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## **Cross-medial news usage in the Dutch-language region: A comparative study of news repertoires in the Netherlands and Flanders**

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### **Abstract:**

This study explores how news users in Flanders and the Netherlands navigate the increasing supply of news in the digitalised media landscape, specifically considering how they combine various news media into distinct news media repertoires. Employing interviews combined with a card-sorting exercise (N=72), five Dutch and seven Flemish news repertoires are observed, each reflecting a different way that news is of value in people's everyday life. Moreover, combining data from both countries, the study discovers seven news repertoires transcending national borders. However, all but one of these configurations are heavily dominated by either Flemish or Dutch news users. Thus, we conclude that despite comparable media systems and a common language, both countries patterns of news usage still show considerable variation.

**Keywords:** audience studies, cross-national comparison, media repertoires, news usage, Q methodology

### **Introduction**

Under the impetus of globalisation, digitalisation and technological innovations the Flemish and the Dutch news landscapes have changed drastically. Nowadays news is available at any time and location from a range of national and international news outlets, e.g. audio-visual media, news websites, print media and news shared on social media. In the information-saturated media environment (news) users are therefore inherently cross-medial (Schrøder,

2011). They combine use of these various platforms into news repertoires: permanently recurring 'subsets' of news media that a user consumes in his daily life (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006). This study explores the present news repertoires (2014) in the Netherlands and Flanders by establishing what value news users allocate to the various media, and examines how the news repertoires overlap and/or differ between both regions.<sup>1</sup>

Recent cross-national research shows that despite general international shifts in news usage – including cross-mediality, the increase of mobile news consumption and the increasing importance of social media as a news source – there are still striking differences in news usage between countries (Newman, Fletcher, Levy & Nielsen, 2016). Previous comparative journalistic research between Flanders and the Netherlands basically focused on news content, e.g. the level of sensation in the news (Kleemans, van Cauwenberge, d'Haenens & Hendriks Vettehen, 2008) or journalistic practices, e.g. the internet usage of journalists (Hermans, Vergeer, d'Haenens & Joniaux, 2009). Thus far, differences in news usage between Flanders and the Netherlands were only researched to a limited degree (see Van Cauwenberge, Beentjes & d'Haenens, 2011).

A comparison between Flemish and Dutch news usage is relevant because media companies in the Dutch-language region operate ever more often on a cross-border basis. Through intensive concentration Flemish media groups have recently conquered a majority of the Dutch newspaper market, including the newspapers of NRC Media (2015) and Media Groep Limburg (2017). Last year Flemish media group Mediahuis launched a takeover bid for the Dutch De Telegraaf (2016) after previously also by the Flemish media group De Persgroep had already incorporated the Dutch newspapers of PCM Uitgevers (2009), VNU Media (2012) and local newspaper publisher Wegener (2015). These takeovers resulted in cross-national journalistic initiatives. For instance, there is question of limited but growing cooperation between editorial staffs within media companies, e.g. between the quality newspapers *De Standaard* and *NRC Handelsblad* (Vandermeersch, 2016). In 2016 De Persgroep also launched the news initiative Topics, an online platform that brings together articles from their 13 (Flemish and Dutch) newspapers in a personalised environment. The Topics initiative does intentionally not focus on one country or region but instead focuses on both Flemish and Dutch people. Dutch online initiatives like De Correspondent are also considering international expansion in Belgium (Vinkenburg, 2016). Newsmakers then usually assume the existence of comparable news consumption patterns in both countries in order that the same product can be rolled out beyond the national borders.

Earlier research established that the Netherlands and Flanders do indeed have a comparable media landscape (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Peruško, Vozab & Čuvalo, 2013). To what extent this kind of comparable *news offer* results in the same patterns of *news usage* amongst Flemish and Dutch people has, however, largely remained under researched. This cross-national study therefore verifies (1) what present national news repertoires exist in the Netherlands and Flanders, (2) where they differ or overlap, and (3) whether there is also question of cross-national repertoires, where Flemish and Dutch people share the same news repertoire. With the help of interviews combined with a Q sorting exercise we

examine the meaning that Flemish and Dutch users give to news in their lives in order to thus gain more insight into the place that (inter-)national news outlets occupy on various platforms in the user patterns of news consumers in the Dutch-language region.

### **News usage in the Dutch-language region**

After four years of research within the Media Support Centre, Walgrave and De Smedt (2015) outlined the state of the Flemish news media. They argued that the Flemish market is characterised by (1) a small market with strong brands, (2) hardly any consultation of foreign news sites by news audiences, (3) centralisation of the 'general' media with few niches, (4) strength of traditional media, (5) considerable confidence in journalism, and (6) limited participation or interaction between media and the online public environment. The media usage in Flanders becomes ever more complex as users expand their traditional media repertoires with new and social media (Van Damme, 2017; Deweppe, Picone, Pauwels, & Segers, 2016; Walgrave & De Smedt, 2015). Radio and national television are still the most popular news channels in Flanders with, respectively, 61.6% and 54.5% of daily users (digimeter, 2016), followed by the smartphone (41.1% daily) and the computer (35.2%). One in three Flemish people (29.2%) daily reads a hard-copy newspaper (digimeter, 2016).

