

The Mirror Effect: Spanish and Belgian Press Coverage of Political Conflicts in Flanders and Catalonia

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This article analyzes how the press in Belgium and in Spain reports on Catalonia and Flanders, respectively. Grounding our arguments in the theories of national identities and the domestication of the news, we propose the concept of the mirror effect to explain the logics of comparison of two different contexts. Combining a content analysis of eight major newspapers with a qualitative discourse approach, the article shows that reporting on political conflicts such as the ones analyzed tends to use “the other’s case” as a model to learn from that may or may not be followed. The results also indicate considerable differences between the Belgian and Spanish cases, the latter being more politicized and focused on the other’s national conflict.

Introduction

In December 2010, Catalan public television screened a 30-minute report on Belgium (Oliver & Segarra, 2010). The report focused on the national crisis within the country, giving a rather complex narrative on the Belgian situation. The context of the report was the crisis of the Belgian government and the success of Flemish nationalism. This television program was only the most visible outcome of the generally increasing Catalan interest in Belgium since the national conflict peaked. Some time later, a

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book by a Catalan journalist focusing on the “death of Belgium” was published with particular focus on the emancipation of Flanders (Gafarot i Monjó, 2011). In February 2012, the program *Sense ficció* (*Without fiction*, Televisió de Catalunya) aired a long documentary (Genovès, 2012) that subjected the tensions within Belgium to a much deeper analysis; perhaps because of the documentary format, the narrative was also quite elaborate. All these productions implicitly and explicitly compared the Flemish and the Catalan cases.

Based on these observations of the Catalan interest in the Belgian situation, this article aims to more systematically analyze how the press in Belgium and Spain covers the national conflicts with Catalonia and Flanders, respectively, and to what extent it makes comparisons to understand and explain—that is, to frame—the internal political situation. These objectives require that the study be theoretically grounded in two traditions: theories of news domestication and theories of mediatization of the nation. These traditions have developed separately, and one of the secondary aims of this article is to establish connections between them. For this purpose, we propose the concept of the *mirror effect* to describe the particular use of international news to reflect on the domestic situation. We explore this notion through a comparative empirical analysis of two countries belonging to different media systems, comparing them at different levels.

Before we start, a word on terminology is in order. Across the world as well as within Belgium and Spain, the term “nation” has different denotations (referring to nation-states or stateless nations) and connotations. In our case, we try to report on the case study without entering this huge debate; therefore we use “national” for the state and stateless levels indifferently. Also, our use of the concepts “region” or “regional” has no political connotation in terms of the political considerations of either country. We do not intend to present Flemish and Catalan nationalism as either a model or an exception. Indeed, similar movements toward autonomy or independence can be observed across Europe, so it hardly makes sense to reserve the term “nation” to modern nation-states as they developed throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

Theoretical Framework

In their celebrated comparative study, Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 68) considered the Spanish and Belgian press to belong to different models. The former, they said, is a Mediterranean or “polarized pluralist model” in which the historical context is one of late democratization, political parties have a notable influence on media and public opinion, and the state and administration in general play a prominent role. The result of this model is a highly politicized press in which partisan communication strategies and a high level of clientelism lead to a journalistic practice far from the liberal model. The Belgian case belongs to the north central European or “democratic corporatist model,” in which a moderate pluralism is present in the press and the state plays an important role, especially in the field of economy and the general organization of the social context. In this model, freedom of the press coexists with strong media regulation. Interestingly, of all the cases of this model, Belgium is the closest to the Mediterranean model (and especially to the French media), as political parties play a relatively strong role in public broadcasting (Hallin & Mancini 2004, p. 70).

The models that Hallin and Mancini describe have been a useful tool for international comparative research. Indeed, in our research we explore whether and how the difference between the two models can be detected in Spanish and Flemish newspapers. However, important nuances characterize each national or regional context: In the Iberian Peninsula, considerable difference between the Madrid and the Barcelona press influences the tone and professional culture of journalists, and the Portuguese press is not as politicized as Spain's. The same is true of nationally plural states, and even of countries like Italy or France, where divergence between the northern and the southern press is considerable. Likewise, considerable differences between French- and Dutch-language media in Belgium have an impact on the professional culture and tone of press coverage. Our analysis will also attend to such contextual differences, as they are particularly relevant to the topic under scrutiny: reporting on national tensions abroad.

A crucial term in the analysis of such international news is "domestication of news," as developed by Gurevitch, Levy, and Roeh (1991). These authors reflected primarily on the "domestication of the foreign," the approach that explains information about foreign events—which include political crises and conflicts—in a way that is familiar to national audiences (Gurevitch et al., 1991, p. 206). This is a rather obvious, though solid, starting point, as our interest is not to establish *whether* domestication operates through particular textual mechanisms but *how*, using comparison as our main tool. A prevalent mechanism for domesticating international news is to draw attention to the topics and facts on the specific country's political agenda. Therefore, for example, information on an environmental crisis in a far-off country may be appropriate if "we" are suffering a similar situation nationally.

