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# THE RISE OF INTERPRETIVE JOURNALISM

## Belgian newspaper coverage, 1985–2014

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*Interpretive journalism is a journalistic style, characterized by reporters expressing their opinion, speculating about the future or explaining why something happened, without referring to verifiable facts or statements from news sources. Previous research upon this phenomenon is rather scattered, and inconclusive about the mechanisms underlying the presence of this journalistic style. This study aims to address both shortcomings by investigating newspaper coverage on coalition negotiations in Belgium. Conducting a quantitative, longitudinal content analysis, the evolution of interpretive journalism is studied between 1985 and 2014. Results show a remarkably strong, almost linear increase in the amount of interpretation in newspaper articles over a period of 29 years. Apart from the structural evolution in the media landscape that might cause this trend to occur, contextual determinants differing from one coalition formation to another turn out to be relevant as well. While interpretive journalism is on the rise, this is especially so when considering lengthy, difficult negotiations. This finding emphasizes the importance of contextual determinants—information accessibility in this case—in explaining journalistic trends.*

KEYWORDS interpretive journalism; opinion journalism; explanatory journalism; longitudinal content analysis; newspaper coverage; coalition negotiations

The descriptive style places the journalist in the role of an observer. The interpretive style requires the journalist to act also as an analyst. The journalist is thus positioned to give shape to the news in a way the descriptive style does not allow. (Patterson 2000, 250)

Scholars have repeatedly argued that the way journalists cover events has changed throughout the years, using the term interpretive journalism to address the increased interchangeability of facts and journalists' interpretation of (an absence of) those facts (e.g. Brants and Van Praag 2006; Patterson 1993; Salgado and Strömbäck 2012). An interpretive style of writing manifests itself by reporters using strategic frames to explain why something happened, expressing their opinion or speculating about the future, without referring, either explicitly or implicitly, to verifiable facts or statements from news sources. However, systematic research upon this phenomenon is lacking (see Salgado and Strömbäck 2012). In order to address the uncertainty surrounding interpretive journalism, this study addresses three specific shortcomings.

First of all, the empirical scope of research on interpretive journalism is of crucial importance. Scholars mostly focus on election coverage when investigating this journalistic trend. Although such studies are valuable, it is difficult to disentangle changes in media coverage from changes in the actual event that is covered, since elections and the preceding campaigns have changed significantly throughout the years (e.g. Mancini and Swanson 1996). I therefore focus on newspaper coverage on coalition negotiations instead, covering 14 different negotiations over a period of 29 years. The key advantage of doing so is that this important political event has not undergone any structural changes over the past years, allowing to meaningfully study a longitudinal trend and disentangle it from contextual influences. Also, the topic of coalition formations is most different from studying coverage on the preceding elections. Journalists generally lack information to cover negotiations since they take place behind closed doors. In election times, on the other hand, politicians are craving for media attention and, as a result, information is abundantly available for journalists to cover political items (e.g. Van Aelst and De Swert 2009).

Second of all, as Salgado and Strömbäck (2012) stress in their overview article on interpretive journalism, a large diversity of conceptualizations and operationalizations is present in the existing literature, which complicates the interpretation of findings. In order to address this, I combine the common core of previous studies and measure interpretive journalism in a rigorous way, addressing separate indicators and later creating a compound variable grasping what indicators are present in one newspaper item. Separate indicators are regarded as part of an interpretive style when not accompanied by factual information or references to sources. Doing so, I aim to focus exclusively on characteristics of a news story that clearly oppose an objective, fact-based style of writing. This approach basically implies that interpretive journalism is more than journalists making sense of reality, which could still be done by building on or describing factual information. Rather than taking a normative stance by adhering this approach, it simply allows me to study one aspect of a multidimensional concept.

A final deficiency in the existing literature is the lack of explanatory theories. While some authors refer to a changing media landscape as a possible explanation for the rise of interpretive journalism, other explanations largely remain uncultivated. In order to address this literature gap, I disentangle both structural (media-driven) and contextual (politics-driven) explanations. Structural trends in the presence of interpretive journalism are to be caused by changes in the media environment, while deviations from this expected linear trend

might be explained by contextual determinants, determinants that differ from one negotiation to another. Specifically, this study addresses contextual determinants by measuring the accessibility of (new) information during the coalition negotiations, assuming that facts are indispensable for journalists when constructing a news item.

Combining the goals previously described, this study focuses on two specific questions:

- (1) Is interpretive journalism on the rise?
- (2) What could explain the use of interpretation by journalists?

In order to answer those questions, 1342 articles from two Belgian newspapers covering 14 coalition formations over 29 years were sampled. Results show that the amount of articles containing journalistic interpretation triples between 1985 and 2014. Since coalition formations have not changed significantly throughout the years, this structural trend is presumably caused by a changing media environment. Additionally, we find that the context of the negotiation influences how journalists report on it. They seem to increasingly interpret negotiations when information is scarce, being the case for lengthy and difficult negotiations.

### Defining Interpretive Journalism

Scholars conceptualize interpretive journalism in a variety of ways, but consensus exists about the fact that it goes beyond descriptive, fact-based, objective or sourcedriven journalism, resulting in coverage in which the separation between facts and interpretation is blurry (Salgado and Strömbäck 2012). Using their own interpretation, journalists become commentators or analysts of the political reality (e.g. Djerf-Pierre and Weibull 2008; Reinemann and Wilke 2007; Salgado and Strömbäck 2012; Wilke and Reinemann 2001). Scholars have used a variety of terms to describe this phenomenon; synonyms such as advocacy journalism, analytical journalism and contextual journalism are used interchangeably (e.g. Salgado and Strömbäck 2012). Building on this broad conceptualization of interpretive journalism, different aspects are reviewed in the existing literature in order to more specifically address what it entails.

