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## PUBLIC OPINION IN THE NEWS: EXAMINING PORTRAYAL AND VIEWPOINT HETEROGENEITY

*Although the news media both reflect and shape public opinion, little is known about how they actually portray public opinion in an integrated manner. A large-scale content analysis of Flemish print and television news, comparing routine and election periods, shows that journalists mostly refer to only one public opinion portrayal in a news item. When more than one public opinion portrayal is present, it is mostly casual inferences used in combination with other portrayals. Regarding the diversity of viewpoints, public opinion is typically represented in a highly one-sided manner and does not reflect nuances in citizen viewpoints.*

KEYWORDS content analysis; print news, public opinion; television news; viewpoint heterogeneity

In recent years, public opinion itself has become a hot topic in public debate. News media were accused of being biased as they often failed to portray public opinion on political outcomes such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as the US president in 2016 (Boydston & Van Aelst, 2018; Perryman, 2019; Zelizer, 2018). Despite these criticisms, portraying public opinion still plays a major part in journalists' function in democratic societies (Gans, 2011). Through the media, both elites and citizens learn about public opinion. On the one hand, political elites use public opinion to legitimize their policies and make them congruent with what the public wants (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). On the other hand, citizens glean from the media information about how other citizens stand on issues (Gunther, 1998; Mutz, 1992). When forming their own opinions and judgments later, people take into account these perceptions of the majority opinion. How journalists "read" and subsequently portray public opinion thus may be quite consequential.

Various studies have focused on different portrayals of public opinion: opinion polls (e.g., Hardmeier, 2008; Strömbäck, 2012), vox pops (or man-on-the-street interviews; Beckers, Walgrave, & Van den Bulck, 2018; Kleemans, Schaap, & Hermans, 2017), inferences to public opinion (e.g., Zerback, Koch, & Krämer, 2015), and protests (e.g., McLeod & Hertog, 1992; Wouters, 2013). Some of these portrayals, such as poll coverage, clearly communicate to citizens how majority opinion stands on an issue, while others, like protests, reveal the existence of divergent perspectives. Moreover, they all vary on how active the public is portrayed to be, with protests depicting citizens as most active and inferences to public opinion speaking to citizens only indirectly, through the words of the journalist. Most research focuses on one of the aforementioned portrayals (e.g., Bowe & Hoewe, 2011; Searles et al., 2016), and no study has investigated the extent to which they are integrated even though portrayals of public opinion do not occur in a vacuum. Audiences are mostly exposed to entire news items on a topic, which means they are exposed to potential multiple displays of public

opinion. For example, audience members see references to specific results of public opinion polls, but also quotes from man-on-the-street interviews or pictures of protesters. In tandem, these multiple portrayals in some instances might provide more context to public opinion than news coverage that portrays public opinion in only one manner. The first goal of our study is thus to investigate which public opinion portrayals are combined in the news.

Studying public opinion portrayals in an integrated manner will also provide a better understanding of the diversity of viewpoints covered in the news. Although representing a diversity of points of view is a central journalistic convention around the world (Dahl, 1999; Schultz, 1998), it is not known whether this principle is mirrored in representations of public opinion. This study analyzes whether the viewpoints reflected in these public opinion portrayals are consonant (i.e., all giving the same point of view) or not. When talking about public opinion in society, do the news media represent the nuances of citizen viewpoints, or do they present the public as a unified mass? As it is difficult for journalists to “read” public opinion (Herbst, 1998), inaccurate projections of what the public thinks about an issue might occur, especially if public opinion is presented as unified.

Our second goal is to examine variations in public opinion portrayals over different time periods, i.e., routine and election times. Given how elections are the most direct expression of public opinion and campaigns are rife with pre-election polls, it is unsurprising that public opinion portrayals appear more frequently in election coverage. During election campaigns, news reporting increasingly focuses on the “horse race,” i.e., which candidates are winning/losing, gaining ground, and/or becoming less competitive (Cushion & Thomas, 2018). News-making routines change during elections (Falasca, 2014), for instance, increasing their focus on interpretative journalism. In addition, more explicit guidelines exist regarding the diversity of opinions presented by journalists, or about the (proportional) airtime different political parties need to receive (Strömbäck & Kaid, 2009). While the very salient

nature of election campaigns generates much research about public opinion portrayals in news coverage during such periods, much less is known about news coverage during more routine political periods. A comparison of election and routine news portrayals of public opinion is therefore warranted.

To analyze the diverse means through which public opinion is represented in the news, we conducted a large-scale content analysis of 3,894 Flemish (Belgian) print and television news stories, comparing routine and election campaign periods. We focus specifically on how public opinion portrayals are combined in the news and the diversity of viewpoints they present.

