

Journalism in times of cost-cutting and Web 2.0: A study on the impact of marketing and digitization on sourcing practices and editorial content

Van Leuven Sarah & Raeymaeckers Karin
(Ghent University, Belgium)

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Abstract: In order to assess the impact of commercialisation and digitization on journalists' sourcing practices, we set up a content analysis of the secondary sources and information actors in the news output of four Flemish newspapers over a period of 10 years (2000-2010). From a longitudinal methodological perspective we match our results with reflexions on the expanding or shrinking mediated public sphere. The analysis shows little to no shifts through time. Mainstream sources dominate the news but citizens are also an important part of it. As far as we can observe, Flemish journalists modestly refer to pre-packaged sources. The opportunities for a more diverse source use offered by Web 2.0 applications have not yet penetrated in their newsrooms. The findings indicate that often heard concerns about cost-cutting in newsrooms or sanguinity about the democratic potential of Web 2.0 seem fairly exaggerated, at least in the Flemish context.

Keywords: public sphere, sourcing, commercialisation, digitization, content analysis, newspapers

INTRODUCTION

This research project is rooted in our observation of the new duality in the current media landscape. On the one hand, the growing impact of commercialisation within the media sector can be demonstrated by the increasing use of institutional, official sources and pre-packaged information (e.g. Lewis, Williams and Franklin, 2008; Buijs et al. 2009). New technologies and especially Web 2.0 applications as Facebook or YouTube however invite a more diverse source use that might lead to more balanced media access for a wider range of actors. Therefore, actors in the civil society, individual citizens and alternative news sources may develop into more important information sources for journalists (e.g. Dahlgren, 2005; Habermas, 2006; Brundidge, 2010). Considering these divergent perspectives, our research reveals the underlying mechanisms of the news production process by identifying the prominent sourcing practices and sourcing actors in the newsrooms of four Belgian newspapers. From a longitudinal methodological perspective we match our results with reflexions on the expanding or shrinking mediated public sphere. We focus our

research on content analysis of prominent sources and actors in the news output over a period of ten years (2000-2010). The results are also analysed in a comparative perspective facing popular and quality newspapers.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND NEWS ACCESS

In the view of Habermas (1989), the mass media are part of the public sphere, which is “an arena, independent of government (even if in receipt of state funds) while also being autonomous of economic interests, which is dedicated to open-ended discussion and debate, the proceedings of which are open to entry and accessible to scrutiny by the citizenry” (Webster, 2011, p.24). In his original account on the public sphere, Habermas (1989) considered the mass media as facilitators of this democratic process by disseminating reliable and high quality information of a wide range of sources. In other words, the free and equal representation of the viewpoints of all citizens or communities in the news is a precondition for a democratic public sphere. Yet, ample studies have shown that mainstream or institutional actors – as politicians, government, business, experts and journalists – dominate the news (see table 1 for an overview of studies on mainstream actors in the news) at the expense of non-mainstream actors as citizens or non-governmental organisations.

Table 1. Overview of mainstream actors in the news as identified by the literature

Mainstream actors	Literature (Selection)
Government and political actors	Davies, 2008; Fishman, 1980; Machin & Niblock, 2006; Petley, 2011; Reich, 2011
Business (companies)	Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Petley, 2011
Scientists/other experts	Atton, 2011; De Keyser, 2010; Machill, Beiler & Schmutz, 2006
Journalists/other media	Carsten, 2004; De Keyser, 2010; Fishman, 1980; Reich, 2011

Habermas recognised that the growing complexity and rationalisation of society in the course of the 20th century and the growth of the mass media have transformed the public sphere into a “court before which public prestige can be displayed – rather than in which critical debate is carried on (Habermas, 1989, p.201)”. It seems that vertical communication between mass media that are highly influenced by state and capital has replaced horizontal communication between citizens. In addition Habermas acknowledged the existence of counter or advocacy public spheres that are able to challenge the mainstream or common public sphere. This can be exemplified by the rise of non-governmental organisations such as Greenpeace, the establishment of alternative or citizen media, or the presence of advocacy voices in mainstream media (Dahlgren, 2005; Downey and Fenton, 2003). This is particularly relevant given the advent of Internet which might be the key to a more balanced public sphere because of the new possibilities for information dissemination, as we will see in the section on expansion of the public sphere.

