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Tuning into Fairness? Comparative Content Analysis of Discrimination Reporting in Flemish Public and Commercial Television News

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Abstract: Disadvantaged groups often face negative portrayals in the media, particularly in news outlets. These portrayals lead to misrepresentation, misunderstanding, and perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. Adding insult to injury, issues important to these groups, such as discrimination, are often reported with bias. Furthermore, media outlets present discrimination discourse differently, evolving from general to specific issues over time. Television news, a primary information source for 76% of Flemish households significantly shapes public perceptions. Therefore, examining television news portrayal of discrimination is crucial, as it can either reinforce or challenge existing prejudices. This longitudinal study analyzes Flemish television news coverage of discrimination (N = 252) from 2017 to 2021, comparing the public broadcaster VRT with its commercial counterpart VTM. Racial discrimination was the most frequently reported issue, influenced by global movements like Black Lives Matter (BLM). There was an increase in coverage of sexuality-related discrimination in 2021, reflecting heightened media focus on LGBTQ+ issues and activism. The portrayal of discrimination varied, with direct discrimination most frequently reported. While VRT and VTM differed significantly in coverage duration and focus, overall coverage of discrimination topics showed no major disparities. This study emphasizes the need to address intersectionality and systemic issues in media coverage to reflect societal diversity accurately.

Keywords: discrimination; television news; public broadcasting; commercial broadcasting; diversity

1. Introduction

Discrimination remains a prominent issue in both society and the news media, spurred on by global developments such as the BLM and #MeToo movements, as well as the increasing success of far-right political parties in Western Europe, bringing discrimination and issues affecting disadvantaged groups to the forefront. The portrayal of discriminated groups in media content plays an important role in shaping and impacting societal views of marginalized groups (Beckers and Moy 2021; Hashmi 2019). News media have a big impact on how people learn about and perceive these groups as they provide a reliable source of information about unfamiliar topics in people's daily lives (d'Haenens et al. 2019; Edgerly 2016; Haynes et al. 2016). However, disadvantaged groups often find themselves depicted in media through a lens of negativity, stigma, and discrimination, leading to one-sided and biased portrayals that may shape the perceptions of the majority (De Cock et al. 2018; De Coninck et al. 2018), adding insult to injury, as discrimination is in itself tied to broader historical and systemic power imbalances (Harnois 2023). Despite the rise of digital news consumption, television continues to be a trusted and frequently used source of information, reaching 76% of Flemish households on a weekly basis (Statistics Flanders 2022; Newman et al. 2023). Television news influences political orientations, beliefs, and behaviors, impacting views on discrimination, fairness, and individual rights (Morgan 2022). In this context, examining how discrimination is portrayed in television news is

important, as it can either reinforce existing prejudices or challenge them (Lăzăroiu et al. 2017). This is particularly important as most research focuses on discriminatory practices within the news media, rather than the portrayal of discrimination in their broadcasts (Grieco 2018; Meeusen and Jacobs 2016)

By analyzing the percentage coverage of discrimination that focuses on race, gender and other categories, and how this changed over time, we can explore the changing priorities and biases within media coverage as it reflects societal attitudes and important movements (Elias et al. 2021). Furthermore, a comparison of the coverage of these issues by two different news channels can reveal significant differences in narrative framing. For example, research by Wright and Unah (2017) suggests that a channel that predominantly highlights racial discrimination may give viewers a distorted perception of the prevalence and severity of racial discrimination compared to other forms of discrimination. Additionally, the way media reports assign responsibility is crucial, as it shapes how viewers perceive and understand the causes and solutions to discrimination (DeAndrea and Bullock 2021).

Both traditional and social media platforms have the power to perpetuate negative stereotypes while also offering the potential to challenge and transform societal attitudes (Ramasubramanian et al. 2023; Alyasova 2022). However, news media often exhibit biases and framing that adversely impact minority communities, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and contributing to their marginalization (Chaerunnisa and Munandar 2022; Driessens and Nærland 2022). The evolving nature of media stereotypes across racial and ethnic groups and across media formats has been highlighted by Arendt (2023). Marginalized groups are often subject to misrepresentation, underrepresentation and silencing in media (Walters and Shaheer 2021; Ramasubramanian et al. 2023), which can have dire consequences for their self-concept, self-esteem and collective identity (Carilli 2021). These challenges in fair representation are also present within Flemish newsrooms. Hendrickx et al. (2022) found that, while Dutch-speaking newsrooms aspire to include diverse perspectives in their news output, practical implementation remains challenging. Similarly, the diversity monitor data (De Swert et al. 2018) from the public broadcaster VRT revealed disparities, with people with disabilities appearing in media coverage only 1% of the time, despite comprising 10 to 15% of the population. First- and second-generation immigrants to Belgium were depicted 8% of the time, although they make up 16% of the population, underscoring the need for increased diversity in Flemish media to enhance audience representation and to promote balanced reporting (De Vlaamse Jeugdraad 2021; d'Haenens et al. 2019). However, it is important to note that, even if a group's media presence matches its population size, true representation can still be unbalanced due to other factors, like stereotypes, hypervisibility, and essentialization.

