

**Was Lampedusa a key event for immigration news?**  
**An analysis of the effects of the Lampedusa disaster on immigration coverage in**  
**Germany, Belgium, and Italy**

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## **Abstract**

In the current paper, we investigate how the Lampedusa shipwreck disaster in October 2013 affected newspaper coverage in three European countries (Belgium, Germany, and Italy). Based on data from a quantitative comparative content analysis, we conclude that Lampedusa can be regarded a key event for immigration coverage, but only in Italy, where journalists devoted a considerable amount of attention to the disaster. We also find that the structure and the general tone of immigration coverage changed after the event. However, those changes were only short-termed and immigration coverage quickly returned to its routine level.

Keywords: international comparison, content analysis, news coverage

## **Was Lampedusa a key event for immigration news? An analysis of the effects of the Lampedusa disaster on immigration coverage in Germany, Belgium, and Italy**

In the past years, immigration has become one of the most prevalent issues in European politics. Between 2012 and 2016, the number of asylum seekers in Europe has considerably increased from 335,300 to 1,260,900 (Eurostat, 2019), accompanied by a growing public awareness towards the issue (Dennison, 2019), and an increase in media coverage across many European states (e.g., the UK: Allen, 2016, Belgium: Jacobs, Damstra, Boukes, & Swert, 2018, Germany and France: Caviedes, 2018). Although this particular time period suggests a close link between the amount of immigration and media attention, most longitudinal studies show that immigration coverage is often detached from long-term real-world developments, such as actual immigration inflows (Jacobs et al., 2018; Vliegenthart & Boomgaarden, 2007). This finding has led some researchers to the assumption that part of the changes observed in immigration coverage are more short-termed in nature and influenced by single events catching the media's attention (Eberl et al., 2018; Vliegenthart & Boomgaarden, 2007).

An example of such a potentially influential event is the 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck that cost the lives of more than 350 refugees<sup>1</sup> drowning near the Italian coast and making it the deadliest migration-related disaster at the time. The sheer number of victims could have made the Lampedusa disaster a newsworthy event not only for the Italian media, but also for other media across Europe, because EU members have a common migration and asylum policy sharing a common responsibility for securing EU borders. Moreover, research has shown that unexpected, unusual events can serve as *key events* (Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995), which alert the media and not only lead to more reports about the event itself, but also increase the likelihood that related or similar events are covered. In addition, they can even

change established frames of coverage, by directing the media's attention to specific aspects of an issue.

Against this background, this paper asks whether the Lampedusa catastrophe served as a key event for immigration coverage. More specifically, we want to know whether the event changed the amount, the framing, and the tone of coverage on immigration in general. In contrast to prior studies, our analysis is not restricted to one country but takes a comparative perspective by analyzing newspaper coverage in Belgium, Germany, and Italy over a period of 18 months between January 2013 and April 2014.

### **Immigration in Germany, Belgium, and Italy**

Research has repeatedly shown that journalistic coverage on immigration varies across countries and is influenced by contextual factors on the national level (e.g., Benson, 2013; Benson & Hallin, 2007). In order to explain the selection of the countries in the current study and to offer a frame for the interpretation of the results, we will provide brief descriptions of the country-specific contexts regarding immigration in Germany, Belgium, and Italy. For the period of investigation underlying this study, we focus on the political situation, public opinion, and media coverage.

#### **Germany**

Two main aspects characterized Germany's position during the so-called refugee crisis. On the one hand, the country played (and still plays) a central role in European immigration politics, not only because of its economic and political power, but also its relatively refugee-friendly policy in the early stage of events. Merkel's famous statement "Wir schaffen das!" ("We will make it!"), at a press conference in August 2015 (Bundespressekonferenz, 2015) probably best summarizes the official German position at that point in time. However, the resulting influx of refugees, especially from Syria, did not go without harsh criticism by parts of the population and the political right. Whereas in winter 2015, the German media were

particularly positive regarding the German “welcome culture”, this picture changed already in January 2016, after immigrants were involved in a series of sexual harassment incidents on new year’s eve in Cologne and other German cities (Maurer, Jost, Haßler, & Kruschinski, 2019). Public opinion followed the increasing salience of the issue. Whereas in 2012 roughly 10% of the population named immigration, when asked about the two most important issues in their country, this share reached 76% in autumn 2015 (Dennison, 2019).

### **Belgium**

Immigration politics in Belgium can be characterized as rather restrictive. Although the country’s national government, which was formed in 2011 after a long period of negotiations, did not include the right-wing nationalist N-VA, the immigration reforms implemented afterwards “all share the overarching goal of making it harder for foreigners to come to Belgium when they are perceived to be non-economically productive or undesirable. By contrast, access for those that are highly skilled has been facilitated in Belgium and even encouraged” (Gsir, Lafleur, & Stanek, 2016, p. 1659). With regard to the Belgium media (in Flanders), Beckers and Van Aelst (2019) show that from 2003 to 2014, public service and private broadcasting services paid relatively little attention to immigration, with only slight variations over the years. This changed in 2015, when the share of news items devoted to immigration increased from 2% to 11% on the public broadcaster and from 1% to 5 % on the news of the commercial broadcaster. Public opinion followed a quite similar pattern and remained constant until 2014, with about 20% percent of the population classifying immigration as one of the two most important issues of the country. However, this share almost doubled in 2015 (Dennison, 2019).

### **Italy**

Italy represents a special case in the current study for two reasons: First, it is the country where the supposed key event (the Lampedusa shipwreck), took place. Second, it serves as a

key entry point to the EU for many African refugees. Italy is therefore much more directly affected by the recent migrant movements and of course the Lampedusa disaster itself (e.g. by providing help and support). The political and media debate in Italy has been particularly controversial and evolved around several aspects of the issue including the Mare Nostrum and Triton rescue operations, the question of responsibility for EU border control, the processing of refugees arriving at the Italian coast, and the conditions for acceptance (Colombo, 2018). Not very surprisingly, public opinion also reacted to these developments. In 2012, after a ten-year period of low perceived relevance, still only 2% of Italians saw immigration as one of the country's two most important problems. However, in the following years, this share increased gradually and reached its peak of 40% in 2016 (Dennison, 2019). Compared to the other countries in our sample, Italy experienced the most significant growth rate regarding public concern about immigration, even though its highest absolute level was still considerably lower than Germany's.