When studying news access one has to make a distinction between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ sources. Primary sources or information actors are the people or institutions that pass information on to journalists. Secondary sources are the information channels that information actors use to spread their message and journalists to gather news (De Keyser, 2010). We distinguish on the one hand between politicians, government, companies, experts, journalists, citizens and non-governmental organisations (primary sources), and on the other hand between news agencies, media brands, public relations and social media (secondary sources).

SHRINKING PUBLIC SPHERE?

COMMERCIALISATION AND CHURNALISM

Since the 1980s, the media industry has changed in numerous ways. In this paragraph, we focus on the commercialisation of news production, which is characterised on the one hand by tabloidization and on the other hand by standardisation or industrialisation of news production. The aspect of industrialisation of newsbeat production is a core element for the transformation of the public sphere. First, research on newsroom practices describes the growing impact of commercialisation induced by deregulation and liberalisation and the appearance of commercial broadcasters in a globalised media market (Bakker et al., 2011; Davis, 2000b; Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Webster, 2011). Second, research demonstrates that a fall in advertising revenues combined with shattered audiences and a rise in production costs result in decreasing profit margins (Carsten, 2004; Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Webster, 2011). Consequently, the media market is becoming ever more concentrated with few major media actors that put commercial motives first to protect the interests of the stake holders. This news environment is characterised by limited access for newcomers and survival of the fittest. McManus (1994) refers to this situation as ‘market driven journalism’.

Numerous scholars argue that the high economic pressure prompts news organisations to primarily focus on cost-cutting and efficiency considerations. One way is to reduce the editorial staff, so journalists need to produce more news in less time and with less resources. Journalists’ workload has increased even more due to the increasing number of pages, supplements and online editions (Curtin, 1999; Davies, 2008; Davis, 2000a, 2000b; De Bens and Raeymaeckers, 2010; Franklin, 2011; Lewis et al., 2006; Machill, Beiler and Schmutz, 2006; Petley, 2011; Phillips, 2011). One of the consequences of this elevated workload is that ‘desk journalism’ increasingly substitutes active news gathering outside the newsroom. Journalists have transformed into ‘information brokers’ that mainly recycle existing content in a process of ‘churnalism’ or journalistic content production in large quantities (Davies, 2008; Franklin, 2011; Paulussen and Ugille, 2010). During a qualitative interview research by Ansgard Heinrich, a former CNN-journalist complained that “*it was like*

working at Burger King. I had a schedule, I had a couple of shows that I helped to produce and it was very rote. I didn't do any journalism. I put together news. I didn't actually help find them" (Heinrich, 2011, p.119). This statement can be exemplified by the finding of O'Neill and O'Connor (2009) and Lewis et al. (2006) that only one news source is used in 75% and 87% of news articles. Different terms are used to describe this situation, such as 'transformational process', 'cut and paste culture', 'cutting job', 'news cannibalisation', 'dog eat dog culture', 'pack journalism', 'Ninja Turtle syndrome' or 'rat pack syndrome' (Carsten, 2004; Franklin, 2011; Lewis et al., 2006; O'Neill and O'Connor, 2009; Petley, 2011; Phillips, 2011).

JOURNALISTIC OUTSOURCING: PRE-PACKAGED INFORMATION

The abovementioned changes in the media sector have not created the dependency on pre-packaged news, but they have boosted it (Franklin, 2011). The traditional use of news agencies' pre-packaged information has been expanded with the application of recycled news articles and moreover, public relations (pr) content (Davies, 2008; Franklin, 2011; Petley, 2011). Yet, it is necessary to distinguish between two substantially different types of pre-packaged information. First, in the context of efficiency measures, news organisations increasingly replace their network of correspondents by news agencies content (Paulussen and Ugille, 2010; Jongbloed, Lauf and Negenborn, 2009; Wouters, De Swert and Walgrave, 2009). However, this content is produced by journalists to broaden other newsrooms' sphere of action (Jongbloed, Lauf and Negenborn, 2009). News that is 'borrowed' from other media outlets likewise has a journalistic origin. In contrast, pr content originates from non-journalistic actors such as companies or politicians and is motivated by private interests and the drive to spread free advertising. Pr-activities are sometimes described as 'pseudo-events' or 'information subsidies' because they are '*diced, sliced and packaged*' to be consumed instead of produced by journalists (Franklin and Carlson, 2011, p. 50). Therefore, contrary to news agencies' or other media content, pr material should be treated with caution when used in everyday news production. In view of the combined play of cost-cutting in newsrooms and the professionalization of information actors that have overwhelmingly started to use public relations tools, the impact of 'information subsidies' on news content however seems unavoidable to many scholars (Bakker et al., 2011; Boorstin, 1962, 1992; Curtin, 1999; Davis, 2000a; Fenton, 2010; Franklin, 2011; Gandy, 1982; Machill, Beiler and Schmutz, 2006; Reich, 2011). Indeed, research has shown that news gathering is largely a routine task and journalists habitually incorporate 'preformulated sources' or 'pre-packaged news', especially press releases or press conferences as well as journalistic types of pre-packaged information, in their news output (Van Hout and Jacobs, 2008).