The Dutch news landscape is characterised by a strongly concentrated newspaper market (Dutch Media Authority, 2015), a diverse public broadcasting system with, compared to Flanders, relatively low offer of news and current affairs (Aalberg, Van Aelst & Curran, 2010), a wide range of commercial broadcasters, and a growing number of successful online news brands without a non-digital precursor, e.g. NU.nl, De Correspondent and Blendle. Online news media (including social media) have the most considerable weekly reach among Dutch people with 81%, followed closely by television (76%). Then followed by radio (57%) and the hard-copy newspaper (43%) (Newman et al., 2016).

The Netherlands and Flanders have relatively strongly comparable media systems with a parallel structure, journalistic culture and news offer. For instance, both countries have a strong public broadcasting tradition, a history of pillarised press<sup>2</sup>, high newspaper circulations and a considerable degree of professionalization within the journalistic discipline (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Van Cauwenberge et al., 2011). These similarities between media landscapes are partly reflected in the Dutch and Flemish media usage: both Flanders and the Netherlands have, for instance, a relatively high adoption ratio of broadband internet, smartphones and social media (Peruško, Vozab & Čuvalo, 2013).

On the other hand, recent cross-national studies also refer to differences between news usage in these two countries. For instance, 40% of the Flemish population say they have obtained online news in the past week via email, e.g. through newsletters, compared to 17% of the Dutch people. In the Netherlands WhatsApp is, after Facebook, the most frequently used social medium for news whilst this app is negligible in Flanders (Newman et al., 2016). Hence, we cannot assume that sharing a comparable media system, culture and the same language results in comparable news *usages*.

This study therefore establishes to what extent the news habits and preferences of the Dutch and Flemish people overlap or differ and to what degree there is question of cross-national news usage in the Dutch-language region. To this end our study relies on a repertoire approach: following on from Hasebrink and Popp (2006) we do not study the individual news usage per medium or carrier but we study how news users combine different sets of news media with each other into one news repertoire and what considerations they make when creating the said composition (also see Schrøder, 2011; Yuan, 2011; Swart, Peters & Broersma, 2017; other studies in this special section of *Participations*). That is why the study uses interviews with Q methodology to study why news users do or do not include certain news media in their news repertoire.

The first research questions are related to the national news repertoires:

RQ1a: *'What news repertoires are built by news consumers within the national borders of the Netherlands and Flanders?'*

RQ1b: *'How do these Dutch and Flemish news repertoires differ from each other?'*

A second window of this study is related to the news repertoires beyond the national borders:

RQ2: *'What cross-national news repertoires are available in the Dutch-language region?'*

## **Methodology**

To provide an overview of the news repertoires in the Netherlands and Flanders, a multi-methodical research was set up in the course of which in-depth interviews were combined with the Q-methodology, a method that has previously turned out to be useful for research on news repertoires (e.g. Kobbarnagel & Schrøder, 2016; Picone, Courtois & Paulussen, 2015). This research method emphasises qualitative data (in-depth interviews) but the Q sorting exercise uses quantitative techniques that render the qualitative analysis more transparent and more reliable (Courtois, Schrøder & Kobbarnagel, 2015).

## **Data collection**

The data of this analysis were collected on the basis of two parallel, identical research projects in the Netherlands and Flanders. In both countries 36 participants were recruited according to the same random theoretical selection based on gender, age, level of education and place of residence (see **Table 1**).

These 72 informants were interviewed in their home context during approximately an hour and a half. During the interview semi-structured questionnaires were used that started with a general question about an average 'day in life'. The focus then shifted to

news usage, the news preferences and the meaning of news (media) in the daily life of the informants.

**TABLE 1:** Theoretic random distribution in the Netherlands and Flanders (N=72)

		36 Dutch people	36 Flemish people
<b>Gender</b>	Woman	18	18
	Man	18	18
<b>Level of education</b>	Lower education	12	12
	Bachelor level	12	12
	Master level	12	12
<b>Age</b>	18-34	12	12
	35-60	12	12
	61+	12	12
<b>Place of residence</b>	Capital*	12	12
	Medium-sized city	12	12
	Non-urban	12	12

\* Only 22% of the residents of Brussels speak Dutch (Janssens, 2013). Hence, in Flanders ‘capital’ is operationalised as ‘provincial capitals’, also including Brussels.

Half-way during the interview the informants were presented with a Q sorting exercise in the course of which they sorted 36 cards, each with a type of news medium (the ‘Q concourse’, see **Appendix 1**), on a scale of -4 (*Plays no role in my life*) to +4 (*Plays a big role in my life*). The position of every card was thus translated into a numerical score. Figure 1 shows an example of a complete Q grid.

