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Negotiating national unity and diversity in public broadcasting : a comparative study on South Africa and Flanders

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### **Abstract**

In the context of globalization, national unity or identity are problematic and even contested concepts. The inherent diversity of most nations, furthermore, complicates the notion of a national unity or identity. Within this struggle to define the nation, mass media are generally regarded as playing an important role in ideas around nationhood. This article explores contemporary struggles to define 'the nation' as unified by comparing the diverse realities of South Africa and Flanders (Dutch-language northern Belgium) with specific focus on Public Service Broadcasting (PSB). Thus, by systematically exploring how diversity is dealt with in two separate national contexts, focusing in particular on PSB, we aim to come to a better understanding of how generic concepts like the nation, unity and diversity function in unique and specific contexts.

### **Keywords**

national identity

PSB

diversity

comparative research

South Africa

Flanders

## **Introduction**

This article explores contemporary struggles to define ‘the nation’ as a unified, coherent entity in relation to the obviously diverse realities of two specific nations, South Africa and Flanders (Dutch-language northern Belgium). While these nations are very different in a number of respects, as will be developed in the comparative analysis below, both do aim to establish themselves as a single political and cultural unity. As indicated by Wodak et al. (1999), stress on the unique and uniform character of the nation is a key characteristic in the discursive construction of national identity. In contemporary nations, however, ‘diversity’ is often included in such representations. Oliver Haag (2010: 333) refers to this as ‘nationalist discourses of diversity’.

In order to contribute to an understanding of issues of diversity and its manifestation in public broadcasting, with specific reference to the construction of a unified nation, we attempt to answer two main questions within the scope of this article. First, how do these two nations deal with diversity? Second, and more specifically, how is this reflected in the policies, initiatives and productions of their respective public service broadcasters?

To this end the article will unfold as follows: We start out with a brief overview of the theoretical framework within which the article can be situated and the reasons for taking a comparative methodological approach. This is followed by a broad historical, political and cultural contextualization and comparison of both regions. We then proceed to focus on media policies relating to national identity and diversity as they are implemented in both contexts. In particular, we will address PSB, which is considered, in both cases, as a national unifying factor. In every instance we first look at each nation individually in an effort to do justice to the specificities of each context and then proceed with a comparison that highlights similarities and differences.

## **Theoretical and methodological framework**

In its current use, the term ‘nation’ refers to (the endeavour to) the correspondence of political and cultural unities, of state and people (Gellner 1983: 1). Chipkin (2007: 2) argues that ‘the nation is a political community whose form is given in relation to the pursuit of democracy and freedom... In this sense, the nation precedes the state, not because it has always already existed, but because it emerges in and through the nationalist struggle for... power’. Anthony Smith stresses the importance of identity in this process. To him, nationalism draws on the history of a certain group in an attempt to create a sense of a common identity through its perceived shared history. He asserts that, even though nationalisms are often based on historically flawed interpretations, they are constructed through a ‘felt filiation, as well as a cultural affinity, with a remote past in which a community was formed, a community that despite all the changes it has undergone is still in some sense recognized as the “same” community’ (1991: 33). In a similar vein, probably the most influential definition of nations is that of Benedict Anderson (1991), who calls them ‘imagined communities’, among other things, because their members do not know each other but nevertheless have an image of the nation as a whole. However, as indicated by Stuart Hall, we should remember that nations and their unity have always been discursive constructions: ‘Instead of thinking of national cultures as unified, we should think of them as constituting a discursive device which represents difference as unity of identity’ (1992: 296–97).

Across national contexts, Public Service Broadcasters have been identified as key institutions supporting the creation and consolidation of nationhood (e.g. Cardiff and Scannell 1987; Van den Bulck 2001). Quite often, they had and have the duty to ‘unify the nation’, to

address the whole population and to create a shared, public sphere, in line with the 'Reithian' British PSB ethos (Price 1995). Unsurprisingly, then, many academics have criticized PSB for disregarding the actual diversity in society (e.g. Martín-Barbero 1988; Murdock 1992). Television, in particular, is often considered an important device for creating a national community. Many authors describe it as a source of common memories, images and experiences, uniting viewers of diverging backgrounds (e.g. Scannell 1992: 320; Van den Bulck 2001). Western European monopolistic public television, in particular, was explicitly devised as institutions aimed at stimulating national unity (Newcomb 1997: 4). Not only could they effectively create a national audience, they often explicitly addressed the nation in 'programmes of national identity' on the occasion of public events and national ceremonies (Cardiff and Scannell 1987).

We do not dismiss the importance of actual material and social conditions, as our elaborate presentation of national contexts indicates, but we do believe media, and more broadly popular culture, matter greatly in the everyday construction of the national imagination (Edensor 2002). Barnard (2006: 39) argues convincingly that popular culture (and therefore mass media), alongside political and social institutions, in South Africa chronicles the transformation of the country as well as imaginatively/materially creating a new South Africa. Similarly, in Flanders, mass media, in particular public television, have played a crucial role in defining Flemish national identity from the 1950s (Van den Bulck 2001; Dhoest 2004).

