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*Published in:*  
Media and Communication

*DOI:*  
[10.17645/mac.7792](https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.7792)

*Publication date:*  
2024

*License:*  
CC BY

*Document Version:*  
Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Wandels, N., Mast, J., & Van den Bulck, H. (2024). Comparing Media Systems Through the Lens of Neoliberal Hegemony: Evidence From the US and Flanders. *Media and Communication*, 12(1), 1-17. [7792]. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.7792>

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# Comparing Media Systems Through the Lens of Neoliberal Hegemony: Evidence From the US and Flanders

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**Submitted:** 31 October 2023 **Accepted:** 28 December 2023 **Published:** 11 March 2024

**Issue:** This article is part of the issue “Communication Policies and Media Systems: Revisiting Hallin and Mancini’s Model” edited by Aurora Labio-Bernal (University of Seville), Rainer Rubira-García (Rey Juan Carlos University), and Rasa Pocevičienė (Šiauliai State Higher Education Institution), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i430>

## Abstract

This article argues that increased insight into the global characteristics of the post-Cold War era provides journalism scholars with alternative interpretative lenses to engage in comparative analysis of media system development in the West. We adopt the sociohistorical approach pursued by Hallin and Mancini (2004) in their seminal work *Comparing Media Systems* to embark on an examination of the dialectic relationship between global neoliberal hegemony, the transformation of media markets, and the emergence of a new journalistic consciousness (doxa). This examination concerns a comparative analysis of developments in a selection of Flemish and American legacy newspapers between 1980 and today, based on a data set consisting of 36 in-depth semi-structured interviews with high agency individuals (executive editors, managing editors, senior journalists, and publishers). The goal of the article is to establish the lens of global neoliberal hegemony as a viable alternative framework to the regional lens of the media systems typology for engaging in comparative analysis of developments in media structures and journalistic practice.

## Keywords

comparing media systems; Flanders; journalism history; media markets; neoliberalism; oral history; USA

## 1. Introduction

Historians increasingly conceptualize the three decades since the end of the Cold War as a separate era (Holslag, 2021; Reid-Henry, 2020; Ther, 2016) defined by a.o. American unipolarity (Mearsheimer, 2019), globalism (Slobodian, 2018), interventionism (Parmar, 2009), and neoliberal ideological hegemony (Harvey,

2005; McChesney, 2001). The era is characterized by a strong transatlantic bond between the US and Europe, embedded in supranational frameworks such as the NATO military alliance and the Transatlantic Economic Council. Internal dynamics in the West (e.g., Brexit, the election of Donald Trump) and global trends (e.g., the expansion of BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the proliferation of international conflict) suggest that this era has come to an end, and a geopolitical shift is taking place.

Once an era is recognized as such, it constitutes a lens that creates the historical distance necessary to interpret longitudinal developments in a new light. In journalism studies, this can contribute to revitalizing the sociohistorical approach that conceptualizes journalism as an institution and a cultural expression embedded within a larger macro-societal environment. As Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 8) put it, “one cannot understand news media without understanding the nature of the state, the system of political parties, the pattern of relations between economic and political interests, and the development of civil society among other elements of social structure.”

Especially in comparative journalism studies, this revitalization can push the field forward. For the past two decades, the media systems typology developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) has been the gold standard in comparative research. The model has been expanded upon (Albæk et al., 2014; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019; Herrero et al., 2017), it has served as a basis for further empirical inquiry (Brüggeman et al., 2014; Kaiser & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2019), and its limits have been challenged and tested (Umbricht & Esser, 2014). In contrast, significantly less attention was paid to the reproduction of the system-based approach that is laid out in *Comparing Media Systems* (2004), with its emphasis on the relationship between media and society at large. As Hallin and Mancini (2016, pp. 168–169) themselves put it:

We worry that this sociological-historical approach to scholarship, which understands social formations holistically as historically embedded patterns of relationship, is for the most part poorly developed in our field, and that as a result advances in measurement outstrip the quality of theoretical analysis.

The ritualistic reproduction of classifications or categories always bears the danger of overlooking elements that these categories were not designed to capture. We therefore question whether Hallin and Mancini’s media systems typology is the optimal framework to understand developments that have taken place during the post-Cold War era. Are attempts to explain recent developments in journalism in terms of convergence or divergence between a liberal, corporatist, and polarized model not overcomplicating or obfuscating the nature of a global media system? Shouldn’t we rather, in the spirit of *Comparing Media Systems* (2004), re-examine newly-wrought relations between the era’s macro conditions and journalism? Can alternative perspectives be considered in order to recapture the essence of Hallin and Mancini’s contributions to the field?

In this article, we adopt the lens of one of the post-Cold War era’s key characteristics, neoliberal hegemony, to interpret media market developments and the establishment of a collective journalistic consciousness grafted onto the neoliberal mode of thought on both sides of the Atlantic. Our goal is to demonstrate the interpretative potential of adopting global neoliberalism as the primary lens to comparatively examine overarching similarities and regional differences in media system development across the boundaries set by the media systems typology. We will first define the main characteristics of global neoliberalism as a basis for our interpretative framework. Next, we briefly discuss regional differences in the emergence of neoliberalism as the hegemonic mode of thought. Finally, we present the findings from a qualitative

comparative analysis of two case studies (Flanders and the US) through the lens of global neoliberalism. This article constitutes a step towards building a model for comparative analysis that reevaluates the examination of sociohistorical context as a precondition for understanding developments both on the global and the local level. We acknowledge that this study is exploratory in nature and that neoliberal hegemony is only one of many potential supranational lenses that can be adopted to examine developments in journalism during the post-Cold War era.

