

THE MAKING OF THE WHITE MARCH: THE MASS MEDIA AS A MOBILIZING ALTERNATIVE TO MOVEMENT ORGANIZATIONS\*

Stefaan Walgrave and Jan Manssens†

Walgrave, Stefaan and Jan Manssens. 2000. The Making of the White March: The Mass Media as a Mobilizing Alternative to Movement Organizations. *Mobilization: An International Journal* 5: 217-239.

*The White March in Brussels on October 20, 1996 left many social scientists speechless. They witnessed by far the largest demonstration in Belgian history, 300,000 participants, but were struck by the total absence of any mobilization machinery. This article's thesis is that the press acted as an adequate alternative to intermediary organizations and, as such, was responsible for the huge success of the White March. Focusing on the coverage of the Dutroux case in five Belgian newspapers during the three months leading up to the demonstration, we argue that there is sufficient evidence that the media co-produced the White March. We demonstrate empirically how the different thresholds of central conventional mobilization theory were passed by the press, and conclude with a theoretical discussion on the circumstances favorable for media-driven peak mobilizations.*

The White March of Sunday, October 20, 1996 was by far the largest demonstration in Belgian history. An estimated 300,000 participants—3% of Belgium's population—took to the streets. The march followed the discovery of the bodies of four girls in mid-August 1996 who had been abducted and murdered by a criminal named Marc Dutroux. When Dutroux was arrested two more girls were found alive and set free. Soon it became clear that the police and the judiciary had made major errors in pursuing Dutroux. As details of the case became known, grief turned into criticism and protest against the judicial apparatus and the government. On Monday October 14, 1996, the highest Belgian court decided that the examining magistrate, Jean-Marc Connerotte, a national hero since he arrested Dutroux and liberated the two girls, was no longer allowed to investigate the case because he had shown too much sympathy for the victims. An immediate and unprecedented protest explosion followed: in three days almost 500,000 people participated in riots, sit-ins, and strikes all over the country (Walgrave and Rihoux 1997). At the end of the week the nature of the protests changed. Out of respect for the young victims, the furious protests were replaced by quiet and dignified collective action—so-called "serene demonstrations." The White March itself was organized by the parents of the Dutroux's victims, and represented the culmination of the "serene" demonstration style. Participants were families with children carrying white flowers and balloons. No slogans or banners were present, only 300,000 silent participants. After the White March the protest stopped as suddenly as it began. Three months later, newly founded, local "white committees" could organize only about a hundred small local white marches.

\* We are very grateful to *Mobilization's* anonymous reviewers for their helpful and provocative comments.

† Stefaan Walgrave is Professor of Sociology at University of Antwerp (UIA), Belgium. Jan Manssens is a researcher at the same university. Please direct correspondence to Stefaan Walgrave, UIA, Department PSW, 1 Universiteitsplein, B-2610 Antwerp, Belgium. E-mails: walgrave@uia.sc.be; manssens@uia.ac.be.

In this article, we ask how it was possible that so many people took to the streets in the White March. We are led to this question because the White March had no preexisting movement organizations, no mobilizing apparatus, and no support from the traditional mobilizing actors such as unions, political parties, professional associations, youth movements, or new social movements (Walgrave and Rihoux 1998). Our hypothesis is that the Belgian mass media successfully and almost completely took over the functions normally performed by movement organizations. To explore this hypothesis and to empirically test its accuracy we focus on the first months of the Dutroux case, from mid-August 1996 until the end of October 1996, ten days after the White March.

### PRECONDITIONS AND PHASES OF MOBILIZATION

Why do people demonstrate? Why do citizens commit themselves to a social movement? Why do they sign petitions? To mobilize large numbers of participants, there are several preconditions that have to be met and steps that have to be taken. Klandermans's distinction between action mobilization and consensus mobilization is a good starting point (Klandermans 1984: 586-587).

In order to get people into the streets both consensus and action mobilization are needed: people must not only be convinced of the rightness of action but must also be encouraged to take action. Even if a movement's ideas are widely shared, action mobilization is not automatically achieved. In Smelser's (1962) words, a generalized belief does not automatically yield mobilization for action. As such, it is plausible that movements with large constituencies or a large mobilization potentials (Klandermans and Oegema 1997: 519) are unable to get people into the street whereas movements with relatively little public resonance can mobilize relatively large protests. A mobilizing ideology is needed to define a situation as unjust and to indicate that it can be changed through collective action (McAdam 1982: 52).

The frame alignment approach (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986) helps to focus the concept of consensus mobilization. Snow et al. state that mobilization is facilitated when a movement organization's ideas correspond with or align with the discourse of the potential constituency. When there is congruency between what a movement organization publicly claims and the opinions of the public mobilization is likely. When congruency is weak, movement organizations can frame the message in such a way as to align it with prevailing opinions or interpretative frameworks. "All politicians are corrupt" could be described as a frame in Belgium in which politicians are distrusted and the legitimacy of government institutions is very low. Mobilization efforts aimed at activating and tuning into these sometimes hidden and implicit frames have greater likelihood of success. Properly aligned frames turn objective facts into meaningful ones that encourage collective action. According to Snow et al. frame alignment between a movement organization's ideas and the broader population's occur in four ways: (1) in cases of close affinity it suffices to emphasize similarities (frame bridging); (2) when the organization's frame is suitable it can be elaborated and reinforced (frame amplification); (3) when the affinity is not immediately clear frames of the potential participants can be broadened so that the organization's proposed collective action is included (frame extension); (4) in cases where there is little affinity, a change in the frames of the potential participants is needed (frame transformation). The first two forms of frame alignment are the easiest to realize (Snow et al. 1986).

Action mobilization can also be divided into several phases and processes. It is common that a huge gap exists between the conviction that a certain situation is unjust and the opinion that collective action is warranted. Klandermans and Oegema (1987: 529) state that only 5% of those respondents who agreed with the objectives of a protest actually participated. Successful action mobilization must take those barriers to participation down and

persuade the public to put their ideas into action. In cost-benefit terms, getting persuaded does not cost anything, but participation costs time and money, and may involve the risk of violence. The type of action, and its place and time also partly determine the cost of participation (Klandermans 1984: 588). The benefits are both the value that is given to the possible outcome and the chance of success (or the efficiency perception, Oberschall 1980). These are linked with the anticipated attendance (how many people will participate), the expectation that one's own participation will benefit the action, and the perceived chance that the action will be successful if many people participate (Klandermans 1984: 585). However, because action mobilization depends on the weighing of the *perceived* costs and benefits (Klandermans 1984: 584-585), the mobilizing organization is confronted with somewhat different framing tasks. Rather than fine tuning collective action frames about social issues (as for consensus mobilization), action mobilization requires framing strategies that convince the potential participants that their presence at a protest can help dispel the problem.

In sum, action mobilization can be thought of as a kind of elimination competition in which potential participants may drop out at different stages in the decision-making process, stages which are not necessarily sequential (Klandermans and Oegema 1987; Oegema and Klandermans 1994). The sequence goes something like this: (1) Not everyone agrees on the issue as the basis for action; (2) Not everyone who agrees is convinced to actively participate. (3) Not everyone who is convinced to participate weighs the costs and benefits positively and is thus motivated. (4) Not everyone who agrees, is persuaded, and is motivated to participate actually do so because of practical reasons (illness, bad weather, no time, etc.). A mobilizing organization wants to keep the dropout rate as low as possible by working on all factors. This enumeration clearly indicates that action mobilization is more than increasing the motivation to participate by influencing the perception of costs and benefits. It is also a matter of eliminating practical barriers of participation and persuading and activating the potential grassroots support.

#### THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN MOBILIZATION

Kielbowicz and Scherer (1986: 72) claim that "the modern mass media have become central to the life and death of social movements." There is a sizeable social-scientific literature that examines the movement-media relationship (Gamson 1992; Gamson and Wolfsfield 1993; Gitlin 1980; Hansen 1993; Kielbowicz and Scherer 1986; Molotch 1979; Sampedro 1997; Schmitt-Beck 1990; Van Zoonen 1992; Wolfsfield 1984). Special attention has been given to the impact of the media on the policy-setting agenda of the state (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988, Sampedro 1997). However, in our judgement, the actual mobilization function of the mass media is not central to the major theories of collective action, let alone in most empirical research on social movements. Gamson and Wolfsfield (1993: 116) observe—without further elaboration—that the mass media are necessary for mobilization because "most movements must reach their constituency in part through some form of public discourse." Schmitt-Beck (1990: 644) merely mentions that the mass media could contribute in the recruitment of supporters. The political opportunity structure approach (Eisinger 1973; Tarrow 1996) considers the mass media as filters, as facilitators, or even barriers to collective action rather than as real actors that play strategic roles. Although it is generally accepted that the mass media are a means for the geographical diffusion of protest (McAdam and Rucht 1993; Tarrow 1991), but the impact of the media *an sich* on mobilization is infrequently considered (Koopmans 1995).