2. The Role of Media in Shaping Public Perceptions

Theories such as agenda-setting (McCombs 2005), framing (Entman 1993), and cultivation (Gerbner 1969) help gain an understanding of how media portrayals influence public opinion. These frameworks explore how media representations shape individuals' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors, highlighting the impact of media narratives on public consciousness. First, agenda-setting theory suggests that the media have the power to influence the public's perception of the importance of various issues by determining which topics receive the most coverage and thus public attention (McCombs 2005). Through repeated exposure to certain issues or topics, individuals tend to perceive them as more salient or significant. This theory suggests that the media not only tell people what to think about but also what to think about in terms of importance (McCombs 2005; Alitavoli and Kaveh 2018). Second, framing theory delves into how news content is created and shapes individuals' perceptions and behaviors (Moy et al. 2016). It focuses on how news content is constructed and presented to shape individuals' perceptions and interpretations of events or issues, promoting a particular way of understanding the issue (Van Gorp 2005; Entman 1993). According to this theory, media not only provide information but also frame that information in particular ways that influence how audiences understand it. Frames

can emphasize certain aspects of an issue while downplaying or ignoring others, thereby shaping the audience's understanding and attitudes (Entman 1993). Lastly, cultivation theory explains the relationship between media exposure, particularly television use, and individuals' beliefs about the world (Gerbner 1969; Gerbner and Gross 1976; Morgan et al. 2017). As such, repeated exposure to messages and representations in media over time can shape individuals' perceptions of reality, leading them to adopt the media's version of reality as their own (Ward et al. 2024). Cultivation theorists argue that heavy viewers of television, for example, tend to perceive the world as more violent and dangerous than light viewers due to the prevalence of violence in television programming (Gerbner 1969). When examining how the media influence public perceptions, media trust cannot be forgotten, as it is a principal factor that guides news selection. Hence it serves as a foundation that determines how credible and authoritative information is perceived, thereby conditioning the impact of news consumption on people's understanding of societal issues and the formation of their attitudes towards them (De Coninck et al. 2023; Shehata and Strömbäck 2022). Together, these three theories, alongside media trust, demonstrate the potential role of media in shaping public perceptions and opinions: what issues are considered important (agenda-setting), how these issues are presented and interpreted (framing), how can prolonged exposure to media content alter perceptions of reality (cultivation), and which news sources are consumed (media trust).

2.1. Media and Discrimination

Discrimination involves drawing distinctions based on different attributes. Hellman (2011) argues that distinguishing between social groups is not necessarily negative and can sometimes be essential. However, these unfair disparities become problematic when they reinforce inequality and discrimination. Arneson (2006) defines discrimination as treating someone differently due to specific traits or their membership of a particular social group. It broadly refers to actions or practices that exclude, disadvantage, or differentiate between individuals based on certain characteristics, which cannot be justified (Kohler-Hausmann 2011; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2007; UK Public General Acts 1998). This unfair treatment, often motivated by prejudice, may be based on personal characteristics, such as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion or disability. This definition assumes conflicts between someone from an ingroup and someone from an outgroup, but it may oversimplify systematic power structures. Nevertheless, discrimination occurs not only at the individual level, but also in structural or institutional mechanisms, where power, history, and context are important to understanding the manifestation and experience of discrimination.

Despite legal safeguards, Unia, Belgium's Interfederal Equal Opportunities Center, has noted an increase in reported incidents of discrimination, hate messages, and hate crimes in recent years (Unia 2022), although it is important to mention that increased reporting of discriminatory incidents does not always indicate more discrimination; it may reflect greater awareness or understanding of the issue. In 2022, 735 new investigations were initiated based on racial criteria, accounting for nearly 35% of all reported incidents. Racial criteria encompass factors such as national or ethnic origin, skin color, nationality, ancestry, or perceived race. Other protected discrimination grounds in Belgium are age, disability, religion, wealth, marital status, political conviction, health condition, physical or genetic characteristics, social conditions, and family composition. In the legal context of Belgium, discriminatory practices included in anti-discrimination legislation are categorized into seven types, ranked by prevalence: direct discrimination (e.g., treating someone less favorably specifically because of their race), intimidation or harassment based on protected characteristics (e.g., behaviors intended to intimidate or harass individuals), hate crimes driven by hatred against individuals or groups characterized by one or more protected criteria, failure to provide reasonable accommodations for individuals with disabilities, indirect discrimination (e.g., policies that seem neutral but disproportionately affect cer-

tain groups), instructing or inciting others to engage in discriminatory acts, and public incitement to discriminate, promote hatred, or incite violence based on protected criteria.

Understanding discrimination in the media requires grappling with the concept of intersectionality, which underscores that individuals embody multiple identities that intersect and influence each other and cannot be understood separately from one another. Intersectionality recognizes that characteristics like race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion intersect within a person, shaping their unique challenges and experiences (McCall 2005; Shields 2008). For instance, individuals who are both Muslim and part of the LGBTQ+ community or who are Black women with disabilities face overlapping forms of discrimination that stem from these intersecting identities. Subsequently, individuals are affected not by one form of discrimination but by multiple, interacting systems of oppression (Crenshaw 1991). The overlapping identities can create new and unique forms of discrimination, like racist sexism, that differ from racism or sexism alone. According to the matrix of domination (Collins 1990), individuals exist within multiple systems of power and each system interlocks with others to create unique experiences of both privilege and oppression.

Collins (1990) argues that stereotypes are not simply images used to establish or generalize differences between groups but are used to justify the mistreatment of marginalized people. This is why they are called "controlling images", referring to deeply ingrained stereotypes that make forms of social injustice and oppression seem natural and normal. Previous content analyses have mainly focused on the separate reporting of different grounds of discrimination. However, the experiences of marginalized people are often underrepresented or oversimplified in the media. Therefore, the current study will examine the occurrence of intersectionality in new articles that go beyond a one-dimensional view of discrimination. We will look at the coverage of different discrimination grounds in the same news item.