To further explore these issues, we employ comparative analysis as a research method for a number of reasons. Comparative analysis can sensitize researchers to variation and similarity, consequently contributing to concept formation and stressing the specificity of seemingly general concepts. Therefore, a comparative analysis might force researchers to clarify the scope and applicability of the concepts they employ. Linked to the above is the fact

that comparative analysis gives the researchers the opportunity to look beyond the usual national framework applied to context-specific research. This might clarify not only the similarities some contexts share but also the specificities of a particular national unity.

Furthermore, in contrast to highly ethnocentric literature, which is usually written in fairly general terms, comparative analysis denaturalizes the media. It reduces the risk of assuming certain aspects of media systems to be 'natural' and consequently draws attention to aspects that may be difficult to detect when the focus is on one national case alone (Hallin and Mancini 2009: 2). A comparative analysis may elucidate specificities that an ethnocentric analysis may not. Hallin and Mancini (2009: 5), however, stress the fact that it is risky to generalize across nations whose media systems, histories and political culture differ, but also which cannot be known in equal depth. For this reason it makes sense that this is a collaborative, explorative project between a South African and a Belgian. Furthermore, by systematically starting from the South African situation we reverse the usual Eurocentric order that takes 'the West' as the self-evident starting point and benchmark.

The aim of our comparison is to systematically discuss similarities and differences between South Africa and Flanders in order to get a better view of their shared issues as well as national specificities. Although we systematically cover the same fields for both, the actual accounts are different because of the distinctive, historically, politically and socially rooted state of these nations; hence, we first discuss each country separately before starting the comparison. In order to present a richly contextualized comparative analysis it is also necessary to first understand the situatedness of the public media we intend to investigate. For this reason, the first part of our analysis comprises a short sketch of the history and contemporary situations of South Africa and Flanders. Such an approach is also in line with the qualitative methodology we favour here, since qualitative research relies on a rich description of context in order to identify and examine emerging themes and trends. The goal

of the contextualization is not to give an exhaustive account of the history of both cases but rather to provide a synoptic background to both regions in order to contribute to discourses of nationhood and unity, also as they play out in the mass media.

### **National contexts**

To understand contemporary struggles around national unity in public broadcasting, it is important to consider the specific historical and social contexts for the development of the nation. South Africans' quest to define themselves as a country with a complex but unified national identity becomes apparent when one considers its history of struggling to become a sovereign democracy: first, the struggle to become an autonomous republic after colonization; second, the struggles both for and against apartheid and its residues; and currently the struggle of attempting to define what being South African means. Moreover, in contemporary South Africa, answering the question of who is and who is not South African has become an issue of national identity. Chipkin (2007: 188) writes in this regard that in 'the absence of any traditional unifying principles (of language, culture, religion, race and so on), the identity of South Africans is elusive'.

On 27 April 1992 South Africa changed to a democracy after decades of being an authoritarian state under oligarchic white minority rule (Wasserman and De Beer 2005b: 36). Preceding this, however, South Africa was a country still reeling from the aftermath of colonialism, rife with racism and notorious for its apartheid policies. In 1909 the Union of South Africa was created as a dominion of the British Empire. The process of segregation in South Africa began officially when the first Union Government enacted the seminal Black Land Act in 1913. This marked the beginning of the repression of black Africans and other people of colour in formalized and structured ways. In 1948 the National Party came into

power and segregation was legalized in the form of apartheid (Wasserman and De Beer 2005a: 196). Following a whites-only referendum in May 1961, South Africa became a republic and left the Commonwealth. During the 1960s the South African government followed the principle of what was called ‘separate development’, which resulted in the establishment of ‘independent’ bantustans

<sup>1</sup> that aimed for the ‘eventual denationalization of the majority of black South Africans and their reconstitution as foreign citizens exercising full political rights outside’ South Africa’s white constitutional order (Jacobs 2002: 283).

These policies of separate development caused violent struggles, both in attempts to maintain the status quo as well as against apartheid. These struggles came to a head at Sharpeville in 1960 when 69 demonstrators were killed by the police. This led to an abandonment of the Black Liberation movement’s previously nonviolent resistance and led to the Rivonia trial in 1963 that saw African National Congress (ANC) leaders sentenced to life imprisonment (Wasserman and De Beer 2005a: 196).

The violence, however, persisted. Growing black opposition, increasing pressure from international forces and economic sanctions against the white minority regime led to negotiations between the apartheid government and the (then recently unbanned) resistance movements in the early 1990s (Wasserman and De Beer 2005a: 196). The first non-racial nationwide elections in April of 1994 indicated the formal end of apartheid in South Africa and the establishment of a Government of National Unity with the ANC as leading party (Barnett 1999: 274).

