



The news is in the frame: A journalist-centered approach to the frame-building process of the Belgian Syria fighters

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Abstract

This article seeks to understand the genesis of frame-building based on the early coverage of the Belgian Syria fighters in the four leading newspapers in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. For a period of 6 weeks, a frame analysis of news stories was linked to reconstruction interviews with reporters and supplemented by newsroom observations and in-depth interviews with superiors. The findings show that the framing of 'new' events on the public agenda stems from familiar frames about related events. More than being only a selection criterion, news values are equally added to the news story in retrospect, in line with the applied frame, which implies that the newsworthiness of the story may be increased by the way it is told. When journalists report an exclusive story, they remained closer to the frame as it is presented to them by their main sources.

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Keywords

Frame-building, framing, news values, reconstruction interviews, sources, Syria fighters

With the introduction of the concept of frame-building, Scheufele (1999) launched a first call for more research into the factors that influence the development of media frames. According to Zhou and Moy (2007), frame-building research, in contrast to agenda-building research, is focused primarily on factors intrinsic to the news medium, like the characteristics of the journalist or journalistic routines. De Vreese (2014) again emphasized the importance of the interaction between media makers and external actors such as elites and strategic communicators. Van Gorp (2010) viewed frame-building as ‘a process in which journalists frame events and issues not only by applying news values but also by being sensitive to cultural themes’ (p. 87). The aim of frame-building research, then, is to investigate how journalistic routines (as news values) and the interaction with external actors (as sources) lead to the construction of culturally rooted frames. We follow Entman (1993) that those frames have ‘to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation’ (p. 52). To this end, this study will map out the emergence process of frame-building from the point of view of the journalist, who is perceived as being the central link in the news production chain.

A news production perspective on framing

Reese (2007) described framing as a process of giving meaning that ‘can be embedded across stories, media, and time’ (p. 50). The way in which a certain subject is framed in a news text is not an isolated incident. Various news stories from diverse media contribute to the dynamic process of framing. Miller and Riechert (2001) considered the framing process to be a cycle consisting of multiple phases, starting with the emergency phase in which journalists are triggered by an event that they feel is newsworthy, followed by the definition/conflict phase, in which various stakeholders try to push their point of view to the fore as the appropriate frame for the issue. The first phases of the framing process are considered to be the most influential (Fowler et al., 2011) because public opinion is still ‘malleable’ (Chong and Druckman, 2007). Because much of the framing research starts from the assumption that a subject contains ‘clearly defined, static, competing sides/alternatives’, Fowler et al. (2011: 172) argued that the fact that the process of frame-building can be much more chaotic in reality is overlooked. In their opinion, that process deserves more attention, particularly when new subjects are put on the agenda in which actors still have to fight to gain dominance over the definition of a problem. This gives rise to the following research question:

RQ1. How does the process of frame-building come into being and develop?

Various researchers pointed out that ignoring the role of sources in the creation of framing is also ignoring basic power questions (Carragee and Roefs, 2004; Reese, 2001; Vliegenthart and Van Zoonen, 2011). It is hypothesized that journalists are increasingly dependent upon ‘official’ sources due to the increasing deadline pressure (Manning, 2001) and the contrast between the declining number of journalists and the growing

public relations (PR) industry (Lewis et al., 2008). According to production researchers, journalistic dependence is situated primarily in the 'discovery' phase, while journalists themselves show more initiative in the 'gathering' and 'reporting' phases (McManus, 1997 [1994]; Reich, 2006). Therefore, it is possible that the sources 'lead the dance' (Gans, 1979) in the selection phase, but that journalists take over in the framing phase (Cook, 1998; Strömbäck and Nord, 2006).

Concerning the origins of frames and the contribution of sources to the applied frames in news texts, Van Gorp (2007) differentiated between framing *through* the media and framing *by* the media. Brüggemann (2014) made a similar distinction with his frame-building continuum ranging from 'frame-sending', in which journalists are actually a conduit for the source's frame, to 'frame-setting', in which journalists themselves are largely responsible for frame selection. Drawing on the findings from previous research, the following research question is asked:

RQ2. What is the influence of the journalistic interaction with sources on the frame-building process?

Several researchers have implicitly or explicitly referred to the conceptual overlap of framing and news values (Brüggemann, 2014; D'Angelo, 2002; De Vreese, 2002). Conflict and human interest, for example, are considered by some researchers to be frames (e.g. Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000), while others consider them to be news values (e.g. McGregor, 2002).

Research on news values seeks to explain why certain events are more easily selected than others (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Harcup and O'Neill, 2001). However, researchers have pointed out that a distinction must be made between the characteristics of an event and the news value that is ascribed to the event by the journalist (Kepplinger and Ehlig, 2006; Staab, 1990). A production-oriented perspective can be useful to detect the latter, as well as to explore news values external to the event, such as the competition between various media and the importance of an 'exclusive' story (Allern, 2002; Schultz, 2007).

The accepted, generic conceptualizations of framing say little about *how* a certain subject is covered. For example, when politicians are covered from within a conflict frame, the question remains as to precisely in what way are they portrayed. Therefore, we prefer to consider concepts as conflict and human interest as news values instead of as frames. Conflict is seen as a news value that can pave the way, for example, for a David versus Goliath frame. While valuing an event as a 'conflict' is a determining step in the frame-building process, framing it as 'David versus Goliath' gave the audience more guidance about how to interpret this 'conflict'. This leads us to the following research question:

RQ3. What role do news values play in the frame-building process?

Method

Multiple methods

This research combined content analyses with newsroom observations and reconstruction interviews. The study of the news product teaches us little about the news production process (Manning, 2001; Reich, 2006). Despite the revival of newsroom ethnographies

(e.g. Paterson and Domingo, 2008), these are rarely used for framing research. Some framing researchers carried out in-depth interviews with journalists (e.g. Kothari, 2010; Lewis and Reese, 2009), but the interviews are rarely directly linked to news texts. This study made supplementary use of reconstruction interviews in order to create as specific a link between the study of the news product and the study of the news production process as possible. The reconstruction of the 'biographies' of news stories (for similar approaches, see Brüggemann, 2013; McManus, 1997 [1994]; Reich, 2006) makes it possible to focus 'on recording actions, not evaluating behavior, on specific stories rather than on general estimations' (Reich, 2006: 501).

