

## **Flemish and Non-Flemish Perceptions of Flemish National Identity as Manifested in Online News Sources**

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The purpose of this content analysis is to gain greater understanding of the ways in which the Flemish and non-Flemish perceptions differ with regard to Flemish national identity. This research is important because these perceptions continue to influence the Flemish national narrative, and because understanding the ways in which these perceptions differ is of concern to Belgians challenged with reconciling the existence of multiple national identities. Alexander Dhoest's (2003) conceptualization of four themes common to national narratives—shared history, shared culture, national language, and national character—provide the analytical framework for this study.

There are a number of "separatist" or "autonomous" movements in Europe and elsewhere, where various subnational groups such as the Flemish are making cultural and political demands (Schnapper, 1994).<sup>1 2</sup> Today, Belgium is divided geographically, linguistically, culturally, and politically. The purpose of this content analysis is to gain greater understanding of the ways in which Flemish and non-Flemish perceptions differ with regard to Flemish national identity. Determining how Flemish and non-Flemish perceptions differ is important because these perceptions continue to influence the Flemish national narrative, and because understanding the ways in which these perceptions differ is of concern to Belgians challenged with reconciling the existence of multiple national identities. The author selected a content analysis for this study because this method has proven useful in a plethora of cultural studies, where the focus involves attitudinal or emotional responses to communication among individuals or groups (Berelson, 1952).

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge the contributions made to this research by my M.A. advisor, Dr. Sandra Braman, Department of Communication, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

<sup>2</sup> Autonomous movements seek a degree of freedom within a nation, while separatist (secessionist) movements seek total independence from a particular union. Nations with autonomous area(s) are often federacies.

As Dhoest (2003) points out in his further articulation of Anderson's (1983) seminal work, the process of nation formation in Flanders involves a complex process of nationalist reinterpretation of identity, premised on the existence of a national people created through the communication processes of a shared history, shared culture, national language, and national character. The Flemish national movement's interest in preserving Flemish cultural heritage and fostering a sense of Flemish national identity is accomplished in part through government-owned mass media in Flanders.<sup>3</sup>

Cultural aspects of social life portrayed in the media contribute to the formation of contemporary narratives of Flemish national identity because mass media not only influence our perception of the social world around us (Myers & Schaefer Caniglia, 2004), they also provide evidence of perceptions that are in place, reflecting the cultural values and concerns of the dominant groups in the community they serve (Lee & Choi, 2005). This study analyzes the content of Flemish and non-Flemish online news sources as proxies for perceptions regarding Flemish national identity.

### **Dimensions of National Identity**

Building upon the work of Stuart Hall (1992), Dhoest (2003) uses the phrase "national narrative" to refer to the ability of cultural narratives to unify otherwise disparate identities. Today, a Flemish national narrative exists, consistent with the Flemish national movement's assertion of national identity. Dhoest conceptualizes four central themes common to national narratives that identify dimensions of analytical use in this study of Flemish and non-Flemish perceptions of Flemish national identity. The author adopted this model, after considering others such as Hall's articulation theory (Grossberg, 1986), for three specific reasons: (a) because the dimensions were clearly articulated and detailed; (b) because the model allowed for analysis of perceptions of Flemish national identity as a phenomenon distinct from politics, since politics is not the focus of this study;<sup>4</sup> and; (c) because this study's intent to understand perceptions of national identity by studying direct and indirect manifestations of national narratives in contemporary media accounts is similar to how Dhoest originally used this model as a means of studying period dramas. The four dimensions are as follows:

1. A shared history is crafted through deliberate reinterpretation of the traditions and events of a distant past, placed within a national framework. Founding narratives evolve and serve to justify a nation's legitimacy as a politically autonomous entity.
2. Shared culture refers to the use of high or elite cultural forms in art and literature to create a homogeneous national identity. For analytical purposes, this study extends this conceptualization of shared culture to include expressions of ethnicity and popular culture.

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<sup>3</sup> There are no national-level media in Belgium today; radio, television, and print media are either Flemish or Walloon.

<sup>4</sup> Politics is, of course, a very important part of Belgian discourse. Entire papers could be written on the political controversy surrounding the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (BHV) district, for example, but that is apart from the purpose of this study.

3. National language is a distinctive aspect of a nation's people, crucial even to the creation of a nation. National languages are, to one degree or another, artificial constructs (Hobsbawm, 2004).
4. National character involves the social construction of a national people with particular character traits. These traits do not need to be favorable, so long as they depict a homogeneous people with specific national characteristics.

The placement of specific manifestations of Flemish national identity into one of these four dimensions is analytically useful, but some overlap exists. The Flemish period dramas depicted a shared culture, but were also a source of stereotypical national character traits. Flemish linguistic heritage, a central aspect of national identity, is also germane to Flemish shared history and culture. Belgian and Flemish national narratives naturally share some elements in common, so information on both, organized along these four analytical dimensions, provides the context necessary for this study.