### **How key events can shape the news**

As our remarks in the previous paragraphs have shown, immigration is a regular, but also quite volatile part of media coverage, with phases of low and high visibility. Fluctuations in media visibility are relevant, since high media attention carries the potential that the public will perceive immigration as an important issue (Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs, 2005) and can also increase its chances to make it on the political agenda (Dekker & Scholten, 2017; Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). In attempts to explain why the media pay different amounts of attention to immigration over time, researchers have examined a broad array of potential factors (see Eberl et al., 2018 for an overview) including immigrant influx (Jacobs et al., 2018) or the broader political context (Allen, 2016; Benson, 2013). Although all these factors contribute to the visibility of the issue in the media to some extent, they do not account for all its variation. Jacobs et al. (2018) e.g., found that the relationship between the

amount of immigration coverage and potential statistical real world indicators (e.g. influx) is low overall. In searching for additional factors, various scholars have proposed to focus on the influence of external events, which might especially explain short-termed changes in immigration coverage (e.g., Eberl et al., 2018; Vliegthart & Boomgaarden, 2007). In the following paragraphs, we pick up this idea and elaborate on the role of key events in the context of immigration coverage. Specifically, we ask whether an unexpected, dramatic event has the power to put the issue of immigration on the media agenda and/or changes the way it is covered.

### **The concept of key events**

Generally, *events* can be defined as spatially and temporally finite occurrences. However, they do not have an inherent, fixed beginning or end, as these qualities are subject to individual and collective interpretation, that is often shaped in public discourse (e.g., Kepplinger, 2001). There is no consensus in the literature as to why and when an event becomes a key event. While some argue that unusual, unexpected, extremely negative, controversial events, or such that combine multiple news factors are more likely to become key events (i.e., severe accidents, terror attacks, economic crises) (Brosius & Eps, 1995, p. 393; Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009) others hold the view that there is only a “loose connection between the character of the happenings and their becoming a key event.” (Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995, p. 373; Vasterman, 2005). The argument behind this reasoning is that many events are not covered, although they *could* be expected to become key events based on their substantial characteristics (i.e. news factors). The reasons why potential key events may not become one include competing news events, the lack of attention by opinion-leading media or powerful actors like politicians, or the lack of resonance with culturally dominant perspectives on an issue (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; Vasterman, 2005).

Because of the fact that they are not easy to predict from mere event characteristics, key events are typically defined ex-post, based on how they are covered by the media. For example, according to Brosius and Eps (1995, p. 406), a key event can be defined an event which generates “intensive coverage of the events themselves and a lasting impact on subsequent coverage”. This is the central idea behind the notion of key events: an event that (a) is covered intensively, (b) changes the criteria of news selection by lowering the threshold for similar events and linked issues to become news, and (c) changes the way these are covered. In fact, the importance of certain events for news making is also investigated under other labels. Among the terms used in the literature are “trigger events” (Wolfsfeld, 2004), “catastrophic events” (e.g., Ross & Bantimaroudis, 2006), “crisis events” (Gamson, 1992), or “mega stories” (Vasterman, 2005). In addition, there is a close connection to concepts like “media storms” (Boydston, Hardy, & Walgrave, 2014), “news waves”, and “media hypes” (Vasterman, 2005; Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009). However, several scholars stress the specific role of self-reinforcing processes in the news media and a certain kind of conformity in the news as a characteristic feature of media-hypes (e.g., Vasterman, 2005, pp. 515–516). Therefore, we consider key events, for which this is not necessarily the case, the more general concept.

The relevance of key events, lies not only in the way they can change coverage and news routines, but also in their potential to influence the public agenda (e.g., Brosius & Kepplinger, 1992, p. 19) as well as citizens’ attitudes, perceptions of groups and problems (Boomgaarden & de Vreese, 2007). Even policy changes are possible, as studies in the realm of political science show. Here, the respective events are referred to as “focusing events” that can serve as a spotlight, highlighting societal problems, and create public awareness for an issue (Birkland & Schwaeble, 2019, June 25).



## Consequences of key events for media coverage

The dynamics of key event coverage and its consequences have been investigated, for example, in the context of xenophobic attacks (Brosius & Eps, 1995), terrorism (Boomgaarden & de Vreese, 2007; Ross & Bantimaroudis, 2006), economic breakdowns (Geiß, Weber, & Quiring, 2017; Kepplinger, Köhler, & Post, 2015), and other negative issues (diseases, traffic accidents, earthquakes; Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995). Several reasons are discussed why such changes in subsequent coverage may occur. Scheufele (2006, p. 69) argues that key events cause uncertainty among journalists as to how they should be understood. Because these events are so unexpected and extraordinary, they do not fit into existing schemata and cannot be handled properly with established routines of news-making. Therefore, they generate an intense need for orientation, urging journalists to question common routines and interpretations: Had they overlooked or underestimated a problem? Did they look at the issue from all sides? Did they consider all the relevant aspects, actors, and implications? And what are the implications for future reporting? This uncertainty among journalists and their need for orientation following an outstanding event can result in changes of the amount, frames, and tone of coverage about the event itself, about similar events, and issue(s) connected to it. Moreover, even news routines, formats, or mindsets of journalism might be affected (Elmelund-Praestekaer & Hopmann, 2017). These more substantial changes, however, are beyond the scope of this article, which concentrates on three basic aspects of immigration coverage: the amount, framing, and tone.

With respect to the *amount of coverage*, key events have been shown to increase the likelihood for further coverage about the event itself, about similar events, and about issue connected to the event (Boydston et al., 2014; Brosius & Eps, 1995; Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995). The reason is that key events focus the attention of journalists, structure subsequent research, and alter news decisions (e.g., Brosius & Eps, 1995, p. 395).

