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'Do (not) go to vote!' media provocation explained

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‘Do (not) go voting!’ Media provocation explained

Abstract

This article conceptualizes media provocation, a common but understudied practice of mediatized protest and resistance, marketing or (self-)promotion and awareness raising. It is defined as a mediated act that questions or contravenes norms, values, laws, rules and symbolic power, thereby intentionally running counter to the normal horizon of expectations in a certain situation or context. As such, media provocation can have a major impact on public debate, politics and the course of events. In this article, the key elements of media provocation are initially examined and subsequently illustrated by drawing on a case study on Stijn Meuris, a Belgian rock artist and television personality. In 2010, he announced his refusal to vote in the next elections, although it is mandatory for all adults to vote. The findings of this case study demonstrate the contingency of the component ‘intentionality’ in the definition of media provocation.

Keywords: media provocation, mediatized protest, promotional strategy, elections, celebrity

Introduction

On 27 April 2010, five days after the Belgian federal government fell following a three-year political and institutional crisis¹, well-known rock artist and television personality Stijn Meuris announced on his Facebook profile that he would not vote in the next elections, although, importantly, this is mandatory for adults. His statement was immediately picked up by a national newspaper and other newspapers, news broadcasts and talk shows promptly followed suit, creating a lively debate for several weeks. Politicians referred to his statement in speeches, wrote opinion letters to newspapers, engaged in debates with Stijn Meuris on

television, and numerous columnists, experts and readers presented their perspectives. On the internet, a list of like-minded abstainers grew exponentially, while several Facebook groups expressing pros and cons of abstention saw the light and subsequently made it into the news as well.

This article will argue that this event and similar examples can be explained as media provocation. Media provocation is a particular type of provocation, just as media scandal is related to scandal (Lull and Hinerman, 1997; Thompson, 2000; Waisbord, 2004). Media scandal explains how certain sudden upsurges in media attention are generated by revealing a private transgression of a norm, value or law. In many cases, the transgressors are individuals or institutions who are rich in terms of symbolic capital or (public) recognition, for example, politicians, celebrities and successful CEOs. Media provocation can be seen as the inverse of media scandal: in this case, we are not dealing with a private transgression of norms, values or laws, but with mediated acts that publicly and intentionally question them. In that sense, media provocation can also be viewed as a particular kind of media or publicity stunt, a staged event to attain media coverage that is often deployed by celebrities to increase visibility. The example of Belgian singer Jo Vally shows that a publicity stunt can also turn into a provocation, even unintentionally. In order to promote his new album, the singer's manager spread the fake rumour that Jo Vally had been taken into custody in Turkey because of a suspicious suitcase; however, this unintentionally provoked the Turkish government who demanded apologies from Belgian authorities (see Van den Bulck and Van Gorp, 2011).

A clear example of media provocation is the dress that Lady Gaga wore at the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards, which was made entirely out of flank steak, triggering a debate on vegetarianism and animal rights, although it was originally meant to support her campaign against the US military's 'Don't ask, Don't tell'-policy for gays and lesbians². Similarly, Madonna has made media provocation a trademark of many of her songs, music videos and

concerts, rebelling against hegemonic identities and conceptions of religion, gender and sexuality (Wilson and Markle, 1992). The same can be said of the famous Benetton-campaigns that were designed to cause controversy, for instance, by depicting pope Benedictus XVI kissing the imam of the Al-Ashar-mosque, thereby intentionally provoking particular segments of the population.

Media provocations are used not only by celebrities and companies for social, political or commercial ends but they are also an important strategy of social movements and other agents in (mediatized) protests or conflicts (see Cottle, 2006). More specifically, what Della Porta and Diani (2006: 177) term a 'symbolic provocation' is an example of the logic of bearing witness, which is a logic of protest aimed at expressing a strong commitment towards a certain goal. In this context, the anarchist tactic of 'propaganda by the deed' can also be considered a set of provocative acts (ranging from non-violent artistic propaganda to violent destructions of storefronts and even bombings and assassinations) (Fleming, 1980). More generally, acts such as burning an adversary's flag in front of the camera; making cartoons or movies on religious figures that offend certain religious groups; using (extreme) violence to attract the attention of the media, politicians and public; or intentionally breaking a law to enforce its change can be categorized as provocative acts. For example, in 1971, in Germany, feminist Alice Schwarzer convinced 374 women, including some celebrities, to testify publicly in a popular magazine stern to having had (illegal) abortions. This was published at the time when the controversial abortion law was being reviewed. The concept of this provocation was taken from a similar publication in Le Nouvel Observateur a year earlier in France, in which 343 women, including Simone de Beauvoir and Catherine Deneuve, testified to having had abortions³.