2.2. Portrayal of Discriminated Groups in News Media

Disadvantaged groups often find themselves depicted in media through a lens of negativity, stigma, and discrimination, leading to one-sided and biased portrayals that may shape the public perception (De Cock et al. 2018; De Coninck et al. 2018). These media narratives have the power to reinforce negative stereotypes (Anderson and Dixon-Payne 2022). This media bias has significant consequences for disadvantaged communities as news media often perpetuates stereotypes and negative portrayals of minority groups, reinforcing their marginalization and exclusion and disempowerment from mainstream society (Jamil and Retis 2022). For example, news channels often depict minorities, such as Arab immigrants, African Americans and people from Roma communities, in a negative light, perpetuating racist ideologies and perceptions (Jamil and Retis 2022; Al-Zubaidi and Hassan 2018). However, it is not only minorities based on race and religion that are portrayed in a negative light, as the media portrayal of disabled people focuses on their dependency rather than their abilities, with themes revolving around special services, successful adaptation and adaptation problems (Kolotouchkina et al. 2020). This depiction is not only limited, biased, and rooted in stigma but also hinders the full social participation of those depicted (Grossetête 2014). Similarly, in the realm of mental health, news media disproportionately highlight the negative aspects of mental illness, leading to an overrepresentation of negative portrayals of individuals with mental health conditions (Ross et al. 2018). Commonly, these portrayals emphasize perceptions of dangerousness and violence (Ross et al. 2018) and can even lead to misreadings, misdiagnoses, and mistreatment of disadvantaged communities in the healthcare industry, as algorithmic biases in healthcare technologies disproportionately affect individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (Baha 2023).

Thus, when examining how the media covers instances of discrimination, it is important to recognize that the media's role is not neutral—it actively shapes public discourse as legacy and mass media's tendency to reinforce prejudices contributes to the intensified

exclusion and marginalization of subordinate or excluded social groups (Jakubowicz 2006). This media bias not only hinders the representation and visibility of disadvantaged communities but also perpetuates discrimination and unequal access to social power (Allen and Bruce 2017). By examining the portrayal of marginalized and discriminated groups, we gain insights into how these portrayals influence the broader media narrative on discrimination and how societal power structures are maintained or challenged (Allen and Bruce 2017; Jakubowicz 2006).

2.3. Comparative Analysis of Public and Commercial Television News

Public service media play a key role in delivering television services that benefit the public. Funded mainly by taxpayers, their mission is to deliver high-quality, diverse programming, promote cultural content, and provide news coverage free from political and commercial interests (Blumler 1991; McQuail 2002). Hence, they play an important cultural role, shaping national identities, promoting informed citizenship, and competing for media users' attention within the market, while producing culturally enriching programs and providing impartial news (Donders 2016). The mission and values of VRT, the public broadcaster in Flanders, are outlined every four years in a management agreement with the Flemish Community. The current agreement for 2021–2025 emphasizes VRT's commitment to inform, inspire, and connect all Flemish people. A key mission is to reflect the diversity of Flemish society, both on-screen and behind the scenes, supported by their dedicated Diversity and Inclusion team. Despite ongoing debates about the role and functioning of public broadcasting in Flanders (De Bens and Paulussen 2005), public service broadcasting remains vital, and Television remains highly relevant, reaching 88.9% of Flemish viewers weekly (VRT 2024). It provides a shared viewing experience, ensuring that everyone receives the same content simultaneously. This fosters collective cultural engagement and informed public discourse, offering high-quality, professionally produced content that unites audiences in an era of personalized digital media consumption (Geers 2020).

Horowitz and Car (2015) also subscribe to this idea, stating that public broadcasts continue to have a significant social and cultural impact, both now and in the future. For example, individuals who prefer commercial news report more negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities and immigrants (Jacobs et al. 2016). It is therefore important to create institutions that secure the independence of public media to ensure their neutrality and effectiveness (Craufurd-Smith et al. 2017).

Commercial broadcasters, unlike their public counterparts, rely primarily on advertising for funding. In Flanders, VTM stands as the most popular commercial broadcaster. One difference between VRT and VTM is VTM's greater focus on soft news (Verhoest and d'Haenens 2022). Moreover, driven by ratings, VTM tends to cater to the preferences of the majority, often overlooking minority groups (De Bens and Paulussen 2005). Despite these differences, broadcasters share a common overarching goal: to maximize their audience reach. Achieving this requires a commitment to diversity and representation. Therefore, it is interesting to examine how VRT and VTM each cover issues related to discrimination, particularly in light of VRT's mission to reflect the diversity of Flemish society and VTM's market-driven approach.

2.4. Research Questions

RQ1 How do the approaches of Flemish television news broadcasters VRT (public) and VTM (commercial channel) differ in their coverage of discrimination-related topics, from 2017 to 2021?

RQ2 How do VRT and VTM differ in their portrayal and representation of alleged perpetrators and victims in discrimination news items, and in assigning responsibility for discriminatory actions, from 2017 to 2021?

3. Materials and Methods

A longitudinal content analysis was conducted to investigate the representation of discrimination in Flemish television news items broadcast by VRT and VTM from 2017 to 2021. In Flanders, these channels are prominent for their daily prime-time news broadcasts, playing significant roles in the media landscape from both commercial (VTM) and public (VRT) perspectives.

Using the iCANDID infrastructure, a comprehensive media data hub for researchers, we compiled a dataset of relevant news fragments (Institute for Media Studies & LIBIS 2021). These fragments were specifically selected based on the presence of discrimination-related terms and their origin from the targeted broadcasters during the specified five-year period. The search term 'discrimin*' and the provider 'ENA' (electronic news archive) were used to identify the relevant items, focusing our analysis on items where the term 'discrimination' was explicitly mentioned in the news broadcasts or labelled as such by ENA—ensuring that we captured direct discussions of the issue. Previous studies often concentrate on the representation of specific groups, which limits cross-group comparisons. Therefore we adopted a broader approach to cover multiple forms of discrimination. On an additional note, by using the term "discrimination" in media reporting our study may not capture stories that use related terms, like "pay equity", "equality", or "sexism", to describe similar issues. Consequently, the findings reflect how discrimination is framed in the media rather than the full scope of coverage.

