

## Look Who's Talking

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# LOOK WHO'S TALKING

## An analysis of actors in television news (2003–2016)

**Kathleen Beckers and Peter Van Aelst**

*Who gets to speak in the news plays a crucial role in the shaping of the news. Consequently, the study of actors in the news is an enduring topic in journalism studies. However, little systematic knowledge exists about differences between news issues in the occurrence of speaking actors. Based on a new fourfold classification of actors in the news, we study differences in actor prevalence over time, between broadcasters and issues. To do so, we analyze the entire population of television news items in Belgium from the two main broadcasters for the period 2003 to 2016. While we do not find large changes over time, significant differences exist between issues in the actors that get to speak in the news. Moreover, the prevalence of speaking actors differs between the public service and commercial broadcaster, even when controlling for news issues.*

**KEYWORDS** Commercial broadcaster; longitudinal content analysis; news issues; news sources; public service broadcaster; television news

Understanding who is allowed to speak in the news is a central topic in journalism studies. Studies of content diversity focus on the importance of having a variety of voices in the news and analyze the diversity of actors that get the opportunity to have their say and convey their point of view (Gans 1979). From a normative perspective, a plurality of voices in the news is perceived as one of the key elements in a democracy (Hansen 1991; McNair 2009). In this regard, news media are often considered as the “fourth estate” in democratic societies, and it is argued that they should inform audiences on matters of public policy by presenting and debating alternatives (Schultz 1998; Rønning 1999, 16; Milner 2002). Several studies found that a larger number of actors in the news also leads to a greater variety of viewpoints (Sheafer and Wolfsfeld 2009; Gans 2011; Strömbäck 2012; Masini and Van Aelst 2017). However, actors in the news are not only studied from a diversity perspective, but also from a perspective of power and access. Who gets to speak in the news here is a question of empowerment, as actors with regular access to the news media not only can shape the interpretation of events, but also ongoing meanings in a society (Lawrence 2000; Berkowitz 2009; Carlson 2009).

In sum, the study of the actors that get a voice in the news is an enduring topic in news media research. However, the research field lacks consensus on how actors should be classified into actor types. As far as we know, none of the studies focusing on actors or sources in the news used the exact same operationalization of actor categories. In our study, we go beyond the traditional elite–non-elite dichotomy, following more recent studies that stress the need for a more elaborate aggregate actor classification (De Keyser, Raeymaeckers, and Paulussen 2011; Tiffen et al. 2014; Kleemans, Schaap, and

Hermans 2015). Our classification consists of four broad categories: political and governmental actors; experts and professionals; civil society organizations and citizens. We believe this classification can be further specified to match the specific focus of a study, but essentially can be applied across all types of issues in the news.

A considerable body of research, varying in focus and method, has analyzed the appearance of various kinds of actors in news coverage. However, up to now, very little is known about differences between issues in the use of speaking actors, as studies either focused on the news in general across issues (e.g. Grabe, Zhou, and Barnett 1999; Tiffen et al. 2014), or on one specific issue (e.g. Hopmann and Shehata 2011; Strömbäck et al. 2013). Studies focusing on different issues found different results in actor prevalence and it can be expected that the actors that get the opportunity to have their say in the news are issue-dependent.

Using our proposed fourfold actor classification, the goal of this research is to gain an understanding of the prevalence of speaking actors in television news. This study analyzes *all* television news items from the period 2003–2016 ( $N = 203,619$  unique news items) from the two main Flemish broadcasters in Belgium. By doing so, this study provides a unique insight in the use of actors in television news over time, between broadcasters and issues.

## The Classification of Actors

To study actors in the news, a classification of actors in groups is necessary. In the literature on actors in the news, two broad tendencies can be found in their classification. First, the general news studies focus on actors in the news at an aggregate level and mostly use measures comprising a minimum amount of categories. Second, issue-specific studies use more elaborate actor classifications based on the functional roles actors have related to the issue under study. This leads to a more detailed insight into the diversity of actors in the news for that specific issue, but is not applicable across issues.

### *Aggregate Classification*

When looking at the research on actors in the news on a more aggregate level, the majority of studies focused on the traditional dichotomous distinction between elite/official and non-elite/unofficial sources (e.g. Bennett 1990; Lee 2001; Raeymaeckers et al. 2015; Vandenberghe, d'Haenens, and Van Gorp 2015; Splendore 2017). This simple twofold distinction, however, is rather rough to capture the complex and diverse nature of actors in the news. This is why some studies proposed to add an additional category to the aggregate dichotomous categorization of sources (e.g. Tiffen et al. 2014; Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2015). The underlying assumption is that not all sources that traditionally were classified as “elite” are comparable. They argue that a category “civil society sources” should be added to the actor categorization. With “civil society”, they point to a group of actors that does not belong to the “political/institutional” elite.

Tiffen et al. (2014) made a distinction between “political and institutional” sources and “civil society” sources. The first category comprises all political and public service sources, as news is often dominated by institutional sources which reflect the views of institutions of government. Civil society sources were seen as all other sources in the news with no distinction between citizen and non-citizen sources. The authors argued that the quality of news debate depends on the wider range of expertise, perspectives and interests that

are drawn upon in the media next to governmental sources and that political sources consequently should be perceived as a separate category. Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans (2015) did include citizens as a separate category and distinguished between elite sources, civil society sources and citizen sources. Civil society sources here comprised all sources except citizens. Other studies used a more strict operationalization of "civil society". Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) made a categorization consisting of institutional sources (political, social, economic and social elites), non-institutional sources and special interest groups. A comparable distinction is made in the research of De Keyser, Raeymaeckers, and Paulussen (2011), who made a distinction between elite sources (i.e. representatives of the political and economic world), less elite sources (i.e. NGOs or special interest groups) and citizens.