Surprisingly, although media provocations are prevalent both in time and space, and potentially have an enormous impact on public opinion, politics and the course of events,

relatively few theoretical or empirical studies have profoundly analyzed them in the past. Moreover, the extant literature is limited to studies on provocations, and thus far, the mediated version has largely been neglected. Therefore, starting from definitions of provocation, this article aims to put forward a rigorous conceptualization of media provocation. Subsequently, this conceptualization will be applied by focussing on Stijn Meuris' announcement to abstain from voting in the next federal elections. In order to do so, I will draw on the articles published in Dutch-speaking newspapers and –magazines⁴ (n = 126), combined with an in-depth interview⁵ with Stijn Meuris. These data serve the sole purpose of illustrating the theory presented here, and are not meant to offer a systematic analysis either of the news reporting or of the practices of celebrities involved in politics.

Definitions of provocation

In previous literature, two articles are particularly dedicated to defining the concept of provocation. The first is the pioneering work by German sociologist Rainer Paris, who published an article in 1989 entitled Der kurze Atem der Provokation, or The Short Breath of the Provocation, in which he defined provocation as a social process. The second article is by Richard Vézina and Olivia Paul (1997), who addressed provocation as an execution strategy in advertising, and empirically tested the effects of provocative appeals in advertisements for clothes.

Paris (1989: 33; italics removed) defined provocation as ‘an intentionally induced and unexpected contravention of a norm, implicating the other in an open conflict which should elicit a reaction, which in turn makes the other especially in the eyes of third parties morally discredited and exposed’⁶. Vézina and Paul (1997: 179; italics removed) described a provocation as ‘a deliberate appeal, within the content of an advertisement, to stimuli that are expected to shock at least a portion of the audience, both because they are associated with

values, norms or taboos that are habitually not challenged or transgressed in advertising, and because of their distinctiveness and ambiguity’.

Notwithstanding a few differences between these two definitions, which I will discuss subsequently, their core elements—intentionality, surprise or distinctiveness, and the contravention of norms (and taboos)—are quite similar or compatible. First, Paris (1989: 33) spoke of ‘an intentionally induced ... contravention’, whereas Vézina and Paul (1997: 179; emphasis added) mentioned that a provocation is a ‘deliberate appeal ... to stimuli that are expected to shock at least a portion of the audience’. Paris (1989) explained that a provocation intentionally runs counter to the ‘normal’ horizon of expectations in a given situation; therefore, it exposes or damages the (identity of the) provoked, which is often associated with disrespect and contempt. We can think of the practice of ‘pieing’ here, or unexpectedly and publicly throwing a pie on someone’s face, as a political act. Paris (1989) added that an unwanted incident that damages another is not a provocation until—and this is an important consideration in the subsequent discussion of Stijn Meuris’ case—it is generally acknowledged or presumed that the damage is directly and intentionally inflicted upon the provoked.

Second, a provocation entails a certain degree of surprise and spontaneity, or a ‘staging of suddenness’ (Paris, 1989: 35), which implies that there is a certain degree of distinctiveness and originality (see Vézina and Paul, 1997). According to Paris (1989), the bigger and more unpredictable the surprise, the larger the impact of the provocation, although in certain cases, a sustained build-up of animosity results in a relative loss of surprise. The aspect of surprise ensures the uniqueness of the provocation because provocations can be repeated only rarely or with great difficulty (Paris, 1989).