The ANC, most notably Nelson Mandela, worked hard to foster a climate of reconciliation and unity (Jacobs 2002: 285). This new national unity was validated by new national symbols such as a national flag, an adapted national anthem and the recognition of eleven official South African languages. Since 1994 South African identity, popularly typified

as a unity celebrating its diversity, has been a constant, albeit not uncontested,<sup>2</sup> point on the South African political, economic and social agenda and consequently it has also been the subject of a myriad of discourses surrounding the topic of national identity.

Unlike South Africa, Flanders is not a nation state but it is a strongly politically and culturally emancipated region and community within the federal state of Belgium. After its independence in 1830, Belgium was established and supported as a modern nation through the usual means, such as the writing of national historiographies and the creation of national symbols such as the national flag and anthem (Morelli 1996). However, linguistically and culturally, Belgium brought together ‘northern-European’ Germanic Dutch-language and ‘southern-European’ French-language regions. Despite the initial bilingual status of the whole country, French was clearly the stronger language politically and culturally while the Flemish region had to take recourse to the (imported) Dutch language standard (Deprez 1999). Belgium was not, as it was subsequently presented by some, a forced marriage of two completely opposed cultures (Stengers 1996). Still, within the Belgian nation state Flemish nationalism started to grow in the nineteenth century, largely as a reaction to the ‘frenchification’ of life in Flanders, and it bloomed in the twentieth century. Through literature and cultural activism, the idea of a Flemish culture and heritage was supported, gradually also accompanied by political claims (Wils 1993; Deprez 1999). The establishment of a language border in 1963 and successive state reforms from 1970 finally led to the contemporary, federalized situation with two main regions: the northern, Dutch-language Flanders (approximately six million inhabitants) and the southern, French-language Wallonia (approx. three and a half million), besides a third, small German-language region and Brussels (one million) as a mostly French-speaking capital situated in the Flemish region.

While in South Africa the overall drive is towards unification, in Belgium the initially unified nation state became increasingly separated, with Flanders increasingly acting as a

national entity. Although the majority of the Flemish population, to this day, does not ask for independence, there is wide support for strong economic and political self-sufficiency. From the nineteenth century, this process of cultural and political nationalism was accompanied by the creation of Flemish 'national' symbols (including a flag and an anthem), the (re)writing of Flemish history as well as the invention of myths (Morelli 1996). At the core of these mechanisms was a wish to present Flanders as a unified, homogeneous region with a strong and old cultural and linguistic heritage. Politically, such representations are broadly supported by nationalist and Right-Wing parties while they are criticized by Left-Wing politicians and intellectuals, who argue that it leads to intolerance and even racism (Lesage et al. 1998). Indeed, the stress on national unity implies a focus on similarity within and an opposition with 'others', both within the nation state (the Walloon) and beyond. Migration, in particular, is represented by some as a threat to Flemish cultural identity. From the 1990s, the Extreme Right party, Vlaams Blok (changed to Vlaams Belang after a conviction for racism in 2004), drew a lot of votes with its intolerant position towards immigrants. Unsurprisingly, the Vlaams Blok always supported apartheid in South Africa and even in 2008 Vlaams Belang president Bruno Valkeniers proclaimed that he fondly remembers apartheid (Cochez 2008). However, it is important to point out that Vlaams Blok and Vlaams Belang, despite their election success (particularly in Antwerp, the largest and most diverse Flemish city), have never participated in Flemish or Belgian government.

Clearly, both countries have very different histories, and while trying to come to a comparison what first strikes us are the different themes, denotations and connotations connected to issues of nationhood and even 'unity through diversity' in both countries. While race, language and culture are prominent themes in both contexts, the South African history of violent conflict and minority rule contrasts with the Belgian and Flemish history of peaceful compromise. In South Africa, race oppositions and institutionalized racism are an explicit

theme, whereas in Belgium race is only implicitly a theme and linguistic and cultural distinctions are the primary focus. In Belgium, nationalism (nowadays) is more connected with regional unity and distinctions within the nation state (Flanders versus Wallonia), whereas South African ideas of nationhood, however contested and plural, are more oriented towards the unity of the whole country. Taken together, these differences are illustrative of the varied inflections of nationhood across the globe, but they also highlight the continued importance of the national context in contemporary (globalized) society.

Despite these clear historical and social differences and divisions, there are some similarities. In both cases we witness a contemporary struggle to define the nation, and unity is a key theme in both countries. Furthermore, even though diversity can be seen (and indeed is often seen) as a threat to national unity, paradoxically, to some extent it is used in both contexts as a mechanism to secure the cohesion of culturally diverse groups belonging to the same imagined community.

