‘This is not who we are’:
Ethnic minority audiences and their perceptions of the media.


Section: The Barriers – The Image of Others and Stereotypes

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Abstract

This paper will examine responses to (news) media representations of ethnic minorities by members of those minorities.

International research concerning ethnic minorities and the media has focused mainly on media content, analysing how ethnic minorities are portrayed in the press and audiovisual media. One of the shortcomings in current research is the lack of knowledge about media perception, i.e. the evaluation of the media, and the attitudes towards the media of ethnic minority audiences themselves. In Europe, in particular, little attention has been paid to audience responses within ethnic minority communities (Ross, 2001).

It is important to know how ethnic minorities feel about the media, because having the sense of being fairly portrayed in the media leads to minorities feeling more included and accepted. Husband (2000), for example, emphasizes the role of the media in creating a multi-ethnic public sphere, where diverse groups can feel they are making a contribution.

This paper will focus on the results of focus groups conducted with ethnic minority audiences in Flanders (the Dutch speaking part of Belgium). The main aims of this paper are:

- to analyse ethnic minorities’ evaluations of, and attitudes towards, the Flemish news media.
- to examine the role of the media in constructing cultural identity;

The audience research was conducted in 2003-2004 by organising focus groups with people from the largest ethnic minority groups in Flanders, the Turkish and Moroccan communities. In the focus groups a relatively new research method, developed by members of the Glasgow Media Group, was used, in which participants are asked to write their own newspaper articles to accompany photographs (see for example Kitzinger, 1993; Philo, 1990, 1996).

In-depth analysis of the results of the focus groups are reported in this paper.
Introduction

Since the 1980s, academics, media producers and policy makers have been increasingly interested in the relationship between the media and ethnic minorities, and the function of the media in a multicultural society. Ethnic minorities’ representation in the media, their media use, and their level of participation in media production, are all considered as indicators of social participation and integration. Therefore research is encouraged by European and local governing bodies (Frachon & Vargaftig: 1995, ter Wal: 2002). Public broadcasters, in particular, have become particularly aware of their potential role in enhancing multicultural society; in Flanders, the establishment of the Diversity Cell by the Flemish public broadcaster VRT is evidence of this.

In this discussion the media are considered, by many researchers, as important players because of their significant role in influencing public opinion about ethnic minorities (Hall, 1995; Verstraeten, 1998; Cottle, 2000; Van Dijk, 2000).

This paper focuses on the news media perception of members of ethnic minority communities in Flanders. News is particularly relevant because of its social function: the construction of reality for people who were not present at a news event (Schlesinger, 1988). International research findings show that the news audience has a high level of trust in news content; particularly in the case of television news in which ‘real images’ are shown (Mullan, 1997). This immediately emphasizes the significance of a fair portrayal of ethnic minorities in news. Assuming that the news audience puts a high level of trust in news content, means that news content must have an impact on members of ethnic communities as well. Ethnic communities are a part of that news audience and see the same news content as everyone else. This paper attempts to examine the responses to (news) media representations of ethnic minorities by members of two different ethnic communities, and if news content influences the construction of a cultural identity.

The research findings of Gillespie (1995) in Great Britain show the significance of television news in ethnic communities. Among the ethnic communities included in Gillespie’s research, the most widely watched and discussed television genre was television news.

It is important to know how ethnic minorities feel about the media, because having the sense of being fairly portrayed in the media, leads to minorities feeling more included and accepted.
Media can help create a feeling of ‘belonging’, a feeling of being included, of being part of society. Husband (2000) for example, emphasizes the role of the media in creating a multi-ethnic public sphere, where diverse groups can feel they are making a contribution.

International research concerning ethnic minorities and the media has focused mainly on media content, analysing how ethnic minorities are portrayed in the press and audiovisual media. One of the shortcomings in research is the lack of knowledge about media perception, i.e. the evaluation of the media, and the attitudes towards the media, of ethnic minority audiences themselves. In Europe, in particular, little attention has been paid to systematic audience research within ethnic minority communities, also called diasporic audiences (Ross, 2001; Tsagarousianou, 2001).

In this paper we examine ethnic minority audiences’ perceptions of and responses to news. This research paper has to be seen in the context of the growing body of audience research, in which the ‘active audience’ is a central concept, and in which researchers examine how audiences read and respond to media texts (see for example Morley, 1980; Fiske, 1989).

The portrayal of ethnic minorities in the newspapers and television news in Flanders

To put the findings on how ethnic minorities evaluate the news in it’s context, it’s important to have an idea about how ethnic minorities are portrayed in the news.