Finally, and essentially, both the definitions imply that provocations involve contraventions or transgressions of norms. Although Vézina and Paul (1997) also added

values and taboos as possible objects of contravention, both the definitions are quite limited because they exclude rules or laws, and as the Meuris example will show, it is not necessary that an actual contravention has already occurred to be classified as a provocation. In the case of Stijn Meuris, only an announcement of a behavioural intention was sufficient to provoke the political class and divide commentators and citizens into opposing groups, although he obviously referred to the taboo subject of voting preferences as well (see below). Consequently, it could be said that a provocation essentially questions rather than contravenes the prevailing norms, values, rules or laws. Hence, indirectly, provocations are struggles over symbolic power, as they attempt to overrule current standards and subvert authority and hegemonic positions. Therefore, a provocation is especially an instrument of resistance, or a 'tactic' (de Certeau, 1988): the rules and definitions of the powerful or of those with vested interests can be used in different ways, and can also be directed against them.

Besides the commonalities between both the definitions, they each emphasize specific characteristics as well. First, Vézina and Paul (1997) argued that ambiguity regarding either its content or the advertiser's intentions is not an essential, but an additional characteristic that can increase the provocative nature of an advertisement. This may be particularly true for advertisements that need to hold consumers' attention for longer periods; however, for other provocations, a clear message or easy to interpret contravention or transgression would potentially send a stronger signal than one that is not immediately clear.

Second, in contrast with Vézina and Paul (1997), Paris (1989) indicated that a provocation harbours a causal syntactic, an inevitability: once set in motion, the people involved automatically become engaged in an unavoidable chain of reactions. However, this implied causality presents us with a limitation. In my view, it is not essential that a provocation necessitates an immediate (counter-)reaction by 'the other', and even less that this reaction implies a moral discredit. This does not mean that a provocation can be a one-

way communication without any consequences; since a provocation is always directed towards or against someone or something, it entails certain social consequences, for example a change in the communicative situation through its transmission and possible reception. Two elements of provocation explain this as follows: first, since the provocation is essentially an instrument of resistance, its communication already depicts the powerful as the powerful, which at the same time attacks their legitimacy (Paris, 1989: 40). Second, once the provocation has been communicated, it is very difficult for the provocateur to repeat it subsequently, since it has lost its ability to surprise, thereby losing its potential impact (see below). In many cases there will obviously be a clear reaction by the provoked; however, this might morally discredit the provocateur. This was the case, to a certain extent, for Stijn Meuris who received several negative reactions and was ridiculed by at least one editorialist for his provocation, which altogether partially damaged his reputation.

Conceptualizing media provocation

While the previous section discussed provocation in general, the central focus of this article is on media provocation. Although the concept might seem rather self-explanatory in that media provocations are those provocations that are mediated, it does require further clarification. In this article, mediation is understood as the open-ended process of communication through media, which differs from mediatization, that is, the meta-process that captures the co-articulation of socio-cultural change and media-communicative change (Hepp, 2012; Krotz, 2007). However, as is evident, both these concepts are related: a media provocation is indeed mediated and constructed using media, which indicates that the practices and fields of raising awareness or protesting (through provocations for example) are intensely related to media and have changed through their mediation, or, in other words, have been mediatized.

In this context, the crucial quality of media provocation is that the media are (partially) constitutive of media provocations; this is in parallel with Thompson's (2000: 61) definition of media scandals. This has four implications: first, the mediation or coverage and unfolding of provocations in the media is a primary characteristic of the constitution of media provocations. Second, non-mediated provocations also exist. I believe that it is a bridge too far to argue as Waisbord (2004: 1077) did on media scandals, that all provocations are media provocations. This is because those provocations that are local and expressed in the private sphere are clearly not media provocations. Third, the mediation of provocations gives the provocateurs a lead because it adds to their impact in the public sphere, and as such questions the legitimacy of the powerful who might therefore be urged to react. Fourth, because of its mediated character, the third parties who observe the provocation are primarily the media audiences. These are not necessarily passive observers though, as the potentially spectacular nature of the provocation and its reference to moral and power issues might easily draw their attention and involve them into debates.

