

**Working Papers Film & TV Studies**

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# **AROUND THE WORLD IN 8 PAGES?** **A longitudinal analysis of international news coverage in Flemish newspapers (1986-2006)**

**Stijn Joye**

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## INTRODUCTION FROM THE EDITORS

Within media and communication studies international news research is one of those rare areas of scholarly pursuit which have continuously attracted great attention from journalists themselves, policy makers and other people operating on the more practical side of the field. This may not be surprising because the tradition of investigating how foreign and international news facts and events are covered by the media does not only touch upon diplomatic, international relations and other issues dealing with the relation between people and nations. It is also linked to questions about the state of democracy and the role of the news media in informing citizens. As a result, questions of international news coverage have often been seen and used as, more or less, a quality index. A recent example, illustrating these points on diplomacy, democracy and quality, is a report ordered by the *Flemish Institute for Peace (Vlaams Vredesinstituut)* on the question of international and foreign news coverage in the northern part of Belgium. The main task of this independent institute, which was created by an official Flemish Parliament decree, is to inform policy makers on how they could better deal with questions on international peace and aid to third world countries. Stijn Joye's report is firmly rooted in this tradition of international news research, adding to it a substantial longitudinal approach on the Flemish case. We hope that this fine Working Paper will go beyond the borders of the Academia, and that it will also be read by, if not inspire, journalists, news editors, publishers and other people carrying a responsibility in the field of the news.

**Daniel Biltreyst and Sofie Van Bauwel**



## ABSTRACT

For some time now, scholars working within the rich tradition of international news studies and other critics have warned for a decline in the quantity and the quality of international news coverage in almost all Western societies. Investigating international news in three Flemish newspapers between 1986 and 2006 and interviewing journalists on the issue, this Working Paper tends to moderate these accusations of a fast and increasingly shrinking international news agenda. Despite a gradual decline in the 1990s, we observed a fairly steady percentage of 15.5% over a period of twenty years, notwithstanding occasional peaks and lows due to exceptional news events. The quality newspapers *De Morgen* and *De Standaard* devoted considerably more attention and space to international news as compared to the more popular *Het Laatste Nieuws*. Nonetheless, international news reporting in all Flemish newspapers displayed several biases in terms of geographic and thematic diversity. The data support the claim that the newspapers in the sample reproduce a certain world order, characterized by Eurocentrism. Although we observed a shift to more human interest and entertainment-oriented stories, international news coverage still mainly deals with hard and negative news.

## ABSTRACT

Ondanks de toenemende globalisering van maatschappij en media, wijzen academici en critici reeds geruime tijd op een daling qua kwantiteit en kwaliteit van internationale nieuwsberichtgeving in de meeste Westerse landen. Op basis van een kwantitatieve inhoudsanalyse van drie Vlaamse kranten en diepte-interviews met betrokken journalisten, wenst deze Working Paper de doemberichten betreffende de huidige staat van internationale nieuwsberichtgeving enigszins te nuanceren. Niettegenstaande een afname in de hoeveelheid internationaal nieuws tijdens de jaren 1990, wijst de longitudinale analyse op een relatief stabiel aandeel buitenland van 15.5%. De kwaliteitskranten *De Morgen* en *De Standaard* brengen het grootste aandeel internationaal nieuws terwijl de meer populaire krant *Het Laatste Nieuws* de aandacht eerder op het binnenland richt. Naar inhoud toe laten de Vlaamse kranten zich leiden door een sterke mate van Eurocentrisme wat zich concreet uit in veel aandacht voor de buurlanden, Europa en de Verenigde Staten van Amerika. Internationaal nieuws blijkt ook vaak hard en negatief nieuws te zijn, al is doorheen de jaren een opmars van entertainment en human-interest nieuws merkbaar.

<sup>1</sup> Flanders is the Northern Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. Together with the French-speaking Wallonia, bilingual Brussels and the German-speaking region it constitutes the federal state of Belgium.



## INTRODUCTION

Our understanding of the world and the events occurring around us are to a great extent influenced and shaped by media in general and news coverage in particular. News seems to carry a unique signifying power, a power to represent events in particular ways (Fairclough, 1995). Referring to Gaunt (1990), insofar as the information and representations received from news media shape our view of the world, it is crucial to understand these processes. International news, which is the key focus of this Working Paper, is generally considered to be a relevant and crucial factor in shaping people's knowledge, perception and evaluation of the world that is beyond their (national) shores (Franks, 2004). Several scholars have also indicated a strong link between international news reporting and official foreign policies of governments (Tomanić Trivundža, 2008). Following the increasing globalization of society, culture and technology, news media may well be able to cover all events in the world (Livingston & Van Belle cited in Lim et al., 2008: 121). Nonetheless, critics have warned for a significant decline in the quantity and the quality of international news covered by Western media (Sampson, 1996; Moisy, 1997; Tomlinson, 1999; Thusssu, 2004). Furthermore, international news reporting is criticized for focusing on an exclusive set of elite countries as well as on negative facts, conflicts and spectacular events (Gans, 1979; Giffard, 1998; Schudson, 2003). International news as an academic field has spurred a rich and diverse body of research: from quantitative news flow studies investigating the determinants of international news, and political economy analyses of the global news agency sector to text-oriented traditions such as framing analysis and discourse analysis, and more qualitative driven gatekeeper studies applying ethnographic field research. In this Working Paper, we focus on two particular strands of research: on the one hand the field of news selection and news values, and on the other hand national and international studies dealing with the quantity and the quality of international news reporting. A first research question analyzes the state of international news coverage in three Flemish<sup>1</sup> newspapers for the period 1986 till 2006. Applying quantitative content analysis, we look into a number of factors that are identified to be good indicators for the quality of international news reporting (cf. Joye & Biltreyst, 2007): the amount of international news, and the geographic and thematic diversity. In order to contextualize the results from this quantitative content analysis, a second research question reflects on the current state of international news reporting in Flanders. For this purpose, we conducted eight semi-structured in-depth interviews with newspaper and news agency journalists. These interviews drew upon insights from the content analysis and dealt with the quantity and the quality of international news coverage, the news values and selection process, and the contemporary role of news agencies as perceived by journalists.

Before we review the literature on international news, a short note is given on the key terminology used in this Working Paper. In what follows, we mainly refer to 'international news' as news that deals with foreign events as well as with events that occur abroad but are related to Belgium. The latter will



be addressed as 'domesticated news'. This category of news includes on the one hand coverage of events with actual Belgian involvement (for instance, Belgian tourists killed in an earthquake in Iran) and on the other hand news reporting in which such relation of involvement was 'created' due to journalistic practices of domestication (for instance, an interview with a Belgian expert on the outbreak of SARS, cf. *infra*). In summary, 'international' news is 'foreign' news plus 'domesticated' news.

<sup>2</sup> As compared to soft news, hard news generally refers to such themes as politics, economics, financial news and international affairs (for an extensive overview of the different definitions and interpretations of hard and soft news, see De Swert, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive overview see Harcup (2004: 30-39) and Brighton and Foy (2007).

# INTERNATIONAL NEWS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

## News selection and news values

News media products such as newspapers are limited in length and attempt to provide a certain balance between national and international news. These considerations imply a severe selection of events according to their newsworthiness or news value. In their pioneering study, Galtung and Ruge (1965) identified twelve factors that define the intrinsic news value of events, such as unexpectedness, proximity, negativity, continuity, reference to elite nations and personalization. Ebo (1992) further refers to political, economic, social and geographic links between countries as a key factor in dictating news selection and coverage. Wu (2003: 20), on the other hand, argues that 'it appears to be economic interest, rather than ideological antagonism, language or culture linkage that plays the central role in determining news from abroad.' Taking into account the radically changed news ecology, Harcup and O'Neill (2001: 276-279) state that for our contemporary times 'new' factors such as the entertainment value, the presence of celebrities and the visual aspects need to be acknowledged. Especially popular newspapers and commercial media prefer to determine their international news priorities based on so-called 'soft' news<sup>2</sup> interests: human-interest stories, spectacular crises, celebrities and entertainment (Franklin, 1997; Holland, 1998; Gripsrud, 2000). Although the issue of news values represents a very productive but heterogeneous strand of research<sup>3</sup>, Golan (2008: 44-45) managed to identify 'four key variables that are consistently found to predict international news coverage. These include deviance (Shoemaker et al., 1986), relevance (Chang et al., 1987), cultural affinity (Hester, 1973) and the prominence of the nation within the hierarchy of nations (Chang, 1998; Kim and Barnett, 1996).'

