

**Lessons from the past.**

**What the discourses on the introduction of “new” media in the past can learn about the (r)evolution of the information society**

**Wim Vanobberghen**

**Vrije Universiteit Brussel**

**Studies on Media, Information and Telecommunication**

**Pleinlaan 2**

**1050 Brussels**

**Belgium**

**E-mail: [wim.vanobberghen@vub.ac.be](mailto:wim.vanobberghen@vub.ac.be)**

**Telephone number : 00-32-(0)2-629.24.95**

**Fax number : 02/629.28.61**

Discourses surrounding the introduction of new communication and information technologies, and Internet in particular, are characterized by a historical amnesia. By analysing the way the introduction of radio (1924 – 1929) and television (1953 – 1955) in Belgium was anticipated and debated in the popular catholic journal *De Standaard*, we want to overcome this historical amnesia empirically. This shall be done by combining insights from the cultural turn within history and concepts from Discourse Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis. The cultural turn within history urges media historians to reject the traditional institutional history for a history from “below”, investigating the way ordinary people experienced change and continuity in their everyday life. This shift in paradigm forces media historians to include popular sources like the popular press into their “canon”. Discourse analysis and Critical Discourse analysis provide us with concepts that help to frame the analysis of such popular journalistic accounts.

## Introduction

The introduction of new communication and information technologies in general, and Internet in particular, has been accompanied by a lot of promises about their revolutionary character. It has been said that those electronic technologies will drastically change all aspects of our political, cultural, economical and social life, resulting in the emerging of a so – called Information Society. As soon as the Internet in the nineties left the military and academic universe in which it steadily became mature since the creation of Arpanet in 1969, a lot of popularised accounts of its potential for society were published by leading scientists such as Manuel Castells<sup>1</sup>, academics such as Nicolas Negroponte<sup>2</sup> or William Mitchell<sup>3</sup> and business men like Bill Gates<sup>4</sup>. Central in these rhetoric's are the claims of novelty. This is highlighted by the appearance of a lot of “epithetized phenomena” suggesting that something new, different and usually better is about to happen.<sup>5</sup> The novelty of what is happening can also be noticed, as Vincent Mosco pointed out, in the increasing amount of literature beginning with the word “End” in the title (End of politics, End of geography, End of Business, End of the City, ...).<sup>6</sup>

Patrice Flichy, and more recently Vincent Mosco, have explored, mapped, and analysed these different discourses surrounding the introduction of the internet and other digital media.<sup>7</sup> Both studies reveal the historical amnesia of these rhetoric's. Internet gurus present the past as

---

<sup>1</sup> CASTELLS (M.), *The rise of the network society*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996

<sup>2</sup> NEGROPONTE (N.), *Being Digital*, New York, Knopf, 1996

<sup>3</sup> MITCHELL (W.), *City of bits. Place, space and the infobahn*, Cambridge (Mass), MIT Press, 1998

<sup>4</sup> GATES (B.), *The Road Ahead*, London, Penguin, 1996. – GATES (B.), *Business @ the speed of thought*, New York, Warner Books, 1999

<sup>5</sup> WOOLGAR (S.), *Five rules of virtuality* in: WOOLGAR (S.) (ed.), *Virtual Society? Technology, cyberbole, reality*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 1-4

<sup>6</sup> MOSCO (V.), *The digital sublime. Myth, power, and cyberspace*, Cambridge (Mass) – London, MIT Press, 2004, pp. 55-56

<sup>7</sup> FLICHY (P.), *L'imaginaire d'Internet*, Paris, La Découverte, 2001, 272p. – FLICHY (P.), *Technologies de fin de siècle. L'Internet et la Radio* in : *Réseaux*, nr. 100 : *Communiquer à l'ère des réseaux*, 1, 2000, pp. 252-271 – MOSCO (V.), *The digital sublime. Myth, power, and cyberspace*, Cambridge (Mass.) – London, MIT Press, 2004, 218p.

something we should not worry about since everything is about to change and cyberspace was unknown to history. What they, however, conceal is that myth-making is inherent to technological development and that new communication technologies of the nineteenth and early twentieth century like the telegraph, the telephone or the radio gave also rise to an impressive body of utopian and dystopian literature about their potential roles in society.<sup>8</sup> Not unlike the analysis of Flichy and Mosco, not many attempts have been made to overcome this historical amnesia empirically. For this reason, this paper aims, on the basis of ongoing doctoral research, to explore the past discourses surrounding the introduction of radio and television in Belgium and to investigate whether or not similarities with the discourses surrounding the introduction of new communication technologies today can be detected. This research will build on two schools of thought within our discipline. First, it seems appropriate to explore the ideas, assumptions and methodology coming from what is called the cultural turn within media history, rejecting traditional institutional history for the study of the way ordinary people experienced continuity and change in their every day life patterns. Secondly, we will draw on the possibilities offered by discourse analysis to build and framework our own case study. By combining the insights from media history and discourse analysis, we will hope to provide a systematic and comprehensive overview of the studied material.

### **New approaches in media history**

Like all other social sciences, history has been influenced since the sixties and seventies by the cultural turn, emphasizing a history “from below” instead of one “from above”. For media history in particular, this development has since the end of the eighties made an end to the traditional institutional perspective concentrating on technological innovation, competition among electronic manufacturers, and regulation and policy-making by the state. Instead, the

---

<sup>8</sup> FLICHY (P.), *Radio-Internet...*, p. ; MOSCO (V.), *op.cit.*, pp. 1-16

study of the everyday functioning of the media in their social and cultural context was stressed.<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, the history of technology analyses technological change no longer from a genealogical and teleological perspective, but emphasizes the social construction of technological devices. The former approach bears two conceptual problems. On the one hand, it favoured a vision of technology as being an autonomous agent. On the other hand, this perspective selects only those elements in the history of a device that led to the development of that particular technology as it is functioning today. Moreover, it implies that a couple of founding fathers had a clear view about the features of a technology and the latter would have been developed through history according to their visions. As a consequence, the richness of all possible technological choices in the technological development of that device at a specific moment as well as the issue of human agency are neglected in these historical investigations. A social constructional view on technology emphasizes the relationship between technology and culture. It regards the history of a particular technology as the history of its uses: the way in which people project their social fears and hopes onto a particular technology and the social practices and social conflicts which arise out of that. For media historians this means that media are no longer to be considered “as fixed objects with natural edges”, but as platforms on which different social groups struggle for power, authority, representation and knowledge. The resulting user framework of a particular medium is thus a complex system of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in an elaborate cultural code of communication.<sup>10</sup> This shift of paradigm forces media historians to include other sources into their research than the traditional canon have until now propagated.

