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Refugees in the news: Comparing Belgian and Swedish newspaper coverage of the European refugee situation during summer 2015

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Abstract: This comparative content analysis of Belgian and Swedish newspaper coverage of the 'refugee situation' in 2015 (N=898) revolves around responsibility indicators, news actor characteristics, and thematic emphasis. As they are a potential influential factor in the public-opinion formation process, the studying of media portrayals is an essential first step in investigating the dynamic interplay between media discourse and societal reactions. Belgium and Sweden differ with respect to migration policy, integration indicators, and the number of incoming refugees. They also differ in terms of journalistic cultural values. As a result, they make for an excellent case study of intercultural differences and similarities in how refugees are reported on. Our analysis made clear that Belgian news coverage shows regional diversity, with Francophone Belgian journalists showing more tolerance towards migrants and thus tending to be more in line with their Swedish counterparts. Still, refugees are seldom allowed to speak for themselves. This warrants attention and action by news professionals.

Keywords: Refugees, newspapers, Migrant Integration Index, Sweden, Belgium, content analysis

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1 Refugees in Belgium and Sweden: Numbers, policy indices, and integration results

Governments, news media and public opinion are increasingly preoccupied with refugees seeking access to Western Europe. Public opinion is divergent (if not negative) and generally misinformed, with amalgamation in 'groups' being one of the problems. Through news selection, gatekeeping and (re)presentation of the situation, the news media choose to connect people or sharpen differences by stressing 'otherness'. This study focuses on newspapers, which remain the backbone of news production, influencing and feeding other types of outlets. We mapped and compared the specificities of each news media system (Sweden as well as the Dutch and French-speaking press in Belgium) in terms of refugee representation.

We adopted the definitions of the United Nations to clearly describe and demarcate what is understood by the terms *refugee*, *asylum seeker* and *migrant*. The 'Convention and protocol relating to the status of refugees', also referred to as the 1951 Refugee Convention in Geneva, protects refugees and precisely defines the referent of the term *refugee*: "A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group" (Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, 1967, p. 1).

As early as 1948 the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognized the right of people to seek asylum from persecution in other countries (article 14). Asylum seekers and their situation are defined as: "When people flee their own country and seek sanctuary in another country, they apply for asylum – the right to be recognized as a refugee and receive legal protection and material assistance" (UN Commission on Human Rights, 1998). Being forced to leave their country of origin against their will is the main distinctive characteristic that sets refugees apart from migrants. Sweden and Belgium were among the first 26 signatories of the original Geneva Convention, in July 1951.

In 2015 the number of first time asylum seekers in the European Union more than doubled compared to the previous year. In absolute numbers, 1,255,600 people applied for international protection in one of the member states of the European Union whereas in 2014, 562,680 individuals had requested asylum (Eurostat, 2016a). In Belgium, the Immigration Office registered 35,476 asylum applications (CGRS, 2015), a 106.1 % increase compared to 2014. Nearly 163,000 people sought asylum in Sweden in 2015. Never before had Sweden welcomed migrants in such numbers (Migrationsverket/Swedish Migration Agency, 2016). In 2015, 35.2 % of all asylum seekers in the EU asked for asylum in Germany,

13.9 % in Hungary, 12.2 % in Sweden and 3.1 % in Belgium. In total numbers of asylum seekers per million inhabitants, Sweden (16,016) comes after Hungary (17,699), with Belgium (3,463) ranking ninth out of 28 EU Member States.

Of all asylum seekers in the EU in 2015, Syrians (29 %) made up the largest group, followed by Afghans (14 %) and Iraqis (10 %). Although the numbers of refugees were already high throughout 2015, what was already a precarious situation became even more so in the third quarter (Eurostat, 2016b). From July to September 2015, the number of Syrian and Iraqi asylum seekers more than tripled in the EU compared with the previous quarter, while the number of Afghans more than doubled, leading to a total of 412,800 people seeking asylum, compared to 395,000 in the first two quarters. Sweden (+197 %) and Belgium (+191 %) had to cope with a strong and sudden spike in applications (Eurostat, 2016b).

The strong increase in asylum claims in Belgium calls for input from good practices and long-term approaches. Sweden is the European country par excellence inasmuch as it combines a large number of refugees with a long history of tolerance and openness, and it scores high on the Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX). The two countries' population figures are comparable: 9.9 million Swedes versus 11 million Belgians. Sweden leads the MIPEX list as the top country out of 38 mostly Western countries, while Belgium ranks seventh. The MIPEX list includes eight different domains of evaluation: labor market analysis, education, political participation, access to citizenship, family reunification, health, permanent residence and anti-discrimination. Recent EU migrant integration indicators (Eurostat, 2014 and 2015) also clearly prove that Sweden scores better on all integration fronts (employment, education, social inclusion and active citizenship) than Belgium. National policy makes for higher activity rates among immigrants, that is, non-EU citizens by birth (Sweden: 77.1 %; Belgium: 62.8 %), a higher education attainment level among this group (Sweden: 40 %; Belgium: 28 %), fewer immigrants at risk of poverty and social exclusion (Sweden: 50.5 %; Belgium: 69 %) and a higher naturalization rate (Sweden: 10 %; Belgium: 5.9 %).

