



# Adequate Information Management in Europe

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## The Case of Belgium

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## 1: Information/news management

In Belgium, information/news management does not often appear as a central concept in theoretical and empirical media research. With the exception of some textbooks, we only found a few scientific publications in which the concept of information/news management occurs. Therefore, it seems more appropriate to give an overview of the ways in which Belgian media scholars understand and use the concept and some of its related terms rather than just a state-of-the-art of Belgian research on this subject.

Among Belgian media scholars, information/news management is mostly treated as a concept of journalism, taking into account that news management refers to the journalistic work process more than information management does. Moreover, in our field of research news management carries a double meaning:

On the one hand, the term refers to the purely journalistic work process of selection and production. In this sense, the concept relates to the way in which journalists handle the information overload, to the choices that are made to determine what news is, and to the factors influencing the journalistic decision-making processes. News management, in this sense, closely relates to the gatekeeping concept. It takes place, in principle, inside the newsroom. However, unlike 'gatekeeping', in Dutch the term 'management' has an economic and commercial connotation, as a consequence of which 'news management' also refers to the impact exerted by market research on the editorial staff. This raises the question of how, and to what extent, journalists should reckon with commercial influences in their work so that their employers stand to benefit most in the market.

Whereas 'news management' can thus be understood as another (more commercial connotative) term for the journalistic gatekeeping process, the second meaning of the concept refers to the process in which political, economic and other institutions attempt to 'control' the news flow. As we will discuss in the section about the national journalism culture, Belgian newspapers have had strong ties with political parties in the past. Although these ties have weakened so that editorial news management has become much more autonomous from political party interests, it is beyond dispute that politicians are still major actors in the agenda-setting process. Already in 1980, Hans Verstraeten used the term 'news management' in his book 'Pers en Macht' (Press and Power) to refer to

the process that precedes the journalistic news selection process and that takes place at the level of political and business authorities that try to influence and control what will and will not be published as 'news'. By using the concept of 'news management', Verstraeten emphasised that before the news is selected by the journalist, it has already undergone a 'treatment', a 'pre-selection' by the government and business sources.

The latter process refers, in other words, to the communication strategies used by authorities (e.g. the EU), business enterprises, and politicians, to convey their messages to citizens, consumers, employees, stake holders, authorities, journalists, etc. This process is also called 'communication management'. In Belgium, graduate schools and universities offer bachelor's and master's degrees in 'communication management'; the curricula contain courses in marketing communication, corporate communication, public relations, verbal and non-verbal communication, advertising, media planning, etc.

The concept of 'information management' is also used in a technological context, as a kind of synonym for 'data management' or 'database management'. The focus, then, is on computer technology and software that facilitates data processing, data retrieval, data analysis, etc. Related to this, the concept of 'content management' is used in the context of the Internet. Especially in the first years of the World Wide Web, scholars and professionals seemed reluctant to describe the editors of news websites as 'journalists'. Online journalists were often called 'web editors', 'content providers' or 'content managers'. Moreover, 'Content Management Systems' (CMS) are easy-to-use software programmes that are used to publish, maintain and update digital information on the web.

For the AIM-project to function concretely and purposefully, more clarity is required on an operational definition, and the difference between news and information management will have to be made plain first. From our perspective, 'information management' is a term with a much broader meaning than 'news management'.

## 2: National journalism culture

### 2.1: Historical

In 1830 the newly independent state of Belgium was given a very liberal press climate in which freedom

of the press was guaranteed by the Constitution and the establishment of censorship was impossible. Soon a flourishing political press sprang up in which the most divergent political and ideological currents were given space. A large number of journalists fled from France and Germany to Belgium where they were free to exercise their journalistic activities. Thus Adalbert von Bornstedt, publisher of the *Deutsche Brusseler Zeitung*, and Karl Marx found a haven in Brussels. Today Belgium still has a political press, even though the links with the political parties have weakened over the years (Bens, 2001).

Along with the ongoing ‘depoliticisation’, an institutionalisation and professionalisation of Belgian journalism has been noticeable since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since 1963 it has been possible for journalists to obtain an official recognition as a ‘professional journalist’ provided that they meet a range of criteria laid down by law. In 1978, a national union of professional journalists was established, and since 1982 Belgian professional journalists have had their own official ethical ‘code of journalistic principles’ (Bens, 2001). The recent establishment of a Council for Journalism, an independent Flemish body for self-regulation of the press and ethical conduct if the journalist, is generally regarded as a further step in the professionalisation of journalism in Belgium (Voorhoof, 2002).

## 2.2: Political

The relationship between the media and politics has traditionally received much attention from Belgian media scholars.

First, we should refer to Jean-Claude Burgelman’s work on the political influences on the Belgian public broadcaster BRT in the period between the Second World War and circa 1990. Burgelman (1990) details the different ways in which political institutions impacted on the information and news policies of broadcast journalists.