From this point of view, the interesting aspect here is not that a specific topic is on the journalistic agenda, but that the way the press narrate and explain it is not an exercise in understanding "the other's problem," but in providing a particular frame for the domestic situation. In this regard, "the national" can be understood as a frame for international news consumed within a particular national context. This, we argue, is what is at stake in the case study in the present research project. Some media stories, by contrast, take a more global approach. After global terrorist attacks, Ruigrok and van Atteveldt (2007) concluded that the U.S., British, and Dutch press covered the events (9/11, the Madrid bombing, and the London attacks) differently, but although the newsworthiness of proximity and the local angle were valid, the framing (*how* this news was reported) reflects a more global or international approach. This implies that the "national frame" is determined by the topic covered and, depending on the case, will acquire greater or lesser importance.

Given the domestication of news, the fact that news from abroad is covered should not be assumed to mean that the approach is a global or cosmopolitan one. Gurevitch et al. (1991) stated that although television news provides a "similar diet" worldwide and materials are increasingly exchanged, in each national context this diet is served up in a different way. Many have confirmed this: Clausen (2004) pointed out the tensions generated in Danish and Japanese newsrooms because they are required to offer a window on the international situation while also preserving a national identity, which often involves protecting national interests; Dimitrova, Kaid, Williams, and Trammell (2005) analyzed 2,000 news stories on different channels and demonstrated that coverage of Gulf War II differed in several countries, activating domesticated treatments; Robertson (2010) concluded that although some news narratives

reinforce a sense of cosmopolitanism in their discussion of international conflicts, they are also a tool for community building or a "site for community-enhancing storytelling." Overall, the processes of globalization of the news are compatible with processes of domestication and the use of the so-called "national frame." As several authors state (e.g. Higgins, 2004; Mihelj, 2011), national identity discourses still have a strong presence and relevance in current media stories. Meanwhile these discourses are often banalized in the highly legitimated forms of nationalism controlled by firmly established nation-states (Billig, 1995), or even in stateless situations (Castelló, 2011; Law, 2001).

Along these lines, as studies in the 1990s revealed particularly in the case of the U.S., national media are mostly interested in topics that may constitute a threat to national security, which link to national values and culture and may affect national citizens economically (Chang & Lee, 1992; Shoemaker, Danielian, & Brendlinger, 1991). Discussion moved from newsworthiness in the 1990s to aspects of agenda setting and framing during the 2000s. News about conflict that was somehow related to the national context had a major impact in the U.S. media, as a study conducted over 25 years made clear (Wanta & Hu, 1993). Also, the more attention the press devoted to a nation, the more importance the audience assigned this nation, and whereas negative reporting cultivated a negative opinion among audiences, positive reporting on a country had no significant effect (Wanta, Golan, & Lee, 2004). Finally, more recent studies have found that in some national contexts, the press tends to provide more extensive coverage of countries historically linked to the home country or somewhat similar to it in terms of historical processes. For instance, a degree of parallelism explains the intense and positive interest the Slovakian media was observed to show in the Czech Republic (Wanta & Mikusova, 2010, p. 233).

These arguments all reveal a strong link between national depictions and constructions in the media, and the "domestication of the news." A key factor in these discursive constructions is what we call the *mirror effect*: news stories in one country tend to focus on another national context in order to reflect on the homeland situation. This implies an explicit or implicit process of comparison, in which similarities and/or differences are used to explain, support, justify, or criticize the domestic situation. The mirrored image of the external community is, in a sense, always distorted or framed in a particular way to reinforce a discourse that is deeply grounded in the ideological construction of national identity. To summarize, we could define the mirror effect as a particular communicative situation in which two symbolic communities take greater interest in each other by seeking models or counter-models for their own social and political context.

Contextual Notes

Before we turn to the empirical exploration of this mirror effect, a closer look at the two particular national contexts under discussion is important. Both states contain "stateless nations," which in Schlesinger's words (2009, p. 13) means that a complex "dual public sphere" routinely exposes audiences to both state and national public spheres, which do not (always) coincide. This is part of a broader European pattern of moving "communication spaces" that has eroded the traditional public sphere of the nation-state (Schlesinger, 1999). Along the same lines, Sampedro and Van den Bulck (1995) compared the regionalization of television in both countries and linked it to the construction of communication spaces and political communities. Catalonia and Flanders are both home to two powerful political

communities (with economic and political centers) operating within one state to provide two different communication spaces (also delimited by language). However, in the Catalan case language is a less important definer than in the Flemish context, as in Catalonia almost all the population can understand both Spanish and Catalan, and unlike in Belgium, language does not configure completely separate cultural communities.

