

Belgium (Flanders)

News diversity put under pressure

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Introduction

Flanders is part of the small European country Belgium, which is located adjacent to the North Sea with Germany, France, the Netherlands, and Luxemburg as neighbouring countries. Belgium has 11.5 million inhabitants, and the country is divided into three regions: the Brussels Capital region (1.2 million inhabitants), Wallonia (3.6 million inhabitants), and Flanders (with 6.6 million inhabitants – the most populated region of Belgium).

After World War II, Flanders was for a long time governed by the traditional parties: the socialists (SP.A), the Christian-democrats (CD&V), and the liberal party (VLD). Since the 1990s, however, these parties started to lose the popular vote. The extreme right-wing party Vlaams Belang increased its political relevance up to roughly 20–25 per cent of the votes, with intermittent electoral downfalls; however, it has never been in government. The Flemish nationalist party (N-VA), which argues for an independent Flanders with an economically right-wing programme, has become the region's biggest political party in the past decade. Since the latest elections in May 2019, the political parties have not yet come to an agreement for forming a Federal government. The Flemish government was formed in October 2019, following a coalition between the N-VA, CD&V and Open VLD. Politically, Belgium is considered a constitutional parliamentary monarchy with different competencies given to the federal and regional governments.

Freedom in the World 2021: status “free” (Score: 96/100, up from 95 in 2018).

Belgium is a stable electoral democracy with a long record of peaceful transfers of power. Political rights and civil liberties are legally guaranteed and largely respected. Major concerns in recent years have included the threat of terrorism,

and corruption scandals that have unsettled the country's complex institutional setting and political landscape. (Freedom House, 2021)

Liberal Democracy Index 2020: Belgium is placed in the Top 10% bracket (rank 11 of measured countries), down from 6 in 2019 (Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2020, 2021).

Freedom of Expression Index 2018: rank 9 of measured countries, down from 3 in 2016 (Varieties of Democracy Institute, 2017, 2019).

2020 World Press Freedom Index: rank 12 of 180 countries, down from 9 in 2019 (Reporters Without Borders, 2020).

Belgium consists of three linguistic communities: one French-speaking, one German-speaking, the other Dutch-speaking. Due to several state reforms, the community authorities were given more powers to regulate the radio and television broadcasting markets. Therefore, the communities have their own media law and media regulators. Distinct media markets exist also from an economic point of view, with media companies usually focusing on servicing one language community. With Belgium already being a rather small country, such a division of the media markets results in even smaller market units, especially compared with the neighbouring France and Germany, although scaling up does happen through both internal consolidation within the Flemish market and outside territorial borders.

Five media companies dominate the Flemish media landscape. The Flemish Regulator of Media (Vlaamse Regulator voor de Media, VRM) asserts and concludes that the high level of concentration is deeply worrying (VRM, 2019a). A couple years ago, Flanders had nine media companies; however, after mergers and acquisitions, VRT, DPG Media, Mediahuis, Roularta Media Group, and De Vijver Media (part of Telenet) are the only five left. Consolidation in the media sector continues to raise concerns about pluralism and media freedom. It continues to be difficult to enter the Flemish media landscape as a new player and be relevant as well as profitable.

The Flemish public broadcaster VRT is the market leader in free-to-air television and radio broadcasting. Its news programmes are also taking the lead in terms of reach, both for television and radio (although youngsters are more inclined to watch commercial television news). On both its main and secondary television channels (Één and Canvas), VRT provides a wide variety of news programmes, viewed by large sections of Flemish people. With five different FM radio stations, VRT tries to reach Flemings across all age groups and has a consolidated market share of approximately 60 per cent.

The public broadcaster's main competitor is DPG Media, operating under this name since 2018 after a take-over of the commercial television player Media-laan by the second largest newspaper publisher *De Persgroep*. Until then, *De Persgroep* owned 50 per cent of Media-laan's shares together with Roularta, a

magazine publisher (cf. *infra*). It is the only company that invests in free-to-air television news, aside from VRT and the regional broadcasters. DPG Media boasts multiple television and radio channels, is active in the newspaper industry (owning the most popular newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* and the quality newspaper *De Morgen*), and offers mobile telephony subscription services, while also being active in streaming and pay-TV services as well.

Mediahuis, which publishes four paid-for dailies, is the key player in the newspaper industry. It owns the second-most popular newspaper *Het Nieuwsblad*, the quality newspaper *De Standaard*, and the biggest regional newspapers *Gazet van Antwerpen* and *Het Belang van Limburg*. The market leader concerning magazines is Roularta Media Group, which offers a broad range of magazines ranging from news to lifestyle, sports, and business. It also owns Mediafin, which publishes a newspaper focusing on financial and economic news, *De Tijd*.

These media companies are also active in the digital domain. And admittedly, other and newer Flemish online media initiatives face difficulties obtaining a foothold there. Foreign media outlets reach Flemings mainly through the Internet, but also – although less – via traditional radio and television.

Covid-19

Belgium went into lockdown on 17 March 2020. The Government banned public gatherings and events, closed borders to neighbouring countries, and a majority of the stores were forced to shut down. Working from home became the new normal. Of course, this had an impact on the lives of all Flemish people, including on their (news) media consumption.

The first weeks of the lockdown showed a substantial rise of news consumption. More and more people tuned in, especially to the main news bulletins at 19:00, and the press conferences of the National Security Council attracted record-high audiences. On 27 March 2020, a record 1.75 million people watched the 19:00 news show of the Flemish public broadcaster VRT. The leading news media also noted a rise in subscribers as well as online traffic. This would have been good news if the advertising market had not concurrently collapsed. According to the Union of Belgian Advertisers (UBA), 80 per cent of advertisers postponed their advertising campaigns. The fall of income from advertisements caused, especially commercial media organisations to go into a “crisis mode”.

This had a severe impact on Flemish media companies and therefore also on journalists. According to a survey published in May 2020, freelance journalists in particular were hit hard by the crisis. More than half had less work and income in March and April. 40 per cent asked for governmental support. Salaried employed journalists were less affected, however, 8 per cent had to go

into temporary unemployment. At the same time, the virus changed journalistic working methods. Face-to-face interviews, press conferences, and access to buildings were hindered dramatically. Journalists were compelled to shift to online sources and conducting interviews via telephone.

In its last few weeks, the government began to reverse restrictions and a return to “normal” life now lies ahead. News consumption has been normalising, with more and more people mentioning “corona-fatigue”. However, as the number of Covid-19 infections began increasing again, some of the restrictions have been reinstated as of August 2020. Advertising revenues have not fully bounced back yet. An end of the crisis for the industry is thus not in sight.

Leading news media sample

Our media sample for the Media for Democracy (MDM) 2021 consists of nine leading news media titles, including newspapers, magazines, radio, broadcasting, and online. More specifically, three national quality daily newspapers (*De Standaard*, *De Morgen*, and *De Tijd*), two regional daily newspapers (*Het Belang van Limburg* and *Gazet van Antwerpen*), one news magazine (*Knack*), and two daily tabloids (*Het Nieuwsblad* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*) are covered in the analysis. Our sample also includes information on the two main companies that offer television, radio, and digital news: public broadcaster VRT and commercial broadcaster DPG Media.

We interviewed journalists and editors-in-chief from Roularta Media Group, DPG Media, and Mediahuis.¹ The chair of the journalist’s union (VVJ) was also interviewed. We were unable – largely due to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent pressure on newsrooms – to set up interviews with journalists of all leading news media. Necessary information was retrieved on the basis of previous interviews with these news brands on similar subjects.

Indicators

Dimension: Freedom / Information (F)

(F1) Geographic distribution of news media availability 3 POINTS

All types of media are distributed and available throughout the whole of Flanders, with a broad variety of news offered by diverse media companies.

Flanders boasts seven paid-for dailies. All of them are distributed in the morning, with five of them national and two regional (on one province each, Limburg

and Antwerp). Some of the national newspapers have different versions depending on the region where they are distributed. For example, *Het Nieuwsblad*, the second-largest newspaper in Flanders, has 16 daily editions per Flemish region. It even has an edition with another title: *De Gentenaar*. This edition is essentially *Het Nieuwsblad*, but contains specific news on the city of Ghent. There is also one free daily newspaper, *Metro*, which is mostly distributed in train and subway stations. Two regional newspapers are distributed on a weekly basis, with *Bruzz* focusing on the news in and around Brussels and *Krant van West-Vlaanderen* on the news in the province of West-Flanders. *De Zondag* is the only free weekly newspaper (CIM, 2019).

