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## Recommendations for the promotion of foreign news coverage in the Flemish media

***Based on recent research on the quantity, quality and impact of foreign news coverage, in this Advice the Flemish Peace Institute discusses the scope for action to support better coverage of news about the international community. With a view to the verifiable social added value of high-quality foreign news, the Institute has formulated a number of specific recommendations for the structural promotion of foreign news coverage in the Flemish media.***

## **1 Introduction**

News coverage of events abroad is important: news offers a ‘window on the world’ and contributes to ensuring that citizens of our globalized world are adequately informed. Furthermore, the nature and amount of published or broadcast foreign news are believed to have a major impact on people’s knowledge, attitudes and perceptions.<sup>1</sup> Various social forums<sup>2</sup> have for some time expressed their concern about the quantity and quality of foreign news in the commercial and public media. They point to the paradox that, as globalisation has progressed in recent decades, localisation of the news in the media has increased proportionally.

There is also an in-depth debate in the academic literature about foreign news coverage. Academics’ main concerns have to do with quantity, as several studies have highlighted a serious decline in the share of foreign news in both newspapers and television news bulletins. The issue of quality is also debated: foreign news is thought to be defined largely in terms of Western values, with the main focus on a small, specific part of the world.

Finally, there is the political debate about the media and international news coverage. The Flemish Parliament discussed various relevant resolutions (see below) during its 2004-2009 term and on 19 March 2009 the Flemish Minister President, Kris Peeters, convened a ‘Media Consultation Platform’,<sup>3</sup> where concern about the decline of foreign news coverage was a major agenda item.

## **2 Current status of Flemish foreign news coverage: new research on facts and impact**

Social, academic and political concern about the declining share of foreign news in the media and the impact of foreign news coverage demonstrated by earlier studies prompted the Peace Institute to initiate an extensive study of the quantity and quality of foreign news coverage in Flanders, its impact on knowledge of the international community and on attitudes towards peace among Flemish citizens, and the potential scope for action to promote greater coverage of foreign news. The Peace Institute published its results in a substantial report entitled ‘A Window on the World – The Status of Foreign News Coverage in the Media: Facts, Impact and Policy’.<sup>4</sup>

The report provides background and an explanation for the development of the **quantity** of foreign news coverage. In the period between 2003 and 2008 the combined share of foreign news aired in the program *Het Journaal* on VRT (the Flemish public broadcaster) and *Het Nieuws* on VTM (the main Flemish commercial channel) fell by a fifth. It should be noted, however, that the start of the analysis period (2003) coincided with an extraordinary situation – the onset of the Iraq war. Second, the impact of the decline after 2003 manifested itself sooner and was more pronounced on VTM than on VRT. Between 2003 and 2008 the public broadcaster devoted on average just under a third of its overall news bulletins to foreign events. On the commercial channel only one in five items highlighted foreign events.

With respect to **quality**, the study found that the foreign news reported in the Flemish media focuses primarily on Belgium's neighbouring countries and on the political and military superpowers. Proximity of any kind (geographical, cultural, historic) appears to constitute a very, if not completely, dominant news value. Moreover, the media's 'spotlight' is restless: the focus on 'foreign' and 'far away' countries usually lasts for only a brief time and describes individual incidents without providing the necessary background. The range of topics covered in the foreign news is also much smaller than in national news items, and they deal primarily with negative news such as wars, disasters and crime. Finally, news editors rely increasingly on the big news agencies for their stories rather than on their own news-gathering services because the cost of monitoring foreign news is very high.

The study also looked in detail at the **impact** of foreign news coverage on citizens' knowledge of the international community and their attitudes towards peace issues. International news appears to have a major influence on people's social and political perceptions of the main (international) problems and, consequently, on where the priorities lie. People's attitudes towards other countries are also affected by their exposure to international news, but the main impact is on their knowledge of international affairs. This knowledge has a mediating effect: media consumption and enhanced knowledge lead to less ethnocentrism and a greater sense of solidarity with the rest of the world. This confirmed the conclusion of an earlier study, 'Peace in Flanders'<sup>5</sup>: knowledge of what is going on in the international community is a significant predictor of commitment to peace. For example, people who focus more on foreign news will take longer to feel that the use of military action is justified. The link with 'micro', interpersonal peace is less clear, but people who devote more attention to foreign news appear to have more positive attitudes towards peace: they consider war less of a 'not my problem' issue and peace less of a luxury, and they have a stronger belief that they themselves can contribute to a more peaceful world.