### **Issues of diversity**

In both countries, creating ‘unity in diversity’ is a key endeavour, but, as this section will illustrate, again national differences make for different emphases. South Africa is, arguably, one of the most diverse and complex countries in the world. In 2011 the South African population comprised roughly 50 million people from a variety of cultures, languages and religious backgrounds. The unequivocal majority of its population consists of Africans (40 million), with smaller coloured (four and a half million), Indian/Asian (one point two million) and white (four and a half million) communities (Statistics South Africa 2011).<sup>3</sup>

Apart from these broad racial divisions, diversity in South Africa also concerns countless ethnic and cultural differences. The black population, for example, is divided into

four main ethnic groups: Nguni, Sotho, Shangaan-Tsonga and Venda. Within these groups there exist numerous sub-groups – for example, Zulu and Xhosa (as subgroups of the Nguni). From the above it is apparent that even from a linguistic point of view South Africa is a diverse country. Officially, the constitution recognizes eleven official languages, although there are more spoken in the country. These official languages include English, Afrikaans, Ndebele, Northern Sotho, Sotho, Swazi, Tswana, Tsonga, Venda, Xhosa and Zulu.

Social and economic differences further contribute to diversity in the South African context. South Africa constitutes the largest economy in Africa and is rated as an upper-middle-income economy by the World Bank; yet it is still plagued by economic and structural inequality. Despite extensive efforts like black economic empowerment (BEE) and other policies of social and economic reform, the country was ranked the third most unequal society in the world in 2011 (based on the Gini index measuring the distribution of family income) and crime rates are also among the highest worldwide (CIA World Factbook).

Apart from all of the above, and despite South Africa's Transition to Democracy, Bronwyn Harris (2002: 169) writes that the shift in political power brought about a new range of discriminatory practices. According to her, xenophobia, especially towards African foreigners, is one such example that is prevalent in the 'new' South Africa. As recently as 2012 the SAIRR (South African Institute of Race Relations) called on the South African government to address the problem of xenophobia (Conway-Smith 2012). Diversity in South Africa, therefore, encompasses much more than race and also involves cultural, linguistic, social, economic and migration factors.

Thus, in South Africa specifically, uniting and reconciling the diverse and divided nation is a key theme of post-apartheid society and this is reflected in the rainbow nation discourse. Archbishop Desmond Tutu is credited with introducing the concept of the 'rainbow nation' in a South African context. In a number of televised appearances after South Africa's

first democratic elections in 1994 Tutu used the ‘Rainbow people of God’ as a metaphor to describe the post-apartheid South African nation, in contrast to the segregation of apartheid. This metaphor suggests a nation that is supposedly diverse but united in spirit (Haron 2007; Milton 2008: 256). The metaphor marked the symbolic shift to democracy and away from white minority dominance over the black majority.

President Nelson Mandela elaborated on the rainbow nation discourse in his first month of office, and during the presidency of Thabo Mbeki the idea of unity was perpetuated in what Orgeret (2004: 156) refers to as ‘the united idea of African renaissance’.<sup>4</sup> The rainbow nation discourse was again invoked by President Jacob Zuma in his inaugural speech when he was elected as president in May 2009 after the country’s third democratic national elections.

Linked to the concept of the rainbow nation is the African principle of *ubuntu*.<sup>5</sup> The term *ubuntu* has its origin in the Zulu maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which roughly translates into ‘a person is a person through other persons’ or ‘I am because of others’. The emphasis here is thus on the community as opposed to the individual, or on the individual as a product of his or her community, again emphasizing unity.

In Belgium, diversity issues have very different roots. Instead of a black majority historically dominated by a white minority of colonizers, in Belgium there is a white majority feeling threatened by a diverse group of ethnic minorities. Belgium is a country of immigration as more people enter than leave the country (CIA World Factbook). Migration in Belgium followed the patterns familiar to many Western European countries, with most labour migrants coming from Southern and Eastern Europe in the first half of the twentieth century with the emphasis shifting to Northern Africa and Turkey in the 1960s (CGKR 2009). Despite the migration stop in 1974, migration continued (for instance, marital migration and family reunification), and thanks to changing legislation many acquired Belgian nationality

(CGKR 2008). Today, more than two-thirds of the foreigners in Belgium are EU citizens, mostly Italian, French and Dutch, but there is also a growing number of Eastern Europeans. The largest groups of non-EU foreigners are still Moroccan and Turkish, while many have also acquired Belgian nationality.