Political tensions between Catalonia and Spain have increased in the last three years. In 2010, the Spanish Constitutional Court made important reductions to a statute passed by both the Catalan and Spanish parliaments and approved in a referendum by the Catalan people. That July the civic platform Òmnium Cultural organized a massive demonstration in Barcelona with about one million participants claiming "Som una nació, nosaltres decidim" ("We are a nation, we decide"). After this episode, the moderate nationalist party *Convergència i Unió* (Convergence and Union, CiU) won the 2010 elections in Catalonia with a platform demanding more financial autonomy from Madrid. In Spain, on the other hand, the right-wing centralists came to power after gaining an absolute majority in the elections of 2011. The media in Madrid and Barcelona tell quite different stories about the political tensions in the country. In 2012, a new Catalan demonstration under the slogan *Catalunya, nou estat d'Europa* (Catalonia, new state of Europe) got the participation of around 1.5 million people in Barcelona. Current Catalan government is exploring the possibility to celebrate a referendum in 2014 and the last official polls (June 2012) say 51% of Catalans would vote "yes" to independence (CEO, 2012). Research on both the press (Castelló, 2011, 2012) and television (O'Donnell & Castelló, 2011) has found significant differences between journalistic understandings of the conflict that offer their audiences divergent narratives.

In Belgium, an old conflict took on fresh virulence after national elections in June 2010, when the biggest winner, the (moderate) Flemish nationalist party N-VA (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie, New Flemish Alliance), became the largest party in the Belgian parliament, closely followed by the French-language socialist party PS. Only after the longest negotiations in history (541 days) could a national government be formed; meantime, regional conflicts overshadowed all other issues, including the economic crisis. The Belgian situation is historically complex, but to simplify, this latest episode appears to be a logical consequence of several decades of state reforms that have increasingly split the northern, Dutch-language Flemish region from the southern, French-language Walloon region. Meanwhile, Brussels, the mostly French-language capital, complicates matters. The situation reflects and reinforces a contrast between the Dutch- and French-speaking communities that has slowly deepened since the 1950s, fed by the former cultural suppression of Dutch and by the economic and social divide between the increasingly richer, Dutch-speaking Flanders and the poorer, French-speaking Wallonia (Gevers, Willemsen, & Witte, 1998, pp. 73–84). The Belgian media system also mirrors and strengthens this divide between north and south. Each community has news media in its own language, and each group of news media restricts its reporting of events that impact the other group (Sinardet, 2007).

Method

To analyze the mutual reporting in the Spanish and Belgian press, we selected eight major newspapers: *El País* and *ABC* (both published in Spanish, based in Madrid and addressed to a broad Spanish readership); *La Vanguardia* and *El Punt/Avui* (in Spanish and Catalan, respectively, and addressed

to a Catalan readership),² *De Morgen* and *De Standaard* (both in Dutch and addressed to Flemish readers); *Le Soir* and *La Libre Belgique* (both in French and addressed to French-language readers). To better discern patterns in the mutual reporting, we analyzed all newspapers for a full year, from June 1, 2010, to May 31, 2011, a period marked by important political events in Catalonia and by Belgian federal elections. We used several databases to select all pieces containing the word "Catalonia" in the Belgian press and "Flanders" in the Spanish press,³ and previous data analyzed for the Belgian case (Dhoest & Bastiaensens, 2013). We selected all types of articles, including news pieces, political analysis or opinion, and reports.

Having made our preliminary selection, we began the first stage of quantitative content analysis. We refined our selection by assuring for each item that the presence of the countries was meaningful and categorizing every item by topic under the following labels: politics, economics, sports, culture, others. For articles consisting of different sections (i.e., separate news items), only the item(s) containing the search term was (were) coded. In cases in which several codes were applicable, only the most appropriate code, covering most of the article, was assigned. We skipped duplicated results (i.e., for different regional editions) but considered all types of newspaper items (including news, opinion, agendas, and other types).

Once the sample had been suitably delimited and ordered by category, we proceeded to a deeper analysis by focusing on comparisons. Reading the whole sample, we selected those pieces that contained any kind of comparison between Spain and Belgium, including their regions. The types of comparison we found concerned the following combinations (also vice versa): Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia) compared with Spain and Catalonia; Belgium compared with Spain and Flanders with Catalonia; Flanders compared with Catalonia; Wallonia compared with Catalonia; other Belgian/Spanish provinces compared with Catalonia/Flanders; Flanders compared with Catalonia and Wallonia with Castile; Flanders compared with Catalonia and Wallonia with the rest of Spain. These coding categories arose from the texts and were delimited so as to respect mutual exclusiveness. This comparative analytical tool provided some interesting results and shed light on how the nations are compared in the newspapers. Of course, not all the items contained in the sample actually made a comparison. Finally, we also selected items specifically focused on national conflict in both countries in order to evaluate whether the conflict was framed solely politically or had other relevant variations (in culture, sports, economics, etc.).

This quantitative research, aimed at identifying patterns on the level of the articles, was complemented with a more qualitative investigation of specific items and particular discursive mechanisms or language uses. Although strictly speaking this research is neither frame analysis nor (linguistic)

² *La Vanguardia* is a special case: Its target audience is mainly Catalan, but it is also distributed and read in other parts of Spain. Since May 2011, it has also been published in Catalan. Also noteworthy is that *El Punt* and *Avui* were separate newspapers until July 2011, when they merged into a single daily (they belonged to the same company since 2009). Before the merger, they mostly ran the same international pieces and analyses. Our analysis counted all the items that appeared in both or one of the papers.