### **The representation of public opinion in the news**

One of the main features of democracies is the relationship between public opinion and policy. Making policies congruent with what the public wants should be a key goal of politicians. But how do they know what the public wants? For politicians and citizens alike, the media serve as one of the main sources of information about public opinion (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010). Despite its many dimensions and definitions (Glynn, et al., 2016), the public opinion we refer to in this paper is public opinion as brought before individuals by the (news) media, which often assumes that public opinion can be measured and determined. Ideally, the representation of public opinion would consist of the diverse views and positions on issues that are present in a society (Blumer, 1948). However, mediated portrayals of public opinion are almost, by their mere existence, a simplification of reality and an aggregation of the opinions that exist within a population. In reality, public opinion is complex, dynamic, and nuanced. But to present audiences with an image of public opinion, a journalist has to interpret and summarize it.

Journalists depict public opinion in the news in many different ways. These public opinion portrayals are used to communicate to citizens what other people in their population think about issues. Some show the majority opinion (often polls, but also general inferences about the majority viewpoint), while others are used mainly to depict the different opinions present in the population (such as references to protest or sometimes vox pops—interviews with ordinary people on the street). Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen (2005) were the first to conduct a broader content analysis of the prevalence of different public opinion portrayals in the news. They distinguished four broad types of public opinion portrayals: vox pops, protests, opinion polls, and (unspecified) inferences to public opinion<sup>1</sup>.

*Public opinion polls* can be surveys on citizens' opinions on a specific topic (issue polls, for instance, on abortion legislation) or elections (“horse race polls”); with a focus on the popularity on politicians or political parties (Brettschneider, 2008; Strömbäck, 2012; Welch, 2002). Polls are regularly accused, usually by partisans, of being biased or easy to manipulate and conducted mainly to serve the interests of media and political elites (Madson & Hillygus, 2020). However, if well conducted, polls still are one of the most systematic ways to find out what citizens think about an issue and help provide a check of journalists' predispositions of the public sentiment (Herbst, 1998).

*Inferences to public opinion* are statements about public opinion that are made without direct evidence (Heinisch & Werner, 2019; Zerback et al., 2015). They often remain rather vague (“everybody agrees that...” or “people dislike the policy”) and are difficult for audiences to verify. These statements can be made by journalists themselves, but also by other speaking actors such as experts and politicians.

*Vox pops* are interviews with ostensibly randomly chosen ordinary individuals who convey a statement in a news item (Beckers, Walgrave, & Van den Bulck, 2018). They can either talk about their personal experiences or give explicit opinions. When incorporated into

such portrayals of public opinion, vox pop statements suggest to audience members that these individuals represent the entire population given their apparent random selection and their lack of organizational affiliation (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000).

*Protests* are references to all forms of collective citizen action in the news. These usually include general demonstrations and marches, but also refer to petitions and symbolic actions (e.g., spilling blood on fur coats). They are the most active portrayal of citizen opinions, as citizens here actively try to capture media attention and sway policy (Dalton, 2013; Giugni, 2004).

These four aforementioned portrayals are longstanding representations of public opinion. However, nowadays, social media play a significant role in the portrayal of public opinion in the news, which is why we include them as an additional category in our categorization<sup>1</sup>. *Social media references* are all references made to public opinion using social media. Social media provide a new way for journalists to measure and represent the public sentiment. Several studies already have found that journalists indeed increasingly turn to social media to report not only on horse race coverage, but also on citizens' reactions to events and politicians (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2014; McGregor, 2019; Paulussen & Harder, 2014).

Extant research has focused mostly on one of these public opinion portrayals, and in some cases on the viewpoints they present (e.g., different vox pops stating opinions; Beckers, Walgrave & Van den Bulck, 2018; or polls covering the majority stance; Searles et al, 2016). Even though journalists can draw a nuanced picture of public opinion using one type of public opinion portrayal, these studies might not provide a full depiction of public opinion as presented in the news – and indeed, audience members likely often are exposed to different portrayals of public opinion in understanding an issue. Journalists might combine several public opinion portrayals to present the audience with what they perceive to be public

opinion. Previous studies into public opinion portrayals indeed seem to indicate that they regularly co-occur. Lewis et al. (2005), for instance, concluded that public opinion inferences seem to serve mostly as context to other public opinion portrayals, often providing the same information as the other portrayals. Individual tweets appear to be combined regularly with generalizing statements about public opinion (Beckers & Harder, 2016). A news item about, for instance, the popularity of politicians often does not only contain poll results, but also vox pops to illustrate the poll data (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). Most of the abovementioned studies make assumptions about combinations of public opinion portrayals in the news and focused mainly on one of them. A better understanding of how different portrayals of public opinion are integrated is thus a first step to better comprehending how journalists construct public opinion in their news stories. The first goal of this paper is consequently to explore the different combinations of public opinion portrayals.