The actual outcome of these journalistic practices has been frequently criticized for displaying several biases. Here, bias refers to a 'selectivity in news reporting, which may or may not lead to the unbalanced, inequitable, or unfair treatment of individuals or issues' (Gunter, 1997: 16). Regarding Western news media, the criticism generally focuses on the extremely high news value of the own region (Stevenson & Cole, 1980; Reeves, 1993; Kamalipour, 2002) as compared to the 'inadequate, negative, and stereotypical portrayal' of the developing world (Rampal, 2002: 111). According to Nederveen Pieterse (1990), one of the main characteristics of mediatized representation is in fact that it is part of the production and reproduction of such global (social) inequality. Especially regarding the developing countries, suffering and chaos seem to dominate the global picture. In Western (news) media imagery Third World people are mainly portrayed as the exotic 'Other', most typically characterized in terms of helplessness, negativity and as inferior to 'us' (Benthall, 1993). Chouliaraki (2006: 8) further argues that this 'idea that hierarchies of place and human life are reproduced in Western news is not new in social research.' Setting out from the premise that news media produce a value-laden product, which may seem 'neutral' but in fact represents many



establishment or other dominant views, scholars working in the field of international news thus generally seek to unmask and redress power imbalances or possible biases in news coverage (Harrison, 2006: 28-31).

## **Quantity and quality of international news reporting**

In the past three decades, forces of globalization, commercialization, competition, and rapid technological developments have profoundly transformed the international news market or so called news ecology (Harrison, 2006). News media have entered the age of hyper-commercialism (McChesney, 2004) or infotainment (Thussu, 2007). Other scholars refer to a trend of tabloidization that is characterized by a focus on human interest (Franklin, 1997), an extensive use of photographs (Holland, 1998), and, of particular relevance to this Working Paper, less international and hard news (Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). Harrison (2006: 15) further states that these changes 'have affected the packaging and selling of news and arguably the nature of news reported' hinting at the rise of soft news, lifestyle and consumer journalism. These global tendencies and the academic debate surrounding it also have relevance for the quality and the quantity of international news which we will discuss below.

When assessing the *quality* of international news reporting, scholars and critics consistently refer to the democratic value of news as it 'carries the burden of defining the world in which citizens operate' (Lewis, 2006: 305). Referring to the above discussed effects of globalization, the precarious state of international relations post-9/11 and the interdependent nature of our modern society, Franks (2004) argues that, particularly in these times, it is crucial for citizens to understand life beyond their (national) shores and to develop an international perspective. International news is generally believed to act as an essential mechanism of the extension of people's horizon (Tester, 2004). In contrast, 'inadequate international media reporting [promotes] dangerous political decisions, particularly during crises and under pressure of time' (Moisy quoted in Hafez, 2007: 54). In fact, international news reporting is regularly accused of drawing such an inadequate and distorted picture (Tomani? Trivundža, 2008) as its nature and content are defined by spectacular events, elite persons, hard facts, violence, natural disasters and conflict (Biltereyst, Peeren & Van Gompel, 1999; Rantanen & Boyd-Barrett, 2004; Harrison, 2006). Furthermore, the geographic scope of international news reporting is limited to a select number of elite countries. As stated above, the news value of a country is determined by its geopolitical, economic and military power. For Western news media, this implies a dominant Eurocentric perspective on the world. Another, related aspect of international news coverage in which this Eurocentric world order manifests itself, is in the technique of domestication. This is a practice that journalists adopt to 'frame' a foreign event within the national context of their public (Clausen, 2004). Domestication can for instance be achieved by including a focus on Belgians living abroad, by paying attention to Belgian relief aid in the case of a foreign





disaster, or by interviewing Belgian experts on the topic (see Joye & Biltreyst, 2007). In other words, domestication makes foreign events 'comprehensible, appealing and relevant to domestic audiences' (Gurevitch et al., 1991: 206). However, according to Manning (2001: 62) too much domestication can lead to the production of 'a rather Eurocentric if not ethnocentric picture of global affairs.'

Concerning the issue of *quantity*, most Western societies have encountered a gradual decline in the amount of international news reporting 'especially about and from the developing world' (Thusu, 2004: 47). Commenting on this development at the end of the 1990s, Moisy (1997: 79) noted that an 'amazing increase in the capacity to produce and distribute news from distant lands has been met by an obvious decrease in consumption.' He based this observation on data for an American news context. For the period 1970 to 1995, Moisy found a fall in the amount of international news stories (35% to 23%) broadcasted by national television (Moisy, 1997). Findings from Norris (1995), Tomlinson (1999) and Tyndall (2008) confirm this decrease in the coverage of foreign affairs by American networks. The findings of Tyndall (2008) however support the idea that exceptional news events such as 9/11 and the global war on terrorism have the potential to invert the overall downward trend. Investigating British television channels as well, Tomlinson (1999) observed the similar negative trend in the amount of foreign news during the first half of the 1990s. Franks (2004) argued that this is particularly true for television coverage of developing countries. She recorded a drop of 49% between 1989 and 2003, however also including the amount of developing countries featured in factual programmes such as documentaries. Contrary to Tomlinson, she further states that the overall amount of international coverage in the British television *news* has remained fairly steady over the years as 'news is following an agenda' (Franks, 2004: 426). In her view, the balance of domestic/foreign news mainly depends on what is happening in the world. Newspapers appear to follow the same trend of a shrinking international news output. Biltreyst (2001) cites Hallin's 1996 study of American newspapers which demonstrated that the share of international news fell from 10.2% in 1971 to 2.6% in 1988. More recent data on American newspapers from the *Pew Research Center* (2005) also pointed towards a decline in international news coverage on the front pages since 1977. McLachlan and Golding (2000) concluded that British quality newspapers such as *The Times* and *The Guardian* also display the general downward trend. In conclusion, it appears that almost all Western societies encounter a decline in the quantity and the quality of international news coverage. This Working Paper aims to investigate the validity and significance of this consensus for the case of Flemish news media, particularly newspapers.

<sup>4</sup> *De Standaard* and *De Morgen* are generally referred to as quality press ('broadsheets') and *Het Laatste Nieuws* as a popular, middle-market 'broadloid' (see De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2007).

## The global and the local: international news in Flemish news media

In 2009 the *Flemish Institute for Peace (Vlaams Vredesinstituut)* published a report on the current state of international news coverage in Flanders. The report by Wouters, De Swert and Walgrave (2009) gave a review of national and international academic research on international news coverage. In their overview of the field, they refer to a wide variety of methodologies applied, different units of analysis and time periods investigated, and even to various definitions of international news. The authors conclude the review by stating that this variety proves to be rather problematic as all-embracing conclusions are very difficult to draw. Referring to the Flemish case, the authors feel that more systematic data are necessary, especially data on the printed press and longitudinal data. The research presented in this Working Paper attempts to address both 'shortcomings' by analyzing international news in newspapers between 1986 and 2006. In the empirical part of this Working Paper, we further reflect on these issues when comparing our results to findings from similar research.

