TITLE

TOWARDS MORE BALANCED NEWS ACCESS?

A study on the impact of cost-cutting and Web 2.0 on the mediated public sphere

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Author 1: **Sarah Van Leuven**
Affiliation: Ghent University
Address: Korte Meer 7-9-11, 9000 Ghent, Belgium
Phone: 09/264.97.58
E-mail: Sarah.VanLeuven@UGent.be
Bio: Sarah Van Leuven is a researcher for the BOF (Ghent University Special Research Fund) project entitled *The public sphere in times of marketing and digitization: a multimethodical, longitudinal study of the use of news sources in Belgium. Case study: international news.* The study aims to generate a better picture of the influence of digitalization and cost-cutting on the news production process, and the related, sometimes adversarial, discussions about the quality of the news.

Author 2: **Prof Dr Annelore Deprez**
Affiliation: Ghent University
Address: Korte Meer 7-9-11, 9000 Ghent, Belgium
Phone: 09/264.68.84
E-mail: Annelore.Deprez@UGent.be
Bio: Annelore Deprez is an assistant professor connected to Ghent University through the Department of Communication Studies. She teaches courses in 'Academic Writing in Communication Studies' and 'Contemporary Aspects of Journalism'. Her research interests include journalism studies, news analysis and political and international communication. Her PhD dissertation titled *International conflict coverage in the Flemish daily press: A longitudinal representation and framing analysis of the conflict Israel-Palestine* focused, on the one hand, on the development of a new instrument of measurement within the relatively new research tradition of framing, and on the other hand, on the representation of both Israeli and Palestinian actors in the conflict.

Author 3: **Prof Dr Karin Raeymaeckers**
Affiliation: Ghent University
Address: Korte Meer 7-9-11, 9000 Ghent, Belgium
Phone: +32(0)9/264.84.29
E-mail: Karin.Raeymaeckers@UGent.be
Bio: Karin Raeymaeckers is the director of the *Center for Journalism Studies*. She teaches media structures, journalism, and political communication at the Communication Studies Department (Ghent University, Belgium). She is a member of several international research groups, including the Euromedia Research Group.

Abstract

In order to assess the impact of cost-cutting and digitalization on the expansion or contraction of the mediated public sphere, we developed a quantitative and longitudinal content analysis focused on sourcing practices for foreign news reporting in four Belgian newspapers (1995-2010). The results show little to no shift in the news access of different types of sources. Political sources dominate foreign news output, but ordinary citizens also play a significant role. Although it becomes clear that Belgian journalists often do not explicitly mention their use of news agency copy, recycled news articles or PR material, our findings indicate that concerns about cost-cutting in newsrooms or sanguinity about the democratic potential of Web 2.0 seem fairly exaggerated, at least in the Belgian context.

Keywords

public sphere, sourcing practices, news access, cost-cutting, churnalism, digitalization, Web 2.0, social media, network journalism, content analysis

Introduction: The public sphere and news access

The mass media are the central platform in the public sphere, which refers to 'an arena, independent of government (even if in receipt of state funds) while also being autonomous of economic interests, which is dedicated to open-ended discussion and debate, the proceedings of which are open to entry and accessible to scrutiny by the citizenry' (Webster, 2011: 24). The widest possible representation of viewpoints in the news is a precondition for participants in the public sphere to make the best possible decision (Habermas, 1974, 1992). 'Put succinctly, who gets "on" or "in" the news is important' (Cottle, 2000: 427). Yet, ample studies have shown that institutional sources—especially politicians, government institutions, well-resourced companies and experts—enjoy privileged news access compared to non-institutional sources such as ordinary citizens and NGOs (Brants, 2005; Calhoun, 1992; Carsten, 2004; Cottle, 2000; Dahlgren, 1991, 2005; Davies, 2008; De Keyser, 2010; Downey and Fenton, 2003; Fraser, 1999; Gans, 1979, 2011; Gerhards and Schäfer, 2010; Reich, 2011; Salter, 2005; Verstraeten, 1996; Webster, 2011). In contrast with Habermas' (1974) never-realized ideal of horizontal public deliberation between 'equal' citizens, the mass media are channels of vertical communication that are strongly linked to the state and the capitalist system. Think, for example, of the close relationship between 'media mogul' Rupert Murdoch and certain political actors, or the media empire of former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Many authors complain that the mass media act as a platform for state and capital to display their arguments in an apparent show of openness that only aims to gain the passive support of the 'mass audience' (in contrast with an active civil society). Citizens are not active participants in a 'conversation' but passive consumers of 'information' (Calhoun, 1992; Dahlgren, 1991; Downey and Fenton, 2003; Fraser, 1999; Gerhards and Schäfer, 2010; Habermas, 1974, 1992; Salter, 2005; Verstraeten, 1996).

When analysing news access in this paper, we distinguish between 'sources' and 'media sources' (De Keyser, 2010; Lewis et al., 2006). Institutional and non-institutional 'sources' (cf. supra) are the people or organizations that give information to journalists in exchange for media attention. 'Media sources' are the different types of journalistic copy that journalists integrate into their news articles, more specifically news agency copy and recycled news articles from other media brands. In light of recent developments in newsrooms, this paper furthermore focuses on how PR material or 'information subsidies' (press releases, press conferences, etc.) on the one hand, and social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, etc.) on the other, can enhance different sources' presence in the mediated public sphere. Some scholars argue that non-institutional sources' use of Web 2.0 applications or social media platforms permits more diverse sourcing practices that can expand the public sphere by introducing more balanced news access for a wider range of sources, including NGOs and ordinary citizens (e.g. Castells, 2008; Dahlgren, 2005; Habermas, 2006; Heinrich, 2011). In contrast, other scholars focus on the negative impact of cost-cutting measures in newsrooms that foster more industrial news production and a broader use of pre-packaged information, and more specifically PR material. This shift is said to strengthen the already privileged news access of institutional sources, because they possess the necessary financial and social resources to produce these 'information subsidies' that anticipate journalistic news needs. Several scholars warn that this situation will result in a meltdown of the mediated public sphere (e.g. Davies, 2008; Lewis, Willliams and Franklin, 2006; Buijs et al., 2009). This article focuses on these two divergent developments and their impact on the mediated public sphere. Therefore, we developed a quantitative content analysis of sources in the foreign news output of four Belgian newspapers over a period of 15 years (1995-2010). The results are also analysed in a comparative perspective with regard to popular and quality newspapers.

