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# Coming Out of the Closet, Also on the News? A Longitudinal Content Analysis of Patterns in Visibility, Tone and Framing of LGBTs on Television News (1986–2017)

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## ABSTRACT

This study documents the results of a longitudinal content analysis of television news about LGBT people in terms of visibility, active representation, tone and framing in Flanders (1986–2017). While attention for LGBT issues has increased over time, LGBTs are not more likely to be visually represented or granted a voice. Gay men are more often actively represented than lesbians and transgender people. News remains negatively biased, although news stories in which LGBT people are depicted as the cause of negativity have become less prevalent. Patterns in framing have shifted: Deviance and abnormality frames have decreased in favor of a rise in equal rights and victim frames. Patterns in tone and framing were similar for gay men, lesbians and transgender people. Results suggest that journalists have shifted from problematizing homosexuality to problematizing homophobia. Implications of news as a source of mass-mediated contact to promote tolerance toward LGBT people are discussed.


## KEYWORDS

LGBT people; television news; longitudinal content analysis; framing; tone; mass-mediated contact; transgenders; media

## Introduction

Over the last decades, progress has been made with regard to equal rights for LGBT people (Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgenders)—including legalization of same-sex marriage and adoption of children—and the fight against sexual discrimination is high on the political agenda (Gerhards, 2010; Hooghe & Meeusen, 2013). While this has resulted in a gradual shift toward more tolerance for the LGBT community, heterosexuality remains the norm in most societies. Homosexuality in all its forms is still widely associated with prejudice and misunderstandings (Redman, 2018).

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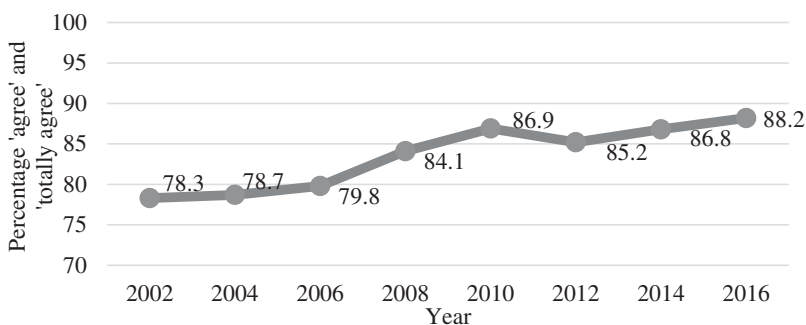
The way homosexuality is covered by the mass media has the potential to set social norms regarding sex and sexual identity and as such shape public opinion about homosexuality (Calzo & Ward, 2009; Lee & Hicks, 2011; Sink & Mastro, 2017). The mass media have been shown to be a key information source, especially for people who lack direct contact with LGBT people (Joyce & Harwood, 2014). In these situations, mass-mediated exposure can operate as extension or substitute for real-life contact with LGBT people (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2006; Sink & Mastro, 2017). According to mass-mediated contact theory—or the parasocial contact hypothesis—on screen contact with LGBT people has been found to operate along similar dynamics as real-life contact with these outgroup members (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007; Riggie, Ellis, & Crawford, 1996; Schiappa et al., 2006; Sink & Mastro, 2017). The main assumption of the theory is that contact with individual group members, under particular circumstances (pertaining to the nature and quality of the contact and the context in which it occurs), operates as a catalyst for tolerance toward that group. To the extent that representations of LGBT people in the mass media conform to some criteria that also apply to face-to-face contact, it may affect public opinion regarding LGBT people. If media can operate as a vehicle to boost tolerance via its extending of real-life contact with LGBT people, this makes a longitudinal and systematic investigation of media representation of LGBT pertinent.

Arguing from the mass-mediated contact hypothesis, we closely examine how the media represent LGBTs. We aim to make several key contributions: First, while the majority of prior studies have assessed LGBT portrayals in fictional content (sitcoms, talk shows, films) (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Cavalcante, 2015), we assess television news, which can be considered a “window on the world”; television news is still the main information and learning source in Europe (Nic, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2018). It is a highly accessible medium, and continues to attract a large and diverse audience. It has been found to play a key role in political agenda-setting (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011) and can be considered a vital source to raise awareness about political issues and LGBT rights (Chen & Pain, 2018; Li, 2017). Journalists are expected to report on issues in an objective way (McNair, 2017), augmenting the trustworthiness of the news. This, in turn, can affect how people think about homosexuality. Next to studying fictional programs, it is therefore key to assess how the news reports about homosexuality. Second, while the diversity of prior news studies is limited in terms of geographical reach (US-dominated), scope (focus on one single debate, like same-sex marriage) and time-frame (Engel, 2013; Moscowitz, 2010), we examine how LGBT news portrayals (including all possible topics) have evolved over time in terms of quantity and quality. This traces back to the mass-mediated contact theory, which suggests that not only sheer representations of LGBT, but also its specific modalities in terms of speaking time,

visibility, tone, and framing warrant scrutiny. Hence, we (1) examine trends in the amount of LGBT news stories over time, (2) assess active representations of LGBT people in the news, (3) document evolutions in tone and framing of news about LGBTs, and (4) recognize within-group diversity by exploring whether gay men, lesbians and transgender people are covered in divergent ways. Instead of examining one static point in time, we acknowledge the dynamic nature of outgroup portrayals in the news by analyzing over 30 years of television news (1986–2017). We do not rely on a sample, but study *all* news stories on LGBT people on the main broadcaster in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, for a 32-year period.

### The Belgian context: A pioneer in LGBT rights

From a comparative perspective, Belgium is a leading country in terms of LGBT rights and acceptance (Eeckhout & Paternotte, 2011): it was one of the first countries worldwide to legalize same-sex marriage in 2003 and to grant same-sex couples the right to adopt children in 2006. Reliable figures about the number of LGBT people in Belgium are lacking, but the Belgian LGBT federation Çavaria ([www.cavaria.be](http://www.cavaria.be)) estimates that about five per cent of the population is gay or bisexual. News organizations, public broadcasters in particular, have put regulations in place (e.g., Diversity Charters) to stimulate nuanced reporting about minorities, including about LGBT people (Jacobs, Meeusen, & D’Haenens, 2016). While discrimination and violence directed at LGBTs is not fully eradicated, Belgium has made substantial advances to ensure equal opportunities for LGBT people (Eeckhout & Paternotte, 2011). Data from the European Social Survey (ESS), a large-scale cross-sectional survey that since 2002 conducted in several European countries, demonstrates that tolerance toward LGBT people in Belgium is high and still on the rise (Figure 1). Respondents had to indicate on a five-point scale from 1 (“do not agree at all”) to 5 (“fully agree”) to what extent they agreed with the



**Figure 1.** Tolerance toward LGBT people in Belgium: “Gays and lesbians should be free to live their lives as they wish.”

following statement: “Gays and lesbians are free to live their lives the way they wish.” Higher scores point to higher levels of tolerance toward LGBT people. Descriptive data show a rise in tolerance taking place in Belgium between 2002 and 2016: while in 2002 only 36.7 per cent of the respondents said they totally agreed with this statement, this percentage has increased until 58 per cent in 2016. In 2016, 88.2 per cent of respondents say they either agree or totally agree that lesbians and gays are free to live their lives the way they wish, compared to 78.3 per cent in 2002. Still, while eight to nine out of ten Flemings accept homosexuality and agree with equal rights for LGBT, implicit negativity and violence toward LGBT still exists (D’Haese, Dewaele, & Van Houtte, 2014; Pickery & Noppe, 2017). For example, one third of the Flemish population thinks LGBTs receive too much attention and prefers their children to engage in heterosexual relationships.