NEWS AGENCIES AND MEDIA SOURCES – Buijs et al. (2009) discovered few traces of news agency (10%) and other media (12%) content. The Dutch Broadcasting Commission (Jongbloed, Lauf and Negenborn, 2009) registered a fall in articles that

are literally taken from the national news agency ANP but a rise of articles that partly exist of ANP-material (27,6% in 2008). Yet, only 6.8% of these articles referred to ANP as a news source. Indeed, ample studies revealed that the use of journalistic sources is much more elevated than we can observe in the news because journalists often refrain from mentioning that information is 'borrowed' from other sources (Carsten, 2004; Fishman, 1980; Lewis et al., 2006; Messner and Distaso, 2008; Reich, 2011). For example, British journalists admitted that a third of all news articles in the Daily Telegraph (website included) are literally taken from other media (Phillips, 2011). 90% of German journalists regard news agencies as an important news source. They also consider other media as an important to very important source of background information (93%), inspiration for story ideas (84%), and for event examination (56%) (Carsten, 2004). 66 and 51 percent of Flemish journalists report that they refer to other media and news agencies on a daily basis (De Keyser, 2010). Lewis et al. (2006) discovered traces of news agency content in 70% of articles.

PUBLIC RELATIONS SOURCES – Ample studies have shown the importance of pr sources in everyday news production (Carsten, 2004; De Keyser, 2010; Lewis et al., 2006; Machill, Beiler and Schmutz, 2006; Paulussen and Ugille, 2010). Franklin studied the importance of PR sources in different articles (2004, Franklin and Carlson, 2011) and concluded that the willingness of newsrooms to use pr content increases as their resources, and especially the number of journalists, decrease. Journalists moreover report that the use of pr content for editorial purposes has increased (Lewis et al., 2006). Still, it is a challenge to empirically measure the presence of press releases and other pr content (e.g. personal contacts between journalists and pr-professionals) in the news because both parties prefer to veil their (often routine) contacts (Davis, 2000b). Besides, many press releases end up in newsrooms indirectly as news agencies or other media content in a 'multi-staged sourcing' process or a 'ladder of news sourcing' (Buijs et al., 2009; Curtin, 1999; De Keyser, 2010; Franklin, 2011). Lewis et al. (2006) indeed found that 47% of articles that fully or entirely originated from press releases closely resembled news agencies content. An important remark here is that mainly news agency journalists complain about a growing work load (Lewis et al., 2006).

RE-FEUDALISATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE: INFORMATION ACTORS – Scholars state that the presence of information actors in the news is linked to their efficiency to spread information and pre-packaged news. Because mainstream actors occupy the majority of resources, the growing importance of pre-packaged information, and especially press releases, might magnify their dominant position in terms of news access even more (Curtin, 1999; Davis, 2000b; Deacon, 1996; Franklin, 2004; Gans, 1979; Lewis et al., 2006). Habermas (1989) and Davis (2000a) refer to this situation as 're-feudalisation' of the public sphere. Some authors are very critical pointing that '*there is no need for a totalitarian regime when the censorship of commerce runs its blue pencil through every story*' (Davies, 2008, p.152). They identify press releases as symptoms of a 'crisis of public communication' in a 'public relations democracy' and

argue that journalists renounce their democratic function as a 'watchdog' of the powerful (mainstream) actors in society and become the spokespersons of those in power. Those authors often link aspirations for commercial success with democratic failure (Buijs et al., 2009; Davies, 2008; Davis, 2000b; Franklin and Carlson, 2011; Herman and Chomsky, 2002; Lewis et al., 2006; Machill, Beiler and Schmutz, 2006).