Moreover, in those studies where the mobilizing influence of the media is considered, it is not thought of very highly (Gamson 1992; Klandermans and Goslinga 1996; McQuail 1993: 381; Snow, Zurcher and Ekland-Olsen 1980). Klandermans and Oegema, for example,

state that "the mass media are not very effective in convincing and activating people," and that the actual action mobilization could be better done via mailings, organizations, or friendship networks (1987: 520). Their study stresses the role of organization and/or informal networks in action mobilization, and the direct influence of the media is indirectly minimized. Several researchers have pointed out that the media are not effective mobilization channels for high cost/high risk activism (Briet, Klandermans, and Kroon 1987; McAdam 1986). Furthermore, the role of the media in other, more approachable actions is questioned: mobilizing organizations do not gain access to the mass media and cannot control the news coverage of their actions (Klandermans 1997).

In sum, mainstream mobilization theory suggests that the mass media are possible channels for consensus mobilization because they are privileged providers of information and reference frames (Gamson and Meyer 1996; McQuail 1993), but that they fall short for action mobilization (Klandermans and Goslinga 1996). Klandermans (1997) states that the media are less important for persuasive communication (action mobilization) but certainly play a role in creating a favorable mobilization climate (consensus mobilization), although also the actual creation of the collective action frame takes place in informal or formal groups. To put it another way, the mass media best function as (reactive) transmitters but not as (proactive) mobilizing actors. However, our analysis of Belgian newspapers on the White March suggests that this conclusion is not altogether correct.

#### METHODOLOGY

Our empirical material consists of the news coverage of the Dutroux case in the five most important Belgian national newspapers, *De Standaard*, *De Morgen*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *Gazet van Antwerpen*, and *Het Nieuwsblad*.<sup>1</sup> These five newspapers are representative of the Belgian print media in terms of ideology, readership, and market share. Together they represent 75% of the 983,000 Flemish Belgian newspapers sold daily.

For the period from August 16 (the liberation of two girls) until October 31, 1996 each newspaper copy (sixty-six copies per newspaper heading, a total of 329 copies)<sup>2</sup> was scrutinized and encoded on the basis of a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of both quantitative (amount of attention for the Dutroux case) and qualitative items (type and content of the news coverage: words used, references to certain events or actors, etc.). For the quantitative approach the entire newspaper was reviewed. For qualitative measures, only articles on the Dutroux case on the front page were analyzed. When there was no article on the front page (or only a very short one), the first, long article that appeared was analyzed. We also encoded captions of Dutroux-case pictures, the titles, subtitles, in-between-titles, and short introductory summaries of all the Dutroux articles, letters to the editor, and editorial comments. Finally, the editorials were also screened. We estimate that about ten to 20% of the actual Dutroux news coverage was analyzed for its content.

The fortnight before the breaking of the Dutroux case, August 1-15, 1996, was taken as a reference period in order to test the hypothesis that the news coverage on the Dutroux

<sup>1</sup> About 60% of the Belgian population speaks Dutch. These newspapers all belong to the Flemish Press. The French Belgian press is omitted in this contribution. *Het Laatste Nieuws* is the top Belgian newspaper (on average 258,000 copies sold between October 1996 and September 1997). *Het Nieuwsblad* follows in second place (231,000 copies). *De Standaard* is the most intellectual newspaper, and pairs with *Het Nieuwsblad* at 77,000 copies each. *De Morgen* is the newspaper of the progressive intellectual (40,000 copies). *Gazet van Antwerpen* is a popular nationally distributed regional newspaper (125,000 copies).

<sup>2</sup> One newspaper is missing, namely *Gazet van Antwerpen* of October 18, 1996. Wherever necessary in the analysis, an average was taken of the three preceding and the three following days of *Gazet van Antwerpen*.

case was exceptional. The same titles were analyzed with a similar encoding scheme ( $n = 60$ ). Since there was no mention of Dutroux during this period, we decided which news item was covered most in each newspaper, and then proceeded with an identical qualitative and quantitative analysis of its news coverage.

### AMPLIFICATION: THE DUTROUX CASE IN BLINDING SPOTLIGHT

Both consensus and action mobilization have quantitative and qualitative aspects. Mass media not only reinforce the importance of an issue—which is called amplification—they also create certain images and sensitize the audience to see an issue a certain way.

Belgian media coverage of the Dutroux case was enormous. Although comparable data of exceptional news events facts are lacking, we know of no other news item that attracted Belgian media attention for such a considerable time and to such an extent.<sup>3</sup> Table 1 provides some figures to support our claim. It combines eleven quantitative parameters for the five newspapers analyzed: (1) the average number of pages on the Dutroux case (per newspaper copy); (2) the average number of pictures on the case; (3) the average number of letters to the editor; (4) the share of coverage on the Dutroux case in relation to total news coverage<sup>4</sup>; (5) the share of pictures in relation to the total number of pictures; (6) the share of letters compared to the total amount of letters; (7) the extent to which the lead story<sup>5</sup> deals with the case; (8) the extent to which the editorial is about the case; (9) the extent to which the Dutroux case is the main item in the newspaper; (10) the extent to which the captivating title (the title in the largest type—not always on the front page) is on the Dutroux case; (11) the share of pictures on the Dutroux case on the first page.

The data speak for themselves: all parameters point to a true Dutroux-mania from mid-August to the end of October. This holds for all newspapers, both the quality dailies and in the more popular press. Although table 1 indicates some differences between the newspapers—*De Standaard* especially—all papers were focussed on the Dutroux case for several months. Therefore, in the discussion that follows, we will not refer to distinctions between the different newspapers but only to the totals.

The fact that the newspapers bombarded their readers with Dutroux news cannot be overlooked. On average one-third of all the national and international news coverage was on the Dutroux case. The same is true for the share of pictures. All this lasted for the period ranging between August 16 and October 31, or sixty-six daily editions for each newspaper. The parameters that take into account the importance of the news, and not just the space devoted to it are even more impressive. In about six newspapers out of ten, the editorial and the lead story were devoted to the Dutroux case, the largest amount of space was given to the case, and the largest title was about the case.<sup>6</sup> The figures for the semi-tabloid *Het Laatste Nieuws* are even more than spectacular: on average, more than fourteen pictures per day on the case. The impact of these pictures and images cannot be underestimated: "There has been a general shift in society's regime of significance, from words to images, from the discursive to the figural" (Lash cited in Szaz 1994).

---

<sup>3</sup> More or less comparable data on the Belgian French media is found in Lits's book (1993) on press coverage of King Baldwin's death in August 1993. But peak media attention only lasted a few days (Antoine 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Total news coverage is defined as that section of the newspaper that might report on the Dutroux case, viz., national and international news, editorial comments, letters to the editor. Local news, economy, culture, television, classifieds, supplements and large advertisements (minimum half a page) were not included.

<sup>5</sup> A lead story is the newspaper's opening article, the main front-page article, usually in the top left or middle.

<sup>6</sup> Even if the lead story was not on the Dutroux case the first article on Dutroux was on the front page in 66% of the cases. In 87% of the total 329 newspapers an article on the Dutroux case could be found on the front page.

Table 1. Quantitative Attention to the Dutroux case in the Belgian newspapers, August 16 to October 31, 1996 (N = 329).

	<i>De Morgen</i>	<i>De Standaard</i>	<i>Het Nieuwsblad</i>	<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	<i>Gazet van Antwerpen</i>	Total
Average number of pages	3.09	1.77	2.77	3.71	2.65	2.80
Average number pictures	6.56	2.55	7.73	14.35	8.60	7.95
Average number readers' letters	2.41	1.91	4.02	4.76	5.12	3.64
Share news coverage (%)	28	23	38	40	35	33
Share pictures (%)	26	18	36	41	37	32
Share readers' letters (%)	40	36	55	54	48	46
Share editorials (%)	64	47	59	62	62	59
Share lead stories (%)	50	58	68	71	60	61
Share main items (%)	70	42	61	71	51	59
Share captivating title (%)	50	77	62	85	54	66
Share page one pictures (%)	46	36	68	68	55	55

The extraordinary amount of news coverage is also clear from a comparison between this period and the reference period in the first half of August before the outburst of the Dutroux case. For every newspaper during this period we identified the most extensively covered item.<sup>7</sup> For each of these items, which on the average was the most important news for only one day, we established the share of coverage, the number of pictures, editorials, etc. Although it was the middle of the summer holidays, a dead-season for news reports and not a representative period, the differences are striking. For all quantitative parameters, news coverage of the Dutroux case scores higher than the most important daily news items during the reference period. The most important reference-period news was given an average of 1.16 pages, as opposed to 2.78 for the Dutroux case. An average of 16% of news coverage was given the most important reference-period items, compared to 33% for the Dutroux case; 2.63 pictures were printed on that item, as compared to 7.95 pictures for the Dutroux case. The main news was discussed in 30% of reference-period editorials, for the Dutroux case, 59%.