The most recent Eurobarometer results (European Commission, 2016: fieldwork May 2016) show that immigration is the main concern at a European level according to 48 % of Europeans, before terrorism and the economic situation. This indicates a rapid change in public perception as immigration only ranked fourth on the concern list in 2014. Among the EU28 countries, a majority of respondents (58 %) have a negative feeling about immigration from outside the EU. Sweden is the only EU28 country in which positive feelings about non-EU immigrants are predominant among a clear majority of inhabitants (62 %).

2 Cultural and emancipative values

A focus on dominant cultural values in different countries can provide a clarifying context when conducting intercultural comparative newspaper content analyses. The four dimensions developed by Hofstede (1980) make it possible to differentiate between cultural value patterns across countries. Although Hofstede's widely adopted approach has its opponents, we believe the framework has proved its strengths when it is used in cross-national empirical studies based on a rigid methodological set-up in order to formulate and test well-defined hypotheses while avoiding over-reliance on only one cultural model in the functionalist paradigm (for an in-depth argumentation, see: Jones, 2007; Williamson, 2002). We thus can sketch a national cultural profile based on these four dimensions that have been confirmed by a multitude of replication studies (Sondergaard, 1994): uncertainty avoidance, individualism, power distance, and masculinity. The uncertainty avoidance index score shows there is a very large difference between Sweden and Belgium. Sweden scores very low on the scale (an index of 29 on a shared 49th place in a ranking of 50 countries and 3 regions), while in Belgium (94, 5th place in a ranking of 50 countries and 3 regions), people seem to feel much more threatened by uncertainty or unforeseen situations (Hofstede, 1997, p. 113; Wohlers, 2015, p. 27). Similarly, Sweden's score regarding the masculinity (Sweden: 5 vs. Belgium: 54) and power distance (Sweden: 31 vs. Belgium: 65) dimensions is much lower than Belgium's. Swedish society is a less 'masculine' society where people feel more equal with one another. Only the individualism dimension does not show such a wide divide (Sweden: 75 vs. Belgium: 71). As a conclusion, those dimensions that are linked to lower levels of xenophobia (Leong and Ward, 2006)—such as uncertainty avoidance—are more present in the Swedish cultural values pattern. Flanders and Francophone Belgium obtain rather similar results on the Hofstedian dimensions: 61 for Flanders versus 67 in Wallonia on power distance, 43 for Flanders and 60 for Wallonia on masculinity, 97 for Flanders and 93 for Wallonia on uncertainty avoidance, and 78 for Flanders and 72 for Wallonia on individualism.

Especially relevant for research on immigration opinions is the Emancipative Values Index. Emancipative values are a specific subset of self-expression values that combines an emphasis on freedom of choice and equality of opportunities as part of the World Values Survey (www.worldvaluessurvey.org). Starting from these indicators a scale is constituted with values between 0 and 1. The Emancipative Values Index is based on four sub-indices: autonomy, equality, choice, and voice. The institutional spheres from which these four indices are derived are widely different: Autonomy mainly refers to the autonomy of children within the family, equality points at gender equality, and choice refers to

ethical matters such as homosexuality, abortion and divorce. Last, the voice sub-index refers to matters of political participation. These core values have been shown (e.g., Welzel, 2013) to be related to important matters such as well-being, democracy and environmental sustainability. These indicators are therefore an important reference for research in all spheres of public life. Sweden scores 72 out of 100 on the emancipative value index, while Belgium only scores 49.

3 Journalism cultures

The Worlds of Journalism project (www.worldsofjournalism.org) deals with many dimensions of the occupational ideology characterized by shared values and roles. One of the questions raised is: To what degree do journalists view it as their role to promote tolerance and cultural diversity in their work? The Worlds of Journalism Study shows that Swedish journalists are more eager to promote tolerance and cultural diversity compared to their Belgian counterparts (Sweden 4.06 out of 5, Belgium scores 3.59).

Although scores for Flanders and French-language Belgium are not so different in Hofstede's research on cultural values, in the Worlds of Journalism data the tolerance scores are 3.93 for French-speaking journalists and a lower 3.31 for their Flemish colleagues. This result echoes earlier studies on refugee coverage (Van Gorp, 2006, pp. 205–206) and political culture in both parts of Belgium (Billiet, Maddens, & Froignier, 2006), each suggesting there is more tolerance for immigration in the south of Belgium.

4 News media coverage of refugees

Previous agenda setting research has been able to relate the prominence of topics in news media such as television news and newspapers (the so-called “media agenda”) to their ranking on the public agenda (e.g., McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In Belgium, a study by Jacobs and Hooghe (2015) shows a positive relationship between the proportion of television news dedicated to migration and public perception of this topic as an important societal issue, since both variables fluctuated simultaneously during the 2003–2014 time period. A content analysis of Swedish newspapers between January 2010 and June 2015 shows that refugees were portrayed more often in a negative than a positive way (Strömbäck, Andersson, & Nedlund, 2017). As this research ends on the threshold of the most recent

intense refugee and immigration wave in Europe, we chose to focus on an analysis of the news during summer 2015.