Data collection

When studying the emergence of continuing big news stories, it is practically impossible to investigate *ex post* the origins of a frame. Ideally, the researcher should start his observations and interviews from the very beginning of such a story. Unfortunately, one cannot predict when such stories will start. To overcome this paradox, this study selected newsrooms and journalists beforehand, in anticipation of a major unexpected event.

The analysis material for this case study was primarily taken from a broader study on the selection and framing of news (see Boesman et al., 2014), whereby 20 newspaper reporters from four Flemish newsrooms were followed during 6 weeks in March–April 2013. The newsrooms belong to the two main newspaper owners in Flanders (*Mediahuis*, *De Persgroep*), each with a 'quality' newspaper (*De Standaard*, *De Morgen*) and a 'popular' newspaper (*Het Nieuwsblad*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*). All articles of the selected reporters were reconstructed using interviews shortly after the article was published. Each article also underwent a content analysis. In addition to this, newsroom observations and in-depth interviews with news chiefs were conducted.

A limited selection of news stories on the same event – the departure of Belgian youth to the conflict region in Syria – was used for this specific study on frame-building. The first week of fieldwork coincidentally coincided with the first reports on these young people in the Belgian press, which created an exceptional opportunity for the researchers. Six reporters from the sample wrote articles on the Syria fighters. The subject was also treated in the interviews with the news chiefs.

Supplementary, all news stories on the Syria fighters from all four newspapers were subjected to content analysis, including those written by journalists who were not included in the sample. In total, 86 news stories underwent a content analysis, of which 30 could be reconstructed because they were written by journalists from our sample.

Data analysis

Following the constructionist approach of Van Gorp (2010), a limited number of frames were reconstructed inductively from the content analyses of news texts, the interviews, and the field notes. As argued similarly by Touri and Koteyko (2014), the aim of this kind of qualitative analysis is not to have an estimate of the frequency of occurrence of the different frames, but to give an estimate of their prominence based on the breadth and density of the framing and reasoning devices.

The constructionist frame analysis consisted of three phases in which the research material was constantly scanned and compared (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). First, a thematic coding was carried out. All textual elements from the news stories that could contribute ‘meaning’ to the Flemish Syria fighters were indicated: key words, metaphors used, images, and recurring arguments. An axial coding was then carried out. The textual elements were listed and patterns were sought to reduce the multitude of *in vivo* codes down to a limited number of codes that were related to Entman’s (1993) problem definitions, causes, consequences, moral judgments, and solutions. Framing packages were created in the third phase (inspired by Gamson and Modigliani, 1989). Each framing package had a logical cohesion of framing devices (word choice, metaphors, etc.) and reasoning devices (from problem definition to solution). Occasionally, the latter were found explicitly in the news articles, but most often the key frame implicitly suggested this logical reasoning. This implies that the key frame, which could be traced back to cultural phenomena such as values, norms, and archetypes, created a coherent whole out of the various devices.

The influence of sources was investigated through a content analysis of quotes in news texts as well as through the information – retrieved via the reconstruction interviews – about how these quotes originated and about the possible exclusion of sources in the final news text. With regard to the role of news values, this study started from the arguments of the journalists. By asking probing questions about why and how an event was selected and constructed into a story, their arguments were linked with the academic notion of news values. For example, when a journalist said that an event was covered because of the involvement of a Belgian Minister, the story was connected with the news value of ‘elite people’.

Findings

Background information on the story

On 7 March 2013, the Belgian Eurojust President mentioned in an interview on Flemish Radio One that Flemish young men were fighting in Syria against Bashar al-Assad’s regime. Press agency Belga processed the interview in a short news item. Most newspapers under scrutiny took over this press release. Although a few earlier stories about foreign fighters appeared in the Belgian press, this was the start of a peak in the press coverage with daily news about Belgian fighters in Syria (Berbers et al., 2015).

In the first days, the quality newspapers paid more attention to the event. They first focused on the number of young people and subsequently on the alleged connections with the radical Salafist organization Sharia4Belgium (e.g. Eeckhaut, 2013) and its enigmatic spokesperson Fouad Belkacem. The popular papers quickly focused on the specific stories of the young people behind these numbers, based on interviews with their family members. In particular, two young converts to Islam were extensively portrayed: Brian De Mulder (e.g. Huyberegts, 2013b; see Figure 1) and then Jejoen Bontinck (e.g. Lefelon, 2013; see Figure 2).

The process of frame-building

The early frame-building regarding the Syria fighters is understood as a process in which Entman’s definition of framing is gradually fulfilled. Journalists do not start with a blank

8 NIEUWS

DONDERDAG 14 MAART 2013 HET NIEUWSBLAD



Ooit was Brian een voetbalbelofte bij Beerschot, nu heeft hij alles en iedereen achtergelaten om 'in het paradijs' te gaan vechten als moslimstrijder. (122 p.)

Voetbalbelofte bij Beerschot, bekeerd door Sharia4Belgium, radicale moslimstrijder in Syrië

VLAAMS TALENT VERDUWT PLOTS OM IN SYRIË TE GAAN VECHTEN

De familie van Antwerpenaar Brian D.M. hoopt al twee maanden op een teken van leven. Ze staan doodsangsten uit sinds de 19-jarige zich bekeerde tot moslim om als **Abu Qasem** te gaan vechten in Syrië. Brian is gehirsdwacht door Sharia4Belgium, zegt zijn zus. 'Hij is stiekem naar het paradijs vertrokken om te strijden.'

PETER HUYBERECHTS

'Moet je niet gaan slapen', vroeg Briana jongere zus in de nacht van 23 januari, ergens in Limburg. Brian knikte van neen en zei dat zij dat stilan wel moest gaan doen.

Hij vernaste haar ook door afscheid te nemen. 'Wees niet ongerust, maar ik kom niet meer terug.' Even later stopte een wagen en stapte hij in. Bestemming: Syrië. Om er mee te gaan vechten met de moslimbroeders tegen het regime van Bashar al-Assad.