Visual and layout data also indicate the amplification of the Dutroux case: in 67% of the 329 newspapers the normal layout was changed (see figure 1). In 65% of the newspapers we found a special header on top of the page (for instance, a row of pictures of the victims). In thirty-one cases no advertisements were found on the first page, although that is not unusual. Extremely big titles were found in twenty-six cases. In total, fourteen supplements on the case were found. A special layout of the first page was found twelve times. In twenty-eight newspapers a series of photographs on the case was found (for instance, a series of photos showing the victims growing up), and in eight newspapers a complete picture page was devoted to the case. One newspaper published black borders of mourning around the victims' pictures, and in one case, a headline filled the complete page. If attention of readership is an important but often scarce commodity in protest events (Hilgartner and Bosk 1988), then it was assured for the Dutroux case.

<sup>7</sup> We refer to, for instance, the deadly mudflow on a Spanish campsite (the main news item in 13% of the newspapers), a tax-dodging scandal (KB-Lux scandal), money transport hold-ups (10%), a hormone mafia and the murder of a veterinarian (Van Noppen) (7%); the EMU debate and the 3% norm (7%).

**CONSENSUS MOBILIZATION:  
THE GAP BETWEEN THE POPULATION AND THE INSTITUTIONS**

The total study period of two and a half months can be divided into six periods. The first runs from Dutroux's arrest and the liberation of two victims, Sabine and Laetitia. It includes the recovery of the bodies of two other victims, Julie and Melissa, and ends with their funeral (August 16-26, nine newspaper days). The second period includes the search, recovery of the bodies, and funeral of two more of his victims, An and Eefje (August 27 to September 14, fourteen newspaper days). Then follows a period of national grief and revelation concerning these dramatic events (September 12-26, thirteen newspaper days). Next comes Dutroux's lawyer's charges against the examining magistrate, Jean-Marc Connerotte, the public's uproar, and the first protest marches (September 27 to October 8, ten newspaper days). The fifth period is the period of the White March. It begins with charges against Connerotte, includes his dismissal from the case, rising popular anger, and ends with the White March (October 9-21, eleven newspaper days). Finally, there is the period after the White March (October 22-31, nine newspaper days).

Central in the news coverage on the Dutroux case, especially in the period leading to the White March, is what we would call "gap discourse." Recognition of the gap between the population and the government, the citizen and the system, the population and its institutions, acted as the master frame within which all events were interpreted. All other collective action frames were implicitly or explicitly linked to this master frame. Gap discourse pointed out how state institutions, the judicial apparatus, and politicians were at odds with the feelings of the population. Words such as "ivory tower," "caste," "other-worldliness," and "arrogance" were legion. This gap discourse is nicely described by the following segment from *Het Nieuwsblad* (October 18, 1996):

Both the magistrates and the politicians seem to overlook the signals [from the population]. Their secret meeting places have become cocoons of inbreeding and cross-fertilization that radiate other-worldliness. In receptions, commission meetings, and informal meetings the "vox populi" is spoken of scornfully: the grumbling population that needs a release once a year but then relapses into a lethargy that can be politically exploited. Is this true? Some complacent inhabitants of "the system" or "the establishment" don't seem to understand that the protest is fundamentally against them and no longer against people like Dutroux or Nihoul [Dutroux's accomplice].

This gap discourse can be found in a quarter of all newspapers and reached a climax in the period around the White March: it was to be found in 50% of all analyzed newspapers and its frequency per newspaper copy increased<sup>8</sup>. From the very beginning of the case, however, the newspapers stressed the gap between the population and the institutions.

This image of the gap shows great similarity with well-known expression of the "divide" between the citizens and the politicians in Belgium. Since the so-called Black Sunday elections of November 24, 1991 when the extreme right Vlaams Blok scored an electoral breakthrough, journalists, politicians, and social scientists have been pointing out that Belgian politics has lost contact with the population, that there was an intolerable distance, an estrangement, between the citizens and the politicians. Thus, gap discourse was not unknown

---

<sup>8</sup> Figures on the frequency of certain items per newspaper copy are not shown in tables.



Figure 1. Changed Layout in *De Morgen's* Front Page, August 19, 1996: Marc Dutroux with the Headline, "The Face of Evil."



Figure 2. The Gap Discourse in Speech and Print: The Front Page of *Gazet van Antwerpen*, October 15, 1996





and found especially fertile soil in the Dutroux case. As the master frame that guided interpretation of the Dutroux case, it connected with familiar themes in Belgian politics (frame bridging). The day after Connerotte's dismissal, the front page of *Gazet van Antwerpen* symbolized this gap discourse: underneath an immense title, "Gap Still Wider," two pictures are literally divided by a tear; on one side a smiling judge draped in ermine, on the other side a furious mass of people (see figure 2). In a mere four paragraphs of text the gap between the population and the judicial apparatus is mentioned four times. The imagery used by the newspapers is highly symbolic and is rooted in the consensus frame. They represent what Szaz has called icons (1994: 62-63). Icons are particularly powerful since their production "speeds up the issue-creation process and makes that process take quite spectacular form." Szaz adds that because of icons, "attitude formation takes place without much need for detail in the cognitive component." The images used abundantly by the media were vehicles fueled by the popular gap discourse. They boosted emotions even more and strengthened the consensus frame.

The mass media not only reported on the estrangement between population and its institutions but definitely took sides. They plainly sided with the furious masses and the bereaved parents. The vocabulary used clearly indicates this: words such as "mine," "we," "our," and "I," indicate that journalists put aside their role as objective observers. A recurrent phrasing was the "for our children" mantra. On the average, 17% of all analyzed newspapers contained this kind of identification discourse. The period just before the White March had 32%. Again, the front page of *Gazet van Antwerpen* is revealing. On October 19, 1996 it carried a picture of a White March poster with the title: "*We are the new citizens. We ask questions*" (italics added). Elsewhere we found: "The feelings of powerlessness have abounded in your letters since the sad news on An and Eefje. All *our* values seem to have shattered to pieces—what should *we* believe in, who should *we* trust, what should *we* do?" (*Het Laatste Nieuws*, September 6, 1996, italics added).

Newspapers also suspended their objectivity by describing feelings of grief, powerlessness, and anger as universally shared sentiments. They frequently used words like "all," "everyone," "each," "everywhere," "the whole population," "the whole country," "the nation," "the citizens," and "the Belgians" to stress the generality of feelings. *Het Laatste Nieuws* (August 21, 1996) wrote: "The outcry over what happened to Sabine and Laetitia, the grief for Julie and Melissa and the fear for An and Eefje, are feelings *we're all sharing* these days and they *unite* us in a remarkable way". On An and Eefje's funeral they wrote: "A sad *nation* says goodbye to An and Eefje, the two murdered girls *we've all got to know so well*" (*Het Laatste Nieuws* September 7, 1996, italics added). These words were found in almost half the newspapers (49%); but again a peak was reached in the period of the White March when 83% of the newspapers used them (an average of 3.01 times per newspaper). The use of such words is not exceptional in journalistic writing, but their extensive use during the Dutroux was: during the reference period, just 22% of the newspapers used similar words in their coverage of the most important daily news items.

Gap discourse constituted the master frame in the newspapers' interpretations of the Dutroux case, but other framing elements were connected with it. We speak of frame bridging or frame extension when ideas and values that have many affinities are explicitly linked, or when existing cultural frameworks are presented in such a way that they are relevant to the collective action situation. In the coverage of the Dutroux case, both these processes occurred, for example, when disappearances of other children that had nothing to do with the Dutroux case were invoked, or when unrelated Belgian political affairs were linked with the Dutroux discourse, or when the possible involvement of senior officials in child pornography was tied to it. The message was clear: the Dutroux case was not a separate issue, but rather the tip of the iceberg. Kielbowicz and Scherer (1986: 81) write: "The mass media are in a powerful

position to synthesize seemingly fragmented and unconnected situations and create what appear to be widespread phenomena. . . . [They] strive to convert stories about particular cases into examples of a general situation." This occurred in the Dutroux case in three ways.

First, when the girls were found, reporters stormed newspaper archives in search of other unsolved disappearances. Almost daily, some newspaper had a new story about an unsolved case from days long gone that was implicitly, but quite often also explicitly, linked with the Dutroux case. Some newspapers seemed to consider it a point of honor to keep their sinister list as complete as possible. Child disappearance seemed a common thing in Belgium: 31% of all 329 editions wrote about other disappearances. For example, *Het Laatste Nieuws* (September 17) accused Michel Nihoul, Dutroux accomplice, of kidnapping seventeen girls.

