

# The Belgian press – deluded by a big hoax?

By **Patricia Kelly**

22.11.2007 / 00:00 CET

**There cannot be a politician left in Belgium who has not been given an opportunity by the country's media to air his or her point of view about what now stands as the longest political crisis in the country's history.**

Newspapers, radio and television have faithfully reported the results of numerous opinion polls both for and against separatism. But with more than a score of newspapers on sale, all of them owned by Belgian companies, predominantly Flemish, none has come out unambiguously in favour of splitting the country up. An air of crisis fatigue has set in and the message beginning to appear in the press is that the public is bored with the antics of its political masters and would like them to get down to working out what Belgians are best known for, which is a compromise.

Newspaper circulation in Belgium, as elsewhere in Europe, is slowly on the decline. But it is almost impossible to gauge the mood of Belgium by reading a single newspaper.

The French-language daily *Le Soir*, for example, tends to concentrate on events in Brussels where the issue of Flemish or Francophone domination in the capital's outer communes is the hot topic, giving an impression that the whole country is up in arms. Yet the mood in Antwerp, Ghent, Namur or Liège can be radically different.

The Antwerp regional paper *Gazet van Antwerpen*, with a circulation of more than 106,000, sells more copies than *Le Soir* (93,000). The anti-clerical *Le Soir* leads the pack in Brussels and Brabant, followed by the down-market *La Dernière Heure* (85,000) and the Roman Catholic establishment favourite *La Libre Belgique* (45,000). Not surprisingly, the newspapers with the largest circulation are to be found in Flanders with the populist *Het Laatste Nieuws* topping the list with a 282,000 paid circulation followed by *Het Nieuwsblad* (202,000), while the circulation of the authoritative *De Standaard* (also Catholic) stands at 82,000.

With 56% of the population using internet and 40% connected to broadband, newspapers are fast losing their lucrative classified advertising revenue and advertisers also appear to be increasingly in favour of direct marketing. Broadcast media, too, are faced with declining revenue from advertising.

Belgian broadcasting mirrors the unique political and linguistic nature of the country, and cultural communities, rather than the federal authorities, are responsible for regulating radio and television. Consequently, Belgium does not have a single public broadcasting organisation, but two separate ones.

Some 95% of Belgians are hooked up to cable television, one of the highest take-up rates in the world. Cable services offer dozens of domestic and foreign channels in countless languages and have had the effect of indirectly undermining the public service broadcasting networks RTBF in francophone Belgium and VRT in Flanders.

Ironically, it was the state television channel RTBF which put together a spoof news report last December, on the eve of an EU summit, claiming that Flanders had unilaterally declared independence and that Belgium

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had ceased to exist. Thousands of people panicked and the public reaction was likened to the famous 1938 Orson Welles radio adaptation of *War of the Worlds* which had many Americans believing that Martians had invaded planet earth. So anyone reading or listening to the Belgian news these days could be forgiven for wondering if the current political crisis is for real.

Patricia Kelly is a freelance journalist based in Brussels.

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