Furthermore, the report pointed out that research for a Flemish (news) context generally tends to focus on television news. This is partly due to the availability of an *Electronic News Archive (ENA)*, developed and monitored by the *University of Antwerp* that has collected all news broadcasts from Flemish television channels *VRT* and *VTM* since 2003. The digital archive contains rich data that are easily accessible and have already spurred several studies regarding international news (see Biltreyst & Joye, 2005; Joye & Biltreyst, 2007; De Swert et al., 2008; Wouters et al., 2009). Other notable studies on television news include work by scholars such as Peeren (2003), Votquene and Van Aelst (2003), Sinardet, De Swert and Dandoy (2004), and De Bens and Paulussen (2005). Most of these studies agree on a decrease in international news reporting in the 1990s, but differ on the exact amount of international news. For recent years, the share is estimated to be around forty percent (Wouters et al., 2009: 35). Regarding content, international television news is characterized by negative and hard news as well as determined by proximity as the dominant news value. This key role of proximity results in a high degree of Eurocentrism and domestication.

In contrast to international news coverage on television, newspapers have only been given marginal attention. To our knowledge, there are only three recent academic studies that deal with international news in Flemish newspapers. In 2002 and exploring tendencies of tabloidization in *De Standaard*, *De Morgen* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*,<sup>4</sup> De Swert (2002) investigated the amount of international news. Looking at international news stories on the front pages over a period of ten years, he observed a general decline: *De Standaard* went from 41% in 1991 to 26% in 2000, *Het Laatste Nieuws* fell from 12% to 5%, while the curve for *De Morgen* displayed several peaks and drops to eventually result in a *status quo* of 26%. De Swert further concluded that international news coverage can be considered as a characteristic distinction between quality and popular press. A second study by Walgrave, De Winter and Nuytemans (2005) applied a similar research design but added the Walloon *Le Soir* and *La Libre Belgique* to the sample of newspapers. Consistent with the findings of De Swert, their data



support the hypothesis of a shrinking amount of international news on the front pages: from 45% in 1991 to 35% in 2000. *Het Laatste Nieuws* only spent 15% of its front page to international news. Finally, Biltereyst and Desmet (2010) expanded the time period and focused on *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws* for the years 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000. Their longitudinal analysis revealed that there is no real quantitative decrease of international news in absolute figures. *De Standaard* maintained an average of two to three pages of hard foreign news while *Het Laatste Nieuws* went from two to 1.4 pages in a time span of four decades. Due to the tremendous growth in the overall news output, the authors did however observe a (rather weak) decline in relative terms. Biltereyst and Desmet also looked at the front page stories. Although both newspapers display a tendency to cover more domestic news on their front page, this is more evident for the popular *Het Laatste Nieuws*. Another distinction between quality and popular press identified by Biltereyst and Desmet dealt with the type of foreign news. *De Standaard* paid more attention to hard foreign news such as politics, crime and law while *Het Laatste Nieuws* focused more on entertainment, human interest and popular culture.

To conclude this section, the debate on international news reporting is of course not restricted to the academia. In 2004, the Flemish think tank, *De Ekstermolengroep*, published a report in which they warned for the negative (societal) consequences of a declining attention to foreign news events. According to the group, this would result in a distorted picture of the world (Aertsen et al., 2004; Joye & Biltereyst, 2007). More recently, in 2009, the financial and economic crisis also affected the Flemish media sector. This has led to a number of debates and cumulated in the organization of a 'Staten-Generaal' where politicians, scholars, journalists and CEOs of media concerns discussed the role of the government, the quality of Flemish media, and future challenges. Several debates also focused on the quantity and the quality of international news coverage.

<sup>5</sup> We started the analysis in 1986 because of pragmatic reasons. The newspaper archive proved to be incomplete for preceding years.

<sup>6</sup> For the first years of the analysis, the newspaper was published in Ghent as *De Vooruit* (see De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2007). For reasons of consistency, we will refer to it as *De Morgen* for the entire period of analysis.

<sup>7</sup> Measures of reliability were calculated on a random sample (N=150) with Krippendorff's alpha 0.7 or higher. For the codebook (in Dutch), please see the appendices of this Working Paper.

## METHODOLOGY

The research presented in this Working Paper encloses a period of twenty years, covering three decades of international news reporting. Our longitudinal research design includes the following years<sup>5</sup>: 1986, 1988, 1991, 1994, 1997, 2000, 2003 and 2006. The newspaper sample consisted of *De Standaard*, *De Morgen*<sup>6</sup> and *Het Laatste Nieuws*. For each year of the design, we selected one day per month: the first Monday of January, the first Tuesday of February and so on. In the case of a missing newspaper (e.g. due to a holiday), the following day was selected. Our research population thus consisted of 288 newspapers which were manually screened by twenty-four students and the author. This resulted in a sample of 8609 articles on international issues or an average of thirty articles per newspaper. Contrary to previous research, we analyzed the complete newspaper, not only the international news covered on the newspapers' front page. This choice mainly draws upon the fact that in recent years, the number of news items (national and international) covered on the front page dropped. On the one hand, some newspapers switched to the smaller tabloid format and on the other hand, we found an increasing number of front pages that only included one or two news events that were illustrated by large pictures. An additional aspect is the increasing space devoted to advertising on the newspapers' front page. Therefore, we included all pages in the sample, except for the sports pages, ads ("zoekertjes" or 'lost and found') and special sections in the weekend issue. A second point of difference with most newspaper research is that we measured media attention in terms of the space devoted to the news item. While most studies count the number of words, we propose the size in cm<sup>2</sup> of the article (pictures included) as an adequate measure to assess the degree of media attention and hence newsworthiness. For reasons of comparison, a variable for the total editorial output of a newspaper (national and international news, without sports and special weekend sections) was measured by multiplying the number of pages with the size of the front page. Regarding our choice of methodology, quantitative content analysis allows us to reduce a huge flow of texts to a standard set of statistically manipulable data representing the presence, the intensity and the frequency of some characteristics relevant to news reporting on international events. The data were coded by the author and the trained students using a pretested codebook (see Wester & van Atteveldt, 2006).<sup>7</sup>

A second part of the results section deals with the findings from eight semi-structured in-depth interviews with journalists of newspapers and news agencies (see Table 1). All respondents have considerable experience and expertise in international news reporting. The online journalist and the journalist from the national news agency *Belga* have a more diverse profile as they both cover a substantial amount of domestic news as well. The interviews were conducted via telephone or face-to-face in the summer of 2009. All conversations were recorded and then transcribed. The transcripts were analyzed using qualitative content analysis techniques (Wester & Peters, 2004: 83-103) and subsequently sorted according to three topics: the quantity and the quality of international news

<sup>8</sup> For more information on *Inter Press Service (IPS)*, see Joye, 2009.



coverage, news values and selection, and the role of news agencies. Regarding the latter, we also chose to interview one journalist from the mainstream news agency *Belga* and one from the alternative news agency *IPS-Vlaanderen*<sup>8</sup>. As such, we were able to reflect on the contemporary role of news purveyors in providing international news as evaluated by both parties.

**TABLE 1**      *Overview of respondents*

<b>Respondent</b>	<b>Gender and age</b>	<b>Medium</b>	<b>Newspaper or agency</b>	<b>Duration</b>
R1	Male – 35	Newspaper	<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	*
R2	Male – 46	Newspaper	<i>De Standaard</i>	44min
R3	Male – 37	Newspaper	<i>Het Nieuwsblad</i>	48min
R4	Male – 29	Online/Newspaper	<i>Het Nieuwsblad Online</i>	30min
R5	Male – 41	Newspaper	<i>De Morgen</i>	31min
R6	Male – 46	News agency	<i>IPS-Vlaanderen</i>	30min
R7	Male – 29	News agency	<i>Belga</i>	38min
R8	Male – 40	Newspaper	<i>De Morgen</i>	1h04min

\* The respondent requested to be interviewed via e-mail.