Zijn Vlaamse vader, Braziliaanse moeder en twee zussen hadden het raden naar die onheilspellende bestemming. 'We wisten totaal niet dat hij plannen had om te vertrekken, laat staan naar oorlogsgebied', zegt Briana oudere zus Bruna (24). 'Pas later vond ik in zijn mailbox de bevestiging dat hij zou vertrekken naar het paradijs om er te gaan strijden.'

In de greep

Of Brian zich al twee maanden in oorlogsgebied bevindt, is onduidelijk, maar gerechtelijke bronnen zeggen dat er wel degelijk signalen zijn dat hij zich daar met enkele bevriende radicale moslims ophoudt. Meer bepaald moslims uit de kringen van de extremistische organisatie Sharia4Belgium.

Volgens Briana zus Bruna is hij al anderhalf jaar in de greep

van de eind vorig jaar ontbonden organisatie. 'Mijn moeder is zelfs met Brian naar Limburg verhuisd. Op de vlucht voor Fouad Belkacem. Het veranderde de weinig, zijn nieuwe vrienden reden meermalen van Antwerpen naar Limburg om hem op te halen. Ze hebben Brian helemaal gehirsdwacht.'

De jonge Antwerpenaar raakte pas gefascineerd door de islam op zijn zestiende. Tot dan had hij een andere passie: voetbal. Brian had talent en maakte figuren in de jeugfreksen van Beerschot. 'Hij leefde voor zijn sport', vertelt zijn zus. 'Tot hij op zijn zestiende te horen kreeg dat de eerste ploeg er toch niet inszat. Dat was een harde klap voor hem.'

Het is, op wat zwaaiwaal met enkele moslimvrienden na, het einde van zijn carrière. Die vrienden en een islamitische buurman maakten hem warm voor wat hij later het enige 'echte geloof' noemde.

Bidden en halahiees

'In korte tijd is mijn broer toen totaal veranderd', zegt Bruna. 'Brian raakte elke dag meer van ons vervreemd. Hij begon gewaden te dragen, had vijfmaal per dag tot Mekka en wou enkel nog halahiees eten. Hij besloot ook Arabisch te leren.' Van zijn studie Handel kwam niets meer in huis.

Op zijn zestiende raakte Brian gefascineerd door de islam. In september 2012 nam hij zelfs actief deel aan de rellen in Borgehout. 'Gebrainwashed door Sharia4Belgium', aldus zijn zus. (122 p.)

Allemaal tot grote frustratie van zijn ouders en grote zus die probeerden Brian op andere gedachten te brengen. Het resultaat was nog meer razen en nog meer vervreemding. 'Hij wou dat wij ons beheerden en had kritiek op hoe wij in het leven stonden. Hij ging alleen nog om met islamitische jongeren. Want Belgische jongeren zijn varkens, zei hij.'

Abu Qasem Brazil

Vorig jaar in juli belandde Brian een tijdje in de gevangenis. 'Een drugskwestie', aldus zijn zus. 'Samen met enkele andere Sharia4Belgium-jongeren. Drie weken staken ze hem in de gevangenis. Onterecht, want hij was nodel en zat in de tang van zijn oudere vrienden.'

Een verblijf naar Limburg en een gevangenisverblijf weerhielden hem er niet van amper twee maanden later deel te nemen aan de rellen in Borgehout. Uit protest tegen een Amerikaanse anti-islamfilm.

Hij breekt volledig met zijn verleden en laat zich voortaan aanspreken als Abu Qasem Brazil. Dat laatste als verwijzing naar de roots van zijn moeder.

Schuld van Sharia4Belgium

Terwijl radicale groepen als Boem thuisziet met een enkelband, zijn naar schatting zeventig Belgische jongeren de voorbije maanden vertrokken naar Syrië. De meesten komen uit de entourage van Sharia4Belgium. Het gaat om jongeren tussen 17 en 25 jaar, zonder diploma, vaak met een strafblad. Dat de organisatie officieel is opgedoekt, verandert volgens een gerechtelijke bron niets aan de rekrutering.

Ook de familie van Brian steekt de schuld van zijn radicalisering volledig op Sharia4Belgium. 'Zij hebben zijn hoofd tot gemaakt', zegt zijn zus. 'Brian was vroeger een rustige jongen die graag tegen een bal trapte en die zijn best deed op school. Nu houdt hij zich gewapend op met salafistische rebellen in oorlogsgebied. Ik moet u dus niet vertellen dat mijn ouders de laatste maanden geen oog meer hebben dichtgedaan.'

Figure 1. The story of Brian in *Het Nieuwsblad* (see Huyberechts, 2013b), used by kind permission of Mediahuis nv.

sheet at the beginning of a new news story. They reflect about new events within familiar frames, from the inductive frame analysis referred to as 'spring', 'war', and 'missing children'. It will be argued here that these familiar frames were activated to define the situation, to indicate what the problem is, and to allocate roles to the main actors in the story, as the victim, hero, or villain. Inspired by what Goffman (1959) called 'setting the scene', three frames are distinguished in the analyzed reporting. The main characteristics of these frames were that they are metaphorical in nature and that they are intertextually connected with recent current events, with the upheaval in the Arabic world, 9/11 and terrorism, and the Dutroux case in Belgium. Soon, however, these familiar frames

vrijdag 22 maart 2013

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VLAAMSE JIHADSTRIJDER MAG NIET NAAR HUIS VAN REBELLEN, VADER SLAAT ALARM

Nadat eerder deze week een Antwerpse vrouw haar broer herkende tussen de strijders in Syrië, slaat opnieuw een ouder alarm. Dimitri Bontinck heeft al een maand niets meer van zijn zoon Jeroen (18) gehoord. Aan een vriendin liet de jongen uit Antwerpen weten dat hij in Syrië is en wordt klaargestoomd tot jihadstrijder. «Maar mijn zoon wil naar huis. Hij voelt zich misbruikt door Shariah4Belgium. Had ik het geld, ik haalde hem zelf terug», zegt vader Bontinck, die een gewezen beroepsmilitair is.