---

<sup>9</sup> ANDERSON (C.) & CURTIN (M.), *Writing cultural history. The challenge of radio and television in :* BRUGGER (N.) & KOLSTRUP (S.) (eds.), *Media History: theories, methods, analysis*, Aarhus, Aarhus University Press, 2002, pp. 15-18

<sup>10</sup> MARVIN (C.), *When old technologies were new. Thinking about electric communication in the late nineteenth century*, New York – Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 3 – 8

## **The press as a source of popular technological imaginary**

Inventors and engineers are indeed not the only people who foretell about the frightening and promising possibilities of new technologies; broader social groups also produce utopias and dreams, each developing different representations of techniques. While the functioning framework of a technology is mainly elaborated within technological circles, the elaboration of its users framework mobilises much more diverse actors who all pronounce different discourses. So next to the texts of technicians, we have to take the literary works of science fiction authors, vulgarisation literature and journalistic accounts into consideration. All these discourses constitute a social imaginary of a new technology, which is a fundamental constitutional part of the users framework of that technology.<sup>11</sup>

For our research setup, journalistic accounts about new technologies are considered worthwhile for gaining insight in the way technologies were introduced in society and how the latter reacted to this. These journalistic accounts of new technologies have been until recently largely ignored in European media history. American historical scholars on the contrary have elaborated a whole research program for investigating their concrete role in the social construction of a new technology. Interesting for this paper are those focusing on the social construction of media technology in the United States, in particular the studies of Susan Douglas about radio<sup>12</sup>, Lynn Spigel about television<sup>13</sup> and more recently the one of William Boddy about radio, television and digital media<sup>14</sup>. These studies learn us that journalists do

---

<sup>11</sup> FLICHY (P.), *L'innovation technique. Récents développements en sciences sociales. Vers une nouvelle théorie de l'innovation*, Paris, La Découverte, 1995, pp. 186 - 196

<sup>12</sup> DOUGLAS (S.), *Inventing American broadcasting. 1899 – 1922*, Baltimore – London, John Hopkins University Press, 1987, 363p.

<sup>13</sup> SPIGEL (L.), *Make room for TV. Television and the family ideal in Postwar America*, Chicago- London, Chicago University Press, 1992, 236p.

<sup>14</sup> BODDY (W.), *New media and popular imagination. Launching radio, television, and digital media in the United States*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, 172 p.

not content themselves to report about new technologies, but engage actively in the formation of a social technological imaginary. Large articles about the use of a technology in the industry or domestic applications and their place in the home filled many pages of journals and magazines. The popular press was often the first channel through which people got their first impressions about new technological inventions. The popular press was also a discursive arena since it functioned as a site for different discourses originating out of different social institutions. These accounts were thus hardly neutral or objective: the journalists supported a certain pattern of beliefs and ideas about how a new technology must be used by legitimating and condemning certain uses. This explains the often different meanings and representations about new technologies we encounter in those sources. Popular media can therefore be seen as sites of cultural debate with power struggles and negotiations among a range of social ideals. Analysing which stories were told and which weren't is thus a fundamental question. It is, however, crucial to keep in mind that the popular press doesn't reflect the response of users directly, but that it reveals a general set of discursive rules and roles that were formed for thinking about a new medium.<sup>15</sup>

In analysing the social imaginary of the popular press, it is fundamental to give the past the opportunity to revive to us in all its available potentialities at a specific moment and not to judge it either in function of the coming events, unknown at that time – avoiding a teleological view on technology – or by the accounts of specialists, engineers or politicians. Popular journalistic accounts, therefore, aren't to be considered as mere fanciful or misleading images of new technologies, but as serious sources which enable us to analyse the connection between technology and culture/ideology, language and legitimation.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> DOUGLAS (S.), *Op.cit.*, pp. XV – XVIII, SPIGEL (L.), *Op.cit.*, pp. 1-8, BODDY (W.), *Op.cit.*, pp. 2-5, FLICHY (P.), *L'innovation technique...*, p. 187

<sup>16</sup> DOUGLAS (S.), *Op.cit.*, pp. XVII - XVIII

## **Input from discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis**

A shift towards a history from “below” by enclosing until today neglected popular sources needs a sound framework. For analysing the social imaginary surrounding technologies on the basis of journalistic accounts, discourse analysis might be a valuable research approach. Discourse analysis’ general idea is to be critical towards any form of taken-for-granted knowledge. It is based on the post-structuralist theory that language plays an active role in the construction of meaning of the social world and that this meaning is not fixed. Discourse analysts however acknowledge that physical objects do exist, but they only get their meaning through language.<sup>17</sup> Within the approaches of Discourse analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), elaborated by Norman Fairclough, is challenging for this research since it pleads for an interdisciplinary approach between text analysis and social sciences. However, the linguistic component of the approach is at this stage of research too complex and would lead us too far from the point we wish to make. Therefore a more “pragmatic” use of CDA will be chosen.

