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Television News Programmes in Western Europe: A Comparative Study

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This article summarizes a study conducted on seventeen news programmes from eight Western European countries. The analysis focuses both on what subjects were taken up (substance) and on how they were presented (form). The results reveal that however standard this essential feature programme may seem, every such broadcast is unique in the way it blends a limited number of ingredients. Qualitative comments are made on the effectiveness of several techniques used by some stations. Correlative analyses reveal two coherent groups comprising those stations broadcasting from 'Germanic-culture' countries on the one hand, and those from 'Romance-culture' countries on the other. The study also highlights the significant quantitative and qualitative differences in the coverage of the closing of the Maastricht Summit (which took place during the period covered by the study).

Introduction

The steady and careful attention that is paid to preparing the regular programming of the TV news make it an essential feature on general-interest channels. The news is often the main asset of a TV station because of the size and fidelity of the audience it attracts. Still, it is necessary to qualify the stereotype which suggests that this is a programme 'that is watched by everyone'. A survey carried out in France by *Médiamétrie*¹ reveals that almost half of the French population never, or hardly ever, watches the main TV news programmes (i.e. in this instance, those on TF1, A2 and LA5), and that one third watches none of the prime-time news broadcasts. If we add up all the viewers² watching one of the main prime-time news broadcasts available in French-speaking Belgium (RTL-TVi, RTBF, TF1, A2 and FR3),³ we obtain a figure of 50 percent given that a number of viewers watch several newscasts in succession, the estimate in the above mentioned French study is confirmed. Furthermore, it has been found that different nationalities behave differently toward the media. For example, a study by

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Keppinger et al. (1987) looked at how the general public heard about the assassination of Sweden's Prime Minister, Olof Palme. The results revealed that 65 percent of Italians heard about it on the television, while only 43 percent of the English and 36 percent of Germans heard about it this way. In the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) the news was primarily disseminated via radio (46 percent as compared to 17 percent in Italy).

The supply of news broadcasts in a given media market proves to be quite invariable. A study conducted at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (Leroy, 1992) looking at French and French-speaking Belgian channels, revealed that the average length of news broadcasts has remained fairly unchanged since 1980, in spite of a few variations. Only the French FR3 has substantially increased the airtime devoted to TV news since the creation of the 19-20 — a mixture of regional news, broadcast from decentralized stations, and national news. It must be emphasized here that regional newscasts are used in this study merely to provide additional background to programme planning. As Cohen (1989: 435) suggested, TV news broadcasts in western countries have many features in common. Today, much attention is paid to European unity, to the emergence of a cross-border culture, to the levelling of public opinions, to the dwindling number of information sources (e.g. the reduction in the number of news agencies). We are therefore entitled to look into the ostensible homogeneity of the news in Europe through careful examination of one of the most favoured media, namely television.

Object of the Study

Taking advantage of the particularly rich supply of TV stations in Belgium — subscribers to cable TV in Brussels are offered no less than twenty-five (unscrambled) channels from a number of European countries — we chose to compare seventeen evening newscasts, aired on sixteen stations from eight Western European countries (see Table 1). Our essentially comparative approach involved defining quantifiable operational criteria. The comparison relates to the events covered (*substance*) as well as to the audio-visual techniques implemented (*form*).

Methodology

This study was carried out over a period of four consecutive weeks (from 15 November to 12 December 1991), which was deemed

