The Role of Sensationalism, Tabloidisation and Diversity in News Coverage of Immigration and Attitudes: Public and Commercial Television News Compared

Laura Jacobs* & Cecil Meeusenb
University of Leuven
laura.jacobs@soc.kuleuven.be, cecil.meeusen@soc.kuleuven.be

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Abstract
Public and commercial news have a distinct logic and adhere to different goals. In this paper, we evaluate the effect of this duality in the case of television news coverage on immigration and ethnic minorities. First, using survey analysis, we investigate whether individuals with a preference for public versus commercial television news differ in their attitudes toward ethnic minorities and immigrants. In a second step, we hypothesize that this attitudinal gap is reflected by differences in content between both types of broadcasters. Relying on a content analysis of Flemish (i.e. the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium) television news (2003-2013), we compare coverage of ethnic minorities and immigrants between public and commercial news. We consistently find that individuals with a preference for commercial news hold more negative attitudes toward ethnic minorities and immigrants. The content analysis shows that, despite the overall negativity bias in coverage, commercial news focuses more on sensational news content, stressing negativity and conflict, and contains more tabloid characteristics like episodic news coverage and soft news topics. In line with its democratic function, public television news offers a more positive view on ethnic minorities and immigrants. We propose that these differences in news content can offer an explanation for the attitudinal gap between public and commercial news consumers. In this regard, we conclude that public broadcasters still have an important tolerance-enhancing and informative role to play in society.

Key words: Ethnic minorities, Television, Public service broadcasting, Commercial news, Sensationalism, Tabloidisation, Anti-immigrant sentiments
The gradual shift to more sensationalism and ‘tabloid’ characteristics in news coverage is a well-documented phenomenon (Esser, 1999; Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001; Norris, 2000; Slattery, Doremus, & Marcus, 2001). From a democratic perspective, scholars have expressed concerns that this trend may lead to a loss of quality and may eventually even undermine news media’s traditional democratic and ‘enlightening’ functions (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995). Indeed, in democracies, news media have the goal to inform citizens about social and political issues, such as immigration and diversity (Iyengar, 2009). Studies show that, generally, in Western Europe public opinion toward ethnic minorities and immigrants is negatively biased (Ceobanu & Escandell, 2010; Rustenbach, 2010). Prior research has emphasised patterns of negative stereotyping of ethnic minorities and immigrants in news content as an important contextual determinant of negative attitudes (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009; Schemer, 2012; Schlueter & Davidov, 2013).

Past studies, however, have adopted a uni-dimensional approach when assessing news depictions of ethnic minorities and immigrants and its relationship with public opinion, without systematically differentiating between various types of news broadcasters or specific news content. However, the ‘dual effects hypothesis’ (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010) suggests that not all news media may yield similar effects. More specifically, there is evidence in Western Europe that individuals differ in their civic attitudes and behaviour according to their preference for public or commercial television news (Holtz-Bacha, 1990; Hooghe, 2002; Schmitt-Beck & Wolsing, 2010). This observation has traditionally been attributed to the distinct logics and goals both types of broadcasters adhere to, which would be reflected in their respective news programming content. Public service broadcasting (PSB) is expected to fulfil a democratic role in society and therefore adopts a ‘public logic’, whereas the commercial news production process is more dominated by a market-oriented logic (Brants, 1998). The specific way both types of broadcasters cover news on immigration and ethnic minorities may reflect these different logics (Van den Bulck & Broos, 2011). Commercial news content is expected to stress more sensational news features, such as a focus on emotional expressions and conflict, and to contain more ‘tabloid’ characteristics than public television news content (Esser, 1999; Vettehen, Nuijten, & Beentjes, 2005). In line with its goal to serve public interest, public television news is anticipated to depict ethnic minorities and immigrants in a more positive way, focusing more on background and context, and stressing the added value of diversity for society (Van den Bulck & Broos, 2011).
The hypothesis about different in news content on public and commercial broadcasters, however, has never been formally evaluated in the case of ethnic minority and immigrant coverage. Therefore, the main goal of this study is to assess whether there is a difference in negative attitudes toward ethnic minorities and immigrants between individuals with a preference for public versus commercial television news. In a next step, we suggest that this attitudinal difference can be attributed to differences in specific news content on both broadcasters. We assess this proposition by relying on an in-depth content analysis of Flemish television news (2003-2013), systematically comparing specific news content on ethnic minorities and immigrants between commercial and public television news. This is done by applying insights from the debate on the quality of news and journalism, such as trends toward sensationalism and tabloidisation, to news coverage on immigration and ethnic minorities. As such, we aim to investigate whether systematic differences in news content are related to the presumed gap between public and commercial television viewers in terms of attitudes toward immigrants and ethnic minorities.

