 (De Preter, 2016: 347). Following the rosy years of "Purple" (see the previous case study), Belgium was once again faced with budgetary difficulties. It even reached the point that, from 2009 through 2012, Europe adopted a procedure and threatened sanctions against Belgium, since the budget deficit amounted to more than 3% of the GDP (De Preter, 2016: 349). This was followed by new budget-cutting measures and a higher retirement age (Deneckere, De Paepe & De Wever, 2012: 212). In practice, the Di Rupo government (2011-2014) – the first tripartite coalition in 40 years under the leadership of a socialist/social democratic premier – was "forced to enact budget cuts, wage moderation, and benefit cuts, often with no argument other than 'preventing something even worse'" (Brepoels, 2015: 569). Despite the fact that Di Rupo I allowed for consultations with the unions – according to Keynesians principles – several clashes occurred (Meynen & Witte, 2016: 423).

In 2014, the social democrats were sent to the opposition, and the so-called 'Swedish coalition' ascended to power. In this coalition, the liberals (blue) and the Flemish nationalists (yellow) constituted the two largest fractions, supplemented by the Flemish Christian democrats. The liberal Charles Michel became the Prime Minister. The Michel government followed an openly and "aggressive" neoliberal course (Meynen & Witte, 2016: 423, 425; De Preter, 2016: 350). It implemented a comprehensive austerity policy and left investments and employment to the market (Meynen & Witte, 2016: 422, 425). Several of the measures were "of a highly technical character," including stricter administrative sanctions for the unemployed, reductions in temporary unemployment payments, raising the retirement age to 67 years, cuts in social security, wage-cost reductions, and a tax shift "that left big capital unaffected" (Meynen & Witte, 2016: 425; Brepoels, 2015: 597). This policy generated a great deal of resentment on the part of the unions, as well as the broader civil society. In the fall

^D The Leterme I and Leterme II governments were traditional coalitions of the three major political groups: Christian democrats, social democrats, and liberals. They followed the so-called 'purple' coalitions between social democrats and liberals, under the leadership of the liberal Guy Verhofstadt.

of 2014 and in the fall of 2015, at least 100,000 people took to the streets (Meynen & Witte, 2016: 425; Brepoels, 2015: 628). The unions protested for greater “fiscal justice” and a “fair distribution of charges”. They also clashed with the style of governance. This was because the coalition allowed little space for social consultation, advocated a limited role for the unions, and stressed the primacy of the political system (Brepoels, 2015: 597, 623; Meynen & Witte, 2016: 422-423). In contrast, employers’ organizations were not much bothered by the limited involvement of the social partners. “This was because they had helped to write the coalition agreement and maintained close contacts with the most liberal and N-VA cabinets (Brepoels, 2015: 597; see also Meynen & Witte, 2016: 425).”

Analysis

CDM 1: The coalition agreement of Michel I (8-10 October)

On 7 October 2014, the ‘Swedish’ coalition reaches an agreement regarding the future governmental and budget policy. The Michel government is a fact. The coalition, under the leadership of Prime Minister Charles Michel (MR), clearly chooses a rightwing socio-economic policy. The measures serve the goal of increasing economic competitiveness (e.g., fewer corporate taxes), on the one hand, and governmental cutbacks on the other (e.g., as much austerity as possible, raising the retirement age). The Christian labor union quickly responds with a blockade at a conference of the Christian Democratic coalition party.

This analysis focuses on the reporting that occurred right after the announcement of the coalition agreement. For a three-day period, every newspaper report concerning the Michel government and its agreement is selected, yielding a total of 121 newspaper reports. *De Standaard* puts out 42 reports. There are 17 news articles, of which 4 are on the front page. Virtually all news articles are written by the political

journalists, including Wim Winckelmans, Peter De Lobel, Maarten Goethals, Bart Brinckman, and Guy Tegenbos. In addition, there are no less than 8 analytical pieces, written by the same journalists. They also conduct 4 interviews. *De Standaard* daily publishes an editorial on the decisions of the government. The authors are ‘senior writers’ and commentators Bart Brinckman and Guy Tegenbos, and editor-in-chief Karel Verhoeven, respectively. There is also an editorial opinion piece in the economics section, by journalist Dries De Smet. Finally, I count 4 opinion pieces, 3 cartoons (by Lectrr) and 2 columns (by Béatrice Delvaux and Dyab Abou Jahjah). *Het Laatste Nieuws* publishes 46 relevant newspaper reports. This number includes 34 news articles, of which 9 are on the front page. Only half of the news articles mention the author. Usually, that is Peter Gorlé, Dieter Dujardin, Katrien Stragier, and/or Isolde Van den Eynde. The latter three also write some analytical pieces, 4 in total. Furthermore, the newspaper publishes 3 editorials, all written by political commentator Jan Segers. Finally, there is 1 interview and 4 cartoons (and, thus no opinion pieces). *De Morgen* puts out 33 reports. It includes 13 news articles (of which 5 appear on the front page) and 6 analytical pieces. These are written by journalists Ann Van den Broek, Ann De Boeck, Roel Wauters, Jeroen Van Horenbeek, Bart Eeckhout, and/or Lieven Desmet. Moreover, the newspaper publishes 3 editorials (by political editor-in-chief Bart Eeckhout or lead commentator Yves Desmet). There are also 5 interviews, 3 cartoons (by Zak), 1 opinion piece, and 2 columns (by Hugo Camps and Alain Gerlache).

	<i>De Standaard</i>	<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	<i>De Morgen</i>
TOTAL: 121	42	46	33
News articles	17	34	13
→ Front page	→ 4	→ 9	→ 5
Analytical pieces	8	4	6
Editorials	3	3	3
Editorial opinion pieces	1	-	-
Interviews	4	1	5
External opinion pieces	4	-	1
Columns	2	-	2
Cartoons	3	4	3

In the days following the announcement of the coalition agreement, all newspapers write extensively about the decisions of Michel I^E. In particular, they focus on three objects: (i) the coalition agreement in general, (ii) specific decisions with regard to the budget policy and retirement age, and (ii) the first labor union protest against the agreement (on a coalition party conference). The reporting mainly consists of evaluations by the journalists themselves. In addition, all newspapers give framing power to the coalition parties, in the form of major interviews or extensive reportages^(7, 28, 85). It is worth noting that in *De Morgen* these interviews are more concise than in the other newspapers^(95, 96), while it features counter-voices more prominently (especially labor unions^(102, 110), but also left-wing opposition parties^{108, 121}). In *Het Laatste Nieuws*, counter-voices (with the exception of employers' organizations) are usually downgraded to small articles in the margin^(56, 71, 82), and in *De Standaard* to the opinion section^(15, 31, 42).

First of all, the newspapers discuss the coalition agreement in general, explicitly labeling it as a right-wing project. In that sense, they are politicizing the agreement, opening an ideological debate about socio-economic policy. However, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* shift the debate in a specific direction by explicitly legitimizing and naturalizing the government plans (i.e., depoliticization). *De Morgen*, on the other hand, holds on to the notion of ideological debate by presenting the agreement as a legitimate political choice (though with disadvantages to a particular social group). Let us start with the remarkable finding that all newspapers – especially in their editorials and analyses – present the new coalition as an outspoken ideological project:

“Belgium has known governments over the last fifteen years that were socio-economically interchangeable. [...] Each time a choice was made for the center. This is changing now, for the first time since the government of Martens-Verhofstadt in 1985. The Michel administration is making a fixed quarter turn to the right. Its choices are clear.”⁴⁷

^E Besides that, they also reflect on the previous negotiations^(3, 50, 91), speculate about the ministerial posts^(8, 59, 116), or publish faits divers^(36, 19, 119). The articles on these objects were all analyzed, but ultimately held back from this chapter. They merely discuss strategic matters, not (political-ideological) policy.

“Actually, these current forty-years-old politicians are the descendants of a counter reaction to those ‘post-ideological’ nineties. De Wever, Beke, De Croo, and even Rutten: they are all bastard children of [the] ‘purple’ [coalitions], an era in which the gap between Left and Right seemed to be finally bridged. [...] It is actually this return to ideology that connects the mainstays of the center-right. Because of purple, the big socio-ethical debates are now settled, so the (economic) Right can be Right again and Left, though in opposition, can be Left again.”¹⁰⁶

“The coalition agreement is a lyric ode to entrepreneurship. [...] perhaps to emphasize that there are no socialists involved here [...]. Nobody was expecting a government that was timid about its turn to the Right, and already in its rhetoric, Michel did not disappoint.”³³

In the first quote, Jan Segers, political commentator of *Het Laatste Nieuws*, claims that the Belgian governments of the past 15 years^F conducted a politics without ideology (e.g., “socio-economically interchangeable;” see also “Left and Right were supposed to be passé”⁷⁷). Similarly, in the second quote, Bart Eeckhout of *De Morgen* addresses the previous decades as seemingly “post-ideological.” In that regard, all commentators – including Karel Verhoeven from *De Standaard* (third quote) – agree that the current coalition represents a return of ideology^(77, 103). Indeed, they find the new government explicitly profiling itself as a right-wing political project (e.g., “quarter turn to the right,” “Right can be Right again,” “emphasize that there are no socialists” and a rhetorical “turn to the Right”). It means that the Michel government is taking a clear position in fundamental socio-economic debates. In their editorials, *De Morgen* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* clarify what exactly is at stake in those debates:

“Ideologically, you can differ in opinion on how to get the economy back on track: through a stringent austerity policy, or just the opposite, by increasing public investment. Ideologically, the discussion is about who should contribute to the redevelopment of the budget: only those who earn their wages through employment, or also those who get rich through speculative and other untaxed capital gains.”⁹⁰

“With the Michel government, the backlash between left and right is back, or has apparently never been out of sight. Today, we are again dealing with the

^F These are the so-called ‘purple’ coalitions between Liberals and Socialists (and Christian Democrats or the green party), governing from 1999 to 2007.

limits of redistribution and who should feel solidarity with whom by contributing more or working longer.”⁷⁷

In the first quote, the lead commentator of *De Morgen*, Yves Desmet, explains how this return of ideology comes with fundamental choices about the role of the government (i.e., “austerity policy” versus “public investment”) and about the obligations of different socio-economic actors (i.e., “who should contribute to the redevelopment of the budget”). Likewise, in the second quote, Jan Segers of *Het Laatste Nieuws* links the ideological revival to concerns about redistribution and solidarity. Knowing the stances the coalition partners take in these debates – they all pursue a slimmed-down government that favors the welfare of businesses – the newspapers are certain Michel I will be an ideologically right-wing government. For example, according to *De Morgen*, the coalition “shares the old-liberal conviction that ‘the state lives above its means, not you’”¹⁰⁶; thus it holds “the rationale of a withdrawing government”¹⁰³. Or, as explained by *De Standaard* in a comprehensive analytical piece: “*The previous government avoided measures that affected families directly, but did deal with others that made the entrepreneurial world go through the roof. In this government, it is mainly reversed*”^{37 (33)}.