Second, for some years, Belgium had been engulfed by high-level scandals. Thirty percent of the newspapers mentioned these affairs in their coverage of the Dutroux case. For example, *Het Nieuwsblad* (October 18, 1996) wrote, "[The public outcry] is not only fed by the Dutroux case, but also by an accumulation of resentment and suspicion because of many unsolved cases of fraud, bribery, and murder, and because political immorality and judiciary failings are left unpunished." A related element is the extent to which the alleged involvement of "senior officials" in the case is mentioned: 15% of the newspapers speculated about it. On October 11, 1996 *De Morgen's* front page heralded, "Neufchâteau [District] Discovers VIP's Network of Child Pornography," and for those who still doubted the involvement of senior officials the editorial added: "And yes, what had been assumed seems to be correct: Bourlet and Connerotte have discovered a network of child pornography that has been operating for decades and in which senior officials participate." This highly suggestive writing is in line with the notorious canon of a conspiracy of silence in Belgium's higher circles. Especially Connerotte's dismissal caused hush-up speculations: "Examining magistrate Connerotte has to leave because he knows too much" was frequently heard. It is no surprise that in the period before the White March 30% of the newspapers mentioned involvement of senior officials.

Third, the mass media linked the Dutroux case with a political-structural frame that was widely held in Belgium. *Het Laatste Nieuws* (September 7, 1996) summarized this nicely in one headline: "No Coincidence Anymore." Not only was Marc Dutroux found guilty but so too were the judicial apparatus and the political system that supported it. From a case of criminal perversion, the case turned into a matter of structural responsibility: "The people are good, but the system is corrupt" (*De Morgen*, October 17, 1996). In the public media (TV and newspapers) this political-structural frame was used from the beginning, in part because the victims' parents had emphasized it (Rihoux and Walgrave 1998). As early as August 21, a *Het Laatste Nieuws* editorial began to push Marc Dutroux into the background by stressing the "mistakes" and the "wrong elements" "in our country" that have caused the death of the girls—this is clearly a case of frame amplification. The repeated failings of the judiciary system and the police were especially brought to the readers' attention in 62% of the analyzed newspapers. "Still More Mistakes," blared *Het Laatste Nieuws's* headline on August 21, right after the affair broke. During the entire study period, failures were mentioned, but they decreased slightly from the beginning of the case to after the White March (78% to 52%).

A second indicator of the political-structural frame was the high number of references to the so-called Law Lejeune, which states that prisoners with good conduct can be released well before the end of their sentence. Dutroux had been in prison for sexual offenses, but was set free on the basis of this law. Immediately after his arrest, *Het Laatste Nieuws* (August 21, 1996) wrote: "Law Lejeune Creates Criminals." In total, the law was mentioned in 19% of the newspapers, with a major difference between the early and the last period. In the period "Julie and Melissa" the Law Lejeune was premier topic of discussion (64%), after the White March it had become a minor theme (5%). Both indicators show how during the period of study media the attention shifted away from the specific juridical subjects.

The reverse happened regarding references to political appointments. Most magistrates in Belgium were politically appointed and were supported by a major party. As a consequence the judicial system was politicized and every party got its share of judicial nominations and promotions. On the average 20% of the newspapers mentioned this theme; but especially just before and after the White March these references peaked (30% and 60%). Depoliticization of the judiciary became the most important problem to be solved: "It is typically Belgian that the depoliticization will start at the bottom, while meanwhile the proverb and also [the reality of political] affairs teach us that the fish starts rotting at the head" (*Het Nieuwsblad*, October 9, 1996). Over the period of study, a gradual shift away from the judiciary in favor politics can be noted. The next quote is a perfect example: "The failing of the judiciary system is inevitable because it is inherent to the system due to its politicization." (*De Morgen*, October 5, 1996). The relatively high number of references to other structural themes—sanctions for the responsible (12%), the possibility that the culprits will be protected (22%), or that those politically responsible will escape punishment (23%)—indicates that the political-structural frame was pushed to the fore.

The politicization of the murders manifested itself in the words chosen by the journalists. The number of times the words "politicians" and "policy maker" occurred was counted (34%), also the occurrence of "the structures" "the institutions" or "the system" (25%), "politics" (32%), "the minister" or "the government" (51%), "the parliament" or "a member of parliament" (25%), and also "the citizen(s)" (22%). Without exception the frequency of each of these political-institutional words rose and, in most cases, peaked in the period around the White March: politicians or policy makers were mentioned in 54% of the newspapers in the White March period, the structures, the institutions or the system scored 33%, politics 43%, the minister or government 48%; the member of parliament 30% and citizens 61%. Especially "the citizen(s)" appeared in full glory in the period of the White March, while before that the term had been almost completely absent. The Dutroux case was formulated in the traditional political-institutional vocabulary and became a political story rather than a human interest story, especially in the period of the White March.

In sum, the media used frame bridging, frame extension, and frame amplification to draw upon cultural frameworks widespread among the population. They took advantage of the already low legitimacy of the institutions, and elaborated the idea of the gap between the people and their institutions into a master frame. Real attempts to change reference frames of the population (frame transformation) were hardly made. As such, the media's limitations as to consensus mobilization are made clear. The power of the media is constrained: it cannot create Dutroux-like cases out of the blue

#### ACTION MOBILIZATION: THE CLIMAX TOWARDS THE WHITE MARCH AND OVERT MOBILIZATION BY THE MASS MEDIA

The key question for action mobilization is to what extent the media linked these interpretative frames to the White March. In terms of the decision to participate, linking these frames would decrease the perceived costs and increase the perceived benefits.

Was more attention paid to the Dutroux case in the period of the White March than before? The implicit assumption is that a kind of overflow effect of consensus mobilization to action mobilization is possible, that when simple amplification and consensus mobilization pass a threshold, they have, as such, a mobilizing effect. From an action-mobilization perspective it is expected that the quantitative attention for the Dutroux case would be even higher in the period of the White March. Figure 3, which presents the most important quantitative parameters by periods, shows that this expectation proved right.

All parameters are almost parallel: in the period just before the White March the attention for the Dutroux case exploded. For some parameters the peak occurred at the beginning of the Dutroux case. Most lead stories (91%) and most pictures (54%) were published then, and the largest share of the coverage was devoted to the case (53%) at that time. Gradually less attention was paid to the case in the An and Eefje period, the aftermath period, and the beginning of the dismissal period. Attention soared again just before the White March and remained as high as in the first period. Just before the White March many lead stories appeared (87%) as well as a large share of pictures (43%). Almost half of the coverage was devoted to the case (45%). It is probably not coincidental that the parameters of the opinion coverage also peaked in the White March period. The number of editorials surpassed that of the first period (85% against 78%). Also the number of readers' letters in the fifth period easily surpassed that of the first period (62% against 45%).

There was more. Although three quantitative parameters were higher in total for the first period, the absolute day peaks of each of these parameters was situated in the period of the White March. The share of Dutroux news (77%), the share of Dutroux pictures (82%), as well as the share of readers' letters on the case (100%), peaked around the White March. Furthermore, the whole White March period climaxed towards the White March. Every day more space was allocated to the case, every day more pictures, every day more readers' letters, and for several days only Dutroux editorials and Dutroux lead stories were published. Figure 4 clearly portrays the build up of the White March showing the relative share in the total news coverage per day.

The White March was not the only action in relation to the Dutroux case. From August onwards people started to demonstrate. At first these demonstrations were in honor of the victims but gradually turned into protests against the events. The quantitative pattern

Figure 3. Quantitative Attention for the Dutroux Case throughout the Sixth Period