**RQ1.** How are different types of public opinion portrayals combined in print and television news?

### **Diversity of citizen viewpoints**

The existence of conflicting interests and opinions in society is fundamental to a healthy public sphere (Habermas, 1989). So too, is people's need for unity and agreement. In the past two decades, societies have become more heterogenous in the expression of their viewpoints and values (Wilson, Parker, & Feinberg, 2020) and people have more possibilities than ever before to share their perspectives with the world (e.g., Bohman, 2004; Dahlgren, 2005). Social media in particular play a significant role in how the media, (political) elites, and the public interact with each other, and traditional media are no longer the only ones presenting and



spreading portrayals of public opinion (Chadwick, 2017; McGregor, 2019). In fact, the rise in fake news, hacks and social bots increasingly interfere with public opinion (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017).

Despite—or because of—these evolutions, portraying different viewpoints in society remains an important goal of media in democracies. Several traditional news outlets have specific guidelines on the presentation of the diversity of viewpoints present among citizens. The BBC (2019), for instance, has a guideline stating that journalists should reflect a breadth and diversity of viewpoints in their coverage. The population and its opinions are diverse, so media coverage should echo this diversity. The Flemish public service broadcaster also mandates that its coverage represents the diversity of the population and its constituent opinions (VRT, 2019). In many other countries, professional journalistic organizations such as the Society of Professional Journalists in the United States put forward similar principles (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014).

When talking about the viewpoints in society on an issue, do the news media represent the nuances present in public opinion, or do they depict the public mostly as being unified? On the one hand, one would expect that a diversity of opinions present in society is more newsworthy for journalists. After all, conflict and change have been found to attract attention and have a higher chance of making it into the news (Larsen & Fazekas, 2020). On the other hand, the representation of public opinion in the media is often a simplified version of reality. Journalists themselves acknowledge that they present the viewpoints they perceive to be the majority, as it is a tool helping them construct a consistent news story. Indeed, journalists usually create narratives of public opinion based on their own interpretations (Entman & Paletz, 1981; Jerre, 2013; King & Schudson, 1995).

Several studies have investigated whether the news media have a right or left-wing political bias, often finding mixed results (Alterman, 2003; D'Alessio & Allen; 2000;

Hopmann et al., 2017). However, a study of the political leaning of public opinion referrals in the news indicated that more than ninety percent of references to public opinion in US and UK television and print news expressed no clear political leaning at all—whether to the right, the left, mixed or centrist (Lewis et al., 2005). Although politics undoubtedly play a significant role in public life, *political* viewpoints make up only a part of the public sphere. Given the broad swath of issues discussed in today’s increasingly complex media landscape, this study goes beyond political viewpoints to examine all viewpoints in the news. Related to the presentation of viewpoints, some studies have examined the diversity of viewpoints as portrayed in a single type of public opinion portrayal. Several studies found that coverage of protests in US news, such as those related to Black Lives Matter protests, focused mostly on one side of a conflict or protest issue (e.g., Araiza et al, 2016; Bowe & Hoewe, 2011; Leopold & Bell, 2017). Similarly, the balance in viewpoints among vox pops in television news tends to be very one-sided (Beckers et al., 2018). In addition, television news coverage of the 2008 US elections presented a rather one-sided picture of public opinion that differs from polls outcomes, in line with biases from the news media and reporters (Searles et al., 2016). So, despite several guidelines and journalistic principles being in place, public opinion portrayals are expected to be mostly consonant and consequently provide a one-sided image of public opinion within a news item.

**H1:** The majority of portrayals of public opinion are consonant, i.e., have only one viewpoint present in a news item.

As mentioned above, journalists likely are aware of the importance of presenting a variety of viewpoints in the news they produce. No evidence exists that newspaper and television differ in viewpoint diversity, although we do expect differences between media

platforms (or type of media organization). For television news, objectivity and balance are considered key in public service broadcasting that traditionally follows relatively strict objectivity rules. Commercial broadcasters have more leeway and are less bound by legal rules of impartiality (Aalberg, Van Aelst, & Curran, 2010; Cushion, 2012; Soroka et al., 2013). For these reasons, journalists of the public service broadcaster might seek to present a greater diversity of viewpoints in their news stories compared to the commercial broadcaster.

For newspapers, differences in editorial orientation might explain differences in the diversity in their content. Elite newspapers are more likely to cover a diversity of actors and perspectives because they are more socially aware and target more “highbrow” audiences, who often prefer more diverse reporting (Benson, 2009). Popular newspapers would be more market-oriented and target different audiences than their elite counterparts, and would therefore turn to a less complex and less diverse content, resulting in a narrower range of viewpoints presented in individual news stories. Indeed, many studies found a higher diversity of viewpoints in elite newspapers than in their popular counterparts (e.g., Benson, 2009; Masini et al., 2018; Roggeband & Vliegenthart, 2007). Although all of these studies refer to news content diversity in general, the same principles should hold regarding the presentation of the diversity of public opinion in the news.