None of the abovementioned studies classified the exact same actors in the different categories. Even studies that were based on one another (i.e. Tiffen et al. 2014; Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2015) did not perceive the same actors as belonging to the "elite" and "civil society" categories. For instance, the study of Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans (2015) identifies experts and journalists as elites, while Tiffen et al. (2014) classified these sources as civil society. This has consequences for the outcomes, as Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans (2015) found civil society sources to make up between 16 and 22 percent of all sources in Dutch television news in the period 1990–2014. Because of their broad conceptualization of civil society sources, Tiffen et al. on the other hand found that they comprised on average 47 percent of all domestic sources cited in news media (television, newspapers and print media) in nine countries with different media systems.

As we want to study news across issues in a systematic way, we follow more recent studies that stress the need for a more elaborate aggregate actor classification than the traditional dichotomy (De Keyser, Raeymaeckers, and Paulussen 2011; Tiffen et al. 2014; Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2015). However, there seems to exist much ambiguity about what this "middle category" exactly entails and how it should be labeled in a meaningful way. This is why we use an aggregate classification based on *four* categories (Figure 1).



**FIGURE 1**

Actor classification across issues

Adding a fourth category and splitting the “middle” category solves the problematic classification of some sources. Moreover, it draws attention to civil society sources that are traditionally underrepresented in news source research, but do play an important role in the democratic process.

The first category comprises *government and political actors*. We made this a separate category because across time, country and media outlets, empirical studies have found news to be dominated by politicians and government institutions (Bennett 1990; Berkowitz and Beach 1993; Hopmann and Shehata 2011; Strömbäck et al. 2013). Other actors—even elite actors—are found to be much less visible in the news. Therefore, this category includes all political parties and politicians active at different levels, government officials, law enforcement officers and emergency service personnel.

The second category is labeled *Professionals and Experts*, which contains all sources that speak from a specific affiliation outside government such as business spokespersons, external experts, and university professors. We also include celebrities to this category as they are often presented as an expert or professional in their field, and clearly distinct from citizens. In traditional dichotomies, these actors were consistently perceived as belonging to the group of “elite sources” (Gans 1979; Bennett 1990; Splendore 2017). However, in studies including a middle category, they were sometimes seen as belonging to the elite (e.g. Raeymaeckers et al. 2015), and sometimes as civil society (e.g. Tiffen et al. 2014).

Consequently, we propose a third category of *civil society organizations*, including trade unions, social movements, non-governmental organizations and interest groups. When talking about civil society, two conceptualizations are used in research: either society outside the state as a whole (Tiffen et al. 2014; Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2015; Roy and Shaw 2016) or a more restricted view such as ours where civil society is seen as all organizations or institutions outside the sphere of government, market and private life (Weaver and Wilhoit 1996; Warren 2001, 14). More concretely this means not only established institutional organizations such as unions and international NGOs but all social, voluntary and political associations in society (excluding political parties) (Birks 2016, 5). The category of civil society sources includes actors directly related to a civil society organization (e.g. chairman, secretary). Individual protesters and volunteers of civil society organizations are seen as (involved) citizens.

The fourth category is labeled *citizens*, which consists of all ordinary citizens that appear in the news. This includes citizens that are affected by a news event, which we call involved citizens, such as victims, eye witnesses of a crime, or employees of a company that are on strike. These involved citizens should be distinguished from uninvolved citizens that do not have a specific representative function regarding the news event often labeled as vox pops. In recent years, citizens have been found to be used as news sources more often in traditional news media (De Keyser, Raeymaeckers, and Paulussen 2011; Hopmann and Shehata 2011; Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2015), supporting our choice to classify citizens in a separate category.

### **The Prevalence of Actors in the News**

Much of the research studying actors in the news found that news stories tend to give disproportionate attention to those who are public figures or who have political and/or economic power. Government officials, politicians and corporate spokespersons were

traditionally found to obtain much more attention than alternative sources (civil society and citizen sources) in the news (Grabe, Zhou, and Barnett 1999; Berkowitz 2009). Political and governmental sources are often the primary definers in the news, being the initiator of a news story or quoted early on in a news broadcast (Carlson 2009; Hopmann and Shehata 2011). Studies also found "elite" sources (political, social, economic and social elites) to have the majority share in the news. Sigal (1973) found the share of elite sources in news items appearing in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* between 1949 and 1969 to be over 78 percent. Similar findings of an elite dominance were reproduced across countries and media outlets (e.g. Brown et al. 1987; Bennett 1990; Lee 2001; Manning 2001). In short, the dominance of elite sources in the news is often considered to be commonplace in journalism studies.

However, more recent studies seem to indicate that changes have occurred within the last decade. Because newsrooms are faced with an increasing competition for audience share and continuous deadlines, the share of non-elite sources would be rising (Witschge and Nygren 2009; Skovsgaard and van Dalen 2013; Bromley 2014). A situation would be created in which all newsrooms try to attract the attention of audiences, by making the news more personal and proximate to the public among other strategies. Brants & Van Praag (2006, 30) stated that the increasing competition between broadcasters in many western European countries leads to a "demand market" whereby the assumed desires of the public have become decisive for what the media select and provide. This would coincide with a situation in which differences between public service broadcasters and commercial broadcasters gradually diminish (Lunt 2009). Also in Flanders, with the introduction of commercial media in the 1980s, the public service broadcaster (*VRT*), like elsewhere in Europe, lost its once "self-evident" monopoly position (Van den Bulck and Donders 2014).