### 3 Scope for action in support of foreign news coverage

Many scientists and media critics consider the reporting of foreign news as a model indicator of high-quality journalism. In their view, a systematic decline in the share of foreign news indicates that the basic conditions for high-quality journalism are being jeopardised. The above-mentioned study showed that both the quantity and quality of foreign news coverage in Flanders are under pressure, which points to the need for remedial measures. Because a potential positive social

impact is associated with the viewing or reading of foreign news, there is a need to ensure that the media provide a sufficient volume of news and that the reporting is high-quality.

The average citizen has an avid interest in news. Seven in ten people in Flanders maintain that they watch the news on VRT or VTM every day, and in 2008 the VTM and VRT evening news bulletins dominated more than 80% of the market share, i.e. the equivalent of almost 1.5 million viewers.<sup>6</sup> The options open to the media, and their news desks in particular, to make a motivating social contribution consequently deserve attention. But how much room for manoeuvre is available for Flemish parties and policymakers, and the Flemish Parliament in particular, to bring about improvements?

It is important to emphasise that Flanders has a free press and to point out that its editorial independence must be safeguarded. The government consequently has a traditional obligation of abstention with respect to the work of editorial desks. However, recent social, political and academic debates and actual developments show that the government's traditional obligation of abstention has the potential to develop into a so-called obligation of care, to safeguard press freedom. Obviously, direct government intervention with respect to content at the editorial level would be fundamentally wrong, but the government can create effective conditions for a first-rate press. To this end four tangible recommendations are put forward.

### 3.1 Management agreement between the public broadcaster (VRT) and the Flemish Government

The management agreement details the agreements reached between the public broadcaster and the Flemish Government and the extent of funding made available to VRT to fulfil its public broadcasting remit. The current management agreement is the third of its kind and runs from 2007 to 2011.

In the VRT–Flemish Government management agreement the public broadcaster agrees to widen its news coverage on channel Eén and devote more attention to cultural, economic, scientific and juridical topics. The first step is to incorporate this type of general definition pertaining to the focus on foreign events in the management agreement. An earlier report on the current management agreement, offered the following recommendation with respect to foreign news reports: *“A public broadcasting company is expected to provide a wide range of information, with sufficient depth, explanation and background. The public broadcaster also needs to act as ‘a window on the world’ with more focus on other cultural communities in Belgium, our neighbouring countries and other foreign countries.”*<sup>7</sup> The current management agreement does not take up this recommendation, so further attention is warranted. Various VRT annual reports also emphasise the need for a greater focus on foreign news.

The study carried out by the Peace Institute notes a trend of a declining share of in the public broadcaster's foreign news since 2003 and calls for sustained attention and additional measures in order to enhance this share. The next management agreement must contain a clear commitment in this respect.

### 3.2 2008 Protocol between the Flemish Government and the Flemish written press

The Flemish Government has drawn up protocols with the written press since 1998 in order to regulate support for this media sector. In the most recent protocol, ‘The 2008 Protocol between the Flemish Government and the Flemish written press sector to safeguard a pluriform, independent and performant Flemish opinion press’<sup>8</sup> (2008 Protocol), the Flemish Government recognised the social added value of high-quality journalism. It is considered a guarantee for democracy, with emphasis on the fact that society justifiably demands quality guarantees because of the media’s social role in the public debate. For these reasons both parties (the Flemish Government and the written press sector) have underwritten a cooperation intent in this protocol in order to safeguard both the existing editorial competences and the development of necessary new competences that would make editorial desks the backbone of high-quality journalism.

Training projects are the key element of the 2008 Protocol. Notwithstanding the fact that the protocol maintains that such projects may focus on any news topic (article 2, item 1), specific attention is drawn to high-quality foreign news coverage, in which the significance of the press as ‘a window on the world’ is specially emphasised (article 2, item 2). In practical terms the Flemish Government provides €1 million annually for these training projects. The funds are divided among the umbrella organisations of the written press sector on the basis of a specific allocation formula.