Although explicit forms of racism in news are almost never seen today, many European and American studies have found continuous bias in the representation of ethnic minorities: negative stereotyping, broad generalizations, lack of background information, almost no attention is paid to the economical benefits of migration, and so on (see for example Blommaert & Verschueren, 1998; Gandy, 1998; Brants et al, 1998; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Van Dijk, 2000; ter Wal, 2002; Law, 2002; Devroe & Saeys, 2002).

Results of research on the portrayal of ethnic minorities in the Flemish news has mainly confirmed the international research results. Research of 2001 (Devroe & Saeys, 2002) of the Flemish newspapers shows that news about ethnic minorities is mostly related to crime, problems and conflicts, and showed a strong generalising bias. Ethnic minorities had little opportunity to express their opinion in the press. The news media frequently construct ethnic minorities as ‘Others’, using a discourse of ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’.
The relation between news content and ethnic minorities’ news evaluations

Audience reception research in different European countries shows that ethnic minority groups are mostly dissatisfied with their media image. Considering that the outcomes of research on media content keep showing bias in the representation of ethnic minority groups, this is hardly surprising. However, there is a need to examine the extent to which the complaints are related to actual media content, because research shows also that ethnic minority groups’ perceptions of media are not necessarily proportionally related to the actual media content (Ross, 2000; Poole, 2001).

The amount of research there has been done (De Aguirre et al., 1996; Ross, 2001; Poole, 2001; Tufte, 2001; Tsagarousianou, 2001; Halloran, 1998; Gillespie, 1995; Clycq, 2002) throughout different European countries - consisting of very diverse ethnic communities - has shown that there is a general feeling of unsatisfaction among ethnic minority groups about the media portrayal of minorities. Among ethnic communities in Europe there is a predominant feeling of exclusion and non- or misrepresentation. They also hold the belief that the media portrayal has an important influence on prejudices and negative attitudes towards them.

Having the feeling of being treated fairly in news and media, or at least having the feeling of being represented, helps to create a sense of belonging, or what Tufte (2001) calls ‘locality’, feeling at home somewhere.

Research Methodology

The predominant ethnic minority groups in Flanders are the Turkish and Moroccan communities; both are Muslim groups. They account for 28% of the non-Flemish population (1.4% of the Flemish population), with about 37,000 people of Turkish origin, and 48,000 people of Moroccan origin. The rest of the non-Flemish population mainly consist European Union nationalities.

In 2003 and 2004 an audience reception study was conducted to examine the responses and evaluations of Turkish and Moroccan people of the news portrayal of ethnic minorities, and the media portrayal of ethnic minority groups in general. Ten focus groups were conducted in Gent, Antwerp and Genk, cities with large concentrations of Turkish and Morrocan people. This paper
discusses eight of the ten groups. In order to find participants for the study ethnic community centres and organisations in the major cities were asked to participate, and the research was advertised on posters and in a magazine of an ethnic minority organisation. The focus groups were conducted in Dutch by myself and two students in Ma Communication Studies assisted. 48 people participated in the eight focus groups, of which 33 men and 15 women. In selecting the participants we did not look for an even number men and women: everybody who wanted to participate, was allowed to, and more men then women volunteered. 30 people had Morrocan origins, and 18 Turkish. Most participants were higher educated: 30% of them were university students, and 40% had a higher education degree.

More than half of the participants (28) indicated that their first language, the language they spoke most, was Turkish or Moroccan.

The participants were put in groups with people of their own ethnicity and age group, which meant we organised 3 Turkish focus groups and 5 Morrocan focus groups. The average age of the participants was 24. People older than 30 were hard to find and to motivate to participate. We only managed to organise one group of people between the age of 30 and 45. Possibly this can be explained because of the short history of migration in Flanders. People from the first and second generation have mostly not been in Higher Education, and many of them have difficulties with speaking Dutch. People volunteering for this kind of research are mostly higher educated people.

Only one selection criteria was used to select participants: one parent had to be born in Turkey or Morroco.

In 2003 no incentives were used to find participants. Due to difficulties in finding volunteers in 2003, we decided to give a cinema ticket to the people participating in 2004. The focus groups were tape recorded, and a written transcription of the recording was made for analysis afterwards.

Before the start of the group discussion, participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire about their media use.

In the focus groups a research method, developed by members of the Glasgow Media Group, was used, in which participants are asked to write their own newspaper articles to accompany

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1 A total of ten focus groups were conducted. Two focus groups were organised in a school, for which classes with a large number of ethnic minorities were selected. The participants here were 15-16 years old. The results for these two groups will not be reported in this paper. We addressed other topics in this group, and these young people didn’t watch news or read the newspapers as regularly and often as the other participants.
photographs (see for example Kitzinger, 1993; Philo, 1990, 1996). The assignment was added to the research because it was thought that the participant written articles might reveal certain things, which the respondents wouldn’t talk about in the group.

