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The mediated construction of “woke” : emerging discourses and primary definers in the Flemish press

Reference:

Dhoest Alexander, Paulussen Steve.- The mediated construction of “woke” : emerging discourses and primary definers in the Flemish press
Journalism : theory, practice and criticism - ISSN 1464-8849 - (2024), p. 1-19
Full text (Publisher's DOI): <https://doi.org/10.1177/14648849241260942>
To cite this reference: <https://hdl.handle.net/10067/2062590151162165141>

Dhoest, A. & Paulussen, S. (2024) The mediated construction of “woke”: Emerging discourses and primary definers in the Flemish press. Journalism. DOI: 10.1177/14648849241260942

Introduction

The term “woke” has a long history dating back to pre-WWII African American responses to racist persecution and was subsequently used in the civil rights movement to designate full political consciousness of one’s racial oppression (Davies and MacRae, 2023). However, the term only rose to mainstream prominence in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and particularly the death of George Floyd on 25 May 2020. Despite its origins and positive connotations in Black American culture, it quickly became part of mainstream parlance and charged with negative connotations, culminating in the right-wing “war on woke”, epitomised by Florida governor Ron DeSantis (Harriot, 2022). Key targets of this movement are racial justice, in particular Critical Race Theory, as well as gender and sexual equality, in particular trans rights.

This paper investigates the introduction and construction of discourses on “wokeness” in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Although Belgium is a relatively stable European democratic country (at the time of writing), polarization and right-wing populism are on the rise, particularly in Flanders. From 2021, “woke” became part of everyday parlance and anti-woke discourse quickly followed suit, echoing and importing American discussions. To track how “woke” became part of cultural debate, we analyse its appearance in the Flemish mainstream press, focusing on incidents provoking increased attention to wokeness. Quantitatively and qualitatively analysing six months of reporting over a period of three years, we review the themes discussed, actors involved, and arguments used in articles about what quickly became known as the “woke movement”. The analysis has three main aims: to reconstruct how the topic of “wokeness” emerged on the media agenda in Flanders; to unpack the characteristics of the ensuing discourses on woke; and to understand the respective role of journalists and their sources in the construction of these media discourses?

The emergence of (anti-)woke discourses

Reflecting on the emergence of the “war on woke” in the U.S., Liz Fekete (2022) talked to Ralph Wilson and Isaac Kamola, who studied the key role of privately funded right-wing networks aiming to foment culture wars and manufacture crises over free speech. These particularly target issues like Critical Race Theory and trans rights, which present racism and transphobia as social and socially constructed problems requiring government action (Kamola, in Fekete, 2022). “Free speech” is weaponised and defined in absolute terms, although hypocritically – as “woke” voices are targeted with harassment campaigns. Provocations are part of this strategy: “The real energy on the Right is in the shock and awe of culture war attacks.” (Wilson in Fekete, 2022: 50)

Focusing on the U.K., Bart Cammaerts (2022) connects the “anti-woke culture war” to the metapolitics of the extreme and alt-right, based on a discursive process of othering and polarisation. He describes anti-woke discourse as a form of moral panic, “moral entrepreneurs” creating fear and crisis, weaponizing “woke” and using it as an insult against anyone fighting injustices and discrimination. Woke is presented as a dogmatic and ideological opinion, while those who espouse such opinions “are part of an aberrant, crazy, elitist, irrational mob, lacking a sense of humour and out of touch with common sense” (Cammaerts, 2022: 735). Social justice struggles are presented as extremist, authoritarian, intolerant and ideological – hence threatening “our way of life”, which justifies action. A key target is “cancel culture”, a term used to designate pushback against racist, sexist or LGBTQ-phobic views while presenting oneself as victim.

Davies and MacRae (2023) also analyze the British war on woke, highlighting the role of the right-wing press in giving a platform to anti-woke voices, creating a moral panic and targeting the “left-wing establishment”, including universities, social scientists and historians. Like Cammaerts (2022), Davies and MacRae identify a process of othering, constructing a positive ingroup claiming to defend Enlightenment, western civilization, the working class and common sense, in contrast to a negative outgroup, presented as a “self-interested, divisive, irrational, malign, undemocratic, clandestine, powerful, sly and conspiratorial” elite (Davies and MacRae, 2023: 24). Tying into this critique, Ahmed (2023) states that current conservatism presents wokeism as a threat to common sense. Like many others, she points at the handy breadth of the term “woke”, which allows to dismiss a broad range of people and

issues. Echoing Cammaerts, Ahmed also comments on the anti-woke self-presentation as powerless victims while presenting those who fight for equality as powerful. Seen in this light, anti-woke discourse can be interpreted as a way for people and parties occupying positions of power to defend these positions, by claiming that they have lost power and are discriminated against.