With this 2008 Protocol, the Flemish Government backs the promotion of high-quality foreign events journalism by investing in editorial training. According to the Media Platform of the Flemish Association of Professional Journalists (VVJ) and the unions, however, this support largely misses its target. Although the protocol focuses mainly on specific objectives, it lacks specifications for awarding subsidies. The protocol allocates support directly for the four umbrella organisations for the written press (article 2, item 3), which complicates the evaluation and monitoring of the distribution of subsidies. Although there is a requirement for annual reports (article 3, item 2), the Media Platform is of the opinion that the Flemish Government’s support policy does not sufficiently emphasise the duty to achieve tangible results. Editorial desks maintain that they benefit very little, or not at all, from this substantial support. The Media Platform therefore proposes that more specific conditions are set for awarding subsidies to the media, the destination and differentiation of support as well as the management and monitoring of such support.<sup>9</sup>

The Peace Institute considers this type of protocol-based support an important tool in the quest to promote high-quality foreign news coverage. However, assessments by journalists in the relevant sector highlight a clear need to refine the protocol. The 2008 Protocol runs for a period of three years (but is renewable twice for a period of one year). It would be advisable to immediately incorporate more tangible conditions for the allocation of financial support in an amended protocol, in consultation with editorial desks and journalists.

### 3.3 Pascal Decroos Fund

Financing the production of longer media reports that provide more diverse coverage of international topics is a tangible way of supporting foreign news coverage. The study carried out by the Peace Institute shows that adequate budgets are crucial for good foreign news coverage. Moreover, 'own' news reports are a clear sign of the importance attached to a specific event; they facilitate the production of 'other' news (other than national news), and the presence of local correspondents is more likely to attract the public's attention and interest.

This is where the Pascal Decroos Fund comes into play, in various resolutions of the Flemish Parliament (see 3.4). The fund, which is a non-profit organisation, has since 1999 been 'promoting exceptional journalism in the Flemish written and audiovisual press' with support from the Flemish Government.<sup>10</sup> A recent evaluation of the fund<sup>11</sup> generated several amendments and recommendations with respect to the role it can play for foreign news coverage. The large number of applications received by the fund clearly show that it continues to be a welcome initiative for the hard-pressed foreign journalism sector. One of the recommendations to result from the evaluation of the fund is the promotion of coverage of European topics, which the report's authors say are underexposed in the Flemish mass media, creating a democratic deficit. This also applies to foreign news in general. The report does claim that the fund is already doing excellent work in that direction, for example through the establishment of an international network of journalists, but this is offset by the fact that further initiatives are hampered by low budgets.

Since 2006, yearly support for the Pascal Decroos Fund from the Flemish Government amounted to €250,000 (€186,000/year before 2006), but at the Media Consultation Platform<sup>12</sup> the Flemish Minister President announced that the government's financial support would be raised to €500,000 for 2009.<sup>13</sup> This was another result of the evaluation report, which found that the main output of projects subsidised by the fund was published in the written rather than the audiovisual media: the limited budget for grants to other media was too low to support substantial output from the Flemish audiovisual sector. Whether the proposed doubling of the government subsidy for the Pascal Decroos Fund will suffice in the light of the fund's extensive task description remains to be seen. Furthermore, the doubled budget was only for 2009. There has been no decision to implement a structural increase of the subsidy in the coming years.

The Peace Institute is of the opinion that the provision of subsidies for projects to help enhance foreign news coverage is a tangible contribution to the creation of the conditions for a greater volume of better-quality foreign news and consequently welcomes the proposed increase in the subsidy for the fund. On the whole, the operations of the Pascal Decroos Fund are seen to be positive. It would be advisable to convert the increase in the fund's financial means into a permanent, structural one.

### 3.4 Political debate in the Flemish Parliament

The Flemish Parliament launched several initiatives in recent years aimed at putting foreign news coverage high on the policy agenda. In 2005 the Commission for Foreign Policy, European Affairs, International Cooperation and Tourism turned its attention to a draft resolution on the

creation of a Flemish media plan for the southern hemisphere.<sup>14</sup> Its aim was to promote a more balanced approach to the reporting of foreign events, specifically those that take place in the southern hemisphere. The proponents of the resolution proposed a range of measures to promote a greater focus on global relationships in the Flemish mass media. Among other things, it proposed more structured support for Flemish independent news agencies, stimuli via the Pascal Decroos Fund, training for journalists in global affairs, a balanced focus on foreign events in the news and other programmes aired by the public broadcaster combined with scientific research on the Flemish media's supply of non-Western news. This draft resolution was not addressed by the commission, and it expired at the end of the 2004-2009 term.