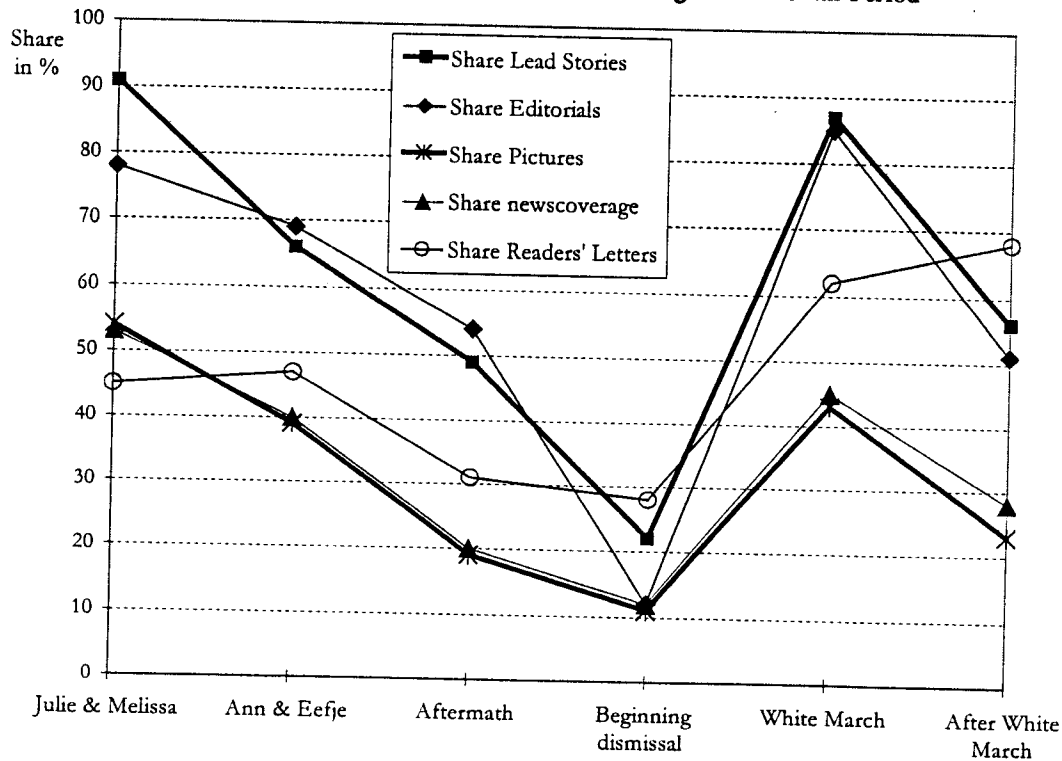


Figure 4. Share of the Dutroux case in the total news coverage per day

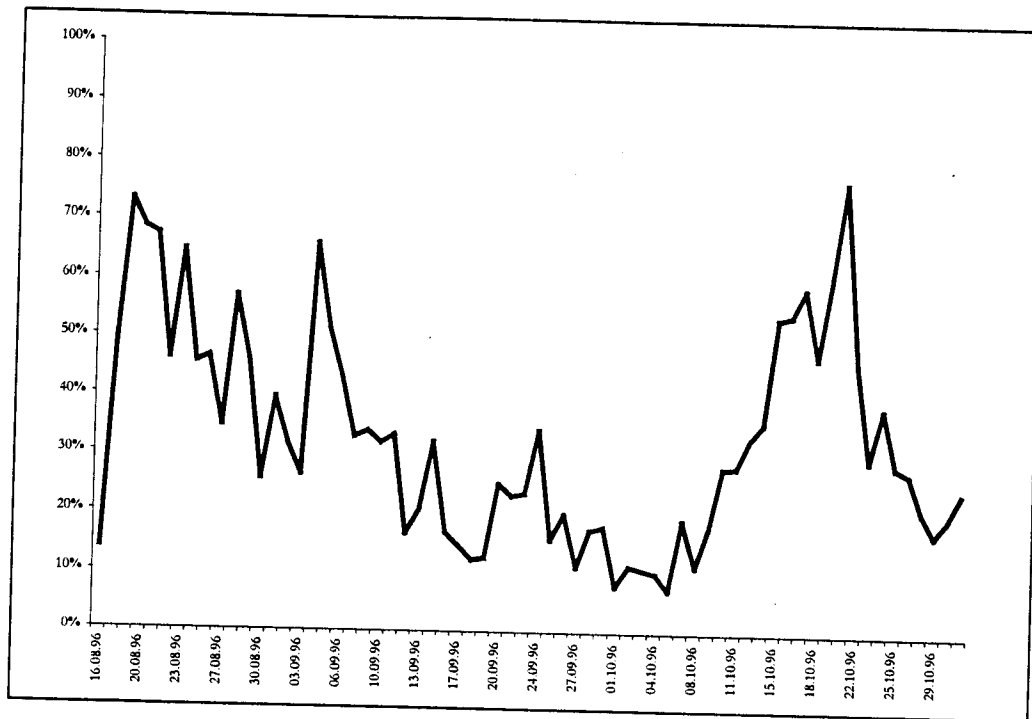
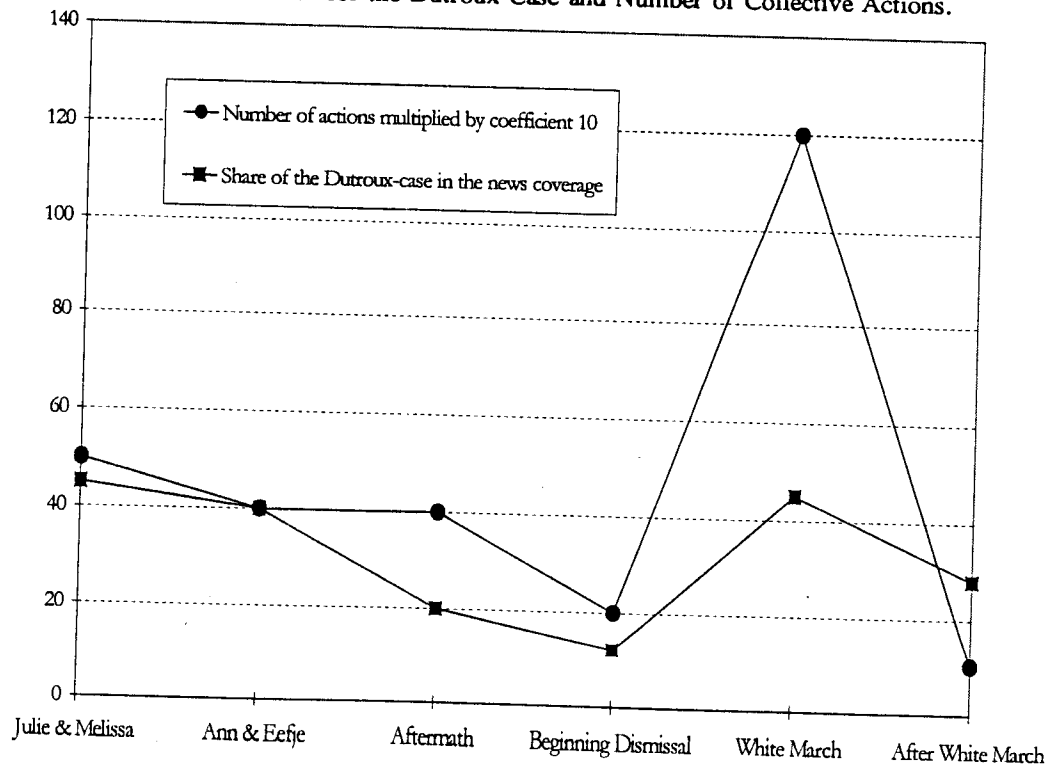


Figure 5. Media Attention for the Dutroux Case and Number of Collective Actions.



of these actions coincides with the pattern of media attention for the case.<sup>9</sup> Figure 5 shows both elements.

Correlation between the number of actions and the size of the coverage does not by itself prove that the media created this mobilization wave. It is plausible that the events which attracted media attention may have also gotten people into the streets even without media coverage. Still, the parallels are strong and highly suggestive of the hypothesis that media attention made massive mobilization possible.

Noting the media's increasing attention to the Dutroux case just before the White March is not the same as saying that the media explicitly or implicitly supported participation in the march. Table 2 combines a number of indicators related to this aspect. For reasons of uniformity the table presents percentages although the number of observations is small.<sup>10</sup>

In order to arouse interest for an action, it should be announced, written about, and commented upon. All this happened in abundance. In more than four-fifths of the twenty-four newspapers the White March was mentioned. In only five days the march was mentioned 87 times by name—an average of more than twice per newspaper. We stress again that all the figures on the number of occurrences are from a sample of about 10% to 20% of the total text that was published in every newspaper on the Dutroux case. Undoubtedly, more than 83% of the newspapers mentioned the White March. The last two days before the White March, all newspapers without exception announced the march. On Saturday, October 19, the day before the march, fifty references were counted, an average of ten references per newspaper. In short, every Belgian citizen knew about the march.

In deciding to participate in an action, the value of the possible outcome, its chances of success, and the expected turn out feature in the calculation. In the White March, the value of the possible outcome is closely related to the political-structural interpretation given to the drama of the girls. The media presented the White March as a logical reaction of the population to this drama: "The public outcry is understandable and justified" (*Het Nieuwsblad*, October 18, 1996). The value of the possible outcome was no more or no less than judicial and political reform.

One of six newspaper copies and three of the five Saturday editions speculated on the results of the White March by calling it a historic event. *Gazet van Antwerpen* (October 19, 1996) opened with the headline, "Sunday Historic White March in Brussels." The first paragraph portrayed participation favorably: "With white flags they'll march through Brussels tomorrow: white and blue collars, students, the self-employed, citizens. No one knows how many there'll be. It'll definitely be one of the most impressive manifestations ever held in this country. It's already referred to as a historic October Movement." *De Morgen* announced a day earlier: "It's a fact that the White March on Sunday will become a historic manifestation."

Exactly one third of the newspapers reported on the presumed massive participation. Every newspaper, with the exception of *De Standaard*, told its readers at least once that many people were expected. Four of five newspapers announced this on the eve of the White March. Almost every day the expected turnout increased. The numbers of extra trains were mentioned, as was the fact that almost all coaches were booked for Sunday. In short, the benefits of participation were made clear: a great number of participants in a demonstration

<sup>9</sup> The number of actions was determined by press coverage in the seventeen local editions of *Het Laatste Nieuws*.

<sup>10</sup> For every newspaper, we examined the five daily editions in the week of October 14-20, 1996, starting with Tuesday October 15, the day after Connerotte's dismissal. One newspaper was missing, *De Gazet van Antwerpen*, Friday October 18.