Our discourse analysis will start from Fairclough’s three dimensional model. Fairclough considers discourses as communicative events that have three dimensions: discourses as text, discourses as discursive-practice and discourses as social practices. It says that language use is always a social practice.<sup>18</sup> Fairclough also applies the concept of “discourse” on three levels of abstraction. In its most concrete usage “discourse” is considered as “a way of speaking which gives meaning to experiences from a particular perspective”. On the most abstract level the concept refers to “language use as social practice”. On an intermediary level, Fairclough sees “discourse” as “ the kind of language used within a specific field” (e.g. medical

---

<sup>17</sup> PHILIPS (L.) and JORGENSEN (W.), *Discourse analysis as theory and method*, London – Thousand Oaks – New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2002, pp. 4-6

<sup>18</sup> FAIRCLOUGH (N.), *Discourse as social change*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992, pp. 62 - 63

discourse).<sup>19</sup> Discourses are part of social practices in three ways: as action, as representation and as identity. Fairclough calls the different ways of discursive acting “genres”. A certain type of activity is connected to a certain kind of text. A genre is a system of orientations, expectations and conventions.<sup>20</sup> A discourse also contains representations: whoever uses language, gives a particular impression of other people, of the material world, other social practices, ...<sup>21</sup> Finally, discourse is part of the identity of someone. The ways of being (the way one writes, one speaks, one looks like and moves) of a person is always expressed in his “style”.<sup>22</sup>

Our empirical study will adopt the dimension of discourse as a social practice and will analyse it from the lowest level of abstraction, “discourse” as representation. Discourses are considered as different ways of representing aspects of the world. Discourses are imaginaries, representing possible worlds which are different from the actual world, and tied in to projects to change the world in particular directions. People use discourses as a part of their resources to relate with one another and as a tool to change these ways of relating to one another. A discourse supposes a certain degree of stability in time and the use of similar representations by a group of people.<sup>23</sup>

### **The research set-up of the doctoral project**

---

<sup>19</sup> FAIRCLOUGH, (N.), *Discourse as ...*, p. 26 – FAIRCLOUGH (N.), *Language as power*, London – New York, Longman, 1989 p. 17

<sup>20</sup> FAIRCLOUGH (N.), *Discourse as ...*, p. 126

<sup>21</sup> FAIRCLOUGH (N.), *Analysing Discourse...*, p. 26

<sup>22</sup> FAIRCLOUGH (N.), *Analysing Discourse...*, p. 26, pp. 160 - 163

<sup>23</sup> FAIRCLOUGH, *Analysing Discourse : textual analysis for social research*, London – New York, Routledge, 2003, pp. 123 - 125

By combining the insights from recent developments within media history and discourse analysis, we are able to build up a preliminary research set-up that will be the basis for our doctoral framework.

Since media history emphasizes the importance of journalistic accounts and discourse analysis the importance of language, we will turn to Carolyn Marvin's framework for studying our own source material. Carolyn Marvin elaborated in her study on the social impact of electricity in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century a framework that can be expanded to other electrical media and consists of three keystones, which we consider as "*sensitizing concepts*". The first element is the body, the centre of all human experience. Second, there is the immediate community consisting of family, professional groups, gender, race and class. The third group is the unfamiliar community and involves the organisation of the world outside the groups to which one belongs.<sup>24</sup>

When selecting journalistic accounts, it is important to know that the compartmentalisation of the Belgian society between Catholics, socialists and liberals was reflected in the structure of the newspaper and magazines landscape. Our focus will be on the Flemish catholic and socialist press and we will take four kinds of popular press into consideration:

- The first category consist of the socialist and catholic newspapers. Their market consisted of diverse groups within respectively the catholic and socialist pillar. We selected "De Standaard" and "Volksgazet". "De Standaard" was one of the leading papers within the Flemish Catholic Movement and had from the start of the introduction of radio and television a great interest for both new media. "Volksgazet" was the leading paper within the socialist movement.

---

<sup>24</sup> MARVIN (C.), *op.cit.*, pp. 234 - 235

- Weekly catholic and socialist magazines make up the second category. We selected magazines for the whole family, women's magazines and popular radio and television weeklies.
- A third category includes the magazines from socialist and catholic pressure groups (workers, farmers, women organisations...), which often played a normative role regarding aspects of domestic affairs, relations on the shop floor and the general way of living of their members.
- Finally, we select the magazines dedicated to radio and television-amateurism. While the first three categories are in the innovation process located on the user side, this one are situated within the engineers environment. Although their content was most of time merely technical, the amateurs often identified themselves with the catholic or the socialist movement.

We will also analyse the advertisements of radio and television brands published in the selected newspapers and magazine. Advertisements will give us an impression of the strategies technicians elaborated to promote a certain user's framework for their invention and how they reacted to the representations of their invention in the popular press.

The temporal limitations of the study of radio and television are based on the evolution of each medium from a luxury or scarce item to a mass product. For radio, our starting year will be 1923, when the first radio broadcaster started its emissions. The terminus ante quem will be 1936. The terminus post quem for television will be 1947. In that year, Belgian socialist Minister Van Acker promised that Belgium would have television very soon. Our terminus ante quem will be 1960, when already more than 618.000 tv sets were sold.

## The Belgian Case: discourses surrounding radio (1923 – 1929) and television (1953 – 1955) in De Standaard

The research set-up in this paper is in comparison with the doctoral set-up restricted in three ways.

First, although in our global research set-up several popular papers and magazines are included, in this paper we will limit ourselves to an analysis of the coverage of the introduction of radio and television in Belgium by the Flemish catholic popular journal De Standaard. As we saw above, the paper had a great interest for radio and television. On 18 October 1922 the daily initiated the column “Radio” dedicated to developments in radio broadcasting and radio-amateurism. Appearing irregularly from October to December 1922, the section became bigger and was published weekly from December 1922 on. Juliaan Van de Pitte, a radio-amateur who in 1923 founded “Radio”, the first Flemish magazine dedicated to radio amateurism, wrote the column until his death in 1928. The section was then taken over by other radio technicians, such as Radio Lumen.<sup>25</sup> When the Belgian television started with broadcasting in October 1953, De Standaard already initiated on 9 January 1954 a special weekly page to the new medium. This section was also written by a former famous Flemish radio-amateur engineer, J. Van Dijck, who had already experimented with television in the early ‘30s.<sup>26</sup>

Secondly, our corpus stretches for radio from 1923 till 1929 and for television from 1953 until 1955.

---

<sup>25</sup> DURNEZ (G.), *De Standaard. Het levensverhaal van een Vlaamse krant, 1914 – 1948*, Tielt, Lannoo, 1985, pp. 187 - 190

<sup>26</sup> DURNEZ (G.), *De Standaard. Het levensverhaal van een Vlaamse krant van 1948 tot de VUM*, Tielt, Lannoo, 1993, pp. 113 - 119

Thirdly, it is in this context impossible to work out the whole framework of Marvin. We will therefore concentrate on the discourses surrounding two sensitizing concepts, each one of them relating to one of the three keystones. The first one will be the “*family*” from the keystone of the “familiar community”. We shall see how radio and television were represented in relationship to the family and some of its preoccupations. The second one will be called “*reaching out to the other*” from the “unfamiliar community”. The central issue here will be how radio and television were imagined as means of solving problems related to the unfamiliar “other”.