Els Witte (2002) also made an important contribution to the study of the complex relationship between the media and politics. In her introduction to the literature on this subject, she deals with the commercial pressures on the mass media; the government and the media; the relationship between parliament, political

parties and the media; the functions and characteristics of political journalists; and the impact of the press on political public opinion.

In her book on the Belgian press Els De Bens also shows how intimately the press used to be linked to politics. The newspapers had strong ties with certain political parties and often co-determined the political agenda. In Flanders the dominant majority of newspapers have had ties with the catholic party. With the exception of the socialist newspapers and the newspapers of the catholic trade union, which were owned and financed by the socialist party and the catholic trade union respectively, the political opinion newspapers did not have any financial ties with political parties (Bens, 2001).

These above publications explain that in the past decades the Belgian press has been characterised by a process of ‘depoliticisation’ – i.e. the weakening of the party affiliation of the press. Although one can still associate every Belgian newspaper with a certain political ideology, journalists today can act independently and autonomously from political party pressures. This does not mean that Belgian newspapers are not interested in politics nor that they do not present opinions and ideological views, but the opinions which they present are not necessarily in line with the opinions of the political party, with whom they were once linked. In other words, today the liberal press in Belgium is sometimes very sceptical about the policy of the liberal party, while the leftist newspapers do not always agree with the decisions of the socialist or green parties. Nevertheless, politicians still try to control the media in different ways: through policy and regulation, as well as also through personal contacts with journalists, appearances on all kinds of television shows, etc. From the journalists’ perspective, the major questions are how they should approach politicians, how they should cover political issues, if and how they should promote civic participation, etc.

Research about the relationship between journalism and politics should also take into consideration international news reporting. Indeed, news flow and news framing studies mainly concentrate on the flow and coverage of political foreign news. In Belgium, significant research in this field has been carried out by Jan Servaes, who investigated the Western dominance in the international news flows and foreign news coverage in the Belgian media by examining the

different filters (source, journalist, press agency, medium, ...) in the process of news making; factors of a more structural nature such as the dominant position of the Western world news agencies; and the news product itself (what is presented and how is it presented?) (Servaes, 1983). Other Belgian media scholars have published on international news flows and news framing (e.g. Biltereyst, 2001; Bens/Hauttekeete & Lagast, 2002).

## 2.3: Legal

In recent years scholars, politicians, journalists and magistrates have participated in debates on the tense relationship between the press and the judiciary (e.g. Clement & Van de Putte, 1996). While theoretical and empirical research in this area is scarce and fragmentary, a report by Dirk Voorhoof (1998) provides a general overview of the various factors influencing and intensifying this complex and ambiguous relationship. Especially in the wake of important and highly mediatised cases, such as the Agusta affair (one of the biggest political scandals in Belgian history) and the aforementioned Dutroux case, conflicts between Belgian journalists and the judiciary have increased. This has resulted in several critical reflections on the necessity, as well as the legal and ethical constraints, of investigative journalism (see Grevisse, 1999).

Also in the wake of the Dutroux case, some critics have noted a tendency in journalism to reject traditional professional values of 'neutrality' and 'detachment' in favour of a more 'emotional', 'committed' style of journalism. Instead of just presenting the facts objectively, some journalists became so emotionally involved that they began to speculate about conspiracies and hidden agendas that would manipulate and hinder the investigation. This has led to debates about journalism ethics and the need for a professional council for self regulation of the press (Grevisse, 1999). Because journalists prefer to keep judicial and political interference to a minimum, the Belgian National Union of Professional Journalists has taken several initiatives to create a framework of self-regulation and self-control, such as is reflected in the 'code of journalistic principles' or the establishment of a Council for Journalism in 2002.

A major issue that relates to legal and ethical aspects of journalistic culture is the protection of the journal-

ist's sources. Recent cases have shown that journalists and magistrates have different perceptions of the journalist's right to refuse the disclosure of confidential sources of information. In 2002, a bill was introduced in the Belgian Parliament that would set up a legal framework for the protection of journalistic sources (Voorhoof, 2003).

## 2.4: Economic

As the concentration of the press intensified in the second half of the twentieth century, competition among the newspaper groups became more fierce, further intensified by the competition from a growing number of audio-visual players in the media market, commercial logic prevailed in the media sector as a whole. In Belgium, as in other countries, commercialisation has continued at all levels of the media and journalism.

Some authors point out that the mutual competition among the media has resulted in a greater homogeneity and less diversity in the media supply (Bens, 2000). Another consequence of commercialisation in the media sector has been a drift towards tabloidisation, which has also been extensively researched in Flanders, e.g. by Laurence Hautekeete, whose doctoral dissertation is now in the finishing stages.