The paid-for daily newspaper industry is dominated by three publishers: DPG Media, Mediahuis, and Mediafin (part of Roularta Media Group). These companies have the most-read dailies in their portfolio (VRM, 2019a). The average price for a single copy of a newspaper varies from approximately EUR 1.50–2.50 on weekdays. For weekend and special editions, the price is substantially higher. On the whole, the prices of paid-for dailies have risen slightly during the last decade (VRM, 2019b).

95 per cent of all Flemish households are equipped with television. Almost half of them have a television with Internet access. Although television viewing via cable is still possible, nearly all Flemish households have switched to digital television viewing. Most of them are connected through one of the two main Belgian television providers, Telenet and Proximus, both of which offer a wide variety of national and international television channels. Alternative providers are TV Vlaanderen and Orange. In Flanders the main broadcasters are VRT, the public broadcaster, and the commercial broadcasters DPG Media (also market leader for newspapers) and SBS Belgium (part of Telenet). All have several freely accessible television channels, and VRT and DPG Media both offer news programmes, with their most watched news programmes airing simultaneously at 19:00. In addition, VRT offers a wide variety of news shows that provide more background to the news.

Reach of radio is near-absolute in Flanders. VRT has an especially large portfolio of radio channels accessible throughout the region. Apart from nationally available radio channels, VRT has separate channels for the five Flemish provinces, with its main radio station, Radio 2, providing regional programming a few hours a day. All of its radio channels have distinct news broadcasts; for example, the news channel for youngsters, MNM, is usually more accessible than the news bulletins on its more specialised news radio channel, Radio 1. The commercial broadcaster DPG Media also distributes radio throughout Flanders. SBS too offers radio, but not at national FM frequencies (VRM, 2019c).

The Internet penetration in Flanders is very high, with 98 per cent of Flemish households having access to the Internet and more than 90 per cent of Flemish people using it on a daily basis (De Marez & Vandendriessche, 2019; VUB &

RMG, 2020). All Flemish newspaper brands are active online, with VRT offering free access to its news sites, audiovisual player, and audio apps. The sites and apps of the commercial newspaper brands are partially behind a paywall. Most of the Flemish radio channels can be streamed for free via the Internet or DAB+ (Digital Audio Broadcasting +). The penetration of DAB+ is limited, estimated at 10 per cent. Flemish television channels offer possibilities to watch their programmes online, and VRT has an online platform where people can watch live or review programmes for free. The commercial television broadcasters also provide online platforms to view their television programmes. These are mostly free, subsidised through advertising, and sometimes complemented with a subscription model for premium features.

(F2) Patterns of news media use (consumption of news) 2 POINTS

In general, interest in news is high, with a notable decline in interest among the younger generations. Although news consumption via traditional media is still popular, shifts to online media are on the rise.

On the whole, the Flemish are interested in the news: 54 per cent expressed that they are “very interested” in news and just over 25 per cent expressed “extreme interest” in it. The gender gap in news interest appears considerable, with almost 20 per cent of women and 30 per cent of men extremely interested in news. Age also plays an important role in news interest: Flemings aged over forty have a significantly higher interest in news, although among the youngest generation (ages 16–24), 65 per cent are still interested in news (Newman et al., 2020; VUB & RMG, 2020).

News consumption patterns among the Flemish people are rather diverse. On a daily basis, 85 per cent get their news via television, newspaper, or radio. Other popular ways to consume news are via social media (25%) or mainstream Flemish news sites (45%). Younger generations stay away from more traditional ways of news consumption and mostly get their news online. A trend of shifting to online news consumption is noticeable for the entire Flemish population during the past decade (VUB & RMG, 2020).

The largest television news broadcaster is the Flemish public broadcaster VRT. With its news programme on channel Één at 19:00, it reaches approximately 1.2 million people and has a market share of almost 50 per cent in that slot. The second-largest news broadcaster in Flanders is the commercial broadcaster DPG Media. Its news programme on channel VTM at 19:00 reaches approximately 0.8 million people and has a market share of 34 per cent (CIM, 2019).

VRT is also the largest news broadcaster via radio; its main channels Radio 2, Studio Brussel, MNM, and Radio 1 reach 52 per cent of all Flemish people on a daily basis. While the focus of the news is the same, differences across channels are adapted to the needs of the target audience. For example, MNM reaches predominantly Flemish youth and people with lower education levels. The news broadcasts on MNM are more accessible, devote more time to explaining things, and focus a bit less on political news. Radio 1 reaches an older, much more educated audience and is a more specialist, dedicated news channel, evident in the nature and quality of their news bulletins. The most popular commercial radio broadcasters are Q-Music (12.4%) and Joe (9%), both part of the DPG Media group. All these radio stations can also be streamed online and via DAB+ (Digital Audio Broadcasting +) (VRM, 2019b).

Only 22 per cent of Flemish people read print versions of newspapers on a daily basis – and this number is declining year by year. As of 2015, more than 30 per cent still read their newspaper in print. Most Flemish people (67%) consume their news online, on either news sites or via the apps of news media. The most popular newspaper is *Het Laatste Nieuws*, the print version of which has a weekly readership of 36 per cent and the online version 53 per cent of all Flemish people. The second-most popular newspaper is *Het Nieuwsblad*, which reaches 26 per cent weekly with their print version and 35 per cent online. The quality newspapers have a substantially lower reach, with the most read of them being *De Standaard*, with a weekly readership of 9 per cent in print and 14 per cent online. Regional newspapers have a weekly readership of about 10 per cent in both online and print (CIM, 2019).

Flemish public broadcaster's news site (*VRT News*) is the third-most visited news site. This places it just behind the market leaders *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Het Nieuwsblad*, with 27 per cent, and just ahead of their main commercial competitor *VTM News*, which has an online reach of 24 per cent (Newman et al., 2020). It is to be expected that *VTM News* will be further integrated into the website of *Het Laatste Nieuws* now that the former title has assumed full ownership of the latter.

Consuming the news on social media has risen substantially (52% in 2017 to 61% in 2019). While this mode of news consumption is the most popular in the younger generation, it is also gaining ground among older Flemish people (De Marez & Vandendriessche, 2019). The market leaders are *Het Laatste Nieuws*, with almost 950,000 followers on Facebook, followed by *Het Nieuwsblad*, with 786,000; *VRT Nieuws* has approximately 365,000 followers on Facebook, just behind *VTM Nieuws* with 425,000 (HLN.be, n.d.; Nieuwsblad.be, n.d.; VRT NWS, n.d.; VTM NIEUWS, n.d.).

(F3) Diversity of news sources

2 POINTS

In the news-making process, news agencies are mostly used by the leading news media as a secondary or tertiary source. Internal content syndication is common practice.

In the Flemish news media, journalists obviously try to write and create their own content. Nevertheless, during the interviews, it became clear that news agencies play a significant role in the news-making process, with common practice being that journalists actually rewrite information provided by news agencies. While leading news organisations try to use agencies as a secondary or tertiary source to complement their research, some smaller news organisations count on them as their main source. The free daily, *Metro*, solely publishes articles informed by news agencies. Also, in case of breaking news, journalists sometimes choose to publish first directly from a news agency and only later adapt the article to incorporate their own research.

Belga is the most important Belgian news agency. This national news agency is a cooperation between Belgian publishers and the audiovisual media sector, who are its main shareholders. This news agency is also the primary supplier of photos and images (via Belga Image). Despite this, Belga's importance in Flemish media appears to show a decline, with VRT reporting that they use Belga less frequently. Another national news agency that Flemish journalists use frequently is Inter Press Service Vlaanderen (IPS). The international news agencies Reuters and AP also are important sources of information for Flemish news organisations (VRM, 2019b).

In Flanders, the number of professional journalists shows a decline. In 2019, there were 2,402 professional journalists registered in Flanders, while in 2016, there were 2,686. The Flemish Union of Journalists (VVJ) sees an alarming decline in the number of interns enrolling in journalism. While 138 new interns enrolled in journalism in 2009, in 2019, the number fell to 84 (VVJ, 2020).

The number of Flemish journalists working abroad is also at a staggering low, though the Flemish public broadcaster still has a limited number of reporters residing abroad, for example in China and the US. Flemish journalists with expertise on a foreign country are usually only sent to those countries when there is something really important perceived to be happening. In other cases, Flemish news organisations tend to make use of Dutch correspondents. Resources for journalistic investigation are falling sharply as well, according to a member of the VVOJ (Flemish Union of Investigative Journalism) (VVJ, 2020).