In the above quotes, all newspapers are politicizing: they present (current) socio-economic politics as a matter of ideological choices, and/or the coalition agreement as outspoken right-wing. *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* then explicitly defend the current “turn to the Right”:

“What became known today regarding the coalition agreement raises high expectations among the many Belgians who have felt that their country is in urgent need of something new. [...] Unlike the Di Rupo generation, the Michel generation does not start with the reassuring illusion that there is still enough time. [...] Michel, De Wever, Beke and Rutten are driven by a major ‘sense of urgency’. Cuts are useful, reforming is necessary and urgent.”⁴⁷

“And let it now proceed. [...] Let this cabinet prove that a recovery of competitiveness and the strengthening of purchasing power (though the wage index jump partially reverses this) can boost growth. It will bring Belgium more prosperity than another state reform. The question whether growth is beneficial to all sections of the population can be addressed later.”⁴

Both editorialists, respectively Jan Segers of *Het Laatste Nieuws* and Bart Brinckman of *De Standaard*, argue that the government intentions cannot be implemented quickly enough. In that regard, the former Di Rupo government is delegitimized for its naive postponing (i.e., “illusion that there is still enough time”). The current coalition, on the other hand, is praised for its “major sense of urgency”. Its program is legitimized as beneficial (i.e., “more prosperity”) and widely supported (i.e., “high expectations among [...] many Belgians”). Concerns about social inequality (i.e., “whether growth is beneficial to all sections”) are rejected as premature⁶. In that sense, labor union accusations of “social horror” and a “cold society” are delegitimized as provocative (e.g., “this administration is not even up and running yet”⁴⁷)⁽⁵⁾ or emotional (e.g., their “blood pressure needs to drop a little”³³). Even more, the proposed measures, such as [government] cuts and recovering [economic] competitiveness, are also naturalized as crucial and inevitable: it concerns “necessary and urgent” reforms, so “let it now proceed” (i.e., depoliticization)^(77, 33). In that way, the ideological debate on the coalition agreement is being closed in *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*. Not in *De Morgen*; the newspaper keeps reminding us about the ideological nature of the coalition agreement:

“The only logic [to it] is that of ideology. Less social security, fewer rights to inexpensive childcare or education: what connects the Flemish and federal governments is the rationale of a withdrawing government, which tests the lower middle class. That is a democratically legitimate choice, but do not tell me that families will benefit, with a sham like the Cayman tax.”¹⁰³

In contrast to the other two newspapers, *De Morgen* is not a big fan of the coalition program. In this editorial fragment, political editor-in-chief Bart Eeckhout presents the government intentions as disadvantageous to a particular social group: families of the lower middle class. However, although not agreeing, he acknowledges that it concerns a valid ideological choice (i.e., political delegitimization). At the same time, Eeckhout criticizes the government for concealing this ideological choice (i.e., “with a sham like the Cayman tax”). Eeckhout thus not only exposes the consequence of the choices of

⁶ However, in Brinckman’s analysis piece ‘Finally freed from the *Parti Socialiste*: New government cleverly makes use of exaggeration’, I find the pull-quote: “A government without [the socialist party] PS makes the Belgian model more Anglo-Saxon. In the future, we are threatened by more inequality”.²¹

the coalition, but also its discursive strategy. In doing so, he further stimulates an ideological debate. Elsewhere, the policy choices and discourse of the government are labeled as ‘new pragmatism’: “a bit cold”^{106 (111)}.

Furthermore, two coalition decisions in particular are very thoroughly discussed by the newspapers. It concerns (i) the much-repeated promise of a balanced budget by 2018 through extensive cuts instead of additional taxes, and (ii) the sudden increase in retirement age. In the following paragraphs, I demonstrate how the newspapers take a different standpoint on the budget policy, while all agreeing on the raised retirement age. They mainly use depoliticizing strategies, presenting the decisions as a matter of (ir)rationality or (im)morality, and impeding a proper debate. The only exception is *De Morgen*, which does attempt to open a (political) debate when it comes to the coalition’s budget policy.

First, concerning the government budget, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* respectively support the additional cuts and reduced taxation. Karel Verhoeven of *De Standaard* naturalizes the need for extra cuts. “Of course the government needs to be slimmed down,” he writes in his editorial, referring to the “benefits of civil servants and government departments, privileges that can often count on little understanding”³³. He delegitimizes any protest against these cuts as “conservative”³³. *Het Laatste Nieuws* supports the tax reductions in its news reporting. The newspaper especially addresses the positive impact on economically active actors (i.e., employees, self-employed entrepreneurs, businesses). For example, the day after the coalition agreement, the front page states: ‘Good news: tax discount for those who work’⁴⁵. According to this short front-page article, not only can “every worker” count on “a modest tax rebate,” but companies as well: “the majority of cost cuts go to companies and job creation”⁴⁵. Along the same lines, the newspaper is positive about the index jump, which prevents workers' wages from rising automatically. It is presented as a long-awaited tax reduction (“companies get the wage cost reductions they’ve been requesting for years”), which will mean a “boost for the economy”⁵¹. Nonetheless, both newspapers are also critical about the government budget policy. More specifically, they emphasize the fact that the new coalition does not live up to its promise to balance the budget solely via cuts, but still relies on taxes:

“The Michel government plans to cut more than 8 billion euros to balance the budget by 2018. The major reduction in taxes is financed for the most part by new taxes. That is the tax shift that CD&V advocated. A capital gain tax is not in the plan. Just before the agreement yesterday, someone stated: ‘At the end of this kind of negotiations, fiscal creativity knows no limits’.”⁶⁶

“Certainly, the amount of cuts is considerably bigger than the amount of new taxes, but to really decrease the government expenses, they definitely had to use some kind of trick [...] A scandalous scam? Certainly not. But definitely a trick.”⁶⁷

Both fragments – written respectively by *De Standaard* journalist Christof Vanschoubroek and *Het Laatste Nieuws* journalist Dieter Dujardin – accuse the new coalition of so-called creative accounting. The first quote refers to old taxes being replaced with new taxes, as part of unlimited “fiscal creativity” (see also: “[s]o this center-right government is also coming out with new taxes and tax tricks to make the bill legit”²³(^{51, 55})). The second quote is part of the short article ‘Tax pressure eventually decreases through a trick’⁶⁷. It reveals how the new coalition has artificially transformed an initial government expenditure into a tax reduction. In this way, both newspapers delegitimize the budget policy of Michel I as misleading^H. Additionally, they delegitimize it as disadvantageous to economic and financial stakeholders, who are subject to additional costs. For example, two days after the coalition agreement, *Het Laatste Nieuws* publishes the article ‘Already mad at Michel after one day’⁵⁸ on its front page. Specifically, the article criticizes the “higher VAT on renovation” for the construction industry, the “2 months of sick leave charged” to employers, and the “250 million of additional taxes” for banks. It states that while government agencies benefit from additional income (e.g., “all kinds of bank taxes provide the state 1 billion each year already”) and fewer expenses (e.g., “a good thing [...] for the health insurance, which saves 354 million euros a year”), companies and industries are the victim (e.g., “they pay the price”). A more comprehensive version of the article is published on page

^H In the editorial ‘Unlearning Belgian recalcitrant behavior’¹⁹, senior writer Guy Tegenbos is also sceptic about the genuineness of the coalition’s budget plans. He warns that “it remains uncertain whether the ‘structural reforms’ on the basis of which the coalition appeals for mercy to the European Commission for this postponement are truly considered as structural”. According to him, these accountancy tricks are a persistent Belgian problem. He writes: “*It is not for nothing that [the European Commission] considers Belgian politicians as a couple of deviants who always deliver unreliable documents at the last minute. That tide has not yet been reversed.*”

two⁶², and the issue of additional sick leave costs for employers is addressed again the following day⁸⁶. Also *De Standaard* writes a piece about this, entitled ‘Companies: costs of sick employees rise by 350 million’^{25 (26)}. Thus, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Standaard* fully support the government cuts and tax reductions that are part of the new coalition’s budget program, but they are critical about new taxes (for businesses).

Contrarily, *De Morgen* disapproves of the substantial cuts the new coalition has decided upon. From day one, the newspaper draws attention to the heavy cutbacks. For example, the front page creates a sharp contrast between ‘New revenues: 3.2 billion’, on the one hand, and ‘Cuts: 8.4 billion’, on the other hand⁸⁹. And on the next page, there is the large title ‘The account of Michel I: New taxes, injection for the economy and above all, a lot of cuts’⁹². The next day, the newspaper publishes the comprehensive article ‘Government: -2.3 billion’¹⁰² on its front page. Journalists Ann Van den Broek and Roel Wauters introduce the article as follows:

“Of the 8 billion euros that the Michel government will save by 2018, almost a third will be at the expense of the government itself. In four years it will lose more than 10 per cent of its resources, while according to the labor unions, there is nothing left to cut.”¹⁰²

Through a series of figures and a statement from the unions, the introduction delegitimizes the cuts in government services as a heavy burden. In the article itself, the unions claim the cuts are “not made by common sense”¹⁰² – which is highlighted as a pull-quote. They label the cuts as irrational, because it contradicts with the government’s guarantee that families are being spared (i.e., “families will be impacted anyway”¹⁰²). In his editorial ‘Center-right thinking error’¹⁰³, political editor-in-chief Bart Eeckhout delegitimizes the coalition’s budget policy in a similar way:

“[T]his coalition has the advantage of clarity: the political parties in power in Flanders are also federally in charge. [...] It is then remarkable that the federal government promises to increase the purchasing power of (working) families with a new type of job discount, while the Flemish government immediately claims that money by raising the expenses of those same families. [...] For sure, it will not be painless for families. You cannot escape the thinking errors that have crept into the center-right Flemish and federal governance agreement. If the intention is to save the welfare state, it would have been much more logical to dare to dissolve the taboo of alternative funding for social security coming from capital rather than from work, and to get the economy going at

the same time with investments in the many Flemish competencies that lend themselves perfectly to that."¹⁰³

Eeckhout presents the [austerity] policy of the center-right coalitions – both the federal Michel government and its Flemish counterpart – as irrational, when the intention is to increase the purchasing power of families⁽¹⁰⁸⁾. He delegitimizes their combined measures as “curious” or “thinking errors,” since families are certainly financially affected (e.g., “raising the expenses of those same families,” “for sure, it will not be painless for families”)^(118, 105). However, Eeckhout not only delegitimizes the current budget policy, but he also proposes alternative measures. More specifically, he promotes a policy of public investment (i.e., “many Flemish competencies that lend themselves perfectly to that”) instead of cuts, and more taxes on capital (i.e., “alternative funding [...] coming from capital”). These measures are legitimized as rational (i.e., “logical”) and progressive (i.e., “dare to dissolve the taboo”), in light of a clear political objective (i.e., to “save the welfare state”). Eeckhout thus links the budget policy to a political-ideological objective, after which he rejects the current policy and supports alternative measures (i.e., political de/legitimization). He mainly argues for a solid tax shift from labor to capital. The fact that the coalition agreement lacks such a tax shift, is frequently mentioned and criticized in *De Morgen’s* reporting. For example, the extensive analytical piece ‘Michel’s account’ emphasizes in a pull-quote that the agreement contains “many new small taxes but not the large capital taxes spoken of over the last few weeks”⁹². Also the fact-check article ‘Many statements, many untruths?’ confirms that a “real tax shift” is absent (e.g., “[t]his is rather a timid version,” “it is rather meagre”)^{108 (89, 105)}. According to lead commentator Yves Desmet, it is apparent that wage earners will ultimately be the ones who will pay for the government policy:

*“The fact that there is an index jump in the agreement but no capital gains tax tells us already who will be carrying the burdens and who will be reaping the benefits of this government. Those who cherish the illusion that the gap between labor income and capital income will get smaller can forget it.”*⁹⁰

In the editorial fragment, Desmet exposes how the budget measures reflect an ideological choice on “who will [or will not] be carrying the burdens”. He implies that only capital owners will benefit (i.e., “index jump” versus “no capital gains tax”), which

he opposes to the ideal of reducing the gap between the poor and the rich (i.e., political delegitimization).