Szcepanik (2016) discriminates between a “lived experience” and a “mediated experience” of events, with the former usually being nonexistent since only a minority of the general public ever comes into close contact with refugees in real life. The concept of mediated experience is closely related to key findings and concepts of the cultivation theory (e.g., Potter, 1993): Repetitive exposure to representations of the real world in the media world can lead to media effects. In this mediated world and its discourse, Szcepanik claims, normatively loaded representations of refugees come to the fore. She points to a normative “refugee archetype” and imaginary refugeehoods in the media coverage by distinguishing between “good, genuine” refugees and “bad” refugees. The refugee archetype or “refugee ideal” is based on a set of normative characteristics such as “poverty, passivity or helplessness, gender-related behavior patterns” (Szcepanik, 2016, p. 32). A “good refugee” is thus female, poor, helpless, and from a specific country. Prominence in newspapers and media texts is an indicator of who deserves protection and who does not, a classification that clearly is in direct conflict with the definition of a refugee as stated in the Geneva Convention. “Bad refugees” are depicted as people who intend to abuse the social welfare system of welcoming European countries, and who lack all the attributes of good refugees. One example of depicting refugees in a biased, decontextualized way is to represent the possession of mobile phones by refugees as a fashionable, expensive act instead of an essential survival tool during their long and dangerous journey while keeping contact with family and loved ones. By using this normative narrative, a refugee is depicted as not poor and therefore not meeting the set of preconditions for representation as a “good, genuine” refugee (Szcepanik, 2016).

A recent study by Fotopoulos and Kaimaklioti (2016) also reports that refugees are portrayed as victims of the civil war in Syria, as helpless and desperate people on the run. The researchers conclude that German, British and Greek online newspapers cover the refugee crisis in a mostly uniform way and that this consonance “contrasts with the conflicting views of Europe’s leaders” (p. 276). With respect to the direct collocates of the words “refugees”, “asylum seekers” and “(im)migrants”, the most common mention was a number (36 to 71 % of the collocates in German, British and Greek newspapers), followed by the words “child” and “Syrian” in the UK. This focus on numbers is also reflected in the use of flood metaphors in news articles that insist on the high numbers of refugees (flows, influx).

Previous research by Van Gorp (2005) showed that refugees were most often portrayed as victims or intruders by the Belgian press. The language of blame

attribution and suggested solutions to problems for which blame is attributed by insinuation is an important focal point in news research. If refugees are seen as people fleeing to the West because forces out of their control such as war leave them no other choice, they will be portrayed as victims. On the other hand, portraying them as intruders suggests that refugees could easily stay at home but are eager to take advantage of Western welfare states. The policy options associated with both portrayals are very different. The policy response to the victim portrayal is epitomized by Angela Merkel's famous statement, "Wir schaffen das" ('We can do it'), first issued on August 31, 2015 and repeated time and again. An example of the intruder/threat portrayal frame can be found in a specific narrative that links refugees to crime and threats to national security. In British newspapers, for instance, 17 % of the articles on refugees and asylum seekers used the words "terrorists"/"terrorism" or referred to ISIS/ISIL/IS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant/Islamic State). By way of comparison, occurrences of such references in the context of refugee coverage in the Greek and German press was "not worth mentioning" (Fotopoulos & Kaimaklioti, 2016, p. 276). As the work of De Cleen, Zienkowski, Smets, Dekie and Vandevoordt (2017, p. 59) claims, the dominant negative discourse on the "refugee crisis" in Flanders draws back on "long-established culturalist, securitarian and economic discursive logics to problematize the presence of migrants, ethnic minorities and asylum seekers" that only have been refreshed and adapted to the current context.

The representation of the demographic structure of the refugee population in the news coverage is an important factor for weighing real-world indicators against media images. General research on the representation of female actors in the news shows that women receive far less media attention than men. This is demonstrated not only by how often women are mentioned in the text, or by the limited type of roles in which they are portrayed, but also by the number of quotations (Len-Rios, Rodgers, Thorson, and Doyle, 2005; Rush, Oukrop, and Sarikakis, 2005; Vandenbergh, d'Haenens, & Van Gorp, 2013). A study on the representation of Muslim men and women in French and Belgian French-language quality newspapers clearly shows the underrepresentation of female Muslim actors (De Cock & Du Pont, 2016).

In addition to actual media attention, Szczeplik (2016) describes the different ways of presenting male and female refugees (i.e., gendered narrative) in newspaper articles. Women are portrayed as more passive, innocent and vulnerable, while male refugees are portrayed as more active but also more aggressive and therefore less easily construed as victims. At the same time, refugees, men and women, are mostly seen as objects of political action in media descriptions, and their voices are too often silenced. A study by the Finnish Institute on quality