Despite the limited resources for and the decrease in the number of professional journalists, most of the interviewees reported that there was no structural content syndication – one exception was the syndication of content offered by VRT. This service is used by other Flemish media organisations, notably those with no news video in-house (e.g., Mediahuis). Interviewees did, however, admit

that a lot of news is reused inside their own news organisations. The content is then adapted to the needs of the audience of the news brand. Academic research into one of the main Flemish media companies has indeed revealed a vast increase in the copy-pasting of news content between 2013 and 2018 (Hendrickx & Ranaivoson, 2019), whereas sharing content between media groups but across borders (in this case between Flemish and Dutch newspapers) is also increasingly common practice.

The same is true for the use of public relations material. Flemish journalists are flooded by public relations messages, but keep their independence and do not let these messages affect their writing. In most Flemish news organisations, there is a clear divide between advertisements and journalistic content. However, we did observe a rise of advertorials, native advertising, and branded content. Still, as a response, the Flemish Council for Journalism has in 2019 reviewed – and sharpened – its guideline regarding journalistic independence from commercial sources. Furthermore, licensed journalists (holders of a press card, see Indicator C5 – Journalists’ job security) are still prohibited from engaging in any form of non-journalistic content production. More common is the intrusion of politicians in journalism: via spokespersons, they try to get their faces on television and in the newspapers (these matters will be further detailed in Indicators F5 and F6 – Company rules against *internal* and *external* influence on newsroom/editorial staff, respectively).

Regarding the selection of sources, there was a divided response by the Flemish media. While some journalists claimed they write politically neutral content, others asserted that (almost) every article has a clear ideological or normative background. In a survey from 2018, almost 60 per cent of Flemish journalists situated themselves on the left of the political spectrum (Van Leuven et al., 2019). Especially in the newspaper industry, it was evident that many newspapers have left or right leanings. This sometimes originated from the historical background of the newspaper or a few journalists or columnists within them who possessed a pronounced opinion. The newspapers more open about their ideological position put it forward in their branding and mission statement. The television news broadcasts of VRT and DPG Media are obliged to be neutral, as required by Flemish media decree. VRT still receives a lot of criticism, especially from (extreme) right-wing parties, of allegedly being too left-wing, in line with public broadcasters of other regions and countries. However, the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020* confirmed high degrees of trust in the news of the Flemish public broadcaster from all political sides (Newman et al., 2020).

In the case of selecting sources that reflect society in terms of gender, age, and ethnic origin, Flemish news media in general still have a long way to go, with much remaining to be done, especially in the representation of ethnic minorities. VRT is an example for other Flemish news organisations of how a

fully incorporated diversity policy makes a difference, although having a policy is not sufficient. Ambitions must be aspirational and reflect demographical evolution. The quotas for the representation of women and minorities on the screen are, however, rather low (40% for women, 10% for migrant communities) – specifically those for migrant communities do not reflect society at all (De Swert et al., 2019).

(F4) Internal rules for practice of newsroom democracy 1 POINT

Discussions between editors(-in-chief) and journalists take place on a daily basis. The majority of journalists affirm that they are heard in these discussions. Management elects new editors-in-chief, with journalists having no say in these decisions. Meanwhile, a lack of guidelines or legislations to support and promote advancement of female journalists and journalists of minority groups continue to remain.

Journalists report no signs of a lack of formal democracy in newsrooms. Editors (-in-chief) tend to be readily available to discuss and (re)negotiate the portrayal and framing of (political) issues in news articles. In most cases, the interviewed journalists indicated that they know both their brand and their editors well enough to gauge what the right and wrong ways are to go forward, and which ideas or steps may lead to discussions.

Most newsrooms interviewed reported having formal councils which get together semi-regularly to discuss matters. They tend to serve as an officious trade union, acting occasionally as spokesperson for and between the editors and the regular staff. The foundations and stipulations of these councils, as well as their legitimacy and official status, greatly differ per newsroom.

Journalists report having only a limited or no say at all in the election of new editors-in-chief, as this decision is usually made by the media company's management. A panel of journalists is requested to provide inputs, but whether that is taken into account in the decision-making process often remains opaque.

There is a severe lack of legislation and guidelines to support and promote the advancement of female journalists or those from different ethnic backgrounds (for more details, see Indicator F8 – Rules and practices on internal gender equality).

Furthermore, Flemish public broadcaster VRT and quality newspaper *De Standaard* are the only two news outlets to officially have a designated ombuds-person. They both regularly write their own editorials which are published in print, online, or both, and, to some extent, critically reflect on the reporting of journalists of their own brands. Other media organisations either do not have similar functions, or do not let them communicate openly in their own media.

(F5) Company rules against *internal* influence on
newsroom/editorial staff

2 POINTS

The majority of Flemish journalists report a high degree of editorial independence. However, the interviewees mentioned an ambivalent relationship between journalism and marketing sometimes. The line between journalistic content and branded content seems to be blurring.

According to a nationwide 2018 study among 1,302 professional journalists – of which 681 were Flemish – Belgian journalists reported general satisfaction with their degree of editorial independence from commercial and marketing pressure. It is noteworthy, though, that a mere 16.9 per cent of Flemish journalists indicated being “very satisfied”, and the overall satisfaction rate landed at a rather small majority of 56 per cent. According to the researchers, older journalists tend to be less satisfied than their younger peers (Van Leuven et al., 2019).

Our interviewees were more critical of the sometimes-ambivalent relationships between journalism and marketing. In the case of one newspaper, the marketing team had been effectively placed inside the newsroom itself, amongst the journalists. The underlying idea was that cooperations could be fostered in such a way that the marketeers who are supposed to “sell” the journalists’ output could get to know them better, and involve journalists more in the process. The interviewed journalists were hesitant to make pronounced statements in favour of or against this system but expressed a mild degree of unease with the change in the newsroom structure, which was not negotiated or explicitly discussed beforehand.

Furthermore, the line between actual journalistic content and branded content appears to be blurring as well: journalists did not report being forced to write branded content, but noted that there were tendencies to harmonize the news and branded content, done purposely to make it less clear for the average media consumer what news is branded and what is not. That is problematic, as consumers should be made aware what content is editorially arranged and what is influenced by a commercial agenda. The Jury for Ethical Practices in Advertising has guidelines concerning branded content, but the vague description of what is understood as “recognisable as advertising” leaves a lot of room for interpretation.

The Flemish public broadcaster has its editorial independence enshrined in the management contracts with the Flemish government, which are renegotiated and signed every five years. Private news companies in Flanders must fulfil fewer specific requirements regarding editorial independence, but are still bound by the Flemish Journalism Code. In many instances, there are off-the-record examples indicating that newsroom integrity is jeopardised. In recent research by Jonathan Hendrickx, an investigation into self-promotion of news brands

of the same media company revealed that the newly-founded media company DPG Media was indeed boosting its own media, programmes, and celebrities across different news brands (Goyvaerts et al., 2020).

(F6) Company rules against *external* influence on newsroom/editorial staff

2 POINTS

No interference from advertisers or sponsors in their daily news reporting was mentioned by Flemish journalists. Meanwhile, knowledge of income stream of their news brands was limited. Also, it was reported that many politicians tried to influence journalists on a regular basis.

Interviewees unanimously disclosed not having had any experience with interference from advertisers or sponsors in their daily news reporting. At the same time, they only displayed very limited knowledge of the income streams of the news brands or companies they worked for. Income streams are mentioned in the annual reports of private and public news corporations, but figures tend to be deliberately vague. For example, public broadcaster VRT is funded through a combination of direct government funding and commercial activities, of which the maximum revenues per year are capped explicitly in the management agreement with the Flemish government.

Due to the small size of the Flemish media market, large, overt cooperations had for a long time been non-existent, or at least not visible to the mass audience. This has changed in the past year, with the Belgian-Dutch media company DPG Media explicitly stating that both journalistic and branded content is now semi-regularly created at the (financial) request and behest of advertisers, which could turn out to be a slippery slope towards more direct involvement of advertisers in news content.