Self-referential processes of journalistic co-orientation in which opinion-leading media may play a key role contribute to this (Reinemann, 2008). In addition, as mentioned above, politics and civil society may also react to the event, providing even more reasons for coverage. But how much increase in coverage is sufficient to justify speaking of a key event, news wave, or media storm? Although this question has been discussed by several authors (e.g., Vasterman, 2005; Wien & Elmelund-Præstekær, 2009), scholars have not yet arrived at a consensus. One rather concrete suggestion comes from Boydston et al. (2014). They argue that the number of articles on an issue should increase at least by 150 percent and that the attention for the issue should last for at least one week, meaning that seven days after a key event 20 percent or more of newspaper front page stories should be devoted to the event. Only then should the label “media storm” be justified.

With respect to the *framing of coverage*, key events have the ability to change how an issue is discussed and defined in the press. However, while some argue that key events may offer the possibility for outsiders to challenge traditional elite dominance in the news (Lawrence, 2000), others assume that key events may on the contrary lead to rally around the government phenomena in which elite frames are generally accepted and adopted by the media (see Geiß et al., 2017, for a discussion). For example, Ross and Bantimaroudis (2006, p. 86) argue that “major events” may “empower groups whose voices and ideas were previously muted or marginalized, and this inclusion may lead to revised understandings of problems and solutions.” More generally, key events often seem to spark frame contests in which media and interested actors try to push their framing of an event (Lawrence, 2000; Scheufele, 2006). But the outcome of such contests may differ depending on elite consensus and the cultural resonance of frames. Not always are elites able to establish a dominant perspective (e.g., Geiß et al., 2017) and not always does it come to a cross-media consonance of frames (Ross & Bantimaroudis, 2006).

Regarding the *tone of coverage*, key events may also influence the way issues and groups are presented because of the way issues are framed (see above) and because of the voices that are covered. For example, the tone of coverage about immigrants in the Netherlands became more negative in the immediate aftermath of a terror attack by a Muslim extremist (Boomgaarden & de Vreese, 2007).

These changes of patterns of coverage may only be short-term, but can also be mid- or long-term. Although there is no agreed upon definition of what time-frames these intervals really refer to, it seems that the notion of “short-term“ often refers to the first few days after an event, whereas changes in the mid- or long-term refer to the coming weeks, months or years (Boomgaarden & de Vreese, 2007; Geiß et al., 2017; Scheufele, 2006). However, research has not come up with convincing explanations to explain these differences. What can be said is that while some studies find that changes of amount, framing and tonality are confined to the short-term (Kepplinger et al., 2015, e.g.), others seem to indicate that those changes can also last several weeks (e.g., Geiß et al., 2017) or that framing may even shift at a later point in time in comparison to the immediate aftermath of an event (e.g., Boomgaarden & de Vreese, 2007).

### **Hypotheses**

In sum, the literature review suggests that key events matter for the salience of the related issue in the news, and that this in turn can affect public opinion and even public policy. This study contributes to this line of research by looking at the amount, framing, and tone of coverage of an event that *could* become a key event due to its substantial characteristics. At face value, the Lampedusa disaster has at least the potential to meet this criterion. To begin with, the Lampedusa shipwreck on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October 2013, was the deadliest migrant shipwreck officially recorded in the Mediterranean so far. The Italian Coast Guard was able to rescue 155 survivors, but at least 350 people were initially declared

missing. After access was gained to the sunken boat, the confirmed death toll reached 359 by October 12<sup>th</sup>. Furthermore, the disaster evoked reactions from both Italian and European politicians that highlighted the need for a joint European answer to the growing problem of boat refugees. As an immediate result of the Lampedusa accident, the Italian government launched “Operation Mare Nostrum”, a one year search and rescue operation by Italian armed forces to rescue immigrants trying to reach Italian soil. In short, the Lampedusa disaster had an unseen number of casualties and led to immediate political reactions from both Italy and the EU. We therefore assume that the Lampedusa event fulfills these criteria and therefore put forward the following first hypothesis regarding the amount of coverage:

*H1:* The 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck caused a sharp increase in the amount of immigration coverage, which comprised more than the immediate event coverage and lasted longer than the first few days after the event.

Due to the catastrophic character of the Lampedusa disaster, the event might not only have affected the issue’s visibility, but also the framing and the tone of coverage. In the case of the Lampedusa catastrophe, this implies that immigrants were more visible and that the humanitarian aspects of immigration should be highlighted more than before. We therefore hypothesize with respect to the framing of immigration after the Lampedusa catastrophe:

*H2:* The 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck changed the framing of immigration coverage by increasing the relative presence of immigrant actors in the news.

*H3:* The 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck changed the framing of immigration coverage by increasing the amount of stories depicting immigrants as victims.

In addition, because of the disaster, the general evaluation of immigration and thus the tone of coverage might have been affected because of the fact that the cost of human life and the humanitarian aspects of immigration were put in the spotlight of attention. This should lead to a more sympathetic tone of coverage. We therefore hypothesize:

*H4:* The 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck changed the *tone of immigration coverage* by increasing the amount of stories presenting a positive picture of immigration.

Finally, although immigration and asylum can be regarded a problem and responsibility of all EU members, who have generally agreed on a common (external) border management, we still assume that media coverage will be most affected in the country in which the disaster actually took place. This assumption is supported by studies on the news value of foreign news finding that the geographical distance between the country of origin and the reporting country as well as a countries involvement in the events are strong predictors of media visibility (Jones, Van Aelst, & Vliegenthart, 2013; Shoemaker, Danielian, & Brendlinger, 1991; Zerback & Holzleitner, 2017). The more foreign news can be “domesticated”, the more newsworthy they become (Clausen, 2004).

We therefore put forward our last hypothesis:

*H5:* The 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck had the strongest effects on Italian immigration coverage when compared to the coverage in Belgium and Germany.