Table 2. Action Mobilization for the White March in the Belgian Media from October 15 to 19, 1996 (N = 24).

	<i>De</i>		<i>Het</i>	<i>Het Laatste</i>	<i>Gazet van</i>	<i>Total</i>
	<i>De Morgen</i>	<i>Standaard</i>	<i>Nieuwsblad</i>	<i>Nieuws</i>	<i>Antwerpen</i>	
Share of references to the White March (%)	80	60	80	100	100	83
Average number of references to White March	1.18	2.00	4.11	2.36	3.10	2.54
Share of references to Connerotte's Dismissal	100	100	100	100	100	100
Average number of references to Connerotte's dismissal	2.45	3.00	4.10	2.82	2.70	3.02
Share with forum for the parents (%)	20	40	40	60	25	38
Share with practical information about participation (%)	60	40	60	60	100	63
Share with reference to the Expected turnout (%)	40	20	20	60	25	33
Share with reference to the expected results (%)	20	0	20	20	20	17
Share with references to the historic character of the White March (%)	0	0	20	40	25	17

of historic character which could initiate structural-political changes. Who would want to miss this historic event? To a certain extent the White March is an example of Thomas's famous dictum that "when people define situations as real then they are real in their consequences." By calling the White March a historic event, expectations were made true.

However, Szaz notes that "even if people have the motivation to act . . . their capacity to do so will be affected by a series of conditions (1994: 86)." There are costs of participating in a manifestation like the White March. These include, for example, money, time, uncertainty about the course of the demonstration, and chances of irregularities. What was the media's attitude about these costs? First, general conditions minimized costs: the choice of the date (a free Sunday afternoon with a predicted 15° C; dry with sunny intervals), the action mode (a peaceful demonstration), and the place (central and accessible capital and a route from one railway station to another) had no effect on the objective costs (or practical hindrances) for participation. Although the subjective costs of participation differed individually, the media tried hard to portray them as minimal. For example, they could not resist stressing the special price of 200 BEF for a return train ticket, irrespective of the distance travelled. Since two thirds of the newspapers provided their readership with practical information, the uncertainty about the further development of the March was largely taken away. On the Saturday preceding the White March every newspaper mentioned the time of march's departure, its route, the price of a train ticket, etc. And all this information was



presented more than once to the reader.<sup>11</sup> The day before the march, *Gazet van Antwerpen* published a half-page map under the not-so-neutral title: "Cheap and Practical to the White March." The text stressed the ease of participation: the trip Antwerp-Brussels by train would take little more than half an hour, the march would start near the *Gare du Nord* (one of the main railway stations in Brussels), the march would always be straight ahead, and potential participants were kindly warned that the time of arrival could well be 6:00 PM. The readers of *Het Laatste Nieuws* (October 16, 1996) were also presented with a practical map, and were encouraged to go by train ("One Only Pays 200 BEF"). For those who preferred the car, all car parks were indicated on the map.

In the week preceding the march, media coverage of protests described vandalism, police charges, water cannons, and dozens of arrests. As such, participants in the White March might risk violence, injuries, panics, arrests, etc. With the White March approaching, the attitude of the mass media changed. While in the beginning of the week they sympathized with the demonstrators' anger and forgave their violence, by the end of the week they strongly disapproved of street violence. "Agitators tried to ruin the atmosphere of indignation . . . the same small group seized every opportunity to inflame the atmosphere." (*Gazet van Antwerpen* October 19, 1996). *Het Laatste Nieuws* (October 18, 1996, page 2) reported that this was "not what the people wanted." Time and again it was stressed that the White March would be serene and dignified. "For the fifth day in a row massive actions were held. The demonstrations were usually peaceful and introduced the big manifestation of Sunday." (*Gazet van Antwerpen*, October 19, 1996). Parents were given a forum in the newspapers to make clear their desire for a quiet demonstration. Editorialists concurred that the march "should be serene and dignified, quiet, and white." (*De Morgen* October 19, 1996).

Experience with demonstrating is a crucial factor in the perceived costs of participation. People who had never before demonstrated no doubt experienced participation in the White March as a major step. We do not know the exact number of people who had never demonstrated before, but we do know that 60% of the participants in the local white marches after the national White March had demonstrated for the first time. A large number of these people participated in the White March (Walgrave and Rihoux 1997: 119). The costs for these people should not be underestimated despite the objective low costs. In any case, the cost was higher than simply signing one of the many petitions that circulated those days.<sup>12</sup>

The press not only offered a favorable cost-benefit analysis but also played a major role in the actual mobilization of the people. This was achieved implicitly by giving the girls' parents ample media attention and offering them free newspaper space to address the public. Parents' letters and appeals were printed in full. *Het Laatste Nieuws* (October 18, 1996) began publishing 'the diary of Paul Marchal, An's father—which would appear regularly—in which he mentions a "quiet march that will be dignified." "Parents Count on Serenity" was the front page headline of *Gazet van Antwerpen* on the Saturday preceding the March. Four of five Saturday editions and 38% of the newspapers had something similar. Not only were the parents covered in the media, but also other authorities, for example, King Albert I himself: "King Asks to Keep Up the Fight" (*Gazet van Antwerpen* October 19, 1996).

But the newspapers did even more. *Het Laatste Nieuws* and *Gazet van Antwerpen*

<sup>11</sup> Practical information was not only provided in the period leading up to the White March. *De Standaard* (September 5) provided the reader with the addresses of the families of An and Eefje so that readers could send their condolences. *Het Laatste Nieuws* (August 22) provided a list of addresses "where in your neighborhood a mourning register can be signed".

<sup>12</sup> On October 9, a petition demanding longer jail terms and less facilities for sexual delinquents, carrying the signature of 2.7 million people, was handed to the President of the Chamber of Representatives. It was by far the largest petition in Belgian history.

supplemented their newspapers with mobilization posters for the White March and asked their readerships to display them. *Het Nieuwsblad* (October 19, 1996) considered this but decided on a simple announcement on the first page: "See You in Brussels on Sunday." *De Morgen* and *De Standaard* (October 19, 1996) published a large advertisement for "the march for the children"—it was not clear whether this was their own initiative or the parents'. *Het Laatste Nieuws* (October 16, 1996) placed its own advertisement on the front page with a free phone number for the public to announce their own "white action."

In sum, the whole discourse reveals a positive media attitude towards the White March that was full of unconcealed appeals to participate. *Het Laatste Nieuws*'s headline on October 16 1996, pleaded to "Make Brussels a White City on Sunday," and the front page was decorated with white balloons for four days before the March. Those not planning to go were made to feel guilty: *Gazet van Antwerpen* wrote on the Saturday preceding the White March that some "famous citizens used the 'yes-but' excuse for not going" and that "some politicians didn't dare to go." In short, every right-minded person had a solemn duty to demonstrate in Brussels. These appeals were not equally strong in all newspapers. The more popular press stood head and shoulders above the rest, while two quality papers, and especially *De Standaard*, were much more distanced in their coverage.

#### CONCLUSION: THE MEDIA MADE THE WHITE MARCH

When the parents of the Dutroux's victims called for a demonstration in Brussels's streets, social movement watchers in Belgium were unanimous in their prediction: without movement organization backing, mass participation would be very difficult to achieve. The unexpected mobilization of 300,000 people—Belgium's largest demonstration ever—initiated our research into the machinery of its mobilization. Our hypothesis, which goes largely against current social movement theory, was that the mass media made the White March successful. Empirical materials point in that direction: the media not only gave massive coverage to the Dutroux case and to its political-structural interpretation, but also helped define the White March's theme and remove obstacles to participation. The media openly played the role of fellow traveller along side the parents of the victims and the discontented public. Usually social movements and protesting groups are covered by the media but have no control over the coverage. In contrast, the Belgian press presented themselves as actors and players in White March events with, as it seems, their own agenda and objectives. Indeed, turning the White March into a success seemed to be an implicit goal of several newspapers.

The most puzzling thing about the White March is that the media seem to have produced both the consensus *and* the action mobilization. Although we didn't survey White March participants and therefore cannot prove that the media mobilized the 300,000 demonstrators, there are three additional points of circumstantial evidence that support our argument about the media's active role. First, interviews with participants in the so-called Second White March that took place in Brussels more than a year later, after the media-attention had diminished, show that a vast majority of the participants claimed that only the media informed them about the demonstration (Walgrave, Van Aelst and Suetens 1998). Second, while it is not uncommon to find that most of the people didn't attend on their own but came as a part of a group, it is atypical to see that those networks primarily consisted in family and friends. We know that there was no common binding social movement organization backing participation (Van Aelst and Walgrave, forthcoming). The Second White March survey shows that the participants were mobilized through interpersonal networks, which suggests that media information is not processed by individuals in isolation but rather

**Table 3.** Comparison of Demonstrators in the Second White March (February 15, 1998; 30,000 participants; emotional theme), the Anti-racist Hand-in-Hand Demonstration (March 22, 1998; 15,000 participants; post-materialistic theme), the Social Non-Profit Demonstration (March 26, 1998; 20,000 participants; trade union theme).