TABLE 1
Sample Analysed

Country	Channel	Time (Local Time)	Name	Number of Broadcasts Analysed
French-speaking Belgium	RTBF	7.30 p.m.	<i>Journal Télévisé</i>	21
	RTL-TVi	7 p.m.	<i>Le Journal</i>	23
Dutch-speaking Belgium	BRTN	7.30 p.m.	<i>Journal</i>	25
	VTM	7 p.m.	<i>VTM Nieuws</i>	19
France	TF1	8 p.m.	<i>20 heures</i>	21
	A2	8 p.m.	<i>Le Journal</i>	23
	FR3	7.33 p.m.	<i>Le 19-20</i>	20
'French-speaking Europe'	TV5 Europe	6.30 p.m.	<i>Le Journal</i>	20
French Switzerland	TSR	7.30 p.m.	<i>TéléJournal</i>	13
Germany	ARD	8 p.m.	<i>Tagesschau</i>	23
	ZDF	7 p.m.	<i>Heute</i>	27
Italy	RAI UNO	8 p.m.	<i>Telegiornale Uno</i>	23
The Netherlands	Nederland 1	8 p.m.	<i>NOS — 8 uur Journaal</i>	26
	Nederland 2	6 p.m.	<i>NOS — 6 uur Journaal</i>	21
Spain	TVE	8.30 p.m.	<i>Telediario</i>	23
United Kingdom	BBC 1	6 p.m.	<i>The 6 o'clock News</i>	17
	BBC 1	9 p.m.	<i>The 9 o'clock News</i>	17
Total				362

'neutral', as it did not include the summer or the Christmas holidays. Third-year students in the Communication Department at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) helped us record and analyse the widest possible sample of newscasts, by counting and timing the events covered.

To coordinate the data to be analysed and foster rigorous and conclusive comparisons, we chose to take account of 'genuine' information only, thereby excluding all peripheral features, such as the credits, the weather forecast, the results of the races, the evening's programme, etc. Each news programme was then broken down according to two criteria: form and substance.

Three 'forms' were distinguished: *pictureless* segments (mainly the newscaster and guests in the studio or in a link-up), segments with *static pictures* (computer graphics, freeze frames, tables, etc.) and, finally, *moving picture* segments (reports and comments from field correspondents).

Regarding substance, segments were divided into two categories using a simple criterion: whether the local viewer regarded the

event as national or international. The two sets defined were then divided into various subsets which are developed and discussed later when the data concerned are examined. To further refine the substance-based analysis, the segments were also numbered and classified into one of the following six categories: politics, economy, society, miscellaneous, culture and sports.

Clearly, classification of the data might be regarded as subjective, as certain segments appear to be on the borderline between two classes. We tried to address this difficulty by using discrete categories defined in straightforward terms and allowing easy classification of the segments. There were very few chances of misjudging the substance of a given segment, as our classification merely required defining the area covered by the segment, and certainly did not call for the thorough linguistic knowledge that, for example, a semantic analysis would have necessitated. It is useful to state that 'mixed' segments, combining more than one type of form or substance, were placed in the dominant category to avoid the further division of already short segments. Thus a report (with moving pictures) briefly interrupted by inserts of a few geographical maps (static pictures) was recorded as a whole under the heading 'moving pictures', unless the 'static' segments took up more than half the report under consideration.

Some news programmes had to be discarded, either because their recording was incomplete (overlaps or overruns), or because external circumstances generated newscasts with an untypical format (for example, Belgian news the day after the general election). The sample was of 362 news broadcasts, about 75 percent of the 476 aired during the study period. All the data compiled were processed through computer programmes.

Results

The presupposed homogeneous structure of the various newscasts was not entirely corroborated by our results, which occasionally revealed quite divergent figures. Following the examination of correlations it is clear that some groupings are possible.

Form: Quantitative Data

The two basic measures as quantified by our study are the total duration of the broadcast (except for peripheral features as mentioned earlier) and the number of items treated (see Table 2).

The *total length* ranges from 13 minutes (NOS 6 uur — 12

minutes 53 seconds; ARD — 13 minutes 14 seconds) to more than half an hour (TF1 — 35 minutes; A2 — 33 minutes), the average being 23 minutes 39 seconds. This difference in length denotes fundamentally divergent approaches to the news. In ascending order of duration, Figure 1 shows that the Germans and the Dutch are characterized by the brevity of their evening news. The second basic measure is the *number of events* covered in each programme. TV5 Europe covers less than eight (7.9 on average) whereas TF1 covers 18.6 and RAI UNO 19.3, the European average being 13.3.