Discussions about the ‘problems’ of Belgian and Flemish multi-ethnic society mostly concern the non-EU groups. These were initially called ‘guest workers’, which encapsulated the idea – shared by policy-makers and migrants – of temporality. Partly for this reason, not until 1989 were policies developed to guide their integration into Belgian society (CGKR 2009: 13). While earlier generations of EU migrants have gradually integrated into Belgium (through naturalization, mixed marriages, etc.), the later groups are still strongly rooted in their culture and country of origin. Combined with limited Dutch-language skills (particularly among the first generation of migrants), low levels of schooling and high unemployment, these cultural divisions coincide with social and economic divisions, which were only gradually and hesitantly tackled through the emergent policies of the 1990s. These focused on social integration and officially adhered to the Anglo-Saxon model of ‘multiculturalism’, which implied respect for cultural diversity, much in line with the Dutch policies promoting tolerance for differences of all kind. However, according to some, these policies were actually quite assimilationist and ethnocentric, focusing on homogeneity rather than acceptance of diversity (Loobuyck and Dirk 2006).

Post 9/11, the (perceived) clash between ‘Muslims’ and ‘the West’ led not only to problematic representations of Islam (Shadid 2005) but also to a further questioning of the (perceived) failure of multiculturalism, firmer positions on ‘integration’ now being taken up again. Diversity does remain one issue in the Flemish (and Belgian) government, but it implies both rights and duties. As the Flemish Government Agreement for the period 2009–2014 states, Flanders ‘respects the diversity of different individuals and groups’ and ‘wants to

give them opportunities to emancipate in a non-discriminatory society, in which integration is also essential'. The end result is called 'interculturalism', a process of interaction between different cultures (Vlaamse Regering 2009: 73).

While overt racism is condemned and is punishable by the anti-discrimination law operational since 10 May 2007, slumbering racist sentiments no doubt underlay the discursive and social exclusion of non-European ethnic minorities from the Flemish imagined community. This is most clearly done through the use of the word 'allochtoon' (people from another country) to refer to all ethnic minority members from North-African and Turkish origin, even the third generation born in Belgium and having Belgian nationality (Verhaeghe 2010).

Comparing the two cases, at first sight both seem to be radically different in terms of diversity issues, as South Africa is clearly both larger and more diverse. Flanders is similar to a South African province in terms of size and population and it is relatively homogeneous with a white majority of about 90 per cent. The South African population is much larger and racially, ethnically, culturally, economically and linguistically more diverse. As a consequence, diversity is a much more central theme in South African politics than in Flanders, where unity on the Flemish (not Belgian) level is primordial.

Despite these radically different appearances, in essence what we have in both countries is a discourse about unity in diversity on the one hand and residual racial imbalance and white privileges on the other. In both cases, these are not officially sanctioned, quite to the contrary. Nevertheless, through the unequal division of capital of all kinds, and even despite an influx of newer and different kinds of capital (be it economic, educational, social or cultural), old patterns persist. Thus, although Belgium scores better in terms of equality (ranked 126th as opposed to South Africa 3rd), one structural inequality is with regard to the education, employment and overall socio-economic situation of non-European ethnic

minorities. Among other things, this leads to the lowest activity rate for non-EU migrants across Europe (69 per cent as opposed to an EU average of 78 per cent; Eurostat 2011). These discourses about unity, but also the enduring racial imbalance manifest in the policies and productions of both countries' public media, will be outlined in the section to follow.

### **Diversity in public media**

From the above it is clear that these disparate countries both deal with issues of diversity and inequality, while simultaneously attempting to create an identity of national unity. As mentioned previously, the media are often considered as playing an important role in this process, and South Africa and Flanders are no exceptions in this respect. This section aims to examine how the public service media of these two contexts are geared towards constructing unified nations.

The South African media system was founded and remains today largely based on the Anglo-American Democratic-Liberal model (Wasserman and De Beer 2005a). This model is characterized by a relative dominance of market mechanisms and commercial characteristics (Hallin and Mancini 2004). By 1820 South Africa had acquired what may be described as its own version of the British Magna Carta guaranteeing 'press freedom' (Wasserman and De Beer 2005a: 196).

However, despite this perceived press freedom, before 1994, under the authoritarian regime of Apartheid, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) functioned as 'a bastion of the apartheid state and mouthpiece for the ruling NP' (National party) (Barnett 1999: 274). Fourie (2002: 20) writes that the mainstream media created 'a cognitive construct of a white utopia – an island of white well-being, progress and prosperity...' During this time of white minority rule the media were subject to legal measures like censorship that repressed

media freedom. Restrictions were placed on any publication of material related to the banned ANC and other so-called ‘enemies of the state’ in South Africa.

