

THE MAKING OF THE WHITE MARCH

The mass media as a mobilization alternative for movement organizations¹

The White March of 20 October 1996 was with its estimated 300,000 participants by far the largest demonstration in Belgian history. Three percent of the Belgian population took to the streets. Such broad popular support is very uncommon in the previously very pillarised society that Belgium is. The March followed the discovery of the bodies of four girls (Julie, Melissa, An and Eefje) in mid August 1996 murdered by a perverse criminal called Marc Dutroux. Dutroux was arrested and two of his victims (Sabine and Laetitia) were found alive and set free. Soon it became clear that the police and the judiciary had made major errors without which the drama wouldn't have occurred. The grief turned against the institutions: the judicial apparatus and the government became target of fierce critiques and protest. On Monday 14 October 1999 the highest Belgian court, the Court of Cassation, decided in its so-called Spaghetti-arrest² that the examining magistrate Jean-Marc Connerotte, a hero of the nation since he had arrested Dutroux and liberated two girls, was no longer allowed to investigate the Dutroux case. He had shown too much sympathy for the victims. The protest explosion that followed had never been seen in Belgian history: in three days almost 500,000 people participated in furious protest demonstrations, riots, sit ins, and spontaneous strikes all over the country (Walgrave and Rihoux 1997). At the end of the week the nature of the protest seemed to change: the outrage and fury made place for quiet and so-called serene demonstrations out of respect for the young victims. The White March on Sunday 20 October and organized by the parents of the Dutroux-victims was the climax of that 'worthy' demonstration style: families with children, white flowers and balloons, no slogans or banners

¹ We are very grateful to the reviewers of the article for their helpful and inspiring comments.

but 300,000 silent participants. After the White March the protest stopped as sudden as it began. Only after three months, newly founded local white committees, were able to organize about hundred small local white marches.

In this contribution, we focus on the making of the White March of 20 October 1996. The question at stake in this contribution seems an easy one but is hard to answer: how is it possible that so many people took to the streets in the White March, how is it possible that the mobilization boomed? We are driven to this important question since there was no mobilising apparatus, no white movement organizations, no mobilization support from the traditional mobilising actors such as unions, political parties, professional associations, youth movements, or new social movements (Walgrave and Rihoux 1998). Our hypothesis is that the Belgian mass media have successfully and almost completely taken over the role and function normally performed by the movement organizations. This hypothesis is further explored here and empirically underpinned. We zoom in on the first months of the Dutroux case, i.e. from the outburst of the case mid August 1996 till the end of October 1996, ten days after the White March.

MASS MEDIA AND MOBILIZATION: POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

Mobilization for collective action: preconditions and phases.

Why do people demonstrate? Why do citizens commit themselves to a social movement? Why do they sign petitions? To achieve a considerable mobilization a number of preconditions has to be met and a number of steps have to be taken.

² The name stems from a visit of Connerotte to a spaghetti dinner that was organized to pay tribute to the victims of Dutroux and where both Sabine and Laetitia were present.

An important distinction is to be made between action mobilization and consensus mobilization (Klandermans 1984: 586-587). Even if the ideas of a movement or a mobilisator are shared by a group of people, participation in action is not necessarily the result; in other words, action mobilization is not automatically achieved. Or to use Smelser's (1962) words: a generalised belief does not automatically yield mobilization for action. In order to get people on the streets both processes are needed: part of the population should not only be convinced of the rightness of the objectives of the action but should also be encouraged to take action. As such it is very possible that movements with a large constituency or a large mobilization potential (Klandermans and Oegema 1997: 519) can hardly get people on the street whereas movements with relatively little response can boost quite a massive mobilization. A mobilising ideology is needed to define a certain situation as unjust and to indicate that such a situation can and should be changed through collective action (McAdam 1982: 52).

The frame alignment approach (Snow, Rochford, Worden and Benford 1986) can make the rather vague concept of consensus mobilization more concrete. Snow et al. state that the ideas of the potential constituency should correspond with, or should be made congruent with, the discourse of the mobilisator. Whenever there is congruency between what a movement organization publicly claims and the opinions of the public-to-be-mobilised, mobilization is likely to be successful. Snow c.s. do not refer to particular opinions or ideas in relation to specific facts and persons but to more general reference and interpretations frames. "All politicians are corrupt" could be such a frame in Belgium where politics and politicians are distrusted by large parts of the population and the legitimacy of government institutions is very low. Mobilization efforts should be aimed at activating and tuning these (sometimes hidden and implicit) frames. They are needed to turn objective facts into meaningful ones. The frames of the population can be tuned to those of the mobilisators in four different ways. In case of a close affinity it suffices to emphasise this (frame bridging); in case the frame is

suitable it can be reinforced (frame amplification); in case the affinity is not immediately clear the existing frames of the potential participant need to be broadened so that also the collective action initiated by the mobilisator is included (frame extension); in case there is little affinity a change in the frames of the potential participants is needed (frame transformation). The first two forms of frame alignment are the easiest to be realised (Snow et al. 1986).

Not only consensus mobilization but also action mobilization can be divided into several phases and processes. A huge gap exists between the conviction that a certain situation is unjust and the opinion that collective action, let alone one's own participation, can alter that situation. Klandermans and Oegema (1987: 529) state that of those respondents who claimed to agree with the objectives of a manifestation only 5 % actually participated. Adequate action mobilization should take those barriers down and should persuade the public to put their ideas into action. The final decision to participate turns out to be a cost-benefit analysis. Getting persuaded does not cost a person anything; participating does: time and money, and involves the risk of becoming a victim of violence, etc. The type of action, the place and time of the action partly determine the cost of participation (Klandermans 1984: 588). The benefits are both the value that is given to the possible outcome of the action and the chance that the collective action brings about the objectives of the action. The perceived chance of success or the efficiency perception (Oberschall 1980) is linked with the anticipated attendance (how many people will participate), the expectation that one's own participation will benefit the action, and the perceived chance that the action will be successful if many people participate. (Klandermans 1984: 585). All this determines the potential participant's readiness to take action. The motivation to participate depends on the weighing up of the perceived costs and benefits (Klandermans 1984: 584-585). It is important to stress that the *perceived* costs (and benefits) are taken into account allowing the mobilisator to change this perception (Klandermans and Oegema 1987: 520). In action mobilization also the mobilisator is

confronted with framing processes but of another kind. Here not the mutual tuning of frames about the social issue is necessary, as for consensus mobilization, but collective action that can dispel the problem.

Mobilization is then a kind of elimination competition, a process with many phases to be completed - not always chronological - and in which many potential participants drop out (Klandermans and Oegema 1987; Oegema and Klandermans 1994). (1) Not everyone agrees on the issue at the basis of the action. (2) Not everyone who agrees is convinced to actively participate. (3) Not everyone who is convinced to participate weighs the costs and benefits positively and is thus motivated. (4) Not everyone who agrees and is persuaded and motivated to participate actually does participate for all kinds of practical reasons (illness, bad weather, no time, etc.) so that the intention is not materialised. A mobilisator should keep the dropout rate as low as possible by working on all factors. This enumeration clearly indicates that action mobilization is more than increasing the motivation to participate by influencing the perception of costs and benefits. It is also a matter of persuading and activating the potential grassroots support and of eliminating practical barriers.

The role of mass media in mobilization.

All the different aspects of mobilization, all the steps that need to be taken in order to be able to speak of collective action, are largely ascribed to organizations. The mobilisators of collective actions are indeed mostly (movement) organizations. They are the ones who try to enforce their view on a certain issue on the public (consensus mobilization) and who try to motivate the public for action (action mobilization). If organizations are not at hand, informal communication networks could in certain circumstances take over for action mobilization. In organizations or communication networks motivation is created (i.e. perception of costs and benefits) and potential supporters are motivated to participate (Klandermans and Oegema

1987: 520). Little attention has been paid to the role of the media in mobilization, and whenever the media were talked about their influence was considered to be low.

Social-scientific literature does pay attention to social movements and media (Gamson 1992; Gamson and Wolfsfield 1993; Gitlin 1980; Hansen 1993; Kielbowicz and Scherer 1986; Molotch 1979; Sampedro 1997; Schmitt-Beck 1990; Van Zoonen 1992; Wolfsfield 1984). Kielbowicz and Scherer (1986: 72) claim that "the modern mass media have become central to the life and death of social movements". Especially the way in which social movements manage to be in the news by creating their own news items is commented on (Kielbowicz and Scherer 1986; Schmitt-Beck 1990). Attention is also paid to the impact of the media on the agenda setting processes (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988). Sampedro, for example, shows how movement actions, media attention and the policy agenda are linked. But books and articles devoted to media and mobilization are few and far between. The mobilization function of the mass media is mentioned but is nowhere central in the development of theories on mobilization, let alone in empirical research. Schmitt-Beck (1990: 644) merely mentions that the mass media could contribute in the recruitment of supporters. Gamson and Wolfsfield (1993: 116) state without further elaboration that the mass media are necessary for mobilization because "most movements must reach their constituency in part through some form of public discourse". The political opportunity structure approach of social movements (Eisinger 1973; Tarrow 1996), considers the mass media as filters, as facilitators or even barriers for collective action rather than as real actors with an own strategy and proactive role. Media attention is important and could be provoked by violent, massive or innovative actions, but the impact of the media *an sich* on mobilization is not taken into consideration (Koopmans 1995). It is, however, generally accepted that the mass media are an outstanding means for the geographical diffusion of protest. Through the news coverage

actions become visible and can be copied. The media are responsible for a contamination from a distance (McAdam and Rucht 1993; Tarrow 1991).