One month after the Media Consultation Platform<sup>15</sup> was held, a draft resolution was submitted on Flemish quality journalism to the Commission for Culture, Youth, Sport and Media.<sup>16</sup> The intentions described in the draft resolution (also not addressed in the 2004-2009 term) include a link between financial support and specific quality-enhancing measures for editorial desks, investment in scientific research focused on the quality of news coverage and the journalistic process, an increase in the funds of the Pascal Decroos Fund and the stimulation of interest in foreign news coverage generally, at the European level and in particular in relation to the problems facing the southern hemisphere.

It is clear that by introducing these resolutions the Flemish Parliament has seriously investigated the options for promoting higher-quality foreign news coverage. The Peace Institute aims to provide information for further debate about these and other proposals in the Flemish Parliament in order to develop tangible support for foreign news coverage in the Flemish media.

## 4 Recommendations

In its study 'A Window on the World'<sup>17</sup> the Peace Institute investigated the actual status of foreign news coverage in Flanders. It examined the facts, impact and scope for action. This study could be a starting point for further research and debate about the quantity and quality of the dissemination of foreign news and its social impact.

Based on this analysis the Flemish Peace Institute shares the concerns about the declining quantity and quality of news relating to the international community. Obviously, the institute underwrites the principle of press freedom and independence of editorial desks. However, the government could supplement its traditional obligation of abstention with an obligation of care. Direct intervention with respect to content at editorial level would be fundamentally wrong, but the creation of effective conditions for a first-rate press would offer specific opportunities. In particular when it comes to foreign news coverage, well-considered support could be a stimulus to offer the population a large and clear 'window on the world'. To this end the Peace Institute has formulated four specific recommendations based on the results of its research.

### **The Flemish Peace Institute submits the following recommendations to the Flemish Parliament**

- **to continue the parliamentary debate during the 2009-2014 term, in the spirit of earlier initiatives and on the basis of the study entitled 'A Window on the World – The Status of Foreign News Coverage in the Media: Facts, Impact and Policy', in order to generate actual support for foreign news coverage in the Flemish media, in consultation with all parties involved;**
- **to take the initiative to ensure that a stipulation is incorporated in the management agreement between VRT and the Flemish Government in which the public broadcaster agrees to devote more attention to the quantity and quality of its foreign news coverage;**
- **to ask the Flemish Government to include more precise conditions for the allocation of support in a revised 'Protocol between the Flemish Government and the Flemish written press sector to safeguard a pluriform, independent and performant Flemish opinion press' (incl. destination, differentiation, management and control), to ensure that this support has a tangible and verifiable effect for media news desks, i.e. with respect to foreign news coverage;**
- **to ask the Flemish Government to increase its financial support for high-quality foreign news coverage in general, and for audiovisual media in particular, i.e. by making the subsidy increase for the Pascal Decroos Fund that was announced in 2009 a permanent structural feature.**