Turning to the Flemish context, no academic publications on (anti-)woke discourse have appeared at the time of writing, but several Dutch-language Belgian academics have commented on the phenomenon for a broader audience. Ico Maly (2023) explores the discursive field of woke, which to him gets exaggerated media attention and is tied to concepts such as “cancel culture”, “identity politics”, “political correctness”, “freedom of speech”, “globalism” and “cosmopolitan elite”. Like “woke”, many of these terms are used in their English form in Dutch-language debate, which to Maly illustrates how this debate is imported and circulates on a global scale, fired up by (extreme) right-wing actors. Like Ahmed (2023), he comments on the vague, catch-all nature of the term, which allows to incorporate a broad range of events in “an endlessly repeated narrative of a leftist dominant elite that is screwing up our society” (Maly, 2023).

Sociologist Sarah Bracke equally defines anti-woke discourse as a moral panic guided by a vague concept: “A ghost without a fixed form, that now appears here and then there and can mobilize local woke busters everywhere.” (Bracke, 2023) She focuses on the supposed threat of wokeness to academic freedom, distinguishing freedom of speech in public debate from academic freedom, arguing that the latter does not encompass the freedom to spread manifest falsehoods. Historian Annelien de Dijn equally counters the supposed threat of a “woke dictatorship” in Flanders: “By presenting themselves as defenders of freedom, right-wing politicians are (...) engaging in a form of gaslighting. By always insisting on the threat of woke dictatorship, they try to create an alternative reality that is at odds with reality.” (De Dijn, 2022)

Both de Dijn (2022) and Maly (2023) argue that the term “woke” was introduced in the Flemish public sphere by right-wing politicians and elites, but they do not specify which actors put the issue on the agenda, and how they did so. Therefore, our first question is:

RQ1: How did the topic of “woke” reach the media agenda in Flanders?

Although several academics have written on (anti-)woke discourses in US and UK contexts, and some Dutch-language academics have commented on the Flemish context, to our knowledge no research has systematically examined discourses on woke in Flemish media to this date. Therefore, our second question is:

RQ2: What characterizes discourses on "woke" in the Flemish press?

Primary and secondary definers

Understanding the social construction of media discourses begins with considering the interplay between journalists and their sources. Journalism scholars have stressed that journalists and news sources mutually obtain authority and legitimacy from each other, resulting in “cyclical pattern (...) in which the source gains authoritative status through being used as a source while the news gains authority through having used this authoritative source” (Carlson, 2009: 530). Although today this practice of “authority signaling” also takes place on social media (Anstead and Chadwick, 2018), mainstream news media (including newspaper journalism) still play a crucial role in accrediting social actors as legitimate sources.

Sources who are granted media access do not only have the ability to put certain issues on the agenda, but they also have the privilege to be the first to define the issue. In their seminal work, “Policing the crisis”, Stuart Hall et al. (1978) introduced the concept of “primary definers” to refer to those institutional actors, such as politicians, policy-makers and experts, who are more likely to be accredited as reliable and authoritative sources in the news. Media, then, can be seen as “secondary definers”, who “are ‘cued in’ to specific new topics” by these primary definers (p. 57). Hall et al. (1978: 58) cite Howard Becker’s concept of the “hierarchy of credibility” to explain why institutional actors in powerful positions in society are more likely to have their definitions accepted. Given the agenda-setting and framing power attributed to primary definers, journalism scholars have historically shown much interest in the study of sources in the news. Carlson (2009) summarizes that “(a)side from the tendency to report official voices, content analyses of news content have been used to demonstrate the overabundance of white male sources” (p. 530). In other words, the sources that obtain primary definer status are likely to be representatives of political and cultural elites in society.

To be sure, as stressed by many authors, journalists do not just passively transmit or uncritically reproduce the discourse of primary definers. They do aim to challenge dominant viewpoints and balance them with other viewpoints and sources. Research shows that there is indeed much competition between news sources and that the discourse of primary definers is often challenged, criticized and contested (Carlson, 2009). However, critical scholars argue that this competition and contestation mostly takes place within “the boundaries of ‘legitimate controversy’” (Harjuniemi, 2023: 877; see also Hallin, 1984), depending on the degree of dissensus that is allowed by elite sources (Bennett, 1990). Raeijmaekers and Maesele (2017) argue that the journalistic notion of objectivity, and its translation in professional norms of “balance” and “impartiality”, does not allow for ideological contestation because it “is rooted within a paradigm of social consensus (...) In that sense, we can state that the ideal of objectivity only allows for evaluating pluralism ‘within the box’, that is, within the limits of existing social consensus.” (p. 655) Below, we aim to examine the degree of pluralism in the media discourses on “wokeness” in the Flemish press, as co-constructed in the interplay between the sources that acquired primary definer status and journalists adopting or resisting the proposed discourses. Hence, our third research question is:

RQ3: How were discourses on “woke” in Flemish media co-constructed in the interplay between journalists and news sources?

Method

To explore how (anti-)woke discourse entered public debate in Flanders, we combined a quantitative exploration of the data with qualitative analysis of discourses. While we do not position ourselves in a specific tradition of discourse analysis and instead take a pragmatic and eclectic approach (including insights from journalism studies), we were inspired by the practical guidelines for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provided by Carvalho (2008), who highlights the need to incorporate the time plane in analysis and to focus on the discursive strategies of social actors. As a starting point, she recommends identifying temporal markers to collect texts, and combining a comprehensive analysis for certain periods with attention to “critical discourse moments”.