**FIGURE 1:** Q grid of source F6 with every news medium (1-36) a numerical score (-4 to +4)

Speelt geen rol in mijn leven				Speelt een grote rol in mijn leven				
-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4
11	28	8	22	34	33	27	15	1
6	36	14	13	26	25	32	9	12
	30	16	21	7	3	5	18	
		20	35	23	4	19		
		17	10	31	2	24		
				29				

A data file was created where the informants are the variables (~ columns) and the 36 news media the cases (~ rows), with the allocated value (-4 to +4) of the informants for every medium in the cells. -Through a principal-component analysis (PCA), informants with a similar sorting exercise were grouped. This PCA then formed the basis for the subsequent qualitative interpretation of the interviews and of the oral reflections that the informants made during the sorting exercise.

On the basis of these data two different analyses were conducted in order to offer an answer to the question how Flemish and Dutch news repertoires are related to each

other. The first analysis departed from the national studies where the repertoires in the Netherlands and Flanders were first analysed at the national level and were only then compared (RQ1). The second analysis united the collected data in one file and thus examined the cross-national repertoires (RQ2). Below both levels of analysis are discussed, at the level of both the data processing and the results.

### **Analysis 1: comparison of national studies in the Netherlands and Flanders (RQ1a-b)**

With respect to this first level of analysis the researchers each identified and listed the respective repertoires of both countries individually (for more detail: see the authors' articles in this special section of *Participations*). After that the two national analyses were combined for a cross-national comparison.

#### ***Data processing***

During the first phase of the analysis the quantitative data were used in respect of which a PCA was applied. As the Dutch and the Flemish data were analysed separately, five guidelines were discussed in advance with regard to the said PCA for the establishment of the number of components in order to enable comparison:

- (1) personal value > 1;
- (2) as few components as possible that explain as much variance as possible;
- (3) as few informants as possible who load on multiple components;
- (4) as few informants as possible who score negatively on a component as they have the opposite characteristics of the detected component; and
- (5) at least three informants in every component.

Per component a factor score was allocated to every news medium. The higher a factor score for the specific news medium, the bigger the role it plays in the relevant repertoire. The observed news repertoires represented the framework for the qualitative interpretation of the interviews and oral reflections during the sorting exercise.

#### ***Results***

When we look at the differences between Flanders and the Netherlands then it is particularly striking that there are no identical repertoires: as shown in **Table 2** there does not appear to be a one-on-one match of Dutch and Flemish repertoires. For instance, whilst in Flanders two repertoires were defined at the level of content preference (F6 Sports lover



TABLE 2. Analysis schedule of Dutch and Flemish news repertoires (see Schröder, 2011; Swart, Peters, & Broersma, 2017)

	DUTCH NEWS REPERTOIRES					FLEMISH NEWS REPERTOIRES						
	N1 Regional orientation	N2 Background orientation	N3 Digital	N4 Passive	N5 National orientation	F1 Quality seeking traditional	F2 Quality seeking world citizen	F3 Digital up-to-dater	F4 Traditional snacker	F5 Critical omnivore	F6 Sports lover	F7 Collateral user
<b>Characteristics</b>	Regional newspaper, local television, teletext, radio	Quality newspapers and print, news magazines	News media created on the Internet, websites, broadcast, online quality newspaper, international news website:	Facebook, professional magazines, public	Current affairs programmes of the light news commercial broadcaster, Facebook quality newspaper print	National news magazines, current affairs programmes, TV, regional news, quality newspaper	International TV news, online, quality newspaper	Popular newspaper online, radio news, 24/24hrs, Facebook, other social media, radio	News via email or sms, popular newspaper, local (bi-weekly) newspaper, current affairs programmes of the light genre	Online first news media, quality newspaper online, news public broadcaster, Facebook, current affairs programmes serious	Twitter, popular newspaper, teletext, TV free news public broadcaster, weekly news aggregator, news via email or sms, popular newspaper online	News via online video platforms, free newspaper, news via aggregator, news via email or sms, public broadcaster
<b>Most important news media</b>	Regional newspaper, local television, teletext, radio	Quality newspapers and print, news magazines	News media created on the Internet, websites, broadcast, online quality newspaper, international news website:	Facebook, professional magazines, public	Current affairs programmes of the light news commercial broadcaster, Facebook quality newspaper print	National news magazines, current affairs programmes, TV, regional news, quality newspaper	International TV news, online, quality newspaper	Popular newspaper online, radio news, 24/24hrs, Facebook, other social media, radio	News via email or sms, popular newspaper, local (bi-weekly) newspaper, current affairs programmes of the light genre	Online first news media, quality newspaper online, news public broadcaster, Facebook, current affairs programmes serious	Twitter, popular newspaper, teletext, TV free news public broadcaster, weekly news aggregator, news via email or sms, popular newspaper online	News via online video platforms, free newspaper, news via aggregator, news via email or sms, public broadcaster
<b>Motivation to use news</b>	Civic duty	Education; Social connection (active)	Need; Forming an opinion	Monitor; Social connection (side effect)	Entertainment; Social connection (integrative)	Civic duty	Civic duty; Need	Social connection (personal and professional)	Social connection (personal)	Civic duty; Social connection (personal)	Monitor; Social connection (personal)	Social connection (family)
<b>Value of news usages</b>	Structure daily life	Knowledge; understanding	Understanding; engagement	Basic understanding (personal); safety	Relaxation	Understanding	Knowledge; understanding	Understanding	Structure daily life	Relaxation; understanding	Knowledge	Accidental
<b>Willingness to pay</b>	Average to high	High to very high	Average to high	Very low to low	Average to high	Average to high	Average to high	Low to average	Low to average	High to very high	Average to high	Very low to low
<b>Technological preference</b>	Traditional	None	Digital	None	None	Traditional	None	Digital	Traditional	None	Traditional	None
<b>Geographical focus</b>	Regional	National; International	National; International	Regional; National	National	Regional; National; International	International	Regional; National	Regional; National; International	Regional; International	Regional; International	International
<b>Manner of news usages</b>	Lean-forward	Lean-forward	Lean-back	Lean-back	Lean-back	Lean-back	Lean-back	Lean-back	Lean-back	Lean-forward	Lean-forward	Lean-back