Expansion of the public sphere?

In his later work, Habermas (1992) acknowledged the existence of counter public spheres where non-institutional sources challenge the mainstream public sphere of institutional sources. This can be exemplified by the rise of NGOs (e.g. Greenpeace), alternative or citizen media, or advocacy voices in mainstream news coverage (Calhoun, 1992; Dahlgren, 2005; Downey and Fenton, 2003; Fraser, 1999; Verstraeten, 1996; Webster, 2011). In this respect, the empowering capacities of Web 2.0 applications may constitute a key element for more balanced news access and the possible proliferation of counter public spheres (Dahlgren, 2005; Downey and Fenton, 2003; Gans, 2011; Gerhards and Schäfer, 2010).

In the context of the globalization, glocalization and digitalization of human interaction, and in accordance with the work of Castells (2008), some scholars state that the network is the ‘new dominant social structure in contemporary societies […] in which our ability to connect beyond time and space constraints takes center stage’ (Heinrich, 2011: 23-24). These authors claim that the new, global environment is—or should be—characterized by a novel, networked mode of communication that can be described as a synthesis of interpersonal and mass communication, in which audiences and mass media producers are connected in one, networked media matrix (Castells, 2008; Hafez, 2009; Hermida, 2010; Lopez Rabadan, 2011). In the context of news production, Heinrich (2011) contends that journalistic organizations should go through a structural transformation and adapt to the sphere of ‘network journalism’ in order to allow journalists to navigate the new global information map. The increased speed of information dissemination and the connectivity within the network sphere allow for non-linear, decentralized and multi-directional information flows between the (almost) uncountable nodes in the network:

> The many information providers meet in a digitally connected global arena. A large array of potential new sources can now be reached via many connection points other than (traditional) official sources such as governmental institutions or press offices. Instead of a rather ’closed’ system of newsgathering, production and distribution, in which only a limited number of partakers had the power to make and shape news, the network journalism sphere is an open space of information exchange. (Heinrich, 2012: 767)

We can relate this development to the new possibilities for expansion of the public sphere, as it is stated that today more than ever before, non-institutional sources—as nodes in the network—have at their disposal the channels necessary to gain access to journalists, namely the Internet and especially Web 2.0 and social media. Web 2.0 refers to the changing use of the World Wide Web as a platform whereby content and applications are ‘continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion’ (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009: 61), and is contrasted with traditional uses of Internet based on individual contributions. Social media, a term that has been broadly used since 2005, are defined as ‘a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content, namely […]

the various forms of media content that are publicly available and created by end-users' (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009: 61). Some well-known examples are weblogs, Wikipedia, YouTube, Flickr and social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter. In contrast with the traditional means for information dissemination, such as press releases or personal relationships with journalists, social media allow users to spread information cheaply, dynamically and instantaneously throughout their network. As a result, they can open the gates to the mainstream public sphere for non-institutional sources (Brants, 2005; Castells, 2008; Dahlgren, 1991, 2005; Downey and Fenton, 2003; Gerhards and Schäfer, 2010; Heinrich, 2011; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009; Webster, 2011).

The question is whether mainstream news outlets make full use of the new possibilities for news gathering available through social media, and whether their newsroom management is adapted to the conditions of the network sphere. As social media are a recent phenomenon, evidence of their impact on news access is mainly anecdotal; for example, established news organizations (e.g. The New York Times or Bloomberg) have formulated policies to organise the use of Twitter in their formalized frameworks of news production (Hermida, 2010). In some cases, such as the Mumbai terrorist attacks in 2008 or, most recently, the Arab Spring movement of 2011, news organizations published unverified videos and anonymous tweets from ordinary citizens in addition to traditional coverage, thereby expanding news access in the mediated public sphere (Broersma and Graham, 2012; Chua et al., 2011; Heinrich, 2011; Hermida, 2010; Lenatti, 2009; Morozov, 2009).

However, these specific contexts of breaking news and access restrictions for media professionals contrast with everyday news production, as studies illustrate that journalists rarely use social media as a means to get in touch with alternative sources in the public sphere (Heinrich, 2011; Knight, 2011; Lariscy et al., 2009; Messner and South, 2011). Many journalists admit that they struggle with 'information overload', language hurdles and the questionable reliability of online information (Hafez, 2009; Heinrich, 2011; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008). Moreover, the network sphere can trigger a further shrinking of the mediated public sphere, since institutional sources such as politicians or companies 'are increasingly moving into the social media space, in order to consolidate that influence' (Knight, 2011: 8). Finally, in a situation of 'digital inequality' (or 'digital divide'), not all citizens have the possibility (Internet access) or ability (related to socio-economic background and technological skills) to disseminate or access online information. Therefore, online citizen comments are not necessarily representative accounts of a population's thoughts and do not automatically point to increased news access for a wider range of sources (Hargittai, 2011; Heinrich, 2011; Hermida, 2010; Lenatti, 2009). Moreover, there are other challenges to Habermas' notion of the ideal public sphere, as we will discuss in the next paragraph.

Shrinking public sphere?