³ In the Belgian papers, we also searched for such variations as "Catalan." In the Spanish papers, however, we did not use variations such as "flamenco," as this is also a form of traditional music and would have made the search inefficient.

discourse analysis, we drew inspiration from both in executing our qualitative content analysis. In line with the definition of Wester and Pleijter (2006), used earlier by authors like Altheide (1996), we regard qualitative content analysis as the systematic, interpretive reading of material, taking into account its context and reading it in relation to a specific question and conceptual model. Drawing on framing and discourse analysis, we used a topic list and systematically took notes on the objects (topics, themes, events), actors, and language use (concepts, metaphors, stereotypes) in our sample (Carvalho, 2008; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Van Gorp, 2005, 2007).

Quantitative Analysis: Themes and Focus

A total of 816 items made up the gross sample of articles that refer somehow to Catalonia (in Belgium) or Flanders (in Spain) (see Table 1). Catalonia was more present in the Belgian press ($n = 490$) than Flanders in the Spanish press ($n = 326$). This may suggest that the Belgian press is more interested in the Catalan political situation than Spain in Flanders, but further analysis will show that this is not necessarily the case.

Some differences among newspapers within each country will be further discussed and explained in the qualitative analysis. Overall, the presence of the other nation in the newspapers was relatively similar across the newspapers. The case of *La Vanguardia* perhaps deserves some explanation: This paper had a low number of references, but that does not mean it pays less attention to Belgium or provides little information about other European countries. On the contrary, *La Vanguardia* is highly esteemed for its broad network of international reporters collecting information from around the world. One explanation for the low figure may be the use of the concept "Flanders" (*Flandes* in Spanish/Catalan). Although Belgium is regularly present across the press (particularly because Brussels is the formal EU capital, where most European decisions are taken), "Flandes" itself has a political meaning attached to a national claim and is almost automatically related to the national cause. This is a first instance of (implicit) positioning toward the Belgian conflict—by not focusing on Flanders—reflecting political sensibilities in the home nation. More instances of this will be discussed below. Results for the rest of the Spanish press were more balanced, but the rationale for the presence of "Flandes" in the Madrid-based (*El País*, *ABC*) differed greatly from that in the Catalan (*El Punt/Avui*) press, as the qualitative analysis will show.

In Belgium, as in Spain, the variation in the number of articles on the other nation does not coincide with the regional/language distinction: the highest and the lowest numbers of references occur in French-language newspapers. In Spain, however, these overall numbers conceal considerable variations in the motivation to discuss the other nation, whereas in the Belgian case this motivation strongly correlates with the soccer world cup. In fact, the overall higher number of references to Spain and Catalonia in Belgian newspapers is mostly due to Spanish/Catalan success in soccer, a point that we will return to below. Newspapers featuring more stories on Catalonia do not necessarily focus more on Catalan politics or make more explicit comparisons; they merely write more about sports.

Table 1. Number of References to Catalan and Flemish Issues in the Press.

| Belgium | n | % | Spain | n | % |
|--------------------------|------------|------------|----------------------|------------|------------|
| <i>Le Soir</i> | 95 | 19.4 | <i>El País</i> | 116 | 35.6 |
| <i>La Libre Belgique</i> | 149 | 30.4 | <i>ABC</i> | 63 | 19.3 |
| Total French-speaking | 244 | 49.8 | Total Madrid-based | 179 | 54.9 |
| <i>De Morgen</i> | 138 | 28.2 | <i>La Vanguardia</i> | 41 | 12.6 |
| <i>De Standaard</i> | 108 | 22.0 | <i>El Punt/Avui</i> | 106 | 32.5 |
| Total Flemish | 246 | 50.2 | Total Catalan | 147 | 45.1 |
| Total Belgium | 490 | 100 | Total Spain | 326 | 100 |

Table 2. Number of References According to Topic.

| | French-speaking | % | Flemish | % | Madrid-based | % | Catalan | % |
|----------------------|------------------------|------------|----------------|------------|---------------------|------------|----------------|------------|
| Politics | 41 | 16.8 | 48 | 19.6 | 50 | 27.9 | 101 | 68.7 |
| Economics | 8 | 3.3 | 5 | 2.0 | 5 | 2.8 | 11 | 7.5 |
| Sports | 135 | 55.3 | 119 | 48.4 | 19 | 10.6 | 4 | 2.7 |
| Culture | 36 | 14.8 | 37 | 15.0 | 61 | 34.1 | 14 | 9.5 |
| Others | 24 | 9.8 | 37 | 15.0 | 44 | 24.6 | 17 | 11.6 |
| Total | 244 | 100 | 246 | 100 | 179 | 100 | 147 | 100 |
| Total/Country | Belgium | | 490 | | Spain | | 326 | |