Articles that focused purely on institutional matters (regulation, development of technological infrastructure a.s.o.) were not selected for this analysis. As a discursive arena, “De Standaard” gave in the debates surrounding the introduction of radio and television a voice to, broadly speaking, three kinds of catholic actors. As the table below illustrates, in the two periods, the majority of the articles appeared in the special radio or television section written by the technicians Van de Pitte (and his successor Radio Lumen after 1928) and Van Dijck. Next to both catholic technicians, in the corpus for Radio, articles from priest, not appearing in the radio section, were published. For television, articles from priests weren’t present, although next to Van Dijck, sometimes accounts about local television matters from correspondents in foreign countries were published. Finally, we also analysed the advertisements that were published in the newspaper. In the table below, all the advertisement we encountered in the corpus. In analysing them, only the first appearance of a particular advertisement was selected.

	<b>Total of articles</b>	<b>Articles from Radio/television section</b>	<b>Articles published not in radio/television section</b>	<b>Advertisements</b>
<u>RADIO</u>				
1924	24	24	0	0
1925	33	33	0	4
1926	40	39	1	5
1927	37	35	2	3
1928	42	38	4	25
1929	43	40	3	48
<u>TELEVISION</u>				
1953	9	0	9	0
1954	29	25	4	11
1955	32	28	4	10

### **The history of radio and television in Belgium**

That radio would become a recreational feature in the household couldn't be foreseen with its invention at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The social embedding of radio was a complex process which was marked by a lot of unexpected changes and in which different groups were involved. "Wireless" telegraphy was introduced in Belgium in 1900. King Leopold II was interested in this new technology since it enabled him to make contact with his colony Congo. Around 1907, the first Belgian experiments for transmitting sound through the "wireless" – so called radio-telephony – took place. Those amateurs kept on working together with the Belgian royal family. Radio Broadcasting originated in Belgium in royal circles in 1914. On 28 March 1914 the first radio-concert, dedicated to the Belgian Queen Elisabeth, was broadcasted by two Italian engineers from the royal palace. Until the German invasion in august 1914, a concert was broadcasted each Saturday evening at 18h. The first radio

broadcasting station in Belgium after WO I was founded in 1923. This “Radio Belgique” was financed by a radio construction firm, “La Société Belge de Radio-electrique”. Meanwhile, since 1921 a lot of radio-clubs were founded, in which radio-amateurs practised their radio hobby and built radio posts. Flemish people opposed Radio Belgique since it was strictly French speaking and although claiming to be “neutral”, it favoured the liberal party in Belgium. Radio grew steadily in popularity. In 1923, only 2666 sets were counted in Belgium. This number rose in 1928 and 1929 respectively to 35000 and more than 50.000. This growing popularity brought the cultural-political dimension of the new medium to the fore. Each ideological group thus started organising their own private station and radio-clubs from 1927 on. The resulting “ether-war” led to the conclusion that radio broadcasting had become a matter of national importance. In 1930 parliament decided to found a “Nationaal Radio Instituut” (NIR – National Radio Institute). NIR started broadcasting on 1 February 1931 and each ideological group got its hours of broadcasting time.<sup>27</sup>

The first experiments with television took place in Belgium between 1932 and 1937 by the Belgian engineer J. Van Dijck. The Belgian government made an end to these experiments because they were interfering the radio transmissions. After WO II, plans for establishing television in Belgium were soon again formulated, but it would last until 28 October 1953 for Belgium to have its first television station. Compared to the radio days, the system of a monopolistic public broadcaster was immediately chosen. A typical Belgian communal question around the technological problem which standard had to be adopted was the principal cause of the late introduction of television in comparison with Belgium’s neighbouring countries. While the Flemish wanted to adopt the European standard of 625 lines, the Walloons opted for the French 819 lines standard. Finally a compromise was made:

---

<sup>27</sup> BURGELMAN (J.C.), *Omroep en politiek in België. Het Belgisch – audiovisuele bestel als inzet en resultante van de naoorlogse partijpolitieke machtsstrategieën (1940 – 1960)*, Brussel, BRT-uitgave, 1990, pp. 54-56 - GOOSSENS (C.), *Radio en televisie in Vlaanderen. Een geschiedenis*, Leuven, Davidsfonds, 1998, pp. 35 - 49

the Flemish television station would broadcast in 625 lines and the French in 819 lines and Belgian television receivers had to be fitted for both norms. Television had a huge “boom” after the Brussels’ World Fair of 1958. In 1956, there were about 62.000 tv-sets, in 1958 and 1960 these numbers rose respectively to 130.000 and 618.000.<sup>28</sup>

### **Visions of technology**

#### **A: Reassuring the family**

##### *A.1) the family and security*

Van de Pitte and Van Dijck were convinced that radio and television had a great future. Already in one of the first articles of their section they both emphasized that within a few years everybody would have a radio or television set in their home and wouldn’t want to live without their set.<sup>29</sup> Convincing people that were reluctant to adopt the new medium was a major concern for both journalists throughout the whole corpus. Their articles illustrate that because of three major fears, people refused to adopt the new medium.

Van de Pitte and Van Dijck debated heavily the rumour that thanks to radio and television, storm, thunder and lightning would cause great damage to the house. In the radio days, people seemed to be persuaded that installing a radio receiver would bring the lightning in the house. In the television era, the growth of antennas on the roof -“woods of antenna’s invading the city” was a frequently used metaphor to describe the phenomenon- provoked an anxiety that a heavy storm would tear them all down. Van de Pitte and Van Dijck emphasized that this fear

---

<sup>28</sup> GOOSSENS (C.), *Op.cit*, pp. 63 - 71

<sup>29</sup> DS, *Radio, een musschenschrik*, 21.09.1924, p.7 – DS, *Radio-varia*, 18.09.1928 – DS, *Een eerste probleem. Waarom zouden we NU reeds aan televisie doen?*, 16.01.1954, p. 8

was unfounded since technicians had already found solutions to counter these elements. New improvements or new possible solutions that reduced the potential danger of lightning were constantly reported and debated in the radio page. Van Dijck's solution to the dangerous wood of antennas was to plead for the introduction of a central antenna system that served a whole row of houses or city quarter. If accidents nonetheless happened, this was because the advice of technicians had been ignored.