We should also refer to the fact that the commercial logic of the media companies appears to lead to an increasing pressure of work on journalists. A recent survey among Flemish professional journalists has shown, not for the first time more, that journalists are complaining about an increasing pressure of time and commercial pressure (Bens / Clercq & Paulussen, 2003). Media companies want to bring as much news as possible to the consumer with as few means as possible, sometimes with dire consequences for the journalistic quality of the end-product (Bens, 2001).

## 2.5: Technological

With the arrival of the Internet, and the World Wide Web in particular, scholarly attention for the relationship between journalism and technology has grown (e.g. Porteman, 1999; Paulussen, 2004). In 2004, Steve Paulussen completed his doctoral dissertation on the impact of digitalisation on news gathering and news production processes. In part of his research, Paulus-

sen focuses on the literature of Computer-Assisted Research and Reporting (CARR) and tries to arrive at a better understanding of the journalist's use of the computer and the Internet. A survey among Flemish professional journalists has shown that the Internet has become an indispensable tool in contemporary newsrooms, both for communication (e-mail) and information retrieval (World Wide Web). Of course, this digitalisation of news gathering has both positive (faster access to information worldwide, more context, more alternative sources,...) and negative (increased time pressure on journalists, uncertain credibility of online information, 'technicalisation' of the journalist's work, ...) implications. The Internet does not only impact on journalistic news gathering practices, but it has also created a new form of journalism: online journalism. In his dissertation Paulussen presents a profile of the first generation of Flemish journalists working for the Internet and he examines to what extent online journalism differs from traditional print and broadcast journalism by using the Internet-specific potentialities of interactivity, hypertext and multimedia. The main conclusions are that in Flanders job opportunities for online journalists are very limited and that online news media are characterised by a limited exploitation of the Internet's added opportunities for online news production.

## 2.6: Social

In 1983 Els De Bens conducted the first survey among Flemish professional journalists working for newspapers, magazines, radio or television. Her study presented a socio-demographic profile of the professional journalist in Flanders as well as a first insight into their working conditions (type of employment, salary, job mobility, seniority,...) and their political-ideological views. Ten years after this pioneering study, Bens (1995) carried out another survey among newspaper journalists in Flanders. Furthermore, at the end of 2002, a survey was conducted among all 2,255 professional journalists in Flanders, who worked for a print medium, radio, television or the Internet. The questions about socio-demographics, working conditions and political-ideological values of the previous surveys by Els De Bens were supplemented with (a) questions about the journalist's use of the Internet (see above), (b) socio-psychological questions about job satisfaction and gender-related issues and (c) enquiries about the journalist's daily tasks, ethical norms

and professional role perceptions (based on the journalism surveys of Weaver & Wilhoit in the US). Given this broad scope, the latter survey provides a wide range of detailed information on the profile of contemporary professional journalists in Flanders (Bens/Clercq & Paulussen, 2003).

Belgium lacks a long tradition in the training and the education of professional journalists. This is also evident from the fact that the Belgian literature contains no practical handbooks for journalism – although one could argue that some general works about journalistic practices and standards are primarily aimed at junior editors and students (e.g. Antoine/ Dumont/ Grevisse/ Marion & Ringlet 1995). At university level, journalism courses have been integrated in the education programmes of Communication Sciences. However, it is fair to say that in recent years there has been a growing interest in journalism education among Belgian academics. An example is that, as of 2004, Ghent University offers a Master's degree in Journalism.

## 3: European public sphere

Whereas Belgian literature contains some interesting theoretical publications about the media and the public sphere in general (e.g. Verstraeten, 1996; 1998), there are no major empirical studies concerning the European public sphere in particular. However in the Communication Sciences departments of the various Belgian universities a large number of master's theses have been written that analyse the often inadequate information flow from the EU to the national media. These content analyses often bring to light the journalists' view on EU policy. The numerous opinion surveys on EU policy indirectly indicate the kind of impact the media have on the EU's image building.

Although the role of the media in the creation of a European public sphere has not yet received much attention in Belgium, there are, of course, some interesting publications in the field of political and social sciences that focus on the European Union. In particular, the work of Jean-Marc Ferry, political scientist at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), should be mentioned here. In 2000, Ferry published his book *La question de l'État européen*, in which he reflects on the 'myths and limits' of a supranational state of Europe, the political and social constitution of the European Union and the 'ethical substance' of a post-

national Europe. With regards to the European public sphere, Ferry pleads for a Charter for the audiovisual media, which should function as a normative regulatory framework for the media's missions of civic and cultural responsibility (cf. Ferry, 2003).

Another French-speaking scholar who has published about the media in Europe is the media sociologist François Heinderyckx (l'Université Libre de Bruxelles). In his book *L'Europe des médias*, he examines cultural diversity in Europe by looking at media audiences, media consumption patterns and media content in different European countries (Heinderyckx, 1998). In more recent years, Heinderyckx' research interests have shifted to the Information Society, ICT and e-government.