EXPANSION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE?

The arrival of new, digital technologies and especially Internet has given rise to a new way of thinking in communication studies that sees possibilities for expansion, instead of shrinking, of the public sphere.

In the current context of globalisation, glocalisation and digitization of human interaction, some scholars state, following Castells (1996), that the network is the "*new dominant social structure in contemporary societies (...) in which our ability to connect beyond time and space constraints takes center stage*" (Heinrich, 2011, p.23-24). These authors claim that the new, global environment is/should be characterised by a novel, networked mode of communication that can be described as a synthesis of interpersonal and mass communication where audiences and mass media producers are connected in one, networked media matrix (Castells, 2008; Hermida, 2010; Lopez Rabadan, 2011; Papathanassopoulos, 2011). In the context of news production, Heinrich (2011) contends that journalistic organisations should go through a structural transformation and adapt to the sphere of 'network journalism' to allow journalists to navigate the new, global information map in search of information. The increased speed of information dissemination and the connectivity in the network sphere allow for non-linear, decentralized and multi-directional information flows between the (almost) uncountable nodes in the network:

"The many information providers, here, meet in a digitally connected global arena, a large array of potential new information sources can now be reached via many connection points other than (traditional) official sources such as governmental institutions or press offices. Instead of a rather 'closed' system of news gathering, production and distribution, in which only a very limited number of partakers had the power to make and shape news, the sphere of network journalism is an open space of information exchange. Here, sources can be accessed directly by users and they can add layers of information not necessarily reflected in mainstream media" (Heinrich, Groningen 2011, p.2).

In this new, network journalism an essential role is granted to Web 2.0 and social media. Web 2.0 refers to the changing use of the World Wide Web as a platform whereby content and applications are "*continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion*" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009, p.61) and is contrasted with traditional uses of Internet based on individual contributions. Social media such as Indymedia, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube or WikiLeaks are defined as "*a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological*

foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content, namely (...) the various forms of media content that are publicly available and created by end-users” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2009, p.61).

The question is whether mainstream news outlets are aware of the new possibilities for news gathering that are available in the network sphere and whether they are organisationally adapting to these changes in the sphere of information exchange (Heinrich, 2011). Due to the fact that social media are a very recent phenomenon, the literature about their impact on journalistic practices is however still very limited (Hermida, 2010). Yet a first indication of the growing importance of social media in news production lies in the fact that established news organisations such as The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal or Bloomberg have formulated policies to organise the use of Twitter in the established frameworks of news production (Hermida, 2010). Several case studies show that social media played a role in major news events coverage. For example, during the Iranian elections in June 2009 or the Mumbai terroristic attacks in the end of 2008, news organisations published unverified video's and anonymous tweets of citizens in addition to traditional coverage. This shows that social media play an important role in news gathering in a context of breaking news or media restrictions (Broersma and Graham, 2011; Chua et al., 2011; Heinrich, 2011; Hermida, 2010; Lenatti, 2009; Morozov, 2009). WikiLeaks exemplifies the latter case: *“Some reporters from mainstream media outlets are following the site regularly, while others have at least found their leaks newsworthy on specific occasions” (Lynch, 2010, p.317).*

These specific contexts of information exchange however contrast with everyday news production, where Lariscy et al. (2009) found that American business journalists rarely use social media sources. Likewise, although Messner and South (2011) registered a rise in the number of articles where Wikipedia is used as a source, this 'increase' is irrelevant in the total news output (161 uses in 5 newspapers from 2001 up to 2007). Many journalists complain about 'information overload' and the unreliability of online information and therefore seem to be reluctant to incorporate social media information in their news output in everyday practice (Heinrich, 2011; Paulussen and Ugille, 2008). Moreover, it is important to note that also institutional information actors such as politicians or companies have started using social media for promotional purposes (Broersma and Graham, 2011; Etter, 2011; Lariscy et al., 2009). *“State and civic institutions (...) are increasingly moving into the social media space, in order to consolidate that influence” (Knight, Cardiff 2011, p.8).* Finally, it is also important to note that not all citizens have the possibility (Internet access) or abilities (related to socio-economic background) to disseminate or even access online information platforms, a situation that is generally referred to as digital inequality (Hargittai, 2011; Hermida, 2010). For example, several studies have already shown that Twitter is inhabited by a limited group of 'computer-literate' and 'well-connected' people that are highly interested in news and current affairs. The '1-10-100' rule states that 1% of the population creates UGC online, 10%