Regarding interventions by shareholders and politicians, opinions and reflections showed a clear division. Shareholders of Flemish media brands tend to remain mostly anonymous, and there is a robust system of editors-in-chief against them trying to interfere with news reporting. However, the situation appears to be different when looking at politicians. Nearly all interviewees, independent from one another, indicated that certain politicians of parties from both the left and right side of the political range intermittently contacted newsrooms to openly voice their dismay at chosen frames, or the presence or absence of certain quotes or even people in the news output of journalists. Of these, the right-wing Flemish nationalist – and currently the largest – political party, N-VA, was mentioned the most for such interference. As many sources regularly indicated, politicians and journalists tend to be much closer on personal levels due to the Flemish media market and its society's small size.

(F7) Procedures on news selection and news processing 2 POINTS

Every leading Flemish news media has their own procedures on news selection and news processing, with freedom to discuss strategies. Editors have the loudest voice, and most times they decide if an article is ready for publication.

Standard stylebooks on news selection are not used in Flemish news organisations. The news organisations have their own “modus operandi” in selecting and producing news content, and the editor-in-chief checks if it suits the style of the brand. It is common practice to pitch a given subject and angle for an article to the editor-in-chief. After the article is written, it goes through an editing phase, and before publishing, it must be approved by the editor-in-chief yet again. With straightforward articles or breaking news, the process can be accelerated, and sometimes the editing even takes place after publishing. Meanwhile, articles written by early-career journalists are checked in more detail.

The procedures for the news selection and production of content are not rigid. Internally, news organisations regularly discuss which strategies to implement or change, with the higher-ranked journalists having a louder voice in these discussions. It is important to stress that news content is increasingly created at the level of the media company, and then disseminated to be published identically across its various brands. This appears to be the case particularly for sports and celebrity news. For example, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, one of commercial media company DPG Media’s news brands, has more journalists working on news about sports than their other brands. This way, they have an important voice in deciding which sports news will be selected and eventually published.

As stated previously, news content comes together mostly due to journalistic research and information from news agencies. Information originating from social media is very rarely used as the main source. Journalists comment that they always double-check their sources, but in case of information coming from social media, they “double-double-check it”. Although journalists seem to be aware of the possible pitfalls of retrieving information from social media, mistakes are often made, most times due to the urge to publish articles as quickly as possible.

(F8) Rules and practices on internal gender equality 1 POINT

Equal conditions of employment and benefits for both genders are ensured and even enshrined in regulations. However, male journalists earn more and are promoted more often than their female colleagues.

The media sector in Flanders is dominated by men – only one-third of Flemish journalists are female. It is not that women are not interested in journalism,

and in the age group below 35, those interested in journalism is almost 45 per cent. This could be a healthy sign indicating that the gender gap is, albeit slowly, closing one step at a time. Another less positive possibility, meanwhile, is that female journalists end their journalistic careers at a fairly young age. Explanations are the glass ceiling that still exists and the hardship of combining the journalism profession with a family life. Male journalists earn considerably more than their female colleagues. In 2018, male Belgian journalists had, according to self-reported data, an average monthly net wage of EUR 2,439, while this was only EUR 2,147 for female journalists, reflecting a 12 per cent difference. The divide also persists in career opportunities: Over 70 per cent of management positions in news media were observed to be filled by male journalists, with the management of public broadcaster VRT being a notable and visible exception (Van Leuven et al., 2019).

The facts above are in stark contrast with the statements of the interviewed journalists – unfortunately nearly all of whom were male – who all claimed that equal conditions of employment and benefits for both genders were ensured and even enshrined in regulations, codes, and guidelines. However, no existence of specific mechanisms such as gender equality advisors or departments or female journalists’ associations were reported at private companies. There was also no legal framework regarding gender equality at the Flemish or federal Belgian political level. This includes the official Flemish Journalism Code, which only mentions gender once in its entirety, and specifically only at the level of news reporting, and not for journalists. The Flemish public broadcaster VRT similarly has gender quotas for the presence of women in management roles and in viewpoint for diversity on screen, but not for female journalists in their workforce. It also has its own designated diversity unit and ethics officer. VRT joined the BBC’s “50:50 The Equality Project” recently, which is committed to inspiring and supporting media organisations around the globe to consistently create journalism and media content that fairly represents our world. Hence, striving for an equal share of men and women in news is reflected (BBC, 2021).

(F9) Gender equality in media content

1 POINT

No rules or guidelines regarding the promotion of gender equality in media content apply, with only the Flemish public broadcaster imposing gender quotas. Our interviewees seemed to be aware of the underrepresentation of women in media, but none indicated the need for regulation or monitoring.

Flanders neither boasts rules or guidelines specifically regarding the promotion of gender equality in media content, nor is there a legal framework ensuring

this on either the Flemish or Belgian level. The official Flemish Code of Practice of the Council for Journalism only specifies that news reporting should not be stigmatising towards ethnicity, nationality, philosophy, sexual orientation, or gender, without further specifications or ramifications (RvdJ 2010b: §IV, point 27; for the English version, see RvdJ, 2010a). Public broadcaster VRT has gender quotas imposed and must have at least 40 per cent of all appearances on its radio and television stations be from women. However, this is not specified to news content per se, but rather to the entire output. VRT reached the quotas for 2019, but only over its different television brands. Its children's channel performs very well (above the required quotas), while its main generalist channel is a bit below 40 per cent and the channel Canvas – bringing most information programmes – ends slightly above 30 per cent. However, private media does not have any such specific quotas, and this is also not actively researched by the Flemish media regulator or other governing bodies.

Most interviewed journalists, of which the majority were men, appeared to be at least aware of the ongoing criticism that women were underrepresented as actors (e.g., experts) when being interviewed in newspaper articles or television news pieces. However, none indicated the existence of or the need for explicit mechanisms to monitor and guarantee gender balance in news subjects. The commitment to increase the gender balance was of course there; however, most of these journalists noted that continuous time constraints in their daily jobs prevented them from spending too much time looking for female experts in a given field. As a result, they often relied on known and experienced media pundits – who turned out to be, in most cases, male. In a similar vein, some journalists expressed their dismay at the notion of “having women in their articles for the sake of it”. They stressed the fact that, while women were also often asked to contribute to articles, they would often decline to comment publicly on something outside their specialisation. Their male counterparts, however, were far more eager to do so. To counter this, the Flemish Community set up an expert database (Expertendatabank²), to promote the visibility of experts who are still underrepresented in the media.

Women's media have a rich history in Flanders. There have been several weekly magazines aimed at women that still exist both online and offline. Notably, the one online-only Flemish news medium aimed specifically at women and minority groups, *Charlie Magazine*, ceased to exist towards the end of 2019 due to a lack of a sustainable business model, paying subscribers, and structured government funding.

(F10) Misinformation and digital platforms (alias social media)

3 POINTS

Concerns about misinformation are rising among Flemish journalists. It has become more prevalent on social media. Fact-checking and double-checking of information is seen as part of the job. A few Flemish organisations are specialised in fact-checking.

The spread of disinformation is a growing concern for all journalists. Over the last few years, the Flemish government has also funded several fact-checking projects. All interviewed journalists unanimously insisted that “doing their job” was the best defence against disinformation. They strongly believed in researching and double-checking facts before publishing them as stories, and considered fighting against misinformation one of the integral parts of their daily work. Some journalists noted that checking sources from social media could sometimes be tricky, especially with viral videos allegedly about current events which may already be years old. In particular, senior journalists hesitantly admitted being occasionally overwhelmed by the influx of online information and sources. In general, sources from social media are less relied upon than direct sources in government, politicians themselves and their spokespersons, or established organisations and recognised groups and associations in Flanders’s small, yet very developed and active, civil society.

There are two notable examples of fact-checking and measures dealing with misinformation, predominantly from online sources. First, Factcheck Vlaanderen, an organisation financially and logistically supported by the (defunct as of 2020) Flemish Journalism Fund, public broadcaster VRT, a few universities and colleges contributing with their artificial-intelligence expertise, as well as the Belgian press agency, Belga. They regularly publish fact-checks on their official website, and as of May 2020, heavily focused on reporting the true facts behind the ease of Covid-19 restriction measures in Belgian society.

A second example is the so-called DDT (Data Disinformation and Technology) unit of the above-mentioned public broadcaster. This unit supports all other VRT journalists, specifically regarding disinformation and data journalism, with a highly trained staff active across social media as well as the dark web.

(F11) Protection of journalists against (online) harassment 2 POINTS

Flemish journalists mention a rise of (online) harassment and intimidation, but knowledge about what to do against this and where to go to file complaints is limited.