## RESULTS

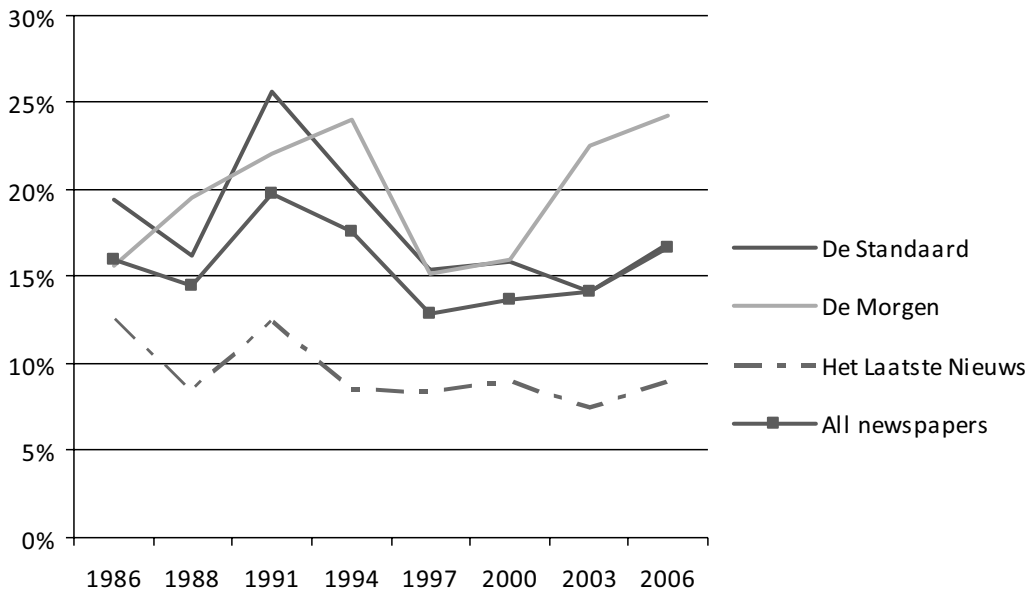
In what follows, we first present the results of the content analysis according to the dimensions outlined above: amount of international news, and thematic and geographic diversity. After this, we briefly deal with a more diverse set of results tackling the sources used by the newspapers, the use of pictures and the presence of actors in the news. The second main part of the empirical section focuses on the findings from the in-depth interviews.

### Amount of international news

Between 1986 and 2006 all three newspapers published 8609 articles on international events, an average of thirty articles per daily newspaper. This corresponds to an overall space of 1,703,773.06 cm<sup>2</sup> of international news. Taking into account the total space of national and international news, which is 10,962,482 cm<sup>2</sup>, this means that the newspapers devoted 15.5% of their space to international events. Of these events, 6.5% are considered to be newsworthy enough to be covered on the front page. In terms of daily pages, a Flemish newspaper published on average 3.5 pages international news out of almost 23 pages. However, we need to point out that these figures are an underestimation as our research design was not able to filter out advertising that was part of editorial pages. The total editorial output is thus lower than 10,962,482 cm<sup>2</sup>, and the percentage of international news will be slightly higher. From a longitudinal perspective, the amount of international news in Flemish newspapers remains quite constant, between 13 and 18% (see Graph 1). The highest percentage of international news, 19.8%, was obtained in 1991 when 'Operation Desert Storm' in Iraq started and the Soviet Union collapsed. Both events attracted huge media attention. Not surprisingly, 1991 also had the highest percentage of international news covered on the front page, namely 8.7%. The lowest percentage of international news (12.9%) was observed for 1997 when several domestic events such as the closure of the Renault factory in Vilvoorde, the crash at the air show in Oostende, the heath wave in the summer as well as the aftermath of the Dutroux case dominated the news headlines. In general, most peaks and drops in the curve of international news can be explained by the occurrence of either major national (such as elections) or international events (mainly with relevance to or involvement of Western countries, including Belgium). News, in terms of relative attention devoted to items, is generally conceived to be a 'zero-sum game' (Adams, 1986: 113, Franks, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Rwanda and Burundi are former Belgian colonies. In 1994, the presidents of both countries were assassinated when their airplane was shot down. This event has generally been considered to be the catalyst for the Rwandan genocide. Over the course of approximately hundred days, an estimated 800,000 people were killed (BBC, 2008), including ten Belgian soldiers.

**GRAPH 1** Amount of international news (1986-2006, % of total editorial output in cm<sup>2</sup>, N=8609)



When we look at the amount of international news covered by the different newspapers (see Table 2), *De Morgen* devoted most attention and space to international news (20.1%), closely followed by *De Standaard* (17.6%). With 9.3%, *Het Laatste Nieuws* published considerably less international news than both quality newspapers. In terms of pages, *De Morgen* offered its readers five pages of international news (out of 25), *De Standaard* four pages (out of 22) and *Het Laatste Nieuws* two out of 21 pages. Regarding the development per newspaper, *Het Laatste Nieuws* closely follows the above discussed general tendency of relative stability with a peak for 1991 and another one for 1986 (nuclear disaster in Chernobyl and explosion of space shuttle Challenger). The quality press displayed more extreme heights and lows. *De Standaard* for instance peaked with 25.6% in 1991, thereafter its share of international news continuously dropped, only to slightly recover in 2006 with 16.9% of international news. The curve for *De Morgen* shows a steady rise till 1994 when the newspaper devoted a lot of attention to the political and humanitarian crisis in Rwanda and Burundi.<sup>9</sup> Especially during the last two years of the time period under study, *De Morgen* established itself as the newspaper with most international news reporting. In 2006 it even devoted 24.3% of its news output to international news.