During the 1992–1993 negotiations, what might be termed a ‘negative convergence’ took place between the different political parties regarding broadcasting reform. Both sides were reluctant to give the other opportunity to control the media, which resulted in the principle of independent broadcasting (Barnett 1999: 281). In contrast to previous years thus, during the 1994 elections, the SABC provided coverage that exhibited an unprecedented degree of balance, fairness and neutrality (Teer-Tomaselli 1995). The elections affected the beginning of the complete restructuring of the broadcasting sector in South Africa. According to Wasserman and De Beer (2005a: 194) emphasis shifted from ‘apartheid-era governmental control of the media (often in the name of “the national interest”) to one of self-regulation (in the “public interest”)

Related to the restructuring was the conceptualization of the media as an important role player in the development of national unity. Radio and television are widely regarded as important stages for ‘symbolic representations of the “rainbow” concept of “One Nation, Many Cultures”’ (Barnett 1999: 275). Subsequently, a year after the first democratic elections the Independent Broadcasting Authority proclaimed the following:

Through local music, and through locally produced entertaining, informative and educational programming, produced by a wide range of South African producers, television... will make a vital contribution to democracy, nation building and development in South Africa... (Independent Broadcasting Authority [IBA] 1995)

In 1996 when the new Constitution was adopted it included a Bill of Rights that guaranteed media freedom, freedom of expression and access to official information. Democratization brought a move away from what was the largely white-owned mainstream media of apartheid.

Media in South Africa today are saturated by images of *ubuntu* and the ‘rainbow nation’ – all connected to how South Africans must unite in their diversity and embrace that which is ‘Proudly South African’.<sup>6</sup> The SABC, for example, was assigned an important role in the South African ‘constitution’s and government’s explicit commitments to promoting all eleven official languages in its charge to broadcast in all the official languages and to promote previously marginalized languages’, in so doing also promoting the rainbow nation ideal (Barnard 2006: 49). This was also reflected in the SABC’s Editorial Policies in 2004:

As South Africa’s public broadcaster, the SABC embraces the constitutional duty to treat all the official languages equitably and with equal respect. We also recognize that language plays a crucial part in promoting and attaining the goals of building our democracy and our nation and protecting and developing our unique diverse cultures. (SABC 2004)

According to Barnard (2006: 39) multilingualism is one of the rhetorical devices used in the development of the media’s political agendas. He writes that the representation of linguistic fragmentation, cultural hybridity and multiple sites of struggle suggests models of postcolonial multicultural democracy that counter patriarchal nationalisms and demands for linguistic purity (Barnard 2006: 39). However, he adds, ‘This is not to say that television programming in South Africa has completely changed its stripes...’ (Barnard 2006: 41). Although the constitutional changes to the rights of expression and media freedom were

complemented by reconfigurations in programming, ownership and services, the transformation is still plagued with inherited economic, institutional and cultural conditions. These conditions continue to impose limitations on the practical implementation of a 'progressive conceptualization of the mass media as a vehicle for nation-building and democratic communication' (Barnett 1999: 274).

Changes in the racial make-up of media ownership and staff did not, for example, change the media's class base (Wasserman and De Beer 2005b). Moreover, the pressure of securing advertising revenue means that the target market of the mass media in South Africa arguably still remains largely white or, at the very least, affluent black. Subsequently, despite de-racialization of ownership, market segmentation still displays some of the polarizations of apartheid (Wasserman and De Beer 2005b: 40).

Further to this, Fourie (2002: 18) states that the growing conflict between the South African government, particularly the ANC, and the media bears an uncomfortable resemblance to the relationship 'between the government and the media in the years of apartheid'. Most notably, even though the principle of independent broadcasting largely governs South African media, the passing of the State Information Bill<sup>7</sup> by the National Assembly on *Black Tuesday* in 2011 proves Barnard's (and Fourie's) point. This bill (which criminalizes the publication of classified information) is widely criticized as an attempt by the government to control the media (not unlike the apartheid government), and in so doing curbing media freedom and diversity in South Africa.<sup>8</sup>

National identity and diversity are also key issues in Flemish public media, albeit in very different ways. In Belgium, the political split is based on, but also further deepens, the cultural division of the country, most notably in media terms. As a consequence, no Belgian national media exist and all media are monolingual and oriented towards one of the language communities. Flanders has its own newspapers and magazines, television and radio stations.

Contrary to South Africa, which arguably is much larger and more diverse, in Belgium there is not a single medium trying to bring together the entire country and its different languages.

The Belgian media system is ‘democratic corporatist’, characterized by ‘a historical coexistence of commercial media and media tied to organized social and political groups, and by a relatively active but legally limited role of the state’ (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 13). Most exemplary in this respect is the strong position of the public broadcaster VRT, supported and controlled by government. From the start in 1953, public broadcasting in Belgium was divided linguistically, the Flemish broadcaster in particular aiming to stimulate ‘national’ (Flemish) culture and identity (Van den Bulck 2001).