## 2. Neoliberal Hegemony and the Journalistic Field

As recent as 2008, Hallin pointed out the need for a better understanding of neoliberalism and its impact on journalism (Hallin, 2008). In journalism studies, the term is primarily invoked for its explanatory power when discussing the impact of commercialization on the structure of media markets (Berry, 2019; McManus, 2009) or in the context of the propagation of hegemonic frames of thought among global audiences (Phelan, 2018). Both these applications channel political-economy perspectives that explore the impact of media ownership concentration and economies of scale on journalistic autonomy (McChesney, 2001; Schiller, 1989) and the homogenizing role of mass media in the shaping of public opinion (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). However, from a comparative perspective, neoliberalism is rarely considered the primary analytical lens. Studies belonging to the Nordic tradition (Jakobsson et al., 2021; Ohlsson, 2015) deal with the impact of neoliberalism within national or regional boundaries, e.g., in the context of an emerging neoliberal media welfare state. However, these ethno- or nation-centric approaches potentially overcomplicate media system development by attributing regional particularity to international trends, arguably overlooking one of global neoliberalism's primary tenets: the increased authority of supranational regulatory bodies (cf. discussion later on). Though local or regional diversity obviously should not be dismissed, we present an argument for incorporating these differences into the analysis only after the lens of global neoliberalism has been applied. This "top-down" approach aligns with the view of McChesney (2001, pp. 2–3), who states that, in order to "grasp media today and in the future, one must start with understanding the global system and then factor in differences at the national and local levels."

Neoliberalism's impact on journalism appears to have been conceptualized by journalism scholars as an external threat due to the fact that it has changed market structures and circumstances, primarily within the boundaries of national contexts. The hidden relationship between neoliberal ideological hegemony and the emergence of a journalistic consciousness that is grafted onto this "common-sense" way of thinking via processes of socialization remains largely unexplored. Scholars have repeatedly demonstrated the emergence of a "commercial logic" or a rationale of "profit maximization" (McChesney, 2001; McManus, 2009), though these realities are rarely interpreted in terms of the transformation of a neoliberal hegemonic "common sense" into a journalistic professional "common sense." Similarly, the social processes that drive such a transformation are rarely examined because most studies are inclined to explain changes in terms of external pressures (technological, economic, and professional boundaries; Nielsen, 2016). Efforts towards understanding these processes of socialization, e.g., via the impact of media management (Breed, 1955) on the collective adoption of attitudes or myths (e.g., the myths of individualism, neutrality, and media pluralism; Schiller, 1973), are limited.

Our study adds to the discussion of neoliberalism and journalism by including both neoliberalism's impact on transforming the conditions wherein journalism is produced and its socializing properties as a dominant

mode of thought. Front and center are the dialectics between neoliberalism, the structure of media markets, and journalistic consciousness. To conceptualize these dialectic relations, we adopt the theoretical framework of field theory developed by Pierre Bourdieu. As a highly heteronomous field where agents struggle “for the power to impose the dominant vision of the field” (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 36), the field of journalism experiences significant exposure to developments and logics that are external to it. Its doxa, i.e., the implicit principles shared by agents belonging to the field that guide action within the field, often reflects the categories and concepts “belonging to the encompassing social world, slightly adjusted [and] reordered” (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 37). In other words, a process of osmosis occurs between field-specific journalistic doxa and the dominant logics that dictate the macrocosm wherein journalists are socialized. Therefore, the emergence of a field-specific doxa grafted onto neoliberal hegemonic thought is grounded in Bourdieu’s acknowledgment that primary and secondary socialization processes within a time-specific macro context shape individual habitus. It follows that habitus functions as a vessel for importing dominant modes of thought that characterize this time-specific macro context within the boundaries of the field of journalism. The eventual incorporation of these attitudes into journalistic doxa is, of course, contingent on the outcome of struggles for field positions between individual agents. However, due to the heteronomous nature of the journalistic field, it is to be expected that agents whose habitus is in tune with dominant modes of thought in society at large have a clear advantage in these struggles. Furthermore, we cannot overlook the impact of structural realities of overarching inter-field power balances (e.g., the structure of media markets and the hierarchical relationships within news organizations) on the transformation of journalistic doxa. This whole process of macro-societal socialization, the struggle for field positions, and the reproduction or transformation of doxa is a cycle with an explicitly generational aspect. Bourdieu conceptualized this in terms of the generational renewal of the field, characterized by the struggle between the establishment and the avant-garde.

To summarize it in Bourdieu’s (1998, p. 39) terms, “journalism is a microcosm with its own laws, defined both by its position in the world at large and by the attractions and repulsions to which it is subject from other such microcosms.” In this way, he bridges the gap between the macro- and microcosm, between neoliberal hegemony on the macro level, and the dominant patterns of thought guiding the actions of individual journalists on the micro level (i.e., doxa).