People seemed also to be reluctant in adopting the new media because of the fear that they weren't technologically perfect yet. To ease this feeling, the argument was that these disadvantages of radio and television couldn't be compared with all the advantages the media would bring along – joy in the family, hours of relaxation, being informed of the latest news in the world...Technicians were furthermore working constantly to improve radio and television, so that its progress would be extra-ordinary and that there was no reason for not joining the world of radio or television.

#### A.2) the family and expenditure

Thirdly, Van de Pitte and Van Dijck countered the argument that radio and television would remain expensive technologies. Drawing on the tradition of constructing your own radio receiver within radio amateur circles, he recommended that everyone would build his own set, which was, according to him, relatively easy and kept the price low. This “build it yourself ideal” would be constantly invoked until ready-made receivers at the end of the twenties came on the market. The price-argument was more difficult to tackle for television. Television-amateurism had never been widespread and was expensive, so there existed no alternative to the television industry. Television sets were (due to the used materials) already expensive and

the forced double norm in Belgium made this even worse. As a consequence, Van Dijck could only maintain that the right amount was paid for the new technology and that only an increase of the demand would lead to a lower price.<sup>30</sup>

### A.3) the family and cohesion

A lot of speculation, hopes and fears were addressed regarding the impact both media would have on family life. Comparing radio to television, this topic seems to be more discussed profoundly by Van Dijck in his chronicles than Van de Pitte and his successor did. A logical explanation is that radio was still in its transition phase from attic to the household, while television was, as we shall see below, immediately promoted as a familial device. The radio technicians described the benefits of radio for the family in broad terms: radio would bring joy and luck to the family and become an indispensable “friend of the home”. Television was described by means of metaphors as “a family friend”, “friend of the home”<sup>31</sup> or as a “family tube”<sup>32</sup>. The medium was also hailed because it made an end to the youth’s habit of going out<sup>33</sup>, thus establishing familial cohesion. Articles about the width and length of the screen and the place the TV-set would occupy in the household, echoed this desired familial reception of television. Van Dijck urged that television would occupy the same function the hearth once did in the family<sup>34</sup> and that television screens wouldn’t be too big since this would prevent the whole family from sitting all together in the living room.<sup>35</sup>

s

---

<sup>30</sup> DS, *Radio, een musschenschrik*, 21.09.1924, p.7 - DS, *Een eerste probleem. Waarom zouden we NU reeds aan televisie doen?*, 16.01.1954, p.8 – DS, *Televisie, een urbanisatieprobleem?*, 20.02.1954, p.8 – DS, *Gemeenschapstelevisie*, 28.08.1954, p. 8

<sup>31</sup> DS, *Vijgen na Pasen*, 24.04.1954, p. 8

<sup>32</sup> DS, *Voor wie kinderen heeft*, 10.07.1954, p. 9

<sup>33</sup> DS, *Voor wie kinderen heeft*, 10.07.1954, p.9

<sup>34</sup> DS, *Voor u dames*, 18.09.1954, p.8

<sup>35</sup> DS, *Rede, mode of snobisme?*, 06.02.1954, p. 8

The focus in the advertisements for radio and television was to bring the public life into the family circle. But we can discern a difference between radio-advertisements and television-advertisements. In the twenties radio was undergoing a change of use from being a male hobby device, practised in attics and radio-clubs, to a family recreational tool due to the development of radio broadcasting stations. In the first years of our corpus (1923-1928), the advertisements for radio were small and put separate components of a radio receiver in the picture. This illustrated that the radio- amateur tradition of building your own receiver was still dominant in propagating radio. Radio was for the first time promoted as a familial recreational device from 1928 on by PHILIPS, that had reacted to the shifting user's framework of radio by producing ready-made radio receivers from 1928 onwards.<sup>36</sup> An advertisement from Philips in 1929 showed a family sitting besides the radio with the text: *“the joy of the domestic fireplace. The evening, spent in the family, are unquestionably the most enjoyable...and the luck of being at home is even increased thanks to listening to an exquisite concert. Take care of radio-pleasure in the home!”*<sup>37</sup> In the corpus 1923-1929, PHILIPS was the only constructor to have such advertisements since other famous brands only followed PHILIPS from the '30's on. However, PHILIPS still kept on advertising separate components for people who still wanted to build their own receiver, but now the joy of concerts or the family were also mentioned. The trend towards reception within the family circle was also illustrated by advertisements for the speaker “Haut Charmeur”, which PHILIPS had developed to end the individualistic listening of radio through earplugs. Television advertisements from different constructors stressed from the very beginning the reception of television within the family circle. PHILIPS was for television also the biggest

---

<sup>36</sup> DE WIT (O.), *Radio tussen verzuiling en individualisering* in: SCHOT (J.W.), LINTZEN (H.W.) a.o (eds.), *Techniek in Nederland in de twintigste eeuw. Deel V: Transport en Communicatie*, Zutphen, Walburg Press, 2002, pp. 215-218

<sup>37</sup> DS, advertisement PHILIPS, 06.10.1929, p.9

advertiser. All its advertisements of 1954-1955 showed a family – father, mother and children – sitting happily together in front of their TV-set.