**H2a:** Public service broadcast news will present a greater diversity of viewpoints in portrayals of public opinion compared with commercial broadcast news.

**H2b:** Elite newspapers will present a greater diversity of viewpoints in portrayals of public opinion compared with popular newspapers.

We also expect the origin of the news issue to play a role in the diversity of citizen viewpoints portrayed. In foreign news, with which journalists have less direct experience,

journalists are found to mainly rely on the elite framing of events, which means that the focus lies on the elite consensus viewpoint (Bennett, 1990). Several studies have established that geographical distance is the biggest impediment to obtain a diversity of sources in the news (Choi, 2009; Hayes & Guardino, 2010; Martin, 1988). In turn, source diversity can be directly and positively correlated with viewpoint diversity (Masini & Van Aelst, 2017). Beyond the physical/geographical limitations of foreign news, domestic reporting is often more complex and comprises a multitude of narratives, so a higher viewpoint diversity can be expected (Lawrence, 2010; Vos & Wolfgang, 2018). We consequently expect there to be less focus on public opinion in foreign news, and an increased focus on the viewpoints of elites, resulting in less viewpoint diversity in public opinion portrayals in foreign news as compared to domestic news.

**H3:** Domestic news will present a higher diversity of viewpoints in portrayals of public opinion compared with foreign news.

Finally, levels of viewpoint heterogeneity can vary depending on the type of news coverage, with higher levels during election periods. This is because elections are all about clashing opinions. In recent years, election debates have become more polarized and political candidates have focused increasingly on how they differ from the other parties (Down & Wilson, 2010; Lau & Rovner, 2009; Walter, 2014). Therefore, election news is expected to focus increasingly on the diverging viewpoints in society. Most research has studied the diversity of viewpoints in election debates or politicians' rhetoric, and public opinion should be presented as being similarly divided in election news coverage.

In addition, many countries have specific rules and practices concerning the fairness and balance of the news media coverage during elections (Strömbäck & Kaid, 2009). In the past,

for instance, broadcasters in the UK monitored candidates' airtime very closely during elections. In France, during electoral campaigns, broadcasters have to devote equal airtime to each candidate. In countries all over the world, similar rules still exist (Strömbäck & Kaid, 2009). In more liberal media systems like the US, the First Amendment supports strict freedom of speech, and candidates and political parties are free to purchase airtime as they wish. However, even in the US, the "reasonable access" act mandates that American radio and television broadcasters provide a reasonable opportunity to any political candidate for federal office to purchase airtime. Investigating the balance of news coverage in Flanders during election versus non-election periods, Van Aelst and De Swert (2009) found that political viewpoints and parties were covered in a more balanced manner during elections.

The abovementioned guidelines mostly apply to political parties or politicians, and not to the representation of citizen viewpoints, though. The goal of this study is to investigate whether these principles of balance also apply to public opinion portrayals. Given the many points of controversy raised during an election campaign and specific guidelines being in place, we expect the representation of viewpoints to be more diverse when references to public opinion appear in election news.

**H4:** Election news will present a higher diversity of viewpoints in portrayals of public opinion compared with non-election news.

## **Method**

To obtain a robust picture of how public opinion is represented in the news during election and politically routine periods, we conducted a manual content analysis of four constructed weeks of Flemish (the largest, Dutch-speaking, northern part of Belgium) print and

television news. Manual coding was necessary, as not all references to public opinion are explicit and therefore would not be captured by automated coding or a keyword-search.

*Context of study.* Characterized by a ‘democratic corporatist’ model with rules about representation of political viewpoints (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), the media in Flanders consist of a strong public service broadcaster (*Eén*) and only one commercial broadcaster (*VTM*) with a primetime news bulletin, both of which are included in this study. These two broadcasters have implemented self-regulation with regard to their neutrality concerning political views, although stricter rules apply to the public service broadcaster (Vlaamse Regulator voor de Media, 2014). For print news, we selected the main popular (*Het Laatste Nieuws*) and elite newspaper (*De Standaard*). Newspapers in Flanders have become non-partisan. Self-regulation exists about the objectivity of reporting and the diversity of points of view present in news coverage. In election times, stricter self-regulating rules and guidelines apply (Soontjens et al., 2021). Flanders can thus be considered almost as a “most likely case” to find high levels of viewpoint diversity, with a strong public service broadcaster, non-partisan media and editorial self-regulation.