	Second White March	Anti-Racist	Trade Union
% of participants mobilized exclusively through the media channel	70.0	6.7	0.5
% of participants mobilized by an organization	8.4	63.3	64.9
% of participants who came in the company..of family	60.8	36.8	0.5

in a social context (see table 3). Third, earlier research shows that the participants in the Second White March and in the local white marches were very heterogeneous, suggesting that this was probably also the case at the White March (Walgrave and Rihoux 1997). This too is an indirect indication of the media's role. Kielbowicz and Scherer (1986: 85) write that movement participants who join after the press coverage have characteristics different from early joiners before media coverage. This suggests that media coverage has an influence on a movement's social composition. If the White March had been organized by social movement organizations and not by the media, participant profiles would have been less heterogeneous because the media reach a far larger population than the traditional mobilizing organizations.

#### DISCUSSION: MASS MEDIA AS MOBILIZERS

The fact that our hypothesis was not falsified by the empirical data raises three important questions regarding its generalizability. First, do the findings hold for other than written media? Second, what about the directionality of the relation between the citizen and the media? Third, where does the White March case lead us regarding social movement theory?

First, the Belgian electronic media seem to have acted less explicitly as action mobilizers, and to have restricted themselves to consensus mobilization. To take one example, TV news reporters and anchors never dressed in white T-shirts or wore White March pins. However, quantitative attention (amplification) given the issue by both TV channels was by no means less than the newspapers. Both the public broadcasting channel and the commercial channel twice devoted their entire evening news to the case (Verstraeten 1997: 90). Baeyens (1997) analyzed the coverage of the public broadcasting channel and the commercial channel during the first three weeks of the controversy and concluded that they spent 50% and 63% respectively of their news on the case. We have suggested that both consensus and action mobilization are results of media attention and that massive and intensive consensus mobilization necessitates less action mobilization. Klandermans (1984: 586) also claims that several motives can more or less compensate one another—for example, a highly valued action outcome can take away the hindrances for participation. It seems that a good media mix with a strong consensus-mobilizing and amplifying electronic media, and an openly action-mobilizing written press can have an enormous impact. Although scientific discussion on the different influences of the written and electronic media is still open (McQuail 1993: 330),

these observations based on the White March case are suggestive of further research.

Second, regarding directionality, there has been a general discussion about the effects of the media on the audience and vice versa taking place for some time. Are the media capable of changing public opinion and public behavior or do they follow it? This is certainly a relevant question regarding our own research. According to McQuail, the greatest obstacle in pursuing these questions are methodological: "Most direct questions about the 'power of the media' either make no sense or cannot be answered" (1993: 381). This refers to the impossibility of isolating media effects from other possible effects outside of an experimental situation. Moreover, "the media are rarely likely to be the only necessary or sufficient cause of effect, and the relative contribution is extremely hard to assess" (McQuail 1993: 327). Our analysis suggests that a simple stimulus-response model (McQuail 1993: 330) is out of the question. It is better to speak of a dialectic between media and public, a mutual exchange. Even without the media's help the Dutroux case struck a chord in the Belgian population, as evidenced by the hundreds of readers' letters published by the newspapers. Of course, the editors selected the letters, but more letters on the case were published than readers' letters column normally carried. Also the increasing circulation of the papers in the analyzed period indicates that the media and the population were on the same wavelength.<sup>13</sup> We tried to show the plausibility of our thesis, but causality cannot be proved. What we do know is that the media have activated all possible mobilization functions, and that there were no other agencies, organizations, or social movements, that mobilized for the White March (Walgrave and Rihoux 1997). The media are the only plausible explanation for the massive turnout.

The third question is how can our findings be reconciled with conventional social movement theory that doesn't think highly of the media's mobilizing capacities. To put it another way, although the media's role in consensus mobilization is widely recognized, action mobilization is rarely treated. Our data suggest that the mass media not only can play a role in consensus mobilization but that, in specific circumstances, they can actually "co-produce" massive mobilizations. What are those specific circumstances? Based on the case of the White March, we close by speculating about the contexts favorable for media mobilization.

1. The media only take an active role when there is clear and manifest disagreement between the people and the elites. This allows the media to present themselves as advocates for the public and to easily cash in on the widespread discontent. Our data show that this was very much so in the Dutroux case, where the pre-existing and popular image of the gap between the public and their leaders served as the master frame.

2. The active role of the media is restricted to highly emotional and symbolic issues that create an atmosphere of consensus, emotion, and togetherness. At the heart of the White March lies the shock following the systematic kidnapping, abuse, and murder of young children by a exconvict living on welfare. Widespread discontent arose because these crimes remained unsolved due to repetitive failures of the judiciary and police system. There was so much emotional consensus that even King Albert took a public stance and assumed a role that would normally be considered beyond his position as impartial head of the nation. The media played these emotions to the fullest and identified with the public. Additionally, they portrayed the players in the drama in terms of victims versus perpetrators, good versus evil, and innocence versus perversion. Symbolic categories were abundantly used by the media.

3. In the absence of a movement or a committed social organization it is advantageous for the media to take an active role because it allows them to present themselves as sensitive and unpartisan watch dogs around a consensus issue. It is striking to see how the

---

<sup>13</sup> The sales figures of the newspapers were given to us provided that they would be treated discretely. As such we can only state in general terms that the circulation of the newspapers increased in the period of our research.

Belgian media so actively supported the White March when there was no movement behind it, but when a "white movement" began their interest waned. The "white movement" was founded after the march, and became strongly aware of the influence of the media (Walgrave and Rihoux 1997). Only six months after the White March, white movement felt completely deserted by the media. By then the media had resumed a more normal coverage of the issue.

4. The media only take an active role when the issue is relatively simple. Gamson (1992) and Klandermans and Goslinga (1996) have shown that the media can do their part in consensus mobilization, but that their capacity decreases as an issue's complexity increases. Not only was the Dutroux case emotional and symbolic, but from the outset it was also straightforward and not too complex, making it easy for the media to report in full detail.

5. The media will only engage fully in peak-mobilization when the *controversy is politically impartial*. This allows them to act more autonomously and frees them from the obligation of remaining politically objective. In the beginning, when the public focus rested on the police and judicial system, the media did not treat the Dutroux case as a political matter. Moreover the sheer drama of the issue and the instant birth of an emotional consensus made political party recuperation nearly impossible. And even when the stress shifted to the politicization, *all* political parties were implicated. It was not before the issue became subject of a parliamentary investigatory commission (more than a year later), that it got into partisan debate. At that stage the media frenzy had ceased.

6. Only when the media environment is commercial and characterized by depoliticization and de-ideologization, can the media create peak-mobilizations. In a politically and ideologically divided media environment, consensus mobilization is only influential among a partisan audience, and is confronted by other voices. Different media will try to impose their own frames, making it difficult to create an overarching consensus. In the past, when Belgian newspapers were the mouthpieces of political parties, they played the consensus-mobilization role within their own territories by advocating a point of view (Johnstone, Slawski and Bowman 1976: 114-116). The depoliticization of the Belgian media (Biltereyst and Van Gompel 1997; De Bens 1997) made the openly active mobilizing approach to the Dutroux case possible. It was astonishing to see how the newspapers all reported more or less the same events and interpreted them more or less in the same way. De-ideologization and depoliticization—and thus commercialization—can lead to unanimity with politically enormous effects (see Noelle-Neumann 1984, and Masuy 1997: 34).

7. The media are more likely to play an active role in, what McQuail calls, *disturbed times*. A general scandal atmosphere and a lack of confidence seem ideal. McQuail (1993: 332-333) suggests the mass media have a much greater impact in turbulent times than in normal circumstances: "It does seem that whenever the stability of society is disturbed, by crime, war, economic malaise or some 'moral panic,' the mass media are given some responsibility. . . . [But] we can only speculate about the reasons for such associations in time, but we cannot rule out the possibility that the media are actually more influential in certain ways at times of crisis or heightened awareness." The Belgian summer of 1996 was indeed a "disturbed time" when the nation seemed struck by moral panic (Hooghe 1998).