newspaper coverage concludes that the “voices of refugees and asylum seekers are heard less often than those of authorities, politicians and experts” (Sumu-vuori et al., 2016). The perspective of actual refugees as represented in interviews and quotations is mostly absent from media portrayals, according to Szcapanik (2016). Similar findings are reported in the studies of Benson and Wood (2015), and Philo, Briant and Donald (2013). Such is also the case in a study on ethnic-cultural minorities in Flemish newspapers: Ethnic minorities are nearly never cited as elite news source (2 %), and even as eye-witness of an event or *vox populi*, their representation stays far under the level of the real-world population indicators (Vandenbergh, d’Haenens, & Van Gorp, 2013). In their large-scale newspaper content analysis, Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017, p. 613) call these practices “bordering” and speak about a misrecognition of refugees as political, social and historical actors. In parallel with the lack of voice given to the refugee, another cross-cultural study of semantic role positioning of the refugee actor in articles from four relatively right-wing titles (France’s *Le Figaro*, Britain’s *The Times*, the Netherlands’ *De Telegraaf*, and Belgium’s *La Libre Belgique*)—selected during the same ‘crisis’ period (summer of 2015)—concludes that refugees are overwhelmingly placed in a negative, passive role with little agency, and are highly collectivized (Lams, 2018). The role of discourse in portraying people on the move is no superficial nor pure decorative element as the use of the expression “refugee crisis” in itself and the description of refugees as “illegal migrants” are not neutral but can have severe implications on the legal and moral support received by other nations (Sigona, 2018).

Our study probes the extent of this rather myopic perspective (*collective portrayal*) in different newspapers, based on the same operationalization method. This collective portrayal dimension is directly related to the agency and voice issues since viewing them as a group deprives refugees of an individual voice, of their specific and unique characteristics. Szcapanik (2016, p. 24) shows that male refugees are repeatedly depicted as a “dangerous, barbaric collective”. This ignores differences and lumps all refugees together rather than recognizing their individuality as human beings. Overrepresentation of institutions rather than individuals might also have a depersonalization effect (Baker, Gabrielatos, & McEnery, 2013).

Another dimension of representation is the use of religious descriptors to communicate about refugees. Refugees from various religions might be portrayed differently in the press. Previous research has shown that Muslims and Islam are depicted negatively in the news and are mainly linked to topics such as violence, war and terrorism (Jacobsen, Jensen, Vit, & Weibel, 2013; Poole, 2002, 2016; Mertens & de Smaele, 2016). Mentioning Islam more often is suggestive of higher concern about, and outright fear of, this religion (e. g., d’Haenens & Bink, 2007).

Given Swedish journalists' greater willingness to promote tolerance and cultural diversity as compared to their Belgian counterparts as well as given differences in other cultural value indicators such as the Hofstedian dimensions and real-world indicators, we designed a comparative study of the coverage of the refugee crisis in 2015 in six national Swedish and Belgian newspapers. Our hypotheses formation is based on the following four focal points: 1) positive and negative portrayals in Belgium and Sweden; 2) gender balance in Belgium and Sweden; 3) male refugees and negativity; and 4) quotations and paraphrases.

These representation issues also fuel the wider theme of news media diversity. 'News media diversity' is a normative ideal implying that the media portray society in its full diversity. News content diversity is seen as an essential precondition of societal pluralism. Herbert Gans (2011) stresses that news should be "multi-perspectival", meaning that different sectors from society should be represented. Minority groups such as refugees should get sufficient access to the news. The latter often get negative coverage, and a balance between positive and negative coverage is required (Masini & Van Aelst, 2017). In this respect the so-called *person-positivity bias* could imply the notion that individual refugees spark more positive reactions among the public than when represented as an impersonal community (Masini & Van Aelst, 2017).

5 Methodology

To study the portrayal of refugees as well as the thematic emphasis and news actor characteristics in Swedish and Belgian newspapers, we conducted a multi-lingual quantitative content analysis. As the number of first-time asylum seekers in the European Union peaked during the third quarter of the year (Eurostat, 2016b), we coded all news articles on refugees appearing from August 24 until September 27, 2015. This time period contains refugee-related events such as the "Wir schaffen das" statement by Angela Merkel, the death of the Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi, reports on the dangerous journey to Europe, countries closing their borders, and news articles on the 71 migrants found dead in a refrigerated lorry in Austria.

The research team collected newspaper data using the GOPress, Europresse and Factiva archives (Belgium), the Media Archive Retriever (Sweden), and online news media subscriptions. For each media landscape the main national quality newspaper and the largest popular newspaper were analyzed: the online news content of *De Standaard* (n=163) and *Het Laatste Nieuws* (n=157) (Flanders); *Le Soir* (n=170) and *L'Avenir* (n=85) (catering for French-language readers in Brus-

sels and Wallonia, respectively), *Dagens Nyheter* (n=192) and *Aftonbladet* (n=130) (Sweden). The selected news articles were at least 300 words long, contained the word ‘refugee’ or the local language variants, and at least half of the article had to consist of discourse on refugee-related aspects. In total, 898 news articles were analyzed which appeared between August 24 and September 27, 2015.

The research team developed a coding instrument (inspired by Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore, 2015) that went through multiple rounds of adjustments before pre-testing. Inter-coder reliability was measured on a sample of Swedish (n= 30) and Belgian news articles (n= 30).

Cohen’s kappa showed perfect reliability for some variables such as *mentioning immigration figures* and *mentioning success stories*. Other variables had a reliability score higher than .90 (for example, *gender*), or higher than .80 (among others, *post-arrival integration*, *educational and occupational background*). The *religion*, *racism*, *mentioning humanitarian dimensions* and *degree of collective portrayal* variables scored above .70, with only a few variables scoring between .60 and .70 (such as *family background*). Variables that scored lower were not used in our analysis, for instance, news text genre.