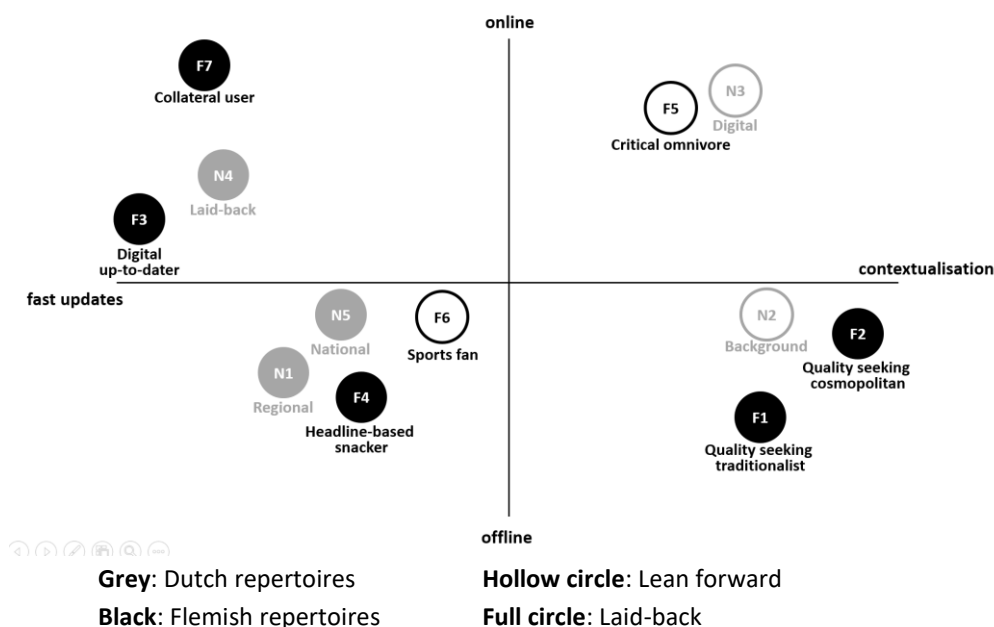
and F5 Critical omnivore), the Netherlands shows a unique differentiation at the level of geographical orientation (N1 Regional and N5 National orientation).

Answering the first research question (RQ1a) we can argue that there is a broad diversity of cross-medial news repertoires within the respective national borders of the Netherlands and Flanders. By means of the PCA five Dutch and seven Flemish news repertoires were observed. **Table 2** (above) describes the characteristics of each of these repertoires.

If we look at the similarities between the Flemish and Dutch repertoires (RQ1b) then we note that in both countries the public broadcaster is valued strongly (see the row 'Most important news media'). In addition we note that social media represent a valuable news medium to the majority but are not taking a central place with anyone. It is remarkable that in both countries news consumption is mostly conceived as a duty and is only qualified as pleasant or relaxing by one repertoire (see the row 'Motivation'). In addition we note that the news usage in both countries is predominantly passive and that news users are usually *laid-back* (see the row 'Manner'). Both countries have two repertoires that follow active – or *lean-forward* - news consumption patterns.

Although the Dutch and Flemish repertoires are therefore exclusive, there are connections between repertoires. **Figure 2** shows how the repertoires in both countries are related to each other by plotting every repertoire on three dimensions: degree of news contextualisation, preference of technology and manner of communication.

**FIGURE 2:** Visual representation of news repertoires, taking the degree of news contextualisation, technological preference and manner of consumption into account



As an example, both F5 Critical omnivore and N3 Digital prefer news that offers ample context, is offered online and can be used in an active manner. Where these Flemish people do, however, use news to relax, news in the Dutch repertoire is particularly valuable to monitor events and form an opinion. Moreover, the Flemish repertoires are more specific.