*Sample and coding.* The sample comprised three constructed weeks of news from the first half of 2018, a politically routine news period. In 2019, one week was constructed from the month before the federal, regional (Flemish) and European elections of May 26. The entire newspapers and television newscasts were coded. For print news, this means that all main articles were coded, with the exception of the (hyperlocal) regional pages, separate sports pages, advertisements and weather forecasts. A total of 1,435 news items were coded from elite newspaper *De Standaard*, which contained on average 68.48 news items per day ( $SD = 22.13$ ). Similarly, 1,485 news items were coded from popular newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*, with an average of 62.60 news items per day ( $SD = 16.71$ ). For television news, all news items were coded, with the exception of sports news when there was a switch to the sports anchor. In

total, 365 news items were coded from public service broadcaster *Eén*, which averaged 18.96 news items per day ( $SD = 6.51$ ); 609 news items from commercial broadcaster *VTM* which contained on average 27.88 news items per day ( $SD = 3.72$ ). In total, 2,947 news items were coded from the three weeks of news in 2018, and 947 news items during the election campaign of 2019. Our choice for these constructed weeks derived from our focus on the level of the news stories as we are interested in finding general, overarching patterns. Constructed weeks help avoiding oversampling specific news days and ensure no specific news event unduly influenced the data.

For every news item, the title, subtitle and news topic were coded. News topic was determined based on the topic codebook from the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP). Every news item could receive up to three topic codes, in order of importance (Krippendorff's alpha = 0.82). Thus if a news item covered the relationship between immigration and crime, it received both topic codes in order of importance based on the main focus of a news item. Also coded was whether the news item explicitly referred to the federal, regional (Flemish) and European elections of May 26, 2019. In 2018, 1% of the news items explicitly referred to the elections; in 2019 this figure was 20.3%. Lastly, for every news item, we coded the origin (domestic or foreign; Krippendorff's Alpha = 0.75).

If no public opinion portrayals were present in the news item, coding stopped here. If one or more public opinion portrayals were present, a more extensive coding form was completed for each separate public opinion portrayal. **Table 1** presents the share of the different public opinion portrayals present in our sample. In total, 1,217 public opinion portrayals were identified in the news items.

*[Insert Table 1 around here]*

Next, at the level of the news item, it was determined if and how many different viewpoints were present in the public opinion portrayals. Every viewpoint was assigned a number, the first viewpoint (e.g., a vox pop stating “*I think the government should extend the abortion limit*”) was assigned the number 1. The second viewpoint (e.g., “*the polls conclude that the majority of Flemings do not want to extend the abortion limit*”<sup>2</sup>), was assigned the number 2. If a third public opinion portrayal (e.g., a protest in favor of the extension of the abortion limit”) again portrayed a similar viewpoint as the first one, it was again assigned the number 1, so that for every news story, we could analyze how many different unique opinions were present (Krippendorff’s Alpha = 0.81).

Much attention was paid to the quality of the coding process. A team of five coders was trained extensively. Coders pilot-tested the codebook on multiple sets of data and intercoder reliability was calculated several times during the process. Because the more implicit inferences to public opinion are both a crucial and rather subtle part of public opinion representation, all data were coded twice. This second round of coding generated another 12% of public opinion portrayals. Because of the amount of attention paid to the coding process, we are rather confident that we identified the different public opinion portrayals in a satisfactory manner.

## **Results**

Our first research question revolves around how public opinion portrayals are combined in the news. In total, 18.6% (N = 691) of all analyzed news items contained at least one portrayal of public opinion. Of those news items, 30.97% (N = 214) contained more than one public opinion portrayal, with combinations ranging from a single portrayal of public opinion to ten portrayals in one story. On average, 1.61 (*SD* = 1.21) public opinion portrayals were



present in a news item. Reflecting patterns of co-occurrence in public opinion inferences, Appendix A presents all possible combinations of public opinion portrayals. An example of a story that includes multiple invocations of public opinion comes from elite newspaper *De Standaard* (May 18, 2019). The story describes the vote of Taiwan's Parliament to legalize same-sex marriage, a first in Asia. The entire article covers the discrepancy between Parliament and public opinion, with the headline stating: “People against, parliament in favor”. It is an example of how journalists use different types of public opinion portrayals to depict a nuanced image of public opinion.

*‘People’ against, parliament in favor* (Inference 1, made by journalist)

*In a referendum in November last year, ten million Taiwanese people voted on the issue. Nearly seven million then rejected the idea of gay marriage* (opinion poll)

*In Taipei, thousands of pro LGBTQ-activists followed the vote live on the street on Friday, despite heavy rain.* (protest, combined with an image of the activists holding up Pro-LGBTQ signs)

**Table 2** presents the share of news items containing both singular and co-occurring public opinion portrayals. As indicated in Table 2, the majority of public opinion portrayals appear on their own most often. When more than one public opinion portrayal is present, most public opinion portrayals are combined with inferences most frequently. This is not surprising, as inferences are an easy way for journalists to simplify complex debates and probably serve to provide context to other public opinion portrayals. Vox pops are the exception. They most often appear together with other vox pops. This is again not unexpected, as they most often appear in clusters of three or four interviews, representing a sample of the population discussed in the news story (Beckers et al., 2018). Of course, the mere presence of

public opinion portrayals does not automatically tell us something about the diversity of public opinion representation, to which we now turn.