First of all, interpretive journalism is associated with the presence of journalists in political coverage. Hallin (1992), for example, defined this journalistic style as journalist-centred reporting, while De Vreese (2001) speaks of journalism driven by reporters rather than their sources. Patterson (2000), one of the first scholars to use the term interpretive journalism, emphasizes this centrality of journalists as well, stating that “Journalistic interpretation provides the theme of an article, while facts illuminate it” (Patterson 1997, 451). Concluding, an interpretive discourse clearly goes beyond facts and empowers journalists at the expense of their sources, resulting in a high degree of so-called media interventionism (e.g. Benson and Hallin 2007).

The second aspect of interpretive journalism is journalists’ focus on the explanation or analysis of events, with a greater emphasis on the why-question instead of the more factual “when-where-who”-questions characterizing event-centred coverage (Barnhurst 2003; Barnhurst and Mutz 1997; Steele and Barnhurst 1996; Salgado et al. 2016). Andersen and Thorson (1989), for example, define interpretive journalism as the questioning of politicians’ motives. Schudson (1982) underscores that interpretive journalism is the journalistic analysis of the implications of political events, while Patterson (1993) describes it as entailing a greater emphasis on the meaning of news. Benson and Hallin (2007) as well hinted at this aspect when arguing that interpretive journalism is a kind of discourse in which reporters retrospectively speculate about significance, outcomes and motives. In a recent study, Esser and Umbricht

(2014) claim that interpretive journalism focuses on causes and explanations in order to address why something happened. Strömbäck and Aalberg (2008) agree that using their own interpretation of what is going on, is one possible way for journalists to address why something happened or why someone (re)acted in one way or another. Based on their extensive literature review, Salgado and Strömbäck (2012) conclude that interpretive journalism is indeed characterized by journalistic explanations.

The third aspect of interpretive journalism is the evaluation of political actors or events (Semetko and Schoenbach 2003; Strömbäck and Aalberg 2008). One of the first to stress this relationship between facts and value-laden expressions made by journalists was Schudson (1982). Patterson (1993) as well defines interpretive journalism as sceptical journalism or simply as bad news, hinting at the use of negative expressions by journalists. Barnhurst and Mutz (1997) on the other hand speak of journalists giving overt commentary. Finally, Salgado and Strömbäck (2012) indicate that interpretive journalism is characterized by journalistic evaluations and overt commentary. Others have addressed this indicator without explicitly linking it to interpretive journalism. Steele and Barnhurst (1996), for example, use the concept journalism of opinion in their empirical work, thereby also addressing this evaluative aspect of interpretive journalism.

The final element that comes forward in the existing conceptualizations of interpretive journalism is prospective speculation about the future. Djerf-Pierre and Weibull (2008) state that interpretive journalism is a style of writing, characterized by (among other things) speculation. This focus on the future is also central to the definition of Benson and Hallin (2007). Since future events or future consequences of current events are most often unknown, what journalists tell us about this future necessarily entails interpretation (Salgado et al. 2016). Taking the existing literature into account, I define interpretive journalism as

A journalistic style that goes beyond descriptive, fact-based journalism. It is characterized by news coverage containing journalistic explanation, evaluation and speculation, without — explicit as well as implicit—references to verifiable facts or statements provided by sources.

### Operationalizing Interpretive Journalism

Systematic measurements of interpretive journalism are exceedingly scarce, due to differences in both the empirical scope of studies and the operationalization of the core concept. However, the majority of studies on interpretive journalism have focused on election coverage in the USA, measuring interpretive journalism as a dichotomous variable.

Indeed, interpretive journalism is generally operationalized by merely distinguishing between descriptive or interpretive coverage, coded as either one or the other. Schudson (1982), one of the first to empirically investigate this journalistic style, did so by focusing on newspaper coverage in the USA about the State of the Union, and found that articles became more interpretive from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Patterson (1993) observed a similar movement away from descriptive election coverage in the New York Times. He determined an increase from 8 to 80 per cent interpretive coverage between 1960 and 1980. Strömbäck (2008) as well approached interpretive versus descriptive as a dichotomy and finds that around 40 per cent of all Swedish election coverage was predominantly interpretive. Surprisingly, he does not find any increase in interpretive journalism from 1998 onwards. Barnhurst and Mutz (1997) measured whether news stories about crime, accidents and jobs reported any journalistic interpretations on a 10-point scale going from event-centred coverage to news analysis, and show that coverage has become more interpretive between

1980 and 1994. Wilke and Reinemann (2001) investigated election coverage in German newspapers between 1949 and 1998 and find that interpretive formats have become more present, but only until 1965. According to their operationalization, interpretive formats focus more on journalists themselves, and less on politicians and their statements. De Vreese (2001) conducted a study in the Netherlands, comparing television news about elections in 1994, 1998 and 1999, examining whether stories contained an interpretive spin, which turns out to increasingly be the case. In a comparative study of French and American newspapers, Benson and Hallin (2007) coded the primary journalistic function of newspaper stories and found that the amount of interpretive articles remained almost identical between 1960 and 1980.

Apart from such general assessments of interpretive journalism, some scholars did attempt to distinguish between separate indicators of this journalistic style. One such indicator is the (strategic) analysis of the implications of political events. Patterson (1993, 2000), for example, coded news stories as being interpretive if they mainly focused on the “why-question” and concluded that journalists increasingly use strategic frames to describe political events. In their comparative studies, Strömbäck and colleagues as well determined between descriptive or interpretive by focusing on journalistic explanation and strategic analysis (Strömbäck and Aalberg 2008; Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2011; Strömbäck and Shehata 2007). They mainly show that cross-country differences exist, but they seem to diminish over time. Finally, Esser and Umbricht (2014) and Salgado et al. (2016) show that journalists increasingly address this “why-question”.