After removing duplicates and irrelevant news items, the final dataset comprised 252 television news items. The analysis employed a codebook (available upon request). To ensure reliability and accuracy, extensive training sessions were conducted for the coding team, which included two primary coders and a third quality control coder. This process involved a preliminary phase of test codes to fine-tune the coding strategy and adjust the codebook as necessary. Inter-coder reliability was assessed by double-coding a randomly selected subsample of 10 percent of the dataset, with Krippendorff's alphas calculated using Hayes' syntax in SPSS version 29. Variables scoring below 0.70 (e.g., variables measuring direct versus indirect discrimination) were excluded from the analysis.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS statistical software. Descriptive statistics outlined the fundamental characteristics of the items, while chi-square and ANOVA tests identified significant differences and trends. Variables included in the analysis were the date and title of the items, the specific grounds of discrimination, expressions and domains of discrimination, and the news brand (VRT vs. VTM). Additionally, actors involved in the news stories—such as alleged perpetrators, victims, relevant institutions, and additional parties—were coded. This coding included whether actors were explicitly mentioned, quoted, paraphrased, or otherwise referenced. The analysis also examined the assignment of responsibility for discriminatory actions, distinguishing between discriminated individuals, those perpetrating discrimination, and any third parties implicated. This comprehensive approach provided a robust framework for understanding the representation and dynamics of discrimination in Flemish television news

4. Results

The analysis of 252 television news items on discrimination from 3 January 2017 to 30 December 2021 showed that the average length of news segments was 52.8 s, with a standard deviation of 7 s. The number of items in which discrimination was present was relatively consistent across the years, with notable peaks in reporting trends in 2017 and 2021. More specifically in 2017, racial discrimination was the most widely reported of the categories of discrimination that were covered, with 26 of the 56 items (46.0%). Additionally, religious discrimination was featured in 10 of the 56 items (18.0%). While sexual discrimination peaked in 2021 with 20 out of 56 (36.0%), items on racial discrimination accounted for 10 out of 56 (18.0%). This can be attributed to instances where public reactions, protests and legal battles against policies, especially those of government figures, such as Trump's travel bans, indicate societal engagement with discrimination issues, including sexuality. Such

actions often mobilize support for LGBTQ+ rights and highlight discrimination. Figure 1 provides an overview of the reporting upon discrimination grounds over the years. The category "other grounds" includes nepotism, company car/vehicle, smoking, having solar panels or not, working conditions, sector of work, function as a union representative, and type of sports club. These were additional grounds identified in our data that were not initially part of our predefined categories.
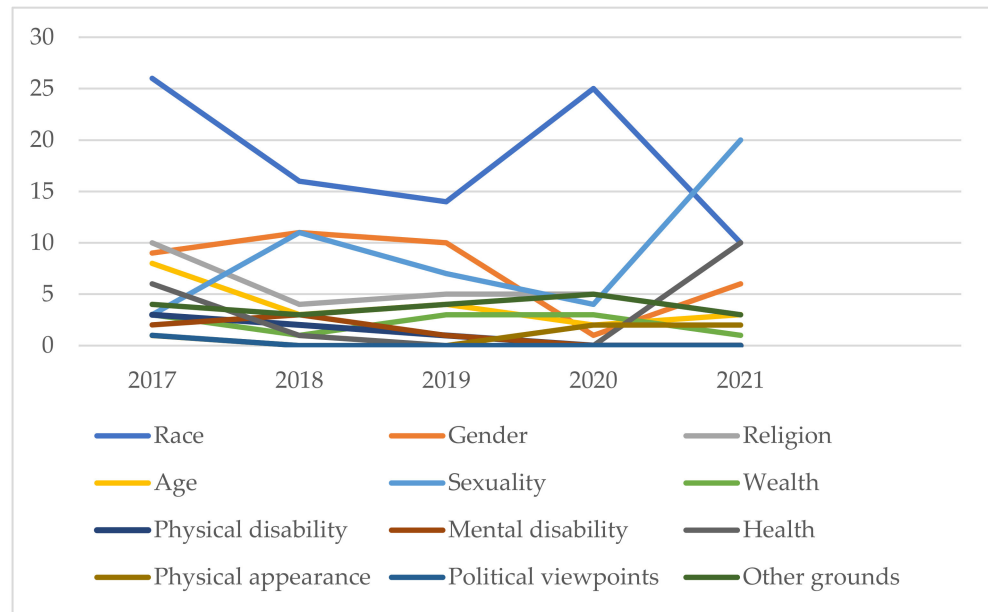

Figure 1. Reporting based upon discrimination grounds through the years.

Table 1 illustrates the coverage of various discrimination grounds in news items, with racial criteria being the most frequently reported at 36.1% of all coverage on discrimination (N = 252), followed by sexuality at 17.9%, and gender at 14.7%. Discrimination based on political viewpoints had the least coverage at 0.8%, while other grounds collectively accounted for 10.7% of the reports.

Table 1. Coverage of discrimination grounds in news items (absolute numbers and percentages).

Coverage of Discrimination Grounds in News Items (N = 252)	
Racial criteria	91 (36.1%)
Sexuality	45 (17.9%)
Gender	37 (14.7%)
Religion	27 (10.7%)
Age	20 (7.9%)
Wealth	11 (4.4%)
Health	7 (2.8%)
Physical disability	6 (2.4%)
Mental disability	6 (2.4%)
Physical appearance	5 (2.0%)
Political viewpoints	2 (0.8%)
Other grounds	27 (10.7%)

Note: A single news item can report on multiple discrimination grounds.

Further analysis looks into the interrelations among various discrimination themes, specifically concentrating on the four most commonly observed grounds: race, gender, religion and sexuality, and how these themes interact and correlate with one another. Table 2 summarizes the occurrences and overlaps among the four grounds of discrimination in news items. As the table shows, the occurrences of articles that discuss multiple forms of discrimination simultaneously are small, underscoring the rarity of coverage that intersects various discrimination themes. This suggests that, while race, gender, religion, and sexuality are significant grounds of discrimination individually, the exploration of their interrelations through news media coverage is less common. There are minimal overlaps, such as the three articles each that connect racial criteria with sexuality and sexuality with religion (both at 1.2%), indicating that news coverage combining these themes is not that prevalent.