Participants were asked to write a newspaper article about a crisis event in November 2002 in Antwerp. A Moroccan Moslim teacher got shot by his neighbour at his parent’s house in Antwerp-Borgerhout. The Moroccan community saw the murder as a racist attack. The authorities however declared that the perpetrator was mentally ill and did not have any racist motives. As a result of the murder and the reaction of the authorities, groups of Morrocan youngsters protested in the streets. The police authorities intervened, which resulted in riots. The controversial chair of the Muslim Arabian European Liga (AEL), Abou Jahjah, was accused of encouraging ethnic minority youngsters to riot, and was arrested for fraud during the time of the crisis. The event received a lot of coverage in the Flemish news, which was followed by a whole discussion about the integration of ethnic communities in Flanders.

Thirteen diverse newspaper pictures were selected from the time of the crisis, and the participants were asked to choose a photograph, and then to write a newspaper article to accompany the photo they chose. The photos showed images of the riots in the streets, the police force, the victim’s funeral, the mourning family, and a city image of the neighbourhood.

Two or three participants were asked to form a team and write an article, as they would like to see it published. Basically they were asked to write an article about the crisis situation which can be seen as their preferred reading of the crisis. I decided to let them form small teams, to make the assignment easier for people who wouldn’t speak Dutch very well, or were not very fluent writers.

Research results

Media Consumption

The participants of these focus groups cannot be compared with the average Turkish and Moroccan population in Flanders. In this qualitative audience reception study there was a self-selection of the participants, which resulted in participants who were younger, higher educated and more news conscious than the average Turk or Moroccan in Flanders. While a lot of Turkish and Moroccan people in Flanders prefer media from the country of origin (see De Aguirre, et al, 1996), especially the older generation, our participants paid more attention to the
Flemish media. This is not necessarily a shortcoming in our research, since our main object was to find out what the opinions are held about the Flemish media, and in particular the news. However, the majority of the participants used media from the country of origin as well.

The research results confirm the results of previous research and indicate that watching television is very much a family activity in Turkish and Moroccan families (see Gillespie, 1995; De Aguirre et al., 1996). This culture of family television watching is unlike the increasingly fragmented viewing experience found more generally in ‘Western’ cultures (Gauntlett & Hill, 1999).

Consistent with previous research (Gillespie, 1995) most of our participants play the role of mediator between their parents and the Flemish news, in the sense that they translate news for their parents. This mostly occurs with special news events: news about Morocco or Turkey, or a big Belgian news item like the trial of serial killer Marc Dutroux. These young participants and their parents are switching traditional roles, in the specific situation where children are educating their parents about news events. Also news is regularly a topic of discussion within the family:

X1: We often discuss the news, especially the news about the Middle East and news topics about ethnic minorities (Male, 26, Moroccan).

X2: Yes that is normal that you discuss news topics. We do not just watch the news and then go to sleep, without talking about it (Male, 20, Moroccan).

X3: Yes, I usually discuss it with my father (Male, 17, Moroccan).

Most of the participants of the focus groups can be described as heavy news users. Quite a lot of them watch international news channels such as CNN and BBC as well as the Flemish news. Some of them watched the news of the French, Holland and The French speaking Belgian channels, and they choose these channels specifically for the reason that, according to them, ethnic minorities seem more integrated in the programming then in Flanders.

Only six (12%) participants did not read a newspaper. Most of the participants read at least two newspapers on a regular basis. When asked which newspaper they preferred, more than half said that they read one of the two Flemish quality newspapers (De Morgen or De Standaard). Only one participant preferred an ethnic minority newspaper. On average they said that they spent about half an hour a day on newspaper reading. 10 participants (22%) said they never listened to the radio news, but nearly half of the participants said that they listened to the radio news at least once a day.
Most participants said that they watched two hours of television a day on average. When asked about their favourite television program more than half mentioned a news or current affairs program, which suggests that indeed they are more news oriented than average. Only one participant did not watch the television news and most of them watch the news on one of the public channels every day. To get news or to be informed about current affairs the most popular media among the participants were television, newspapers, and also the internet.

**Media from the country of origin and multicultural programs aimed at ethnic minorities**

In Flanders the supply of ethnic community media/diasporic media is very limited. Many Turkish and Moroccan families, however, own a satellite dish by which they receive the Arabian, Morrocan and Turkish channels. Newspapers from those countries are available as well, and of course there is the internet on which Morrocan and Turkish websites can be consulted. In this study those media are considered as ‘media from the country of origin’.