Since the 1980s, the industrialization of news production, induced by deregulation, liberalization and the appearance of commercial broadcasters in a globalized media market, has had a major impact on the transformation of the public sphere (Cottle, 2000; Davis, 2000b; Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Webster, 2011). Research demonstrates that a severe drop in advertising revenues, combined with fragmented audiences and a rise in production costs, resulted in decreasing profit margins for media outlets (Carsten, 2004; Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Webster, 2011). Media concentration and competition open the door to what McManus (1994) calls 'market driven journalism'. Efficiency considerations and cost-cutting measures reduce the editorial staff, and journalists must therefore produce more content in less time and with fewer resources. Journalists' workload has increased even more due to the increasing number of pages, supplements and online editions (Curtin, 1999; Davies, 2008; Davis, 2000a, 2000b; De Bens and Raeymaeckers, 2010; Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Lewis et al., 2006). In these circumstances, 'desk journalism' increasingly substitutes active news gathering outside the newsroom. Davies (2008) contends that many journalists have transformed into 'information brokers' that mainly recycle existing content in a process of 'churnalism'. This is illustrated by the finding from O'Neill and O'Connor (2009), and Lewis et al. (2006), that only one news source is used in 75% and 87% of news articles, respectively. Depending on the author, different terms are used to describe this situation, such as 'transformational process', 'cut and paste culture', 'cutting job', 'news cannibalisation', 'dog eat dog culture', 'pack journalism', 'Ninja Turtle syndrome' or 'rat pack syndrome' (Carsten, 2004; Curran, 2005; Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Lewis et al., 2006; O'Neill and O'Connor, 2009). The traditional use of news agency copy and recycled news articles from other media brands has been expanded with the application of PR content, which strengthens the privileged news access of institutional sources and thereby results in a further shrinking of the public sphere (Davies, 2008; Franklin and Carlson, 2011).

News organizations are increasingly replacing their network of correspondents with news agency copy (De Keyser, 2010; Hafez, 2009; Jongbloed, Lauf and Negenborn, 2009; Paulussen and Ugille, 2010). Even so, news agencies have been part of the news production process since the beginning of commercial news production in the 19th century. They allow traditional media brands to broaden their sphere of action while reducing the costs of news gathering (Broersma, 2009; Davies, 2008; Jongbloed, Lauf and Negenborn, 2009). In addition to the information they get from news agencies, media brands often copy and paste news from each other, sometimes in the absence of key professional standards such as fact checking (De Keyser, 2010). In contrast to news adapted from a media source, PR content originates from non-journalistic sources such as companies or politicians, and is motivated by private interests and the drive to spread free advertising. PR activities are sometimes described as ‘pseudo-events’ or ‘information subsidies’ because they are ‘diced, sliced and packaged’ to be consumed instead of produced by journalists, and to ‘artificially’ expand one’s news access (Franklin and Carlson, 2011: 50). Therefore, in contrast to news agency copy or recycled news articles, PR material should be treated with caution when used in everyday news production. Nonetheless, in view of the combined circumstances of cost-cutting in newsrooms and the professionalization of non-journalistic actors that have overwhelmingly started to use public relations tools, it is no surprise that ample research shows that journalists habitually incorporate press releases and other PR material into their news output (Boorstin, 1962, 1992; Buijs et al., 2009; Carsten, 2004; Curtin, 1999; Davis, 2000a, 2000b; De Keyser, 2010; Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Gandy, 1982; Jongbloed, Lauf and Negenborn, 2009; Lewis et al., 2006; Paulussen and Ugille, 2010; Reich, 2010, 2011; Salter, 2005; Van Hout and Jacobs, 2008). The increasing use of PR material results in a further shrinking of the public sphere, as it is mainly politicians, large companies and other established parties that possess the necessary financial and social resources to produce ‘information subsidies’ as a means to expand their news access (Cottle, 2000; Curtin, 1999; Davis, 2000b; Franklin, 2004; Gans, 1979, 2011; Lewis et al., 2006). Some authors are very critical of this phenomenon, pointing out that ‘there is no need for a totalitarian regime when the censorship of commerce runs its blue pencil through every story’ (Davies, 2008: 152). They identify press releases as symptoms of a ‘crisis of public communication’ in a ‘public relations democracy’, or of a ‘re-feudalisation of the public sphere’, and argue that journalists renounce their democratic function as a watchdog of the powerful (institutional) actors in society, and instead become the spokespersons of those in power. These authors often link aspirations for commercial success with democratic failure (Buijs et al., 2009; Davies, 2008; Davis, 2000a, 2000b; Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Habermas, 1974; Lewis et al., 2006).

It is clear that Habermas’ notion of the public sphere is challenged by two divergent developments. Scholars, however, disagree on whether digitalization and cost-cutting can trigger an expansion or contraction of the mediated public sphere in terms of news access. Our research clarifies this issue by means of a quantitative and longitudinal content analysis of the sources in the foreign news output of four Belgian newspapers (1995-2010).

Methodology

To answer the question of whether the introduction of digital technologies and the increasing emphasis on cost-cutting measures in news organizations have a positive or negative influence on the news access of different types of sources, we formulate two main hypotheses:

> **H1a** – The new availability of social media platforms results in an expansion of the mediated public sphere, with more balanced news access for a wider range of sources including ordinary citizens and non-institutional groups.
>
> **H1b** – The tendency towards cost-cutting in newsrooms results in a shrinking mediated public sphere because of the increased news access for institutional sources, mainly by means of information subsidies.

We developed a quantitative content analysis to examine the sources in the foreign news output of four Belgian newspapers over a period of 15 years (1995-2010). We decided to quantify the arguments of different sources by counting all statements between quotation marks. We do not include paraphrased passages, as these are not stable measurements.[1] We developed a categorization of ten types of sources. The first group are institutional sources, or more specifically politicians, government institutions, companies (and umbrellas), socio-economic sources (trade unions), journalists, experts and a residual category of institutional sources (celebrities, religious sources). The second group are non-institutional sources, specifically ordinary citizens and non-institutional groups (especially NGOs), while the third group is a residual category of undefined sources.

Media sources are the different types of journalistic copy that journalists integrate into their news articles, namely news agency copy (Reuters, AFP, etc.) and recycled news articles from other media brands (newspapers, TV and radio channels, magazines, etc.). In light of recent developments in newsrooms, this paper analyses the extent to which information subsidies (press releases, press conferences, spokespeople, and branding websites) can point to a contraction of the mediated public sphere, while social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, weblogs, YouTube, etc.) can be useful information channels for journalists to get in touch with alternative sources and expand news access to a wider range of sources. To guarantee the reproducibility and validity of the measurement, we only take media sources, information subsidies and social media platforms into account when they are explicitly mentioned in the article. In contrast to the study by Lewis et al. (2006), for example, we do not take into account the category of 'looks like PR but not found'. Other important variables are: size of the article (short, which we define as articles up to 150 words, or large articles), byline (no byline, journalist, correspondent, news agency, copyright, letter to the editor/UGC), type of article (factual news report, background news or commentary), outlook of the news (global outlook or limited to strong national outlook), social position of the source (individual not related to an organisation, executive, employee, position in organisation undefined or the organisation is itself the source), and the relation of the source to the event (personally involved, independent authority, eyewitness, vox pop).

