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In Flanders Fields: De/politicization and Democratic Debate on a GM Potato Field Trial Controversy in News Media

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In May 2011, a highly mediatized direct action in the form of a “field liberation” took place in Flanders, Belgium, against a field trial of genetically modified potatoes. This direct action and its aftermath revealed the conflictual and antagonistic nature of the genetically modified organisms (GMO) debate in Flanders. Consequently, it serves as a particularly suitable case to investigate the post-political thesis with regards to environmental discourse and politics. The aim of this paper is to investigate in what ways news media in their reporting contribute to processes of depoliticization and, resultantly, impede a democratic debate on the issues at stake. This paper attempts to provide an answer to this question based on a critical discourse analysis of the reporting by Flanders’ two generalist, elite newspapers De Standaard and De Morgen and the alternative online news site DeWereldMorgen. The findings reveal the existence of three ideological cultures, which are characterized by different degrees of de/politicization. We conclude by discussing how this study adds to our understanding of the relation between the depoliticization of environmental discourse, democratic debate and 21st century news media.

Keywords: *field trial, direct action, GM food, de/politicization, democratic debate, news media*

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Introduction

In October 2010, a Belgian consortium of research institutes and BASF Plant Science submitted a request to the Belgian Biosafety Advisory Council (BAC) for a field trial in Wetteren (Flanders, Belgium). The aim of the field trial was to test a series of genetically modified (GM) potato varieties. Despite some critical minority opinions within the BAC, the

field trial started 4 May 2011. Next to the field there was a board saying: “the potato of the future”.

In response, the *Field Liberation Movement* (FLM) announced direct action in the form of a “field liberation” to replace the GM potatoes by organic varieties. Because of the form of the direct action, institutionalized environmental movements refused to participate, despite their traditional critical stance towards using GM organisms (GMOs) in agriculture. Several hundred protesters arrived at the site on May 29. That same day, a hundred scientists and sympathizers of the field trial organized a counter-demonstration under the name *Save Our Science*. With strong media attention, the direct action turned into a confrontation between protesters and the police, with several protesters succeeding in entering the field and pulling potatoes.

Subsequently, the direct action had an interesting aftermath: because of her public support for the direct action, postdoctoral researcher Barbara Van Dyck was immediately dismissed by the University of Leuven¹. On July 21, FLM received the *Prijs Jaap Kruithof*, an annual prize awarded by civil society organizations to movements that campaign for an equal society. In May 2012, the trial started against the protesters, of which eleven were sentenced in absentia to six or eight months in jail for vandalism, assault and battery, and conspiracy². At the same time, statements of support for the protesters and their activism circulated from all corners of society.

In other words, this direct action and its aftermath reveals the conflictual and antagonistic nature of the GMO debate in Flanders. Consequently, it serves as a particularly suitable case to investigate the post-political thesis, which claims that contemporary environmental discourse and politics is characterized primarily by processes of depoliticization (Kenis & Lievens, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2007, 2010). The aim of this paper is to investigate in what ways news media in their reporting of the direct action and its aftermath

contribute to processes of depoliticization and, resultantly, impede a democratic debate on the issues at stake, based on a critical discourse analysis of the reporting by Flanders' two generalist, elite newspapers *De Standaard* and *De Morgen* and the alternative online news site *DeWereldMorgen*.

The first section discusses both the literature on the post-political thesis and the analytical framework this paper starts from. The research design of the study is elaborated in the second section, and the results of the critical discourse analysis in the third. In the discussion section, we conclude by discussing how this study adds to our understanding of the relation between the depoliticization of environmental discourse, democratic debate and 21st century news media.

The Post-Political Thesis and the Environment

The post-political thesis refers to the idea that the end of the Cold War has inaugurated an era characterized by the reduction of democratic politics to a *depoliticized* 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). Drawing from post-foundational political philosophy, this idea is based on the premise that each social order or society is the provisional product and expression of a particular configuration of power relations and mechanisms of exclusion. The democratic character of a particular social order, however, depends on whether these traces of power and exclusion are recognized and made visible, so they are open to democratic discussion and contestation. While politicization is used to refer to discourses or practices that make this possible, in the case of depoliticizing discourses or practices these traces of power and exclusion are erased, thereby concealing the possibility of a radically different society. The main protagonists of this thesis, however, have a different view on the depoliticized nature of

the present conjuncture: while Mouffe (2005) focuses on the *repression* of antagonism, Rancière (1998) focuses on the *disavowal* of equality and Žižek on the *foreclosure* of class struggle (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014). In this regard, Kenis and Lievens (2014) emphasize how Mouffe starts from a rather descriptive-analytical conception of (de)politicization, while Rancière and Žižek start from a rather normative conception, focusing either on a particular principle (i.e. equality) or subject (i.e. workers).