For instance, Dutch people with laid-back news usage show similarities with both F3 Digital up-to-dater and F7 Collateral user, and F1 Quality seeking traditionalist and F2 Quality seeking world citizen only have one Dutch variant (N2 Background). For F6 Sports lover and N1 Regional a likeness is missing; these repertoires are unique per country.

**TABLE 3:** Rotated Component Matrix of the cross-national news repertoires

Source	National repertoire	Dominant Repertoire	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
<b>Fi27</b>	<b>F3</b>		.808							
<b>Fi20</b>	<b>F3</b>		.721							
<b>Fi09</b>	<b>F3</b>		.710							
Ni14	N5		.611							
<b>Fi07</b>	<b>F3</b>	<b>Flanders -</b> F3 Digital up-to-dater	.593							
<b>Fi31</b>	<b>F3</b>		.587							
<b>Fi36</b>	<b>F3</b>		.581							
Ni23	N5		.578							
Ni36	N5		.546							
Fi35	F7		.533							
<b>Fi10</b>	<b>F3</b>		.531			.437				
Fi08	F4		.417							
<b>Ni31</b>	<b>N1</b>	<b>Netherlands -</b> N1 Regional orientation news usage		.732						
<b>Ni08</b>	<b>N1</b>			.701			.444			
<b>Ni17</b>	<b>N1</b>			.645						
Fi23	N4			.635						
<b>Ni06</b>	<b>N1</b>			.613					.461	
<b>Ni05</b>	<b>N1</b>			.600					.453	
<b>Ni10</b>	<b>N1</b>			.573						
Fi29	F4			.540				-.455		
<b>Ni18</b>	<b>N1</b>			.532						
Fi04	F5			-.531				.448		
<b>Ni12</b>	<b>N1</b>			.528						
<b>Ni15</b>	<b>N1</b>			.463						
<b>Ni09</b>	<b>N1</b>			.433						
<b>Fi30</b>	<b>F1</b>		<b>Flanders -</b> F1 Quality seeking traditionalist			.754				
<b>Fi19</b>	<b>F1</b>					.688				
<b>Fi14</b>	<b>F1</b>				.662					
<b>Fi02</b>	<b>F1</b>				.626					
<b>Fi16</b>	<b>F1</b>				.618					
Fi28	F2				.575	.512				
Ni29	N2				.533					
<b>Fi01</b>	<b>F1</b>			.451		.516				
Ni19	N1				.501					
Ni28	N2				.452					

Source	National repertoire	Dominant Repertoire	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>Fi03</b>	<b>F2</b>					.751			
<b>Fi12</b>	<b>F2</b>					.745			
<b>Fi21</b>	<b>F2</b>				.441	.675			
<b>Fi34</b>	<b>F6</b>					.555			
<b>Fi15</b>	<b>F6</b>	<b>Flanders -</b>				.545			
<b>Fi18</b>	<b>F2</b>	F2 Quality	.453			.533			
Fi25	F1	seeking world				.530			
<b>Fi05</b>	<b>F2</b>	citizen	.503			.518			
Ni34	N2-	F6 Sports lover				<b>-.492</b>			
Ni16	N/					.488			
Fi33	F4					.478			
<b>Fi24</b>	<b>F6</b>					.420			
Ni24	N2						.746		
Ni04	N2						.723		
<b>Ni02</b>	<b>N3</b>						.659		
<b>Ni03</b>	<b>N3</b>	<b>Netherlands -</b>					.632		
<b>Ni27</b>	<b>N3</b>	N3 Digital news					.586		
<b>Ni20</b>	<b>N3</b>	usage					.574		
<b>Ni30</b>	<b>N3</b>						.543		
Ni01	N1			.444			.542		
Fi17	F5					.449	.481		
Ni11	N2					.439	.458		
Ni35	N4							.664	
Fi26	F4							.661	
Ni26	N5							.588	
Ni33	N1							.546	
Fi13	F5	<b>No dominant</b>						.545	
Fi32	F4	<b>factor</b>						.541	
Ni32	N/				.505			.534	
Fi06	F5							.487	
Ni25	N5		.430					.484	
Fi11	F7		.433					.460	
<b>Ni22</b>	<b>N4</b>								.705
<b>Ni07</b>	<b>N4</b>	<b>Netherlands -</b>							.675
Ni13	N2	N4 Laid-back							.539
<b>Ni21</b>	<b>N4</b>	news usage					.469		.524
Fi22	V7								<b>-.447</b>

## **Analysis 2: cross-national study with combined data**

### ***Data processing***

Whereas the first analysis was based on two datasets, this second analysis is done on the combined data. The Dutch and the Flemish data were thus combined into one dataset with data of all 72 informants. This allows for clustering of informants beyond national borders. The same PCA guidelines as above were used.

### ***Results***

Answering the second research question (RQ2) we can argue that there are seven news repertoires within the Dutch language region, which includes both the Netherlands and Flanders. What immediately strikes us is that three repertoires are dominated by Dutch informants and three others are dominated by Flemish news users. One repertoire (6) is not dominated by one or more national repertoires. We describe these repertoires in detail below. Informants are referred to as Fi (Flemish informant) or Ni (informant from the Netherlands).