Prior work about LGBT representations in the Flemish media has exclusively assessed fictional programming. Vanlee, Dhaenens, & Van Bauwel, 2018 find that 38 per cent of domestic fiction productions between 2001 and 2016 included LGBT+ roles and narratives and 23 per cent placed LGBT+ characters in a lead role. In their longitudinal study of sexual and gendered normality in fictional productions, the authors conclude that diversity is considered a part of normality and that “the television culture is sensitive to sociocultural changes, regardless of commercial or reactionary interest as guiding forces in the dissemination of images” (Vanlee et al., 2018, p. 622). So far, however, no previous study has examined LGBT representations on Belgian television newscasts. Therefore, we aim to expand our knowledge in this field by systematically assessing news representations of homosexuality.

*Note.* Design weights are included.  $N_{2002} = 1,653$ .  $N_{2004} = 1,593$ .  $N_{2006} = 1,615$ .  $N_{2008} = 1,628$ .  $N_{2010} = 1,599$ .  $N_{2012} = 1,737$ .  $N_{2014} = 1,660$ .  $N_{2016} = 1,661$ . *Source:* ESS 2002–2016.

Our expectation is that patterns in news regarding homosexuality will have followed this general shift toward rising tolerance and sexual normality over time, but at the same time we expect to find some (negativity) bias in contemporary news depictions. In sum, by providing an in-depth longitudinal analysis of LGBT coverage, we aim to advance the understanding of television news as an influential information climate in which dominant views about homosexuality are being constructed and disseminated.

### **The visibility of LGBT people in the news**

For a long time, LGBT people were barely visible in the media and popular culture. This lack of media attention can be problematic: Next to reduced mass-mediated contact opportunities, lack of media attention for LGBTs and their political rights may reproduce social inequalities in power relations, a phenomenon coined “symbolic annihilation” (Tuchman, 1978). It refers to

the mass media's reproduction of social inequalities in power relations. The neglect of sexual minorities in the media has contributed to their marginalization and exclusion from influence in society (Moscowitz, 2010). Media visibility of LGBT people can be seen as one key vehicle for their political emancipation and a precondition for the recognition of their rights and legitimacy as a social group. This is especially relevant as mass media has been recognized to shape social reality and, hence, can affect how people evaluate particular issues and groups in society.

The invisibility of LGBT people in the media is gradually declining: Media attention for homosexuality as an issue has grown (Calzo & Ward, 2009; Garretson, 2015). This rise was mostly driven by the introduction of popular US sitcoms and talk shows featuring LGBTs, like "Ellen" by lesbian talk show host Ellen DeGeneres, "Will & Grace" and "Modern Family" (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Cavalcante, 2015). However, despite studies assessing over-time LGBT visibility in fiction (Cavalcante, 2015; Dow, 2001; Hart, 2000; Vanlee et al., 2018), LGBT presence in the news has attracted substantially less scholarly attention. Furthermore, the few extant longitudinal news studies have focused on one particular debate, i.e. same-sex marriage (e.g., Li & Liu, 2010; Moscowitz, 2010). In-depth analysis of news attention for LGBT people remains important, however, since due to its information and education function news has a large potential to shape public opinion by recognizing LGBTs as a relevant socio-political group and stressing equal rights (Alwood, 1996; Moscowitz, 2010). Based on the rise in LGBT characters and issues in fictional programs, the growth in tolerance toward LGBT people in Flemish society and the creation of a Diversity Charter by the public broadcaster, we start by formulating a general expectation:

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Over time, there is an increase in visibility of LGBT people on Flemish television news.

### **From passive to active representation**

Compared to passive representation (i.e., homosexuality as a news topic), active news representation, in which LGBT people are visually depicted on screen and given a voice, is arguably more relevant as a source to affect public opinion (Moscowitz, 2010). This can be understood from the perspective of mass-mediated contact theory. Similar to classic intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2011), mass-mediated contact with social groups has been found to reduce prejudice (Park, 2012; Vezzali, Hewstone, Capozza, Giovannini, & Wölfer, 2014; Visintin, Voci, Pagotto, & Hewstone, 2017): exposure to LGBT representations in the media can stimulate tolerance, especially for individuals with limited real-

life contact experiences with LGBT people (Riggle et al., 1996; Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005; Schiappa et al., 2006; Sink & Mastro, 2017). However, to realize these indirect contact opportunities, outgroups need to be actually visible in the media (Sink & Mastro, 2017). Lack of individual exemplars of LGBT people may put a limit on the potential of news media to fuel familiarity with LGBT persons, and in this way mass media may not contain the necessary elements to boost tolerance. Individuals exposed to positive portrayals where LGBT people take center stage are more likely to develop tolerant attitudes toward this group (Joyce & Harwood, 2014; Sink & Mastro, 2017). Lack of visual representation and voice risks to reduce individuals to their group membership, disregarding within-group diversity. One of the core strengths of television news is the power to bring events and people to life via live reporting and interplay between sound and image (Uribe & Gunter, 2007). Visual cues have been shown to be effective in shaping public opinion due to their straightforward interpretation, potential to grasp attention, power to evoke emotions, and their advantages for memory recall (Powell, Boomgaarden, De Swert, & De Vreese, 2015). In terms of voice, giving LGBTs the floor to elaborate on issues may be crucial to mobilize support, reduce prejudice, promote the diverse nature of the LGBT community, and attribute positive traits like authority and credibility (Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001). In this way, LGBT representatives are actively staged and attributed an “expert” role, which offers room for viewers to identify with them and their cause, just like with direct intergroup contact. This does not mean that active representation cannot be negative, but it is more likely to be positive, because individuals are taken seriously and are being included as a news source. Prior studies assessing immigration news have found, for instance, that when immigrants are depicted as individuals, the coverage and response is more likely to be positive than when depicted as a large, anonymous group (Aalberg & Beyer, 2015).