The thematic contexts in which newspapers write about Flanders in Spain or Catalonia in Belgium vary considerably (see Table 2). Politics is clearly important in the Spanish press. Almost half of the references to Flanders in the Spanish press relate to politics, but further analysis is needed to determine whether the picture of a monolithic Spanish press suggested by this figure is a distortion. Considering the Madrid-based and the Catalan press separately, politics is evidently more salient in Catalonia, whereas the Madrid-based press coverage provides a balance between politics and culture. This is both an illustration of the quite polarized and politicized state of the Spanish press as a whole, as described by Hallin and Mancini, and a qualification, since clear regional differences are detectable. Of course, the topic of the Belgian governmental crisis was on the agenda of all the newspapers, although more so in the Catalan press. The Catalan-language newspaper *El Punt/Avui* in particular attached overwhelming importance to the political crisis and the national contest in Belgium, which again may indicate its own editorial position toward national issues in Spain. Belgium is important to the Catalan press because of the national conflict

between the Flemish and the Walloons, which provokes constant comparisons. The Madrid-based press, on the other hand, attached greater importance to the specific governmental crisis and Belgian state's difficulty in reaching agreement. This crisis was reported alongside coverage of the change in the Belgian presidency of the Council of the EU in January 2011. Another important theme in the Spanish press, especially in the Madrid-based newspapers, is culture, as the historical link between the Spanish Empire and the Flemish regularly appears in various forms, particularly in culturally oriented pages and topics. Below we shall comment on this finding, as we did not expect the importance of these historical episodes to be reflected in the 21st-century press.

Table 3. Comparisons Between Belgium and Spain in the Press.

| Combinations | Belgium | % | Spain | % |
|--|----------------|------------|--------------|------------|
| Flanders with Catalonia | 31 | 59.6 | 47 | 75.8 |
| Belgium (Flanders and Wallonia) with Spain and Catalonia | 9 | 17.3 | 10 | 16.1 |
| Flanders with Catalonia, and Wallonia with the rest of Spain | 4 | 7.7 | 3 | 4.9 |
| Wallonia with Catalonia | 2 | 3.9 | 1 | 1.6 |
| Other ⁴ | 6 | 11.5 | 1 | 1.6 |
| Total | 52 | 100 | 62 | 100 |

In the Belgian press, more than half of the articles referring to Catalonia dealt with sports, whereas politics was the subject of less than one fifth of them (see Table 2). Excluding the articles on sports so that only articles on politics, economics, and culture are considered, Spanish coverage of Flanders is actually higher than Belgian coverage of Catalonia (242 as opposed to 205 articles). This reflects the popularity of soccer in Belgium and in particular the international popularity of the Spanish soccer league (including the Catalan team FC Barcelona) and the World Cup in 2010, where the Spanish national team (with a number of Catalan players) became world champion. Therefore, the Belgian patterns found in the year we analyzed may be partly caused by this exceptional event, and we should be cautious in generalizing them to other periods. Interestingly, soccer reports were often the context of references (often in passing) to the Spanish–Catalan conflict. As Table 2 illustrates, similar numbers and proportions were observed in Flemish and French newspapers, which do not differ significantly at this general level. In both, sports are the most important context of references to Catalonia, and if sports articles are excluded, a similar number of articles refer to Catalonia in both languages. At least at this general level, no clear differences are discernible between Flemish and French-language newspapers, which may point to the less polarized media landscape in Belgium.

⁴ Other combinations are: Belgium with Spain and Flanders with Catalonia; Belgian region / Spanish province with Catalonia/Flanders; Flanders with Catalonia and Wallonia with Castile. Note that the broader level of combinations is more common in the Belgian press.

In the specific subsample of articles that compare (rather than just mention) the other region (see Table 3), the comparison between Flanders and Catalonia predominates. Although there are other combinations, this is where the mirror effect between the two stateless nations occurs most clearly. In the Spanish press, the Flanders–Catalonia comparison accounted for more than 75% of all the comparisons made, while in the Belgian case this share was almost 60% (increasing to more than 75%, counting all articles that make this comparison among others). This is in part because the political leaders made these comparisons (including the President of Catalonia in one of his speeches). But again here, the Catalan press had a special role: *El Punt/Avui* alone accumulated 33 of the total 47 comparisons between both regions, which means that half of the total comparisons (62) in the Spanish press were in this daily and compared Flanders and Catalonia. Closer examination of the figures for Belgium shows that Dutch- and French-language newspapers published similar numbers of articles that make some kind of comparison (27 and 25 respectively). It is also worth noting that 75% of the comparison-making Belgian articles dealt primarily with politics, in line with our expectations and with the results from the Spanish press. In short, what we equally find in both countries is a mirror effect in which the political situation in one reflects the political situation in the other.

We considered it relevant to identify the weight of information versus opinion pieces for the sample exhibiting a mirror effect. For the Spanish case, we found a curiously exact proportion between information ($n = 31$) and opinion ($n = 31$). This indicates the mirror effect is taking place as a transversal phenomenon across all genres, even news, interviews, and reports. This in part is explained by the fact that several politicians in the Catalan context, including President Artur Mas, compared Catalonia with Flanders in some speeches, which journalists duly reported in the chronicles. In the Belgian case, slightly more information ($n = 31$) than opinion ($n = 21$) articles drew comparisons. However, 16 of the informative articles constituted long interviews with politicians and opinion makers, so the mirroring mostly was not done directly by journalists but by other parties. Of course the press played an important role in making these voices heard, but again, the articles analyzed do not (directly) express the viewpoint of the journalists themselves, which may reflect the less overt politicization of the Belgian press.