#### *Shared History*

A shared history places the roots of a nation in a mythical past (Dhoest, 2003), invoking stories that serve to justify national political autonomy. These stories can obscure the empirical basis of modern nations; the origin of modern nations is largely due to the primacy of capitalism and its relationship to both the new printing industry and to the religious Reformation movement (Anderson, 2006). Nevertheless, national myths create a sense of continuity and timelessness (Gimeno Martinez, 2008) by emphasizing select aspects of history.

Historians are tasked with explaining the past and arranging select events into narrative form. Different historiographical approaches can be employed. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one common approach was romantic historiography, which draws on mythological archetypes of the triumph of good over evil and is essentially "a drama of self-identification" (White, 1973, p. 8). Some historians told regional histories, focusing on Flanders or Liege as part of their efforts to establish Belgium's legitimacy, but these regional histories were soon replaced by national narratives meant to foster a stronger sense of shared national history (Tollebeek, 1998). The most common founding narrative—one that this author learned from her Flemish grandmother—is that Belgium existed as an oppressed nation for many centuries under various foreign rulers and finally rose from tyranny in 1830. This Flemish and Belgian narrative, portraying the foreign rulers of Belgium as alternatively violent and benevolent, is consistent with romantic historiography.

The Flemish shared a history of Catholicism that was appropriated by those wishing to establish Belgium's legitimacy as a sovereign nation. Belgium needed to gain the respect of the international community, and one way to do this was to promote itself as a bastion of Catholic faith (Tollebeek, 1998). Belgium's lack of a territorial history was addressed by trying to conflate the earlier County of Flanders with Belgium and vice versa, using religion as the metaphorical glue.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The geographic territories were not the same; the historic County of Flanders is territorially divided between present day France, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

The Flemish desire for autonomy is historically rooted. Brigitte Alfter (personal communication, November 24, 2008), a journalist stationed in Belgium and an informant for this study, suggests this is best illustrated by the metaphor of the elder and younger brothers. The francophone Walloons, originally the elder brother, were wealthy bullies who made fun of the Flemish. The Flemings, the younger brother, were very poor. In the 1960s, the industries in Wallonia collapsed just as Flanders began to experience economic expansion, but the elder-younger brother mentality has not changed. According to Alfter, it is often said that the Walloons are still arrogant, and the Flemings have low esteem.

The Flemish history of marginalization first led to the formation of the Flemish national movement and subsequently to the formation of the federalist government structure in 1970. Most Flemish political parties today support either autonomy or secession (Billiet & de Witte, 2008).

#### *Shared Culture*

A shared culture involves the historic use of elite art forms to foster a sense of Flemish identity. Expressions of ethnicity, including the use of national symbols and popular culture forms also contribute to the contemporary Flemish narrative.

The appropriation of art as a means of creating a modern national narrative is a recurring theme (Anderson, 2006; Dhoest, 2003). Works of art serve as evidence of a people's cultural superiority, what is often referred to—particularly in Europe and North America—as “high culture” (Orchard, 2002). Elite art was appropriated in the years immediately following the formation of the Belgian nation as a means of establishing international legitimacy.

James Ensor (1860–1949), a Flemish artist, is said to have been inspired by the early Flemish renaissance artists (Dwyer, 2007). While many of the works of earlier Flemish masters focused on Catholic imagery, Ensor's paintings symbolically communicated discontent with the Belgian monarchy and ruling elite. Ensor's work was meant to engage the common people, and his artistic commentary was influential just as the Flemish national movement was gaining ground in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Today, the Flemish masters, collectively, hold an important place in the Flemish narrative.

The attempt to create a mythic justification for national political autonomy by employing historiography ultimately failed to obscure the empirical origins of modern nations. Nations are political units that often do not coincide precisely with cultural units (Gellner, 1964). Most nations are culturally diverse, and cultures are often defined in contrast to one another (Fiske, 2002). Greenfeld (1992) argues that the nation was presented as homogeneous, although in practice, nationalism does not need to be related to a common territory, language, tradition, history, or ethnicity. Many nations in Europe are ethnically constituted (Greenfeld, 1992; Muller, 2008), and Belgium is no exception.

Van Ginderachter (2007) uses the term “ethnie” to complement Anderson's idea of an imagined community when the former writes, “An ethnie is a group of people who imagine themselves as community with a collective name of their own, who believe that they share a distinctive culture and a common ancestry” (p. 217). The founding myths connected to an ethnie provide the community with its

constitutive political myth. One Flemish founding myth holds a special place in Flemish national identity—the Battle of the Golden Spurs, supposedly fought on July 11, 1302 (Dhoest, 2003; Labio, 2002), is now commemorated by a Flemish holiday symbolizing the Flemish resistance to the French.