There are some indications that among Belgian media researchers the European public sphere and specifically the news coverage concerning the European Union are attracting increasing scholarly attention. At the Department of Communication Sciences of the Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL), for instance, Gaëlle Rony is currently doing doctoral research on the prevailing discourses and the role of Belgian, French and Turkish newspapers with regard to the enlargement of the European Union, and particularly the possible entry of Turkey to the union. Her research is still in a preliminary stage, but may certainly contribute to our understanding of how (Belgian, French and Turkish) media handle information in the European public sphere. Further, we can refer, for example, to recent articles by José-Manuel Nobre-Correia (2004a-b), in which the author states that Europe is still not a priority for the media. We note that these articles are critical reflections ("essays") rather than accounts of theoretical or empirical research.

With respect to the role of the media in the public sphere, we can also point out a recent national project, supported by the King Baudouin Foundation, that deals with the potential role of journalism in enhancing civic participation, obviously building on the ideas of 'civic journalism' (Carpentier/Grevisse & Harzimont, 2002). Twenty-two Belgian news media (including newspapers, magazines, on-line media, radio and tv stations) experimented with journalistic formats that stimulate social participation and active citizenship. Some of the media set themselves the emancipatory goal of contributing to the positive portrayal of certain minority groups in society. Other media enabled

the public to actively participate in the news production process: readers interviewed politicians, wrote articles for the newspaper or moderated discussions in web forums. Finally, some media had the ambition to provide the public specific services – an interesting example was the project of a magazine, *Le Ligeur*, that created tools for parents to make their children familiar with the basic characteristics of democracy.

Another interesting article has been written by Ides Debruyne, head of the Fonds Pascal Decroos, a journalists' organisation that attempts to stimulate investigative journalism in Belgium. The author addresses the media's lack of interest in the European Union (Debruyne, 2004). More specifically, he observes that in Belgium:

- journalists do not sufficiently inform the public about the crucial role and huge impact of the European Union on all levels of our society;
- journalists themselves seem to lack specialised knowledge about the European institutions;
- commercial considerations in the newsrooms limit journalists' chances to specialise in complex, EU-related issues;
- all media categorise news concerning the EU as 'foreign news', despite its wide implications on national, regional and local levels;
- media fail to fulfil their role to inform the public about European decisions when they are made, instead of after they are made and irrevocable;
- there is a pressing need for qualitative journalism that informs the public both promptly and in depth about important developments in Europe.

Although (and because) these critical, general observations need more scientific consideration, we believe that the article can serve as an interesting starting point for further research concerning the (Belgian) journalists' role and position with regard to the European public sphere.

## 4: Conclusion

This report looks, from a Belgian perspective, at the scientific communication research concerning information management, journalism culture and the European public sphere. The main objective of this report was to give a state-of-the-art of the existing theoretical and empirical research on these subjects, that has a

relation with Belgium, either because it concerns Belgian media or society or because it was conducted by Belgian scholars or researchers.

First, we have reflected on the two key concepts of the AIM project: information and news management. In this section of the report, we did not merely present an overview of the available publications in/about Belgium, simply because, to our knowledge, there are almost no significant publications in which information/news management is mentioned as a key concept. Nonetheless, we have tried to capture the term 'information management' and some other 'compound management concepts' (as they are called by our German colleagues in the AIM project) from the perspective of Belgian communication sciences. It has become clear to us that, regardless of the huge ambiguity of all these concepts, information management can be used in a much broader sense than news management. News management always relates to some extent to journalism. On the one hand, news management is what journalists do inside the newsroom (handling the news; gathering, selecting, processing, interpreting and writing of news). On the other hand, news management refers to the strategies that sources use to control the flows of information, to shape the news and to influence the work of journalists from outside the newsroom. Information management is not only used in a journalistic context (news management), but also in the context of ICT (database management, content management) and marketing communication (communication management).

Whereas Belgian communication research concerning information and news management is scarce, the body of literature on the Belgian journalism culture is more diverse. In particular, the relationship between journalism and politics has been the subject of several academic publications in Belgium. As the third section of this report shows, there is also Belgian research available concerning the relationship between journalism and the judiciary, journalism ethics, commercial trends in journalism, the journalistic use of ICT, online journalism and sociological studies of the journalistic profession and its practitioners.

Finally, considering the state-of-the-art in research on the European public sphere, we face a large research deficit. However, there seems to be a growing awareness among Belgian media scholars of the necessity of

studies on the media coverage of EU issues and on the role of the media in the European public sphere. Such studies should pay attention to the working conditions and routines of journalists who cover EU issues, to the internal and external factors that determine which EU issues are covered and which not and to the (potential and practiced) strategies of EU officials to disseminate news and information to journalists and to the public.

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