Links: Jeroen bij zijn plechtige communie. Rechts: Amper drie jaar later liet hij een baard groeien en begon over de koran te prediken. De familie

«Mijn zoon is misleid om te moorden in Syrië»

PATRICK LEFELON

Dimitri Bontinck heeft al duizenden foto's en filmpjes bekeken om toch maar een glimp van Jeroen op te vangen. Zijn enige zoon liet op 28 februari het laatste van zich horen. Hij zag zogezegd aan een islamistische universiteit in Cairo. «Wij zouden hem een tijd niet meer horen want hij werd afgesloten van internet en gas. Dat vond ik al vreemd. Dan kwamen die berichten over Antwerpse jongens die in Syrië meevrachten. Vorige week werd mijn schrift bewaard. Van zijn Marokkaanse vriendin hoorde ik dat Jeroen de voorbije weken een militair opleiding heeft gekregen. Hij zit nu ondergedoken in een villa vlak bij de Syrische frontlinie. Maar om in de strijd te worden gezonden. Maar hij zei dat niet zitten. Hij wil terugkomen naar België, maar kan niet weg. Zijn papieren zijn door de rebelenbeïndig afgenomen. Hij huilde aan de telefoon toen hij moest ophangen, vertelde zijn vriendin ons.»

Brave schooljongen

Volgens de familie is de jongen pas eind februari naar Syrië vertrokken omdat hij dan net 18 was geworden. Toch is hij al vanaf zijn 15de een erg actief lid van Shariah4Belgium. De overgang van brave schooler op het jezuïetencollege naar een diepgelovige, radicale moslim ging razend snel. Op zijn 15de nam hij nog deel aan het tv-programma 'Nieuw licht' met Jack Houck, amper een jaar later droeg hij een djelbab, liet een baard groeien en stond over de koran te prediken, vertelt Dimitri. «Zijn beleving begon toen hij een Marokkaanse leerde kennen die hem meer de moskee nam. Hij sloot zich kort erna aan bij Shariah4Belgium. Ik heb die belken verschillende keren gewaarschuwd dat mijn zoon minderjarig was en naar zijn ouders moest luisteren. Ik heb de politie ingeschakeld om hem weg te halen bij Shariah4Belgium, tevergeefs.»

MAROKKAAN

Onselt minderjarigen in Brussel staat alarm omdat een Marokkaanse actief is als moskee. Vorige week is een 15-jarige jongen uit Vilvoorde de avond van zijn vertrek naar het front nog kunnen worden tegengehouden.

De tiener had aan zijn zus gezegd dat hij die nacht zou worden opgehaald om naar Syrië te vertrekken. Dan zij de tussenkomst van een koranleerkracht liet de jongen zich om-

JEJOEN ZIT ONDERGEDOKEN IN EEN VILLA VLAK BIJ DE FRONTLINIE. DE REBELLEN HEBBEN ZIJN PAPIEREN AFGENOMEN

Jeroen brak echter nooit met zijn ouders. Zijn 18de verjaardag hebben we thuis gevierd. Ik liet Jeroen ook gerust met zijn geloof. Hij deed tenslotte geen criminele dingen. Integendeel zelfs, hij ging als vrijwilliger vaak op bezoek bij zieke mensen. Na zijn verjaardag begon hij plots te spreken over Egypte. Hij zou er filosofie gaan studeren. Ik heb nog voorgesteld om samen die universiteit te gaan verkennen. Maar dat zag hij absoluut niet zitten. Zijn ouders hebben Jeroen op 11 maart als vermist opgegeven. Hij is toegevoegd aan de lijst van 70 Belgische jongeren die vermoedelijk met de radicale moslims vechten aan het Syrische front. Intussen schreeuven de families om actie tegen radicale moslimleiders als Fouad Belkacem. Hij zit niet een enkelhand thuis in Boom zijn gewangemistraf uit voor een veroordeling van het aanzetten tot haat tegen niet-moslims.

Zelf terughalen

Vader Dimitri: «Het gerecht had Shariah4Belgium moet zo'n negen stigmatiseren. De groepering is opgedoeld, maar doet ondergrondse groeven verder. Waaronder willen gerecht en politie niet inzien dat onze kinderen geen daders, maar slachtoffers zijn. Zij worden misleid door die radicale moslims om in Syrië de ongelovigen te gaan uitmoorden. Mijn zoon heeft dat eindelijk zelf begrepen. Hij heeft zijn vriendin gezegd



Vader Dimitri Bontinck.

dat hij het niet aankan om mee te vechten.» Voor vader Bontinck kriebelt het om zelf naar Syrië te trekken. Hij is een gewezen beroepsmilitair die voor de VN werkte in oorlogszones in Afrika en Joegoslavië. «Moet ik het geld hebben, ik ging hem zelf terughalen. Ik vind genoeg oud-collega's om mee te gaan, besluit de man.

KEN VAN DE MOSKEE

proberen jongeren tegen te houden. «Moskeeën worden ten onrechte aangewezen als de rekruteringsplaatsen. Dankzij onze koranleerkrachten hebben wij pas nog twee 18-jarigen kunnen stoppen. Dat waren verstandige, perfect geïntegreerde kerels», vertelt Abdel, een koranleerkracht uit Brussel. Begin deze maand zijn nog zeker een tiental Brusselse jongeren naar het front vertrokken. (P.4)

Minister Milquet «Inlichtingendiensten zijn ermee bezig»

De nationale inlichtingendiensten volgen het fenomeen van Belgische jongeren die onder invloed van moslimfundamentalisten in Syrië gaan strijden, op de voet. Dat valt te horen op het kabinet van minister van Binnenlandse Zaken Milquet. Welke acties ze dan ondernemen op het terrein, wie er geschadwd wordt, wat het dreigingsniveau in ons land is en hoeveel jongeren er al weg zijn, wil de minister niet kwijt. «De informatie is geheim. Wij kunnen meegeden van de antiterreurle Oad, de staatsveiligheid en het federaal parket nauw samenwerken rond de kwestie. Deze diensten zijn in contact met andere diensten van de federale overheid, aldus de woordvoester van Milquet. In het parlement verklaarde Milquet gisteren dat zij nooit enige mail heeft ontvangen van de familie van Brian De Mulder, de bekende Vlaamse die die zien is op televisiebeelden van moslimstrijders in Syrië. (DWW)

Tweede Nederlander gesneuveld in oorlog

Er is opnieuw een Nederlandse strijder gesneuveld in Syrië. Volgens 'De Telegraaf' heeft hij Sofian Elmassi (20) en woonde hij in Delft of Rotterdam. Uit die eerste stad was ook de woensdag dood gemelde Mourad Masali (21) afkomstig.