Based on Paris (1989: 39), the presence of third parties, or media audiences, can be seen as both a threat and an opportunity for provocateurs. On the one hand, it is a threat because it compels the provocateur to initiate the provocation, which is a conflict, in such a way that the third parties do not blame him/her for the outbreak. Alternatively, according to Paris (1989), the provocateur elicits an overreaction by the provoked, which can then be denoted as provocation. Although this reasoning is caught in the causal logic discussed above, it is useful in analysing the self-legitimation of the provocateurs, because they often mention, as did Stijn Meuris, that they had to do it, the provoked asked for it and their reaction only confirms it. On the other hand, third parties present provocateurs with an opportunity, because they are a potential source of power. As argued before, in many cases, a provocation is initiated by the

powerless against the powerful; therefore, if the provocateur has the support of the audiences (and the media), the provoked could become socially isolated and publicly damaged.

Finally, two consequences of (attempts to) media provocations that lack uniqueness can be highlighted, namely, the occurrence of fatigue and their reduction into a media spectacle. First, equivalent to notions such as compassion fatigue (Moeller, 1999), scandal fatigue (Waisbord, 2004) or celebrity charity fatigue (Author et al., 2012), provocation fatigue may settle in when the audience is confronted repeatedly with the same kind of provocation. A media provocation's potential effect is thus neutralized by a desensitization of the audience. This might inflate the sensational and controversial character of the subsequent media provocations, thereby increasing the higher risk of alienating (a part of) the audience and reducing the credibility of the provocateur.

Second, the repetition of media provocations and their ritual character might turn them into nothing more than media spectacles, depoliticizing their message and reducing them into mere entertainment (Kellner, 2003: 2-3). If Belgian anarchist Noël Godin throws French philosopher Bernard-Henry Lévy a pie on the face for the sixth time, this event is unlikely to generate the same surprise and media impact as it initially did. Similarly, the worldwide imitation of the 'SlutWalks'—a street protest by women dressed provocatively, which originated in Toronto after a police officer said, 'women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized'⁷—risks becoming a photo opportunity for certain media. This example raises three interesting points: first, media provocations are sometimes initiated as media spectacles to attract the attention of the audience; second, a provocation (in this case by the police) may be followed not only by just a reaction but also by a counter-provocation (the SlutWalk); third, media provocations are context-dependent. The performance and manifestation of a media provocation obviously vary according to the kind of social relationships and fields in which it is established (Paris, 1989: 38) as well as the chosen

moment and the locality. In certain national or cultural contexts, a media provocation might question a norm that is still taboo, whereas in others it may not be a controversial issue or contravene any norm. Let us consider the example of gay pride parades: in certain countries where gays and lesbians do not have equal rights as others or where they are even prosecuted for their sexual preferences, events such as big pride parades could still provoke particular social groups, whereas in other countries or among other social groups, where gays and lesbians are fully accepted, these events have less impact and tend to become a spectacle. Another interesting example is that of the feminist protest group, Femen, which shows that media provocations can also be exported and dislocated from specific contexts. Originating in Ukraine, Femen brought their protest tactics of topless demonstrations to Paris and Istanbul, for example, to fight for women's rights, thereby addressing the taboo of (public) nudity.

Summarizing the points outlined above, a media provocation can be broadly defined as a mediated act that questions or contravenes norms, values, rules, laws and symbolic power in such a way that it intentionally runs counter to the 'normal' horizon of expectations in a certain situation or context. The manifestations of these media provocations are contingent and vary across the continuum, starting with statements that are provocative because of the tone used for their communication and ending at the other end of the spectrum with extremely violent acts (such as propaganda by the deed). The case in this article focuses on media provocation as a statement of intended behaviour.

Case study: 'Do (not) go voting!'

This case study aims to apply the media provocation theory and to illustrate its key points. The case study clearly raises many more questions than can be addressed in this article, such as what were the reactions of politicians, editorialists, experts and the audience to Stijn Meuris' declaration on Facebook that he will not vote in the next elections or how Meuris

legitimized his intervention. In this article, I will only focus on the key elements of media provocation. These are that media provocation (a) runs counter to the normal horizon of expectations; (b) is mediated; (c) questions norms, values, rules, laws or symbolic power and (d) occurs intentionally.