A Dual Effects Hypothesis: Public and Commercial News Compared

Attitudes toward ethnic minorities and immigrants

Western Europe has a long-standing tradition of public service television (Bardoel & d’Haenens, 2008). Despite substantial cross-national differences in the modalities of public service broadcasters, several common features can be distinguished (Syvertsen, 2003). Generally, public service media can be considered as ‘a major pillar of the democratic process’ (Iyengar, 2009). Public broadcasters are usually at least partly state-funded, which liberates them to a certain extent from commercial pressures and diminishes the dependence upon advertising revenues (Syvertsen, 2003). In return for this privilege, they have a vested mandate to deliver a range of public services while adhering to democratic principles and values (Curran, Salovaara-Moring, Coen, & Iyengar, 2010; Holtz-Bacha & Norris, 2001). The provision of citizens with balanced information and education on societal issues are core functions (Aalberg, van Aelst, & Curran, 2010). Moreover, they are often entrusted with the stimulation of pluralistic values and the reflection of a nation’s diversity (Rogers, O’Boyle, Preston, & Fehr, 2014). Commercial broadcasters do not have a similar obligation to serve the public interest and, by lack of public financial support, need to be market-oriented, increasing their dependence on profit and audience maximization (Allern, 2002; McManus, 1994). By lack of official guidelines, larger freedom and a profit-making logic, commercial news has less
incentives to report on minorities and diversity in a balanced manner (Rogers et al., 2014). Moreover, theories in political communication suggest that, due to competition, commercial broadcasters are susceptible to report more sensational news stories and to disseminate more soft news, such as crime and ‘tabloid’ stories, stressing news values such as conflict and negativity (Norris, 2000; Vettehen et al., 2005). An increased tendency toward sensationalism in immigration coverage has been documented in commercial news (Benson, 2002).

Media effects studies gauging the impact of television news consumption on a range of civic attitudes and behaviours, have taken these differences in objectives as a starting point to examine the possibility of a ‘dual effects hypothesis’ (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010). The underlying idea is that public broadcasters, due to their public service duty and outspoken function in informing citizens, may be more effective in fostering civic attitudes and behaviours than commercial broadcasters. This hypothesis has been confirmed in various Western European contexts: contrary to exposure to commercial television and commercial news, frequently watching public television and public news is positively associated with political knowledge, interest and social capital (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; Holtz-Bacha & Norris, 2001; Hooghe, 2002; Schmitt-Beck & Wolsing, 2010; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010). Although previous research found a close relation between news content and public opinion on ethnic minority immigrants (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009; Schemer, 2012), differences between types of news broadcasters remain an underexplored area in this regard. Therefore, the primary aim is to assess whether broadcaster preference is related to attitudes toward ethnic minorities and immigrants. We hypothesize the following:

**H1**: Individuals who watch public television news have more positive attitudes toward ethnic minorities and immigrants than individuals who watch commercial television news.

**News content**

In this paper, we suggest that attitudinal differences can be attributed to differences in news content, which reflects the different logics of both broadcasters. More particularly, we rely on concepts of political communication – such as sensationalism, tabloidisation, and reflection of democratic values by balanced and objective reporting – to identify how news content between public and commercial broadcasters may diverge in a way which could contribute to an attitudinal gap between its viewers. It is important to note here that we only focus on actual news content as especially substance is considered crucial (Walgrave & De Swert, 2002), and do not consider any differences in formal news features. Moreover, we
restrict ourselves to those ‘sensational’ or ‘tabloid’ aspects that are applicable on news coverage on ethnic minorities and immigrants.

First, an important aspect of news content on ethnic minorities and immigrants which may diverge between public and commercial news is its ‘sensational’ nature (Benson, 2002). Sensationalism is a vague and hotly-debated concept with many definitions (Grabe et al., 2001; Slattery et al., 2001; Uribe & Gunter, 2007). Studies often relate sensationalism to an emotional and dramatic discourse by defining it broadly as ‘emotionally arousing features in the news’ (Grabe et al., 2001; Pantti, 2010; Uribe & Gunter, 2007). It can be applied to content and formal news features (Grabe et al., 2001). With regard to content, news topics such as crime, conflict, terrorism, disaster, human interest and showbiz are considered to be ‘sensational’ because they can stir emotions (Davis & McLeod, 2003; Slattery et al., 2001). In a related manner, another aspect of sensationalism refers to the prominent position in news coverage of emotional expressions, e.g. explicit emotional appeals, at the expense of a more rational discourse (Pantti, 2010; Uribe & Gunter, 2007). Generally, sensationalism has a negative connotation, as it is often associated with a decline in news quality due to the increased market-oriented logic of news production and journalism (Allern, 2002; McManus, 1994; Plasser, 2005). Some political communication specialist have expressed concerns that more dramatic and sensational styles in news reporting may even undermine news media’s democratic functions (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995). There is indeed evidence that in commercialized environments, news contains more sensational elements (De Swert, 2007; Djerf-pierre, 2000; Slattery et al., 2001; Vettehen et al., 2005). Especially crime tends to a more common ingredient on commercial television news compared to public news because conflict is considered attractive, straightforward, accessible and easy to follow and can therefore count on large audiences (Lowry, Nio, & Leitner, 2003). We hypothesize that:

H2: commercial television news content on ethnic minorities and immigrants contains more elements of sensationalism than public television news content.