A key question is whether we can discern an evolution in active representation too. Prior research has hinted that in media coverage homosexuality as an issue is still approached from a heteronormative angle: LGBT issues are often debated without staging LGBT people (Moscowitz, 2010). This is questionable from the outlook of power relations in society. Failing to represent minorities in public debate risks to jeopardize their position and recognition as a legitimate social group; lack of active representation may also mean that the conditions for successful mass-mediated contact are not present. Still, given the gradual shift toward homonormativity (i.e., normalization of same-sex relationships) in Flanders and assuming that news, especially on public TV stations, should offer a diversity in viewpoints, it follows that in news about LGBT issues the LGBT community should be visually depicted and heard. We expect that:



**H<sub>2</sub>:** Over time, there is an increase in the active representation of LGBT people on Flemish television news in terms of (a) visual representation and (b) voice.

### **The tone and framing of news about LGBT people**

After assessing the quantity of LGBT depictions, we focus on the quality of news portrayals in the form of tone and framing. There should not only be room for mass-mediated contact to take place (which requires active representation), but the portrayals of LGBT people should also meet some criteria regarding the nature of this contact in order to be boost tolerance (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007; Riggle et al., 1996; Sink & Mastro, 2017). We focus on two criteria: news tone and the framing of news stories regarding LGBTs. The tone of a news story relates to the direction of news, including an evaluation of a particular topic or group in the news (Sheafer, 2007). News tone has ramifications for the salience and reception of political issues, because it can steer public opinion in a particular way. This holds particularly whenever a group is subject to highly unidirectional coverage—positive or negative—which enhances chances that this dominant tone is internalized by the audience while judging outgroups (Jacobs & Van der Linden, 2018; Zaller, 1992). Scholarship assessing (evolutions of) the tone of LGBT news is scant. Preliminary evidence by Meeusen and Jacobs (2016) illustrates that news coverage of homosexuality is negatively skewed. Yet, in comparison to other minority groups in society, this negativity bias is less persistent. Furthermore, a prior study by Barnhurst (2003) based on evidence from the nineties documents an increase in mixed (combination of positive and negative tone) and positive coverage in news about same-sex marriage. Given the shift in norms in Western societies and following regulations in which guidelines to limit stereotypical coverage are issued, we hypothesize:

**H<sub>3</sub>:** Over time, there is (a) an increase in positive news and (b) mixed news of LGBT people on Flemish television, and a (c) decrease of negative news of LGBT people on television.

Like all news, stories about LGBT people are likely to contain framing elements. Framing refers to the way information is packaged in the news, involving the selection of information (De Vreese, 2005). Frames are core ideas that organize news messages, adding an interpretation or angle to how news reports about issues, such as homosexuality. Reliance on frames allows journalists to reduce complexity and to provide viewers with a simple account of events. Importantly, frames are affected by newsmakers' norms and values, especially when reporting about groups they are less familiar with. This process asserts that some aspects of a news story are underlined at



the expense of other perspectives which are covered less (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Prior research on the framing of LGBT people and homosexuality in the news generally relies on a set of recurring issue-specific frames: First, given their marginalized position in society, news often portrays LGBTs as different, displaying deviant sexual behavior, with immoral and criminal urges (Adamczyk, Kim, & Schmuhl, 2017; Baisley, 2015). This draws a picture of LGBTs as outgroups adhering to norms that challenge society's dominant heterosexual focus. This *deviance* frame depicts LGBTs as a fundamental threat to the social order, focusing on unsafe sex, HIV/AIDS, criminal behavior and promiscuity. Second, the media has framed homosexuality as a mental disorder and an abnormal lifestyle (Alwood, 1996; Hart, 2000). This *abnormality* frame stresses contrasts between heterosexuality and homosexuality, clarifying that while homosexuality may be tolerated, it is by no means natural (Vanlee et al., 2018). Third, in some news stories arguments against homosexuality are placed in a *religious context*, with actors from leading religions (Catholicism, Islam) condemning homosexual behavior, building on religious/traditional belief systems (Adamczyk et al., 2017). Fourth, an emerging frame is that LGBT people are portrayed as a social group with legitimate demands, focusing on the struggle to respect *human rights* and to ensure *equal opportunities* (Baisley, 2015; Moscowitz, 2010). Finally, a recurrent narrative is a frame depicting LGBTs as *victims* of discrimination and physical violence (Warren & Bloch, 2014).

So far, the framing of LGBTs in television news has not often been studied in a longitudinal way. Still, frames are largely affected by the worldviews of news producers (De Vreese, 2005), implying that framing patterns can greatly fluctuate over time. Because in Western Europe homosexuality has become less taboo over time, one would expect a shift in the type of frames that are applied. In many Western societies, LGBT people have mobilized in social movements that organize manifestations to get their issues on the public agenda and in which they denounce acts of discrimination and violence, standing up for their rights (Engel, 2013). Similarly, in contemporary Western society blatant, overt expressions of prejudice have been discredited, suggesting that deviance and abnormality frames may become less acceptable (Herek & McLemore, 2013). Public broadcasters have also installed charters enacting their commitment to reduce stereotypical portrayals in favor of more balance (Jacobs et al., 2016). Finally, the secularization of Western Europe could make that religion is steadily losing grip on society as guidance for norms and values, which could result in a shift in news coverage:

**H<sub>4</sub>:** Over time, there is a shift in the use of frames in television news coverage of LGBT people with a decrease of (a) deviance, (b) abnormality and (c) religion frames and an increase of (d) equal rights and (e) victimization frames.

## Comparing news depictions of LGBT people

Contrary to prior media studies that have focused on one group (e.g., gay men) or have treated LGBT people as one group, we focus on within-group diversity. While LGBTs share common traits, most notably a sexual orientation that is not exclusively heterosexual, these subgroups have distinct characteristics too. Studies have revealed rather compellingly that attitudes toward these groups differ in intensity: Gay men, bisexuals and transgender people are more often subject to prejudice than lesbians (Huffaker & Kwon, 2016; Worthen, 2013). Some studies have also suggested that distinct stereotypes are applicable to LGBTs, for instance, with gay men associated with promiscuous sexual morals, lesbians with child adoption, and transgender people with identity crises and split personalities (Raley & Lucas, 2006).

Despite this divergence in attitudes and beliefs, literature comparing news portrayals of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgenders is scarce. Preliminary evidence highlights that gay men are the most visible group in the mass media, while visibility for transgender people and lesbians lags behind (McInroy & Craig, 2015; Vanlee et al., 2018). This lack of balance in media visibility may originate from broader patterns of gender stereotyping and sexual prejudice. Intersectionality stresses that outgroups with a double minority status face additional exclusion (Verloo, 2006). Discounting lesbians may resonate with journalists' well-documented tendency to overrepresent men as news sources (De Swert & Hooghe, 2010). However, regarding the tone and framing of LGBTs, we have no clear prior expectation. We will explore whether the tone and framing of news stories for respectively gay men, lesbians and transgender people differ on Flemish television news.