### **Method**

To test our assumptions, we conducted a comparative quantitative content analysis of immigration news in Belgium (Flanders), Germany, and Italy.<sup>2</sup> Except for Italy, which according to Hallin and Mancini (2007) can be categorized as a Polarized Pluralist media system, Belgium and Germany are representatives of the Democratic Corporatist Model. But despite these general differences and similarities of their media systems, we have seen that each country provides unique immigration-specific contexts, which according to our theoretical outline, should influence how key events affect immigration coverage. Besides more or less restrictive immigration policies represented by Belgium and Germany, Italy stands out because of its geographical distance and direct involvement, not only in the Lampedusa disaster itself, but also as a main entry point of African immigrants.

To get a comprehensive overview on immigration news, to reach a certain level of heterogeneity within the countries, and to avoid large systematic differences between them, we selected 5-6 national and regional newspapers in each nation, differing in terms of political leanings (conservative / liberal), audience preferences (lowbrow / highbrow), and geographic focus (regional / national): Belgium (*De Morgen, de Standaard, De Tijd, Gazet van Antwerpen, Het Nieuwsblad, Het Laatste Nieuws*), Germany (*Die Welt, Berliner Morgenpost, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Tagesspiegel, Süddeutsche Zeitung, Stuttgarter Nachrichten*), Italy (*La Repubblica, Gazzetta di Modena, Il Giornale, Il Messaggero, Il Mattino*). In a first step, all articles between January 2<sup>nd</sup> 2013 and April 30<sup>th</sup> 2014 dealing with immigration were collected via online databases<sup>3</sup>. This relatively long period of investigation was important in order to identify short as well as mid- and long-term effects of the Lampedusa disaster (October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013) on immigration coverage. Immigration was defined according to the United Nations definition as the entrance and the presence of people in a country other than their nation of birth in order to settle down. After that, in a second step, human coders excluded all articles that did not discuss immigration in at least three sentences, resulting in a total sample of 2,059 news articles (Belgium:  $N = 642$ , Germany:  $N = 561$ , Italy:  $N = 856$ ).

As our unit of analysis, every article was coded quantitatively according to five categories. Besides a few exceptions, national and international intercoder reliability as indicated by Holsti's pairwise agreement ( $PA$ ) and Krippendorff's Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) was satisfying (see Table 2, Appendix). Somewhat problematic cases regarding reliability included Belgium, where the codings for "article tone" failed to reach the minimum standards for both measures ( $PA = .75$ ,  $\alpha = .61$ ). Unsatisfying Krippendorff scores were further obtained for the "immigration issue" category in Belgium ( $PA = .84$ ,  $\alpha = .53$ ) and the "immigrants as individuals or groups" category in Belgium ( $PA = .91$ ,  $\alpha = .62$ ) and Germany ( $PA = .80$ ,  $\alpha =$

.56) although in these cases, *PA* scores were on a satisfactory level. In two cases (immigration issue category in the German and International codings), a Krippendorff score of zero was observed, while values of pairwise agreement were almost perfect (Germany *PA* = .97, International *PA* = .97), which can be explained by a strong punishment the Krippendorff coefficient puts on slight deviations in codings that show no variation.

For each article, two formal categories were coded as indicators of issue importance and the attention devoted to immigration by journalists. The first one simply determined how prominent the news item was placed in the newspaper and distinguished whether it was a *front page story* or if it was found on the inner pages. As another indicator of issue importance, we recorded *article length* based on the approximate word count. Three article sizes were distinguished: (1) small articles (approx. less than 200 words), (2) medium articles (approx. between 200 and 400 words), (3) large articles (more than 400 words), and (4) extra-large articles (more than 600 words).

An additional category identified if *immigrants as individuals or groups* were present in the article. In this way, we were able to tell if the newspapers covered immigration in a depersonalized way or if the persons actually affected were part of the picture the media drew of immigration. Finally, two categories were used to examine how journalists evaluated immigration and immigrants. First, coders assessed the *general tone of immigration coverage* for each article. To do so, they first recorded the presence of viewpoints referring to immigration and immigrants. Those two variables were collapsed in one single indicator, called “viewpoints about immigration”, which consists of four categories: (1) Negative viewpoints: Negative characterization of immigrants and/or view of immigration as a threat. (2) Administrative burden viewpoints: Immigrants and/or immigration are seen as creating organizational/logistic problems. (3) Victimization of migrants: Immigrants are portrayed as victims. (4) Positive viewpoints: Positive characterization of immigrants and/or view of

immigration as an opportunity. The general tone variable was constructed by combining the four viewpoints. Explicitly negative (-2) and explicitly positive (+2) viewpoints received a larger weight than the administrative burden (-1), and victimization (+1) viewpoints. As a result, the scale ranges from -3 (very negative tone towards immigration) to +3 (very positive tone towards immigration).

In addition to the content analytic data and as a point of reference, we also gathered information on the number of deaths and missings in the Mediterranean Sea during our period of investigation. The data were derived from the database of the “The Migrants’ Files” (2016). The numbers represent immigrants, who died or went missing while approaching southern European borders via one of the Mediterranean routes defined by Frontex.