Table 2. Occurrence of intersectionality between different grounds in news items (absolute numbers, N = 252, and percentages).

Discrimination Ground	Racial Criteria	Sexuality	Gender	Religion	N
Racial Criteria	91 items (100.0%)	3 items (3.3%)	2 items (2.2%)	6 items (6.6%)	91
Sexuality	3 items (3.3%)	45 items (100.0%)	5 items (5.5%)	3 items (3.3%)	45
Gender	2 items (2.2%)	5 items (5.5%)	37 items (100.0%)	5 items (5.5%)	37
Religion	6 items (6.6%)	3 items (3.3%)	5 items (5.5%)	27 items (100.0%)	27

Next, the different expressions of discrimination within Flemish television news are analyzed. To begin with, direct discrimination emerges as the most frequently reported type of discrimination, accounting for 93.0% of racial discrimination incidents (85 out of 91 cases), 84.0% for gender (31 out of 37), 81.0% for religion (22 out of 27) and 96.0% for sexual discrimination (43 out of 45).

Moreover, indirect discrimination, characterized by policies or practices that are apparently neutral but have a disproportionate impact on certain groups, is also observed but to a lesser extent. It occurs in 19.0% of cases of racial discrimination (17 out of 91), 30.0% of cases of gender discrimination (11 out of 37), 44.0% of cases of religious discrimination (13 out of 27) and 16.0% of cases of sexual discrimination (7 out of 45).

Subsequently, physical manifestations of discrimination, such as violence, were reported in 21.0% of news items about racial discrimination (19 out of 91), 5.0% for gender (2 out of 37), 4.0% for religion (1 out of 27) and 27.0% for sexual orientation discrimination (12 out of 45), indicating its notable presence, particularly in cases related to sexuality.

Following that, verbal discrimination is reported with varying prevalence across different grounds of discrimination. Specifically, it is observed in 30.8% of cases of racial discrimination (28 out of 91), 27.0% of cases of gender discrimination (10 out of 37), 33.3% of cases of religious discrimination (9 out of 27), and 38.0% of cases of sexual orientation discrimination (17 out of 45). Last, discrimination related to services and goods, reflecting unequal access to products or services, was mentioned in 54.9% of the news items on racial discrimination (50 out of 91), 56.8% for gender (21 out of 37), 55.6% for religion (15 out of 27) and 51.1% for sexual orientation discrimination (23 out of 45). This suggests systemic issues extending beyond interpersonal interactions and significantly affecting various categories. A full overview is provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Discrimination ground and expression in news items (in row percentages).

Discrimination Ground	Direct Discrimination	Indirect Discrimination	Physical Discrimination	Verbal Discrimination	Discrimination in Services/Goods
Racial	93	19	21	31	55
Gender	84	30	5	27	57
Religious	81	48	4	33	56
Sexuality	96	16	27	38	51

Note: These percentages reflect the proportion of news items within each discrimination ground (racial, gender, religious, and sexuality) that reported specific types of discrimination (direct, indirect, physical, verbal, and discrimination related to services/goods) relative to the total number of items in that category.

Analysing the trends in discrimination reporting across the most reported on different grounds—race, gender, religion, and sexuality—from 2017 to 2021 provides insight into media attention to these grounds. There is a significant peak in race-related coverage in 2020, with twenty-five instances, likely due to the George Floyd case and the Black Lives Matter movement. This peak is followed by a substantial drop to ten instances in 2021. In contrast, the coverage of sexuality-related discrimination shows a marked increase from four instances in 2020 to 20 in 2021. The coverage of gender discrimination sees a dramatic decline to nearly zero in 2020, with only one instance reported, before a slight increase to six instances in 2021. Meanwhile, the coverage of religious discrimination remains relatively low and fluctuates over the years, peaking at ten instances in 2017 and declining to three instances by 2021. Coverage of most reported discrimination grounds over time can be found in Figure 2.
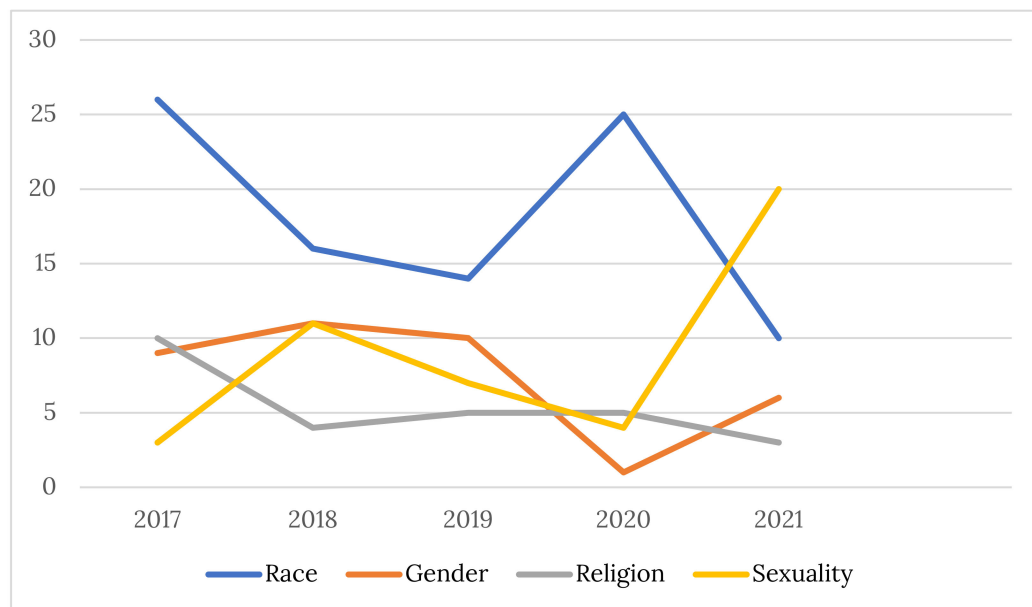

Figure 2. Coverage of most reported discrimination grounds over time.