Second, all newspapers write extensively about the increase in retirement age. Completely unexpectedly – no government party advocated raising the retirement age in its electoral program – the coalition decides that Belgians should work until age 67, instead of age 65. Remarkably, every newspaper agrees with this decision and defends it as undisputable (i.e., depoliticization)¹. To begin with, they all present it as a rational measure given the rising life expectancy of the population:

“The measure is justifiable. We live longer. Sooner or later, that needs to translate into working longer. The alternative is an ever-increasing pressure to be productive among employees. Or less pension.”⁴

“Today there are five working Belgians for every two retirees. If we do nothing, there will be only four working Belgians in 2025 for every two retirees and by 2040, just three. One does not need an Einstein brain to realize that our pensions will become unaffordable. [...] [T]he decision was rationally inevitable. End of the ostrich policy.”⁶⁰

“[It is], in essence, probably the only very unpopular measure that should not be fuel for an ideological Left-Right discussion. [...] The discussion about pensions, however, is not ideological but demographic. [...] Thirty years of retirement after a career that lasted only a few years longer than at the introduction of the pension – you do not have to be a mathematician to see that this is not feasible.”⁹⁰

These editorial fragments – respectively by Bart Brinckman (*De Standaard*), Jan Segers (*Het Laatste Nieuws*), and Yves Desmet (*De Morgen*) – explicitly legitimize and even naturalize working longer (e.g., “justifiable,” “rationally inevitable,” “sooner or later”). The government measure is presented as no more than logical (e.g., no need to be Einstein or a mathematician). It seems a matter of common sense^(9, 47, 54, 105). Furthermore, the editorials impede any debate about the measure by only referring to very unattractive alternatives (i.e., “an ever-increasing pressure to be productive,” “less pension”), or by presenting the topic as not suitable for political discussion (e.g., no “fuel for an ideological Left-Right discussion”). Elsewhere, *De Standaard* and *Het*

¹ As a result, the newspapers simply ignore the fact that the age increase was not part of any election program. Or, in the rare case this deficit is mentioned, it is immediately overruled by arguments that show the need for an age increase^{54, 60, 93}.

Laatste Nieuws support the increase in retirement age by referring to a recent expert report. It concerns the conclusion of a pension reform committee of 12 experts. The two newspapers claim that the coalition “went a long way with the plans of pension expert [and head of the commission] Frank Vandenbroucke”⁹, its decision is “supported by the pension experts’ proposal”¹¹, and it “is nothing but what Frank Vandenbroucke recommends”⁶⁰. Through the reference to the expert report, the measure is labeled as well-researched and thus, rational^l. Additionally, *De Standaard* positions the age increase as part of an international trend. For example, an analytical piece by political journalist Wim Winkelmans starts off with the following introduction:

*“This government also takes structural measures, such as the pension reform, which we have heard about before. Often, they simply imply what international organizations and Europe have been recommending to us for a long time, and what has long been common in many European countries.”*³⁷

Winkelmans presents working longer as internationally common and even obligatory. In his editorial, senior writer Guy Tegenbos justifies the “pension and labor market reform” in a similar way: “[i]t is often about issues that should have been decided long ago and that Europe has insisted upon already for a long time”¹⁹. And in his analytical piece on the matter, Tegenbos refers to a recent study of the OECD to claim that it is “internationally common”⁹ to retire at a later age. “Half of the industrialized countries have 67 as the retirement age (Denmark, Norway and Iceland) or are moving towards that age (the Netherlands and Germany),” reads the pull-quote. *Het Laatste Nieuws* furthermore defends the coalition decision by pointing out the humanity of the measure, thereby legitimizing it in moral terms. For example, the newspaper ensures that “the government provides a fair transition period”^{60 (44)}, “there are social corrections for the lowest incomes”⁵⁴, and “hard occupations are spared”⁵⁴. Lastly, all newspapers delegitimize criticism of or resistance to the pension measure as irrational and immoral. Protest is presented as partisan (e.g., “the opposition just has to point, aim and shoot”^{10 (90)}), ignorant (e.g., “[t]he Belgian has a false image of pension

^l However, *De Standaard* admits that the new administration even goes “quite a bit further”⁹ than the experts recommended. Indeed “[i]n her report, she [i.e., the commission] did not explicitly suggest an age increase, but she left room for it”¹². *De Morgen* also writes that the government measure differs (in some respects) from the commission’s recommendations^{98, 108, 113}.

retirement”^{98 (53)}, and selfish (e.g., “[a]pparently, the Belgian prefers not to look into his own heart”^{53 (60, 52)}). Yves Desmet of *De Morgen* ultimately concludes that resistance is useless: “they will also have to admit that working longer is inevitable, even though it is particularly unpleasant”^{90 (60)}. Nonetheless, all three of the newspapers allow for one specific criticism, mainly formulated by experts. For instance:

‘Specialists demand profound labor market reform: “We are not yet ready to work longer”’⁶⁵

“The Pension Commission, headed by Frank Vandebroucke (sp.a), already pointed to the risks: without a customized labor market, the measure does not make sense and threatens to cause an inflow into health insurance or unemployment.”⁹⁸

“Some comments are appropriate here. Working longer combined with the limitation of the early retirement benefit requires of employers a mature approach to their older workers.”⁴

These fragments represent a recurring warning in the news reporting about the retirement age^(12, 66, 113). Several specialists get framing power to argue for an expanded labor market. They claim it is essential that the elderly remain economically active, through (i) additional incentives and job opportunities for older employees, and (ii) the decrease of early retirement programs. In other words, the newspapers fully support the new government decision to increase the retirement age, provided that the reduction of the social system for the elderly (i.e., the pension system) is accompanied by an expansion of the economic system (i.e., the labor market).

Two days after the release of the coalition agreement, the labor union organizes its first action at a convention of the Christian democratic party CD&V. On the conference, the members of CD&V must vote for or against government participation^K. The Christian labor union ACV takes this opportunity to protest against the right-wing measures in the coalition agreement. All newspapers write about the protestation,

^K Also the other coalition parties – i.e., the liberal parties MR and Open VLD, and the Flemish Nationalist party N-VA – organize such a conference. Their conferences are part of the news reporting as well^(35, 84, 117). In all three newspapers, the reporting is very positive: the conferences are characterized by unanimity and enthusiasm (with the exception of a few communitarian critiques^{35, 117}).

mentioning on their front pages that the Christian democratic politicians were attacked with “yells”³², “catcalls”⁷⁴, and “merciless” criticism¹¹². However, as is illustrated below, they take a different standpoint. While *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* undermine the protest against the coalition agreement, *De Morgen* presents the labor union as a legitimate counter-voice. There are no real attempts to stimulate a (political-ideological) discussion on (disagreement to) the coalition agreement.

To begin with, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* repeatedly position the protesters in opposition to the conference participants. For example, in their news reporting, both papers minimize the extent of the protest:

*“The [labor union] blockade has no impact on the conference. The atmosphere is good with the seven hundred members present.”*³²

*“CD&V leaders Kris Peeters and Wouter Beke were booed by the ACV friends at the start of the party conference. Nonetheless, CD&V agreed almost unanimously with government participation.”*⁸⁵

In both fragments, the protest outside the conference venue seems insignificant compared to the large enthusiasm inside ^(35, 74, 77). Both newspapers also question the loyalty of the opponents. They distinguish between the sincere CD&V followers (the members inside the conference hall) and the opportunistic protesters (the ACVs outside):

*“The indignant ACV militants haven’t had a CD&V membership card for a while.”*⁷⁷

*“‘If all ACV members voted for CD&V, then the party could weigh more heavily on the negotiations,’ they mock. Another party employee also believes he recognized some Red Communists among the green union troops.”*³⁵

The journalists – respectively editorialist Jan Segers from *Het Laatste Nieuws*, and “the political reporters” from *De Standaard* – state that the protesters are neither members nor voters of CD&V, thereby implying that their criticism is not well founded⁽⁷⁴⁾. In addition, both newspapers create a stark contrast between the emotional, hot-tempered discourse of the opponents, and the substantiated, “inspired”⁷⁴ discourse of the proponents (i.e., the party establishment’s argumentation):

“Catcalls from the Union. Running the gauntlet among the green vests. But that was outside. Inside, in the conference hall, [party leader] Beke received loud applause yesterday. The chairman and his ministers have enough talent, expertise and sense of justice for five years of thorough reforms together with N-VA and Open VLD. [...] They [i.e., the Christian democratic politicians] can't count on gratitude from their left-wing followers, but the children and grandchildren of those green vests will be better off.”⁷⁷

“Displeasure about the content can only be shouted, it seems. Every elected individual or minister is blamed for blasphemy. Sometimes laconic, just as often, insolent. ‘Poor guy’, they say, when one member does not want to take a flyer. One time, an egg flew through the air. The contrast between outside and inside is huge.”³⁵

The attitude of (some) opponents is depicted as rather extreme (e.g., catcalls, throwing an egg) and ignorant (i.e., they are lacking insight at the moment, but their children “will be better off”). The CD&V establishment, on the other hand, is described as having “enough talent, expertise and sense of justice”. In other words, while the protesters are delegitimized as irrational, the party establishment is legitimized as acting rationally and morally.

In *De Morgen*, we get a different image, mainly because of the front-page article ‘They are cheering, but ACW merciless to CD&V establishment’¹¹². In the article, the union delegation is called “extended,” and positioned as a prelude to wider criticism: “the party knows all too well that the last word has not yet been said”¹¹². Moreover, the article suggests that the labor union protest is well-substantiated, by starting off with some strong arguments against the coalition agreement (through framing power for *beweging.net*, the umbrella organization for civil society organizations with a Christian-Democratic background)⁽¹¹⁰⁾. For example, “[a] society in which the economy is more important than the people, in which the people serve the economy, is not the kind of society that *beweging.net* wants”¹¹². So, indirectly, *De Morgen* legitimizes the protest as reasoned and thus, rational. Nevertheless, it presents the action itself as rather extreme (e.g., “especially noisy,” “an egg was thrown”¹¹²).

In summary: This first critical discourse moment (CDM 1) shows that the newspapers share different opinions on the general coalition agreement, the budget plans, and the

first labor union protest. On the one hand, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* are fully behind the new government and its socio-economic intentions. They applaud the right-wing plans of Michel I, convinced that economic growth and a slimmed-down government should be the priority. In that regard, they support the tax reductions (for those who work and companies) and the government cuts. However, they disapprove of any new taxes, especially when these disadvantage economic and financial stakeholders. Nonetheless, overall, both newspapers agree with the budget policy of Michel I; criticism on the new government measures is mostly put aside. *De Morgen*, on the other hand, is more skeptical about the coalition agreement, worried about how it will affect lower middle class families and wage earners. In that regard, the newspaper disapproves of the substantial cuts the coalition has decided upon. Alternatively, it promotes a policy of public investment and more taxes on capital. The newspaper affirms the criticism (of the labor union) of the coalition agreement. Remarkably, all newspapers share the same opinion on the increase in retirement age. Every newspaper supports the coalition's decision, provided that the reduction of the social system for elderly (i.e., pension) is accompanied by an expansion of the economic system (i.e., labor market).

To make their argument, the newspapers use different discursive strategies. At first, all newspapers are politicizing the coalition and its agreement, presenting it as an outspoken ideological project. However, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* limit the (ideological) debate, as they provide so-believed 'objective' reasons to strongly legitimize and naturalize the government plans (i.e., depoliticization). Their discourse suggests that there is only one right way of dealing with socio-economic problems. They present a right-wing approach – that focusses on economic growth – as crucial and urgent. Furthermore, governments cuts are naturalized as inevitable and tax reductions are presented as long-awaited. Additionally, new taxes are delegitimized as misleading and economically counterproductive. The labor union protest (against government cuts) is delegitimized as irrational and positioned in such a way it seems insignificant. Only *De Morgen* sticks to a politicizing discourse in commenting on the coalition's decisions. By linking the coalition agreement and/or alternative measures to an ideological objective, the newspaper encourages discussions about the kind of socio-economic policy we want. For example, in light of the political ideal of the

welfare state, government cuts are delegitimized as irrational while extra taxes on capital are legitimized as rational (i.e., political de/legitimization). In the case of the labor union protest, *De Morgen* makes no reference to ideological objectives. It only legitimates the protest (which is delegitimized in the other news reporting). When it comes to the increase in retirement age, all newspapers make use of the same depoliticizing strategies. Every newspaper legitimates working longer as a rational decision, and even naturalizes it as inevitable. There seems to be no alternative. Resistance to the pension measure is delegitimized as irrational or immoral behavior.