Whenever the mobilising power of the media is mentioned, it is not thought of highly (Gamson 1992; Klandermans and Goslinga 1996; McQuail 1993: 381; Snow, Zurcher and Ekland-Olsen 1980). Klandermans and Oegema (1987: 520), for example, state that "the mass media are not very effective in convincing and activating people" and that the actual action mobilization could be better done via mailings, organizations or friendship networks. Moreover, the media are said not to be an adequate mobilization channel for participation in action involving high costs and/or serious risks (Briet, Klandermans and Kroon 1987; McAdam 1986). It is highly improbable that violent, militant collective actions are brought about by the media. Furthermore, the role of the media in other more approachable actions is questioned: the mobilisers do not make it to the mass media and cannot control the news coverage of their actions (Klandermans 1997). Klandermans and Oegema indirectly proved that participating in a national demonstration does require some effort: only those respondents who had been convinced by an organization or informal networks participated in the demonstration examined by them; not a single respondent, however much convinced of the objectives of the manifestation, took part in the manifestation unless he had had informal or formal contacts with the movement (Klandermans and Oegema 1987: 525-526). Although they do not explicitly discuss the influence of the media, the possible direct influence of the media on mobilization is indirectly minimised.

The mainstream mobilization theory thus suggests that the mass media are possible channels for consensus mobilization, as they are the privileged providers of information and reference frames (Gamson and Meyer 1996; McQuail 1993), but that they fall short for action mobilization (Klandermans and Goslinga 1996). Klandermans (1997) states that the media are less important for persuasive communication (action mobilization) but certainly play a role in

creating a favourable mobilization climate (consensus mobilization) although also the actual creation of the collective action frame takes place in informal or formal groups. In short: the media are capable of influencing people's thoughts, but to influence their behaviour is another matter. The mass media as a (reactive) transmitter and not as a (proactive) mobilizing actor. Our own analysis of Belgian newspapers on the White March suggests that this conclusion is not altogether correct.

METHODOLOGY

Our empirical material consists of the news coverage on the Dutroux case in 5 major Belgian³ newspapers, viz. *De Standaard*, *De Morgen*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *Gazet van Antwerpen*, and *Het Nieuwsblad*. The most important national newspapers are among the list⁴. These five newspapers are representative of the Belgian written press, in terms of ideology, readership and market share - together these five newspapers have a market share of 75% of the in total 983,000 sold Flemish Belgian newspapers.

For the period from 16 August (the liberation of two girls, Laetitia and Sabine) till 31 October 1996 each newspaper copy (66 copies per newspaper heading, a total of 329 copies)⁵ was scrutinised and encoded on the basis of a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of a quantitative (amount of attention for the Dutroux case) and a qualitative part (type and content

³ About 60% of the Belgian population speaks Dutch. The newspapers under study all belong to the Flemish Press. The French Belgian press is omitted in this contribution.

⁴ *Het Laatste Nieuws* is the best-sold Belgian newspaper (on average 258,000 copies sold between October 1996 and September 1997). *Het Nieuwsblad* follows in second place (231,000 copies). *De Standaard* is twinned with *Het Nieuwsblad* and is the most intellectual newspaper (77,000 copies). *De Morgen* is the newspaper of the progressive intellectual (40,000 copies). *Gazet van Antwerpen* is a popular nationally distributed regional newspaper (125,000 copies).

of the news coverage: words used, references to certain events or actors, etc.). For the quantitative approach the entire newspaper was skimmed through. This approach was impossible for the qualitative analysis of the content of the news coverage: in a period of two and a half months these five newspapers published 914 entire pages on the Dutroux case. All the articles on the Dutroux case on the front page - the showpiece of every newspaper - were analysed. In case there was no (or only a very short) article on the front page, the first (longer) article on the Dutroux case in the newspaper was analysed. Next to the subscriptions of the pictures of Dutroux also the titles, subtitles, 'in-between-titles', short introductory summaries of all the Dutroux-articles, letters to the editor and editorial comments were taken into account. Finally, also the editorials were screened. We estimate that about 10% to 20% of the actual Dutroux-news coverage was analysed for its content.

The fortnight just before the outburst of the Dutroux case from 1 till 15 August 1996, was taken as a reference period in order to test the hypothesis that the news coverage on the Dutroux case was exceptional. The same titles were analysed with a similar encoding scheme (n=60). Since there was no mentioning of Dutroux at that time, we decided for each copy which news item was covered most and then an identical qualitative and quantitative analysis was carried out on the news coverage of that particular news item.

AMPLIFICATION : THE DUTROUX CASE IN THE BLINDING SPOTLIGHTS

Both consensus and action mobilization have quantitative and qualitative aspects. Mass media not only reinforce the importance of an issue which is called amplification, they also create a certain image of the situation and they sensitise.

⁵ One newspaper is missing, namely *Gazet van Antwerpen* of 18 October 1996. Wherever necessary in the analysis, an average was taken of the three preceding and the three following days of *Gazet van Antwerpen*.

The Belgian media coverage of the Dutroux case was enormous. Although comparable data of exceptional news facts are lacking⁶, we know of no other news item that agitated the Belgian media for such a considerable time and to such an extent. Some figures can prove our claim. Table 1 combines eleven quantitative parameters for the five newspapers analysed: (1) the average number of pages on the Dutroux case (per newspaper copy); (2) the average number of pictures on the case; (3) the average number of letters to the editor; (4) the share of coverage on the Dutroux case in relation to the total amount of news coverage⁷; (5) the share of pictures in relation to the total number of pictures; (6) the share of letters compared to the total amount of letters; (7) the extent to which the lead story⁸ deals with the case; (8) the extent to which the editorial is on the case; (9) the extent to which the Dutroux case is the main item in the newspaper; (10) the extent to which the captivating title⁹ is on the Dutroux case; (11) the share of pictures on the Dutroux case on the first page.

Table 1. Quantitative attention for the Dutroux case in the Belgian newspapers from 16 August to 31 October 1996 (n=329)

(Table 1 here)

The data speak for themselves: all parameters point to a true Dutroux-mania from mid August to the end of October 1996 and this in all newspapers, both in quality and in more

⁶ More or less comparable data on the Belgian French media can be found in a book by Lits (1993) on the press coverage of King Baldwin's death in August 1993. But the peak in media attention only lasted a few days (Antoine 1993).

⁷ Total news coverage is defined as that section of the newspaper that might report on the Dutroux-case, viz. national and international news, editorial comments, letters to the editor. Local news, economy, culture, television, classifieds, supplements and large advertisements (minimum half a page) were not included.

⁸ The leadstory is the opening article of the newspaper. It is the main article on the front page, usually top left or in the middle.

popular newspapers. Although the table indicates some differences between the newspapers – especially *De Standaard* stands out – all papers were focussed on the Dutroux case for several months. In the following distinctions between the different newspaper headings will no longer be made and only totals will be mentioned. The fact that the newspapers bombarded their readers with Dutroux–news cannot be overlooked. On average one third of all the national and international news coverage was on the Dutroux case. The same is true for the share of pictures. All this lasted for the period from 16 August until 31 October, 66 newspapers long. The parameters that take into account the importance of the news, and not only the space devoted to it are even more spectacular: all around 60%. In about 6 newspapers out of 10 the editorial and the lead story were devoted to the Dutroux case¹⁰, the largest amount of space was spent on the case and the largest title was on the case. The ‘performance’ of the semi-tabloid newspaper *Het Laatste Nieuws* is more than spectacular: on average more than 14 pictures per day on the case. The impact of pictures and images cannot be underestimated ever since "there has been a general shift in society's regime of significance, from words to images, from the discursive to the figural" (Lash cited in Szaz 1994).

The extraordinary amount of news coverage is also clear from a comparison between this period and the reference period just before the outburst of the Dutroux case, viz. the first half of August 1996. For every single newspaper from this period we looked for the item that was covered most extensively, in other words the most important news of the day. For that news report, which on average could only keep the readership spellbound for one day¹¹, we

⁹ The captivating title is the title in the largest type; it is not always found on the front page.

¹⁰ Even if the leadstory was not on the Dutroux-case the first article on Dutroux was on the front page in 66% of the cases. In 87% of the total 329 newspapers an article on the Dutroux-case could be found on the front page.