## **Results**

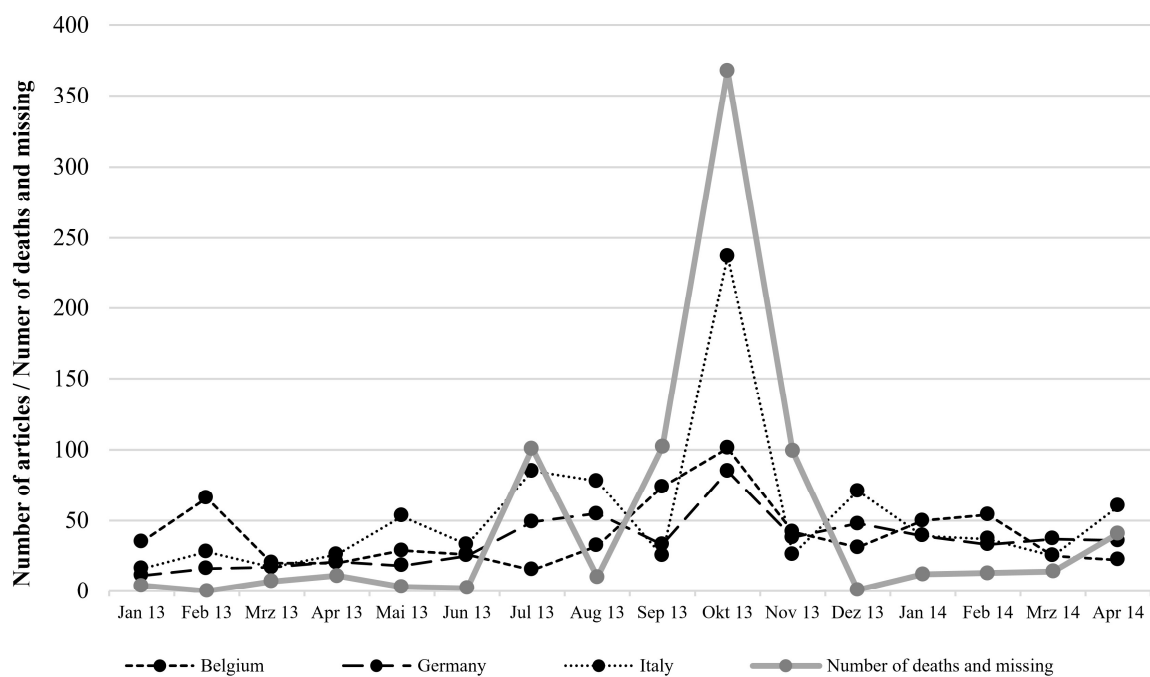
### **Lampedusa as a key event for immigration coverage**

In the first step of the analysis, we want to answer the question if the media in the three countries actually considered Lampedusa as a key event, which triggered journalistic attention for immigration as a general topic. To do so, we employ three indicators of journalistic attention: (1) The amount of articles on immigration, (2) the share of front-page-articles on immigration and (3) the length of immigration articles.

We first look at the amount of coverage devoted to the issue of immigration. If journalists really considered Lampedusa to be a key event, then one should be able to observe a considerable increase in the number of articles immediately after the event. Figure 1 shows the absolute number of immigration articles during the course of time in the three countries. It can be seen that the media reacted quite differently to the incident. The most obvious pattern is that only in Italy the number of articles on immigration increased considerably: Whereas in September 2013, Italian newspapers published only 20 articles on immigration, the respective amount was tenfold in October 2013, shortly after the disaster. Compared to that, coverage in



Belgium and Germany did not show such a distinctive pattern. Although the amount of coverage here also peaked in October, the increase was only marginal and very much on the same level as before and after Lampedusa. Italy also had the strongest relative increase of articles (+ 820%), whereas intensity changes in Belgium (+ 45%) and Germany (+ 145%) were considerably less pronounced. Therefore, only Italy passes the threshold for key events by exceeding a 150 percent increase in coverage (Boydstun et al., 2014).



*Note.*  $N = 2,059$  newspaper articles covering “immigration” as a topic and  $N = 788$  deaths or missing. The numbers of deaths and missing were derived from the database of the “The Migrants’ Files” (2016).

Figure 1. Number of articles including immigrants as actors

When journalists devote attention to a certain topic or event, they can also do that by placing it more prominently within the newspaper. Certainly, the most prominent spot is the title page, which usually contains the most relevant topics and events of the day. This should also apply for the Lampedusa disaster and we therefore identified the share of articles on immigration that made it to the title page. We proceed in two steps: First, we look at the number of title page stories during the week after Lampedusa to check if the event qualifies for a key event according to the criteria by Boydston et al. (2014). Second, we take a broader perspective by comparing three distinct phases throughout our period of investigation. The first phase is called “Before Lampedusa” and starts on Jan 2<sup>nd</sup> 2013 and ends on Oct 2<sup>nd</sup> 2013 one day before the accident. The second phase (“During Lampedusa”) covers the disaster itself on Oct 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013 and the three following weeks until Oct 26<sup>th</sup> 2013, when the amount of coverage went back to the routine level. The final phase (“After Lampedusa”) ranges from Oct 27<sup>th</sup> 2013 until the end of our investigation period on Apr 4<sup>th</sup> 2014. Dividing our period of investigation in the three phases allows us to analyze two aspects of newspaper coverage: On the one hand, we can detect changes in newspaper coverage following the Lampedusa disaster. On the other hand, we can answer the question if those changes are short or mid-term effects, by comparing phase 2 immediately after the incident and phase 3 that covers the following months.

The analysis of the number of front-page stories again shows that the Lampedusa disaster was interpreted as a key event only in Italy. During the week after the shipwreck, the Italian newspapers published a daily average of 3.86 front-page stories per newspaper, compared to only 0.86 in Belgium, and 0.69 in Germany. The share of immigration articles on the title pages of the newspapers across the three phases that allows us to identify long-term developments and comparisons can be found in Table 1. The results show that in two countries an effect on coverage can be observed. Again, the Italian newspapers seem to place

significantly more immigration stories on the front page during the second phase compared to the time before Lampedusa. This effect also seems to be rather long lasting, as in phase three, several months after the event, the share of front-page stories is still increased. A similar pattern can be observed in German newspapers, although – as the results in Figure 1 have shown – newspapers did not publish significantly more articles. However, compared to Italy, the share of stories placed on the front-page drops to its initial value shortly after the event. In Belgium, shares remained almost constant throughout the three phases, which again points to the fact that Lampedusa did not lead to more media attention devoted to immigration as a news topic in the country.