A final set of figures concerns the items focused on the national conflict in each country. As Table 4 reveals, there are important differences between the two countries: the Spanish press focuses more intensely on the national conflict in Belgium (134 items) than the Belgian press does on the conflict in Spain (43). This is largely because the Catalan press publishes twice as many stories on the Flemish–Walloon conflict than the Madrid-based newspapers. Interestingly, differences also appear within the Catalan press, as *El Punt/Avui* by itself provides around half of all the stories focused on the Belgian national conflict in the Spanish press overall (67 out of 134). This is an instance of the political polarization of the Spanish press, as differences between newspapers from the same region in Belgium are less straightforward. Nevertheless, the Flemish press in Belgium provides more coverage of the conflict between Spain and Catalonia (30 out of 43 pieces), which indicates that it is considered more meaningful for Flanders. The conflict is mainly politically framed (65.1%), but remarkably, it was also the top issue in 25.6% of the sports items. These articles mostly focused on the rivalry between soccer teams FC Barcelona and Real Madrid, which is traceable to the Spanish Civil War and subsequent dictatorship of General Franco. So whereas differences between Flemish and French-language newspapers are limited at

the level of the quantity of articles dedicated to Catalonia and the number of political comparisons, we do find clear regional differences regarding the focus on the political conflict.

Table 4. References to the National Conflicts.

| | French-speaking | % | Flemish | % | Madrid-based | % | Catalan | % |
|----------------------|------------------------|------------|----------------|------------|---------------------|------------|----------------|------------|
| Politics | 9 | 69.2 | 19 | 63.3 | 41 | 91.1 | 84 | 94.4 |
| Economics | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2.2 | 2 | 2.2 |
| Sports | 3 | 23.1 | 8 | 26.7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Culture | 1 | 7.7 | 3 | 10.0 | 3 | 6.7 | 3 | 3.4 |
| Total | 13 | 100 | 30 | 100 | 45 | 100 | 89 | 100 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| Total/Country | Belgium | | 43 | | Spain | | 134 | |

Qualitative Analysis: The Discursive Mirror

Closer analysis of the articles revealed several important uses of language. In the case of Spain, we had to discard recurrent uses of the expression "*poner una pica en Flandes*" (to put a pike in Flanders). This mention of Flanders refers to the Eighty Years' War of the 16th and 17th centuries, when the Flemish fought for independence from the Spanish Empire. Also recurrent were references to the Tercios de Flandes, a Spanish army troop inspired by the Roman legions and Swiss pikemen that was highly effective during this war. The saying is a Spanish expression and does not appear in the Catalan-language *El Punt/Avui*. It should be noted, however, that the Spanish-language, Barcelona-based *La Vanguardia* used it anecdotally on two occasions, compared to the twenty times it occurred in the traditional, conservative *ABC*. The expression can be used detached from the historical referent and means to take a first step toward colonization or any other goal. Our main aims ruled out inclusion of this expression, which appeared almost exclusively in the Madrid-based newspapers.

The Spanish press also made a considerable number of cultural references to Flanders. Our analysis revealed the vivid presence of colonial history in current language uses. One example of the vigorous presence of Flanders in Spanish culture is the saga of Captain Alatriste by writer Arturo Pérez-Reverte, which has also been made into a popular film (*Díaz Yanes*, 2006). Therefore, "historical Flanders" is still rooted in the imperial sense of Spanishness, particularly in the Madrid-based newspapers, a concept with considerable potential at a moment when Spain was undergoing a huge financial and political crisis. One article, for example, linked the national conflict in both countries to the historical situation and suggested that Spain had a historical responsibility to help Belgium remain united:

For the second time in history, the paths of Belgium and Spain have crossed. The first time was, of course, when Flanders became the main ideological and military showroom of a counterreform fostered by Spain. Currently, both countries are struggling with the

difficulties entailed in the profound constitutional transformation from the unitarian state to the politically decentralized state. . . . In the broad scenario of federalism, the Belgian case is particularly similar to the Spanish one, for historical and political rather than constitutional reasons. (Calvo-Sotelo, 2010)⁵

However, as mentioned above, the largest number of references to Belgium in the Spanish press during the period under consideration concerned the political crisis in the Belgian government. Most of the newspaper pieces on this conflict were short international reports by journalists working from Brussels, but there were also some deeper analyses, which in the case of the Madrid-based media defended the unity of Belgium and the solidarity between Flemish and Walloons (e.g., Mortier, 2010). The Madrid-based press centered on the figure of Bart De Wever, labeling him “secessionist” and linking the Nazi past of Flemish nationalism with French-language Wallonia’s lack of trust (Martínez de Rituerto, 2010a). The *El País* correspondent in Brussels usually focused on the anti-independence claims, on one occasion even using the metaphor of Belgium as a Siamese twin with two bodies (Flemish and Wallonia) sharing a single head (Martínez de Rituerto, 2010b, 2010c).⁶ Other metaphors and figures present the country as a puzzle or jigsaw (Editorial: “El rompecabezas belga,” 2010), portray two countries for the price of one (Martínez de Rituerto, 2010d), or use medical language that describes the Belgian division in terms of an illness (Bassets, 2010; Editorial: “El rompecabezas belga,” 2010).