synthesizes UGC by commenting or sharing (additional) links, while 89% of the population are merely consumers that do not take part in online content creation (Heinrich, 2011; Hermida, 2010; Lenatti, 2009). Citizen comments that are collected online can therefore not simply be considered as representative accounts of a population's thoughts. As a result, it seems that most newsrooms have not yet incorporated the new 'network' sources in their news gathering practices (Bélair-Gagnon, 2011; Heinrich, 2011; Knight, 2011). We want to contribute to this body of literature by examining how far Flemish journalists are adapting to 'network journalism' by incorporating social media sources and non-mainstream actors in their coverage.

METHODOLOGY

On account of the finding in the literature review that journalism scholars study the transformation of the public sphere in terms of two different movements, we formulate the following two main hypotheses as a starting point for our study:

H1 – The commercialisation of the media industry and more specifically the tendency towards cost-cutting and the rising workload result in an increasing presence of mainstream actors and pre-packaged information in the news output of traditional media brands.

H 2 – The arrival of Internet and particularly Web 2.0 applications invite for a more diverse use of journalistic sources that offers new possibilities for more balanced news access, including citizens and non-mainstream organisations.

Because the results are analysed in a comparative perspective facing popular and quality newspapers, we can formulate a third hypothesis:

H3 – The impact of commercialisation and digitization is different for popular and quality newspapers.

We conducted a quantitative content analysis of the prominent themes, sources and actors in the news output of four Flemish newspapers over a period of 10 years (2000-2010). We take the year 2000 as a reference point because at this moment in time mergers between newspapers companies were largely completed, resulting in the formation of a Flemish newspaper market with three dominant media groups. This oligopoly situation led to extreme competition and a bursting impact of commercial incentives in newsrooms. At the same moment, media companies started to introduce new – digital – technologies in newsrooms (De Bens and Raeymaeckers, 2007, 2010). In addition to this longitudinal assessment, the results are analysed in a comparative perspective facing popular (Het Nieuwsblad and Het Laatste Nieuws) and quality (De Standaard and De Morgen) newspapers. We composed a stratified sample of twelve issues every year, resulting in a total sample of 96 issues (Riffe, Aust and Lacy, 1993; Wester and Selm, 2006). The study analysed foreign coverage for three reasons. First, international news is an important

part of the public sphere in a globalised world. Second, the shift to ‘network journalism’ might be most visible in foreign coverage as it is much more difficult to acquire access to information sources in foreign countries than it is in a news organisation’s country of origin (Heinrich, 2011). Third, in times of efficiency considerations foreign coverage is one of the first victims. On the one hand, this might lead to an increasing presence of mainstream actors and pre-packaged information in the news. On the other hand, Internet and Web 2.0 applications may offer new possibilities to easily reach (free) information that used to be hardly accessible information in the pre-digital era. In total, 2229 newspaper articles were selected and analysed by a team of 10 trained coders. A coding guide and registration form¹ were developed to ensure a certain level of uniformity in the selection and analytical choices and included items about the news article in general and about the themes, sources and actors appearing in it. A critically composed sample of 27 articles was tested for intercoder reliability with an outcome of Cohen’s Kappa values ranging from 0.70 up to 1.00. Analysis was carried out using PASW Statistics 18. All reported results are significant at $p \leq 0.05$ level unless indicated otherwise. In general, we only report significant findings.

RESULTS

The analysis shows an insignificant but indicative increase from 41.5% to 48.7% short news articles. The number of medium sized articles decreased from 40.0% to 23.5%. We also registered significant shifts in terms of type of news article, with an increase of factual news reports (77.5% to 81.5%) combined with a decrease of the already underrepresented background news (7.9% to 7.2%) and comments (8.1 to 6.9%). These findings indeed suggest a tendency towards more ‘churnalism’ in the Flemish press but however need to be nuanced as we also found an (insignificant) increase in large articles (18.5% to 27.8%). This latter finding suggests that Flemish journalists, although they (need to) produce more (short and factual) news reports, still find the time to invest in more in-depth and time consuming news coverage.