These different conceptions of depoliticization have been used in various ways within the literature on the environment to critique contemporary environmental discourse and politics. It has been criticized for its consensual and/or technocratic nature and its reduction of environmental politics to individual moral action and/or technological innovation. For instance, Swyngedouw (2010) and Goeminne (2012) have both focused on how the scientization of the climate change debate has caused science to become the object of the debate over the political struggle regarding the organization of society. A similar argument has been made by Berglez and Olausson (2014), Kenis and Mathijs (2012) and Machin (2013) regarding the interpretation of the environmental question as an individual and ethical responsibility. Kenis and Lievens (2014) have argued how the discourse of sustainable development has been successfully re-appropriated and reframed by international institutions with the primary aim of promoting “green capitalism”. Ultimately, these depoliticized discourses and practices are problematized for impeding an ideological-democratic struggle on the alternative political programs at stake in environmental policy, and resultantly, transformative, socio-environmental change.

Depoliticization and Democratic Debate: The Risk Conflicts Perspective

In our previous work, the risk conflicts-perspective has been developed as an analytical framework to systematically identify processes of depoliticization and politicization (i.e.

de/politicization) in mediated public discourse, with the aim of evaluating the extent to which democratic debate is cultivated or impeded (Maesele, 2015a). Its starting point is that techno-environmental issues in late modern societies constitute a new type of *social conflict*. Competing social actors are found to selectively adopt conflicting claims to knowledge as a material and discursive resource in pursuing alternative sustainable futures. They thereby aim at the politicization or depoliticization of a risk conflict. This perspective draws from Mouffe's (2005) conception of (de)politicization and agonistic democratic debate. She defines this as an adversarial debate between actors whose opposing demands constitute clashing political positions between which a rational reconciliation is impossible, but which are nonetheless accepted as legitimate. She takes aim against the post-politics of consensus for moralizing and rationalizing the ideological nature of democratic politics. As a result, instead of an adversarial democratic debate, we are faced with a struggle between "right and wrong", turning anyone who disagrees into a fundamentalist or blind radical. Consequently, technocratic and market considerations have come to substitute a democratic-ideological struggle between alternative futures.

Methodologically, the aim is to establish the ideological cultures (of relevant media outlets) at work in a given social debate. An ideological culture is established by subsequently identifying (i) the preferences and assumptions on the ideological fault lines at stake and (ii) the discursive de/politicization of those preferences. Ideological fault lines represent a struggle between competing analyses about what constitutes progress with regards to specific political categories, such as nature or the economy. In previous research on climate change and GM food (Carvalho, 2007; Maesele, 2010, 2011), the techno-environmental and economic fault lines were repeatedly found to be central. The techno-environmental fault line concerns competing analyses of the role of science and technology in society and nature and the interpretation of "sustainable" agricultural and food practices. One can either promote a

discourse in which there are no limits to the technoscientific mastery and exploitation of nature for material development or economic growth, or a precautionary discourse in which nature is conceptualized as fragile and the limits of techno-scientific mastery and exploitation are emphasized. The economic fault line concerns competing analyses of the role of the market in science and society. One can either promote a discourse of market liberalism that assumes that economic progress is best achieved through the use of market forces, or a discourse of public accountability based on values of equity and social responsibility.

The subsequent question is whether these particular preferences are depoliticized or politicized. We define politicization as a discursive logic that frames an issue as involving key *political* choices between alternative (sustainable) futures, by revealing competing sets of claims, values and/or interests underlying opposing demands. Depoliticization is defined as a discursive logic which frames an issue in terms of a social consensus about an inevitable, natural development best left to *technocratic* or *market* considerations. In this process, legitimate, responsible actors and demands are distinguished from illegitimate, irresponsible ones, based on the assumption of a (moral or rational) consensus about what constitutes progress on a respective ideological fault line. Last, when there is an ideological culture characterized exclusively by a depoliticizing logic, it can be expected to contain the naturalized, i.e. hegemonic, ideological preferences, which allows us to derive the dominant problem definition of a particular issue.

Consequently, the risk conflicts-perspectives adopts the premises and expectations of critical media theory (Curran, 2002). Starting from an understanding of society as inevitably marked by conflict and asymmetries of power, this paradigm adopts a society-centric approach and evaluates media's role and performance on the extent to which they are characterized by structural power relations (e.g. economic) and/or ideological constraints. As a result, critical media theory allows us to formulate substantive critique on the ideological

role of media in liberal democratic societies. However, this last decade, several studies have denounced the lack of research looking into the role of ideology in media representations of science and the environment (Carvalho, 2007; Maesele, 2015b). For instance, media research into the GMO debate is predominantly characterized by content analytic studies identifying the frequency of predefined thematic categorizations (often referred to as “frames”) and how these evaluate the technology (Gaskell & Bauer, 2001; Priest & Ten Eyck, 2003). Only a handful of studies have focused on the role of ideology (e.g. Holmgreen, 2008; Rupar, 2007), but none included the role of discursive logics of de/politicization.

Research Design

Data collection and selection

First, both generalist, elite newspapers of the Flemish newspaper landscape, *De Morgen* and *De Standaard*, were selected. Such elite newspapers are generally preferred in content analytical studies in the field of communication studies for their agenda-setting function (Boykoff, 2011). Furthermore, both are characterized by a different background: *De Morgen* is the heir of two social-democratic newspapers and profiles itself currently as a progressive newspaper, while *De Standaard* once had an explicitly catholic and pro-free market-editorial line and profiles itself currently as a centre newspaper. Second, we included the online news site *DeWereldMorgen*. *DeWereldMorgen* is not part of a commercial media group. As an *alternative* medium, it distinguishes itself explicitly from *mainstream, commercial* media both operationally and content-wise. Relying mainly on sponsoring from civil society, it works without structural advertising dependency and profit motive, and with an editorial mix of professional and citizen journalists. Previous research has found it to give voice to otherwise

neglected actors and views, and to question decisions which are presented as unproblematic by the elite, generalist newspapers (Raeijmackers & Maesele, 2014).