To that purpose, we started with a Google Search Trend analysis, which disclosed that the term “woke” was hardly searched in Flanders before 2020. It was increasingly searched from 2021, with a first peak in September 2021, followed by a second peak in September 2022 and a third one in March-April 2023 (see Figure 1). Based on this information, we selected three periods, each coinciding with a peak in Google search activity, to explore what may have triggered people’s interest in woke. Using the Belga.press database, we collected all articles mentioning the term “woke” in four newspapers, two “elite”, more highbrow titles (*De Morgen* and *De Standaard*) and two more popular ones (*Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Het Nieuwsblad*), for three two-month periods: 1 September-30 October 2021, 1 September-30 October 2022, and 15 February-15 April 2023. We decided to focus on newspaper reporting because of the continued importance of journalists as an interpretive community circulating discourse (Zelizer, 2017). We did not include the public broadcaster VRT, because its news website VRT NWS did not pay much attention to the debate on woke, online publishing five news articles on the topic in the selected periods.

Based on a preliminary selection process, articles that were less relevant to Belgium (only reporting on other national contexts) were left out, leading to a total sample of 226 articles. Each period encompasses one or two key “critical discourse moments” leading to a spike in public interest, but also spreads out before and after. Hence, the sample allows to get a sense of both “everyday” reporting on woke, and “crises” leading to intensified debate.

First, we conducted a preliminary quantitative exploration of the data to get a sense of the general properties of the reporting. Beside the newspaper title and date of publication, we coded the genre (news report, interview, or opinion piece), actor introducing the term “woke” (journalists or non-journalistic sources) and overarching attitude towards “woke”. While the former categories were self-evident, for “attitude” we coded all articles which (almost) exclusively presented a negative or positive view on woke as respectively negative and positive, categorizing the remaining articles (which were more neutral and/or offered both positive and negative views) as “neutral”.

Second, we conducted a more in-depth analysis of discourses, again following Carvalho (2008) who recommends focusing on objects (topics or themes, as constituted in reporting), actors and language, which can help to identify discursive strategies and ideological standpoints. All articles were uploaded in NVivo and in a first analytical stage they were coded inductively,

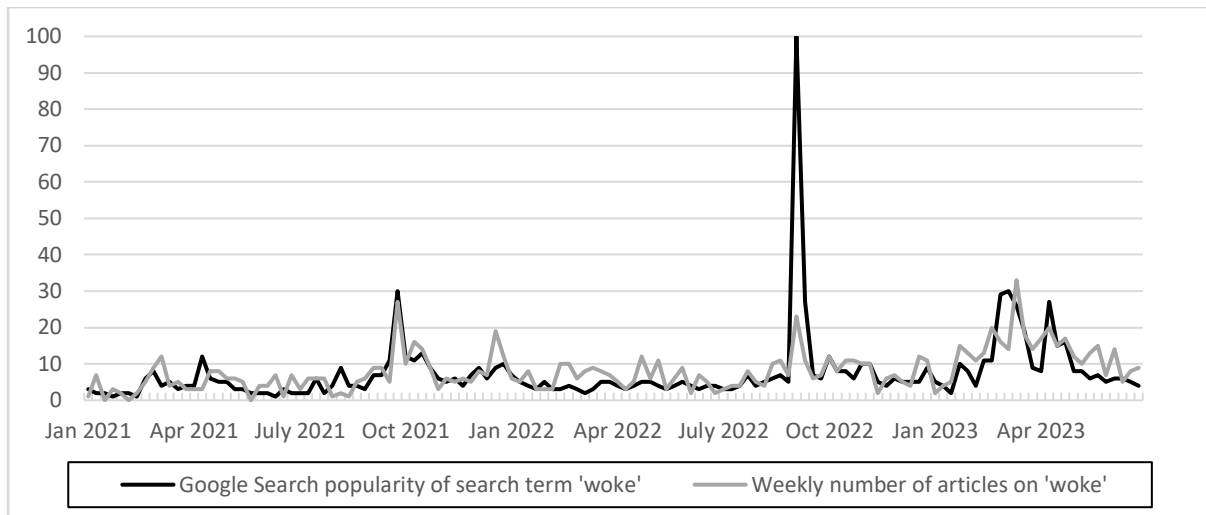
identifying objects, actors, and language use. To add a contextual layer to the analysis, Carvalho (2008) recommends combining a comparative synchronic analysis with historical-diachronic analysis. To accomplish this, NVivo reports were generated on all codes, chronologically charting how they appeared and evolved, which offered the basis for further analysis.

Following Carvalho's recommendation to combine historical-diachronic analysis with comparative synchronic analysis, this paper is divided in two main parts, each focusing on one or several research questions. First, we first provide a diachronic, more descriptive overview of the emergence and consolidation of discourses on “wokeness” in the Flemish press, addressing RQ1. This analysis is based on the NVivo codes, which we integrated in a single timeline for each of the periods studied. While we included all articles in the initial analysis, in this article we focus on the most prominent events and patterns, which are illustrated with representative quotes. Second, in a more synthetic synchronic analysis we unpack the resulting discourses on “woke”, discussing the different dimensions (objects, language use and actors) separately across the whole period studied. In this analysis, we aim to both dissect the anatomy of discourses on "woke" in the Flemish press (RQ2) and to better understand the interplay between journalists and sources in co-constituting these discourses (RQ3). Descriptive quantitative findings are used throughout to support the more elaborate qualitative analysis.