Twenty-two different themes were identified (number 23 was labeled “other” and mainly included articles about culture or art). They ranged from immigration figures to (human) rights to journey-related matters (search and rescue, mafia/traffic, mortality figures, aid supplies, humanitarian issues, rejection rate, etc.), the immigration issue itself (civil and political response, racism) and arrival and settlement (reception, post-arrival integration, economic threat, threat to national security, cultural threat, health risk for the country of destination, crime against/by refugees, success stories, benefits or resources for the country of destination, etc.). Taking reliability as a key criterion, 12 of these 22 themes were used in this article, divided into 6 positive themes (welcoming political reactions, welcoming civil society reactions, rights for migrants, humanitarian dimensions, success stories and post-arrival integration) and 6 negative themes (unwelcoming political reactions, unwelcoming civil society reactions, economic threat, threat to security, threat to health, and crime by migrants).

In each news story the first three refugees mentioned were coded by gender in order of appearance. The total number of refugee and non-refugee actors quoted or paraphrased was also calculated. We recorded all mentions of religion—Christian, Muslim, etc. The degree of *collective portrayal* was coded on a scale from 1 (highly collective portrayal) to 5 (highly individual portrayal) based on plural nouns, personal pronouns, statistics and figures or metaphoric language used (e. g., floods, wave, engulfed by, etc.). For this study, correlations between the following variables were examined: The *collective portrayal* variable was linked with the personal and occupational backgrounds of refugees. Correlations between

mentions of the Islamic religion and potential threats to national security were examined as well, while gender was put into relation with identified threat frames and political/civil responses to the refugees' arrival.

6 Research hypotheses

For comparisons between the Swedish and Belgian newspapers, we formulated the following hypotheses as guidelines for our comparative content analysis, based on the literature as detailed above.

H1: Immigration figures/levels are mentioned and discussed more often in the Belgian press than in the Swedish press.

H2: Swedish newspapers

- a. report more on the positive aspects of the refugee issue (i. e., welcoming reactions in civil society/by politicians, refugees' rights, humanitarian dimensions of the refugee debate, success stories, and post-arrival integration), and
- b. refer to fewer negative aspects of the refugee issue (i. e., threat-related news items such as health threats, economic threats, threats to national security and crime committed by refugees, and unwelcoming political reactions) than their Belgian (and especially Flemish) counterparts.

H3: Swedish newspapers report more on female refugees (gender balance) than Belgian newspapers.

H4: In newspaper articles, male refugees are more often portrayed in a negative light (intruders, etc.) than female refugees, and more so in Sweden than in Belgium.

H5:

- a. Refugees are less often quoted than other actors in news articles on the refugee situation.
- b. Refugees are more paraphrased than quoted in news articles on the refugee situation.
- c. Refugees are more often quoted and paraphrased in the Swedish press than in the Belgian (especially Flemish) press.

H6:

- a. Islam is less often mentioned in the Swedish press than in the Belgian (especially Flemish-language) press (more frequent mentions imply a higher preoccupation with this theme).
- b. Articles on the refugee situation that mention Islam are more linked to threat-related news themes (health threat, economic threat, threats to national security, and crime committed by refugees) than articles that do not.

H7:

- a. In news articles, refugees are mostly presented as a collectivity rather than as individuals.
- b. The Swedish press is less likely to portray refugees in a collective way than the Belgian press.
- c. Swedish newspapers report more on the educational and occupational background of refugees and their family background than the Belgian press.

H8: Testing the person positivity hypothesis:

- a. Articles with positive themes adopt more often an individualization lens.
- b. Articles with negative themes adopt less often an individualization lens.
- c. Individual refugees are mentioned more often in the context of positive themes, especially in Sweden (less often in Belgium, especially in Flanders).
- d. Individual refugees are mentioned less often in the context of negative themes, especially in Sweden (less often in Belgium, especially in Flanders).

7 Findings

7.1 Emphasis on immigration figures (H1)

The Belgian news items include more references to immigration numbers than their Swedish counterparts (38.1 % versus 27.3 %, $X^2=10.611$, $p=0.001$), but this difference is due to a higher frequency of references in the southern part of Belgium (50.6 % in Wallonia versus 28.1 % in Flanders), ($X^2=30.367$, $p=0.000 < 0.00$).

7.2 Positive/negative reactions to the refugee issue (H2)

We expected (H2a) the Swedish media to reflect more positive reactions from civil society and politics than the Belgian media. We also expected the Swedish news media to portray fewer negative reactions (H2b). Hypothesis 2 is only partially true: H2b can be confirmed, but H2a is to be rejected if we consider the Flemish and French-language corpora together. If we look at them separately, we note that the Swedish media do report more positive reactions to the refugee issue than the Flemish newspapers, but not more than the French-language press.

Table 1: Positive and negative news portrayals in Belgium (Wallonia and Flanders) and Sweden (in %, N=898).