Because of these developments, traditional public service news providers across the world have to compete more heavily for audiences. However, most studies still find differences between commercial and public service broadcasters, such as a higher amount of layman's quotes on a commercial broadcaster in the Netherlands (Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, and Beentjes 2005) and Belgium (Beckers, Walgrave, and Van den Bulck 2016). Soroka et al. (2013) found that public service broadcasters generally tend to report on average more hard news than the commercial newscasts in their markets and as a consequence also give a more prominent place to political elites. Some studies, however, did not find large differences between the two types of news broadcasters regarding the prevalence of elite or citizen actors (de Vreese 2001; Lunt 2009; Hopmann and Shehata 2011; Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2015).

Arbaoui, Swert, and van der Brug (2016) found that media system might also play a role in the prevalence of speaking actors in the news. Differences in the findings of previous studies might be explained by characteristics of the specific media systems. Television systems that depend more on commercial revenues have a significantly higher use of "ordinary actors" in news coverage, both in commercial and public television broadcasts. Moreover, Arbaoui, Swert, and van der Brug (2016) conclude that in competitive television systems, public television distinguishes itself from commercial television by using ordinary people significantly less often than in less competitive systems. The Belgian media system can be described as a "democratic corporatist model" (comparable to media systems in Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, and Germany). It is characterized by a strong public service broadcaster (*VRT*) and contains only one commercial broadcaster with a

primetime news bulletin (*VTM*). The Flemish media system is thus not highly competitive with regards to television news. However, the pressure on the public service broadcaster to compete with the commercial broadcaster has grown considerably, with viewer ratings as a main performance criterion (d'Haenens and Bardoel 2007). Hence, there are reasons to expect that differences between the commercial and public service broadcaster might have diminished within the last decade.

Moreover, many previous studies found different patterns in sourcing practices between print and television news. We expect that non-elite sources will take up an even more central place in television news. Television news has been found to use references to citizens more often than print media (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005). Here, more attention is paid to the public's everyday lives and to their possibilities to identify with the news (Djerf-Pierre 2000). The consequences of decisions for ordinary citizens would take center stage by including them in television reporting. As mentioned in the introduction, not only the mere presence of sources is important. The opportunities they have to convey their point of view (Gans 1979), i.e. the airtime they receive also plays a role in their chances to frame a news item.

Because of the diverging findings and differences between studies, we decided not to formulate specific hypotheses, but research questions to explore evolutions in the prevalence of speaking sources in Belgian television news.

**RQ1:** Are there changes over time in the relative frequency of sources in television news in the period 2003–2016?

**RQ2:** Are there differences in the relative frequency of sources between the public service broadcaster and the commercial broadcaster in the period 2003–2016?

All previously mentioned studies used a *sample of news items* to study actor usage or diversity in the news. Some studies comprised a specific period (e.g. election time; see Hopmann and Shehata 2011) or—constructed—weeks (Berkowitz and Beach 1993; Tiffen et al. 2014; Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2015). Our study is unique in that it comprises the *entire population* of news items from Flemish television news from the period 2003–2016. This way, we get a fuller understanding of the prevalence of speaking actors in the news in the past decade and we are able to compare between broadcasters and issues in a systematic manner.

Surprisingly, very little is known about the influence of the news issue on the actor types that appear in the news. In the literature on actors or sources in the news, we can distinguish between “issue-specific” and “general” news studies. Most existing actor studies focused on one specific issue, such as political news (e.g. Schoenbach, Ridder, and Lauf 2001; Hopmann and Shehata 2011; Strömbäck et al. 2013) or immigration (Hargreaves and Perotti 1993; Masini and Van Aelst 2017). Unsurprisingly, diverging results were found in the prevalence of actor types in the news.

Next to these issue-specific studies, more general news studies have focused on actors across issues (e.g. Grabe, Zhou, and Barnett 1999; Tiffen et al. 2014; Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2015). This research looked at more general trends over time or studied differences between countries in the prevalence of different actor types. However, thus far, no systematic insight exists of the differences that occur between issues and whether some issues are characterized by particular actors. As a consequence, it remains unclear to what extent choices in issue focus explain the dominance of certain

actors groups over others. More specifically, it might be that differences in actor types between broadcasters are partly or even largely attributed to differences in issue attention. Because our data includes a large dataset comprising all Flemish television news items (2003-2016), we are able to compare the prevalence of actors for different issues, leading to the following research question:

**RQ3:** What differences exist between issues in the prevalence of different actor types in television news?

## Research Design and Sample

To gain an elaborate understanding of the speaking actors that are present in the news, we have conducted a longitudinal, quantitative content analysis of *all* television news items from the period 2003 to 2016 in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking Northern part of Belgium. The Flemish region can be considered as a separate media system, as very few of the about 6,5 million inhabitants (60% of population) watch the news of the French speaking part of the country. This study is based on the "Electronic News Archive"<sup>1</sup>, a dataset containing all 7 pm news broadcasts from the two main Flemish television stations (public broadcast channel *Eén* and commercial channel *VTM*) in the period 2003 to 2016 (10,042 news broadcasts). The newscasts are archived and coded on a daily base. Information about the countries, issues and actors involved in the news items are coded and stored together with the actual video footage of the news item. The Electronic News Archive represents one of the largest digital news archives available for scientific research.

