

Where is the balance in the news? The determinants of balanced coverage of political news sources in television news.

Proefschrift voorgelegd tot het behalen van de graad van
Doctor in de Sociale Wetenschappen: Politieke Wetenschappen
aan de Universiteit Antwerpen te verdedigen door

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Antwerpen 2011

 **Universiteit
Antwerpen**

Faculteit Politieke en Sociale Wetenschappen

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Nederlandse titel:

Waar is het evenwicht in het nieuws?

Determinanten van balans tussen politieke actoren in het televisienieuws

Abstract

The basic idea of this Ph.D. study is to use the concept of balance to make it possible to study media bias at news item level, offering the great advantage that news item specific characteristics can be brought into explanatory analyses on media bias. First, the study of the use of political actors in the news is situated in the wider field of media research. Then, some of the basic concepts of the debate on this subject are presented in the large framework of the media bias literature. At the end of this chapter, balance will be chosen as the specific concept to work with, since this can be measured at the news item level. After specifying the exact way this concept will be used in the framework of this Ph.D., and after validating of this concept, existing literature is discussed that can be helpful in the quest for determinants of balance on different levels of the news making process. These determinants will be evaluated on the country level, the broadcaster level, the journalist level and the item level. Two empirical chapters follow upon this, one based on Flemish ENA-data (2003-2007) and one based on a self-collected international sample of 24 newscasts of eleven countries. Both analyses will be performed with multilevel logistic regressions. The former should shed more light on the journalist level predictors (e.g. ideology), while the latter is expected to illuminate the way in which country and broadcaster specific variables determine the presence of actor balance in a news item. In the conclusions of both these empirical chapters, attention will be given to the reaction of some news makers themselves to these results (based on interviews). In the final conclusion, some limitations of this study will be highlighted, and an evaluation will be made of the use of balance-analyses like this, and their possible merits for future research.

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Preface

This Ph.D. would not have been written if it was not for those many people that have supported me during my (pretty long) stay at the University of Antwerp. First of all, my family, who did not choose for this Ph.D. to be written, but they endured the periodical disadvantages anyway. They are a great inspiration.

It took several years of 'data slavery' for the research group M²P before I started to think about writing a Ph.D. I am very thankful to the research group and the faculty for the confidence and time they granted me. First of all, I need to thank my supervisor Stefaan Walgrave. Also for the useful guidance for this PhD. I must have been one of the most difficult PhD-students to supervise. I wanted to do my own thing, make my own mistakes, something most PhD-students are not allowed anymore nowadays, because of the shorter PhD-tracks and the rising importance of (fast) success of PhD-students. No problem for Stefaan. Even if he must have been frustrated about not getting fully written texts to comment upon, and about having to read about research that could have been better if I had consulted him before I had actually conducted it. But apart from all that, the most important thing Stefaan did for me: he had blind confidence in me. Stefaan, and by extension the research group M²P, is an all or nothing formula that suits me well. You get a lot when you give a lot. It doesn't work for everybody, but it surely worked for me. Above all, I had a great time. Many of the M²P colleagues during those years deserve to be mentioned here. Some people who probably consider themselves forgotten, are actually not. Mik Suetens, thanks for getting pregnant so I could get my first job at the university of Antwerp. The other M²P-people at that time, Jan Manssens, Kristof De Coster, Tom Caals, Jan Jagers and dinosaur Peter Van Aelst were just great to me back then already. Moreover, the current bunch of M²P-people is actually even closer (to insanity) than the older generation: Anne Hardy, Julie De Smedt, Ruud Wouters, Jeroen Van Laer, Joris Verhulst, Jonas Lefevere, Didier Dierckx, Jeroen Joly, Tanja Perkö, Amber Boydston & Anke Tresch.

Great to have shared office with (for very different reasons) memorable people like Joris Verhulst, Tobias Van Assche and Peter Van Aelst. I even survived sharing a table with Jana Deforche. Recently, I got a lot smarter and maybe a tiny little bit more human by sharing office with Jorg Kustermans and Marjolein Meijer. Thanks all of you for accepting me viciously attacking everything you said or did.

My gratitude also goes out to Rens Vliegenthart, David Hopmann and the unbeatable number one, Jonas Lefevere for their useful and necessary help with this PhD, on top of the well-appreciated, useful, and constructive comments of my Ph.D. commission (Peter Thijssen, Hilde Van Den Bulck, & Hedwig Desmaele).

Finally, special thanks goes to the different researchers working on the ENA-project, who had to deal with me on a daily basis for at least a while: Sarah Schueremans, Volkan Uce, Daniëlle Sadicaris, Anne Hardy & Julie De Smedt. My gratitude also to the leaders of the ENA-project, Stefaan Walgrave & Marc Hooghe for letting us do what we thought was right with their project money (including gathering the data for this Ph.D.).

Chapter I. Introduction

News media are undoubtedly important for democracy. They construct reality for the citizens, informing them about the world they live in, and allowing them to care about issues that are not obtrusive (Page & Shapiro, 1992). They help people understand the workings of politics, and for most citizens they are the main source of political information (Norris, 2000; Cooper & Johnson, 2009). This includes providing input for citizens to form rational preferences and to hold officials responsible (Althaus, Edy, Entman & Phalen, 1996). In this latter role, they are watchdogs for democracy, putting pressure on politicians to follow the rules of democracy (Graber, 2002). Media essentially provide pluralistic information from which informed choices can be made and debates can take place (Manning, 2001). As such, they are necessary instruments to facilitate democracy. In a negative way, it can be argued that if news media are not working properly (poor quality or misfit with the public's expectations etc.), democracy would suffer. Responsible reporting is necessary to avoid a climate, or even a spiral, of cynicism (Capella & Jamieson, 1997).

Probably because of this generally acknowledged importance, news media are also highly debated. Criticism comes from different angles, from academics and politicians, but also from the people who consume and rely on the news. The aspects of the news media being criticised, vary as well. The news media are alleged to be too sensational, cynical, strategic, negative, personalized, etc. Probably the most resonating lament about news media is that they would be *biased*. In Europe, we expect our news media to be objective, so that we can know for sure that the information we receive is authentic. Then, we can form our opinion about them ourselves.

This is especially the case for television news. While newspapers have a history of partisanship or at least ideological leanings (De Bens, 2001), people in Western Europe hardly know anything other than objective television news. Not only the public and the politicians rely on this objectivity, virtually all television news journalists report to be highly attached to the journalistic principles of objectivity (Deuze, 2002). While newspaper markets still show traces of external pluralism, every single news broadcaster is expected to be objective. When this is not the case, or at least the impression exists that television news media are biased, this seriously undermines the working of democracy. Studying bias is thus most

relevant on television news broadcasts, which is exactly what will be done in this Ph.D. study.

While everybody agrees that bias is unwanted, people tend to disagree on the observation of bias. Some do not see media bias when it is there, others claim media bias to be present when it is not. Several examples are even at hand where political actors deliberately hold up the picture of media bias against them, to victimize themselves and benefit from the underdog position (Alterman, 2003; Parenti, 1996; Lee, 2005 on the right in the U.S., a.o. De Swert, 2011 on the Vlaams Belang in Flanders). To avoid discussions without evidence and to facilitate the debate about it, scientific attention to the phenomenon of media bias in television news is badly needed.

Even if this kind of scientific evidence is often absent or ignored in societal discussions, media bias is a well-studied concept. Considered in its broader meaning, media bias can refer to any media representation that is not in accordance with certain proposed standards. This can be both about the (lack of) media attention for certain groups within the population (ethnic groups, women, see e.g. De Swert & Hooghe, 2010) and about the way they are portrayed in the media (like stereotypes, see e.g. Van Craenenbroeck & De Swert, 2005)). In this Ph.D. study, I limit the scope of media bias to media bias considering media attention for *political actors*. Each with their own goals and interests, communication, political and economic scholars have studied this narrower concept of media bias quite extensively. However, an overview of this research (chapter II.) reveals several problems. This Ph.D. study aims to contribute (partly) to the resolution of these problems.

First, there is the U.S.-focus of the existing bias research (1). The U.S. differs severely from European countries like Belgium both for which media system and for which market and political system is concerned. The bulk of the research that has been done on media bias, is thus not directly applicable to a European context. Some valuable non- U.S. one-country media bias studies were done in the recent years (see Chapter II.), trying to look for ways to study media bias in different contexts. This is also what this Ph.D. study wants to do, preferably in a more uniformly applicable way. This relates to the second problem: the difficulty to assess media bias in multi-party political systems (2). One of the main reasons why bias research is so big in the U.S., is that it is relatively easy to measure in a two party system. The more parties involved, the more difficult it is to find a benchmark based on which media bias can be determined. The next chapters will

not leave this subject aside. Studies in which this specific benchmark problem is tackled, are seldom, and mainly European (e.g. Tresch, 2009), however not solely (e.g. Niven, 1999; 2001; Sutter; 2002). The main problem with these (various) benchmarks is that usually they are only to be measured and evaluated on an aggregate level (3). Taking a lot of individual news items together reduces the possibilities to explore certain factors that could determine bias/balance in the news. If one wants to look at all possible determinants of media bias, including factors measured at the level of the individual news item (like e.g. characteristics of the reporter making the news item, specific topic or news item duration), it is necessary to be able to measure and evaluate bias at that individual news item level too. Finally, a fourth main problem with existing bias research is the lack of comparative research, especially between countries (4).

In this Ph.D., I will try to contribute to media bias research by addressing these problems by setting a benchmark that is applicable to more complicated multi-party systems. To facilitate the analysis of media bias at the level of the news item, I will propose to use the concept of balance, referring to the well known journalistic principle of providing word and counterword. The two main research questions of this Ph.D. are:

RQ 1. Do political actors get balanced in the news, and how and when does this happen? Is balance such a general practice as one might expect after reading journalists' intentions and basic principles? Do all political actors get treated alike? Is balancing government party statements with opposition statements a standard practice for journalists?

RQ 2. What are the determinants for balance in the news? Is balance to be explained by factors at the level of the individual journalist, broadcaster-specific features, media system variables or political system variables? Does it make a difference whether the news item is made in times of an election campaign?

To address these research questions properly, I will first define and operationalize a workable concept of bias that enables measurement at the level of a news item. I will propose to use the concept of balance for this, operationalized as the presence of at least two speaking news sources that are not from the same side in the news item (see Chapter III). Using this concept, I will conduct two separate but related empirical analyses, testing the various possible factors that could be influencing the presence of media bias, according to what is found about it in the literature (Chapter IV). First, a longitudinal data set of Flemish television news

(ENA) will be used to learn about the presence of bias in television news in Flanders (RQ1) and to account for factors (RQ2) that need specific information about the journalist (e.g. journalist party preference or ideology) and time-related factors (e.g. election times versus non-election times) (Chapter V). This analysis is based on data of all prime time (19h00) Flemish television newscasts on the public channel VRT and the private channel VTM between 2003 and 2008, all together more than 3000 television newscasts¹.

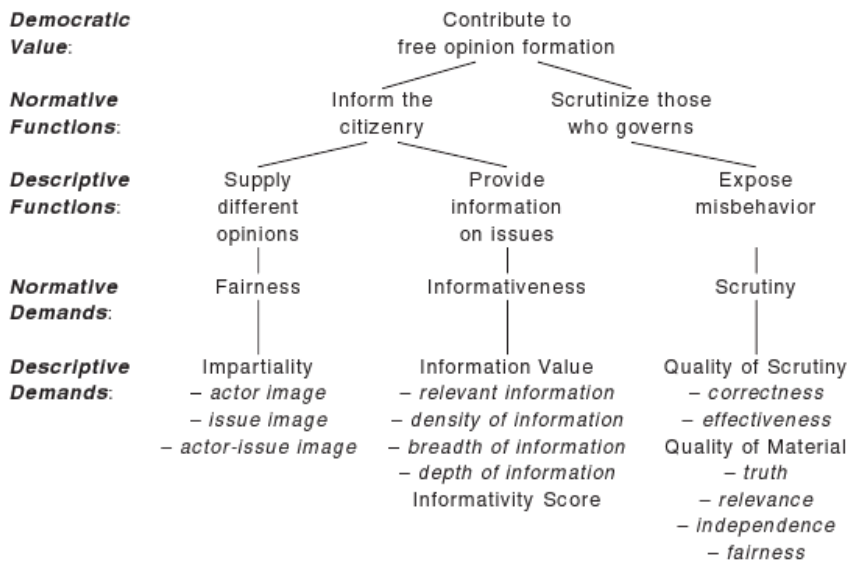
The second empirical analysis (Chapter VI) is an international comparative analysis on a completely self-gathered dataset including coding similar to the ENA-coding, but on a constructed sample of 28 television news broadcasts for 24 broadcasters in eleven countries (Flanders, Wallonia, The Netherlands, Germany, France, U.K., Ireland, Italy, Norway, Canada, Turkey, U.S.). The sample was taken between December 18th 2006 and April 5th 2007 (every fourth day all 24 news programs were taped). This international sample allows the assessment of media bias in a comparative perspective (RQ1) and enables the introduction of media and political system variables in the explanatory model (RQ2), like e.g. news media competition, amount of parties, government majority in parliament etc. In a multi-level regression analysis, it becomes clear how much explanatory power is available on different levels of the news production (individual journalist – broadcaster / country). Both empirical studies are complementary. After each of these two empirical studies, I will summarize their results, and discuss them with the help of the outcome of interviews with key newsmakers (of both VRT and VTM). In the conclusion (Chapter VII) I will critically discuss all these results, and I will suggest an empirical design for future research that should enable the analysis of all the aforementioned factors in one single multi-level analysis.

¹ More, and more detailed, information about these datasets can be found in Chapter V and Chapter VI.

I.1. The role of news media in democracy

This is a Ph.D. study in political communication. The motivation for this Ph.D. study to look into news media and news media performance, is therefore rooted in the role that can be attributed to news media in democracy. Kent Asp (2007:33) gives an illuminating overview of the functions of news media in democracy (figure 1). If I follow Asp in taking the facilitating of the free exchange of ideas as the main task of the news media in the service of democracy, “to contribute to free and autonomous opinion formation” could be distinguished as the primary value. To account for the dual function usually attributed to journalism, Asp distinguishes two equal normative functions of the media: *‘Informing the citizenry’* and *‘Scrutinizing those who govern’*. One might see this latter role of news media as the watchdog of democracy broader than Asp does, by not limiting it to political actors of the (current) government, and also applying the same scrutiny on other political actors with the potential to come into power. Exposing wrongdoings and potential threats associated with certain political actors (e.g. treatment of Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang by Belgian news media in the nineties) requires an active, investigative journalism. It only comes to the foreground when actual misbehaviour is found. This Ph.D. study is more interested in the other function Asp distinguishes, i.e. informing the citizenry. Two things need to be done to pursue this: *supplying different opinions* and *providing information on issues*. Although I have touched this latter field of research on issue information earlier (Sinardet, De Swert & Dandoy, 2006; De Swert, 2007), this does not fall within the scope of this Ph.D. study. It is rather in the former function of supplying different opinions that this study is situated: we need fairness and thus impartiality from the news media. I follow the most general definition of bias (for an extensive overview of existing academic definitions, see chapter I.4), provided by the Oxford Dictionary (2011), it is an “*inclination or prejudice for or against one person or group, especially in a way considered to be unfair*”, and biased media obviously do not comply with the demand of impartiality or fairness, thus failing to supply different opinions in a satisfactory way, and failing to inform the citizens sufficiently.

Figure 1. The Functions of News Media in Democracy – Theoretical Premises



(Source: Asp 2007)

Asp also provides the seeds for a benchmark (see chapter I.3 and chapter II), as he was inspired by Westerstahl (1983), who stated that objectivity has a *factual component* (truth, informativeness and relevance) and an *impartiality component*. This concept of impartiality then implies a neutral attitude, i.e. neutrality in presentation and balance as equal or proportional attention for opposing interpretations, points of view and versions of events.

Overviews like Asp provided, can be very helpful in the process of determining the quality of news coverage, more specifically, in determining the standards political communication scholars want to apply to evaluate this news quality. It matters what we expect from news media. The conventional news standards that can be derived from schemes like Asp's, are based on the so-called "full news standard" (Bennett, 2003). The idea is that journalists provide practical and functional truth in the news coverage, so citizens can make up their mind in an informed way (Hove, 2008; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). News media function as a necessary filter for public information (Bennett, 2003). For believers in the feasibility of the full news standard, it is therefore important that the demands towards journalism (like e.g. fairness) are met, but this is not unchallenged. Although the full news standard is a premise most scholars (and especially media practitioners) start from, some do not believe in the feasibility of the idea of impartial and

comprehensive news coverage in the current era. Mostly they refer to the massive amount of information that is available, and the unrealistic assumption of a public that wants such detailed political information. Zaller (2003) therefore suggests stepping away from the full news standard, and advocates instead that media would fulfil a 'burglar alarm' function, whereby media would direct the scarce attention of the citizens only to a limited number of critical issues that are at stake at the present time. The existing normative standards of journalism are in that case neither realistic, nor necessary (Zaller, 2003; Fengler & Russ-Mohl, 2008). Sharply rephrased, Graber (2003:145) agrees with this stance that we should get rid of the "unsustainable belief that democracy requires citizens who fully understand all major policy issues and a press that supplies them with all of the necessary information". In this line of thinking, discussing or researching conventional concepts like fairness is less useful, since it not a (realistic) demand for journalism in their eyes.

These critical sounds, though, do not mean that it has become useless to study the degree to which the classical demands to news media coverage are followed, and what the determinants of this process might be. Hove (2008) signals that the two functions of public communication (the *critical* and the *warning function*) of Habermas (1996; 2006) can be helpful to reconcile both sides of the discussion. Critical communication (in which people subject information and opinions to rational analysis and empirical verification) is a filtering process and the outcome comes close to the full news standard. But Habermas' second function is social or public warning, and this corresponds to what Zaller expects media to do. Both functions are in constant interaction with each other, and both are needed. As Hove (2008) states: "Warning communication enables previously unnoticed problems to enter the public agenda. But critical communication enables people to identify which social problems count as legitimate objects of public concern". So, despite the criticism on the full news standard, news standards like fairness (often referred to in the large framework of the term objectivity) remain important and relevant for scholarly attention. In the following paragraphs, I will expand on this curiously popular concept of objectivity.

I.2. Objectivity as a standard for journalism

To follow up on the demands of news media in democracy, journalists have their codes and principles addressing specific kinds of media practice and attitudes to the process of journalism (McQuail, 2000). Objectivity is the most prominent of those principles of reporting practice (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996), and it is the most relevant one for the underlying study. Nowadays, we can find it in all deontological codes of journalism around the Western world (e.g. declaration of Munich, ASNE 2002).

It is interesting to see these principles in their historical context. They came along with the first professionalization of journalism (Schudson 1978, Mirando 2001), as a reaction on the very first political 'journalists', i.e. the publicists, which were basically political actors/militants themselves, trying to influence the (limited) public opinion by means of the press (Neveu, 2002). Guarantees for freedom of the press, higher literacy, technological changes and a shift towards a commercial view on news media (penny press) led to the emergence of the first 'real' journalists, which needed to work radically different from the earlier publicists. Objectivity, accuracy and distance from commitment and sensationalism became important guiding principles for journalism (Tuchman, 1978). Paraphrasing Schudson (1995), journalists took on a 'panoptic' position, above politics. In the Anglo-Saxon world this evolution took place already in the 19th century (Mirando, 2001), and it can be seen as an international trend, although one that suffered great differences in application between countries (Neveu, 2002). In those countries where a great deal of political parallelism was maintained some time longer, press groups were economically weaker, and (often) literacy was lower, thus journalism did not develop as an independent profession so easily. France and Italy are classical examples of countries where political parallelism has existed until far into the twentieth century and even beyond, while the pillarized press (in countries like The Netherlands and Belgium in the second part of the twentieth century) is another clear example of the differences between countries. One could see these forms of partisan press as the remains of the pre-journalistic generation of the publicists (Neveu, 2002).

As opposed to newspaper journalism, which has been mainly partisan in many countries for a long time and needed to evolve in the direction of objective reporting (cf. depillarization), television journalism (in the Western World) has

always had objectivity as a primary leading principle (Hallin & Mancini 2004)², with or without central regulation³. Objectivity implies that journalists are working in a formally independent environment, building up their stories in an impartial way, producing accurate, balanced, complete and honest information about the topic, with a clear distinction between facts and interpretation (Ryan 2001: 4-5). For Berry (2005: 16), objectivity is what distinguishes journalists from the public and pseudo- journalists. In a negative definition by McQuail (2005) objectivity means that the process of reporting is not contaminated by subjectivity or interference with the reality being reported on. He links this way of looking at objectivity to the ideal of rational (undistorted) communication of Habermas (1996). Since the media are a key institution of the public sphere nowadays, the quality of the media coverage is essential for public association and debate.

However, just like changed circumstances (or 'interdependencies' like Neveu (2002) would say) led to the evolution from publicists to journalists, other factors led to a further evolution of political journalism. The third generation of political journalism can be referred to as 'critical expertise' (Neveu 2002). Under the influence of the combination of higher educated journalists and more professionalised political actors (e.g. spin doctors), along with the widespread availability of public opinion data (polls) and the rise of television, journalists evolved away from the partisan (1st generation) or, later on, from the distant descriptive position (2nd generation) they held, toward a role as political analysts (3rd generation). This more active role empowered the news media as a fourth estate (Schultz 1998).

Not only journalists are seeking refuge in objectivity as a leading principle. According to McQuail (2005), the public will show an increased trust in the media coverage when this is done according to the principle of objectivity. News media owners see objectivity (in most cases) as a positive asset of their 'product',

² Several exceptions have been documented, with the most prominent one the Italian television landscape, which is based on external pluralism, including the ideological divergence of the public channels (Roncarolo, 2002). Also the Dutch model is based on external pluralism, but the main news programs are made by the NOS, which is considered to be objective. For additional information programs, different "omroepstichtingen" can contribute what they want in their broadcasting time. In addition, there is the recent trend (cfr. Fox News) to focus on target audiences, while appealing to their existing values, ideas and opinions. See also Appendix 4.

³ E.g. in the U.S., Federal Communications Committee regulation "Fairness Doctrine" held the television network news to a high standard of fairness for most of the 20th century (Groeling & Baum, 2008). In the U.K., OFCOM is a regulator that would take appropriate measure against (a.o.) a lack of objectivity in television news.

increasing their market value (Sutter, 2002). Considering the wide adherence to objectivity in reporting practice, it seems to be an undisputed concept.

Not everyone is, however, merely positive about what objectivity does for journalism. For some authors (Tuchman, 1972; Ryan 2001) striving for objective and fair reporting strengthens the status quo, working against changes in society. Tuchman⁴ (1972), who has done landmark research on the presence of different kinds of societal groups in the media, attributed what she called the prominence of institutional sources to the journalistic principle of objectivity or neutrality. It seems that objectivity as a journalistic principle itself could lead to media coverage that does not meet the demands of fairness we explained earlier (see *infra*).

Thus, although not unchallenged, objectivity remains a leading principle in Western television news journalism. This is important, since nearly all theories about the news access for certain groups or types of actors use this principle in their specific context. In this study, I will look at objectivity as a practical set of applicable principles, rather than considering it as a goal on itself. It is by means of objective reporting in all its facets that journalism can contribute to the successful fulfilment of the functions news media have in democracy.

⁴ Some of the literature on sourcing and elite dominance is quite old, and dates back to a journalistic stone age. I will look into these theories, knowing that they came to life in other circumstances. The question is if the situation they describe is as different as the time span would suggest. A bunch of scholars expect(ed) new electronical technologies, facilitating communication, to open up the sourcing patterns of journalism, which was supposed to lead to the (partial) abolishment of official source dominance (Koch, 1991), a trend that has not always been evaluated as successful in practice (Soley, 1992; Hansen et al., 1994).

I.3. Objectivity, fairness and impartiality in practice

I.3.a. Patterns in news access for political sources

Fairness is the normative term for impartiality (Asp, 2007), which on its turn has implications on the process of selecting sources, aiming to reflect different points of view and to present two (or more) sides where judgements or facts are contested (McQuail, 2005). It is this aspect of objectivity, the impartiality in the use of different political actors as news sources in television news, that is the focus of this study.

The term ‘news source’ can be used in a broad and in a restricted way. The broad concept of news sources embodies all informative material newsmakers potentially have at their disposal for making news. This can be people, as well as documents, surveys, statistics and even actions from the journalist himself by direct observation (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989)⁵. It is the basis of a news story, the place where the journalist gathers the information for the construction of the news item. This is, however, not the definition that I will apply. In this study, “news sources “ or “actors” are those people that are brought forward (in this study on television news: on screen) by the journalist as part of the story, as relevant voices concerning the specific news item. They include people expressing their views, facts or opinions in the television news. They do not need to be the instigator or the origin of the news story. Their sheer presence on screen with a quote is sufficient to make them news sources, without the need for further background information. What matters here, is who the news receivers get to see.

This study is, as a lot of the scholarly work that is mentioned in this section, particularly concerned about the presence of *political* news sources in the news. In most cases, this is even defined narrowly in the zone of partisan politics (politicians and political parties). The broadest interpretation this study will apply, also includes the news access for societal actors (civil society) or even common people’s voices in the news (as a balance for partisan actors). This interpretation implies a reduction of the discussion about fairness, leaving out e.g. the field that

⁵ In many studies about this form of news sources, the journalistic principle of source protection is the prime focus. When the news sources have crucial information with potential impact on their own private situation (e.g. safety, freedom) or public position (e.g. loss of income, damage to public image), they often do not want their name to be public, which in turn leads to some controversy every once and a while.

is concerned with the (lack of) presence of woman in the news, or other forms of (lack of) news source diversity in television news.

1.3.b. News Access: looking for a benchmark

A key concern in the quest for objective journalism is news access. It starts from the assumption that news sources with a significant contribution get (sufficient) access to the media (Cottle, 2000:5). Some authors (Atton & Wickenden, 2007: 347) even consider the question whether and, if so, to what extent all relevant (even marginal) political news sources actually obtain news access, as the major issue in the debate on news media's functions and performance in democracy. The million dollar question in this debate is of course what the benchmark should be (Schiffer, 2006). What is 'sufficient'? Can we, as academics, determine which political actors should get media attention and how much?

The answers to these questions largely depend on the theoretical perspective one holds on the role of news media in political communication. The perspectives Tresch (2009) sketches in her work on the presence of MP's in Swiss newspapers can be very enlightening in this matter, even if it deals with MP's only, leaving aside the presence of powerful actors like state leaders and cabinet members. Tresch roughly differentiates between a view in which news media are passive "Chroniclers", one in which media influence news access only by means of their routines (news values, news selection) and a last perspective in which media also actively influence news content and access by way of interventions e.g. based on media ownership or ideological ties (Tresch, 2009).

Media reality mirroring political reality

The chroniclers perspective implies the expectation of media "mirroring" political reality in the news coverage, without any influence by the media themselves. In this situation, media make an effort to let media reality coincide as much as possible with political reality. Kepplinger and Habermeier (1995) refer to this as the "correspondence assumption". Tresch (2009, 70) states that in this situation each politician is expected to get about the same amount of media attention in all the different media, because their concern is mutual: the need to inform their audience about what happens in parliament and to provide a mirror image of the legislative process (which would be a fixed reality). In this scenario, media are not more than the paper and the plasma of which they are fabricated. Media do not influence the picture people get from politics, nor do they have anything to do

with who gets a voice in the news. The public gets to see the whole, undistorted picture. This ideal convenes with what Neveu's second generation journalists were trying to do as distant descriptors (Neveu, 2002). As Hallin & Mancini (1984) state, this idea of media as a mirror of society – or in this case politics- is in itself an attractive thought. Critics, however, have an easy job fighting the potential reality of this perspective. The underlying assumption that political actors do their job without being concerned about how to get (as much and as positive as possible) in the media, regardless of the work they are doing in parliament, has become completely unrealistic in the mediatized world we live in, and it has been outdated for more than a century. Other critics even have a problem with the idea of mirroring itself. They point at the danger of reinforcing social inequalities by mirroring them. When reality is not fair, the mirroring image will also not be fair (Tuchman, 1972).

Even if the idea of media as a mirror of (political) reality does not live in academic debate, the image of news as a reflector of reality can easily be retrieved in descriptions journalists give about how they work and what their influence on politics is. Moreover, this image (or the expectation to get it) also lives in the mind of the news consumers (Ward, 2007). However, news consumers at the same time tend to have a hunger for other things that are inconsistent with reality reflection (McQuail, 2005:360); they want to see beautiful, successful and/or unconventional people and they have a need to see idealized representations as well as they need realistic reflection of society.

Apart from its desirability, it speaks for itself that the chroniclers or mirror-perspective is far from realistic. A strict interpretation of mirroring political reality in this case would only be approximated by broadcasting all the parliamentary debates and ministerial council meetings and party bureaus on television, or by printing transcripts of them in the newspapers. It is obvious that journalists need to make a selection, and that they will need instruments for doing this. The routines they apply to come to the image of politics in the media, lead to the second perspective Tresch (2009) described, the news values perspective.

The news value perspective

Modern journalism relies on professional norms (impartiality, objectivity) and common standards of newsworthiness (Hallin & Mancini, 2004: 36). With these news standards and norms, the journalist is capable of reducing the bulk of information that is out there to proportions that fit into the space available for coverage. Altheide & Snow (1979) introduced the term 'media logic' (later

embraced by many scholars like Van Aelst, 2007; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, Mazzoleni, 1987; Brants & Van Praag, 2006) for the phenomenon that news coverage is more and more determined by these criteria, which form a 'logic' endogenous to the media themselves. As such, media, by their way of working, gained power over what becomes news and what does not. Hopmann, Van Aelst & Legnante (2011) call this, probably more appropriately, the 'media routine logic'.

Concerning the coverage on political actors, the perspective of news value theory or media routine logic, implies for example that journalists incline to presume that what politicians in leading positions say and do is more relevant and more newsworthy than the activities and messages of an average member of parliament (Tresch, 2009: 72). It is more about the name and position of the politician than about what he/she does (parliamentary activities). Here the media do have an influence on the news content that reaches the news consumer, but it is originated in functionality, rather than in intentions.

Basic news value theory (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001) focuses on the properties of an event as an influence on the chances of that event to get in the news. One of these, is the connection of the story to an elite status of the actor. Because what they do can influence the public directly, state actors benefit from an "inherent" news value, which leads them to more/easier access to the media (De Swert & Walgrave, 2002; Walgrave & De Swert, 2005). Real political power brings along media attention⁶, which can further strengthen the political power. Wolfsfeld (1997: 24) calls this the 'principle of cumulative inequality' or – inspired by Merton (1968) and the bible, we could call it – the *Matthew-effect* of media and politics: *"For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away"*.

The differences, as compared to a mirroring situation, generated by these news routines should be relatively universal, since media are described as rather mechanical institutions following rather universal criteria to filter and cover news. Therefore, inter-media differences should be small in this perspective.

⁶ Important remark: the attention of the media is issue-driven, and all the differences in news values for specific political actors will only play a role in the source selection process among the relevant politicians about the specific subject of the news item. Tresch (2009) and Wolfsfeld & Sheaffer (2006) therefore say that parliamentarians only have a thematic relevance for news media.

Media coverage depending on interests of journalists, editors and market factors

In the last perspective, it is important what the media need, not (predominantly) what the political actors do or who they are. Media, and by extension journalists functioning within them, are active players here, acting in correspondence with their political goals and market interests (Staab, 1990). Events or, in the framework of this study, actors get attributed higher news values by journalists and editors, when they are more compatible with their own political orientation, or when they are serving other (e.g. economical) purposes better.

Thus, distinguishing a simple or universal benchmark for objective news reporting proves to be difficult, and that is probably why there is almost no scholarly basis to determine one (Hofstetter, 1976, Niven 1999; 2001; Schiffer, 2006). Agreeing with the obvious impossibility of the mirroring perspective in practice, surely in a complex political system as in Belgium, I will build further on the two latter perspectives in the quest for determinants for the presence of political news sources in television news. Since the clear problem of the lacking bench-mark does not seem to refrain hundreds of scholars from doing research on the presence (and absence) of political actors in the news, leading many of them to draw strong conclusions about news media quality and performance, I will give an overview of their concepts, theories and research findings in the following chapter. My answer to the benchmark-problem, however, will be to abandon the idea of an ideal distribution of attention to political actors, and rather focus on the determinants of each individual decision that is made in the process of the making of a single news item (television news item, news paper article, Blog content etc.).

I.4. Evaluating objectivity of news media: bias, bonus & balance

Most scholarly work does not leave much doubt that structural factors exist that influence the access of political actors to television news, thereby blurring the reflection of the mirror (or whatever benchmark) to a smaller or greater extent. As a logical consequence of the previously mentioned problems to determine a benchmark, variations are omnipresent. It is very difficult to determine when exactly the premise of objectivity and impartiality is violated, but as I will show in this chapter, a lot of authors considered it worth trying. They often (but not always) do this by using the concept of 'media bias'. McQuail (2005:355) for example, states with some sense for exaggeration that "media bias is the reverse of objectivity". This is of course far from an operational definition. As it happens so often in academic work, a concept that is too popular, becomes an empty concept, free to be filled by each researcher in his or her specific project. In this way, the concept of media bias is comparable with e.g. the concept of framing (Entman, 1993). Many good and workable definitions exist, but they are often not compatible, or even similar. Still, some authors use the term without a clear definition (e.g. Della Vigna & Kaplan, 2006). Media bias might be a highly studied phenomenon already, but at the same time Entman (2007) states that bias is a highly undertheorized concept too, and that it should be used with care (see also: Kuklinski & Sigelman, 1992). The reason for this is that it comes to the fore as an easy concept at first sight, and that the focus in these studies mostly lies in the presentation of (descriptive) empirical results.

In Table 1, some (but certainly not all) definitions of media bias are listed. Note that some definitions are very operational, mostly due to the lack of theoretical framework in these studies. To keep the overview within reasonable proportions, some branches of media bias research are not addressed. The focus of this Ph.D. study is on the presence of political actors in the news, so I discard e.g. those definitions or sub-forms of bias that go beyond actors (e.g. bias in the attention for certain subjects (like e.g. Hopmann et al., 2009)) or that are concerned with non-political characteristics of actors in the news like gender or ethnical background (like e.g. Midtboe, 2011).

Author	Bias=
D'Alessio & Allen (2000: 133); Tresch (2009)	Partisan (=ideological) Bias =differential access to media according to their party affiliation or issue-specific political positions.
Gentzkow & Shapiro (2005: 2)	Media bias = "The choice to slant information by selective omission, choice of words and varying credibility ascribed to the primary source"
Kuklinksi & Sigelman (1992)	Bias = "only in the obvious case where news programs consistently favour one party or ideological perspective over another".
McQuail (1992: 191)	Bias ="A systematic tendency to favour (in outcome) one side or position over another"
McQuail (2005: 355-357)	Bias = the reverse of objectivity.
Lee (2005)	Bias in the news media ="any form of preferential and unbalanced treatment, or favouritism, toward a political or social issue... or political party"
Page & Shapiro (1992)	Media bias they found for the U.S.: pro-capitalist, anti-communist bias, minimal government bias, and nationalistic biases.
Schiffer (2006)	Partisan Bias : "a systematic favouring of one party or ideology resulting from the intentional or unconscious biases of reporters, editors, or organizations"
Asp (2007:33-36)	Bias : certain views/actors are favoured over the other. Three aspects have to be followed up on: how and how much the actor is covered, the issue coverage (of issues favourable for certain actors) and the (issue-)context of the actor coverage
Tresch (2009)	Local Bias : differential access based on location of specific audience target group
Cater (1959)	Congressional bias : Congress becomes a privileged news source because of the easy availability and the inevitable ties between journalists and Congress members, resulting in the avoidance of unfavourable publicity for members of Congress.
Shoemaker & Reese (1991)	Bias in news = distorting reality, giving an inappropriate picture of minority groups or women in society, or differentially favouring a particular political party or philosophy.
D'Alessio & Allen (2000), Groseclose & Milyo (2005b)	Gate-keeping (or selection-) bias : When news is (not) selected on ideological grounds Coverage bias : When a certain side of an issue gets more/less coverage Statement bias : when coverage (tone) is more or less favourable for a certain actor
Niven (1999)	Partisan bias : When political actors of different parties in similar situations on the same topic are treated differently by media outlets.
Entman (2007:163)	Distortion bias : when news contains a purported distortion or falsification of reality Content bias : news that favours one side rather than providing equivalent treatment to both sides in a political conflict. Decision-making bias : the motivations and mindsets of journalists who allegedly produce the biased content. Entman (2007) suggests to abandon the first one, and transforms the second and the third into a new concept.
Durante & Knight (2009)	Media Bias : when a station devotes more attention to a certain party when they are in power than to other parties when they are in power.

<i>Author (continued)</i>	<i>Bias= (continued)</i>
Berkel (2006)	Hidden bias: when the editorial line expressed in the commentary section leaks into the regular coverage. (e.g. by –predominantly- interviewing ‘opportunistic witnesses’ i.e. people who are supportive to the editorial line). This happens in the production process prior to the publication of the news. Berkel states that these hidden biases are usually interpreted as deliberate strategies to exert political influence.
Hofstetter (1976)	Bias= partiality in the news programming. Bias as lying, distortion and/or aggrandizement of values
Hofstetter (1976: 34)	Structural bias: “when some things are selected to be reported rather than other things, because of the character of the medium or because of the incentives that apply to commercial news programming instead of partisan prejudices held by newsmen”
Kepplinger, Brosius & Staab (1991)	Bias= the direction of news coverage; when an item is more supportive to one side of the conflict.
Sutter (2000)	Corporate advertising bias: Advertisers are financing media organizations, who will try not to cover their advertisers (and friends) negatively.
Babad (2005)	Media Bias = differential (preferential) treatment of politicians by interviewers. This is only a real bias when effects on the audience can be substantiated.
Sutter (2001)	Pro-business Bias: Coverage content favourable for business and business climate (free market etc.)
Groseclose & Milyo (2005a)	Media Bias: Difference in citations of (left/right) think tanks and policy groups between the media and members of congress in general.
Corneo (2005)	Bias: providing more space to issues of interest to large groups
Patterson & Donsbach (1996)	Partisan Bias= When partisan beliefs intrude on news decisions
Groeling & Baum (2008), Bennett et al. (2006), Hallin (1986), Bennett (1990), Entman & Page (1994)	(Media) indexing: media coverage is indexed to elite rhetoric. Media are largely passive and non-strategic, faithfully reflecting the actual substance of elite debate, especially from the most powerful elites. Elite debate determines whether arguments are acceptable and/or the government stance is challenged.
Della Vigna & Kaplan (2006) & many others: e.g. also Baker (1994)	Undefined

Table 1: overview of some of the most important and diverse definitions of media bias.