CDM 2: The criticism of Michel I (4-6 November)

The labor unions announce that they will collectively demonstrate against the government policy on November 6. They express strong criticism of the measures of Michel I. Also from the political field, both nationally (i.e., left-wing opposition parties) and internationally (i.e., the European Union), criticism resounds.

This analysis focusses on the reporting that occurred just before the union demonstration¹. For a three-day period, every newspaper report concerning (criticism of or protest against) the socio-economic government policy is selected, yielding a total of 46 newspaper reports. Of these reports, 18 appear in *De Standaard*. They include 12 news articles, with 2 appearing on the front page. Most of the news articles are written by the journalists Christof Vanschoubroek, Dries De Smet, Johan Rasking and Bart Brinckman. Also included is 1 analytical piece by political journalist Peter De Lobel. ‘Senior writers’ Bart Brinckman and Guy Tegenbos each write an editorial on the criticism of the government policy. Finally, the newspaper also publishes 1 interview (with the Minister of Finance) and 2 cartoons (by Lectrr). *Het Laatste Nieuws* publishes 12 newspaper reports on the government policy and the political/social criticism of

¹ A more detailed analysis revealed that the reporting immediately after the demonstration was heavily distorted by the “protest paradigm” – journalistic routines that automatically cast social protest actions in a negative light (e.g., Reul et al., 2016: 3). The focus of the reporting was more on the course of the protest than on the reasons (i.e., substantive discussion on the direction of the socio-economic policy). Therefore, this period was not suitable for this study.

this policy. They include 7 news articles (with 3 appearing on the front page), written by political journalist Dieter Dujardin. In addition, 2 editorials are published, one by political commentator Jan Segers and one by journalist Nadine Van Der Linden. Each day, the in-house cartoonist Erik Meynen draws an applicable cartoon. *De Morgen* publishes 16 relevant newspaper reports. This includes 9 news articles (2 on the front page), most of which are written by political journalist Roel Wauters or ‘chief politics’ Bart Eeckhout. They also write 1 analytical piece together. Furthermore, *De Morgen* publishes only 1 editorial on the issue (written by lead commentator Yves Desmet), as well as 4 opinion pieces and 1 cartoon (by Zak).

	<i>De Standaard</i>	<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	<i>De Morgen</i>
TOTAL: 46	18	12	16
News articles	12	7	9
→ Front page	→ 2	→ 3	→ 2
Analytical pieces	1	-	1
Editorials	2	2	1
Editorial opinion pieces	-	-	-
Interviews	1	-	-
External opinion pieces	-	-	4
Columns	-	-	-
Cartoons	2	3	1

Let us start with the twofold political criticism of the government agreement, which is comprehensively analyzed in the following paragraphs. Based on several studies, the new policy is called into question by the left-wing opposition parties Parti Socialiste (PS) and Partij Van De Arbeid (PVDA), as well as by the European Commission. Whereas *De Standaard* dismisses almost all criticism, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen* (strongly) support the European warning. The left-wing opposition criticism, however, is only taken by heart by *De Morgen*. This reflects the standpoints of the newspapers with regard to the coalition agreement. *De Standaard* adopts a largely positive stance on the (budget-cutting) policy of the government. In contrast, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen* adopt a negative stance. While *De Morgen* denounces the many cuts (by reproducing the left-wing opposition criticism), *Het Laatste Nieuws* expects even more

cuts (through the European warning). All of the newspapers defend their standpoints in terms of (ir)rationality or and (im)morality, usually in order to close the debate (i.e., depoliticization), but occasionally to spark the discussion as well (i.e., cultivation, primarily in *De Morgen*).

A first series of negative evaluations comes from the left-wing opposition parties. More specifically, the Parti Socialiste (PS) calculates that the government measures will cost the average Belgian €336 in purchasing power. In addition, the Partij Van De Arbeid (PVDA) states that the government will affect 20,000 retirees each year by repealing the retirement bonus. *De Morgen* devotes long news articles to both studies^{154, 166}, along with several opinion pieces^{153, 158 – M}. In the news articles, the studies are summarized in detail. Every time, the opposition parties receive extensive framing power to explain the results, while the government only gets a few lines to reply. In addition, journalists Ann De Boeck (for the PS study) and Bart Eeckhout (for the PVDA study) consistently quote some experts, who confirm the statements of the PS and the PVDA in prominent places in the news articles (i.e., leads and highlighted quotations)^N. For example:

“The repeal of the retirement bonus for older employees will affect around 20,000 people each year, as calculated by the radical-left PVDA. The criticism is not coming exclusively from the left. In the past, the authoritative expert committee [led by] Vandenbroucke has also expressed its reservations with regard to the government measure.”¹⁶⁶

“Are we all really getting poorer, as calculated by the PS (DM 11/3)? For the first time since the devaluation in 1982, purchasing power is in danger of a major decline. This is claimed by Professor Peter Scholliers (VUB) [...]”¹⁵⁴

De Morgen seems to be aware that the studies can be easily put aside as partial (e.g., by claiming that the criticism would come “exclusively from the left”). It counters this

^M In the original analysis of this chapter, which included an additional day (i.e., November 3, 2014), the publication pattern of *De Morgen* was much more remarkable. Indeed, on November 3, *De Morgen* made the PS study front-page news and published another extensive news article on the study (respectively: De Boeck A., Michel I costs each Belgian €336 per year, *De Morgen*, November 3, p1.; De Boeck A., How we all will have to downgrade, November 3, p5.).

^N *De Morgen* nevertheless publishes the skeptical opinion piece ‘€336? If that is all’¹⁵³ by the entrepreneurs’ platform VKW. One day later, however, a counter-reaction appears in the form of the opinion piece entitled “ ‘Economists make their calculations, and I make mine’¹⁵⁸. This piece confirms the PS criticism.

with explicit quotations from specialists. Their authority (i.e., “the authoritative expert committee,” “Professor”) makes the studies appear independent and reliable. In this way, the criticism in the studies is legitimized and a debate on the government measures is provoked. In other words, *De Morgen* encourages a debate on the policy by impeding the exclusion of critical voices (i.e., cultivation).

In contrast to *De Morgen*, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* hardly report on these studies: The PVDA study is never mentioned, and the PS study appears to be a side issue. For example, *De Standaard* only discusses the PS criticism in the margins of a full-page analytical piece on the union demonstration¹²² and in the margins of a long interview with the Minister of Finance^{130 (125)} – both times on page 11. *Het Laatste Nieuws* mentions the PS study only very briefly in its extensive editorial on the EU¹⁴². Remarkably: all of these pieces sketch a negative image of the PS as a party. It is criticized for not having made budget cuts in the past (e.g., “[t]he previous government did not make an effort, for fear that voters would penalize them for what was perceived as a ruthless policy”¹⁴²). Or, it is criticized for exaggerating its current opposition role (e.g., “PS never misses an opportunity to lash out at the federal majority”¹²²). As a result, one tends to be skeptical of the PS study. It is written off as hypocritical (e.g., “to be sure, €336 is approximately the same amount that the previous coalition has overpaid this year for each average Belgian”^{142 (130)}). Or, as a gratuitous opposition (e.g., “[t]hey did this even before [the government] was formed, and they are doing it now, with even more fury and numbers”¹²²). In other words, these ‘off-topic’ news reports position the PS within a negative context, directly undermining its study. It is furthermore interesting to note how, in its actual articles on the PS study (which appear in the margins), *De Standaard* continuously assigns extensive framing power to the government, in the person of the Minister of Finance^{123, 131}. The minister delegitimizes the PS study as erroneous (i.e., “at first glance, many errors”¹²³) and selective (e.g., “short-sighted”^{123 (131)}). His arguments are used as a headline¹³¹ or as a highlighted quotation¹²³. The journalists also confirm the selectivity of the study (i.e., “in its analysis, the PS discussed the impact of the measures on those with middle and high incomes, but not on those with low incomes”¹³¹). The criticism by the left-wing opposition thus receives hardly any resonance in *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*. However, this does not necessarily indicate that both newspapers actually

support the government policy. *De Standaard*, on its part, does support the measures via extensive framing power for the Minister of Finance. *Het Laatste Nieuws*, on the other hand, expresses disappointment in its editorial¹⁴²:

*“As a journalist, [Minister of Finance] Van Overtveldt professionally pulled [the PS government of] Di Rupo to pieces [...] Although 2015 has not even started, Van Overtveldt is looking at a billion-euro deficit himself. A different government, the same exasperating habits.”*¹⁴²

For the editorialist, political commentator Jan Segers, government policies can never succeed unless the government keeps its budget strictly under control (see also below).

Not only the left-wing opposition parties have doubts about the government policy, so does the European Commission. It fears that the harsh budget-cutting measures will discourage consumption, impede economic growth, and ultimately feed the Belgian budget deficit. This criticism of the government policy receives support in *De Morgen*¹⁵⁶, as well as in *Het Laatste Nieuws*^{142, 143}. The latter even publishes an editorial about the negative European evaluation¹⁴². In this piece, Jan Segers confirms that the Belgian budget is under pressure (i.e., a government deficit of 3%). To prevent readers from “shrugging their shoulders in indifference” and thus having no debate on the issue, he presents the European criticism as completely justified. Using hard statistics (e.g., “3%, that represents a deficit of nearly 12 billion”), a pessimistic view of the future (i.e., “billions that we must borrow and thus eventually repay”), and comparison to other countries (e.g., “clearly higher than the average for the Eurozone”), he confirms the undesirability of a large government deficit. *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen* also both publish a news article on the criticism of the European Commission^{143, 156}. In these articles, they assign (prominent^o) framing power to various experts. These experts confirm the risk of a lack of economic growth (e.g., “in time, this lack of growth will indeed matter, says [economist] Peersman”^{156 (143)}), such that the European criticism seems justified. The two newspapers thus open the

^o In *Het Laatste Nieuws*, the discourse of the “budget expert” is incorporated into the headline, lead, and a highlighted quotation¹⁴³. In *De Morgen*, however, framing power is usually assigned to the Minister of Finance (e.g., the headline ‘Poor statistics are an “asset” to the government’)¹⁵⁶. It is only in the second part of the article that the journalist gives the floor to two specialists, who refute the minister’s optimism.

debate by explicitly legitimizing a critical voice, which could have easily been neglected (i.e., cultivating). It is interesting to note, however, that they foresee different solutions. *De Morgen*, on its part, quotes an expert who predicts the introduction of a capital gains tax (i.e., “[t]hen we will see that those who are now being affected will demand that it should be collected from those for whom it would be less of a problem – for example, large asset holders”¹⁵⁶). *Het Laatste Nieuws* journalist Katrien Stragier, on the other hand, claims that only additional cuts can be expected: “More cuts are thus looming [since] Van Overtveldt would avoid more taxes”¹⁴³.