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> See Verhulst J. *et al.* (2007), *Peace in Flanders*, Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute.
- <sup>2</sup> See e.g. Vidal, K. (2009), "Maak van mij alsjeblieft geen oorlogsjournalist", *De Morgen*, 20 June 2009 (interview with VRT journalist Jef Lambrecht); *Media en conflict*, topic of the Flemish Peace Week 2008, <http://www.vredesweek.be>; *Conference Report Peace in Flanders*, Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, 2 October 2007; and Poppe G. (2007), *De wereld buiten beeld in de media?*, MO-paper no. 6, March 2007.
- <sup>3</sup> Staten-Generaal van de Media (Media Consultation Platform) – Actual and future challenges for the Flemish media sector, organised within the framework of VIA (Vlaanderen in Actie – Flanders in Action), Thursday 19 March 2009, Antwerp. Report available at [http://www.cjism.vlaanderen.be/downloads/statengeneraal20090319\\_cjism\\_verslag.pdf](http://www.cjism.vlaanderen.be/downloads/statengeneraal20090319_cjism_verslag.pdf).
- <sup>4</sup> Wouters R., De Swert K. & Walgrave S. (2009), *A Window on the World – The Status of Foreign News Coverage in the Media: Facts, Impact and Policy*, Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute.
- <sup>5</sup> Verhulst J. *et al.* (2007), *Peace in Flanders*, Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute.
- <sup>6</sup> Wouters R., De Swert K. & Walgrave S. (2009), *A Window on the World – The Status of Foreign News Coverage in the Media: Facts, Impact and Policy*, Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute, p. 119.
- <sup>7</sup> Coppens, T. (2005), *Opdracht Volbracht?*, University of Ghent (on behalf of the Vlaamse Mediaraad (Flemish Media Council)), <http://www2.vlaanderen.be/media/Media/beleid/vrt/documenten/volledige%20vrt-studiedef.pdf>.
- <sup>8</sup> 'Protocol 2008 between the Flemish Government and the Flemish written press sector with respect to the safeguarding of a pluriform, independent and performant Flemish opinion press', <http://www2.vlaanderen.be/media/Ondertekende%20versie%20protocol%202008.pdf> (in Flemish).
- <sup>9</sup> Media platform (VVJ, ACV, ABVV, ACLVB) 'Voor het behoud van het pluralisme en de kwaliteit van het nieuws. Een zwart-, wit-, en draaiboek voor de mediacrisis en haar uitwegen in 2009-2010', Formulated by the Flemish Media Consultation Body, 19 March 2009, [http://www.agjpb.be/vvj/pdf/staten\\_generaal\\_nota\\_vvj.pdf](http://www.agjpb.be/vvj/pdf/staten_generaal_nota_vvj.pdf).
- <sup>10</sup> [www.fondspascaldecroos.be](http://www.fondspascaldecroos.be).
- <sup>11</sup> Boonen, B., d'Haenens, L. & Opgenhaffen, M. (2008), *Evaluatierapport over het Fonds Pascal Decroos voor bijzondere journalistiek*, KULeuven.
- <sup>12</sup> Staten-Generaal van de Media (Media Consultation Platform) — Actuele en toekomstige uitdagingen voor de Vlaamse mediasector (Actual and future challenges facing the Flemish media sector), organised within the framework of VIA (Vlaanderen in Actie – Flanders in Action), Thursday 19 March 2009, Antwerp.
- <sup>13</sup> Van Munster, R. (2009), 'Eerste staten-generaal voor media klaagmuur van frustaties', *De Morgen*, 20 March 2009; 'Peeters verdubbelt budget Fonds Pascal Decroos', *Het Nieuwsblad Online*, 20 March 2009; 'Verdubbeling budget Fonds Pascal Decroos', news item, at [http://www.fondspascaldecroos.org/archief/nieuws/2009/verdubbeling\\_budget\\_fonds\\_pascal\\_decroos.html](http://www.fondspascaldecroos.org/archief/nieuws/2009/verdubbeling_budget_fonds_pascal_decroos.html).
- <sup>14</sup> Draft resolution submitted by Messrs. Sabine Poleyn, Miet Smet, Jan Loones, Bart Caron and Dany Vandenbossche pertaining to the formulation of a Flemish media plan for the southern hemisphere, Flemish Parliament, Item 397 (2004-2005) - No 1. This draft resolution was not submitted to a vote.
- <sup>15</sup> Staten-Generaal van de Media (Media Consultation Platform)– Actuele en toekomstige uitdagingen voor de Vlaamse mediasector (Actual and future challenges facing the Flemish media sector), organised within the framework of VIA (Vlaanderen in Actie – Flanders in Action), Thursday 19 March 2009, Antwerp.
- <sup>16</sup> Draft resolution submitted by Messrs. Bart Caron, Piet De Bruyn, Eloi Glorieux and Dirk De Cock pertaining to Flemish high quality journalism, Flemish Parliament, Item 2227 (2008-2009) - No 1. This draft resolution was not submitted to a vote.
- <sup>17</sup> Wouters R., De Swert K. & Walgrave S. (2009), *A Window on the World – The Status of Foreign News Coverage in the Media: Facts, Impact and Policy*, Brussels: Flemish Peace Institute.

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***The Flemish Peace Institute was founded by the Flemish Parliament as an independent institute for peace research. The Peace Institute engages in scientific research, documents relevant information sources, and informs and advises the Flemish Parliament and the general public at large on questions of peace.***

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