## Data & method

### *News data*

We investigate LGBT representations in the daily news of the main broadcaster *VRT* (Vlaamse Radio en Televisie) in Flanders. The partly state-funded public broadcaster occupies a key position and has a strong market share. In 2017, the overall market share of the public broadcaster was 35.5 per cent. No other television channel reaches a larger audience; the second largest market share was 19.6 per cent for *VTM*, the main commercial broadcaster. The other domestic commercial channels have remarkably lower market shares, ranging from 1.6 to 7.4 per cent. Moreover, the market share for the *VRT* newscast ("*Het Journaal*") is even stronger. In Flanders, only two television channels have a daily newscast in prime-time: the public broadcaster *VRT* and the commercial broadcaster *VTM*. The market share for the prime-time newscast on the public broadcaster was -by lack of competition- very high in the 80s, but since the foundation of the commercial broadcaster in 1989, the

market share has somewhat dropped. Still, its market share remains much stronger than the prime-time newscast of the commercial broadcaster: In 2017, the *VRT* prime-time newscast had a market share of 51.8 per cent, compared to a market share of 30.2 per cent for the *VTM* newscast.<sup>1</sup> In 2003, the *VRT* has signed a Diversity Charter institutionalizing its intention to report in a balanced and nuanced manner about vulnerable groups in society.

The collection of the news stories was done in cooperation with the public broadcaster *VRT* in Flanders; these news stories date back to 1986.<sup>2</sup> The *VRT* Archive annotates and archives for all news stories in the 7pm newscast the main topics and several key words. These data are freely available for scientific purposes at the *VRT* headquarters in Brussels. To select all relevant news covering LGBT issues during our 32-year observation period (1986–2017), we used all LGBT related key words within the *VRT* annotation system: “homosexuality,” “bisexuality,” and “transgender.” These key words are general topics or themes and did not need to be explicitly mentioned in the news stories to be coded as such. These theme-based key words included various subtopics, such as “sexual discrimination,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” “gay pride,” and “sexual identity,” and could therefore be reliably used to select all news stories where homosexuality—in all its facets—was an issue.

All stories matching the key words were manually double-checked to ascertain whether the story indeed dealt with homosexuality. This resulted in 464 news stories in which LGBT issues presented the main topic, excluding news where LGBTs are only incidentally mentioned and were not central to the narrative. A huge advantage is that we do not make use of a sample but study the full population of news explicitly referring to LGBTs for a 32-year period. This 32-year period maximizes variation, making the longitudinal set-up an asset to this study. All 464 news stories were subsequently carefully watched (if necessary, multiple times) by the authors and coded using a specifically designed and pre-tested coding scheme.

### ***Coding and inter-coder reliability***

The coding has been carried out by the authors of this study who are experienced in quantitative content analysis. The unit of analysis was the single news story. In Flanders, a newscast is split into a number of smaller units that are thematically delineated from each other. The coders made use of all audio-visual information provided to the spectator in the news story, varying from the announcement by the news anchor, actual footage and visuals, audio, reporters, and voice-overs. To achieve objective coding, coders were instructed to ignore any prior knowledge they may have about a specific news topic or actor. For example, it was possible that former Belgian prime minister Elio Di Rupo featured in a news story dealing with equal chances for LGBT people. Di Rupo is openly homosexual; however, if this was not

derivable from watching the news story, Di Rupo was not coded as gay.<sup>3</sup> The objective of the coding procedure was to obtain insight into the quantity and quality of LGBT representations in Flemish television news.

Inter-coder reliability was assessed via double-coding a randomly selected subsample of 10 per cent of the news stories and by comparing the codings systematically for each variable. For each variable the inter-coder reliability values (percentage agreement and Krippendorff's Alpha) were calculated, confirming that the reliability meets the formal requirements with an average percentage agreement of 94.2% and an average Krippendorff's coefficient of 0.85, ranging from 0.58 to 1.00 (details in online supplementary Table A1).

### **Operationalization variables**

First, we coded whether an LGBT actor was visually depicted on screen (*visual representation*), including whether the actors were granted speaking time (*voice*). Visual representation required that LGBT people were really shown on camera and were visible on screen. Visual representation and voice together make up active representation. The identification of LGBT persons was done only using indications in the news story such as self-reporting (person referring to his/her own homosexual or transsexual orientation), reporting by others (person described by others as being gay or transgender, including descriptions by reporters, news anchors and/or voice-overs), and context or displayed behavior (e.g., engaging in romantic behavior with a person from the same-sex, protesting in a pro LGBT rights manifestation).<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that in most situations, the identification occurred via self-reporting or reporting by others. Voice was operationalized as being allowed to speak at least for a few seconds in the news story. We made use of the following operational definitions for the identification of LGBT people. While they may be simplified, a straightforward measure is necessary to quantify news coverage for LGBTs: a *gay man/lesbian* is a male/female presented/described as being attracted to men/women; a *transgender individual* is a person presented/described as someone who transferred from the socially constructed category of man to woman and vice versa (Davis, 2009).

Second, we coded four types of *news tone*: *negative without cause* (LGBT portrayal focusing on negative aspects, without attributing blame to LGBT people), *negative cause* (focusing on negative aspects and attributing blame to LGBT people), *positive* (focusing on positive aspects) and *mixed* (focusing on positive and negative aspects). Neutral news stories were also coded, but they were rare (3.7 per cent of all news stories) and were not included in subsequent analyses. The tone of the news story was always a combination of the topic and the evaluation of a problem and who is presented as responsible for causing this problem. Distinguishing between news where