We take the year 1995 as a reference point because, at that time, mergers between media companies had resulted in the formation of a Belgian newspaper market with five dominant media groups. This oligopoly led to extreme competition and a dramatic influx of commercial incentives in newsrooms. An interval of five years between the sampled weeks (1995-2000-2005-2010) is sufficiently selective to detect possible turning points of technological renewal (De Bens and Raeymaeckers, 2010). In addition to this longitudinal assessment, the results are analysed in a comparative perspective with regard to popular (*Het Nieuwsblad* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*) and quality (*De Standaard* and *De Morgen*) newspapers. We selected one popular and one quality newspaper owned by the Flemish speaking part of Belgium's two dominant media groups *Corelio* and *Persgroep* to compare their response to digitalization and cost-cutting. The selected newspapers are moreover Belgium's four most important Flemish language newspapers in terms of readership (popular newspapers), and in terms of the quality of democratic debate (quality newspapers) (De Bens and Raeymaeckers, 2010). Based on the assumption that popular newspapers generally set aside little space and resources for foreign coverage, we assume that their foreign news output is especially vulnerable to the impact of cost-cutting measures. In contrast, quality newspapers are believed to save more resources for quality and innovation in foreign coverage (De Bens and Raeymaeckers, 2010). These assumptions result in a third and fourth hypothesis:

> **H2a** – Popular newspapers are more sensitive to institutional sources and information subsidies than their qualitative counterparts.

> **H2b** – Qualitative newspapers are more sensitive to non-institutional sources and social media than their popular counterparts.

We composed a stratified sample of twelve issues per year, resulting in a total sample of 192 issues (Wester and Selm, 2006). The study analysed foreign coverage for three reasons: first, international news is an important touchstone for the public sphere in a globalized world, since it is crucial to be well-informed about events in the global network as they are felt all over the world (consider, for example, the global financial crisis) (Castells, 2008). Second, the shift to 'network journalism' may be most visible in foreign coverage, as Web 2.0 applications offer new possibilities to overcome time and space limitations, and to easily reach alternative sources and (free) information that was hardly accessible in the pre-digital era (Heinrich, 2011, 2012). Third, the focus on international news should also reflect the impact of cost-cutting strategies in newsrooms, with foreign coverage often being one of the first victims. In total, 4,515 foreign news articles were manually collected in the Ghent University Library archives, and were analysed by a team of 20 trained coders. A coding guide and registration form[2] were developed to ensure uniformity in the selection and analytical choices, and included items about the news article in general and about the sources appearing in it. A critically composed sample of 27 articles was tested for intercoder reliability with an outcome of Cohen's Kappa values ranging from 0.70 up to 1.00. Analysis was carried out using PASW Statistics 18. All reported results are significant at $p \leq 0.05$ level unless indicated otherwise. In general, we only report significant findings.

Results

The appearance of sources

On average, one source (0.94) is quoted per news article, with a significant increase observed when comparing 1995 (0.77) with the later sample years (0.95 – 1.03 - 1.02). This finding contradicts the literature on churnalism that states that journalists consult fewer sources because of time constraints (Davies, 2008). In 76.9% of the articles, journalists consulted no (49.5%) or only one (28.2%) source, but this finding is evidently related to article size, as short articles on average contain significantly less sources (0.30) than large articles (1.48). At the newspaper level, we found that the quality newspapers *De Morgen* (1.21) and *De Standaard* (0.98) consult significantly more sources on average than both of the popular newspapers (0.70 and 0.77). Again, article size plays a role as the popular newspapers published significantly more short articles than the quality newspapers did.

Overall, 4,231 sources are quoted in 4,515 news articles. A total of 30.2 per cent of all sources are political sources, followed by ordinary citizens (15.6%), government institutions (15.4%), and experts (9.5), with economic sources (7.4%) completing the top five. When focusing on dominant sources (people or organisations that are first quoted in the article), we observe the same top five, but with government sources overtaking ordinary citizens. Thus, we can infer that institutional sources, and especially politicians, dominate foreign coverage, although the analysis shows that ordinary citizens also play a major role. This finding is in accordance with survey research indicating that Flemish journalists consider ordinary citizens to be important news sources (De Keyser, 2010). Furthermore, the analysis shows that non-institutional sources are quoted less than institutional sources in background news (29.5% versus 69.5%), but that a higher relative proportion of all non-institutional sources (35.2%) appear in background news as compared to institutional sources (25.4%). Likewise, non-institutional sources are relatively more quoted in large than in short articles (89.2% of all non-institutional sources appear in large articles) compared to institutional sources (84.1%). This indicates that institutional sources enjoy privileged news access particularly in short, factual news reports, where journalists have little room for active news gathering and often rely on official sources (Gans, 1979, 2011).

From a longitudinal perspective, most sources' presence in foreign news output is stable (see Table 1). Nonetheless, companies became more important as a news source, especially in 2010 (11.5%), which can be linked to the increased attention given to economic news (8.5% in 2010 compared to 3.9-5.3% in earlier years) since the start of the global economic recession in 2008. In contrast, the number of political and government sources decreased steadily; thus, H1b is not supported. H1a is partially confirmed as we found that ordinary citizens became more important as sources between 1995 (12.5%) and 2000 (15.9%). Nevertheless, their presence in the foreign news output did not increase following the introduction of Web 2.0 applications in the 21st century; despite a further increase in 2005 (17.9%), their presence in 2010 (15.7%) dropped back to the level observed in 2000. H2 is denied as we found that institutional sources, especially political and government sources, are significantly more dominant (first quoted) in quality (78.5%) than in popular (70.6%) newspapers. In contrast, non-institutional sources are quoted more frequently in popular (28.6%) than in quality (20.2%) newspapers. From a longitudinal perspective, ordinary citizens gradually became more important as sources in quality newspapers between 1995 (16.4%) and 2005 (23.3%). It is thus especially remarkable that their presence dropped back to 18.9% in 2010, despite the new and growing availability of social media. For popular newspapers, we found no significant changes over time. These findings indicate that the impact of cost-cutting and digitalization cannot overcome traditional biases in newsrooms. It shows that quality newspapers still emphasize hard news, and especially political news, more than popular newspapers do. It also confirms that popular newspapers attach more importance to ordinary citizens' views than quality newspapers do.