Second, the evaluation of political events or actors is central to many operationalizations of interpretive journalism. Patterson (1993, 2000) measured the amount of negative references journalists made about American presidents throughout the years, in order to determine whether they interpreted more. Such negative evaluations turn out to be on the rise. Semetko and Schoenbach (2003) also focused on this (either positive or negative) evaluation of political actors. Steele and Barnhurst (1996) on the other hand classified how journalists spoke in television coverage on American elections between 1966 and 1988. They measured whether journalists gave their opinion, which turns out to increasingly be the case. Esser and Umbricht (2014) and Salgado et al. (2016) in their comparative study, find as well that the amount of opinion-based stories upon the political game is on the rise, operationalizing journalistic evaluation as the use of value-laden terms. Strömbäck and colleagues argue that the journalistic style is interpretive when journalists evaluate a situation, measured as well by the use of value-laden terms (Strömbäck and Aalberg 2008; Strömbäck and Dimitrova 2011; Strömbäck and Shehata 2007).

Finally, prospective speculation is regularly used as an indicator of interpretive journalism. Salgado (2007) coded Portuguese election news according to whether it contained interpretations of future possibilities or consequences, and showed that 20 per cent of all newspaper stories included such speculative statements made by journalists. In their comparative study, Salgado et al. (2016) measured the presence of journalistic speculation about future consequences of events, things that may happen in the future as a consequence of something that has happened. They find that journalistic speculations about future consequences exist in 9 per cent of the total news sample.

Set aside the above indicators, scholars have sometimes measured interpretive journalism differently or have used different indicators of this journalistic style. Hallin (1992) and Esser (2008), for example, examined whether journalistic soundbites increased throughout the years. Esser and Umbricht (2014) and Fink and Schudson (2014) on the other hand focused on the contextualization of events by journalists. The latter argue that contextual news stories focus on “the big picture” (see also Barnhurst and Mutz 1997).



Salgado and Strömbäck (2012) therefore conclude that both the presence of journalists in the news and them giving context information are indicators of an interpretive style of reporting. However, both the content of the longer soundbites and the contextual information can be purely fact-based, not containing any interpretation. This is why those two indicators will not be implicated in this study.

Taking the previous into account, I combine the common core in a conservative measurement of interpretive journalism, in order to make it applicable to other cases, to ensure the reliability of the findings, and to grasp the amount of interpretation in one article. Doing so, I gratefully make use of the indicators Salgado and Strömbäck (2012) propose in their literature review. The crucial thing is that those indicators must occur in statements of journalists, without the explicit or implicit support of factual information/ information coming from sources. Specifically, the following indicators are examined:

- (1) Journalistic explanation: journalists targeting tactical considerations, strategies, motives or reasons behind actions, thereby retrospectively explaining why something happened or why a politician has (re)acted in one way or another (e.g. Aalberg, Strömbäck, and De Vreese 2012; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Lawrence 2000).
- (2) Journalistic evaluation: journalists expressing their opinion about political actors or events, measured by their use of value-laden terms. Doing so, journalists share their own beliefs in relation to what is positive or negative, right or wrong (e.g. Patterson 1993; Trussler and Soroka 2014).
- (3) Journalistic speculation: journalists interpreting future possibilities or possible consequences of current events (e.g. Esser and Umbricht 2014; Salgado et al. 2016).

### Explaining Interpretive Journalism: The Media Environment

Despite differences in the conceptualization and empirical measurement of interpretive journalism, scholars have repeatedly investigated this style of reporting. However, they have largely refrained from drawing any conclusions upon why this journalistic style seems to be on the rise. Some researchers suggest that a changing media environment is the most likely explanation (e.g. Patterson 2000; Salgado et al. 2016; Steele and Barnhurst 1996), but this assumption has, as far as I know, never been empirically challenged with other possible explanations.

The content of any given media environment is determined by the interplay between what consumers demand and what sources supply (Trussler and Soroka 2014). Or, in other words, changes in the media environment can be attributed to both a commercial logic (demand side) and an organizational logic (supply side). Focusing on the former, we see that a more public-oriented, commercial logic has become the bottomline of news production. Journalists need to attract public attention in an increasingly competitive media environment, due to, for example, a growing amount of media outlets (Aalberg, Van Aelst, and Curran 2010; Altheide 2004; Altheide and Snow 1991; Brants and Van Praag 2006). An important evolution in this regard is the growing importance of online news platforms. Such platforms have to attract more and more readers, expose them to advertisements and ideally charge them for additional content. This does not only trigger journalists to generate attractive content, but it also leads online platforms to distinguish themselves from their traditional counterparts (Paulussen 2004). An interpretive style of writing seems to suit this quest for audience maximization, both for online and traditional media, as news consumers tend to be attracted to evaluative (mostly negative) news, the explanation and more in-depth interpretation of

events and predictive news about the future (e.g. Salgado et al. 2016). The indicators of interpretive journalism seem to match classic news values (e.g. Neveu 2002; O’Neill and Harcup 2009; Trussler and Soroka 2014). Also, and this is especially so when considering the topic of coalition formations, citizens simply want to be informed about important political events. This commercial logic might thus affect the willingness of journalists to write in an interpretive manner.