LGBTs are portrayed as the cause of negativity is relevant because blame attribution can play a role in affecting public opinion (Meeusen & Jacobs, 2016). Some examples can illustrate the coding process: a news story has been coded as “negative and cause” if it stresses that due to their own promiscuous behavior, gay people got affected with AIDS; as “negative without cause” if a lesbian couple was (verbally or physically) attacked for their sexual orientation; an example of a “positive” news story is a news story reporting about the fact that children raised in a family with two parents of the same-sex grow up to be more open-minded. Making the distinction between “negative without cause” and “negative with cause” allows us to bring nuance and permits us to document patterns of problem attribution (for a similar approach see Snow, Vliegthart, & Corrigan-Brown, 2007). More specifically, it allows us to differentiate between negativity in terms of topics or issues covered in relationship to LGBT people, and to what extent individual LGBT persons are portrayed and presented as cause of the negativity. The advantage of this approach is that although news is often characterized by a negativity bias (Harcup & O’Neill, 2017), this does not mean that LGBTs are presented as the cause of this negativity, which is of course relevant when applying criteria of mediated contact theory to news coverage. Third, based on previous research (e.g., Alwood, 1996; Moscovitz, 2010) we coded five frames<sup>5</sup>: deviance, abnormality, religion, victimization, and equal rights.<sup>6</sup> Following prior research (Brewer & Gross, 2005), we define a news frame as a “central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning.” As such, frames offer an indication “what the controversy is about, the essence of an issue.” The *deviance frame* stresses immoral and deviant behavior ascribed to LGBTs, like (unsafe) sexual contacts and promiscuity, AIDS/HIV, allusions to the perverse nature of homosexuality, crime or pedophilia. The *abnormality frame* encompasses narratives underscoring homosexuality as a mental disease or an abnormality. The *religion frame* invokes religious arguments (from the leading monotheistic religions, in Flanders mostly Judaism, Islam and Christianity) that are articulated in news about LGBT. A *victim frame* in which LGBT people are represented as victims of discrimination, and/or (physical) violence was also coded. Finally, an *equal rights frame* entails general expressions of support in news stories advocating for equal rights for LGBTs, and more specifically, regarding same-sex marriage and adoption.

Fourth, we included two control variables which allow for more fine-grained analyses: *duration of the news story* (in seconds) and *news type* (domestic news, foreign news, or combination of domestic and foreign news). We include duration of the news item because longer news stories have a stronger possibility to contain more nuanced stories and to actively represent LGBT people. News type was included because we expected—given the relatively tolerant stance in Belgian society—domestic LGBT news to be more positive than foreign news.

Further details on the variables are described in online supplementary Tables A1 and A2.

## Findings

Figure 2 plots the visibility of LGBT people in the news from 1986 until 2017. In total, homosexuality was the main topic in 464 news stories over a 32-year period. Since 1986, we observe a steady increase in the visibility of LGBTs, confirming  $H_1$ . In the late 1980s and early 1990s homosexuality is a non-issue on Flemish television news. In that period, news stories dealing with LGBT topics were almost all about AIDS/HIV and the repudiation of homosexuality by the Vatican. In 1996, we observe a first increase in LGBT visibility which is mainly due to the coverage of the political debate regarding registered partnership for LGBTs (which was eventually approved in 1998). Between 1996 and 2011, visibility remained stable, with a small peak in 2003 when same-sex marriage was legalized. In 2012 another sharp increase was observed. This seems due to a rise in media attention for discrimination following incidents of extreme violence against the LGBT community, both in domestic and foreign news. In 2017, LGBT visibility dropped. Online supplementary Figure A1 also included a figure with relative data rather than absolute numbers.

Regarding active representation, we note that in 71.1 per cent of the news stories LGBT people were visually represented and in 49.4 per cent of the cases they were given a voice. In 67.6 per cent of the news items where LGBT are visually depicted, they are also given a voice. The evolution of active representation closely mirrors that of general visibility until 2012 (Figure 2). While the passive visibility of LGBTs in the news has increased in 2012, proportionally they were not more often visually represented or granted

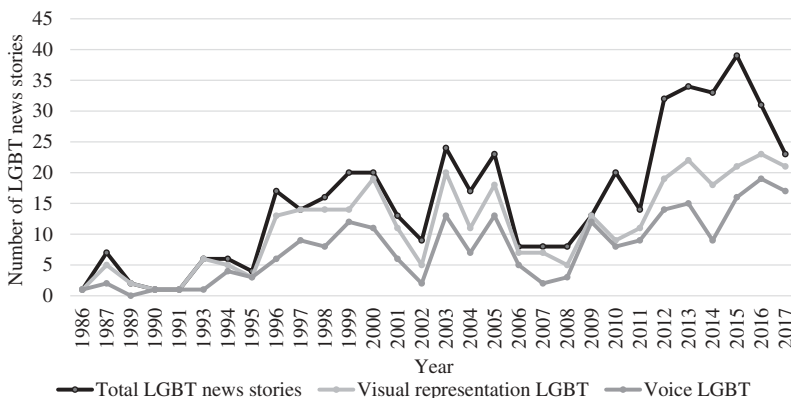


Figure 2. Evolution of visibility, visual representation and voice for LGBT people on Flemish television news (1986–2017).

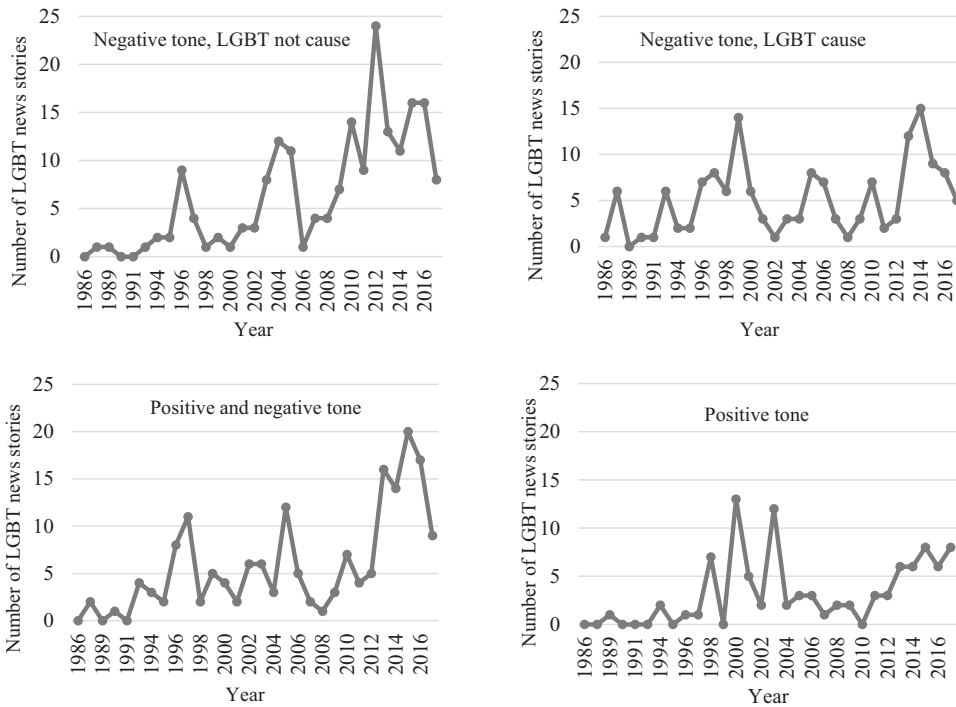


a voice. Table 1 shows the results of a logistic regression expressing the linear trend in the likelihood for LGBTs to be given visual representation and speaking time in news stories that have homosexuality as main topic, controlling for news duration and type. Hence, while Figure 2 plots the absolute number of stories where LGBTs are visually represented or given voice, the logistic regression estimates the odds that whenever a news story deals with homosexuality, LGBTs are depicted or given a voice. Contrary to  $H_2$ , the odds for LGBT people to be visually represented decreases over time, while the odds for voice remain stable.<sup>7</sup> So, whereas in absolute terms we observe a modest increase in active representation, this is mainly due to the overall rise in new stories about homosexuality. Relatively speaking, chances for LGBTs to be visually represented or given voice do not increase over time. Longer news stories increase the likelihood of visual representation and voice for LGBTs, while chances for voice are higher in domestic news than in foreign news.