[Cf. Table 1]

Journalists can emphasize or deny the authority of sources by referring to their position on the social ladder. If we only consider people (as we cannot ascribe a 'position' to an organization), we find that executives (50.2% of all sources) greatly outnumber individuals (20.0%)—people who are not attached to a formal organization—and employees (7.4%) (see Table 2). The significant finding that the institutional sources in Belgian foreign news output are generally executives, in contrast with the non-institutional sources who are mainly individuals or employees, thus confirms the privileged news access of institutional elites. Over the course of the study, we registered a small decrease in executive sources and, especially between 1995 and 2000, a substantial increase of individual sources, along with a very modest increase of employee sources. We still expected the largest increase among individuals and employees in foreign news output to occur between 2005 and 2010 because of the introduction of social media platforms (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009), but this assumption (H1a) is not supported by the findings of the content analysis. H2 is again refuted as we found that individuals and employees are quoted significantly more often in popular (25.4% and 9.6% of all sources in popular newspapers, respectively) than in quality newspapers (17.1% and 6.2%). In contrast, executives are relatively more present in quality (54.8%) than in popular (41.7%) newspapers. The above-mentioned rise of individual sources is visible in both types of newspapers, while the small decrease among executive sources and the minor increase among employee sources can, for the most part, be linked to the popular newspapers, which again confirms their increasing emphasis on ordinary citizens' views. Although not the focus of this paper, it is important to note that this can also be an indication of commercialization, specifically in terms of the increasing focus on soft news and entertainment (tabloidization) (De Bens and Raeymaeckers, 2010).

[Cf. Table 2]

Sources can relate to a newsworthy event in several ways. Our analysis shows that most sources are personally involved in the event (79.8%), such as victims of a disaster or participants in an assembly. Again, however, we found significant differences as to the social position of sources. From the analysis, it is clear that experts such as scientists or lawyers—and to a lesser extent, journalists—are mostly related to the event as an independent authority on the issue. In contrast, ordinary citizens—and again, to a lesser extent, journalists—are connected to the event as eyewitnesses more often than other types of sources. The fact that ordinary citizens are rarely addressed as vox pop further underlines their importance as a news source. H2 is further disproven as we found that independent authorities are consulted significantly more often by quality (10.9% of all sources in quality newspapers) than by popular (8.1%) newspapers. In contrast, sources that are personally involved in the event are quoted even more often in popular (83.4%) than in quality (77.9%) newspapers. This again points to a difference between the human interest angle visible in popular newspapers, and the hard news angle in quality newspapers.

The use of media sources

A look at the byline provides an overview of the articles that have been copied verbatim from other media sources. Our analysis shows that a substantial 21.8% of the articles are provided by news agencies, while 1.5% of the articles are recycled from other media brands (copyright ©). A further 2% of the articles are initiated by news agencies but are complemented to some degree by journalists. Furthermore, we found that a considerable 40.9% of the articles are attributed to journalists (38.5%) and correspondents (2.4%). The limited and moreover decreased contribution of correspondents (3.1% of the articles in 1995, dropping to 1.2% in 2005 and back to 2.0% in 2010) in contrast with the increasing importance of desk-bound journalists (from 21.1% of articles in 1995 up to 49.9% in 2010) in every newspaper validates the often-heard complaints about decreasing resources for active news gathering outside the newsroom (Davies, 2008; Jongbloed, Lauf and Negenborn, 2009). However, it is important to note that the decrease in correspondent news is not accompanied by an observable increase in news agency copy. In fact, the number of news articles attributed to news agencies declined in all newspapers from 27.4% on average in 1995 to 13.6% on average in 2010. As it seems highly unrealistic that more desk-bound journalists have become less reliant on news agency copy to fill the international news pages, we expect that these findings are related to changing transparency standards among Flemish newspapers. More specifically, in accordance with research by Lewis et al. (2006), we expect that many articles attributed to journalists are actually cut and pasted from news agency copy. This is a valid concern, especially as we found that 28.0% of the articles have no byline and thus carry no clear identification of who has written the story. Research from the Dutch News Monitor (Schaper et al., 2010) has shown that most articles without a byline originate from news agency copy.

The assumption that relates these findings to transparency policies finds support in the significant differences ($p<0.000$) between the two media groups. In particular, we found that articles in *Persgroep* newspapers *De Morgen* (39.7% of all articles in this newspaper) and *Het Laatste Nieuws* (43.6%) carry no byline far more often than articles from *Corelio* newspapers *De Standaard* (7.2%) and *Het Nieuwsblad* (18.9%). In contrast, *Corelio* newspapers *De Standaard* (47.8%%) and *Het Nieuwsblad* (29.1%) attributed articles to news agencies significantly more often than *Persgroep* newspapers *De Morgen* (8.8%) and *Het Laatste Nieuws* (3.4%). These findings seem to indicate that *Persgroep* newspapers are less transparent about their use of news agency copy. Further research is necessary to confirm this assumption.

[Cf. Table 3]

Articles that provide a global outlook on events are significantly more likely ($p<0.000$) to have no byline or attribute the news article to a news agency, while articles that are ‘domesticated’ for the national Belgian public are more often attributed to journalists. This is consistent with the finding that Belgian journalists quote significantly more sources in articles with a national outlook than in articles with a global outlook. In addition, Belgian sources are consulted significantly more often in coverage with a national outlook. Together, this indicates that journalists can more easily get in touch with Belgian sources in a foreign country and are more inclined to quote these Belgian sources to domesticate the foreign event for a national public (e.g. Belgian victims involved in a disaster). In contrast, they are less inclined to actively gather reactions from non-Belgian participants in the event and instead rely more on external copy, which is related to the news selection criterion of ‘proximity of the news’ (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Joye, 2010). It also demonstrates the impact of cost-cutting on foreign news desks, as news organizations lack the means to send journalists abroad for every news event, unless Belgian citizens are in some way involved. What is especially remarkable in this case is that the quality newspapers as well as the popular newspapers over the course of time published foreign coverage with a national outlook, and quoted Belgian sources, more and more frequently (significant rise). This indicates that most national media still appeal to domestic rather than international markets (Hafez, 2009) despite the new availability of online and social media sources that can overcome time and space limitations, and extend networks of informants internationally (Heinrich, 2011).