Nationalism involves the process of collectivization and individuation of a nation, and ancient symbols that engender a sense of shared culture and continuity with the past are needed to support a national myth (Gimeno Martinez, 2008). The symbol of Flanders is a black lion on a yellow background that has its roots in the historic County of Flanders. Wallonia's symbol is that of the bold rooster, reaffirming a more ancient French cultural identity and harkening to earlier Walloon nationalistic movements.

Period dramas broadcast on Flemish television promoted a sense of Flemish national identity (Dhoest, 2003; Van den Bulck & Van Poecke, 1996). Most period dramas were set in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Flemings were farmers and laborers. Period dramas depicted the struggle between Catholicism and socialism, between classes, and between language. Cumulatively, they formed a cultural picture of poverty and hardship, where people lived with nature in pristine villages. The purpose of this particular form of popular culture was twofold: It created a sense of uniquely Flemish identity and countered the influence of the French culture.

#### *National Language*

The use of multiple languages was common in preindustrial empires, where one language was privileged in court, another in religion, and perhaps another in trade (Gellner, 1964), but there was typically a lingua franca that people used to communicate with others from distant regions. Language is crucial to national narratives and the formation of identity because it is "the most important sign system of human society" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 37).

When Belgium was formed in 1830, its first Constitution stated that the language(s) to be spoken in the new nation were optional (Stephenson, 1972). The French language was dominant at the time (Edwards & Sheam, 1987) due to the economic and cultural status of France and the economic strength of Wallonia, but the Dutch language did not fall out of use.<sup>6</sup> Language was so central to Flemish identity that the desire to protect it led to the creation of the Flemish national movement (Dhoest, 2003). In Belgium today there are three official languages—French, Dutch, and German (Aunger, 1993). Four unofficial Flemish dialects are still used in Flanders regularly. In fact, at least 90% of the Flemish speak an unofficial dialect in the workplace and in school.

Hall (1997) argues that culture is sometimes defined, based on shared conceptual maps, but even when two or more communicators share the same map, they must also possess a shared language to share the conceptual ideas that are necessary to the exchange of meaning through codes, which, in conjunction with conceptual maps and shared language, together govern relationships. Thus, Walloons

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<sup>6</sup> Dutch is the official language of Flanders.

and Flemings, who are not fluent in Dutch or French, respectively, are unable to fully understand one another's conceptual maps.

#### *National Character*

The fourth analytical dimension involves the representation of a national people with particular character traits. Historians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century told stories about how tightly Belgian commoners held onto their old traditions (Tollebeek, 1998). Character traits consistent with these stories, such as stubbornness, became associated with the Belgians and also with the Flemish.

The Belgians tend to define their own national identity in contrast to that of their neighbors, a comparative identity construct. Alfter (personal communication, November 24, 2008) illustrates how the Flemings and Walloons distinguish themselves from the Netherlands and France, respectively. The Flemings claim the Dutch are boring, Calvinistic, and drink milk for lunch, while they come from a good Catholic heritage, enjoy life and good food, and are laissez-faire. The Walloons tell the following joke to illustrate their distinction: "How do you make some money quick? You buy a Frenchman for what he is worth, and sell him for what he *thinks* he is worth" (2008). Belgians today are conflicted about their own national identity.

#### *Summary*

These four analytical dimensions provide a means of understanding the cultural sources and manifestations of Flemish national identity. The review of the literature serves as the basis for formulating expectations of what may be found in this research in each of these analytical dimensions.

The Flemish news source can be expected to include content reflecting their Catholic history and that refers favorably to the Flemish desire for greater autonomy. The non-Flemish news source is likely to reflect a less favorable view of the Flemish desire for greater autonomy and is expected to include little religious content.

The Flemish news source is expected to refer favorably to Flemish ethnic heritage, the Flemish lion, and Flemish artists or styles of painting, and is expected to contain some content on specific expressions of Flemish popular culture. The non-Flemish news source is likely to include less content on Flemish elite art, ethnic heritage, or Flemish popular culture, in favor of more Belgian-centric content.

The Flemish news source can be expected to include content that refers favorably to the Flemish desire to preserve their linguistic heritage. The non-Flemish news source is likely to include content critical of the Flemish language laws.

The Flemish news source can be expected to include content that refers to the Flemish as hard working, loyal, and brave, as well as content comparing the Walloon character with that of France. The non-Flemish news source is expected to include references to less favorable Flemish character traits, such as Flemish arrogance.