### 3. Defining Neoliberalism

As we set out to examine how neoliberal hegemony has shaped media markets and journalistic doxa, we must first define neoliberalism. This is a challenging venture, as neoliberal theory and practice are not always aligned, and the term has a problematic history in the way it has been applied in academia. Mirkowski and Plehwe (2009, p. 20) state that “hegemonial neoliberalism must be conceived of in plural terms as a political philosophy and a political practice.” Ther (2016, pp. 11–12) adds that it is, in the first place, a “rhetorical toolkit to legitimize radical reforms.” Both imply its potential to adapt to national or regional contextual differences and, as a result, take different forms. Harvey (2005, p. 2) offers a working definition that can serve as a basis for further elaboration: “neoliberalism is...a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” In other words, neoliberalism aims to reshape modes and relations of production via economic policy (i.e., the economic base). It aims to do this in light of a perceived common good (i.e., the ideological

rationale). As Ther (2016, p. 20) puts it, neoliberalism as an ideology is built on a belief in a “dual *telos* of planned economy to market economy,” which would then facilitate the transition from “dictatorship to democracy.”

Neoliberal economic policy primarily emphasizes private ownership, the rule of competitive markets, and the free flow of capital. These founding principles are practiced via policy that emphasizes deregulation, privatization, and the general withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision (Friedman, 1951). Despite its advocacy for a minimal role of the state, neoliberal thought considers the state responsible for facilitating “the conditions for profitable capital accumulation on the part of both domestic and foreign capital” (Harvey, 2005, p. 7). As such, the neoliberal state is required to create and safeguard competition in markets in a bid to “bring all human action into the domain of the market” (Harvey, 2005, p. 3) and let profits “rule wherever they can be generated” (McChesney, 2001, p. 13). Furthermore, the state’s role is to lift barriers to international trade and protect private capital. The latter implies, in the first place, the pursuit of price stability and the restriction of inflation, primarily through austere monetary policies (Williamson, 2003). This is reflected in a tendency to increase the executive power of institutions such as central banks, which remain beyond the grasp of democratic accountability. This emphasis on expanding legal accountability over democratic accountability is based on the idea that “world law trumps world state” (Slobodian, 2018). Supranational institutions provide a strong legal framework in order to preserve free trade and the free flow of capital on a global scale. Private ownership is, as such, protected from the “overreach of states” and the inherent threat that democratic rule poses to the functioning of the global market system (Nicol, 2010; Slobodian, 2018). Consider in this regard the establishment of the WTO in 1995 as an “apparatus of juridical power to encase markets beyond democratic accountability” (Slobodian, 2018, p. 266). The neoliberal turn within international bodies such as the EU, the World Bank, and the IMF can also be considered in this light. As such, this supranational legal framework creates a global environment of competition, both within markets and between states (Slobodian, 2018).

The core belief that underpins neoliberal thought is that markets and consumerism are the necessary paths to achieving individual freedom (Friedman, 1962; Hayek, 1960; Ther, 2016). The organization of social life via markets is considered an antidote to the coercive forces of the state since individuals are considered free to choose whether they engage with each other in the marketplace (Friedman, 1962). The project of neoliberalism is, therefore, aimed at “finding the right state and the right law to serve the market order” (Slobodian, 2018, p. 87). Embedded in this idea is an inclination towards moral relativism conceptualized by proponents of neoliberalism as an apolitical worldview. On the other hand, critics argue that neoliberal logic leads to a profound depoliticization (McChesney, 2001). In any case, both agree that neoliberal thought promotes some degree of detachment of markets from political life. Consumerism and individualism are elevated to the very essence of freedom, whereas collectivism is dismissed. As neoliberal political reformer Margaret Thatcher put it, “there is no such thing as society, only individual men and women” (Harvey, 2005, p. 82). In neoliberal thought, these men and women are reduced to the “*homo economicus*” (Ther, 2016), the underlying idea being that rational engagement with each other in the marketplace will produce both prosperity and freedom. Freedom is primarily defined in terms of the freedom of enterprise and the freedom to engage in markets; prosperity, as individual capital accumulation and the acquisition and consumption of commodities (“consumerism trumps state”; Friedman, 1962; Harvey, 2005; Slobodian, 2018). Applied to the field of journalism, it appears that neoliberalism is ideologically conducive to the transformation of news into a salable commodity that can be detached from its political functions and is not necessarily available to all

(McChesney, 2001; Schiller, 1989). Similarly, it appears to be fertile ideological soil for the propagation of what Schiller (1973) called the myths of “individual freedom” and “neutrality.” This collection of intertwined ideas (depoliticization, competition in markets, consumerism, i.e., transforming the citizen into a consumer, individual freedom, and supranationalism) form the core of neoliberal thought. Aside from how neoliberal hegemony has transformed media markets, we will be looking at how these ideas are transformed and incorporated into journalistic doxa.

As a final note in this section, we re-emphasize the aforementioned gap between neoliberal theory and practice. If anything, one of global neoliberalism’s defining tenets appears to be its compatibility with and adaptability to other socioeconomic and ideological frameworks, with some even appearing to be antithetical. For example, despite neoconservatism’s opposition to perceived excesses of individual freedom and its emphasis on a strict moral framework (Guelke, 2005), it appears to be highly compatible with the neoliberal mode of production. The same can arguably be said about corporate expressions of progressive identity politics. On the other hand, despite the Keynesian underpinnings of Western interventionism, it has proven to be an instrumental vehicle for the dissemination of neoliberal values across the globe.

