

Book Review

Gertjan Willems en Bruno De Wever (eds.), *De verbeelding van de Leeuw. Een geschiedenis van media en natievorming in Vlaanderen*. Antwerpen: Peristyle, 2020, 381 pp., ISBN 9789492639400

The important role of media in forming and sustaining national and community identities is more and more acknowledged. In the 1980s Benedict Anderson coined the concept of 'imagined communities', referring to the capacity of media to build and convey feelings of community and belonging, even if there is no physical contact on an individual or group level. Since then, the concept has often been applied in research about the relation of media and national identities. The interest in this topic has grown considerably because of the increasing interest in the broader idea that media are vital in constructing cultural identities. Media are seen as crucial for cultivating a sense of belonging to a distinct culture based on a shared sexual, ethnic, or cultural identity.

It is therefore not by coincidence that the content of media is high on the research agendas in history, media studies, communication sciences and minority studies. The studies brought together in *De verbeelding van de leeuw* [The Imagination of the Lion] (the lion is a symbol of Flanders) are a very nice example. The book offers - for the first time in the historical sciences in Flanders - a nice and varied collection of studies of the way



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media shaped and gave direction to Flemish identity. The obvious disadvantage of a bundle like this, is the bringing together of scattered and varied research traditions. From detailed historical source study to the more methodologically driven communication sciences, it is all there.

But reading carefully, you can see that almost all studies connect to the idea of 'imagined communities' and a wide variety of more recent theories covering the same subject. Inspiration for example was Sabina Mihelj's study on *Media Nations* (2011) that stresses the ritual aspect of media and identity. In her view the most prominent role of media is to create 'rhythm of thinking' and a 'collective symbolic system'. In the same line of argument is the work of Billig and Skey & Antonsich about everyday 'banal' nationalism. This research looks at forms and contents that are always present in everyday life, but often remain unnoticed or unidentified. Newspapers for example are writing daily with an obvious set of language tools and cultural notions. Deconstructing these notions sheds light on ideas about community and identity.

One of the peculiar aspects of Flemish media identity is the very gradual and slow start of it. Most media of the nineteenth century were published in the French language, the official language of the Belgian nation since the independence of the Netherlands in 1830. In the twentieth century more and more newspapers and magazines changed to Flemish, a variety of Dutch. As Sarah van Hoof shows in a contribution on language care, a battle resulted from this growing awareness of the importance of language for Flemish culture. Elites in literature, journalism, and broadcasting favoured the standard of 'pure' or 'civilized' Dutch language. But others preferred the Flemish language of common people, including phrases and words that weren't part of standard Dutch.

Other studies also see changes in the relation of French and Flemish from the late nineteenth century. Starting with a careful and modest coming out of a Flemish cultural and literate elite, the cultural awareness of

Flemish identity spread rapidly in the twentieth century. Media like newspapers and broadcasting were the agents of the changes. In first instance it aimed for emancipation of the Dutch language equal to the dominant French. Later on, Flemish nationalism politicized the press, that began to publish stories longing for a strong Flanders with glorious stories from the past.

With the rise of mass media like radio, film, and television, Flemish identity became more and more important. After the Second World War growing pressures for equal treatment of Flemish culture resulted in the acknowledgment of the Flemish Cultural Community in the 1960s and the gradual growth to a federal Belgian state with greater autonomy of the French and Flemish communities. In this perspective it is a pity that the emphasis in the book is on the period before the war, because big questions can be raised about the role of media like television on the federalization of culture in Belgium. Only two chapters cover this topic. Communication sciences scholars give a very interesting analysis of the cultural policies of public service broadcasting and the way in which Flemish identity was constructed in fictional programs. And political media scholars try to get a grip on one of the most intriguing topics in news reporting of the last two decades: how to report on nationalistic and populist parties that promote anti-immigration and xenophobic (some even say: racist) ideas? The study shows that public broadcasting didn't choose for laying a 'sanitary cordon' around these parties. They were roughly treated the same as other parties, but the most radical party Vlaams Blok (Flemish Block) didn't get the attention they wanted on basis of the number of voters they attracted. Since then, the relation of Vlaams Blok with what they call 'the mainstream leftist media' is antagonistic, to say it carefully.

Growing pressures for the promotion of Flemish identity have culminated in a strong position of Flanders in the Belgian nation. Media have constructed this identity, but also strengthened it, gave the

emancipation for equal rights a focus and direction, created a sense of urgency, and mobilized people to adjust their norms and behaviour. The big question that follows from this is of course: are media frontrunners in the process or do they just follow what is happening in politics, culture, or society? Looking at the cases presented in this book about Flanders you can say that both arguments are valid. Media were important agents of broader developments, as well as mobilizing factors in times of great tensions.

In the interaction of media contents and cultural articulation of identities lies the secret of media power. The risk of a finalistic view on this interactive network can be felt in this book too. Finalistic in the sense that a strong Flemish identity always was there, only waiting to be awakened by new political ideas and media attention that reflected those.

History shows that processes like these are more complex; it also shows the power of politics. In almost two centuries of development Belgium has found a way to pacify the growing cultural animosity between two main identity groups (Flemish and Walloon). In doing so other minorities (like the German-speaking people) got considerable independence too. Almost all Belgian policies touching on identity nowadays are in hands of communities (education, culture, welfare, media), regions (economics, infrastructure, employment), and what is called 'language areas'. The federation Belgium therefore has become one of the most complicated nations. It still functions although there are some movements towards final separation. Resisting the burden of federal Belgium, the state that increasingly becomes a pragmatic political solution for a nation that was not able to form one powerful and overarching nationalistic feeling or identity. The monarchy, the army and the national football team were and still are almost the only symbols of the Belgian nation. But even when covering the successful national football team, the Walloon television organization RTBF focusses mostly

on the outstanding efforts of ‘their’ star player Thibaut Courtois, and the Flemish VRT on ‘our red devil’ Kevin de Bruyne. They are in the same team, but identification with successful efforts takes place through the nationalistic cultural lenses the media use to look at reality.

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