First, it is necessary to provide a better explanation of the context of Meuris' media provocation. An important concept here is the political opportunity structure, which captures 'consistent—but not necessarily formal or permanent—dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for collective action by affecting people's expectations for success or failure' (Tarrow, 1998: 76-7). First, it is necessary to consider the stalemate in Belgian politics here (see endnote 1), because politics and political parties were in a vulnerable position. In this context, Meuris' media provocation was an expression of frustration with this stalemate and he seized this moment by announcing an election boycott. Furthermore, this is also related to what Crouch (2004) terms post-democracy. Post-democracy is an ideal typical model, in which

politics is really shaped in private by interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests, (and although) elections certainly exist and can change governments, public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professionals expert in the techniques of persuasion, and considering a small range of issues selected by those teams (Crouch, 2004: 4).

Indeed, as we will see subsequently, this is exactly what Meuris is denouncing; according to him, the elections did not provide sufficient possibilities for valuable alternatives and he believes governments should finally start solving 'serious' problems.

Related to the political opportunity structure is what Cammaerts (2012) termed the ‘mediation opportunity structure’; this structure comprises three related structures. The first structure is the ‘media opportunity structure’, or the representation of protest in mainstream media. In Meuris’ case this enabled him to communicate his message to wider segments of the population and increase reflexivity on the political crisis. The second is the ‘discursive opportunity structure’, which relates to ‘strategies of self-mediation geared towards producing counter-narratives and disseminating them independently from the mainstream media organizations’ (Cammaerts, 2012: 122). Meuris, for example, started his media provocation by posting a status update on Facebook. As such, the social networking site Facebook was used as a protest tool, which refers to the ‘networked opportunity structure’.

Finally, this media provocation generated significant impact particularly because of Meuris’ celebrity status. The announcement of abstention by a celebrity and consequently an intended violation of a law offered the media a sensational story, which simultaneously personalized the discussion regarding the necessity of the mandatory nature of voting and offered a fresh discussion topic to political news reporting. Moreover, the news value was even more sensational because his announcement contrasts with the numerous examples of celebrities calling upon (especially young) people to vote in countries where voting is not mandatory for adults (e.g., Austin, et al., 2008; Cloonan and Street, 1998). Meuris is a rather mainstream artist and therefore his involvement in disruptive activism, which in many ways is comparable with that of American actor Martin Sheen, who has a long track record of supporting controversial standpoints, was not without risk, because it potentially alienated audiences (see Collins, 2007).

Meuris is a famous singer and frontman of local bands Noordkaap, Monza and Meuris. Moreover, in the past, he was a journalist for the newspaper Het Belang van Limburg (1989–2000) and the television magazine Bonanza (2001). Since 2001 he has been shooting

commercials as a freelance director, as well as reportages for Woestijnvis, a major production company, and for public broadcast channel Canvas (VRT). Meuris has even presented two television shows on astronomy, a subject that he is passionate about, on this television channel (2007–2009).

A final aspect, which is very relevant here, is Stijn Meuris' political image. Overall, he has the image of a progressive artist, acquired as a result of performing with Axelle Red at Belgavox (2009), a pro-solidarity political event, and his support for various charity (media) events. More importantly, he is widely known as a sympathizer of the social-democratic party, sp.a⁸. In the personal interview, he explained that, in sharp contrast with many other celebrities, he has never attempted to hide his political preference. Whenever journalists ask him which political party or candidate that he will be supporting in the next elections, he has always answered 'sp.a'. 'That is an incredible taboo! Really man, here [in Belgium] one is more likely to admit that he cheats on his wife than say who he is voting for!' (Meuris, personal interview)⁹. Because of his public sympathy, he has been asked to join sp.a several times in the past, and although he seriously considered doing so once, he refused because he thinks he will be unable to thrive in politics.

Horizon of expectations

Stijn Meuris' clear and longstanding political commitment demonstrated above is the first reason that his announcement on Facebook, which was an engaged act of disengagement, came as such a big surprise. On 27 April 2010, five days after the federal government fell following the failure of the negotiations on the long protracted institutional issue Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (see endnote 1), he wrote the following status update on his Facebook profile:

Getting frustrated with political events. It has been, to understate, enough. Step 1: have just decided that when elections are held, I will not be voting. Not left, not right, not central. Not. Nothing. No way. Step 2 will be more drastic and be about money. Hit them where it hurts. Enough amateurism¹⁰.