As mentioned before most of the participants used those media from the country of origin, of which satellite television from Turkey or Morocco is the most popular media from the country of origin source. Ethnic newspapers were only consulted now and then. They do say that when they watch those television channels it is mostly because their parents are watching and they watch it together with them. The older generation of Turkish and Moroccan immigrants have more difficulties with Dutch, and for that reason prefer to watch their own television channels. When given the choice, when their parents are not at home for example, most of our participants preferred the Flemish television channels. Although with special news events (special news from Turkey or Morocco, or special international news events like 9-11) they choose to watch Turkish (mostly TRT, the Turkish public broadcaster) or Arabian (mostly Al Jazeera) news as well, because, according to the participants, those media give another point of view than most Western media. The reporting of the Iraq war and of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict was often mentioned as an illustration of this. Another reason for consumption of media from the country of origin was to stay in touch with the culture and country of origin. Some participants pointed out that they felt they do not have enough knowledge of that culture. For that reason using those media helps elaborate that cultural knowledge and contact with the country of origin. This confirms the research results of Tsagarousianou (2001) who found that

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2 Media produced by and for ethnic minorities in the ‘host’ country
the reason for media from the country of origin use was reducing the psychological distance
with their country or origin.

There was a distinction here between the Turkish and Moroccan participants. Due to language
difficulties many more Turkish than Moroccan participants used media from the country of
origin. The Arabic used on Al Jazeera is different from the Arabic most Flemish Moroccans
speak, therefore it is sometimes quite hard for them to understand what is said in the Moroccan
media. The Turkish people have less or no language difficulties, which probably explains why
more Turkish people use their own media.

However they were very critical towards the quality of those media. They believed that there is
too much propaganda on some Turkish and Arabic channels and that some of those media do
not meet the ‘high standards’ of Western broadcasters, and are too biased.

These findings show a negotiation between the Flemish media consumption and the Media from
the country of origin consumption. Although older generations are mostly oriented towards
media from the country of origin, their children are using both and criticise the Flemish media
as well as the Media from the country of origin. In some families conflicts arose about the
choice of media, since most participants preferred Flemish channels. In that sense, there is a
clear distinction between the older and younger generation, which confirms other research
findings on media use of ethnic communities (Gillespie, 1995; Hargreaves & Mahdjoub, 1997;
Tufte, 2001).

In the nineties the Flemish public broadcaster did provide multicultural programs3 aimed at an
ethnic audience as well as a Flemish audience. The programs were cancelled due to low
viewing numbers.

A multicultural program was considered by participants to be useful, especially to educate the
Flemish audience about Muslim culture, and to encourage the older generation of Turkish and
Moroccan people to watch Flemish media: to educate the older generation in the Dutch
language and Belgian culture. For that reason subtitling and using Arabic and Turkish is seen as
necessary in a multicultural program.

Participants believed that prejudice against ethnic minorites is based on a lack of knowledge
about Muslim culture, therefore a multicultural program should educate the Flemish audience
and improve their knowledge, in order to diminish racism and prejudices.

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3 First there was Babel, later on Couleur Locale. The programs were mainly made by Moroccan and Turkish
people.
People have the wrong idea about us. They think Moroccans are thieves. It would be useful to show in a program like that how we live: the atmosphere in our homes, information about the Ramadan, basically more information about us and our culture (Male, 19, Moroccan).

The participants felt that non- or misrepresentation of ethnic minorities in mainstream programming is another important reason to introduce a multicultural program. It is clear that the ethnic viewers felt a need to be represented in the media. The Holland public broadcaster provides airtime for the Holland Muslim broadcaster, and nearly all of the participants, Turkish as well as Moroccan watch the programs of that broadcaster at a regular basis.

Belgian television does not reflect the multicultural population at all. Belgian soaps do not have any Moroccan characters (Male, 25, Moroccan).

I like watching the programs on the Holland Public Channel. There is a clear distinction between the Holland and Belgian programs. In Holland you do see ethnic minorities on television, while here in Flanders we see them rarely, and only when something bad has happened (Female, 25, Moroccan).

Given the choice between integration of ethnic minorities in the existing programs or the introduction of multicultural programs, most participants preferred the first option. However both options received a positive evaluation.

Though not opposing to it, the participants seemed less interested in diasporic media. They thought that it would isolate their communities more. They pointed out the diversity of the different ethnic communities and believed that it would be hard to provide media for all those different communities.