Table 1. Share of front-page articles and long articles with immigration as the main topic

	Share of front page articles			Share of long articles		
	Phase 1 Before Lampedusa	Phase 2 During Lampedusa	Phase 3 After Lampedusa	Phase 1 Before Lampedusa	Phase 2 During Lampedusa	Phase 3 After Lampedusa
Belgium	11.2 % <sup>a</sup>	16.0 % <sup>a</sup>	12.2 % <sup>a</sup>	60.2 % <sup>a</sup>	64.2 % <sup>a</sup>	63.3 % <sup>a</sup>
Germany	15.0 % <sup>a</sup>	29.3 % <sup>b</sup>	18.1 % <sup>a, b</sup>	60.2 % <sup>a</sup>	67.1 % <sup>a</sup>	61.9 % <sup>a</sup>
Italy	12.7 % <sup>a</sup>	26.2 % <sup>b</sup>	21.4 % <sup>b</sup>	6.0 % <sup>a</sup>	11.6 % <sup>b</sup>	7.3 % <sup>a, b</sup>

Front page articles: Belgium:  $\chi^2(2, N = 639) = 1.399, p = .497$ ; Germany:  $\chi^2(2, N = 540) = 7.776, p = .020$ ; Italy:  $\chi^2(2, N = 856) = 18.041, p = .000$ ; Article length: Belgium:  $\chi^2(2, N = 642) = 0.763, p = .683$ ; Germany:  $\chi^2(2, N = 553) = 1.187, p = .552$ ; Italy:  $\chi^2(2, N = 856) = 6.235, p = .044$ ; All:  $\chi^2(2, N = 2591) = 14.043, p = .001$ .

Cell entries with the same superscript do not differ significantly on the .05 level (z-test).

As a final indicator of journalistic attention, we analyzed how the length of articles devoted to immigration changed over time. Here, the emerging patterns only somewhat resemble to those previously obtained: In all three countries, the share of long articles (more than 400 words) increased during phase two and then fell back to its initial level. However, this increase was only significant in Italy.

Based on the previous analyses, Lampedusa can be considered a key event for immigration coverage, but only in the Italian case. Here, the three attention indicators employed (amount of coverage, front-page stories and article length) most consistently point to a considerable (at least) short-term increase in journalistic attention to the issue. Although some of the patterns observed for Italy were also present in the other countries, they are much less pronounced here. Hence, H1 is only supported in the Italian case.

### **The effects of Lampedusa on immigration news content**

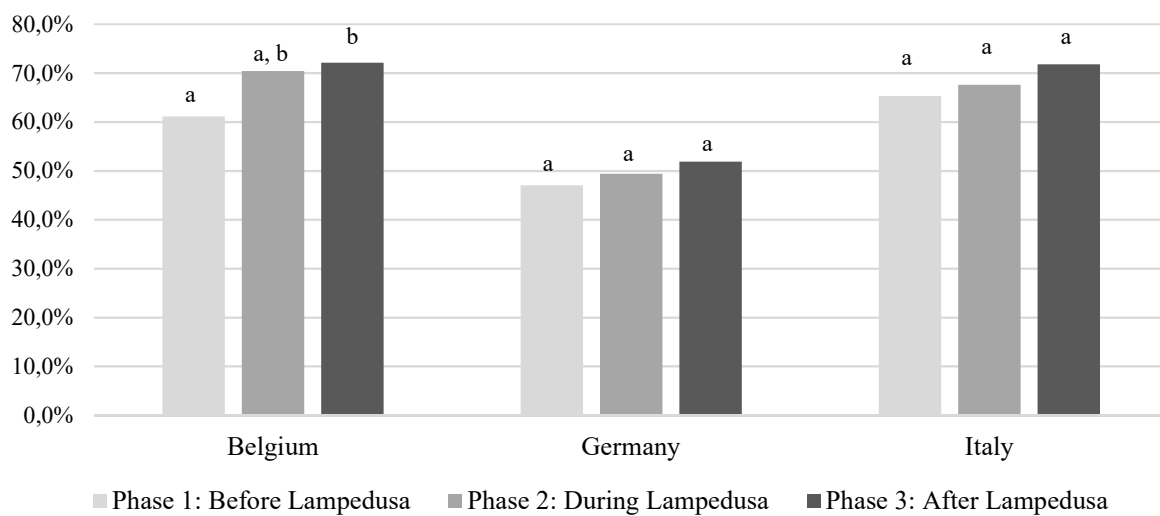
We predict that Lampedusa would also affect the structure of immigration coverage. In order to observe such effects, we take a closer look at three aspects of newspaper content structure: (1) the presence of immigrant actors in immigration coverage (H2), (2) the journalistic pronunciation of humanitarian aspects of immigration (victimization) (H3), and (3) the tone of immigration coverage in general (H4).

#### *The presence of immigrant actors in immigration coverage*

Not very surprising, immigrant actors are a central part of immigration coverage in all countries and mentioned relatively often within the articles analyzed (Figure 2). On average, two of three news stories depict immigrants as individuals or groups. There is also a trend across all countries towards extending this share over the course of time; however, the increase is not dramatic. Especially in Italy, where immigrant actors already appeared in 65% percent of the articles before Lampedusa, the event led only to a minor increase.

Nevertheless, a somewhat stronger trend can be observed in Belgium, where compared to

phase one, 11 percent more articles referred to immigrant actors after Lampedusa. Germany seems to be an exception, because although the country already showed the lowest share of immigrant actors in the news, still only a marginal increase in phase two can be observed. Given the increase of articles on immigration especially in Italy, one could conclude that all in all more immigrant actors appear in newspaper coverage, although their relative importance within immigration coverage has not changed very much.