Over het lot van de Vlaamse strijders die in Khan Yunis bij een radicale militie ingelijfd zijn, is nog geen duidelijkheid. Behalve nieuwe beelden van een verminkte soldaat en de melding dat er bij recente gevechten zeker 40 rebellen gedood zijn, is er weinig nieuws. In Turkije is intussen een Oostturkse kaartprellant opgepakt die op weg was naar Syrië. Het gaat om Mohamed Mahmud, die gill als één van de grootste inspiratiebronnen van Shariah4Belgium. Hij zette zijn Belgische geestesgenoten vorig jaar aan tot wraak voor het Moskebeke milikanisdent. Gisteren raakte ook bekend dat bij een zelfmoordaanslag in een moskee in Damascus 24 doden vielen, onder wie Mohammed Said al-Bat, een hoge soennitische geestelijke die vandaag op de staats televisie een blijk gaf te geven. Er vielen volgens het ministerie van Gezondheid ook 84 gewonden. (21/3)

Figure 2. The story of Jeroen in *Het Laatste Nieuws* (see Lefelon, 2013), used by kind permission of De Persgroep nv.

were modified to fit the concrete new(s) story. The new Pact with the Devil frame was constructed from the old Missing Children and War on Terror frames. It was activated to

help explain the situation in terms of causes and effects and solutions. The answers to these questions might give the public the feeling that they understand what is going on. The frames that are created on the basis of the definition of the situation are included in the bigger story, in which journalists not only provide a perspective of the 'bizarre' behavior of these young people but also help the reader to fully comprehend the situation using frames of reference with which they are already culturally familiar. This frame, referred to as *Pact with the Devil*, not only offered a definition of the situation and a perspective on the young men (as freedom fighters, terrorists, or victims) but also helped to explain more clearly the defined problem, primarily through pointing out the causes, responsibilities, and solutions. The ability of frames to trigger – implicitly and simultaneously – this chain of reasoning devices is what makes framing potentially powerful.

Defining the problem and setting the scene. In early March 2013, the reporting on Syria was still partially influenced by the *Arab Spring frame*. Following on previous revolutions within the Arabic world, the fight of the Syrian rebels against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad was presented as legitimate. The literal reference to the Prague Spring of 1968 evokes associations with popular Western values such as freedom and autonomy. The frame put the events in Syria into a democratic light (Baresch et al., 2012). The Syria fighters did what the international community failed to do: support the Syrian people in their fight against a dictatorial regime. In this frame, the young men who went off to Syria were assigned the role of 'freedom fighter'.

The Arab Spring frame was set in contrast with the perspective of the young men as 'terrorists' (e.g. Erkul, 2013). The more additional connections were established with the Sharia4Belgium organization, the more the Arab Spring frame became supplemented by the *War on Terror frame*, which has formed a powerful narrative since 9/11 for understanding various conflicts around the world (Lewis and Reese, 2009). According to this frame, the young men are given the role of perpetrator. The governments now take on a corrective role. Their task consists of judging the young men's behavior, impeding their departure, and anticipating a potential return. Leaders play a starring role in this frame, including the mayors of the hometowns of these youngsters and the Belgian Minister for Interior Affairs (e.g. JBW et al., 2013).

A third frame came to the forefront as soon as the parents of the young men came onto the stage, that is, the *Missing Children frame* (e.g. Lefelon and Van Vlielden, 2013). In this frame, the young men are not seen as fighters, but as children and the victims of press gangs. Following the media hype around the 'missing children' stories after the arrest of child murderer Marc Dutroux in 1996 (Van Gorp, 2005; Vasterman, 2005), this is a familiar narrative for Belgian journalists to define the event: Flemish parents see their children suddenly leave home. Whereas the War on Terror frame assigns a leading role to the politicians, in the Missing Children frame this role shifts to the parents.

Offering an explanation. The previous frames offer an insufficient explanation of why these good kids (Missing Children frame) suddenly changed into fighters (Arab Spring frame) who were capable of atrocities (War on Terror frame). Something like this does not happen all by itself. The *Pact with the Devil frame* provides an apparently logical explanation for this: evil has taken possession of them. Making a Pact with the Devil is

a popular cultural theme in the West and refers to an agreement that a human being makes with the Devil in exchange for the fulfillment of his or her own desires. The most famous version of this frame is the Faust legend, but it could just as easily be traced back to the Biblical story of the Fall.

In this frame, the young men have undergone a radical transformation from ‘the boy next door’ to an extremist fighter in a remote civil war. The suggested ‘normality’ of the young men must support the idea that it could have been the reader’s child. This is done by emphasizing their catholic education and prevailing talent (Brian as a footballer, Jejoen as a Michael Jackson dance imitator; e.g. Huyberechts, 2013d). In this frame, the young men had a ‘guileless’ youth and they were even successful. They threw away their futures for no reason. They were no longer themselves. The frame was reinforced using images *before* (Brian tying his shoes, Jejoen solemnly taking his first Communion) and *after* (Brian demonstrating with Muslim friends, Jejoen looking angry in traditional Islamic dress; see Figures 1 and 2).

The young men were radically changed by their Pact with the Devil. In this pact, the young men are both active (Arab Spring, War on Terror) and passive (Missing Children). These young men took the initiative but were seduced at the same time. Sharia4Belgium leader Fouad Belkacem fulfilled the role of seducer in the news story here. Belkacem acted as a sort of Pied Piper, who led the youngsters away from their trusted surroundings toward their demise. Words such as *recruited*, *tricked*, *seduced*, and particularly *brain-washed* were regularly used in the headlines and teasers (see, for example, Lefelon, 2013). The Pact with the Devil frame suggests that, by removing Belkacem as the cause, the problem will be solved (see Table 1 for an overview of this frame package).