For each outlet, relevant news articles, interviews, editorials and op-eds were collected, for *De Standaard* and *De Morgen* via the digital press database Mediargus, and for *DeWereldMorgen* via both Google and its online archive. The analysis focused on the period between 1 April 2011 and 30 June 2011, in order to include both the run-up to and the immediate aftermath of the direct action on May 29. The total population consisted of 121 articles: 41 for *De Standaard*, 44 for *De Morgen* and 36 for *DeWereldMorgen*. *De Standaard* and *De Morgen* have a similar publishing pattern regarding news articles (26 vs 25, respectively), op-eds (9 vs 10, respectively) and interviews (5 each), but *De Morgen* publishes 4 editorials in comparison with only 1 for *De Standaard*. *DeWereldMorgen*, however, publishes three times more opinion pieces (26) than news articles (8), and 2 interviews.

Critical discourse analysis

To analyse these news articles, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is preferred in comparison to other types of content analysis (either quantitative or qualitative) since it allows for a richer examination of the resources used in any type of text for producing meaning. Seminal authors such as Fairclough (1995), Van Dijk (1991) and Wodak (1996) have advanced CDA as a research programme that puts forward discourse as a social practice that is in a dialectical relationship with other social dimensions: discourses not only (re-)shape social structures, but are simultaneously shaped by them. By empirically analysing language use within its social context, CDA aims to reveal the role of discursive strategies and practices in the creation and reproduction of relations of power, which are understood as ideological effects.

More specifically, we draw from Carvalho's (2007, 2008) elaborate critical discourse analysis-framework, which she developed in her work on the ideological nature of newspaper

reports on climate science. First, this framework starts with a *textual* analysis of individual newspaper articles as the principal unit of analysis, focusing on the following six items: structure and lay-out, objects of discourse, social actors (who has framing power, i.e. who succeeds in determining the terms of the debate?), language and rhetoric, discursive strategies (particularly framing, positioning and legitimization), and ideological preferences. These last two macro-analytical items, which are not independent from, but accumulative to the previous ones, are most essential to our analytical framework when it comes to the identification of ideological cultures. Second, this textual analysis is combined with a *contextual* analysis that investigates both the simultaneous framing in various media (comparative-synchronic) and the temporal evolutions within one medium (historical-diachronic).

Using this framework, Carvalho (2007) showed how ideological cultures have direct implications for the selection and presentation of three key news elements, i.e. (i) “facts” or “truth claims”, (ii) sources or “agents of definition”, and (iii), the inferences drawn from knowledge for political action. These elements are primarily given meaning through the discursive strategies of framing³ (i.e. how discourse is organized according to a certain perspective), positioning (i.e. how actors are constructed into a certain relationship with others, and whose framing power is recognized and highlighted) and legitimization (i.e. how a particular demand, action or power is justified or sanctioned). Since our aim is to establish the ideological cultures of the selected news outlets in their reporting on the direct action and its aftermath, the analysis below focuses on the interplay between how actors and demands are positioned and (de)legitimized on the one hand, and which ideological preferences and assumptions on a particular fault line are either naturalized or problematized in this process, on the other.

Since the establishment of an ideological culture depends on revealing the recurring patterns in the reporting for each outlet, it is important to stress that we focus first and

foremost on news articles and editorials, i.e. those articles fully written by the journalists of a respective news outlet. The gatekeeping process of a particular outlet, however, also includes the selection of which actors (and demands) are relevant to be given room in the op-ed or interview sections. These sections are therefore also discussed, but only secondarily, to the extent that they provide a direct contribution to the clarification of the journalistic patterns.

Finally, in the conclusion, we will evaluate whether and in what ways a particular ideological culture is found to discourage a democratic debate by framing the issue at stake in terms of a social consensus about an inevitable, natural development best left to *technocratic* or *market* considerations (i.e. depoliticization), or to encourage a democratic debate by framing the issue as a debate involving key *political* choices between *alternative* sustainable futures (i.e. politicization).

Analysis

The results of the critical discourse analysis are discussed for each ideological fault line. In doing so, we successively present the discursive constructions found in *De Standaard*, *De Morgen* and *DeWereldMorgen*.

The techno-environmental fault line

The three selected outlets have different takes on this fault line. *De Standaard*'s take is illustrated by its only editorial on the issue, with the title "Useless potato war" (Tegenbos, May 30), published the day after the direct action:

At stake in the war: 27 rows of genetically modified potatoes, planted by our best scientists, our biotechnologists. They are searching for varieties which make the potato less vulnerable for diseases, so less pesticides will be needed. Such project should be charming biological farmers and environmental activists, but 250 of them stormed 50 police officers [...]