#### 4. Towards Neoliberal Hegemony on Both Sides of the Atlantic

The first decade(s) after the Cold War can be defined as neoliberalism’s triumph, as evidenced by the work of, e.g., Francis Fukuyama. During this time, its political and ideological tenets became dominant in state institutions, financial institutions, education, and mass media. As such, “neoliberalism has...become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey, 2005, p. 3). Despite the global scope of the neoliberal project, we must turn our attention to regional differences in how neoliberalism as “common sense” manifested itself. Any longitudinal comparative analysis of media through the primary lens of neoliberalism is required to take into account the history of how these “spatial configurations” (Ther, 2016) came about.

The neoliberal turn in the West occurred in the context of a wider crisis of embedded liberalism (Holslag, 2021; Slobodian, 2018; Ther, 2016). Neoliberal ideology only entered the mainstream at a time when the social contract between labor and capital came under considerable pressure during the mid-1970s (Harvey, 2005; Slobodian, 2018). The first political flagbearers of neoliberal policy in the West came to power simultaneously around 1980 on both sides of the Atlantic. Reaganomics and Thatcherism prioritized deregulation and strict anti-inflation policy and professed a mindset of free markets as a vehicle for maximizing individual freedom with “economy as the method” (Harvey, 2005). Nonetheless, there were considerable distinctions between the methods both countries pursued to amass popular support for these reforms. In the US, reform was facilitated by a combination of election commodification via new campaign financing laws and the mobilization of a moral conservative base. In the UK, where the welfare state was more developed, traditional class awareness embedded in institutions (such as labor unions) was gradually deconstructed both by elite bodies (universities, financial institutions, think tanks) and late 1960s revolutionaries calling for more individual freedoms.

Policies enacted in the Anglo-Saxon world eventually put pressure on European welfare states as well. Further integration of European economies into supranational European bodies played an important role in this process (Varoufakis, 2017). Increasing competitiveness through budgetary restraint, inflation control,



and market reform were top priorities for political leaders. In France, Mitterrand abandoned his Keynesian inclinations in order to ease inflation and prevent the devaluation of the franc; in Germany, Helmut Kohl declared a new economic policy, “away from more state to more market; away from collective burdens to more personal achievements; away from entrenched structures to more flexibility, individual initiative and competitiveness” (Ther, 2016, p. 40); in Belgium, the Martens government attempted to increase competitiveness, among other things, by devaluation of their coinage, under IMF pressure (Michielsen, n.d.). However, continental étatism initially prevented a swift neoliberal turn as had occurred in the US and the UK. Budgetary austerity became more commonplace after the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, which facilitated neoliberal reform (Burkitt & Baimbridge, 1994). In Belgium, media owners rallied behind these reforms, openly advocating for privatization, the cutting of state budgets, and increased executive power for central banks (Leysen, 1993).

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, neoliberal policymakers were emboldened by an intellectual climate that unilaterally proclaimed the definitive victory of capitalism (Fukuyama, 1989). Throughout the 1990s, neoliberal reform swept across the nations of the former Soviet Union. As Ther (2016, p. 10) writes: “In the early nineties, Western experts assumed that the development of market economy and democracy were interconnected and interdependent.” Furthermore, the sovereignty of European nation-states was increasingly transferred to supranational bodies such as the WTO and the EU (Burkitt & Baimbridge, 1994; Slobodian, 2018). European nations’ historically strong welfare state tradition received a critical blow in the aftermath of the 2008 mortgage crisis and the sovereign debt crisis that followed it (Varoufakis, 2017). Southern Europe, in particular, became subject to the severe austerity that had previously been imposed to transform Eastern European states (Ther, 2016).

These varying origin stories of neoliberal hegemony across countries and media systems reflect how spatial variations can be expected when adopting the neoliberal lens. This will show up during our discussion of the US and Flanders cases.

## 5. Connecting Neoliberal Hegemony, Media Markets, and Journalistic Attitudes: An Oral History Approach

In what follows, we will present a comparative analysis aimed at examining how the neoliberal turn has affected journalism on both sides of the Atlantic, both in terms of media market transformation and the emergence of neoliberal journalistic doxa. This is a qualitative analysis that is exploratory in nature, meaning that its scope is limited. It is based on an examination of two case studies that are clearly demarcated in space and time. We analyzed historical developments that have occurred in a limited selection of legacy newspapers in the US (*Philadelphia Inquirer* [P.I.]) and Flanders (*De Standaard*, *De Morgen*, *Het Nieuwsblad*, and *Het Laatste Nieuws*) between 1980 and 2023. Both countries are traditionally categorized as exponents of different media systems (the “liberal” and the “democratic corporatist” model, respectively), though we will not factor in these differences a priori. As our analysis will show, regional differences expose themselves anyway. Given the goal of this article, we will interpret these differences in light of the uneven development of neoliberal hegemony in the US and continental Europe. Furthermore, our selected timeframe enables us to track longitudinal developments within the field of journalism in relation to the overall development of neoliberalism.