This status update appears to be driven especially by a high degree of frustration and despair with Belgian politics. Since there was a crisis in the political arena of Belgium once again following three years of difficulties and long running negotiations, Meuris did not see a solution in new elections. Indeed, he did not blame one political party or particular politicians, but the entire political class by saying, ‘not left, not right, not central’. However, the condition not to proceed with step two, that is, to stop paying taxes, remains a vague threat.

Besides introducing a discontinuity in his personal biography of political commitment, the second reason that Meuris’ abstention announcement surprised many observers is that such an announcement was not made by a ‘usual suspect’, as Meuris himself expressed in an opinion letter on 3 May 2010:

This time, it is not the usual suspects who turn their back on politics. Not the professionally sour people, the antis, the contras, or the drop-outs. This time, it is neither about the fans of extreme right or left wing anymore, who basically never weighted on political reality. This time, it is a segment of the population that can best be described as the positive-active ones. People who work, pay their taxes and fines, but who are also well-informed and have extensive social networks. People who have—believe it or not, ladies and gentlemen politicians—always sincerely believed in democracy and in politics. (Meuris, 2010)

A third reason why Meuris' announcement ran counter to the normal horizon of expectations is that it presents a relatively rare case of a rather 'mainstream' celebrity who publicly announced his refusal to vote. Usually, mainstream celebrities endorse politicians, as Oprah Winfrey did during the primaries for Barack Obama in 2007, for example (see Pease and Brewer, 2008), or they attempt to motivate young people to vote (Austin, et al., 2008). Here, Stijn Meuris did exactly the opposite, or, it was at least interpreted as a call for others not to vote (see below).

Finally, a fourth reason that his announcement breached normal expectations is that, as explained by him in the interview as well (see above), it referred to the taboo of voting. According to Meuris, his statement invaded people's private sphere, because many people, he believes, prefer not to talk about their political preferences.

Mediation

Media played a crucial role in Stijn Meuris' provocation, both in its genesis and in its subsequent unfolding. In fact, there would have been no provocation without the facilitation of the social and mass media. The social website Facebook enabled Meuris to share his thoughts about politics with his friends, several of whom were journalists, and the wider public, since most of the content on his profile page can be publicly accessed. Not surprisingly, his status update was immediately picked up by the newspaper Het Belang van Limburg (for which he had worked as a journalist for more than ten years) in its next issue, which included an interview with Meuris in which he explained his statement.

The following day, competing newspaper Het Laatste Nieuws also brought the story; however, it was only on Saturday, 1 May 2010, that the event really exploded, mainly due to three related events. First, in contrast with Meuris' statement, author Jeroen Olyslaegers (2010) explicitly called people not to vote in his column in the newspaper De Morgen.

Second, in his speech on Labour day, sp.a minister Pascal Smet lambasted both Meuris and Olyslaegers for ‘their’ call and indifference towards politics. Third, this criticism by Smet was reported in a press release by national news agency Belga, which was subsequently published on all newspapers’ websites and broadcast by radio and television news shows. The immediate reactions of Smet and other politicians on Meuris’ provocation confirm that its mediation gave him a lead and that the provoked parties were urged to respond.

Because of the commotion, newspaper De Standaard asked Meuris to write an opinion letter to explain his motivations and the background of his statement in more detail. Once again, this was widely commented upon and made front-page news in the most popular newspaper Het Laatste Nieuws on 4 May 2010. Meanwhile, Meuris was invited to a number of television shows to clarify his statements and numerous Facebook groups emerged in which people expressed that they did not want to vote in the next elections either. In less than one week 44,458 Belgian citizens joined the groups, ‘No, we do not want to vote in June’ and ‘1 million Belgians who are tired of the political clowns and who do not want to vote anymore’ (Van Driessche, 2010).