Another potential difference between public and commercial television news – and somewhat related to sensationalism – refers to the degree of ‘tabloidisation’. There is no uniform definition for tabloidisation; the concept originates from the ‘tabloid’ press, and is used to denote a process toward an increased presence of ‘tabloid characteristics’ in news media (Hauttekeete, 2007). These tabloid characteristics can refer to specific content or formal features. In terms of news content, tabloidisation corresponds with a shift in news values from
more serious, ‘hard’ news topics’, e.g. politics, economics, to more trivial, ‘soft’ news topics, e.g. crime, human interest (Esser, 1999; Franklin, 1997). Hard news is usually considered an event or issue considered important, whereas soft news tends to be less important or urgent (Palmer, 1998). Moreover, hard news would be mainly directed at public affairs reporting and being informative, whereas soft news has mainly an entertainment-value (Baum & Jamison, 2006). Tabloid news generally reduces the complexity of issues, prefers a simplified reading of events, and lacks in-depth coverage (McLachlan & Golding, 2000; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). Furthermore, it has a tendency to focus on personalized narratives to enhance feelings of closeness and identification (Bek, 2004). The shift toward tabloidisation can be situated in the broader academic debate on the democratic task and responsibilities of news media. Generally, the overall concern is that tabloidisation would undermine journalist quality (Grabe et al., 2001). By focusing less on hard news, citizens would not be adequately informed anymore, and therefore lack the necessary tools to formulate a well-balanced opinion. Furthermore, although personalized news coverage may be instrumental in capturing the audiences’ attention and increasing news accessibility, it fails to place news in a broader societal context and to elucidate complex matters (Dahlgren & Sparks, 1992). In his seminal work ‘Is Anyone Responsible’, Iyengar (1991) showed that when individuals were exposed to episodic news, highlighting exemplars and covering news from a more personalized angle, in contrast to thematic news stressing the social context, they were more likely to attribute responsibility to individuals, disregarding societal factors. The increase of tabloidisation is largely attributed to the increasing market-orientation of news media (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Dahlgren & Sparks, 1992). It focuses on news-selling and the belief that the audience has lost its interest in ‘hard’ news and prefers soft, ‘easy to digest’ news with a high entertainment value; key aspects of commercial news reporting (McManus, 1994). Past studies have indeed found that commercial news tends to incorporate more tabloid characteristics than public service media (Bek, 2004; Norris, 2000). We therefore hypothesize that:

**H3:** commercial television news content on ethnic minorities and immigrants contains more elements of ‘tabloidisation’ than public television news content.

Finally, a last mechanism is more inherent to the nature of the topic under study, i.e. immigration and ethnic minority reporting, and refers to a potential difference in commitment between both types of broadcasters to offer a balanced representation of ethnic diversity. An aspect of public broadcasters’ democratic role is their specific duty to promote a tolerant
climate for various types of minority groups and to reflect the diverse nature of society in their programming (Rogers et al., 2014). The multiculturalist and pluralistic initiatives implemented by public broadcasters across Europe has been the focus of several studies (Engelbert & Awad, 2014; Titley, 2014). In several countries and regions, most notably the UK, the Netherlands and Flanders, the stimulation of on-screen ethnic diversity and balanced minority portrayals belong to the explicit responsibilities of public broadcasters (Van den Bulck & Broos, 2011). Some public broadcasters even maintain concrete target figures to increase minority visibility. In this regard, especially public service television news is said to fulfil a crucial role in creating and sustaining pluralist democratic societies in Europe (Iyengar, 2009). Some policies, such as the Charter of Diversity of VRT, i.e. the Flemish public broadcaster, stipulate the adoption of an open and qualified perspective, underscoring mutual respect for every identity (VRT, 2014). Moreover, it stresses the added value of diversity by emphasizing the merits of expanding horizons: exclusion, stereotyping and discrimination have no place. This all suggests that public broadcasters will make an effort to report on minorities in a positive manner, and will try to limit references to problems and negative consequences. It is evenly important, in this regard, to point out that commercial broadcasters generally do not have this specific obligation (Van den Bulck & Broos, 2011). Due to their larger freedom, the lack of directives, and their market-oriented logic, they have less incentives to reflect diversity and to depict minorities in a balanced way, rendering these newscasts more prone to patterns of stereotyping. We hypothesize that:

H4: Public television news content on ethnic minorities and immigrants contains more positive elements than commercial television news content.

The Flemish television market

The media system in Belgium parallels its institutional structure. Belgium is a federal state in which three language groups are present, i.e. the Dutch, French and German-speaking communities. Over the years, many competences have been transferred to the regional level via a gradual federalisation process (Deschouwer, 2009). Since the 1970s, media policy falls under the communities’ authority, which led to the development of two large and distinct media systems: the Dutch- and French-speaking community each have their own newspapers, tabloids, radio and television stations, and media consumption across the linguistic border is limited (Sinardet, 2013). In this paper, we rely on evidence from the Flemish media system.
Flanders presents an excellent case study for several reasons. First, Flanders has a dual broadcasting system where a strong public broadcaster co-exists with commercial players in a fragmented and competitive television market. In their typology of media systems, Mancini and Hallin (2004) classify Flanders as a democratic corporatist model: early development of a mass press, high levels of professionalism, guarantees in terms of press freedom, and the presence of a strong public broadcaster (Aalberg et al., 2010). The two main players on the television market are the public broadcaster VRT (‘Vlaamse Radio- en Televisieomroep-organisatie’) and the commercial broadcaster VTM (‘Vlaamse Televisie Maatschappij’). Their flagship newscasts attract large market shares every evening. In 2014, ‘Het Journaal’ on VRT reached a market share of 52.6%, while ‘Het Nieuws’ reached a market share of 42.8%. No other Flemish newscasts attract similar numbers of viewers (CIM TV, 2014). Second, more importantly, the state-funded public broadcaster VRT is commissioned by the Flemish government to fulfil several requirements with regard to diversity in programming, staff and audience. In 2003, VRT adopted the Charter of Diversity, institutionalizing its commitment to reflect diversity on and off screen and to promote tolerance in society (Van den Bulck & Broos, 2011). VRT maintains target figures in terms of on-screen visibility of minority groups (5%) and intends to report on minorities in a nuanced and objective manner. As such, VRT explicitly adopts an inclusive and pluralistic strategy as part of its general aim to serve the public interest. The commercial broadcaster VTM does not have similar obligations to take up a gatekeeping role in stimulating tolerance and in disseminating equal and balanced minority coverage.