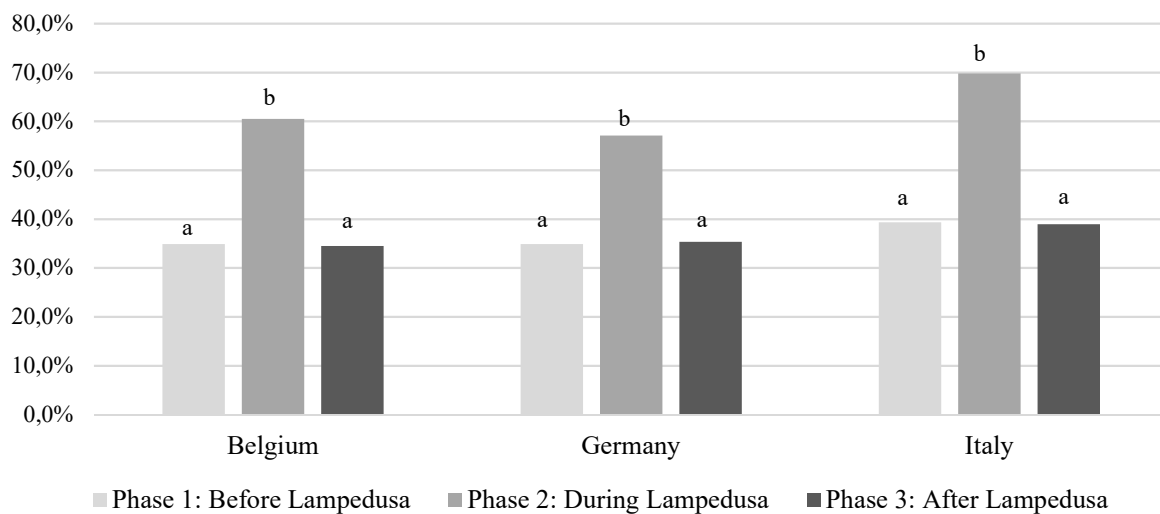


Belgium:  $\chi^2(2, N = 642) = 7.927, p = .019$ ; Germany:  $\chi^2(2, N = 561) = 1.174, p = .556$ ; Italy:  $\chi^2(2, N = 856) = 2.959, p = .231$ .

Bars with the same superscript within a single country do not differ significantly on the .05 level (z-test).

**Figure 2. Share of articles containing immigrant actors as individuals or groups**

Due to its catastrophic character and costs of human lives, we expected the Lampedusa disaster to increase the share of humanitarian aspects in immigration coverage, as indicated by an increased victimization during that phase. Figure 3 shows the share of immigration articles in which immigrants were presented as victims and it confirms this assumption. In all countries analyzed, the newspapers clearly victimized immigrants considerably stronger than before Lampedusa. Compared to the other aspects analyzed in this study, the trend towards victimization also was the most prevalent of all: In Germany and Italy the share of victimizing news stories increased by approximately one third and even more than doubled in Belgium. However, again it only lasted for three weeks until it fell back to its routine level (H3 supported).



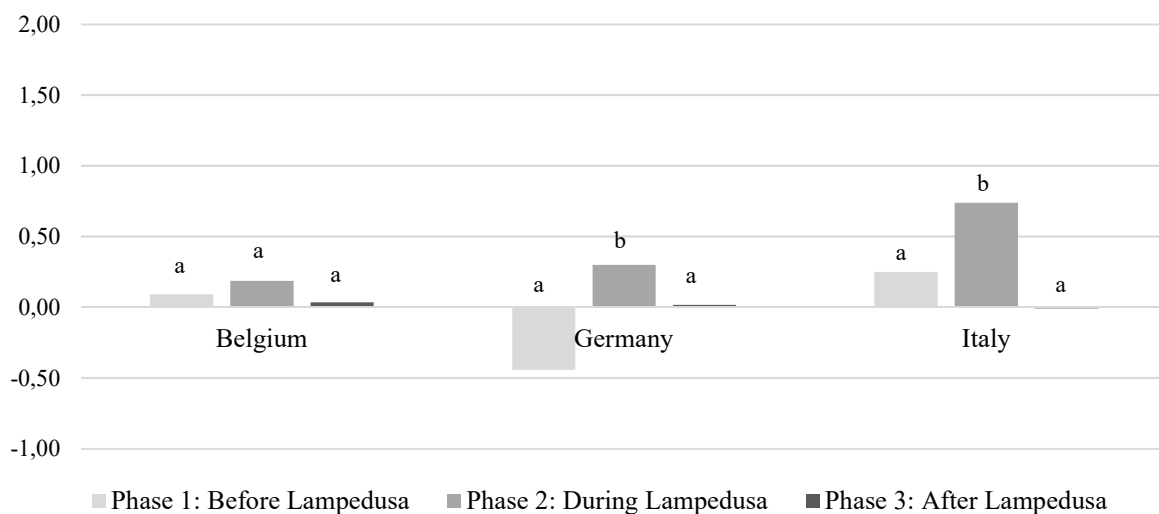
$\chi^2(2, N = 642) = 19.806, p = .000$ ; Germany:  $\chi^2(2, N = 561) = 13.658, p = .001$ ; Italy:  $\chi^2(2, N = 856) = 62.462, p = .000$ .

Bars with the same superscript within a single country do not differ significantly on the .05 level (z-test).

**Figure 3. Share of articles victimizing immigrants**

### *The tone of immigration coverage*

Because after the disaster, humanitarian aspects of the refugee crisis and the pitiful fates of the affected people (i.e., victimization) are emphasized in the media, we also expected a more positive general tone in immigration coverage compared to the period before the event (H4). Nevertheless, this change should be rather short termed because of the temporal character of the disaster and journalists should get back to their routine patterns fast. Figure 4 seems to confirm this general assumption. In all countries, the mean general tone of immigration coverage turned more positive although the effect was not very strong and only significant in the Italian case. Moreover, in phase three the average tone fell back to its original level in all countries after the acute emergency coverage ended. In Italy, newspapers even covered immigration more negatively than they did before Lampedusa.



Belgium:  $F(2, 641) = 0.389, p = .678$ ; Germany:  $F(2, 560) = 2.604, p = .075$ ; Italy:  $F(2, 855) = 14.464, p = .000$ .

Bars with the same superscript within a single country do not differ significantly on the .05 level (Duncan-test).

**Figure 4. General tone of articles on immigration (means)**



However, it should be kept in mind that with regard to the tone category, reliability scores in Belgium and in the international codings were rather low (see Table 2, Appendix). Finally, the overall pattern occurring in immigration coverage before, during and after Lampedusa does only partly support H5, which assumed that in Italy (as the only country directly affected by the disaster) the changes in coverage would be most pronounced. In fact, this was only true for the amount of attention the media paid to the immigration issue. All other trends detected (structure and tone of immigration news) were quite similar and no country specific patterns could be detected.

### **Conclusion**

This study tried to determine the effects of the Lampedusa disaster on immigration coverage. Our main assumption was that if Lampedusa represented a key event, immigration coverage should (1) receive considerably more attention during and after the event and (2) changes regarding the structure and tone of immigration news in general should be expected. To test if Lampedusa features the characteristics of a key event and to detect possible impacts we examined the time before, during and after the event and compared central characteristics of immigration coverage in national and regional newspapers across three European countries.