The influence of sources

The purpose of the second research question is to find out the influence of the sources on the frame-building process. The major sources in this story were the ‘official’ ones (ministers, mayors, police and justice spokespersons, researchers from official research institutions) and the ‘concerned parties’ (the families of the young men who had left, the young men themselves, those who were said to have recruited them). In addition to this, academics were brought in sporadically, as independent experts. It will be argued how sources take the lead in the War on Terror and the Missing Children frames, whereas journalists take the lead in the Pact with the Devil frame. On Brüggemann’s (2014) frame-building continuum, they became less of a ‘frame-sender’ (i.e. a conduit for the source’s frame) and more of a ‘frame-setter’ (i.e. largely responsible themselves for frame selection).

Journalists as frame-senders. All the above-mentioned actors had a perspective on the departure of the young men and, to a varying extent, an agenda regarding how they should be dealt with. In the dominant discourse from the official sources, such as the head of the Coordinating Unit for Threat Analysis (as quoted in Van Vlieden, 2013), the young men were seen as a potential threat should they return to Belgium: ‘We also note that there are people from Belgium who depart with an Al Qaeda – spirit. If they come back with an education and know-how, some may be a danger to society’. While this

Table 1. Frame package 'Pact with the Devil'.

Frame package	Pact with the Devil
Reasoning devices	
Definition of the problem	Young men are suddenly changed from someone good to someone bad
Cause	Young men are brainwashed
Consequence	Young men are no longer themselves and turn against their own education and society
Solution/action	Imprison the Devil and bring the young men back (literally, with their parents; and metaphorically, to themselves)
Moral evaluation	Do not go with strangers. Always stay yourself
Framing devices (examples)	
Metaphors	(Brian disappeared) 'like a thief in the night'
Exemplars (/stereotype)	(Belkacem as) 'the Big Leader' (reference to Kim-Jung Il)
Depictions	'The recruiter and his followers'; 'a clip showing their adoration for the radical provocateur'
Visual images	Pictures of a gesticulating Belkacem standing upright behind Brian and Jejoen
Use of contrast	Lexically ('from talented soccer player to radical fighter) and visually (pictures 'before' and 'after' their recruitment)
Word choice	(the young men were) brainwashed, seduced, recruited, estranged (from their family)
Quantifications	'While radical spokesman Belkacem sits at home with an ankle bracelet, an estimated 70 Belgian young men left for Syria'
Expressions	(suddenly Belkacem) pops up, (Brian is) in the grip of, (he must be saved) from the clutches of [...]

discourse was in favor of the War on Terror frame, in its turn, the discourse of the families promoted the Missing Children frame. The young men's family members, such as Brian's mother (as quoted in Huyberechts, 2013a), saw their relatives as victims of religious extremists:

You just cannot imagine what it does to you as a mother to be confronted with your run-away son, armed in a war zone. You can see he's been brainwashed and that he isn't planning on coming home any time soon. It makes me insane. I want my son back. If this message ever reaches Syria: Release Brian and send him home.

Journalists as frame-setters. The more journalists learned about the subject and the various viewpoints, the less dependent they were on sources. Also, a source does not always precede a frame. Journalists can 'recognize' frames just as well in the information from sources or even go in search of frame-building source material. The frame-building process is an exchange between the journalist and the source, in which the sequence is not always easily determined, as is shown by the following interview fragment with a reporter from *Het Nieuwsblad*:

HET NIEUWSBLAD WEEKEND ZATERDAG 23 MAART 2013

NIEUWS 7

Filmpje op Meir toont invloed van leider Sharia4Belgium op Vlaamse jongeren

DE RONSELAAR EN ZIJN VOLGERS

die nu voor Syrië vechten

De ouders van de naar Syrisch oorlogsgebied gestuurde Brian De Mulder (19) en Jehoen Bontinck (18) wijzen met een beschuldigende vinger naar Fouad Belkacem. De spreekbuis van Sharia4Belgium zou al maanden beïnvloedbare jongeren ronselen voor 'de heilige strijd'. Een filmpje van de Antwerpse jongens toont hun adoratie voor de radicale provocateur.

PIETER HUYBERECHTS

Een opgedoken filmpje van eind 2011 toont nu ook onomstotelijk de invloed van Fouad Belkacem aan op uitgestuurde jihadisten als Brian en Jehoen. Het filmpje toont Belkacem die op de Antwerpse Meir 'een toespraak houdt. Op een bankje, net voor hem, zit het tweetal geboid te luisteren naar hun Grote Leider. Intussen, anderhalf jaar later, zit Belkacem rustig thuis met een enkelband, terwijl zijn jonge volgelingen in Syrië moeten vreezen voor hun leven. Over hun lot raakte ook vrijdag niets bekend. Het tweetal vecht er samen met

naar schatting 170 andere Belgische en Nederlandse moslimstrijders.

De levensloop van Brian en Jehoen verloopt nagenoeg parallel: een katholieke opvoeding, talent dat bovendien (Brian als voetballer, Jehoen als Michael Jackson-dansiminator), vervolgens opgelopen frustraties (van ploeg moeten veranderen, breuk met vriendinnetje, problemen thuis en op school) en uiteindelijk een bekering tot de islam. Niet veel later duikt Belkacem op om hun zoektocht naar 'het ware geloof' te bespoedigen. In een mum van

tijd radicaliseren ze.

Officieel werd de extremistische organisatie eind vorig jaar ontbonden. Toen al waarschuwden terrorisme-experts dat de organisatie gevaarlijker dan ooit zou worden. Achter de schermen ging het ronselen van beïnvloedbare jongeren onverminderd voort.