The obvious immediate conclusion of this overview is that there is not a clear dominant definition of media bias (Sutter, 2001). If there is a common ground to be found in all of them, it is probably that bias as it is used in this field of research always refers to *a suboptimal condition*, a deviance from a (known or unknown, specified or unspecified) benchmark or equilibrium. For the remainder, differences are omnipresent. What is the optimal condition? Some authors avoid to answer this question by taking a relative bias by comparison (in time, or between media outlets). Others do dare to take the step towards an objective benchmark (e.g. Niven, 1999) and show great creativity in that process (e.g.

Groseclose & Miliyo, 2005a, on using the references to ideological think tanks as an indicator of media bias). Rather unfortunately, yet another way of dealing with this problem exists, and it is even a common one. Since so much research on media bias is U.S.-based, and/or often situated in election times (see *infra* Chapter II.2 and II.3), the tendency to just interpret bias as any deviance from the fifty-fifty or completely equal treatment, is widely spread. While this might even make sense in a context of an electoral system as in the U.S., this is also a (too) easy way out of the problem. Following Kuklinski & Sigelman (1992) and Schiffer (2006), all working on U.S. elections, reality itself could be considered well out of that imaginary equilibrium. Especially in cases where incumbents are involved in the elections, where one of the candidates is enjoying large support among the electorate, or where some other reason makes a certain partisan actor more newsworthy than the other one, striving for an easy equal and balanced fifty-fifty benchmark could actually lead to less objective coverage and thus in reality more biased news coverage. This is what Shoemaker & Reese (1996) call, the “paradox of objectivity”.

CLARITY

The word ‘bias’⁷ is used quite easily, sometimes with a specification. For all clarity, all definitions mentioned in Table 1 are at least partly directed towards media content, and not (only) towards the news makers (it has to show in the news, bias in the head of journalists does not count). The most common of these specifications is ‘partisan bias,’ but not even all ‘partisan bias’-concepts are alike. Sometimes the ‘partisan’ part refers to the *cause of the bias*, and then partisan bias means “bias because of partisanship (of journalist, editors, etc.).” Likewise, ‘structural bias’ refers to bias that can be attributed to organizational causes. Other specifications rather specify the *direction of the expected bias* (e.g. liberal bias, conservative bias), and in some studies the bias is named after the way it is (or will be) *measured* (coverage bias = mentions, statement bias = tone, selection bias = gate-keeping) (D’Alessio & Allen, 2000; Groseclose & Milyo, 2005b). For this Ph.D. study, the use of the concept *partisan coverage bias* is most appropriate,

⁷ Even if media bias is by far the most used term in studies about objectivity and fairness of media coverage content, there is another important, related term that is also frequently used. “Slant” is a somewhat milder form of media bias. For Peffley, Avery & Glass (2001) bias implies a departure from objective reality, which they consider a very rare happening. Slant is then the situation in which a certain opinion is favoured more than another (also mentioned) opinion. Other scholars using the slant in a meaning closely to this one are e.g. Entman (2007).

although in yet another meaning of partisan, i.e. bias in the way political, partisan actors are covered in the news content. Here the *aspect of media content in which a bias is expected* serves as a denominator. In this line, a gender bias study like De Swert & Hooghe (2010) is also a coverage bias study, but not a political, partisan study (since that study is about the presence of female news sources in television news). Other studies are very much about political actors in the news, not so much about the (amount of) attention though, but about the colour of that attention, the tone (e.g. Kepplinger, Brosius & Staab, 1991). D'Alessio & Allen (2000) distinguish three "bodies of thought" about the nature of media bias. First, there is (here less important) *gate-keeping bias*. This is bias in the selection phase: some things get passed the gatekeepers, while others do not. It is very difficult to know when the selection is biased, but if this selection happens on ideological factors, this is (selection) bias. A second kind of bias is *coverage bias*. This implies measuring the amount of coverage for each actor or each side of an issue. Third, there is *statement bias*, which occurs when coverage (tone) is more or less favourable for a certain actor. In the overview table of the definitions it becomes clear that most studies apply at least coverage bias, often in combination with statement bias (tone). In the next chapter, the existing empirical research will be evaluated, and a clearer picture will emerge on how often each of these kinds of media bias research have been done.

The focus of attention in this Ph.D. will be on D'Alessio & Allen's coverage bias. Tone is an aspect of media bias that is not included in any way in this Ph.D. Study; it requires another kind of study. The benchmark problem in media tone studies is also a lot easier to solve by comparing or by making neutrality the universal benchmark. The main reason not to pursue this kind of bias is, however, that coding tone involves a more detailed scrutiny of news to determine bias, which could prove especially challenging in a comparative study involving multiple languages. This goes beyond what is feasible for an individual Ph.D. student without a funded network. Studying tone would bring this study close to other challenging concepts that require an additional theoretical discussion, like for example (valence) framing (De Vreese & Boomgaarden, 2003).

DEFINITION BY DESCRIPTION

Sometimes, and this goes as well for the semi-scientific (e.g. Baker 1994) as for the scientific studies (e.g. Della Vigna & Kaplan 2006), media bias remains undefined by the scholars researching it. A description of the different sub-forms of bias and/or a list of examples of bias is usually the substitute in these studies. Baker (1994), for example, identifies several situations, the presence of at least one of which would lead to the conclusion of bias.

Bias by commission: the use of assumptions about facts or wrong and/or untruthful use of facts so that a certain standpoint stands out as better than the others .

Bias by omission: ignoring essential points or facts

Bias in story selection: certain stories, favouring a certain party, are not told, while others, favouring other parties, do get shown.

Bias by placement: for television news this refers to bringing standpoint A in the main news story, while bringing standpoint B only later in the news broadcast (in a less prominent time slot).

Bias by selection of sources: when one side of the argument gets supported by more sources (including indirect references) than the other one.

Bias by spin: Events or policies that are being reported on, can be interpreted in several ways. Spin should in this context be understood as “subjective comments about objective facts”. If only one interpretation is dealt with in the news report, while other significant interpretations exist, bias by spin is present.

Bias by labeling: The use of extreme labels for certain political actors, while using mild labels for others. Also the misleading use of labels by labeling some actors by their ideology and some not. Being labeled as an expert instead of a political actor matters for the credibility of that news source.

Bias by Policy Recommendation or Condemnation: This is for Baker “beyond reporting” (Baker, 1994). It means that the reporter is making evaluations of current or past policies (without attribution).

This example shows how broad studying bias can be at the initial starting point. Of Baker’s eight forms of bias, only ‘bias by selection of sources’ and partly ‘bias by labelling’ are really about actors. Baker’s idea of media bias is largely focused on the news content. Are all the opinions about an event or policy present in the news story, and/or do they get equal treatment (in various ways)? Even in the

simple U.S.-context Baker is studying (there are only two standpoints for him: the conservative and the liberal), it is very difficult to measure media bias like this. For some elements of bias, serious interpretation is needed to decide whether or not there is bias in the news. What strikes, however, most in this example is the prominence of 'equal treatment' as a goal to strive for. Outside of a two (equal) party system, this way of studying bias immediately becomes problematic and much more complicated.

INTENTION

Another issue is the incorporation of intention into the definition of media bias. Some authors state that one can only speak of media bias, if the journalist or media organization causes the breach of the benchmark *deliberately* (e.g. Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2005: 2) which includes 1) that they know that they are producing distorted news coverage and 2) that they choose to do it anyway. These definitions imply that content analysis on itself cannot be sufficient to determine the presence of media bias. Not only does the picture need to be distorted, this also needs to have been done deliberately. Since it adds an extra condition, on top of any observable deviation of a benchmark, defining bias like this severely limits the prevalence of bias. One can imagine that many occasions of bias, defined as deviations of the news coverage from any predetermined benchmark, are not due to intentional acts by the journalist or editors, but rather coincidental or caused by other factors. Moreover, intentional bias acts like that are not in line with general journalistic principles, and thus bound to be exceptional. Fox News in the U.S. might be a noteworthy example of a broadcaster where one could find this kind of bias (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2008), but for example European broadcasters have such a tradition of objectivity that such an openly partisan intention is unthinkable. This comes along with an additional problem, i.e. that it is extremely difficult to account for these intentions when no general declaration of such intent exists (and usually it does not). One would need to ask journalists and reporters what their intentions were. This requires not only a serious effort, it would most likely also be an unsuccessful effort in a European context. If there are journalists who intentionally make biased news items, they will surely not admit this, since they are not supposed to.

Thus, these problems make definitions of bias with the inclusion of intention to bias rather obsolete. If applying it in a European broadcaster context, no bias would be found. That is why I will not add any intention-component to the definition of bias or balance in this Ph.D. Looking at media bias beyond the

content of news coverage can of course be very interesting. For example, the goal could be to get to know how journalists think about political actors (and why). It could be very illuminating to learn how they deal with that in their every day reporting. In my view, however, all this only matters if these observations, feelings and intentions are also to be found *in the actual news coverage*. When I argued that studying the presence of political actors in the news is important from the perspective of the media's role to provide pluralistic information to the audience at the service of democracy, this implied that the focus must be on the actual media content that becomes available for the audience to see. This view on bias is compatible with the work of many authors on bias (e.g. Baker, 1994; Sutter, 2001; ...) Intentions are not communicated, and not relevant if the desired pluralistic equilibrium (whatever it may be) is reached. That is why I choose not to follow up on the literature that incorporates the 'intent'-component into the definition of media bias. This is also what Entman (2007) suggested to do with one of his own intentional bias-definitions, i.e. what he called "distortion bias" (= "when news contains a purported distortion or falsification of reality"). Intention can better be considered as a promising *explaining* variable for media bias found in news content. Both ideological reasons (ideological preference) and commercial reasons (target audience) are possible to account for the presence of the intention to bring biased news coverage. Sometimes, this intention is out in the open -e.g. Fox News or Durante & Knight (2009) about Italy- but in many other cases it is a strategy that is hidden for the outside world.

BEYOND BONUS

In addition to the quite large body of research on media bias, studies have been conducted on actor presence in news coverage without even mentioning the term media bias. Mostly, these are what I call *media bonus*-studies, investigating extra 'elite'⁸ attention in the news media (Berkowitz & Beach, 1993; Bennett, 1990; Tuchman, 1978; Atton & Wickenden, 2005; Hansen et al., 1994; Schoenbach et al, 2001; Schulz & Zeh, 2005; Schönbach & Semetko, 1996; De Swert & Walgrave, 2002; Walgrave & De Swert, 2005; Hopmann & al. 2011), although the word 'bonus' is not always a standard component of their basic concept (instead, terms like elite dominance, authority skew, elite prominence, incumbency bonus,

⁸ The meaning of 'elites' can vary. For Berkowitz and Beach (1993), Tresch (2009 and Danielian & Page (1994) this includes also business elites, while e.g. Groeling & Baum (2008) and Bennett et al. (2006) reserve the term for political elites. Some authors do not make explicit distinctions within these political elites, but e.g. Althaus, Edy, Entman & Phalen (1996) do by distinguishing congressional elites and governmental elites.

chancellor's bonus are used). In essence, media bonuses imply that certain powerful and highly credible sources enjoy a favourable news access compared to other actors. When they do or say something, this action could have immediate consequences for society and societal debate. It is *routine* to include these news sources. They are safe bets, their presence will not lead to any challenge of the reporter's choice of sourcing. These bonuses can mostly be linked to theories like indexing (see *infra*). Basically, they all refer to a broad concept of bias, since they imply a differential treatment of actors in news coverage. Moreover, these studies can serve as an inspiration to start exploring why media bias is (only) occasionally found. Later in this Ph.D. study, reference will be made to the basic notion of the media bonus studies that the differential power positions political news sources hold, do influence the decision making process of news makers.

So, as an intermediate conclusion, based on an overview of quite some different definitions, we can state that there is not one, dominant or overarching definition of media bias to be taken and used as it is. Many good efforts have been made, however, and I will build on that heritage. Those scholars working on coverage bias, open up for studying bias without including the troublesome factor of the evaluation of 'tone'. The many descriptive definitions (like Baker's) should not be an excuse for staying descriptive, but can help to keep the definition and operationalization of bias (what I will do with the concept of 'balance') simple and concrete. Other aspects point at limitations that need to be considered while interpreting the results throughout this study, but at the same time, they force me to make choices and to be open about it. Intention is often suggested implicitly when people are talking about media bias, but by employing the methods of most researchers, i.e. content analysis – in that way this Ph.D. study is not so different- that aspect of intention is not captured. The choice here is made to care about manifest content, that is the picture people get to see at home, when they watch the news. Neither us researchers, nor the public can look into the heads of the people who made these news items.

In the following chapter, which will provide an overview of empirical media bias research, some more problematic aspects about media bias research are targeted. Traces of these aspects are already to be found in some of the above mentioned definitions, but they do not yet stand out that clear. These problems and their solutions are often hidden in the operational decisions of studies, in the methods part. These aspects are 1) the measurement level of bias, 2) the U.S.-focus of media bias research, 3) election versus non-election periods under investigation and 4) the benchmark problem.

Chapter II. Research on media bias

Relying on the sounds that come from the public forum, we would expect studies on media bias to find empirical evidence quite easily. Politicians often complain about their access to the media. People tend to see media as biased too. Scholars on media bias, in the U.S. or elsewhere, tend to agree on the existence of some form of media bias (but for notable exceptions see: Hofstetter, 1974; Just et. al, 1996; Graber, 1997; Mayer, 2005 etc.). At the same time they seem to disagree on what kind of bias this is and in which direction the bias is found (Baron 2006). Generally speaking, many scholars have their focus on the media ownership's influence on editorial decisions, mostly resulting in a conservative bias (1). This is also picked up by civil society think tanks (e.g. Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting – FAIR - for the U.S.). Others, who focus on the liberal, personal ideology of most reporters, tend to find a liberal bias (often found in studies based on interviews with journalists like for example Lichter, Rothman & Lichter (1986); Cooper & Johnson (2009)) (2). This is in its turn followed by conservative media watchers (like e.g. Media Research Center in the U.S.). A third important group of scholars on media bias finds mixed results, not uncommonly varying in time and place (3). Here, the suspected origin of the bias is (at least partly) to be found in circumstances outside the media or the reporters themselves.

The first objective of this chapter is to get a brief overview of results from the most important media bias studies in the field. Some remarkable studies will be discussed in more detail, but the core of this effort can be found in Table 2, in which I tried to list up and categorize some of these studies so that it becomes clear what the merits of media bias research have been up till now, and on which aspects research gaps are to be found. Four of these aspects will get special attention:

- 1) The measurement level: are media bias studies predominantly aggregate studies?
- 2) The U.S.-focus of media bias research.
- 3) The electoral focus: do media bias scholars swear by studying election campaigns, neglecting regular periods of time?
- 4) The benchmark problem. How do scholars deal with this problem that was discussed in Chapter I?

II.1. Aggregate vs. individual: how to measure and evaluate media bias?

On which level should one investigate media bias? Usually, the media content data are gathered on the level of individual news items, sentences or even mentions of political actors, then aggregated to a higher level, and then evaluated for the presence of bias. On which level these data are aggregated, can vary substantially, depending on the research question.

Several options seem to have been followed in media bias research, ranging from all media together, over a specific medium or a specific media outlet to an individual media story. Some authors prefer to study media bias at the highest level possible (Sutter, 2001). In their response to the statements about 'the media' in societal debate, these scholars take these accusations quite literally: 'The media are biased' in this case means 'all media are biased', or at least all the media of a specific country taken together in one pack. This is a super-aggregate analysis of bias, for which all coverage of several news media (outlets) are thrown together on one pile. The number that comes out of that, is then evaluated for bias. For Sutter (2001) this is a supply-side source of biased news, so it that implies a news cartel is present, in which media intentionally stick together following one (partisan or ideological) line. Another typical example of a super-aggregate approach like this is the work of the critical system theorists, stating that the media as a whole are to be considered as a propaganda machine for society's elites (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Taylor Jackson & Stanfield, 2004; Herman, 2000). Based on economical arguments, however, Sutter (2001) proves this situation to be unlikely to happen and/or sustain, since defecting this cartel situation would give the defecting media outlet a great benefit (Sutton, 2001). News media are thus not very likely to stick together and be biased as a whole. Taking all media together and evaluate their bias is thus bound to hide large differences between media (outlets), as e.g. Zeldes, Fico, Carpenter & Diddi (2008) shown for U.S. broadcasters.

Nevertheless there are still plenty of empirical studies using content data about media bias from several media outlets together in their analysis, in an effort to prove hypotheses formulated on whether 'the media' are biased or not (e.g. Niven, 1999; 2001; Lott & Hassett, 2004). If bias is necessarily a structural phenomenon, aggregation or consideration over a longer time period is needed (Schiffer, 2006). This way, structural phenomena like incumbency bonus, i.e. the systematic surplus in media attention for government politicians (Hopmann, De

Vreese & Albaek, 2011; Schönbach, de Ridder & Lauf, 2001; De Swert & Walgrave, 2002; Walgrave & De Swert 2005) can be determined well.

Because no individual follows ‘the media’, but rather a limited selection of media outlets, it can also be interesting to investigate media bias on a lower level, i.e. the level of a single news outlet (e.g. Puglisi (2008) on The New York Times). Differences between media outlets are also interesting for a comparative analysis, especially if one is looking for organizational explanations for the presence of bias (E.g. Farnsworth & Lichter, 2011; Brandenburg, 2006; Kenney & Simpson, 1993).

When a researcher wants to determine whether a specific news story or news item is biased, one has the problem of the lack of a benchmark that is sensible to use at such a low level (see *infra*). However, if that issue could be resolved, a researcher can proceed to investigate the impact (on bias) of specific characteristics of the news item (e.g. subject, duration, etc.) and/or other factors that cannot be taken in consideration by an aggregate analysis of all data of a news outlet (e.g. factors related to the specific journalist(s) who made the news item, like journalistic ideology). Research like this, that seeks to explain (the chance for) bias in individual news items, or that wants to estimate the importance of individual characteristics of news items for the likelihood of bias, is quite seldom (Hopmann, 2011), but see De Swert & Hooghe (2010) for a similar analysis on gender, and De Swert & Hooghe (2007) for one on bias/balance.

II.2. The U.S.-focus of media bias research

Table 2 makes it clear at first glance: the bulk of media bias research has been done in the U.S.. Authors like D’Alession & Allen (2000) and Schiffer (2006) have tried to bring a lot of these American studies (respectively 59 and 95 content analysis-based studies) together in meta-analyses, to provide an overview of media bias across time, but also for re-analysis and use of the longitudinal aspect to get a better insight in the dynamics of media bias (Schiffer, 2006). Still, it is impossible to list all the American studies about media bias. Not even counting the semi- and pseudo-scientific studies produced by think tanks and groups constituted to fight either liberal or conservative media bias, the number of academic studies on media bias exceeds reviewable proportions. Most of them spring from the rich tradition of campaign coverage research (e.g. Graber, 1997; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2008; 2011), which often accumulates to valuable longitudinal datasets.

A possible drawback from this flood of U.S. studies is, however, that the benchmark problem is often not a matter of discussion. More coverage (when it is about coverage bias) or more positive attention (when it is about statement bias) for the Democrats than for the Republicans, or vice versa, immediately leads to the (easy) conclusion of bias. Moreover, most of these U.S. studies do not aim to explain why media bias occurs, they rather describe (and blame, in cases when bias is found). Looking at Table 2, which brings together some of the most interesting media bias research, one can see the dominance of U.S. studies, but more importantly, it becomes clear that the bulk of these studies does find some kind of media bias. Especially when Fox News is involved (e.g. Farnsworth & Lichter, 2008), it is obvious that finding bias is almost guaranteed.

European political systems and media systems differ significantly from the American. In Europe, there is a tradition of public broadcasting (Hopmann, 2009). Private broadcasters were gradually allowed, usually without restrictions, but still most private broadcasters tend to stick neatly to objectivity as a standard. With the notable exception of the Mediaset-channels of Silvio Berlusconi (Sani & Segatti, 1998; Roncarolo, 2008), most other channels that were found to provide biased news, were (Southern-European) public broadcasters, sometimes in spite of formal regulation to prevent it. In addition, the political system differs, with multi-party systems, in which a simple equality-standard like so often used in U.S. research is simply not viable. Not only are there usually more than two significant political parties in European countries, they also often do not have a equally large electorate. Small and big parties co-exist, which makes it difficult to pay equal attention to each one of them. Moreover, they do another thing that is different from how politics is done in the U.S.: they form (government) coalitions.

European scholars thus had to come up with different ideas on benchmarks. The percentage of votes at the last election (e.g. Brandenburg (2005) for Ireland and De Swert & Walgrave (2002) for Belgium) is an obvious one, but some researchers prefer to work with the results of the latest opinion polls (e.g. Brandenburg (2006) on the U.K.; Hopmann, de Vreese & Aalbaek (2010) on Denmark), or even take the results of the elections following upon the media coverage, into account (van Praag & van der Eijk (1998) on The Netherlands).

European research does obviously exist, but it lacks the substance and the consistency of the U.S. research. The only constant that can be found in much of this European research, is the conclusion that there is a clear incumbency bonus (Schönbach, de Ridder & Lauf, 2001; Hopmann, de Vreese & Aalbaek, 2011; De

Swert & Walgrave, 2002; De Swert & Walgrave; 2005; Schulz & Zeh, 2005; Tresch, 2009; Norris et al., 1999). Most of the European media bias research is rightly concerned about the question how to do media bias research in a non-U.S. context, taken into account factors the U.S. researchers did not (need to) take into account. This often comes down to looking for (alternative) benchmarks. Ideally, much of the merits of the rich American research heritage on media bias could be used as an inspiration and starting point for media bias research in an European and/or multi-party context. Changes, though, will always be necessary.

II.3. The electoral focus of media bias research

Many studies on media bias have been realized in election times only (e.g. Schulz & Zeh, 2005; Brandenburg, 2006; D'Alessio & Allen, 2000; Norris et al., 1999; Hughes & Lawson, 2004; Lichter, 2001; Kenney & Simpson, 1993; Schiffer, 2006; Just at al., 1996; Zeldes et al., 2008; Graber, 1997; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2008; 2011; etc.). The basic argument of these authors is that this is the period of time that media coverage matters the most, i.e. has the most chance to have a concrete impact on politics through the ballot. This impact is proven multiple times, but in my opinion this does not mean that the other news coverage, outside the (about) three month period of election times, is irrelevant enough to be ignored by media bias scholars. Years of media biased attention most likely cannot be completely wiped away by a relatively short period of controlled absence of media bias. Some researchers tend to agree on this argument, and do study non-election periods (too) (e.g. Durante & Knight, 2009; Gans, 1979; Groeling & Kernell, 1998; Groeling, 2008; De Swert & Hooghe; 2007; Bennett, 1990, De Swert & Walgrave, 2002; Walgrave & De Swert, 2005; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996; Niven, 2001; 2003; etc.).

There are obviously large differences in coverage between election and non-election periods, on multiple aspects of news coverage (Van Aelst & De Swert, 2009). This is especially the case for the division of attention among all political actors (De Swert & Hooghe, 2007). In some countries, this difference might be attributed solely to different priorities and lines of thinking in the news rooms, while in other countries agreements and legal framework oblige newsmakers to apply an unbiased standard for political news sources selection in a specific period of time before the election day (for a good overview on these, see Hopmann, 2009).

While the Van Aelst & De Swert (2009) study focuses completely on the specificity of the election (campaign) *time* period, which is mostly also the criterion for sample selection for the bulk of the media bias scholars focussing on election news, one could argue that it is not so much the time that makes the difference, as the kind of news. Some scholars, like Brandenburg (2006), only study news coverage directly related to the election (campaign). Thus, they select on *subject*, not on time period. In that case, even sharper differences can be expected compared to regular news, since a large part of the election news is prospective news (what do political actors propose?) rather than retrospective (what have they done and how did they do it?).

The difference between election and non-election news is thus very relevant, and it should at least be dealt with in one way or another in media bias studies, instead of the so often seen as natural automatic decision to study only media bias in election times.

II.4. Benchmarks in existing media bias research

A few paragraphs above (II. 2) I already summed up some benchmarks used by European scholars. As said, in the U.S., the benchmark for media attention for political actors is often set on 'equal' attention (see also Sani & Segatti (1998) doing the same in Italy), and this is not a viable benchmark for most countries or situations, and even in the U.S., there are scholars who do not like this simple and rudimentary benchmark.

Some go for what the European scholars also tend to prefer, i.e. 'proportionate' attention (Gunter, 1987). As Hopmann (2011) states, the question then is what 'proportionate' means. There is no universal standard, and in practice, this is filled in by the researcher, e.g. by using the most recent opinion poll results (Hopmann, Albaek & De Vreese, 2010), the division of seats in parliament according to the last election result (Cuyt & De Swert, 2000, De Swert & Walgrave, 2002; Brandenburg, 2005) or specific requirements (e.g. because of formal regulation).

However, some scholars (e.g. Patterson & Donsbach 1996) state that mere content analysis will never be sufficient to determine media bias, because of the lack of a criterion to judge the appropriateness of the media coverage. Some political actors might get more and/or more positive attention because of a legitimate reason, or what Niven (1999: 848) calls "the merits of the parties' positions". They might be more qualified, their stance could be supported by all

the experts in the field etc. The answer of those scholars is to make this more controllable by interviewing (Cooper & Johnson, 2009) and testing (Patterson & Donsbach, 1996) journalists. They provided journalists with a hypothetical story about an environmental issue and an industrial reaction to it. Then, the journalists needed to expand on how they saw the newsworthiness of this news story, the way they would bring it, the prominence they would give it, headline, picture etc. Patterson & Donsbach (1996) found the results of these exercises to be consistent with the personal beliefs of the journalists (for similar methodology and results, see also Kepplinger, Brosius & Staab (1991)). These studies are often quoted, but usually they are not followed in its provocative conclusion that partisan beliefs of journalists determine news content and media bias. Rather, authors like Niven (1999) nuanced the conclusions of Patterson & Donsbach, supported by the main argument that the situation in which the journalists were asked to do the hypothetical exercise, did not resemble the real-life conditions of the news making process.

Niven also has another critique, this time on the way media bias is studied by the bulk of the other scholars in the field. He targets classical content analyses, comparing treatment and tone of the coverage on political actors in the news media. For him, however, the inclusion of a benchmark in the form of a really objective baseline is essential (meaning: more than just comparing to a bare proportion). Niven himself does this by comparing the media treatment of U.S. governors in similar situations (Niven, 1999), judging them by objective real-world criteria (in this study these are the murder rates and employment rates in those governors' respective states). When a governor of one particular party gets different media treatment than a governor of the other party, operating under the same conditions, there is media bias. In another study (Niven, 2001), he does a similar effort to prove that unequal (that is of course easy to determine in the American two-party context) coverage is not necessarily the same as unfair coverage. He looked at bias by targeting a specific kind of news, in this case unemployment coverage, for which sufficiently reliable real-world data were available. He then compared media coverage of unemployment of the Republican and Democratic president under similar real-world conditions considering unemployment. He found little or no difference, and thus no sign of partisan bias of the media (but he did find that media focussed a lot more on the negative than on the positive).

Groeling (2008), in turn, coins the problem of selection bias, and argues that most bias research fails to get a real grasp on bias, because they do not compare the

results from their content analyses to what really happened. An ideal bias study also takes into account these events that never made it to the news and the reason for this. Even if Groeling was mostly talking about statement bias (tone) rather than coverage bias, the same could be said about research on political actors appearing in television news: the better (but practically extremely difficult) way to do this would be comparing media attention to a list of available and relevant politicians that *could* have been used as news sources for a particular story. As Schiffer (2006) states, it is highly unlikely that all political actors are equally relevant in all situations.

Non-partisan, non-ideological factors can also lead to an apparent bias in the news (e.g. Bill Clinton favouring good coverage due to the economy doing well). In addition to that, not all politicians are equally media-educated, hard-working, well-known, interesting etc. While it might be possible to account for that on a case level, on an aggregate level, this could lead to wrong conclusions. When a researcher has a large database of news items at his disposal, he/she could solve this problem in a similar way as Groeling (2008) and Groeling & Kernell (1998) did, i.e. doing a limited analysis on a specific subject for which the population of potential stories could well be overviewed. Groeling (2008) limited his research to stories about the regularly published polls on the U.S. president's approval rate amongst the public. As such, he could see if and when journalists acted differently from what can be expected from the real-world indicators.

Durante & Knight (2009) wanted to compare similar situations in yet another way, i.e. by comparing the coverage of Berlusconi's private network on the right wing politicians during a right wing incumbency with their coverage on the left wing politicians during a left wing incumbency. Thereby, they avoided potential incumbency noise in the analysis. However, this was only possible because the numerous Italian parties had clustered into left and right blocks, creating an almost U.S.-like situation.

To conclude with what is probably the most creative effort to get by the benchmark problem in media bias research, Groseclose & Miliyo (2005a) based their analysis on the references news media made to think tanks. They compared the presence and prominence of specific think tanks in the media coverage with the number of times they were mentioned by respectively Democratic and Republican members of Congress, and they actually found a liberal bias like this.

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Comp?</i>	<i>Election?</i>	<i>Where?</i>	<i>Bias?</i>	<i>Which bias?</i>	<i>Remarks</i>	<i>Aggregation?</i>
Television news							
Farnsworth & Lichter (2008; 2011)	Yes	Yes	U.S.	Yes	Coverage & Statement	Continuous research on election campaign coverage	Aggregate
Graber (1997)	Yes	Yes	U.S.	Yes	Coverage & statement	Television news. Presidential candidates	Aggregate
Zeldes et al. (2008)	Yes	Yes	U.S.	Yes	Coverage	Comparative, no explanation	Aggregate
Lowry & Shidler (1995)	No	Yes	U.S.	Yes	Coverage & statement	Found no coverage bias, but statement bias	Aggregate
Kuklinski & Sigelman (1992)	Yes	No	U.S.	Yes, Republic.	Coverage	U.S. Senators	Aggregate
D'Alessio & Allen (2000)	Yes	Yes	U.S.	Yes, conserv.	Coverage & statement	Meta-analysis on 59 studies on election campaign coverage in the U.S. since 1948.	Meta-study
Smith (1988)	Yes	No	U.S.	Yes	Issue coverage	Benchmark: comparison between media coverage in good and bad economic circumstances.	Aggregate
Sutter (2002)	No	No	U.S.	No	Corporate advertising bias	Economic analysis. Conclusion was that advertising does not create a significant bias	Aggregate
Mayer (2005)	No	-	U.S.	No	Any bias	Effort to question previous findings of conserv. media bias	-
Patterson & Donsbach (1996)	Yes	No	U.S.	Yes, mixed	Treatment (of issues)	Bias depends on the individual journalist	Individual (interviews)
Lichter (2001), Bozell & Baker (1990)	Yes	Yes	U.S.	Yes, liberal	Coverage & statement	Very specifically on election campaign coverage	Aggregate
Gans (1979)	Yes	No	U.S.	Yes	Coverage bias	Television & news magazines: access of sources reflect power hierarchies.	Aggregate
Bennett (1990), Dickson (1994), Zaller & Chiu (1996)	No	No	U.S.	Yes	Coverage	On foreign policy. Range of opinions presented = dependent on the convergence or divergence of the (2) main U.S. parties.	Aggregate
Niven (1999)	No	No	U.S.	No	Coverage & statement	Objective baseline: media attention for governors in similar situations on a topic (e.g. decreasing employment rates)	Aggregate

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Comp?</i>	<i>Election?</i>	<i>Where?</i>	<i>Bias?</i>	<i>Which bias?</i>	<i>Remarks</i>	<i>Aggregation?</i>
Groseclose & Milyo (2005a)	Yes	No	U.S.	Yes	Coverage bias, but indirectly	Special baseline as benchmark: the similarity in citing think tanks by media and by congressmen (per party)	Aggregate
Hofstetter (1976)	Yes	Yes	U.S.	No	Coverage & statement	Network news on presidential candidates. No bias found due to code scheme choices (Robinson & Sheehan, 1983).	Aggregate
Groeling (2008), Groeling & Kernell (1998)	No	No	U.S.	Yes	Coverage & statement	Original benchmark: only about stories on the regular president's approval rates poll in the U.S., and as such not neglecting selection bias.	Aggregate + individual case-level
Kepplinger, Brosius & Staab (1991)	No	No	Germany	Yes	Selection	Combination of interviews with journalists and content analysis on their news coverage on one specific issue.	Individual
Walgrave & De Swert (2005)	Yes	Not only	Flanders	Yes, incumb.	Bonus	Evaluation of several bonuses, including chancellor's bonus and government bonus.	Aggregate
Durante & Knight (2009)	Yes	No	Italy	Yes	Coverage	Comparison of a right- and a left-wing incumbency period.	Aggregate
Norris et al. (1999)	Yes	Yes	U.K.	Yes	Coverage & Statement	Legal requirements are strict in the U.K., so only minor bias/incumbency bonus (in coverage)	Aggregate
Hughes & Lawson (2004)	Yes	Yes	Mexico	Yes	Coverage	Link with propaganda	Aggregate
Schulz & Zeh (2005)	Yes	Yes	Germany	Yes, bonus	Coverage	Main finding: High Chancellor's bonus	Aggregate
Brandenburg (2005)	Yes	Yes	Ireland	Yes, incumb.	Coverage, bonus	Benchmark opinion polls and last election result (Parliamentary representation)	Aggregate
De Swert & Hooghe (2007)	Yes	Not only	Flanders	Yes	Coverage	Study on balance (word-counterword) in Flemish television news	Individual news item
Sani & Segatti (1998)	Yes	Yes	Italy	Yes	Coverage	Equal amounts of attention as benchmark	Aggregate

<i>Authors</i>	<i>Comp?</i>	<i>Election?</i>	<i>Where?</i>	<i>Bias?</i>	<i>Which bias?</i>	<i>Remarks</i>	<i>Aggregation?</i>
Newspapers only							
Lott & Hassett (2004)	No	No	U.S.	Yes, dem.	Coverage	Likelihood to be assigned positive headlines for both party incumbents under comparable economic conditions.	Aggregate
Kenney & Simpson (1993)	Yes	Yes	U.S.	Yes	Coverage & statement	Mixed results: Bias found for the Washington Times, Not for the Washington Post	Aggregate
Puglisi (2008)	No	Not only	U.S.	Yes	Coverage and issue coverage	Coverage of The NYT 1946-1994, comparing periods of incumbency of both parties.	Aggregate
Schiffer (2006)	Yes	Yes	U.S.	Yes, slightly	Coverage & statement	Meta-analysis of 95 studies on senate campaign coverage. Over-time comparison on non-ideol. & non-partisan factors	Aggregate
Graber (1976)	Yes	Yes	U.S.	Yes, incumb.	Statement bias, framing, bonus	Bias = Incumbency effect. The study is on the way politicians were covered.	Aggregate
Niven (2001)	No	No	U.S.	No	Coverage & statement	Unemployment coverage was compared for different presidents under the same real-world conditions.	Super- Aggregate
Niven (2003)	Yes	No	U.S.	No	Coverage & statement	Benchmark by using media coverage of congressional party switchers (before and after)	Aggregate
Brandenburg (2006)	Yes	Yes	U.K.	Yes	Coverage, statement & (issue) agenda bias	Pure campaign study. Benchmark: current amount of voters according to the polls. Results pointed at media attention rather following parliamentary representation of parties.	Aggregate
De Swert & Walgrave (2002)	Yes	No	Flanders	Yes, incumb.	Bonus	Chancellor's bonus studied for different chancellors in Belgium	Aggregate
Tresch (2009)	Yes	No	Switzerland	Bonus only	Coverage	Presence and prominence of Swiss legislators.	Individual (legislator perspective)

Table 2: Overview of literature about media bias

CHAPTER III: From Bias to Balance. An item-level approach to media bias.

In the previous chapter, it became clear that media bias is a concept that has been defined and operationalized in many different ways, that media bias research is mainly descriptive, that it suffers from the lack of universal benchmark, and that efforts to do explanatory media bias research (mainly) have been done on an aggregate level, mostly in simple, two-party systems. In this chapter, I will argue that it is useful to try to measure media bias on the level of the individual news item, in order to be able to take into account those factors influencing media bias at that level in an appropriate way. This Ph.D. is not an attack on (aggregate) media bias research, but rather aims to improve it by expanding its possibilities, by contributing to a part of media bias research that has not been studied extensively, i.e. explaining media bias on the individual news item level.

I will propose to work with the term ‘balance’, which I will define and operationalize in a very simple way. This chapter is meant to clarify what exactly balance means in this Ph.D., since it will be the dependent variable in the two analytical chapters. The main advantages of a straight-forward and simple definition and operationalization are discussed (clarity, easiness to code, replicability), but I will also focus on the possible limitations of this approach, and check the validity of the concept of balance as defined here. This will be done by a more in-depth pilot study of 210 randomly selected news items from the two datasets that will be used in this Ph.D. These data have been introduced shortly in the introduction, and are discussed in detail in both empirical chapters that follow.

III.1. From an aggregate to an item-based approach. How ‘balance’ can help.

Even if many media bias researchers acknowledge the possible influence of factors that are situated -or can only be measured - at the item-level, many of their analyses are done on a more aggregate level (see chapter II). This results in a less accurate estimation of these factors. Of course, they do so because they define media bias as a concept on a more aggregate level, operationalizing it typically by comparing the percentages of attention for different parties over a certain period of time in a selected part of all media (coverage). Relatively often,

media bias definitions are, however, actually quite vague about how and on which level the phenomenon of bias should be measured and evaluated.

Evaluating media bias in an aggregate way has its value, since it stays close to the reason why media bias matters in a larger political communication context. As in Asp's (2007) scheme, the ultimate democratic function of the media is contributing to free opinion formation by informing the citizenry, and this is (partly) done by providing a forum for the different opinions that exist. Often in descriptive media bias research, specific media are scrutinized for media bias. Then, the question is whether the overall picture of the total attention for the different opinions in this specific medium is corresponding to the general division of opinions in society. Regardless of the question if one can ever really know how this general division of opinions would be, there is at least the need for a benchmark. Comparison to this benchmark then allows the evaluation whether or not the news medium under scrutiny is biased, and if so, to what extent. Sometimes, descriptive research encompasses several media, which may be considered a representative or indicative sample of all media, so further aggregation of the results may lead to a general evaluation of the question whether 'the media' perform this part of their role in the democratic process properly.