PRIMARY SOURCES: INFORMATION ACTORS

On average 1 information actor (0.98) is quoted in a news article, with a slight but insignificant increase comparing 2000 (0.95) with 2010 (1.02). In 76.9% of articles, journalists quote any (47.2%) or only one (29.6%) actor. This indicates that journalists do not consider balance, in terms of reporting both sides of a story, as a major issue in their coverage (Diekerhof, 2011). It is yet important to note that article size has a significant impact on the number of quoted actors, with short articles quoting no more than 0.33 actors on average and large articles reflecting more balance by quoting 2.14 actors on average. At newspaper level, we found that the quality newspaper De Morgen (1.22) significantly quotes more sources on average than both popular newspapers (0.81 and 0.83). The difference between the second quality newspaper (1.02) and the popular newspapers is but significant at the $p \leq 0.1$ level. The analysis offers partial evidence for H1 en H2. Generally taken, 2192 actors

are quoted in 2229 news articles. 28.9 percent of all quoted actors are political actors, surprisingly followed by individual citizens (15.8%). As expected, government actors (15.6%), economic actors (9.5%) and experts (9.0%) complete the top 5 (table 2). The relatively low presence of media actors (4.2%) is remarkable. When focusing on the dominant (firstly quoted) information actors, the top 5 ranking is unchanged. Although this finding confirms that mainstream actors, and especially political actors, dominate foreign coverage while citizens complement mainstream actors as information actors, we did not find any significant shifts through time. Moreover, the low presence of civil society organisations such as non-institutional movements (e.g. NGO's) and especially socio-economic actors (e.g. trade unions) seems to stay a cause for concern, also in the age of 'network journalism'. H3 is confirmed as we found that institutional actors, and more specifically political and government actors, are significantly more dominant in quality than popular newspapers. This finding can be explained by the fact that quality newspapers emphasize hard news, and especially political news, more than popular newspapers do.

Table 2. Overview of actors quoted in 4 Flemish newspapers (2000-2010) (N=2192)

Ranking	Type of actor	Times quoted	% quoted
1	Political actor (I)	633	28.9
2	Individual citizen (NI)	347	15.8
3	Government actor (I)	342	15.6
4	Economic actor (I)	209	9.5
5	Expert (I)	198	9.0
6	Non-institutional movement (NI)	173	7.9
7	Other institutional actor (I)	123	5.6
8	Media actor (I)	92	4.2
9	Socio-economic actor (I)	38	1.7
10	Other	37	1.7
	TOTAL	2192	100.0

SECONDARY SOURCES: PRE-PACKAGED NEWS AND SOCIAL MEDIA SOURCES

The mean number of sources that is referred to in a news article is 0.92, with a slight but insignificant decrease comparing 2000 (0.98) with 2010 (0.85). In 77.9% of articles, journalists mention any (43.1%) or only a single (34.8%) information source. This finding is consistent with the literature on commercialisation that states that journalists consult fewer sources because of time considerations. Of course, this finding needs to be nuanced, because survey research has shown that journalists often fail to mention their sources (e.g. Carsten, 2004). Thus, further research needs to examine whether this finding shows a 'real' decrease in the number of information sources that Flemish journalists consult as a consequence of 'churnalism' or whether it externalizes a decrease in newspapers' source transparency. We found significant differences at newspaper level in the number of reported sources (H3). The quality newspaper De Standaard outnumbers all other dailies with an average of 1.32 sources per article. The quality newspaper De Morgen and the popular newspaper Het Nieuwsblad follow at a distance (0.94), the second popular newspaper Het

Laatste Nieuws is lagging far behind (0.42). Furthermore, we found that short articles significantly report less sources (0.70) on average than medium or large articles (0.98-1.30), which indicates that the tendency towards ‘churnalism’ especially holds true for the more factual, short news reports. Foreign news without a reference to Belgium (1.02) mentioned significantly more secondary sources than foreign news with a link to the homeland (0.65). This can be explained by the finding that Flemish journalists consult significantly more primary sources (e.g. Flemish victims involved in a disaster) in the case of coverage with a link to the home country (1.31 when strong link, 1.03 when moderate link), while they (need to) consult more secondary sources in the case of foreign coverage without a reference to the home country (0.85 actors quoted on average), which is related to the news selection criterion of ‘proximity of the news’ (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Joye, 2010). This is however also an indication of the impact of cost-cutting on foreign news desks, as it shows that news organisations do not possess the means to send journalists abroad when no Belgians are involved, thus they need to turn to secondary sources.