Diachronic analysis

To answer the first research question, we started by analyzing how the Flemish public and media attention for “woke” evolved over time. Figure 1 shows that between 2021 and mid-2023 the relative Google search volume for the topic of “woke” in Flanders coincided with increased media attention for the topic in the four selected newspapers.¹ The first peak was in the final week of September 2021, the second and largest peak was in the first week of September 2022, and a third peak occurred in the period of March-April 2023. As developed below, each of these peaks in the media and public’s interest was related to a specific event in which an elite person drew attention to the supposed trend and threat of “wokeness”.

Figure 1: News media and public’s attention for “woke” in Flanders over time (2021-2023).



Note: The black line shows the weekly relative search volume for the topic of ‘woke’ in the geographic area of Flanders, normalized to a range from 0 to 100, with 100 corresponding to the peak popularity for the term, which was obtained in the first week of September 2022 (source: Google Trends). The grey line shows the weekly number of printed news articles mentioning the term ‘woke’ that were published in four Flemish newspapers (*De Morgen, De Standaard, Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Het Nieuwsblad*) (source: Belga.press).

2021: Putting woke on the agenda

The first peak in journalistic interest occurred after the opening speech of rector Luc Sels of KU Leuven, the oldest and most prestigious Flemish university, on 27 September 2021, in which he addressed threats to freedom of speech and academic freedom. While the speech itself dealt with different kinds of threat (Sels, 2021), the press mostly focused on his concerns about woke:

“Woke” has taken on an activist, militant side that makes me very uncomfortable. (Sels, in *De Standaard*, 27 September 2021) ²

Although his argument concerned threats to academic freedom at Belgian universities, it was supported by foreign evidence, including vague references to “some Anglo-Saxon universities”.

Sels, acting as one of the first "definers" of the issue, immediately set the negative tone by focusing on the threat of woke. His speech was factually reported on by several newspapers, followed by a small number of pieces adding nuance or countering his arguments. Some journalists argued for attention to the broader range of threats to academic freedom and

warned against the import of culture war discourse, such as *De Standaard* head writer and columnist Marc Reynebeau:

The irony is that the excesses of woke – yes, they exist – get attention mainly because they fuel the conservative culture war. (*De Standaard*, 29 September 2021)

These journalistic voices were supplemented by critical op-eds from within the Leuven academic community, such as cultural philosopher Lieven De Cauter stating: “Right-wing trolls are more dangerous than woke.” (*De Standaard*, 1 October 2021) Echoing the academic literature, writer Aya Sabi pointed to one of the key contradictions in anti-woke discourse:

... it remains deeply ironic that it is precisely the men at the top of the intellectual and scientific elite who complain in long speeches about how they are no longer allowed to say anything. (*De Morgen*, 20 October 2021).

Beside the lone support of columnist Mia Doornaert (*De Standaard*, 28 October 2021), the responses to Sels’ speech in the Flemish press either pleaded for more nuance or were outright critical.

“Woke” emerged and quickly immersed Flemish debate in 2021, appearing in 67 articles over a two-month period. This happened most prominently in the discussions on Luc Sels’ speech as well as other smaller political and cultural controversies. Increasingly, terms such as “culture war” and “cancel culture” started to be used regularly. The 2021 sample also contained several passing references to woke, particularly in cultural products such as books, theater plays, comedy shows and songs – the undertone always being: “we can’t write/say/sing certain things anymore”. Elite papers dedicated most articles to the topic, almost 75% of the total amount (50 out of 67). From the start, the term had negative connotations, which were either confirmed or contradicted by sources, while journalists mostly took a neutral stance. Almost 40% of the articles discussing woke (26 out of 67) were opinion pieces, which illustrates how strongly charged the topic was, from the start, and how we witness an epistemic struggle to define this emerging topic.

2022: Fanning the flames

The main “woke” controversy of 2022 occurred on 5 September 2022, in the first episode of the new talk show *De tafel van vier*, hosted by the Flemish celebrity Gert Verhulst, co-founder and owner of media company Studio 100. One of the topics of discussion was “woke”, on which occasion Gert Verhulst and one studio guest repeatedly used the n-word, claiming not to see the problem. Compared to the moderate media response to Sels’ lecture (8 articles in the sample), this event led to a deluge in reporting (22 articles), also in popular newspapers which had not reported widely on the issue by that time. The journalistic response was predominantly negative, mostly blaming Verhulst for his insensitivity and for repeatedly using the n-word.