In *De Standaard*, the EU report is discussed in a long news article (by foreign affairs journalist and ‘news manager’ Bart Beirlant)¹³², in the interview with the Minister of Finance (by journalists Christof Vanshoubroek and Dries De Smet)¹³⁰, and in one editorial (by ‘senior writer’ Bart Brinckman)¹²⁶. Various actors (i.e., an expert, the authorized European commissioner, and Minister Van Overtveldt) get the opportunity to interpret the EU figures. Nonetheless, the framing is mostly set by the journalists themselves. They acknowledge but minimize the negative statistics. They furthermore weaken the criticism of the government policy through the comparison to other countries. For example, the pessimistic growth statistics are presented as fitting within a European trend (e.g., subtitle ‘Belgium is the poor relative in poor Europe’¹²⁶). And the editorial states that “countries that have put their budgets in order will first [hit] bottom and then demonstrate stronger growth rates”¹²⁶. The news article clarifies which are the countries concerned:

“The report by the European commission nevertheless gives the Michel government some arguments to defend its policy, which focusses on the recovery of the competitive power of companies. Spain, Greece, and Ireland, which have taken structural measures in recent years because they were standing with their backs against the wall, will see considerable growth in 2015. [...] ‘Countries in which few or no reforms have been enacted, like France and Italy, continue to muddle along,’ according to Koen De Leus [economist at KBC].”¹³²

The news article thus (implicitly) defends the policy of Michel I by positioning it within a context of “good” and “bad” countries. The heavy reforms and cuts would correspond to the policies in Spain, Greece, and Ireland – countries that will “see considerable growth.” An alternative policy is then discouraged through references to

France and Italy – countries that, according to an expert, “continue to muddle along.” Within this context, the government policy appears to be a wise choice for the long-term. This is not to say that there is no room for improvement. For example, *De Standaard* argues for “additional measures” to get the budget in order (or to do so more quickly)^{130 (132)}. In this regard, the journalists suggest a capital gains tax (e.g., “[f]or example, the government does not realize the ever so necessary tax shift in which labor is taxed less, while capital and environmental pollution are taxed more heavily”¹²⁶, “[o]nce again, no proper fiscal reform is in the works”¹³⁰).

In the run-up to the demonstration, the three newspapers obviously report on the union plans. Several news reports are published each day. These reports concern the expected turnout^(133, 145, 155), the feared (traffic) disruption^(124, 149, 165), and especially the relevance of the union action^(125, 136, 140, 146, 152, 162). As I show below, the newspapers’ opinions are sharply divided about that last point; each has a different story to tell^P. While *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* present the union action as irrelevant, closing the debate on the government policy (i.e., depoliticization), *De Morgen* defends the protest as relevant and opens the debate (i.e., politicization and cultivation).

On the one hand, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* proclaim a message similar to that of the government. The government naturalizes the coalition agreement as inevitable and necessary: “[t]here is truly no alternative,” reads the headline for the interview with the Minister of Finance¹²⁶. This ‘there is no alternative (TINA)’ message is incorporated into the editorials of both newspapers:

*“Hopefully, the demonstrators realize that sacrifices are necessary. Given the higher life expectancy, the only way to guarantee our social security system for the future is to work longer. Structural measures cannot be avoided.”*¹²⁶

*“Nevertheless, the solidarity that the unions are forcing today is not deeply rooted in all of the people that they claim to represent. People who also do not enjoy their increased contributions, but who are not blind to government deficits and European regulations. Parents who look at the youth unemployment in Greece and think: ‘never, not for our children.’”*¹⁴⁶

^P The difference in preferences is particularly striking in the analytical pieces and op-eds. In the general news reporting, however, the differences are more subtle, in part because all of the newspapers make sure that framing power is assigned to both proponents and opponents of the union actions^(133, 148, 157).

In the first editorial fragment, *De Standaard* 'senior writer' Bart Brinckman tries to convince the demonstrators that their resistance is futile. He presents the coalition measures, like working longer, as "necessary" and inevitable⁹. In the second editorial fragment, *Het Laatste Nieuws* journalist Nadine Van Der Linden warns that the demonstrators are "blind" to the harsh reality. In this regard, Van Der Linden refers to possible European sanctions (for government deficits) and the dramatic youth unemployment in Greece. The editorials thus argue that there is no alternative to the current policy stance, which would make the union opposition irrelevant⁽¹⁴⁸⁾. In (the editorials of) *Het Laatste Nieuws*, the union protest is undermined even further. First, the union demands are delegitimized as irrational. They are presented as being unrealistic and insufficiently grounded: the union is asking for "money that is no longer there," without "showing where it can – fairly – be found"¹⁴⁶. Second, the union action is delegitimized as immoral. The union would react selfishly (i.e., "[a]sk not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country"¹⁴⁶), mortgaging the next generation (i.e., if "you are going to protest tomorrow because you feel that the government [...] are treating you too harshly, your children will pay the price"¹⁴²). Third, the actions are presented as having no broad support from the public. For example, in the lead of his article, political journalist Dieter Dujardin underrates the expected turnout for the demonstrations: "Can we still ignore the resistance? A poll by VTM seems to suggest that we can"¹⁴⁸. The poll would indicate "that 6 of every 10 Flemish people do not support the demonstration"¹⁴⁸. Finally, in the run-up to the union demonstration, in-house cartoonist Zak draws several cartoons reflecting the futility of the action (i.e., N-VA chairman Bart De Wever, who is the so-called 'mother-in-law' of the government, prohibits any concession to the policy in each cartoon)^{140, 144, 147}. *De Standaard* also argues that the unions fall short in their criticism. For example, it uses the statement "Unions' reasoning is short-sighted" of the Minister of Finance as a front-page headline¹²⁵. A highlighted quotation in the article clarifies the statement: "The unions are emphasizing only what has to be given up"¹²⁵. A cartoon by Lectr illustrates this short-sightedness: a beer-drinking, unemployed man accuses

⁹ In contradiction, Brinckman also writes in his editorial that we should abandon "the notion that there is no alternative at all"¹²⁶. He is then referring to a capital gains tax as an additional measure, in response to the European report (see above).

the government of being anti-social, without looking inwards¹³⁵. Remarkably: ‘senior writer’ Guy Tegenbos accuses both the unions and the employers’ organizations of a narrow-minded and one-sided vision in his editorial entitled ‘Display of power is overshadowing the talks’¹³⁴:

“Apparently, the conflict must be stirred up; apparently, power must be displayed [...]. Public opinion must be conquered with strongly judgmental language. We, employees and civil servants, retirees and benefit recipients, are screwed. We are being bled dry. Only we will pay the bill – not the rich, not the self-employed, not the companies. They must all be convinced of this, just as much as the self-employed, the employers, and the hard-working two-income families were convinced during the previous administrative period that they were being screwed and plucked by the Di Rupo government. Consultation will be out of the question for a long time to come.”¹³⁴

According to Tegenbos, both pressure groups are degenerating into a provocative (e.g., “conflict must be stirred up”) and polarizing discourse (i.e., a comprehensive us-versus-them argument)^(133, 136). For example, the unions would portray themselves as the only victims of the Michel I policy (e.g., “[o]nly we will pay the bill”). Employers would have proclaimed a similar message with regard to the policy of the previous government (e.g., “bled dry by the Di Rupo administration”). Tegenbos undermines their discourse by arguing that it concerns propaganda (i.e., “[p]ublic opinion must be conquered”), and thus no objective conclusions (see also: “creative math and picturesque exaggerations”¹³⁶). This would obstruct the discussions on policy reforms (i.e., consultation is “out of the question;” see also: “unions and employers are no longer succeeding in stretching their own boundaries”¹³⁴). For this reason, Tegenbos concludes that *“these pressure groups must let the politicians decide. [...] Those who always say ‘no’ and who are unable to stretch their own boundaries should restrict themselves to changing some minor details after the fact”*¹³⁴. In other words, the government policy is once again presented as irrevocable, and fundamental protest is presented as futile⁽¹²⁵⁾.

An entirely different story appears in *De Morgen*, and particularly in the editorial entitled ‘TINA’ by opinionated editor-in-chief Yves Desmet¹⁶¹. First, the union criticism is not regarded as short-sighted, but grounded. Desmet confirms that the Michel government “chooses” measures that are in the benefit of the employers and

to the detriment of employees: “[w]hat we surely can predict is that companies will book fewer costs and more profits,” “for 95% of the measures they look in the wallets of those who are working and earning wages”^{161 (163)}. Second, Desmet delegitimizes the government’s TINA reply to the union protest:

“According to the N-VA-minister Johan Van Overtveldt, [...] the union protest against his administration [is] useless and short-sighted: there is absolutely no alternative to this policy [...]. The TINA argument, ‘there is no alternative,’ is completely ridiculous. This government is not carrying out an irresistible natural law; it is making ideological choices. It can, of course, do so; it is democratically legitimized to act as such. However, it must stop claiming that this policy is a purely objective and value-free necessity. In the choice of how much to cut or from whom efforts will and will not be requested remains an obvious political preference. Again, this is their right, but they should be honest about it.”¹⁶¹

Desmet begins by revealing the government’s naturalizing discourse (i.e., exposure). He labels the Minister of Finance’s reply as literally a “TINA argument” (e.g., “there is no alternative,” an “irresistible natural law”). He then delegitimizes such discourse as “completely ridiculous.” According to Desmet, the government should simply acknowledge that its policy has emerged from “ideological choices” and “an obvious political preference,” which is its “right,” as it has been “democratically legitimized.” In other words, Desmet politicizes the (socio-economic) policy and calls on the government to do the same. In this way, he opens the debate. Third, Desmet emphasizes that there are strong political alternatives (i.e., political legitimization):

“Of course there are alternatives: one could choose to make somewhat fewer cuts and invest somewhat more, as proposed by such economists as Paul De Grauwe and Paul Krugman – not exactly known for being union leaders. One could try to replace the offensive, unequal approach of [those who get their] income through labor and [those who get their] income through owning capital by a more fair approach [...]. [T]his is not what the unions are saying, but what is stated by the IMF, the OECD and Professor Thomas Piketty in this year’s most important standard economic work.”¹⁶¹

Desmet suggests investments (instead of cuts) and additional taxes on capital. Aware that these measures are usually dismissed as typical union proposals, he explicitly links them to well-known economists or authorities (“not immediately known for being

union leaders”). Through the authority of these specialists, he legitimizes the measures as a valid alternative, stimulating not only a technical (i.e., cultivation) but most importantly a political discussion (i.e., political legitimization). “*Everyone [has] the right to argue for those [alternatives]. Even the people wearing green and red plastic vests [...],*” Desmet concludes¹⁶¹. The interference of the unions is also legitimized elsewhere in the newspaper. For example, in the front-page article ‘Secret conversations between the premier and the unions’¹⁵² by political journalist Roel Wauters. In the lead paragraph, Wauters writes that “Premier Charles Michel (MR) [is] willing to make concessions to the unions”¹⁵². It means that the union protest does have an effect and that it is thus indeed relevant. Together with ‘chief politics’ Bart Eeckhout, he repeats this in the analytical piece entitled ‘Shouting enables talks’^{162 (160)}. More specifically, they refers to the protest against the previous government: “[t]he 2011 protest against Di Rupo was also successful [because] many sharp edges were smoothed over after consultation with the unions”¹⁶². In addition, the journalists demonstrate their confidence in the consultation between employers’ organizations and unions: “[g]reat, formal agreements may thus be difficult, but discussion is taking place”¹⁶². They present the “anger” of the organizations as purely strategic (e.g., “[b]oth sides are showing their teeth, in order to demonstrate that they are serious when they come to the table”; “window dressing”¹⁶²). In this manner, *De Morgen* defends the interventions of the union (and employers) in the socio-economic policy.

In summary: In this second critical discourse moment (CDM 2), we see how the newspapers adopt different standpoints. *De Standaard* remains a firm supporter of the Michel I coalition agreement. The newspaper highlights the benefits and necessity of the (budget-cutting) policy, in part by assigning extensive framing power to the Minister of Finance. It is reluctant when it comes to criticism of the government policy from political sources (like the EU, but especially the left-wing opposition parties), and very negative toward protest from civil society (like employers’ organizations, but primarily unions). *De Morgen* calls for additional taxes on capital as a replacement for the current measures. The newspaper does not agree with either the policy or the communication of the Michel government. It therefore aligns itself with the criticism from the left-wing opposition (by assigning framing power to the parties and experts)

and the union protest. Finally, *Het Laatste Nieuws* is mostly concerned with government cuts and economic growth (i.e., hierarchy of values). From this mindset, it supports the criticism of the European Commission, but not the protest of the left-wing opposition parties and the unions (who openly denounce the cuts). In the latter case, the newspaper stands behind the current government agreement.