In Flanders, the public service broadcaster was able to retain its central position in the media landscape. Currently, only one commercial broadcaster (*VTM*) with a primetime news bulletin exists next to the public service broadcaster (*Eén*). During the past two decades, the popularity of the commercial news broadcast has been rising and both news bulletins are popular and compete for audiences. In 2017, the 7 pm news broadcasts from the two main broadcasters had an average market share during prime time of around 80% (CIM 2017). The state-funded public service broadcaster *VRT* is commissioned by the Flemish government to fulfil several requirements with regard to the balanced representation of actors and voices in the news. The commercial broadcaster *VTM* may have more leeway and does not have similar obligations.

The dataset is constructed at the level of the individual news items ( $N = 203,619$  unique news items). The separate sports section of the news bulletin discussing sports results and the daily weather forecasts were left out of the analysis. For every news item, the date, length, medium and issue topic were coded. Issue topic was determined based on a list of specific issue codes.<sup>1</sup> Every news item could receive up to three issue codes. Moreover, all actors that were present in these news items were coded. In all, 65.6% ( $N = 133,577$ ) of the news items contained one or more speaking actors. This resulted in a dataset containing 318,284 actors who had their say in the news items.

For every actor, name, speaking time and function description were coded. The function description was either the literal function description as it appeared on screen, or it was selected from a list of function descriptions. Based on our new fourfold aggregate actor classification, we subdivided all actors in four categories. Next to the coding of actors at the fourfold aggregate level, we coded all actors based on their affiliation in the ten categories that can be found in [Figure 1](#).



On average twelve active coders (job students) watched the newscasts in detail and filled in a standardized coding form. Each coder received an individual training and was followed up intensively. Inter coder reliability tests were performed regularly during the coding process. Krippendorff's alpha reached satisfactory values for the actor categories ( $\alpha_{\text{Political actors}} = 0.98$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{Experts and professionals}} = 0.94$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{Civil society organizations}} = 0.96$ ;  $\alpha_{\text{Citizens}} = 0.79$ ). The news issue codes were also reliable with inter coder reliability scores between  $\alpha = 0.68$  and  $\alpha = 0.90^1$ .

Not only will we study the presence of actors in the news—which was the focus of most previous news source research—, but we will also study the speaking time of actors in the news which might influence their ability to shape the news.

## Results

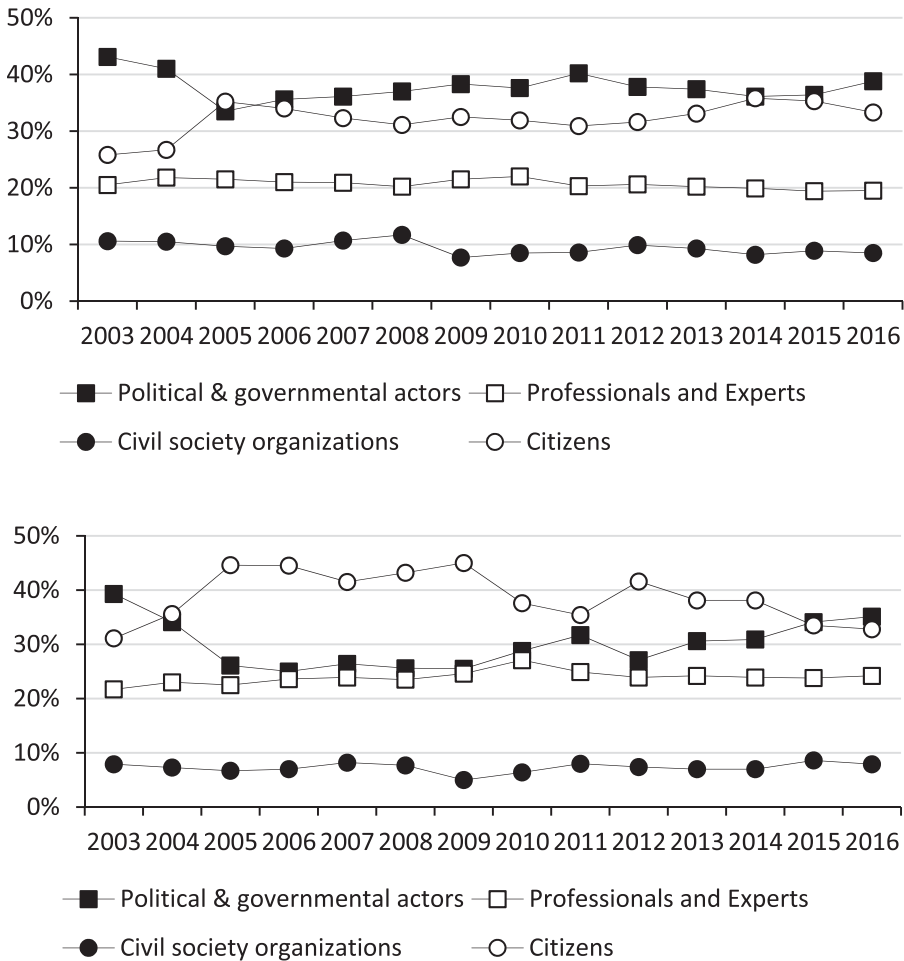
### *Prevalence of Speaking Actors*

First, we look at the evolution of the share of the different speaking actors across issues. Figure 2 displays the share of the four aggregate actor categories per year for the two main Flemish broadcasters separately. The first thing that stands out in these graphs is the relative stability in the share of the different actor types in the 14-year period. Secondly, by splitting up the actors that are often taken together as “elite” sources, we gain a more elaborate understanding of the prevalence of sources than a dichotomy would have. It becomes apparent that in general, political actors and citizens are the most quoted actors and they seem to compete for news space.