Our primary data for analysis were gathered via in-depth semi-structured interviews with high agency individuals (i.e., executive editors, managing editors, senior journalists, and publishers) who were active in the newsroom of either one of the aforementioned newspapers over the past four decades. The perspective of high agency individuals is particularly valuable due to the often boundary-spanning nature of the organizational role of these individuals (being involved both in editorial matters and matters of management; Gans, 1979) and their impact on the socialization of attitudes within the newsroom (Breed, 1955; Schiller, 1973). Nonetheless, their perspective remains remarkably unexplored in journalism studies. Interviews were conducted in a sphere of confidentiality and centered around a life/career overview approach. Specific attention was given to interviewees' background (primary socialization), professional education (secondary socialization), the organizational conditions of their employment, their primary tasks and responsibilities in the newsroom, their journalistic norms and values, and external factors influencing the newsroom. If applicable, the reasons for leaving the field of journalism were discussed. In total, we conducted 12 interviews with 10 American interviewees and 24 interviews with 22 Flemish interviewees (see Supplementary File). Interviews ranged anywhere from one hour to over three hours. Collected data were triangulated with each other and other available source material, such as public records, company data, interviews with third parties, (auto-)biographies, and secondary literature on the Flemish and the American news media landscape (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010; de Ridder, 2001; Gorman & McLean, 2003; Halberstam, 1975; Leysen, 1993; MacPherson, 2006; Ruys, 1999; Underwood, 1995). Data were categorized using NVIVO software and subsequently analyzed via thematic content analysis. We adopted a diachronic perspective in order to lay bare developments in market circumstances and attitudes over time.

Our approach is qualitative in nature and is grounded in the oral history tradition, which “draws on memory...to gain a more complete or different understanding of a past experienced both individually and collectively” (Bornat, 2003, p. 35). The interview format allows us to tie together the material realities of news work, which are contingent on organizational structures and the overall structure of the market, and the dominant views, attitudes, and judgments about these realities journalists hold. By diving into the personal and professional history of the interviewee, we also gain insight into the experiences that have shaped these attitudes and how these have contributed to the construction of a habitus (Benson & Neveu, 2005). Furthermore, discourse utilized by interviewees reveals implicit categories of classification and judgment, which constitutes a breadcrumb trail toward uncovering the hidden structural attitudes and modes of thinking (doxa) that organize the field as a whole. As Bourdieu (2005, p. 38) puts it, it is the task of the sociologist to transform “[implicit schemes of classification] into explicit categories, into discourse.” Semi-structured interviews, where the interviewee is allowed a certain amount of agency in setting out the perimeters of the interview, encourage this transformation of implicit categories into explicit discourse. We, therefore, argue that it is the most appropriate research method for uncovering the subtleties of journalistic doxa.

## 6. The Neoliberal Lens in Practice: A Comparative Analysis of US and Flemish News Media

The neoliberal turn instigated a profound transformation of media markets on both sides of the Atlantic. At the end of the 1970s, the P.I. was a highly profitable newspaper. Newsroom mechanization allowed savings on technical personnel, and considerable investments were made in newsroom expansion, which eventually resulted in the accumulation of considerable symbolic capital (the newspaper won multiple

Pulitzer prizes during this era). American newspapers, in general, held a strong monopoly on the advertising market, which accounted for the bulk of newspaper revenues. Classified ad sections especially impacted newspaper profitability in the years prior to the internet boom. In Flanders, the situation was somewhat different at the advent of the neoliberal turn. Newspaper markets were more politicized due to the pillarized societal context (Wandels et al., 2023). This meant that individual newspapers were more limited in their advertising reach than the American press. Rather, the profitability of Flemish newspapers depended on a loyal reader base that shared the editorial views of the newsrooms (Christian-democratic, socialist, liberal). Despite the detrimental effects of the 1970s inflation crisis on the newspaper industry, which led to the bankruptcy of one of Flanders' major newspapers, circulation remained stable (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010).

Attitudes concerning profitability among newspaper owners and executives in the US noticeably shifted during the 1980s. At the P.I., executives adopted the logic of shareholder value maximization, which increased the pressure on the newsroom to reduce expenditures, primarily on journalistic personnel. P.I. was part of the Knight-Ridder newspaper company, which had publicly traded shares since the mid-1970s. Despite being beholden to financial markets, the Knight-Ridder corporation had managed its newspapers as if they were a private company. According to interviewees, this attitude changed in the mid-1980s. By this time, pressures from competitors such as Gannett—who leveraged economies of scale and weak labor protection—increased, causing Knight-Ridder to change course:

[Gannett] managed to get over 30% operating profit, not just on a few select papers, but everywhere. And their stock price went up. Other newspaper companies, including Knight-Ridder, tried to match what Gannett was doing. The problem was that Gannett bought smaller papers where you had no unions. And they could cut costs and reduce staff in ways that were impossible in unionized news organizations [like ours]. (Quote 1, US)