A comparison between the total length and the number of items allows a more refined analysis. What is clearly important is to determine whether shorter broadcasts tackle fewer topics or whether they manage the news more succinctly. If we look at the *average time devoted to each item*, we see that on NOS 6 uur and ARD, coverage lasts 1 minute 10 seconds and 1 minute 12 seconds respectively. At the other end of the spectrum, we find that the BBC1 newscasts (6 o'clock and 9 o'clock news) devote 2 minutes 38 seconds and 2 minutes 47 seconds respectively to each item. Figure 2 shows that the number of events covered does not increase linearly with the total length of the programme. In a news broadcast of approximately the same duration, RAI 1 covers almost twice as many topics as, for example, the BBC. It can be seen from Figures 1 and 2, which directly compare the average item length and the number of events covered, that shorter broadcasts do not necessarily deal with the fewest items. As a result, two hierarchies can be obtained, depending on whether newscasts are arranged by duration or by the number of events covered. It seems that brevity is not linked with a more rigorous selection of topics, but rather with a shortening of the time allotted to each item. The descriptive elements (that is, who, what and when) are clearly favoured at the expense of the explanatory elements (that is, how and why). The implications of these findings about how viewers perceive, understand and recall what they see and hear are beyond the scope of this study, although they deserve further in-depth examination.

Not surprisingly, breaking down the results into the three *formal* categories reveals that moving pictures are largely dominant in all the newscasts under consideration (see Figure 3), except TV5 Europe. The BBC news programmes are the most lavishly illustrated (80 percent of moving pictures), the European average being 70 percent. It seems that editorial staff are afraid of boring

TABLE 2
Duration (in Seconds), Number of Items and Proportion of the Total Length.
Average Measures of the Four Weeks Surveyed

	RTL- RTBF	TVI	BRTN	VTM	TF1	A2	FR3	TVS ^a Europe	ARD	ZDF	UNO	RAI	NOS	6 uur	TVE	BBC1	BBC1	Aver- age
Total duration	1660	1439	1467	1354	2100	1980	1345	1178	1638	794	1050	1569	974	773	1545	1628	1633	1419
Total number of items	15.4	14.7	11.5	15.1	18.6	15.5	12.7	7.9	14.5	11.1	13.7	19.3	10.2	11.1	14.2	10.3	9.8	13.3
Average length/item	108	98	128	90	113	128	106	149	113	72	77	81	95	70	109	158	167	109
Duration	553	393	314	305	581	590	469	656	381	282	316	450	217	156	434	274	250	389
Duration 'static pictures'	48	16	26	58	22	22	18	22	42	22	30	92	18	19	40	60	79	37
Duration 'moving pictures'	1059	1030	1127	991	1497	1368	858	500	1215	490	704	1027	739	598	1071	1294	1304	992
Duration 'national'	895	918	792	762	1270	1267	782	—	841	393	503	1089	446	372	948	965	774	766
Duration 'international'	765	521	675	592	830	713	563	1178	797	401	547	480	528	401	597	663	859	654
Number national stories	7.5	8.3	6.2	7.4	11.8	10.2	8.4	—	7.2	5.8	7.0	14.1	4.7	5.6	8.5	6.2	4.8	7.3
Number international stories	7.9	6.4	5.3	7.6	6.8	5.3	4.3	7.9	7.3	5.3	6.8	5.2	5.5	5.5	5.7	4.1	5.1	6.0

Duration 'pictureless' pictures	33%	27%	21%	23%	28%	30%	35%	56%	23%	35%	30%	29%	22%	20%	28%	17%	15%	28%
Duration 'moving pictures'	3%	1%	2%	4%	1%	1%	1%	2%	3%	3%	3%	6%	2%	3%	3%	4%	5%	3%
Duration 'national'	64%	72%	77%	73%	71%	69%	64%	42%	74%	62%	67%	65%	76%	77%	69%	79%	80%	69%
Duration 'international'	54%	64%	54%	56%	60%	64%	58%	—	51%	49%	48%	69%	46%	48%	61%	59%	47%	52%
Number national stories	46%	36%	46%	44%	40%	36%	42%	100%	49%	51%	52%	31%	54%	52%	39%	41%	53%	48%
Number international stories	49%	56%	54%	49%	63%	66%	66%	—	50%	52%	51%	73%	46%	50%	60%	60%	49%	53%
Number international stories	51%	44%	46%	51%	37%	34%	34%	100%	50%	48%	49%	27%	54%	50%	40%	40%	51%	47%

^aMost programmes on TVS Europe are produced by 'member' stations in several countries, and the audience is the 'French-speaking community'. TVS Europe will therefore be seen as an international station, and thus all stories in its news programmes will be considered international as well.