**TABLE 2** *International news in Flemish newspapers (1986-2006, N=8609)*

<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>International news (articles)</b>	<b>International news (cm<sup>2</sup>)</b>	<b>Total amount of news (cm<sup>2</sup>)</b>	<b>International news (% cm<sup>2</sup>)</b>	<b>Total number of pages</b>	<b>International news (pages)</b>	<b>International news (pages per newspaper)</b>
<b>De Standaard</b>	1986	491	77170,13	397280	19,4%	191	37,1	3,1
	1988	457	70912,83	436800	16,2%	210	34,1	2,8
	1991	594	114958,35	449280	25,6%	216	55,3	4,6
	1994	414	82276,04	403520	20,4%	194	39,6	3,6
	1997	437	69043,51	447200	15,4%	215	33,2	2,8
	2000	470	93188,12	588640	15,8%	283	44,8	3,7
	2003	502	95256,69	671840	14,2%	323	45,8	3,5
	2006	422	88779,49	524552	16,9%	493	83,4	7
	<i>Total</i>		<i>3787</i>	<i>691585,16</i>	<i>3919112</i>	<i>17,6%</i>	<i>2125</i>	<i>375</i>
<i>Average per newspaper</i>		<i>39,4</i>	<i>7204</i>	<i>40824,1</i>	<i>17,6%</i>	<i>22,1</i>	<i>3,9</i>	<i>3,9</i>
<b>De Morgen</b>	1986	202	47774,96	305200	15,7%	280	43,8	3,7
	1988	386	75771,24	386950	19,6%	355	69,5	5,8
	1991	300	76321,8	346680	22,0%	214	47,1	3,9
	1994	438	115301,27	479520	24,0%	296	71,2	5,9
	1997	279	62211,45	409860	15,2%	253	38,4	3,2
	2000	337	78684,71	492480	16,0%	304	48,6	4
	2003	317	97008,12	430920	22,5%	266	59,9	5,4
	2006	395	111840,91	461160	24,3%	366	88,8	7,4
	<i>Total</i>		<i>2654</i>	<i>664914,46</i>	<i>3312770</i>	<i>20,1%</i>	<i>2334</i>	<i>468,5</i>
<i>Average per newspaper</i>		<i>27,9</i>	<i>6999,1</i>	<i>34871,3</i>	<i>20,1%</i>	<i>24,6</i>	<i>4,9</i>	<i>4,9</i>
<b>Het Laatste Nieuws</b>	1986	285	45378,25	363600	12,5%	202	25,2	2,1
	1988	254	37461,72	444600	8,4%	247	20,8	1,7
	1991	352	56830,86	459000	12,4%	255	31,6	2,6
	1994	335	39344,83	464400	8,5%	258	21,9	1,7
	1997	247	39518,27	471600	8,4%	262	22,0	1,8
	2000	242	45374,06	504000	9,0%	280	25,2	2,1
	2003	207	40948,51	550800	7,4%	306	22,7	1,9
	2006	246	42416,94	471600	9,0%	262	23,6	2
	<i>Total</i>		<i>2168</i>	<i>347273,44</i>	<i>3729600</i>	<i>9,3%</i>	<i>21,4</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Average per newspaper</i>		<i>22,4</i>	<i>3580,1</i>	<i>38449,5</i>	<i>9,3%</i>	<i>21,4</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>2</i>
<b>All newspapers</b>	1986	978	170323,34	1066080	16,0%	673	107,5	3
	1988	1097	184145,79	1268350	14,5%	812	117,9	3,3
	1991	1246	248111,01	1254960	19,8%	685	135,4	3,8
	1994	1187	236922,14	1347440	17,6%	748	131,5	3,7
	1997	963	170773,23	1328660	17,6%	748	131,5	3,7
	2000	1049	217246,89	1585120	12,9%	730	93,8	2,6
	2003	1026	233213,32	1653560	14,1%	895	126,2	3,5
	2006	1063	243037,34	1457312	16,7%	1121	187	5,2
	<i>Total</i>		<i>8609</i>	<i>1703773,06</i>	<i>10961482</i>	<i>15,5%</i>	<i>6531</i>	<i>1015,1</i>
<i>Average per newspaper</i>		<i>29,9</i>	<i>5915,9</i>	<i>38060,7</i>	<i>15,5%</i>	<i>22,7</i>	<i>3,5</i>	<i>3,8</i>

<sup>10</sup> In reflecting on these methodological issues, we acknowledge and underwrite the concerns raised by Wouters, et al. (2009) (cf. supra).

<sup>11</sup> For most years in the analysis, the average paper size for *De Morgen* is 1620 cm<sup>2</sup>, for *De Standaard* 2080 cm<sup>2</sup>. In 2006 both newspaper had adopted the Berliner format: *De Morgen's* size is then 1260 cm<sup>2</sup> and *De Standaard* 1064 cm<sup>2</sup>. This change in format also explains the peak in number of pages for 2006.



Referring to the other Flemish newspaper studies by De Swert (2002) and Biltreyst and Desmet (2010), we can identify some similarities and differences. Consistent with Biltreyst and Desmet we found a small decline in the number of pages of foreign news in *De Standaard* (4.6 to 3.7) and *Het Laatste Nieuws* (2.6 to 2.1) between 1990 and 2000, although both studies slightly differ on the number of pages. Analyzing front pages for the period 1991 to 2000, De Swert observed a decreasing amount of international news. Our data confirm this finding for the selected time period as the total amount of international news dropped from 19.8% to 13.7%. However, both studies differ on two important points. First, our analysis also reveals that since 2000 international news was on the rise again to finally reach a similar percentage as in 1986 and 1988. Secondly, and looking at the data for each newspaper, our study supports the hypothesis of a fall in international news reporting between 1991 and 2000, but according to our findings, this appears to be a more moderate development than identified by De Swert. He concluded that *De Standaard* went from 41% to 26%, we found a fall from 25.6% to 15.8%. For *De Morgen*, De Swert found a *status quo* of 26%, we observed a drop from 22% to 16%. *Het Laatste Nieuws* went from 12% to 5% in the study by De Swert while our data show a fall from 12.4% to 9%. These differences underwrite, among others, the sensitivity of sampling regarding an analysis of international news.<sup>10</sup> First, concerning the studies' time frame, 1991 proved to be an exceptional year regarding international events. By consequence, using 1991 as reference point can create possible misinterpretations regarding the amount of international news and its evolution through time. Secondly, both studies differ in their choice of analysis unit. De Swert analyzed the front page while we opted to analyze the newspaper in full. The relevance of taking into account the complete news output becomes clear when looking at the data in Table 2. Drawing upon the absolute number of articles on international news and, though to a lesser extent, the amount of international news in cm<sup>2</sup>, we could conclude that *De Standaard* covers most international news. A daily copy of *De Standaard* contains on average forty articles or 7204 cm<sup>2</sup> on international events, as compared to twenty-eight articles and 6999 cm<sup>2</sup> for *De Morgen*. In relative terms, and thus incorporating the total amount of news covered (national and international), *De Morgen* however takes the lead. The reason for this lies in the different formats of both newspapers. Except for 2006, pages of *De Morgen* are smaller in size<sup>11</sup> which resulted in a higher proportional share of international news as well as more pages. Using the total news output as reference variable also has the advantage of taking into account the tremendous growth in the overall editorial news output of the newspapers (see Table 2), as also Biltreyst and Desmet (2010) have done in their analysis of *De Standaard* and *Het Laatste Nieuws*.

<sup>12</sup> For this quantitative analysis, we drew upon a thematic list that was compiled by the *Electronic News Archive* (University of Antwerp). See also Biltreyst & Joye, 2005.

## **Thematic and geographic diversity**

A second indicator for the quality of international news is the diversity in themes and countries covered by the newspapers. According to the literature review, Western news media are generally not displaying a wide variety in their coverage of international events. International news is slanted towards bad news, hence focusing on violence, conflict, natural disasters, or on politics and elite actors (Rauch, 2003; Rantanen & Boyd-Barrett, 2004; Harrison, 2006). Regarding the geographic scope, most attention is devoted to events occurring in neighboring countries or the Western hemisphere, or to events related to the home country (Stevenson & Cole, 1980; Reeves, 1993; Kamalipour, 2002). Let us have a closer look at the thematic and geographic diversity of Flemish newspapers.

### **Thematic analysis**

Table 3 shows a breakdown of the international news in sixteen themes.<sup>12</sup> For the most part, international news is mainly focused on hard news: political events, financial or economic issues, law and crime, and war and peace. Entertainment news also receives a lot of coverage, especially in the last years of the research design (cf. *infra*). These five topics cover 72.1% of all international news (in cm<sup>2</sup>) in the three newspapers. On the lower end of the table we find themes such as tourism, religion, and environment, but also disasters. The latter is remarkable as several authors refer to disaster news as a typical foreign news topic given its negative nature. In 1979, Rosenblum even accused Western news media of a 'coups and earthquakes' paradigm in their reporting of the world, especially reports on the developing world (cf. *supra*). However, our analysis points out that Flemish news coverage of Africa, Asia and Latin America, the three continents where the developing countries are located, focuses on the same topics: politics (even up to 31% for Africa and Latin America), crime and law (around 20%), and war and peace (around 16%). Disaster news only takes about 3 to 4 percent. This low percentage can be explained by referring to the geographic bias in disaster proneness. As the overall majority of disasters take place in the developing countries (Belloni, et al., 2000; EM-DAT, 2009), their news value for Flemish newspapers is rather limited (see the geographic analysis below).