#### ***1. Continuous and ready to use news***

Informants from this repertoire mostly originate from *F3 Digital up-to-dater* and *N5 Nationally oriented news usage*. What characterises these informants is that they remain informed with ready to use news throughout the day. News must be '*easy, available and clear*' (Fi27). The most popular news media are therefore online media (#1 website popular newspaper and #4 news on Facebook) and broadcasts of the public broadcaster (#2PSB radio, #3 radio 24/24 and #5 TV news).

Informants have a broad interest in the current affairs and want to remain informed of '*the common day-to-day affairs in Belgium. The general news really*' (Fi09). They feel a duty to stay informed of news, both for personal and professional (work or school) reasons. They follow the news to have '*just a brief summary, an overview*' (Ni14). Informants combine a laid-back way of consuming news with actively being busy with news.

Fi27: When I surf on websites then I am really actively looking. I also actively read the newspaper, but definitively when I am on Facebook, I sometimes see a post or article that is shared by somebody else so then it is rather passive.

#### ***2. Traditional news (usage)***

This repertoire basically has participants from *N1 Regionally oriented news usage*. Regional newspapers (#1) and regional television news programmes (#3) and news via teletext (#2) were sorted highest. The news habits of these informants are particularly stable: sometimes they have used news at a fixed place at specific times for dozens of years, usually in a fixed social setting together with their partner or family. 'The VRT news programme because that

was the only news in those days, [...] it is a habit. Read the *Gazet van Antwerpen*. This has been done at home for so long' (Fi23).

They are very brand loyal; when they consume digital news, it is from news media they are already familiar with through print, radio or television as they consider these to be most reliable. Informants with this repertoire feel it is important to monitor what is going on around them as these kinds of events may affect their daily lives. Ni31: 'People should not have blinkers on and think that it would not happen to them. Because everything can happen to anybody.' In their opinion regional news has the biggest potential impact on their daily lives and is therefore of most interest to them. Ni17: 'Something else abroad, it is also terrible or also important, but it does affect you a bit less.' Informants with this repertoire preferably consume news laid-back: media must provide an overview fast and easy.

### **3. Background news**

This repertoire is basically dominated by *F1 Quality seeking traditionalist*, but the interest in regional news is absent. Informants from this repertoire have an explicit preference for news that they conceive as quality news, via print media (#1 quality newspaper and #3 news magazines) and television (#2 current affairs programmes, #4 television news programme public broadcaster and #5 current affairs programmes of the light genre). Staying informed of the current affairs is considered to be a pleasant and relaxing pastime.

Informants have an explicit interest in staying informed of what is going on at the national and international level. In this respect they expressly emphasise the importance of looking beyond the immediate environment. Fi14 complains, for example, about excessive attention to, in his opinion, 'small' things, e.g. a national industrial action.

Fi14: Last week! There was only one item in the news, the industrial action. It was in Antwerp, but there was no foreign news, nothing on the radio the entire day. Nothing. Things still happen in the world right!

People with this repertoire feel that news is necessary but they do not play an active role in the collection of news. Informants tend to fall back on news media that can easily be fitted into the daily rhythm. How this 'easily' is interpreted depends on the source. Fi16 finds it, for instance, annoying when she personally needs to look for news. She prefers news that is presented in a ready to use format. Ni29, on the other hand, prefers the convenience of 'his' news apps and websites, 'it is the first thing I do early in the morning. It is an automatism. It is something I enjoy doing'.

### **4. News public broadcaster**

This repertoire is dominated by two very different Flemish repertoires *F2 Quality seeking world citizen* and *F6 Sports lover*. Although both these repertoires are very distant from each other, informants share ample appreciation for news of the public broadcaster. They

combine news of #2 PSB radio, #3 teletext, #4 PSB news site and #5 PSB television news. News of the public broadcaster is deemed to be news of a very high quality or '*reliable and trustworthy news*' (Fi03). Informants like the combination of fast updates (referring to the radio) and background information.

Fi12: I also think that this is the best news and it is of the best quality, [... hence] of everything, a broad range, but it is not vague and you receive in-depth information.

The most important news medium for this group is, however, the popular newspaper, which immediately also explains the presence of *F6 Sports lover* in this repertoire. Reading hard-copy news is considered to be pleasant and informants spend a lot of time on their newspaper. The preference for the public broadcaster can then be explained by *Sporza*, the sports brand of the VRT that is available online, on the radio and on television.

### **5. Critical and online news (usage)**

Respondents from this repertoire basically originate from *N3 Digital news usage*. They have considerable interest in news, backgrounds and opinions and follow the news continuously on their smartphones, laptops and desktops at work. These informants are very critical when it comes to news media.

Ni3: Where I miss the story behind the news in the general news media, I do find this on the internet. And I think that is the biggest, the biggest advantage of the digital revolution. That individuals are empowered ever more to personally make choices. And are consequently less fed and can look for themselves.