#### A.4) the family and best practices

The articles illustrate that children were often the ones who urged their parents to purchase a radio or television set. Concerning the radio, this feature only appeared once in an imaginary dialogue written by Van de Pitte. When addressing readers that wouldn't adopt radio, Van de Pitte starts from the deception of the child because of his parent's attitude: "*Some readers haven't probably not all been thinking about purchasing a radio. Why? Father or Mother doesn't want to, says the boy, who would wants a receiver so badly.*"<sup>38</sup> Van Dijck says it more explicitly: "*the youth can be considered as the best propaganda tools for the television receivers. The current social evolution went hand in hand with the enlargement of the power of the child, and it is undeniable that a lot of parents have decided to buy a tv-receiver, since the sportive son, coming back from school, was being captured by some store window, which had aimed its magic lantern on the Waldorfstadium in Bern.*"<sup>39</sup>

The youth's fascination for television caused fears about the effect of television on children. Excessive viewing of "*that cocktail of sweet, acid and salty tastes would definitely lead to nervousness, stress, pedantic opinions and even worse physical effects.*"<sup>40</sup> There existed also a fear that children would lose their creativity, become passive and addicted to the new media.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> DS, *Radio, een musschenschrik?*, 21.09.1924, p. 7

<sup>39</sup> DS, *Voor wie kinderen heeft*, 10.07.1954, p. 9

<sup>40</sup> DS, *Voor wie kinderen heeft*, 10.07.1954, p. 9

<sup>41</sup> DS, *Voor wie kinderen heeft*, 10.07.1954, p. 9

Parents were warned about the challenge television imposed on parental authority, especially that of the father. Parents were told to stick to the hour that children had to go to bed despite their plea to stay awake, otherwise the school results would turn out badly. Giving in once to your children, would mean you would always give in.<sup>42</sup> Television, in this case called an “intruder”, could also undermine the authority of the fathers in a more subtle way. Based on testimonies from the United States, Van Dijck gave the examples of children who, learning good manners from television programmes, didn’t hesitate to correct their father eating behaviours.<sup>43</sup>

Television also posed a challenge to established patterns in the family life, which were considered being an essential part of it. Dinner was such a crucial ritual. Van Dijck gave the advice not to “*eat your evening meal while watching television, but to change the hour of dinner, since it couldn’t be good for most stomachs to eat so absent-minded a dinner that the housewife had prepared with great dedication. Cosiness is an appreciated feature of the evening meal in Flanders, especially when all the family members are sitting at the table... don’t let television take away these moments.*”<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, there were efforts of combining “media rituals” to other established patterns of family-life. When radio in 1929 started to spread faster into the Belgian households, Radio Lumen urged its readers to have an annual inspection of their radio receiver and to combine it with the annual house cleaning which started usually after the winter.<sup>45</sup>

## **B: Reaching out to the “Other”**

---

<sup>42</sup> DS, *Voor wie kinderen heeft*, 10.07.1954, p. 9

<sup>43</sup> DS, *Voor wie kinderen heeft*, 10.07.1954, p. 9

<sup>44</sup> DS, *Voor u dames...*, 18.09.1954, p. 8

<sup>45</sup> DS, *Radio schoonmaak*, 02.06.1929, p. 10

### B.1) E-learning avant la lettre?

Radio and television were both hailed as tools that would have a profound impact on the education of people. Television and radio were propagated as tools that would broaden people's horizon of the world and would let them learn about facts, events, languages, particularities and cultural traditions of the different peoples of the world.<sup>46</sup> Television was often described metaphorically as “*a window to the real actual world*” or even as “*the teacher at home*”.<sup>47</sup> This educational capacity of new media was also taken up by manufacturers in their advertisements. In 1929 an advertisement by PHILIPS sold its radio sets with a text written next to an image showing a boy listening to radio in the living room, next to his reading mother: “*The right pronunciation. The greatest European stations broadcasts courses in foreign languages. Help your children obtaining a good pronunciation of foreign languages.*”<sup>48</sup>

The educational potential of both media led to visions about practical applications in the classroom. Commenting on a congress held by the pedagogues dealing with “school-radio”, Radio Lumen urged that radio would become a great educational tool for lessons that need examples and explanation. This would ease the task of the teacher and strengthen the interest of pupils for the subjects taught. In a country that “*cared for not letting the people lower their intellectual level, as soon as all authorities in the field of pedagogy and education would be informed about this new education method, the concrete application would follow. After a period of study, it was time for concrete realisation!*”<sup>49</sup> A lot of articles covering the spread of radio in classrooms in the neighbouring countries were frequently published to support this

---

<sup>46</sup> DS, *Verruimde horisonten*, 12.02.1955, p. 8

<sup>47</sup> DS, *Vijgen na Pasen*, 24.04.1954, p. 8 – DS, *Voor u dames...*, 18.09.1954, p.8 – DS, *Dag dagelijks mirakel*, 08.05.1955, p. 8

<sup>48</sup> DS, advertisement PHILIPS, 23.09.1929, p. 6

<sup>49</sup> DS, *Radiophonie op school*, 03.12.1929, p. 6

vision. Van Dijck adopted a similar strategy when urging for the establishment of school television in Belgium. Experiments and practical applications in the United Kingdom and France demonstrated the great possibilities of television. Television would not replace the teacher, as was sometimes feared, but would help them by illustrating issues teachers couldn't demonstrate in their classroom and providing information on topics he had no knowledge about.<sup>50</sup> Especially in the field of surgery-education, radio and television would bring a lot of advantages since students of medical science would benefit from surgery being broadcasted in their classroom.<sup>51</sup>

### B.2) technology as universal binding agent?

Radio and television were hailed as great achievements on the way to world peace, harmony and a better understanding among the peoples of the world. Traditional barriers to this harmony as politics, language, and state borders would fade away thanks to the new media. When the League of Nations intended to build a radio station that could broadcast over the world, "De Standaard" made an investigation of all technological solutions for the problem, concluding that soon it would become a reality that "*representatives of the Union would talk to the world as an auditorium, which would be a great achievement for peace in the world.*"<sup>52</sup> This vision of technicians was shared by enthusiastic Catholics involved in radio broadcasting: "*the human thoughts had become a common good of the world thanks to the ether waves. As our thoughts are free and unlimited, the area covered by ether waves is unlimited as well and goes beyond state borders. Also the burden of language differences has been conquered by radio thanks to the transmission of thoughts in sounds in the music.*"<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> DS, *Kinderuurtje en schooltelevisie*, 19.02.1955, p. 8