	Sweden (n=322)	Belgium (n=575)	French-speaking Belgium (n=255)	Flanders (n=320)
Positive reactions				
Welcoming political reactions	9.3	11.3	14.9*	8.4*
Welcoming civil society reactions	29.8	24.7	29.4*	20.9*
Rights for migrants	6.5***	28.2***	34.9**	22.8**
Humanitarian dimensions	24.2***	42.1***	53.3***	33.1***
Success stories	1.9	3.8	2.7	4.7
Post-arrival integration	10.6***	22.3***	22.4	22.2
Negative reactions				
Unwelcoming political reactions	14**	21.2**	16.5***	25***
Unwelcoming civil society reactions	2.8	2.8	2.4	3.1
Economic threat	4***	13.7***	11	15.9
Threat to security	3.1*	6.8*	3.9*	9.1*
Threat to health	0.3	0.5	0	0.9
Crime by migrants	1.9	2.8	2.4	3.1

Note: *= $p < 0.05$, **= $p < 0.01$, ***= $p < 0.001$ (comparisons between Belgium and Sweden and between Dutch-language and French-language Belgium).

The part of the hypothesis that was confirmed is our assumption that the Swedish media contain fewer negative reactions (H2b). Each measured dimension of negativity proves less developed in Sweden. “Health threat” (0.53 % versus 0.30 %,

$X^2=2.403$, $p=0.121$), “crime by migrants” ($X^2=0.729$, $p=0.393$) and “unwelcoming civil society reactions” ($X^2=0.013$, $p=0.911$) were only registered in a few of the analyzed articles. This may explain why the differences between Belgium and Sweden do not reach statistical significance. The dimensions that occur in more articles, that is, “unwelcoming political reactions” (21.2 % versus 14 %, $X^2=13.393$, $p=0.000$), “economic threat” (13.7 % versus 4 %, $X^2=21.208$, $p=0.000$) and “threat to security” (6.8 % versus 3.1 %, $X^2=5.404$, $p=0.020$) are more outspoken in Belgium with statistical significance. Each of the three dimensions refers to negativity, of which there is more in Flanders than in French-language Belgium. The same holds true for the unwelcoming political reactions (Flanders with 25 % versus French-speaking Belgium with 16.5 %, $X^2=13.393$, $p=0.000$) and threat to security (9.1 % versus 3.9 %, $X^2=5.404$, $p=0.020$) dimensions.

Another part of the hypothesis deals with positive reactions (H2a). While the Swedish media are clearly less negative, they do not necessarily dwell more on positive aspects. The Swedish media do report more welcoming civil society reactions (29.8 % versus 24.7 %, $X^2=2.774$, $p=0.096$) but the number of success stories (1.9 % versus 3.8 %, $X^2=2.629$, $p=0.105$) or the accounts about welcoming political reactions (11.3 % versus 9.3 %, $X^2=0.861$, $p=0.353$) do not show significant differences. In fact, the Belgian media report positive aspects significantly more often, notably ‘rights for migrants’ (28.2 % versus 6.5 %, $X^2=59.590$, $p=0.000$), ‘humanitarian dimensions’ (42.1 % versus 24.2 %, $X^2=28.702$, $p=0.000$) and ‘post-arrival integration’ (22.3 % versus 10.6 %, $X^2=19.1$, $p=0.000$). This noticeably stronger reporting of positive aspects is mostly to be found in the French-language Belgian press, which reports more positive dimensions than its Flemish counterpart since it pays more attention to the welcoming political reactions (14.9 % versus 8.4 %, $X^2=5.915$, $p=0.045$), welcoming reactions in civil society (29.4 % versus 20.9 %, $X^2=5.480$, $p=0.019$), rights for migrants (34.9 % versus 22.8 %, $X^2=10.250$, $p=0.001$), and humanitarian (53.3 % versus 33.1 %, $X^2=28.702$, $p=0.000$) dimensions.

All told, Swedish news media do report fewer negative dimensions of the refugee debate, while not reporting positive dimensions more frequently than the Belgian press, mostly thanks to the French-language news coverage.

7.3 Gender balance in Belgian and Swedish coverage (H3)

Altogether we came across 152 individual refugee actors in the joint French and Dutch-speaking Belgian corpus. We note a difference in the gender balance of named individual refugees when comparing Belgian and Swedish news accounts. Of the 299 individual refugees mentioned in the Belgian and Swedish articles altogether, 30.4 % and 17.4 % are female in the Swedish and Belgian press, respec-

tively ($X^2=6.295$, $p=0.009$). No difference between the Flemish-speaking and French-speaking press could be found (17.2 % in the former vs. 17.6 % in the latter: $X^2= 0.007$, $p=0.932$).

7.4 Male refugees and negativity (H4)

The assumption that male refugees would be associated with more negative reporting in general had to be refuted, at least based on the statistical significance criterion. We created a dummy variable using the negative variables of Hypothesis 1 (unwelcoming reactions from politicians and civil society and various threat items) and a variable indicating the male or female identity of each refugee. Male refugees make up 17.2 % of the cases associated with negative dimensions, while 10.4 % of the females are associated with negativity. No statistical significance was reached ($X^2=1.811$, $p=0.178$).

For Sweden it is worth noting that within the subsample of individual refugees the difference between the male and female associations almost reaches a significance rate of 0.05 (20 % negativity regarding males versus 5.7 % negativity regarding females, $X^2= 3.764$, $p=0.052 < 0.10$). Differences in negativity towards males and females were not noted in the Belgian press (15.8 % males versus 15.6 % females, $X^2=0.01$, $p=0.981 > 0.05$).