Demonstrators are allowed to express their objections and fears. That is good. Let us keep the pressure high on scientists! They have to come up with arguments and proofs!

As this quote illustrates, *De Standaard* is found to start from a frame of scientific progress, in which GM food is part of a scientific development serving the public interest, while any disruption of this process is delegitimized as “useless”. Using the discursive strategies of positioning and legitimization, the debate is narrowed to two groups of mutually exclusive actors: epistemic authority is granted only to the scientists involved in the field trial, who are authorized (“our best scientists”) and homogenized (“scientists”). On the other hand, epistemic credibility is denied to the protesters, since these only make use of “objections and fears”. This suggests a closed scientific consensus, ruling out any significant scientific uncertainty. This discursive construction is confirmed in “To G or not to G: the objections of environmental activists screened” (Hvde, Sts, Joh, May 31), in which the *De Standaard*’s science journalists refute the “objections” of the protesters, by invoking institutional sources with a scientific authority:

Eating genetically modified organisms (GMOs) is bad for your health. [...] there are no indications that gene crops endanger the consumer’s health. The American watchdog FDA considers GMOs [...] to be not more unsafe than classically grown vegetables [...] *Growing GMOs harms the environment.* Some GMOs stimulate large-scale monocultures [...] also in the classic agriculture they are abundant. [...] *Refining crops genetically is unnatural.* [...] It is all about potato varieties which in principle, could also be grown using classic improving techniques (however, this should take more time and should be much more expensive).

In this discursive construction, genetic modification is equated to conventional agriculture. This creates the discursive space to ridicule counterarguments and to naturalize the principles

of current large-scale industrial agricultural and food practices. On the other hand, a distinction is made by representing GMOs as a safe, natural and better alternative to emphasize the necessity of genetic modification. Finally, *De Standaard* assigns framing power primarily to the organizers of the field trial. This is evident from the titles of the news articles published directly after the direct action, in which a statement from them is uncritically reproduced (thus endorsed), such as in ““A sad day for science”” (Bergmans, May 30), ““Normal scientific result impossible”” (Vanhecke, May 31), “The potato of the future” (ME, May 30), and ““Majority Flemish people in favour of genetically modified organisms”” (Belga, May 31).

In *De Morgen*’s discursive construction, we find different strategies of positioning and legitimization, since in addition to the organizers of the field trial the protesters are also assigned epistemic authority and framing power. When environmental journalist Debusschere lists the arguments for and against GMOs the day after the direct action, no distinction is made between the legitimacy of both (“Pro-con genetic manipulation”, May 30). Furthermore, they are announced like this: “Why do we actually need vegetables with an artificial genetic structure? And why is there a need to protest so fiercely against a GMO test field?”. The question wording and specific vocabulary illustrate how GMOs are not naturalized as a form of scientific progress like in *De Standaard*, but are put forward as a contested development. This is further evidenced by the explicit attention of *De Morgen* to the scientific background of various protesters in multiple news articles. For instance, the following quote comes from “Is it a hippie? No, sometimes it’s even a scientist”:

However, it is more remarkable that in Wetteren also a lot of university researchers participated in the protest action against the GMO field. Bio-engineers, biologists and civil engineers, as well as PhDs in the humanities. “Having a job at a university and being active in

anarchistic milieus do not have to exclude each other”, says a bio-engineer. (Carpentier, May 31)

Finally, we find no naturalization of the existing agricultural model in *De Morgen*. On the contrary, the editorial published on the day after the action states: “There has been no real debate [in Wetteren]. Although there are a lot of questions about our agricultural model that is based on monocultures and pesticides” (Samyn, “Potato police”, May 30).

In comparison with *De Standaard* and *De Morgen*, the techno-environmental fault line receives little explicit attention in *DeWereldMorgen* and the question of epistemic authority or scientific (un)certainty is not even asked. On the contrary, in its framing *DeWereldMorgen* consistently starts from a social issue in which the techno-environmental fault line cannot be distinguished from other fault lines. The framing power is mainly reserved for the protesters and their supporters, who always appear to be academics; 5 of 8 news articles and 1 of 2 interviews focus on the academic protest against the sanctions for the academic participants in the action. In this way, the existing disagreement in the academic world is central in the reporting, without necessarily discussing scientific (un)certainty:

According to [the academics] the presence of scientists in both camps exactly indicates that in the scientific world, there is no consensus about the social need for and the added value of GMOs. (Callewaert, “No sanctions yet for KU Leuven employees after GMO action”, June 1)

Techno-environmental arguments, however, are discussed in more detail in the op-ed section, in which a remarkably broad selection of actors give their opinion, such as diverse civil society organizations, the Farmers Association, an individual farmer, a politician and an organizer of the field trial. This is different from the newspapers where principally academics, politicians or journalists publish op-eds.