4.1. Comparing Public (VRT) and Commercial (VTM) Broadcasting in Flanders

The duration of news items varies between Flemish public broadcaster VRT (M = 113.74, SD = 49.494) and its commercial counterpart VTM (M = 91, SD = 53.582), with VRT's segments on discrimination being significantly longer than VTM's (t = 3.48, df = 249, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, the number of news items covering discrimination also differs, with VTM airing 134 items (53.2%) compared to VRT's 118 items (46.8%) This finding is noteworthy, especially considering the expectation that the public broadcaster might give more emphasis to this socially significant issue.

The comparison of discrimination coverage between VRT and VTM revealed insights into their respective approaches. Specifically, VRT highlighted discrimination cases as the

main focus in 60.2% (71 out of 118) of its related items, while VTM did so in 70.1% (94 out of 134) of its coverage. Despite these differences, statistical tests showed that the variation in focus on discrimination cases between the two networks was not statistically significant. When broadening the scope to include items where discrimination was a prominent theme, regardless of specific cases, VRT covered such issues in 50.8% (60 out of 118) of its items, compared to VTM's 42.5% (57 out of 134). Again, statistical analysis indicated no significant difference in the proportion of discrimination-focused content between VRT and VTM.

These findings suggest that both broadcasters demonstrate a similar commitment to addressing discrimination, whether through specific incidents or broader thematic discussions. Both the frequency of different discrimination grounds—race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation—and the variety of discrimination types yielded both significant and nonsignificant differences between the broadcasters. Regarding discrimination grounds, race emerged as the most prominently featured, with VRT covering racial discrimination in 43.2% (51 out of 118) compared to VTM's 29.9% (40 out of 134). Gender discrimination was reported in 10.2% of VRT's items (12 out of 118) and 18.7% of VTM's (25 out of 134). Religion-based discrimination was featured in 11.9% of VRT's (14 out of 118) and 9.7% of VTM's (13 out of 134) items, while coverage of discrimination based upon sexual orientation was nearly identical, with VRT at 17.8% (21 out of 118 items) and VTM at 17.9% (24 out of 134 items). Only one of these differences reached statistical significance with race as discrimination ground having a *p*-value of 0.027 (χ^2 = 4.891, df = 1). None of the other differences reached statistical significance, with *p*-values of 0.05 for gender (χ^2 = 3.608, df = 1), 0.580 for religion (χ^2 = 0.307, df = 1), and 0.981 for sexual orientation (χ^2 = 0.001, df = 1), all exceeding the alpha level of 0.05. A full overview can be found in Table 4, which shows how VRT and VTM cover various discrimination grounds in their news items from 2017 to 2021. This table was created using Chi-square tests to analyze the relationship between each discrimination ground and the television channel (VRT vs. VTM) separately.

Table 4. Overview of Coverage of Discrimination Grounds (items, absolute number, percentage, *p*-value).

Variable	Total Items	VRT Items	VTM Items	Significance Level
Racial Criteria	91 items	51 (43.22%)	40 (29.85%)	0.027
Sexuality	45 items	21 (17.80%)	24 (17.91%)	0.981
Gender	37 items	12 (10.17%)	25 (18.66%)	0.057
Other grounds	27 items	11 (9.32%)	16 (11.94%)	0.495
Religion	27 items	14 (11.86%)	13 (9.70%)	0.580
Age	20 items	10 (8.47%)	10 (7.46%)	0.757
Wealth	11 items	7 (5.93%)	4 (2.99%)	0.253
Health	7 items	4 (3.39%)	3 (2.24%)	0.579
Physical Disability	6 items	5 (4.24%)	1 (0.75%)	0.070
Mental Disability	6 items	4 (3.39%)	3 (2.24%)	0.875
Physical Appearance	5 items	3 (2.54%)	2 (1.49%)	0.551
Political Viewpoints	**2 items**	**2 (1.69%)**	**0 (0.00%)**	**0.130**

Note: Percentages are calculated based on the total number of items by VRT (N = 118) and VTM (N = 134).

In terms of discrimination types, direct discrimination was the most frequently reported, with VRT at 88.1% (104 out of 118 items) and VTM at 84.3% (113 out of 134 items). Indirect discrimination was covered in 25.4% of VRT (30 out of 118 items) and 28.4% (38 out of 134) of VTM items. Verbal discrimination instances were reported by VRT and VTM at 23.7% (28 out of 118 items) and 23.1% (31 out of 134 items), respectively. None of these differences reached statistical significance. The analysis also looked at physical discrimina-

tion, where VRT reported a significantly higher percentage (18.6% or 22 out of 118 items) compared to VTM (8.9% or 12 out of 134 items), with a *p*-value of 0.027 (χ^2 = 4.911, df = 1). Discrimination in the provision of services or goods was also analysed, with VRT at 67.0% and VTM at 60.0%.