7.5 Quotes and paraphrases (H5)

Refugees are less often quoted than non-refugees (0.32 versus 1.60 times per article, $t=-0.177$, $p=0.000$). However, these 0.32 quotes per article are higher than the 0.06 paraphrases per article ($t=8.623$, $p=0.000$). So, refugees are not given as much voice as compared to non-refugees, but they are directly quoted more often than they are paraphrased. Table 2 summarizes the mean number of quoted actors in the total sample, and in the regional samples (Sweden, Belgium and the two Belgian language regions). The t-values and probability values (last two columns) point to high significance in each region: Quotes by non-refugee actors are overrepresented, but the difference between the means (column 3) shows that the phenomenon is more present in Belgium (difference = 1.64) than in Sweden (difference = 0.62), and especially in Flanders (difference = 1.75), as compared with the French-speaking press (difference = 1.52).

Table 2: Differences between mean number of non-refugee and refugee actors quoted in news stories.

	Mean quoted non-refugee actors	Mean quoted refugee actors	Difference between means	T-value	Probability value
All regions	1.60	0.32	1.28	17.712	0.000
Sweden	1.00	0.39	0.62	6.380	0.000
Belgium	1.93	0.28	1.64	17.240	0.000
Flemish- speaking part	2.03	0.29	1.75	13.527	0.000
French- speaking part	1.79	0.28	1.52	10.730	0.000

Refugees are more quoted than paraphrased, as shown in Table 3. However, our expectations are met in that in Sweden, refugee actors are more quoted and more paraphrased, and the difference between quoted and paraphrased actors is most notable in Sweden.

Table 3: Differences between mean numbers of quoted and paraphrased refugee actors in news stories.

	Mean quoted refugee actors	Mean paraphrased refugee actors	Difference between means	T-value	Probability value
All regions	0.32	0.07	0.26	8.622	0.000
Sweden	0.39	0.09	0.30	5.542	0.000
Belgium	0.28	0.05	0.23	6.606	0.000
Flemish- speaking part	0.29	0.04	0.25	4.714	0.000
French- speaking part	0.28	0.06	0.22	4.763	0.000

7.6 Religion and negativity (H6)

The hypothesis that religion—here Islam—is mentioned more often in the Belgian press is not supported (11% Belgium versus 5.9% Sweden, $X^2=6.523$, $p=0.12$). Our results do indicate a significant difference between the two Belgian press systems due to frequent mentions of Islam in the Dutch-language press (15.3% of the Flemish items versus 5.9% of the French-language ones, $X^2=14.034$, $p=0.000$).

The further hypothesis concerning the relationship between mentions of Islam and at least one of the above-mentioned negative topics is strongly confirmed (54.9 % negative topics in the context of Islam ($X^2=28.760$, $p=0.000$), and only 26.7 % negative themes in articles in which Islam is not mentioned). The hypothesis is also valid for Flanders (61.2 % negativity in articles mentioning Islam versus 37.6 % in other articles; $X^2=9.562$, $p=0.002$) and Sweden (54.9 % negativity in articles with reference to Islam and 18.8 % in others; $X^2=28.760$, $p=0.000$), but not significantly with respect to the French-language items ($X^2=0.956$, $p=0.326$).

7.7 Collective portrayal, educational, occupational and family background (H7)

On the one hand, the degree of collective portrayal measured with an ordinal variable between 1 (very collective) and 5 (very individual portrayal) is not different between Belgium and Sweden (1.51 versus 1.46, $t=0.708$, $p=0.479$) and within Belgium (1.46 in the Belgian Dutch-language press versus 1.58 in the Belgian French-language press, $t=-0.1369$, $p=0.172$). Therefore, we have to reject Hypothesis 7b.

On the other hand, there are no differences in frequency of mentions of family, educational and occupational background between the three regions. The Swedish press does not mention educational and occupational background significantly more often (11.5 % versus 7.8 % in Belgium, $X^2=3.307$, $p=0.069$). The same goes for family background (16.1 % versus 15.2 % in Belgium, $X^2=0.155$, $p=0.694$).

Within Belgium, family background is mentioned significantly more often in Francophone items (18.4 %) than in Flemish items (12.5 %, $X^2=3.826$, $p=0.05$), but there is no significant difference between them as far as mentions of educational or occupational background are concerned (9 % in Flanders versus 6.9 % in Wallonia, $X^2=0.844$, $p=0.347$).

7.8 Collective portrayal and positive/negative themes (H8)

In each country and region there appears to be a correlation between the degree of collective portrayal/individualization and negative/positive themes, respectively. The person positivity hypothesis (H8) can thus be confirmed, in a double-ended way. Our codebook included positive and negative themes that were not mutually exclusive since articles can include only positive themes, both positive and negative themes, only negative themes, or neither positive nor negative themes.

