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The Belgium Media Industry in the Context of Multilingualism Language, Community and Cultural Identity

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“If you turn on the TV at 7:00 in the evening, you will receive evening news in Dutch. Half an hour later, at 7:30 p.m., there is another evening news program broadcast in French. What’s more – the two versions are almost different, as if you are living in two countries. This is how Belgium works.”

Quoting the presentation given by Alexander Homann, the director of the Representation of the German-speaking Community in Brussels, it seems astonishing (to some extent unimaginable) for us to conceive a country like this. Straddling the boundary between Germanic and Latin Europe, Belgium is deemed as the real ethnic melting pot and the crossroads of Europe. Actually, there are three rather than two official languages in Belgium: Dutch, French and German. As the data shows, the Flemish make up about 58 percent of the population and speak a form of Dutch, while 41 percent are French-speakers. Approximately, only a small amount of people mainly distributed in the Walloon Region, which accounted comprise about 1 percent of the population, speak German.¹

Then here come the questions. How does Belgium avoid ethnic and regional conflicts to achieve relative harmony among all the groups? What is the media industry like under such a multilingual environment? How does the German-speaking community represent their culture and values as well as avoid being assimilated into the majority groups? What kind of institutions help proceed this process and what kind of role do these institutions, such as minority language media, play in the whole Belgian society?

An Overview of the History: Federalism, Autonomy and the Media Market Structure

Cormack made clear several points in his investigation into minority language media and two of them should be repeated here. ‘1) ‘that in any discussion of minority language media careful attention needs to be given to the specific context’; 2) ‘that central to any discussion of these media must be the consideration of the political environment’ (Cormack, 1998). Historical perspective is definitely one of the most useful angles from which we can learn to explain the

¹ <http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/economies/Europe/Belgium.html>

differences and understand what is going on in Europe.

Dating back to its history, Belgium has amended the constitution many times since the 1970s, due to its domestic financial crisis and national language conflicts. After restructuring the economic and language policies, Belgium is currently in a relatively stable period. The Belgian federalism was intended to be based on linguistic differences. Under the federal government, three administrative regions and three language communities were established primarily as one of the solutions to ease the tension between the Dutch-speaking Flemings and the French-speaking Walloons. The regions and the communities each have their own parliament (called council), and their own government. The real power is in the hands of the local government and each region has its own characteristics. To be more specific, the regional government takes the responsibility of public services in land and property, as well as contacts and cooperation issues among different regions. On the other hand, the language communities enjoy autonomy in culture, education, radio and television, health care, welfare, science and technology, use of languages and international relations concerning all these areas, as well as in cooperation between the communities in cultural, educational and individual-related matters (Stefan Wolff, 2000). Essentially, the German-speaking Community, established in 1970, is a political independent entity – a small state within the Belgian federal system (The German-speaking Community, 2006) that has independent parliament and government.

The wide-ranging sovereign powers of the community are reflected in the media industry. Overall, the media market is divided into two parts according to the differences in cultures. The process of ownership concentration that started in the 1960s has resulted in a lower number of newspapers and it has also led to a decrease in the number of independent newspaper. Currently, there are 23 newspapers in Belgium. In Flanders the market is controlled by three groups – Corelio Media, De Persgroep and Concentra; while the French-speaking Walloon region is dominated by Rossel and IPM. This is the situation of the newspaper market. (Els de Bens, 2007)

As for the radio market, with the law in 1930, the Public Service Broadcasting Institution was founded. With the financial support by a license fee at the beginning, commercial advertising was not allowed in the radio program. In 1998, there were three different types of radio stations: local radio, city radio and regional radio. The year 2001 was big for private radio. Q-Music, owned by the VMMa (a national commercial broadcaster), and 4FM, owned by Think Media, were granted national broadcasting licenses. Up Until then, the public broadcaster had held sway over the market with a share of 85 percent. In the years that followed, Q-Music acquired the 4FM license and the PSB saw its market share shrink to 61.2 percent in 2007. (Karin Raeymaeckers, 2009)

The first Belgian television broadcasts aired in 1953. In 1960, the separation between Flemish and Walloon public broadcasters was made possible as Flanders got the Belgische Radio and Televisie (BRT) and Wallonia could watch and listen to the Radio Télévision Belge Francophone (RTBF). The broadcasters continued to share some facilities. Both could be characterized by a rather strong degree of politicization: the presence of political parties on the board of governors of the PSB was institutionalized from the start. (Karin Raeymaeckers, 2009)

Influenced by new media, media started to converge in Belgium several years ago. Take one of the pioneers, De Tijd, as an example. In May 2010, the paid-version of De Tijd was put online with around 150,000 daily visits. De Tijd also provided mobile terminal services.² Currently, most of the Belgian media have their online version. Through the website “pressbanking”, readers can pay to look through all national newspapers in Belgium.