We looked for media sources not only in the byline (verbatim copy), but also in the body of the articles. The combination of both measures showed that one in four articles used news agency copy, which further confirms the importance of international wire services as a source for international news. Nonetheless, we registered a significant decrease in the number of articles that used one or more news agency source from 30.0% to 17.4%. One possible explanation is that *De Morgen* (38 to 4 Reuters references) and *Het Nieuwsblad* (57 to 4 Reuters references; 20 AP references in 1995 and 43 in 2000, to only 7 in 2010) discontinued their subscription to these wire services as a cost-saving measure. An important point is again that *Corelio* newspapers (*De Standaard* 51.7% and *Het Nieuwsblad* 30.3%) used significantly more news agency copy than *Persgroep* newspapers (*De Morgen* 15.0% and *Het Laatste Nieuws* 4.2%). This may once again indicate differences in the news organizations’ transparency policies. As far as we can observe in the news output, recycled news articles from different media brands are used in 20.5% of the articles, divided roughly equally between the sample years. Both quality newspapers report significantly more traditional media sources than the popular newspapers do. H2 is still refuted, as we found no apparent shifts over time.

The role of information subsidies and social media platforms

As far as we can observe in the news output, information subsidies are used in 11.1% of the articles. Yet, spokespersons make up the largest number of references to PR efforts, while press releases and press conferences are mentioned in no more than 79 articles (1.7%). Based on the literature, we can assume that the real number is higher, as journalists and PR professionals prefer to veil their often routine contacts (e.g. Carsten, 2004). This draws attention to the fact that, despite the enormous scope of our data collection (4,515 news articles), quantitative content analysis brings no complete insight as to the news production process, and we are in fact depending on the extent to which journalists explicitly mention their sources in the news output. Nonetheless, the analysis shows that institutional sources gain access to journalists by means of PR tools almost three times more than non-institutional sources. This can be explained by the fact that the former, more so than the latter, have the resources at their disposal to produce information subsidies. H1b and H2 are yet again contradicted, as we found no increase in PR material over time, and no differences between the newspapers. Social media platforms did not exist in 1995, but by 2010 they were used as an information channel in only 17 articles (1.5% of all articles in 2010). Since the use of social media platforms in everyday foreign news production is negligible, H1a is again refuted.

Conclusion and discussion

As scholars disagree about the answer to the question of whether digitalization and cost-cutting trigger expansion or contraction of the mediated public sphere in terms of news access (H1), we attempted to clarify this issue by means of a quantitative and longitudinal content analysis of the sources in the foreign news output of four Belgian newspapers (1995-2010). The results are also analysed in a comparative perspective with regard to popular and quality newspapers (H2).

First, our analysis confirms that, in a commercial news environment, institutional sources—and especially political sources—enjoy privileged news access (e.g.

Habermas, 1974; Brants, 2005; Webster, 2011). In contrast, the fact that 15% of all sources are ordinary citizens, who are moreover mainly addressed in their role as citizens (involved in the event) rather than vox pop, contradicts many criticisms of unequal news access and its deteriorating effect on democratic debate in the public sphere (Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2009). Further research is nonetheless necessary to examine the content of these sources' contributions. Cottle (2000) states that the quality of democratic debate is not only determined by free and equal news access, but also by the content and framing of different sources' messages. For example, even if all sources are equally represented in the news, the message can still be framed in favour of one dominant party.

From a longitudinal perspective, the analysis shows that H1 is refuted. We found no substantive changes in the sourcing practices of Belgian journalists that can be explained by cost-cutting or the introduction of social media in newsrooms. This shows that the harsh criticism of churnalism in the British context (cf. Davies, 2008) cannot simply be applied to other countries (Broersma, 2009). The British media system is characterized by a high level of competition between media outlets. In contrast, Belgian media organizations endeavour towards a more healthy balance between commercialism on the one hand, and high standards of journalistic practice along with an ideology of public service in journalism on the other (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). The result is that Flemish popular newspapers cannot be compared to British mid-market or down-market newspapers. Further research in other geographical and journalistic contexts can enlarge our understanding of the impact of cost-cutting and digitalization on sourcing practices in other countries.

The finding that the presence of ordinary citizens in foreign news output did not increase since the introduction of Web 2.0 applications in the 21st century is consistent with research showing how Flemish journalists consider ordinary citizens to be important news sources, but remain reluctant to use UGC and social media platforms in the news gathering process. Rather, they prefer more traditional information channels such as the telephone (De Keyser, 2010; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008). An important remark here is that journalists often do not mention the information channels they use to contact sources, and the actual use of social media may thus be higher than we can observe in the news output. Another possible explanation for the limited increase of social media platforms and (foreign) non-institutional sources lies in the fact that social media were still a fresh phenomenon in 2010. Recent developments, such as the Arab Spring, indicate that social media sourcing is becoming ever more prominent as a professional practice, and researchers should therefore continue evaluating the further implementation of ‘network journalism’ in foreign coverage (Cottle, 2011; Heinrich, 2011; Lotan et al., 2011).