FIGURE 1
Total and Average Duration per Item
Arranged according to Total Duration.

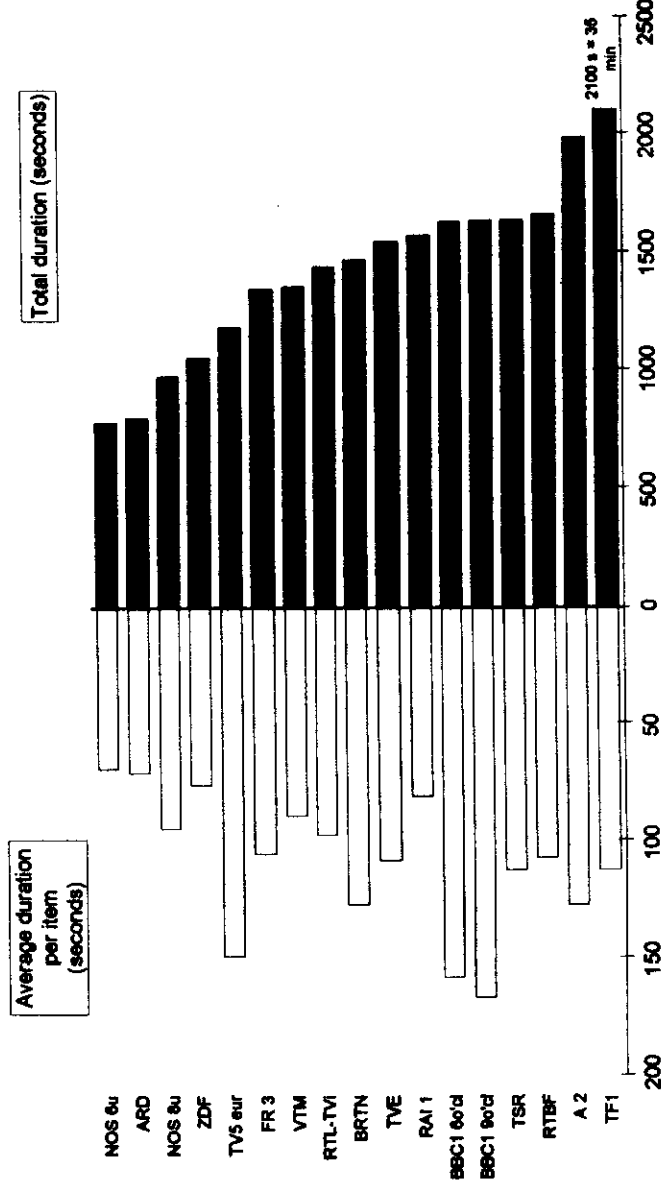


FIGURE 2
Number of Items as a Function of Total Duration

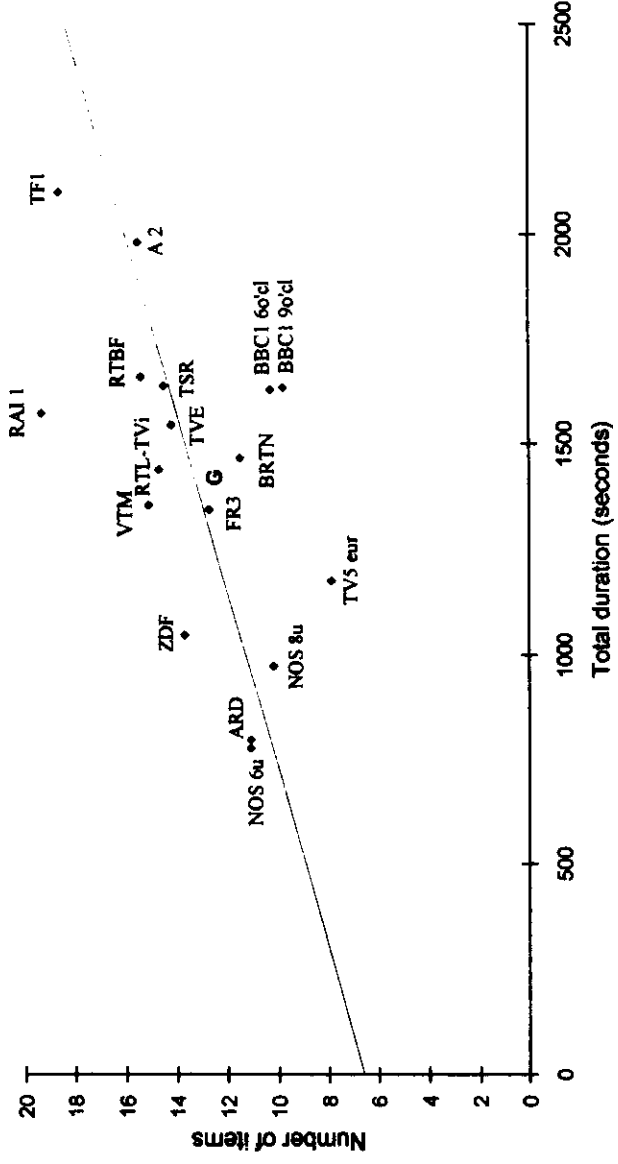
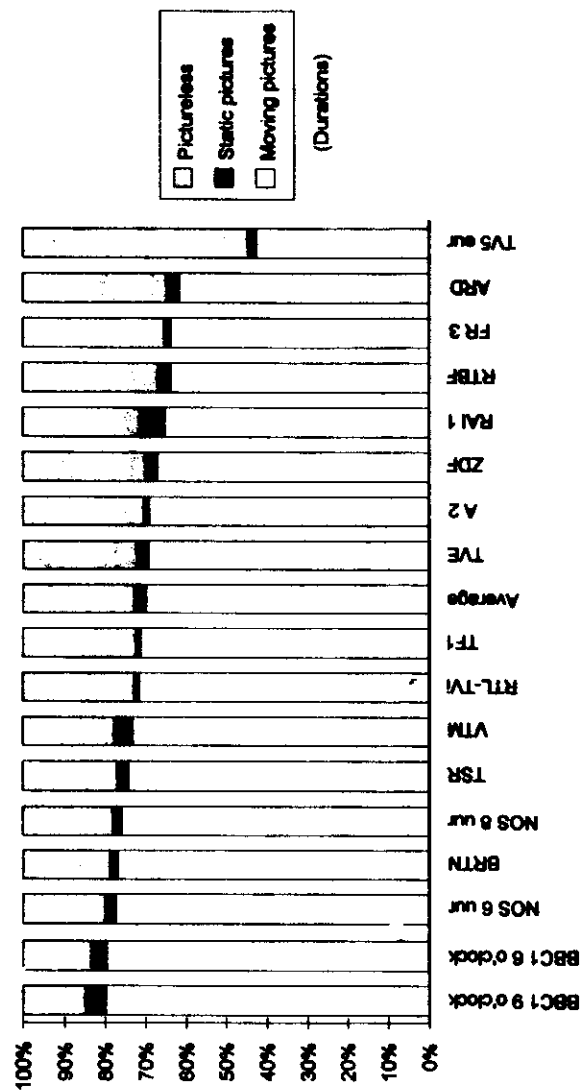


FIGURE 3
Distribution of the Three Different Forms



the viewer and therefore choose to illustrate the news with copious moving pictures. If no 'fresh' pictures are available, broadcasters resort to archives or even ornamental pictures (only indirectly related to the topic). These procedures should be banned as the viewer's perception can be entirely blurred by the lack of connection between sound and image (see Katz et al., 1977). The extent of the newscaster's comments or of the segments which take place in the studio (which we called 'pictureless') ranges from 15 percent on the BBC, to 35 percent on FR3 and ARD, to 55 percent on TV5 Europe (where one or more guests are regularly present on the set), the average being slightly over a quarter (28 percent). On average, 'static pictures' amount to only 3 percent of the broadcast's length. It appears that television news seeks to assert its own identity: 'pictureless' segments are tantamount to a radio programme while 'static pictures' are reminiscent of the written press.