Not surprisingly, there is a negativity bias in news for LGBT people: 38.6 per cent of the news stories have a negative tone, while only 20.9 per cent have a positive tone. In 36.0 per cent of the cases, the news story has a mixed (positive and negative) tone; 3.7 per cent is neutral (see online supplementary Table A2). However, the negative tone of news stories warrants some qualification: 16.8 per cent of the news items have a negative tone caused by an LGBT person/issue, while 21.8 per cent has a negative tone not caused by an LGBT person/issue. Figure 3 displays the absolute evolution of tone, i.e. the number of news stories per tone category. The clearest rise can be observed for negative tone where LGBTs are not blamed and for the mixed tone news stories. Again, we estimated the odds of a specific tone given the total number of LGBT news items in a logistic regression (Table 1). Our hypotheses are not unequivocally confirmed: While there is a decrease of negative news stories where LGBT people are the cause of the negativity, a similar linear decrease was not significant for negative tone when LGBTs are not the cause ( $H_{3a}$ ). We did not find a significant linear increase in the odds for mixed ( $H_{3b}$ ) or positive ( $H_{3c}$ ) news stories either. Interestingly, the likelihood of negative news stories where LGBTs are not blamed is higher for domestic news items compared to balanced and foreign news. In foreign news stories compared to domestic news stories the odds of negative news with LGBTs as cause of negativity are higher. In cases where LGBTs are granted speaking time, news stories are more often positive and less often negative. Finally, the longer the news story, the lower the likelihood of a negative tone.

Different frames can be applied to one news story. The most frequently used frame is the *equal rights* frame (73.7 per cent), followed by the *victimization* frame (42.0 per cent), *deviance* frame (29.3 per cent), *religion* frame (27.6 per cent) and *abnormality* frame (24.8 per cent). Over time, there is a clear absolute rise in the use of equal rights frames and victim frames, especially during the last five years (Figure 4). Findings show that after controlling for the duration of the news





**Figure 3.** Evolution of news tone for LGBTs on Flemish television news (1986–2017).

story and news type, the odds of deviance and abnormality frames in news regarding LGBT people significantly decrease over time, while the odds of victim and equal rights frames increase; the odds for the religion frame remain stable. Hence,  $H_{4a}$ ,  $H_{4b}$ ,  $H_{4d}$  and  $H_{4e}$  are confirmed, while  $H_{4c}$  is rejected. Domestic news stories are less likely to contain equal rights and religion frames than news stories with a foreign component. Interestingly, when LGBTs are granted a voice, the odds of victim and equal rights frames increase.

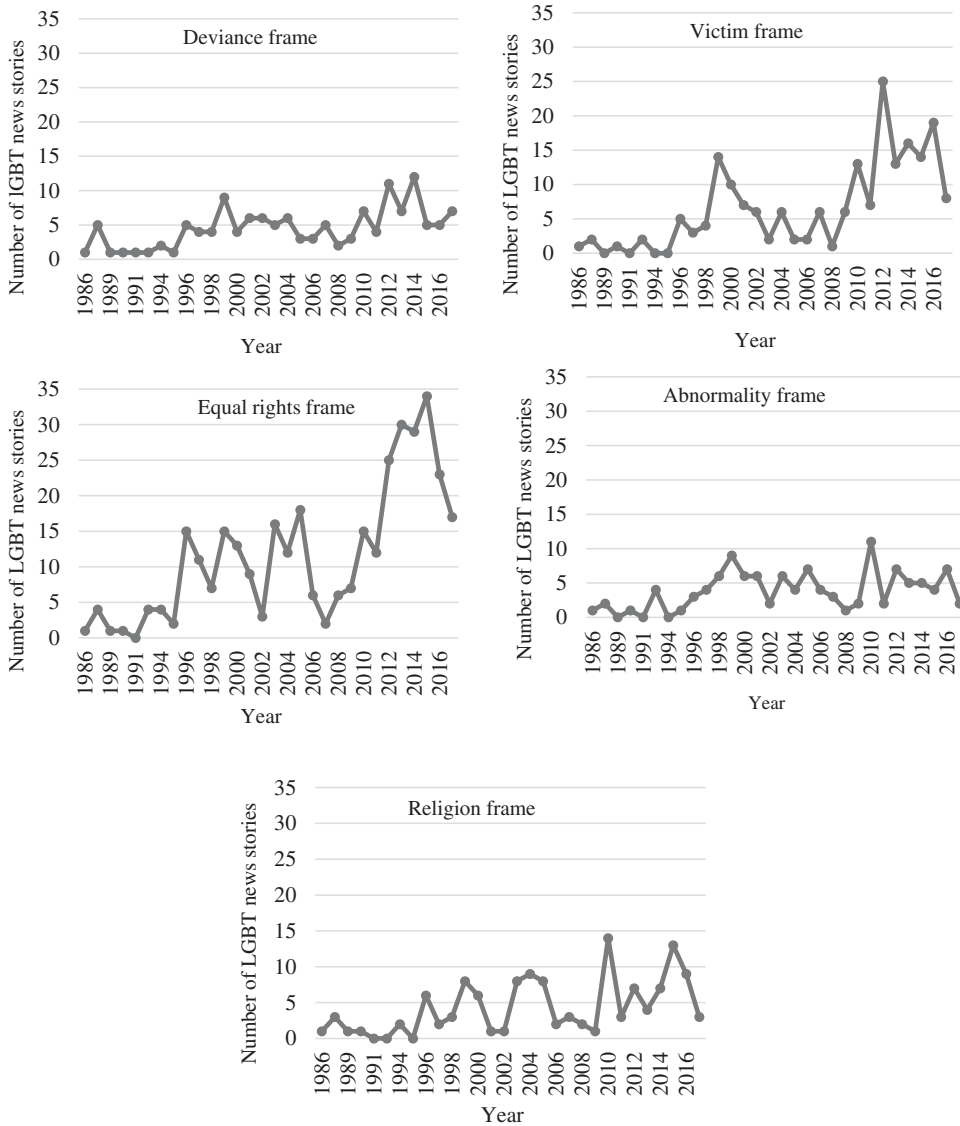
In terms of LGBT comparisons, gay men are more often visually represented (50.9 per cent) and granted voice (34.4 per cent) compared to lesbians (27.2 per cent visuals, 15.3 per cent voice) and transgender people (13.6 per cent visuals, 5.4 per cent voice). In 30.0 per cent of the news stories LGBTs were depicted but it was unclear for the coders to be certain about the specific sexual orientation (often news stories about gay prides). Second, regarding tone and framing not many differences exist (Table 1, Model 2). When lesbians are granted a voice (compared to when they are not granted a voice) the tone of the news stories is less often negative caused by LGBT, more often mixed, with higher odds of an equal rights frame. Clear patterns are not found for gay men or transgender people. When gay men are granted a voice (compared to when they are not granted a voice) they appear more often in a victim frame, and when transgender people are granted voice (compared to when they are not granted voice) they appear less often in a deviance frame compared to any other kind of frame. Still, conclusions