H2 is also refuted as we found no differences in sourcing practices between popular and quality newspapers that can be explained by divergent responses to cost-cutting and digitalization. It seems that recent developments cannot overcome traditional biases in newsrooms, with quality newspapers emphasizing hard, political news while popular newspapers attach more importance to ordinary citizens’ views. More importantly, we found significant differences between the two media groups that point to different transparency policies. This indicates that the real use of media sources and information subsidies is probably more prominent than we can observe in the news output. Moreover, research has shown that many press releases are indirectly absorbed into newspapers via news agencies in a ‘ladder of news sourcing’. This is an important finding if we take into account that it is mainly news agency journalists who complain about a growing workload and lack of time to check their sources (Lewis et al., 2006). Furthermore, as public relations activities are increasingly sophisticated, it seems that reconstruction interviews with journalists (e.g. Reich, 2010) or newsroom ethnographies (e.g. Van Hout and Jacobs, 2008) can provide a more complete insight into journalist-source relationships.

Notes

[1] Take, for example, the paraphrase ‘The Minister of Finances seems to assume that ...’. It is not clear whether the Minister explicitly stated these words, or whether it is an interpretation of the journalist.

[2] For more information about the choice of newspapers and the methodology of the study, contact the authors. The registration form can be obtained from the authors on request.

References

Boorstin D (1962, 1992) *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: Vintage Books.

Brants K (2005) Guest Editor's Introduction: The Internet and the Public Sphere. *Political Communication* 22(2): 143-146.

Broersma M (2009) De Waarheid in Tijden van Crisis: Kwaliteitsjournalistiek in een Veranderend Medialandschap. In: Ummelen B (ed) *Journalistiek in Diskrediet*. Diemen: AMB, pp. 23-39.

Broersma M and Graham T (2012) Social Media as Beat: Tweets as News Source during the 2010 British and Dutch Elections. *Journalism Practice* 6(3): 403-419.

Buijs K, Daalmans S, Frye A, ten Haaf D, Hijmans E and Schafraad P (2009, February) De Onafhankelijkheid van Nieuwsbronnen en de Kwaliteit van de Journalistiek. Een Verkennende Analyse van Binnenlandse Nieuwsonderwerpen in Vier Nederlandse Dagbladen. Paper presented at Etmaal van de Communicatiewetenschap, Ghent, Belgium.

Calhoun C (1992) Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere. In: Calhoun C (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 1-48.

Carsten R (2004, May) Everyone in Journalism Steals from Everyone Else: Routine Reliance on Other Media in Different Stages of News Production. Paper presented at ICA, New Orleans, LA.

Castells M (2008) The new public sphere: Global civil society, communication networks, and global governance. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616: 78-93.

Chua AYK, Razikin K and Goh DH (2011) Social tags as news event detectors. *Journal of Information Science* 37(1): 3-18.

Cottle S (2000) Rethinking News Access. *Journalism Studies* 1(3): 427-448.

Cottle S (2011) Media and the Arab Uprisings of 2011: Research Notes. *Journalism* 12(5): 647-659.

Curtin PA (1999) Reevaluating public relations information subsidies: Market-driven journalism and agenda-building theory and practice. *Journal of Public Relations Research* 11(1): 53-90.

Dahlgren P (1991) Introduction. In: Dahlgren P and Sparks C (eds.) *Communication and Citizenship: Journalism and the Public Sphere*. London: Routledge, pp. 1-24.

Dahlgren P (2005) The Internet, public spheres, and political communication: Dispersion and deliberation. *Political Communication* 22(2): 147-162.

Davies N (2008) *Flat Earth News: An Award-Winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in the Global Media*. London: Vintage.

Davis A (2000a) Public relations, business news and the reproduction of corporate elite power. *Journalism* 1(3): 282-304.

Davis A (2000b) Public relations, news production and changing patterns of source access in the British national media. *Media, Culture and Society* 22(1): 39-59.

De Bens E and Raeymaeckers K (2010) *De Pers in België: Het Verhaal van de Belgische Dagbladpers Gisteren, Vandaag en Morgen*. Leuven: LannooCampus.

De Keyser J (2010) Bronnen en nieuwe technologie voor nieuwsgaring. In: Paulussen S and Raeymaeckers K (eds.) *Journalisten: Profiel van een Beroepsgroep*. Leuven: LannooCampus, pp. 81-97.

Dimitrova DV and Strömbäck J (2009) Look who's talking: Use of sources in newspaper coverage in Sweden and the United States. *Journalism Practice* 3(1): 75-91.

Downey J and Fenton N (2003) New media, counter publicity and the public sphere. *New Media and Society* 5(2): 185-202.

Etter MA, Plotkowiak T and Stanoevska-Slabeva K (2011, May) CSR Communication Strategies for Twitter: Microblogging as a Tool for Public Relations. Paper presented at ICA, Boston, USA.

Franklin B (2004) *Packaging Politics: Political Communications in Britain's Media Democracy*. London: Arnold.

Franklin B and Carlson M (2011) *Journalists, Sources and Credibility*. London: Routledge.

Fraser N (1999) Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. In: During S (ed.) *The Cultural Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, pp. 518-536.

Galtung J and Ruge M (1965) The Structure of Foreign News: The Presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus Crises in Four Norwegian Newspapers. *Journal of Peace Research* 2: 64-91.

Gandy OH (1982) *Beyond Agenda Setting: Information Subsidies and Public Policy*. Norwood: Ablex.

Gans HJ (1979) *Deciding what's News*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Gans HJ (2011) Multiperspectival News Revisited: Journalism and Representative Democracy. *Journalism* 12(1): 3-13.

Gerhards J and Schäfer MS (2010) Is the Internet a Better Public Sphere? Comparing Old and New Media in the USA and Germany. *New Media and Society* 12(1): 143-160.

Habermas J (1974) The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964). *New German Critique* 3(Autumn): 49-55.

Habermas J (1992) Further Reflections on the Public Sphere. In: Calhoun C (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 421-461.

Habermas J (2006) Political communication in media society: Does democracy still enjoy an epistemic dimension? The impact of normative theory on empirical research. *Communication Theory* 16(4): 411-426.

Hafez, K (2009) Let's Improve 'Global Journalism'! *Journalism* 10(3): 329-331.

Hallin DC and Mancini P (2004) *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hargittai E (2011) Minding the digital gap: Why understanding digital media inequality matters. In: Papathanassopoulos S (ed.) *Media Perspectives for the 21st Century*. London: Routledge, pp. 231-240.

Heinrich A (2011) *Network Journalism: Journalistic Practice in Interactive Spheres*. London: Routledge.