Data and methods

Survey analysis

Data. The survey data used to compare immigrant attitudes between public and commercial news viewers stem from two waves of the Belgian Election Panel Survey 2009-2014. In 2009, a geographically stratified sample of 4,831 adult Belgians was randomly selected from the National Register. Fieldwork resulted in 2,331 completed face-to-face interviews (48.3%). In 2014, the original 2009 sample was updated and 4,488 addresses could be recovered. After three reminders, 1,542 (34.4%) valid self-administered questionnaires were returned. For the purpose of this study, only respondents from the Flemish subsample who indicated that they had watched either public or commercial news were included in the final sample (N 2009=1,099, N 2014=709, N panel 2009-2014=439). Unfortunately, anti-immigrant
prejudice was not measured identically at both time points, restricting us to cross-sectional instead of panel designs.¹

**Measures.** Preference for public or commercial news was measured by asking respondents which television newscast they had watched most often during the last two weeks. In 2009, this was administered with a closed-ended question and respondents had to select from a list of four broadcasters (33.6% commercial news, 66.4% public news). In 2014, television news preference was registered with an open question that was coded by the authors afterwards (26.0% commercial news, 74.0% public news). Only 10% of the respondents switched news broadcaster between 2009 and 2014 (5% from public to commercial news, and 5% from commercial to public news): preference for a certain television newscasts is very stable.

To check the robustness of the relation between television news broadcaster and immigration attitudes, we use a broad operationalization of anti-immigrant prejudice and assess different indicators. The Belgian Election Panel was not constructed for prejudice research, limiting the number of clear prejudice items. However, because of the detailed media consumption measures and the availability of the necessary control variables, we deem this survey suited to address our research questions. In 2009, two prejudice proxies were used: (1) Attitudes toward asylum seekers (‘Belgium should close its borders for asylum seekers’ – five-point Likert scale agree-disagree), (2) Attitudes toward immigration (‘Immigration contributes to the welfare of our country’ – five-point Likert scale agree-disagree). In 2014, more suitable items were available: (1) Attitudes toward asylum seekers (‘Belgium should close its borders for asylum seekers’ – five-point Likert scale agree-disagree), (2) Economic threat due to immigration (‘In general, it is good for the Belgian economy that people from different countries come to live here’ – five-point Likert scale agree-disagree – reversed scaled), (3) Cultural threat due to immigration (‘In general, the cultural life in Belgium is undermined because people of different countries come and live here’ – five-point Likert scale agree-disagree) (Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006b), (4) Positive feelings toward immigrants (Feeling thermometer 0-100 scale, higher values indicating more positive feelings).

Importantly, to avoid spurious effects, a whole range of control variables were included in the analyses. Thanks to the panel design, all control variables were identically measured in

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¹ Attitudes toward asylum seekers was measured both in 2009 and 2014 (although only with one item: ‘Belgium should close its borders for asylum seekers’) and was used as a proxy of attitudes toward immigrants. Cross-lagged analyses showed that preference for public vs. commercial news in 2009 (Time 1) was a stronger predictor of attitudes toward asylum seekers in 2014 (Time 2), than that attitudes toward asylum seekers in 2009 (Time 1) was a predictor of the preference for public vs. commercial news in 2014 (Time 2), providing some tentative evidence of a causal mechanism from news consumption to prejudice, and not the other way around.
2009 and 2014. We controlled for gender, education level (six-point scale, 1=‘no degree’, 6=‘university degree’), age, religious denomination (dummy coded: religious vs. non-religious), economic position (‘how would you describe the economic situation of your family during the last year’ – five-point scale, 1=‘it deteriorated strongly’, 5=‘it improved strongly’), left-right ideology (11-point scale, 0=‘left’, 10=‘right’), political interest (11-point scale, 0=‘not at all interested’, 10=‘extremely interested’), frequency of television news consumption (six-point scale, 1=‘never’, 6=‘daily’), and frequency of other news media consumption (newspaper, news websites, radio news, six-point scale, 1=‘never’, 6=‘daily’).