In a nationwide 2018 survey, 15.3 per cent of Flemish journalists indicated having experienced harassment or intimidation in their function as a journalist by political sources, advertisers, companies, media publishers, and citizens.

These experiences were mostly about their gender (46.7% of said 15.3%), age (30.3%), ethnicity (5.7%), and sexual orientation (2.5%). Notably, female journalists reported having experienced this much more in respect to their gender than their male counterparts (67.2% vs. just 4.3%) (Van Leuven et al., 2019).

Most of the interviewed journalists said that they have followed (mandatory) trainings for how to respond to physical, verbal, and online abuse and aggression, with varying degrees of satisfaction in terms of use and purpose. However, some of the interviewees indicated that instances of abuse and aggression are rising as a part of their daily work. None of the interviewed journalists were able to mention specialised legal services at hand provided by their employers in the case of (online) harassment, indicating that knowledge on what to do and where to go is limited. In the same vein, no specific entities to address instances of gender-based harassment were reported.

No concrete examples or cases demonstrating the degree to which leading news media provide support could be given.

Dimension: Equality / Interest Mediation (E)

(E1) Media ownership concentration national level 2 POINTS

Belgium as a whole has a very diverse multilingual media landscape, with only very few overlaps in brands and company ownership between, notably, the Dutch- and French-language communities and media markets.

Belgium's complex political and linguistic division into two, three, or even four different entities, depending on one's definition, actually ensures that Belgium as a country has a very diverse media landscape, with legacy outlets and public broadcasters in Dutch, French, a mixture of both languages, as well as German. Notwithstanding, the 2017 Media Pluralism Monitor marked Belgium as a "high risk" country regarding (horizontal) media ownership concentration, and a "medium risk" country when it comes to cross-media concentration of ownership and competition enforcement. It is noteworthy that the researchers themselves admitted to having considered the Dutch- and French-speaking media markets as separate entities and did not focus on Belgium as a whole, "which often resulted in high risk assessments due to their limited size" (Valcke et al., 2018: 7).

Partly government-funded public broadcasters operate in three Belgian communities (linguistically divided between a Dutch-, French-, and German-speaking community) and are (among) the key players in their respective small media markets. Most notably in Flanders, public broadcaster VRT is the most dominant in terms of radio and television market share as well as television

news ratings, though it lags behind considerably in online news. In Wallonia, private broadcaster RTL consistently beats public broadcaster RTBF in both overall market shares and television news ratings. Even though the German-speaking Belgians are a tiny minority of just 70,000 people, its dedicated public broadcaster BRF boasts one television channel and three radio channels, with much content delivered by RTBF.

Private media tend to be active solely in their own media market, with little overlap between the Flemish and Walloon sides. Publishing and broadcasting company Roularta, along with its 50 per cent stake in sister company Mediafin, is the only “Belgian” media company, with newspapers (*De Tijd* and *L’Echo*), magazines (*Knack* and *Le Vif*), news websites, and business television news channels (*Kanaal Z* and *Canal Z*) in both main Belgian languages. Flemish media company DPG Media also owns the Walloon news website *7sur7*, but it is mostly active in other countries, as is its direct rival company Mediahuis. The latter is active in the Netherlands and Ireland. DPG Media holds assets in the Netherlands and Denmark – in fact, Mediahuis and DPG Media are the leading newspaper groups in the Netherlands.

Telecommunications companies are still more “national”, with two main players: Telenet (part of LGI, active in many European nations) and the telecommunications incumbent Proximus, active across the nation.

(E2) Media ownership concentration regional (local) level 1 POINT

The Flemish media market is highly concentrated. In recent years, a wave of mergers and acquisitions led to the total number of leading media companies dropping from nine to just five.

The Flemish media regulator VRM has consistently branded the market as “highly concentrated”, with, as of its 2019 report, the so-called “Big 5” media companies owning and controlling 80 to 100 per cent of all Flemish legacy (news) media (VRM, 2019a). Flanders only boasts a population of roughly 6.5 million people, leading to a handful of key players. Of the just seven paid-for daily newspapers, four are owned and published by one company, Mediahuis. Only a few years ago, there were still nine companies present holding the majority of (news) media, but a recent tidal wave of media mergers and acquisitions has brought sweeping changes to the small market.

Most notably, the main commercial television player, Mediahuis, and the second-largest newspaper publisher, De Persgroep, announced their merger in 2018, and as of 2020, they operate as one company called DPG Media, with all their newsrooms grouped together in one building in Antwerp. Other recent cases of media mergers have created previously unseen degrees of vertical and

diagonal integration, with Belgian telecommunications company Telenet not only providing cable broadband services, but in March 2018 also acquiring De Vijver Media. Since then, the company also owns a number of television stations, among which is the second-largest commercial channel.

Amidst the recent changes in ownership structure, the public broadcaster VRT has managed to maintain its dominant position over free-to-air television and especially radio broadcasting, with market shares of over 35 per cent for its three channels and close to 60 per cent for its five radio channels (CIM, 2020). At the time of writing, VRT's new five-year management contract with the Flemish government was being negotiated, with private players having expressed their hope for VRT to limit its online news offering to video and to enter the joint venture of the two main commercial players in setting up a designated Flemish SVoD (streaming video-on-demand) service.

(E3) Diversity of news formats

2 POINTS

Radio, television, and newspaper news maintain a strong dominance in Flanders. Regular online news is catching up rapidly but is nearly all owned by legacy players. Online-only news media only operate in the fringes.

Despite the small size and limited scope of the Flemish media market, there is a vibrant news market in various formats. However, we gauge that it is less developed than in neighbouring countries. Most of the news formats tend to remain very traditional, with a strong dominance retained by radio, television, newspaper, and magazine formats. The two Flemish news broadcasters – public broadcaster VRT and private media company DPG Media – aside, there are also ten mostly privately owned and run regional television channels providing daily news broadcasts for various Flemish regions. VTM provides three daily news broadcasts on television, whereas VRT has four, and also a few daily news (talk) shows on its second free-to-air television channel Canvas. It also has an Instagram account and a YouTube channel to offer news to younger people.

Print circulation figures are dwindling in Flanders, but not as much as elsewhere in Western Europe. This is in part thanks to the rather controversial, yet ongoing, federal government funding allocated to the national post service, which enables it to deliver newspapers and magazines to subscribers, free of charge to the media companies and consumers. This funding was brought to life in the 1990s to maintain news diversity and has a very high value for the post service too, but critics say it has become outdated and not in line with changed ways of news consumption. Not surprisingly, these critics are situated within the online-only news companies and consider the arrangement unfair competition between them and the “big players”.

It is notable that online news too is predominantly dominated by newspaper brands, with the two largest newspapers also owning the two largest Flemish news websites. The commercial news broadcaster VTM lost its own news website, as it was sacrificed to the growing surge of the biggest overall news website *hln.be*, which is part of DPG Media, as mentioned earlier. Online-only news media exist, but operate in the fringe of the legacy media. These online-only initiatives are often overtly left- or right-wing oriented. Even though their relevance and popularity were slightly increasing, there are no mainstream influential online-only news outlets, unlike in many other countries. Having said that, they can impact the news provision of more mainstream media, and in that sense, their impact should not be underestimated.

While most legacy news media are active across all social media outlets, public broadcaster VRT is one of the few Flemish media companies to have a designated Instagram channel devoted to providing news content for teenagers and young adults. With over 46,000 followers at the time of writing, the editors-in-chief themselves recently called the account a success among the difficult-to-reach young demographic. Experiments with artificial intelligence and automated journalism are in very early stages and have only rarely reached the masses as of yet.

(E4) Minority/Alternative media

1 POINT

There are no news outlets directly addressing minority groups. Public broadcaster VRT does offer a portion of its online news in English, French, and German though.

In the small Flemish media market, there is no real minority media (anymore). One notable example was *MVSLIM*, an online news platform started by two young Flemish Muslims, which reported solely in English. The platform became so popular that it was only recently sold to a London-based company. Flanders is a diverse society with people from all countries and backgrounds represented, but this has, perhaps surprisingly, not yet resulted in any form of emergence of minority media geared towards several different ethnic groups.

Public broadcaster VRT offers limited versions of its Dutch-language news website, *vrtnws.be*, in French, German, and English. Notably, the Flemish authorities themselves directly finance the English-language online newspaper *Flanders Today*, published by Mediahuis, the aforementioned media company which owns four of the seven paid-for Flemish daily newspapers. According to its website, its journalists have “full editorial autonomy regarding the content of the newspaper” (*flanderstoday.eu*, 2020).