Heinrich A (2012) Foreign reporting in the sphere of network journalism. *Journalism Practice* 6(5-6): 766—775.

Hermida A (2010) Twittering the news: The emergence of ambient journalism. *Journalism Practice* 4(3): 297-308.

Jongbloed W, Lauf E and Negenborn R (2009) *Over Nieuws en het ANP*. Hilversum: Commissariaat voor de Media.

Joye S (2010) *De Media(de)constructie van Rampen: Een Multimethodisch Longitudinaal Onderzoek naar de Vlaamse Nieuwsberichtgeving over Nationale en Internationale Rampen*. Ghent: University Press.

Kaplan AM and Haenlein M (2010) Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. *Business Horizons* 53: 59-68.

Knight M (2011, September) The Origin of Stories: How Journalists Find and Create News in an Age of Social Media, Competition and Churnalism. Paper presented at The Future of Journalism Conference, Cardiff, UK.

Lariscy RW, Avery EJ, Sweetser KD and Howes P (2009) An examination of the role of online social media in journalists' source mix. *Public Relations Review* 35(3): 314-316.

Lenatti C (2009) All a-Twitter: Social networking as a tool for newspaper journalists. *The Seybold Report* 9(3): 2-4.

Lewis J, Williams A, Franklin B, Thomas J and Mosdell N (2006) *The Quality and Independence of British Journalism: Tracking the Changes over 20 Years*. Cardiff: Cardiff University.

Lopez-Rabadan P (2011, September) New Trends in Political Journalism: The Management of Specialized Sources as Criterion in the Professional Renewal of Press. Paper presented at The Future of Journalism Conference, Cardiff, UK.

Lotan G, Graeff E, Ananny M, Gaffney D, Pearce I and Boyd D (2011) The Revolutions Were Tweeted: Information Flows During the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions. *International Journal of Communication* 5: 1375-1405.

Lynch L (2010) 'We're going to crack the world open': Wikileaks and the future of investigative reporting. *Journalism Practice* 4(3): 309-318.

McManus JH (1994) *Market-Driven Journalism: Let the Citizen Beware?* Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Messner M and South J (2011) Legitimizing Wikipedia: How US national newspapers frame and use the online encyclopedia in their coverage. *Journalism Practice* 5(2): 145-160.

Morozov E (2009) Iran: Downside to the 'Twitter Revolution'. *Dissent* 56(4): 10-14.

O'Neill D and O'Connor C (2009) The passive journalist: How sources dominate local news. *Journalism Practice* 2(1): 487-500.

Paulussen S and Ugille P (2008) User generated content in the newsroom: Professional and organisational constraints on participatory journalism. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 5(2): 24-41.

Paulussen S and Ugille P (2010) Werkvoorwaarden in de Vlaamse pers. In: Paulussen S and Raeymaeckers K (eds.) *Journalisten: Profiel van een Beroepsgroep*. Leuven: LannooCampus, pp. 53-66.

Reich Z (2010) Measuring the Impact of PR on Published News in Increasingly Fragmented News Environments. *Journalism Studies* 11(6): 799-816.

Reich Z (2011) Source Credibility and Journalism: Between Visceral and Discretional Judgement. *Journalism Practice* 5(1): 51-67.

Salter L (2005) The Communicative Structures of Journalism and Public Relations. *Journalism* 6(1): 90-106.

Van Hout T and Jacobs G (2008) News production theory and practice: Fieldwork notes on power, interaction and agency. *Pragmatics* 18(1): 59-85.

Verstraeten H (1996) The Media and the Transformation of the Public Sphere: A Contribution for a Critical Political Economy of the Public Sphere. *European Journal of Communication* 11(3): 347-370.

Webster F (2011) Information and Democracy: The Weakening of Social Democracy. In: Papathanassopoulos S (ed.) *Media Perspectives in the 21st Century*. New York: Routledge, pp. 21-40.

Wester F and van Selm M (2006) Inhoudsanalyse als systematisch-kwantificerende werkwijze. In: Wester F, Renckstorf K and Scheepers P (eds.) *Onderzoekstypen in de Communicatiewetenschap*. Dordrecht: Kluwer, pp. 121-150.

Attachment 1: Tables

	1995 (%)	2000 (%)	2005 (%)	2010 (%)	All Coverage (%)
Political	36.7	29.8	27.3	28.3	30.2
Government	15.9	17.9	14.8	13.3	15.4
Companies	3.4	8.0	6.0	11.5	7.4
Journalist	6.1	4.4	6.9	3.9	5.3
Expert	9.0	8.3	11.2	9.4	9.5
Other inst. Actor	8.5	5.3	8.2	9.4	7.9
Citizen	12.5	15.9	17.9	15.7	15.6
Non-inst. Group	7.0	9.1	7.3	6.9	7.6
Other Actor	1.0	1.2	0.4	1.7	1.1

Table 1. Overview of sources by year of publication (N=4231)

	1995 (%)	2000 (%)	2005 (%)	2010 (%)	All Coverage (%)
Individual	15.3	21.6	20.2	22.0	20.0
Executive	54.9	47.0	50.1	49.4	50.2
Employee	6.2	7.9	7.9	7.4	7.4
Position not specified	4.5	4.9	4.0	6.6	5.0
Organization	19.0	18.6	17.8	14.4	17.3

Table 2. Overview position of sources by year of publication (N = 4231)

	1995 (%)	2000 (%)	2005 (%)	2010 (%)	All Coverage (%)
No Byline	39.3	22.8	22.5	26.4	28.0
Journalist	21.1	35.5	48.8	49.9	38.5
Correspondent	3.1	3.3	1.2	2.0	2.4
News Agency	27.4	27.5	18.2	13.6	21.8
Journalist and News Agency	1.8	2.8	1.6	1.7	2.0
Copyright	1.5	1.4	2.2	1.0	1.5
Letter to the Editor/UGC	5.6	6.9	5.5	5.3	5.8

Table 3. Overview of bylines by year of publication (N=4515)

Attachment 2: Covering letter

We hereby confirm that all authors have agreed to this submission and that the article is not currently being considered for publication by any other journal.