### Analytical Framework

The purpose of this interpretive content analysis is to gain greater understanding of the ways in which the Flemish and non-Flemish perceptions differ, which is important because these perceptions continue to influence the Flemish national narrative, and because understanding the ways in which these perceptions differ is of concern to Belgians challenged with reconciling the existence of multiple national identities. This study will also explore the usefulness of the four dimensions as an analytical framework for the study of autonomous or separatist movements and for perceptions of national identity.

#### *Method*

This study analyzes the content of Flemish and non-Flemish online news sources as proxies for perceptions regarding Flemish national identity. Drawing on the works of Krippendorff (2004), Chaffee (1991), and Creswell (2007), the author chose a semantic content analysis for this study because this method provides a means of identifying alternative perspectives on Flemish national identity and of making inferences based on the ways in which these perceptions are manifested in particular online news sources. A semantic or relational level of analysis includes the process of identifying the concepts or themes present in a given text that serve as indicators of perceptions along each of the four analytical dimensions in this study. The exploration of any meaningful relationships between the concepts identified is also facilitated by use of this semantic content analysis. Exemplars from several studies guided the application of this methodology, such as Dhoest's (2003) content analysis on Flemish period dramas, and a content analysis by Morreale and Pearson (2008), because these studies employed a similar approach, with indicators organized along specific analytical dimensions.

Two news sources were identified for this study using a criterion-based sampling strategy (Creswell, 2007). There are 21 news sources published in Belgium, and most of these are newspapers available only in Dutch, French, or German. Three specific criteria were established for selecting news sources for this study: (a) availability of an online archive of published news and feature articles; (b) existence of an English-language Web site for access and readability (given that the author is not fluent in either Dutch or French); and (c) selection of news sources that most closely reflected the Flemish and the Walloon perspectives, as this study uses news source content as proxies for perceptions regarding Flemish national identity.

No French-language news source published in Belgium was available in English, online, or in printed form, so various international news sources were considered as proxies for the non-Flemish perspective. International news sources are more likely to represent the Walloon-francophone perspective rather than the Flemish perspective because more international journalists speak French than Dutch and are thus more likely to translate French news sources from Wallonia as a means of gathering information for their coverage of Belgium (B. Alfter, personal communication, November 24, 2008). Preference was given to international news sources headquartered in Europe rather than U.S.- or Asian-based news sources like the *International Herald Tribune* (owned by *The New York Times*) in the interests of capturing a more European-centric non-Flemish perspective.

Two English-language news sources representing the Flemish perspective were identified: *Flanders Today* and *Flandersnews.be*. *Flanders Today* is a weekly publication featuring Flemish culture,

and while this publication is potentially data rich, it was not selected because we could not identify a comparable type of publication to represent the Walloon perspective. *Flandersnews.be*, published daily by VRT, the Flemish public broadcaster and a Flemish government entity (B. Alfter, personal communication, November 24, 2008), credibly presents the Flemish perspective and is available in English, so it was selected for this study. Two news sources representing the non-Flemish perspective were identified: the *Financial Times* and *BBC International Europe*. The *Financial Times* reports almost exclusively on business and financial news in Europe, whereas *BBC International Europe*, published by the British government, reports on a wider range of news topics. *BBC International Europe* has stringent editorial guidelines, a European news section, and European-based journalists, so it was selected for this study.

*BBC International Europe* and *Flandersnews.be* are comparable online daily news sources run by government entities, and each contains news and feature articles of interest to this study. These similarities allow for analysis of perceptions manifested in daily news stories that report on the same event in both news sources. Both news sources are targeted to an audience that prefers to read the news in English rather than in Dutch or French. All articles related to Belgium, Flanders, or Wallonia from *Flandersnews.be* and *BBC International Europe*, published in the second half of 2008, were included in the sample, because each article potentially includes references that reflect perceptions of interest to this study. Web site advertisements and editorials were not included in this sample.

#### *Coding*

The sample included 157 articles. Developing the coding scheme for this study involved combining inductive and deductive approaches to coding the textual data. The four analytical dimensions were ideal for deductively organizing the data, and specific indicators of perceptions of Flemish national identity were derived through an inductive coding process. These indicators were further organized into categories along each of the four analytical dimensions. The final coding scheme is found in Table 1.

#### **Results**

Using the four dimensions common to national narratives as an analytical framework provided a means to understand how Flemish and non-Flemish media representations of the cultural aspects of Flemish identity are different. The data included 218 coded references: 108 coding items from the Flemish news source and 110 coding items from the BBC news source. Table 1 shows the number of items coded for each analytical dimension and each indicator, broken down by news source. This section emphasizes findings that are qualitatively relevant.



Table 1: Coding Results by Dimension.