What remains interesting, complicated but widely accepted by Belgian is that according to Mr. Homann, there is indeed no bilingual media in Belgium even in today’s unobstructed networked environment. Just as he said, “Any form of the media, the newspapers and magazines, the radio station, all is single-language media. The Dutch-speaking Flemings don’t speak French, vice versa. The result is, there would be no market for bilingual media.”

Development of Minority Language Media in Belgium, The Grenz-Echo and BRF

However, the story does not come to an end there. In addition to the Flemish and the Walloon’s media, the development of the minority language media in Belgium should by no means be ignored. For better understanding, let’s first take a glimpse of the minority language media.

Minority language media is one of the media forms existing particularly in Europe, besides in some other regions and countries across the world. As the minority of the population of a territory, people try their best to establish their own newspapers, magazines, radios, TV stations, the website, etc. It is increasingly believed that through the media, groups and social classes shape their image, the meaning of their lives and their appraisal of who are unlike them (Cohen & Yong, 1981).

In comparison, the case in China tells a completely different story. Though China is also a multi-ethnic country, in fact, there is a lack of minority language media to let the voices of national minorities heard. Instead, what China has is rather the regional media based on the geographic borders, for example, the Tibet Television Channel broadcast in the Tibetan language. All regional television stations are more or less regulated by SARFT (State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television), which is essentially administered by the Party and the central authority.

Here in Belgium, the minority language media play an important role in the community. In simple terms, a paper agency and a radio station constitute the main parts of German-speaking media market. In June 1927, the first edition of the daily newspaper, the Grenz-Echo, was published with the subtitle "Christian institution to promote the economic interests of neubelgischen areas ". As a Christian daily newspaper, it claimed to be “politically independent and liberal”. The Grenz-Echo used to be banned because of its political standpoint against Nazism in 1930s before it was republished after the war. Today, the news of the Grenz-Echo is divided into domestic and global news, including social politics, media culture, commercial finance, global travel, sports, arts and entertainment, etc. At present, the Grenz-Echo is published six days per week and its

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_Tijd#cite_note-7

Kommentar [b1]: This part is written by myself, therefore no sources could be added.

circulation has reached over 11,000 copies per day.³

Apart from the newspaper, the community also has its own electronic media. For instance, German-speakers in Belgium have their own radio station. In 1945, the French radio station, RTB, broadcast several hours a day in German. Eupen acquired its own station in 1960, and in 1977, the German Community was granted an independent public service radio center BRF (Belgisches Rundfunk – und Fernsehzentrum) which broadcast in German 24 hours a day. (Stefan Wolff, 2000) From the stand to the content, BRF includes news (headlines, comment, regional, national, internationally, press review, sports), service (weather, traffic, counselor, and live stream), culture (music, cinema, books, art, media), society (country & people, stars & scene), BRF1 (program structure, playlist, BRF news, chansons songs and folk, forum, sweepstakes at BRF1, hit-parade, jazz time) and BRF2 (program structure, playlist, sweepstakes at BRF2, Christ for us today, faith and church, dialect).⁴

In terms of the television station, although there is no German language television service in Belgium, it is of course possible for German-speakers to receive German television programs, as well as Dutch and Luxemburgian transmissions. On the whole, the community is very well served in this respect (Stefan Wolff, 2000).

“Multi-lingual Country, Monolingual Region” Cultural Identity and the Role of the media

In Chen L.D.’s article, some features of the media industry development of Belgium were put forward. From her point of view, the media industry began early in Belgium, but at a very slow speed. And it fell behind others until Belgium’s independence. The close connection between politics and media industry can be traced in its history.

Owing to the political process, media activities of the three languages coexist simultaneously in today’s Belgium. From a national perspective, the media industry development shows a rather balanced, peaceful pattern. However, in different language communities, the media each set up its own systems, showing a fragmented state on the whole. For the audience, the media they get in touch with is highly consistent with their first language. All these result in a multi-lingual country with monolingual regions. Meanwhile, Belgian media industry is facing the impact of external media. (Chen L.D, 2013)

Expressing his own pride in the ethnic/political/cultural compromise in Belgium, Mr. Homann said, “If you ask a French, he’s always proud to be French. But we’re just HAPPY to be Belgium”. The phrase above referring to “Multi-lingual Country, Monolingual Region”, somehow explains the delicate relationship between the German-speaking community and the other two large communities:

“Belgian Germans can well count themselves as lucky that they live in a country where two such

³ <http://www.grenzecho.be/Die-Zeitung.aspx>

⁴ <http://brf.be/>

large linguistic communities (Flemish and Walloon) have been striving to find an acceptable modus vivendi. Had they found themselves living in an otherwise monolingual state, their linguistic and cultural aspirations may well not have been respected to the degree that they have been. Rather than suffering peripheral damage from the central struggle, they have been beneficiaries of it.” (Stefan Wolff, 2000)

Under such circumstances, the privately owned Grenz-Echo plays an important role not only in the German-speaking Community but also in the entire Belgian state. The principle mission of the Grenz-Echo is to ensure certain basic media needs, to inform people of what happen in the Germany-speaking Community and in the whole world. As the only German-language daily newspaper, it has been regarded as the “mouthpiece” of the German-speaking population of Belgium. In a sense, BRF does exactly the same work. Minority language media provides an opportunity to respect the right of the region’s citizens to news in their own language. Through these media platforms, the Germany-speaking Community is able to increase self-esteem, combat negative images from time to time, achieve greater cohesiveness such as some political influence and finally establish a culturally collective identity.