The newspapers draw on a variety of discursive strategies to defend their standpoints. *De Standaard* adopts a primarily depoliticizing discourse and discourages (political) discussion about the government policy. To start, the criticism from the PS and the EU is positioned within a specific context (e.g., historical or international comparison) and indirectly undermined. In addition, the unions (and employers) are explicitly delegitimized as irrational and irrelevant. The newspaper naturalizes the government policy as inevitable. *Het Laatste Nieuws* does the same with regard to the union protest: it delegitimizes the action as irrational and immoral, arguing that there is no decent alternative to the current policy. In this way, it closes the debate. With regard to the EU warning, however, the newspaper stimulates debate by explicitly legitimizing the criticism as justified. In a similar manner, *De Morgen* explicitly legitimizes the arguments of left-wing opposition parties and unions, in order to prevent their exclusion and guaranteeing the debate. Both of these newspapers thus adopt a cultivating discourse. *De Morgen* also engages in politicization. Its presentation of the government agreement as a justified issue of ideological choices (exposing depoliticization) encourages political-ideological debate concerning the policy and the union statements.

Conclusion

Newspapers: Ideological cultures

The reporting on (the criticism of) the Michel I government agreement shows that *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* write from within the same ideological culture. They defend neoliberal interpretations, drawing largely on a depoliticizing discourse. These

two newspapers attach considerable importance to economic growth and a slimmed-down government. They naturalize government cuts, tax reductions, and working longer, while delegitimizing new taxes. From this mindset, the two newspapers support the government policy from the start – also as an ideological project (i.e., political legitimization) – and they reject the (union) criticism against it. In this way, they impede any debate on the desirable socio-economic policy. As time passes, *De Standaard* continues to defend the policy of Michel I, while *Het Laatste Nieuws* would like for the government to devote even stronger efforts to government cuts and economic growth. To the latter, these neoliberal ideals are of fundamental importance (i.e., hierarchy of values).

De Morgen writes from a different ideological culture about (the criticism of) the Michel I government agreement. The newspaper defends a social-democratic vision, drawing largely on a cultivating or politicized discourse. The newspaper clings to the ideal of the (Keynesian) welfare state. From this mindset, it delegitimizes the planned cuts and calls for more government investments and more taxes on capital. It encourages debate on the socio-economic policy through (i) revealing depoliticization in the coalition discourse (i.e., exposure), and (ii) explicitly presenting policy as a matter of ideological choices and/or linking it to political ideals and interests (i.e., politicization). In addition, it ensures that critical voices cannot be brushed aside by explicitly legitimizing them (i.e., cultivation). With regard to raising the retirement age, however, the *De Morgen* lapses into depoliticization itself: working longer is naturalized as inevitable.

Newspaper landscape: Ideological debate

From this analysis of *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen*, we can conclude that the newspaper debate on the Michel I government agreement (and the criticism against it) is rather diverse, but not very pluralistic. It is rather diverse in the sense that *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen* (re)present differing standpoints with regard to the general and budgetary policy of the new government,

as well as with regard to the criticism against it. This diversity of standpoints does not occur, however, in the reporting on the retirement age: all of the newspapers defend the government decision. It is not very pluralistic, as the newspapers do little or nothing to invite (political) debate on the socio-economic policy. The standpoints are discussed primarily in terms of right/wrong or presented as inevitable. This is particularly the case with regard to raising the retirement age. Only *De Morgen* encourages (political) debate on the coalition's general and budgetary policy. Briefly stated, at the time of the Michel I government agreement, the newspaper landscape often presents opposing standpoints, although it seldom encourages any broad (political-ideological) debate.

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DISCUSSION

The ambition of this doctoral project was twofold. First, I aimed to expand the academic debate on media pluralism, taking into account the element of ideological contestation, both theoretically and analytically. This goal has been achieved in the first part of my doctoral thesis. Here, I included three theoretical papers which built up to the development of the framework of agonistic media pluralism. In a fourth methodological chapter, I expanded on the method and practical steps of the framework. The framework allows for a systematic and transparent evaluation of ideological media pluralism in a specific media landscape. Both the scope and form of media coverage are analyzed to determine whether an outlet primarily closes or opens a debate on the issue at stake.

My second ambition then was to put theory into practice and analyze ideological (i.e., agonistic) media pluralism in Flanders, the northern part of Belgium. I chose to do so from a historical perspective. More specifically, I wanted to analyze possible changes in ideological media pluralism with regard to the very gradual transition from a partisan – ‘pillarized’ – press to a commercialized newspaper market. Whereas the newspapers used to belong to three political-ideological pillars, they are now part of two commercial media groups. Although this structural transition is characteristic of the Flemish newspaper landscape, it has rarely been the subject of longitudinal content analyses on media diversity and pluralism (e.g., Distelmans, 1999; Van Aelst, 2006; Beckers et al., 2017). In fact, so far, there have been no attempts to analyze the possible effects on the ideological scope and form of news coverage. We simply do not know whether and how this has impacted ideological media pluralism.

Because of its ambitious and explorative nature, my longitudinal analysis was limited to three newspapers: *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, and *Vooruit/De Morgen*. Each has different ideological origins (i.e., belonging to the catholic, liberal and socialist pillar, respectively) and can be regarded as a main generalist newspaper in Flanders

today. Furthermore, the analysis was limited to one theme: socio-economic policy reforms. Five comparable cases were selected. All dealt with coverage about large (protests against) austerity plans. More specifically, I looked at the Unitary Law (1960), the Egmont Plan (1977), the Global Plan (1993), the Generation Pact (2005), and the coalition agreement of Michel I (2014).

In the following part, I first compare the results of the five case studies in terms of scope and in terms of form of media discourse, or put differently, in terms of diversity and in terms of pluralism. Second, I reflect on three factors that might explain my findings: the process of media de-pillarization, the influence of a neoliberal worldview, and the journalistic culture of newspapers. Lastly, I propose some future research avenues.

Results

First, regarding the scope of news coverage, I can conclude that changes have taken place with regard to media diversity. However, it does not concern a linear evolution.

Most diversity in news coverage on socio-economic policy has been found in the cases of 1960 and 1977, when the newspaper landscape was still largely pillarized. In those cases, there was a clear distinction between the standpoints of *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* on the one hand, and the standpoints of *Vooruit* (predecessor of *De Morgen*) on the other. Without exception, they (re)presented different actors and opinions. In doing so, different worldviews were promoted: liberalism and socialism/social democracy, respectively. *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* consistently advocated government cuts and argued against extra taxes. In other words, public cutbacks were (always) preferred over private contributions; the government should (always) slim down. In that sense, those austerity programs were wanted – wishing for even more cutbacks and less taxes than the governments agreed on – and, furthermore, any form of critique or protest was disapproved. Contrarily, *Vooruit* supported all protests against government austerity programs. The newspaper campaigned for more public interventions and expenses, funded through extra taxes

on private capital. It expected the government to play an active role in the organization of the economy.

Less diversity has been found in the case of 1993, right after the newspaper landscape had formally de-pillarized, and in 2014, the most recent case. While the outlets continued to (re)present differing opinions on some issues, the same message was spread on others. In 1993, the coverage of *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* was still very different from that of *De Morgen* (successor of *Vooruit*). Whereas the former advocated a neoliberal policy with more government cuts instead of taxes¹, the latter argued for a social democratic policy of government initiatives. Regardless their differing ideological perspectives, however, all of the newspapers called for an end to the labor union protests against the government program, thereby limiting news coverage to only one viewpoint in that regard. Also in 2014, the coverage of *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* was somewhat different from that of *De Morgen*. The first two defended neoliberal measures such as government cuts and lower taxes, while the latter argued for a social democratic investment policy with extra taxes on big capital instead. With regard to employment, however, all three of the newspapers supported the government decision to raise the retirement age, cutting down government expenses by extending people's activities on the job market.

Hardly any diversity has been found in the case of 2005. All of the newspapers defended the ideal of an 'active welfare state'. This was the Belgian variant of 'Third Way' politics, which sought a middle ground between neoliberalism and social democracy, mainly by linking social rights to strict individual obligations (Brepoels, 2015; De Preter, 2016). In particular, all agreed on the end-of-career-arrangement, in which the age for early retirement benefits was raised. Only with regard to some budget measures, the *Standaard* disagreed with *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *De Morgen*. The fact that the former liberal newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* and the former socialist newspaper *De Morgen* took the same stance, was nonetheless remarkable. In general,

¹ Although *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* shared the same preferences – both advocated public cutbacks instead of private contributions – they were found to set different priorities (i.e., so-called 'hierarchy of values'). *De Standaard* valued reaching actual government decisions and agreements over relentlessly pursuing the ideal of a strict austerity policy (while remaining critical about the lack of sufficient government cuts and the imposition of additional taxes at the same time). Contrarily, for *Het Laatste Nieuws*, more government cutbacks and tax reductions remained of fundamental value. This was also the case in 2014.

the case of 2005 showed such a significant similarity between the standpoints of all newspapers, that I dare to speak of media uniformity (cfr. chapter 3).

Second, regarding the form of news coverage, I can conclude that the Flemish press has been characterized by a constantly low level of ideological (i.e., agonistic) media pluralism. Both in a pillarized and in a commercialized newspaper landscape, there has been little effort to stimulate (political-ideological) debate on the socio-economic organization of society.

Little ideological debate was facilitated in the cases of 1960 and 1977, when the newspaper landscape was largely pillarized. All three of the newspapers predominantly relied on depoliticizing discursive strategies, closing the debate and rejecting (ideological) alternatives. For example, in *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*², government cuts were naturalized as inevitable, and more government expenditures were delegitimized as irrational. Everything that went against a more liberal policy – both in terms of government measures and union claims – was excluded as irrational or immoral. *Vooruit*, on its part, delegitimized austerity plans as immoral and unacceptable, while socialist (union) opposition and alternatives were legitimized as popular and essential. Nonetheless, every now and then, *Vooruit* was found to use politicizing strategies as well. More specifically, the newspaper linked particular claims and actions to the interests and beliefs of particular socio-political groups (i.e., workers versus capital) or to ideological worldviews (e.g., liberal). This strategy of political positioning, however, was mostly used to further delegitimize certain policy proposals or plans as unacceptable. In that sense, the political reference did not serve as a catalyst for ideological debate, but actually reinforced ideological boundaries³. The result was not politicization, but polarization; antagonism instead of agonism.

² In the case of 1977, *Het Laatste Nieuws* (only) very exceptionally used a strategy of political positioning as well, linking actors or policy to particular ideological worldviews. However, similar to *Vooruit* (see further), it did not lead to more ideological debate, but to a stronger delegitimization. Moreover, in contrast to *Vooruit*, these examples of politicization were too sporadic to consider them as characteristic for the coverage of *Het Laatste Nieuws* in 1977.

³ Only a couple of times, when *Vooruit* was promoting the union proposal of reducing working hours as an alternative employment policy in 1977, there has been a call to open up the debate and include (a) different ideological view(s). It stands as the sole exception and, thus, is uncharacteristic for the coverage of *Vooruit* in 1960 and 1977.