The woke debate turned into a round of throwing wrong-words-we-aren’t-allowed-to-say into the living room. (...) It was one of the most toe-curling TV moments of the year. (*De Standaard*, 7 September 2022)

The show occupied a week-long news cycle. In the next episode, Gert Verhulst gave a half-hearted apology but one of the editors quit, shocked and disappointed (*De Morgen*, 08/09/2022). The woke “spokesperson” invited in the first episode, Belgian-Nigerian screenwriter Raf Njotea, tried to add nuance to the debate in an opinion piece (*De Standaard*, 8 September 2022). Gert Verhulst gave interviews in several weekend papers, admitting that he made an error of judgement but stressing the importance of openly addressing issues:

And I also still think that during discussions you should call the child by its name. Hence the choice to use the n-word. So the manner, the tone, and the use itself, that’s clearly where we made an error of judgment. (*De Morgen*, 10 September 2022)

De Morgen journalist and columnist Joël De Ceulaer dedicated a long essay to woke, developing a middle ground argument typical for most journalistic writing on the topic. On the one hand, he explained the background of woke thought, referring to BlackLivesMatter and intersectionality, and argued that woke is too often used in a negative sense, particularly by the right, as a straw man to discredit struggles for social justice. On the other hand, however, he argued that there is a dangerous, “activist” side to woke, dividing the world in

oppressors (primarily white, heterosexual men) and the oppressed (*De Morgen*, 10 September 2022).

Despite the overarching negative or at least balancing response, the controversy over *De tafel van vier* contributed to the mainstream visibility of the woke debate, particularly through the involvement of Gert Verhulst, one of the most powerful people in Flemish media. The incident also contributed to the term's charged connotation. An online reader poll in *De Standaard*, conducted soon after the incident, disclosed that almost half (44%) of its readers thought woke had a negative connotation while more than a quarter thought that "you can hardly say anything anymore" (*De Standaard*, 8 October 2022).

As in the year before, in 2022 woke was often reflected upon in cultural products, particularly in comedy, urging a reviewer to comment: "Gender, woke and the perceived generation gap: these are relevant topics, but they have reached the point where as a comedy fan you sigh: not again." (*De Morgen*, 13 October 2022) Academic freedom, which occasioned the first spike in reporting in 2021, reappeared in 2022 when right-conservative N-VA politician and party leader Bart De Wever made a tour of Flemish universities with a talk about "how woke destroys our culture". De Wever, arguably the most powerful Flemish politician at the time of writing, mostly expressed his indignation about woke "excesses" in media and at universities, referring to diversity policies and decolonization:

People are deconstructing the past. Everyone must come off his pedestal. Because according to today's moral standards, we were all very bad people in the past. (*De Standaard*, 29 October 2022)

De Standaard journalist and columnist Marc Reynebeau again tried to bring nuance to the discussion about the "phantom of woke" which supposedly brainwashes university students and destroys "our culture": "What all this has in common, apart from evoking an almost apocalyptic threat, is a lack of precision." (*De Standaard*, 19 October 2022)

Overall, the 2022 sample of 64 articles was dominated by the *De tafel van vier* controversy over the use of racist language. While some clear anti-woke voices were heard, most prominently that of Gert Verhulst and most strongly that of Bart De Wever, the overarching sentiment was neutral (in 70.3% of the articles) or even positive (in 20.3%). Throughout the sample similar statements appeared, asking for nuance and balance while tempering the fear

about woke and/or drawing attention to the excesses of right-wing censorship in the U.S. However, the continuous debate about woke confirmed it as an interpretive framework with negative connotations.

2023: Political recuperation

After his first appearance in the 2022 sample, N-VA chairman Bart De Wever took central stage in 2023 when he published the book “About woke” (De Wever, 2023). In an interview with *De Standaard*, despite getting critical questions, he managed to repeat many of the key points of his book. Thus, he argued that woke has infiltrated mainstream media, particularly in relation to language use. When the interviewer countered that certain people do not want to be addressed stereotypically, he defined this as an expression of a culture of victimhood:

Yes, but why? Because victimhood is almost instilled in them by the dominant intellectual culture that runs around proclaiming all the time that we have been extremely bad people, that our society is structurally racist, that you are discriminated against here anyway. (*De Standaard*, 4 March 2023)

One of his main points was that “woke” makes people feel guilty and “criminalizes the West”, which leads to a counterreaction:

That’s how people experience it: that they must apologize for slavery when they never had slaves, to people who were never slaves. That undermines tolerance for other cultures, commitment to inclusion, addressing discrimination. (*De Standaard*, 4 March 2023)

To him, woke is a “militant minority” leading to extremism, as people will “not only feel economically left behind by globalist postmodernism, but also feel culturally dispossessed and offended.” (*De Standaard*, 4 March 2023)

De Morgen editor Bart Eeckhout was sharp in his response, observing that De Wever hardly refers to Belgian examples and noting on the irony of a dominant conservative voice claiming to be silenced:

The garb of resistance leader against the establishment hardly fits someone who is chairman of the country's largest party, mayor of the largest city in the Flemish Region and figurehead of the party that has been in the Flemish government continuously since 2004. (*De Morgen*, 4 March 2023)

Beside a few more reviews and one op-ed, the newspapers quickly lost interest, but De Wever's book became a best-seller.