**TABLE 3**      *Thematic diversity (1986-2006, N=8609 articles)*

	Articles	Articles (%)	cm <sup>2</sup>	cm <sup>2</sup> (%)
Politics	1687	19.6%	368299.95	21.6%
Financial news & Economy	1476	17.1%	230731.18	13.5%
Law & Crime	1202	14%	203077.51	11.9%
Entertainment	938	10.9%	227133.36	13.3%
War & Peace	789	9.2%	198643.99	11.7%
Human interest	582	6.8%	82544.64	4.8%
Social affairs	430	5%	83044.59	4.9%
Education & Science	283	3.3%	58691.96	3.4%
International organizations	262	3%	49912.14	2.9%
Disasters	217	2.5%	49372.23	2.9%
Traffic	194	2.3%	37809.13	2.2%
Environment	184	2.1%	34039.34	2%
Religion	147	1.7%	28029.96	1.6%
Migration & Integration	82	1%	19097.91	1.1%
Sports	71	0.8%	17839.32	1%
Tourism	65	0.7%	15484.85	0.9%

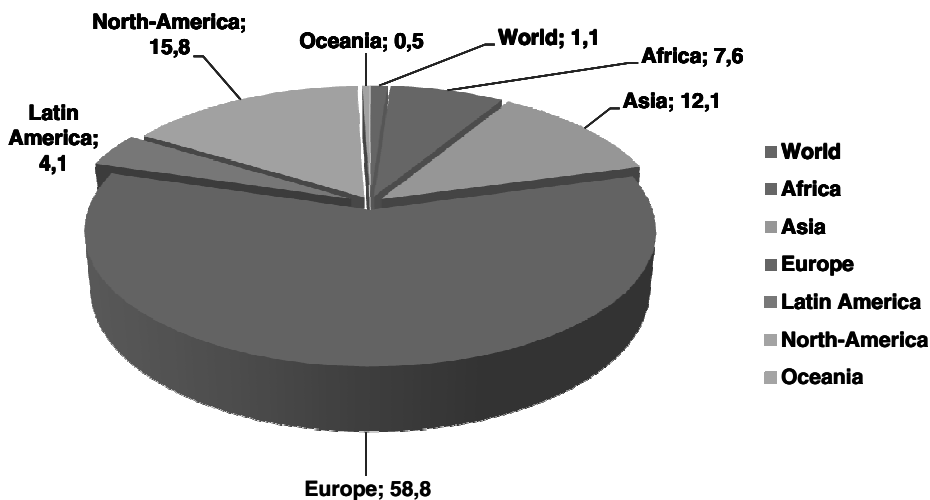
Although the annual ranking of thematic categories remains relatively constant over the years, we observed a remarkable tendency: the gradual rise of so-called soft news. Since 1994, Flemish newspapers tend to devote more attention to entertainment and human-interest stories while political news drops in attention and hence newsworthiness. For instance, in 2003 and 2006 entertainment was the second theme in the ranking with 16% while political items fell to a fourth place (around 13%). News reporting on North-America is even dominated by entertainment news. Another indication for this trend was found by analyzing the subtheme. Coders were able to attribute a second, though less prominent theme to each news article on international events. This happened for three out of four articles. Again, we see the same dominant themes, but starting in 1994 it is the topic of human interest that tops the ranking. We also see a steady increase in the number of articles covering social issues. Regarding the different newspapers, the more popular, middle-market *Het Laatste Nieuws* relatively covers more news on entertainment and human interest issues than its counterparts from the quality press. It also reports most on law and crime while both *De Standaard* and *De Morgen* have political news at the number one position. These results are consistent with findings from previous research on tabloidization and soft news (Franklin, 1997; De Swert, 2002).



## Geographic analysis

The academic literature on Western news coverage hints at a very Eurocentric perspective on international news. As illustrated by Graph 2, Flemish newspapers are no exception to this. Nearly 60% of all editorial space concerns events that happened in Europe. In second place comes North-America with 15.8%, followed by Asia (12.1%), Africa (7.6%) and Latin America (4.1%). This 'hierarchy' is constant over the years, although we noticed a decrease in the amount of news on Latin America (from 5.5% in 1986 to 2.9% in 2006) and Africa (from 8.4% to 5.2%) to the benefit of Asia and North-America. *Het Laatste Nieuws* portrayed the strongest tendency to focus on Europe and North-America, while the quality press attempted to provide a diverse coverage by paying more attention to Africa (for instance 9.4% of all articles in *De Morgen* focus on Africa) and Latin America.

GRAPH 2 *Proportional distribution of international news output in cm<sup>2</sup> according to continent (1986-2006, N=8609 articles)*



In terms of individual countries, Table 4 shows the top ten of most covered countries. These ten countries receive 57.3% of all international news coverage and they represent the most important actors in terms of geopolitical, military and economic power. We recognize all permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom and United States) and almost all members of the G8 (Japan was number 11 and Canada took spot 33 in the list). The top ten also includes all neighboring countries of Belgium as well as popular holiday destinations such as Spain and Italy. In other words, the newsworthiness of an international event is determined by the global political, military and economic power of its location as well as by its proximity to the home country, Belgium in this case. Due to the two Gulf wars that took place in 1991 and 2003, Iraq





also made it to the top ten. This ranking of newsworthy countries does not differ between the three newspapers.

**TABLE 4** *Top ranking of most covered countries by number of articles (1986-2006, N=8609 articles)*

	<b>Country</b>	<b>Articles</b>
1	United States of America	1348
2	United Kingdom	721
3	France	624
4	The Netherlands	529
5	Germany	473
6	Russia	344
7	Italy	265
8	Israel	185
9	China	155
	Iraq	155
10	Spain	135

Related to this is the practice of domestication (cf. supra). In general, Flemish newspapers published 1720 articles or 457,007.17 cm<sup>2</sup> of domesticated news. This corresponds to a share of 19.9% (in terms of articles) or 26.8% (in terms of space in cm<sup>2</sup>). The latter indicates that these news items are generally longer pieces than articles covering foreign news. There is no significant longitudinal evolution in the amount of domesticated news as it remains quite stable around 20%. The largest percentages of domesticated news are to be found in *Het Laatste Nieuws*: 24.7% of all the articles are domesticated, but this percentage rises to 35.4% when we look at the size of the articles. These data confirm the newspaper's strong Eurocentric and even ethnocentric approach of international news. The continent that counts most domesticated news coverage is Africa with 27.6% of its articles domesticated. This high percentage is most likely a consequence of the 1997 genocide in Rwanda and Belgium's involvement in it.

### **International news: sources, actors and use of visuals**

In this third section we will briefly discuss the results for three remaining variables: sources, actors, and pictures.

Regarding the use of news sources, our analysis was severely limited by editorial policy. In their international news reporting, Flemish newspapers do not always indicate the source of the article (own coverage, news agency, copyright). While *Het Laatste Nieuws* even makes no reference at all,



the quality press mostly stated that it concerns own news gathering and coverage by their journalists and correspondents. In *De Standaard* 76.4% of the articles has a reference of which 32.2% is own coverage. For *De Morgen*, this is even 57.8% of all articles with a reference (59.7% of all articles). When a news agency is mentioned, the three Western news purveyors *Reuters*, *AP* and *AFP* are most cited. *Reuters* is clearly the most popular source (23.8% for *De Standaard* and 14.1% for *De Morgen*). Of course, this is related to the subscriptions of the newspapers. Due to the Flemish newspapers' inconsistency in mentioning the source used, our results could easily be misinterpreted. Although international news is generally believed to be very dependent on news agency copy, we are thus not able to make any comments on this.

A second minor part of the quantitative content analysis briefly dealt with the actors that were mentioned in the international news. From all categories, political actors (Belgian politicians, foreign politicians and international institutions) were mentioned most frequently (in 63.7% of all the articles), followed by civilians (43%) and companies (19.2%). The quality press spent more attention to political actors while *Het Laatste Nieuws* focused more on civilians in its international coverage. Given the fact that celebrities were coded as civilians, these findings may be linked to *Het Laatste Nieuws'* tendency towards covering soft news as compared to the quality press' focus on political items (cf. supra for the thematic analysis).