The exploding media attention for Meuris’ statement can thus be partially explained by a combination of media self-referentiality, that is, news media reporting what other media are publishing; media amplification, that is, the increase of an event’s perceived importance because of its mediation (Thompson, 2000: 83); and the increasing involvement of newsworthy people, such as politicians. Besides these media logics, another explanation that the media eagerly reported on Meuris’ provocation might be that now they had found a recognizable figurehead and embodiment of the larger and difficult to grasp wave of political disaffection and disengagement among the population. Therefore, Meuris enabled the media to personify a complex issue and his celebrity status added a significant touch of sensationalism.

The object of provocation

As mentioned before, the main object of provocation here is the announcement of a behavioural intention of refusing to vote. This announcement is controversial and provocative mainly because (1) it attacks the reputation of politics and politicians since, according to Meuris, they are the root of the problem; (2) it challenges the mandatory nature of voting in Belgium; and (3) it consequently challenges the norm that people should obey the law. However, even though truants run the risk of being fined, in practice, courts do not prosecute because of the huge backlog of cases. Therefore, in this case, questioning the law has an especially symbolic value, both as a part of the democratic institution and as an object of the political debate on the necessity of the mandatory character of voting, which was introduced in Belgium in 1893.

Meuris' announcement on Facebook was motivated by his indignation with the political situation in Belgium and his perception that the state of the political system was hopeless. This relates to the academic debates on post-democracy, which argue that democratic institutions have become disconnected from its citizens and fail to represent and enact the collective will:

I mean, it was very clear that the elections in 2010 were not useful. And in the end, my decision, which was very personal, was based on that. It was only about: 'Look guys, democracy ends where it becomes useless.' ... There were literally more serious things going on—societal, economic, you name it—than just another game of arguing on 'Who can be in the government?' In short, I missed leadership. (Meuris, personal interview)

This quote clarifies that Meuris' announcement on Facebook was an expression of frustration and profound indignation and a very personal decision. Indeed, in every interview or public

statement, he emphasized that his refusal to vote was a personal decision and not a call for civil disobedience:

I have never incited the formation of groups and will not be a member of any. For me, this is not a charity for the victims of the tsunami or the earthquake in Haiti. I think that such an individual decision is more disruptive than the massive ventilation of emotion.
(quoted in Rits, 2010)

Nevertheless, the following two observations must be made here: first, in the interview, Meuris admitted for the first time that he, together with a number of friends, had momentarily thought about starting a party to translate people's indignation and discontent into a political movement (Meuris, personal interview). Second, almost without exception, Meuris' statement has been interpreted and represented as a call to other people, which exemplifies the strong functionalist thinking on celebrities. This holds that when a celebrity says or does something, even unintentionally, it sets an exemplar for media consumers, as though there is a linear or even causal relationship. Nonetheless, Meuris himself was not always clear about the strictly personal character of his announcement. For example, he said, 'I don't call anyone not to vote. But I'm not holier than the Pope, of course. For many people it is a trigger not to go and I think that's fine' (quoted in De Meyer, 2010).

Intentionality

As discussed above, a provocation usually goes against the grain intentionally; however, there is an exception when a certain behaviour is perceived to be a provocation by others, although the 'provocateur' did not (immediately) intend to provoke. The Meuris case is the perfect example of such an exception, as he says, 'in the end, it has become a provocation, I admit that, but it was not my intention to, hmm, express a provocative statement, not at all' (Meuris,

personal interview). Nevertheless, by eagerly explaining his ‘personal’ expression of indignation and discontent in the media (which was certainly intentional), and the consequences it involved, that is, his abstention, his statement soon became a subject of discussion in the media. If Meuris’ statement was strictly personal, which it perhaps was only at the very beginning, he could have refused all the media attention from the start.

Conclusion and discussion

This article has conceptualized media provocation, which could be defined as a mediated act that questions norms, values, rules, laws and symbolic power in such a way that it intentionally runs counter to the ‘normal’ horizon of expectations in a certain situation or context. A media provocation could thus be viewed as a particular kind of critique and protest by (a group of) people or institutions. It has also been argued that a media provocation is empirically contingent and varies on a continuum, ranging from statements that are provocative because of their communicative tone to extremely violent acts. This variation and contingency should be the subject of future empirical studies, and case studies should be used to expose the peculiarities of different kinds of media provocations and the consequences of these peculiarities for the communication practices and the agents involved in media provocation.