In explanatory media bias research, aggregation is done to ensure comparability. It is decided upon in function of the level of the factor one is studying. If one wants to find out whether the ideological profile of a newspaper matters for media bias, a comparison has to be made of the measured bias on the level of newspapers, e.g. one leftist, one neutral and one right-wing newspaper. In such a case, as long as the researcher gathers enough material, it is possible to calculate the percentage of attention for each politician and party over a period of time and a series of articles/ newspaper editions, and then compare these figures with each other and possibly also with a pre-determined benchmark.

Consequently, if one wants to get a grasp of the impact of factors that are not attributed to the news medium but to a lower level, like factors related to individual journalists (e.g. their personal ideology or party preference) or individual news item characteristics (e.g. a certain topic like campaign news), one needs to disaggregate and evaluate on these lower levels. To find out whether the party preference of a journalist matters for media bias, there is need for comparison of the measured bias on the level of journalists, in this case by comparing the output (over a certain period of time) of several journalists with

different party preferences. Research like this is far more rare than research comparing factors on a higher level. Moreover, using the classical approach of comparing percentages of attention, might lead to misleading results here. It is harder to rationalize why -even if measured over a very long period of time- the division of attention over different political parties by a particular journalist would need to live up to any benchmark whatsoever. There is no norm, rule or principle justifying that a particular journalist has to be evaluated like this, based on this journalist's whole output over a certain period of time. Due to circumstances, the topics the journalists got assigned, the specialization, etc., it is not even likely that this division of attention would be reached, and at least it is not likely that any journalist or even the editor of the newsroom would ever be able to monitor that for each journalist in particular. It proves hard enough on them already to keep track of this for the general news output. Moreover, the aggregate evaluation would conceal individual choices that are relevant. Journalists do make decisions on who to include as speaking news sources in their news items each and every time they make an individual news item. And the same goes for item-specific characteristics of a news item. If only aggregate divisions of attention are compared, it is impossible to take item-level characteristics (like e.g. the length of a news item) into account in an adequate way. To dwell further on the example of the length of news items, suppose news items about institutional politics would be half a minute longer than other items. How can a researcher take this – most likely quite important item-level characteristic- into account to make sure that any difference found in media bias between items on institutional politics and others is not only due to the average difference in length of the items? Obviously, there is a need for a lower level measurement of media bias.

Here, in an effort to accommodate this difficulty, I propose to use the concept of 'balance' for this purpose. Balance is a very common English word, and occasionally, the concept turns up in the literature about media bias. However, the consensus about what it actually encompasses, is surely not broader than for the concept of media bias. Mostly, when balance(d) is mentioned, it is used in the meaning of balance = not biased (e.g. Rouner et al. 1999; D'Alessio & Allen, 2000; McQuail, 2000; Groseclose & Milyo, 2005a; Baron, 2006; Schiffer, 2006; Entman, 2007; Cenite et al, 2008; Levite; 1996, Danielian & Page; 1994). Understood like this, balance does not help in the context of this Ph.D., because the authors evaluate bias/balance on aggregate. However, some authors do help clarifying what balance could mean. For Westerstahl (1983), for example, balance comes down to equal or proportional time and space for, and/or emphasis on opposing interpretations, points of view and versions of events. According to McQuail

(2000: 213), it refers to “reporting alternative perspectives and interpretations in a non-sensational, unbiased way, as far as possible”. Since this Ph.D. study is about actors and their physical (non-)presence in television news, the focus needs to be redirected from standpoints and interpretations to statements and interventions (by actors). One of the rare authors who opens up for an actor-based item-level analysis of balance, is Berkel (2006). She defined balance as an equal ratio between positive and negative references by journalists in the media content about actors.

None of these conceptualizations of balance are very satisfying and/or useful for my goals in this Ph.D. project. Either they are not fit for an item-level analysis of television news or they are not based on the appearance of actors themselves. Since the aim is to link to the actor attention based media bias research, I need another concept. I propose to go back to a well known journalistic principle to help filling in what balance could mean for individual news item presence of political actors.

Balance = the situation in which more than one opinion about the subject is brought forward in one news item.

It appeals to a specific form of objectivity, i.e. “word-counterword” or “presenting both sides of a story”, which is an important principle of journalism. News items can thus be expected to be balanced, and it is interesting to see when they are not. Many authors consider it safe to state that journalists prefer stories that include views of several parties as opposed to stories featuring only the views of one single party (Groeling & Baum, 2008). For Tuchman (1972), balance is the top of the bill of a set of procedures or strategic ‘rituals’ that journalists commit to with the intent to counter any possible accusation of bias or unfairness (Kuklinski & Sigelman, 1992). First, the reporter is confronted with complex and multifaceted issues that need to be covered in a relatively short news item. Sometimes, the different opinions they are looking for are readily available. Conflict is one of the most prominent news values as brought forward by Galtung & Ruge, since then rephrased by Harcup & O’Neill (2000). In those cases, there will be a natural presence of several actors and opinions. However, just as often, issues come to the journalist as simple, unambiguous stories (Kuklinski & Sigelman, 1992). To avoid criticism of unfairness, reporters will then tend to create “a pro and con”-model (Epstein, 1975: 207) with on the one hand the news itself (e.g. proposal for new legislation) and on the other hand a voice of the

'other side'. In essence, *"the reporter is Hegelian. He thinks in terms of thesis and antithesis."* (Cater, 1959: 18)

An important element in the balance definition above is the fact that these opinions are "brought forward". The main goal here is still to come to a concept that can be used for an item-based evaluation of the use of political news sources in the news. An important additional advantage of such a concept is that it will be easily codable. Evaluating texts on the presence of different opinions, poses the researcher for a number of coding problems. First, there is the difficulty of distinguishing facts from opinions.

In this study, I will operationalize this balance as an "opportunity balance". Not *what* the news source says, but the fact *that* the news source is present in the news item saying something, is important and determines whether the criteria for balance are met or not. Traces of using the term balance in this way, are found in a limited amount of studies (Baker, 1996; Dalton et al. 1998; Dyck & Zingales, 2003; Niven, 2003, Hooghe & De Swert, 2007).

Operationalizing balance like this holds huge practical advantages, but it is not self-evident that both balances will be found in the same cases. It would not be helpful if the difference was large. In the next paragraphs, I will discuss this and provide a validity test.

III.2. Operationalizing balance as "opportunity balance"

The main reason to operationalize balance as opportunity balance, is its simplicity. Determining whether the content of statements is truly in balance, is many times more difficult than registering that two different kind of news sources are present (speaking) in a news item. This is related to another problem. It is not just a lot of work, it is also complex, more interpretative work, which could prove to be difficult to code in a reliable way and/or to replicate by other researchers. It also presupposes a lot of in-depth knowledge of whatever subject these news sources would be talking about. It proved e.g. very difficult for me, as the coder of this subsample test, to evaluate whether stances by politicians in television newscasts in other countries were sufficiently different in content. Finally, considering balance in standpoints or arguments rather than opportunities, is also more complex because these standpoints can easily be paraphrased by the journalist. If it would be about the presence of different standpoints or arguments, a coder would have to evaluate the whole news item, and consider whether possibly found (different) standpoints are sufficiently attributed to a

certain political actor, too. In many cases, this would be hard to determine, especially since journalists sometimes engage in interpretative journalism, in which the journalist is the central interpreter, providing most of the arguments. However, in democracy, people are asked to vote for people or parties, not for standpoints, and the main way for the public to find out which political party or politician says what, is still through the mass media.

Apart from these mainly practical reasons, also more fundamental reasons are present to opt for studying opportunity balance, rather than a balance in standpoints. Using direct quotes, journalists can (try to) influence what news sources are saying, and certainly they can make a selection out of their words, but in essence the message is controlled by the one who expresses it. Access to the news is not in the hands of news sources themselves, often leading to great frustration on their part, but they do have control over the authentic message they want to express. What they do not say for the camera, cannot be broadcasted. Exposure to news sources that are speaking in direct quotes in television news, have also been found to have a distinctively larger effect on the audience than when the same message is brought by a journalist paraphrasing the same stance (De Swert & Hardy, s.d.).

Another advantage of operationalizing balance as opportunity balance, is that it becomes possible to distinguish different kinds of balance. Some authors (e.g. Tuchman, 1972) already suggested that journalists tend to interpret balance (sometimes for their own convenience) rather in terms of the presence of two or more different news sources allowed to speak on camera, because this gives the clearest direct impression of objectivity and balance. It is an interesting research topic, then, to try to get a grasp of how these journalists choose their news sources, and to find out whether they turn to different kinds of sources in different situations etc.

This leads to a similar conceptualization as was done in Hooghe & De Swert (2007). In that study, balance was first defined broadly, and then further divided in internal and external balance. Here, I will build further on that division, but the main focus of this study will be on **partisan balance**, while other kinds of balance will only be addressed to a limited degree.

A **balanced news item** is a news item in which there is more than one (kind of) news source expressing his/her opinion.

Political balance = the situation in which in one and the same television news item, at least one incumbent (party) politician and at least one opposition politician get a direct quote on camera.

This concept of political balance is comparable with the concept of 'internal balance' in De Swert & Hooghe (2007). To ensure some guarantee that the two different sources represent opposing standpoints, De Swert & Hooghe chose to speak of internal balance only in cases where both an incumbent (party) politician and an opposition politician are present in the same news item. Next to this internal balance, De Swert & Hooghe also distinguished 'external balance', which comes down to the situation where a partisan news source is balanced by a non-partisan news source, often an expert, civil society spokesman, protesters or people in the street giving their opinion. Here I will call this kind of balance non-partisan balance.

Non-partisan balance = the situation in which in one and the same television news item, at least one political news source and at least one non-partisan news source get a direct quote on camera.

Three distinct forms are distinguished in this study, depending on the function of the non-partisan news source: balance by experts (1), balance by civil society actors (2) and balance by popular exemplars (3).

These definitions themselves do not say anything about the order of the actors appearing in the news item, nor do they attach any importance to the prominence of the news sources' interventions, their length or quality, or say anything about which actor has taken the initiative and who is reacting. Most importantly, they disregard what these news sources are actually saying. As long as (at least) two news sources are there, saying anything at all in the news item, the conditions are met. The main advantage of this definition is that all these other aspects do not need to be coded in order to determine whether there is balance or not. Coding the presence of speaking news sources is fairly easy, and can relatively easily be automated using computer-assisted coding. The main (possible) disadvantage *could* be that this conceptualization of balance would be far off the idea of balance as it is meant (different opinions). In the next paragraphs, an effort is done to get an idea about how far away from this original concept this operationalization leads.

III.3. Validation: content vs. opportunity. A pilot study.

The concept of opportunity balance on itself easily relates to many media bias studies that are only concerned about the presence of certain political actors in the news (e.g. Zeldes et al. 2008, Durante & Knight, 2009), not measuring what these political actors are actually saying. Being on television news with a quote is often regarded as a success on itself. In this perspective, the presence of a least two speaking news sources of opposing parties means a truly balanced situation, regardless of what these people are actually saying. To put it boldly, these political actors get their opportunity, and whether they take this chance or not, is up to them.

Of course, this may sound a little simplistic. It is true that politicians control what they say in front of the camera, but this control should not be overstated. There is always more audiovisual (interview or press conference) material than can be used in the final television news item, and it is the journalist, and/or on a higher level the editor in chief, who decides which quotes reach the final version of the news item. They also control whether or not different news sources are commenting the same issue or case in a news item. That is certainly not self-evident, even if most news items are about one subject. When for example a large package deal is being negotiated, a news item about the progress in these negotiations could well contain both a politician stressing his/her concern that a certain proposal on crime policy is not being picked up, and another one giving extra information about the consequences of the economical measures that are almost agreed upon. Consequently, providing air time to two opposing politicians in one news item does guarantee exposure for both sides (balance of opportunity - which is also a merit on itself), but it does not guarantee that this news item is also balanced in terms of actually expressed opinions about the same issue (balance of opposing opinions) which would be an even higher merit.

It would be interesting to know to what extent the in this Ph.D. proposed opportunity balance operationalization also matches a balance in opinions. To find this out, I conducted a pilot-study with a more in-depth analysis on a subsample of 210 news items, i.e. 3 times 70 randomly selected⁹ news items from three strata (items without balance, with partisan balance, and with non-partisan balance) within the complete data set that is used in this study (see *infra* Chapter

⁹ As a basis for the random selection, Italian and Turkish newscasts were left out, because of lack of sufficient knowledge of the language.

V and Chapter VI), so from both the international and Flemish data. For each of these selected news items, the video material was retrieved, and the content of the item was studied in detail.

Thus, news items with three specific (non-)balance situations were selected:

- 1) 70 news items which according to the earlier definitions would not be considered as balanced (= only one or more incumbent politicians as speaking sources, no opposition sources, nor experts, civil society actors or popular exemplars)
- 2) 70 news items which according the definition of political balance would be politically balanced (= one or more incumbent politicians as speaking sources, and one or more opposition sources too)
- 3) 70 news items with non-partisan balance (= one or more incumbent politicians as speaking sources, and one or more non-partisan news sources speaking in the news item)

These subsamples help to find out to what extent the opportunity-based approach on balance leads to similar results as the standpoint-based approach in which balance is only considered balance if opposing standpoints are uttered. Possible reasons why there could be a mismatch, can be that an opportunity balance approach *misses occurrences of standpoint balance* (1), or rather that it points at balance where (at a closer look) *there is no standpoint balance* (2).

III.3.1. Missed occurrences of standpoint balance

The first possible situation in which an opportunity balance definition does not consider a news item balanced, while it is in terms of opposing standpoints, is the situation in which two or more politicians of the same party/coalition are featured in the same news items, expressing different opinions. When the defense minister states that the army should order armored vehicles of a certain type, because the troops are insufficiently protected at foreign missions, and in the same news item, the prime minister reacts to this statement that this will not happen, because this is not a priority of the government at this moment for budgetary reasons (note also the difficulty to determine from which point a statement is really opposing !), there is a balance of opinions, but the opportunity balance approach will not pick it up, as long as an opposition politician does not come to say anything about this particular topic. An analysis of the data in this pilot study learns that in 74.9 percent of the cases, there is only one government news source speaking in the news item. So, in those cases, this problem surely does not occur. In 14.7 percent

of the cases, there is more than one government (party) source, but they do not express different opinions. Only in 10.5 percent of the news items, the government news source is actually balanced (in opinion) by a 'friendly' politician. These figures are based on all 210 news items. When we only look at the 70 news items in the sample that were considered 'unbalanced', 6 of them turn out to be cases where the opportunity balance leads us to a conclusion of imbalance, while different opinions are expressed anyway.

Two other situations in which opinion balance could be missed by opportunity balance, is when the journalist decides to give the opposing opinion in a paraphrased form, instead of letting a political actor say it him/herself, and the situation in which the government politician him/herself anticipates to criticism and provides the counterarguments for his/her own standpoint herself (I will call this 'autobalance'). These two forms are milder mismatches. Research has proven journalistic paraphrasing to be significantly less effective than bringing the same message by a speaking news source (Lefevere, De Swert & Walgrave, 2011; De Swert & Hardy, s.d.). People trust what they see more than what they (only) hear (Graber, 1988). Thus, it can be argued that a situation in which an opposing standpoint is brought by journalistic paraphrasing, is at least not an equal form of opinion balance, but I will check this anyway. In 12 of the 70 unbalanced cases (17 percent), there was such a balancing statement hidden in journalistic paraphrasing, and consequently not picked up by the opportunity balance.

Sometimes, politicians anticipate on their political opponents' stances by using part of their own speaking time to paraphrase or mention their possible standpoints. For example, a minister of media could say *"I know that the opposition wants to strengthen the budget for the public channel, because they think a healthy public broadcaster is necessary, but for us that is unthinkable, we would rather facilitate a healthy media landscape."* For the autobalance situation, another argument can be made to minimize its importance. Of course, a government politician will not provide counterarguments to tackle his/her own, but rather to anticipate on what the opposition will to argue. Then, his/her own arguments can already take this into account. The opposition standpoint, in these cases, will always be brought in an inferior way, and presented as less viable than the government point of view. Nevertheless, the counter opinion was mentioned, so I will check this. This can be done on all 350 statements in the pilot study¹⁰.

¹⁰ 70 government statements in the unbalanced group, 70 government statements and 70 opposition statements in the partisan balance group, and 70 government statements and 70 non-partisan news source statements in the non-partisan balance group.

15.2 percent of the government (party)politicians did this, for other sources, including popular exemplars and opposition news sources, this was 8.9 percent.

When we are very strict, and take all three of these forms of missed balances equally serious, this means that from the 70 unbalanced news items according to the opportunity balance definition, 20 news items would not be completely unbalanced, that is about 29 percent. One of these 20 accumulated all three missing balances, five of them had two of the aforementioned hidden balances, and 15 only one.

III.3.2. Opportunity balance where there is no balance of opinions

Equally important as unmasking hidden balance, is evaluating whether the instances of balance found by the opportunity balance approach could also be considered as balanced in a standpoint balance approach. There are several reasons why this is not the case, all related to some premises the opportunity approach necessarily starts from.

To begin with, the opportunity balance goes out from the idea that when news sources get an opportunity to express themselves, they will actually state something substantial, or something meaningful. This can be a standpoint about policy (e.g. *"Our party supports the building of new prisons in Belgium"*) or strategic positions expressing neutrality (e.g. *"We choose not to engage in this discussion"*) or even evaluations of how a party of politician has done (e.g. *"The employment minister made a mess of the labour market reforms the last years"*). Non-substantial statements are non-statements (e.g. *"no comment"*) and statements about practical (e.g. *"I try to get into my car"*) and especially about non-political matters (e.g. *"My children are boyscouts"*). If too many of the statements in this pilot study turn out to have no substance, this would seriously undermine the validity of the opportunity balance concept. However, the analysis of all 350 statements in the pilot study learns that 96.3 percent of them has a trace of a standpoint or strategic position in itself, so only in 3.7 percent of the cases, news sources spoil their opportunity to express an opinion.

Substance is important, but of course also what it is about. If both news sources are talking about something completely different, the opportunity balance definition will registrate a balance that is not really a balanced situation. This is what I referred to in the introduction of this chapter III.3. While most news items are single-issue items (De Swert et al. 2009), a minority of news items is about

several issues and some (especially in election time) are a patchwork of statements about different issues. Therefore it is interesting to check how often news sources in the same news item are actually talking about the same thing. Of course, some margin is left here for politicians to broaden the scope of an issue. When a certain politician speaks about investing lots of millions in a new highway that goes through a nature reserve, opposing sources might address topics like environment and quality of living, while the original statement most likely would have been categorized as being about transport, mobility and public investments. In this pilot study, I do not just look at subjects, but also at cases. Only when no connection exists between the statements (like e.g. that they were made in the context of the same case or as a reaction to the same event), and none of the statements can be considered as reactive to the other one, the statements are considered to be about something else, usually caused by the journalist who made a multi-topic news item.

Only the balanced subsamples are considered in this case ($N = 140$), and of those, 92.1 percent contained two statements about the same subject. In 7.9 percent of the news items (11 cases), there was no connection between those statements. So in general, these balancing news sources are expressing themselves about largely the same thing.

A second question that immediately follows, is whether these statements are also opposing? Sometimes, actually even quite often, news items about politics or policy-related issues in television news use an antagonistic or conflict frame for the format of the news item. This implies the juxtaposition of two (or more) different opinions. A basic scheme for building up a typical news item can consist of a statement of a protagonist (often a policymaker) and a statement of an antagonist (often a member of the opposition, civil society or expert) or vice versa. The level of agreement can vary considerably. It is very uncommon that actor A states "Yes" and actor B states "No", which would be the ideal antagonistic situation. In reality, their level of agreement is much higher than this, and their actual issue stances might not differ that much. It is very difficult to determine whether the expressed issue stances are really different, or even what 'really different' actually means. In this study, any difference in opinion is counted, no matter how small. A *"Yes, I largely agree with the government plans, but there is one detail that ..."* is thus sufficient to make it an 'opposing statement'. Importantly, however, this difference in opinion must be clear from the news item itself, not from any background information.

Of all statements in balanced news items (N=140), those in 92.1 percent or 129 items were about the same subject, as we saw in the previous paragraph. Of these 129 instances in which opposing news sources were talking about the same subject, 99 (or 76.7 percent) contained expressions of different points of view by both news sources. Taken all three possible reasons for overstating opinion balance together, 99 out of 140 or 70.7 percent of the news items that showed an opportunity balance, are actually also balanced in opinion.

III.4. Conclusion

All considered, the differences in outcome from a more superficial analysis applying the opportunity balance approach and from the more in-depth content study of the news items, allowing for the evaluation of a balance of opinion in these news items, are limited. In most cases, both measurements concur. There does not seem to be a large misfit. For every hundred television news items with an opportunity balance, about 30 percent is not really to be considered as balanced in terms of content, and another 30 percent of items that contain some form of content balance, have been missed in the process. These differences have to be noted and taken into account in the discussion of any results coming from an analysis using opportunity balance as the operationalization of balance in opinion. However, as seen in the previous paragraphs, not all these misfits are equally problematic. The figures given, are the results of the most rigorous consideration. Especially counting opinions that are not coined by political actors themselves in the news item, but rather by paraphrasing of the reporter, is actually quite strict, and the possible arguments that were mentioned not to consider these items as equally balanced, do make sense.

It might not be a perfect approximation for a real and complete judgement of balance as understood as providing two different opinions, but these moderate limitations that come to the fore here, do not seem to weight up to the potential advantages of using balance in the proposed way. It allows explanatory research on media bias on the item level, so that finally these item-level variables can be taken into the equation. It can be an impulse for researchers to tackle media bias using a multivariate research design. Opportunity balance is fairly easy to analyze, not just in terms of time and money, but also because there remains room for interpretation. Coding balance based on the appearance of political actors as speaking news sources in a news item, is so straightforward that it can be applied on about any news, in any country at any time, without major problems of reliability. Most likely, these problems will occur if one performs large coding

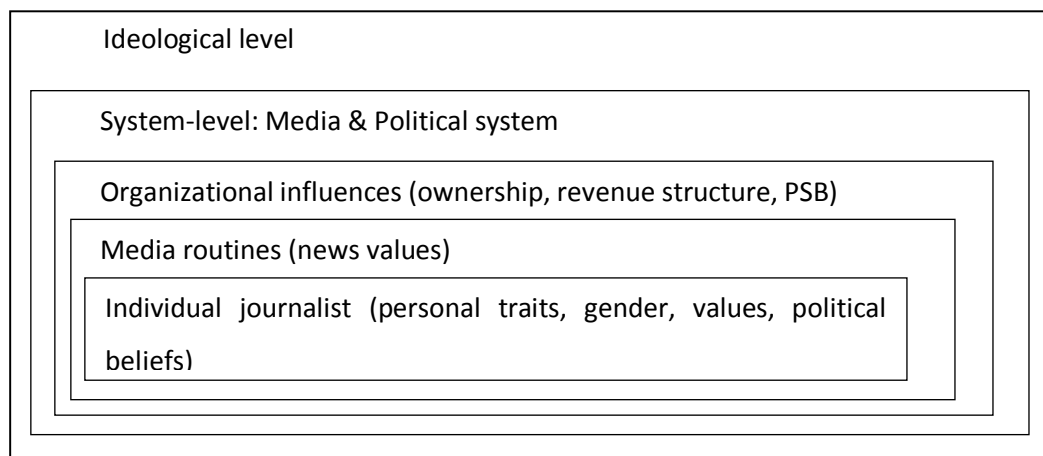
efforts with a detailed study of each news item, like I did in this pilot-study. Because I went through them numerous times and given the relatively limited amount of items, I have a good feeling that my intra-coder reliability would have been good if I had the clarity of mind to test it while I was doing this effort. But I am not optimistic about trying to do these detailed, on-screen item evaluations on a larger scale, with a team of different coders. Determining what is different and/or opposing, is highly interpretative.

Using the 'harder' opportunity balance, which is based on easily identifiable, manifest elements in the news items, is therefore probably more useful to facilitate comparative research on media bias, which is highly needed, since still too little is known about the reasons why media bias or balance occurs sometimes and in some places, and not in others. Too often, previous media bias studies have made themselves incomparable because of too many different definitions, but also by the use of interesting, but sometimes extravagant and surely not globally applicable definitions (Gloseclose & Milyo, 2005a) and benchmarks.

Chapter IV. Explaining balance in television news items

In the previous chapters it became clear that *balance* is the concept this Ph.D. study is about. In this chapter, I will look into the factors that can explain the presence or absence of balance. Since it became clear that the use of the concept in the concrete meaning I employ in this Ph.D. project is limited in the existing literature, I will look into theories and research about the presence of media (content) bias too. As we saw in the overview of empirical studies, media bias has been a popular research subject for decades, and many of these studies also theorize on the reasons why certain biases are (not) found in the media coverage. For as far as these theories can be used for studying the presence of balance in the news, I will readdress them here.

For this chapter, I will take the seminal work of Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese (1992, 1996) as a starting point to structure the overview of potential factors determining the presence of balance in television news. Especially their famous onion-structured (or doughnut-structured, as they call it) figure indicating the environmental influences on the shaping of media content can be very helpful. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) distinguish five levels of these environmental influences, each of which contains several factors.



The theoretical model of Shoemaker and Reese (1996) contains the basic contours of the levels on which this study is looking for factors influencing one specific aspect of media content, i.e. balance in the news. However, as can be seen in the figure above, not all the factors or even all the levels of Shoemaker and Reese are

included in this study. In this chapter, I will give an overview of the literature on *individual factors* (IV.2), including journalists' education, gender, or personal values, not in the least their political beliefs, and *factors related to the media organization, in this case the news broadcasters* (IV.3). The latter are factors such as ownership (and the political beliefs of the owners), revenue structure (commercial/state subsidies/license fee or combination) and broadcaster-specific regulations (relevant for public channels). Finally, there are also factors to be distinguished *outside the news media themselves, i.e. the media and political context* (IV.4), including news competition, state structure and political parties. But I will start with the media routine level, which is difficult to integrate into a testable theoretical design (IV.1).¹¹

IV.1. The media routine level

At the *media routine level*, routine source and information selection procedures are at play. For Shoemaker and Reese (1996: 100) routines are “those patterned, routinized, repeated practices and forms that media workers use to do their jobs”, and in the process of news making, they are part of the journalists' immediate environment. These are indeed restraints on the individual choices of journalists, which is exactly the reason for their existence (Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, & Wrigley, 2001), and so they deserve their place in the Shoemaker and Reese model. However, to build a theoretical model that can also be tested in the framework of this Ph.D. study, this media routine level is problematic in several ways.

¹¹ Considering the fifth level, i.e. *the ideological level*, I acknowledge the existence of this level, but the underlying study does not go into this level further. There simply is no variation. Critical system theorists look at the system as an explanation, taking ideology into account. Herman & Chomsky (1988) state in their propaganda-model that a class of wealthy and powerful people and groups, dominating the masses, is controlling the media as gateways and communication channels for disseminating information and ideas. Alternative ideas are not forbidden, but rather filtered out quietly and unobtrusively (Taylor Jackson & Stanfield, 2004; Herman, 2000). In that way, media are “manufacturing consent” on those opinions (Chomsky, 1988). Media conglomerates and government have common interests which are strong enough to give them reason to rule out other voices. While they obviously point at a deliberate ideological distortion of the news, also in terms of news source access to the news (which can be considered to be in line of media bias as a dependent variable), they do not provide a measurable independent variable to account for these alleged distortions.

To start, one could question whether these routines are to be situated between the individual journalist level and the organizational level, as Shoemaker and Reese do, when one would like to build a truly hierarchical model, in which all sublevels are nested within the overarching higher level(s). The way they are usually interpreted, routines are rather seen as general ways of practicing journalism (e.g. Hallin & Mancini, 2004), including a lot more similarities than differences between different news organizations or even countries. Hierarchically, routines should therefore not be situated under the organizational level (only). Moreover, one could argue that media routines, when defined as general practices, are not sufficiently variable within a context of Western media to be tested. Furthermore, under the assumption that they were largely general but still also varying practices, these possible variations can be expected to be found at the three other levels distinguished in the Shoemaker and Reese model: individual differences in the use of routines, organizational differences and extra-media organization differences. This is the way a.o. Prenger (2007) works in his study on journalists' self-censorship. First he considers certain norms and professional codes to be generally practiced all over Western journalism, and then he starts looking at factors causing deviations from these norms in individual cases. Thereby, he considers factors on several levels: the individual journalist (e.g. fear for consequences) of course, but especially also pressures from the media organization and from the extra-media context (e.g. market, audience).

This last way of looking at the routine level is probably the most appropriate one for this Ph.D. study. In fact, the main research questions here can be seen as questions about the extent to which and the reasons why a particular routine is practiced, i.e. balancing political news sources following the principle of objectivity. In line with authors like Hallin (1989), Gans (1979) and especially Tuchman (1978), objectivity as a norm can be seen as a defensive routine (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996:107). Thus, if we consider routines, or at least the practicing of routines as variable and explainable by factors on different levels, this is a point that needs to be considered in the conclusion of the media content analysis in this study, and particularly in the discussion about the generalization of these results.

Journalistic routines have been studied extensively, also in a context of media bias/balance (e.g. Schoenbach, De Ridder & Lauf (2001); De Swert & Walgrave, 2002; Tresch, 2009 and many others). In the framework of this study, looking for factors influencing the presence of balance in the news, the question is whether the routines applied favour certain political actors over others. According to

Hopmann (2011), media routines (e.g. news values such as importance or conflict) can favour certain politicians or parties over others (e.g. incumbents¹² versus the opposition) and lead to imbalanced news coverage. They transcend the individual journalist's ways. Routines are about how journalism is done, about how news is made. For as far as media routines are common professional standards applied by all journalists, the way to test their effect is not to include another independent variable into a multivariate analysis, but rather to see whether, taking other factors into account, there is a difference in treatment between two groups of political actors. If such a difference in balancing is found across media outlets, one might see this as an indication that media routines do have an influence on whether journalists allow certain political actors to have the only voice in a news item, or rather balance them out by adding another one.

IV.2. Factors on the individual level (of the journalist)

Much scholarly work has been done on the ideology of (political) reporters on itself, without looking at the possible consequences. Differences in ideology do exist between journalists, but the general distribution of ideologies from journalists does not completely overlap with the population's. In nearly all cases, the results show that they tend to be more liberal, progressive, left-wing than the public in general. This has been found for the U.S. (Lichter, Rothman & Lichter, 1986; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996; Patterson & Donsbach, 1996; Beyle, Ostdiek & Lynch, 1996; Weaver, Beam, Brownlee & Wilhoit, 2003; Cooper & Johnson, 2009), as well as for Europe (De Clercq & Paulussen 2007). Sutter (2001) sees three possible causes for this higher likelihood of journalists to be progressive: self-selection (it is hard, costly and inefficient to work in an ideological hostile environment – which is already dominated by progressive co-workers- so ideological dissidents adapt or go away), the distribution of talent in society and journalism education.

So the people making the news are generally more progressive/left-wing than the people watching the news. The people making the news are, moreover, also often more progressive/left-wing than the people paying them to do it. At first glance,

¹² Throughout this Ph.D., I will use the term 'incumbents' as a synonym of "government and government party politicians". The other politicians are generally referred to as the 'opposition'. Following e.g. Hopmann et al. (2011) and Vliegthart & Walgrave (2011), the term 'incumbents' should thus be understood broader than the usual meaning in political science, where the term is often reserved to refer to governing politicians in an election or re-election context (incumbents vs. challengers).

and under the assumption that media owners care about the ideological line of their medium, it may seem odd that they allow different ideological viewpoints (or any noticeable ideological viewpoints at all) among their employees without suppressing them, or at least prohibiting them to influence the news content. Why do they take this risk? According to Sutton (2001), media owners know that this can result in biased media content, even against their own, but they only care about this issue when the costs of having these 'ideological dissidents' is higher than the benefits, and there are benefits. As Frank (1996) showed, people are for example inclined to accept significantly lower wages for the same job if they are allowed to do their job in a personally rewarding manner, next to the extra quality and quantity of work they are willing to do in that case, because they are highly motivated.

However, an important question is: do these differences matter for the news content? It is not self-evident to look into the role of the individual journalist in news content studies. The picture of what Fengler & Russ-Mohl (2008) call "the notion of the journalist as a selfless watchdog of the public interest" is so strong that studying journalism in an alternative way, looking at journalists as (also) self-interested creatures making their own decisions, is quite rare. Baron (2006), Hamilton (2004), Fengler & Russ-Mohl (2008), Mullainathan & Shleifer (2003) and recently Van Aelst, Shehata & Van Dalen (2010) are notable exceptions, acknowledging the journalists' pursuit of their own rational interest in the process of news making. As rational, economic creatures, they try to minimize costs while striving for maximum benefits (Niven, 2005). For mainly economic scholars like these, this is mainstream thinking, but not so for non-economists.

Remarkable examples of communication scholars addressing this matter do exist, though. Probably the most relevant study is the one by Patterson & Donsbach (1996), in which they substantiate the link between self-reported political orientations of journalists in five Western countries and the choices they make in the news making process, especially where news reports go beyond mere facts. Patterson & Donsbach stress that the influence of the partisanship occurs regardless of a rigorous commitment to journalistic codes of neutrality and objectivity. It is very plausible that many journalists do not realize to what extent their partisanship leaks into the news coverage under his/her responsibility. This is also what Goldberg (2002) concluded from his scrutiny of the U.S. news media: news media are biased, and they usually do not realize themselves that they are biased. Patterson & Donsbach (1996: 466) call this a "perceptual gap between journalists' self-image and their actions". This can be an explanation for the fact

that journalists are so passionate in the rejection of the claim that there might be a bias in the news coverage, originating from the individual journalist-level. The perceptual gap between journalists and the public concerning this kind of personal bias in news content is large. When in 2000 the (American) public was asked whether journalists occasionally let themselves be led by their personal beliefs in covering political news, nine out of ten agreed (Niven, 2001). The gap between what politicians and journalists say about this matter, is just as large (Cooper & Johnson, 2009). However, this does not necessarily mean politicians really think so. A.o. Alterman (2003) and Groeling (2008) argue that political actors have an interest in making the press look biased (against them), so they can claim better coverage for themselves. If such coverage is clearly dismissed, they can also profile themselves as underdogs, or victims of a vicious media campaign, driven by their political adversaries (e.g. on the extreme right in the media: De Swert, 2011).

It seems like only journalists themselves still claim that their personal beliefs do not enter the news content. Because even if communication scientists and journalism studies scholars are doing well ignoring the individual journalist factor when looking into factor determining news content, they conclude differently when some do touch the subject. For Ryan (2001), journalists are not even capable to be robotized into objectivity by whatever textbook. Journalists are human beings; they have a background, a certain age, sex, race, experience and history that they cannot deny playing a role in their work. For D'Alessio & Allen (2000), the critical role journalists fulfil in the information stream (e.g. gatekeeping) does not make it very plausible that the news output is unrelated to the political beliefs of reporters (and editors). Levite (1996) provides proof of that for liberal journalists. Campbell (2006) reports effects of ideological views held by British journalists on the media content in EU-stories. In what he calls a 'journalistic deficit' he clarifies the difference between the values of the journalists and their audience, and that this is not an innocent phenomenon without consequences, due to the high trust the public has in British television news and its fairness and balance.

This discrepancy does not necessarily mean that this is reproduced in media coverage. A series of authors have produced counter arguments for this statement. For Jamieson (2000: 118) it is likely that journalist rather "respond to the cues of those who pay their salaries and mask their own ideological dispositions". In addition to that, she refers to journalistic practices and norms (e.g. of objectivity and balance) to reduce traces of bias in the coverage. Crouse

(1973) even speaks about a counter-effect: for journalists who are adepts of the traditional rigorous objectivity doctrine, the sense of their own ideology influencing their work is unbearable, and makes them (over)compensate. In his view, journalists are always harder (in tone) on the politicians who are in line with their own ideology. In practice Crouse's way of seeing it means that, since most of the journalists are ideologically left-oriented, conservative politicians enjoy an easier treatment than the liberal ones.

Another characteristic of individual journalists that has been influential for the media content they produce, is gender. Rodgers & Thorson (2003) found that the gender of the journalist makes a significant difference in the choice of sources for a news story. More female and ethnic minority sources get access to news items made by female reporters (De Swert & Hooghe, 2010), and there is also a tendency for female journalists to aim less high on the elite ladder. More than their male colleagues, they will, although according to Zoch & Vanslycke Turk (1998) mainly for reasons of accessibility and better guaranteed access to information, go for news sources from the sub-top rather than the top elites. This could work two ways. One could expect female journalist to have more political balance in their news items, because at that sub-level, they are confronted with smaller power differences between political actors. On the other hand, this could also mean that female journalists tend to look for balance outside the political arena. Civil society spokespeople, regular people or experts could then take the spot of opposition politicians in these news items, resulting in less political balance, but certainly not less balance if also the non-partisan news sources are counted.

What can and cannot be learned about individual journalist's behaviour from the "indexing" theory

In the upcoming paragraphs, I will take a small excursion into the indexing theory (Bennett, 1990), with the intention of coming to what Niven (2005) did with it, because it will be very helpful to understand the impact of differences in working circumstances and characteristics of journalists on the inclination to balance news items.

"Mass media news professionals, from the boardroom to the beat, tend to 'index' the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic" (Bennett, 1990: 106).

The indexing theory was formulated by Bennett (1990) in the U.S. context. Indexing implies a process whereby newsmakers hold a mirror up to the official discussion. In brief, this theory states that media – as a general practice- will have the tendency to give voice to 'safe' (political) elites, while social movements and non-elite-opinions are sidelined, and dissident voices are muted in silence. Especially in cases of political consensus, news sources will be very elite-dominated (Livingston & Bennett, 2003). More variation is to be expected in cases where political consensus has not been reached yet, or consensus is not relevant (non-political news). The amount of different opinions in the news would thus be dependent on the amount of different opinions amongst the political elites (Cottle, 2000).