¹¹ We refer to, for instance, the killing mudflow on a Spanish campsite (the main news item in 13% of the newspapers), a tax-dodging scandal (KB-Lux scandal), money transport hold ups (10%), the hormone maffia and the murder on a veterinary (Van Noppen) (7%); the EMU debate and the 3% norm (7%), etc.

established the share of coverage, the number of pictures, the editorial, etc. Although it was the middle of the summer holidays, the dead-season, and not the most representative period for normal news coverage, the differences are striking. For every one of the mentioned quantitative parameters news coverage of the Dutroux case scores higher during two and a half months than the total of all most important changing news items per day of the whole reference period. The most important news was given on average 1.16 pages in the newspaper as opposed to 2.78 for the Dutroux facts; on average 16% of the news coverage for that period was on that particular item, which amounted to 33 % for the Dutroux case; 2.63 pictures were printed on that item, as compared to 7.95 pictures for the Dutroux case; the main news was discussed in 30 % of the editorials, for the Dutroux case we come to 59%; etc.

Still other figures than those in table 1 indicate the amplification of the Dutroux case: in 67% of the 329 newspapers the normal layout had been changed (see Figure 1). In 65% of the newspapers we found a special header on top of the page (for instance, a row of pictures of the victims). In 31 cases no advertisements could be found on the first page although that is usual. Extremely big titles were found in 26 cases. In total some 14 supplements on the case were found. A special layout of the first page was found 12 times. In 28 newspapers a series of photographs on the case could be found (for instance, a series of photos showing the growing up of the victims) and in 8 newspapers a complete picture page was devoted to the case. One newspaper published mourning bands round the pictures of the victims and one title filled a complete page. The attention of the Belgian readership was definitely drawn. If attention of the readership is an important but scarce commodity (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988) then it was assured for the Dutroux case.

Figure 1. An example of the changed layout and the massive attention paid to the Dutroux case in *De Morgen* (14 pages on Monday 19 August 1996). The front page shows a big picture of Marc Dutroux with the headline: "The face of evil"

(Figure 1 here)

CONSENSUS MOBILIZATION: THE GAP BETWEEN THE POPULATION AND THE INSTITUTIONS

The total period of two and a half months can be subdivided in six periods. The first period runs from the liberation of Sabine and Laetitia, over the recovery of Julie and Melissa, to the funeral of Julie and Melissa (16-26 August, 9 newspaper days). The second period is the period of An and Eefje: the search, the recovery and the funeral of both adolescents (27 August - 11 September: 14 newspaper days). Then follows the aftermath of the dramatic events (12-26 September: 13 newspaper days). Next are the announcement of Dutroux' lawyer to revenge the examining magistrate, Jean-Marc Connerotte, and the prelude to the Spaghetti-arrest and the first protest marches (27 September - 8 October: 10 newspaper days). The fifth period is the period of the White March: from the advice of the district attorney at the Court of Cassation to get the examining magistrate Connerotte off the case, over the dismissal of the examining magistrate, over the popular anger to the White March (9-21 October: 11 newspaper days). Finally, there is the period after the White March (22-31 October: 9 newspaper days).

Central in the news coverage on the Dutroux case, especially in the period leading to the White March, was what we would call 'gap discourse'. The gap between the population and the government, the 'citizen' and 'the system', the population and its institutions acted as the *master frame* within which all events were interpreted. What we call here the master

frame is the most important frame to which all other frames are implicitly or explicitly linked. In short: the reactions of the institutions, the judicial apparatus, but also of the politicians were stressed to be at odds with the feelings of the population. Words as ‘ivory tower’, ‘caste’, ‘other-worldliness’, ‘arrogance’ were legion. We present you with an example found in *Het Nieuwsblad* (18 October 1996): "Both the magistrates and the politicians seem to overlook the signal (of the population). Their secret meeting places have become cocoons of inbreeding and cross-fertilisation that radiate other-worldliness. On receptions, commission meetings, and informal meetings the ‘vox populi’ is spoken of scornfully: the grumbling population that needs a release once a year but then relapses in a lethargy that can be politically exploited. Is this true? Some complacent inhabitants of ‘the system’, of ‘the establishment’ don’t seem to understand that the protest is fundamentally against them and no longer against people as Dutroux or Nihoul." This gap discourse can be found in a quarter of all newspapers and reached a climax in the period around the White March: it was to be found in 50% of all analysed newspapers and its frequency per newspaper copy increased¹². From the very beginning of the case, however, the newspapers stressed the gap between the population and the institutions.

This image of the gap shows great similarity with the canonised and known expression of the ‘divide’ between the citizens and the politicians in Belgium. Since the elections result of 24 November 1991, the so-called Black Sunday with the breakthrough of the Vlaams Blok (extreme right party), journalists, politicians and scientists have stated that politics has lost contact with the population, that there is a intolerable distance, an estrangement between the citizens and the politicians. The gap discourse in the Dutroux case was not unknown and found fertile soil. The master frame in the Dutroux case was connected with a familiar interpretation of political Belgium (frame bridging). The day after the Spaghetti-arrest the

¹² Figures on the frequency of certain items per newspaper copy are not shown in tables.

front page of *Gazet van Antwerpen* symbolised this gap discourse: underneath an immense title "Gap still wider" two pictures are literally divided by a tear; on one side a smiling judge draped in ermine, on the other side a furious mass; in a mere four paragraphs text the gap between the population and the judicial apparatus is mentioned four times (see Figure 2). The imagery used by the newspapers is highly symbolic and is rooted in the consensus frame. They represent what Szaz has called icons (1994: 62-63). Icons are particularly powerful since their production "speeds up the issue-creation process and makes that process take quite spectacular form," and Szaz adds that because of them "attitude formation takes place without much need for detail in the cognitive component." The images used abundantly by the media were just that: vehicles that got their fuel from the popular gap discourse and that served to boost emotions even more, in their turn thus strengthening the consensus frame.

Figure 2. The gap discourse in speech and in print; the front page of *Gazet van Antwerpen* of 15 October 1996

(Figure 2 here)

The mass media not only reported on the estrangement between population and its institutions but they definitely took sides. They plainly sided with the furious mass and the bereaved parents. The vocabulary used clearly indicates this: words as 'mine', 'we', 'our', 'I', indicate that the journalist forgets his role as observer, objective reporter. A recurrent phrasing is the 'for our children' mantra. In on average 17% of all analysed news paper copies such identification discourse could be found; the period just before the White March beats the lot with 32%. Revealing is the front page of, again, *Gazet van Antwerpen* (19 October 1996) which pointed to the inserted poster for the White March with the title: "*We* are the new citizens. *We* ask questions" (italics by us). Elsewhere we found: "The feelings of

powerlessness have abounded in your letters since the sad news on An and Eefje. All *our* values seem to have shattered to pieces – what should *we* believe in, who should *we* trust, what should *we* do?" (*Het Laatste Nieuws* 6 September 1996).

The same involvement without explicit identification was also achieved in precisely the opposite way, namely by making absolute the feelings of grief, powerlessness and anger and by stressing their generality. Absolute words are used like ‘all’, ‘everyone’, ‘each’, ‘everywhere’, ‘the whole population’, ‘the whole country’, ‘the nation’, ‘the citizens’, ‘the Belgians’, etc. *Het Laatste Nieuws* (21 August 1996) wrote: "The outcry over what happened to Sabine and Laetitia, the grief for Julie and Melissa and the fear for An and Eefje, are feelings *we're* all *sharing* these days and they *unite* us in a remarkable way". On An and Eefje's funeral they wrote: "A sad *nation* says goodbye to An and Eefje, the two murdered girls *we've* all got to know so well" (*Het Laatste Nieuws* 7 September 1996). These words that stress the collectivity were frequently used in the period analysed: almost one in two newspaper copies used these words (49%); but again a peak was reached in the period of the White March when 83% of the newspapers wrote such absolute words (on average 3.01 times per newspaper). The use of such words, however, is not exceptional in journalistic writings, but the coverage of the Dutroux case beats the lot as is shown from a comparison with the reference period in which 22% of the newspapers used similar words in their coverage of the most important news items of the day.

Figure 3. Identification between media and population, a page from *Gazet van Antwerpen*, 19 October 1996. "We are the new citizens, we ask questions"

(*Figure 3 here*)