Apart from a commercial logic that determines the demand side, organizational aspects can influence the supply side, that is, how journalists cover events (Trussler and Soroka 2014). The way news items are constructed has undergone some profound changes throughout the years. Journalists increasingly have to cope with time shortages, pressure to publicize 24 hours a day and increased interconnectivity due to the online revolution (e.g. Bucy, Gantz, and Wang 2007; Seib 2002). Due to a lack of resources and a faster news cycle, journalists seem to spend a lot of time reusing and slightly adapting existing news content, instead of producing original items (Chyi and Sylvie 1998). Generating original content requires an extensive staff, while reproduction is less labour-intensive. Small staff sizes, in combination with the speed of publishing and lack of resources, seem to especially dominate how online news platforms work (Arant and Anderson 2001). Moreover, the exchange of information between journalists and politicians has become less institutionalized in many European countries, which increasingly deprives the former from (inside) political information (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Van Aelst and Aalberg 2011). Related to this growing journalistic independence and in line with the general decline of trust towards public figures, we have experienced an increase of so-called critical professionalism throughout the years, causing journalists to take on a more critical or sceptical stance towards politicians and the political game as a whole (e.g. Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Patterson 2000; Salgado et al. 2016). Interpretive journalism is one possible solution to cope with this heightened capacity problem, as it simplifies—it is both faster and cheaper—news production. Using their own interpretation simply requires less sources or information in general, making it a convenient tool for them to fill pages when coping with organizational pressures (Patterson 2000). Also, building on this changing media environment, journalists might be under greater pressure to offer in-depth analyses instead of simply dealing with the facts. Taking into account the changes in the media that have unfolded throughout the years, the following hypothesis is tested:

H1: News coverage has become more interpretive.

### Explaining Interpretive Journalism: The Political Context

Set aside those expected structural/long-term changes, contextual determinants might influence how journalists cover the topic of coalition negotiations on a short-term basis. While the process of negotiating a new coalition has not changed profoundly over the years, some aspects of the event differ from one formation to another. Those contextual determinants can affect both the willingness and capacity of journalists to write in an interpretive manner. Patterson (1993) argues that an understanding of the news media’s reality begins with a recognition that reporters must have a story to tell. Since having access to information is a crucial precondition for journalists to be able to do so, a lack of information could cause them to turn to their own interpretation to fill the pages (Becker and Vlad 2009). In the case of government negotiations, the amount of information that is available to journalists depends on the communication style and strategy of participating actors. Generally, politicians are more eager to communicate their achievements rather than their failures with the world,

which is why they are expected to share more information with the press towards the end of the negotiations, when an agreement is close to be made and there is simply more good news to circulate, regardless of the total length of the negotiations (Meade and Stasavage 2006). Previous research on political bargaining confirms that early negotiations mostly take place in secret, while later offers are often made in public, to emphasize politicians' sincerity (Rapoport and Kahan 1974). Since the information shortage is more pressing in the beginning of the coalition talks, the following hypothesis is tested:

H2: Newspaper coverage about the beginning of the negotiations is more interpretive.

Another proxy for the accessibility of information is the amount of quotes and press leaks in newspaper articles. When politicians communicate systematically with the press—for example by organizing regular press conferences—about what is being discussed behind closed doors, journalists have more and straightforward information at their disposal. As a result, they can write without the necessity to use their own interpretation of what is going on. However, politicians can also anonymously leak information to the press, which leaves journalists with fragmented information that is not necessarily trustable, since it is often shared out of strategic considerations and it is frequently contradicted by other insiders (Spörer-Wagner and Marcinkowski 2010). During government formations, journalists are in desperate need of information, which is why we expect the type of source to affect how journalists write and not the other way around. Because journalists are in doubt about the reliability of information coming from those unidentifiable sources, relying on them when covering a story is trickier, which is why the following hypotheses are tested:

H3: Newspaper coverage is more interpretive when it contains press leaks.

H4: Newspaper coverage is less interpretive when it contains quotes.

To keep the audience engaged, journalists also need to come up with new, interesting information or need to explore new angles of the same topic. While government negotiations are held in secret, citizens want to know what is going on. The more so because of the great contradiction with the preceding elections in terms of openness of communication. Covering a topic on which a steady information flow from politicians towards the media is lacking, this “newness” of information could be even more problematic. That is why the total duration of the coalition formation is taken into account. By giving their own interpretation of what is going on behind closed doors, journalists can provide readers with new stories or frame “old” information in an innovative manner. The longer it takes politicians to form a government, the more pressure there is on journalists to do so, since information is exceedingly scarce and citizens have to be kept informed. That is why the following hypothesis is tested:

H5: Newspaper coverage about long negotiations is, in general, more interpretive.

## Data and Method

This case study on interpretive journalism focuses exclusively on newspaper coverage about coalition negotiations in Belgium. Belgium has a proportional multimember district system and relatively long government negotiations. As most European democracies, Belgium is a multiparty parliamentary democracy in which coalition talks take place behind closed doors. Also, even in majoritarian systems such as the UK, coalition governments have recently seen

the light. The average length of coalition talks in Belgium is comparable with, for example, the same event in the Netherlands, Austria and Luxembourg (e.g. Martin and Vanberg 2003). In all such multiparty democracies, the secrecy surrounding such coalition negotiations makes journalists extremely dependent on politicians' goodwill to share information (Rapoport and Kahan 1974). This lack of transparency is thus expected to attract the media's attention in all countries that are subject to coalition negotiations. Apart from the political system, and of crucial importance when studying journalistic trends, the Belgian media system is very similar to media systems in Scandinavian and other Western-European countries. Hallin and Mancini (2004) categorized those media systems as democratic-corporatist, meaning that they have historically been characterized by high political parallelism (e.g. De Bens and Raeymaeckers 2007; Lijphart 1999), strong professionalization of the journalistic profession and a relatively strong state intervention to protect press freedom (Hallin and Mancini 2004). The affiliation between press and parties has largely disappeared today (De Bens and Raeymaeckers 2007) and the Belgian media system has moved towards a more liberal model, showing some similarities with the British media system, for example (e.g. Hallin and Mancini 2016).