The competitive atmosphere in the newspaper business at the time was arguably instigated by the large influx of MBA graduates in newspaper companies (Underwood, 1995), who propagated the idea that “there [is] no mission for a company other than shareholder value” (interview excerpt). These voices represented a logic that was indirectly imposed on the field of journalism within the microcosm of the news organization. Moreover, despite operational profit margins approaching (and regularly surpassing) the 20% mark throughout the 1980s and 1990s, effectively making the P.I. a “cash cow” for the Knight-Ridder company, executive management implemented budgetary austerity. In practice, this meant further staff reductions and sometimes cost-cutting measures that were antithetical to journalistic doxa at the time:

As the internet eroded revenues, the only way the business side could maintain these profits was cutting the newsroom, cutting everything. [For example, they cut] circulation. On purpose. Because by printing fewer papers we could save money on newsprint, on ink, on truck drivers....I thought it was insane. (Quote 2, US)

This rapid transition towards an aggressive strategy of shareholder value maximization was initially deterred in Flanders by the fact that most newspapers were still privately owned. Nonetheless, the neoliberal turn did profoundly affect the market. First of all, in a more politicized media landscape such as Flanders, the impact of the Soviet Union's implosion and the subsequent victory of free market capitalism has to be taken

into account. Neoliberal political hegemony in the 1990s accelerated the “de-pillarizing” tendencies that were already present in Flanders at the time. This was reflected in the legacy news media landscape, as the legacy print press had to adapt to an emerging “de-pillarized” market reality of depoliticized consumers (Wandels et al., 2023). Some interviewees internalized this reality as an existential threat to the newspaper industry: “[If we don’t change the content of the newspaper], we are going to die out, together with our audience” (Quote 3, Flanders).

Second, notwithstanding an absence of the direct pressures exuded by financial markets via stock ownership, similar pressures were exercised on the Flemish media market in different forms. During the late 1980s, legislation was passed that opened up the television broadcasting market in Belgium (which had remained the exclusive domain of the public broadcasting service up until 1989) for commercial enterprise. This put pressure on advertising revenues that had traditionally been absorbed primarily by print news media (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010). As a reaction to a tightening advertising market, newspaper executives and owners sought to secure profitability by pursuing economies of scale via corporate mergers and takeovers. This increased the total circulation of the newspaper group, improved its business proposition on the advertising market, and produced budgetary benefits through newsroom synergies. In this increasingly competitive environment, marketing agencies became increasingly involved in newsrooms, educating Flemish newsroom executives on how to secure audiences:

When I saw these marketing reports...I read disconcerting sentences, such as: “the market decides how and about what [the news organization] reports,” “news beats should be evaluated based on their return on investment,” and “from now on, the reader is chief editor of the newspaper.” (de Ridder, 2001, p. 147)

Interestingly enough, the pressure that Gannett put on Knight-Ridder was even felt on the other side of the Atlantic:

In America, *USA Today* had started incorporating color pictures and infographics. [In response, our executives] pushed the idea that the newspaper needed to change its outlook. It needed to include color pictures and more infographics, or else the newspaper was inadequate. (Quote 4, Flanders)

Changes in the executive hierarchy of the newspapers under examination mirror the mentality shift towards shareholder value maximization. At the P.I., the chief editor, who had traditionally operated side by side of a general manager, was required to report to a newly installed publisher on newspaper performance by the late 1980s. Before, the chief editor reported directly to executives at Knight-Ridder’s headquarters. Negotiated newspaper budgets were abandoned for non-negotiable financial targets dictated by HQ: “Miami [i.e., the location of Knight-Ridder H.Q.] no longer asked for plans. They just told you what your budget was going to be and how much profit they wanted” (interview excerpt). This put considerable pressure on the “wall” between journalism and business. At *The Daily News*, a sister newspaper of the P.I. owned by Knight-Ridder, the newsroom actively pursued closer collaboration with marketing and sales departments “part[ly] out of desperation” (interview excerpt). Similar organizational restructurings took place at Flemish newspapers. Throughout the 1990s, there were experiments with different hierarchical structures and organizational models, each meant to curtail the power of the newsroom and advance the company’s business interests. The barriers that separated journalism and business eventually came down

during this period, paving the way for more interdepartmental collaboration. Our data show that all these developments propagated increased bureaucratic financial control over the news production process (Wandels et al., 2022).

By the mid-2000s, the advertising model that had supported the American newspaper business deteriorated due to competitive challenges posed by the internet. Ever since, the business has been in a prolonged state of decline. The same is true at the P.I. Some interviewees argue that the fixation on the maximization of shareholder value (i.e., a core tenet of neoliberal thought) during the years when profit margins soared (1970s–1990s) had contributed to this collapse, as investments in research and development of new business models had been sacrificed for short term profitability. Between the late 1980s and the early 2000s, multiple executive editors at P.I.—under whose supervision the newspaper had acquired national acclaim—resigned as they had become frustrated with the budgetary austerity exercised by executives. One of them was fired for resisting further cutbacks. Eventually, Knight-Ridder sold the company in 2005 at peak market value, after which the newspaper became subject to multiple ownership changes and organizational restructurings, which eventually decimated the newsroom. In Flanders, both circulation and advertising revenues have remained more stable throughout the 2000s (De Bens & Raeymaeckers, 2010). Nonetheless, increased competitive pressures have driven the media landscape toward corporate consolidation. In a tightening market, newspapers sought to survive and ensure profitability by merging, creating synergies, and cutting costs. Newspapers that had historically represented opposite perspectives on the ideological spectrum (e.g., liberalism and socialism) were incorporated into the same ownership structure. As a result, what had been a media landscape traditionally characterized by its external pluralism today is embedded in a more homogeneous ideological framework. Two major international media conglomerates now own most of the newspaper market in the Low Countries. P.I., on the other hand, is now owned by the Lenfest Foundation. This non-profit organization has rid the Inquirer of the profitability requirements demanded by Wall Street, though the mindset that was instilled in newsrooms during decades of budget cuts and financial austerity lingers on. The evolution towards a vastly different media market under the impulse of neoliberal policy and ways of thinking from the early 1980s onwards has left permanent marks on the mindset of newsrooms both in the US and Flanders: on the way they perceive audiences, make editorial decisions, and conceive of their role.