Some important differences can be observed between the public service and the commercial broadcaster. On the one hand, political and governmental sources are the most frequent speaking actors almost consistently on the public service broadcaster. The commercial broadcaster, on the other hand, quotes citizens most frequently, although the share of citizens fluctuates throughout the years. Across broadcasters, the biggest change over time can be seen in the period 2003–2005, as the share of political and governmental actors drops on both broadcasters. The share of citizen sources makes a reverse movement in the same period and grew on average from 29% in 2003 until 41% in 2005. From 2005 on, the share of citizens on the public service broadcaster is relatively stable. On the commercial broadcaster citizens were clearly the most prominent actors in the news between 2005 and 2014, but in recent years their presence has gone down again, at the advantage of political and governmental actors. Contrary to previous research, we thus find that the share of citizens in the news does not increase in the period 2003–2016. The share of professionals & experts and civil society organizations seems to be relatively stable over the years for both broadcasters.

Across the years, there are significant differences between the broadcasters for all actor types. Table 1 shows that both political and governmental actors and civil society organizations have a significantly larger share on the public service broadcaster. On the other hand there are significantly more professionals and experts on the commercial broadcaster. Lastly, there are on average more citizens in the news of the commercial broadcaster. On the public service broadcaster, political and governmental sources are quoted most often, while the commercial broadcaster hands the word most regularly to citizens.

Solely looking at the mere prevalence of actors might not tell the whole story, however. Citizens appear to be regular speaking actors over time and across broadcasters,

**FIGURE 2**

Share of actor types in the news for public service broadcaster *Eén* (top) and commercial broadcaster *VTM* (bottom) separately (2003–2016),  $N = 133,577$

but are their abilities to shape the news similar to those of other actor types? In [Table 2](#), the average speaking time (in seconds) of the different actor types is shown. While citizens appear in the news frequently, their speaking time is significantly shorter than all other actors ( $M = 12.16$ ,  $SD = 10.24$ ),  $F(3, 307,424) = 5268.90$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.05$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . They receive only half of the speaking time compared to other speaking actors and their ability to frame a news item is consequently smaller. There are no significant differences between the public service broadcaster and the commercial broadcaster in the average speaking time of the actors.

[Figure 3](#) illustrates the share of the speaking time of the actors types per year compared to the total speaking time of all actors in that year. When comparing these graphs with [Figure 2](#), it shows even more clearly that politicians dominate on a consistent base on the public service broadcaster. On the commercial broadcaster, political and governmental actors, professionals & experts and citizens competed for airtime for quite some

**TABLE 1**

Prevalence of actor types on public (Eén) and commercial broadcaster (VTM), 2003–2016

	<b>Eén %</b>	<b>VTM %</b>
Political & governmental actors	<b>36.3</b>	28.1
Politicians	<b>27.4</b>	17.8
Government institutions	2.9	2.8
Law enforcement and emergency agencies	6.0	<b>7.5</b>
Professionals and Experts	22.2	<b>25.9</b>
Media and journalists	1.6	1.4
Business professionals	11.0	<b>12.6</b>
Experts and academics	5.4	<b>6.4</b>
Celebrities	4.2	<b>5.5</b>
Civil society organizations	<b>9.4</b>	7.3
Civil society and interest groups	<b>9.4</b>	7.3
Citizens	32.1	<b>38.8</b>
Involved citizens	18.5	<b>22.0</b>
Uninvolved citizens	13.6	<b>16.8</b>

Note: Percentages in bold differ at the  $p < .05$  level

time. However, since 2013 politicians have the largest share of the airtime, comparable to the airtime they receive on the public service broadcaster. In 2005, citizen sources had an average share of 30% of the speaking time, while politicians had a share of 34%. In 2016 across broadcasters, political sources received 43% of the airtime while citizens received only 22% of the total airtime.

### *Issue-specific Differences*

Before looking closer into the relationship between issues and actors, we first present what issues both broadcasters covered in the period 2003–2016. Table 3 shows systematic differences in issue attention between the public and commercial channel. The largest variation exists for the issues crime, culture & entertainment and politics, which are also the most frequent issues in the news. Commercial broadcaster VTM seems to focus more on topics traditionally seen as “soft-news” such as crime and entertainment, while public service broadcaster Eén focuses more on “hard news” such as politics, mobility and economy. This raises the question whether some of the differences between the broadcasters in the actors they cover might be related to the issues they cover.