8. Finally, one can assume that the mobilizing impact of the media depends on the population's confidence in the media. Recent figures show that confidence in Belgium media, especially the written press, is considerably higher than in other European countries. Also, while other institutions in Belgium (parliament, government, political parties, and judiciary) lost the population's confidence during the Dutroux case, the media's trust level rose.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Comparative data on institutional trust are found in Euromarometer 48.0, October-November 1998

This list is derived from the analysis of only one case, and is not exhaustive of the preconditions for peak-mobilization by the media. It is offered as a prototype to better understand when and how the conventional mobilization theory could be extended towards the mass media. While it is clear that such a set of preconditions will only seldom hold, it seems that the role of the Belgian media in the White March is not unique. In other West European countries similar media patterns can be traced. Furedi (1997) describes the role of the media in the anti-gun movement after the shootings in Dunblane, UK, in a similar way. The White March also indicates that the role of the media is temporary (see also Sampedro 1997). The media are unreliable allies: "media coverage does produce an increase in expressions of concern about an issue, but . . . those expressions of concern fade just as quickly when coverage wanes" (Szaz 1994: 64). Like their readers, the media are easily bored and continually hunt for new facts (Downs 1972). Gamson and Meyer (1996) note that "once media attention shifts to some other issue and the controversy has lost its salience, the open space closes again and would-be movement spokespersons no longer get their phone calls returned." The somewhat artificial unanimity in the Belgian press collapsed eventually, when in 1998 a media war burst loose between believers and disbelievers of files related to the Dutroux case.

This list of preconditions suggests that under very specific circumstances the media are able to mobilize for peak-mobilizations, but that they are inappropriate for permanent and sustained mobilization. Inevitably the media will broaden their scope again once a dramatic event has faded and attention will be paid to other issues; political parties will jump onto topics that get huge public attention thus bringing it into the normal political process and making it partisan; emotions tend to fade quickly thus making the issue less salient; the ensuing search for those accountable (when there is someone to blame) will soon become too complex and argumentative to explain in a straightforward manner and to understand easily. These are all situations that go against the list of preconditions, making it highly improbable that the media are fit for permanent and sustained mobilization.

#### REFERENCES

- Antoine, F. 1993. "Scores Des Unes. L'événement dans l'intra-médiatique." Pp. 141-155 in *Le Roi est Mort. Émotions et médias*, M. Lits, ed. Bruxelles: Vie Ouvrière.
- Baeyens, Nele. 1997. *BRTN en VTM: Vergelijking van de nieuwsverslaggeving van de openbare en de commerciële omroep in verband met de zaak Dutroux*. Communicatiewetenschappen Leuven: KULeuven.
- Biltreyst, Daniel, and Roland Van Gompel. 1997. "Crisis and Renewal of the Fourth Estate: On the Post-war Development of the Flemish Newspaper Press" *Communications, the European Journal of Communication Research* 22 (3): 275-300.
- Briet, M., B. Klandermans, and F. Kroon. 1987. "How Women Become Involved in the Women's Movement." Pp. 44-63 in *The Women's Movement in the U.S. and Western Europe: Feminist Consciousness, Political Opportunity and Public Opinion*, M. Katzenstein, and C. Mueller, eds. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- De Bens, E. 1997. *De Pers in België*. Tiel: Lannoo.
- Downs, A. 1972. "Up and Down with Ecology: The Issue Attention Cycle." *The Public Interest* 28: 38-50.
- Eisinger, P. K. 1973. "The Conditions of Protest Behaviour in American Cities." *American Political Science Review* 67 (1): 11-28.
- Furedi, F. 1997. *Culture of Fear*. London: Cassell.

- Gamson, William A. 1992. *Talking Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gamson, William A., David S. Meyer. 1996 "Framing Political Opportunity." Pp. 275-290 in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, D. McAdam, J. McCarthy, and M. Zald, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gamson, William A., and Gadi Wolfsfeld. 1993. "Movements and Media as Interacting Systems." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 528: 114-125.
- Gitlin, T. 1980. *The Whole World is Watching. Mass media and the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hansen, A. 1993. *The Mass Media and Environmental Issues*. London: Leicester University Press.
- Hilgartner, S., and C. Bosk. 1988. "The Rise and Fall of Social Problems: A Public Arenas Model." *American Journal of Sociology* 94(1): 53-78.
- Hooghe, M. 1998. "De 'witte mobilisatie' in België als moral crusade: De vervlechting van emotie en politiek." *Sociologische Gids* 45(5): 289-309.
- Johnstone, J. W. C., E. Slawki, and W. Bowman. 1976. *The News People: A Sociological Portrait of American Journalists and Their Work*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Kielbowicz, R. B., and C. Scherer. 1986. "The Role of the Press in the Dynamics of Social Movements." Pp. 71-96 in *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*. L. Kriesberg, ed. Greenwich CT: JAI.
- Klandermans, B. 1984. "Mobilization and Participation: Social-psychological Expansions of Resource Mobilization Theory." *American Sociological Review* 49: 583-600.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1997. *The Social Psychology of Protest*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Klandermans, B., and D. Oegema. 1987. "Potentials, Networks, Motivations and Barriers: Steps Towards Participation in Social Movements." *American Sociological Review* 52: 519-531.
- Klandermans, B., and S. Goslinga. 1996. "Media Discourse, Movement Publicity and the Generation of Collective Action Frames: Theoretical and Empirical Exercises in Meaning Construction." Pp. 312-337 in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, D. McAdam, J. McCarthy, and M. Zald, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Koopmans, R. 1995. "The Dynamic of Protest Waves." Pp. 111-144 in *New Social Movements in Western Europe. A Comparative Analysis*, H. Kriesi, R. Koopmans, J.W. Duyvendak, and M.G. Giugni, eds. London: UCL Press.
- Lits, M. 1993. *Le Roi est Mort. Émotions et médias*. Bruxelles: Vie Ouvrière.
- Masuy, C. 1997. "Une émotion populaire médiatisée. Laboratoire pour un autre journalisme." Pp. 25-40 in *La Société Indicible*, N. Burnay, P. Lannoy, and L. Panafit, eds. Bruxelles: Editions Luc Pire.
- McAdam, D. 1982. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930-1970*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1986. "Recruitment to High-Risk Activism: The Case of Freedom Summer." *American Journal of Sociology* 92: 64-90.
- McAdam, D., and D. Rucht. 1993. "The Cross-National Diffusion of Movement Ideas." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 528 (July 1993) 56-74.
- McQuail, D. 1993. *Mass Communication Theory, An Introduction*. London: Sage.
- Molotch, H. 1979. "Media and Movements". Pp. 71-93 in *The Dynamics of Social Movements*, M. Zald, and J. McCarthy, eds. Cambridge MA: Winthrop.
- Noelle-Neumann, E. 1984. *The Spiral Of Silence—Our Social Skin*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Oberschall, A. 1980. "Loosely Structured Collective Conflict: a Theory and an Application." Pp 45-68 in: *Research in Social Movements, Conflict and Change vol. 3*, L. Kriesberg, ed. Greenwich CT: JAI.
- Oegema, D., and B. Klandermans. 1994. "Why Social Movement Sympathizers Don't Participate: Erosion and Nonconversion of Support." *American Sociological Review* 59: 703-722.
- Sampedro, V. 1997. "The media politics of social protest." *Mobilization*, (2)2: 185-205.
- Szaz, A. 1994. *EcoPopulism: Toxic Waste and the Movement for Environmental Justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.



- Schmitt-Beck, R. 1990. "Über die Bedeutung der Massenmedien für soziale Bewegungen." *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* (4)42: 642-662.
- Smelser, N. 1962. *Theory of Collective Behavior*. New York: The Free Press.
- Snow, D., L. Zurcher, and Eklund-Olson. 1980. "Social Networks and Social Movements: A Microstructural Approach to Differential Recruitment." *American Sociological Review* 45: 787-801.
- Snow, D., E. B. Rochford, S. K. Worden, and R. B. Benford. 1986. "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization and Movement Participation." *American Sociological Review* 51: 464-482.
- Tarrow, S. 1991. *Struggle, Politics and Reform: Collective Action, Social Movements and Cycles of Protest*. Cornell: Cornell University.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1996. "States and Opportunities. The Political Structuring of Social Movements." Pp. 41-61 in *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements*, D. McAdam, J. McCarthy, and M. Zald, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Aelst, P., and S. Walgrave. Forthcoming. "Who is That (Wo)man on the Street? From the Normalization of the Protest to the Normalization of the Protesters." *European Journal of Political Research*.
- Van Zoonen, E. 1992. "The Women's Movement and the Media: Constructing a Public Identity." *International Journal of Communication* 7: 453-476.
- Verstraeten, H. 1997. "De zaak-Dutroux: de media tussen publieke sfeer en markt." Pp. 77-94 in *Kritische Reflecties Omtrent de Zaak-Dutroux*, C. Eliaerts, ed. Brussel: Balans-VUBPres.
- Walgrave, S., and B. Rihoux. 1997. *Van emotie tot politieke commotie. De Witte Mars, een jaar later*. Leuven: Van Halewyck.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998. "De Belgische witte golf: Voorbij de sociologische bewegingstheorie?" *Sociologische Gids* 45(5): 310-339.
- Walgrave, S., P. Van Aelst, and M. Suetens. 1998. "Van witte beweging naar slachtofferbeweging." *Samenleving & Politiek* 5(5): 35-41.
- Wolfsfield, G. 1984. "The Symbiosis of Press and Protest: An Exchange Analysis." *Journalism Quarterly* 61: 550-556.