Despite the fact that they were not sure whether ethnic community media would be useful, the participants did regularly watch the Holland Muslim Broadcaster. It seems they saw and were concerned about the danger of being isolated by diasporic media, but nevertheless found pleasure in consuming those media. Possibly this is related with their feeling of not being represented in the mainstream media. One group of participants were contributors for the Flemish multicultural website Kif Kif, which aims to provide an alternative view on the news. They feel the Flemish media are mainly ‘White and racist media’, and that there is a current need of providing an alternative view of ethnic minorities.

The rise of diasporic media around the world confirms that ethnic communities do not see themselves represented, and create their own media in order to supply an alternative (Ross, 2001; Cottle, 2000). Those media help to create what Husband (2000) calls a multi-ethnic
public sphere, where diverse groups can feel they are making a contribution, and feel they are being represented.

Consumption of media from the country of origin as well as diasporic media raises questions about whether those media are not encouraging isolation of ethnic communities, a concern which not only exists within general society but also within the ethnic communities themselves. However, our findings along with the different studies on diasporic audiences (Gillespie, 1995; Tufte, 2001; Hargreaves & Mahdjoub, 1997) indicate that those media are used along with media from the residing country, and that ethnic and diasporic media consumption is mostly dependent on generational factors. As mentioned before the findings of this study indicate that the younger generations even prefer the programs of the residing country. In that sense there is a negotiation between the two cultures. Echchaibi (2002:40) argues that diasporic media often have been viewed as a means through which information of interest can be exchanged, or a means for preserving moribund cultures. According to Echchaibi however, by seeing these media merely through a communitarian logic of bonding, we are failing to understand their instrumental role in helping redefine and challenge the identity and boundaries of a diasporic community.

**Evaluations and perceptions of the media and the news**

There was a general feeling of disappointment about the way ethnic minorities are portrayed in the media. Many respondents felt that their ethnic group was almost never represented in fiction series, soaps, talkshows, game-shows, reality TV, or other entertainment genres. They held the belief that when they are represented, it is usually a misrepresentation which emphasizes stereotypes about their culture, and that they are mostly portrayed in a negative way.

There are two Moroccan characters in Thuis (Flemish soap). When the teenage daughter has a boyfriend in the soap, the father is strongly opposed to the relationship. But that is such a stereotype! I’m sure there are Belgian fathers as well who oppose their daughter having a boyfriend (Male, 20 Moroccan).

Many respondents said that they feel excluded and that the society pictured in the media is not at all the multicultural society they want to see. Overall, they did not feel that they are being taken seriously as an audience, or even as members of society. Some participants even said they
had lost hope in the mainstream media, and did not believe an effort was being made to show diversity.

We are equal citizens in this country. We have been here for more than 40 years, that's not a new thing, is it? (Female, 23, Moroccan)

There should be more ethnic minorities on television. Television should reflect a multicultural society and not a biased image of what Belgian society looked like in the sixties (Male, 25, Moroccan).

When talking about news representations, the majority were even more dissatisfied. The observations about news representation made by the respondents are very similar to research findings from content analyses. Their complaints are indeed related to the content of media products, but the relation between the two is not always in proportion. It might be very difficult to change their opinions once they are formed. Poole (2001) found evidence in her research with British Muslims that quite an amount of her participants misread media texts, and that they, despite having clear theories about the hostility of the media, could only provide general examples of this. Ross (2000: 141) argues that viewers have particular beliefs about television content and continue to hold those beliefs despite actual changes and shifts in programme content and orientation.

The participants argued that there is only coverage about ethnic communities when something bad happens, that ethnic minorities are mostly related with crime in the news, and that there is almost never any positive news about ethnic minorities. In particular they were annoyed when nationality is mentioned in crime related reporting.

I can be terribly annoyed about that! For example, with a Belgian family drama, like a father shoots his children then the headline of the article will be ‘Father murders children’, but when exactly the same thing happens in a Moroccan family, then they mention the ethnicity and the headline will be: ‘Moroccan father murders children’ or something (Male, 20, Moroccan).

When I open my newspaper and I see an article about ethnic minorities I think ‘what is it now again about us’? Whenever you see an article about ethnic minorities it’s about burglary, rape, and stuff like that. (Female, 20, Turkish)

It was striking that in different focus groups the same example was given of the Belgian/Morrocan long distance runner Mohammed Mourhit, to illustrate the way news media
play with (not) mentioning the ethnicity of a news actor. When Mourhit was doing well and won a lot of competitions it was reported that he was Belgian. Some time after his success he got caught with drugs. In the reporting about the drugs offence he was said to be Moroccan.

Participants often complained that when ethnic minorities are interviewed, it is usually in connection with ‘ethnic minority’ themes, such as integration, Islam, the head scarf, the position of women in muslim culture, etc.

There was unhappiness about the stereotypical portrayal of ethnic minorities as being bad in Dutch, women wearing headscarfs, …. 