Little ideological debate was facilitated in the cases of 1993 and 2014 as well. Both right after the newspaper landscape had de-pillarized (1993) and more recently (2014), the press was mainly found to impede (ideological) debate. *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* – the two largest newspapers in terms of readership – consistently used depoliticizing strategies⁴, implying that there was only one right way of dealing with socio-economic problems. For example, government cuts and tax reductions were naturalized as necessary and inevitable, just like raising the retirement age. Elements that clashed with their ideal of a down-sized government – like new taxes, union opposition, or political criticism – were then delegitimized as irrational or presented as insignificant. Also *De Morgen* (successor of *Vooruit*) used depoliticizing strategies, delegitimizing government measures as immoral and persistent union protests as irrational, or naturalizing an increase in retirement age as inevitable. However, quite often, *De Morgen* was found to use politicizing strategies as well. It frequently positioned government policies in relation to the interests of opposing socio-political groups (i.e., employees and beneficiaries versus employers) and/or presented it as matter of political-ideological worldviews (e.g., neoliberal, Keynesian, welfare state). Then, it called upon the government to reconsider its policy or upon the unions to raise their voice. In other words, it advocated debate, change, or compensation measures. Sure, *De Morgen* was found to pick a side, legitimizing social democratic standpoints and delegitimizing (neo)liberal measures, but not to the extent that certain actors or demands were excluded from the debate. Instead of a complete dismissal, *De Morgen* argued for a democratic shift. To support alternative viewpoints, a cultivating discourse was sometimes used as well, relying on ‘objective’ (mostly rational) arguments instead of ideological ones.

No (ideological) debate was facilitated by any of the newspapers in the case of 2005. All three limited themselves to a depoliticizing discourse. The end-of-career arrangement and the full government agreement were naturalized as necessary, or legitimized as rational and moral. Union opposition against the government plans was

⁴ Only after the government agreement of Michel I was announced in 2014, they briefly politicized the agreement as an outspoken ideological project. However, they quickly returned to a depoliticizing discourse, naturalizing the government plans as inevitable.

simply dismissed. In other words, neither of these newspapers considered the government plans worthy of a democratic debate, and instead chose to promote them.

In summary, for the past half a century, during pivotal moments regarding socio-economic policy, the Flemish newspaper landscape has not been found stimulating a broad discussion on the socio-economic organization of our society. Although diverse socio-economic standpoints were often provided, they were rarely presented as debatable and/or ideological. Both pillarized and de-pillarized/commercialized newspapers mainly seemed to make use of a depoliticizing discourse, closing the space for disagreement. This was particularly the case for the two largest newspapers, *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*, and for the reporting on the Generation Pact (2005). Only *Vooruit/De Morgen* sometimes pointed out the role of ideology and/or the need for debate (the latter nonetheless being ruled out in pillarized times). Apart from that, there has been no room for agonistic media pluralism in the Flemish newspaper landscape over the past fifty years.

Reflection

These results from my longitudinal content analysis imply that the structural transition from a pillarized to a commercialized newspaper landscape cannot be seen as a decisive factor with regard to agonistic (i.e., ideological) media pluralism. To begin with, the analyzed decline in diversity did not match the linear trend of de-pillarization/commercialization. I indeed found that the pillarized press provided more diverse opinions than the de-pillarized press. However, not the most recent case (i.e., 2014), but an in-between case (i.e., 2005) served as the all-time low. Furthermore, I did *not* find a significant difference between the pillarized and the de-pillarized newspaper landscape with regard to facilitating (ideological) debate. In both situations, politicization was limited to a number of pieces in just one – smaller – newspaper. Thus, although it might sound counterintuitive, in times of pillarization, the newspaper landscape did not provide more explicit ideological coverage – and definitely not more debate (but polarization instead). In sum, the structural element

of media de-pillarization cannot be used as an explanation for the low level of agonistic media pluralism in Flemish newspaper coverage on socio-economic policy. Therefore, I look at two other factors that might have an influence on the scope and form of news coverage, one external and one internal⁵.

First, when focusing on the absence of ideological debate, the worldview newspapers (re)produce seems to be an important factor.

On the one hand, there is the remarkably consistent reporting of *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*. In all cases, the two newspapers have been found to advocate neo/liberal socio-economic policies, such as tax reductions, government cuts, and working longer to limit pension costs. They predominantly did so by using a depoliticizing discourse, eliminating the notion of ideology and the possibility of alternatives. Even in 1960, when they were still organized as partisan newspapers, liberal measures were already defended as seemingly a-political.

On the other hand, there are some interesting changes in the reporting of *Vooruit/De Morgen*. As long as the newspaper defended socialist or social-democratic standpoints, it was referring to ideological interests and/or values – even though, at times, it just contributed to a further delegitimization and the closure of debate (i.e., 1960 and 1977). However, when *De Morgen* promoted ‘Third Way’ politics – a variant of neoliberalism that was accepted by social democrats, and vice versa (Brepoels, 2015) – it was using depoliticizing strategies. Especially decisions on working longer and postponing the retirement age were presented as inevitable and “not ideological,” both in 2005 and in 2014. My analysis thus suggests that the more newspapers support neo/liberal policies, the more they ban the elements of choice and ideology from their discourse, and the less they allow for reflections on the way society is organized socio-

⁵ Other factors were considered as well, like the composition of the government, ideological hegemony, or newspaper ownership. However, because of some apparent counter-examples, these factors could not be seen as decisive. First, being part of the opposition seems no requirement for politicization (e.g., *De Morgen* in 1993: politicizing when the socialists were in power). Second, politicization seems not restricted to a counter-hegemonic worldview (e.g., *De Morgen* in 1977: politicizing when social democracy was the dominant ideology). Third, a change in ownership does not seem to imply a change in coverage (e.g., *De Morgen* in 1993: still defending the same social democratic standpoints as before it was obtained by De Persgroep).

economically. In other words, the neo/liberal ideological project seems to rely on, or at least benefit from, seemingly ‘a-political’ or ‘impartial’ media discourses.

Second, when focusing on the few instances in which (ideological) debate is facilitated, the journalistic culture of news outlets seems to be an important factor. Over the decades, and in line with the structural trend of de-pillarization, Flemish newspapers have shifted from a partisan way of reporting to a so-called ‘professionalized’ journalistic culture (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005; De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010). Newspapers longer (cl)aimed to be political opinionators, but ‘objective’ information providers and ‘neutral’ watchdogs. Therefore, reporting was no longer allowed to be overtly ideological and clashing, but had to be ‘impartial’, ‘balanced’ and ‘de-idealized’. Whereas *De Standaard* allegedly adopted such a professionalized culture quite early on and already demanded ‘objectivity’ from its journalists by the end of the 1960s (Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2005), the journalistic transition in *Vooruit/De Morgen* took much longer⁶.

In the 1960s and a large part of the 1970s, *Vooruit* still operated as a party paper (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010). The newspaper heavily depended on the socialist movement, both economically and content-wise (e.g., editorials). My case studies of 1960 and 1977 show that, as a partisan newspaper, *Vooruit* was capable of identifying political-ideological choices, but not of opening a debate. Its reporting sought for antagonistic clashes and polarization.

In the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, *De Morgen* increasingly presented itself as independent and committed at the same time: an “open, progressive, and non-partisan newspaper” that defended “democratic socialism”⁷ and that “jolted its readers’ conscience” (Vanspauwen, 2002). At that time, *De Morgen* was known for a nonconformist and assertive style of journalism. Also after the newspaper was obtained by a commercial media group in 1989, it reaffirmed its editorial independency and its progressive editorial line (Vanspauwen, 2002). My case study of

⁶ With regard to journalistic culture, I can only refer to *De Standaard* and *Vooruit/De Morgen*, since there is hardly any literature on *Het Laatste Nieuws* (cfr. context of each case).

⁷ The word ‘socialism’ was deleted after its bankruptcy and the split with the socialist party in 1986.

1993 demonstrates that this kind of committed (but independent) journalism of *De Morgen* succeeded in stimulating ideological awareness and opening the debate.

In the second half of the 1990s and the 2000s, *De Morgen* also explicitly claimed to have adopted a professionalized journalistic culture. As a quality newspaper for the “first de-pillarized generation in Flanders” it defined its main goal as providing independent and critical information/analysis, on which basis its readers could form their own opinions (Vanspauwen, 2002). In other words, *De Morgen* now (cl)aimed to adopt a more reserved or ‘objective’ style of reporting, instead of actively and openly campaigning for a particular ideal. It implemented a strict distinction between ‘facts’ and ‘commentary’ (e.g., relocating the editorial to the opinion page). My case study of 2005 shows that this kind of professionalized journalism did not at all stimulate (ideological) debate, similar to the professionalized reporting of *De Standaard* throughout the whole analysis. It only contributed to the depoliticization of neo/liberal policies.

In 2014, *De Morgen* explicitly returned to a form of committed journalism. Under the slogan “More Salmon,” the newspaper actively engaged itself to “a healthy dose of non-conformism,” “like a salmon that goes against the stream” (‘Dit land heeft meer zalm nodig’, 2014). It aimed to include and reflect on alternative viewpoints. My case study of 2014 demonstrates that this kind of committed journalism had the ability to foster (ideological) debate. As such, both the case of 1993 and the case of 2014 suggest that agonistic media pluralism can (only) benefit from a committed, but independent, journalism.

This committed journalistic culture clashes⁸ with the current ideal of professionalized journalism. My analysis has nonetheless shown that the idea of newspapers as neutral information providers is both unrealistic and undesirable with regard to agonistic media pluralism. Unrealistic, because the newspapers were always found to report from one particular worldview, even when they had adopted a professionalized journalistic culture. Undesirable, because this seemingly neutral way of reporting

⁸ For example, in the early 1990s, critics described *De Morgen’s* reporting as “prejudiced,” “fanatic,” “bitter,” and “pushy” (Vanspauwen, 2002: 187, 198).

contributed to the depoliticization of the neoliberal socio-economic project, thereby impeding a public debate about and beyond the current consensus.

Then, how could we describe this committed journalism? In the literature, some scholars refer to it as ‘advocacy journalism’ – although “the term is ill-defined and has come to encompass a broad church of subjective forms of reporting that promote social issues and causes” (Fisher, 2016: 714). In the broadest sense, it refers to the “support or argument in favor of a cause or policy through a work of journalism” (Fisher, 2016: 712). It has been used both negatively, to identify public relations practices or political propaganda (Fisher, 2016), and positively, to identify civic or journalistic practices that try to empower issues or voices that are typically ignored (Waisbord, 2009).

With regard to my doctoral study, it might be interesting to understand advocacy journalism through the work of Rijsselmus (2014). Firstly, Rijsselmus starts from the same normative-theoretical assumptions as I did. The idea of a power-free and consensual society is criticized, just like the idea of power-free journalism and neutral reporting (cfr. chapter 1 and 2). Alternatively, he introduces the philosophy of Chantal Mouffe and argues for a journalism that does not deny, but recognizes the role of power (cfr. chapter 3). Secondly, Rijsselmus explicitly positions advocacy journalism as different from both partisan journalism and professionalized journalism (cfr. my results). On the one hand, advocacy journalism aims to be independent of politics and economy. In that sense, it is different from partisan journalism, but similar to professionalized journalism. On the other hand, advocacy journalism does not aim to be neutral. “Unlike [professionalized] journalism [...], there is an explicit recognition of political interest and a perspective (p332)”. It does not believe in the existence of bare facts: facts and reality exist, but only get meaning through interpretation⁹. Thirdly, whereas my doctoral thesis has put forward a new framework for journalism *research*,

⁹ This view on journalism relates to what Broersma (2010) calls “journalism as a performative discourse”: “events and facts have no intrinsic importance, but simply become important because they have been selected by journalists who adhere to a culturally and ideologically determined set of selection criteria (Broersma, 2010: 25-26)”. It should come with a “reflective style” of journalism, in which reporters do not “hide that the representation of reality that is put forward is theirs, inherently influenced by their values, beliefs, impressions, and experiences (Harbers, 2016: 502)”. See also: constructive journalism, multiperspectival journalism.