Also, with regard to the specific case selection, focusing on the topic of government negotiations offers some unique opportunities for studying a longitudinal trend in how journalists report. Given the goal of this study, namely to distinguish between structural and contextual determinants, it is crucial to keep the topic constant. Coalition negotiations are ideal in this regard. They have not undergone profound structural changes over the 29 years covered in this study. While the context of a specific formation surely differs from one formation to another, it has not changed in a structural manner: how coalitions are negotiated has not changed significantly, formations have not systematically increased in duration, the complexity of issues on the table has not changed substantially, nor the amount of actors being present at the negotiating table. While the negotiations in the 80s and 90s were complex because of the state reforms that had to be passed, the coalition talks in 2010 and 2014 were on the other hand dominated by a more polarized public debate. Also, the presence of (references to) sources is rightfully categorized as a contextual determinant. While articles in 2011 counted on average 2.7 quotes, the average article in 1988 contained 2.8 quotes. The same argument holds for references to press leaks. Information accessibility thus differs from one formation to another, but not in a structural manner.

To test the hypotheses and formulate an answer to the research questions, a quantitative analysis of newspaper articles is conducted. News stories were sampled from Flemish<sup>1</sup> newspapers, one popular (Het Laatste Nieuws) and one quality newspaper (De Standaard).<sup>2</sup> Explicit news analysis or unequivocal commentaries such as editorials or columns are excluded from the sample because such coverage is inherently interpretive and journalists signal to their audience that the coverage is going beyond descriptive, fact-based journalism (see Salgado et al. 2016). This conservative approach allows to focus on news items that appear to be based on factual information in order to examine the more subtle blend of information and interpretation. As the included coverage has no sign indicating a more subjective approach, readers are not explicitly warned for the indiscriminate use of facts and interpretation. In total, 1342 newspaper articles about 14 formations were sampled (see Table 1). Starting the day after the elections, two articles were selected on each day of the negotiations, out of the total amount of articles generated when using the same set of keywords (formation, formations, coalition talks, coalition formation, governmental formation, negotiations) in Gopress, a Belgian press database. Since the formations in 2008 and 2010 took very long, I systematically skipped one day when

TABLE 1 - Descriptives news stories

| Year formation | Duration (days) | N (articles) |
|----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| 2014           | 139             | 151          |
| 2010–2011      | 541             | 339          |
| 2009           | 36              | 43           |
| 2007–2008      | 194             | 195          |
| 2004           | 36              | 34           |
| 2003           | 55              | 61           |
| 1999           | 31              | 37           |
| 1995           | 33              | 51           |
| 1991–1992      | 130             | 157          |
| 1987–1988      | 148             | 207          |
| 1985           | 46              | 67           |
|                |                 | Total = 1342 |

sampling articles about those negotiations. That way, a similar amount of articles is included for each negotiation, and we additionally deal with the fact that journalists simply did not cover the events on a daily basis because of the exceptional duration. In the final analysis, 1249 newspaper articles are included, as 93 cases were dropped because of missing values on crucial variables.

The sampled articles are coded based on a self-constructed codebook (see Table 2). The dependent variable interpretive journalism is measured at the article level, and is composed of explanation (addressing the reasons behind an event or the motivations of actors 0/1), evaluation (expressing their opinion by using value-laden terms that have clear, nonneutral connotations 0/1) and speculation (speculating about the future or future consequences of current events 0/1) by journalists. The three indicators are coded on a present/absent basis, indicated as being present when not substantiated by verifiable facts or statements provided by sources. One article can contain all three elements, which is why the actual dependent (compound) variable measuring interpretive journalism consists of a scale ranging from zero to three,<sup>3</sup> designating the amount of interpretive indicators present in an article. The coding of journalistic explanation (.75), speculation (.84) and evaluation (.67)<sup>4</sup> turned out to be sufficiently reliable between the two coders taking the Krippendorfs reliability test that was conducted on a randomly drawn subsample of 130 articles (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007). The actual coding was done by one experienced coder, thereby assuring even more consistency.

The independent variables in this study are situated both at the article and at the negotiation level. To decide whether structural changes in the media are the main driving factor behind interpretive journalism, I aggregate all articles about a certain formation and examine whether the amount of interpretation in news coverage increases throughout the years. To implicate contextual determinants, situated at the level of the negotiation, as a possible cause of interpretive journalism, proxies for information accessibility are used. The analysis is twofold. On the one hand, I take into account the accessibility of information by indicating which negotiation phase (first phase and second phase 0/1) the article covers, and by counting the amount of press leaks (references to non-identifiable news sources such as “a Flemish politician”) and quotes or paraphrases (identifiable sources) in each article. Those article-level variables (press leaks, quotes and negotiation