The results show that the disaster was not treated in the same way by the newspapers across the countries. In terms of the attention paid to immigration coverage, the strongest effects were observed in Italy where the media devoted a considerable amount of space to the event and also more often placed articles on immigration on the front page. Similar effects were observed in the other three nations, but far less pronounced. This confirms previous research that foreign events need to be domesticated in order to become prominent in the national press. The event in front of the Italian coast was seen as relative distant in Belgium and Germany. However, also in Italy the amount of coverage for the immigration issue

returned to its pre-Lampedusa level rather quickly. In that sense, the largest immigrant tragedy in the Mediterranean was not even a key event for the Italian press.

The same is true for the effects on the structure of the news. In the weeks after Lampedusa, some aspects of how immigration was covered were affected. Immigration news had a slightly more positive character and immigrants – although they did not show up more frequently as actors in the articles – were more often treated as victims by the newspapers across countries. All the reactions of the newspapers to the Lampedusa disaster were rather short-termed and only visible for a few weeks.

How should these results be interpreted? First, our findings underline the endurance of traditional news values and news routines that characterize journalistic work and what is considered newsworthy (Shoemaker, Chang, & Brendlinger, 1987). Many dramatic events get extra news attention, but very few can be considered as actual game changers in the way journalists work. Although hundreds of people died in the sea, it is possible that the Lampedusa tragedy lacked additional characteristics to influence coverage in a certain direction. For instance, at first sight, it seems that the powerful image of Alan Kurdi, the young child that was found dead on a Turkish beach, has sparked more public and journalistic outrage and compassion than other tragedies involving more casualties. This suggests that dramatic events also need powerful images to have a more profound impact. Still, an alternative explanation is that one key event is simply not enough to structurally change the news coverage of an issue, but that multiple successive key events on the same issue are necessary.

A second, more optimistic view, on our findings is that journalists reflect the real world better than often is assumed. Our analysis of the real world data and immigration coverage shows that both are closely connected. The Lampedusa tragedy got plenty of attention but immigration coverage returned back to normal as soon as the number of

immigrants dying at the southern European border declined. If this finding is consistent, immigration news should have risen again together with the new influx of immigrants in Europe and rising number of tragedies in the course of 2014 and 2015, as suggested in some studies (e.g., Beckers & Van Aelst, 2019).

Finally, from a theoretical point of view, our review of existing research on key events as well as our own results further underline the necessity to develop a common theoretical framework to analyze the impact of key events. Particularly, such a framework needs to offer a systematic description of the factors and conditions that turn events into key events. In addition to features of the event itself, identified by earlier studies (e.g., negativity, unexpectedness, and relevance), our results stress the importance of contextual factors on the national level as well. Since all countries in our sample were confronted with the same event, but showed different reaction patterns in the media, there is good reason to suggest that the national context (e.g., political, geographic) forms the breeding ground for the development of key events.

Of course, our study has some limitations that have to be considered when interpreting the data. Probably the most important one is that our media sample is not ideal, because—like other studies on immigration coverage (see Eberl et al., 2018 for an overview)—we focused on newspapers as a specific part of the media system. Although newspapers hold a central position, because other media tend to orient themselves towards them (e.g., Vliegthart & Walgrave, 2008), there still might be differences in the way other outlets (e.g., television channels) reacted to the Lampedusa disaster (Beckers & Van Aelst, 2019). Besides these limitations, we hope this study can serve as a source of inspiration to provide a more thorough picture of how news coverage is influenced by sudden key events in the short- and long-run.

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<sup>1</sup> There is a discussion whether to use the terms “migrant” or “immigrant”, because they conceal the more complex backgrounds behind each individual refugee case. When we use the terms in the paper, we do not intent this, but simply do so to follow the established scientific terminology and understanding.

<sup>2</sup> The original country sample also included the UK, which had to be excluded due to low intercoder reliability.

<sup>3</sup> Gopress in Belgium and LexisNexis in Germany, newspapers’ digital archives in Italy. The search string we used (adapted to the specific requirements of the database and language) read: Immigr\* OR migr\* OR (immigr! OR migr!) w/10 (foreign\* OR reunificat\* OR illegal\* OR irregul\*OR undocumented OR smuggl\* OR traffic\* OR detainee OR expel\* OR expulsion OR slumlord) OR diaspora OR refoulement OR (sham AND marriage) OR repatriate\* OR resettle\* OR asylum OR refugee OR (reception center) OR (processing centre)

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## Appendix

Table 2. Reliability scores (Holsti percent agreement and Krippendorff's Alpha)

	<b>Belgium</b>		<b>Germany</b>		<b>Italy</b>		<b>International</b>	
	Holsti	K-Alpha	Holsti	K-Alpha	Holsti	K-Alpha	Holsti	K-Alpha
Front page	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00
Article length	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	1,00	0,79	0,85
Issue immigr.	0,84	0,53	0,97	0*	0,98	0,94	0,97	0*
Immigrants	0,91	0,62	0,80	0,56	1,00	1,00	0,87	0,71
Tone	0,75	0,61	0,80	0,73	0,93	0,91	0,72	0,80
Overall	0,90	0,75	0,91	0,66	0,98	0,97	0,87	0,67

National reliability codings were performed by two coders per country and based on slightly different number of national articles (Belgium: 32, Germany: 30, Italy: 44). For the international reliability test, five articles were coded by two coders in each country.

\*The two zero scores result from scenarios in which one coder disagreed with all other coders in a single judgment regarding a binary category (0/1). While all others coded every item with "1" (immigration is the main topic, which it was in fact), one coder indicated "0" (immigration is not the main issue) in one case. Hence, although overall agreement as indicated by Holsti is high, but Krippendorff punishes such rare deviations very strongly. For the calculation of Holsti, the tone variable was recoded to indicate the general tendency of the article (positive, neutral, negative). Reliability scores of the tone category in Belgium and in the international codings did not reach a satisfactory level.