The economic fault line

This fault line is also approached differently. *De Standaard* starts from an approach that is similar to the previous fault line: GMOs are naturalized as a form of economic progress in the general interest, thereby delegitimizing any disruption as harmful. Framing power is awarded to the organizers of the field trial. The arguments of two spokesmen for the interuniversity Flemish Institute for Biotechnology (VIB) are repeatedly quoted in the articles by economic affairs-journalist Dendooven. For instance, in “Environmental activists aim at poplar forest” on May 31, we find that the action most significantly impacts “the image and climate for innovation in Flanders”, since “Flanders has a lot to lose concerning biotechnology”. That same day, this is repeated in the interview “Europe is lagging behind”. Similarly, in the feature article “Flemish biotechnology has a lot to lose” (June 4), the following issues are emphasized: (i) the economic importance of the technology, (ii) the role of VIB in starting up companies or making deals with companies, and (iii), Flanders’ leading international position. In the lead of the article, we are warned:

The Flemish Institute for Biotechnology hopes to launch two new companies this year [...] “We are in a leading position with regard to green biotechnology, but then Sundays on which protesters are destroying scientific research will have to be avoided”.

In this discursive construction, we observe a pattern where, first, scientific and economic progress in the case of GMOs is intertwined: there appear to be no conflicts of interest between science and business. The involvement of BASF in the experiment is mentioned from the first reporting, although the commercialization of GMOs is never problematized (e.g.

Lesaffer, “Struggle against potato disease”, May 5). Second, this progress discourse is explicitly coloured Flemish: the scientific quality of Flemish biotechnology plays a crucial role as a weapon in the (inter)national competition between countries and regions. This turns GMO opponents into opponents of Flanders’ progress (e.g. Tegenbos, “Useless potato war”, May 30).

In contrast, *De Morgen* and *DeWereldMorgen* reproduce (and thus endorse) the economic arguments of the protesters, thereby problematizing (i) the role of economic and financial interests in the development of GMOs, and (ii), the intertwining of these interests with universities. Both, however, report differently on this matter: while *DeWereldMorgen* focuses on these arguments in its op-ed section, *De Morgen* does this in its news section. For instance, using discursive strategies of positioning and legitimization, *De Morgen* problematizes BASF’s involvement in the field trial. In “Chemical giant pumps money into lucrative GMOs: BASF has already spent more than one billion Euros on research plant biotechnology” (Van De Perre and Carpentier, June 11), Greenpeace is quoted in the lead with “For them, it is all about money, not about fighting famine” and protester Van Dyck in the first sentence of the article, with: “Knowledge is produced in the interest of private profits”. In an accompanying interview with the coordinator of the field trial advisory committee both the title (“Huge transparency problem in GMO dossier”) and the highlighted quote (“You will not pass a capable student saying he knows the matter but not wanting to write it down, for an exam, do you? So did BASF act.”) suggests a distrust regarding BASF’s involvement in the field trial (Carpentier, June 11). When some weeks later a study shows a systematic intertwining of business and universities, *De Morgen* mobilizes public concerns in a series of articles. In the front-page article “Flemish unis highly paid by the industry” (Amkreutz, June 23), the lead warns “This high percentage raises questions about the independence of research”. In the following editorial (Desmet, “Research”, June 23), the

intertwining is problematized in a twofold way: how the dependence will determine the course of university research and how this will complicate internal criticism, referring to Van Dyck's dismissal. The journalist asserts that the profit logic of a company "should not be" the logic of a "university financed by society".

For *DeWereldMorgen*, these arguments are taken as fact in this social issue, and just as with regard to the techno-environmental fault line, *DeWereldMorgen* does not further analyze this in its reporting, except for repeatedly quoting the action committee of academics who mobilize against Van Dyck's dismissal:

The case [is] no longer about pro or contra GMOs, but more broadly about the freedom and independence of research. "The case revealed a disagreement that has been existing since long, about the growing intertwining of university research and industrial interests, and about the market logic that is sneaking into university." (Callewaert, "Rector KU Leuven makes some space, march against Van Dyck cancelled", June 26)

This argument however is elaborated in the op-ed section, in which a focus on the interests of multinationals in universities (and the field trial) is exceeded for a focus on the existing political-economic model and how its values and interests have a structuring influence on science, agriculture and society. In this way, GM production is not only about the companies themselves, but about a specific mode of social agency aimed at making financial profits (e.g. De Cauter, "The core of the GMO case: The earth is not for sale", May 31; Lippens, "Independent research? The masks fall off", June 6). In addition, other op-eds are found to discuss potential alternative agricultural and economic models, such as agro-ecology (Staes, "This is the debate I want to have after 'Wetteren'", May 31, see also Vanbrabant, "Bio-agriculture and GMOs...What is it all about?", June 10). Ultimately, in this discursive construction, the GM debate is part of an ideological debate on the organization of society,

because this forms the basis for the way science is used. Hence, this appears to be what is at stake in the following fault line: to what extent is it possible to conduct this debate in Flanders?

The democratic-institutional fault line

During the analysis, a third fault line emerged, revolving around competing interpretations of freedom of speech: on the one hand, a rather restrictive interpretation was found to delegitimize the direct action as a form of civil disobedience, by depicting it as both *violent* and *undemocratic*, for not respecting the – closed – process of institutional decision-making. On the other, a broader interpretation was found to legitimize the direct action as a form of civil disobedience, for serving as an ultimate means of *non-violent* protest against the *undemocratic* character of institutional decision-making, on account of the over- or underrepresentation of certain actors and demands. We decided to label this fault line the democratic-institutional fault line.