**Content analysis**

**Data.** Data for the content analysis were collected via the Electronic News Archive (ENA), a digital news archive founded and financed by the Flemish government. Since 2003, the ENA collects, codes and analyses every prime time newscast of VRT and VTM. For every news item, a team of professional coders provided a general description (generally the exact text as read by the news anchor while announcing the news item), several keywords and the main themes. Inter-coder reliability tests are conducted on a regular basis and proved to be satisfactory (De Smedt, Wouters, & De Swert, 2013).

**Sample.** To select all television news coverage on ethnic minorities and immigrants, a string of relevant search terms was developed. Using this search string, all news items containing a reference to immigrant or ethnic and religious minority actors and issues in either the overall description or keywords were selected, which corresponds with a dictionary-approach in quantitative content analysis studies (Young & Soroka, 2012). This search string was based on previous research on immigration news coverage (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009). Only domestic news was included (ter Wal, d’ Haenens, & Koeman, 2005). Applying these search criteria on the prime time newscasts of the two main Flemish television stations for the period 2003-2013 resulted in 6,074 news items. In order to have a sufficiently powerful sample size 27% of the total number of news item (n = 1,630) were randomly selected to code into more detail according to the studies’ purposes.

The observation period was from January 2003 until December 2013. This is partly due to data availability, but also entails several important methodological and theoretical benefits.

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2 The key words grasped both references to immigrants and immigrant-related issues, as well as references to ethnic minorities by selecting mentions of nationality, ethnicity or minority group status, as well as integration and minority issues, such as racism, religion and integration. Full search string can be requested from authors.
First, inclusion of eleven years of news content permits to reach a sufficiently large sample size to study trends in coverage by public and commercial broadcasters. Second, in the selected time period there have been societal developments and events with regard to immigration and minority policy, allowing for enough variation in the news content. Finally, including eleven years of news coverage corresponds with a large socialization potential, making it possible to sketch a clear picture of how ethnic minorities and immigrants are portrayed in television news during one decade. In this way, news coverage for ethnic minorities and immigrants can be seen as a prevailing narrative by aggregating news stories, or as a general ‘information environment’ (Boomgaarden & Vliegenthart, 2009; Jerit, Barabas, & Bolsen, 2006).

**Coding and Inter-coder reliability.** The coding was conducted by a team of extensively trained researchers. During the training, the study’s goal, general coding guidelines and the coding scheme were explained in detail. Several examples were collectively coded. Subsequently, coders were assigned to code a number of test items to apply the training materials. In a follow-up training session, these codings were compared to identify difficulties in the coding. In case of ambiguity, the team watched the whole news story and jointly decided on the coding. In line with common procedure, inter-coder reliability was evaluated by double-coding a subset of the sample. For all variables used in the analysis, coefficients for inter-coder reliability were well above the minimum value .67 with an average Krippendorff’s alpha value of .77, and an average percent agreement of 90.0%.

**Variables.** The unit of analysis for all variables included in the content analysis was the news item. The news content variables were operationalized as indicators of three main explanatory mechanisms: sensationalism, tabloidisation and balanced representations of ethnic diversity and immigration (for an overview of the indicators and hypotheses see Table 1).

**Sensationalism.** Two indicators of sensationalism were coded: the presence of negative verbalised emotions (fear, anger) and references to conflict. First, negative verbalised emotions were taken up, because as Vettehen et al. (2005) note ‘explicit references to basic emotions by anchors, interviewees, or bystanders appeal to basic human needs’. Indeed, sensationalism has been described as an increase in emotional appeals (Grabe, Zhou, Lang, & Bolls, 2000; Pantti, 2010; Uribe & Gunter, 2007). Based on theories on the role of emotions in perceived intergroup

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3 Inter-coder reliability per variable was as follows. For negative verbalized negative emotions: \( \alpha = 0.81, 91.2\% \) percentage agreement (PA). For conflictual interactions: \( \alpha = 0.87, 92.3\% \) PA. For the type of frame (episodic vs. thematic): \( \alpha = 0.70, 86.2\% \) PA. For news topic (hard vs. soft): \( \alpha = 0.78, 84.3\% \) PA. For negative consequences, \( \alpha = 0.75, 92.3\% \) PA. For positive consequences, \( \alpha = 0.86, 98.8\% \) PA. For references to problems, \( \alpha = 0.71, 93.9\% \) PA. For cause of problems, \( \alpha = 0.79, 87.7\% \) PA. For tone, \( \alpha = 0.69, 87.6\% \) PA.
threat (Mackie, Smith, & Ray, 2008; Riek, Mania, & Gaertner, 2006), anger and fear were selected as basic emotions. In the codebook, each basic emotion was described by means of several equivalents (e.g. for ‘anger’, ‘angry’, ‘fury’, ‘rage’, for fear ‘afraid’, ‘fear’, ‘terror’). The presence of negative verbalized emotions was scored if any of these equivalents were identified in the news item (Vettehen et al., 2005). This corresponds with a dictionary-based approach when coding sentiment in political texts (Young & Soroka, 2012). An explicit verbal reference to anger or fear thus needed to be present in the news item. Second, conflict is also deemed a key characteristic of sensational news content. Conflict is the expression of negativity as a news value, easily lends itself to emotional appeals, and has the potential to grasp the audiences’ attention (Wang, 2012). The presence of conflict was operationalized as conflictual interactions between minority group and majority groups in the news item. First, it was coded whether there was any interaction at all, and then it was coded whether the interaction could be considered cooperative, conflictual or both. Conflictual interactions could range from very subtle expressions, e.g. a verbal dispute, to more obvious conflict, e.g. physical aggression.