After the introduction of commercial broadcasting in 1989 and the faltering ratings of public broadcasting in the early 1990s, from 1997 Flemish public broadcasting was granted a more business-like system of organization and was regulated by five-year ‘management contracts’ with Flemish government. In those documents, ‘Flemish identity’ takes up a prominent position. For instance, the third management contract (2007–2011) stresses the importance of ‘Flemish cultural identity’ but it also states that the VRT has to be there for all people in Flanders, including minorities (VRT and Vlaamse Gemeenschap 2006: 2). This management contract states that the VRT has to take action to ensure diversity in terms of representation (‘The total offer of the VRT attempts to correctly reflect the diversity in Flemish society’) and employment (‘The VRT strives towards a staff that is as diverse as possible’) (VRT and Vlaamse Gemeenschap 2006: 34). This is in line with broader tendencies in diversity policies among Western European broadcasters, moving in the 1980s from assimilationist and integrationist paradigms to multicultural and anti-racist policies, more recently replaced by paradigms of cultural diversity and calls for social cohesion (Leurdijk 2006; Horsti and Hulten 2011). Mainstreaming and integration are now the key words, replacing the former focus on specific minority group needs.

Despite these policies, both in terms of representation and in terms of employment, the VRT continues to underperform, and so the previous management contract (2012–2016) stresses diversity even more. It states that the first task of the VRT is to reach ‘all Flemings’, including ‘new Flemings’, with an inclusive and generalist programme offer (VRT and Vlaamse Gemeenschap 2011: 10). Although strengthening one’s own (read: Flemish) culture and identity is a fundamental aim of public broadcasting, this should also include a reflection of diversity in society. For the first time, these aims are translated into measurable diversity indicators, including the presence of at least five per cent ‘new Flemings’ in the programmes made or ordered by the VRT (2011: 15) and the employment of at least four per cent by the end of 2014 (2011: 37). Responding to these obligations, the VRT moved diversity actions from the rather marginal Diversity Cell in the HR department to a central duty of the Director of Production.

What these policies and results indicate is a continuing taken-for-granted ‘whiteness’ in Flemish media, even in public service media that do have cultural diversity policies and targets. Being diverse does not come naturally, and only imposed targets may be effective. This situation mirrors broader society, where a superficial climate of tolerance hides a deep-seated distrust of difference and even racism. The limited representation of ethno-cultural diversity in the media mirrors and reinforces the limited presence of ethnic minority voices in social debate and politics, while the limited employment of ethnic minority Flemings in public broadcasting mirrors the lack of diversity in the broader workplace and the high figures of unemployment among non-European ethnic minorities.

Comparing both cases, it becomes clear that national unity is a central issue in both (public) media, but in Flanders it is mostly a matter of a quite implicit reinforcement of linguistic and cultural identity, whereas in South Africa it is more explicitly related to the unification of the racially, linguistically and culturally diverse country.

Despite this key difference, there are a number of similarities. Thus, in both cases a number of policies and actions are set up specifically to support the notion of the nation as ‘unity in diversity’. Also, in both cases public media are consciously mobilized to question the self-evidence of white privilege, with mixed results. Even though there are concerted efforts to create more representative media outputs as well as producers and ownership, there is still inevitable inequality. In both cases ownership is still predominantly white, and even where this is not the case, class or social differences still dictate production and consequently target audiences.

One issue that comes up, in this context, is a tension between the desire to provide role models and positive images of a self-evidently diverse society, and the actual racial, economic and class differences in both societies. Should public television ‘show it as it is’ and explore the persistent racial divisions in society, or rather provide examples of society as it could and should be? A related issue concerns the degree and character of diversity on television, as the creation of unity always implies some kind of exclusion. For instance, in Flanders only some (larger) ethnic groups tend to be portrayed and their intersections with other variables (such as gender, class and sexuality) are downplayed. Instead of creating a (potentially artificial) image of a unified yet diverse society, it may be better to strive towards open-ness to all kinds of diversity in a variety of combinations and intersections.

## **Conclusion**

Building upon the view of national identity and unity as discursive constructions, in this article we compared the construction of the South African and Flemish nations, focusing in particular on PSB and how it employs diversity. We started from a double question: how do these two nations deal with diversity, and, more specifically, how is this reflected in the

policies, initiatives and productions of their respective public service broadcasters? From both cases it has become clear that the interaction between complex societies and governmental ideas on what national unity entails manifests in, and also to some extent governs, public broadcasting.

Despite their historical and geographical differences, at the start of the twenty-first century both regions are facing similar challenges: ethnically and culturally they are diverse and this diversity is seen as a threat to national cohesion and identity, as it is linked to social distinctions and discriminations. Paradoxically, however, the same diversity that is perceived as a threat to national unity is employed as a device to secure cohesion of culturally diverse groups belonging to the same national imagined community. In both cases, diversity is used to foster national identity and unity, in particular through their respective public media. However, while both South African and Flemish media have the goal of representing and promoting diversity in common, and concepts such as ‘unity’ and ‘diversity’ are used in both, it became apparent that these terms have different connotations in each context and that the theme of ‘unity in diversity’ is much more prominent in South Africa. Moreover, although the PSB of both countries are geared towards creating a unified idea of the nation, they simultaneously – particularly regarding content and positions – perpetuate some of the ideas their policies attempt to counter.