The case study in this article has demonstrated that the element ‘intentionally’ in the definition of media provocation is contingent as well. Meuris’ ‘personal’ statement was initially not expressed as a (media) provocation, but, as admitted by him, it quickly became one through its mediation and framing as such in the media, and he eagerly encouraged this as well. Consequently, given the competition between news media for good stories on the one hand, and the search for scarce media-attention of different agents (including celebrities, politicians or social movements and the industry) on the other hand, it would be valuable to

analyse the frequency, (ways of) staging and news representation of media provocation events. Comparative research could make a significant contribution here because, as confirmed by the Meuris case study, media provocations are highly context-dependent (involving different media systems and political and social contexts).

Additionally, although in this article media provocations aimed at social or political change were central, it is equally relevant to study media provocations expressed for commercial or marketing ends. More specifically, media provocation is occasionally used as a strategy by marketing agencies and the celebrity industry in their campaigns and promotions (see Wernick, 1991). Here, the consequences of media provocation fatigue could also be examined, both for the provocateur, in terms of the difficulty to continue to surprise the audience, and for the audiences, who are confronted with numerous provocations. In sum, the media provocation concept opens up a large research agenda for scholars concerned with mediatized protest, promotional industries and media, norms and moral values.

Endnotes

1. Since the federal elections of June 2007 and until the fall of the government in April 2010, there was almost a permanent political crisis with long-lasting negotiations on the new government and on the problem of the electoral district Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde, which had to be split according to Dutch-French language borders. During this three-year period four different prime ministers were appointed. Yves Leterme of the Christian-Democratic party (CD&V) offered his resignation as the leader of the negotiation talks or as the prime minister to the King five times (but some requests were denied). New elections were announced for 13 June 2010.
2. At www.mtv.com/news/articles/1647701/lady-gaga-talks-vma-meat-suit-with-ellen-degeneres.html (accessed 25 January 2012).

3. At
www.welt.de/politik/article1573009/Wir_haben_abgetrieben_Geschichte_eines_Bluffs.html (accessed 26 January 2012).
4. The analysis concerns only the articles published from 28 April 2010 (the day after Stijn Meuris wrote his status update on Facebook, when the first coverage appeared) to 14 June 2010, or the day after the federal elections, in the Dutch-speaking newspapers. The articles were retrieved using the official news database Mediargus with the combined search terms ‘Meuris voting’ (in Dutch: ‘Meuris stemmen’). The newspapers De Standaard, Het Nieuwsblad, De Morgen, Het Laatste Nieuws, De Tijd, Gazet van Antwerpen and Het Belang van Limburg, and the news magazine Knack were searched. Both editorial content, opinions and reader’s letters, were included.
5. The interview lasted approximately 2.5 hours and concentrated mainly on Meuris’ provocative announcement in 2010; it additionally focused on his overall political involvement, its balance with commercial imperatives and his political socialization.
6. Translated from German: ‘einen absichtlich herbeigeführten überraschenden Normbruch, der den anderen in einen offenen Konflikt hineinziehen und zu einer Reaktion veranlassen soll, die ihn zumal in den Augen Dritter, moralisch diskreditiert und entlarvt.’
7. At www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-13320785 (accessed 30 January 2012).
8. sp.a is the abbreviation of ‘Socialistische Partij Anders’, or the Dutch-speaking social-democratic party in Belgium.
9. All quotes from Stijn Meuris’ interview conducted on 27 December 2011 as well as quotes from news articles have been translated from Dutch to English.
10. The original statement in Dutch reads as following: ‘Mij aan het ergeren aan de politieke actua. Het is, om het te understaten, welletjes geweest. Stap 1: net besloten dat ik, als er nieuwe verkiezingen komen, niet ga stemmen. Niet links, niet rechts, niet midden. Niet.

Niks. No way. Stap 2 zal drastischer zijn en over centen gaan. Hit them where it hurts.
Genoeg geknoei.'

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