Indicators	Flemish	Non-Flemish	Total
Shared history			
<u>Religion</u>			
Catholicism, positive	8	1	9
Catholicism, negative	0	0	0
Category subtotal	8	1	9
<u>Flemish autonomy</u>			
Desire for greater autonomy, positive	35	0	35
Desire for greater autonomy, negative	4	36	40
Discrimination practiced against Flemish	2	1	3
Concern greater autonomy will lead to			
Belgium dividing into two separate countries	2	15	17
Category subtotal	43	52	95
Dimension total	51	53	104
Shared culture			
<u>Elite Art</u>			
Artists referred to as Flemish	3	1	4
Artists referred to as Belgian	0	0	0
Art styles referred to as Flemish	1	0	1
Art styles referred to as Belgian	0	0	0
Category subtotal	4	1	5
<u>Ethnicity</u>			
Flemish ethnic heritage, positive	23	4	27
Flemish ethnic heritage, negative	0	1	1
Belgian cultural heritage, positive	2	2	4
Belgian cultural heritage, negative	1	0	1
Flemish lion, positive	3	0	3
Flemish lion, negative	0	1	1
Walloon rooster, positive	0	0	0
Walloon rooster, negative	2	0	2
Category subtotal	31	8	39
<u>Popular culture</u>			
Flemish popular culture, positive	3	0	3
Flemish popular culture, negative	0	0	0
Category subtotal	3	0	3
Dimension total	38	9	47

<u>Indicators</u>	<u>Flemish</u>	<u>Non-Flemish</u>	<u>Total</u>
National language			
<u>Flemish linguistic heritage</u>			
In favor of minimizing or eliminating threats to Flemish linguistic heritage	13	3	16
Accepting of linguistic diversity within Belgium	0	3	3
Critical of Flemish resistance to non-Flemish languages	0	14	14
Lack of a single Belgian language	<u>1</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>
Category subtotal	14	23	37
<u>Lack of shared conceptual map</u>			
Divide between Germanic and Latin linguistic cultures	<u>1</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>10</u>
Category subtotal	<u>1</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>10</u>
Dimension total	15	32	47
National character			
Flemish as hard working	0	4	4
Flemish arrogance	0	2	2
Flemish prickliness	0	1	1
Flemish defensiveness	0	3	3
Flemish thriftiness	0	1	1
Belgian stubbornness	1	1	2
Belgians as skilled at compromise	0	3	3
Walloon character aligned with France	3	1	4
Flemish character aligned with the Netherlands	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>
Dimension total	4	16	20

#### *Shared History*

There were 104 references coded for this dimension, 49% from the Flemish news source and 51% from the BBC news source. Nine references were coded for the first category, religion, and 95 references were coded for the second category, Flemish autonomy.

The Flemish articles contained eight positive references to Catholicism, while the BBC articles, representative of the non-Flemish perspective, contained only one such reference. Coded references from

the Flemish news source included several articles on the anticipated sainthood of Father Damian and on the appointment of Johan Bonny as Antwerp's new bishop. The only reference to religion in the sampled BBC articles referred to Christianity indirectly, mentioning a Rubens painting with a religious theme, entitled "The Apotheosis of James I" ("Rubens Sketch," 2008).

The Flemish penchant for autonomy is reflected in the data from this study. There were 35 positive references to the Flemish desire for greater autonomy coded in the Flemish articles, while no positive references were found in the BBC articles sampled. Many of the positive references addressed Flemish support for greater devolution or for further constitutional reform. Both are synonymous with the desire for greater regional autonomy. The first (unaccepted) resignation of Belgium's Prime Minister Leterme in July 2008 was, according to the articles in this sample, a result of the coalition government's failure to reach an accord on reforms. References favorable to the goals of the Flemish nationalist movement were also coded as being in favor of greater autonomy.

The Flemish desire for autonomy resulted in the formation of a geographically divided nation, but this division has yet to be expressed in cyberspace; Belgium has a single domain extension (.be) available for use by all Belgians. One article explained that the Flemish government is applying for its own (Flemish) domain extension on the Internet—perhaps .vla, .vln, .vlaanderen, or .fla. Expressing some regret, the article's author explains, "A two letter extension is not possible because these are reserved for independent states that are recognised by the United Nations" ("Flandersnews.vla???", 2008).

There were 40 items coded as negative references to the Flemish desire for greater autonomy, of which 36 were from the BBC news source. The four references found in the Flemish news source were reports on the Walloon (non-Flemish) perspective. The BBC articles referred to how much autonomy has already been devolved, to possible negative consequences of further devolution, and to the desire of the Flemish to keep their tax dollars from leaving Flanders. One BBC article even makes an explicit reference to "the autonomy-minded Flemish" ("Can Divided Belgium," 2008).