Up till now we have made no distinction between text and images when discussing international news. Table 5 shows the amount of visuals published by the newspapers and their proportion of the total amount of international news. In general, we can identify a positive trend in the number of pictures published. In 1986 all three newspapers published 242 pictures which corresponds with 22.1% of all space devoted to international news. Twenty years later, the number of pictures has increased to 678 or 31.2% of all space. Several scholars argue that this increased use of visual material is an important characteristic of tabloidization (cf. supra). However, a difference between the quality and the popular press is still visible. In *Het Laatste Nieuws* one out of two articles is illustrated with a picture. This slightly drops to 44.9% for *De Morgen* and more substantial to 25.5% for *De Standaard*. If we take the size into account, *Het Laatste Nieuws* reserves one third of its space to visuals, followed by *De Morgen* with 27.1% and *De Standaard* with 22.1%. It is important to note that our data did not allow us to reflect on the content and hence the mode of photographic representation of international news. Tomani? Trivundža (2008: 33) however argues that the visual coverage of international news reveals similar biases as the textual coverage: an unbalanced geographical distribution with a dominance of what he refers to as the global West as well as a dominance of more negative topics in which the developing countries are depicted as compared to photographic representations of the developed countries.



**TABLE 5** *Use of pictures in international news reporting (1986-2006, N=8609)*

<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Pictures</b>	<b>Pictures (cm<sup>2</sup>)</b>	<b>Pictures (cm<sup>2</sup> %)</b>
<b>De Standaard</b>	1986	89	14828.08	19.2%
	1988	86	14042.35	19.8%
	1991	112	20788.75	18.1%
	1994	78	16563.99	20.1%
	1997	90	14239.42	20.6%
	2000	139	22293.48	23.9%
	2003	136	24894.9	26.1%
	2006	234	25528.76	28.8%
	<i>Total</i>	<i>964</i>	<i>153179.73</i>	<i>22.1%</i>
<b>De Morgen</b>	1986	77	13215.82	27.7%
	1988	104	18159.58	24.0%
	1991	130	20401.45	26.7%
	1994	186	28961.55	25.1%
	1997	112	17537.38	28.2%
	2000	130	18910.06	24.0%
	2003	182	27743.01	28.6%
	2006	270	35092.47	31.4%
	<i>Total</i>	<i>1191</i>	<i>180021.32</i>	<i>27.1%</i>
<b>Het Laatste Nieuws</b>	1986	76	9534.89	21.0%
	1988	67	8259.43	22.0%
	1991	159	17974.77	31.6%
	1994	125	13021.88	33.1%
	1997	126	14828.36	37.5%
	2000	169	20284.85	44.7%
	2003	182	17498.02	42.7%
	2006	174	15211.66	35.9%
	<i>Total</i>	<i>1078</i>	<i>116613.86</i>	<i>33.6%</i>
<b>All newspapers</b>	1986	242	37578.79	22.1%
	1988	257	40461.36	22.0%
	1991	401	59164.97	23.8%
	1994	389	58547.42	24.7%
	1997	328	46605.16	27.3%
	2000	438	61488.39	28.3%
	2003	500	70135.93	30.1%
	2006	678	75832.89	31.2%
	<i>Total</i>	<i>3233</i>	<i>449814.91</i>	<i>26.4%</i>



## Findings from the in-depth interviews

In order to gain a better understanding of the above presented results, we will discuss some of the findings from eight semi-structured in-depth interviews with news chefs and journalists from the three newspapers analyzed above, complemented with journalists from the popular, middle-market *Het Nieuwsblad* (print and online) as well as journalists from the news agencies *Belga* (national) and *IPS-Vlaanderen* (global and alternative). The following three topics will be discussed: the quantity and the quality of international news coverage, news values and selection, and the use of news agency copy.

### Quantity and quality of international news coverage

Commenting on the statements about an assumed decline in the quantity and the quality of international news, our respondents feel that this is not the case for Flemish newspapers. They point out that this issue is very dependent on the newspaper itself, its profile, target audience and editorial policy. Especially journalists and editors from the quality press reject the statements as they refer to the substantial number of pages daily devoted to international news and the amount of foreign news on the website (cf. *infra*) and in the weekend sections. Regarding the aspect of quality, almost all respondents argue that this is in fact a case of misperception, not based on data and hence related to feelings of nostalgia that are best summarized by the axiom “*in the early days, everything used to be better.*” The interviewees who further expressed themselves on the difficult issue of quality generally believed that such critics have a romanticized perception of international news reporting. However, one respondent identified a potential ‘source’ of this criticism: the steady rise of soft news, human interest and news about celebrities. This adds on to comments by journalists of the popular press who also do not believe that there is less international news, but who do acknowledge a shift in the content produced. Hard political news is still covered but loses in newsworthiness as compared to human interest and celebrity news. This shift in content was clearly identified in the quantitative content analysis. Members of the quality press implicitly underwrote this tendency by acknowledging that also for them it became more important to offer the reader a well-balanced mix of hard news and soft news, serious and less serious, negative and positive news. In their view, hard news however remains the “*core business*” of international news reporting and a key issue in the image or profile of the quality newspapers. Reflecting on the issue from a longitudinal perspective, the journalists point towards a radically changed news ecology. Particularly the Internet is perceived to have a profound impact on international news reporting. On the one hand, the number of available sources for a journalist and the amount of easily accessible information has risen exponentially in the last years. On the other hand, newspapers have developed their own websites which they consider to be an integral part of the overall news ‘brand’. Journalists look at the website as an additional news





channel to cover international events that were not selected for the printed newspaper or as a tool to provide more background information. Nonetheless, the online journalist in the sample noted that international news on the website generally displays the same geographic and thematic biases as the printed version, with a focus on domesticated news, economy (e.g. consumer affairs) and celebrity news.

## **News values and selection criteria**

A second focus of the interviews dealt with the criteria used by journalists to select international news and to assess the news value of an event. The data from the quantitative content analysis revealed a rather Eurocentric and even 'local' perspective on international news as well as an increasing trend of visualization. Regarding the latter, all journalists signaled the contemporary importance of images. They believe that pictures (and video in the case of websites) are a useful way to attract attention and to make (distant) events comprehensible. It also influences the news value of an event. Events of which no images are available will most likely receive none to minor coverage. Inquired about the dominant Eurocentric approach to international news, our respondents refer to the key role of proximity in selecting and covering distant events. Proximity is a broad concept, but the respondents mentioned the geographic distance (cf. the newsworthiness of the neighboring countries), tourism, cultural affinity, and emotional and psychological involvement with the distant event as relevant indicators of proximity. In general, what is close to the Flemish reader and of relevance to his/her 'world' will be considered as being newsworthy. Taking this into account, a Eurocentric perspective on international news is a logical consequence according to some journalists. Another consequence is the domestication of international news. Although this is a well-applied practice among journalists, it is no "*primary reflex*" for all. A journalist of *De Morgen* refers to it as "*the Brit in the shit*"-paradigm, based on the practice of British tabloids to only pay attention to foreign events when a compatriot is involved. Both journalists of *De Morgen* stated that they only consider domestication when it is relevant and adds value to the story, for instance in the case of an eyewitness account. They further refer to the editorial policy and ideology of the newspaper as a key factor in determining the news value of an event rather than the factor of proximity and possibilities for domestication.

The amount and nature of international news can further be influenced by a number of contextual factors. The journalists of *De Morgen* already mentioned the editorial policy, others referred to time and money constraints, the staffing, and the amount of domestic news. For example, during summer more pages are available to international news reporting as there is not much activity on the national political scene. Finally, the journalist him/herself is also an important factor in the discussion. The personal interests, expertise of a region, foreign language skills, overall experience, and the network of contacts can all be determining factors. In their choice of selecting events or scanning the news input provided by the news agencies or other sources, journalists admit that they are often lead by



these personal characteristics, henceforth affecting the geographic and thematic diversity of that day's international news offer in the newspaper. For example, one respondent referred to a colleague who speaks fluently German. When this colleague is responsible for the 'gatekeeping', a remarkable higher share of news on Germany and from the German news agency *DPA* is selected.