The gap between the people and their institutions was the master frame in the newspapers' interpretations of the Dutroux case, but other elements and frames were connected with it. We speak of frame bridging or frame extension when elements or frameworks that have many affinities are explicitly linked or when existing frameworks are presented in such a way that also the current situation can be interpreted. In the news coverage of the Dutroux case both these elements occurred, when at the drop of a hat other disappearances of children were referred to (that had nothing to do with the Dutroux case), and when other Belgian affairs in general and a (possible) involvement of senior officials were written about. The message was clear: the Dutroux-case was not a separate issue, it was part of a whole series of affairs, and it was the top of an iceberg. Kielbowicz and Scherer (1986: 81) write: "The mass media are in a powerful position to synthesise seemingly fragmented and unconnected situations and create what appear to be widespread phenomena ... (they) strive to convert stories about particular cases into examples of a general situation." When Sabine and Laetitia, Julie and Melissa, and An and Eefje were found, the newspaper archives were stormed in search of other unsolved disappearances. Almost daily some newspaper had a new story about an unsolved case from days long gone that was implicitly, but quite often also explicitly, linked with the Dutroux case. Some newspapers seemed to consider it a point of honour to keep their sinister list as complete as possible. Child disappearance seemed a common thing in Belgium: 31% of all 329 editions wrote about other disappearances. For example: *Het Laatste Nieuws* (17 September 1996) accused Michel Nihoul, an accomplice of Dutroux, of kidnapping 17 girls. For some years Belgium has been in a gulf of political or other scandals, or would-be scandals. Almost a third of the newspapers (30%) mentioned these affairs in their coverage of the Dutroux case and as such linked Dutroux and the scandalitis. *Het Nieuwsblad* (18 October 1996) for example, wrote: "(The public outcry) is not only fed by the Dutroux case, but also by an accumulation of resentment

and suspicion because of many unsolved cases of fraud, bribery, and murder and because political immorality and judiciary failings are left unpunished." Another interesting element is the extent to which the alleged involvement of 'senior officials' is mentioned, 15% of the newspapers speculated about these senior officials. Mid October 1996 *De Morgen* (11 October 1996) titled on its front page: "Neufchâteau¹³ discovers VIP's network of child pornography" and for those who still doubted the involvement of senior officials the editorial added: "And yes, what had been assumed seems to be correct: Bourlet and Connerotte have discovered a network of child pornography that has been operating for decades and in which senior officials participate." This highly suggestive writing is in line with the notorious canon of the believed hush-up policy in Belgium's higher circles. The baseline of it is that each suspicious case in which senior officials are involved, is being hushed up. Especially the Spaghetti-arrest caused hush-up speculations – "examining magistrate Connerotte has to leave because he knows too much" – was one of the most heard speculations. It is no surprise that in the period before the White March (and the Spaghetti-arrest) the involvement of senior officials was even mentioned in 30% of the newspapers.

The gap between the citizens and the state was the *master frame*; the case was extended to other disappearances, to Belgian scandals and to the possible involvement of senior officials (frame bridging and extension). Equally important was the fact that the Dutroux case was given a political-structural reading by the mass media. *Het Laatste Nieuws* (7 September 1996) summarised it in one title: "No coincidence anymore". The disappearance and murders of children were not mere accidents, no concurrence of circumstances. Not only Marc Dutroux was found guilty but also the judicial apparatus and the political system that had tolerated and even maintained the failing judicial system. From a case of individual responsibility the case turned into a matter of structural responsibility: "The people are good,

¹³ Neufchâteau is the name of the examining magistrates district.

but the system is corrupt" (*De Morgen* 17 October 1996). In the public (on TV and in the newspapers) this political-structural frame was used from the beginning, probably because the victims parents had played on the political-structural register (Rihoux and Walgrave 1998). The mass media stressed this interpretation and appropriated this structural-critical discourse. As early as 21 August *Het Laatste Nieuws* pushed Marc Dutroux into the background and stressed in the editorial the 'mistakes' and the 'wrong elements' 'in our country' that have caused the death of the girls. We can justly speak of frame amplification, confirming an existent frame.

Especially the repeated failings of the judiciary system and the police were brought to the attention of the reader. In 62% of the analysed newspapers, i.e. two in three, mistakes by the judiciary system or the police were mentioned. "Still more mistakes" titled *Het Laatste Nieuws* (21 August 1996) immediately after the outburst of the affair. During the whole period the failures were stressed, but they were slightly less stressed from the beginning of the case till after the White March (from 78% to 52%). A second indicator of the political reference frame was the high number of references to the so-called Law Lejeune on early releases. The Law Lejeune states that prisoners with good conduct can be released well-before the end of their sentence. Dutroux had been in prison for sexual offence before but was set free on the basis of this Law. This enabled him to continue his earlier practices. Immediately after the arrest of Dutroux *Het Laatste Nieuws* (21 August 1996) wrote: "Law Lejeune creates criminals". In total the Law was mentioned in 19% of the newspapers, with a major difference between the early and the last period: in the period 'Julie and Melissa' the Law Lejeune was topic of discussion number one (64%), after the White March it had become a minor theme (5%). Both indicators show how during the period of our analysis the attention shifted away from the specific juridical subjects. The reverse happened in relation to the references to political appointments. Most magistrates in Belgium are appointed politically, because they

are supported by a major party. As a consequence the judicial system is deeply politicized and every party gets a share of the nominations and promotions in it. On average 20% of the newspapers mentioned that theme; but especially just before and after the White March these references peaked (30% and 60%). Political appointments became the most important theme in the media, the most important problem to be solved. The next poujadistic quote can exemplify this: "It'll be typically Belgian that the depolitisation (of the magistrates) starts at the bottom, while the proverb and meanwhile also the affairs learn us that the fish starts rotting at the head". (*Het Nieuwsblad* 9 October 1996). A gradual 'dejuridisation' in favour of a politicization of the Dutroux case can be noted in the period analysed. The next quote is a perfect example: "The failing of the judiciary system is inevitable because it is inherent to the system due to the politicization". (*De Morgen* 5 October 1996). The relatively high number of references to other structural themes - sanctions for the responsible (12%), references to possible protection of the culprits (22%) or of those responsible politically (23%) - indicates that the political-structural frame was pushed to the fore.

The politicization of the horrible murders manifested itself in the words chosen by the journalists. The number of times the words 'politicians' and 'policymaker' occurred was counted (34%), also the occurrence of 'the structures', 'the institutions' or 'the system' (25%), 'politics' (32%), 'the minister' or 'the government' (51%), 'the parliament' or 'a member of parliament' (25%), and also 'the citizen(s)' (22%). Without exception the frequency of each of these political institutional words rose and, in most cases, peaked in the period around the White March : politicians or policymakers were mentioned in 54% of the newspapers in the White March period, the structures, the institutions or the system scored 33%, politics 43%, the minister or the government resulted in 48%; the member of parliament in 30% and the citizens in 61%. Especially 'the citizen' appeared in full glory on the media scene in the period of the White March, while before that he had been almost completely

absent. The Dutroux case was formulated in the traditional political-institutional vocabulary and as such it is more than obvious that this was first of all a political dossier and not a human interest story, especially in the period of the White March.

We also checked the values named by the written media in connection to the Dutroux case. Would these values be personal or rather political? The value mentioned most was 'responsibility' (in 46 newspapers). The other values mentioned were 'serenity' (45), 'trust' (41), 'solidarity' (39), 'democracy' (33), 'impartiality' (28), 'humanness' (27), the 'constitutional state' (27) and 'justice' (24). A comparison with the reference period indicated that such value discourse is not normal practice: in the coverage of the Dutroux case almost three times as many value words were used as in the coverage of the most important news items of the reference period. Apart from serenity, solidarity and humanness one could state that the most frequently mentioned values are all political-structural. Almost all values are mentioned most in the period of the White March and in this period the political values score even higher than the personal values.

Considering the possible forms of frame alignment it should be noted that, by means of bridging, extension, and amplification the media used existing frameworks, widespread among the population. Real attempts to change reference frames of the population (transformation) were hardly made. The media took advantage of the already low legitimacy of the institutions, the idea of the divide between the people and their institutions and the gap. As such the limitations of the media as to consensus mobilization are indicated. The power of the media is limited, it cannot create Dutroux-like cases out of the blue.

ACTION MOBILIZATION: THE CLIMAX TOWARDS THE WHITE MARCH AND THE OVERT MOBILIZATION BY THE MASS MEDIA

The key question for mobilization is to what extent the media linked those interpretation frames to the White March. Or in terms of the mobilization theory: have the mass media increased the motivation of the potential participant by decreasing the costs and increasing the benefits?

Was more attention paid to the Dutroux case in the period of the White March than before? The implicit assumption is that a kind of overflow effect of consensus mobilization to action mobilization is possible, that simple amplification and consensus mobilization without concrete actions has, as such, a mobilising effect. From an action mobilization perspective it is expected that the quantitative attention for the Dutroux case was even higher in the period of the White March. Figure 4 shows that this expectation proved right. The figure contains the most important quantitative parameters but periodised.

Figure 4. Quantitative attention for the Dutroux case throughout the six periods

(Figure 4 here)

All parameters are almost parallel: in the period just before the White March the attention for the Dutroux case exploded (again). For some parameters the peak was to be situated in the beginning of the Dutroux case: most lead stories (91%), most pictures (54%) were published and the largest share of the coverage was devoted to the case (53%). Gradually less attention was paid to the case in the period of An and Eefje, the aftermath and the beginning of the dismissal; attention soared again just before the White March and remained as high as in the first period. Just before the White March many lead stories appeared (87%) as well as a large share of pictures (43%) and almost half of the coverage was devoted to the case (45%). It is probably not coincidental that especially the parameters of the opinion-coverage peaked in the period of the White March: the number of editorials surpassed

that of the first period (85% against 78%) and also the number of readers' letters in the fifth period easily surpassed that of the first period (62% against 45%).

There was more. Even if the first period scored in total higher for three quantitative parameters than the period of the White March, the absolute day peaks of each of these parameters was situated in the period of the White March. The share of Dutroux news (77%), the share of Dutroux pictures (82%), as well as the share of readers' letters on the case (100%) peaked around the White March. Furthermore, the whole White March period climaxed towards the White March. Every day more space was allocated to the case, every day more pictures, every day more readers' letters and for days only Dutroux editorials and Dutroux lead stories were published. Figure 5 clearly visualises the build-up of the White March showing the relative share in the total news coverage per day.