These negative images of Belgium contrast with the depictions in the Catalan press. Moreover, the moderateness of *La Vanguardia* differs markedly from the pro-nationalist vision of *El Punt/Avui*. The personification of Belgium was quite clear in items referring to “agony,” “killing,” or “death” (Segura, 2010a); other common metaphors were “game over”—referring to chess—or “evaporation” (used by De Wever) (Segura, 2010b, 2010c). Unlike *El País*, which reported that “nobody wants independence,” *El Punt/Avui* replicated the words of Laurette Onkelinx by stating that “most of the Flemish population wants the secession.” Even more negative, however, was a reference to “decomposition” (Segura, 2010d). The presence of Flemish observers during the nonbinding referendum for independence that took place in Barcelona on June 10, 2010, was the perfect occasion to establish parallelisms between both countries. The mirror effect was especially strong in the Catalan-language press when President Artur Mas of Catalonia gave a speech that compared Catalonia’s process of working to achieve greater sovereignty with the Scottish and Flemish cases (Etxearte, 2010). *La Vanguardia*’s journalists referred to Belgium as a “nonexistent nation” (Navarro, 2010) and even used the concept of the “mirror” to say that Catalonia has become an “example for some EU regions” (including Flanders) (Vivanco, 2011).

The Belgian press, however, painted a different picture. As mentioned above, Flemish- and French-language newspapers drew an almost equal number of comparisons between (some parts of) Spain and (some parts of) Belgium, and three quarters of these articles centered on politics. Interestingly, two thirds of these articles focused primarily on Belgian, Flemish, or Walloon news, that is, the context in which parallels are made with Spain and/or Catalonia. Therefore, this was not domesticated international

⁵ Our translation from Spanish.

⁶ The “Siamese” metaphor is also found in a statement by Yves Desmet (former director of *De Morgen*) (see “El diablo habla flamenco,” 2010).

news, but rather national news presented in a comparative mirror frame. Further confirming this, all the items focused on Flanders appeared in the Dutch-language press, and all the articles that looked mainly at Wallonia appeared in the French-language press. Though unsurprising, this again qualifies the idea of a unified national press: regional differences are important, in Belgium as in Spain. Nevertheless, as indicated above, Flemish articles did not draw significantly more comparisons between Flanders and Catalonia, which are also dominant in the French-language press.

Analysis of these comparisons, however, reveals a clear difference between the Dutch- and the French-language press. Both presented Flanders as a rich region that provides funds to poorer regions, but they evaluated this differently, particularly in editorials and columns: whereas the Flemish press tended to present the funding role of Flanders in a negative light (Parys, 2011), the French-language press reproached the Flemish for being egoistic ("Le blog," 2010). For instance, political scientist Jean-Yves Camus described this tendency as "fiscal egoism" in an interview with *Le Soir* headlined: "In the West, desire for autonomy and socioeconomic egoism" ("A l'Ouest," 2011). Both the Flemish and the French newspapers presented Catalonia as a good example for Flanders, but this was always done by third parties, mostly N-VA members and other Flemish nationalists. French-language newspapers, however, portrayed Flanders and Catalonia as bad examples for Wallonia, and once again only third parties expressed this opinion, in editorials or columns. For instance, Riccardo Petrella (2010), professor emeritus at the Catholic University of Louvain-La-Neuve, declared that Flanders and Catalonia have an "every man for himself mentality," and *La Libre Belgique* quoted Jean-Jacques Viseur of the Walloon party cdH (centre démocrate Humaniste) as saying:

Wallonia should rise to the challenge of playing the card of Walloon nationalism. It must be original because it hasn't got the driving force of humiliation and frustration that Basque, Catalan, Serbian, Slovak or Flemish nationalisms have—and this may be its trump card. ("La Journée," 2010)

Of the 52 articles that drew a comparison between (a part of) Spain and (a part of) Belgium, 13 did so in the context of reporting on the Spanish-Catalan regional conflict. Like other articles that referred to this conflict without drawing a comparison, the reports were occasioned by crucial events such as the Spanish Supreme Court's curtailment of the Catalan autonomy statute (July 2010), the Catalan prohibition of bullfights or *corridas* (July 2010), the Catalan regional elections (November 2010), or the Catalan referendum on independence (April 2011). Flemish newspapers tended to devote more attention to these key events than the French-language press, suggesting that Catalan political news is deemed more relevant in the Flemish context—another sign of (implicit or explicit) domestication at work. The example of the curtailment clearly reveals the different approaches. Not only did the Flemish newspapers give this key event more attention, but pro-independence figures and Belgian (Flemish) politicians also gave more attention to proponents of Catalan autonomy and independence. For example, Frieda Brepoels of N-VA voiced her discontent in an interview with *De Standaard* under the meaningful heading "Catalan slap in the face," where she suggested that the curtailment could "push the Catalans toward independence" (De Lobel & Verschelden, 2010). Flemish articles allotted more space to proponents of Catalan autonomy striving to legitimize their protest, and they frequently used metaphors and stereotypes (e.g., they often depicted Spaniards as "conquistadores who planted their flag" and want the Catalans to "jump to their