I can imagine if you are a camera reporter and you have to shoot footage from ethnic minorities to illustrate a news topic, you just go to the local immigrant neighbourhood and film a woman with a headscarf. This way nobody can be mistaken that you are talking about ethnic minorities. But that woman is not representative for ethnic minorities. (Male, 29, Turkish)

Participants were strongly opposes to the association they believed the news media makes between Islam and terrorism. They did think that news reporting about Islam and terrorism, and which links those two things, has an important impact on how they get judged. Consistent with other research (Ross, 2000; Poole, 2001) the participants believed that news coverage is responsible for prejudices against them.

I was studying for my exams on the 11th of September, when I heard the news about the crashing of the Twin Towers in New York. When I heard I was hoping so much that the perpetrators wouldn’t be Muslims, because I knew the people would say: you see, all Muslims are fundamentalists (Male, 26, Moroccan).

Another topic respondents believed is being over reported and creates a wrong image of Muslim culture is the position of women: women being subordinate to men. They felt it is an image that does not reflect reality at all.

The participants criticized the fact that diversity within and between the different ethnic communities is ignored. Respondents pointed out that there are significant differences between, for example, the Turkish and Moroccan communities. In addition there is much diversity in opinions and life styles within one community already. They are opposed to being treated as one homegenous diasporic group. The complaint was made that when a member of a community is interviewed about a topic, those statements are considered to be the opinion of the whole community. The respondents were asked if they would collaborate with an interview. Most of them said they would give interviews, some of them had already done so in the past.
However, most of them would only do it on the condition that they would not have to talk about immigrant related themes. Some of them were more reserved, because they didn’t want to make statements, which would afterwards be presented as the opinion of the whole ethnic community.

Most inaccurate information is given about Islam and Muslim culture, according to the participants.

Last week, during the Sacrifice Feast I saw a cartoon in De Morgen (Flemish quality newspaper), on which you saw a wall against which sheep were sacrificed. The title of the cartoon was: End of the Ramadan. But that has got nothing to do with it! There is no relation between the Sacrifice Feast and the Ramadan (Female, 31, Turkish).

I find it ridiculous that often things are said about Muslims, which Muslims know themselves is incorrect. Belgians just presume that the information they get about Islam is correct, which obviously it isn’t. I know that the media check their information, but they should check their information about religion more than what they do now (Male, 25, Moroccan).

Role models in the media

Many respondents said that there is a lack of positive role models in the media. It is believed that there are quite a lot of experts with an ethnic minority background, who could be interviewed about all kinds of topics, and never get the chance to do so. Participants called for more ethnic minority experts, actors, people in the audience of all kinds of shows in order to see more diversity and have positive role models. When asked if there is anyone with an ethnic minority background they look up to, they give examples of some politicians and journalists, but emphasize that they are a very small number.

When there is for example a news item about cancer, they might just as well interview a Turkish doctor or professor, instead of a Flemish one (Male, 26, Moroccan).

Participants said that there should be more journalists with an ethnic minority background. They believed that it might influence the audience when they see more ethnic minority journalists, and that they might provide role models for young people. Some respondents also believed that ethnic minority journalists would give another perspective on immigrant related news. On the other hand, most of them do not believe in a system of quotas, where a certain percentage of
The journalists should be from an ethnic minority background, if we want to see changes in content. They are much better placed to write about the failure of the integration policy or about the social discrimination of minorities, than for example a West-Flemish journalist who has never had any direct contact with minorities (Male, 26, Moroccan).

However, they did not think that only ethnic minority journalists can be accurate reporters about ethnic minorities. They believed that if Flemish journalists would have a better knowledge about Muslim culture, and if more attention would be paid to reporting on ethnic minorities in the training of journalists, content would get better.

The writing exercise

As mentioned before the participants were asked to write an article, as they would like to see it published, about the murder of the school teacher Mohammed Achrak in Borgerhout. They wrote the article in groups consisting of two or three persons. Some of them found it hard to write the article. In particular the respondents of the focus groups conducted in 2004 found it difficult, because they did not always remember exactly what happened.

The respondents were also asked what they thougt about the news reporting about the murder, and the riots following. Most of them were very unhappy about the fact that right after the murder it was said that the killer was mentally ill, and had no racist motives. They do believe that this was a racist murder; and they believe the media should have focussed much more on the racist motives behind the murder and the grieve of the family. This is in contradiction with the findings of Gillespie (1995) who asked the opinion of young South-Asians about the murder on a South-Asian man by a young white man. In the media the murder was covered as being a racist murder. Most young people in Gillespie’s research remained sceptical or ambivalent about the racist motivation behind the murder, and preferred to think of the killer as a ‘madman’.