Meanwhile, woke had become a firm part of everyday parlance. The most extreme voice in this debate was that of extreme-right Flemish nationalist party Vlaams Belang, whose members protested a drag queen story hour in Bruges. Protesters from Vlaams Belang as well as radical right-wing organization Schild en Vrienden carried signs with slogans such as "spare children woke madness", "stop sexualizing children" and "gender ideology = pedophilia" (*De Morgen*, 30 March 2023). While both Vlaams Belang and Schild en Vrienden have a history of anti-immigration (often outright racist) agitating, they recently added gender-related "woke" topics to their list of targets (Gustin, 2023).

Beside gender and sexuality, race and decolonization remained key topics of debate. The main "canceling" event of 2023 concerned the removal of paintings from in the entry hall of the Arenberg theatre. Four multiracial pictures by photographer Mous Lamrabort had replaced paintings of white historical figures, which led to protests from the Antwerp N-VA alderman of culture, Nabila Ait Daoud, who considered the removal of the paintings as an erasure of history, and had the photos removed (*Het Laatste Nieuws*, 17 March 2023). N-VA politician Luk Lemmens defended the decision, describing the removal of the paintings as cancel culture.

They are figures who may be honored. The woke movement should understand that old white men, like me, are proud of the past. They should respect that. (*Het Nieuwsblad*, 17 March 2023)

All newspapers repeatedly reported on this incident, which remained in the news for more than two weeks and was discussed in 16 articles. As before, many tempered the heated tone of the debate. To journalist Paul Goossens, this incident was the product of Bart De Wever's war on woke:

This makes the first blaze around woke a fact. Fortunately, the name of the pyromaniac is known. In his inimitable way, N-VA president Bart De Wever, the self-proclaimed promoter of more Flemish community, continues to stir up conflicts and contradictions. (*De Standaard*, 17 March 2023).

Another tempering voice was that of philosopher Patrick Loobuyck, who worried about woke excesses but mostly about anti-woke hysteria and argued that “wokers” replaced “Muslims” in right-wing discourse: “Calling something ‘woke’ beats the debate to death. It is a new enemy image. Woke people are the new Muslims.” (*De Morgen*, 4 March 2023)

While woke was still “new” in 2021, many articles including an attempt to define or explain it, by 2023 it had become part of everyday parlance. Not only were most articles dedicated to woke in the selected two months of 2023 (95, as opposed to 67 and 64 in the selected two-month periods in the preceding years), but there were also most “woke incidents” in that year. Journalists (particularly those in popular newspapers) continued to occupy a neutral and nuanced position in reporting on woke, only some explicitly criticizing anti-woke discourse. As before, the most prominent voices against woke and anti-woke were those of (mostly elite) sources in interviews or opinion pieces. As in previous years, most articles appeared in elite newspapers (66 out of 95, about 70%), almost half of which were opinion pieces (44 out of 95), again testifying to the ongoing epistemic struggle in which elite primary definers played a key role.

Synchronic analysis

After the chronological overview above, this section provides a more synthesized account of the emerging anti-woke discourses (RQ2) and zooms in on the respective role of journalists and sources in defining the issue (RQ3).

Characteristics of Flemish discourses on "woke"

Unpacking the distinctive building blocks of discourses as described by Carvalho (2008), first we discuss the *objects* (i.e. topics or themes, as constituted in reporting). As indicated above, key issues in the analysed Flemish media discussions on "woke" concerned race (including

decolonisation) and, to a lesser degree, gender and sexuality, in line with international tendencies (Fekete, 2022). Central topics of discussion were language use, freedom of speech and cancel culture. Culture, in particular literature and comedy, took central stage in debates about woke – so culture, narrowly defined, was one of the key battlefields in the so-called “culture wars”.

As to *language use*, woke was described as a threat from the very beginning. While only a minority of the articles (21.7%) were outspokenly anti-woke, most of the other articles responded to the perceived threat of woke, which was hardly ever discussed positively or in its own right. Although the term and the concomitant debates were imported from the U.S. (Maly, 2023), the original, more positive meaning as developed in the African American community was hardly referenced. Allen (2023) considers this as a process of “misappropriation” and epistemic injustice, a term being stripped of its original meaning and replaced with a caricatured novel meaning.

Even if the articles presented a lot of voices countering the supposed threat of “woke”, anti-woke voices set the tone, strongly echoing international tendencies. “Woke” was reified and presented as an uncontested and uniform yet vague entity, making it an ideal catch-all container for a broad range of issues. Detractors mostly referred to the “woke movement”, other collocations such as woke “thought” and “culture” equally implying coherence. Woke was mostly associated with incidents, as in “woke debate” and “woke fuss”. While hardly anyone in the sample identified as such, wokeness was ascribed as an identity to “wokists” and “wokists”. Very much in line with Cammaerts’ (2022) analysis, detractors used a long list of negative collocations to associate wokeness with exaggeration (e.g. woke activism, hysteria, extremism), misguided beliefs (woke ideology, globalism, piousness) and disease (woke virus, craziness, lunacy). While anti-woke voices in our sample described woke people as irrational, exaggerated, moralizing, intolerant, polarizing, radical and totalitarian, they associated themselves with common sense, rationality, respect for nature and tradition, enlightenment and freedom of speech. Thus, anti-woke discourse in the Flemish press presents a binary and polarized world view, opposing “us” to a threatening woke block in a process of othering that was also observed by Cammaerts (2022) and Davies and MacRae (2023), among others.