However, Althaus et al. (1996) argue (based on empirical proof) that other professional norms and routines can falsify this prediction in certain cases. Since journalists tend to look for the voice of the 'other side' they will, if possible, air this opinion, regardless of its relative marginality within the official debate. In the realm of foreign affairs issues (based on which indexing is developed), these alternative sources might come from foreign news sources (Althaus et al. 1996). By analogy, for domestic news sources, alternative sources can be found in civil society. Even if government sources are not necessarily dominant in the way that other sources do not get a chance to gain news access, they might still have an important asset in the form of control over the content that is being discussed. Media tend to simplify conflicts into two-sided, but rarely into multi-faceted constructed conflicts, in which the question often comes down to the proposed solution PRO and the proposed solution CON (Althaus et al. 1996). *"The*

administration's ability to frame the problem, set the agenda of options, and define criteria for success during critical moments as the policy unfolds seems to be more politically significant than its inability to dominate the aggregate total of assertions." (Althaus et al., 1996:418). The indexing theory may be more useful in the broader picture of government influence on the prevalence and framing of issues for the public than on the issue of presence of and balance between political news sources.

Even if the indexing theory is very well known and cited often, it is a difficult fit for this Ph.D. study. The main problem is the very specific and intentional U.S. focus of the indexing theory, while the American political and media system situation is probably more particular than in any other country in the world. In a U.S. context, it does make sense. There are only two political parties, and when they agree, media have to dig deep to find anyone with any political power or credibility to air different opinions. When these two parties agree, it is very difficult, costly and risky for a journalist to go and look for these other voices and, even more, to give them a quote on TV. They tend to avoid these vulnerable situations by not balancing in those cases, and by balancing extensively in the cases when these two parties do not agree. That is the easiest situation in the world: two parties, two opinions, that is an easy balance.

The supposition behind the indexing theory that the (party) political spectrum does not cover the bulk of opinions that exist in society, is not shared in this Ph.D. study. This may be the case in political systems like in the U.S., but in other political systems where chances are there for smaller parties to arise and play a role in politics, this makes the indexing theory virtually inapplicable. One of the goals of this Ph.D. study is to start a research tradition, especially for multi-party systems, that provides possibilities to think further than indexing. As will be explained in chapter V, not only political balance (between politicians) will be studied, but also balance by non-partisan actors (e.g. government news sources by means of civil society news sources, or even regular people on the street, demonstrators, workers, etc....), which will make it possible to check how (if at all) alternative voices are given a chance through these non-partisan channels. For now, however, the idea is to learn from the indexing theory (or at least the economic approach to it) about individual journalist behaviour.

In an economical approach on the indexing theory, Niven (2005) concludes that using mainstream frames is one of the ways of individual journalists to minimize costs. Important costs for journalists are time, budget, distance and disapproval

by their peer group; possible benefits are reaching the deadline, not getting negative comments, approval by peer group, holding on to a good relationship with important news sources, etc. New and extreme opinions are avoided, favouring the security of the use of governmental sources, but where the indexing theory states that non-elite opinions hardly ever stand a chance, the economical theory of Niven believes in more possibilities for non-elites in non-consensus situations.

The essential point to pick up from this, is 1) the economical trade-off journalists make when they are working on a news item, 2) the currency of being a powerful news source, and 3) the currency of other factors that could be, but are not necessarily related to holding a power position. Networks and good communication lower costs (effort, time) for journalists, so the chances rise that sources with these qualities, will get access to the news more often. But more importantly, journalists need to relieve more than costs in terms of time and money. They also need security, they need to make sure that they will not be criticized by their superiors and colleagues. That will make them cautious in taking risks in sourcing. If they include a quote of a news source that is marginal and unimportant in the eyes of their colleagues-journalists, they will get to hear this. When a journalist is confronted with a situation with very limited time and still a need for a balancing news source, this kind of arguments can play a role. In that case, if they go out fast and grab any opposition politician they can find just to get a quote in time, the benefit from the limited praise they might receive for a nicely balanced news item might not outweigh the risk of getting laughed at/criticized by colleagues (and politicians!) for their poor judgment of the relevance of the quote.

In this light, characteristics like experience, routine, network, specialization etc. can make a difference between journalists when it comes to balancing news items. A starting journalist, without networks or experience, will be more sensitive for what the colleagues think, and will have more costs than other journalists in the same situations. An experienced political journalist with a cell phone filled with politicians' phone numbers, will have no trouble to arrange that perfect interview in the short time that is left before the deadline. He/She knows what a good balancing quote is without having to study on the topic (Gans, 1979), and has the contacts to arrange it in no time. The starter journalist, or any journalist not specialized in politics, does not have these advantages (Gans, 1979). At least it is plausible that differences like this can lead to differences in the application of balance in the news items these journalists make.

Time frame: Elections versus non-elections

As we saw in the previous chapters, some authors limit their research on political actor presence in television news to the news coverage in election times (e.g. Hopmann). They expect to find no difference with other periods of time, but they give as main reason for picking this period that it is the campaign coverage that has the highest impact on a very important variable, i.e. voting. Other, more practical reasons are probably related to the controllable cost of news content coding in a limited time period.

In Van Aelst & De Swert (2009), we did a systematic comparison between non-election and election periods based on these data, including a limited actor comparison (the dependent variable was political balance as defined in this Ph.D. study). I refer to this article for a deeper discussion on why it can be useful to compare elections and non-elections times and why they would differ. It comes down to the conclusion that about everything is different: audience expectations, politicians act and react differently, and thus media cannot do anything else than adapt to these changed circumstances (Gulati, Just & Crigler, 2004). Some countries such as Italy have clear regulations about the division of the (free) media attention on public broadcasts among the political parties/politicians involved in the campaign (Roncarolo, 2002). In most countries these rules are less stringent, but still an informal tradition of impartiality prevails. For instance, the British BBC seems to apply its 'stopwatch rules' more strictly in election times than in routine periods (Plamondon, 1998). Also, research on a recent Spanish campaign showed that the public broadcaster was inclined to respect stopwatch rules more strictly during the campaign than in the weeks before (Semetko and Canel, 1997). As public broadcasters in many European countries still have a dominant position in the news market, it is not irrational to expect that commercial broadcasters will also follow these informal rules, possibly to a lesser extent. In Belgium, there is no formal regulation of this kind, but there has been a tradition of self-regulation. Newsroom observations at the Flemish public broadcaster during the Belgian election campaign of 2003 confirmed that journalists are more inclined to respect an equal distribution of attention given to the different parties than in regular periods (Van Aelst, 2007). This journalistic attitude is strengthened by political actors who are very alert to news media bias since they believe that the impact of such a possible misrepresentation increases with the ballot approaching (Hudson, 2004).

IV.3. Factors at the organizational level

"Nothing is more important to CBS than our credibility and keeping faith with the millions of people who count on us for fair, accurate, reliable, and independent reporting."

Andrew Heyward, CBS-president (in Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2005: 6)

The first kind of organizational-level characteristic that comes to mind is ownership, even if this might be more due to the level of spectacle around the exceptional cases (like Fox News or Mediaset), than because of a general trend towards ownership influence on media content. Generally, and especially in Western Europe, broadcaster ownership is not supposed to matter much for television news content. Researchers often tend to overstate the importance, or at least the deterministic character of ownership for media content production (Cottle, 2003). News desks are usually independent from the ownership. A well-known exception of a broadcaster (group) for which the ownership is considered crucial for the content it produces, is the Mediaset group owned by Silvio Berlusconi. There has been world-wide protest against the entangling of media power and political power around the person of Silvio Berlusconi, so there is a concern that these ties have an influence on the content (and sourcing pattern) of the news broadcasts of his media company Mediaset (Roncarolo, 2008; Durante & Knight, 2009). The role of ownership as a determinant of media performance, is well-studied, especially following democratisation processes in e.g. Eastern Europe or Latin-America (Hughes & Lawson, 2004). Sutter (2001:437), though thinking in an American context, calls owner's ideology a (potential) supply-side source of media bias.

In their study on partisan control, media bias, and viewer responses, Durante & Knight (2009) proved that, at least in the case of Italy, the ideological orientation of the news content shifted after the political power change in 2001. After the right-wing coalition of Berlusconi took office, the coverage on the main public channel moved to the right. The viewers also shifted in the new situation. Leftist viewers turned away from the public channel, while right wing viewership increased. Those people who came from a right-wing oriented channel to the public channel (because of the promising new political situation), found themselves watching less rightist news coverage than in the situation where they stayed with their previous channel choice. For Durante & Knight (2009), it is clear that in a sufficiently pluralistic media environment, an ideological shift in the news

content does not necessarily need to have the effect of manipulating public opinion as intended.

D'Alessio & Allen (2000: 134) state for the U.S.A that "the business-oriented nature of American media is the key element in determining the media's biases." For them, this meant that publishers and owners, who are usually business-oriented and thus conservative, had the power to force their (more liberal) journalists and editors to stay in that ideological line. Hamilton, however, shows that political bias in the news does not necessarily have anything to do with the owners of the broadcaster, but that it is rather the consequence of a marketing strategy with the goal of reaching as large an audience as possible (Hamilton, 1974). For Gentzkow and Shapiro (2005), broadcasters are primarily concerned about their reputation, for the preservation of which they will mainly look at the prior beliefs of their customers. They determine whether and in what direction media bias will be present in the news coverage. They base their statement on the assumption that consumers (for as far as they are still uncertain about the quality or accuracy of a broadcaster) will infer that the coverage is of higher quality when it is in line with their prior expectations.

On a more general level, there is also the difference between commercial and public broadcasters. The difference, however, is not so straightforward as it may seem. It is not so that public broadcasters have to obey politicians and their rules, while private broadcasters always do what they want. In the U.S., for example, a tradition existed that the (private) network broadcasters had to follow the standards and guidelines set by the Federal Communications Commission, which for example included the requirement to balance (controversial) news coverage (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2008). In Western Europe, the BBC and the PSB-model were exemplary for the development of public television broadcasting in many countries (Gripsrud, 1998). The focus was on social responsibility, and the enemies were commercialism, sensationalism and politically unbalanced news coverage. Governments established a public television monopoly to serve democracy (Van Cuilenburg & Mc Quail, 2003), with independence, diversity and social responsibility as cornerstones. However, over the years, and country per country, the adherence to these traditional values, as well as the degree of political control over these public broadcasters, vary severely. Even within Belgium, different evolutions (partly due to a different kind of private competitor) made that the Flemish public broadcaster is more flexible and more independent from political intervention, while the Walloon public broadcaster RTBF is still more

traditional (e.g. does not care so much about viewer ratings) and more prone for political influences (Van Den Bulck & Sinardet, 2007).

Apart from the general regulations that apply for all broadcasters, public broadcasters are often subject to significantly more rules, guidelines, expectations and control from politics. This depends on the control mechanisms that are in place (Hopmann, 2009). The more a broadcaster is financed by private market revenues as opposed to public means, the more these broadcasters need to prioritize the survival of the channel by ensuring that sufficient viewers (or sufficient viewers belonging to a group that is interesting for advertisers) remain. Commercialisation can have an influence on the way newsmakers from such a broadcaster handle balance in at least two ways.

First, there is the limitation of means. While public channels often get big budgets for the information function they are expected to execute, private channels have less means and do also not invest them in the information department as a priority. The consequence is that private channel news desks are often smaller and less equipped than their public counterparts. In the line of what was stated earlier about the trade-off journalists make in their daily practice between costs and benefits, this means that this trade-off is different. At a smaller news desk, a small crowd of newsmakers have to make just as many news items as the large one at the public channel. That means bigger time pressure, and thus sometimes there will be no time to chase a great balancing source that is not readily available, especially because the currency of having balance is already less at private channels, since nobody really requires them to do so.

The other way balance could be influenced, is by the tendency to sensationalize news. It can be discussed whether sensational news is necessarily less balanced, and the answer is probably negative, but an estimation of how the news is, does not lie about the priorities of the broadcaster. Of course, these are not antagonistic choices, but it is about news quality or quantity: more viewers, or better television news. If a broadcaster makes highly sensational news, this is an indication that journalistic principles and news quality are at least not the greatest priority, which adds just another hindrance in the process of getting balanced news items. Sensationalising news namely means including about everything different from just another talking head of a dull politician (e.g. street interviews, extra concrete video footage, or just less politics all together).

Cottle (2003), finally, draws the attention to the potentially large influence of the specific media organizational characteristics. The specific production environment might be much more important than the more institutional or ownership-related factors. These factors could be very specific – and thus hard to pick up in a quantitative comparative analysis, but then still they might show up as unexplained variance at the broadcaster level later in the analysis.

IV.4. Factors at the system level (media & politics)

Over the heads of all the differences we see between news media in different countries, there is the undeniable umbrella of the media system. Several studies used the media system as a variable in multivariate design. Hallin and Mancini (2004) refined existing and original theoretical and empirical findings into their three models of media and politics. When they overviewed the media and political systems in the 18 Western countries they included in their study, they found them to cluster into three models of media and politics: The Democratic corporatist model (Nordic countries, the Netherlands, Germany, ...), the polarized-pluralist model (Greece, Spain, Portugal, Italy, France to a lesser degree) and the Liberal model (United States, Canada, Ireland, United Kingdom in many ways). They used four major dimensions of media systems to build up the models. The first dimension is the structure and development of the media markets (literacy rates and following news paper circulation, including amount of copies, but also target audiences and engagement in the political and societal field). The second dimension is political parallelism, i.e. the degree to which the media system matches the political divisions (e.g. political parties). It is found in organizational connections between media and political organizations (e.g. pillarization), membership of political organization by the media audience, the amount of journalists finding the way into politics and the role the journalists want to play. The third dimension takes into account the development of journalistic professionalism (journalistic autonomy, development of professional organizations and norms) and the degree of state intervention in the media system (by way of subsidies, regulations, ownership of media).

Some of the dimensions at the basis of the three models of Hallin and Mancini, are part of hypotheses in this study, and the selection of the sample of the international comparative analysis is based on the division Hallin & Mancini made. However, their models are not built on information about television (since it is mostly an historical analysis, the history of television has not been long enough to draw conclusions), and they warn themselves for using them just like that in

analysis on television content. For that reasons, the models themselves will not be further explored as variables in any analysis in this study.

MEDIA COMPETITION

Many studies provide clues that media competition can influence news content. Many of them are coming from economists. In these studies, news content is seen as a product that media provide. The quality or content of this product depends on what it needs in order to sell the product. As Sutter (2001: 436) states: "The media are simply responding to their customers' preferences". Both commercial news broadcasters (profit maximalization for survival reasons), and public broadcasters (that often need to reach a certain market share) need a quality product to survive. As for the influence of competition on the quality of news content, more economic scholars tend to find this a positive factor: The more competition, the greater drive for newsmakers to make accurate, quality news (e.g. Stromberg, 2001; Dyck & Zingales, 2002) because this increases their marketing possibilities (Mullainathan & Shleifer, 2003).

More media competition will reduce bias, according to Gentzkow & Shapiro (2005), because the chance that the biased/inaccurate news coverage gets exposed (by coverage of competing news media) increases. Mass communication scholars are often more critical towards market-driven journalism (Bagdikian, 2004; Mc Chesney, 1999; Bogart, 1995; McQuail, 1992), and especially the profit-orientation that comes with it. According to Fengler & Russ-Mohl (2008), they also tend to see journalists more as victims of changing newsroom conditions and increasing media competition. This is the consequence of seeing journalists as a group of executors of principles, and of the focus on their professional roles and the roles they wish to fulfill in society (see Weaver et al. 2006; Weisschenberg, Malik & Scholl, 2006, De Clercq & Paulussen, 2007), instead of looking at their actual behaviour. As a consequence, communication scientists hardly ever take the personal characteristics (including, but not limited to, ideology) of individual journalists into consideration.

Both groups of scholars seem to meet on the topic of journalistic norms: they agree that they have become less important in explaining the news content. According to Underwood (1995), financial interests and, following McManus (1994), also the interests of sources and media-consumers determine the news production much more than journalistic norms.

Some authors, like Mullainathan and Shleifer (2005) and Gentzkow & Shapiro (2006) point at news media users' preferences as the dominant factor in driving news coverage. At least for newspapers, they demonstrate that content is usually in line with the prevailing ideology of the readers. Private owner ideology is then less important. Mullainathan & Shleifer (2003) point at the importance of audience heterogeneity (at broadcaster level) as an even more important factor to predict media bias than the media competition level as a whole. There is, however, a connection between both. Sutton (2001: 435) describes how in a situation of two or three competing media outlets, convergence to the (ideological) middle can be expected. This incorporates moderate news content and tendency to objective coverage. In this situation, the media outlets split the market. From four or more competitors, Sutton expected product differentiation, leading to the emergence of e.g. biased coverage.

Baron (2006) stipulates that one of the effects of the presence of bias in the news is that it results in scepticism among the public, and thus in a reduction of demand for news. Therefore it is questionable whether (commercial) media companies would tolerate bias in their news coverage in a competitive environment, but there could also be a demand for biased news (cfr. Fox News), which could lead to the situation that having a particular bias in the news coverage could improve news media's market position. For Baron (2006), it is far more likely that (in a competitive environment) media owners choose profit maximization over the distribution of their own personal views.

NATIONAL NEWS CULTURES AND FORMAL LEGISLATION

Many theories of news access present themselves to be valid all over the world, or at least in the Western world. Proof of significant influence from both the media system and the national news culture, would at least weaken these claims and make them less deterministic. For Papathanassopoulos (2001), there are, despite all claims of convergence to the Anglo-American professional model, still large differences between national media systems and news cultures. He illustrates this by pointing out the special relationship that exists in Greece between the media-owners and the power elite. However, in an international comparative study on the coverage of the murder of the Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, Uce & De Swert (2007) also found that in this case news producers in Turkey have a specific way of telling the story which would not be understood nor accepted anywhere else.

McNair's standpoint is that it is only logical that national news cultures sometimes differ severely from each other (McNair, 1998). For him, journalism is always an emanation of historical processes that can be very local, and that are often the same historical tendencies that have initiated or strengthened the nation state in the past. In addition to that, local contemporary social conditions also play a role for McNair (1998). The whole of historical and social conditions makes for some countries convergence less likely to gain foothold (Mancini, 2000).

Reasons enough to expect some variation on the country-level, but there are also some similarities. Most of the European countries in the dataset for this Ph.D. study first got a public service broadcaster, funded by public means (tax money, license fees). Evidently, the state exercised a high level of control over these broadcasters, usually through formal structures of control and regulations (Starkey, 2007). Since there was only one broadcaster (for technical reasons), this broadcaster needed to be there for everyone, very much unlike the often very partisan newspapers. Only about 25 years ago, private channels were allowed to emerge, building on commercial financing (Pfetsch, 1996).

Even in the U.S., where public service broadcasting was not the starting point, the (private) networks were required to have balanced television newscasts (Cushion & Lewis, 2009). In countries like the U.K., there are clear regulations ("due impartiality") forcing channels whether they are funded by licence fees, advertising or subscription, to cover political affairs in a serious, balanced and impartial way (Campbell, 2006). In other countries, e.g. Italy, these kind of regulations exist only in election times. Even if the presence of a regulation does not guarantee the correct application of it on the terrain, it is likely to have a very significant effect on journalists' source patterns.

POLITICAL SYSTEM VARIABLES

Political system variables can be expected to be of influence on television news coverage. Strömbäck & Dimitrova (2006) attributed clear differences between (election) news coverage in Sweden and the U.S. to political system factors, as well as to media system factors.

In striving for balanced news coverage, the journalist is confronted with a far more difficult choice for additional news sources when the number of parties rises. In a two party system, the choice will be relatively easy: when the journalist decides to use an additional news source, this will often be a voice from the

opposing party. For Tuchman (1978) this situation still leads to a prevalence of the government sources, since they will get a more prominent place. The choice, however, becomes more difficult when the number of parties rises. Not all parties can always be heard, even in cases it is desirable.

Our hypothesis is that when the amount of parties (in the opposition) is higher, the journalist will be increasingly driven to balance with experts, social movements or even popular exemplars, to avoid a risky choice between different opposition forces. If certain parties are selected, the journalist will still be tempted to opt for an expert or a voice from society more often to back up his/her choice, or to ensure proper balance-perception. As a result, the unbalance between ruling politicians and challenging opposition politicians will be larger in these situations, and non-political actors will get more chances.

In addition to these party factors, we add an hypothesis, based on research in countries with a presidential system. In those countries, the president draws so much attention, that rather than of an elite dominance, we can speak of a chancellor bonus. If we disregard this extra attention for the presidential position, nothing much is left of an elite dominance. We have to take into account, though, that countries with a ceremonial presidency are a lot less likely to show this chancellor's bonus.

<i>Level</i>	<i>Theory & Determinant</i>	<i>authors</i>	<i>Remarks:</i>
Country level (or higher)	Propaganda model: Ideology	Herman & Chomsky (1988)	Elite dominance, convergence of interest of elites
Country level	Development journalism: government control	Wong (2004), Cenite et al (2008), Loo (1996), Mc Daniel (1986)	Heavy reliance on official sources
Country level	Media competition	Stromberg (2001), Dyck & Zingales (2002), Mullainathan & Shleifer (2003), Bagdikian (2004), Mc Chesney (1999), Bogart (1995), Gentzkow & Shapiro (2005) ...	
Country level	National news culture	Papathanassopoulos (2001), Uce & De Swert (2010), McNair (1998), Mancini (2000), Durante & Knight (2009), Schulz & Zeh (2005)	+ different social and historical conditions
Country level	Commercialisation	Schulz & Zeh (2005)	
Country level	Political factors (amount of parties, strength of civil society etc)	Strömback & Dimitrova (2006)	
Broadcaster level/media system level	Public broadcasting vs. Market driven (commercial).	Strömback & Dimitrova (2006), McManus (1994), Croteau & Hoynes (2001).	
Broadcaster level	Ideological and partisan links of the broadcaster	D'Alessio & Allen (2000), Gentzkow & Shapiro (2005)	
Broadcaster level, journalist level	Indexing: Journalistic routines:	Bennett (1990)	
Broadcaster level, journalist level	Civic Journalism	Kurpius (2002)	Broader scope of news source, more unofficial news sources
Broadcaster level, journalist level	Economic view on indexing theory (reporter's and media organizations' self interest)	Niven (2005)	
Journalist level	Ideological and partisan links of the journalist	Patterson & Donsbach (1996), Shoemaker & Reese (2001), Ryan (2001), Campbell (2006), Donsbach & Patterson (2004); Cooper & Johnson (2009)	
Journalist level	Specialization, experience	Gans (1979)	
Event level (item level)	Issue	Berkowitz & Beach (1993), Tuchman (1978)	

Table 3: Literature review table on factors influencing bias or balance.

Chapter V. Explaining political balance in Flemish television news

The following two chapters are empirical chapters, each testing a partly different and partly overlapping set of factors that, according to the literature review, could have an effect on the presence of balance in television news items. An effort has been done to keep both chapters as uniform as possible. The dependent variables are largely the same (main variable: political balance as defined earlier in Chapter IV), and, where possible, the same independent variables will be added to the analysis. This should make it possible to evaluate the results from both empirical analyses together in the concluding chapter.

In this first empirical chapter, based on data on Flemish television news, I will look into the ‘lower’ levels of influence on balance (item level and journalist level, and only in a rudimentary way the broadcaster level). This database has the advantage of being longitudinal and large, and relatively detailed in coding. The focus will be on item-specific and journalist-specific factors. The main disadvantage of the Flemish dataset is that it is ‘only’ about Flanders, including both the public and the private news broadcaster (VRT and VTM). The international comparative database for the second empirical chapter (Chapter VI) has an additional value at exactly that point, since it comprises of newscasts from 24 broadcasters out of 11 countries. Then it becomes possible to include higher level factors (broadcaster level and country level) in the analysis, which will be the focus of chapter VII.

V.1. Political balance in Flemish television news¹³

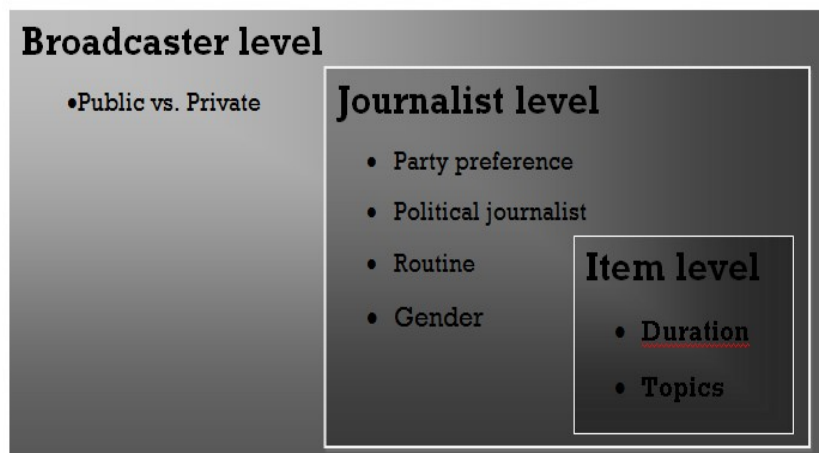
The first question that comes to mind is how often balance can actually be observed in television news items. On the one hand, balance can always be expected, since journalists have been following this word-counterword practice

¹³ The underlying chapter is an extension and a follow-up study on an earlier study (De Swert & Hooghe, 2007), based on partly the same data and largely the same variables. The period of time that was studied was extended from 2003-2005 to 2003-2007, but a more comprehensive difference is that here, the analysis will be done with multilevel regression analyses. In the original study, there was no ground to use a multilevel design, since there were no factors distinguished at any other level than the basic news item-level (besides the public-private distinction, which was a variable with only two possible outcomes, VRT and VTM). The introduction of information about the journalists that was done for this chapter, changes this. Several factors, measured at the journalist level were added.

for many years. In theory, journalists would probably agree to the statement that word-counterword is the preferred way of making a news item. On the other hand, it became clear from chapter V that many factors can disturb the daily journalistic practice, hampering the practical application of journalistic principles like this. Combined with the general impression that emerges from the daily observation of the news, this leads to the expectation that balance will probably not be so omnipresent as it would in an 'ideal' world.

RQ1. How often does balance occur in television news items and does this vary over time and broadcaster?

In the next paragraphs, I will build up hypotheses involving factors at three different levels: the news item level (including formal characteristics like duration, as well as the topics that are covered), the journalist level, and (only rudimentary) the broadcaster level (public-private). The hypotheses are based upon a larger reading of the possible factors influencing bias of balance than reported here, but this literature has been discussed in chapter V. The larger framework is similar to the way Shoemaker and Reese (1996) dealt with influences on media content, but only the inner circles are included here (see chapter VII for a larger coverage of the model).



Graph 1: Overview of the variables used in the upcoming analysis

Item-level factors

Some simple, but crucial variables can be expected to hinder a correct estimation of other variables, and thus lead to incorrect conclusions if not controlled for. The most obvious variable like this is the news items *duration*. Even if over the years, news items have shortened to some degree in Flemish television news, an average news item is still between 90 and 100 seconds long. This becomes about 120 seconds when only news items containing at least one speaking news source are considered. Generally, it is the editor and not the journalist who makes the news item, who decides how much time there is for a particular news item. Sometimes there is more time for a news item, while other times only a small gap needs to be filled in the newscasts. Either way, in practice there is considerable variation in news item duration, and it speaks for itself that for a journalist, one way of saving time is to leave out some (of the possibly interesting) interviews with news sources. Without even suggesting that this process would favour any party whatsoever, it is safe to expect that duration matters, since the shorter news items are, the more chance there is that only one speaking news source remains in the item, which would then not be considered as balanced.

From the test reported on in chapter IV on 'balance', one of the main conclusions was that in some cases, balance could be missed by the way it is operationalized in this study. Sometimes for example disagreement exists between political actors from the same party or coalition. Of course, for the news media this is highly newsworthy, and they would let these disagreeing actors speak in the news item, which would be perfectly balanced for the occasion, but it would not be picked up by the operationalization of balance as opportunity balance, as used in this Ph.D. project. It is difficult to check for this, but for one topic this could prove a useful exercise, i.e. for *international (affairs) news* (not foreign news). In these items, the foreign affairs minister will often play a prominent role, but in many of these cases it is not so much a balance with the (local) opposition the journalist is looking for in the news item, but rather a balance between (disagreeing) international actors. The chance that the foreign minister of Belgium features a news item in which there is also a quote by Angela Merkel or José Manuel Barroso is much larger than that the journalist decides to pay a visit to the office of the Flemish Green party to hear what they think. Another topic that can be expected to show different balancing practices, is news that is *about specific party organization*, like e.g. a pre-election convention or the internal election of a new chairman for the party. Often in items like this, only one party is really relevant, so the journalist will not seek to balance these items like other items. Finally, there is

the special status of soft news. Since *soft news* is, by definition, not about politics, these items will often belong in the category of items in which the politicians does not offer any standpoint (which was an exceptional situation, according to the test in chapter IV). When a politician makes a bad fall, gets a new hair cut, is present at a celebrity party or at a soccer match, they do make the news occasionally. Sometimes they may even say something, but usually the content of these statements will be limited to facts, humor or very personal opinions about politically irrelevant matters.

*H1a. The longer a news item lasts, the more likely it is that the item is balanced*¹⁴

H1b. When a news item has specific political party coverage as the only topic, there is less chance this item will be balanced

H1c. When a news item is about international news, there is less chance this item will be balanced

H1d. When a news item is about a soft news topic, there is less chance this item will be balanced.

The routine level in the Shoemaker & Reese (1996) scheme is not a statistical level that can be included as a separate level in a multilevel analysis. The second option is to include media routine variables at the item level. Because of the existence of certain routines, certain news contexts will lead to different media content outcomes. *Elections* are a good example of this. In election times, many things work differently for news media. One of the things Van Aelst & De Swert (2009) found when they compared election news with non-election news, was that when it comes to the amount of attention for political actors, the newsmakers were much more attentive to the checks and balances in election times than in regular periods. The eyes of politicians and the public are wide open in election times, and especially politicians become extremely sensitive for any possible media disadvantage they think they are suffering (Cuyt & De Swert, 2000). For all these reasons, journalists and editors will at least take extra care for the distribution of attention and quotes in television news, or even follow it up with a calculator. In some countries, this routine is even regulated in formal guidelines or legislation (e.g. U.K.).

The expectation is clear, i.e. there will be more balance in election times, but what remains to be examined, is whether this is a matter of the time period (all the

¹⁴ When balance is mentioned, in all these hypotheses, political balance is meant as the dependent variable. Only when specific reference is made to another kind of (non-partisan) balance (e.g. by experts), this can be different.

news in those six weeks before the election day) or a matter of the topic (all the news that is specifically about the elections and campaign news). Therefore, both these variables will be used in the analysis¹⁵.

H1e. In election times, news items in general will be more balanced than in non-election times.

H1f. Election news items will be more balanced than non-election news items.

Journalist level factors

Probably the most interesting variable, and at least the most contested one, is the personal ideology or party preference of journalists. Especially in Belgium, this is a taboo subject for journalists. Journalists are not supposed to have party affiliations, and party preferences are not supposed to be known, and certainly not meant to be at play when they are doing their job. The recent media fuzz about the formerly hidden political preference of Siegfried Bracke (a prominent political journalist for the public channel VRT for many years) is a good example of the climate that still exists in Flanders about journalists and their political preferences. Siegfried Bracke entered politics (following a trend among political journalists in Flanders), but still he prefers to be vague about his former political party affiliation, despite evidence presented in the press.

The public, and especially partisan viewers of television news, have the tendency to accuse journalists of being ideologically aligned with certain parties, and that this is affecting their work as newsmakers. In Flanders, the most common accusation of such kind is that the journalists from the public channel VRT are socialists or at least leftist (the 'Rode VRT' – the Red VRT). In many other countries, similar accusations are expressed towards journalists. Even if these accusations are often not based on hard scientific evidence, or have -on the contrary- even been proven wrong, they have roots in an empirically substantiated phenomenon, namely that journalists in general tend to be more liberal or more leftist than the general population (De Bens, 2001; De Clercq & Paulussen, 2007; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996). What really matters though is not whether they have an ideological preference or even affiliation, but rather

¹⁵ Actually, there might be even another factor hiding inside the differences found between election news and non-election news. It might be a matter of the way journalists deal differently with prospective (like in most election news) versus retrospective content. This variable was, unfortunately, not covered by the ENA-coding.

whether this affects their behaviour, i.e. their way of covering politics. Does it affect the presence of balance between different political news sources in television news items?

As described in Chapter II & Chapter V, Donsbach & Patterson (1996) found such a personal ideological bias when they tested journalists on it. In an artificial situation like Donsbach & Patterson created, journalists are at least partially led by their personal ideological beliefs. They did not, however, test this kind of bias in actual news content. They did, like Goldberg (2002), note that this influence of personal preferences was not picked up by the journalists themselves, suggesting that it is an existing, but subconscious influence.

H2a. The personal party preference of a journalist affects the balance in the news items he/she makes.

If the journalist's preferred party is in government, incumbent voices will be less balanced.

If the journalist's preferred party is in the opposition, incumbent voices will be balanced more often.

Research has shown that the socio-demographic background of the reporter matters for the news content. This is e.g. found for ethnic background and gender (e.g. Liebler & Smith, 1997; Zoch & Van Slycke, 1998; Armstrong, 2004). There is insufficient ethnic diversity within the population of television news journalists in Flanders to study this factor, but gender can be included as a factor. Earlier studies (e.g. Hooghe & De Swert, 2007; De Swert & Hooghe, 2010) have proven – specifically for Flanders- that gender differences can lead to differences in news content.

Some topics are more often frequented by female reporters, although this is of course also (or even more) a matter of choices made by the editor-in-chief. But especially the way of reporting can differ between men and women. Women are alleged to aim for lower-level elites and to be more diverse in their news source selection than men. This might translate itself in a difference in balance. Women would then produce more balanced news reports than men, and this for two reasons:

- 1) The tendency towards more diversity, which automatically includes a tendency towards the inclusion of more news sources from a broader pool of news sources that they consider to have a potential relevance.

- 2) Because of their preference for lower-lever elites (regardless whether this is a conscious decision, or rather a consequence of less access or any other mechanism), the difference in power position between potential news sources are smaller. A party leader asks for balance by another party leader, and there are only few. They might be unavailable for comment, or unwilling. An MP can be balanced by any other MP, which enlarges the pool of possibilities.

H2b. The gender of a journalist affects the balance in the news items he/she makes. Female journalists will provide more balance in the news than male journalists.

In chapter V it was mentioned that Niven (2005) described political journalism as an economical process. The balance between costs and benefits determines certain decisions. Although this can probably be said about any decision in the news making process, this is particularly important in the process of news source selection. Looking for, contacting and interviewing a person for a sound bite in a news item is a time-consuming effort. Time, as well as money, is scarce. The probability that (and, if so, the amount of time) news sources are interviewed for a news item depends on the division of costs and benefits for the particular journalist working on that news item. These costs can differ between journalists. Two factors are important here: routine and specialization in politics. By their experience, routinized journalists have long lists of contacts that are viable news sources for all kinds of topics. In that way, they save time in the selection process. On top of that, they tend to have shorter lines to these news sources (e.g. direct cell phone numbers rather than the phone number of the personal assistant or spokesperson), resulting in another time profit. In a similar way political journalists (“Wetstraatjournalisten”) can reduce costs in the domain they are specialized in. Therefore, both routine and specialization in politics can provide journalists with a better armory, so they do not need to rely on the most powerful sources only. The hypothesis here is that because it is easier for them, more routinized journalists and/or journalists that are more specialized in politics will prove to provide more balanced news than others.

H2c. More routinized journalists will provide more balance in the news.

H2d. Political journalists will provide more balance in the news than other journalists.

These hypotheses are all about the influence of journalists on balance in the news. Because I did not do a survey among all journalists who made news items for the news content data base, I probably miss potentially valuable variables, e.g. information on the personal role perceptions of the journalists on news source selection and penetration of ideological cues into the news content, which is information that is generally included in journalist surveys nowadays (De Clercq & Paulussen, 2007). More information would also have led to better measurement of certain variables (e.g. experience, see *infra*). Thus, the journalist-level variables are far from perfect in the underlying study. It is therefore important to take into account that there is variance to be explained on this level, regardless of the variables considered in this paper. This might be of interest for the research field of media bias, since so far only few scholars have taken factors concerning the journalist into account in their studies on bias or balance.

Broadcaster-specific factor

For the broadcaster level, it would be interesting to have more variation in the sample than just the Flemish public channel and the Flemish private channel. This will be dealt with in the following chapter (VI). For now, this factor is included for what it is worth: it shows the difference between VRT and VTM. Because VRT is a public channel, one could rightfully expect that due to the higher level of political involvement (e.g. executive board) and the fact that VRT is subject to criteria, also concerning political information, listed in the 'Beheersovereenkomst', the agreement between the Flemish government and the public channel in which - amongst others- is listed what the Flemish government expects from the VRT. Against that background, it is not difficult to imagine that the pressure to deliver balanced work all the time, and to measure and correct it all the time, will be less stringent at the private channel VTM than at the public channel VRT. However, when VTM was established, this was done in a rather different way than some other transitions in the same period. RTL-tvi in Wallonia was part of the large RTL-group, while VTM was constructed as a new, independent broadcaster, inspired by the public broadcaster (Coppens, 2005). Due to the duopoly situation both these broadcasters found themselves in for many years after, the divergence between both broadcasters – especially concerning the kind of news- has never been that large. In the field of news on politics, however, VTM does not produce the volume VRT does, and neither does the private broadcaster devote equal attention to institutional politics (Desmedt, Hooghe & Walgrave, 2010; 2011).

H3. The public channel VRT will have more balance in the news than the private news channel VTM.

Finally, I also formulate another, overarching hypothesis that has to do with journalistic routines. Several branches of research come to the same conclusion: incumbents (and sometimes also incumbent party politicians) have an advantage in news values, resulting in a higher media exposure (Hopmann et al. 2011; De Swert & Walgrave, 2002). Government sources are more easily available, more credible and safer for journalists to use.

H4. Opposition politicians will be balanced more often than incumbent politicians

Additionally, rather as a second-order research question, the analysis will briefly handle the influence of all these factors on different kinds of non-partisan balance too. The main goal of this study, however, clearly remains describing and explaining political balance.

RQ2. How do the aforementioned factors influence non-partisan balance?

V.2. Data and methods

Dependent variable

Belgium is not an easy country to study political actors in the news. To start with, it is a multi-party system, featuring a more than average number of parties. Since not one party or ideology can dominate the political spectrum, governments are always formed by coalitions. Furthermore, there is the complex structure of the state, with a federal government and several regional governments, not necessarily in matching coalitions. Media markets are organized regionally, and thus they match more with the regional government level than with the federal government level, which does, however, not mean they give this regional level more attention (De Smedt, Hooghe & Walgrave, 2010).