Table 3. Overview of reported sources in 4 Flemish newspapers (2000-2010) (N=2229)

Ranking	Type of source	% 2000	% 2010	TOTAL %
1	News agencies	31.2	17.4	24.2
2	Traditional media brands	19.9	18.7	19.3
3	Public relations	12.8	11.7	12.2
	<i>Press releases/press conferences</i>			1.3
4	Social media	0.2	1.5	0.9

Four different types of sources are of interest in this analysis, namely news agencies, public relations, traditional media brands and social media. On average, one on four articles refers to a news agency, which indicates the importance of wire services as pre-packaged information. Surprisingly however, we registered a significant decrease in the number of articles that mentioned one or more news agency sources, from 31.2% to 17.4%. If we look more closely at individual news agencies, we see that the drop is mainly caused by Reuters and AP. We suppose that this is a consequence of the fact that De Morgen (30 to 4 Reuters references) and Het Nieuwsblad (28 to 4 Reuters references, 43 to 7 AP references) discontinued their subscription to these wire services. An important remark is that the Corelio newspapers significantly report more news agency sources than the Persgroep newspapers do. This might indicate differences in news organisations’ transparency policy. Public relations sources consist of press releases, press conferences, spokespersons or websites and are reported in 12.2% of articles, equally divided between 2000 and 2010. Yet, spokespersons make up the biggest number of references to public relations, press releases and press conferences are mentioned in only 30 articles (1.3%). Based on the literature, we can assume that the real number is more elevated as journalists and pr-professionals prefer to veil their often routine contacts. Traditional media sources are reported in 19.3% of articles, equally divided between 2000 and 2010.

Another confirmation of H3 is present in the finding that both quality newspapers significantly report more traditional media sources than the popular newspapers do. Although social media sources significantly rose from 2 articles in 2000 to 17 articles in 2010 (0.9% in total), we can state that their relevance in everyday news production is negligible. Thus, as far as we can observe in the news itself we can conclude that the analysis does not support H1 and H2.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This research project consists of a quantitative and longitudinal content analysis to examine the impact of commercialisation and digitization on journalists' sourcing practices considering the notion of public sphere (H1 en H2).

In view of secondary sources, the impact of digitization seems almost non-existent. Social media sources were mentioned in only 19 articles (0.9%) and although the analysis shows that citizens are important information actors, their importance has not grown since the introduction of Web 2.0. However, recent developments have shown that the importance of social media might especially hold true in times of breaking news and media restrictions and less in terms of everyday news production. Therefore, a case study approach of certain types of news events with an important role awarded to social media (e.g. 'Arab Spring') might increase our understanding of sourcing practices in a digitized news environment.

Likewise, we registered little to no rise of pre-packaged information or mainstream actors. Nonetheless, the low reported use of secondary sources, and especially press releases (1.3%), is questionable. In view of the literature we can expect that journalists often fail to mention their sources and thus, the real use of secondary sources might be more elevated than we could observe in the news output. Further and more in-depth research (input-output analysis) is required here. The privileged news access of political actors, government, companies and experts, as described in the literature, is confirmed in our analysis. The relatively low presence of media actors is surprising but can be explained by the fact that journalists often fail to mention their media sources.

At newspaper level (H3) we did find some remarkable differences. First, the analysis shows that the quality newspapers refer more to secondary sources and quote more information actors than the popular newspapers do. This suggests that Flemish quality dailies still adhere to a certain level of balance and information checking more than their popular counterparts. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that also news organisations' different policies may play a role in the implementation of sourcing practices. Moreover, Hallin and Manicini (2004) suggest that journalism culture also influences newsrooms' sourcing practices. Therefore, we will extend our research by comparing French and Dutch language newspapers in Belgium.

Our analysis applies to Flemish journalism and cannot be generalised to journalism practice in general. It is clear that little to no shrinking or expansion of the public

sphere due to commercialisation or digitization of the media sector could be detected. One possible explanation is that our time interval (2000-2010) is too limited. Therefore, we will extend the scope of the research with an interval of 5 years including 1995 and 2005 in the analysis. Another possible explanation is that Flemish journalists stand firm in a changing news environment. The new possibilities for information gathering offered by Web 2.0 applications have not yet penetrated to them but their coverage shows a relatively high amount of balance between different information actors and between copy-paste pieces and in-depth news coverage.

NOTES

¹ For more information about the choice of newspapers and the methodology of the study, contact the authors.

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