Politically affiliated news brands do not have a large audience and, therefore, cannot be seen as leaders within the Flemish media landscape. These primarily

extreme-right-wing and extreme-left-wing online news media only exist at the fringes.

(E5) Affordable public and private news media 2 POINTS

The public broadcaster is funded directly through Flemish taxpayers' money, whereas research has shown that Belgians pay considerably more for broadband access than their neighbours.

Since 2001, the Flemish government does not levy licence fees anymore, as is, for instance, still the case today in the UK. Instead, a small portion of Flemish taxpayers' money is used to partially fund the public broadcaster VRT. According to 2019 figures, the average Flemish person paid EUR 40.6 annually (VRT, 2019), with the average household having a monthly income of approximately EUR 2,250.

An average annual subscription for a Flemish newspaper in June 2020 cost around EUR 35 per month, with 31.50 for the biggest newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*, EUR 38.50 for quality newspaper *De Standaard*, and EUR 45.50 for business newspaper *De Tijd*. All newspapers offer various formulas to predominantly read online and to receive the print newspaper only once a week or every day, seasonal discounts, and combo packages with other magazines of the same media company.

Broadband access is fairly expensive in Belgium, mainly due to the near-duopoly of providers, Telenet and Proximus. Orange is a third established player but is far less popular. A 2017 study ordered by the then-liberal telecommunications minister Alexander De Croo (Belgian Federal government) indicated that Belgians paid roughly twice as much per month for combined phone, Internet, and television services than the French (EUR 73.52 versus 36.43). Belgians also paid considerably more than their other neighbours (De Standaard, 2018). Endeavours to have a fourth telecom player in the Belgian market have proven unsuccessful as of yet.

(E6) Content monitoring instruments 1 POINT

The Flemish government-owned media watchdog only assesses the media market on economical parameters, but might soon be given the questionable task of assessing the impartiality of the public broadcaster.

The Flemish media regulator, Vlaamse Regulator voor de Media (VRM), provides an annual report on the tendencies of ownership concentration. It

thereby assesses the Flemish media market almost uniquely based on economical parameters, without studying or taking into account news media content. VRM checks if media companies adhere to media decrees and regulations set out by the Flemish government and fines companies that do not do so. While the current Flemish media minister has announced that VRM might be allowed to analyse news media content, no concrete follow-up on this initiative was observed at the time of writing.

In another, perhaps more worrying, trend, VRM could in the near future also be qualified to analyse the impartiality policy of public broadcaster VRT, after right-wing critics consistently remarked that VRT would allegedly lean too much towards the left in offering viewpoints and actors. While no concrete action on this has been taken either, singling out the public broadcaster to ensure fair and balanced representation of (political) opinions could be a worrying stepping-stone towards indirect government control over public broadcasting, thereby damaging its editorial independence. However, this does not necessarily mean that the public broadcaster should not hold itself to the highest standards in this domain.

Looking at gender, no specific regulations to ensure a balance between male and female actors in the news exist. Public broadcaster VRT is the only news corporation to have imposed quotas – requiring 40 per cent of all “appearances” across its channels to be female and 7.5 per cent so-called “new Flemings”, or people with foreign backgrounds – but this is not solely applicable to news. Other Flemish media companies are not obliged to adhere to such quotas, let alone publish or make accessible to the wider public findings of internal studies and analyses. VRT annually publishes its *Diversiteitsmonitor* [Diversity monitor], for which its own research unit collaborates with universities to verify if the variously imposed quotas are achieved. For 2020, they have, with a 41.2 per cent share of all “appearances” for women and 8.3 per cent for “new Flemings” (VRT, 2020).

(E7) Code of ethics at the national level

3 POINTS

There is no code of ethics at the national, Belgian level, but rather at the Dutch- and French-speaking levels specifically. Journalists refer to these codes frequently, and they are taught in journalism studies.

There is no code of ethics at the national, Belgian level. Like the entire media policy and the biggest part of the media market, it is strictly divided along linguistic borders. The French- and German-language on one hand, and the Dutch-language Belgian news media on the other, have their own independently

functioning self-regulating bodies: the Conseil de déontologie Journalistique and the Raad voor de Journalistiek (RvdJ), respectively.

The RvdJ's code is thus applicable for all Flemish news organisations and brands as well as individual journalists; it is taught in journalism studies at colleges and universities and according to the interviews, it is semi-regularly consulted in cases of quarrels among journalists themselves, or with civilians or politicians. The RvdJ's code is divided into four chapters: Faithful reporting, Independent inquiry, Fair play, and Respect for the privacy and human dignity. Most of the 26 articles of the code have their own specific guidelines to be adhered as well (RvdJ, 2010b; for the English version, see RvdJ, 2010a).

(E8) Level of self-regulation

2 POINTS

Most news media have their own editorial statutes, deontological codes, and newsroom council or ombudsperson. In case of unethical journalistic behaviour, citizens can file a complaint with the journalism councils in both regions.

Most Flemish news media have their own editorial statutes, deontological codes, and newsroom council or ombudsperson (Journalistenloket, n.d.). In many cases, these are, of course, heavily influenced by or even identical to RvdJ's above-mentioned code, and it is generally known and accepted that the official code has more "weight" than statutes or regulations per specific brand. This is also related to the fact that all news organisations have committed to adhering to the code and the rulings of the regional councils for journalism. When this self-regulatory body – consisting of representatives from journalists, publishers, and civil society – receives a complaint from a citizen and rules that unethical journalistic behaviour took place, the concerned news organisation commits itself to rectifying the mistake and publishing the ruling of the council on its news outlet.

The interviewees concluded independently that they all did their very best to report in a fair, balanced, and impartial manner with the limited resources and time they have at their disposal, and they conceded that sometimes having more time to check stories and contact sources could enhance the overall quality of their output. They are aware of the criticism of mainly right-wing politicians and civilians who accuse them of too often being too left-leaning in their tone and frames, but disagree with it regardless. Some did indicate it is a challenge to remain "in touch" with the entire audience, pointing to the fact that most journalists are highly educated, male, white, and so on. This too came with challenges in terms of reaching youngsters, less-educated people, and ethnic minorities (see Indicators E9 – Participation & E10 – Rules and practices on internal pluralism).

The journalists we interviewed failed to provide us with specific examples of instances of discussion regarding the output of themselves or their colleagues and interference by an ombudsperson or editorial statutes, even though they all admitted that there are occasional instances.

(E9) Participation

1 POINT

Citizens cannot truly contribute to news reporting, and the option to comment on websites has been scaled back in favour of comments on social media.

No newsroom of a Flemish leading news outlet is open to the public at any given time: all meetings and decisions are taken behind the scenes by editors and journalists themselves. Some media have SMS services or online tools to allow citizens to send in news or press releases, but there is no structured medium or mode for citizen-fostered journalism. Some smaller, online-only news media offer opportunities for viewers to send in articles and opinion pieces, which may or may not be eventually published. They consider this to be valuable acquisitions to their small workforces as a means to receive free content for publication.

The right of citizens to reply to any given news article is not enshrined in the aforementioned Code of Practice of the Council for Journalism. The right of rebuttal is mentioned in Section III, Article 20, which explicitly states that “the journalist offers the other party the option of a fair hearing when his reporting makes serious accusations that may damage the honour and reputation of that party” (RvdJ, 2010a).

Commenting is not possible on most news websites, nor are there active online-news forums. A sole exception is the website of tabloid newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws*, which also happens to be Flanders’s largest news website. Its comments section has infamously spawned its own designated social media accounts mocking them, due to the frequent appearances of racist, xenophobic, and misogynistic remarks. All legacy news media do offer the possibility of commenting on articles through Facebook, which helps them gain more traction and awareness for their brand online, but due to shortages of staff, and mostly time, in no cases did interviewees report systematically scanning incoming comments, only hiding or removing comments in exceptional cases where “too overtly presented hatred” was seen. This has to do with limited resources as well as priority-setting, and might need more attention; potentially, new technological developments regarding artificial intelligence could help here too.

(E10) Rules and practices on internal pluralism

1 POINT

There is a lack of designated rules and guidelines applicable to presenting opinions of journalists within the same newsroom. Overt diversity in viewpoints is most notable at the fringe, online-only news media.