<sup>51</sup> DS, *Kinderuurtje en schooltelevisie*, 19.02.1955, p. 8

<sup>52</sup> DS, *Het Volkenbonds-omroepstation te Genève*, 31.12.1928, p. 6

<sup>53</sup> DS, *Wat de radio is voor de katholieken*, 08.10.1929, p. 2

The peace fulfilling role of television propagated by Van Dijck is best illustrated when he comments the establishment of a relays link, called Eurovision, between eight countries in Western Europe, leading to a European “television community”<sup>54</sup>: “ *This international link will not only in the coming program exchange bring the eight different nations together and lead to a greater knowledge and appreciation of the specific characteristics of each people, but will also wash away the “screen definition dams”, built by stubborn and short-sighted politicians to trouble international understanding, despite the modern technology.*”<sup>55</sup> Since a similar relays link had already been established in the United States between New York and Los Angeles, Van Dijck dreamt about “world television” that would close the gap between the Old and the New World. This utopia however was immediately countered by a fear that American advertising agency would conquer these new “stratovision stations” and propagate the materialistic American ideology resulting in a serious setback for the European Idea and the culture of the West.<sup>56</sup> A corresponding fear of being cultural negatively influenced was the concern that thanks to radio and television, the Flemish language would be poisoned by English vocabulary, this being a negative token of the cultural strength of the Flemish people.<sup>57</sup>

Finally, within the realm of politics, radio would be a means to strengthen the authority of the state. There was no doubt that radio would enable every citizen to become aware of every new law enacted by the state, a virtue that was necessary to consider yourself a good citizen. Meanwhile, radio would also bridge the gap between the urban and the rural areas since the

---

<sup>54</sup> DS, *Eurovisie...wereldvisie*, 22.05.1954, p. 8

<sup>55</sup> DS, *België, knooppunt in de Europese televisiegemeenschap*, 03.04.1954, p. 8

<sup>56</sup> DS, *Eurovisie...wereldvisie*, 22.05.1954, p.8

<sup>57</sup> DS, *Onze taal en radiotaal*, 09.12.1929, p. 1 – DS, *Onze klank – en beeldomroepkroniek*, 09.01.1954, p.7

latter would no longer be excluded from political information that otherwise circulated only in the city centres.<sup>58</sup>

### B.3) Familiarize the unknown “Other”

Radio and television would bridge the gap between the leaders of the nation and the population. The fact that the Belgian Royal Family had great interest for radio, was described as “a quality the people had no reason to complain about.” That the Prince of Wales was frequently using radio to address the English people had no doubt a serious impact on the strengthening of the bond between the Royal Family and the English population.<sup>59</sup> Van Dijk welcomed in 1955 the broadcasting of “Queen’s Day” in the Netherlands as a good example of the way television brought the head of the nation together with its citizens, the heart of the nation.<sup>60</sup>

Since the new media brought people in contact with the “unfamiliar” other, it became crucial for Catholics to control the way their disciples got in touch with other groups and to tackle the differences. The discourses concerning this topic were represented in “De Standaard” by articles from priests, taken from other Catholic magazines or from speeches on catholic congresses dealing with the radio issue. As we saw above, together with the increasing spread of radio in the households, within catholic circles the interest for the new medium grew, resulting in 1929 in the founding of the Katholieke Vlaamse Radio Omroep (KVRO). The Catholic movement compared “*the iron masts of the radio stations to church towers*”<sup>61</sup>, perfect tools for propagating the catholic faith and preaching to non-catholic people, who

---

<sup>58</sup> DS, *Iedere burger wordt geacht de wet te kennen*, 29.05.1929, p. 6

<sup>59</sup> DS, *Radio ten dienste der vorsten*, 15.01.1928, p. 6

<sup>60</sup> DS, *In dienst van volk en staat*, 25.09.1955, p. 8

<sup>61</sup> DS, *Wat de radio is voor de katholieken*, 08.10.1929, p.2

could otherwise not be reached. A testimony of a famous Jesuit Father Martindale illustrated this claim that in countries where the catholic faith was not widely spread, radio speeches attracted the attention of non-catholics, since “out of his own experiences, he got regularly 30 to 35 letters from the latter and only 1 or 2 from Catholics after he had given a radio speech.<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, while other ideological groups also discovered the possibilities of radio, the question if catholic disciples could listen to non-confessional programs was a hot debated issue. An article from 1926 dealing with this matter stated that there existed no special Canonical Law which prohibited listening to other ideological speeches, hence also listening to radio, as long as people didn’t participate in the happening. This, however, didn’t suppose that anyone was allowed to listen to preachers, socialists, ... A Divine Law prescribed that no one dared to bring his faith into danger without any excuse. People who didn’t possess the necessary skills and knowledge were easy victims for other thoughts. So although the danger with radio was lower since direct interaction with the speaker was absent, underestimating it was a wrong reaction.<sup>63</sup> Priests were however warned that people could find this ideological conquest of the ether boring and unwanted since it interrupted their everyday life pattern. Examples from the United States were there fore invoked. In his *American Chronicle*, in which he commented the American way of life, Dr. J.A.Goris wrote that Americans wished to save their mental health by liberating themselves from all those religious radio churches. Americans started to turn off their radios once a priest started his sermon. This radio preaching was also a threat to the church preaching since people preferred it above the direct contact with often shouting and angry priests in the local chapel. Hence, the quality of the religious experience of people was at stake.<sup>64</sup>

## **Conclusion**

---

<sup>62</sup> DS, *Katholicisme en radio*, 15.04.1929, p. 6

<sup>63</sup> DS, *Draadlooze redevoeringen en preeken van andersdenkenden*, 13.04.1926, p. 3

<sup>64</sup> DS, *Radio en Godsdiensstige propaganda*, 02.10.1928, p. 2

This historical account, based on preliminary research findings, illustrates that the introduction of television and radio was accompanied by hopes and fears about their societal impact. The cultural turn within history, stressing a history from “below” instead of one from “above” and its influence on recent media history, provides us with interesting starting points for demystifying the claims of internet gurus about the potentials of new communication technologies and counter their historical amnesia. By enclosing journalistic accounts and advertisements in the popular press, which have for too long been ignored in European media history, we were able to detect some complex societal debates surrounding the introduction of new media in the past. The application of some useful concepts and insights from Discourse Analysis and Critical Discourse analysis made it possible to build a sound framework for organising our source material.