The participants in our research believed that the news media focussed too much on the riots in the streets. The news media were criticised for not being neutral, and over reporting the
violence, and the role of Abu Jahjah, the chair of AEL (Arabian European League), in the riots. Their complaints about the news reporting are reflected in the articles they wrote.

The most popular pictures chosen to write an article about were: the pictures of the riots on which you see the police forces in combat uniform (picture 15 and 24, chosen six times) a picture of the funeral ritual (picture 12, chosen four times), and a picture of the press conference on which you see the brother of the victim together with the mair of Antwerp (picture 2, chosen three times).

In the articles written about the pictures on which you see the police forces, the respondents often write that the massive amount of police men provoked the riots. They think that the police force being present was not at all in proportion with the amount of young people who were protesting in the streets. The amount of police forces in the streets is seen as a provocation and partly blamed for the riots.

Accompanied with the photo of the funeral ritual on which you see that people are carrying the coffin above their heads, down the streets, the respondents wrote articles in which the emphasis is put on the grieve, and the solidarity of the Moroccan community with the victim and his family. This is what some participants who live in Borgerhout, the place where the riots took place, said about the solidarity after the murder:

X4: Everybody was sympathising with the family (Male, 20, Moroccan).
X5: Yes, everybody from the neighbourhood (Male, 26, Moroccan).
X4: For once, we were one (Male, 20, Moroccan).

Despite the fact that the focusgroups were conducted a year and half later, these participants can still recall very well what happened and show more emotional alliance with the event than respondents from other focus groups. Which of course is normal since they were living in the neighbourhood where everything happened. They are most critical as well for the media, and show a lot of distrust in news reporting about the Moroccan community. They identify strongly with the group of Muslims. One participant in the group said that the victim Mohammed Achrak was ‘the first Muslim Martyr in Antwerp. In one of the articles written by that group of participants we could read the following (they chose the funereral picture):

The present Muslim brothers and sisters shouted ‘Allahu Akbar’ to say goodbye to the victim. The loss was massive, and you could read the emotions on all the faces present.
In particular the use of the words ‘Muslim brothers and sisters’ suggests that the writers of this article strongly identify with the Muslim Community.

The photo about the press conference showing the brother of the victim and the mair of Antwerp was quite popular as well. Some respondents chose it because they found it the most neutral picture, others chose it because they wanted to point out the dignified reaction of the brother of the victim, who was asking the Moroccan community to stay calm and to have peaceful demonstrations in the streets.

A lot of articles mention that the victim, Mohammed Achrak, was an Islam teacher. Some of them pointed out that his role as a teacher was just as important as his ethnicity.

In about half of the written articles, racism is mentioned as a possible motive for the murder. Most respondents were annoyed that in the news reporting just as much attention was paid to the riots as was to the murder of Achrak.

**Cultural identity**

Gandy (1998: 48) argues that not everyone who accepts their classification as a member of a racial group shares the same level of comfort or ease with that assignment. Individuals will differ in the extent of their attachment or identification with the group.

The findings of the present study do indeed suggest that the participants differed in their identification with the racial group they belonged to. This could clearly be seen after linguistic analysis of the focus group conversations, in the way the participants talked about the ‘us’ and ‘them’ groups. Some respondents were using the words ‘us’ and ‘we’, when referring to ethnic minority groups represented in the media. Those respondents also showed most dissatisfaction with these portrayals. Other respondents, and those were mostly children from mixed couples, spoke about ‘they’ and ‘them’, and were unhappy, but more nuanced in their views, about the representation of ethnic minorities in the media.

A young woman described the reaction of herself and her family to the murder of Mohammed Achrak, in which she talks about ‘our culture’:
My family went to see the parents of Mohammed after the murder. That is what our culture is like. Many young people went to the family to share their grief. And many more, men and women, went praying in the mosque. Because that is our culture (Female, 23, Moroccan).

Another respondent of a mixed couple, in a different focus group, when asked about what she thought about the representation of ethnic minorities, answered the following:

Sometimes they are positively portrayed, sometimes negative. However, when it is negative news the emphasis is put on the fact that they are Moroccan (Female, 21, Moroccan).

In the group discussion this young woman spoke about ‘they’ and ‘them’, when referring to Moroccan people, clearly distinguishing herself from the group of Moroccans who are reported on in the media.

The young participants, most of them born in Belgium, feel that they belong to two cultures, and identify with both, Flemish culture as well as Moroccan or Turkish culture. Some participants felt more connected with Flemish culture, others with the Moroccan or Turkish culture. When looking at their media consumption, the negotiation between the two cultures is obvious as well. Diasporic subjects usually resist singular belonging, and take new alternative positions of identification (Echaibi, 2002: 38). Most of them feel as much Belgian or Flemish, as they feel Moroccan or Turkish.