Figure 5. Share of the Dutroux case in the total news coverage per day

(Figure 5 here)

The White March was not the only action in relation to the Dutroux case. From August onwards people started to demonstrate. First these demonstrations were more in honour of the victims but gradually they turned into protests against the events. The quantitative pattern of these actions coincides with the pattern of media attention for the case¹⁴. Figure 6 shows both elements.

Figure 6. Media attention for the Dutroux case and number of collective actions

(Figure 6 here)

¹⁴ The number of actions was listed on the basis of the press coverage in the 17 (local) editions of *Het Laatste Nieuws*.

The sheer parallelism between the number of actions and the size of the coverage is, however, not a proof of the media creating this mobilization wave. The events that attracted the attention of the media also got the people on the streets even without this media attention. Still, it backs the hypothesis that to a large extent the media attention made this massive mobilization possible.

The still increasing attention for the Dutroux case just before the White March does not provide proof for the fact that the media made an explicit theme of the White March and as such supported it explicitly or implicitly. Table 2 combines a number of indicators related to this aspect. For reasons of uniformity the table presents percentages although the number of observations is small (n=24)¹⁵.

Table 2. Action mobilization for the White March in the Belgian media from 15 till 19 October 1996 (n=24)

(Table 2 here)

Action mobilization particularly stresses the benefits of the action and minimalises the costs. In order to arouse the interest for an action that action should be made known, should be mentioned and announced, should be talked and written about. That happened in abundance. In more than four fifth of the 24 newspapers the White March was mentioned. In only 5 days the March was mentioned 87 times by name, on average more than twice per newspaper copy. We stress again that all the figures on the number of occurrences are related

¹⁵ For every newspaper the five daily editions in the week from 14 to 20 October 1996 were examined : the edition of Tuesday 15 October, the day after the Spaghetti arrest, up to and including the edition of Saturday 19 - Sunday 20 October. One newspaper was missing, *De Gazet van Antwerpen* Friday 18 October 1996.

to a sample of about 10% to 20% of the total text that was published in every newspaper on the Dutroux case. Undoubtedly, more than 83% of the newspapers mentioned the White March. The last two days before the White March all newspapers without exception announced the March. On Saturday 19 October, the day before the March, fifty references were counted, on average ten references per newspaper. In short: those citizens in Belgium who did not know what was ahead came from another planet. The Spaghetti-arrest, the main catalyst of the public outcry and the White March was even more put in the spotlights. In every newspaper copy the Spaghetti-arrest was mentioned, three times on average.

In weighing the pros and cons of action participation, the value of the possible outcome, the chances of a result and the expected turn out feature among the benefits. The value of the possible outcome is closely related to the political-structural interpretation given to the drama of the missing and murdered girls. The media presented the White March as a logical reaction of the population to this drama: "The public outcry is understandable and justified" (*Het Nieuwsblad* 18 October 1996). It was stressed that the horrible events were not a coincidence but were caused structurally and politically. The value of the possible outcome was no more or no less than a judicial reform and even a reform of the political system. All this is related to the general framing and the consensus mobilization mentioned in the previous paragraph.

In advance, the newspapers speculated on the results of the White March and the chance that the White March would have the expected results became a real theme. It was mentioned in one on six newspaper copies and in three of the five Saturday editions. In one on six newspapers and in three Saturday newspapers before the March, the White March was called historic. *Gazet van Antwerpen* (19 October 1996) opened with "Sunday historic White March in Brussels"; the first paragraph was very explicit in its recruitment: "With white flags they'll march through Brussels tomorrow: white and blue collars, students, the self-employed,

citizens. No one knows how many there'll be. It'll definitely be one of the most impressive manifestations ever held in this country. It's already referred to as a historic October Movement." *De Morgen* (18 October 1996) announced a day earlier: "It's a fact that the White March on Sunday will become a historic manifestation."

Exactly one third of the newspapers reported on the presumed (massive) number of participants. Every newspaper, with the exception of *De Standaard*, told its readers at least once that many people were expected in Brussels on Sunday 20 October; four on five newspapers announced this on the eve of the White March. Almost every day the expected turnout increased, the numbers of extra trains was mentioned and the fact that almost all coaches were booked for Sunday. In short: the benefits of the White March were clear: a great number of participants, chances on a favourable effect and the March would be historic in character. Who would want to miss this historic event? To a certain extent the White March is an example of the Thomas-theorem which states that 'when people define situations as real then they are real in their consequences': in calling the White March in advance a historic event, the expectations became, or were made, true.

However, Szaz (1994: 86) notes that "even if people have the motivation to act (...) their capacity to do so will be affected by a series of conditions." Participating in a manifestation like the White March is not all roses, costs ensue. What was the media's attitude to these costs? Some of these costs were, for example, the financial cost, the time invested, the uncertainty about the course of the manifestation, the chances of irregularities. In general it could be stated that the choice of the date (a free Sunday afternoon with a predicted 15° C; dry with sunny intervals), the action means (a peaceful demonstration), and the place (central and accessible capital and a route from one railway station to another) had no effect on the objective costs (or practical hindrances) for participation. Although the subjective costs of participation differed individually the media tried hard to keep them as low as possible for

everyone. Thanks to the special price for a return train ticket, 200 BEF irrespective of the distance travelled, the financial costs were kept low for everyone and the newspapers could not resist stressing this. Since two thirds of the newspapers provided their readership with practical information, the uncertainty about the further development of the March was largely taken away. On the Saturday preceding the White March every newspaper mentioned: time of departure, exact place and route of the march, price of a train ticket, etc. All this information was presented more than once to the reader¹⁶. The day before the March *Gazet van Antwerpen* (19 October 1996) published a half page map under a not really neutral title: "Cheap and practical to the White March". The text stressed the easiness of participation: the trip Antwerp¹⁷-Brussels by train would take little more than half an hour, the March would start near the *Gare du Nord* (one of the main railway stations in Brussels), the March would always be straight ahead, and the candidates were kindly warned that the time of arrival could well be only at 6 p.m. The readers of *Het Laatste Nieuws* (16 October 1996) were also presented with a practical map, and were encouraged to go by train ("One only pays 200 BEF"). Yet for those who preferred the car, all car parks were indicated on the map. In the week preceding the March the gulf of protest was characterised by vandalism, police charges, water cannons, and dozens of arrests. As such, those possibly participating in the White March risked violence with personal consequences (injuries, panic, arrests, etc). With the White March approaching, the attitude of the mass media evolved. While in the beginning of the week they could still sympathise with the anger and forgive the violence of the demonstrators; by the end of the week they strongly disapproved of the violence on the street. "Agitators tried to ruin the

¹⁶ Practical information was not only provided in the period leading up to the White March. *De Standaard* (5 September 1996) provided the reader with the addresses of the families of An and Eefje so that readers could send their condolences and *Het Laatste Nieuws* (22 August 1999) provided a list of addresses "where in your neighbourhood a mourning register can be signed".

¹⁷ *Gazet van Antwerpen* is an Antwerp-based journal.

atmosphere of indignation (...) the same small group seized every opportunity to inflame the atmosphere." (*Gazet van Antwerpen* 19 October 1996). And that was "not what the people wanted" according to *Het Laatste Nieuws* (18 October 1996, page 2). Time and again it was stressed that the White March would be 'serene' and 'dignified': "For the fifth day in a row massive actions were held. The demonstrations were usually peaceful and introduced the big manifestation of Sunday." (*Gazet van Antwerpen* 19 October 1996). The parents were given a forum in the newspapers to make their point for a quiet March clear and the editorialists supported that the March "should be serene and dignified, quiet and white." (*De Morgen* 19 October 1996).

The experience with demonstrating is a crucial factor in the perceived costs of participation. People who had never before demonstrated, experienced their participating in the White March without any doubt as a major step, a big effort. We do not know the exact number of people who had never before demonstrated but we do know that 60% of the participants in the local white marches after the national White March had demonstrated for the first time. A large number of these people participated in the White March (Walgrave and Rihoux 1997: 119). The costs for these people should not be underestimated despite the objective low costs. In any case, the cost was higher than simply undersigning the many petitions¹⁸ that were around those days.

The press not only offered a favourable cost-benefit analysis but also played a major role in the actual mobilization of the people. This was achieved implicitly by giving the parents ample media attention and offering them a forum, free newspaper space to address the public. Letters and appeals by the parents were printed in full. *Het Laatste Nieuws* (18

¹⁸ On 9 October a petition demanding longer jailterms and less facilities for sexual delinquents, carrying the signature of 2,7 million people was handed to the President of the Chamber of Representatives. It was by far the largest petition in Belgian history.

October 1996) published 'the diary of Paul Marchal (An's father) – that would appear regularly- in which he mentions a "quiet march that will be dignified." "Parents count on serenity" titled *Gazet van Antwerpen* (19 October 1996) on its front page the Saturday preceding the March. Four on five Saturday editions and 38% of the newspapers had something similar. But not only the parents were heard in the media also other authorities were covered, for instance, King Albert I himself: "King asks to keep up the fight" (*Gazet van Antwerpen* 19 October 1996).