commands”) (Hancké, 2010). The French-language newspapers did not regard this curtailment as a conflict and paid less attention to proponents of Catalan autonomy and independence. They did not proclaim the standpoints of CiU and the independentists, but they gave space to a statewide party (the Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE) and a unionist party (the Partido Popular, PP). French-language newspapers, for their part, focused on how the curtailment affected regional and national politics: the Partit Socialista de Catalunya (PSC) lost in the Catalan elections and Prime Minister Zapatero was unable to reach agreement with the Catalan nationalists.

Conclusions

This article defines the mirror effect as a particular communicative situation in which two symbolic communities take greater interest in each other by finding models or counter-models for their own social and political context. This effect increases the newsworthiness of particular topics in coverage of the others’ sociopolitical realities. The processes of news domestication influence the discourses and narratives generated by the other side. This study has detected a mirror effect between the national contexts of Spain and Belgium, and more specifically between Catalonia and Flanders, but each country used this effect differently, reflecting both the different media models they follow and further regional differences within each country.

Overall, the different images of Flanders portrayed in the Spanish press depend on the national viewpoint taken by the newspaper. Madrid-based dailies tended to have a negative vision of the national conflict and the rise of pro-independence forces in Belgium. Curiously, the colonial past was still very present in certain discourses on Flanders, sometimes as a result of successful books or films, or because of features of the language itself. The Madrid-based press reflected an image of a country heading toward chaos and drew some parallels with the Spanish context. And with the case of Scotland in mind, the Madrid-based press warned of the dangers of breaking up Western Europe’s current nation-state organization. On the other hand, the Barcelona-based dailies were much more understanding of the Flemish situation, although relevant differences were visible in how *La Vanguardia* and *El Punt/Avui* used the mirror. The image portrayed by *La Vanguardia* was rather balanced and stressed the complexities inside Belgium, offering pragmatic reasons to keep the Belgium state alive alongside the image of the leader of N-VA as a thrilling character of whom the Walloons nonetheless were deeply suspicious (e.g., “El diablo habla flamenco,” 2010). In the case of *El Punt/Avui*, we found clearer evidence of a mirror effect situation, as the articles published in this paper amounted to a constant political reading of the national conflict in Belgium. Like the overall picture, what we find in Spain is a clearer political polarization of the media landscape.

In both Belgian and Spanish newspapers, the most common comparison between the two countries was between Flanders and Catalonia. These two regions were compared on a variety of levels: political (regional conflicts), economic (rich regions providing funds), and ideological (separatism and nationalism). Unlike the Madrid-based and Catalan newspapers, the Dutch- and French-language Belgian newspapers made an equal number of comparisons, but in each case the mirror reflected different images, largely because of the opinions the papers chose to give voice to. N-VA members and other Flemish nationalists presented Catalonia as a good example for Flanders, whereas the French-language newspapers portrayed Flanders and Catalonia as bad examples for Wallonia. The Belgian newspapers

interpreted Catalan events, particularly those concerning the Spanish-Catalan conflict, through a Belgian (or Flemish/Walloon) framework. Flemish newspapers tended to devote more attention to these conflicts than did French-language newspapers and also created a platform for proponents of Catalan autonomy. Overall, the Madrid-based press in Spain and the French-language press in Belgium took a more negative angle on nationalism/regionalism, whereas the Catalan and Flemish newspapers seemed to relate to each other, both sharing demands for autonomy and even independence.

These findings reinforce the idea of national models as stated in Hallin and Mancini's paradigm, although we noticed considerable differences of treatment between national contexts (and between the Madrid- or Barcelona-based press and the Dutch- or French-language press). In the case of Spain, the mirror effect was clearly in force in the Catalan situation—specifically in the pro-nationalist press, which tended to point to Flanders as a model or a situation similar to that in Catalan. In Catalonia, comparisons were more intense and more circumscribed by political debate. In the Belgian press, references to Catalonia concerned a wide range of topics and situations (sports being a particularly important field), although the Flemish press also mirrored the Catalan national context. Belgian newspapers within each region took less overtly different political positions, but the ideological differences between both regions were evident.

Our research has some limitations. First, the period we studied may not be representative because specific, meaningful sports and political events took place in that year. Second, we studied international reporting on only one particular issue in which the mirror effect may be especially important. Further research is needed to investigate whether a similar mirror effect is also present in reporting on other issues and regions. Third, we focused mainly on how a specific national press reports on another country; however, really understanding this requires deeper analysis of sources, journalistic culture, and even audience reception. Nevertheless, we were able to demonstrate that the mirror effect can, in some ways, produce a distorted image of a country when one community tends or "wants" to see its own particular similarities to another. Using tinted spectacles to decipher the other's context from the perspective of one's own domestic situation is perhaps unavoidable in contemporary journalism, but the image ultimately offered to readers should at least be a recognizable discourse.

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