Key *actors* in spreading this anti-woke sentiment were academics (such as Luc Sels), media and cultural figures (such as Gert Verhulst), and politicians (such as Bart De Wever). The

loudest anti-woke voices belong to white, middle aged cisgender men – a characterization they universally abhor – who occupy positions of power and actively put woke on the agenda. Whereas most woke “incidents” in 2021 and 2022 involved people who were supposedly canceled by the “woke movement”, which led to their defense by anti-woke voices, in 2023 a lot of reporting was instigated by anti-woke actors themselves, particularly N-VA politicians (e.g. the Arenberg picture removal and De Wever’s book).

Primary and secondary definers

To better understand the respective role of journalists and news sources in the constitution of the discourses analysed above, the quantitative exploration offers some initial cues. Most of the articles (58.8%) took a neutral stance, journalists reporting on incidents without taking a side, or trying to offer nuance, which was even more pronounced in popular newspapers (70.5%). So, despite the overarching negative connotations of “woke”, the predominant journalistic response to the perceived threat of woke was one of moderation: yes, there are excesses, but these are mostly situated in the U.S.; yes, we should be more sensitive, but culture should not be censored.

On the surface, then, journalistic reporting on “woke” looks quite balanced, anti-woke incidents and voices being counterbalanced by mitigating and countering voices. However, the very fact that “woke” is a force to be reckoned with was rarely questioned, so it quickly got widely accepted as a new, valid interpretive framework. As the chronological account indicated, we found three critical discourse moments, all instigated by an elite person – respectively an academic, a celebrity TV host and a politician. They set the agenda and raised awareness of the topic, resulting in more articles on woke. Media paid extensive attention to the controversy, confirming the status of these elite persons as legitimate voices or “primary definers” in the debate. Journalists gradually became more attuned to the topic, increasingly writing about such incidents as instances of “wokeness” and “cancel culture”.

Thus, woke was deliberately put on the agenda by anti-woke actors like Bart De Wever stirring up commotion, provoking others (both journalists and non-journalistic sources and voices) to respond. While complaining about culture wars, it was mostly anti-woke actors who initiated those incidents and fed controversy – thus acting as primary definers. This became most clear

when De Wever first made his lecture tour around Flemish universities and then wrote a book about woke, deliberately building on the negative discourse around wokeness, recuperating and instrumentalizing it politically while further fueling it. In line with Cammaerts' (2022) analysis of the U.K., De Wever is the most prominent Flemish "moral entrepreneur" feeding the moral panic surrounding woke.

Despite offering nuance or critique in interviews and opinion pieces, journalists and opinion makers engaged in discussion with the primary definers, who themselves had delineated the contours of "legitimate controversy" (Harjuniemi 2023) by vaguely defining "woke" and framing it as a threat. The journalists and opinion makers, even those who responded critically, mostly stayed within this delineated framework, acting as "secondary definers". Indeed, 19.5% of the articles did explicitly counter anti-woke discourse, some of which were written by critical journalists such as Marc Reynebeau and Bart Eeckhout, but most of which were opinion pieces. The latter form a substantial portion of all articles (39.8%), and these often countered anti-woke discourse (35.6% of all opinion pieces). The strong presence of opinion pieces suggests that news sources (rather than journalists) played a key role in defining "woke". This is further supported by the fact that in more than half of the articles analysed (54.9%), non-journalistic voices (either sources in articles, interviewees, or op-ed writers) were the first to use the term "woke".

The voices opposing anti-woke discourse, particularly in opinion pieces, countered the framing of woke as a threat, explicitly naming it an "anti-woke discourse", "umbrella term" or "frame". However, as noted by George Lakoff (2010), negating a frame just activates a frame. Even when countering the negative framing of "woke", journalists and editorialists reactivated it. The wide-shared indignation over the inflated threat of wokeness in opinion pieces evokes the "aghastness" identified by journalist Thomas Frank (2017) in responses to Trump's 2016 election, which to Freedman (2018) is a recurring shortcoming in media responses to populism, as expressing outrage does little to undermine the tendencies identified.

Moreover, as mentioned above the overarching vocabulary was negative and suggested a uniform and powerful entity, which led academic Jonathan Hendrickx to criticize the media coverage of this issue:

The use of terms like “woke movement” implies that there is an organized association of “wokers” who decide at general meetings what is (not) said.

Editors too often engage in such discourse. (*De Morgen*, 12 April 2023)

Indeed, one of the key findings of this study is that the Flemish press, while generally critical of anti-woke discourse, was instrumental in its spread. Although some journalists, particularly in the elite press, did question the power of the “woke movement”, most did not fundamentally question its existence.

Conclusion

In this article, we aimed to reconstruct how the topic of “wokeness” emerged on the media agenda in Flanders (RQ1); to unpack the characteristics of the ensuing discourses on woke (RQ2); and to understand the respective role of journalists and their sources in defining “woke” (RQ3).