That is why they combine many different informants in order to examine current developments from different points of view and to obtain a picture of reality that is as complete and reliable as possible. This mostly regards news platforms that were created on the internet (#1), but also websites of quality newspapers (#2), sites of public national broadcasters (#3), online news of regional newspapers (#4) and websites of foreign broadcasters (#5). These informants follow the news in order to understand developments and to form opinions. The large amount of online news informants helps them with this.

Fi17: You then have that vision, you have an opinion piece, you read it, you think about it, but it is only via the internet that you can check it: right, that person says this. Let's check if somewhere else it is also that way... And then I sometimes also read the reactions.



On the other hand, this overload of information makes it complex to follow the news: informants find it difficult to 'get the facts because everybody says conflicting things' (Ni27).

## **6. Close news**

This is the only news repertoire that is not dominated by one or more national repertoires and therefore contains a pattern that was not expressed at the national level. Informants with this repertoire are characterised by an interest in news that is, in one way or the other, personal or is related to the life of the source. This engaged news can refer to local news (e.g. regional newspaper or a Facebook group with news about the community), but also news that has direct consequences for the user, e.g. industrial action (Fi26) or political decision (Fi13).

Fi13: I follow Belgian politics a bit more. Not that I am politically engaged but they eventually decide on taxes and pension... so this does usually affect you directly. So I definitely follow that. The regional news too.

The most important news media for this repertoire are therefore shared news, via #1 Facebook or #2 email and sms. In Flanders the latter is usually related to newsletters, among the Dutch informants this is mostly about the *instant messaging* service WhatsApp:

Ni35: This happens regularly, that colleagues 'app' me. And often half an hour after it has happened. It is very fast. I often find that interesting [... and] enjoyable. I do not really need to sit down for it but I simply receive it from colleagues and friends who have picked it up.

Being busy with news is mostly a pastime. Informants share the opinion that not following the news would not have a considerable impact on their daily lives. The informants prefer short updates or 'an enumeration of what has happened (...) or what is going on. So (...) as concise as possible' (Ni35). The informants value the television news programme (without explicitly preferring #5 commercial or #4 public broadcasters), but barely watch it. News on teletext #3 is popular again due to its short and diagrammatical overview. Teletext is mostly consulted for election results and sports.

It is remarkable that many informants expressly state that they avoid negative or 'bothersome' (Ni33) news.

Ni26: I do note that I slightly close myself off from the very negative news. So the umpteenth IS decapitation or something like that. I prefer not to click it.

## **7. Social news**

The last repertoire is dominated by *N4 Laid-back news usage*. To these respondents news is mostly a way of joining the conversation and staying connected to people in their environment. They are mostly interested in news that affects them directly in their daily lives and that of those around them. Facebook (#1) acts as an access portal to this kind of news: informants use it to stay informed of interpersonal news (follow the children) and to follow a wide range of mostly regional news media. In addition regional newspapers (#2), free local papers (#5) and trade journals (#3) are part of the repertoire. This is supplemented with listening to radio news (#4):

Ni21: I also receive news through groups of friends who are interested in the same news and who share the same type of news, so that is what you receive. You do not receive the actual, national news. That does not always pass by on Facebook, and that is why I think it is very useful to listen to the radio in the car.

To these informants news is regularly a topic of conversation, for instance at work, with family, at the gym. These informants preferably consume the news passively: the news must come to them.

## **Conclusion and discussion**

Since the emergence of the internet and the tremendous popularity of mobile devices news has become available always and everywhere. Media users can choose from a wide range of news media to compose a personal news diet beyond brands and platforms. This study tries to analyse these news diets, or news repertoires, in the Netherlands and Flanders. To this end analyses were conducted at two levels: national, where the Flemish and Dutch data were analysed separately and then compared, and cross-national, where all data were combined.

The national analysis resulted in five Dutch and seven Flemish news repertoires. Characteristic for both countries is the considerable role of the public broadcaster in the daily lives of news users and a preference for passive consumption of news. Although a majority of the informants considers social media (more specifically Facebook) to be valuable as a place for 'public connection' (Couldry, Livingstone & Markham, 2007), they play no central role in any of the (Dutch or Flemish) repertoires.

Although some of the Flemish and Dutch repertoires are thus related on some points, there is no one-on-one overlap between news repertoires in both countries. First of all the seven Flemish repertoires are more specific than the five Dutch repertoires. This could indicate that the news usage in Flanders is relatively more fragmented. Secondly, both countries have repertoires that are typical of the country, e.g. regionally oriented news usage in the Netherlands – where approximately half of the newspaper editions are regional newspapers (Dutch Media Authority, 2015) – and the sports lovers in Flanders, which has a relatively large offer of sports.