Gebrainwast

De ouders van Brian en Jehoen leggen de schuld voor de radicalisering van hun zonen volledig bij de voormalige Sharia4Belgium-spreekbuis en diens entourage. 'Ik heb Belkacem en zijn trawanten hier meermalen uitgenodigd en hen gesmeekt om mijn zoon met rust te laten. Het mocht echter niet baten. Belkacem heeft hem compleet gebrainwast', aldus Jehoens vader Dimitri. Bij Brians familie klinkt hetzelfde verhaal. Volgens de ouders zou Sharia4Belgium ook stevig betaald worden voor het ronselen van jonge strijders. 'Ik hoor waaaien dat er 3.000 euro betaald zou zijn om Brian te overtuigen', vertelt Brians zus Bruna. 'Als dat klopt, dan wordt dit verhaal nog schrijnender dan het al is.'



In een filmpje is te zien hoe Brian (links) en Jehoen (rechts) geboid luisteren naar Sharia4Belgium-kopstuk Fouad Belkacem. Foto: P.

Figure 3. Belkacem as 'recruiter' in *Het Nieuwsblad* (see Huyberechts, 2013d), used by kind permission of Mediahuis nv.

If you've been following the case for the last two weeks, you will come to the conclusion: Belkacem is the man [behind]. You must let the parents say that, that Belkacem is behind it all. We can sense this too. But let the parents say it.

It can be argued that this journalist is 'outsourcing' the diabolical role of Belkacem to his sources. The Pact with the Devil frame is further emphasized in the news processing. Screenshots from YouTube videos of the converted Brian and Jehoen, sitting on the ground with a gesticulating Belkacem behind them (see Figure 3), serve as strong framing devices for the Pact with the Devil frame, as do descriptions such as

On a bench just in front of him, the two young men sit listening intently to their Great Leader. In the meantime, a year and a half later, Belkacem sits quietly at home, wearing an ankle monitor, while his young disciples fear for their lives in Syria. (Huyberechts, 2013d)

The role of news values

The third research question focuses on the role of news values in the frame-building process. In particular, 'human interest' played a role in the selection of events, the meaning of 'proximity' changed throughout the process, and (non-) 'exclusivity' was the cause for a frame shift from the Missing Children frame to the Pact with the Devil frame.

The making of a human interest story. With 'human interest', this article refers to the willingness of reporters to give the story a human face. This was important in shifting the

focus from the first news stories about the ‘numbers’ of Belgian fighters in Syria to the stories behind the numbers. It could be argued that popular papers *attributed* human interest as news value to the story. The following interview fragment with a news manager of *Het Nieuwsblad* illustrates that human interest was a requirement for popular papers to make news based on the information acquired through routine channels:

As soon as I [heard] about foreign forces in Syria, I was convinced that there was ‘news’ in it. But we had to translate the event into a specific story. That is why it only became newsworthy for us when we had Brian’s [De Mulder] story. We needed Brian in order to tell the story.

Because the young men themselves – being in Syria – were difficult to interview, the popular newspapers told their stories through the eyes of their families. This human interest focus gave birth to the Missing Children frame, which in its turn paved the way for the Pact with the Devil frame.

The quality newspapers were more reluctant to cover these human interest stories. *De Standaard* occasionally published more concise versions of a story published by its sister paper *Het Nieuwsblad*, but they only put one of their own reporters on the story a month after the first article about Brian appeared in the popular press (see Bergmans, 2013). *De Morgen* ignored Brian and Jejoen’s stories completely for nearly 2 weeks. The journalists of popular papers used the same motivations to justify why they focused on Brian and Jejoen’s specific stories as the journalists of quality newspapers used them to justify why they initially ignored these stories. A news manager of *De Standaard* explains,

We ‘missed’ Brian’s story. [...] It was considered to be a human interest story without any bigger implications. I think that this is the legacy of our history as an institutional paper. Sometimes our trepidation restricts us from covering human interest stories.

As a result of this ‘institutional’ approach, quality newspapers stayed initially closer to official sources, who favored mainly the War on Terror frame. When these papers finally covered Brian en Jejoen’s stories, this was done as an illustration for their more ‘general’ stories. The popular newspapers did the opposite. When they outlined the bigger picture (the news about ‘the Syria fighters’ in general), this was done as an explanation of a human interest story about one of the boys in particular. *Het Nieuwsblad*, for example, took Brian’s case as departure point to outline a broader theme given by the experts (see Huyberechts, 2013c).

Different meanings of proximity. During the interviews, the journalists made clear that they perceived ‘bringing the news close to the Flemish reader’ as their most important task. This tied in with what is usually referred to in news value research as ‘proximity’, which in this article is seen in terms of geographical distance as well as cultural and psychological nearness. Proximity was partially implied in the departure event ‘Young Fleming head to Syria’, but it was also further explored in the frame-building process.

In order to bring the Syria fighters closer from within the Arab Spring frame, a news manager from *Het Nieuwsblad* had the idea of making historical associations with other periods in which Belgian civilians went to fight abroad as a sort of private militia, that is,

‘our boys who went to fight on the Eastern Front or in the Spanish civil war’. The displacement of this frame by the War on Terror frame forced the historical association to make room for the contemporary danger that a (returned) Syrian fighter could pose to the reading public. The relevance for the public in the Missing Children frame was that one’s own children could be taken from you and could then turn against their own culture.

The Pact with the Devil frame partially arises through the further refining of proximity (on one hand, the young men were ‘normalized’), through which a contrast is constructed (on the other hand, the young men were ‘abnormalized’). The following interview fragment with a reporter from *Het Nieuwsblad* gives insight into the creation of this frame:

Advancing the two extremes; I think that works well. He started out as an ultra-Flemish kid with Beerschot [well-known Belgian football club]. And now he’s a radical Muslim fighter. That’s a contrast. Especially because he’s Flemish. [...] It could be your own son.

Framing is about the emphasis of certain aspects of an event and the suppression of other aspects (Entman, 1993). Just as important, therefore, is knowing what has not been selected or emphasized. For example, only the stories of converts were told, and not those of Muslims with a typical migration background (who are the principal share of the people going to Syria). A reporter from *Het Nieuwsblad* explains,

If it had been young Turkish men, then we wouldn’t have been able to devote a full page to it for two days running. [...] The reasoning [of the news chiefs] is then: Does that bother a lot of people? [...] While these are Flemish stories.