But the newspapers did even more: *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Gazet van Antwerpen* supplemented their newspapers with mobilization posters for the White March and asked their readerships to hang them; also *Het Nieuwsblad* (19 October 1996) considered this but decided to keep it simple with an announcement on the first page: "See you in Brussels on Sunday". *De Morgen* and *De Standaard* (19 October 1996) published a larger advertisement for "the march for the children"; it was not clear whether this was their own initiative or the parents'. *Het Laatste Nieuws* (16 October 1996) placed its own advertisement on the front page with a free phone number for the public to announce their own 'white action'.

The whole discourse revealed a positive attitude towards the White March and was full of unconcealed appeals to participate. *Het Laatste Nieuws* (16 October 1996) titled "Make Brussels a white city on Sunday" and the front page had been decorated with white balloons for four days before the March. Those not planning to go were made feel guilty: *Gazet van Antwerpen* (19 October 1996) wrote on the Saturday preceding the White March that some "famous citizens used the "yes-but" excuse for not going" and that "some politicians didn't dare to go". In short: it was every right-minded person's solemn duty to demonstrate in Brussels. This mobilization was not equally strong in all newspapers. Especially the more popular press stood head and shoulders above the rest, while two quality papers, and especially *De Standaard*, were much more distanced in their coverage.

CONCLUSION: THE MEDIA MADE THE WHITE MARCH

When in the beginning of October 1996 the parents of the Dutroux-victims called for a demonstration in the streets of Brussels on the 20th, social movement watchers in Belgium were unanimous in their prediction: with no movement organizations backing it, it would be very hard to mobilize a lot of people. This was just days before 300,000 people made the White March into the largest Belgian demonstration ever. This contrast was so puzzling that it marked the beginning of our research into the question of who worked the machinery of the White March mobilization. Our hypothesis - that goes largely against current social movement theory - was that it were the mass media that made the White March into a mobilization success. The empirical material points indeed in that direction: the media have contributed more than their mite to the consensus and action mobilization for the White March. Not only the massive Dutroux-coverage and the political-structural interpretation of the horrible events, but also the theme making of the White March itself and the mobilization of the public were impressing. As such almost all mobilization obstacles were taken. The media were not aloof but, on the contrary, played openly the role of fellow traveller of the parents and the discontented public. Usually social movements and protesting groups are covered but have no control over the coverage. In the Dutroux case the media took over the discourse of the parents and the street. The Belgian press forgot their role of distanced and objective reporter, they were not mere observers but presented themselves as participants, as actors and players in the social events with, as it seems, an own agenda and objectives. It seems that turning the White March into a success was an implicit goal of several newspapers. The fact that they added posters, provided a forum for the parents and actively mobilised,

speaks volumes. A television breakdown or a strike of the newspapers in the week preceding the White March would have had an enormous impact and the March would have been much smaller.

The most puzzling thing about the White March is that it seemed it were the media who produced both the consensus *and* the action mobilization. Although we cannot really prove that the media mobilized the 300,000 demonstrators of the White March - we didn't survey the participants of the White March itself - we have some more circumstantial evidence to establish our point that the demonstrators were made aware of the issue and the demonstration by the mass media. (1) Interviews with participants in the so-called Second White March that took place in Brussels more than a year later, after the media-attention had diminished, support this finding and show that a vast majority of the participants claimed that only the media informed them about the manifestation, an unusually high number (Walgrave, Van Aelst and Suetens 1998).

Table 3. Comparison of the demonstrators in the Second White March (15 February 1998; 30,000 participants; emotional theme), the anti-racist Hand-in-Hand demonstration (22 March 1998; 15,000 participants; post-materialistic theme), the Social Non-Profit demonstration (26 March 1998; 20,000 participants; trade union theme).

(Table 3 here)

(2) While it is correct to state that it is not uncommon to find that most of the people didn't attend on their own but came as a part of a group, it is atypical to see that those networks primarily consisted in family and friends. There was no common binding social movement backing it (Van Aelst and Walgrave, forthcoming). The Second White March

survey shows that the participants were mobilized through interpersonal social interaction networks, which suggests that media information is not processed by individuals in isolation but in a social context. (3) Earlier research showed that the profile of both the participants in the Second White March and of those in the local white marches, was very heterogeneous and that this was probably also the case at the White March (Walgrave and Rihoux 1997). This is again an indirect indication of the role of the media. Kielbowicz and Scherer (1986: 85) write that members of social movements who only became member after the press coverage have other characteristics than the members from the very beginning. Implicitly they indicate that media coverage has an influence on the social composition of the movement. If the White March had been organized by organizations and not by the media the profile of the participant would have been less heterogeneous. The media reach the population at large far more than the traditional mobilising organizations.

DISCUSSION: MASS MEDIA AS MOBILISATOR

The fact that our hypothesis was not falsified by empirical data, brings up some important questions. For example: do the findings hold for other than the written media? What about impact? How does the relationship between the media and the citizen work? Where does this all leave us in terms of social movement theory? How can we reconcile our findings with conventional knowledge on mobilization?

Claiming that the media largely created the White March should be put into perspective. Although the main newspapers were analysed, only the written press was investigated. When nowadays the power of the mass media is discussed audiovisual media is meant and not the written press. Still, the scientific discussion on the different influences of

the written and electronic media is still open (McQuail 1993: 330). During the same period, the Belgian audio-visual media seem to have acted less explicit as action mobilisator and to have restricted themselves to consensus mobilization: the TV-newsreaders were not dressed in white T-shirts or wore White March pins. However, the quantitative attention (amplification) of both channels for the issue was by no means less than in the newspapers. Both the public broadcasting channel and the commercial channel twice devoted their entire evening news to the case (Verstraeten 1997: 90). Baeyens analysed the coverage of the public broadcasting channel and the commercial channel during the first three weeks of the controversy and concluded that they spent respectively 50% and 63% of its news on the case (Baeyens 1997). We suggested that consensus and action mobilization are communicating vessels, implying that massive and intensive consensus mobilization necessitates less action mobilization. Klandermans (1984: 586) also claims that several motives can more or less compensate one another: a highly valued outcome of an action can take away the hindrances for participation. A good media mix with a strong consensus mobilising and amplifying electronic media and an openly action mobilising written press seems to have an enormous impact.

The relation media-citizen is neither one-way nor mechanical. The question could be raised whether the media takes after the citizen or vice versa. It is not because a newspaper covers the White March favourably that its readership participates, it could just as well be the other way around; the newspaper covers the March favourably since its readership is pro-march. A simple stimulus-response model (McQuail 1993: 330) is out of the question here. We could rather speak of a dialectic between sender and receiver, a mutual exchange. It is not clear whether the mass media took the public in tow in the Dutroux case or whether they were swept away by the massive reactions. Even without the media's help the Dutroux case touched a string of the Belgian population, evidence of which are the hundreds of readers'

letters published by the newspapers. Of course, the editors selected the letters, but more letters on the case were published than readers' letters column could take. Also the increasing circulation of the papers in the analysed period indicates that the media and the population were on the same wavelength¹⁹.

Since long a more general discussion is going on on the effects of the media on the reader, watcher and listener. Are the media capable of changing the public opinion and are they capable of changing the public's behaviour? The largest obstacle in this discussion is the methodological question: "Most direct questions about the 'power of the media' either make no sense or cannot be answered" (McQuail 1993: 381). This relates to the impossibility to isolate the effect of the media from other possible effects, which is possible in an experimental situation: "The media are rarely likely to be the only necessary or sufficient cause of effect, and the relative contribution is extremely hard to assess" (McQuail 1993: 327). We have no sound argumentation to ultimately prove that only the media created the March. We tried to found the plausibility of the thesis but the causality cannot be proved. What we do know is that the media have activated all possible mobilization functions, but to what extent only the media are responsible remains an open question. In any case, there were no other agencies, organizations or social movements, that mobilised for the White March (Walgrave and Rihoux 1997). The media are the only plausible explanation for the massive White March. Of course this leads to the crucial question: under which conditions do the media choose to actively mobilize for peak-mobilizations?

¹⁹ The sales figures of the newspapers were given to us provided that they would be treated discretely. As such we can only state in general terms that the circulation of the newspapers increased in the period of our research.

A crucial question sparked by our findings is how they are to be reconciled with conventional movement theory that doesn't think highly of the mobilizing capacities of the media. In short: media are apt for consensus mobilization but action mobilization is out of the question. Our research forces us to rethink this idea: the data suggest that the mass media not only can play a role in consensus mobilization but that, in specific circumstances, they can actually 'co-produce' massive mobilizations. What are those specific circumstances? Based on the case of the White March we speculate about the nature of contexts favorable for media mobilization.

(1) media only take an active role when there is *clear and manifest disagreement between the people and the elites*, allowing the media to present themselves as the spearhead of the public and easily cashing in on the widespread discontent. The data show that this was very much so in the Dutroux case where the pre-existing and popular image of the gap between the public and their leaders served as the masterframe.