To further operationalize political balance, as initiated in chapter III, some choices need to be made about what to consider as political balance.

- 1) This study is mainly about balance concerning political actors at the federal state level. The main analysis has the presence of at least one federal incumbent politician speaking in the news item as a necessary condition for inclusion in the dataset. The purest form of balance is the presence of a federal opposition news source as well in the same news item. However, considering what was said earlier about the political situation in Belgium and following the operationalization of De Swert & Hooghe (2007), I considered it relevant to include regional incumbent politicians and/or regional opposition politicians as possible balancing news sources. The presence of these regional news sources, next to the federal incumbent news source(s), thus leads to political balance in this analysis.
- 2) Party leaders are considered according to the position of their party in the federal government. If their party is a governing party on the federal level, they are considered as federal incumbents. If their party is an opposition party (but possibly a governing party at the regional level), they are considered as federal opposition politicians.
- 3) Local politicians (provincial and local community politicians) are disregarded all together in these analyses. However, they are included when they combine a local mandate with a federal or regional mandate (which is common in Belgium), as long as they were acting in the news items in this latter role.

- 4) Ex-politicians, often politicians who held high positions in the past, who are not actively involved in party politics anymore, are not counted as politicians for their (ex-)party. They are rather wanted for their expertise, and because the viewers listen to them and trust them, not for their party affiliation.

As a starting point for the main analysis on political balance, all the news items containing at least one incumbent federal news source speaking on screen, are selected for the analysis. In more concrete terms, this means:

Incumbent news sources:

Federal prime minister, ministers, secretaries of state, members of federal parliaments of any of the parties that are in government, party leaders and other party members of incumbent parties that cannot be attributed to another level than the federal level.

Opposition news sources:

All members of federal parliaments belonging to any party that is not an incumbent party. This also includes party leaders of these parties, and other party members of incumbent parties that cannot be attributed to another level than the federal level.

In addition to these federal opposition news sources, also Flemish regional politicians are taken into account as balancing news sources (all politicians that can be attributed to the regional level, including regional ministers and members of the regional parliament of both opposition and government parties).

A news item is then politically balanced when it contains at least one incumbent political actor speaking on screen (first group) combined with at least one politician of the second group speaking on screen.

In the analyses in this chapter, the main focus is on this political balance of federal incumbents as described above. However, I think it is also important to give an impression of the larger picture. That is why at some points, which will be clearly labeled, also other forms of 'political balance' are presented. To check hypothesis H4, about the difference in being balanced between incumbents and opposition politicians, the analysis needs to start from all the news items featuring at least one federal opposition news source. Balance is then achieved when also federal incumbent news sources (or regional politicians) are present as speaking news sources in the same news item. To be able to formulate an answer to RQ, balance

is extended from a pure political phenomenon (only taking into account political actors, i.e. partisan balance) to a concept that also comprises balance by means of non-partisan news sources. Just like for partisan balance, the starting point for this non-partisan balance is the presence of a federal incumbent speaking news source in the news item, but this time balance is achieved by the juxtaposition of this incumbent news source to a non-partisan speaking news source, i.e. experts, civil society representatives or common people).

Independent variables

Variables based on the topic codes:

<i>Variable name</i>	<i>Operationalization</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Mean in dataset</i>
Party-specific topic	=1 when the topic of the news item is internal political organization of political parties, interest groups or local governments (e.g. a party meeting) and no other topics are coded for the same news item.	0 or 1	.04
International news	=1 when one of the topics in the news item is international relations, international security, war and peace or European Union.	0 or 1	.19
Soft news	=1 when one of the topics in the news item is culture, celebrity news, royalty news or sports.	0 or 1	.08
Elections (topic)	=1 when one of the topics coded for this news item is election and campaign news.	0 or 1	.09

Other variables at item-level, but not based on the coding of the topic codes:

<i>Variable name</i>	<i>Operationalization</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Mean in dataset</i>
Elections (time period)	=1 in the six weeks before each election (2003; 2004; 2007)	0 or 1	
Duration of the news item	= the total length of a news item in seconds	23-240	130.5 sec

The following independent variables related to the journalist and broadcaster level, are used in the analysis. The gender of the journalist was based on the name

and, if necessary, a background check of the journalist. Party preference of the journalist was measured by connecting the ENA-data to another 2006-database, the MEDPOL by Stefaan Walgrave & Peter Van Aelst (Van Aelst, Brants, Van Praag, De Vreese, Nuytemans & Van Dalen, 2008). Even though only a small part of the journalists matched (18 out of 127)¹⁶, a relatively large part of the news items could be kept in the analysis, since the most productive journalists were among those 18 of whom the information was available.

<i>Variable name</i>	<i>Operationalization</i>	<i>range</i>	<i>Mean in dataset</i>
Journalist – Party preference	= 1 when the journalist's party preference was for one of the incumbent parties, =0 if for another party	0-1	.89
Journalist – Gender	=gender of the main (=first mentioned) journalist responsible for the making of the news item. 1=female, 0=male.	0-1	.28
Journalist – Political Journalist	= how many of the last ten news items made by the journalist where political news items (MEDPOL)?	0-10	7.92
Journalist – Routine	= the amount of news items made by the particular journalist during the first five years of ENA coding (2003-2007).	1-333	140
Public broadcaster	=1 for news items from the public channel VRT, and =0 for news items broadcast by the private channel VTM.	0-1	.54

¹⁶ The MEDPOL-research had a different scope. In one way, it was broader since also radio and newspaper journalists and journalists working for other information programs were targeted. In another way, it was also narrower, since a large amount of journalists was not targeted (actively) because they were not known to be involved in making news items on politics. The data of ENA and this Ph.D. prove that also a significant number of non-political journalists make news items involving politicians. The opinions of these journalists would be at least as interesting as those of the political news desk.

Methods

This study will apply quantitative content analysis¹⁷ as its main method. Content analysis is one of the most widely applied methods in communication science. Most content analyses are quantitative of nature (Bryman, 2008), but qualitative content analysis is also often applied, which sometimes does more right to the analysis of the content of particular documents of media messages (Wester & Van Selm, 2006). For an excellent overview of the possibilities and limits of qualitative content analysis, see Pleyter (2006). For this study, quantitative content analysis, which enables systematic processing of a large amount of data for statistical analysis (Wester & Van Selm, 2006), is the most appropriate one. The main characteristic of quantitative content analysis is that it happens systematically using a fixed registration instrument allowing to investigate a large amount of data in order to be able to engage in statistical analysis. Especially since this study aims to involve many variables on different levels in order to determine the factors that influence balance, it is fair to say that quantitative content analysis, as introduced by Berelson (1952) and Holsti (1969), and followed up by Krippendorff (2004) and others, could turn out to be the method for a fruitful effort¹⁸.

The sample for this analysis is taken from the ENA-database. ENA started on January 1st 2003 with archiving and encoding television news in Flanders for the scientific community, and continues its activities up till today (www.nieuwsarchief.be). Daily, the flagship prime-time news broadcasts of the public broadcaster VRT (19h.00 at één) and the private broadcaster VTM (19h.00 at VTM) are taped, divided into news items and then coded by a team of trained semi-professional coders. For each news item, ENA provides information about the news item (topics, duration, item order, formal features like for example if there is a studio interview), as well as about the news sources that are mentioned

¹⁷ A word of gratitude should go to several people who made the ENA-database what it is today. To start, the ENA-supervisors Marc Hooghe & Stefaan Walgrave, and the financing instances over the past years, including the Max Wildiersfonds (FWO) and Flemish government (in person of ministers of media Geert Bourgeois, Kris Peeters and Ingrid Lieten). Not to be forgotten are: the ENA-coordinators Sarah Schueremans, Volkan Uce, Anne Hardy, Daniëlle Sadicaris & Julie De Smedt for maintaining this database and the dozens of coders who did a great job at ENA.

¹⁸ If I would engage in a similar study today, and availability of transcripts was guaranteed, I would investigate the possibilities of computer-assisted content analysis (see e.g. Kleinnijenhuis & Van Atteveldt, 2006) for the Flemish data. Still, even today, this would be a challenging effort, because of the lack of text and the inexhaustibleness of any list of political and non-political actors.

in this news item (named people and organizations) and/or that are granted speaking time in this news item (regardless whether this is a taped video of an intervention in parliament or from a press conference, or an interview). Of these speaking news sources, i.e. those of interest for this study, ENA registers the name, function, gender, language and speaking time.

The team of ENA coders necessarily changes over time, but the ENA-staff guarantees uniformity in coding and reliability. They do this by means of a strict (but paid) and thorough training at the intake of news coders. Only coders who conform sufficiently to the norms, are allowed in the team. Coders are also regularly followed up by occasional detailed checks of their encodings during their period as coder for the ENA, and all encodings that are received by the ENA-staff receive a visual (but not thorough) check before being added to the master file. Formal inter-coder reliability testing is done occasionally by the academic ENA-staff, and the mean Cohen's Kappa values for the variables used in this study range from .79 (topic codes) till .96 (news item duration). The bulk of the variables coded by ENA are (almost) free from interpretation, so scores over Cohen's Kappa .90 are a reasonable expectation for most of them (e.g. the coding of the name of the journalist who made the news item, item order, whether it is a studio interview, the presence of actors, if and how long they speak, etc.). These variables can hardly be understood wrongly, but mistakes due to loss of attention, lack of concentration or forgetfulness do occur. Nearly all variables involving more room for interpretation by the coders have been removed from the original ENA-codebook in 2003. The only variable that involves a risk, because it is more than just registering something, is the topic coding. Drawing upon a detailed issue-codebook containing 266 different issue codes, up to three issue codes are attributed to a single news item. Many news items are really about one topic, and then of course there is only one code; the average number of issue codes per item is 1.47. The reliability of the topic coding is one of the priorities of ENA. The aim is Cohen's Kappa .80 for this variable, however not on the list of 266 issue codes, but on a recoded version where these are reduced to the main categories (like sports, politics, international news, culture, environment, celebrity news, economy, employment, etc.)

To make the ENA-file of use for this study, some recoding needed to be done. The actor function in ENA is a fairly large, open field. This is done because the same person can come in the news in different roles, and ENA has chosen to keep a description as close to the reality of that particular new item as possible. As a

consequence, I needed to recode all news source functions to a standardized format (e.g. politician, lawyer, civil servant, civil society spokesman, man on the street, etc.). For politicians, extra information needed to be added about their party affiliation and (in case of several mandates) the particular mandate relevant in that news item (e.g. major or member of parliament), and whether this was at the federal, regional or local level. Based on this information, each actor could be attributed to the incumbents or non-incumbents.

Sample

Even if ENA-coding of television news is available up till 2011, I have chosen to limit this study to the period from January 1st 2003 till June 10th 2007. Ever after this date, maybe with the exception of a short period of time in 2008 under prime minister Herman Van Rompuy, the political situation has been highly unstable at the federal level in Belgium. Federal government formation took extremely long time (Leterme I), a government was appointed at interim (Verhofstadt III), and about every government was plagued by conflicts between language groups on both sides of the language border. Instead of meandering between all these political crises and focusing on those few stable periods, I chose to limit this study till the election day of the federal elections at the 10th of June 2007. Thus, this sample only comprises data from two federal governments: Verhofstadt I (12th of July 1999 – 11th of July 2003) and Verhofstadt II (11th of July till the 10th of June 2007). The federal government formation period in 2003 (18th of May 2003 till the 10th of July 2003) was deleted from the sample (for some results on the different character of these specific periods of government formation, see Van Aelst & De Swert, 2009).

<i>Time period</i>			<i>Non- election time</i>	<i>Election time</i>	<i>Gov. formation</i>	<i>Government coalition (Federal)</i>	<i>Government coalition (Regional - Flanders)</i>
	<i>Beginning</i>	<i>End</i>					
1	01/01/2003	05/04/2003	X			VLD/PS/SP/PRL/ Agalev/Ecolo	VLD/SP/Agalev/VU
2	06/04/2003	18/05/2003		X (Fed.)		VLD/PS/SP/PRL/ Agalev/Ecolo	VLD/SP/Agalev/VU
3	19/05/2003	10/07/2003			X (Fed.)		VLD/SP/Agalev/VU
4	11/07/2003	01/05/2004	X			VLD/MR/SP.a/PS	VLD/SP.a/Groen !/Spirit
5	02/05/2004	13/06/2004		X (Reg.)		VLD/MR/SP.a/PS	VLD/SP.a/Groen !/Spirit
6	14/06/2004	19/07/2004			X (Reg.)	VLD/MR/SP.a/PS	
7	20/07/2004	29/04/2007	X			VLD/MR/SP.a/PS	CD&V-NVA/SP.A-spirit/ Open Vld (Vivant)
8	30/04/2007	10/06/2007		X (Fed.)		VLD/MR/SP.a/PS	CD&V-NVA/SP.A-spirit/ Open Vld (Vivant)
9	11/06/2007	21/12/2007			X (Fed.)		CD&V-NVA/SP.A-spirit/ Open Vld (Vivant)

Table 4: Overview of governing coalitions in Belgium (and Flanders)

The dataset also takes Flemish regional elections into account. Two regional Flemish government coalitions¹⁹ are covered in this dataset, with a more distinct change in the coalition at the turnover point after the regional elections in 2004. For the same reasons as we did for the federal government formation period, also the Flemish regional government formation period (i.e. June 14th 2004 – July 20th 2004) was deleted from the entire dataset.

Finally, I need to deal with the state structure, and the possibility of cross-cutting news items involving both the federal and in this case the Flemish regional level. Since the coalitions are not (always) symmetrical/identical in the federal and the regional government, it is not possible to just add them up by party. Two

¹⁹ Within these two coalitions, several governments came and went. Dewael II, Dewael III and Dewael IV, as well as Somers I and Somers II, all before the elections. Even if the prime minister of Flanders was replaced during this period, these changes were not really substantial, only involving a shuffle within the coalition, e.g. because PM Patrick Dewael became a minister in the federal government. From 2004 until 2007, the government Leterme I was more stable. Thus, the only real shift in incumbent parties took place after the elections in 2004.

decisions were made following this third complication. First, I decided to take the presence of a federal incumbent as the reference point (see point 1.). Items that only include Flemish incumbents (e.g. Flemish prime minister or a member of the Flemish parliament belonging to one of the governing parties) will not be taken into account in the analysis (only if also a federal incumbent is present). Basically, this means that balance for federal and regional politicians needs to happen in separate analyses. Even if at times reference will be made to the results concerning the regional politicians, the main focus of this analysis is on federal incumbents as a starting point. The second decision is to include these Flemish regional politicians as possible balancing political actors. Both the presence of Flemish incumbents and Flemish opposition politicians will be considered as providing balance to the federal incumbents.

V.3. Results

How often are television news items balanced? For Flanders, only the results of the study of De Swert & Hooghe (2007) are available on this. Partly on the same data, this study found 2/3 of all news items featuring federal incumbents politicians, to be balanced in one way or another (either political balance or non-partisan balance, measured in non-election times) over the 2003-2005 period. About ¼ of the news items with government politicians showed (partisan) political balance (De Swert & Hooghe, 2007:110). The most striking results of the De Swert & Hooghe (2007) study were the difference in balance for government and opposition politicians, and the large difference in balance between non-election and election periods.

The results in the current study, which differs only in details²⁰ and (extended) time period from the De Swert & Hooghe study, are presented in a similar way as in the original study (see Table 5). In the framework of this Ph.D. study, balance with partisan news sources is the most interesting (the grey area in the table). Only for the very last question (RQ2), the other information in the table is also relevant. These bivariate results provide a first impression on how and when balance occurs (RQ1), and on whether it varies by broadcaster (H3) and time period (H2e).

In general, only about every fifth news item involving a federal incumbent is balanced by an opposition politician (Type I. Balance). The comparison between the news broadcasts of the public broadcaster VRT and the private channel VTM does not reveal great differences, although the tendency seems that the private channel's news items are slightly more often balanced than those of the public channel. This finding is not very promising for possible confirmation of H3, which stated that it would rather be the other way around.

²⁰ E.g. extra long (>3 minutes) items, as well as studio interviews were not included anymore, and the category of 'regular people' was defined more strictly in this study. The time period is extended from 2003-2005 to 2003-2007.

	<i>Non-election</i>		<i>Election times</i>	
	VRT	VTM	VRT	VTM
<i>Type I. Balance with partisan news sources</i>	20.3	21.6	34.8	36.6
Balance with a member of the federal opposition	15.0	14.6	25.4	26.7
Balance with a member of the regional incumbents	6.5	7.9	9.8	11.1
Balance with a member of the regional opposition	1.0	1.8	2.0	4.5
<i>Type II. Balance with non-partisan news sources</i>	36.8	43.1	32.8	38.3
Balance with an expert	4.7	7.1	2.9	7.4
Balance with civil society sources	18.6	18.8	14.3	18.5
Balance with regular people	9.2	15.6	13.5	12.8
Balance with other news sources	11.0	11.0	6.1	9.1
Both types of balance considered together				
One-sided (only government party sources)	46.2	39.5	41.8	36.6
Balanced in general (at least one other speaking news source of type I and/or type II)	53.8	60.5	58.2	63.4

Table 5: Balance in items with at least one federal government news source speaking (2003-2007; N=3044)

For H2e, however, these results are supportive. The difference between the non-election periods and the election periods is quite large, and in the direction as was expected. On both channels, political balance occurs almost twice as often in election times than in non-election times.

These results also provide valuable information about the dependent variable for further analyses. Political balance (Type I.), as described in earlier paragraphs, is counted in three distinct situations:

- a) When the federal incumbent news source is balanced by a federal opposition politician
- b) When the federal incumbent news source is balanced by a regional government politician
- c) When the federal incumbent news source is balanced by a regional opposition politician

From Table 5, it becomes clear that in three out of four cases of political balance, this balance is achieved by the juxtaposition of a federal opposition politician, and only in a minority of the cases, this is done by giving air to regional (government or opposition) political sources.

Finally, the figures in the second part of the table (the type II. Non-partisan balance) reveal that balancing by using non-partisan news sources is a regularly applied technique. It is more common than the purely political balance. Among

these various non-partisan news sources that can be used to achieve such a balance, especially the civil society representatives (e.g. union leaders, spokespeople of NGO's, etc.) and the common people (the so-called popular exemplars) are frequently observed. Experts are also an option, but this is less common.

The differences between the broadcasters for this 'Type II. Non-partisan balance' are larger than for type I. The private channel clearly prefers this way of balancing over the other or unbalanced option, at least more often than the public channel does. In election times, this kind of balance seems to be the victim of the suddenly rising success of the political balance in that time period, because non-partisan balance is less common in election times.

Apart from all these observations, a general overview of these results mainly learns that federal incumbents in Belgium are relatively often unbalanced in television news items. The question is whether this observation goes for covering all politicians in general, or that it is rather a specific finding for this particular group (federal incumbents). First, I will briefly present what a similar exercise on Flemish regional incumbents reveals (Table 6), and afterwards (in Table 7) provide results of switching the starting point of balance from a federal incumbent perspective to a federal (and in the second part of the table also region) opposition perspective. In these tables, the balance in news items featuring at least one opposition speaking news source, is presented as a first step in the process of answering H4, which expected that opposition news sources would be more (often) balanced than government news sources.

When a similar assignment is done, starting from Flemish regional incumbents, they appear to be balanced significantly more often than their federal colleagues. Especially political balance is applied more often. When looking more closely to the groups of news sources used to achieve this balance, Table 6 reveals that it is not because the Flemish incumbents are more challenged by their colleagues from the regional opposition in the news items (this happens actually less often than was the case for the federal incumbents), but that it is rather the pressure of the presence of federal news sources that pushes the political balance higher for the Flemish incumbents²¹.

²¹ Of course, by working like this, there is no way (because there is no information like that coded) to find out who the real initiator of the event or standpoint is. In the context of this study, 'Is balanced by' does not mean that the one that is balanced, necessarily was the initiator of the event, standpoint or media contact.

	<i>Non-election</i>		<i>Election times</i>	
	VRT	VTM	VRT	VTM
Type I. Balance with partisan news sources	26.5	30.5	48.1	50.4
Balance with a member of the Flemish opposition	8.9	9.2	24.1	17.5
Balance with a member of the federal incumbents	16.3	22.2	26.5	36.5
Balance with a member of the federal opposition	6.1	3.8	7.4	12.4
Type II. Balance with non-partisan news sources	38.0	45.7	29.6	34.3
Balance with an expert	4.6	7.1	4.3	9.5
Balance with civil society sources	22.6	23.4	15.4	13.9
Balance with regular people	15.8	21.5	11.1	11.7
Balance with other news sources	4.9	7.1	2.5	10.9
Both types of balance considered together				
One-sided (only government or government party sources)	39.3	30.0	32.1	31.4
Balanced (at least one other speaking news source of type I. and/or type II.)	60.7	70.0	67.9	68.6

Table 6 Balance in items with at least one regional/Flemish government news source speaking (2003-2007; N=1300)

When looked at from yet another angle, i.e. starting from the sample of news items featuring at least one federal opposition news source, the evaluation of the use of balance is even more dramatically different from the federal incumbents than the Flemish regional figures were. The differences revealed by the figures in Table 7, are quite impressive. In more than half of all the news items in which a federal opposition politician gets to speak, there is also an incumbent federal politician present. Balance with non-partisan news sources is a lot less frequent, and the difference between election times and non-election times is more moderate than it was for the incumbents, but if type II non-partisan balance is taken into account as well, only one out of four news items containing a federal opposition news source speaking allows this source to speak without counterword. For the federal incumbents, this was well over 40 percent. These bivariate results seem to confirm H4: opposition news sources do get balanced more often than government news sources.

Federal <u>opposition</u> news source speaking (2003-2007; N=604)	Non-election times		Election times	
	VRT	VTM	VRT	VTM
Type I. Balance with partisan news sources				
Balance with a government news source or one from the incumbent party	52.3	49.1	44.3	48.9
Balance with a member of the regional incumbents	11.7	9.6	10.0	9.8
Balance with a member of the regional opposition	5.6	10.1	11.4	9.0
Type II. Balance with non-partisan news sources				
Balance with an expert	3.3	5.7	4.3	9.8
Balance with civil society sources	9.4	12.8	12.9	6.8
Balance with regular people	4.0	8.6	10.7	9.8
Balance with other news sources	5.2	7.2	3.6	6.8
Both types of balance considered together				
One-sided (only opposition sources)	27.6	21.0	28.6	30.1
Balanced (at least one other speaking news source of Type I. and/or Type II.)	72.4	79.0	71.4	69.9
Regional/Flemish <u>opposition</u> news source speaking (2003-2007; N=272)	Non-election times		Election times	
	VRT	VTM	VRT	VTM
Type I. Balance with partisan news sources				
Balance with a regional government news source or one from the incumbent party	36.7	34.0	41.1	26.7
Balance with a member of the federal incumbents (parties)	16.4	18.8	16.8	32.8
Balance with a member of the federal opposition	14.2	14.7	11.6	8.9
Type II. Balance with non-partisan news sources				
Balance with an expert	2.7	7.1	5.3	7.8
Balance with civil society sources	7.5	14.7	7.4	8.9
Balance with regular people	3.1	6.1	6.3	8.9
Balance with other news sources	4.9	11.7	1.1	4.4
Both types of balance considered together				
One-sided (only regional opposition sources)	35.8	24.4	33.7	35.6
Balanced (at least one other speaking news source Type I. and/or Type II.)	64.2	75.6	66.3	64.4

Table 7 Balance in items with at least one federal (part 1) or regional (part 2) opposition news source speaking (2003-2007)

While this bivariate analysis revealed quite some interesting results regarding RQ1, in line with the expectations coined by the hypotheses H1e (about elections times) and H4 (about the difference between incumbents and opposition actors), the bulk of the proposed hypotheses require a more refined analysis. The dataset contains variables at different levels: properties of news items (level 1) are clustered depending on the journalist that made them (level 2). The most optimal technique for multivariate modeling of a dependent of which the variance is clustered at higher levels, is multi-level modeling. Although other techniques exist, they all suffer from statistical drawbacks that do not hamper multi-level models (see Steenbergen and Jones, 2002). The main statistical motivation is that the standard errors for predictors at the higher levels would be underestimated, which increases the chances of type I errors. Because most of the hypotheses require variables at these higher levels, a multi-level model is chosen for this study. The dependent variable of the analysis is dichotomous (political balance or not), which requires a logistic multi-level model. This implies a transformation of the dependent, and fixes the level 1 variance at 3.29. Naturally, this severely limits the ability to estimate (changes in) variances at the various levels. It is still possible to get an idea of the changes in variations by means of the variance partition coefficient (VPC) but the general practice on this matter is to be (very) careful in attributing much significance to these interpretations (Goldstein, Browne and Rasbash, 2002; Steele, 2009). That said, the main interest of this study is not so much to establish how much variation is present at the various levels, but rather to examine the extent to which specific factors at the various levels predict balance in the news.

For the main analysis, the news items containing at least one federal incumbent are used as the basic data file (N=2597), excluding the ones without sufficient information about the journalist who made the item (i.e. when no name of the journalist was provided, usually this is said or shown on screen at the beginning or the end of the news item). These items were made by 117 different journalists from both VRT and VTM, who form the second level in this analysis. The dependent variable is political balance, i.e. what was earlier referred to as Type I. balance. The intercept-only Model A in the first column of Table 8 does not only provide a base-line to evaluate later model fits, it also reveals another important piece of information. Interpreting absolute variances should be done with care, but the level 2 variance being significantly larger than zero at least suggests that patterns of balance are structurally different depending on the journalist that created the item. In subsequent models, variables are added at the item level and at the journalist level to test whether or not they have a significant effect.

Item-level factors

In Model B, the item-level factors that were mentioned earlier, are added to the model. Adding so many variables with great expectations attached to them, is bound to improve the model compared to the null-model, and so it does²². Model B allows the evaluation of H1a to H1f, and H3. Three of the variables introduced here are highly significant.

The first one is not a surprise: *news item duration*. The longer a news item lasts, the more chance there is that this news item is a politically balanced one. Even if this is a logical result, it is important to take such a strong variable in the model as a control variable for the rest of the analysis: all other effects occur *on top* of this strong predictor. H1a is confirmed.

In H1b, H1c and H1d three different topics or groups of topics were hypothesized to influence the inclination of journalists and editors to apply balance the same way they normally would. The first one was *specific party-related news*. News about events or decisions about, and orchestrated by, one specific party, do not need to be balanced. Even if the newsmakers want to, it would be difficult to do this in an elegant way. It is for example not self-evident to let the party leader of a rival party comment on the decision of a certain party to elect a new chairman or to expel one of its prominent members from the party. Moreover, in this specific kind of one-party news, it is more likely than in other news items that the journalist creates balance by bringing in several (opposing) voices from the same party, which is –as explained earlier– not included in the balance definition here. Specific party-related news does show a tendency to be less balanced in Model B, with a negative coefficient, but it is not significant. H1b can therefore not be confirmed.

International news, on the contrary, does work as expected. In international news, less balance is applied by journalists. As stated earlier, many of these news items do contain some kind of balance, but it is not a balance between the home country's incumbents and opposition, but rather a balance of different international political actors, i.e. a balance between countries. H1c is clearly confirmed. Finally, *soft news* was expected to be more free from all the balancing

²² Model fit is tested by using the Wald Chi² statistic, provided by STATA. In this case in which I want to compare a model with eight predictors to the null-model, Wald Chi² (8)= 125.73. The p-value of the chi² test (in this case: Prob >chi² = .000) then informs about the model fit. This model is (highly) significant.

requirements, but obviously, journalists do care about balance in soft news items too, since the coefficient is even slightly positive (but not significant). At least they do not seem to be tempted to slack on balance even in reports on politicians in leisure activities and (semi-)cultural activities. It is still hard to believe that a journalist would go and look for balance in a news item about the prime minister making a bad fall with the bike, but it is conceivable that when politicians are allowed to give a quote on how good they thought the newest Studio 100 musical was they just saw in exclusive preview, the journalist –just to be sure- chooses some from different parties. Summing up, H1d is clearly rejected.

Parameter	Model A	Model B	Model C	Model D
<i>Fixed effects</i>				
Duration of the item (in seconds)		.01 (.00) ***	.01 (.00) ***	.01 (.00) ***
Specific party-related news (=1, all other news = 0)		-.09 (.16)	-.10 (.15)	-.15 (.19)
International news (=1, all other news = 0)		-.77 (.19) ***	-.75 (.18) ***	-.80 (.25) ***
Soft news (=1, all other news = 0)		.10 (.22)	.11 (.21)	.09 (.29)
Election news (=1, all other news = 0)		1.09 (.15) ***	1.08 (.15) ***	.81 (.20) ***
Election campaign period – 2003 (=1, other periods = 0)		.32 (.26)	.37 (.25)	-.21 (.36)
Election campaign period – 2007 (=1, other periods = 0)		.17 (.26)	.19 (.26)	.20 (.36)
Public Channel (VRT=1, VTM=0)		.05 (.21)	-.12 (.17)	.11 (.14)
Journalist: gender			.10 (.19)	.16 (.21)
Journalist: routine			.01 (.00) ***	.00 (.00)
Journalist: political journalist (=1)				.10 (.03) **
Journalist: party preference (incumbent party=1, opposition party=0)				-.07 (.27)
Intercept	-1.83 (.13)	-2.57 (.22) ***	-2.90 (.25) ***	-2.85 (.48) ***
<i>Random effects</i>				
Level 2 variance	.60 (.17)	.43 (.14)	.17 (.01)	.00 (.00)
Log likelihood	-1345.3742	-1279.2761	-1267.005	-672.337
Ni / Nj	2591/127	2591/127	2591/127	1168/18

Table 8: Dependent variable federal balance, starting point: at least one Federal incumbent politician present as speaking news source. Table entries are coefficient estimates with s.e. in parentheses. * = $p \leq .05$ ** = $p \leq .01$ *** = $p \leq .001$.

On hypotheses H1e and H1f on election news, the analysis could be very illuminating. In the bivariate analysis, it seemed like *election campaign periods* were periods of clearly higher prevalence of balance in the news. Of course that was not a wrong observation, but the nuance that can be made with the help of the factors in Model B is that it is not so much the period of time that seems to count, but rather the *election news* itself that makes the difference. Election campaign periods could have more balanced news, because in that time period there are many (more) news items about elections. The other news (and there is a lot of non-election news too in the last six weeks before the elections) is not necessarily more nor less balanced than usual. H1e can only be confirmed partly and conditionally, while H1f is confirmed in this analysis. What it is exactly that makes election news (as a subject) more prone to balance, though, does not become clear from this analysis. It could be an automatism from journalists to see election news topics as demanding for balance, but it could also be a consequence of the specificity of election news. More often than the usual news topics, election-related news items can be expected to be prospective, instead of reactive/retrospective. Prospective content is more open, it is not sure who the main stakeholders will be, and if and how the proposed policy will be executed. Therefore, prospective news is likely to be more diverse and balanced, which could explain the clearly higher level of balance in election news. Further research, that does include this specific factor, is needed to confirm this.

Finally, also the *broadcaster* information was added in Model B, since it is to be attributed to the item level as long as insufficient broadcasters are present to make this a level in the analysis. Nonetheless, the clustering at the journalist level already accounts for some of the higher level variance. H3 predicted that news on the public channel would generally be some more balanced but the analysis shows no such pattern. The coefficient is weakly positive, but also quite far from being significant. As in so many aspects of making television news, VRT and VTM largely have the same practice. H3 thus needs to be rejected.

The factors that have to do with the journalists are added in two stages. First, using the whole sample, gender and routine are introduced, and in a second wave on a much smaller subsample, party preference and specialization in politics are added. This is necessary, since the latter information is only known for 18 journalists in the sample.

Model C is a significant improvement compared to Model B (Wald χ^2 (10) = 160.14, Prob> χ^2 = .000). All factors that were significant in Model B are still

significant after the introduction of the two first journalist-related factors. Level 2 Variance goes down quite a lot in Model C, which suggests that the variables that are introduced account for part of the unexplained variance at the journalist level; however, given the concerns regarding interpretation of (changes in) variances in a logistic multilevel model we cannot make inferences regarding the proportion of variance that is explained by the variables in the model. That said, the factor *journalist routine* has a large impact on balance in the news. The more often journalists make news items for television news, the more they tend to apply balance. This factor is highly significant. Hypothesis H2c can be confirmed. This does not go for *gender* of the journalist (H2b). Female journalists do not prove to produce significantly more balanced news items.

Finally, two more factors are introduced in Model D, *party preference of the journalist* and whether the *journalist is specialized in politics (political journalist)*. Model D cannot simply be compared with the other models, since more than half of the database had to be taken out of the analysis because of the lack of information about these journalists on political party preference in particular, but a comparison with these same models on the reduced dataset, reveals that Model D is indeed an improvement (compared to Model C with reduced dataset: Wald $\chi^2(12) = 80.86$, $\text{Prob} > \chi^2 = .000$). Unfortunately for all the trouble it has caused, this party preference variable proves not to be significant. H2a thus needs to be rejected. The coefficient is even negative (but insignificantly) which means that they rather tend to overcompensate their party preference than to let it influence their reporting behaviour in a way that favours their preferred political party/coalition.

H2d, on the contrary, can be confirmed. When a journalist is working with and about politics on a daily basis, this seems to have a positive effect on the chances that the news items produced by this journalist will be balanced. More knowledge of the topics, the process of politics, and not in the least better contacts with the politicians themselves make that for a political journalist, balancing is not only natural or a principle, but also a realistic goal. They know which politicians are specialized in which matters, and they know which of them can speak to the camera. On top of that, they have direct lines, so they can reach them –if necessary- on a very short notice. Journalists who only occasionally make news about politics or remotely about politics, do not have all this background, and will surely feel less eager and, in many cases, less capable in finding a convincing balancing source for their news item.

In appendix, the results of analyses with similar models can be found, based on all news items featuring at least one federal opposition news source (Table 18Table 18), or on all news items featuring at least one Flemish regional incumbent (Table 19) or at least one Flemish regional member of the opposition (Table 20). While the difference between federal and regional politicians is presented as illustrative²³ here, the comparison with the federal opposition gives some background with H4. From the bivariate analysis, it became clear that federal opposition politicians get balance far more often than federal government politicians. The determinants of balance seem to be largely the same, with the important exception of election news (topics). For opposition news sources, it does not matter whether the news is about elections or not, they are in each case often balanced. In election times, the (insignificant) tendency is even that opposition politicians get to speak alone in a news item slightly easier than in non-election times.

Considering RQ2, about the factors influencing balance by non-partisan news sources (Type II.), Table 9 does not really show any shocking results. It seems to be difficult to find factors determining the absolute absence of any balance whatsoever (neither Type I. , nor type II.). The only significant factor in Analysis A is specific party-related news, which is less often balanced than any other news. The same goes for the first kind of non-partisan balance that was distinguished, i.e. balancing by experts (Analysis B). From the earlier bivariate analysis, it already became clear that this kind of balance is relatively rare, and it now also seems to be difficult to predict when it is going occur, based on the variables in this dataset. In the election of 2007 there was a (almost significantly) higher chance for this, and the public channel VRT can –with the same questionable significance- be found to do this kind of balance a little less often than VTM.

Considering balance by the use of common people, the results are a little bit disappointing. Not much comes out of this analysis. As for the political balance, the party-specific and international issues, for which less balance is to be expected, work. On top of less use of balance by common people when the news is about these subjects, there is also the tendency that political journalists make less use of this option. They probably prefer partisan news sources, at least

²³ One finding is really remarkable, and that is that for the Flemish incumbents, it is not only election news that makes them more often balance in the news, it is also the election time itself. In times of regional elections, newsmakers seem to balance these incumbents in all news coverage. That is something they do not do for the federal incumbents.

because they know them well enough, and maybe because they feel at ease bringing politicians together in one news item without the risk of being criticized for doing bad journalism. Other factors like gender, public channel and routine do not work, even if literature about the use of common people in the framework of sensationalism suggests that these factors have an influence on the use of common people or popular exemplars.

Finally, plenty of factors are at play stimulating the use of civil society representatives as balancing news sources for the incumbents. In party-related, international and election news, this kind of balance does not happen that often, but in longer news items, and in items made by journalists with a party preference supporting an incumbent party, this happens more often. Balancing this way could thus well be a sneaky way to balance, while at the same time not devoting too much attention to parties from an opposing political party.

Parameter	Analysis A: No Balance at all	Analysis B: Balance by expert	Analysis C: Balance by popular exemplar	Analysis D: Balance by civil society
<i>Fixed effects</i>				
Duration of the item (in seconds)	-.01 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.01 (.00) ***	.00 (.00) *
International news (=1, all other news = 0)	-1.15 (.78)	-.53 (.50)	-.77 (.38) *	-.86 (.30) **
Party organization topic (=1, all other news = 0)	.88 (.29) **	-.20 (.49)	-.95 (.53) °	-1.89 (.52) ***
Soft news (=1, all other news = 0)	.42 (.61)	.65 (.46)	-.28 (.45)	-.45 (.37)
Election news (=1, all other news = 0)	.46 (.30)	-.68 (.53)	.06 (.35)	-1.64 (.38) ***
Election campaign period – 2003 (=1, other periods = 0)	.39 (.49)	-.49 (1.05)	.42 (.46)	.92 (.42) *
Election campaign period – 2007 (=1, other periods = 0)	.47 (.54)	1.08 (.60) °	.05 (.55)	.64 (.48)
Public Channel (VRT=1, VTM=0)	.16 (.27)	-.56 (.30) °	-.45 (.32)	-.08 (.17)
Journalist: gender	..16 (.40)	-.16 (.39)	-.01 (.37)	-.05 (.23)
Journalist: routine	-.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)	-.00 (.00)
Journalist: political journalist (=1)	-.01 (.07)	.03 (.07)	-.13 (.06) *	-.02 (.04)
Journalist: party preference (incumbent party=1)	-.27 (.46)	.24 (.57)	.61 (.44)	.63 (.32) *
Intercept	.47 (.95)	-3.10 (.88) ***	-1.81 (.77) *	-2.85 (.48) ***
<i>Random effects</i>				
Level 2 variance	.00 (.00)	.00 (.00)	.15 (.13)	.00 (.00)
Log likelihood	-212.0551	-220.9918	-343.7183	-510.6888
Ni / Nj	1168/18	1168/18	1168/18	1168/18

Table 9: Dependent: different kind of non-partisan balances, starting point: at least one Federal incumbent politician present as speaking news
source: ML statistical estimates. Table entries are coefficient estimates with s.e. in parentheses. °= $p \leq .10$ * = $p \leq .05$ ** = $p \leq .01$ *** = $p \leq .001$.