The other side: Isolation and Centrifugation?

Balance Between Self-esteem and Cross-cultural Communication

There are still critical voices about the media market in Belgium. The most intense discussion is concentrating on the identity awareness of the Belgian people. During the process of formulating and promoting language/culture/media policy, each language community, considering their interests, intends to emphasize their own community culture rather than the culture of Belgium as a nation state (in fact, this culture has not yet been fully formed) (Lorwin, 1972). Nowadays, “Belgian” is increasingly perceived as a federal term referring merely to one’s nationality, not one’s cultural identity (Stefan Wolff, 2000).

The establishment of identities is always linked to the media performances. As sources of funding remain extremely vital to media, newspapers and radios can only receive financial support after they get a number of stable audiences. As people would seldom enjoy media contents in another language, it is pretty tough to open up a bilingual language media market in the Belgian society. Not only the audience, but most correspondents also speak and write just in certain language. Even if some have a good grasp of another language, they just write in their mother language. Therefore, journalists have different approaches to interview, report and broadcast, which in the end lead to different versions towards the same news event: the Flemish have Dutch version, the Walloon produce their French one and the Germans create the third. Furthermore, they even choose different topics for their front page. That’s how fragmented journalism has formed with the combined decisions of media producers and audiences. News reports are the first drafts of the history, so it can be imagined that over time, Belgian might have opposite descriptions, comments and attitudes towards the history they see and experience, and the stereotype will be delivered and dissimilated from generation to generation.

Some researchers have observed the tendency of centrifugal doctrine in Belgium and have

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warned that it would hinder the formation of the national culture (Lorwin, 1972), which might eventually result in secession. Declaring “Community Spirit”, Belgian people refuse to learn to speak another official language. Mr. Homann introduced that the young generation prefer to choose Spanish as their second language in universities instead of Dutch, French or German. Flemish and Walloon students study in the same university, but they can hardly develop a harmonious, qualitative friendship with less and less cross-cultural communication. On the contrary, Belgian-Germans become the group with strongest language skills – because they are the minorities, they realize that they have to learn other languages to improve their own status. “We have to do so,” said Mr. Homann, “If we cannot speak French, we cannot even go to the supermarket. Our territory is so tiny that with a few steps you will accidentally go to the French Quarter.”





A Visit to the German-speaking Community, Brussels Excursion, 4 Nov, 2014 (taken by Yihan Huang)

Another problem lies in the nepotism between politics and the minority language media. “Not just the cultural and entertainment needs but also the political needs of minority communities must be considered if minority language media are to be assessed and compared (Cormack, 1998).” As the official website Media (of The German-speaking Community) claimed, a further responsibility of the German-speaking Community is to raise media awareness and develop competence by making new media accessible to all and by facilitating a critical professional and consumer relationship to media structure and content. In a way, minority language media has to be closely linked to the politics in order to survive and thrive. In turn, this will more or less influence their standpoints as well as the political propositions of the media.

Suggestions for Further Observation

Now we can answer questions raised at the beginning of the blog. Fragmented politics in Belgium offers a full range of respect to different communities (especially in cultural dimension) and avoids ethnic and regional conflicts to the maximum extent. Media industry reflects a similar situation with the political structure. Through the minority language media, the German-speaking people are able to represent their culture as well as their values and avoid the integration into majority groups. Nevertheless, in today’s information age with the rapid expansion of new media technology as well as social media, to what extent can the traditional minority language media achieve their goals still needs to be put into further inspection.

At the same time, the exceeding regional/cultural identities will result in the isolation among regions and the disappearing of national community. Stefan Melton commented the media performance during the European Cup in 2000. His conclusion reveals that there is a potential

rule to exaggerate the athletes' achievements in news reporting, aiming at formulating national identity. After comparing the media content of Belgium and Netherland, Melton found that this kind of "rule" in Belgium was not as obvious as it is in Netherland (Stefan Melton, 2005). How to make beneficial changes in the existing media industry, how to break the more and more solidified barriers among different language groups, and how to reach a consensus between ethnic self-esteem and cross-cultural communication – all remain to-be-solved challenges to Belgian.

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