Also with regard to the cross-national level of analysis we can argue that there are only to a limited degree actual cross-national news media repertoires indicating that national borders are no longer relevant. Our analysis shows that there were seven repertoires among all 72 informants. Six of the seven repertoires are strongly dominated by either Flemish or Dutch people. Moreover, these six cross-national repertoires regroup the same informants as in the national levels. As a result, these six repertoires are dominated by one (and by exception two, ref 4 News public broadcaster) national repertoire(s). In other words, certain specific combinations of news media are so strongly present that they appear both in the national and cross-national analyses. Nonetheless, we must also point out that none of the repertoires are exclusively Dutch or Flemish. Whereas the six repertoires are dominated by Dutch or Flemish informants, they all include informants of the other nationality as well.

Only one repertoire is not dominated by a national repertoire. The repertoire 6 Close news was newly formed in the cross-national analysis. This repertoire thus has an actual cross-national character. This suggests that although both countries theoretically have quite similar media systems, news habits and news preferences differ considerably between Dutch and Flemish people, not just at the level of media titles, but also in terms of the types of news media that users combine. These results are remarkable considering the comparable news offer and the increasing number of cross-border journalistic initiatives in the Dutch-language region. The results of this study therefore point in the direction that it cannot be assumed that Dutch and Flemish people have comparable news repertoires. Public research that takes national borders into account therefore remains a necessity for media companies: the same news products are part of a different repertoire as a result of which the specific added value that they can offer may differ.

Moreover this study again shows the value of Q methodology as a method for cross-national research regarding news usage. In addition to earlier studies with the same methodological layout (e.g. Courtois, Schrøder & Kobbernagel, 2015) our study showed how the combination of both Flemish and Dutch card sorting in one dataset can distinguish cross-national patterns of news usage and news preferences. The way that news is valued in the daily lives of users with a certain repertoire has multiple dimensions (see **Table 2**). This makes it difficult to find one-on-one relationships between repertoires in both countries without prejudicing the complexity and contextualisation of these news diets. On the other hand, Livingstone (2003) rightly argues that when research results are analysed too strongly from a national context, no usable benchmark remains in either of both countries on the basis of which a cross-national comparison can take place. This application of the Q methodology attempts to steer a proper middle course in this dilemma.

From a methodological point of view this study was therefore instructive as for the first time two levels of analysis, national and cross-national, were applied alongside one another. Even when characteristics (or benchmarks as referred to by Livingstone, *supra*) are allocated in a systematic manner (ref. Analysis Schedule in **Table 2**) at the national level, no one-on-one overlapping repertoires could be found between the Netherlands and Flanders.

By adding the second cross-national level of analysis in this study, it does, however, become apparent that this difficult comparison is not caused by the method but by actual differences in news repertoires. The dominance of a nationality (Flemish or Dutch) in the second level of analysis indicates that both countries have specific preferences in combining news media. In other words, this study shows that even in a world of blurring borders between countries and with theoretically similar media landscapes, the news usage and the news preferences of users differ considerably. Comparative research that takes the national context of news usage into account therefore remains a necessity.

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## Appendix:

### **Q concourse: set of 36 cards with news media with categorisation<sup>#</sup>**

#### **Q cards**

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1. Television news public broadcaster
2. Television news commercial broadcaster
3. Regional television news
4. Current affairs programmes of the light genre
5. Current affairs programmes
6. Non-stop news broadcaster
7. Foreign news broadcasts and/or current affairs programmes
8. News via teletext
9. Radio news public broadcaster
10. Radio news commercial broadcaster
11. Radio news 24/24hrs
12. Quality newspaper, including specialised newspapers
13. Popular newspaper
14. Free newspaper
15. News magazines or weekly quality newspaper
16. Regional newspapers
17. Local weekly / biweekly / monthly newspapers
18. Online quality newspaper
19. Online popular newspaper
20. Free online newspapers
21. Online news magazine or a weekly quality newspaper
22. Local or regional online newspapers
23. Weekly / biweekly / monthly online magazines
24. Online news public broadcaster
25. Online news local or regional broadcaster
26. Online news foreign broadcaster
27. News via Facebook
28. News via Twitter



29. News via other social media
30. News via online video platforms
31. News via blogs
32. News via email or sms
33. News via trade journals
34. News via news generating search engines
35. News platforms created on the internet
36. News via non-medial organisations

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# The list regards the Flemish concourse. In both countries the set of cards was adjusted to the national use of language (e.g. in Dutch 'publieke omroep' vs. 'openbare omroep').

## **Notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> Being neighbouring countries, both in Flanders (the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium) and the Netherlands, Dutch is the official language. However, there is a clear regional difference in pronunciation and vocabulary. Moreover, the Netherlands and Flanders have distinct media systems.

<sup>2</sup> Pillarization (Dutch: *Verzuiling*) refers to segregation of a society based on different religions or ideologies (i.e. 'pillars'). This pillarization characterizes the social structure and political institutions in the Netherlands and Belgium for much of the twentieth century. These pillars include: Catholic, Liberal, Socialist and (in the Netherlands) Protestant. Many other social institutions were similarly constituted, including media. Each pillar thus had their own newspaper(s) and/or broadcasting media (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010; Wijfjes, 1994).