Self-esteem is an important part of our identity or self-concept. What we think about ourselves has to do with ‘other-directedness: what we believe others think about us (Gandy, 1998: 58), which varies to a greater or lesser degree, depending upon aspects of personality. The media play an important role in ‘other-directedness’. The media provide us with the opinions of ‘others’ about the groups we belong to. The way ethnic minorities are portrayed in the media has an important influence on how ethnic minorities believe other social groups think about them.

Our participants feel very unhappy with the way they are represented in the media. Of course, those feelings of unhappiness will be influenced by the extent to which they feel that they belong to the group. As we argued before, not every respondent experienced a similar amount of belonging. Most respondents feel that Muslims in particular get very negative associations in the media. As part of the Muslim group they feel judged, and are most unhappy and disappointed about that. Some of them refuse to read articles or watch news items about ethnic
minorities, because it makes them feel unhappy; some of them take it personally, and are angry about it. They find the reporting about Muslims mostly upsetting.

**Conclusion**

In this paper we examined the responses of ethnic minorities to (news) media representations and the role of the media in constructing cultural identity. Our results showed that the participants used Flemish media as well as media from their country of origin, though the latter was mostly when they watched television together with the family, or when they wanted to see another point of view on important international news events. Our results indicate that, compared with ‘Western’ cultures, television viewing is more a family activity in Turkish and Moroccan families.

Regarding news, young people are mediating between their parents and the Flemish news, and are switching traditional roles, in the sense that children are educating their parents about specific news events. The choice of media consumption from the country of origin or diasporic media seems mostly, though not entirely, dependent on generational factors: the younger generations were more oriented towards Flemish media, while the older generation preferred media from the country of origin.

The participants were very disappointed about the representation of ethnic minorities in the Flemish media, and especially about news representations. Overall the respondents felt excluded and not taken seriously as an audience. In the media they did not see the multicultural society that they would like to see. There were complaints about non- or misrepresentation. The participants were mostly discontented about the way Muslims were portrayed and often connected with terrorism. They felt that the news regularly reported incorrectly about Islam and religious practices, and that ethnic minorities were mostly connected with crime. The participants believed that the diversity within and between the different ethnic communities is ignored.

They also felt that there was a lack of positive role models for ethnic minorities in the media, and thought that more ethnic minority journalists could influence news content in a positive way.

In contrast with the findings of Gillespie (1995), the findings of the writing exercise about Borgerhout showed that the participants were opposed to racism being dismissed too quickly as a motive for an interracial murder. Our respondents *did* want reporting about racism.
Regarding the construction of cultural identity, our findings showed that our participants differed in their identification with the racial group they belonged to. This was most obvious for children of mixed couples, but participants who did not have parents of mixed race also differed in their feelings regarding cultural identity. Most of our respondents identify with as well Flemish/Belgian culture as with Turkish or Moroccan culture.

Our findings showed that the extent of cultural identification is connected with the extent the participants were dissatisfied with the media representation of ethnic minorities. Since self-esteem is an integral part of identity, and self-esteem is influenced by what others think about us, and is thus influenced by how we get represented in the media, we can only assume that a negative media portrayal influences – along with other factors – the construction of a cultural identity.

To summarize, our respondents were very much disappointed in the media, and the news media especially. Some participants believed in the supply of alternatives by diasporic media, in order to see themselves represented more fairly, and to express their opinions.

**Discussion**

There are debates (see Gunaratnam, 2003; Ross, 2000) in both qualitative and quantative cross-cultural research about interracial interviewing and the problem of being of another ethnicity than the research subjects: in my case specifically being a white researcher with Turkish and Moroccan focus group participants. Sometimes I indeed felt that some participants saw me as being ‘Other’, mostly expressed in the way they spoke to me. However, Ross (2000) and Gunaratnam (2003), argue that identical matching of researcher and research subjects is not a solution. If we see race as another social variable such as gender, age, education, etc, then there is no need to identically match; but there is a need to be alert, as a researcher, for the possible reactions of the research subjects on a researcher of another race.

It is necessary to further analyse the extent to which the complaints about media representations of ethnic minorities are connected with the actual media content. It would be interesting if future research tried to find the connection, and if changes in content are indeed perceived as such by ethnic minorities.
Further analysis needs to be done on the results of the writing exercise about Borgerhout. The results should be compared with the actual news reporting about the murder.

Also future research will pay more attention to the role of media portrayal in the construction of cultural identity.
References