*[Insert Table 2 around here]*

### **Viewpoint heterogeneity**

Hence, the key hypotheses undergirding this study relate to the heterogeneity of viewpoints journalists provide when portraying public opinion. To begin, 89.4% of news items ( $N = 619$ ) included one or more viewpoints, for an average of 1.07 viewpoints per news item ( $SD = 0.28$ ). The overwhelming majority of news items (93.4%) introduced only one point of view; 6.2% included two viewpoints; and less than half a percent of the news items included three viewpoints. However, as already discussed above, the majority of news items contains only one public opinion portrayal, mostly resulting in only one opportunity to provide a viewpoint. If public opinion is portrayed more than once in a news item, journalists have more opportunities to provide different points of view. When looking only at the news items containing two or more public opinion portrayals ( $N = 165$ ), we find that a larger share of these news items (24.8%) contains more than one viewpoint and a significant correlation between the number of public opinion portrayals in a news item and the number of viewpoints present ( $r = 0.55, p < 0.000$ ). Yet even when more than one public opinion portrayal is present in a news item, three fourths of these news items still present only one point of view (75.2%).

Exemplifying such consonant views of public opinion is a news story aired on the public service broadcaster *Eén* (March 7, 2019); this story included four portrayals – two inferences to public opinion and two vox pops. The news story covered Britain and Russia expelling the other country's diplomats after the poisoning of a Russian military intelligence

officer who had been unveiled as a British double agent. All four invocations of public opinion expressed support of Russian president Vladimir Putin.

*“Putin is popular because he confronts the West.”* (Inference 1; made by journalist)

*“Most of the people we address here support the president.”* (Inference 2, made by journalist)

*“Putin is a very strong personality and he alone can lead this country. My family is doing well, we have free health care, free education, I get a higher education for free”*  
(Vox pop 1)

*“Absolutely. For the current president. Why? Because after the chaos of the nineties and the unclear democracy there finally is stability.”* (Vox pop 2)

Incorporating multiple viewpoints was less common. An example is reflected in an article published in the popular newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* (May 21, 2019). The article, which covered the advertisement of a beer brand referring to transgender singer Sam Bettens, presents individuals’ mixed response to the advertisement.

*“Not everyone likes the ‘Pintje, Sam?’ ad for Sam Bettens”* (Inference, made by journalist)

*“Oh, isn't this humorous? A welcome for Sam into the men's world”* (Vox pop 1)

*“Genius”* (Vox pop 2)

*“A reason for me to never drink [beer brand] again”* (Vox pop 3)

Overall, the low levels of viewpoint heterogeneity in public opinion portrayals support Hypothesis 1. However, this overall absence of viewpoint heterogeneity belies substantive

differences between items appearing in print versus television news. Television news items contain, on average, more points of view ( $M = 1.12$ ,  $SD = 0.36$ ) than print news ( $M = 1.06$ ,  $SD = 0.24$ ),  $T(212.4) = 2.01$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . This is quite surprising, as television news stories are often concise compared to print news articles that provide more context, which would mean that journalists have less space compared to print news articles to provide a variety of viewpoints.

Hypothesis 2a posited a greater diversity of viewpoints in public service broadcast news than in commercial broadcast news. The data do not support H2a: No difference in viewpoint diversity existed between the public service broadcaster ( $M = 1.11$ ,  $SD = 0.36$ ) and the commercial broadcaster ( $M = 1.12$ ,  $SD = 0.36$ ),  $T(159) = -0.141$ ,  $p > 0.05$ . However, a significant difference emerged for newspaper type, as predicted by Hypothesis 2b. News items in the elite newspaper *De Standaard* contained, on average, more points of view ( $M = 1.07$ ,  $SD = 0.28$ ) than news items in the popular newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* ( $M = 1.03$ ;  $SD = 0.17$ ), although the difference was small;  $T(456) = 2.185$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

Hypothesis 3 predicted that domestic and foreign news items would differ in their viewpoint heterogeneity. After all, it is easier for journalists to search for a variety of points of view when producing domestic news as compared to foreign news. However, the data did not support H3: The number of viewpoints in domestic ( $M = 1.07$ ,  $SD = 0.27$ ) versus foreign news ( $M = 1.09$ ,  $SD = 0.30$ ) did not differ significantly ( $T(499) = 0.986$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ).