When we leap into time and read the books published in the nineties by the Internet gurus or Internet pessimists, it’s not hard to hear some echoes of the topics discussed above. Although history is not repeating itself, it seems, as American Scholars emphasize, that the discursive rules and roles for discussing new technologies have not altered. By means of an analysis of the way radio and television were anticipated and debated in the catholic and socialist popular press, our doctoral project will investigate in detail on which aspects discourses surrounding new media in Belgium rely on discourses, pronounced with the introduction of new media in the past, and on which aspects they diverge.

## **Bibliography**

### **Primary literature**

ANDERSON (C.) & CURTIN (M.), *Writing cultural history. The challenge of radio and television* in: BRUGGER (N.) & KOLSTRUP (S.) (eds.), *Media History: theories, methods, analysis*, Aarhus, Aarhus University Press, 2002, pp. 15 - 29

BODDY (W.), *New media and popular imagination. Launching radio, television, and digital media in the United States*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004

BURGELMAN (J.C.), *Omroep en politiek in België. Het Belgisch audio-visuele bestel als inzet en resultante van de naoorlogse partijpolitieke machtsstrategieën (1940-1960)*, Brussel, BRT-uitgave, 1990

CASTELLS (M.), *The rise of the network society*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996

DOUGLAS (S.), *Inventing American broadcasting. 1899 – 1922*, Baltimore – London, John Hopkins University Press, 1987

DE WIT (O.), *Radio tussen individualisering en verzuiling* in: SCHOT (J.W.), LINTZEN (H.W.) a.o. (eds.), *Techniek in Nederland in de twintigste eeuw. Deel V: Transport en Communicatie*, Zutphen, Walburg Press, 2002, pp. 202 - 229

DURNEZ (G.), *De Standaard. Het levensverhaal van een Vlaamse krant, 1914 – 1948*, Tielt, Lannoo, 1985

DURNEZ (G.), *De Standaard. Het levensverhaal van een Vlaamse krant, van 1948 tot de VUM*, Tielt, Lannoo, 1993

FAIRCLOUGH (N.), *Language and power*, London - New York, Longman, 1989

FAIRCLOUGH (N.), *Discourse and social change*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1992

FAIRCLOUGH (N.), *Analysing Discourse: textual analysis for social research*, London -New York, Routledge, 2003

FLICHY (P.), *L'innovation technique. Récents développements en sciences sociales. Vers une nouvelle théorie de l'innovation*, Paris, La Découverte, 1995

FLICHY (P.), *Technologies de fin de siècle. L'Internet et la Radio* in : *Réseaux nr. 100 : Communiquer à l'ère des réseaux*, 1, 2000, pp. 252 - 271

FLICHY (P.), *L'imaginaire d'Internet*, Paris, La Découverte, 2001

GATES (B.), *The Road Ahead*, London, Penguin, 1996

GATES (B.), *Business @ the speed of thought: using a digital nervous system*, New York, Warner Books, 1999

GOOSSENS (C.), *Radio en televisie in Vlaanderen. Een geschiedenis*, Leuven, Davidsfonds, 1998

MARVIN (C.), *When old technologies were new. Thinking about electric communication in the late nineteenth century*, New York – Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988

MITCHELL (W.), *City of bits. Space, place and the infobahn*, Cambridge (Mass.), MIT Press, 1998

MOSCO (V.), *The digital sublime. Myth, power, and cyberspace*, Cambridge (Mass) – London, MIT Press, 2004

NEGROPONTE (N.), *Being Digital*, New York, Knopf, 1996

PHILIPS (L.) & JORGENSEN (W.), *Discourse analysis as theory and method*, London – Thousand Oaks- New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2002

SPIGEL (L.), *Make room for TV. Television and the family ideal in Postwar America*, Chicago – London, University of Chicago Press, 1992

WOOLGAR (S.), *Five rules of virtuality* in: WOOLGAR (S.) (ed.), *Virtual society? Technology, cyberbole, reality*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 1-22

**Source material:**

Radio:

*De Standaard, 1924 – 1929*

Articles to which we referred specifically:

*Radio, een musschenschrik?*, 21.09.1924, p.7

*Draadlooze redevoeringen en preeken van andersdenkenden*, 13.04.1926, p.3

*Radio ten dienste der vorsten*, 15.01.1928, p.6

*Radio-varia*, 18.08.1928, p.5

*Radio en Godsdienstige propaganda*, 02.10.1928, p.2

*Het Volkenbonds-omroepstation te Genève*, 31.12.1928, p.6

*Katholicisme en radio*, 15.04.1929, p.6

*Iedere burger wordt geacht de wet te kennen*, 29.05.1929, p.6

*Radio schoonmaak*, 02.06.1929, p.10

*Radio en boekhandel*, 02.09.1929, p.6

*Wat de radio is voor de katholieken*, 08.10.1929, p.2

*Radiophonie op school*, 03.12.1929, p. 6

*Onze taal en radiotaal*, 09.12.1929, p.1

*Advertisement PHILIPS*, 06.10.1929

*Advertisment PHILIPS*, 23.09.1929, p.6

Television:

*De Standaard, 1953 - 1955*

Articles to which we referred specifically:

*Onze klank – en beeldomroepkroniek*, 09.01.1954, p.7

*Een eerste problem. Waarom zouden we NU reeds aan televisie doen?*, 16.01.1954, p.8

*Rede, mode of snobisme*, 06.02.1954, p.8

*Televisie, een urbanisatieprobleem?*, 20.02.1954, p.8

*België, knooppunt in de Europese televisiegemeenschap*, 03.04.1954, p.8

*Vijgen na Pasen*, 24.04.1954, p.8

*Televisieslag van de Vlaamsche schrijvers. Een referendum van groot belang*, 08.05.1954, p.8

*Eurovisie...wereldvisie*, 22.05.1954, p.8

*Voor wie kinderen heeft*, 10.07.1954, p. 9

*Gemeenschapstelevsie*, 28.08.1954, p.8

*Voor u dames*, 18.09.1954, p.8

*Verruimde horizonten*, 12.02.1955, p. 8

*Kinderuurtje en schooltelevisie*, 19.02.1955, p.8

*Dag dagelijks mirakel*, 08.05.1955, p.8

*In dienst van volk en staat*, 25.09.1955, p.8