**Table 1. Logistic regression for active representation (H<sub>2</sub>), tone (H<sub>3</sub>), framing (H<sub>4</sub>), and comparisons per LGBT group.**

	Active representation (H <sub>2</sub> )				Tone (H <sub>3</sub> )				Frames (H <sub>4</sub> )									
	Visual representation		Negative tone, LGBT not cause		Negative tone, LGBT cause		Balanced (positive & negative tone)		Deviance frame		Religion frame		Victim frame		Abnormality frame		Equal rights frame	
	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)	B (SE)
<b>MODEL 1</b>																		
Year	-.051(.015)***	-.002(.013)	.059(.017)***	-.050(.016)**	.005(.013)	.000(.015)	-.037(.014)**	-.020(.014)	.038(.013)**	-.050(.014)***	.040(.014)**							
Duration news story	.007(.003)**	.018(.003)***	.003(.003)	.000(.003)	.006(.002)*	-.012(.003)***	.005(.002)*	.009(.003)***	.000(.002)	.006(.003)*	.000(.003)							
News type																		
Domestic (ref.)																		
Mixed	-.450(.307)	-.889(.307)**	-.943(.379)*	.470(.410)	.500(.296)	-.115(.391)	.335(.313)	.784(.313)*	-.226(.299)	.474(.333)	.682(.373)							
Foreign	.370(.255)	-.624(.023)**	-.985(.289)***	.890(.289)**	-.007(.232)	.083(.265)	.256(.238)	.748(.246)**	-.112(.222)	.373(.254)	.368(.251)							
Voice			-.656(.252)**	-.486(.282)	.473(.213)*	.618(.268)*	-.272(.223)	-.123(.230)	.622(.209)**	.364(.237)	.838(.238)***							
<b>MODEL 2</b>																		
Voice gay men			-.145(.244)	-.494(.289)	.319(.207)	.219(.242)	.229(.216)	.856(.203)***	.420(.236)	.309(.219)	.414(.225)							
Voice lesbian women			-.474(.351)	-.206(.730)**	.751(.262)**	.542(.292)	-.464(.308)	.036(.266)	.847(.361)*	-.562(.321)	-.015(.300)							
Voice transgender people			-.800(.630)	-.218(.569)	-.072(.448)	.499(.469)	-.158(.747)*	.157(.427)	.508(.517)	-.662(.561)	.296(.465)							

N = 464. Reported are the unstandardized coefficients (B), standard errors (SE) and significance levels. \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ .



**Figure 4.** Evolution of frames for LGBTs on Flemish television news (1986–2017).

regarding this latter group should be qualified, because the sample size is rather low, which of course presents a relevant finding on its own.

### Discussion

News can be powerful in shaping public opinion about homosexuality because it operates along the same line of real-life intergroup contact theory (Calzo & Ward, 2009; Sink & Mastro, 2017). Exposure to news representations of LGBT can, in this regard, be seen as a form of mass-mediated contact (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007; Park, 2012; Schiappa et al., 2005, 2006; Visintin

et al., 2017). We adopted this premise as theoretical justification and empirical necessity for a longitudinal study of news coverage for LGBT people on Flemish television news. Particular attention was paid to the evolution of LGBT representation over time, in terms of attention, visual representation, voice, tone and the use of framing.

As expected, over time there is a gradual rise in the attention for LGBT people and issues in the news. While in the 1980s and 1990s LGBT persons were only marginally present in the news, from 2000s onwards homosexuality has gained ground as a news topic. However, this gradual rise in attention does not equally extend to active forms of representation: over time, when news stories depict LGBT issues, LGBTs are not more frequently granted a voice in the news debate regarding homosexuality and they are actually less often visually depicted. Only in half the stories about homosexuality, representatives from the LGBT community are given a voice. Hence, the optimism regarding the rise in passive visibility needs to be qualified with regard to active representation as proportionally LGBTs are not more often visually or orally depicted in the public debate about LGBT issues. This slow evolution in active representation may make that the opportunities for mass-mediated contact via exposure to television news portrayals of LGBTs is limited (Sink & Mastro, 2017). Lack of focus on individuals may facilitate stereotypical coverage, where the uniqueness of LGBT individuals is overlooked, possibly reducing them to their group membership (Joyce & Harwood, 2014). Generalization and neglect of within-group diversity are classic features of prejudice. From a diversity angle, lack of speaking time for LGBT people may be problematic and should be interpreted in terms of power relations: Unequal access to the news may not only prevent the spreading of diverse viewpoints and angles, but may also consolidate group positions in society. Focus on individual lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender people in the news could be an instrument for the audience to get to know these individuals and their lifestyle, realizing its full potential as a source of tolerance and mass-mediated contact. However, there could be other explanations for the lack of active representation after 2011 as well: first, there was more attention for cases of gay bashing, but victims are normally not directly interviewed in television news; second, the attention for LGBT issues may have risen amongst heterosexual people, making that this group is more often given a voice in news on LGBT issues, making that the articulation of gay rights may be less exclusively owned by LGBT people.