Newsroom executives such as chief editors are navigating a multitude of business models that are not always compatible with traditional journalistic interests. They are socialized within a context that encourages them to pursue active collaboration with advertising and marketing departments that provide extensive audience data upon which to base their editorial decision-making. Advertising income from newsletters, for example, requires editorial volume, which is increasingly difficult to produce due to the decimation of newsroom staff. At P.I., a “breaking news desk” was set up to achieve this marketing-driven goal. Simultaneously, the demand for high quality journalism that is more time intensive requires the newsroom to adopt a subscription model. This dual model effectively keeps high quality journalism away from the public via the paywall while simultaneously flooding the market with lower-quality content. It confirms the idea of re-imagining news as a salable consumer good available to those willing to pay (Schiller, 1989). This tension between a newsroom’s autonomy to pursue the stories they consider worth telling and limitations to the availability of these stories set by business considerations delegitimizes the public service role of the press that is still actively upheld in discourse. Additional tension is added by the increasingly sophisticated insight that audience analytics offer to newspaper executives: “It’s really important information because it tells you

for the first time what people are reading and what they're interested in. And it would be foolish for you not to look at the data, learn, and help shape coverage" (Quote 5, US).

This demonstrates how consumer-centric logic is internalized in the higher echelons of the newsroom. Set against attitudes held by chief editors merely four decades earlier, it exposes a shift within the collective consciousness of newsrooms related to audience and role perceptions. News needs to be exciting and engaging, which influences editorial choices: "I think even if they had better resources, a lot of newspapers would neglect state government, saying it's boring" (Quote 6, US).

In Flanders, a similar overall awareness of consumer value and the need for a collaborative attitude towards the company's business arm is prevalent in newsrooms today. When contemplating new editorial initiatives, chief editors take their expected market value into consideration:

If I launch an idea for a new journalistic product [e.g., a magazine or a podcast], I am mindful of the targets of our sales director. I want him to think: "Yes! Our brand revenue needs to grow another 3% this year, and this can help me achieve that." (Quote 7, Flanders)

Audience metrics have helped American and Flanders newsrooms to understand their readers in their capacity as consumers, and they put direct or indirect pressure on newsrooms to give readers what the analytics suggest they want. News stories are, as such, transformed into commodities in a marketplace of attention that is either validated via popular attention (clicks) or conversion rates (subscriptions). It suggests that, in the context of a collaborative environment between the business and journalism arms of the news organization driven by audience metrics, "public service" has increasingly come to mean "customer satisfaction." Interviewees are quick to point out that these metrics do not drive news production while simultaneously admitting that they form the basis for goals and targets used by executives to evaluate the newsroom's performance. This demonstrates the internal conflict at the heart of journalistic consciousness today:

[Key performance indicators that apply to me] have become a lot more precise. They concern average approval ratings of [our newspaper] by our readers, the number of users that have downloaded our online news app, the number of subscribers that are logged on our website, the average amount of clicks per reader....These are all part of my annual targets. (Quote 8, Flanders)

[Last week] our daily production was below the target. So then we have conversations....We encourage people...to manage their staff to increase production....We don't say "do stupid stories," right? There's an understanding there. (Quote 9, US)

The language that interviewees use conjures up the idea of the production of any other commodity. However, in the quest for increased productivity in order to hit specific targets, some of the primary democratizing functions of the press have come under considerable pressure. As news content is driven by the mechanisms of the market, we have seen the emergence of news deserts and coverage gaps in the US. Local government, in particular, has gradually escaped the public eye as news desks became smaller. As one interviewee put it, "it's just a matter of math." These recent challenges to the public service role of the press have precedents in the austerity that characterized the shareholder value maximization rationale that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Our data suggest that by the late 1990s, editorial choices at P.I. had in part become contingent on

advertising: Initiatives to increase reporting on local matters were thwarted because net advertising income from local, low-circulation supplements was lower than that of national advertisements in the main newspaper. Furthermore, budgetary austerity had more direct effects on the public service function of the press as well:

I said [to my reporter]: “Why don’t we try to send you to Afghanistan and try to find Osama Bin Laden?” But I had no money in my budget because it had been cut. So I went to the publisher and explained what I wanted to do, and why, and how much money I needed....He said to me: “Who gives a fuck about Afghanistan?”...Four months later, 9/11 happened.” (Quote 10, US).