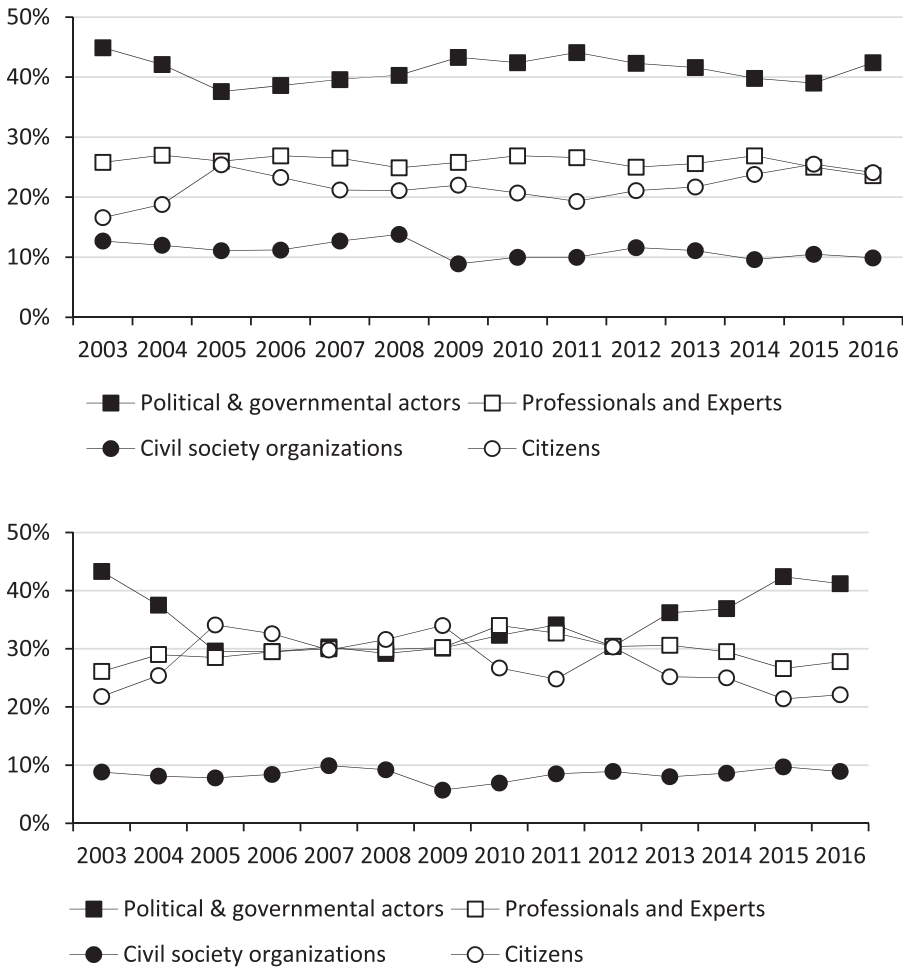
Table 4 indeed illustrates how the prevalence of the actor types fluctuates to a large degree between issues. Political and governmental actors are for instance most prevalent in

**TABLE 2**

Average speaking time (in seconds) of different actor types

	<b>Eén M (SD)</b>	<b>VTM M (SD)</b>
Political & governmental actors	20.65 (.06)	20.37 (.07)
Professionals and Experts	22.65 (.05)	21.30 (.05)
Civil society	21.16 (.12)	19.9 (.09)
Citizens	12.21 (.06)	12.11 (.06)

Note: There are no significant differences between the broadcasters at the  $p < .05$  level



**FIGURE 3** Share of speaking time of specific actor types for public service broadcaster *Eén* (top) and commercial broadcaster *VTM* (bottom) separately (2003–2016)

political news, while they are hardly ever quoted in news about sports, consumer affairs or culture. Professionals and experts, on the other hand, are quoted most often in news about culture & entertainment (e.g. celebrities) and sports. Large differences can also be observed for civil society organizations. While they are hardly ever quoted in political news, they are one of the most frequent speaking actors in labor news. This reflects to a large extent to prominent position of labor unions and employer organizations in a corporatist country such as Belgium. Citizens are quoted regularly in all issues, but they are least prevalent in political news.

Table 4 also supports our choice to split up the middle category, as it lays bare where exactly differences between issues occur. The large differences that exist between issues also supports the need for issue-specific coding schemes. When studying political news, it might be relevant to make a more elaborate distinction between political sources, for instance in terms of left or right wing politicians. In labor news, it might be relevant to

**TABLE 3**  
Prevalence of issues on *Eén* and *VTM*

	<i>N</i>	<i>Eén</i> (%)	<i>VTM</i> (%)
Crime	32,344	13.8	<b>17.7</b>
Culture & entertainment	27,772	11.8	<b>14.6</b>
Politics	22,474	<b>13.5</b>	8.9
Economy	19,826	<b>11.6</b>	9.7
Justice	21,467	9.9	<b>11.1</b>
Mobility	19,231	8.4	<b>1.4</b>
Disasters	18,828	8.7	<b>9.7</b>
Social affairs	18,766	8.6	<b>9.8</b>
Environment	13,889	6.4	<b>7.2</b>
Science	13,428	<b>3.0</b>	2.6
Labor	9416	<b>5.4</b>	4.0
Consumer affairs	6586	2.6	<b>3.7</b>
Education	4151	1.8	<b>2.2</b>
Sports	3825	1.2	<b>2.4</b>
Migration	3732	<b>2.3</b>	1.5

Note: Percentages in bold differ at the  $p < .05$  level

study which civil society sources are quoted (e.g. trade unions). When focusing on immigration news, specific attention might be paid to potentially marginalized actors such as refugees.

To analyze differences between broadcasters and issues and better understand how they relate to each other, we have conducted four logistic regression analyses with medium and the separate issues as independent variables. Year and news item duration (in seconds) are added as control variables in the models. The issue “politics” is added as a reference

**TABLE 4**  
Share of actor types in different news topics on public service broadcaster *Eén* and commercial broadcaster *VTM* (2003–2016)

Issue	Political and governmental actors (%)	Professionals and Experts (%)	Civil Society organizations (%)	Citizens (%)
Crime	36.6	22.8	6.2	34.4
Culture & entertainment	17.8	36.5	3.9	41.8
Politics	67.7	8.2	4.7	19.4
Economy	30.5	27.0	15.2	27.3
Justice	39.8	26.9	7.3	26.0
Mobility	31.6	17.6	10.3	40.6
Disasters	32.2	14.4	4.7	48.8
Social Affairs	28.5	18.0	13.6	40.0
Environment	21.8	25.1	8.7	44.4
Science	25.9	39.2	7.0	27.0
Labor	21.3	17.0	28.3	33.3
Consumer affairs	11.8	31.8	13.6	42.8
Education	14.2	11.1	15.6	59.2
Sports	12.2	39.2	4.6	44.0
Immigration	42.4	9.5	9.8	38.3