Tabloidisation. For tabloidisation, there were two indicators: the amount of episodic versus thematic framing, and the reference to soft versus hard news topics. First, episodic and thematic frames were coded (Iyengar, 1991), because these concepts measure the extent news contains elements of personalization, a key ‘tabloid’ characteristic. In thematic news coverage attention is paid to the overall background and general context of an issue. Episodic news depicts concrete events that illustrate issues, and offer a more individualized and personalized account of events. Using this definition, coders had to indicate whether a news item was framed primarily from an episodic or a thematic perspective. Another key aspect of ‘tabloidisation’ is the shift from a focus on ‘hard’ news to ‘soft’ news. Of course, all news items contain references to immigration or ethnic diversity actors and issues, but they have links with other topics as well. As the soft vs. hard news distinction is fluid, subject to criticism and not uniformly accepted, we adopt common elements from most definitions (Palmer, 1998; Baum & Jamison, 2006; De Swert, 2004). Soft news are items with high-entertainment value, or reporting on less important and relevant issues, whereas hard news is more focused on public affairs and informing citizens. We consider stories on politics, the economy and social policy issues (i.e. labour and rights) as ‘hard news’, and stories on crime, justice and terrorism as ‘soft’ news. Although many definitions of soft news include showbiz and human interest, it should be noted that we deal with stories on immigration and ethnic minority issues and actors and that this classification does not apply. In sum, ‘hard news’ stories were coded when news
stories contained references to politics (e.g. negotiations, government and parliament-related issues, policy, elections), to the economy (e.g. welfare, economic growth, finance and monetary policy), and to social policy issues, such as labour (e.g. labour policy, unemployment) and rights (e.g. human rights, racism, equal rights). ‘Soft’ news stories were coded when news stories contained references to crime and justice (e.g. criminal acts, trials) and to terrorism (e.g. terrorist acts, radicalisation).

**Balanced representation of ethnic diversity and immigration.** This last explanatory mechanism is inspired by the idea that public service broadcasters will adhere more to democratic principles, reflect ethnic diversity and foster tolerance by disseminating balanced depictions of ethnic minorities and immigration (Van den Bulck & Broos, 2011). As indicators, we opted to include the tone of news coverage on immigrants and ethnic minorities, the degree of problematization, as well as the reference to positive or negative consequences of immigration and ethnic diversity. First, the tone or general ‘valence’ is considered to be an important factor which can greatly impact evaluations as it adds an affective component to messages (Sheafer, 2007). The tone of a television news item was coded using the following question: ‘Overall, would you say the news item has a positive, negative, mixed or neutral tone?’ (van Klinger, Boomgaarden, Vliegenthart, & de Vreese, 2014). For example, a news item stating that the balance of integration efforts for immigrants is successful, was coded as ‘positive’; a news item reporting on an ethnic minority involved in crime was coded as ‘negative’. Second, the degree of problematization of ethnic minorities and immigrants was taken into account. To this end, it was coded whether a news item reported on a problem or not. Subsequently, coders had to indicate whether ethnic minorities or immigrants were portrayed as cause of this problem. Third, it was coded whether television news items referred to positive and negative consequences of ethnic diversity or immigration. Positive consequences could, for instance, refer to enrichment for culture or society, to economic benefits (e.g. filling shortage occupation, increase of welfare) or commitment to respecting human rights. Negative consequences could, for instance, refer safety issues (e.g. increase in crime or terrorism), to cultural and religious contrasts and tensions, or to economic conflicts (e.g. competition on labour market, increased welfare expenditure, illegal work and abuse of social benefits).
Results

1. Survey analysis

To assess whether individuals who watch public news instead of commercial news have more positive attitudes toward immigrants, we performed a range of regression analyses. Results are presented in Table 2, and clearly confirm Hypothesis 1: individuals who watch public television news are more tolerant toward the entrance of asylum seekers, immigration, perceive less cultural threat and hold more positive feelings toward immigration than individuals who prefer commercial television news. Only with regard to economic threat no significant difference between public and commercial news could be observed, suggesting that television content contributes less to economic motivations of anti-immigrant prejudice. For economic threat, one’s own economic situation is more important than news consumption. Frequency of television news consumption is not significantly related to attitudes toward immigration, except for a small relation with economic threat. Frequency of other media consumption has no significant relations whatsoever. Finally, regarding the control variables, individuals with high political interest, high education and a left-wing orientation report less prejudice.
Table 2. Public versus commercial news and attitudes toward ethnic minorities and immigrants.