Regarding this fault line, *De Standaard* and *De Morgen*'s reporting is highly similar initially: while awarding framing power to the organizers of the field trial and their sympathizers, both newspapers are found to reproduce an assumed consensus on what is considered to be a legitimate expression of freedom of speech, namely dialogue with the field trial organizers, and other, illegitimate manners, such as the announced action. Already before the action, the reporting focuses on the expected violence. Illustrative here is the article “Most secured field in Belgium: environmental movement threatens genetically modified potatoes”, in which the extensive measures, in comparison with the small size of the field, are accentuated (Lesaffer, *De Standaard*, May 5; see also Vander Mensbrugghe “Security guards protect potato field in Wetteren”, *De Morgen*, May 28). Afterwards, the action itself is delegitimized as a *violent* and *undemocratic* attack on science, positioning the protesters as

criminals and science/scientists as victims. In the front-page articles of May 30, we read in *De Morgen* “This is no longer protesting, this is an act of aggressive violence” (Van De Perre, “Potato field turns into battle field in Wetteren”) and in *De Standaard*: ““This is a sad day for science [...] We have to conclude that the democratic process is not working and that even the police could not stop the destroyers. They announced a non-violent action, but this was pure war.”” (Bergmans, ““This is a sad day for science””). Those directly involved in the field trial are supported by statements of institutional actors, such as the prime minister who labels the action as “fundamentalism” in the latter article and the rectors and vice-rectors of the Flemish universities, who condemn the action in an open letter, from which *De Morgen* quotes:

“The destruction of a field trial with genetically modified potatoes was no protest action of concerned citizens, but a targeted attack on free scientific practice and a disregard of democratically taken decisions. We regret and condemn that the protesters choose violence over an open debate.” (Herbots, ““One who calls himself a scientist, does not do this””, June 1)

In both newspapers, the field trial scientists are consistently represented as victims, with depictions such as “a defeated Lieve Gheysen from UGent” (Van De Perre, “Potato war in Wetteren”, *De Morgen*, May 30) and “The scientists can also count on the consolation of the Flemish prime minister” (Vanhecke, ““Normal scientific result impossible””, *De Standaard*, May 31)

In the above-mentioned framing of both newspapers, the assumption of both a moral and rational consensus is used to position the protesters as criminals and to delegitimize them as a threat to freedom of speech and research. In direct contrast to this, we also observe a framing in both *De Morgen* and *De WereldMorgen*, which, by revealing the values and interests underlying opposing responses, puts forward freedom of speech and research as threatened, not by the protest(ers), but by the commercialization of scientific research. The

prosecution of the protesters for conspiracy and Van Dyck's dismissal kick start a different framing in *De Morgen* regarding the action and its aftermath, based on different strategies of positioning and legitimization and with the protesters and their supporters regaining framing power. In the editorial published the day after the dismissal (Eeckhout, "Order", June 4), the "huge violation of the separation of powers" is denounced as well as the "hard repression" from "the established order" against those "who do not agree with the consensus" by protesting against the "interests and money (from business and authorities) [...] behind biotechnology". In contrast to its previous reporting, *De Morgen* is now found to repeatedly denounce the restriction of the direct action to an act of violence as a distraction from the socio-political question regarding GM food. In the article "'We too radical? The classic NGOs are just too soft'" (Van De Perre, June 4), the protesters are granted framing power to explain the methods of civil disobedience and direct action from the severity of the ecological question and the lack of militancy in the "classic" environmental movements. A spokesman for Friends of the Earth analyses the situation as follows:

During the past week the press has spent more attention to GMOs than during the past decade. Hence, the methods are efficient enough to trigger the debate [...] One of the reasons why they choose civil disobedience is also to make a conflict visible. The authority and universities have always been in favor of GMOs because of economic interests. Well, this is hereby revealed.

On the other hand, as opposed to the techno-environmental and economic fault lines, the democratic-institutional fault line is central both in the news reporting and in the op-ed section of *DeWereldMorgen*. First, the news reporting consistently emphasizes the non-violent character of the action: both in the reporting beforehand on a similar action in The Netherlands (Fietser, Mayu and Mariana Duarte, "GMO field pelted with biological potatoes", May 5) as well as afterwards by explicitly legitimizing the action as a "non –

violent” form of civil disobedience on the one hand (Brauwerts *et al.*, “Test field in Wetteren freed from synthetic potatoes”, June 1), and by attributing the violence only to the police: “On the TV news, the ‘violent’ character of the action is also always illustrated with images of police officers hitting protesters with their batons” (Callewaert, “Protest against dismissal KU Leuven researcher is growing”, June 4). Second, *De WereldMorgen* not only problematizes (potential) university sanctions and the eventual dismissal of Van Dyck, but also intensely mobilizes protest against these decisions. Based on quotes from an action committee of academics, a “dialogue” is called for in the form of a “critical reflection” about the interpretation of labels such as “free and independent research”, “sustainable agriculture” and “violence” (Callewaert, “No sanctions yet for KU Leuven employees after GMO action”, June 1). In addition, the dismissal is denounced as violating a “democratic basic right” (i.e. freedom of speech) and as the enrolment of “a new climate of criminalizing activism and even criminalizing sympathy for activism” (Callewaert, “Protest against dismissal KU Leuven researcher is growing”, June 4). Furthermore, the direct action is legitimized by pointing to its success, because it “has provoked a huge debate: on GMOs, the relation between science and society, the marketization of university research, and the freedom of researchers to protest and to have political viewpoints” (Soete, “Angry gowns march”, June 21). Finally, more than ten op-eds are published from academics on the criminalization of activism (De Caeter, “Activism is no violence (and defending activism certainly not)”, June 6), the lack of democratic decision-making in universities (Lippens, “Independent research? The masks fall off”, June 6) or the freedom of research in general (Zahidi, “What scientific freedom?”, June 30).