**TABLE 5**

Logistic regression models with the actor dummy variables as dependent variables (N = 133,577 news items)

	<b>Political and Governmental Actors</b>		<b>Professionals and Experts</b>		<b>Civil Society Organizations</b>		<b>Citizens</b>	
	<i>B</i>	Odds ratio	<i>B</i>	Odds ratio	<i>B</i>	Odds ratio	<i>B</i>	Odds ratio
<b>Model I</b>								
Medium (VTM = 1)	-0.210***	0.811	0.204***	1.226	-0.196***	0.822	0.339***	1.404
Year	0.010***	1.010	-0.001	0.999	-0.004	0.996	-0.004*	0.996
News item duration	0.001***	1.001	0.006***	1.006	0.001***	1.001	0.006***	1.006
<b>Model II</b>								
Medium (VTM = 1)	-0.169***	0.845	0.172***	1.188	-0.145***	0.865	0.276***	1.317
Year	0.022***	1.022	-0.012***	0.988	-0.017***	0.983	-0.006***	0.994
News item duration	0.002***	1.002	0.006***	1.006	0.001***	1.001	0.007***	1.007
<i>Issues (politics = ref)</i>								
Crime	-0.275***	0.759	0.122***	1.130	-0.227***	0.797	0.421***	1.524
Culture & entertainment	-1.350***	0.259	1.317***	3.734	-0.38***	0.684	0.464***	1.591
Economy	-0.631***	0.532	0.728***	2.071	0.634***	1.886	-0.224***	0.990
Justice	-0.126***	0.881	0.469***	1.598	0.023	1.024	-0.245***	0.782
Mobility	-0.23***	0.795	0.139***	1.149	0.505***	1.657	0.495***	1.641
Disasters	-0.358***	0.699	-0.188***	0.829	-0.342***	0.710	1.080***	2.944
Social Affairs	-0.365***	0.694	0.071**	1.074	0.767***	2.154	0.584***	1.792
Environment	-0.849***	0.428	0.748***	2.113	0.435***	1.545	0.589***	1.803
Science	-0.765***	0.466	1.144***	3.139	-0.104*	0.901	-0.215***	0.806
Labor	-0.895***	0.409	0.091***	1.095	1.575***	4.830	0.374***	1.453
Consumer affairs	-1.404***	0.246	1.125***	3.082	0.966***	2.629	0.722***	2.058
Education	-1.122***	0.326	-0.92*	0.912	1.472***	4.358	1.463***	4.317
Sports	-1.519***	0.219	1.207***	3.344	-0.072	0.931	0.314***	1.369
Immigration	0.085	1.089	-0.502***	0.605	0.505***	1.657	0.514***	1.672
<b>Pseudo R-square</b>			<b>Pseudo R-square</b>			<b>Pseudo R-square</b>		
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>			Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>			Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>		
Model I = 0.005			Model I = 0.020			Model I = 0.003		
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>			Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>			Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>		
Model II = 0.107			Model II = 0.126			Model II = 0.123		
*** <i>p</i> < .001			*** <i>p</i> < .001; ** <i>p</i> < .01; * <i>p</i> < .05			*** <i>p</i> < .001; * <i>p</i> < .05		

category. The dependent variables in the models are four dummy variables that indicate the presence (1) or absence (0) of a specific actor type (political and governmental actors; professionals and experts; civil society organizations; citizens) in a news item. Because of our large sample size, we are mostly interested in the odds ratios (OR). In Table 5, the results of the separate regression analyses can be found.

The odds ratios for year and news item duration are close to zero in all models, meaning that their influence on the prevalence or absence of actors is limited. We firstly tested the models without the separate issues (Model I). In the second model (model II), we added the different issues to analyze how the influence of medium changes when the issues are brought into the model. For all actor types, type of medium (public service of commercial broadcaster) has a significant influence on the likelihood that specific actor types appear in a news item. The odds ratios for medium decrease when adding the specific issues in the model (model II). However, they remain significant and the differences between the broadcasters thus hold when controlling for the specific issues. Political and governmental actors (OR = -0.169) and civil society organizations (OR = -0.145) are more likely to appear on the public service broadcaster. Professionals and experts (OR = 0.172) and especially citizens (OR = 0.276) are more likely to speak on the commercial broadcaster.

As could be seen in Table 4, large differences are present in the occurrence of actor types between issues, and this also shows in Table 5. Political and governmental sources are most likely to appear in political news, as all other issues (with the exception of immigration) have negative coefficients compared to the political news dummy. Professionals and experts, on the other hand, are most likely to appear in culture & entertainment news (OR = 1.317), sports (OR = 1.207) and science (OR = 1.144). In general, the differences for professionals and experts are less outspoken than those for political and governmental actors. Variances can also be observed for the civil society organizations. They are most likely to appear in news about labor (OR = 1.575) and education (OR = 1.472). Citizen actors are quoted more regularly in most issues compared to political news, which becomes apparent from the many positive coefficients in the regression table. Citizens have the highest chance to appear in news about education (OR = 1.463) and disasters (OR = 1.080). Political news is most similar in the prevalence of citizen actors to the issues of economy, justice and science, which typically contain few citizens.

To sum it all up, linear trends in the prevalence of actors over time are minimal. Issues play a large role in the explanation of different actor types in the news. Specific issues are related to specific actors. Lastly, differences between the broadcasters exist in which actor types they cover, even when controlling for the different issues.

## Conclusion and Discussion

Who gets to speak in the news is crucial for the shaping of the news. The goal of this research was therefore to gain an understanding of the use of speaking actors in television news over time, between broadcasters and issues. To do so, we used a unique population dataset of Flemish television data. We believe our study contributes to the literature in several ways.