V.4. Conclusion

In this conclusion of the first empirical chapter on balance in Flemish television news, I will present an overview of the results of this analysis of balance in Flemish television news, contextualized by what newsmakers themselves had to say about these results, drawing on their own daily experiences. Statistical results from content analysis, like presented here, can be very enlightening, but usually they ask for some contextualization. It is interesting to see to what extent the people of the daily news making practice support the findings of this study, and whether they have complementary insights which could shed another light on the outcomes of the number-crunching effort in the content analysis. After all, it is always a good idea to confront data from different sources with each other when doing social scientific research (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993).

For this purpose, newsmakers from both the public and the main private broadcaster in Flanders were interviewed. They were confronted with the rough results, combined with some information about the theoretical backgrounds of this study. For the public broadcaster VRT, editorial chief of *Het Journaal* Wim Willems was interviewed (Brussels, 28/03/2011). For the private broadcaster VTM, the main and most senior political journalist of *Het Nieuws* Dirk Van Den Bogaert was interviewed (Vilvoorde, 06/05/2011)²⁴. While Wim Willems has a position from which it is more easy to overview the editorial part of the news making chain, Dirk Van Den Bogaert has the experience from the daily practice of a political journalist. Both, however, were asked not only to compare the results of this Ph.D. study with their own daily experiences, but also to evaluate them in a larger context. As such they were frequently probed to give their view on the applicability of the results to their colleagues, and compare situations and evolutions in news making concerning balance over time.

Generally, the impression that comes forward from this limited effort for triangulation is that few findings come as a surprise to the newsmakers themselves, even though some of these results were only known to them as part of their 'gut feeling', rather than as factual knowledge. Journalists usually keep a healthy dose of skepticism towards academics trying to describe and explain aspects of journalism. My impression was, nevertheless, that overall, even if/because the results were not shocking and never really contra-intuitive, they found the results stimulating, rather than another outcome of a superfluous news

²⁴ It was agreed with the interviewees to avoid direct quotes in the report of these interviews.

media content study. They reacted positively to the conclusion that some things they observed or practiced over the years have roots in political communication theory.

The conclusions of this first empirical chapter about Flemish television news, are quite straight-forward. This is especially the case for the item-specific characteristics. *Longer news items and news about elections contain more balance, while international news items contain less.* These are logical results. More time leads to more opportunity to give a voice to news sources in the news item, which obviously increases the chance of balance, because it might still be expected that, as seen in the theoretical chapter on balance, journalists –when they can- choose for a word-counterword approach. However, one should be careful with such a conclusion, since there is no way to know if the relationship is not at least partly the other way around: when the journalist adds another interview with a balancing news source to the news item, this will automatically become longer. If journalists were completely free in deciding how long their news items would be, this was the viable explanation, but the time available for a news item is generally considered to be depending on the decision of the editor(s), after an evaluation of all available news of the day.

Considering the findings from the pilot study (see chapter III), I introduced variables like specific-party news, international news and soft news, because these are –for various reasons- expected to be less likely to have balance in them. Party-specific news does not contain less political actors, but they are more likely to be from the same party. On this specific kind of subject, the journalist will be inclined to look for an internal balance, rather than for an external balance. As we saw in chapter III, this is a (content) balance that is not picked up in the balance as it is measured here. I expected this to have a negative impact on the chance for balance. This is not confirmed by the results. Just like soft news, there is no significant effect of this subject on the chance for balance. For soft news, I had expected that journalists would feel less need to balance, because this kind of news would be considered of less importance. Journalistic principles like balance, however, seem to be applicable to this news too. International news does show less balance. This is more specifically due to the fact that these items are often balanced in another way. When it is about the opinions of several countries next to each other, the view of the foreign affairs minister is more the voice of a country than the voice of a party. And thus, it is logical that the journalist does not seek balance with an opposition voice.

	<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>Conclusion</i>
H1a.	Longer items, more balance	Confirmed
H1b.	Party-specific news, less balance	Rejected
H1c.	International news, less balance	Confirmed
H1d.	Soft news, less balance	Rejected
H1e.	Election campaign period, more balance	Confirmed, with remark
H1f.	Election news, more balance	Confirmed
H2a.	Party preference journalist for incumbents, less balance	Rejected
H2b.	Female journalists, more balance	Rejected
H2c.	Journalist with more routine, more balance	Confirmed
H2d.	Political journalist, more balance	Confirmed
H3	Public broadcaster more balanced than private	Rejected
H4	Incumbents more balanced than opposition	Confirmed

Table 10: Overview of the results of the analyses on Flemish television news

Election news, rather than news in election time, is clearly more balanced than other subjects, which indicates that it is more the (characteristics of the) topic itself than a change in focus of the journalists in campaign periods. This is an interesting result that could inspire researchers to take this difference into account (like e.g. Van Aelst & De Swert (2009) did not do in their comparison between election news and non-election news). In the eyes of the newsmakers I interviewed, more balance in election times is a natural phenomenon. They explicitly link this to the specific time period. Politicians are more sensitive for coverage on themselves and their party, but most importantly, media enforce stricter rules on themselves. For VTM, one could say that balance only really becomes an issue when it is election time, but at VRT, balance almost becomes an obsession in campaign periods. Exposure per party is then closely measured, and even planned. If necessary, corrections are made. The newsmakers did acknowledge the specificity of news items about the campaign and elections, by referring to the (generally) planned nature of these news items. For them, this news is less reactive and more manageable by the newsmakers themselves. It opens up for more unbalanced news items, since journalists are backed up by the plan, that would involve a planned appearance of certain political actors in the overall election coverage in proportions that are decided upon on beforehand. Within-the-item balance (as it is defined in this Ph.D. study) is then not (so much) needed, and clearly of a lower priority than the representation of parties in the aggregate election coverage. In those cases, the tendency to apply balance as a

automatism or ritual is much lower. Government politicians lose their bonus as policy makers, then. Now new ideas from them are also challenges for the opposition, and not just the other way around. For that reason, clearly more balance than usual can be found for incumbent politicians in election campaign periods.

In addition to that, Van Den Bogaert made an interesting remark on the benchmark they would use to guide them in determining the amount of attention certain politicians and political parties are supposed to get. From research on the prominence of Bart De Wever in the news (newspaper) (Hooghe & De Swert, 2010) it already became clear that journalists tend to benchmark by the present political climate (as they feel it, or as comes forward in the polls), rather than by the existing division of power a.o. measurable by the amount of seats in parliament. Van Den Bogaert confirms that, at VTM, they clearly benchmark with the present political situation, even if this is highly deviant from the results from the last election (e.g. also the attention for Jean-Marie Dedecker as LDD-front person before his party was even in parliament).

Political journalists and journalists with more routine, appear to balance their news output more often than other journalists. This could be a confirmation of the cost-benefit mechanism as described by Niven (2001; 2005), which means that journalists take decisions and act individually in many steps of the journalistic process, including the choice of the interviewees and the choice for balance. Balancing requires contacting an extra relevant and appropriate political news source, which does not cost the same for every journalist. When an experienced political journalist just needs to open up his or her notebook, knowing exactly who to contact and how to reach them, balance is evidently just a small cost, especially if compared to the unroutinized generalist reporter who suffers a lot more insecurity in the choice of a balancing news source, and who needs to make a larger effort to get in touch with that particular politician.

Both newsmakers confirmed this finding wholeheartedly. In the eyes of Wim Willems, some experienced political journalist like Ivan De Vadder or Linda De Win (both public channel) are so socialized into the “politique politicienne” and have such a tremendous network of contacts in the political world, that they manage to bring balance into their news items more easily. Dirk Van Den Bogaert certainly fits into that list. These contacts are readily available, they know who to reach, how to reach them and how to convince them (if necessary) to cooperate, and all this at a faster tempo, which is important since time pressure is often a factor to

deal with in television news making. Nevertheless, both newsmakers agreed that the effect of experience must be more than just a large network of contacts. For Willems, it might be due to the fact that these experienced journalists, specialized in politics, are really more inclined to balance as a common practice, and not just because they have a better opportunity to do so. They have a special feeling about when balance is required, that general, unspecialized journalists do not have. The latter will be satisfied much easier with a quote of the minister in charge of the policy domain of the news topic, while political journalists look for controversy, and are also better in detecting it when it is out there. So it is not just the network, but also the experience.

In general, opposition politicians are far more often balanced (relatively seen) than incumbent (party) politicians. These results are in line with trends that are distinguished by the media bonus literature (e.g. Hopmann et al. 2011; Schönbach & Lauf, De Swert & Walgrave, 2001), giving the ruling government a significant media advantage due to the political power they have. For the newsmakers that were interviewed, this does not come as a surprise. Both of them referred to these incumbents as actors that matter. Van De Bogaert even spontaneously referred to a governmental 'bonus' in the news, thereby unintentionally connecting to what the media bonus literature has found about extra attention for incumbents. The bonus should thus not only be seen as extra attention, but also as extra credibility and importance, leading to less frequent balancing of these incumbents. Wim Willems specifically referred to an automatism to turn to the policy makers for a reaction in a news report on an opposition claim. The main cause for this would be that opposition politicians' claims in the media are often very reactive to policy (if not an immediate reaction, then at least a delayed reaction). In the cases they are not reactive, journalists often still see their claims as challenging policy, which then leads to soliciting governmental politicians for an immediate reaction in the news item. This is very much less the case the other way around. Incumbent politicians have it a lot easier to bring up a subject, idea or policy, without journalists running to the opposition for a reaction. Especially because other actors can react to these ideas too, and in that perspective Wim Willems pointed at experts as an interesting option. Dirk Van Den Bogaert admitted that for him it is natural to look for a balance with non-party political news sources. When a certain policy measure is up for discussion, he often prefers to turn to the people who know about this policy domain, and/or will be affected by the proposed policy. While Van Den Bogaert sees the news on the public channel as clearly more institutional (and thus focused on balancing by party political news sources), he claims to have a different practice at the private

channel VTM. For Van Den Bogaert, other elements are front stage, i.e. the arguments people make and how they manage to bring them to the camera. These elements are often more important than whether or not there is 'political' balance in the news item as defined in this Ph.D. study.

Another crucial point made by the newsmakers in this context, was about the role of the level of controversy over a certain topic of a news item. This phenomenon can be linked to the Indexing theory by Bennett and followers (Bennett, 1990), stating that only in situations of sufficient elite disagreement, news media turn to truly balanced news stories. The main difference, though, between indexing and the reality the newsmakers in Flanders describe, is that they do not feel that they deliberately nor unconsciously hesitate to cover stories brought by non-elite and non-government news sources. According to Wim Willems, incumbents know they are powerful sources. They can and do turn down requests for interviews and they –occasionally- complain directly to the journalists, the editor or even the board about the content of the news.

Luyendijck (2010), a journalist himself in the Netherlands, has written about the ambiguous relationship between (political) journalists and politicians at the Binnenhof in The Hague and in the surrounding bars and restaurants. He concluded that there is quite some pressure on these reporters to please politicians, especially those who seem to be in a power position. Scoops, inside information, off the record interviews etc. all depend largely on the personal relationship between journalists and politicians (see also Walgrave & Van Aelst). When figures show that journalists more easily turn to these powerful politicians for a response rather than the other way around, this does not come as a surprise. Wim Willems stated that he did not want to rule out that this has an influence on the content of the news coverage, but that it is surely not clear whether this is a good or a bad thing (see *infra* for more on political journalists). He also thought that journalists, who occasionally get a phone call by a dissatisfied powerful politician, were likely to get influenced by this, even if he sees it more as an unconscious process, possibly emanating some time later in the form of overcompensation of the alleged bias or inaccuracy. Again, Dirk Van Den Bogaert found this less applicable to VTM than to VRT. At VTM too they sometimes get phonecalls from dissatisfied politicians, but according to Van Den Bogaert this happens much less often than at the public broadcaster, and –especially speaking for himself- it does not have much of an impact on later journalistic products. Van Den Bogaert stressed that for him the ultimate criterion is whether a politician or any other news source manages to express him or herself. Knowing how to deal

with the media and to make an argument in not too much time and sentences, and appealing to the audience, are very important for Van Den Bogaert, and this is more important than the balance in the news item.

What might be one of the most surprising results, is that *the public channel does not balance its news significantly more often than the private channel*. Even if on paper the public broadcaster VRT has an obligation to be impartial and objective, and thus knows that they are more vulnerable for criticism about this in case the coverage does not follow the journalistic guidelines to the point, the private broadcaster VTM seems to follow the same line. VTM will never have to explain to politicians why they do or do not balance politicians, but they follow the same principles quite rigorously anyway. Most likely this has to do with two factors: the duopoly situation of the television news market in Flanders, which leads to two players that always keep an eye on each other, and the fact that it is commercially not interesting to deviate from a generally objective journalistic line (Sutton, 2001; Durante & Knight, 2009). That is certainly an important element to consider in the next chapter, when more broadcasters are brought into the analysis.

Concerning the reaction of the newsmakers to this finding, it is interesting that both Wim Willems and Dirk Van Den Bogaert are completely unsurprised by it. Even if one could build a solid theoretical case on why public channels would be more careful with balance and bias, and would need to follow more (formal or unwritten) rules about it, this does not show in the results at all. In the eyes of journalists, they are professionals, working by and large the same way. To state it with the words of Dirk Van Den Bogaert, the newsrooms of VRT and VTM are “perfectly interchangeable”. The personal characteristics of journalists do not differ much at all between VTM and VRT in Flanders for example. According to Wim Willems this is logical, because many journalists working for VTM have been working for VRT before, and the other way around.

One might conclude that formal rules (as they exist, especially in election times for certain public channels) are redundant, since they do not seem to make a difference. The newsmakers did, however, agree with the need to be cautious in generalizing the situation in Flanders and other duopoly news environments to countries where many more players are active on the market of television news. There, newsrooms might not be so interchangeable. Moreover, Dirk Van Den Bogaert brought up another point concerning this matter, i.e. the considerable difference in available resources between private and public channels. In Flanders, VRT can draw on a lot more specialists, journalists, crews and material, because

they also make radio and several profound information programs. This results in a David against Goliath situation in reporting about what happens in the Wetstraat. Van Den Bogaert takes, however, pride in the quality VTM still manages to bring in their political news, even if there is less of it than on the public channel (Uce, Schueremans & De Swert, 2005; Nieuwsmonitor). He named several reasons why this is possible: a higher alertness, a good cooperation within the limited team of political journalists and a lot of hard work.

Finally, another interesting result is that *journalistic party preference rather works contra-productive for balance*. From the numbers in these analyses, it seems that journalists rather overcompensate their own party preference by providing balance more often, than that they try to bring their preferred party into a beneficial position by letting them feature in a news items as the only, unbalanced (political) news source. The generally slightly more progressive ideological position of journalists found in the literature (Donsbach & Patterson, 1996; De Clercq & Paulussen, 2007, Weaver & Wilhoit, 1994), obviously does not lead (directly) to a partisan way of applying the principle of balance in the news. Both newsmakers that were interviewed, pointed at the awareness amongst journalists who are a little more progressive than the general population. In their eyes, it is an unavoidable phenomenon, closely related to the profession itself. You do not become a journalist without a sense of societal engagement and responsibility. Obviously this leads to tensions in the population and allegations of this ideological skew into the news coverage, as e.g. Patterson & Donsbach (1996) expected to happen. Wim Willems showed great satisfaction over the finding of this Ph.D. study that there is no such general bias in the news on the public channel, despite occasional challenges on public forums. He referred to a.o. the Nieuwsmonitor (De Smedt, Walgrave & Hooghe, 2010) to support his claim of being objective and fair. Contrary to Van Den Bogaert who stated that he would never find himself in the situation that his personal ideology would make any difference in selecting news sources, he did not want to rule out that occasionally a journalist could be influenced by his or her own ideology or opinion, or even party preference. At the same time, however, he showed great confidence that the control mechanisms in their news organization are sufficient to pick these instances up if they would be recurrent. So –maybe quite surprisingly- he does not rule out single occasions where unbalance (or balance) in a news item could be influenced by a journalist's personal ideology, but his impression is in line with the findings here: there is no significant general tendency that this happens. Moreover, he reports that the opposite could be happening more frequently, i.e. that journalists are going to anticipate such criticism and overcompensate it by

balancing where they intuitively might not have considered. This statement resembles what some (a.o. Tuchman, 1978) have stated in the academic discussion about balance, i.e. the ritual balancing, when journalists do not balance because they feel it is right, but because they feel that they have to or because the 'risk' (Niven, 2001) they take by deviating from the general/ritual journalistic norm to balance news items regardless of the content, is just too high in their eyes.

Some of the hypotheses that were confirmed or rejected in this chapter, will be analyzed again with an international dataset in the next chapter. This will make it possible to transcend the specific Flemish context.

Chapter VI. Explaining political balance in an international comparative perspective

In this second empirical chapter, I will broaden the scope of this balance study by looking at balance in an international comparative perspective. The main goal is to find out whether the factors at the broadcaster level and national level (both political and media system related factors) that were distinguished in Chapter V are at play in explaining the presence of balance in television news. While the Flemish data from chapter V were richer on the level of the journalist (with especially the ideological preference of the journalist as a variable), the international analysis will allow for estimating the strength of higher level variables as media competition, commercialism, work pressure, number of political parties, size of the incumbent support in parliament etc. Obviously it would also have been interesting to know the ideological background of the journalists in this sample, as well as information on their role conceptions etc. This information, however, is not available, nor was it realistic to engage in an effort to get access to this kind of data (which would have required an international survey of journalists). Nevertheless, where possible, an effort will be made to keep the variables from chapter V also in this analysis.

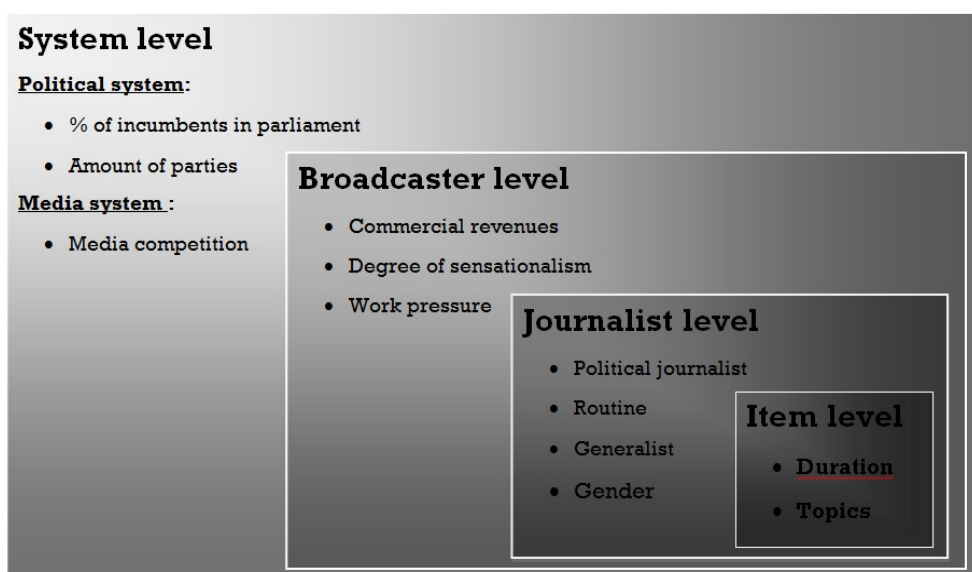
As in the previous analysis, I will first give an overview of the presence of balance in television news items, in this case in television news of 24 broadcasters in eleven countries. The operationalization of balance is basically the same as in Chapter V (but see *infra* for more information on small differences in operationalization compared to the situation where only the Belgian political system needed to be taken into account).

VI.1. Hypotheses

For an analysis like this, it is a good idea to start with an estimation of the variance between broadcasters. Does the presence of balance in television news differ sufficiently between broadcasters to engage in the planned explanatory analysis later? If the presence of balance is a flat line across the sample, one could conclude that balance is a general and universal routine which is not influenced by other factors at any level. In societal debate, it is not uncommon to find statements about journalistic principles in this way, as universal standards all journalist agree and act upon. It only becomes interesting for further analysis, if the conclusion would tend towards the opposite: variation between countries and broadcasters.

RQ1. Does the presence of balance in television news items vary by broadcaster and/or by country?

As discussed in chapter IV, the (bias) literature provides clues for several factors that could be valuable in the search for explanations for the presence of balance. These factors are situated at different levels (cf. Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; 1996). In the following paragraphs, these factors are drawn from the previous theoretical discussion and attributed to the right level. In this chapter, there are more levels than in the analysis on the Flemish data, because the internationally comparative design creates an extra level. Factors are situated at the item-level, journalist level, broadcaster level or the country level (see Graph 2).



Graph 2: Schematic overview of the factors studied here, situated at the level they are to be considered at.

Item-level factors

At the item level, it proved to be really interesting to study the influence of elections. That became clear from the analysis on the longitudinal Flemish database, but unfortunately, this cannot be tested using this international comparative sample, since one of the criteria in the sampling process was the avoidance of election campaign periods. That does not mean that individual item characteristics should be neglected completely in this international comparative analysis. Some variables can be expected to hinder a correct estimation of the other variables. Analogue to the analysis in the previous chapter, these variables are the duration of the news item and some topics, on which the reporting is not very likely to follow the same rules of balancing as on others (i.e. international news, soft news and party-specific political coverage). These control variables are both necessary and informative. First of all, because it became clear from the analysis in the previous chapter that these variables are significant in the Flemish context. That makes it very likely that they are important in this comparative analysis too. Moreover, since there is news from many more different broadcasters in the sample than in the Flemish analysis, the chance is also bigger that specific differences in for example duration could be blurring the effects of the other factors. Adding these controls to the analyses will thus be necessary to gauge the real importance of the other factors in the model, and it will lead to a more precise insight in how influential these factors actually are.

H1a. The longer a news item lasts, the more likely it is that the item is balanced²⁵

H1b. When a news item has specific political party coverage as the only topic, there is less chance this item will be balanced

H1c. When a news item is about international news, there is less chance this item will be balanced

H1d. When a news item is about a soft news topic, there is less chance this item will be balanced.

²⁵ When balance is mentioned, in all these hypotheses, political balance is meant as the dependent variable. Only when specific reference is made to another kind of balance (e.g. by experts), this is different.

Journalist-specific hypotheses

For analogue reasons as in chapter V, I hypothesize that gender, being a political journalist and experience play a role in the use of balance in television news. I add another variable that could be an indication of the same phenomenon, although being it the other way around: reporters who are extremely unspecialized, meaning that they are asked to cover a wide variety of topics, will suffer the most from the lack of fixed contacts, networks and routine lines of information. The expectation is therefore that they will show a general pattern of source superficiality, resulting in a reduced frequency of balance in the news items they make.

H2a. Items made by female journalists will more likely be balanced than items made by male journalists

H2b. Items made by experienced, routinized journalists, will be more likely to be balanced

H2c. Items made by political journalists will be more likely to be balanced

H2d. Items made by Journalists with a very diverse set of topics assigned to them ('generalists') will be less likely to be balanced.

Broadcaster-specific hypotheses

In the analysis on Flanders, a dichotomous variable was build in to distinguish between the public and the private channel (public channel or not). Rather than checking the factor public/private broadcaster, this was illustrative for the difference between VTM and VRT. The results in the previous chapter indicated that the expected difference, i.e. that the public channel balances more often, is not to be found. This may have to do with the specific case of Flanders , e.g. the tradition of a duopoly on general television news broadcasting, which leads to similarities, rather than differences. Here, with many more public and private broadcasters in the sample, it is possible to check a real hypothesis about this. Reviewing the literature, there are some different approaches, leading to different expectations. While some (mostly economical) authors proclaim commercialization as a positive factor in avoiding bias and thus promoting balance, others stress the larger responsibility public broadcasting has, to be objective. It seems like both have plenty of incentives to produce balanced news, but for different reasons. Therefore a research question seems most appropriate here. Rather than to distinguish crudely between public service broadcasters and private broadcasters, I choose to include the degree of commercial revenues for

each broadcaster. While this is (close to) 100 percent for purely private broadcasters, this variable makes it possible to distinguish between public broadcasters that are purely funded by public means, and those that have mixed financing, since the latter might be more sensitive for commercial arguments than the former.

RQ2. Does the percentage of commercial revenues have an influence on the use of balance? Do private broadcasters use balance less often than public service broadcasters?

Other factors at the broadcaster level, are linked to the work pressure for the journalists and the mean degree of sensationalism of the television news program. From an economic point of view, more work pressure (in this analysis, it means that a single journalist needs to produce more news items, and thus has less time to prepare them) would lead to less balance, because from the theoretical chapter, it became clear (e.g. Niven , 2001) that balance has benefits, but that it also comes with some costs. Lack of time can lead to a journalistic decision to drop balance, not because the reporter does not want to, but because of this practical hindrance. Sensationalism has to do with attracting attention from the viewers, which involves many techniques, of which some could also have a negative influence on the journalist's chances/preference to seek political balance in the news item. Interviews with politicians are not the most sexy part of a newscast, and thus tend to be avoided, and might be replaced by e.g. testimonies of people on the street (popular exemplars) (Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten & Beentjes, 2005; Lefevere, De Swert & Walgrave, 2011). I hypothesize that a higher general mean sensationalism index (De Swert, Hardy & Lefevere, s.d.; De Swert, 2009; Wang et al., 2009) indicating the level of sensationalism as proposed by Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten en Beentjes (2005), will lead to less political balance.

H3a. The higher the work pressure with a certain broadcaster, the less chance the news items of this broadcaster will be balanced.

H3b. The more sensational television news broadcasts are, the less chance the news items of this broadcaster will be balanced.

Country-specific hypotheses

Media Competition (in the context of this Ph.D., competition on the television news market) is not a news desk's best friend. Usually, following simple economic laws, competition involves the need for cost reduction, but also the possibility of renewal and creativity. At least, priorities shift, which puts pressure on journalistic ethics and principles in the daily news practice. A tendency towards originality cannot be expected to lead to the preservation and neat practice of great universal journalistic principles, since in a highly competitive environment, it helps to be different, rather than to be identical. An even more important factor is the increased pressure on the news desk to save costs. Quality news making, including the general practice of balancing, needs an investment, which is less likely to happen under highly competitive circumstances (Kleemans et al. 2008). Since political news coverage is considered important for democracy, but usually does not attract many (extra) viewers, political balance will most likely become less of a priority.

I also add two political system variables to the model. The first one is *the number of parties (represented in parliament)*. The more parties there are to choose from to get a reaction, the easier for journalists to get such a reaction. Thus, this is mainly a practical argument. In addition to that, more parties means more sides to look at for each individual party, which will make them more aware of (existing or presumed) 'unfair' media treatment. This increased risk for criticism leads to an increased value of balance as a benefit for the journalist. In such a multi-party-environment it becomes more important to be able to lean on the general principles of journalism as a (potential) defence.

The other political variable is a measurement of political power in parliament. The larger *the support for the government in parliament*, the more powerful this government is. In the logic of media being largely influenced by political power in their choices of actors to bring in the news (e.g. Bennett, 1990), one could imagine that the more back-up a government has in parliament, the less chance there is that reporters are always going to look for balancing sources in the (smaller) group of opposition politicians.

H4a. The more media competition there is in a country, the less likely it is that the items in the news broadcasts in that country, will be balanced.

H4b. The larger the support for the incumbents in the main parliament of a country, the less likely it is that the items in the news broadcasts in that country, will be balanced

H4c. The more political parties there are in a country, the more chance that the news items in this country will be balanced.

Finally, there is also a hypothesis that has to do with journalistic routines. A similar hypothesis was formulated in the analysis of the Flemish data in the previous chapter, and this was clearly confirmed. Several branches of research come to the same conclusion: incumbents (and sometimes also incumbent party politicians) have an advantage in news values, resulting in a higher media exposure. Government sources are more easily available, more credible and safer for journalists to use.

H5. Opposition politicians will be balanced more often than incumbent politicians

In addition to these question, and analogue to the analysis in the previous chapter, it is interesting to get to know more about the determinants of non-partisan balance. The broadcaster-specific characteristics are very promising in that perspective. A stronger tendency towards sensationalism might lead to other preferences regarding balance, and more specifically to balancing with less dull partisan actors, and more vivid actors like popular exemplars (Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten & Beentjes, 2005; Hendriks Vettehen, 2008; Kleemans et al., 2008). They might be less credible as news sources, but they are also easier accessible and more mouldable by the journalist, who has plenty of options to choose from if he/she goes out on the street and record reactions. These popular exemplars even seem to resort more effect on the viewers' opinion than regular politicians. Several factors could be of influence here, including the dependence on commercial revenues, soft news, lack of specialism of the journalist, etc. Furthermore, it is equally interesting to see which factors determine balance by experts and civil society spokespeople, because – even if this is not a main question for this Ph.D. study- the use of these kinds of balance is bound to influence the chances for political balance negatively.

RQ3. How do the aforementioned factors influence non-partisan balance?

VI.2. Data and methods

For this comparative analysis, I will rely on an international dataset based on four weeks of television news coverage in eleven Western countries. Since data collection did not take place within a network of international scholars, all broadcasts in the sample needed to be taped or ordered from Belgium. The budget for this data collection was also limited, since all costs needed to be fitted in the ENA project²⁶. Availability of newscasts online and of native-speaking coders also played a role. The sample is therefore – to some extent- a convenience sample (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2005). However, the initial selection of countries was based on theoretical grounds. Following the classification of media systems by Hallin & Mancini (2004), I tried to include countries from all three models of media and politics they distinguish. The Netherlands, Germany and Norway as democratic-corporatist countries, the U.K., Ireland, the U.S. and Canada as representatives for the liberal model and France, Italy and Turkey for the polarized-pluralist model. Finally, Belgium was split up in Flanders (as a democratic corporatist country) and Wallonia (probably fitting best with the polarized-pluralist system), which is an extension of the division Hallin & Mancini made in 2004 (Uce & De Swert, 2007).

The sample of newscasts was based on a constructed period of four weeks taken between December 2006 and April 2007 and thus containing 28 news casts for each television news broadcaster. From the first day of the sample (December 18th 2006) every fourth day was selected for the sample, ending April 5th 2007. As such, every day of the week is represented four times in the 28 day-sample, with a maximal spread over this four month period of time. Even if this was practically more time-consuming, this way of sampling is well worth the effort. Specific research on sampling for content analysis has shown the superiority of such a sample over other sampling methods (Riffe, Aust & Lacy, 1993; Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2005).

The sampling period was selected in such a way that the media content of as few

²⁶ I need to thank several people and instances to make this sample possible: the Flemish government (department of media) the financing of most of the data collection (and coding), Stefaan Walgrave & Marc Hooghe for agreeing with and giving me 'carte blanche' for the collection and coding of this international sample, NTE for taping news for a ridiculously low price, the Norwegian national library for sending me missing Norwegian broadcasts at no cost, Mediatenor for sending (some) German and U.K. broadcasts without profit margin and Antonio Greco for trying to tape Italian newscasts.

countries as possible would be affected by major (planned) events or upcoming elections. This sample is deliberately chosen to be a sample of non-election news, thereby distinguishing itself from the (few) international comparative projects that have set up a similar dataset previously²⁷. As it turns out that the news content of television news in election times differs significantly from regular news periods (Van Aelst & De Swert, 2009), these two periods should not be merged in a comparative analysis between countries. We know from the analysis in the previous chapter on the Flemish data that election news coverage will tend to be more balanced than other news. The main interest of the analysis of this chapter on the international dataset is to find and explain differences in regular news periods. For most of the countries in the sample, elections were far away from the sample period. Only in France a small part of the run towards the presidential elections was covered by this period of time, and in The Netherlands, government formation was still going on in the very beginning of the sample. Fortunately, no major news events (cf. Tsunami) dominated the international news agenda for a longer period of time during that period. Still, the exact same days were coded in all countries so as to avoid that any single event would bias the data too much and make them non-comparable between countries.

The basic set-up was to tape, code and analyze the main ‘flagship’ newscasts in prime time of the largest private channel (measured by viewer ratings in 2007) and the public service broadcaster for each country²⁸.

²⁷ A noteworthy exception is the Foreign News project, set up by Akiba Cohen, comparing television news from 14 countries around the world. However, and despite my involvement in the making of the codebook for this project, this project offers only a limited coding of actors in the news.

²⁸ For most countries, this worked out fine. In a few cases, however, practical constraints led to changes to this plan. For Italy, the Mediaset Canale 5 television news was targeted as the commercial channel. At the time, unfortunately, this broadcast was not available in streaming video on the internet, neither did I get any response from the news broadcaster itself to sell me the broadcasts. Technical problems led to the failure of most recordings of the channel using a private satellite receiver. Regrettably, Canale 5 needed to be skipped from the sample for these reasons. For Ireland, similar problems occurred, only worse: the private channel could only be taped by somebody in Ireland. At the time nobody could be found willing to do this, so also this broadcaster was removed from the sample. For Germany, two public channels exist next to each other, ARD and ZDF. As no clear reason could be found for either one to be preferred over the other, I chose to include both of them. This goes as well for the U.S.: PBS (public broadcaster) did not provide everyday newscasts in the format of the other channels in this sample, and was on top of that difficult to obtain. On the other hand, three traditional private ‘networks’ have television news in the U.S. (ABC, NBC and CBS), and usually scholars chose to code all three of them, rather than to select one or two of them.

Different methods were applied to get access to the video material of the different broadcasts.

- 1) Some of the broadcasts were bought from a professional media monitoring company. Mediatenor provided the television news broadcasts from BBC, ITV, ZDF, ARD and RTL at the cost of only the DVD's and sending.
- 2) The Flemish data (VRT, VTM) come from the ENA.
- 3) Several broadcasters provided short-term access to their television news on their website in streaming video. These videos were downloaded and stored for coding. This was done for ABC, NBC, CBS, France 2, TF1, NOS, RAI, RTE, RTL-tvi, RTBF, CTV and CBC.
- 4) Some broadcasts needed to be taped from satellite, because they were not available on cable in Flanders, nor on the internet. This was the case for RTL4, Star and TRT. They were – unlike the Canale5 news- taped with success at three different places.
- 5) Finally, the Norwegian newscasts NRK and TV2 were provided by the broadcasters themselves (at no cost) and by the Norwegian National Library.

In total more than 700 broadcasts and 9,514 news items were analyzed and coded. Table 1 contains a description of the evidence.

TV Station	Country	Channel type	# news items
VRT	Belgium-Flanders	Public	595
VTM	Belgium-Flanders	Private	594
RTL-tvi	Belgium-French	Private	559
RTBF	Belgium-French	Public	512
CTV	Canada	Public	347
CBC	Canada	Private	208
Fr2	France	Public	574
TF1	France	Private	712
ARD	Germany	Public	262
ZDF	Germany	Public	293
RTL	Germany	Private	336
RTE	Ireland	Public	484
RAI	Italy	Public	487
NOS	Netherlands	Public	334
RTL4	Netherlands	Private	286
NRK	Norway	Public	481
TV2	Norway	Private	400
TRT	Turkey	Public	598
Star	Turkey	Private	496
BBC	U.K.	Public	234
ITV	U.K.	Private	155
ABC	U.S.	Private	232
NBC	U.S.	Private	232
CBS	U.S.	Private	103
Total			9,514

Table 11: Countries and broadcasters in the sample (+ N-values)

Although the number of news broadcasts is the same for all TV stations, the total number of news items differs. This is due to two factors: the length of the main newscasts differs, and the length of the news items varies across channels. In France, the commercial broadcaster *TF1* has long newscasts with on average short items leading to a lot of items (N=712) while the other extreme, *ITV* in the U.K., has short newscasts leading to a smaller sample of news items (N=155). This is an illustration of how different news broadcasts can be. To overcome at least the problem of difference in duration of news items, duration will be controlled for (in the multivariate analysis). Furthermore, the analysis will most of the time draw on percentages and not on absolute figures.

Coding

Coding was done by trained and experienced coders, selected from the large pool of coders used for the longitudinal news coding project ENA. Initially, they were selected on the basis of two criteria: excellence and experience in coding for ENA and sufficient knowledge of the language of one of the countries in the sample²⁹. Perfect understanding of Dutch (for the coding training) and near-perfect knowledge of the foreign language was required. They were trained in Dutch by myself. They were only allowed to start when their personal reliability scores (compared to the master coder) were sufficient (i.e. Cohen's kappa higher than .80). As long as they did not reach this score, they remained in the training phase, and unfortunately some of them never made it to the group of coders for the real project due to insufficient reliability.

Intercoder-reliability scores of tests during the real coding were generally very satisfying with Cohen's kappa .90 and higher for both the item-level coding (including name of the journalist, itemization, item length, item order) and actor coding (name of the actor, whether they were speaking, gender etc.)³⁰. Looking at the overall simplicity of the variables coded in this study and the total lack of room for interpretation, these reliability scores have to be this high. The main mistakes are omissions, rather due to forgetfulness or inattention than due to a misfit in interpretation. For the Italian and Turkish coders, more relaxed reliability scores between .80 and .90 were also accepted, because of the scarcity of these coders, and the corresponding problems to replace them if dismissed. It turned out to be especially difficult to keep the Italian coders on board.

²⁹ I personally coded some newscasts of all countries in the sample (except the Italian and the Turkish) before the training to rule out surprising situations and coding difficulties in the coding process. This led to several adaptations of the codebook. The Norwegian newscasts were all coded by myself, since no Norwegian speaking coders were available. Intra-coder reliability was checked for myself only, and this was also very satisfactory.

³⁰ During training and in pilot tests, reliability was tested extensively and rigorously between coders (on English and Dutch spoken newscasts) as well as between the coders and the trainer, before coders were allowed to start coding. During the actual coding, reliability was only checked between coders and the trainer (me), based on one or two double codings (full newscasts). This is not the perfect procedure, but because of language comparability problems and since no specific funds were available for this project, it was not possible to check a large amount of coders on a larger amount of codings. Reliability for the Turkish newscasts was controlled by M²P-researcher Volkan Uce, a native Dutch and Turkish speaker who was one of the coders and also the ENA-coordinator at the time of the data-collection.