TABLE 2 - descriptives independent variables

| Variable                  | Description   | N     | Mean | SD   | Min | Max |
|---------------------------|---|-------|------|------|-----|-----|
| <b>Structural</b>         |   |       |      |      |     |     |
| Explanation               | Journalists try to unravel strategies or motivations of actors. They target the reasons behind events or actions, without support from verifiable facts or statements provided by sources.<br>E.g. <i>Politician X obstructed the negotiations because he wants to secure his position in the coalition.</i><br>0. No explanation ⇔ 1. At least one explanation   | 1,342 | .28  | .45  | 0   | 1   |
| Evaluation                | Journalists make statements about their own opinion by using value-laden terms. These terms are subjective and carry non-neutral connotations. Evaluation refers to journalists expressing their opinion, without referring to verifiable facts or statements provided by sources.<br>E.g. <i>Politician X has not the capacities to lead the negotiations. It will be a disaster.</i><br>0. No evaluation ⇔ 1. At least one evaluation (either positive, negative or ambivalent) | 1,342 | .31  | .46  | 0   | 1   |
| Speculation               | Journalists make statements about the future or future consequences of current events or actions, that are not explicitly based on verifiable facts or statements provided by sources.<br>E.g. <i>We expect the negotiations to go on for at least one more month.</i><br>0. No speculation ⇔ 1. At least one speculation   | 1,342 | .55  | .5   | 0   | 1   |
| Interpretive journalism   | Sum ranging from 0 to 3 composed of the above dummies   | 1,342 | 1.14 | .95  | 0   | 3   |
| <b>Contextual</b>         |   |       |      |      |     |     |
| <b>Information access</b> |   |       |      |      |     |     |
| Negotiation phase         | Phase 1 runs from day one until there is agreement about which parties will form the new coalition.<br>0. First phase ⇔ 1. Second phase   | 1,249 | .49  | .5   | 0   | 1   |
| Quotes                    | The total amount of quotes in each article ("...").   | 1,342 | 2.68 | 2.53 | 0   | 14  |
| Press leaks               | The total amount press leaks in each article. All vague descriptions of news sources that are not identifiable are considered press leaks. E.g. <i>An insider, a socialist, a Flemish politician,...</i>  | 1,342 | .88  | 1.32 | 0   | 10  |
| <b>New information</b>    |   |       |      |      |     |     |
| Duration                  | Duration of the negotiation, starting the day after the elections until the new government swears its oath<br>0. Less than 100 days ⇔ 1. More than 100 days   | 14    | .78  | .41  | 0   | 1   |
| Control                   |   | 1,342 | 1.88 | .68  | 1   | 3   |
| Article length            | 1. Long article (+ 600 words)<br>2. Medium article (300-600 words)<br>3. Short article (- 300 words)  |       |      |      |     |     |

phase) are less ambiguous to code, all generating a Krippendorff's alpha of 1.0 in the reliability test. On the other hand, I focus on the duration of the formation (total amount of days), to address journalists' need for new information.

To statistically test the effect of both structural and contextual determinants on the presence of interpretation in newspaper articles, a multilevel analysis is conducted in which I control for the fact that news stories are nested within a certain formation.

## Results

First, I visually investigate if journalistic interpretation in newspaper coverage is indeed on the rise. Figure 1 presents the indicators separately, before turning to the compound variable in Figure 2.

The graphs visualize a clear increase in the amount of newspaper articles containing journalistic explanation, evaluation and speculation over the years. Figure 1(a) shows a clear increase in the amount of news stories containing at least one journalistic explanation from 9 per cent of the stories in 1985 to 48 per cent in 2014. It does not concern a strictly linear trend, which indicates that contextual determinants might be at play. Figure 1(b) presents the amount of articles containing journalistic evaluations throughout the years. Results show that journalists used value-laden terms in 18 per cent of all articles in 1985, compared to 40 per cent of the articles in 2014. The expectation that it would mainly concern negative expressions also finds proof in the data; 19 per cent of all articles is predominantly negative, 10 per cent is ambivalent and merely 1 per cent is positive, which clearly taps into the commercial preferences of news consumers and confirms findings from previous studies (e.g. Djerf-Pierre and Weibull 2008; Patterson 1993). Finally, Figure 1(c) shows an almost linear increase in the amount of speculation. While it was in 1985 highly uncommon for journalists to prospectively speculate upon negotiations, the opposite is true in 2014, with almost 70 per cent of all articles containing speculation. Over a period of 29 years, the amount of articles containing speculation more than doubles. The upward trend is rather similar for all indicators and a steep increase seems to take place from 2005 onwards, which can be explained by the introduction of online news platforms and the more widespread use of internet in news production in general.

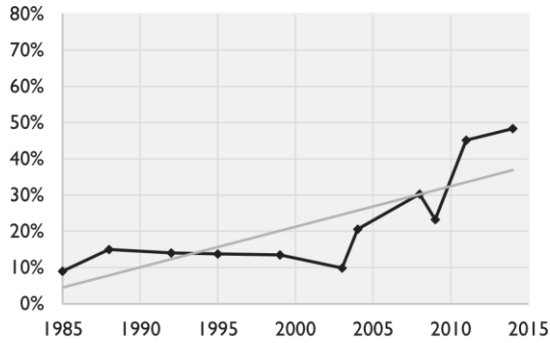
Figure 2 presents the compound variable measuring interpretive journalism, using its mean to compare across coalition negotiations. An almost linear increase in the amount of interpretation in newspaper articles becomes visible, with the same transition period situated around 2005. While coverage about the negotiations in 1985 contained on average less than one interpretive indicator, almost two out of three are present in 2014. When using a dummy variable to capture if an article contains at least one of the three indicators, results show that the amount of interpretive articles triples between 1985 and 2014.

Moving on to Table 3, a multilevel analysis is conducted in order to examine some possible explanations underlying the presence of this journalistic style. A multilevel approach is necessary since newspaper articles are nested within a certain negotiation. The dependent variable is the compound measure of interpretive journalism, indicating how much (0/3) indicators of this journalistic style are present in an article. Separate analyses for each indicator can be found in Table A1 in the Appendix.