(2) the active role of the media is restricted to *highly emotional and symbolic issues* that create an atmosphere of consensus and togetherness. At the heart of the White March lies the shock following the systematic kidnapping, abuse and murder of young children by a previous convict living on social benefit, that remained uncovered due to repetitive failures of the judiciary and police system. The discovery of the avoidable murders on the innocent children incensed and united the nation and became the nucleus of the powerful discontent that was to follow. There was so much emotional consensus that even King Albert took a public stance and even assumed a role that would normally be considered to go beyond his position as impartial head of the nation. The media played these emotions to the fullest and identified with the public. On top of this the issue lend itself perfectly to portray all the people involved as victims versus perpetrators, good versus evil, innocence versus perversion. Symbolic categories that were abundantly used by the media.

(3) for media to take an active role *the absence of a movement or a committed social organization* is more of an advantage than a disadvantage, making it possible for them to present themselves as sensitive and unpartisan watch dogs around a consensus issue. It is striking to see that the Belgian media participated so actively to make the White March into a success when there was no movement behind it, while their attention for the case waned when in the wake of the White March a white movement developed and started to organize the discontent. The white movement that was founded after the White March became strongly aware of the influence of the media (Walgrave and Rihoux 1997). Only six months after the White March, by April-May 1997, the white movement felt completely deserted by the media. By then the media had distanced themselves from the Dutroux case, from the parents and the white movement and resumed a more 'usual' coverage of the whole issue.

(4) the media only take an active role when the issue at hand is *relatively simple*. Gamson (1992), Klandermans and Goslinga (1996) have shown the media can do their bit in consensus mobilization, but remarked that their capacity decreases as the complexity of the controversy increases. Not only the Dutroux case was an emotional and symbolic issue, but at the outset it was also straightforward and not too complex, making it easy for the media to report on it in full detail.

(5) the media will only engage fully in peak-mobilization when the *controversy is politically impartial*. This allows them to act more autonomously, being freed from the incessant obligation to remain unpartisan when political parties quarrel. Certainly in the beginning, when the focus rested on the police and judicial system, the Dutroux case was not treated as a political matter. Moreover the sheer drama of the issue and the instant birth of an emotional consensus, made party political recuperation nearly impossible. And even when the stress shifted to the politicization, *all* political parties were implicated. It was not before the

issue became subject of a parliamentary investigatory commission (more than a year later), that it got into the party political debate. At that stage the media frenzy had ceased.

(6) only when the *media environment is commercial and characterized by depolitisation and de-ideologization*, the media can create peak-mobilizations. In a politically and ideologically divided media environment consensus mobilizing efforts are only influential in their own pillar and are confronted with other voices. When the different media each try to impose their frames, it is difficult to create an overarching consensus and 'unpartisan' action mobilization will fail. In the past, when they were still the mouthpiece of political parties, Belgian journalists of the written press certainly advocated a point of view (Johnstone, Slawski and Bowman 1976: 114-116), but played a consensus mobilization role within their own 'territory'. The depolitization change of the Belgian media environment (Biltreyst and Van Gompel 1997; De Bens 1997) made the openly active mobilizing approach to the Dutroux case possible. Now it was more than astonishing to see how the newspapers all agreed on their coverage. They all reported more or less the same events and facts and interpreted more or less in the same way and they all wrote a lot. The de-ideologization and depolitisation, and thus commercialisation, can lead to a unanimity with, so it seems, enormous effects. This media impact on public opinion, following their presentation of a consonant version of social reality, has been described by Noelle-Neumann (1984) and Masuy (1997: 34) concludes: "From objectivism to unanimism."

(7) the media are more likely to play an active role in, what McQuail calls, *disturbed times*. A general scandal atmosphere and a lack of confidence seem ideal. McQuail (1993: 332-333) suggests the mass media have a much greater impact in turbulent times than in normal circumstances: "It does seem that whenever the stability of society is disturbed, by crime, war, economic malaise or some "moral panic", the mass media are given some responsibility (...) (But) we can only speculate about the reasons for such associations in

time, but we cannot rule out the possibility that the media are actually more influential in certain ways at times of crisis or heightened awareness". The Belgian summer of 1996 was indeed a 'disturbed time' when the nation seemed struck by moral panic (Hooghe 1998).

(8) and finally, one can assume that the mobilising impact of the media depends on the *population's confidence in the media*. Recent figures show that confidence in the media, especially the written press, in Belgium is considerably higher than in other European countries. And more, while all other institutions in Belgium (parliament, government, political parties, justice...) lost the population's confidence during the Dutroux case, the media's trust level even rose²⁰.

This list is not exhaustive and does not constitute the alpha and omega of preconditions for peak-mobilization by the media, mainly because it is derived from the analysis of only one particular event, but serves as a prototype instrument to better understand when and how the conventional theory on social movement mobilization could be extended towards the mass media. While it is clear that such a set of preconditions will only seldom unfold, it seems that the role of the Belgian media in the White March is not unique. In other West European countries similar media artefacts can be traced. Furedi (1997) describes the role of the media in the anti-gun-movement after the shootings in Dunblane (UK), in a similar way. Media mobilization is reserved for exceptional cases and the white case also indicates that the role of the media is temporary (see also Sampedro 1997). The media are a very unreliable ally: "media coverage does produce an increase in expressions of concern about an issue, but (...) those expressions of concern fade just as quickly when coverage wanes" (Szasz 1994: 64). Like their readership the media hunt for new facts and are easily bored by a certain theme (Downs 1972). Gamson and Meyer (1996) note that "once media attention shifts to

²⁰ Data about trust in institutions in a comparative perspective can be found in the Eurobarometer 48.0 of October - November 1998.

some other issue and the controversy has lost its salience, the open space closes again and would-be movement spokespersons no longer get their phone calls returned." The somewhat artificial unanimity in the Belgian press collapsed after some time. In 1998 a media war burst loose between believers and disbelievers concerning related files of the Dutroux case. We only showed in this contribution that the media under very specific circumstances are in fact able to mobilize for peak-mobilizations, but it seems that they are inappropriate for permanent and sustained mobilization. The congruent collapse of the white mobilization and the swift decline in media attention for the Dutroux-case supports this argument. The list of preconditions also suggests that the suitability of the media for enduring mobilization is limited. Inevitably the media will broaden their scope again once a dramatic event has faded and attention will be paid to other issues; political parties will jump onto topics that get huge public attention thus bringing it into the normal political process and making it partisan; emotions tend to fade quickly thus making the issue less salient; the ensuing search for those accountable (when there is someone to blame) will soon become too complex and argumentative to explain in a straightforward manner and to understand instantaneously. Those are all likely situations that go against the list of preconditions and that make it highly improbable that the media are fit for permanent and sustained mobilization.

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Table 1. Quantitative attention for the Dutroux case in the Belgian newspapers from 16 August to 1 October 1996 (n=329)

	<i>De Morgen</i>	<i>De Standaard</i>	<i>Het Nieuwsblad</i>	<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	<i>Gazet van Antwerpen</i>	<i>Total</i>
Average number of pages	3.09	1.77	2.77	3.71	2.65	2.80
Average number of pictures	6.56	2.55	7.73	14.35	8.60	7.95
Average number of readers' letters	2.41	1.91	4.02	4.76	5.12	3.64
Share news coverage (%)	28	23	38	40	35	33
Share pictures (%)	26	18	36	41	37	32
Share readers' letters (%)	40	36	55	54	48	46
Share editorials (%)	64	47	59	62	62	59
Share leadstories (%)	50	58	68	71	60	61
Share main items (%)	70	42	61	71	51	59
Share captivating title (%)	50	77	62	85	54	66
Share page one pictures (%)	46	36	68	68	55	55

Figure 1. An example of the changed layout and the massive attention paid to the Dutroux case in *De Morgen* (14 pages on Monday 19 August 1996). The front page shows a big picture of Marc Dutroux with the headline: "The face of evil"

(A4-size copy included, marked on the back)

Figure 2. The gap discourse in speech and in print; the front page of *Gazet van Antwerpen* of 15 October 1996

(A4-size copy included, marked on the back)

Figure 3. Identification between media and population, a page from *Gazet van Antwerpen*, 19 October 1996. "We are the new citizens, we ask questions"

(A4-size copy included, marked on the back)