Rijssemus suggests a new framework for journalism *practices*. He lists eight rules that advocacy journalists were found follow (p332)¹⁰:

“An advocacy journalist: 1. makes a choice of news based on advocacy – 2. asks questions based on advocacy – 3. is an engaged interpreter of facts that have been checked – 4. emphasizes arguments that are excluded from or minimized in public debate – 5. is an involved participant – 6. critically reveals deeper-lying causes – 7. publishes value-laden facts – 8. uses engaged language.”

Such clear-cut rules do not only support future practices of advocacy journalism, but also future studies. They help to recognize current and past expressions of advocacy journalism, which then can be tested on their ability to, for example, stimulate ideological debate and benefit agonistic media pluralism.

Research

As mentioned before, this doctoral project has been approached as an explorative study and, as such, the reach of my empirical study is limited. To get a better insight on (changes in) agonistic media pluralism and factors that might influence the scope and form of media coverage, more research is absolutely needed.

First, doing a content analysis of different (types of) media might bring new insights. This project has focused on three generalist newspapers, representing the Flemish mainstream newspaper landscape. Adding other newspapers might help to build an even stronger case, or might add more nuance to the findings. Most interesting, however, is the analysis of other types of media, such as alternative news platforms, news satire or even particular products of popular culture. These media have in common that they are often differently organized than professional-commercialized

¹⁰ For more details: Rijssemus, 2014: 333, 219-246 [in Dutch]. Also interesting: Harbers' hands-on tips and tricks for a reflective style of journalism (2016: 501-506).

news media. How do we find variable editorial practices, variable ways of organization, or variable media values and routines, contribute to (ideological) debates in society? Can we find examples of advocacy journalism (e.g., Pepermans & Maesele, 2017; Harbers, 2016)? Or, can we find other journalistic cultures contributing to agonistic media pluralism?

Second, one should look at the other levels of media processes, i.e. production and audience. It would be interesting to learn more about the organizational practices and motivations of media producers. In other words, what is the (journalistic) culture they are subject to? How do they decide on their standpoints and their discourse? Which (professional) routines do they follow? Both interview-based and ethnographic studies can give valuable insights on this matter. Another interesting field of research is the audience (e.g., Pepermans, 2015). How do audiences respond to high versus low levels of media pluralism? Are audience members aware of de/politicizing strategies? How does de/politicization in media coverage influences people's engagement in public debates? Organizing focus-groups, interviews, or surveys can contribute to answering these questions, as well as analyzing online comment threads or evaluating media literacy programs.

Third, research on different themes can lead to different results. For this project, I have chosen to focus on socio-economic reforms. It turned out that *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* share a similar position when it comes to socio-economic policy, whereas *Vooruit/De Morgen* (often) takes another standpoint. However, the newspapers might take different positions when it comes to the environment, communitarian matters, ethical questions (e.g., abortion), etc. This might lead to different levels of media diversity and pluralism.

Fourth, revealing and comparing the extent of media pluralism within and between various regions and countries might help to understand which factors are influential. Do the characteristics of a media market (e.g., strong public broadcaster), a political system, or media policies have an impact? What is the role of specific social/media organizations and individuals?

Last, by analyzing different moments in time we can get a clearer view on evolutions in media pluralism. Before this doctoral project, I already conducted some analyses on ideological debate about socio-economic policy. More specifically, together with Pieter Maesele, I have examined Flemish news coverage of the Belgian government formation in 2010-2011 (Raeijmaekers & Maesele, 2014) and the election victories of New Left parties in Europe in 2015 (Maesele & Raeijmaekers, 2016). Interestingly, these case studies seem to confirm the results of my longitudinal analysis: *De Standaard* consistently depoliticizes neoliberal preferences, while *De Morgen* does the same in 2010-2011 (like the case of 2005) but takes a different stance and politicizing discourse in 2015 (like the case of 2014). This seems to confirm that *De Morgen* has recently adopted a different journalistic culture (i.e., somewhere between 2011 and 2015). Even more interesting: the editors-in-chief of both newspapers have recently – in the wake of the US presidential election and the Brexit referendum – reflected upon their journalistic modus operandi. In *De Standaard*, we could read that journalists should be more “sensitive to well-founded contestation and, thus, less easily accept authority claims” (Verhoeven, 2016). *De Morgen* repeated that “journalists should, like salmon, dare to go against the current, even when they discover truths that clash with the common sense (Goovaerts, 2017)”. These statements suggest that (some) Flemish mainstream newspapers are willing to include alternative standpoints and/or question the consensus. Are they opening up to advocacy journalism? I am very curious about what the future will hold for agonistic media pluralism – definitely some food for debate!

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SUMMARY

ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

Little debate: Ideological media pluralism and the transition from a pillarized to a commercialized newspaper landscape (Flanders, 1960-2014).

When it comes to scholarship on media diversity and pluralism, there has been little debate on ideology in 21st century academia. Nonetheless, recent events such as the Brexit referendum and the migration crisis have shown that society is not at all free from fundamental disagreement. Big ideological debates about the values and organization of our society – be it with regard to the climate, the economy, geopolitics, etc. – still matter. Moreover, some recent critical media studies have shown that mainstream media today still play an active role in steering such ideological debates. These are interesting observations that call for more substantial research on ideology in mediated public debates.

To answer this call, a theoretical and analytical framework has been developed. Whereas previous research on media pluralism and diversity mostly started from a liberal or deliberative understanding of the role of media, this framework starts from an agonistic approach. Instead of analyzing media on the extent to which they *leave out* – in fact, camouflage – ideological standpoints, the framework of agonistic media pluralism looks at whether and how media *address* ideological debate. Using critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a method, it systematically examines both the scope and the form of media coverage to determine whether (ideological) debate is either opened or closed.

Then, the new analytical framework is used to empirically test the level of ideological media pluralism in Flanders, the northern part of Belgium. The Flemish media

landscape is characterized by the historic(al) transition from a partisan – ‘pillarized’ – press to a commercialized newspaper market. However, research on the possible effects of this structural transition on the ideological scope and form of news coverage, has been lacking. Therefore, this doctoral project conducts a longitudinal content analysis to find out how the Flemish newspaper landscape has been dealing with ideological debate over the past fifty years. The analysis is limited to three newspapers (i.e., *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, and *Vooruit/De Morgen*) and five comparable cases (on socio-economic policy reforms).

The results of the longitudinal content analysis indicate that over the past half a century, during pivotal moments, the Flemish press has stimulated little (ideological) debate on socio-economic policy. The structural transition from a pillarized to a commercialized newspaper landscape does not appear to be a decisive factor with regard to (this absence of) ideological media pluralism. The results reveal, however, two other influential factors: a newspaper’s worldview and journalistic culture. First, the more newspapers support the neo/liberal project, the more they are found to ban the elements of choice and ideology from their discourse. Second, when newspapers adopt either a partisan or a professionalized journalistic culture, they are found to leave little room for (ideological) debate. In contrast, when a newspaper adopts a committed, but independent, style of journalism, it is found to stimulate ideological awareness and open debate. The doctoral thesis ends with a reflection upon this kind of committed journalism (which could be labeled as ‘advocacy journalism’) and some suggestions for future research on ideological media pluralism.

ABSTRACT IN DUTCH

Gezocht: debat. Ideologisch mediapluralisme en de overgang van een verzuild naar een gecommmercialiseerd krantenlandschap (Vlaanderen, 1960-2014).

Wanneer het gaat over mediadiversiteit en –pluralisme blijken mediaonderzoekers weinig aandacht te hebben voor de factor van ideologie. Nochtans tonen recente gebeurtenissen, zoals het Brexit referendum en de migratiecrisis, dat de maatschappij nog steeds wordt gekenmerkt door fundamentele meningsverschillen. Grote ideologische debatten over de waarden en organisatie van onze samenleving – met betrekking tot het klimaat, de economie, geopolitiek, etc. – blijven ertoe doen. Bovendien blijkt uit enkele recente kritische mediastudies dat traditionele nieuwsmedia wel degelijk een actieve rol spelen in het vormgeven en sturen van dergelijke discussies. Dit vraagt om meer diepgaand onderzoek naar ideologie in gemedieerde publieke debatten.

Om hieraan tegemoet te komen, wordt een theoretisch en analytisch kader ontwikkeld. Waar eerder onderzoek naar mediapluralisme en –diversiteit voornamelijk vertrok vanuit een liberaal of deliberatief begrip van de rol van media, vertrekt dit kader vanuit een agonistische benadering. In plaats van media te beoordelen op de mate waarin ze ideologische standpunten *achterwege laten* – in feite: camoufleren – gaat het kader van agonistisch mediapluralisme na of en hoe media ideologische debatten *stimuleren*. Door systematisch de reikwijdte (*scope*) en vorm (*form*) van mediaberichtgeving te onderzoeken via de methode van kritische discoursanalyse, kan worden vastgesteld of media (ideologische) debatten openen, dan wel sluiten.

Vervolgens wordt dit nieuwe analytisch kader gebruikt om de mate van ideologisch mediapluralisme in Vlaanderen te meten. Vlaanderen wordt gekenmerkt door de historische overgang van een partijdige – ‘verzuilde’ – pers naar een gecommmercialiseerde krantenmarkt. Het ontbreekt echter aan onderzoek naar de

mogelijke effecten van deze structurele verandering op de ideologische *scope* en *form* van nieuwsberichtgeving. Dat is exact wat dit doctoraatsproject wil nagaan aan de hand van een longitudinale inhoudsanalyse: hoe ging het Vlaamse krantenlandschap om met ideologisch debat tijdens de afgelopen vijftig jaar? De analyse beperkt zich tot drie kranten (i.e., *De Standaard*, *Het Laatste Nieuws* en *Vooruit/De Morgen*) en vijf vergelijkbare cases (over socio-economische beleidshervormingen).

Uit de resultaten van de longitudinale inhoudsanalyse blijkt dat de Vlaamse pers amper (ideologisch) debat over socio-economisch beleid stimuleerde op belangrijke momenten tijdens de afgelopen halve eeuw. De structurele verandering van een verzuild naar gecommmercialiseerd krantenlandschap blijkt geen beslissende factor voor (dit gebrek aan) ideologisch mediapluralisme. De resultaten suggereren wel twee andere belangrijke factoren: het wereldbeeld van kranten en hun journalistieke cultuur. Ten eerste blijkt dat wanneer kranten het neo/liberale project verdedigen, er in hun discours weinig plaats is voor elementen van keuze en ideologie. Ten tweede blijkt dat zowel een partijdige als een professionele journalistieke cultuur weinig ruimte laat voor (ideologisch) debat. Een geëngageerde – maar onafhankelijke – vorm van journalistiek blijkt daarentegen wel ideologische bewustwording te stimuleren en debat te openen. Dit doctoraatsproject eindigt daarom met een reflectie over deze vorm van geëngageerde journalistiek (wat bestempeld kan worden als ‘advocacy journalism’) en doet enkele suggesties voor toekomstig onderzoek naar ideologisch mediapluralisme.

Over the ages, there have been many public disputes about socio-economic measures, like government budget cuts, pension reforms, working time reductions, etc. How have such disputes been covered in the Flemish (i.e., northern Belgian) press? Did newspapers always provide diverse standpoints? Did they stimulate a pluralistic debate on the issues at stake? What about the transition from a partisan and ‘pillarized’ press to a professionalized and commercialized newspaper market? Is there (still) room for ideological discussion? And how to measure ideological disagreement in news reporting?

In this doctoral thesis, a theoretical and analytical framework is developed to determine whether media coverage opens or closes the debate on large ideological issues (part I). This ‘framework of agonistic media pluralism’ is used to empirically test the Flemish newspaper coverage during pivotal moments on socio-economic policy in the last fifty years (part II). Especially newspapers’ worldview and journalistic culture appear to be influential factors with regard to (the absence of) ideological debate.

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