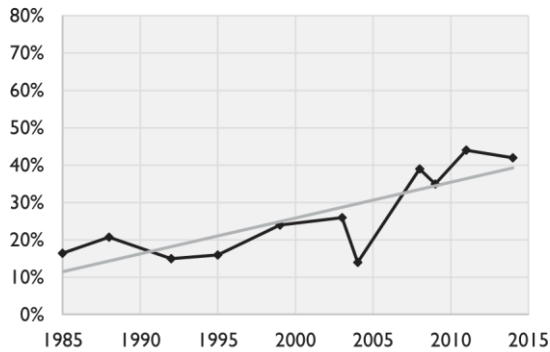
The first model contains a time variable to investigate whether there is indeed a structural increase in the presence of journalistic interpretation. The positive coefficient indicates that the amount of interpretation in news coverage increases significantly each



a. % Articles containing journalistic explanation



b. % Articles containing journalistic evaluation



c. % Articles containing journalistic speculation

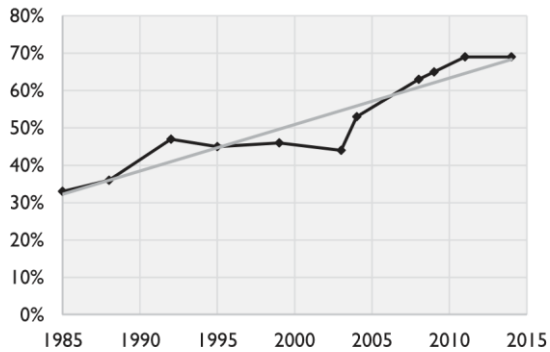




FIGURE 1  
Evolution indicators interpretive journalism

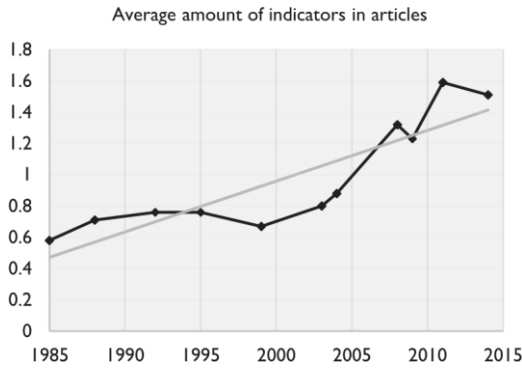


FIGURE 2  
Evolution compound variable interpretive journalism

TABLE 3  
Multilevel regression predicting interpretation in newspaper coverage

| Interpretive journalism  |                   | Model 1         | Model 2          | Model 3          |
|--------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|------------------|------------------|
| Structural trend         | Year              | 0.03 (0.00)***  | 0.02 (0.00)***   | 0.02 (0.00)***   |
| Information access       | Negotiation phase | –               | 0.28 (0.05)***   | 0.24 (0.05)***   |
|                          | Press leaks       | –               | 0.17 (0.02)***   | 0.17 (0.02)***   |
|                          | Quotes            | –               | –0.09 (0.01)***  | –0.10 (0.01)***  |
| New information          | Duration          | –               | –                | 0.12 (0.06)      |
|                          | Article length    | 0.36 (0.04)***  | 0.40 (0.04)***   | 0.40 (0.04)***   |
| Constant                 |                   | –52.2 (8.93)*** | –44.55 (4.79)*** | –43.13 (4.85)*** |
| R <sup>2</sup> (overall) |                   | 0.2             | 0.3              | 0.3              |
| Variance (between)       |                   | 0.11            | 0                | 0                |
| Variance (within)        |                   | 0.85            | 0.79             | 0.79             |
| N (formations)           |                   | 1249 (14)       | 1249 (14)        | 1249 (14)        |

Note: Standard errors between brackets. \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001.

additional year, which clearly confirms Hypothesis 1. Moreover, the R<sup>2</sup> (.21) validates the expectation that this trend is caused by structural changes in the media environment, since no changes occurred in coalition negotiations between 1985 and 2014. Article length, implicated

as a control variable, influences the amount of journalistic interpretation substantially. Longer stories naturally contain more interpretation, since they give a bigger platform to the interpretations of journalists. Adding to that, articles have become longer throughout the years, with the percentage of long news stories increasing from 3 per cent in 1985 to 36 per cent in 2014. The increase in article length is thus part of the overall structural evolution. This finding confirms the 'new long journalism'-hypothesis from, among others, Barnhurst (2003).

This structural trend remains significant in the second model, when adding formation-level, contextual variables. The accessibility of information to journalists seems to affect how they cover coalition negotiations. The negotiation phase, used as a proxy for information accessibility, inserts a significant influence on interpretive coverage, thereby confirming Hypothesis 2. Articles contain less interpretation towards the end of the negotiation, since politicians will then be more eager to communicate with the press. There is more (good) news to share, there is less uncertainty about the outcome of the negotiation, and politicians want to show citizens they are successfully negotiating a new coalition. References to press leaks, a proxy for information scarcity, also trigger journalistic interpretations, while quotes have the opposite effect. Both Hypotheses 3 and 4 find support in the data, which confirms the importance of information accessibility in explaining interpretive journalism. When journalists have information—preferably straightforward facts from trustable sources—at their disposal, they less likely turn to interpretive writing. This implicates that politicians themselves are, in the context of negotiations, able to influence how journalists cover this important event. When they regularly share information with the press, the coverage upon the negotiations will be less interpretive. The contextual determinants in model 2 cause the  $R^2$  to rise to 30 per cent explained variance.

When adding the duration of the coalition negotiation, a proxy for the necessity of journalists for new information, in the last model, the  $R^2$  remains constant. The duration does not affect the presence of interpretive journalism. Therefore, Hypothesis 5 is rejected.

## Conclusion

Is interpretive journalism on the rise? The answer is a definite yes. Drawing on newspaper coverage about coalition negotiations in Belgium, results show that a descriptive style of reporting gradually gave way to a more interpretive style. The amount of articles containing interpretation triples between 1985 and 2014, thereby confirming findings from previous studies and adding that the upward trend is currently still developing, also in Europe and in newspaper coverage on government negotiations. With regard to the question why journalists turn to this style of writing, this study offers some modest insights. Keeping the topic of coalition negotiations constant, we find that structural changes in the media environment, as well as the accessibility of information to journalists during the negotiations, partially explain the use of interpretation by journalists.