Hypothesis 4 predicted that journalists will present a more nuanced image of public opinion and consequently a higher diversity of viewpoints during election campaigns. To begin, significantly more portrayals of public opinion are present in election news compared to nonelection news. Roughly one in six news items (16.2%) in non-election news contain public opinion portrayals, and this percentage is nearly three times greater (46.8%) when a news item relates directly to the election campaign ( $T(231.3) = -11.66$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). While election news items invoke public opinion more often than nonelection news items, this

relative frequency of portrayals is not accompanied by a greater diversity of viewpoints; nonelection news ( $M = 1.07$ ,  $SD = 0.28$ ) presents no greater diversity of viewpoints than election news ( $M = 1.07$ ,  $SD = 0.25$ );  $T(617) = 0.138$ ,  $p > 0.05$ .

Not surprisingly, polls take up a central place when public opinion is covered during elections. For instance, a story aired on the commercial broadcaster *VTM* on May 21, 2019, referred to a poll on who would be the best Prime Minister of Flanders according to voters.

*“Most Flemings also think Hilde Crevits would be best suited to become Prime Minister. In a poll of VTM Nieuws and Het Laatste Nieuws, Crevits gets 54%, De Wever 46%.”* (news anchor). At the same time, on-screen statistical results of the poll show: *“Who do you prefer as Prime Minister? 54% Hilde Crevits vs. 46% Bart De Wever.”*

To the extent that election-based news items contained multiple viewpoints, an example appears in the form of an article from elite newspaper *De Standaard* (April 24, 2019), about the decrease in popularity of the Christian-Democrats (CD&V). The story refers to not only the negative outcome of an election poll for the party, but also favorable assessments of the party.

*“For the first time since the previous parliamentary elections, the party has been put at a significant loss, with the worst result ever in this political barometer. With only 14.7% of the votes, CD&V loses.”* (Opinion poll)

Wouter Beke (Party leader CD&V): *“We have only been among the people in recent days. And they say different things,”* he says. *“They really appreciate our story.”* (Inference, made by politician)

## **Conclusion**

In the context of increasing debates on the (mis)representation of public opinion in the news, this paper systematically analyzed how public opinion is portrayed in Flemish print and broadcast news. We studied whether journalists present a diversity of viewpoints existing in the population when constructing a news story or whether they focus mostly on what they perceive to be the majority stance. Moreover, we specifically looked at differences between election and non-election news, as stricter (self-regulating) rules exist about the diversity of voices presented during election campaigns.

Although journalists refer to public opinion in roughly every fifth story, they mostly offer only one public opinion portrayal per news item: inferences, vox pops, opinion polls, protests, and social media inferences, in that order. Whereas previous research has focused mainly on one type of public opinion portrayal, this study focuses on how multiple types are combined in ways that likely reflect the breadth of public opinion information to which audience members are exposed. Combinations of different public opinion portrayals do not automatically result in better, more nuanced news coverage, but they offer a more robust way to study public opinion representation, given that in one third of the news items referring to public opinion, journalists use more than one public opinion portrayal. However, when public opinion is portrayed in multiple ways, it is not used to create a more complex or nuanced story. It is mostly casual inferences that are used in combination with other portrayals. They seem to provide context or introduce other public opinion information and offer a way of using public opinion to anchor claims made in the news story without threatening the objectivity of the reporter.

In general, when news stories refer to public opinion, they provide little nuance. It thus appears that in most cases, journalists only portray what they interpret to be the “majority opinion.” Emerging from the first systematic study of diversity of viewpoints in news invocations of public opinion portrayals, these findings align with previous studies showing that journalists tend to trust their own “gut feeling” when representing public opinion (e.g., Entman & Paletz, 1981; Jerre, 2013; King & Schudson, 1995). However, although journalists themselves feel confident about their capacity to “read” public opinion (and as this study shows, their coverage often seems to follow this interpretation), in reality, research has shown that journalists often hold misperceptions about the public’s actual sentiment (Beckers, Walgrave, Wolf, Lamot & Van Aelst, 2019; Jerre, 2013). By only presenting one point of view, inaccurate projections of public opinion might occur. The lack of diversity of viewpoints in public opinion portrayals in election news might be even more important, as the consequences of providing the audience with public opinion portrayals here are potentially substantial. A large amount of research has shown that public opinion portrayals in the media can influence people’s perceptions, judgments and ultimately even (voting) behavior (e.g., Burstein, 2003; Daschmann, 2000; Giugni, 2004; Sonck & Loosveldt, 2010).