News about LGBTs is still mostly negative in nature, although negativity is of course generally a well-documented feature of news. Comparing between conclusions regarding the representation of ethnic or immigrant minorities, the level of negativity in LGBT news is slightly lower (Meeusen & Jacobs, 2016). Nevertheless, some noteworthy evolutions can be observed. In recent times, LGBT people are less likely to be attributed blame for a problem in

news stories, meaning that they are less stigmatized as the cause of negativity. The distinction between being depicted as the cause of negativity or not, hence, seems crucial. However, no similar trend toward more mixed and uniformly positive news became evident. This decline in negative news stories where LGBTs are blamed is a relevant finding, because it qualifies the negativity bias. These results could be interpreted from a media logic angle, where newsmakers as “fourth estate” assume a watchdog role via uncovering problems. Focus of newsmakers on signaling problems and bringing these under the attention presents a well-documented news value. There may simply be structural limits regarding positivity in news, since journalists tend to emphasize what is going wrong in society. The decrease in stories where LGBT people are blamed for causing trouble and as the source of negativity thus may be an indication of a shift toward more nuanced narratives. This interpretation is corroborated by the framing analysis: The framing patterns have gradually developed over time with a sharp decrease in the likelihood of deviance and abnormality frames in favor of equal rights and victim frames. While in earlier years, news stories facilitated perspectives regarding the immorality, (sexual) deviance and abnormality of homosexuality, contemporary news narratives are more likely to embrace the vision of LGBT people as a legitimate social group in society struggling for recognition and equal opportunities. In this way, frames could affect the political agenda-setting regarding LGBT issues and may initiate changes in legislation (Li, 2017). Moreover, this shift in framing can create awareness for the equal treatment of LGBT people in society. An increased focus on equal rights frames in the news may eventually result in a different mind-set where new social norms regarding homosexuality are internalized. An unmistakable shift in the dominant frames has emerged: Journalists have shifted from problematizing homosexuality and transsexuality to problematizing homophobia and transphobia. Future studies combining news and public opinion data should assess whether this shift in attributes of news for LGBTs operates as a catalyst for tolerance toward LGBTs.

Comparisons between the portrayal of gay men, lesbians and transgender people revealed minor differences with regard to visual representation and voice. As in Flemish fictional programs (Vanlee et al., 2018), a disparity in news exists: Gay men are more often visually depicted and granted a voice than lesbians and transgender people. Broader patterns of gender discrimination and intersectionality may explain this finding (Verloo, 2006): for multiple reasons, journalists rely on elite sources, which—as a reflection of gender inequality in society—often are male. This lack of gender diversity in news sources is persistent and also seems to apply while covering subgroups of LGBT people. Similarly, transgender people continue to be the most marginalized and least visible sexual minority in the news. News attention for transgender people has only been documented in the last decade and is

sporadic at best. This may have ramifications for the normalization and acceptance of these particular sexual minorities: Consistent disparity in the news may make that people, when lacking direct contact, have less opportunities to learn about lesbians and especially transgender people. Similarly, this relative invisibility also prevents the development of role models for lesbians and transgender people, a pattern which has been found in studies of fictional news coverage as well (Vanlee et al., 2018). While under impulse of the news media more people may become increasingly familiar with gay men and gradually grow more tolerant, unequal access to news media for other groups may inhibit their recognition as a legitimate group in society. Still, the picture is more complex: If lesbians are granted a voice, they are less often attributed blame, and more likely to appear in mixed news stories, stressing equal rights. However, overall differences between outgroups in terms of tone and framing remain limited, which may suggest that newsmakers largely construct similar frames which apply to LGBTs in general.

The findings from this study warrant future monitoring and in-depth (qualitative) analysis in terms of its attitudinal and behavioral effects. It remains an open question whether homosexuality will continue to remain a relevant news issue, or that at some point we will enter in a phase of normalization, where attention will drop. Similarly, we cannot disentangle effects of exposure to these shifting patterns in tone and framing, although it is remarkable that this change in framing, for instance, coincides with a wave of tolerance. Still, it is up for future debate whether news is at least partly responsible in setting the norms with regard to homosexuality; prior research in other contexts seems to suggest that this is the case, and that—whenever several criteria are met—the mass media may influence LGBT attitudes (Schiappa et al., 2006). Future studies should expand the scope and study other (less progressive) geographical contexts, and assess portrayals of bisexuals. Only in a small number of occasions, explicit references were made to bisexuals, suggesting that journalists have a tendency to simplify and to reduce gender to binary categories. Finally, future studies should closely assess how the different modalities of news representation of LGBT people and issues affect public opinion and whether they can indeed, alike with fictional programs, operate as a vehicle of intergroup contact and reduce prejudice. For now, our study has illustrated that in recent times newsmakers display more congeniality regarding the grievances of the LGBT community than they did some decades ago.

## Notes

1. Commercial and public broadcasters report in a different way about minorities (Jacobs et al., 2016), and this should be assessed in future research. However, for now, such a comparison is beyond scope, as we are mainly interested in an evolution over time.

2. The *VRT* Archive includes news stories dating back until the 1950 s, but these are not available due to technical issues and lack in comparability in terms of the annotation system. We opted for 1986 as our cutoff point, which is the starting year of the uniform annotation system. In total, 32 years are included, which is the maximum time frame for which we could ensure high quality data.
3. We also differentiate between news personnel appearing on camera and sources they are interviewing or reporting about; still, in Flanders, reporters do not often appear on camera. If news anchors were shown on camera, they were—similar to the general guidelines—only coded as LGBT if this would become clear from information shown on screen. If the homosexuality of a news reporter or news anchor is not mentioned or in any way derivable, this person has not been coded as an LGBT person.
4. This approach may result in not every LGBT being documented; still, we prioritized reliability and objectivity over completeness. As our operationalization was identical for every year, our method allows to assess change which is our main goal. Hence, the results are a conservative test. Further, in Flemish newscasts, a description of the function of a person who is being featured is usually depicted on screen. If a person in the news was presented as a spokesperson of an LGBT organization, this was considered as “reporting by others,” resulting in coding this actor as an LGBT. While representatives of LGBT organizations are not necessary gay, this illusion is created due to the news habit of introducing these persons as such. Chances are high that spectators will perceive this actor as not exclusively heterosexual. Finally, our operationalization allows for the identification of LGT people, while the identification of bisexuals is more challenging. It is possible that bisexual persons were coded as being either gay or lesbian, because at the moment of featuring they were portrayed with a male or female partner. Therefore, we excluded bisexuals from the analysis (actors were clearly recognized as bisexual only in 14 news stories in case of visual representation, and 4 news stories in case of voice).
5. Our coding scheme did allow for the identification of other frames, but not many other frames were present. The coding clarifies that the five frames were highly applicable to Flemish news coverage of LGBT, as only 6.4 per cent of the news stories did not contain any of these frames.
6. The operationalization of tone and frames differs. Tone is determined by the topic of the news story and the attribution of responsibility for a particular event or development. The operationalization of frames goes beyond this categorization, because it predefines particular angles from which homosexuality as an issue is approached; these angles also include a certain evaluation of the issue with regard to homosexuality and provide a central rationale guiding the news story regarding LGBT issues.
7. Because the number of news items was very low between in the first 10 years of our observation period, the models were also estimated for the period 1996–2017 ( $N = 436$ ). Results were very comparable to those in [Table 1](#), except that the odds for news items in which LGBT are depicted as the cause of the problem and in which LGBT people are depicted in a deviance frame remain stable over the period.

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