The substantial increase in interpretive journalism has implications for both citizens and politicians. First of all, news consumers can be affected by this style of writing. How journalists cover political topics has been proven to influence public opinion, public knowledge and by extent citizens' trust in politicians, institutions and democracy in general. Even more so when citizens are largely dependent on information provided by the media, which is certainly the case for the topic of coalition negotiations (e.g. De Vreese and Elenbaas 2008). As Patterson

(1993, 1997)—one of the most profound critics of interpretive journalism—argues, “the absence of clear-cut boundaries between facts and interpretations raises questions about the informative function of the mass media”. One might, however, take an opposite stance in this normative debate, arguing that the media simply fulfil their duty as a watchdog of democracy by interpreting politicians’ actions and monitoring elite behaviour. What stance one takes in this normative debate, is depends on what professional roles journalists (should) adhere to. Such role conceptions, as Van Dalen, De Vreese, and Albæk (2012) conclude, differ strongly across countries, making comparative research in this regard all the more interesting and necessary.

Second, interpretive coverage might also affect the political process itself, for example, by harming the crucial trust between the negotiating actors (e.g. SpörerWagner and Marcinkowski 2010). Adding to that, the findings of this study implicate that politicians themselves can influence how journalists report about the negotiations. By systematically providing journalists with (inside) information and by avoiding press leaks, politicians can diminish the amount of interpretive coverage. Given the fact that they want to form a coalition as quickly as possible and show citizens a positive image of themselves, it might be in their own interest to do so.

Set aside the findings and implications, this study has some limitations worth acknowledging. First and foremost, one might argue that the analysis is still inconclusive about the explanatory theories. As much as I tried to control for other possible explanations besides a changing media environment, it remains difficult to draw conclusions upon the mechanisms underlying news production and construction, based on a content analysis of newspaper articles. A solution to this problem is to amplify this quantitative research with a qualitative approach. By observing journalists in their daily routines, it should be feasible to explain more in-depth when and why journalists turn to an interpretive style of writing. Doing so, future research can further elaborate on the importance of information access as a possible explanatory theory.

Second, one could also doubt the generalizability of the results presented. During negotiations, parties often have an interest in holding back information, whereas in a lot of other political news they have the opposite interest, namely getting their message out. It does not come as a big surprise that coalition formations are times of speculation and interpretation, as these negotiations take place behind closed doors. However, regardless of the fact that a high level of interpretive journalism is to be expected in coverage of coalition negotiations, this study still finds proof of a significant increase over the 29 years investigated. Adding to that, the findings largely confirm what scholars have repeatedly proven in studies focusing on election coverage, mostly in the USA, but recently also in other European countries. Additionally, I believe that other topics share some similarities with the topic of coalition negotiations, making it possible to generalize results. A wide variety of “hard” topics suffer from a lack of transparency. Think, for example, about foreign policy or decisions regarding the secret service. Politicians only occasionally and often strategically communicate about such matters, leaving a lot of inside information being unattainable for journalists.

Concluding, I believe this research makes a small but significant contribution to the existing literature. Examining the understudied topic of interpretive journalism, a longitudinal trend is unravelled. While no study systematically explored the causes underlying such an

increase in interpretive journalism, this longitudinal content analysis makes a modest attempt at tracing some of those causes. At the very least, I hope this study will open up a new avenue in exploring changes in journalistic styles and addressing the underlying mechanisms.

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## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## NOTES

1. Flemish is the Dutch language as spoken in Flanders, the northern (and largest) part of Belgium.
2. No differences were found between the popular and quality newspaper with regard to the amount of journalistic interpretation
3. It is useful to use separate indicators to measure interpretive journalism, as the scale reliability is only .41. This means the measure is an additive index indicating that interpretive journalism consists of different aspects that together constitute a distinct journalistic style.
4. In the reliability test, journalists' tone was coded as either neutral, positive, negative or ambivalent. Differences between the two coders taking the reliability test mainly occurred in deciding whether a certain term was ambivalent or positive/negative. However, in the final analysis included in this paper, both positive/negative and ambivalent references are seen as opposing a neutral style of writing, and are thus taken together. This is why the slightly lower alpha for the use of value-laden terms should not be given too much weight.

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## Appendix 1. Robustness check

TABLE A1.  
Multilevel logistic regression with separate indicators in different models.

|                    |                   | Explanation      | Evaluation       | Speculation       |
|--------------------|-------------------|------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Structural trend   | Year              | .04 (.01)***     | .03 (.01)***     | .04 (.01)***      |
| Information access | Negotiation phase | .41 (.15)**      | .30 (.15)*       | .51 (.14)***      |
|                    | Press leaks       | .23 (.05)***     | .24 (.05)***     | .37 (.06)***      |
|                    | Quotes            | -.10 (.03)***    | -.09 (.03)***    | -.30 (.03)***     |
| New information    | Duration          | .57 (.23)*       | .08 (.20)        | -.02 (.20)        |
| Control            | Article length    | .86 (.12)***     | .56 (.11)***     | .64 (.11)***      |
| Constant           |                   | -85.19 (19.6)*** | -67.00 (17.4)*** | -78.58 (17.29)*** |
| Variance (between) |                   | 0.14             | 0.13             | 0.16              |
| N (formations)     |                   | 1249 (14)        | 1249 (04)        | 1249 (04)         |

Note: Standard errors between brackets. \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\*p < .001.