The interviewed journalists reported partaking in “regular” discussions and debates amongst themselves in the newsroom regarding differing opinions and viewpoints on certain matters. The necessity of having a diverse newsroom in terms of political orientation as well as gender and ethnic background was clear to all interviewees, although they all readily admitted that their newsrooms tended to be more homogenous on more parameters than they would like to see.

No specific rules or guidelines were applied in presenting opinions of journalists within the same newsroom. Some interviewees said that it was often general knowledge who was more left or right leaning across the political spectrum, and that this indeed could partly define the tone and frame in a given article. However, they also imagined and claimed that reporting was made more diverse by the shifting around of journalists writing on specific topics per beat. In a similar vein, no official rules stipulated that all opinions should receive their appropriate weight in reporting. But, as with so many aspects of journalism, it is arguably the single most important of the many tacitly agreed mutual understandings which are so important to the field, without explicitly being enshrined anywhere.

All legacy media houses possess some ideological roots or another, but most have abandoned these over time. Some newspapers still boast of a “progressive” or “free market” ideology, but instrumentally overt diversity in viewpoints is most notable at the fringe, online-only news media. There was a *cordon médiatique* – a French term also used in Flanders – against the far-right political party, in which it was systematically barred equal access to present its viewpoints. However, after the 2019 general election, since this party became the second largest in Flanders, it has been treated more like the others. Some left-wing online-only media, however, continue to refuse working with or reporting on the party. Alternatively, the far-left party, which also gained ground in the recent elections, while continuing to be only the sixth largest party in Flanders as of the 2019 election results, was never held back by the aforementioned cordon. However, it was often excluded from key political debates due to its negligible size.

Dimension: Control / Watchdog (C)

(C1) Supervising the watchdog “control of the controllers”

2 POINTS

Different independent supervisors scrutinise the Flemish (news) media, each of them monitoring a different field in journalism. Most of these “controllers of the controllers” publish their findings and elaborate reports on platforms freely accessible to the public. Self-regulation is also common on the level of media organisations and their brands, with a few media organisations even installing an independent ombudsperson.

The official, independent supervisor of the Flemish audiovisual media is the Vlaamse Regulator voor de Media (VRM). Its main assignments consist of verifying the enforcement of the media decree and assigning admissions and licences. Furthermore, VRM maps media concentration and publishes an annual report on the issue. Another important task is supervising the compliance of VRT with its Management Agreement [Beheersovereenkomst]. VRM has the power to sanction against media organisations, for instance, if they go against commercial communication rules. It can impose fines, even if they are usually not very high, ranging from EUR 5,000 to 15,000, depending on the repeated nature of infringements.

The Council for Journalism [Raad voor de Journalistiek] (RvdJ) is the independent body for self-regulation of the Flemish press. It is a non-governmental organisation, responding to questions and handling complaints from the public about the journalistic conduct of the press. RvdJ was formed in 2002 by Flemish journalist unions, publishers, and media companies, and it is funded, in two equal halves, by the publishers and the audiovisual media companies, and by the journalist union (VVJ). Filing a complaint is possible for every citizen and is free of charge, although the majority of the Flemish people are unaware of its existence. The council aims to provide the public with a free and fast way of redressing possible mistakes by the media. Its decisions are meant to underline the rules of good journalistic practice and to encourage ethical and professional standards of journalism. It also provides a Code of Practice. (RvdJ, 2010a–b; see also Indicator E9 – Participation).

Another independent body for self-regulation is the Jury voor Ethische Praktijken inzake reclame [Jury for Ethical Practices on Advertising] (JEP). Its main purpose is monitoring whether the content of advertisements is in line with the regulations concerning advertisement ethics. Everyone is able to file a complaint free of charge. JEP also works pro-actively by advising advertisers (JEP, n.d.).

Self-regulation is also common for the individual news media brands themselves, and especially the mainstream newspapers have a tradition in publishing rectifications of articles. Via reader letters and social media, the public is able

to criticise media content. The Flemish public broadcaster VRT and the quality daily newspaper *De Standaard* even installed a designated journalist whose main job is scrutinising published media content. These ombudspersons publicly critique and elaborate on mistakes in articles – this way, they explicitly hold up a mirror for their own media organisations.

The Fonds Pascal Decroos, now part of Journalismfund.eu, is a non-profit organisation investing in quality and investigative journalism, but also trying to hold the media organisations to a standard of qualitative, nuanced, and critical journalism. It challenges journalists to think outside the box and facilitates independent (cross-border) investigative journalism in Europe (Journalismfund.eu, n.d.)

Although several different regulatory bodies are installed, the public is rarely aware of their existence and core tasks. Regarding civil media criticism, not many platforms exist. There are some underground and anonymous blogs, but none of them are popular or enjoy widespread reach and appeal.

(C2) Independence of the news media from powerholders

2 POINTS

Flemish media organisations enjoy editorial independence, as set out in the Belgian Constitution and the media decree. Journalists declare being satisfied with the level of autonomy of their redaction. Nevertheless, politicians trying to influence the press is common practice.

As stated in the management agreement [Beheersovereenkomst] and by media decree, the Flemish public broadcaster VRT has editorial independence. They bear full responsibility for internal and external productions and programming of their different channels, and their financial sources have no influence on the content. Addressed in the policy framework of the VRT, this applies to its television and radio channels, as well as its news sites. In the selection and presentation of news and other journalistic content, the content will always prevail over potential influence of financial considerations. In its mission statement, VRT emphasises a guarantee of impartial, independent, and reliable news. The board of directors, politically composed by the Flemish Government, has no influence on the content in any way. However, VRT is obliged to invest in certain types of content, like documentaries, and to be a front-runner in investigative and foreign journalism.

Commercial media organisations also enjoy editorial independence, as set out in the Belgian Constitution. However, for commercial media organisations, it is sometimes difficult to safeguard independence from their powerholders, as selection and programming of content can be influenced by revenue streams.

News shows, on the other hand, must be neutral, as determined by decree – if violated, they can be sanctioned.

For the Flemish newspaper industry, editorial independence is also very important. The chair of the Flemish Journalists' Union (VVJ) indicates there are three kinds of independence. First, there is political independence: journalists are exempt from having to cope with the pressure of politicians. Second, there is judicial independence: the Belgian Constitution and additional media legislation guarantee free journalism; this is also partly ensured by the high degree of self-regulation, in which impartiality and independence have always been important aspects of Flemish journalism (see also Indicator C1 – Supervising the watchdog “control of the controllers”).

Third, and most difficult to maintain, is economic-commercial independence. All newspaper companies in Flanders, other than the public broadcaster, are commercial companies; hence, they depend on revenues. In the volatile and highly competitive media landscape, every newspaper tries to reach as many readers as possible, to convince as many advertisers as possible, and to reduce the costs. The influence of the publisher cannot, therefore, be overlooked. Often, a minimum of journalistic independence is safeguarded by putting this commitment in mission statements and by providing deontological codes on the interrelations between the publisher and the newsroom.

At the same time, our interviewees indicated no significant interference of owners on journalistic daily routines. This was also reflected in the nationwide journalist survey, in which most of the respondents declared being (somewhat) satisfied with the autonomy of their redaction in relation with influence of the marketing and commercial departments (Van Leuven et al., 2019). Politicians trying to influence journalists, on the other hand, is commonplace and almost daily practice. While journalists were ready to admit that this occurred frequently, they also asserted that they do not succumb to this political pressure because they feel protected by their media organisations.

(C3) Transparency of data on leading news media 2 POINTS

Data on leading news media is easily accessible online, with the only difficulty sometimes being unravelling the complex power structures and revenue streams.

Information on Flemish media organisations is fairly simple to consult and to request. Different (independent) organisations publish data on Flemish leading news media. For example, the Centre for Information on Media (CIM) offers reach figures of all media in Flanders, and the Flemish Regulator of Media (VRM) reports on changes in the media landscape and violations against the media legislations.

The Flemish public broadcaster VRT includes in its mission statement to be as transparent and open as possible. Because VRT is financed by the Flemish community, it considers being transparent as its duty too. As previously explained (see Indicator C1 – Supervising the watchdog “control of the controllers”), numerous organisations supervise VRT and publish their findings on freely accessible platforms.

Commercial media organisations are not obliged to share (financial) information with the Flemish people. However, a majority of them are reasonably open concerning power structures and finances. Despite this, unravelling the diverse revenue streams is not an easy task and becomes more difficult as the sector becomes more integrated.

(C4) Journalism professionalism

2 POINTS

The majority of Flemish journalists acquired a degree of higher education. However, less time and resources for professional journalism are available. This contributes to a general decline in overall job satisfaction.

