

## **Call for papers *Democratic Belgian discord? Diversity of political opinion in the press***

Eupen (Belgium), Friday 4 October 2024.

Workshop organised by the Zentrum für Ostbelgische Geschichte (ZOG) and CAMILLE KBR-ULB.

Keynote speech by Prof Dr Andreas Fickers and Prof Dr Christoph Brüll (C<sup>2</sup>DH, Université du Luxembourg).

Political, societal, and economic divisions are currently a frequent topic of discussion in the press. German, British, and US-American media, for instance, often convey the image of countries and societies split down the middle. Right-wing populism on the one side, and a more or less liberal left often branded as ‘woke’ by its opponents appear to live in different versions of reality, each of which is centred on opposing concepts of identity. Both sides increasingly lack shared platforms on which to exchange ideas, argue, or even quarrel, as a similar division line runs through the media. As polarisation intensifies, public broadcasting services are increasingly being distrusted, while social media services become important sources of ‘news’. Driven by algorithms, these environments resemble echo chambers where users are only presented with similar-minded messages, and conflicting opinions do not exist.

Upon examination, we find that a country with two groups speaking different languages and forming their opinion through different media has existed for decades: Belgium. Yet in spite of the hard battles fought between Flemish nationalists and Walloon unitarists, and with a German-speaking minority likewise pushing for recognition, a federalised Belgium continuously negotiating the position of its constituent parts and their relationship with each other is still around. Withstanding all commentators repeatedly predicting the end of a project begun in 1830, Belgium is now one of the oldest European states never shook by revolution or civil war, yet survived two world wars fought, in part, on its territory, as well as two occupations by Germany.

But the roots of dissention predate the linguistic struggle, and even go back to the country’s very beginning: the Belgian Constitution of 1831 was the result of a compromise between two sworn ideological enemies who kept vying with each other for political power throughout the nineteenth century: liberals and Catholics. Later in the century, socialism added another explosive ingredient to the mix. Until the second half of the twentieth century, the Belgian press

was consequently deeply divided among party lines and acted as a constant catalyst of public dissension. As any readers of old newspapers will confirm, fake news campaigns are hardly a recent invention.

In this workshop, we shall focus on the media history surrounding this remarkable stability. One option is to treat discord, often seen as a threat to democracy, as a stabilising factor, and to view media debates on political, social, and economic issues as a peaceful means to find common ground, reach a consensus, learn to live with opposing points of view, or at least to develop a sense of mutual indifference. This is one option at least when considered against authoritarian or totalitarian states. Not only do such regimes in past and present stifle debate, presenting instead a picture of unity where, upon closer examination, there is none. Another option is to contest the above assumption and present cases where debate and differing political opinions had little or no impact on political or democratic stability.

Contributions will ideally focus on, but are not limited to, Belgium, and could be from any period of Belgian history. They could also focus on one country alone or draw comparisons to or present entangled histories with other countries or regions. We welcome contributions from all disciplines, e.g. history, media studies, political science, sociology, linguistics, cultural studies, etc.

Unfortunately, we cannot cover travel costs but will provide help if the price for a train ticket prevents anyone from giving a paper. Those travelling from further away will be able to sign up for an informal pre-conference dinner the night before and are encouraged to book their accommodation well ahead as hotel rooms are very limited. We also aim to publish the findings of the workshop, either in traditional form (conference volume) or in a more modern format (online posters/podcasts), depending on the submissions we receive and on the participants' preferences.

The default conference language is English. However, anyone who is uncomfortable with that may present in any of the three Belgian national languages (Dutch, French, German).

Researchers from all career stages are welcome to submit a proposal. Please send an abstract of your proposal, max. 500 words in length, to: [williams@geschichte.be](mailto:williams@geschichte.be), along with some very basic biographical information.

For further information, please feel free to get in touch with Brecht Deseure (brecht.deseure@kbr.be) or Nicholas Williams (williams@geschichte.be).

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