There were no significant differences found between VTM and VRT considering the involvement of different actors in discrimination news items, including victims and perpetrators, and the way they were directly quoted, paraphrased or reported on. For victims, both broadcasters mentioned them often in their items, with VRT doing so in 71.2% (84 out of 118) and VTM in 65.7% (88 out of 134) of cases, a difference that was not statistically significant (*p* = 0.640). Victims were directly quoted or spoke in 32.2% of VRT's cases (38 out of 118) and in 23.1% of VTM's (31 out of 134), while being paraphrased in 25.4% (30 out of 118) and 23.1% of items, respectively (31 out of 134), again showing no significant difference in treatment (*p* = 0.270 for quotes; *p* = 0.717 for paraphrasing). Visual representations of victims were also similar between the two broadcasters, with VRT featuring them in 50.8% of cases (60 out of 118) compared to VTM's 41.8% (56 out of 134), which did not constitute a statistically significant difference (*p* = 0.236). In the diverse landscape of discrimination news coverage, victims are identified and grouped by various characteristics that are dependent on the grounds of discrimination. For instance, ethnicity and national origin are prominent categories specifically for cases of racial discrimination. This includes individuals identified as Belgian Turks, minorities, foreigners, Muslims, and people of specific national descents, like Sudanese or Filipinos, alongside broader groups, such as Asian communities and people of different skin colors. Similarly, gender and sexual orientation are significant categories when it comes to discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation. This encompasses women, the LGBTQ+ community, and transgender individuals, highlighting the gendered and sexual orientation-based dimensions of discrimination. Third, health and disability status are noted, with mentions of mentally limited individuals, those with disabilities and those who did not opt to get vaccinated against COVID-19 during the pandemic. Fourth, social and economic status play a role, with single individuals, low-income families, and workers in precarious conditions highlighted, indicating the socio-economic gradients of discrimination. Fifth, specific cases or situations, such as George Floyd, pinpoint discrimination's acute instances and broader societal implications. Finally, we see occupational groups, including market vendors, healthcare workers, and independent journalists, alongside other specific groups, like the Belgian Cats basketball team, named as victims.

4.2. Portrayal of Perpetrators and Victims

Regarding the portrayal of perpetrators, there were no significant differences in their representation between VRT and VTM. Perpetrators were quoted or spoke in 28.0% of VRT's items and 27.0% of VTM's, with paraphrasing occurring in 38.1% for VRT and 39.0% for VTM, both showing no statistical significance (*p* = 0.979 for quotes; *p* = 0.974 for paraphrasing). The overall mention of perpetrators was nearly identical, with 75.4% for VRT (89 items out of 118) and 73.9% for VTM (99 items out of 134). Visual representation of perpetrators showed some variation, particularly in the use of photos (3.0%, or 4 instances, in VRT vs. 13.0%, or 17 instances, in VTM) and in-studio appearances (0.0%, or 0 items, in VRT vs. 1.0%, or 1 item, in VTM). Yet these differences did not reach statistical significance. These findings underscore the fact that, despite minor variations in visual representation, both broadcasters maintain a consistent approach in depicting victims and perpetrators in discrimination-related news coverage. When looking into who are named as perpetrators, there were several distinct categories identified, each reflecting different sectors of society implicated in discriminatory practices. Firstly, political figures and institutions were prominently featured, including then U.S. President Trump, various discriminatory politicians and populists known for sowing division, and specific governmental bodies. Noteworthy among these were local and national entities, such as Polish cities, municipalities, and the Polish government, as well as the Austrian government and Madrid's regional govern-

ment. These instances underscore systemic or policy-related discrimination, highlighting the role of political leadership and governance structures in perpetuating discrimination. Secondly, organizations and corporate entities were identified as key actors in discrimination narratives. This category included fitness chains, employers (both current and former), insurance companies, airlines, associations, universities, and notable companies, like the online retailer bol.com. Under this categorization, we also find the housing market and real estate agencies, and energy suppliers. Thirdly, social and religious groups were frequently cited as perpetrators. This group encompasses hate preachers, supporters of radical right movements, ultra-Orthodox Jews, extremist right-wing individuals, radical Muslims, and overall 'members within the Muslim community', which draws attention to the way that, when assigning roles like victim or perpetrator, media coverage frequently portrays underrepresented groups—such Muslims—as those committing the crimes, disregarding historical or local power relations. Moreover, fourthly, law enforcement and security personnel, including police officers and specific agents from justice departments, were highlighted for their involvement in hard-handed tactics and discriminatory actions, reflecting issues within policing and security operations. Fifth and finally, cultural figures and events, such as rapper Boef and the Aalst carnival, were also pinpointed for spreading discriminatory messages, illustrating how cultural expressions and public events can serve as platforms for disseminating discrimination.

4.3. Shifts in Responsibility Assignment

Finally, we compared how responsibility was assigned within news stories on discrimination. Here, we found that a sizeable proportion (64%) of news items attribute responsibility to specific entities. Specifically, responsibility for discriminatory actions is ascribed as follows: 4.0% to the alleged victims, 57.0% to the alleged perpetrators, and 16.0% to an unrelated third party. These third parties can be divided into five groups. First, governments and institutions were noted, where the lack of governmental action against discrimination was blamed, for example, broadcasts calling out the fact that, despite promises from the prime minister to implement measures against anti-Semitism, such actions have yet to materialize. Second, law enforcement and unions were blamed. Here, the protective role of police unions often shields officers from accountability, as seen in the case where over 30 complaints against an officer were ignored. Third, public sector bodies were named, such as in the case of the healthcare sector's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically regarding vaccine accessibility and the controversy around mandatory vaccination policies. Fourth, overall public viewpoints are blamed, mostly in the context of a reaction to social media campaigns. An example is that initiated by Sofia Taloni, highlighting the presence and rights of LGBTQ+ individuals in Morocco, which faced a major backlash. This illustrates how public platforms, and their users can either amplify or mitigate the discourse around discrimination. Lastly, religious institutions are blamed, such as in the case of the response from Jehovah's Witnesses regarding their internal rules based on biblical principles, despite legal challenges. Yet, comparison between the two news channels, VTM and VRT, did not yield any notable differences in the attribution of responsibility across the categories of discriminated actors, discriminatory actors, and other entities. However, temporal analysis shows a pronounced variation over the years in terms of assigning responsibility within news items (χ^2 = 41.591, df = 4, p < 0.001). The year 2021 witnessed the highest rate of responsibility assignment (83.9% of fragments), whereas 2017 and 2018 saw the lowest rates, at 41.1% and 42.6%, respectively. No significant annual difference was observed in attributing responsibility to the alleged victims of discrimination. In contrast, significant yearly differences emerged in the attribution to alleged perpetrators (χ^2 = 76.933, df = 4, p < 0.001) and to third parties (χ^2 = 11.930, df = 4, p = 0.018). The years 2019 to 2021 showed increased assignment of responsibility to alleged perpetrators, with percentages at 74.0%, 72.0%, and 76.0%, respectively, compared to the lower rates in 2017 (36.0%) and 2018 (33.3%). Responsibility attribution to a third party was notably higher in 2020 (30.0%) than in other surveyed years, where it remained below 16.0%.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The portrayal of discriminated groups in media content significantly influences societal views of marginalized communities (Beckers and Moy 2021; Hashmi 2019). Analyzing how discrimination is depicted in television news is essential, as this medium remains a crucial public information source. Coverage of discrimination can either reinforce existing prejudices or challenge them (Lăzăroiu et al. 2017). This longitudinal study examined 295 Flemish television news items on discrimination from 2017 to 2021, focusing on the public broadcaster VRT and its commercial counterpart VTM.