Yet, one of the main limitations of this content analysis is our focus on individual news stories. It could be argued that balance at the level of an individual news item is not always desirable, as it could create what is called a “false equivalency” of opinions (e.g., Jamieson & Waldman, 2003), which might not always reflect how viewpoints are distributed in reality (on for instance topics such as climate change). However, especially in television news, news stories often provide a ‘summary’ of a news event, and there is only one story per event in one newscast. Moreover, public opinion is mostly portrayed on politicized, contested topics in society. Because “measuring” public opinion in society is fraught, it is difficult to know how much viewpoint heterogeneity is desirable. However, as the overwhelming majority of news

stories reflects only one side of public opinion – during both routine periods and election campaigns – for most topics, a more nuanced representation of public opinion would help audiences to better understand the issues at hand. Moreover, journalists for controversial topics can often do so without providing this false equivalence. Yet, it could be that news media cover the same topic in different news articles or on different days, and use that other coverage to provide a more nuanced picture of society. By providing a starting point for studying public opinion in the news, this study hopefully can enhance our understanding of public opinion representation on specific topics.

This analysis only includes traditional print and broadcast media. We did not investigate online media as it was not feasible to include in a content analysis this expansive, given its dynamic and constantly updated content. However, the most-read websites in Flanders are linked to traditional news outlets with comparable content (CIM, 2020). Yet, it could be that online and offline news content differs. With easily accessible opinions on the web and social media platforms, it might be that public opinion is presented more heterogeneously online. However, previous studies seem to indicate that this is not the case (e.g., McGregor, 2019). Future research should help to provide a better understanding on this matter.

In addition, this study focuses on the Flemish media system. The media situation in Flanders is very advantageous for the quality of the news, with a strong public service broadcaster and only one commercial broadcaster with a primetime newscast which are similar in focus and quality, comparable to many Northern-European media systems (e.g., Norway, Finland, Germany, Austria; Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Moreover, newspapers are nonpartisan and no real tabloids are present. Strong self-regulation exists for all news media. However, even in a favorable media context like the Flemish one, where the media and political landscapes would be conducive to high levels of viewpoint diversity, public opinion in a news article is often constructed as homogenous and having one viewpoint. Journalists



mostly seem to portray what they believe to be the majority opinion. It therefore could be that different and even more extreme findings would exist in media contexts which are more liberal or contain media with more partisan leanings.

In all, this study concludes that in their construction of news items, journalists in traditional news outlets often represent the public and their opinions rather homogenously. Different public opinion portrayals are used to support instead of compensate/nuance one another. Understanding how public opinion is portrayed can help scholars better grapple with the process by which such portrayals can shape public opinion itself.

## NOTES

1. For a more extensive theoretical elaboration of the different types of public opinion portrayals, see Author (2020).
2. For opinion polls, the framing of the poll results was used to determine the viewpoint

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APPENDIX A.

All possible combinations of public opinion and their presence in the sample

Public opinion poll	Inference	Vox pops	Protest	Social media reference	N	% of news items
x	x	x	x	x	0	0.00
x	x	x	x		2	0.29
x	x	x		x	0	0.00
x	x	x			3	0.43
x	x		x	x	0	0.00
x	x		x		3	0.43
x	x			x	1	0.14
x	x				39	5.64
x		x	x	x	0	0.00
x		x	x		0	0.00
x		x		x	0	0.00
x		x			2	0.29
x			x	x	0	0.00
x			x		1	0.14
x				x	0	0.00
x					79	11.43
	x	x	x	x	0	0.00
	x	x	x		0	0.00
	x	x		x	0	0.00
	x	x			13	1.88
	x		x	x	3	0.43
	x		x		20	2.89
	x			x	8	1.16
	x				367	53.11
		x	x	x	0	0.00
		x	x		8	1.16
		x		x	0	0.00
		x			46	6.66
			x	x	1	0.14
			x		72	10.42
				x	23	3.33
					691	100%

**Table 1.** Share of different public opinion portrayals (N = 1217)

	N	%
Opinion Poll	147	12.03
Inference	658	53.93
Vox Pop	228	18.66
Protest	130	10.64
Social Media Reference	54	4.75
	1217	100

Note: Krippendorff's alpha = 0.88

**Table 2.** Co-occurrence of public opinion portrayals

	Opinion polls (N = 128)	Inferences (N = 459)	Vox pops (N = 74)	Protests (N = 110)	Social media references (N =36)
	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Single portrayal</b>	57.81	63.62	33.78	60.00	55.56
<b>Co-occurring with:</b>					
Polls	7.81	10.02	6.76	3.64	2.78
Inferences	35.94	24.62	24.32	25.45	33.33
Vox pops	3.91	3.92	52.70	9.09	0.00
Protests	3.13	6.10	13.51	12.73	11.11
Social media references	0.78	2.61	0.00	11.11	16.67

Notes: Figures in each cell represent the column percentage of articles portraying a single instance of public opinion as well as the column percentage of articles that portrayed co-occurrences of public portrayal portrayals. Figures do not add up to 100% given multiple overlapping portrayals of public opinion.