Moreover, the young men’s culturally mixed origins (Brian is Belgian-Brazilian, Jejoen is Belgian-Nigerian) were initially ignored. By emphasizing the young men’s Flemish origin and their talents before focusing on their conversion and recruitment, a contrast is constructed with the young men’s current situations. The Pact with the Devil frame is strengthened by the virtually exclusive focus on the stories of converts.

Exclusivity as the explanation for a frame shift. In the context of the further attention that was given to the event, the most important question we observed in the newsroom was, ‘Do we have this exclusively?’ If this was the case, journalists remained closer to those frames that could be strongly linked to a specific source, that is, the War on Terror frame (supported by the official sources) or the Missing Children frame (supported by the families). After all, the news lies in what is being said by the source. For example, the first interview with Brian’s family (see Kestens, 2013) remained close to the Missing Children frame. The journalists at *Het Nieuwsblad* felt that this competitor’s news story was too important to ignore. They based the story primarily on the same news material, but re-told the story from a more specific angle (see Huyberechts, 2013b). The news in the story by *Het Nieuwsblad* was not in the information but rather in the frame (Pact with the Devil) that the reader is offered to understand the story. In a certain sense, this frame was a rationalization by the reporter about why the already circulated story is considered important enough to cover it again. The story ‘a Flemish person fights in Syria’ is not

news; however, the story ‘*boy-next-door Fleming who has suddenly changed, fights in Syria*’ is certainly news. It is still so important because it could just as easily have been the reader’s son.

Discussion and conclusion

The authors had incredible luck in being exclusive witnesses to the beginning of the running news story about the Belgian Syria fighters. The first contribution to this study lay in the identification of the early process of frame-building. The results showed that frames do not necessarily exclude each other or stand against each other. They could as well blend from one to another. From this respect, framing should not be considered as the choice of a static entity but as a dynamic process driven by the journalistic dealings with sources and news values. The analyses showed that the framing of a new topic on the public agenda originated from familiar frames, a process through which Entman’s (1993) definition of framing was gradually completed. First, the events were understood within familiar frameworks influenced by key events such as 9/11 or the Dutroux affair, which guided journalists to frame the youngsters as terrorists or as victims. By reporting on what was happening, journalists, as ‘interpretative communities’ (Zelizer, 1993), were actually retelling these key events. Second, journalists went in search of explanations and responsibilities. Here, the frames were less obviously linked to key public events. They were developed through a succession of news stories. The Pact with the Devil frame was not yet visible in the first news stories, but was developed through the confrontation and combination of frames that at first remain close to the sources. These frames never completely disappeared, but were contained in a more explanatory frame. The Pact with the Devil frame did not emerge immediately, but developed relatively quickly into a persistent frame for understanding the news story.

A second contribution made by this study concerns the role of sources and news values in the frame-building process. Production studies can provide insight into the manner in which journalists utilize sources. In addition to the influence of the elite sources, this study points to the influence of the ordinary people (the families in this case). These sources do not always have a clear agenda, let alone a media strategy, but they still succeed in influencing the framing. Paradoxically enough, this was partly precisely because they were not an official source, which means their story had a greater chance of becoming exclusive. These sources did not have access to the routine channels along which the information from elite sources reaches the journalists. Human interest was attributed to the subject of the Syria fighters in the first stories about Brian and Jejoen, in the first instance by the popular press, later followed by the quality press. Although human interest stories are often criticized for ignoring history and social context (Edelman, 1988), the emotionality involved in such stories can serve as well as a tool to call attention to larger social problems (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013).

When the journalists in the sample thought they had access to exclusive information, they remained close to the frame in which the source of this information was central. When they covered an already published story, they came more to the foreground as frame-setters (in the terminology of Brüggemann, 2014). In that case, the journalists traded, as it were, their role of news hunter for that of storyteller. Given that the

information covered is not strictly news, the journalist must provide a reason for why it is still important for the reader. This reasoning is the frame in which the public can come to understand the event of the Flemish Syria fighters. This study emphasized the importance earlier news production studies paid to exclusivity (e.g. Schultz, 2007). If the competition between media is considered as just a selection factor (as proposed by Caple and Bednarek, 2015), it risks ignoring the importance of exclusivity in the framing of news stories. In this study, exclusivity was less decisive in *what* events to cover but more in *how* to cover these events.

One could assume that the newsworthiness is included increasingly less in *the facts* (e.g. young men with Belgian nationality go fighting in Syria) and more in *the frame* (e.g. talented Flemish young man is seduced to become a radical Islamist fighter in Syria) in which the information is packaged. In the construction of the Pact with the Devil frame, the presented frame itself compromises the news. In this frame, proximity was fashioned, as it were, to serve the frame. This ties in with a functionalist approach to news values in which 'news selection is not understood as a direct response to certain stimuli but as an intentional act to reach certain ends' (Staab, 1990: 428).

This article advocates for a multi-method approach to frame-building. However, a number of shortcomings, partially inherent to the methodological choices that were made, have to be mentioned. First, by selecting journalists beforehand, the cooperation during the fieldwork went fairly smoothly due to the agreements made, but not all newsrooms provided the same amount of material with regard to the final subject. Second, because of the preference of interviews to observations, the researchers remained predominantly linked to the journalist's self-reporting. Third, allowing the subject to emerge from the data makes this research difficult to replicate. The advantage to this approach was that reporters reconstructed these stories with an open mind, in the same way they did for other stories on a different subject. As a result, they were focused on their actions rather than on the (potentially sensitive) subject.

When we described journalists as frame-setters, we considered the frames activated by journalists as the outcome of newsroom routines, such as the application of news values and the interaction with news chiefs. Follow-up studies, however, could also look at the individual level of influence on news framing. Surveys could investigate whether or not the frames in the mindsets of journalists (see Engesser and Brüggemann, 2015) correspond with the frames in the news products that they generated.

Concerning the role of sources, further research could look beyond the journalistic dealings with the sources, by examining the source material itself, for example, by carrying out comparative content analyses with press releases from official sources or by interviewing the involved parties. Moreover, it is important to point out that the frames that the journalists and researchers observed are not necessarily the same ones that the public may have observed. Effect studies should be carried so as to map the entire media and audience framing process in an integrative fashion.

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