First, our analysis revealed both differences and similarities in how the broadcasters covered discrimination. VTM featured more items on discrimination, while VRT provided more in-depth coverage with longer segments. Despite these differences, both channels showed a comparable commitment to discussing discrimination, with no significant disparity in the overall proportion of news focused on this issue. VRT tended to emphasize racial discrimination more than VTM, while both networks gave similar attention to gender, religion, and sexual orientation. Additionally, direct and indirect discrimination, as well as the representation of victims and perpetrators, were similarly reported by both VRT and VTM. These similarities can be attributed to prevailing media logic and news values that influence both channels, such as continuity, cultural importance, drama, audiovisual fragments, and news from elite countries, like the United States (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Harcup and O'Neill 2001; Harcup 2023).

When dissecting the reporting trends, our study found that racial discrimination was the most frequently reported ground, particularly influenced by global movements, such as Black Lives Matter (BLM). The global racial justice movement following George Floyd's death in 2020 heightened awareness and action against racial discrimination in Belgium, news coverage peaking on this issue in 2020. Additionally, there was an increase in coverage of sexuality-related discrimination in 2021, reflecting a growing media focus on issues pertaining to sexual orientation and the increased visibility and activism of LGBTQ+ communities during this period. These findings illustrate how global events, such as COVID-19 and BLM, influence local media coverage, indicating that the media agenda is shaped by both internal and external factors. When comparing news coverage with real-world statistics from Unia reports, we found discrepancies. Both The National Center for Equal Opportunities (Unia) and our analysis point to race being the most prevalent discrimination ground, yet other grounds, like disability and health discrimination, were more prevalent in real life than reflected in our television broadcasts (Unia 2022). This discrepancy aligns with cultivation theory, suggesting that media representation can shape public perceptions differently from actual occurrences (Gerbner 1969). As a result, individuals' perceptions of the most common grounds of discrimination may be biased, leading to reduced awareness and recognition of grounds that are rarely reported in the news.

Next, our findings revealed no significant differences between VRT and VTM in terms of how they portrayed victims and perpetrators of discrimination. Both broadcasters mentioned victims in approximately 70% of their news items, with no significant differences in the use of direct quotes, paraphrasing, or visual representation. Similarly, perpetrators were also portrayed consistently across both channels, with no significant differences in the frequency of quotes or paraphrasing.

This study emphasized the necessity of addressing intersectionality and systemic issues in media coverage to accurately reflect diversity in contemporary society (Joseph and Winfield 2019). Importantly, our findings indicate that intersectionality is frequently neglected in news reports, revealing substantial opportunities for enhancement. News articles often portrayed discrimination through single-axis categories, failing to recognize the compounded effects of overlapping identities, such as race and gender or religion and sexuality.

Overall, this study provides a detailed understanding of Flemish television news coverage of discrimination, highlighting its strengths and limitations in reflecting and shaping public perceptions. Both VRT and VTM show a strong commitment to addressing

societal inequalities through their reporting, despite minor differences. This similarity points to a media logic where certain issues are spotlighted while others do not, regardless of whether the media are public or commercial.

Several limitations of our study should be acknowledged. First, although the study provides valuable insights into the portrayal of discrimination, it does not examine the effects of this coverage on viewers. A more complete picture of the media's role in influencing public opinion on discrimination would be possible if we could understand how news consumers interpret and are impacted by these news items. Second, because of its longitudinal design, the study's coverage is restricted to the two most popular television news broadcasters in Flanders: VRT and VTM. Other current affairs shows and regional news broadcasts, which might present other viewpoints, are not included. Furthermore, by concentrating on Flemish broadcasters, the French-speaking region of Belgium is left out and may be overlooked when reporting on discrimination-related concerns. Moreover, by quantitatively mapping intersectional discrimination, layers of nuance and understanding of the unique experiences of discrimination cannot be fully captured. Another limitation of this study is that, for feasibility reasons, this study used the keyword "discrimination" to select news fragments. As a result, news fragments that also deal with discrimination but are not so literally named, such as fragments with the words 'racism', 'ageism', 'racism', and 'equality', are possibly not included in this study. Lastly, by focusing our analysis on cases where discrimination was explicitly mentioned in the broadcast or labelled by ENA, our analysis may exclude instances where discrimination is implied but not explicitly named.

Future research should continue to explore the dynamics of media representation and its impact on social change and inclusive discourse, as well as including indirect media representations of discrimination. By comparing media portrayals of discrimination with real-world data, researchers can better understand inherent biases in coverage and work towards more accurate and comprehensive reporting. Moreover, it would be valuable to examine the extent to which discrimination is reported in foreign contexts, as our findings show that, despite the limited number of stories on discrimination, some focus on international issues rather than addressing it as a local or national problem.

This approach will help ensure that media coverage more faithfully represents the complexities and intersectional nature of contemporary discrimination, fostering a more inclusive and informed public dialogue.

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