The diachronic account, addressing RQ1, showed how quickly and strongly a negative tone dominated the discussion on woke in Flemish newspapers. In the articles we analysed, woke was almost uniquely discussed as a threat, anti-woke voices setting the tone while journalists and commentators mostly offered nuance or counterbalance. The synchronic anatomy of the resulting discourses, addressing RQ2, showed how specific objects (particularly race, gender and sexuality, and culture) were discussed using mostly negative language (evoking threat) by elite actors (academics, media and cultural figures, and politicians).

Contextualizing these discourses academically and internationally, it is worth noting that anti-woke discourse in Flanders uses strikingly similar arguments to that in the U.S. and U.K (Fekete, 2022; Cammaerts, 2023; Davies and MacRae, 2023), despite the radically different and more moderate political and social context. Often, reference is explicitly made to U.S. cases, testifying to the global nature of anti-woke discourse (Maly, 2023). It also presents similarities, and sometimes actively refers, to older discourses, particularly on political correctness which came to prominence in the 1990s. As noted by Fairclough (2003), this was also a question of cultural politics, with a strong focus on language use, where similar actors (in particular feminist and anti-racist ones) were equally represented as a homogeneous and radical social movement.

We should also highlight parallels and connections to other contemporary discourses, in particular anti-gender discourses which are gaining ground in Europe and abroad (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). As noted by Paternotte (2023), “gender ideology” acts as the conceptual matrix and symbolic glue in these discourses which unite heterogeneous actors and target a variety of issues around a vague catch-all term or “empty signifier”. However, anti-woke discourse is even broader and more all-encompassing, thus presenting an attractive framework to raise fear: it is (seen to be) everywhere.

For anti-woke actors, woke presents a handy (if imaginary) enemy. It feeds on existing fears, exploiting and arousing them; not coincidentally, several critics call it a “ghost” (e.g. Bracke, 2023). Extreme and far-right political parties like Vlaams Belang and N-VA instrumentalize and weaponize these fears to target progressive voices as well as left-wing parties and politicians, blaming them to be focusing on the wrong (cultural, identity-related) issues while neglecting “actual” problems – which, of course, is what they themselves do. In Flanders as abroad, extreme and far-right parties are often involved in similar “culture wars” over national identity, race and migration, and gender and sexuality, typically involving the discursive opposition between “us” (common people) and “them” (the othered, corrupt and vilified, elite) (Erdocia, 2022; Maly, 2018). This is very much in line with Mudde and Kaltwasser's definition of populism as a "thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'" (2017: 6).

Through RQ3 we aimed to understand the respective role of journalists and news sources in defining "woke". On the surface, anti-woke articles only constitute a minority of the total sample (about one in five), counterbalanced by a similar number of articles arguing against anti-woke discourse as well as a majority (three out of five) taking a neutral position. The latter, however, by not taking a side and reporting on or responding to anti-woke voices, did take over and reconfirmed the framing of “woke” (as a movement and threat) proposed by anti-woke voices, which acted as primary definers of the topic. Journalists, by taking up their role as neutral, “objective” reporters, contributed to the spread of anti-woke discourse and merely acted as secondary definers. It is striking how quickly, strongly and deliberately a restricted number of elite actors managed to set “wokeness” on the media agenda and act as its primary definer while delimiting the boundaries of legitimate controversy. Despite the

overarchingly neutral and sometimes critical tone of journalistic responses, and the great number of (often critical) opinion pieces, on the whole the press response did contribute to creating a sense of crisis, continuously returning to the conceptualization of "wokeness" as a threat. Journalists' reliance on sources as "definers" of reality results in what Carlson (2009: 528) calls "a journalism of attribution rather than a journalism of independent verification".

To conclude, it is important to point at some limitations of this study. First, while its sample is broad, encompassing six full months of press reporting over a period of three years, it is not entirely representative as it deliberately focused on periods with increased interest in woke. This allows to observe the dynamics in periods of increased debate but does not fully allow to chart how woke gradually permeated Flemish public debate on an everyday basis. Second, we only studied Dutch-language media, thus only covering half of the Belgian media landscape. A comparison with French-language media would be useful to further explore the connection between social and journalistic discourses and the political landscape, which leans more to the left in French-language Belgium. Third, by studying newspapers our study only captures part of the debate. Additional analysis of broadcasting would be useful to further explore discursive patterns in mainstream media, while an analysis of online and social media responses would allow to get a fuller view on the debates also encompassing non-elite voices. The latter would allow to capture more extreme voices, such as that of extreme right party Vlaams Belang, which mostly relies on social media to spread its views and has made "woke" into the next battlefield (Gustin, 2023). The picture painted in this paper, then, may be too rosy: while mainstream Flemish media such as newspapers at least try to offer nuance or balance, anti-woke discourse circulates more widely on social media. To better grasp anti-woke discourse, it needs to be situated within a wider context, particularly in relation to far right political movements and parties which are globally connected and are particularly adept at mobilizing online (Maly, 2018; Zhang and Davis, 2022) – which is the topic of follow-up research.

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¹ For a discussion of the limitations of using Google Trends as a data source, see Cebrián and Domenech (2023).

² All quotes from newspapers are literal translations from Dutch by the authors.