Figure 4. Quantitative attention for the Dutroux case throughout the six periods

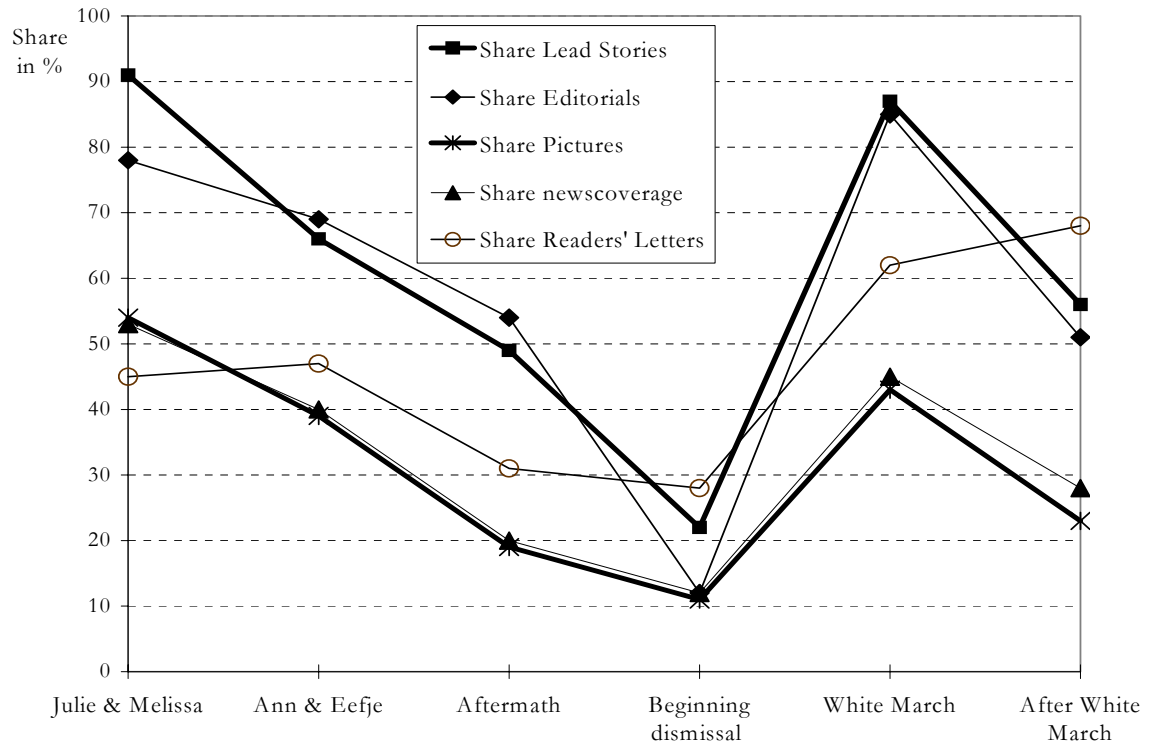


Figure 5. Share of the Dutroux case in the total news coverage per day

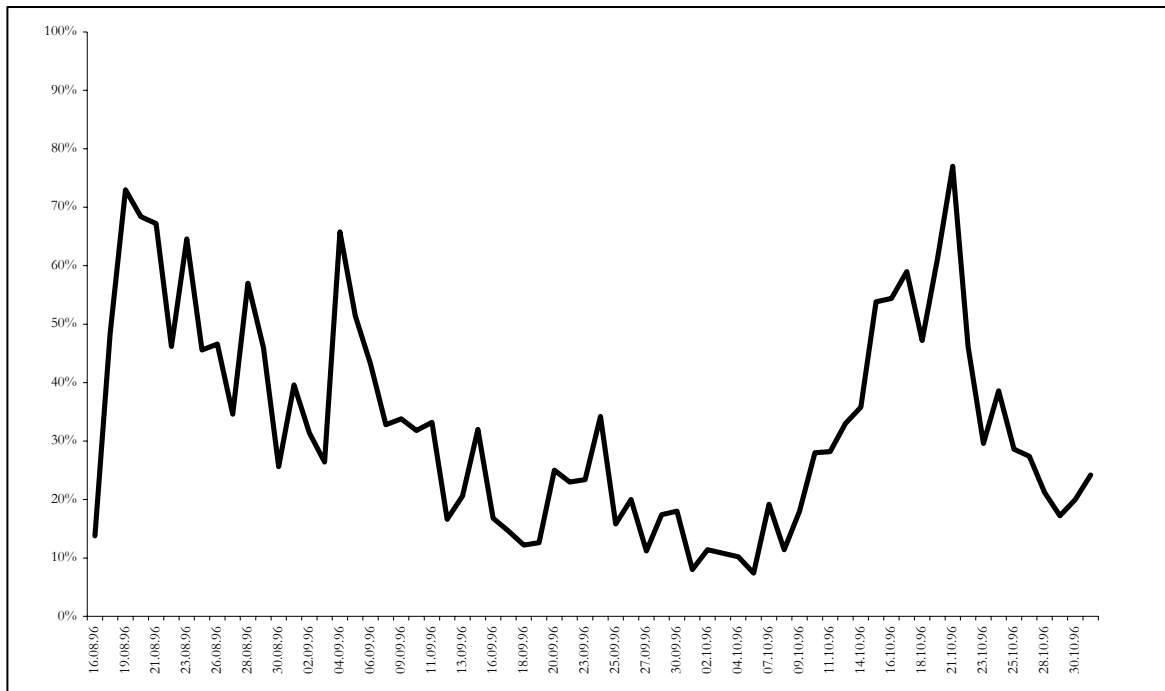


Figure 6. Media attention for the Dutroux case and number of collective actions

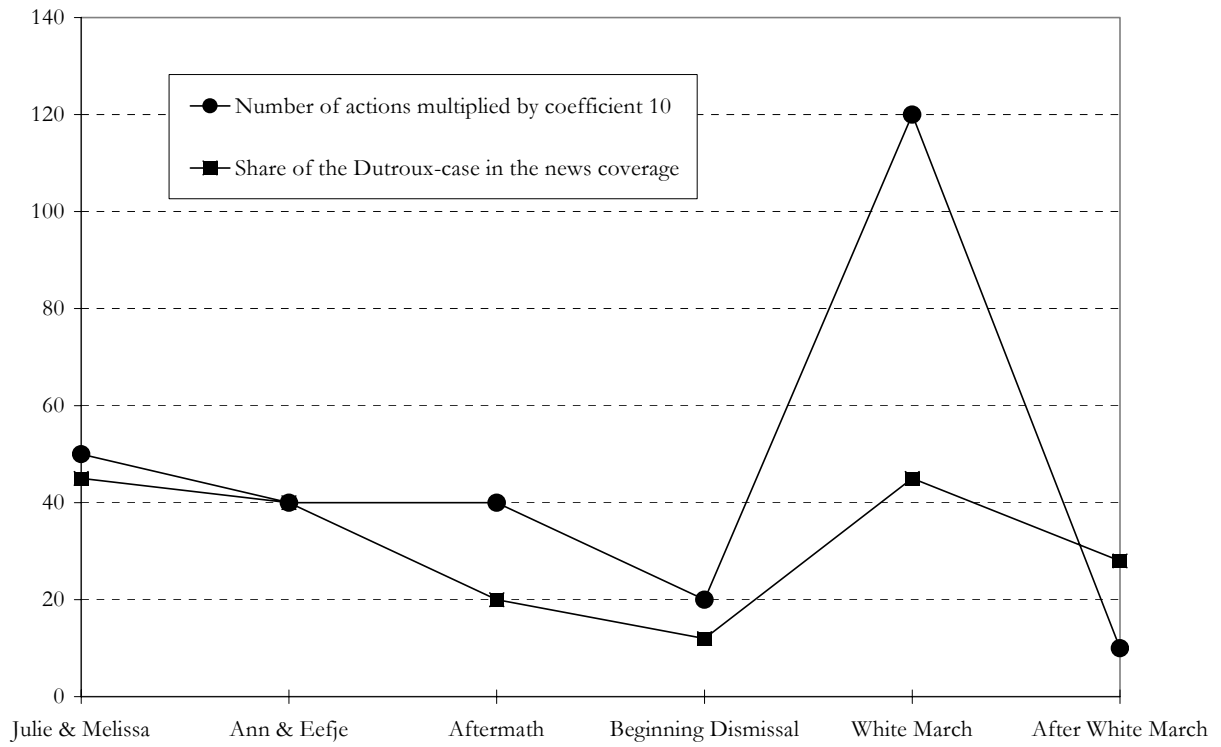


Table 2. Action mobilisation for the White March in the Belgian media from 15 till

19 October 1996 (n=24)

	<i>De De Morgen</i>	<i>De Standaard</i>	<i>Het Nieuwsblad</i>	<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	<i>Gazet van Antwerpen</i>	<i>Total</i>
Share reference to White March (%)	80	60	80	100	100	83
Average number references to White March	1.18	2.00	4.11	2.36	3.10	2.54
Share reference to Spaghetti-arrest (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100
Average number references to Spaghetti-arrest	2.45	3.00	4.10	2.82	2.70	3.02
Share with forum for the parents (%)	20	40	40	60	25	38
Share with practical information (%)	60	40	60	60	100	63
Share with reference to the turn out expected (%)	40	20	20	60	25	33
Share with reference to the results expected (%)	20	0	20	20	20	17
Share with references to the historic character of the White March (%)	0	0	20	40	25	17

Table 3. Comparison of the demonstrators in the Second White March (15 February 1998; 30,000 participants; emotional theme), the anti-racist Hand-in-Hand demonstration (22 March 1998; 15,000 participants; post-materialistic theme), the Social Non-Profit demonstration (26 March 1998; 20,000 participants; trade union theme).

	Second White		
	March	Anti-Racist	Trade Union
% of participants mobilized exclusively through the media channel	70.0	6.7	0.5
% of participants mobilized by an organization	8.4	63.3	64.9
% of participants who came in the company of family	60.8	36.8	0.5