For some variables, interpretation was avoided by limiting the role of the coders. This is the case for two key variables: the issue codes (1) and the function of politicians (2). For the topic coding (1), coders were not asked –as they were in the ENA-coding- to code topics following a 266-topic long codebook, but instead only to summarize the essence of the news item in one or two sentences and keywords. The attribution of topic codes was done by myself according to ENA-coder standards, for all news items, based on the information provided by the coders. The advantage of this approach is the limitation of training time (which is significant for a long issue codebook like that), and the avoidance of many dismissals of coders during training due to the lacking capacity to live up to the standards. Now, only coders with slacking concentration needed to be excluded from participation in the actual coding.

In a similar effort as in ENA, all people speaking on screen in the news item were coded, regardless of the availability of all information needed for coding. Sometimes a news source is speaking in the news item, but no information is given about the name of this person. This can happen because the name does not matter (e.g. vox pop), because the person is considered to be known by everyone, or because of lack of time. The same goes even more for the function of the actors. The coders were asked to provide as much information about this function as they could get out of the news item. This includes the basic coding of name of the actor, gender, speaking time and relevant information about any function or mandate an actor has. Coders were asked to be extensive in providing information, especially about politicians. However, not in every news item all necessary information (mandate, party affiliation etc.) was given. This information was added by me in a later stage, based both on clues from the coding, as (mainly) on information from official sources like parliamentary records and formal party documents.

Coders watched the recorded news broadcasts, and analyzed them item per item. Itemization was done by the coders themselves, following strict and simple rules. These are the same as Schulz & Zeh (2005: 393) used: "...the news item is defined and delineated by a reference to a specific news event or topic, often also by a particular presentation format." Large blocks of several news elements (videos, stand-ups, interviews in the studio) about the same subject (e.g. a huge storm) were thus separated in different news items. Also between news items about different topics without news anchor intervention (e.g. news carrousels), coders were asked to start a new record. This way of itemization is identical to the way this is done by ENA for the Flemish data used in the previous chapter.

Dependent variable

The dependent variables used in this study are very similar to those in Chapter VI, but there is an important difference, which matters in particular for the Belgian data, and to a lesser degree also for Canada (with Quebec) and a.o. Germany (where regions are powerful and regional leaders hold minister-titles too). In the international sample, only federal level politicians are included. Members of regional parties or parliaments were ignored (unlike in the analysis in the previous chapter), although they were included when they were also part of the national parliament or a leader of a party that is also represented in the national parliament. While this is not a problem at all for some countries, this considerably reduces the dataset for Belgium in particular, since a substantial share of politics is disputed on a regional level, and real national parties do not even exist. The operationalization of balance with other actors than politicians is exactly the same as in Chapter VI.

Independent variables

One of the key variables is the issue coding. Drawing upon a detailed issue-codebook containing 266 different issue codes, up to three issue codes could be attributed to a single news item. If one of these three codes referred to for example elections, the item is considered to be about elections in the analysis. Many news items are really about one topic, and then of course there is only one code; the average number of issue codes per item is 1.47. The following variables in this study are based on recoding of these issue codes.

<i>Variable name</i>	<i>Operationalization</i>	<i>Range in data</i>	<i>Mean in dataset</i>
Specific party-related news	=1 when the topic of the news item is internal political organization of political parties, interest groups or local governments (e.g. a party meeting) and no other topics are coded for the same item.	0 or 1	.02
International news	=1 when one of the topics in the news item is international relations, international security, war and peace or European Union.	0 or 1	.21
Soft news	=1 when one of the topics in the news item is culture, celebrity news, royalty news or sports (excluding sports policy).	0 or 1	.09

Also other independent variables that are directly based on the coding, are used. This includes the duration of the news item, acting as a control variable, and journalist-specific characteristics.

<i>Variable name</i>	<i>Operationalization</i>	<i>Range in data</i>	<i>Mean in dataset</i>
Duration of the news item	= the total length of a news item in seconds	7-715 sec	113.6 sec.
Journalist - Gender	=gender of the main (=first mentioned) journalist responsible for the making of the news item. 1=female, 0=male.	0-1	.31
Journalist – Political Journalist	=percentage of all news items in the dataset by that journalist that is about (pure) politics (i.e. issues codes 100-199 of the codebook)	0-100	24.3
Journalist -Routine	=The number of news items for that particular journalist in the current database (based on 28 broadcasts)	1-15	4.6
Journalist -Generalist	=1 if the journalist has made more than two news items in the current database and no (main) subject is recurrent in more than 1/3 of the journalist's new items.	0-1	.03

Finally, some information external to the coding was added to the data-file for this analysis:

<i>Variable name</i>	<i>Operationalization</i>	<i>Range in data</i>	<i>Mean dataset</i>
Media Competition (Country level)	=1 when only two nation-wide news broadcasters are active on the news media market with a general newscast, =2 when there are three, =3 when there are four, =4 when there are more than four broadcasters competing on the battle-ground of television news. See also: Walgrave, De Swert & Sadicaris (2011), De Swert, Hardy & Lefevere (s.d.), Wang et al. (2009); De Swert (2008).	1- 4	2.4
Incumbent support in parliament (Country level)	=the percentage of seats occupied by the governing party/coalition in parliament (first chamber).	40.3 - 73.0	60.4
Party fragmentation (Country level)	= The effective number of parties (Eff N) by Laakso and Taagepera (1979). Indices extracted from Gallagher & Mitchell (2008), based on the 2006-2007 figures (where possible).	1.99- 7.91 (here)	4.1
Dependence on commercial revenues (Broadcaster level)	= variable based on the percentages of the budget of the broadcaster coming from commercial revenues. For commercial stations this variable is standard set on 5. For public broadcasters, this number may vary from country to country, depending on the level of commercialization of public television (e.g. advertising). 1 means no other income than state subsidies. Source of the information used: Television Key Facts 2007.	1 - 5	3.1
Work pressure (Broadcaster level)	=The mean amount of news items per journalist in the current database per broadcaster	1.2 - 7.9	2.7
Sensationalism broadcaster (Broadcaster level)	=Composite Sensationalism Index of De Swert, Hardy & Lefevere (s.d.), which is a value expressing the general level of sensationalism of each broadcaster, based on variables of content, formal features and vividness (Vettehen, Nuijten & Beentjes, 2005)	0-100 (min. here: 22.6, max. 55.3)	34.8

VI.3. Analysis. Balance in the news: a comparison between 24 broadcasters

The first research question asked whether there is variation in the data (RQ1). The idea is to exclude the possibility that balance is a universal phenomenon, not or barely affected by country, broadcaster or journalistic boundaries. Table 12 reveals that reality is indeed not like that. There seem to be large differences in the presence of balance in television news items between broadcasters. A closer look at the data shows that these percentages of balance largely cluster per country. Within countries, differences between broadcasters are relatively limited. Notable exception is Turkey, where the public channel does not seem to practice balance at all, 84 percent of all 61 TRT news items in this sample remained completely unbalanced. Also important to note is the level of balance found for Flanders in this sample. From the ENA-analysis in the previous chapter, more exact data are available for VRT and VTM, measured over a longer period of time, which makes it possible to assess the validity of the sample. For VRT the figures are about the same (around 20 percent balance with opposition news sources), but for VTM the five percent of the international sample is a lot lower than the number the ENA dataset revealed. This could indicate that a 28 days sample might not be sufficient to estimate the use of balance for broadcasters with limited political coverage (like it is often the case for commercial news broadcasters). At least some caution needs to be taken interpreting these figures. It seems like a large and/or longitudinal dataset like ENA is necessary to be able to provide a sufficiently precise and reliable estimation of the use of balance in television news.

The clustering per country in Table 12 (about balance of items containing at least one incumbent politicians speaking) and later also in Table 13 (about balance of items containing at least one opposition politician speaking) points in the direction of country-specific, and thus extra-media influences. At the same time, the absence of large specific differences *within* countries indicates that the broadcaster-specific factors might only be of second order. Alternatively, it could also mean that some of these broadcaster-specific factors are very similar within countries. Sometimes, this can be as simple as the length of the newscast people are used to in a certain country. For example, in Germany the main newscasts are traditionally relatively short, logically leading to less room for balance within news items (not only the program, but also the news items themselves are relatively short). This shows in Table 12: German news items are more often unbalanced for all three broadcasters, and all three of them, ARD, ZDF and RTL, do not often have

political balance in their news items. On the other hand, the U.S. news items have more balance, probably partly due to the fact that they are significantly longer. However, item length is surely not the only factor. Also e.g. the Norwegian news items seem only in exceptional cases to be politically balanced, and these newscasts and news items are really not of the shortest in the sample, with an average item duration comparable to Flanders.

(N=741)	<i>With opposition (politicians)</i>	<i>With Society actors</i>	<i>Civil Experts</i>	<i>With common people</i>	Unbalanced
ABC (U.S.A.)	58	0	25	17	17
CBS (U.S.A.)	38	6	19	6	31
NBC (U.S.A.)	32	8	20	4	44
ARD (Germany)	20	22	4	6	57
RTL (Germany)	5	16	11	16	58
ZDF (Germany)	9	32	9	14	48
BBC (U.K.)	23	46	0	31	38
ITV (U.K.)	42	33	0	42	25
CBC (Canada)	44	0	11	11	44
CTV (Canada)	45	31	28	34	17
France2 (France)	27	27	21	21	40
TF1 (France)	36	19	5	8	51
NOS (The Netherlands)	52	22	11	19	26
RTL4 (The Netherlands)	25	33	8	21	54
NRK (Norway)	10	32	14	24	40
TV2 (Norway)	10	18	10	18	46
RTBF (Wallonia)	14	14	18	4	61
RTL-tvi (Wallonia)	15	18	18	18	53
VRT (Flanders)	16	20	4	4	64
VTM (Flanders)	5	10	20	15	55
Star (Turkey)	26	18	10	23	51
TRT (Turkey)	5	7	5	5	84
RAI (Italy)	43	6	2	0	55
RTE (Ireland)	36	14	11	4	43
Total	23	19	12	14	49

Table 12: Types of balance by broadcaster (in %). Starting point: all news items with at least one incumbent news source speaking

The figures in the table are of course aggregate means, and thus they do not reveal much about possible differences due to factors at the individual level. The only thing that can be said, is that as well as the broadcaster level factors, these individual journalist factors seem to be degraded to second order factors, since the extra-media clustering is so outspoken. One thing surely comes forward from these data, and that is that cross-national media routines do not play a dominant

or decisive role in the news making process concerning the use of political news sources in television news. If they were, these results should have been much more similar for all these broadcasters.

Some findings, however, are quite universal. Hypothesis H5 expected balancing of incumbent politicians (as reported in Table 12) to occur less frequent than this would be the case for politicians of the opposition. Table 13 gives an overview of the results of an analysis on all the news items featuring at least one opposition politician (N=214). While the observed balance for incumbent news sources is very low (23 percent), the frequency of balance for opposition news sources is dramatically higher. No less than 78 percent of these items were balanced by an incumbent politician, and including also the other, non-partisan balances, only 18 percent of the time, opposition politicians can speak while not being countered by any other news source (that was 51 percent for the incumbents). So there is something universal in the analysis anyway. This difference stands out clearly, notwithstanding the very low N-value of the analysis for some broadcasters. H5 is clearly confirmed: opposition politicians get far more often balanced in television news items – across the Western world- than incumbents do.

N=214	<i>With incumbent (politicians)</i>	<i>With Civil Society actors</i>	<i>With Experts</i>	<i>With common people</i>	Un- balanced
ABC (U.S.A.)	7/10	0/9	2/10	0/10	2/9
CBS (U.S.A.)	6/9	0/9	0/9	0/9	3/9
NBC (U.S.A.)	8/8	1/8	1/8	0/8	0/8
ARD (Germany)	10/10	3/10	0/8	0/8	0/10
RTL (Germany)	1/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	0/1
ZDF (Germany)	4/4	1/4	0/4	0/4	0/4
BBC (U.K.)	3/5	1/5	0/5	1/5	2/8
ITV (U.K.)	4/4	0/4	1/4	2/4	0/4
CBC (Canada)	4/5	0/5	1/5	0/5	0/5
CTV (Canada)	13/14	3/14	4/14	3/14	0/14
France2 (France)	13/18	4/18	4/18	2/18	3/18
TF1 (France)	12/13	2/13	2/13	1/13	1/13
NOS (Holland)	14/17	2/17	2/17	3/17	3/17
RTL4 (Holland)	6/8	3/8	2/8	4/8	0/8
NRK (Norway)	5/7	0/7	0/7	0/7	2/7
TV2 (Norway)	4/4	0/4	0/4	0/4	0/4
RTBF (Wallonia)	4/4	2/4	1/4	0/4	0/4
RTL-tvi (Wallonia)	5/5	1/5	3/5	1/5	5/5
VRT (Flanders)	4/5	1/5	0/5	0/5	1/1
VTM (Flanders)	1/1	0/1	0/1	0/1	1/1
Star (Turkey)	5/10	0/10	0/10	2/10	4/10
TRT (Turkey)	3/11	0/11	1/11	0/11	1/11
RAI (Italy)	21/26	3/26	1/26	0/26	4/26
RTE (Ireland)	10/15	0/15	0/15	0/15	5/15
Total	78/100 (N=214)	13/100 (N=214)	12/100 (N=214)	9/100 (N=214)	18/100 (N=214)

Table 13: Types of balance by broadcaster (in absolute numbers). Starting point: all news items with at least one opposition news source speaking

The next step will be to try to determine which factors are influencing the presence of balance. As we saw earlier, these factors are situated at different levels (cfr. Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; 1996). The hypotheses listed are situated at the item-level, journalist level, broadcaster level and country level. For similar reasons as in chapter V, a multi-level design is the appropriate way to deal with this in such a situation. In this chapter, it is even more necessary to tackle this dataset with a multi-level analysis, since an extra level is added due to the international comparative character of the dataset.

In Table 14, the results of a multilevel logistic regression analysis are reported with as dependent variable *whether or not a news item containing at least one incumbent (party) politician speaking also contains a quote of a non-incumbent politician as a balance (=1)*. In total, 741 news items in the international news dataset contained at least one incumbent as a speaking news source. The design includes two extra levels to check for the differences between journalists (Level 2; N=397) and between countries (Level 3; N=12). At all these levels, several factors are presumed to have an influence (see supra). Ideally, adding even another level would make the analysis more correct, i.e. the broadcaster level (N=24), since also on that level some factors are hypothesized to be at play in determining the presence of balance. However, due to the limited variation of broadcasters within countries (minimum one, maximum three for each country), it is unrealistic to introduce this broadcaster level to the models in this analysis. Since a choice needed to be made, I chose to work with the most conservative design, i.e. to include the country as a level, to ensure no differences would be overestimated only due to country aggregation.

Item level variables

The results reported in Model 1 in Table 14 indeed reveal that these item-related variables matter. Model 1, in which only these item-level variables are considered, is a significant improvement (Wald $\chi^2 = 14.67$, $\text{Prob} > \chi^2 = .005$) compared to the null model (Null model not reported in the table: Log Likelihood -368.6103; Level 2 (Journalist) variance 1.49, SE = .66; Level 3 (Country) variance .59, SE=.34), and both the *duration of the news item* and topic *international news* come forward as significant factors.

Longer news items are more often balanced. For each extra second, there is one percent more chance that there is balance in a news item (odds ratio³¹ = 1.01). The explanation for the effect of news item duration is relatively straightforward. The less time the reporter gets -which is often an editorial decision- for his or her reportage, the less time will be available for (more) direct quotes. Having less speaking news sources leads to less likelihood that there will be balance in the

³¹ Odds ratios are presented occasionally as an illustration or for presenting the findings in a more concrete way. They are omitted from the tables (where the coefficients are reported). When odds ratio < 1, there is a negative influence of the independent on the dependent, when it is > 1, this is positive. E.g. the odds ratio (1.01) here should be understood as: for each extra unit in the independent variable (in this case = an extra second), there is one percent more chance for the news item to be balanced.

news item, especially when there is only time for one quote in the news item in which case balance is not possible. Often journalists will be tempted to choose for the incumbents in cases of limited quoting opportunities, while paraphrasing any opposing stances, or omit them all together.

As expected, and also found in the previous chapter on the Flemish data, balance occurs less frequently for international (relations) news than for national political news items. International news items are not even half as often balanced compared to domestic news items. It is not sure that this means that foreign affairs are a typical issue on which the incumbents are dominant. The reason possibly has more to do with the way balance is defined in this study. E.g. the Belgian foreign affairs minister counts as a Belgian incumbent, and items in which this minister is speaking are part of the Belgian news items in this international database. However, in some cases this minister might also be balanced by the French, German or Congolese foreign affairs minister or president, rather than by a Belgian opposition politician. This is not the kind of balance this study is about. Foreign actors are not taken into account for determining balance in this study, but of course they do fill the air time that otherwise could be available for a domestic non-incumbent news source. Therefore the option is taken to control for this 'international' factor to avoid the possible flaw in the analysis.

The other topic controls were introduced for different reasons. Some news items really are about domestic politics, but are not balanced because the reporter will denounce the necessity of balance in them. Sometimes only one party is relevant. *Party organization news* was hypothesized to be such a topic. This includes for example very specific reports on a party meeting or convention, including the election of a new party leader, determination of new formal party rules or new ideological lines of the party, as well as the exclusion of politicians from the party because of internal disagreements etc. However, from the analysis it becomes clear that this is not at all a factor to worry about in the context of balance. The coefficient in Model 1 is barely significant, and moreover, the sign of the coefficient rather indicates the opposite.

For *soft news*, a similar argument was made to hypothesize less likelihood of balance. The relevance of the opinion of another political actor other than the main politician in soft news items is supposed to be limited, since soft news is by definition non-policy-related news. If politicians occur in this kind of news item, it is usually for their engagement in projects outside the domain of politics, rather than for making a policy-related statement. An example of this latter kind of news

items is a politician who is spotted at a sports event, cheering for a specific team and possibly commenting on the event. Another example is when politicians speak about their personal life, what they like to eat, when they get married, die or get injured in the course of practicing their hobbies. The soft news factor does appear to have some negative impact on the chance for balance, but this result is not statistically significant. Hypothesis H1d can therefore not be confirmed.

Parameter	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
<i>Fixed effects</i>												
Item-related variables:												
Duration of the item (in seconds)	.00	(.00)	**	.00	(.00)	**	.01	(.00)	*	.00	(.00)	
International news	-.87	(.32)	**	-.87	(.32)	**	-.94	(.32)	**	-.53	(.33)	
Party organization topic	.78	(.70)		.78	(.70)		.66	(.70)		-.57	(.74)	
Soft news	-.23	(.42)		-.21	(.43)		-.24	(.43)		-.07	(.53)	
Media system-related variable:												
Media Competition							.35	(.25)		.40	(.20)	*
Political system-related variables:												
Party fragmentation							-.16	(.14)		-.15	(.12)	
Incumbency support in parliament							-.06	(.02)	*	-.05	(.02)	**
Broadcaster-specific variable:												
Dependence on commercial revenues (1-5)				.01	(.10)		.01	(.11)		-.01	(.10)	
Work pressure				-.05	(.15)		.20	(.16)		.18	(.15)	
Sensationalism				.00	(.03)		-.04	(.04)		-.07	(.03)	*
Journalist-specific variables:												
Political Journalist										2.11	(.44)	***
Routine										.04	(.05)	
Journalist: gender (1=female, 0=male)										-.21	(.29)	
Journalist: generalist (1=generalist)										-.81	(.91)	
Intercept	-1.96	(.39)	***	-1.50	(.89)	**	1.98	(1.73)		2.77	(1.67)	
<i>Random effects</i>												
Level 2 variance – journalist	1.55	(.68)		1.50	(.67)		1.51	(.67)		.96	(.58)	
Level 3 variance – country	.59	(.39)		.56	(.38)		.21	(.17)		.04	(.09)	
Log likelihood	-360.6205			-360.4792			-355.6617			-284.4418		
Ni / N _i /N _k	741/397/12			741/397/12			741/397/12			583/385/12		

Table 14: Dependent variable political balance, starting point: at least one national incumbent politician present as speaking news source: multilevel statistical estimates. Table entries are coefficient estimates with standard errors in parentheses. ° = $p \leq .10$ * = $p \leq .05$ ** = $p \leq .01$ *** = $p \leq .001$. Log-Likelihood of the null-model: -368.6102.

Also after the introduction of item-level controls, there is still variance at Level 2 and Level 3 to be explained. There are structural differences between countries and between journalists for what political balance in the news is concerned. That is promising for the introduction of factors situated at these levels.

Variables at broadcaster level

In Model 2, the three proposed broadcaster specific variables are brought into this analysis. In the absence of a broadcaster level in the analysis, the presence of the country-level accounts for a substantial amount of variation at the highest level. Looking at the values of these broadcaster-specific factors in Model 2 (and the following models), there is no immediate need for further testing of any results, since none of these three broadcaster-specific factors seems to be working. None of them comes even close to statistical significance. Consequently, Model 2 has a slightly better fit than Model 1, with a minimal (but still significant: Wald $\chi^2(7)=15.03$, Prob> $\chi^2=.036$) increase of the log-likelihood.

All three hypotheses about broadcaster-specific factors thus need to be rejected. Even if many other broadcaster-specific factors are thinkable for which insufficient information was available for this study, it is still a surprise that these factors are not significant. Especially the dependence of commercial revenues, which is merely a more specific measure of the public versus private television difference. Relatively good arguments came forward from the previous chapters for public channels to have a larger tendency to balance their news items. The reason why public channels were expected to balance more easily, was first of all the more strict regulation they need to obey, but maybe even more the informal pressure of being financed by public means. This would lead to a high inclination to bring news for the whole public, and thus also to a significantly larger importance for values and norms of objectivity and fairness. Private broadcasters do not always need to keep a close eye on this, even if they may do so voluntarily. The question that was not answered yet was of course whether this higher awareness by public broadcasters is also traceable to the individual news item level. The analysis here learns us that it does not. There is no difference between public and private channels on the chance of an individual news item to be balanced. Even when the public-private division is a little bit refined, like was done in this study by making a difference between public channels based on *the share of commercial revenues* they receive, this factor is nowhere near reaching statistical significance.

The *level of sensationalism* does not work either. More sensational broadcasters are not necessarily less inclined to balance their news. Obviously, news quality is not a one-dimensional phenomenon, but also other reasons can be mentioned here. More sensational broadcasters attribute less attention to politics and politicians. They prefer other topics, and also other news sources. The political items they do show, are usually shorter, so part of the effect might be absorbed by the duration factor. However, a more plausible explanation for the sensationalism misfit in this model is that there are also reasons for sensational broadcasters to balance news items. One of the ways to make sensational television news is to emphasize conflict, which is usually and at least most easily found between incumbents and opposition politicians. So, while they may not be interested in balance for balance (or the sake of democracy), they may make balance part of their arsenal of sensational news elements, ready to grab the attention of the audience on topics they normally do not prefer to cover if they can avoid them.

Finally, *work pressure*, as hypothesized to be a tempering factor for balance, does not live up to the expectations either. The reasoning was that increased work pressure would lead to so tight dead-lines for the journalists that they would refrain from lengthy quests for the right balancing source, settling for the presence of the most important source, i.e. the easily accessible incumbent. While the sign of the coefficient is negative, it is so far away from significance that it is not appropriate at all to see even the least of a confirmation of this hypothesis in that.

The finding that these factors are not significant, does not necessarily mean that there are no broadcaster specific variables that could have explanatory power of balance. Again, it is difficult to keep the broadcaster and the country level separated in this analysis, but in Model 2 the level 3 (country level) variance, that is still to be explained (.56, $SD=.38$), shows that there is quite some room for more and better factors here. Some of them, of course, are to be situated at the country level. When Model 2 is run with the broadcaster level as a substitute for the country level the unexplained variance is similar (.43, $SD=.26$), while still none of the broadcaster-specific variables becomes significant. It even turned out to be unrealistic in this study; future research should engage in a broader quest for factors like editorial policies and cultures, habits, history and other kinds of broadcaster-specific particularities to get a better grasp of the importance of the individual broadcaster in the whole story of balance.

Variables at country level

When in Model 3 the proposed country-specific variables (media competition, number of political parties and parliamentary support for government) are added as well, Log-likelihood (-355.6617) improves significantly (Wald χ^2 (10)= 25.42; Prob > χ^2 = .005). One of the three variables introduced here is significant. It is the *parliamentary support for government*, measured by the percentage of members of parliament belonging to the governing parties³².

The effect of parliamentary support is negative, which is in line with the hypothesis H4b. The larger the parliamentary majority supporting the government (parties), the less they tend to be balanced in the news. Translated into an odds ratio, the negative coefficient in Table 14 becomes .95, meaning that for each percent of extra support in parliament, chances for balancing news items in that country are five percent lower. Following these results, journalists do seem to feel more pressure to balance incumbent news sources when the support for them in parliament is smaller.

There are several possible explanations thinkable why this would happen. It could be that journalists do try to mirror the parliamentary division of power (1), and thus give more attention to the opposition party/parties when they are stronger in parliament. If the parliamentary division is 51 (governing parties) versus 49 (opposition) and the newsmakers decide to give the opposition 49 percent of the media attention, this will almost automatically lead to more frequent occasions of balance than when they would do the same in a 70-30, but there is probably more to it than that. From previous research, it is known that the news media do not tend to mirror these power divisions, but that governing parties enjoy a (even relatively large) media bonus (De Swert & Walgrave, 2001; Hopmann, De Vreese & Aalbaek, 2011). Another reason why parliamentary division of power would matter, is more in line of Nivens (2005) economical interpretation of the indexing theory (2). The more powerful a news source is (which can be read as: the more

³² Since the broadcaster variables (3) were also added at the country level, the total number of variables on this level (6) is quite high for the fairly limited N-value. This could be problematic for this analysis. Therefore, I reran a reduced Model 3 without the insignificant variables at country level (5) just to make sure that the result for that one significant factor is similar to the result in the original model, as it should be. The only significant factor was the percentage of support in parliament, coefficient -.04 (.02)* in the original model 3. This result is also found in the reduced model in this test: coefficient -.06 (.02)*. This result is thus not created or blown up by the disturbance of the other, insignificant factors.

parliamentary support a political actor has), the more credible the source becomes, and the more interesting and safe this source becomes for the reporter. The reporter will feel less need to balance this news source, because it is more powerful. The reporter limits the risks, and saves time and effort (for balancing). Also a more basic reading of the indexing theory can lead to an explanation for the effect found here. Bennett (1990) stated that news media usually follow the elites (only), unless there is controversy among these elites. If we consider Bennett's elites to be the government (party) politicians, this would mean that the effect found could be due to more controversy and political disagreement (3), which makes sense, since a government with only a small majority in parliament, or even a minority cabinet, will be less stable and uncontested than one with large support in parliament.

One of the reasons to tackle this Ph.D. study was to get a fresh intake from the mainly U.S.-based bias research, cultivated on the stable dual party situation that country has been in. Doing (comparative) balance research in multi party systems will eventually lead to better insights in the way a more complicated party landscape influences the daily balancing practice of reporters. The variable presented here, the bare number of parties competing in a country, was not very likely to disclose all the differences party landscapes can make on the journalistic product. At least, the conclusion of the insignificance of the number of parties is that there is no straight-forward linear effect of the number of parties. More parties will sometimes lead to more balance (more options to choose from for the journalist increases availability of sources, and the chance that one of these sources has sufficient skills to talk to the media), but sometimes the opposite can be true. More options also lead to positive selection problems: when several sources are willing, available and have relevant information and arguments, the journalist might be tempted to give none of them, or to paraphrase them all shortly, instead of picking one.

Translated to a virtual example, one might say that, based on these results, adding a third, substantial political party to the spectrum in the U.S. would not lead automatically to more or less balance in television news, although it could, if this party's emergence would influence the strength of the government's majority in parliament substantially, e.g. by joining one of the original two parties after elections. A counterexample would be if the opposition party would split in two parties. That is then alleged not to have a significant influence on how often newsmakers would balance the governing party politicians.

Media competition does not work at all in this analysis. Too many other factors and circumstances are at play in the effects of media competition on news content, and expecting a significant effect of media competition as a factor on itself was probably too blunt. The insignificance of this factor is on the contrary more illuminating as support for what several economists have found in the relation between media competition and media bias: being biased is not a good strategy to play in a competitive market.

Variables at the journalist level

Up to this point, the three models did not look at the journalist level. This is done in Model 4. Model 4 cannot be compared with the first three models without keeping in mind that quite a large part of the sample is dropped from the analysis (from N=741 to N=583), because of the simple reason that no journalist is known for these news items, so that no journalist-level information could be attributed. Log-Likelihood is thus not comparable, but to get a grasp of the improvement of the model, a comparison was made with the Log-Likelihood of Model 3 only including those 535 news items that are part of the sample for Model 4. This comparison shows a clearly significant improvement by introducing the journalist level variables (from Log-Likelihood -386.2709 (Model 3) to -372.9766 (Model 4) – Wald χ^2 (14)=42,25, Prob > χ^2 = .000).

From all these journalist-level variables, only one significant variable comes to the fore, i.e. whether the journalist is a political journalist or not. Thus, not just in Flanders political journalists offer more balanced news items than other journalists. It is a strong and highly significant factor in this analysis on international data too. Partly, this is due to the fact that ‘pure’ political news items are often made by these political journalists. However, when controlled for these broader group of “political” news items³³ instead of party organization, this result remains intact. It must have something to do with the nature of political journalists that makes them balance more often. It may be a feeling or sensitivity they develop during their career, or a more practical matter of better and easier access to politicians because of their large networks, but it could also be explained by the higher importance these journalists bestow on treating their daily news sources fairly. They need to work with these same politicians always, which means that there is some kind of external control: if they would make a biased news

³³ Operationalized as all news items for which at least one of the topic codes coded was an institutional politics code: government organization, parliamentary organization, state of the union, organization of election, division of power, multi-level politics, etc.

item, they will hear about it from complaining politicians straight away. This might complicate their future work, so it would make sense if they try to limit instances like that.

Other variables on the journalist level are not significant. Gender of the journalist does not make a difference, and neither does the experience of the journalist. The real generalists among the journalists, always working with different topics, do show a tendency towards the expected effect, i.e. that they have less inclination or opportunities to balance their news items, but this effect is not significant.

Even if quite some of the level 2 variance is gone in model 4, the remaining variance is still more than zero, which suggests that more variables at the journalist level should be explored in order to explain balance. This could be either journalistic ideology (like in the previous chapter on the Flemish data) or conceptions or personal style of the journalists.

Beyond political balance

It is interesting to look beyond the pure political balance too. Sometimes, journalists do not turn to other politicians to balance a political standpoint, but to experts. According to Steele (1990:28), (university) experts are very interesting for journalists to create at least the image of objectivity, while still more or less controlling the content of what they are saying (compared to the situation in which they would have turned to an opposing political actor for a balancing point of views).

Hypotheses H3a, H3c and H4a stated that commercialism, sensationalism and news competition would increase the application of balance by means of popular exemplars. Do regular people rule as balancing news sources? To check this hypothesis, and to answer RQ2 about what more can be said about balancing by means of experts, civil society sources and/or regular people based on this study, Table 15 summarizes the results of four different multilevel logistic regression analyses, each time using the same factors as in the earlier analysis on balance by means of political opposition news sources, but with a different dependent variable.

No balance at all

If balance of government sources is considered in a broader perspective, including not only opposition politicians, but also experts, civil society news sources and popular exemplars as possible balancing sources, the percentage of news items that are balanced will increase. Then it also becomes interesting to see when there is no balance at all, with none of these sources. In which cases do incumbents really get the media arena only for themselves? In Analysis A reported in Table 15, partly the same factors come forward as in the analysis on political balance, but of course with reversed signs, since here the chance that a news item is unbalanced, is estimated. The longer the item, the less chance for unbalance, and items about party organization and international topics are more frequently completely unbalanced. The larger the majority in parliament supporting the incumbents, the more chance for unbalanced news items. In addition to that, the more political parties there are in a political system, the more chance there is for unbalanced news items. This supports the claim we made earlier that the presence of many parties might not only increase possibilities for journalists, but also (and even more) encumber them with a selection problem. The result here indicates that it might indeed be that journalists in those circumstances rather choose to avoid giving voice to alternative sources altogether and limit themselves to paraphrasing alternative stances. However, it remains puzzling that they do not seem to choose to solve their selection problem by using (usually more neutral) non-political sources.

For what *balancing news items with experts* is concerned (Analysis B), the only significant factors are routine and specialization in politics, both in a negative way. Political journalists do not like to consult experts as a balancing source. They might solicit them, but not in combination with politicians in the same news item.

Parameter	Analysis A: No balance at all			Analysis B: Balance by expert			Analysis C: Bal. by popular exemplar			Analysis D: Balance by civil society			
<i>Fixed effects</i>													
Item-related variables:													
Duration or the item (in seconds)	-.00	(.00)	°	.00	(.00)	*	.01	(.00)	**	.00	(.00)		
International news	1.14	(.25)	***	-.88	(.40)	*	-.70	(.38)	°	-1.14	(.32)	***	
Party organization topic	.96	(.56)		.16	(.84)		-1.35	(.59)	*	-1.05	(1.06)		
Soft news	.39	(.40)		.14	(.51)		.83	(.36)	*	-.24	(.45)		
Media system-related variables:													
Media Competition	.02	(.13)		-.17	(.18)		-.42	(.19)	*	-.31	(.15)	*	
Political system-related variables:													
Party fragmentation	.24	(.08)	**	-.18	(.12)		-.23	(.13)	°	.03	(.08)		
Incumbency support in parliament	.04	(.01)	***	-.02	(.02)		-.02	(.02)		.01	(.01)		
Broadcaster-specific variable:													
Dependence on commercial revenues	-.01	(.07)		.09	(.10)		.01	(.10)		-.16	(.08)	*	
Work pressure (smaller staff)	-.16	(.10)		.27	(.14)	°	.10	(.14)		-.03	(.12)	*	
Sensationalism	-.01	(.02)		.02	(.03)		.06	(.04)		.05	(.03)	*	
Journalist-specific variables:													
Journalist: political journalist	.52	(.30)	°	-.92	(.43)	*	-2.13	(.55)	***	-1.68	(.37)	***	
Journalist: routine	.02	(.04)		-.11	(.05)	**	-.10	(.06)	°	-.05	(.04)	*	
Journalist: gender (1=female, 0=male)	-.01	(.21)		-.06	(.30)		.07	(.30)		.26	(.23)		
Journalist: generalist	.59	(.55)		-.18	(.73)					.31	(.46)		
Intercept	3.66	(1.18)	**	-1.20	(1.41)		-.78	(1.53)		.59	(.53)		
<i>Random effects</i>													
Level 2 variance – journalist	.24	.32		.38	.74		.87	.98		.00	.00		
Level 3 variance - country	.00	.00		.00	.00		.00	.00		.00	.00		
Log likelihood	-368.1468			-213.9287			-227.0423			--276.4200			
Ni / Nj/Nk	583/385/12			583/385/12			583/385/12			583/385/12			
Model fit vs. null-model	Chi² (14)=44.61			Chi² (14)=23.32			Chi² (14)=27.57			Chi² (14)=49.43			
	Prob>chi²=.000			Prob>chi²=.055			Prob>chi²=.016			Prob>chi²=.000			

Table 15: Several balances, dependent variable federal balance, starting point: at least one national incumbent politician present as speaking news source: ML statistical estimates. Table entries are coefficient estimates with s.e. in parentheses. ° = $p \leq .10$ * = $p \leq .05$ ** = $p \leq .01$ *** = $p \leq .001$.

From Analysis C, it becomes clear that the prevalence of *balance by means of regular people is not* more frequent in countries where there is more media competition, and with broadcasters that have more sensational news and are less or not at all dependent on public finances. However, none of these factors is both significant and works in the expected direction. Media competition is significant, but the effect is opposite to what was expected. Less contra-intuitive is the finding that political journalists seem to have an aversion of this kind of balance, and that soft news is significant as a factor (for the first time). When incumbent politicians are allowed to speak in soft news items, they are more likely to be balanced by a popular exemplar comment than in news items on other issues.

Finally, Analysis D learns that *balancing with civil society news sources* (e.g. a union spokesman) does not happen so easily on international news topics in countries with high media competition; not on private broadcasters, and especially not by political journalists. Interesting is the finding that the broadcaster-specific variable of work pressure is significant here. Finding appropriate civil society news sources is not an easy task, and so it takes time. Those broadcasters where work pressure is high, do not provide that time, and this appears to end up with a lower chance for balance with civil society actors.

VII.4. Conclusion

Many hypotheses were brought forward in this empirical chapter on an international comparative dataset of television news from 24 broadcasters in 12 countries. Here, they are brought together in a similar overview as in the previous chapter on the Flemish data. It is interesting to see that many of the results found in the Flemish dataset, are also found in the analysis on the international data. Some variables cannot be compared, since they were only present in one of both analyses, but bringing these results together, leads to a larger picture of the influences on balance in television news. These results were also discussed with the newsmakers I interviewed, editor-in-chief Wim Willems (VRT) and political journalist Dirk Van Den Bogaert (VTM) (see chapter V), and some of their comments are presented here in the conclusion.

Considering the variables linked to item characteristics (duration) and the subject of the news item, very similar results emerge from both empirical analyses. The longer the news item, the more chance that it is balanced. Even if the causality of this factor is not completely clear (is the item longer because of the inclusion of balance, or is there balance because the news item could be longer?), and might vary according to the degree of freedom journalists have to decide themselves over the length of their news items, it is certainly a factor that should always be controlled for in analyses like these.

Considering subject-related factors, international news is clearly a specific kind of news for which balance most likely should be studied differently, since government sources in these news items are often representing the country in an international context. At least, the same mechanisms cannot be expected to be at play for international news. I had expected this to be the same for specific party-related news and soft news, both of which were expected to be less balanced because the journalists did not consider them as regular news items that would have a use for a reaction of another political party. However, this is not confirmed. Balancing does not happen significantly more or less in these kinds of news items. Also on these topics journalists seem to practice their normal way of balancing, even if one could argue that it is not absolutely necessary or expected.

Considering journalist-related factors, being a political journalist seems to boost the use of balance in news items. These journalists are both more inclined to use balance, and more (easily) capable of getting access to the right sources to bring as balance in their news items. Both Wim Willems and Dirk Van Den Bogaert

confirmed that this finding was in line with their experience. According to Wim Willems, political journalists also have an instinct for political conflict, and of course they have the inside knowledge and the right – official and unofficial-communication channels available for direct contact with the political stakeholders.