Discussion

Three ideological cultures?

Our findings suggest that the framing of the issues in *De Standaard* and *De WereldMorgen* appears to be diametrically opposed, in terms of their representation of the direct action and its aftermath either as a debate involving key *political* choices between *alternative* futures (i.e. processes of politicization) or as a matter of *technocratic* or *market* considerations (i.e. depoliticization).

The ideological culture of *De Standaard* is characterized by depoliticizing discursive strategies on all ideological fault lines. This allows us to derive the dominant problem definition and the naturalized ideological preferences from its framing. Namely, the development of GM food is put forward as a *normal* element of an *inevitable, natural* scientific and economic evolution in the general interest. Hence, any disruption of this process harms the general interest. First, this means that GMOs are equated with scientific and economic progress. What is being naturalized in this process is the human mastery over and exploitation of nature, and classic large-scale industrial agricultural and food practices (techno-environmental fault line) as well as the commercialization of scientific research and neoliberal economic policy principles, such as market liberalism, competition and the profit motive (economic fault line). Second, this means that the direct action is delegitimized as a disruption of scientific and economic progress. The framing of the direct action as a violent and undemocratic attack on the freedom of science simultaneously naturalizes the presumed non-violent and democratic nature of (the actors and demands which are part of) the existing institutional decision-making process. Hence, the democratic-institutional fault line turns this scientific and economic consensus into a “social” consensus, about the interpretation of freedom of speech (and research), and second, about the desirability of GMOs. In terms of positioning and legitimization, the protesters and their supporters are stigmatized as *radical, fundamentalist* enemies of scientific and economic progress, and thus of the social consensus.

Only the supporters of the field trial are awarded epistemic authority. Consequently, an adversarial democratic debate about alternative sustainable futures is precluded in favour of technocratic decision-making and/or market forces. This framing is mainly the consequence of relying on (and uncritically reproducing) the discourses of the field trial organizers.

Although the ideological culture of *De Standaard* aims to close the space for democratic debate, *DeWereldMorgen*'s ideological culture aims to cultivate it. This ideological culture is characterized by politicizing discursive strategies on all fault lines, with the development of GM food put forward not as the consequence of an inevitable, natural process, but of a *deliberate social* and *political* choice based on specific values and interests (namely the above-mentioned naturalized ideological preferences in *De Standaard*). Hence, the three fault lines can hardly be distinguished. On the contrary, in its framing, *DeWereldMorgen* consistently starts from a social issue in which the role of science and technology in society and nature, and the interpretation of sustainable agriculture (techno-environmental fault line), the financing of scientific research, the role of agribusiness and specific economic development principles (economic fault line), as well as the interpretation of academic freedom, freedom of speech, civil disobedience and activism (democratic-institutional fault line), are indissolubly connected. This means that the existing political-economic model of neoliberal capitalism and the structuring influence of its values and interests on science, agriculture, economy and democracy is put forward as the problem, and alternative agricultural and economic models are simultaneously being considered. Precisely because existing institutional decision-making (and the actors and demands which are part of it) impedes this debate (see the ideological culture of *De Standaard*), the ideological culture of *DeWereldMorgen* acknowledges both the political purpose and the “non-violent” form of the direct action. Furthermore, it mobilizes protest against the sanctions and prosecution of the protesters and their supporters. In other words, the democratic-institutional fault line is used

as a lever to challenge the hegemonic preferences on the first two fault lines. In terms of positioning, the emphasis is put on the diversity and pluriformity of legitimate actors and demands: scientists, (biological) farmers, environmental activists, civil society, concerned citizens and politicians. Moreover, it is not the question of epistemic authority that is at stake but the societal need for and added value of GMOs. Again, this framing is mainly the consequence of relying on (and uncritically reproducing) the discourses of the protesters and their sympathizers.

At first, the ideological culture of *De Morgen* also seems to challenge hegemonic ideological preferences. We find politicizing discursive strategies on the techno-environmental and economic fault lines, framing the development of GMOs, not as an inevitable, but as a *contested* process. On the democratic-institutional fault line, however, we initially find depoliticizing discursive strategies: based on a presumed social consensus on existing institutionalized protest options, the legitimate demands of responsible actors (i.e. the field trial organizers and supporters, institutional actors and “classic” environmental movements), are hereby distinguished from the illegitimate demands of irresponsible actors (the protesters), who are excluded from democratic debate. However, after the depth of the prosecution and sanctions becomes clear, a shift occurs to politicizing discursive strategies: then the protesters are no longer threatening freedom of speech and research according to this ideological culture, but underlying economic interests and the commercialization of science are. Eventually, we find *De Morgen* mobilizing public concerns about the intertwining of business and universities. This framing (and shift) of the preferences on the fault lines is again strongly dependent on the framing power that is assigned to actors.