## **Role and use of news agencies**

When confronted with the statement that the international news section of a newspaper is essentially a 'copy and paste' of the news provided by the news agencies, all respondents denied this for their newspaper by stressing the own editorial input and the share of international news that is produced by the own journalists and correspondents. Nonetheless, news agency copy remains an important source, although the contemporary role of news agencies is conceived as being not as central and indispensable as it once used to be. This development is nurtured by the rise of the Internet and the proliferation of online news sources and services such as *Google News*. Nowadays, journalists look upon news agencies in a more passive role as "*trigger*" media, as signaling events to the journalist. Some respondents also refer to them as "*a beacon of reliability*", providing reliable and trustworthy information. In other words, news agencies offer the (first) basic information on an event which is then further complemented by the journalist using the Internet and his/her own sources and network. This practice might be an explanation for the high percentage of 'own coverage' we found in the quantitative content analysis.

Our sample of respondents also included two journalists working for a news agency. Both feel that the use of news agency copy is very dependent on the newspaper, its profile and target audience, and its financial and human resources in terms of the number of journalists working on international news and the (financial) possibilities of journalists to travel and/or report from abroad. They believe that the newspapers that do not have sufficient financial resources tend to draw proportionally more on news agency copy, such as the free newspaper *Metro*. In their work of disseminating international news, both journalists also encountered the newspapers' demand for domesticated news and the key role of proximity. Although trying to strike the right balance between global and local, the news agencies are fully aware of the fact that putting 'Belgium' or 'Flanders' in the headlines increases the newsworthiness and hence the chance of selection.



## CONCLUSION

Within academia, there appears to be a general consensus on a gradual decline in the quantity and the quality of international news reporting for almost all Western societies. Investigating international news in Flemish newspapers between 1986 and 2006 and interviewing journalists on the issue, the data presented in this Working Paper tend to moderate this 'crisis at the heart of our media' (Sampson, 1996) and other accusations of a fast and increasingly shrinking international news agenda. Despite a decline in the 1990s, we observed a fairly steady percentage of 15.5% over a period of twenty years, notwithstanding occasional peaks and lows due to exceptional news events such as the Iraq war (1991). The quality newspapers *De Morgen* and *De Standaard* devoted considerably more attention and space to international news as compared to the more popular *Het Laatste Nieuws*. Nonetheless, international news coverage in all Flemish newspapers displayed several biases in terms of geographic and thematic diversity. These data for a Flemish context underscore several key findings from international research, including the claim that our newspapers reproduce a certain kind of world order, mainly a Euro-American centered one. Most attention is paid to the United States of America and Europe, particularly to our neighboring countries. This is related to the central role of proximity as a news value. The findings from the expert interviews also confirmed proximity as a key indicator of newsworthiness. Newsworthiness is further determined by the geopolitical, economic and military power of a nation. Regarding the thematic variety, international news is slanted towards hard and negative news, although the data hint at a shift away from hard news. Entertainment news and human interest have gained in importance. Though this was no initial goal of the research project, the data thus revealed a slumbering tendency of tabloidization. If we define tabloidization as a process that 'involves a shift to new and more entertainment-oriented kinds of content, and a shift from verbal to visual priorities' (Oikarinen quoted in De Swert, 2002: 29), the Flemish newspapers tend to provide more soft news and visual material in their international news reporting. According to McLachlan and Golding (2000), providing less international news is another possible indicator of tabloidization.

As a concluding remark, we briefly refer to the societal relevance and importance of international news. In times of an increasingly globalized society and culture, developing an international perspective is more important than ever (Franks, 2004), and so is the role of adequate and substantial international news reporting in this process. In the words of Wallis and Baran (1990, quoted in Harrison, 2006: 175): 'by remaining ignorant of the world we have created, we remain ignorant of ourselves.'



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## APPENDICES

### Codebook for newspaper

**Naam en nummer** codeur: .....

**Krant:**

- De Standaard (1)
- De Morgen (2)
- Het Laatste Nieuws (3)

**Datum** van de krant (dd/mm/jjjj): ..... / ..... / .....

**Krantnummer:** \_\_\_\_\_ (jaartal – krant – maand, bv 2003204)

**Formaat** krant: \_\_\_\_\_ cm<sup>2</sup>

Aantal **pagina's** van krant (zonder sportkatern, zoekertjes en weekendbijlagen):  
..... pagina's

Top drie belangrijkste items **voorpagina:**

1. ....
2. ....
3. ....

Aantal artikels **buitenlands** nieuws: ..... artikels



## Codebook for articles

<b>Naam en nummer</b> codeur:.....	<b>Krant:</b>
	<input type="radio"/> De Standaard (1)
	<input type="radio"/> De Morgen (2)
	<input type="radio"/> Het Laatste Nieuws (3)
<b>Datum</b> van de krant (dd/mm/jjjj): ..... / ..... / ..... → <b>Krantnummer:</b> .....	

Titel van het **artikel** en **paginanummer:**

.....

Korte samenvatting **inhoud** artikel (en stijlvorm):

.....  
.....

### Bron

artikel: .....

<b>OMVANG:</b> Vul in	<b>ACTOREN IN ARTIKEL:</b>
Omvang van de <i>foto's</i> : ..... cm <sup>2</sup>	<input type="checkbox"/> 1. Belgische politici: .....
Omvang van de <i>tekst</i> : ..... cm <sup>2</sup>	<input type="checkbox"/> 2. Buitenlandse politici: .....
Omvang van het <i>totale artikel</i> : ..... cm <sup>2</sup>	<input type="checkbox"/> 3. Politieke instellingen: .....
<b>Aantal</b> foto's bij artikel: .....	<input type="checkbox"/> 4. Sociale organisaties: .....
	<input type="checkbox"/> 5. Burgers: .....
	<input type="checkbox"/> 6. Militairen: .....
	<input type="checkbox"/> 7. Bedrijven (industrie): .....
	<input type="checkbox"/> 8. Religieuze actoren: .....
	<input type="checkbox"/> 9. Andere: .....





**THEMA ARTIKEL:**

- 1. Politiek (verkiezingen, beleid, ...)
- 2. Gerecht & criminaliteit (rellen, moord, ...)
- 3. Migratie & integratie
- 4. Financiën & economie (werk, bedrijven, ...)
- 5. Sociale zaken (armoede, gezondheid, ...)
- 6. Mobiliteit & verkeer (ongevallen, ...)
- 7. Milieu & natuur
- 8. Entertainment (media, royalty, sterren, ...)
- 9. Onderwijs & wetenschappen
- 10. Toerisme
- 11. Religie
- 12. Oorlog & vrede (terrorisme, ...)
- 13. Internationale instellingen (VN, EU, ...)
- 14. Rampen (natuurramp, menselijke ramp, ...)
- 15. Sport (Olympische Spelen, WK, ...)
- 16. Human-interest (faits divers, randnieuws, ...)

*Verdere specificatie:*

- Soort ramp:  
.....

**GEOGRAFISCHE DOMINANTIE:**

- 1. Puur buitenland
- 2. Buitenland met link naar België

**GEOGRAFISCHE ACTOREN:**

- Actor 1:.....
- Actor 2: .....
- Actor 3: .....

**FOTO'S:**

- Niet van toepassing
- Korte beschrijving foto's + bron:  
.....  
.....  
-----

**PERSONEN OP FOTO'S:**

- Niet van toepassing want geen foto's
- Niet van toepassing want geen personen
- Korte beschrijving:  
.....  
.....