In the international dataset, journalists with more routine were not found to balance more often, while this was a significant factor in the Flemish analysis. This might be due to the way the variable was measured in the international dataset. The ideal way of measuring this variable, is to survey journalists and ask them. In these analyses, I needed to use a proxy, based on the data of the content analysis. In the Flemish dataset, an estimate based on the amount of news items during several years, provided a much better proxy than the same estimate based on 28 newscasts. The latter is still sufficient to make the distinction between journalists who make news items daily and occasional reporters, but the measurement is necessarily rougher. That may be why for the international dataset, journalistic routine does not emerge as a significant factor.

	<i>Hypothesis</i>	Conclusion
H1a.	Longer items, more balance	Confirmed
H1b.	Party-specific news, less balance	Rejected
H1c.	International news, less balance	Confirmed
H1d.	Soft news, less balance	Rejected
H2a.	Female journalists, more balance	Rejected
H2b.	Journalists with more routine, more balance	Rejected
H2c.	Political journalists, more balance	Confirmed
H2d.	Generalist, less balance	Rejected
H3a.	More work pressure, less balance	Rejected
H3b.	More sensationalism, less balance	Rejected
H4a.	More media competition, less balance	Rejected
H4b.	More parliamentary support for government, less balance	Confirmed
H4c.	More political parties, more balance	Rejected
H5	Incumbents more balanced than opposition	Confirmed

Table 16: Overview of the results of the empirical analysis on the international comparative dataset

The reporter's gender (both analyses), party choice (only in Flemish dataset) and lack of specialization (the generalist factor in the international sample) do not show the hypothesized effects on the use of balance. One potentially important factor that could be moderating the individual journalistic influences, was – unfortunately- not taken into account in these analyses, i.e. the influence of the specific editors of the news broadcast, the person who makes the final calls on which news items make it to the news and is so, e.g. how long they can be etc. From the interview with Dirk Van Den Bogaert, it became clear that he considered himself largely free to make the news item he wanted, but sometimes he also has to compromise e.g. when the editor does not provide sufficient time for the news item. There is not much information about the actual influence of these editors on the news content, especially not when the use of actors is concerned. It might vary severely between broadcasters how much these editors can put an individual stamp on news item content. This should be studied, preferably even not by surveying journalists and editors, but by observing the news making process. It might be that these editors are merely following a set of strict broadcaster specific guidelines (and in that case the influence is situated at the organizational level). Alternatively, some broadcaster might leave openings for individual accents for these editors, which would mean that could even be dealt with as an additional level.

Of all the broadcaster- and country level factors, only the percentage of support for the government in parliament turns out to be significant. Political power does matter for the daily practice of television news journalists. When a government is more powerful (i.e. in this case more support in parliament), there will be less political balance in the news. Balance is not that universal that it is a phenomenon that one can always and everywhere find to the same degree. Some factors do matter, and political power is one of them. That also means that the daily use of balance is quite different from the ideal principle of always giving a word-counterword. When government is more powerful, opposition politicians are less often used as a balance in the news, and alternative sources turned out not to compensate this.

However, many other factors do not seem to matter at all, even if convincing arguments exist to at least assume that there might be an influence on balancing. Especially when following more economic approaches of journalism, balance comes with benefits (e.g. less risk for criticism) but also with costs. While government news sources are usually quite easily available (e.g. by statements at a government press conference) and the relevant actor is usually clear (e.g. the

minister for a particular domain), this is different for opposition news sources. They need to be found and contacted, and their relevance is not always as crystal clear. That is why political journalists have such an advantage applying balance, it just costs them less. Broadcasters can find themselves in situations, though, where these costs for balance might not weight up to the benefits. That is why the expectation was that more sensation-focused broadcasters, broadcasters in a more competitive environment, and broadcasters where the work pressure on the individual journalist is higher, would turn out to balance news items less. While for mainly publicly financed broadcasters there still is an incentive to balance since the public/politics demands this from them (formally), private broadcasters do not have this formal incentive. However, none of these factors turned out to matter for balance. In that way, balance is a universal principle. It does not need to be formally required for journalists to apply it. There might be tendencies to bring news differently because of competition, time pressure and cost reduction, but journalists do not seem to cut down on balance because of it.

Dirk Van Den Bogaert, working as a political journalist for VTM, a Flemish private broadcaster, acknowledges that they clearly feel on the work floor the difference in available means between the public channel and the private channel. He often finds himself in a situation where the public channel has several camera teams, and he has only one. For him, however, this is not essential. A limited availability of means can be compensated by hard work and high alertness. Indirectly, of course, there will be an influence on the news content and choices of (political) news sources, because less resources will go to the reporting of politics, resulting in less journalists with specific specialization in pure politics. According to Wim Willems, this is a process in progress, and VTM is losing connection. He pointed at the fortunate situation the VRT is in, having an audience that asks for and appreciates good and objective journalism, and that is willing to give up possible entertainment value for news quality. In a more commercial environment, this kind of audience support is not or at least less present, according to Willems.

The importance of elections, time-pressure, the difference between non-incumbents and incumbents, and the special way of reporting politics by political journalists (“Wetstraatjournalisten”) are all elements that were clearly in line with the way the interviewed newsmakers saw their work and the news. Even the lack of significant differences between public broadcasters and private broadcasters in balancing did not inspire them to any combative challenges. The duopoly situation in Flanders is a special situation, resulting in a lot of comparison between VRT and VTM. According to Wim Willems, the staff of both broadcasters is

interchangeable, and Van Den Bogaert agrees, only pointing at the additional point of the smaller staff size for private broadcasters because of the (sometimes huge) differences in capital.

Some questions remain, though, even after asking these newsmakers about it directly. The main issue is the benchmark problem. While researching balance does not seem to need a benchmark, the results from this chapter suggest that some benchmark is considered anyway. Since more support for government in parliament leads to less balance, in one way or another the journalists seem to take this benchmark into consideration.

Balance offers an relatively simple way to assure the presence of different voices and opinions in television news items about politics. It has been a leading principle of journalism for ages, and it can be evaluated item by item. Newsmakers say they want to give all relevant political actors sufficient attention, but it is not always clear how much attention this should be, and, even more problematically, individual journalists do not have an overview over how often certain political actors have been in the news. Apart from maybe in election times, no exact countings are done on the news desks. If they would, they would find out that the attention for government sources is a lot higher than any of the classic benchmarks suggest, because in daily practice the individual context of the subject of the specific news items is what matters. That is also where the stories of the chief editor and the journalist differ: while the former needs to be concerned with the general picture, the latter wants to take the best decision in the particular context of the news item. Balance then seems to be a more relevant concept than media attention. Therefore, it is also more logical to expect individual journalistic characteristics to be influential in the decision whether or not (or how) to balance.

Chapter VII. Conclusion

Balance turns out not to be an omnipresent phenomenon (main RQ1). Despite the backing by a great principle of journalism – the word-counterword-principle – far from all news items are balanced. Newsmakers seem to practice a rather relaxed way of dealing with the great principle of journalism. However, in election times they do better, under pressure of a suddenly attentive public and a crowd of politicians who think the media are influencing the campaign, usually in their eyes blatantly in their disadvantage. Elections are the first factor, the accelerator of balance. What in regular times lives a dusty life in the head of the newsmakers, revives in all its glory ‘when it matters’. Notwithstanding a cargo load of political communication studies working on the interaction between media and politics in election times only, public opinion is not built in a few weeks of overkill media attention, and so neglecting the importance of (political balance in) regular news reports, is not a neutral act. Especially since another finding of this study is that not every politician gets balanced alike. While incumbents can only enjoy the company of one of their opposition colleagues in about 20 percent of the news items, these colleagues do not have to count on going solo too often, they are balanced by incumbents in more than 50 percent of the items they are in.

So maybe there is more at stake after all. Considering this rather spectacular difference, it might not be a matter of a sloppy implementation of an old journalistic principle anyway. It may be the power position incumbents hold, that makes the difference. These differences may indeed sound familiar to the attentive media scholar. Not only were they found in earlier balance studies (De Swert & Hooghe, 2007; Van Aelst & De Swert, 2009), but more importantly they resemble earlier findings of media-attention studies using different concepts for studying the presence of political actors in the news, i.e. the media bonus literature (De Swert & Walgrave, 2002; Walgrave & De Swert, 2005; Schulz & Zeh, 2005). Incumbents, and especially government sources, always turn out to be the strong sources, receiving a kind of attention that is clearly different. With the combination of incumbent political actors receiving a large share of media attention, and them not being balanced so often, it was bound to be a result of this study that the news is not permeated by balanced stories.

How does power position influence balance then? In the theoretical chapter, the economical approach on journalism by David Niven (2005) offered a tool to tackle this question. By considering journalists as individual, rational actors behaving

upon a constant trade-off between costs and benefits, he facilitates explanations for variations in media content (see also Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) at the level of the journalist. Journalists have to deal with time-pressure. It is a really important factor in the decision-making of the journalist. Several aspects of balancing news items can be costly. Some of these costs are not fixed. The information cost, for example, is not the same for every journalist. Routinized journalists, and especially specialized journalists (like in this study political journalists) know the ways, and have little books with important names and numbers so they can reach any of the politicians they consider appropriate balancing sources by one simple direct phone call. They also have an advantage in relation to another important cost, i.e. the risk for bad reception of the news item by colleagues, the public and/or politicians. The very choice of a balancing source is a key factor. It does not only offer an explanation for why political journalists do better in balancing news items (they have the knowledge, and the confidence), but also for the finding that incumbents are balanced a lot less often than opposition politicians. In line with Niven (2005), backed by the indexing theorists (Bennett, 1990), incumbent news sources can be considered powerful, credible and –especially important in this context– ‘safe’ sources for journalists to use without much risk of being criticized for using irrelevant news sources. So they hesitate less to make news items with only an incumbent source, than with only an opposition source. It would be extremely interesting for future research to build on this, by trying to map this particular sensitivity among journalists and trying to find possible effects of it on the news content.

Besides the more subjective arguments, involving calculations of risk, importance and credibility, there are also more straightforward factors, influencing balance in the news. To start with, there is the duration of the news item. The more time a journalist gets for making the news items, the more chance there is that this news item will be a balanced one. As logical as this sounds, it also indicates that the lack of balance could have a lot to do with lacking possibilities. Journalists may want balance, maybe even always, but often it just cannot happen.

One of the most surprising findings of this Ph.D. study may be that public channels seem to fail to do better than private channels when it comes to balancing news items. Reasons to expect public channels to do better, have to do with money (mostly they have a bigger budget for news), regulations and news quality. The financial aspect is a reality. In Flanders (but the same could be said about the U.K., Norway, Germany etc.) the public channel’s news desk is a lot bigger than the private channel’s one. More people means more time to make a news item and

chances for specialization, and as we saw, this could lead to more balance, because time and means are available to achieve this balance. Regulations usually hit the hardest on publicly funded broadcasters. In exchange for the money, the government wants to set standards, which might be more concrete or strict than standard journalistic code. Private channels usually get away somewhat easier, making them more free to have a more relaxed attitude towards several aspects of their television news content, like balance. Nevertheless, there seems to be no real difference in balance. There is a lot less volume of politics on private television, generally speaking, but the way it is brought is not that different. This is one of the points on which the expectations in this study were most wrong. Less resources, more commercial pressure, higher importance of the number of viewers, more media competition etc. are all factors that according to traditional sensationalism research are bound to weigh on the quality of the news product (Kleemans, Van Cauwenberghe, d'Haenens, & Vettehen, 2008), and they do, on some aspects, but obviously they do not so on the matter of balance. None of the factors related to this aspect, turned out to be significant in the models presented earlier. This is really good news. Maybe it is like VTM-journalist Dirk Van Den Bogaert said that with creativity and hard work, truthful to the basics of journalism, they try to compensate for the earlier mentioned advantages public channels (journalist) may have.

This also links to Cottle (2003) who points at the potential influence of workfloor-specific circumstances or cultures, in this case the way the (people at the) newsdesk work(s). If particular circumstances are so important, it is not a surprise that the organizational variables in the analysis here, were not too successful.

Another point that is worth coming back to, is the problem of the benchmark. As discussed in chapter I, II and Chapter IV, newsmakers have struggled with the problem of this calibration point they could use to guide them in their continuous attempt to get the different opinions in society to the news audience. Several possible benchmarks have been mentioned, and also from the interviews with the newsmakers, it became clear that newsmakers do have an eye for this, and do try to comply to such a benchmark. They make that benchmark up by themselves, based on the parliamentary division of power, but even more by the forces in the political momentum. Some journalists like to say that they are so good in feeling the political momentum of the day, that they denounce the existence of a benchmark as such. The problem is of course that these journalists also help creating political momentums, like it was the case for Bart De Wever (The Flemish nationalist leader, who got widely known (partly) due to his media exposure in a

successful series of quizzes on the public broadcaster, and has been dominating news media -and elections- ever since). Media can hype politicians or political parties, so they become popular, and then they can say they were right ‘feeling’ this on beforehand. Undoubtedly, there is a link between unbalanced exposure and this kind of media frenzy. However, little to no research has been done to find out what the exact effect of such an unbalanced exposure (once or repeatedly) has on viewers.

For scientific scholars on media bias, a more formal benchmark will always be needed, and in that light, the findings of this study can be important and constructive. The degree of support in parliament seemed to matter: the more support a government has in parliament, the less their presence in television news is balanced by an opposition news source. In that way, television news makers seem to implement a certain political context-specific benchmark for balancing television news, rather than trying to always have both government and opposition news sources in the news item.

One of the main contributions of this Ph.D. is that balance was defined, operationalized and analyzed on the news item level. This conceptualization of balance makes it possible to investigate factors influencing balance, and by extension media bias, on different levels. Bringing in the item-level made it possible to gauge the effects of personal characteristics of journalists, while at the same time testing national and broadcaster-specific variables. While this study did not check all possible variables, already some interesting results came to the fore. If not for the results of these very analyses here, at least as a stimulation to conduct further research following similar designs, this Ph.D. has a chance of being a positive contribution to political communication research.

Limitations

Every study has its limitations, and so does this one. While none of them is realistically fixable within this Ph.D. project, they should not be seen as unfortunate fatalities the scientific community needs to accept. The description of some of them might prove very valuable for future media bias and balance researchers.

First, and probably most importantly, there is the *conceptualization of balance in this study*. The useful concept of balance as it is defined in this study, comes with some downsides. To make it possible to code balance in a fairly simple way, so

that large datasets can be studied, aspects of the 'pure' concept of balance are left behind. Pure balance, as it is often found in the literature and especially also in public discourse, encompasses the presence of two (or more) different opinions. In this Ph.D., this idea of different opinions is reduced to different voices, thereby knowingly taking the risk that these different voices do not express different opinions. Since the actual content of the statements is not coded, caution is needed in the interpretation of the results. This study is about the opportunity to express another opinion, without measuring the actual difference in opinion. Even though I have tried to get an idea of the degree of error stemming from this conceptualization, and this turned out not to be a huge difference (70 percent of the opportunity balance was actually also a balance of different opinions), it would still be best to keep this in mind interpreting the results of this study.

Another point that can be raised in the framework of the conceptualization of balance, is that it follows a strict party logic, while public attachment to (single) political parties is only going down (party dealignment) (Dalton, 2000; Mughan, 2009). Just like it is difficult for parties to do politics with such a diminishing basis of partisans amongst the people, it can be considered equally difficult for news media to keep on covering politics with political parties as front stage actors. Party dealignment involves a more unclear picture of which opinions are relevant. Often applied journalistic benchmarks for media attention like the last elections results lose a great deal of meaning when party identification is less fixed or more diffuse. But at the same time, when voting intentions become more volatile, media coverage becomes more important in the eyes of politicians and public. Pressure will rise, which on its turn could lead to media holding on even stronger to such 'hard' benchmarks in their defense of their news coverage.

Another possibility, however, would be that newsmakers would look for new ways of deciding which actors should be in the news. For example, they could make up their own, gut-feeling benchmark. In the interview with VTM's main political journalist Dirk Van Den Bogaert, this also came forward. That benchmark is likely to be a lot less party-oriented, more situational and more focused on individual politicians. Unfortunately, the interested media scholar does not easily grasp this gut-feeling benchmark, nor can/will journalists explain how it exactly works. For traditional media bias research using a party-related benchmark, this is highly problematic. For research on balance, it might be less of a problem, since party dealignment does not affect the adherence to the journalistic principle of word-counterword. Journalists might, however, tend to balance more between

individual politicians than between parties, or between government and opposition.

The second concern is related to the internal validity of the results of this study. The goals of this study might have been a little overambitious. It takes a millionaire or a genius to achieve a miracle. With the data that were available, or possible for a human being to collect, it was clear from the beginning that a full insight in the determinants of balance would not be reached, and neither do the analyses in chapter V and chapter VI fully test the hierarchical theoretical model that was inspired by Shoemaker & Reese (1996). Several important variables should still be added to the models, to come to a better estimation of which factors and which level of factors are determining balance most. Examples are personal role conceptions of journalists, and their personal view on balance (which – as became clear from the interviews with the newsmakers- seems to be more variable than expected) and Ugland & Henderson's (2007) distinction between top-level journalists and second-level journalists. Top-level journalists are "committed to gathering and telling stories in a particular way, one that honors the higher virtues that have traditionally shaped the profession" (Ugland & Henderson, 2007), while second-level journalists are also dedicated to bringing truthful information on a regular basis, but without the same adherence to the journalistic traditions and codes as can be found in journalism (ethical) text books and conventions. If such a split exists between journalists, they would surely have different ways of dealing with (political) balance.

A third aspect to be addressed, is the data selection and collection process linked to this study. While the quality of the ENA-data for Flanders is generally well appreciated, resulting in their use in dozens of reports and scientific articles, the international dataset for this Ph.D. study is slightly less sound. Ideally, such a large comparative project would take place in the framework of a network of researchers, preferably funded by an international sponsor. Nothing like that was available for this data-set, which is the fruit of a crazy effort of a Ph.D. student, supported by some funds of his equally data-addicted supervisor. This resulted in some issues with the dataset. More than in other, more or less comparable comparative studies, this dataset has quite a lot of missing broadcasts. The most troublesome is the lack of balance in the sample because of the failure to obtain the video material for Mediaset in Italy or the Irish commercial television. Although foreseen to be included in the sample, technical problems and the lack of a support system within these countries to tackle problems that always rise in data collections like these, came with a great cost of at least two broadcasters

that could not be included. International networks can deal with these things better, but on the other hand, they have more difficulties to stay in tune with coding reliability.

Finally, the simplicity of how balance was operationalized in this study, obviously makes it an interesting concept to tackle with computer-assisted content analysis. In the present study, none of this computer-assisted content analysis has been employed. For television, this is still not self-evident because of the lack of a.o. full transcripts of all these television news broadcasts. However, technology is moving rapidly, and it might become possible to do this on a large scale. Especially a study using roughly the same concept, but on newspapers, should be possible by CCA easily.

Nevertheless, overviewing these limitations in the light of the results that were generated by the analyses in this Ph.D., I do not think there are critical problems or flaws in the analysis in such a way that the results would be meaningless or useless. On the contrary, the descriptive results are informative, and the explanatory results are even among the first of its kind. At the very least, they are a screaming invitation for scholars to walk further on this path.

The future of balance = the future of bias?

With this last consideration, I came to the point of the future potential of the results of this study. It provides an excellent occasion to reconnect with the original starting point of this Ph.D. study, i.e. media bias. Balance was coined as a useful concept to study media bias in a multi-party context. Studying media bias like this, addresses several of the problems media bias research is confronted with. Balance can be evaluated on the individual news item level, allowing for testing factors influencing balance at that very level. Moreover, it is a uniformly applicable concept, which can be used in both the U.S. and non-U.S. contexts, and which allows internationally comparative research on media bias.

To achieve this, bias was reduced to partisan bias, and then further reduced to lack of balance. How can balance like that be a good indicator for media bias at item level? The use of balance by journalists could sometimes lead to more media bias (in the classical, aggregate meaning), especially when two parties or coalitions of clearly unequal size are continuously balancing each other. The smaller party would in that case benefit from the balancing process, and that would show in any aggregate bonus or bias analysis. More balance, thus, does not

automatically need to lead to less bias. In reality it works rather well. Government (party) news sources are clearly less often balanced, and have more mentions than most objective benchmarks and structural incumbency bonus. The other way around, opposition parties are more often balanced, are a lot less often mentioned and suffer from an opposition 'minus'. Since there seems to be a pattern, it looks like we indeed are measuring related concepts. At least, it is plausible that the same determinants that formed the basis for the incumbency bonus, are also responsible for the government being less often balanced in the news, with the interesting difference that the latter concept can be tested on individual news item-level.

Since the exact relationship between balance and bias as defined by the classical definition(s) is not determined, it is probably more appropriate to see these concepts as complementary, each of them helpful and constructive in explaining the (political actor) content of television news items, rather than to see them as competing alternatives measuring the exact same phenomenon. Researchers who stick to the aggregate bias concept, are confronted with major benchmark problems when trying to study media bias in multi-party contexts. The lack of a universal benchmark has been a major hindrance for international comparative research on media bias. Balance, operationalized as presence of both government and opposition news sources, is just like the American bias research about the presence of actors from only two parties, by collapsing government party actors and opposition party actors into two main categories. Thus, balance does help to consider individual news item level factors, and facilitates comparative research, but the price for that is that it does not provide an alternative, multi-party-context benchmark. Using balance thus rather circumnavigates the benchmark problem than to resolve it. Since balance does not come out of the analyses in this Ph.D. as the general, omnipresent practice it is often stated to be, other studies tackling the benchmark issue in multi-party contexts are still badly needed.

The following is what I suggest future balance and bias research should do, regardless of whether this would be done by myself or any other researcher. To start, this kind of research can only benefit from *international network cooperation*, both in data collection, analysis and interpretation of results. If possible, such a network would *increase the amount of coded news items*, since it became clear from the analysis here that for some broadcasters, especially private ones, 28 days of television news just does not deliver sufficient material to draw broadcaster-specific conclusions. This increase might become more realistic by applying some form of *computer-assistant content analysis*. Given the simplicity of

'balance' in the way it was used in the underlying study, that cannot be a problem, on condition that source material like transcripts of the news items would be (made) available. The most important suggestion, however, is originated in an aspect that was considered important, but still remained underdeveloped in this study: the individual journalist and his or her functioning within the newsroom. The analyses revealed plenty of variance still to be explained at the journalist level. The journalist-level variables (and probably also the variables linked to the news organizations) in this study were suboptimal, since it was simply not an option to do a large international survey among journalists (and potentially also editors), and connect these data to the content data. If any researcher would manage to realize this, surely more and better insights in the actual role of the journalist in the decision-making process on balance in news items would emerge. If this Ph.D. can be a starting point or source of inspiration for an effort like this, the efforts will have been worthwhile.

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APPENDIX A: overview of what balance is in this study

Basically this means that a news item, with as starting point the presence of at least one Federal incumbent, is balanced in the following situations:

News source 1	News source 2	News source 3	Outcome
None	None	None	Not in analysis
Federal opposition	None	None (or another Federal opposition source)	Not in analysis
Regional incumbent	None	None (or another Regional incumbent)	Not in analysis
Federal incumbent	None	None (or another Federal incumbent)	No balance
Federal incumbent	Federal opposition	None; or any other Federal incumbent or Federal opposition news source.	Balance
Federal incumbent	Flemish incumbent	None; or any other Federal or Flemish incumbent	Balance
Federal incumbent	Flemish opposition	None; or any Federal incumbent or Flemish Opposition source	Balance

Table 17: Examples of what balance is (in this analysis)

APPENDIX B: Information broadcasters international sample

	Media and politics system ²	Media market		
		Market share ³	Fragmentation ⁴	News Competition ⁵
ABC	Liberal	9.0	12.0	4.0
ARD	Democratic corporatist	14.6	28.6	3.0
BBC	Liberal	23.7	44.0	3.0
CBC	Democratic corporatist	-	-	2.0
CBS	Liberal	10.0	12.0	4.0
CTV	Liberal	-	-	2.0
France2	Polarized pluralist	20.3	52.0	2.0
ITV	Liberal	20.3	44.0	3.0
NBC	Liberal	9.0	12.0	4.0
NOS	Democratic corporatist	13.6	27.5	2.0
NRK	Democratic corporatist	39.9	70.0	1.0
RAI	Polarized pluralist	23.8	44.9	3.0
RTBF	Democratic corporatist	15.3	46.3	1.0
RTE	Liberal	27.5	40.3	1.0
RTL	Democratic corporatist	13.0	28.6	3.0
RTLtv	Democratic corporatist	25.8	41.1	1.0
RTL4	Democratic corporatist	13.9	27.5	2.0
Star	Polarized pluralist	9.7	14.2	4.0
TF1	Polarized pluralist	31.7	52.0	2.0
TRT	Polarized pluralist	4.5	14.2	4.0
TV2	Democratic corporatist	30.1	70.0	1.0
VRT	Democratic corporatist	29.9	51.8	1.0
VTM	Democratic corporatist	21.9	51.8	1.0
ZDF	Democratic corporatist	14.0	28.6	3.0

Notes: ² Media and politics system variables are taken from Hallin and Mancini (2004).

³ Market share data are coming from Television 2007, International Key Facts. Figures refer to the general audience share of the specific channel.

⁴ Fragmentation data are coming from Television 2007, International Key Facts. Figures refer to the sum of the general audience share of the largest public and largest commercial channel.

⁵ Figures refer to the news competition on national level. 1: there are two channels who provide news in prime time; 2: there are three channels who provide news in prime time; 3: there are four channels that provide news in prime time; 4: there are more than four channels that provide news in prime time.

APPENDIX C. Multilevel models by chapter V. (Flemish ENA data)

Parameter	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
<i>Fixed effects</i>				
Duration or the item (in seconds)		.01 (.00) ***	.01 (.00) ***	.01 (.00) **
Specific party-related topic		-.35 (.20)	-.33 (.20)	-.64 (.25) **
International news		.28 (.34)	.30 (.33)	.48 (.54)
Soft news		-.48 (.34)	-.51 (.34)	-.56 (.54)
Election news		-.07 (.20)	-.11 (.20)	-.27 (.27)
Election campaign period – 2003		-.21 (.34)	-.10 (.33)	-.21 (.36)
Election campaign period – 2007		-.32 (.35)	-.30 (.34)	-.65 (.51)
Public Channel (VRT=1, VTM=0)		-.07 (.30)	-.06 (.23)	.11 (.24)
Journalist: gender			.02 (.26)	-.22 (.35)
Journalist: routine			.01 (.00) ***	.00 (.00)
Journalist: political journalist				.02 (.06)
Journalist: party preference (incumbent party=1, opposition party=0)				.42 (.41)
Intercept	.22 (.15)	-.89 (.38) *	-1.30 (.39) ***	-.59 (.80)
<i>Random effects</i>				
Level 2 variance	.63 (.03)	.73 (.03)	.21 (.05)	.00 (.00)
Log likelihood	-535.91553	-521.85847	-514.98572	-255.305
Ni / Nj	847/82	847/82	847/82	465/16

Table 18: Balance, dependent variable political balance, starting point: at least one Federal opposition politician present as speaking news source: multilevel statistical estimates. Table entries are coefficient estimates with standard errors in parentheses. * = $p \leq .05$ ** = $p \leq .01$ *** = $p \leq .001$.

Parameter	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
<i>Fixed effects</i>									
Duration of the item (in seconds)				.01 (.00)	***		.01 (.00)	***	
International news				-.91 (.42)	*		-.71 (.46)		
Party organization topic				.37 (.18)	*		.40 (.21)		
Soft news				-.28 (.35)			-.22 (.39)		
Election news				.43 (.18)	*		.55 (.21)	**	
Election campaign period – 2004				.83 (.36)	*		.79 (.41)	*	
Public Channel (VRT=1, VTM=0)				.00 (.20)			-.07 (.19)		
Journalist: gender							-.13 (.28)		
Journalist: routine							.00 (.00)		
Journalist: political journalist							.05 (.05)		
Journalist: party preference (incumbent party=1, opposition party=0)							.89 (.51)		
Intercept	-.51 (.13)	***		-1.78 (.30)	***		-2.32 (.78)	***	
<i>Random effects</i>									
Level 2 variance	.11 (.02)			.05 (.02)			.00 (.02)		
Log likelihood	-560.679			-532.051			-408.136		
Ni / Nj	835/24			835/24			650/18		

Table 19: Dependent variable political balance, starting point: at least one Flemish Regional incumbent politician present as speaking news source: ML statistical estimates. Table entries are coefficient estimates with s.e. in parentheses. °= $p \leq .10$ *= $p \leq .05$ ** = $p \leq .01$ *** = $p \leq .001$.

Parameter	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Fixed effects</i>			
Duration or the item (in seconds)		.01 (.00) ***	.01 (.00) *
Specific party-related topic		-.58 (.27) *	-.78 (.31) *
International news		.30 (.42)	.48 (.96)
Soft news		.42 (.63)	.18 (.70)
Election news		-.51 (.26) *	-.70 (.31) *
Election campaign period – 2004		.17 (.37)	.11 (.47)
Public Channel (VRT=1, VTM=0)		-.12 (.25)	.01 (.30)
Journalist: gender			-.02 (.43)
Journalist: routine			-.00 (.00)
Journalist: party preference (incumbent party=1, opposition party=0)			.84 (.69)
Journalist: political journalist			.08 (.07)
Intercept	.38 (.12) ***	-.26 (.42)	-1.37 (1.12)
<i>Random effects</i>			
Level 2 variance	.00 (.00)	.00 (.08)	.00 (.00)
Log likelihood	-206.052	-196.083	-146.095
Ni / Nj	305/18	305/18	231/15

Table 20: Balance, dependent variable political balance. Starting point: at least one Flemish regional opposition politician present as speaking news source. Multilevel statistical estimates. Table entries are coefficient estimates with standard errors in parentheses. °= $p \leq .10$ *= $p \leq .05$ ** = $p \leq .01$ *** = $p \leq .001$.

Parameter	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Fixed effects</i>			
Item-related variables:			
Duration or the item (in seconds)	.02 (.00) ***	.02 (.01) ***	.02 (.01) ***
International news	.04 (.60)	.10 (.59)	.10 (.59)
Party organization topic	-.08 (1.06)	.27 (1.08)	.41 (1.06)
Soft news	.61 (.91)	.87 (.92)	.67 (.92)
Media system-related variables:			
Media Competition			.07 (.34)
Political system-related variables:			
Effective number of parties			.32 (.20)
Percentage of majority in parliament			.05 (.03)
Broadcaster-specific variable:			
Dependence on commercial revenues		.22 (.20)	.31 (.19) °
Work pressure		.52 (.32)	.23 (.45)
Level of sensationalism		-.12 (.05) *	-.11 (.06) °
Journalist-specific variables:			
Journalist: political journalist			
Journalist: routine (# items)			
Journalist: gender (1=female, 0=male)			
Journalist: generalist			
Intercept	-1.16 (.83)	1.08 (1.54)	-3.14 (2.45)
<i>Random effects</i>			
Level 2 variance – journalist	.98 (.97)	.50 (.81)	.47 (.80)
Level 3 variance – country	.33 (.53)	.33 (.50)	.04 (.33)
Log likelihood	-99.1493	-95/4486	-93.4432
Ni / Nj / Nk	214/132/12	214/132/12	214/132/12

Table 21: Balance, dependent variable political balance, starting point: at least one national opposition politician present as speaking news source: multilevel statistical estimates. Table entries are coefficient estimates with standard errors in parentheses. ° = $p \leq .10$ * = $p \leq .05$ ** = $p \leq .01$ *** = $p \leq .001$. Log-Likelihood of the null-model: -107.8452.

APPENDIX D³⁴. Short overview of (television news) media markets and broadcasters in the countries of the sample of this Ph.D. study

UK

While British newspaper media are amongst the most partisan in the world, British television news has a strong tradition of impartial and objective newsmaking, since all terrestrial broadcasters are obliged to fair and balanced reporting by law or statute (Brandenburg, 2006).

The British public broadcaster BBC is the largest broadcasting corporation in the world. It is a public service broadcaster, established by a Royal Charter and funded by the licence fee that is paid by UK households. ITV1 is the UK's main Free-to-air commercial public service broadcaster. The ITV network is not formally speaking a national TV broadcaster, as it is constituted by 15 regional licencees. ITV's Evening News is made by ITN, that also makes newscasts for Channel 4. The latter and Sky News have significantly lower audiences shares than BBC and ITV news programs. The budget of ITV is significantly smaller than the one of BBC, and even Sky News.

BELGIUM

The Belgian media landscape is divided along the lines of the language-based communities. In this study, the Dutch-speaking and the French-speaking part of the country are considered separately.

BELGIUM: FLANDERS

In Flanders, there are only two players on the television news market: the public channel VRT (budget mainly by Flemish government funding, and a restricted part from commercial activities) and the private channel VTM. Another channel, VT4 has tried to enter the television news market several times, so far without significant success. At the time of the data gathering of this Ph.D., there were no general newscasts on other channels like VT4, VijfTV (both SBS at the time of this research period) or Vitaya. The Flemish television news market is a duopoly. Private television was introduced in 1989, and proved to be successful, also for what television news is concerned. VTM news broadcasts were aimed to compete directly with the public channel newscasts. In the recent years, however, VRT has won back the dominant position on the news market with their main evening newscast. There is hardly any competition from foreign stations.

³⁴ Sources: European audiovisual Observatory (www.privatetelevision.eu) ; TNS-mrbi RTÉ Corporate Reputation Survey 2006; <http://www.kijkonderzoek.nl>, the Euromedia Handbook (Kelly, Mazzoleni & McQuail, 2004).

BELGIUM: FRENCH-SPEAKING COMMUNITY

In the French-speaking part of Belgium, RTBF is the public channel, mainly funded by regional government money. The private broadcaster RTL-tvi was introduced in 1982 (licensed in 1987), operating with a Luxemburg license. This channel is part of the RTL-group. Other competition including national television news casts is not available in the French-speaking part of Belgium, even if the French-speaking population is also inclined to consider television channels (and news) from France.

THE NETHERLANDS

The public broadcasting system in the Netherlands is a special case. It is based on the principle of external pluralism, involving many public broadcasting organizations. These are member-based associations sharing common facilities. NOS is a coordinating organization, and also has a statutory obligation to make (objective) news and sports programs for the three Dutch public television channels and the Dutch public radio services. The flagship newscast NOS Journaal at 20h has around 1.5 million viewers on average.

The main private competitor RTL4 targets young adults between 20 and 49. Over a million people watch the news at RTL4 (RTL Nieuws), which is slightly less than the NOS Journaal. Another private competitor, SBS6 (SBS group) also provides a newscast (Hart van Nederland), which has a specific focus on local and regional news stories.

FRANCE:

After the gathering of French public channels under the umbrella of France Télévisions, Antenne2 is called France2. It has the largest audience in France, after TF1, which was the first free-to-air commercial generalist channel in France. It started as a public channel, but became a private channel in 1987 (largest share owned by Bouygues). This channel has the highest market shares in France. Some more competition on the news market exists in France, mainly by M6 (RTL-group).

GERMANY

Germany's public television is based on cooperation between the different regions (Länder), and financed by a system of license fees. They first established ARD, and later also ZDF. This second public broadcaster is run as an independent non-profit corporation under the authority of the Länder, the sixteen states that make up the Federal Republic of Germany. This leads to a unique situation with two competing public broadcasters, in addition to numerous private competitors,

also broadcasting television news (RTL, Sat1-ProSieben etc.). RTL (° 1984) has the largest audience share in Germany.

TURKEY:

Turkey has a public broadcaster TRT and many private channels (ShowTv, StarTv, CNN Türk, Fox Türk, Canal D as the biggest ones) sending general news broadcasts. Some of those operate from outside the borders via satellite, or are even targeted at the Turkish diasporas. The Turkish media system is an example of the consequences of what Hallin & Mancini (2004) call “savage deregulation”, resulting a.o. in a high level of sensationalism (Uce & De Swert, 2007; De Swert, Hardy & Lefevre, Unpublished). Star was Turkey’s first free-to-air generalist private channel. They often reach the highest ratings of the private channels for their flagship daily newscast.

U.S.

In the U.S., there are many television broadcasters, due to the size of the country. Networks provide programs to regional affiliates or to their own channel. This is what CBS, ABC and NBC do with e.g. news programs. Until recently, in the U.S. a tradition existed that the network broadcasters had to follow the standards and guidelines set by the Federal Communications Commission, which for example included the requirement to balance (controversial) news coverage (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2008). There is not one central public broadcaster company in the U.S. , but there is the PBS network, which is a non-profit, non-commercial educational, publicly owned service providing programs to many regional and local affiliates.

ITALY

The Italian broadcasting system is often discussed, both in academic and in societal debate (e.g. Sani & Segatti, 1998; Roncarolo, 2008; Durante & Knight, 2009). This has a lot to do with the role of Silvio Berlusconi and his ownership of Mediaset, a media company holding some of the main private television channels in Italy. The debate is often about the objectivity of information. Traditionally, Italy held on to a form of external pluralism within the public broadcaster RAI (which had a monopoly until 1976), with different boards for different public channels, always appointed by political parties. When Silvio Berlusconi became prime minister of Italy and controlled both RAI and the Mediaset channels like Canale 5 and RETE4, this was considered a problem by many observers.

Italy also has a tradition of strict rules on covering politics in elections times (Roncarolo, 2008). They are e.g. required to balance all statements if possible. But

at the same time, this is no guarantee for unbiased news coverage, since the rules are complicated and thus it is easily possible to find a backdoor (Roncarolo, 2008). Half of the RAI's revenues come from license fees, and the other half from advertising. TG1 (RAI Uno) is the largest television news broadcast, followed by TG5 (Canale5) from mediaset.

IRELAND

RTE is the main news broadcaster in Ireland. Three quarters of the population considers it to be their main source of news. It is one of the oldest public television channels in the world, and it is funded by both television license fee and advertising. There is competition within Ireland by TV3 (° 1998), a private channel with a general newscast intended to compete with the RTE newscasts.

NORWAY

In Norway, NRK is the public broadcaster. Since 1958 they have national newscast (Dagsrevyen), which is by far the most popular television program (around one million viewers on a daily basis). TV2 (°1992) is the largest private channel in Norway, and has with TV2 Nyhetene the largest and only significant competitor for NRK Dagsrevyen.

CANADA

In Canada, there is a federally funded public broadcaster/network (CBC), which provides a.o. general television news broadcasts, which can be watched all over Canada using a network of local broadcasters. The budget is supplemented by the fruits of commercial advertising on television. The main private television channel providing a national newscast, is CTV (° 1961, Bell Media). It was meant to be an alternative for the CBC.