Table 4 presents the degree of individualization in articles with positive themes: In all regions this is higher in items with positive themes, thus confirming what we hypothesized. ANOVA tests were run to determine whether there were significant regional differences with respect to the collective portrayal dimension in articles with and without positive themes. Such was not the case in items without positive themes, with the Swedish press being the least inclined to view migrants as an indiscriminate group ($F=2.544$, $p=0.080$). In addition, an ANOVA test on regional differences regarding collective portrayal in articles with positive themes was non-significant ($F=0.677$, $p=0.509$).

Table 4: Degree of collective portrayal in news stories with and without positive themes.

	News stories with positive themes (mean)	News stories without positive themes (mean)	T-value	Probability value
All regions	1.62	1.22	-6.645	0.000
Sweden	1.58	1.30	-2.722	0.000
Belgium	1.64	1.15	-7.034	0.000
FL-BE	1.59	1.19	-4.129	0.000
FR-BE	1.70	1.04	-7.002	

Note: 1=collective portrayal; 5=individual portrayal.

Table 5 also confirms the person-positivity hypothesis with higher individualization in articles without negative themes compared to articles with negative themes. This is significant in each region, but additional ANOVA tests failed to demonstrate differences between regions: neither in the news stories with negative themes ($F=0.053$, $p=0.949$), nor in the news stories without negative themes ($F=1.121$, $p=0.397$).

Table 5: Degree of collective portrayal in news stories with and without negative themes.

	News stories with negative themes (mean)	News stories without negative themes (mean)	T-value	Probability value
All regions	1.29	1.58	4.518	0.000
Sweden	1.28	1.51	2.099	0.000
Belgium	1.29	1.63	3.633	0.000
FL-BE	1.28	1.59	2.889	0.004
FR-BE	1.32	1.67	2.517	0.013

Note: 1=collective portrayal; 5=individual portrayal.

8 Conclusion and discussion

This study examined cross-cultural differences between Swedish and Belgian newspaper coverage of the refugee situation in Europe during the summer of 2015, when the arrival of refugees in Europe reached its peak. Based on the arguments found in the literature review, we formulated eight hypotheses about potential cross-cultural variations in attention to immigration figures, themes, characteristics of the refugee actor, and variable correlations.

Most importantly, our results show that as far as the refugee situation is concerned, any comparison of Belgian news coverage with foreign press coverage needs to distinguish between Belgium's two news media landscapes. When significant differences between Sweden and Belgium emerge they often interact with regional differences within Belgian representations of the refugee issue. The hypothesis that the Swedish press would stress more the positive sides of the political dimension of welcoming refugees was rejected owing to a high degree of attention to positive news in the French-language items in Belgium, which is not so much the case in the Flemish press. More proof of a split approach in Belgium can be found in the confirmation of Hypothesis 6—that the Belgian press would make more frequent mentions of religion than does its Swedish counterpart. Such is only the case for the Flemish corpus, in which mentions of the refugees' Islamic background are more frequent. In addition, the link between Islam and threat-related news items was significant in the Flemish and Swedish corpora, but not in the French-language news stories. Similarly, immigration levels were expected to be mentioned more often in the Belgian press. Again, this was confirmed only as a result of the French-language news coverage. Our study shows that cultural value patterns and variations in journalistic values as demonstrated by the Worlds of Journalism research do result in a different approach as reflected in newspaper items on refugees. A higher tolerance score among French-language journalists as compared to their Flemish colleagues is echoed by a more tolerant representation in the Belgian French-language press.

The hypothesis on gender balance, expecting more attention to female refugees in the Swedish press than in the Belgian press, was confirmed. This is in line with cultural value indicators such as the Hofstedeian cultural orientation values, where Belgium scores higher on the 'masculine' dimension than Sweden. Since Swedish journalists seem more willing to promote tolerance and cultural diversity, we hypothesized that they would dwell less on 'threats', as was confirmed by the data. On the other hand, mentions of the refugees' educational and occupational background were no more numerous in the Swedish than in the Belgian items.

What our data make abundantly clear is a lack of voice given to the refugee actors in all news texts examined. Use of positive themes and avoidance of nega-

tive themes go together with more individualization, confirming the person-positivity hypothesis. This holds especially true in Sweden, although the Swedish press does not tend to be any less inclined to portray migrants as a collectivity than its Belgian counterparts. Indeed, as was hypothesized, individual immigrants spark more positive reactions, but individualized portrayal is scarce in the items studied. The high collectivization of the refugee actor supports the conclusion in the cross-cultural study on refugee representation by Lams (2018).

Other actors—mostly politicians—are quoted and paraphrased much more frequently than the actual protagonists. This confirms the findings of earlier studies of refugee coverage across several countries (Benson & Wood, 2015; Philo et al., 2013; Sumuvuori et al., 2016; Szccepanik, 2016). While the primary focus on either positive or negative themes might vary depending on the particular time frame and zeitgeist, this lack of voice appears to be consistent and warrants more attention from news media professionals in order to improve minority empowerment and foster news diversity.

As this comparative and quantitative content analysis of the news coverage of refugees is limited in time and scope, future research will need to widen both the time frame considered and the journalistic production perspective. Comparing neighboring countries with varying news cultural indices may enhance the understanding of the link between news discourse and the formation of opinions by the general public. To study the impact on public opinion of consistently more positive/negative audiovisual and print or online media portrayals of refugees, survey findings need to be related to content analyses in a multifaceted, mixed-method research design.

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