The concern that greater autonomy will lead to secession is mentioned often in the BBC articles sampled. Articles were coded for references to the Walloons' concern that greater Flemish autonomy will lead to Belgium dividing into two separate countries. Of 17 references coded for this indicator, 15 were from the BBC news source. The two references in the Flemish news source are reports of the Walloon perspective. The Walloons are extremely concerned about secession and its consequences, and the results of this analysis are consistent with this claim. One article reports that the Flemish sports minister suggested restructuring Belgium's football federation into French and Flemish divisions, and the representative of a Liege (Walloon) sports group responded that he interpreted this as a first step toward (political) secession.

#### *Shared Culture*

There were 47 references coded for this dimension, primarily found in the Flemish news source. For the first category, elite art, there were five coded references. There were 39 references coded for the second category, ethnicity, and three coded references for the third category, popular culture.

Five references to either Flemish artists or art styles were found, four from the Flemish news source. While not quantitatively significant, the expectation that appropriation of art is significant to the Flemish national narrative is illustrated by the fact that the Flemish government purchased a painting, "Old Man in an Ale House" for 743,000 Euros (more than US\$1 million) because it was painted in the 1600s by Brouwer, a Flemish artist. The single coded BBC reference referred to a large oil sketch painted by "Flemish master Rubens" ("Rubens Sketch," 2008).

The 39 references coded for ethnicity reflect the degree to which the Flemish remain committed to preserving their ethnic heritage. Most of the items coded for this category are positive references to Flemish ethnic heritage (27 references), and most of these (23 of the 27) were found in the Flemish news source. Coded references included mention of the Ijzer Pilgrimage and the Poppy Parade, commemorating the soldiers who died in the Flanders Fields during World War I; positive references to a new social orientation course designed to promote Flemish culture to recent immigrants; and an article introducing *Randkrant*, a new publication that will feature Flemish culture in the Rand, the area surrounding Brussels. Several articles reported on Wallonia's desire to annex the Rand or to the cultural threat posed by the presence of increasing numbers of immigrants residing in Flanders. According to one article on the social orientation course, "Lessons will not only dwell on traffic regulations and environmental legislation, but also highlight three basic principles of life in Flanders: equality between the sexes, the separation of church and state, and freedom of speech" ("Integration Course," 2008).

There were four positive references to Flemish ethnic heritage found in the BBC news source, each of which reported on the Flemish desire to preserve their Flemish identity. Only one reference, from the BBC news source, was coded as a negative reference to Flemish ethnic heritage, because the article was critical of the new mandatory Flemish social orientation course.

There were four references to the Flemish lion, three of them positive references in the Flemish news source, and one negative reference in the BBC news source. There were two references to the Walloon rooster, both negative, each illustrating article headlines in the Flemish news source. Three positive references were coded in the Flemish articles for expressions of Flemish popular culture.

#### *National Language*

There were 47 references coded for this dimension, of which 32% were from the Flemish news source and 68% from the BBC news source. A total of 37 references were coded for the first category, Flemish linguistic heritage, and 10 for the second category, lack of shared conceptual map.

Of the 16 references to perceived threats to Flemish linguistic heritage coded for this indicator, 13 were found in the Flemish news source. A few Flemish articles reported on the need for the social integration courses to include Dutch language lessons for recent immigrants and on the successes of these courses. Several articles reported on the Flemish desire to split the BHV district as a means of preserving Flemish linguistic heritage. The BHV district issue is viewed as a linguistic matter, because 2003 redistricting made it possible for francophones to vote for political leaders within Flanders, resulting in the election of francophone mayors in Flanders. According to one article, the Flemish interior minister refused

to appoint three mayors elected in the BHV district because they flouted language laws. "The three mayors issued election papers in French, when they are bound to do this in Dutch first" ("No Appointment," 2008).

Even the non-Flemish have a degree of respect for this Flemish perspective, based on three references coded for this indicator from the BBC news source. One article states that Flemish linguistic defensiveness is fueled, because in some areas the Flemish are a minority on their own soil. A second article notes that the Flemish language requirements aren't xenophobic. "The real reason for Flemish linguistic punctiliousness lies not in xenophobia, but in the troubled history of Belgium. The defense of a long-suppressed language is pivotal to Flemish identity" ("Belgian Ethnic Rift," 2008).