In Flanders, a similar mindset of “news as a market good” is widespread and challenges traditional Flemish ideas of the public service role of legacy news media, albeit in different ways. Our data suggest that the ways in which Flemish newsrooms interpret values such as “autonomy” and “objectivity” have gradually transformed over time. Older generations advocate their prerogative to take a political stance and “stick your neck out” (interview excerpt) to defend certain policies. On the other hand, interviewees who are currently in the business champion the idea of “political neutrality” (conform to the “myth of neutrality” proposed by Schiller, 1973), which has translated into a new set of editorial values that incorporates the importance of reader preferences in a commodified market: “We no longer wrote about whether Belgium should be split in two or three. Whether financial legislation should be reviewed. No, we focused on questions like ‘Why are there so many traffic casualties?’” (Quote 11, Flanders).

This change in the general editorial attitude of Flemish newsrooms represents a different aspect of neoliberal hegemony, namely a tendency towards depoliticized. In the abovementioned example, traffic casualties are considered a neutral and apolitical topic that directly affects the lives of consumers and is therefore worthy of more attention as compared to the intricacies of financial legislation.

## 7. Conclusion

This article argues that comparative journalism studies can benefit from revising the sociohistorical approach that was championed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) in order to understand post-Cold War era developments of media systems. However, rather than strictly adhering to the media systems typology that they developed, we argue in favor of adopting new historical lenses. Via an exploratory qualitative analysis of two case studies (US and Flanders), we provide evidence for the viability of adopting the lens of global neoliberal hegemony toward interpreting recent developments in media markets and the collective consciousness that guides journalistic practice (doxa).

First of all, we argue that neoliberal policy has inherently transformed the media market on both sides of the Atlantic, albeit with different outcomes. In the US, which proved to be a more fertile soil for neoliberal transformation, profitable newspapers of record such as the P.I. have been in a continuous state of decline since their 1980s heyday due to budgetary austerity. Though P.I. had been a newspaper of record that boasted a newsroom of well over 600 people until the late 1990s (including foreign desks), today it is reduced to a metropolitan newspaper that lacks the human resources to cover local government adequately. Following the logic of shareholder value maximization, majority shareholder Knight-Ridder required that the P.I. reach unsustainable profitability goals while foregoing further investment in the newsroom. Eventually, Knight-Ridder sold its shares and diverted its attention to more profitable endeavors. In Flanders, where



neoliberal reforms were enacted at a slower pace, competition for advertising revenues in the newspaper market increased after the liberalization of the television market in the late 1980s. The emergence of a post-Cold War ideological consensus of neoliberal hegemony contributed to diminishing audience loyalty, which had traditionally been based on political or ideological affiliation. In a bid to win new audiences, Flemish newspapers gradually became less political and adopted the logic of markets. Economies of scale were pursued to guarantee profitability, resulting in a duopoly where newspapers from different ideological traditions are effectively owned by the same companies, eroding the local tradition of external pluralism.

Concerning the incorporation of neoliberal ideals and ways of thinking (e.g., commodification, consumerism, competition, individualism, depoliticized) into journalistic doxa, we provide evidence of an analog development in Flanders and US newsrooms' attitudes concerning audience preferences, role perceptions, and collaboration between journalism and business. Newsrooms appear to be more receptive to the idea of journalism's innate subjugation to the rules of the market and the necessity for austerity during financially dire times. Despite regional differences in how these attitudes are expressed, they align largely with the neoliberal way of thinking on both sides of the Atlantic. Audiences are reduced from citizens of a nation-state (which is in tune with the hegemonic paradigm of the welfare state) to consumers in a global (or supranational) marketplace. Freedom as a concept is subsequently reduced to the freedom of audiences to purchase news commodities in the marketplace. As a result, newsroom personnel have internalized that they need to be more aware of audience preferences in order to safeguard their competitive advantage (and survival) and perform their societal functions. In other words, interviewees from our case study are convinced by the idea that they are, in the first place, subject to the punishing hand of the market instead of any sort of professional oath (comparable to the Hippocratic oath in the medical profession). Both in the US and Flanders, it appears that the neoliberal reflex to approach news as a salable consumer commodity poses challenges to the democratizing roles of journalism. This aligns with anti-democratic tendencies that are embedded in neoliberal ideology and the adage of "consumerism trumps state." Arguably, the idea of public service itself has been transformed within the boundaries set by neoliberal hegemonic thought. In Flanders, this contributed to the depoliticized of the press, making it more akin to the American press and its values of neutrality. However, within any hegemonic framework, the concept of neutrality is contested, as it only serves to reproduce hegemonic values that have been elevated as objective truths.

We re-emphasize that this article has primarily been an exploratory effort. We have attempted to draw parallels in transatlantic media system development based on a limited selection of available data. Other themes could have also been presented (e.g., labor precarity and the value of objectivity), though they were left out due to spatial constraints. Similarly, other characteristics of the post-Cold War era could have been considered as a primary lens and would undoubtedly have generated interesting results.

### **Acknowledgments**

Nils Wandels performed the literature study, data gathering, and data analysis, and is the lead author of the article. Professor Mast and Professor Van den Bulck contributed to the conceptualization and editing of the article.

### **Funding**

The research was funded by Vrije Universiteit Brussel and Drexel University.



## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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