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<th>2014</th>
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<td>‘Immigration contributes to the welfare of our country’</td>
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<td>-.243</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age in years</td>
<td>.045</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic position</td>
<td>-.016</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious denomination (ref. no)</td>
<td>.033</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-right ideology</td>
<td>.182</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency tv news consumption</td>
<td>.045</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency other media consumption</td>
<td>-.022</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political interest</td>
<td>-.126</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.198</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1,024</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Entries are standardized regression results. Listwise deletion. * p < .1; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .00
2. Content analysis

The survey analysis showed that individuals with a preference for watching public television news have more positive attitudes toward ethnic minorities and immigrants than commercial television news viewers. In a next step, we analyse whether we can find differences in specific news content on immigrants and ethnic minorities between both broadcasters. Overall, we expected news content on commercial television to be of a more sensational (H2) nature, and driven by a tabloid logic (H3) than public television news content. We anticipated that the latter would report on ethnic minorities and immigrants in a more positive way (H4). The results are summarized in Table 1.

Figure 1 gives an overview of the differences between public and commercial television in terms of sensational news content (H2). First, the presence of negative verbalised emotions, is a common ingredient of television news coverage: approximately a quarter of all news stories contains references to negative verbalised emotions, such as anger and fear. Still, we can conclude that commercial television news on ethnic minorities and immigrants more often makes explicit appeals to negative emotions such as anger (+8%) and fear (+7%) than public television news. Second, references to conflict also present common features of news stories. However, commercial television news contains more conflictual interactions than public news (+8%). Hypothesis 2 is thus confirmed: commercial television news reports on ethnic minorities and immigrants in a more sensationalist manner than public news.

Figure 1. Sensationalism in television news content on immigration and ethnic minorities
Figure 2 displays differences between public and commercial television in terms of tabloid news content (H3). First, when considering the type of framing, we can see that across broadcasters, episodic frames are more prevalent than thematic frames. This means that news stories on ethnic minorities and immigrants are less often covered from a general, thematic perspective, but mainly focus on individuals and specific, episodic events. Still, commercial television news more often adopts an episodic perspective (+10%) than public news, whereas public news more often offers a thematic perspective (+9%). This confirms that commercial news more often offers a personalized vision, focusing less on general background and context. Second, when assessing which news topics occur in conjunction with ethnic minority and immigration actors and issues, we observe that overall most news on immigration tend to be related to issues on crime and justice, followed by politics. This means that ‘soft’ news topics often find their way to news coverage on ethnic minorities and immigrants. It is also telling that terrorism is more central to news content than stories on the economy. Again, as expected, we can observe that commercial news more often contains ‘soft’ news topics, whereas public contains more ‘hard’ news topics. However, although this holds for soft vs. hard news in general, this does not apply to all news topics equally. With regard to soft news topics, commercial news reports more often on crime and justice (+11%), but there is no difference between public and commercial news in terms of terrorism. With regard to hard news topics, public news reports more often on politics (+8%), labour (+4%) and rights (+4%), but there is no difference between public and commercial news in terms of the economy. Overall, however, we can draw the conclusion that commercial news content has more tabloid characteristics than public television news content. It thus seems that public television news focuses more on ‘serious’ news and offers a more diverse supply of news topic, whereas commercial television news more narrowly focuses on crime and justice. Hypothesis 3 is thus supported.
Figure 3 presents differences between public and commercial television news content in terms of a balanced representation of ethnic minorities and immigrants. Overall, the main conclusion is that television news is heavily negatively biased, with a negative tone, references to negative consequences and elements of problematization being predominant. However, again, there are differences between public and commercial television news. First, with regard to news tone, we can conclude that public television news indeed more often has a positive tone (+4%) and less often a negative tone (–9%) than commercial television news, although positive news stories remain scarce overall. Second, although public and commercial news more or less report evenly on problems, ethnic minorities and immigrants are less often problematized and portrayed as cause of a problem on public news (–6%) than on commercial news. Third, public television news more often mentions positive consequences (+6%) and less often negative consequences (–9%) of immigration and ethnic diversity than commercial television news. We can thus conclude that ethnic minorities and immigrants receive more favourable coverage on public television news than on commercial news, confirming hypothesis 4.
Figure 3. Balanced representation of ethnic diversity and immigration in television news content on immigration and ethnic minorities
Table 2. Summary of content analysis indicators and results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Confirmed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensationalism (H2)</td>
<td>Negative verbalized emotions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>Public&lt;Commercial</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Public&lt;Commercial</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>Public&lt;Commercial</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tabloidisation (H3)</td>
<td>Framing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Episodic</td>
<td>Public&lt;Commercial</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thematic</td>
<td>Public&gt;Commercial</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard vs. Soft news</td>
<td>Crimle &amp; Justice</td>
<td>Public&lt;Commercial</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Terrorism</td>
<td>Public&lt;Commercial</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard news</td>
<td>Politics</td>
<td>Public&gt;Commercial</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>Public&gt;Commercial</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rights</td>
<td>Public&gt;Commercial</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>Public&gt;Commercial</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balanced representation of</td>
<td>Tone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ethnic diversity and</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Public&gt;Commercial</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>immigration (H4)</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Public&lt;Commercial</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Problem</td>
<td>Public&lt;Commercial</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Immigrant/ethnic minority</td>
<td>Public&lt;Commercial</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>cause of problem</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consequences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Public&gt;Commercial</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Public&lt;Commercial</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 It should be noted here that we have also assessed whether these trends hold over time, as some have pointed out that– due to commercialization and competition – a process of convergence of public and commercial news may become evident. Conclusions are that generally commercial and television news follow the same patterns (i.e. when commercial news focuses more on crime on a certain point in time, so does public television) and thus seem to react to the same real-life events. There does not seem to be an overall evolution toward more similar news content over time or ‘convergence’. Furthermore, the differences between public and commercial television tend to be fairly stable over time.
Discussion