The non-Flemish perspective was expected to be more accepting of greater linguistic diversity or more critical of Flemish resistance to non-Dutch languages (or both), and the findings are consistent with this expectation. There were no references coded for either of these perspectives in the Flemish news source, but this study found 17 such references in the BBC news source. Three of those 17 references were coded as more accepting of greater linguistic diversity. One such reference states explicitly, "Wallonia, by contrast, is relaxed about integrating foreigners and has no mandatory [language] courses" ("Belgian Ethnic Rift," 2008). The 14 other references were coded as critical of Flemish resistance to non-Dutch languages. Many of these references were detail-rich, providing examples where the Flemish reaction to the use of a non-Dutch language was perceived as extreme. One reference coded was a story about the banning of French on school grounds in Zaventem, in the Rand. A 16-year-old student explains that if students are caught speaking French in the playground, after one warning, they will get a detention. Another reference coded tells of a letter written by the Flemish government to a restaurant shopkeeper in Overijse, another town in the Rand. "As you know, this is a Flemish commune, whose official language is Dutch. However, we notice that your neon sign, 'Thai takeaway,' is in English only. We would like to request that you change this to 'Thai meeneemrestaurant'" ("War of Words," 2008).

Four references to a lack of a single Belgian language were coded. Such findings, again, are only qualitatively interesting, lacking any strong numerical significance. Three of the four references came from the BBC news source. One reference from the BBC news source laments, "Although the railways are federal, train tickets are not bilingual—in Flanders they are in Dutch only, while tickets for the same journeys printed in Wallonia are in French" ("Can Divided Belgium," 2008).

There were 10 references coded for mention of the fundamental divide between the Germanic and Latin linguistic cultures, nine of them in the BBC news source. According to one BBC reference, "The cultural divide between Europe's Germanic north and Latin south has run through the middle of Belgium since the Roman Empire. We are a very dual country . . . that differ in many, many ways" ("Rich Flanders," 2008). The sole reference for this indicator from the Flemish news source illustrates this same point: "The Cardinal [Godfried Canneels] said he hoped that the different language communities in Belgium would understand each other, despite their differences" ("Better Understand," 2008).

### *National Character*

There were 20 references coded for this dimension, 20% from the Flemish news source and 80% from the BBC news source. This dimension includes nine indicators, of which seven refer to either Flemish or Belgian character traits, and two refer to the way in which Belgians define their national character in contrast to that of their neighbors.

For the first indicator there were four references to the Flemish as hard working, all from the BBC news source. According to one article, "The hard-working north is supporting the south, just like in Italy. Flanders indeed has wealth, a hard-working population, and beautiful, world-famous cities" ("Rich Flanders," 2008). The other seven references, coded for Flemish character traits, were also found in the BBC news source and referred to Flemish thriftiness (one reference), Flemish defensiveness (three), Flemish prickliness (one), and Flemish arrogance (two).

Two indicators captured references to Belgian character traits. For the first indicator, two references were coded for Belgian stubbornness, one from each news source. Three references, all from the BBC news source, referred to Belgians as skilled at compromise.

Two indicators were designed to capture the way in which the Belgians tend to define their national character in contrast to that of their neighbors. Four coded references suggested the Walloon character was aligned with that of France. No references were found suggesting the Flemish character was aligned with that of the Netherlands. As expected, three of the four references indicating that the Walloon character is aligned with that of France were found in the Flemish news source.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to gain greater understanding of the ways in which the Flemish and non-Flemish perceptions differ with regard to Flemish national identity. News source content served as a source of data and was analyzed as proxies for perceptions regarding Flemish national identity. The four dimensions common to national narratives identified by Dhoest (2003)—shared history, shared culture, national language, and national character—provided the analytical framework for this content analysis.

### *Shared History*

The presence of several articles on Catholicism in the Flemish news source may reflect the historical significance of religion in the Flemish national narrative, but no such conclusion can be drawn because of the nature of the unique news stories featured at the time of this sample. The absence of references to Catholicism in the BBC articles was expected. Based on the data analyzed, the Flemish continue to seek greater political autonomy today, even in the face of significant resistance from Wallonia, but they do not appear to seek complete independence. The Flemish articles rarely contain mention of the possibility of secession, and when they do, it is in the context of reporting on the expressed concerns of the Walloons.

Interestingly absent from the discourse in the Flemish news source is consideration of the potential consequences (benefits and drawbacks) should the Flemish succeed in gaining greater constitutional autonomy. While the Flemish perspective on autonomy is goal-oriented, the non-Flemish discourse is focused on potential consequences if the Flemish are to be ultimately successful.

From the non-Flemish perspective, the Flemish demands for greater autonomy are either synonymous with, or a major step toward, secession. Based on reports from the BBC, the Walloons recognize that only extremist groups like Vlaams Belang explicitly entertain the idea of Flemish independence. However, there is concern that these groups will gain more power if an accord on reforms is not forthcoming. That the non-Flemish discourse includes consideration of possible consequences of secession suggests the Walloons remain concerned that no matter what actions they take, secession may be inevitable.