Depoliticization and News Media

In order to discuss how this case study adds to our understanding of the relationship between the depoliticization of environmental discourse, democratic debate and 21st century news media, it is important to first stress the fundamental difference between the newspapers and the alternative online news site in terms of audience reach. According to the Flemish Centre for Information about Media, *De Standaard* was found to reach 360.000 people in 2012-2013 and *De Morgen* 251.000 (see <http://www.cim.be>). According to *DeWereldMorgen*, in 2012 about 40.000 people were subscribed to its daily newsletter (Soete & Barrez, 2013). These numbers provide some indication as to the significant difference in reach between the newspapers and *DeWereldMorgen*. Furthermore, the role of both elite newspapers in public and policy debates cannot be compared to the *DeWereldMorgen*'s (which is almost non-existent). Therefore, we should primarily focus on the newspapers in formulating an answer to these questions, and draw from the results on *DeWereldMorgen* only to better understand the choices and, more specifically, the limits of the newspapers' framings.

Now in what ways do we find these newspapers to contribute to a broad democratic debate on the issues at stake in this case study, which, based on the respective fault lines, can be redefined as (i) the role of science and technology in sustainable agriculture, (ii) the commercialization of science, and (iii), freedom of speech? First, while we do find a different framing regarding (i) and (ii), this is not based on competing ideological preferences, but on whether hegemonic ideological preferences are depoliticized (*De Standaard*) or politicized (*De Morgen*). While the reporting in *De Standaard* is aimed at closing the discursive space for a debate on these preferences, *De Morgen*'s reporting is aimed at (re)opening it. In other words, a democratic debate about these techno-environmental and economic aspects of GMOs is found to be directly dependent on the discursive space for processes of politicization, and in this case, we find these primarily in the reporting by *De Morgen*. However, when we compare the politicization of the economic fault line in both *De Morgen* and *DeWereldMorgen*, a

fundamental difference can be observed: while *De Morgen* limits its focus to the role of commercial interests in universities, *DeWereldMorgen* focuses directly on the existing political-economic model and its policy principles. In other words, only *DeWereldMorgen*'s discursive space enables an exercise in opposite political-economic models. This suggests a restricted scope of the (politicization of the) economic fault line in *De Morgen*.

Second, both newspapers were found to discourage a democratic debate about freedom of speech in their (initial) reporting of the direct action, since both delegitimized the latter as violent and undemocratic. A potential explanation for this can be found in the protest paradigm from the social movement literature: this refers to an implicit model of social control mechanisms in commercial media for protest actions which challenge the balance of power and aim for fundamental social change (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). This literature indicates a collection of characteristics with regard to the definition, interpretation and evaluation of such protest actions which are expressed in a routine pattern of delegitimization and which we also observe in the reporting of the newspapers: first, a certain form of framing which emphasizes violence, damage and confrontation, second, the use of official information resources in order to reinforce both the apparent importance of the event, and the observed objectivity of the reporting, and finally, the invoking of a public consensus in order to explain deviant behaviour. It is important to emphasize here that these characteristics actually represent the mere application of professional journalistic routines and practices, and the objectivity norm more specifically, in the case of a protest action. And this objectivity norm of professional journalism has indeed been criticized for being grounded in a consensual, post-ideological understanding of society, only allowing for journalism within the limits of social consensus (Hall, 1982). Unsurprisingly, *DeWereldMorgen* is found to explicitly redefine this norm in its online "about"-section as the rejection of neutrality and the endorsement of the journalistic awareness of one's own subjectivity.

Ultimately, this allows us to conclude that the extent to which we find the selected newspapers contributing to a broad democratic debate on the issues at hand is quite restricted, first in terms of which newspapers and second in terms of which issues and their scope. In the end, together these elements suggest that the main difference underlying the selected commercial and alternative media resides in the possibility of directly challenging the existing political-economic policy model. Since this suggests that a debate about radical, transformative socio-environmental change appears to be impossible within the commercial media market, it is fair to conclude that 21st century news media shape and reflect the depoliticization of environmental discourse and politics. These different shades of depoliticization and politicization we have observed, however, run counter toward a potential expectation that depoliticization and elite newspapers are synonymous. This study confirms that depoliticization is neither a manifestation of a deeper objectivity nor tied to specific practices and institutions, but should be researched case by case. Nonetheless, as an analytical concept, it has shown us its added value for formulating a substantive critique both on the ideological role of media and on the state of democratic politics in liberal democratic societies of the 21st century.

Notes

1. Van Dyck was reinstated on 1 January 2014 following the election of a new rector for the University of Leuven.
2. In September 2013, these sentences were reduced to three to six months' probation.
3. Following Carvalho (2008), framing is regarded as an operation or action, which is inherent to each interpretation of social reality, including texts. This is different from how frames are generally used in the framing analysis literature, as both an optional intervention in talking about reality and a (predefined) independent thematic category (Gaskell & Bauer, 2001).

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