In both cases, homogeneity is a key characteristic of the discursive construction of the nation, even when diversity is a central theme in this discourse. As in many other countries, both the countries relevant to the scope of this article make deliberate efforts to address and bring together the whole nation. However, well-intentioned policies and buzz-words like ‘the rainbow nation’, ‘the African Renaissance’ and ‘multiculturalism’ cannot prevent ethno-cultural divisions to persist and even strengthen. In both cases, we witness a struggle to represent the national ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991) as a unity.

For instance, in South Africa, the homogeneous treatment of the rainbow nation is problematic. Herman Wasserman (2008: 262) writes that popular cultural texts provide a 'symbolic construction according to which viewers can construct a collective "rainbow" identity'. This raises the question of how the rainbow nation constructed by these texts looks. In line with this, Milton (2008: 261) writes, 'One should ask to what extent the image of the "rainbow nation" has informed the imagined community of the "new" South Africa, as reflected in these programmes'. Both the South African and the Flemish cases proved that ideas around diversity and inclusivity differ not only from context to context, but that there is not always clear consensus on this within a specific national context. Creating a unified notion of the nation is complicated by issues such as tensions between government and society, migration, immigration, xenophobia and the variety of different national visions in competition with one another.

The main contribution of this comparative analysis lies not in the dense description of each context, or even in the similarities identified, but rather in the attempt to transcend the national framework in our analysis. Through our comparative analysis we attempted to distance ourselves from taking the national for granted, responding to the criticisms against 'methodological nationalism', which implicitly considers nations as self-evident, discrete, self-contained and relatively homogeneous entities for research (Beck and Grande 2010).

At the onset of this article mention was made of the tension existing between the national and the global when it comes to defining concepts such as the nation, unity and diversity. In this regard, the second contribution we aimed to make is by situating our analysis within the broader endeavour to 'de-westernise' media and communication studies, considering non-western cases in order to go against universalistic claims based on context-specific western knowledge and, in the process, aiming to create transnational dialogue (Waisbord and Mellado 2014). By systematically starting each comparison with the South

African case study we attempted to foreground ‘objects of study located outside the West’, which Waisbord and Mellado (2014: 364) view as a helpful way in which to ‘expand the research agenda and probe the conventional analytical parameters of Western-based scholarship’. At the same time, all of the above does not lead us to relinquish the national as a unit of analysis for, throughout our analysis, we were confronted with the importance of national contexts and the national specificity of concepts like unity, diversity and national identity.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> A ‘bantustan’ can be roughly translated as a black African homeland. These bantustans were created to enforce and establish linguistic and cultural separation.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note here that, even though popular discourses construct a narrative of unity in diversity, South Africans (as suggested by their history) were not unified in the struggle to rid themselves of apartheid. In South Africa, there exists a variety of different, often conflicting, national visions. Not all South Africans support the national vision of the rainbow nation as is evidenced by the widespread white migration after 1992. It is acknowledged that a satisfactory account of the nuanced nature of the different desires and visions of nationhood of different South Africans cannot be represented within the scope of this article.

<sup>3</sup> It is notable that the apartheid government segmented South Africa into the four distinct racial groups mentioned here (white, black, coloured and Indian); however, these categories are still utilized today, even when they are used for the purposes of black economic empowerment.

<sup>4</sup> Although the rainbow nation metaphor is mentioned here with the notion of the African renaissance it is important to note that the two cannot be conflated. While both are unifying discourses they differ on issues of inclusivity. For the purpose of this article they serve as examples of metaphors that reflect the diversity of South Africa and propose some kind of unity.

<sup>5</sup> Kamwangamalu (1999: 25) writes that the ‘concept of *ubuntu* is understood as a collective solidarity whereby the self is perceived primarily in relation to the perception of others’.

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As a matter of interest, not specifically pertaining to the scope of this article, there also exists a debate on the suitability of ubuntuism as possible normative media theory, which underscores the prevalence of the concept, not only in South Africa but in Africa today.

<sup>6</sup> As a case in point one could use the brand identity of one of the SABC channels. SABC1 was branded with the slogan 'Simunye, we are one' after the restructuring of public media post apartheid. This brand identity is in line with the rainbow nation discourse invoked earlier.

<sup>7</sup> The POIB (protection of information Bill) was passed by the National Assembly due to a majority vote of the ANC. The bill has drawn widespread condemnation from the public, academics and society at large, which resulted in 21 November 2011 (the day the bill was passed) being referred to as *Black Tuesday*.

<sup>8</sup> Added to this, at the time of publication the South African Public Broadcaster was shrouded in controversy for its decision to ban coverage of protest actions, despite severe criticism from the public and a decision by ICASA compelling the broadcaster to reverse the ban.