This study contributes to the broader academic debate on the alleged decline in news quality by assessing the role of sensational and tabloid styles of news coverage as potential source of negative attitudes toward ethnic minorities and immigrants. We examined the possibility of a ‘dual effects hypothesis’ (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010) by comparing news content and attitudes on ethnic minorities and immigrant between public and commercial television news viewers. We hypothesized that differences in the goal attainment of public and commercial broadcasters would be reflected in specific news content, which in turn would give rise to an attitude gap between individuals with preference for commercial over public news (and vice versa).

By means of a content analysis of news coverage of ethnic minorities and immigrants (2003-2013) and public opinion data, we were able to shed light on this research question. First, validated by various attitudinal indicators, we found evidence that individuals who prefer public news hold more positive attitudes toward ethnic minorities and immigrants than commercial news viewers, even when controlling for a whole variety of important confounding mechanisms. Second, content analytical data seem to confirm that there are particular elements in news content of both types of broadcasters which may offer an explanation for this attitudinal gap. Public television news reports on ethnic minorities and immigrants in a more positive manner than commercial news does: news more often has a positive tone, stressing positive consequences and benefits of ethnic diversity and immigration for society. Commercial television news, by contrast, contains more sensational and tabloid characteristics: references to negative emotions (such as fear and anger) are more prevalent, conflict is more frequently emphasized and news tends to be more personalized, containing less in-depth coverage and background, instead focusing predominantly on ‘soft’ news topics, such as crime.

These findings fit in with academic literature assessing the potential detrimental effects of television and news exposure on civic attitudes and behaviours (Aarts & Semetko, 2003; Hooghe, 2002; Schmitt-Beck & Wolsing, 2010; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010). As such, this study corroborates prior conclusions that public television news may contain distinct features or specific content elements, which are better suited to foster a civic mind-set. This has already been shown with regard to political knowledge, interest, participation and social capital. In this study, we expanded these insights with the conclusion that differences in news content on ethnic diversity and immigration between public and commercial television possibly has a large potential to shape public opinion on this topic as well.
The support of a ‘dual effects’ approach cautiously implies that – even in the current era of commercialisation, diversification and austerity measures in the public sector – public broadcasters may still have an important duty to fulfil in society. Whereas commercial broadcasters seem to firstly approach television viewers as clients or consumers, public television news seems to address them primarily as citizens. The role of public broadcasters in stimulating democratic and civic attitudes and setting social norms, such as tolerance toward ethnic minorities and immigrants, should thus not be easily disregarded. The evidence presented here suggests there is still an important role to play for public broadcasters in helping citizens to form an nuanced opinion on ethnic minorities and immigrants. Moreover, it also highlights that initiatives explicitly taken to promote tolerance, such as the adoption of an inclusive and pluralistic strategies (e.g. the VRT Charter of Diversity), seem to yield results and pay off, although it is clear that there still is considerable scope for improvement.

Indeed, some qualification is in order. It should be noted here that differences between public and commercial news, although significant and stable, remain fairly limited and that overall both broadcasters do seem to follow similar patterns in news coverage. Public television news, too, contained a large amount of sensational and tabloid news features, such as an episodic style of reporting, and references to conflict, problems and crime. News content on ethnic minorities and immigrants still continues to encompass many negative elements, and pays only little attention to positive exemplars. The main conclusion simply seems to be that this negativity bias holds less for public television news. Despite differences in television news content between public and commercial news, it thus remains clear that the role of news content as important determinant of intergroup relations should not be overlooked, and that also in the future efforts should be directed at monitoring news content and its impact on public opinion.

Notwithstanding our contributions, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, an important caveat relates to the concepts of sensationalism and tabloidisation. In our study, the emphasis was on differences between public and commercial broadcasters in actual television news content. However, as pointed out in several studies, the ‘sensational’ or ‘tabloid’ nature of news can also be expressed in formal news features, such as use of images or audio-visual cues (Esser, 1999; Grabe et al., 2001; Hauttekeete, 2007; Slattery et al., 2001). Future studies may therefore want to elaborate on this and evaluate whether we can also find this differences between broadcasters in more formal news features. Moreover, it should also be noted that – although we have taken up several indicators of sensational and tabloid content about which there is relative consensus – there are many other
indicators which we were not able to analyse, and should be included in future studies. Second, due to data limitations, it was not possible to integrate news content indicators in the survey analysis. This forced us to adopt a two-step approach, in which we first evaluated differences in attitudes between public and commercial television viewers, and in a second step compared news coverage as a potential explanation. Therefore, our suggestion of news content as explanatory mechanism for attitudinal differences between public and commercial televisions news watchers remains tentative and needs further investigation. Nevertheless, our study is one of the first to systematically address the hypothesized difference between public and commercial news in the case of immigration and ethnic minority coverage. We conclude that the distinct logic of both broadcaster types is crucial in understanding the relation between media content and prejudice.
References


27