#### *Shared Culture*

Consistent with predictions, the Flemish and non-Flemish discourses on shared culture reflect differing perspectives. The desire to preserve Flemish ethnic heritage is a dominant theme in the Flemish news source. The presence of several positive references to Flemish art, popular culture, and to the symbol of the Flemish lion, as well as the presence of negative references to the symbol of the Walloon rooster in the Flemish news source, is collectively indicative of a distinct Flemish national narrative.

#### *National Language*

As expected, this research confirms that Belgians do not possess a shared conceptual map. It is interesting that only the BBC articles included explicit references to the lack of a single Belgian language, and that most references coded for a lack of a shared conceptual map were found in the BBC news source. Together, the lack of such discourse in the Flemish news source and the low numbers coded in the BBC articles suggest this is not a remarkable issue for the Belgians.

The Flemish commitment to preserving their linguistic heritage is supported by this research, and as expected, the non-Flemish perspective is clearly critical of the degree to which the Flemish resist non-Dutch languages. The findings of this study suggest that language is likely to remain a significant point of contention in Belgium.

#### *National Character*

The Flemish period dramas, broadcast until the 1980s, were a source of stereotypical Flemish national character traits, and their portrayal of the Flemish as hard-working is reflected in the BBC articles sampled. The depiction of this one Flemish character trait is the single national character trait that continues to appear in the news sources sampled. The Flemings further identified themselves as possessing a distinct national character by portraying the Walloon national character as aligned with that of France. The BBC news source included a few negative references to Flemish character traits, but given the present tensions in Belgium, this is not unexpected.

### Conclusions

The Flemish and non-Flemish perceptions with regard to Flemish autonomy and the preservation of Flemish cultural and linguistic heritage were the most significant differences found in this study. The Flemish desire to preserve their cultural heritage was a dominant theme in the Flemish news source. The Flemish news source contained information on the perspectives of the francophones, and the BBC news source likewise contained references to the Flemish points of view. However, the presence of such perspectives does not appear to improve mutual understanding and may even serve to highlight the fundamental divergence of their mutual perceptions.

One fundamental difference between the two news sources is that the Flemish news source content treats the existence of multiple (Flemish and Belgian) national identities as unproblematic, whereas the non-Flemish news source treats the presence of a Flemish national identity as a destabilizing influence. The Flemish do not frame their desire for autonomy as a secessionist movement, but instead are focused on preserving their own cultural, ethnic, and linguistic heritage without much thought to the eventual consequences of gaining greater autonomy. The cultural aspects of language and ethnicity portrayed in media content will likely continue to contribute to the ongoing development of the narrative of Flemish identity, but Belgium's political future will be largely dependent on the ability of the Flemish and francophones to compromise—a character trait of which all Belgians are proud.

This study analyzed the content of Flemish and non-Flemish online news sources as proxies for perceptions regarding Flemish national identity as a means of understanding the ways in which the Flemish and non-Flemish perceptions differ. Belgians faced with reconciling the existence of multiple national identities can benefit from the findings of this study. The Walloons may benefit from a greater understanding of the underlying cultural concerns that are reflected in the Flemish national narrative. Awareness of the ways in which the Flemish and non-Flemish perceptions differ with regard to Flemish national identity is a step toward developing a greater degree of mutual understanding, cooperation, and dialogue between the Flemish and Walloon communities.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

First, this study was conducted by a researcher who was not a native of Belgium. While this outsider perspective did lend a degree of objectivity to the research, it also presented a significant limitation in that the author could not sufficiently represent the complexity of Belgium or its people, nor derive conclusions that would be otherwise apparent to Belgian researchers.

This study looked at news source content over a limited time period; a larger study, including articles over a number of years, would provide information on how these perspectives have changed over time. The amount of information I could code for cultural aspects was limited by my need to rely on online news sources available in English. The ideal sample would have included articles from the two most widely-circulated newspapers in Belgium. These newspapers would also include culture or lifestyle sections that would have been data rich.



Triangulation of research methods would enrich our understanding of this subject. The results from this study could be used to devise a set of interview questions that could be asked of leaders in the Flemish and francophone communities. A focus group would be useful in validating my arguments and inferences.

The first three analytical dimensions—shared history, shared culture, and national language—were very useful for understanding the Flemish and non-Flemish perceptions of Flemish national identity, but little information was found pertaining to the fourth analytical dimension, national character. It is possible this lack of information is associated with the news sources' desire to avoid the appearance of bias. All four dimensions remain potentially useful as an analytical framework for the study of autonomous or separatist movements, depending on the type of text coded. It would be very interesting to conduct a similar content analysis focused on another European ethnies, such as the Welsh or the Basques, in the interests of identifying patterns common to their national movements and to the findings of this study of Belgium. Such a study would also help ascertain the degree to which these four dimensions are useful as an analytical framework for other separatist and/or autonomous movements.

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