Flemish journalists are highly educated, with 93 per cent acquiring a degree of higher education and nearly 65 per cent possessing a university degree. It is important to point out that especially younger journalists enjoyed higher education. There is also a significant difference concerning gender: three-quarters of female journalists have a university degree, compared with 59 per cent of male journalists (Van Leuven et al., 2019).

Professional integrity is one of their most important ethics, according to Flemish journalists. They consider it to be completely impermissible to receive money from a source or pay for information. Their opinion on how to get information tends to be more nuanced though. Acquiring information by using confidential files without permission or concealing that they are journalists was reported as less problematic. According to the nationwide 2008 survey, it is notable that privacy and ethics are less valued than they were ten years ago.

A possible explanation could be increasing financial pressure. Financial resources for journalists are progressively declining – especially Flemish investigative journalism has seen a substantial cut in resources. Three-quarters of Flemish journalists declare there is no time or budget to do profound research. According to them, this leads to a further “sensationalisation” of news and a shift to soft news. In the selection of topics, the potential click-rate is privileged more often than not.

In addition, a majority of Flemish journalists state an incremental increase of workload (82%) and broadening of tasks (87%) in recent years. Journalists are expected to work more across media platforms and to be more technologi-

cally skilled. As an example, at VRT, about 80 per cent of journalists work for at least two media (combinations of radio, television, and online), and more than 60 per cent even work for all three. Job satisfaction, on the whole, also appears to be declining.

(C5) Journalists' job security

2 POINTS

A lot of Flemish journalists worry about job security, even though professional journalists are protected by law. Due to financial pressure, journalists are more and more forced to work as freelancers, lacking protection measures. Older journalists fear being fired because of their higher wages.

Since 1963, Flanders acknowledges the title “Professional journalist” [Beroeps-journalist]. It is administered to every journalist whose main occupation has been working as a journalist for a minimum period of two years. Licensed professional journalists receive an official press card and additional advantages as well as a statutory supplementary pension. For freelance journalists, protection measures are limited.

The average professional Flemish journalist has worked in journalism for approximately 21 years. Almost half had another occupation before starting to work as a journalist. This is less common among young journalists, as they more often aspire to a journalistic career right after graduation. While it is common for Flemish journalists to work for multiple media brands, still, nearly half remain loyal to one media organisation. The large majority of Flemish journalists have a contract of indefinite duration, and almost 80 per cent work full-time.

A lot of journalists worry about job security. This number has risen from 66 per cent in 2013 to 79 per cent five years onwards (Van Leuven et al., 2019). Older journalists are especially worried they will be fired in the near future. Journalists also declare they are sometimes forced to work as freelancers by media companies – most notably, regional journalists who in Flanders and the Netherlands have filed (and won) court cases against unfair pay on a few occasions.

(C6) Practice of access to information

1 POINT

According to the Belgian Constitution and media decree, every Flemish citizen can request information from committees or boards under the jurisdiction of the Flemish Government. However, Flemish journalists rarely make use of this feature, due to impracticalities and lack of usefulness of acquired information.

In Belgium, Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) applies. This law guarantees freedom of speech, freedom of information, and

press freedom. In the Belgian Constitution, freedom of information is also set out in Article 32. Flanders has expanded this law in its Open Government decree [Openbaarheid van bestuur].

Every completed document from a committee or board under the jurisdiction of the Flemish Government can be requested, and the board or committee is obliged to answer the request within 15 days. “Wobbing”, as it is called by Flemish journalists, is not common practice – only 16 per cent make use of this feature. Journalists indicated that the usefulness of the information is rather low, and the procedure for obtaining the documents also takes too long and is often impractical. Some journalists are annoyed that sensitive information is rarely released (Van Leuven et al., 2019).

Flemish journalists gain a press card after being officially acknowledged as professional journalists. This card gives them access to secured places and facilitates getting in contact with official authorities or private companies. It also comes with financial advantages like freely accessing events or reduced fares on public transportation.

(C7) The watchdog and the news media’s mission statement

2 POINTS

Flemish journalists declare being the watchdog of democracy is of utmost importance, with media organisations welcoming and supporting investigative journalism. However, resources and time invested in investigative journalism are declining.

All the leading Flemish news media houses agreed that investigative and watchdog journalism is and remains essential. Both public and private media companies agreed that investigation is the first and noble duty of all journalists. Most of the respondents explained that in their media company and newsroom, investigative reporting is welcomed and supported. The Flemish public broadcaster VRT is even obliged to invest time and money into investigative journalism, resulting in startling reports about corruption in politics, privacy issues, and so on.

Flemish journalists reported that their most important tasks are to bring to the public reliable information, articulating this information in an understandable way, being impartial, and analysing and interpreting complex societal problems. Almost 70 per cent declared that being the watchdog of democracy is of utmost importance (Van Leuven et al., 2019).

(C8) Professional training

2 POINTS

Additional training and education are offered by almost all media organisations. However, they are not obliged to offer this, and journalists cannot be forced to partake.

Most of the interviewees declared that additional training is of significant importance. Especially technological competences concerning the digitalisation of (news) media was reported to be necessary. In-house trainings, therefore, also focused on working with social media and new types of software. The journalists and editors-in-chief both acknowledged that their media organisations offered a wide variety of training programmes; however, journalists mentioned not always having sufficient time to take part in these. The limitations of resources are also a possible explanation for not letting every journalist participate in additional trainings.

It is not obliged by law that journalists partake in additional training or education, and media organisations have no obligation to offer these trainings or education either. At VRT, however, journalists must partake in training concerning coping with verbal and physical aggression. For the news sector as a whole, the Flemish government has funded professional training through the Media Academy³ in collaboration with the sectoral umbrella organisations, but unfortunately, decided to terminate the funding mechanism for this in 2019.

(C9) Watchdog function and financial resources

1 POINT

Resources for investigative journalism have substantially declined. Every leading news media house has tried to do investigative journalism, but the majority do not have journalists working full-time on long-term projects.

As already stated, and emphasised by the chair of the Flemish Journalists' Union, the resources for investigative journalism have substantially declined (figures are not disclosed by the media). Nonetheless, every leading news media house attempts to do investigative journalism. Some media organisations provide additional resources and time to investigate a bigger story of societal importance or the possibility to attract attention to their medium. Only a few media organisations have a specific taskforce for investigative journalism; a "task force" mostly consists of one or two journalists who get the opportunity to work on longer projects.

Participation in international networks of investigative journalists, such as the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), which had been collaborating in operations such as Offshore Leaks and *Panama Papers*, has come more to the front in a few Flemish media organisations. Because of the small size of the Belgian market, start-ups focusing on investigative journal-

ism, such as Apache, struggle with generating enough revenue to support their work. The Flemish Government is, however, still offering project subsidies for investigative journalism through the Pascal Decroos Fund.

Conclusions

Because of its complex linguistic and political situation, Belgium is often the odd country out. This is no different when looking at its distinct media markets, with little overlap or exchanges between the Dutch- and French-speaking media outlets. Several Flemish media companies have, however, expanded their activities beyond Flanders, most notably holding very powerful positions in the Dutch media market and being active in Ireland and Denmark as well. Both on the company and the newsroom level, there are few formal rules to either promote or prevent internal democracy, internal and external influence on newsrooms, and gender equality. Even though Belgian female journalists have, in comparison with their male colleagues, enjoyed more education, they are still a minority in the workforce and are paid less too.

Belgium's Dutch-speaking media market is small and highly concentrated, with a handful of legacy news brands dominating news consumption. While there is a diverse range of brands, dissemination platforms, and outlets, news diversity is increasingly put under pressure, as articles are ever more copy-pasted across titles under the same company or conglomerate. There is no specific minority media, though in recent years, a few online-only alternatives – and often right-wing – news media have emerged and are increasingly gaining momentum through social media. Citizens' participation remains at a staggering low. Moreover, there are growing fears that government will monitor the impartiality of the Flemish public broadcaster in a way that might jeopardise its independence.

Nonetheless, we assigned higher than average scores to the control/watch-dog dimension because of widely reported large degrees of independence, overall satisfying degrees of professionalism and job security for journalists, and reasonably sound opportunities for them to access information and obtain professional training.

Notes

1. The majority of the journalists and editors-in-chief we interviewed are male.
2. <https://www.expertendatabank.be/nl/over-ons>
3. <https://www.mediacademie.be>

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