First of all, we argue that our new fourfold actor classification allows for a systematic understanding of the role issues play in relationship to the actors that appear in the news. Previous studies differ in the way they operationalize and categorize the different actor types. By moving away from the traditional elite–non-elite dichotomy and by including

more actor categories, we have tried to resolve the existing problematic categorization of specific actor groups (such as civil society organizations). The classification we apply in this study is based on four broad aggregate types that can be further specified to match specific issues: political and governmental actors, professionals and experts, civil society organizations and citizens. This generic typology of actors can be used across issues. To focus on specific issues, the generic categories can be refined or “unfolded” to focus on particular actor categories that are related or relevant for those issues.

Second, using this new classification leads to several substantial findings. Related to changes over time this study shows that the prevalence of different actor types in the news has not changed drastically in the period 2003–2016. This finding is in line with the study of Hopmann and Shehata (2011), who also did not find large differences over time in the prevalence of citizen sources in political television news. Corresponding to some more recent television news studies, we find that especially citizens and politicians compete as most prominent speaking actors in the news (De Keyser, Raeymaeckers, and Paulussen 2011; Hopmann and Shehata 2011). This large share of citizen actors seems logical, as most news directly or indirectly involves citizens. Including citizens in the news might also be a way of broadcasters to connect with their audiences in times of increased competition for audience share (Witschge and Nygren 2009; Skovsgaard and van Dalen 2013; Bromley 2014). However, while citizens are frequent speaking actors in Flemish television news, looking solely at their prevalence does not tell the whole story. The chances of citizen actors to shape a news item are still smaller than other actors in the news, as they receive on average only half of the speaking time.

The most innovative part of our study is related to the relationship between issues and actors. We demonstrate that issues play an important role in explaining the actors that are likely to appear in the news. Large differences exist in the prevalence of actor types between issues. While citizens in general are frequent speaking actors for most issues, political news is dominated by political actors and citizens have less chance to speak here. Civil society actors do not play a big role in the news in general, except in news about labor and education, where they are among the most prevalent speaking actors. These issue-dependent differences show the value of our fourfold classification of actors, as it provides a more elaborate understanding of differences that exist between issues. Previous research often found political actors to have power and regular access to the news (Bennett 1990; Lee 2001; Manning 2001). However, this study has shown that although this is the case for most issues, for some issues they hardly ever get to speak in the news. Alternative sources do have a relatively prominent voice in the news, although their chances to frame the news are smaller than those of the “traditional” elites. Future research into the prevalence of actors in the news should thus bear in mind these issue-specific differences when analyzing the news. Issues play a more substantial role in the presence of speaking actors than time and medium, which are often the main variables in studies on actor diversity (e.g. Tiffen et al. 2014; Kleemans, Schaap, and Hermans 2015).

Next to issues, also the type of broadcaster plays a significant role in the type of actors that appear in the news. The public service broadcaster is more likely to hand the word to political & governmental and civil society actors, while the commercial broadcaster pays more attention to professionals & experts and citizens. These differences might be explained partly by a different issue focus. The public service broadcaster pays more attention to rather “hard” news topics such as politics, issues that typically include more political actors and less citizens. The commercial broadcaster, on the other hand, focuses



significantly more often on soft news topics such as crime and entertainment, which include more citizen sources. However, the differences between broadcasters remain, even when controlling for the separate issues. Differences between broadcasters thus seem to be fairly stable and exist across issues.

A classification of actors into categories always entails a simplification of reality. While this study focused on general changes over time, it might be that there are more subtle changes within the actors categories. It is likely, for instance, that there were some changes within the civil society category that could not be seen in the aggregate data. Future studies can start from our broader classification, but also need to use a more detailed categorization of actors when focusing on specific issues. Another limitation of this paper is that it only studies who gets to speak in the news, but not what they say or how they are framed. Future research might therefore focus more on analyzing what different actor types add to a news story and how they relate to each other in the viewpoints they give. This is important as actor diversity is often seen as a prerequisite for viewpoint diversity.

By using a systematic analysis of Flemish television news, this study shows that the news reality is more complicated than linear trends over time can explain. We do not find large effects of time on the prevalence of speaking actors in the news. What seems to matter most for the prominence of several actor types in the news is media profile (public service or commercial broadcaster) and news issue. Although this study focused on the television news in one country only we do not believe these results are highly context specific. The media landscape with a relative strong public service broadcaster and a few commercial competitors is similar to multiple European countries, in particular in other "corporatist democratic countries" in the northern and central parts of Europe. It might be more different in pure competitive contexts without public television such as the US. Of course, political system variables will have an impact on the presence of specific actors in the news. For instance, in countries with a weaker corporatist tradition than Belgium, civil society actors such as unions will be less present in economic news. However, we expect the mechanism behind the relationship between issues and actors to be rather similar: different issues lead to different kinds of power relationships between actors that are, in turn, reflected and shaped in the news. This is a hypothesis that needs to be tested in different media and political systems.

We hope our research will serve as a starting point for future studies and helps researchers to classify and analyze actors in the news. The differences found in the actor occurrence between issues show the need for a more elaborate understanding of issue-specific differences in the news. We believe that our strategy to focus on large categories of actors across issues provides a good base for studies focusing on specific issues. It allows to better understand systematic differences across time and outlets, but simultaneously provides a nuanced insight in the complexity and diversity of actors for different issues.

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## NOTE

1. For more information on the coding procedure and the issue-specific codes see: De Smedt, Wouters, and Swert (2013).

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