Form: Qualitative Data

Consistent groupings do not emerge from a more qualitative analysis of the way the news is presented. Various editions in one country, or even on one station, can be very different in form. The various 'recipes', however, make use of only a restricted number of ingredients, the blend of which gives each news programme an apparently specific flavour. It is difficult to analyse these components from a typological point of view, for the variations in the combinations are extremely close. Table 3 nonetheless constitutes an attempt to present (for information purposes only), some of the key ingredients. It is necessary to pinpoint certain aspects of the quality and balance of those ingredients.

There are four programmes that do not, as is conventional, start by first announcing the main *headlines*. Among these, it is notable that RTL-TV's newscast is preceded by such a segment (a few minutes before the broadcast proper), and FR3, as well as TV5 Europe, often announce the headlines but in an irregular and non-formalized way. Most of the newscasts under consideration begin with a summary of the main points. The function of this opening is similar to that of a magazine cover or a daily newspaper's front page. But here, more than in the written press, the attention-grabbing device is coupled with a genuine desire to synthesize the news. Moving or static pictures, scrolls or key-words, musical theme, offscreen announcements — many resources are used. The

TABLE 3
Qualitative Analysis (Presentation and Set)

	RTB F	RTL TVI	BRTN	VTM	TFI	A2	FR3	TV5 eur	TSR	ARD	ZDF	RAI UNO	NOS 8 u	NOS 6 u	TVE	BBCI 6p.m.	BBCI 9p.m.
Headlines are announced	X		X	X	X	X			X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Set: newsroom, control room decor	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X	X	X	X	X
blue screen																	
Inlays: images	X	X	X		X	X		X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
text	X	X			X	X				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
News in brief segment	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Newsreader: single (+ guests) pair	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Framing: face and shoulders		X		X					X			X	X	X	X	X	X
face and chest																	
from head to waist																	
Desk: notes	X	X															
computer terminal	X	X															
Weather forecast			X							X	X		X	X	X	X	X

day's main story is also generally summarized at the end of the programme. Only A2 and TVE go so far as to read the headlines a second time, while BBC1's 6 o'clock news does so three times (beginning, middle and end). It seems that the latter approach has an almost pedagogical purpose, as it assumes that repetition will enhance recall.

A survey of the *set* reveals that five shows take place in a 'CNN-like' environment: machines, screens, computers, control room are apparent in the background, while staff members are actually busy working. This kind of set seeks to strengthen the show's credibility by giving a full view of the underlying technical aids and human resources, not to mention the implicit reference made to US networks which initiated this type of set (especially CNN). However, this heterogeneous, sometimes bustling background often causes distraction, an undesirable side-effect highlighted by Baggaley and Duck (1981). Indeed, PR consultants advise that speakers wear neutral clothes and hairstyles at lectures or press conferences, to allow the audience to focus its attention on the content of the speech, not on the colour of the tie that the speaker happens to be wearing, or on the big poster accidentally hanging next to him or her. What then should we think of fancy sets or enigmatic insets, not to mention the garish ties that are very much in fashion on some stations? How many times have you heard an exclamatory 'Will you look at that tie!' when the anchor appears on the screen?

The environment in which the newscaster appears has little impact on the interest he or she is likely to arouse, apart from some especially catchy *in situ* reports (e.g. live broadcasts from Berlin as the wall was taken down). But the same cannot be said of the credibility the viewers grant him or her. It will be higher if, for example, the report is recorded on location (e.g. live broadcasts from Maastricht during the summit). In any case, some sets are particularly sober, indeed virtually bare. Even if the viewer occasionally catches a glimpse of a spacious and state-of-the-art studio, the anchors on RAI UNO and BBC1's 6 o'clock news are set against an entirely blue background, with an occasional brief inlay. The German stations ARD and ZDF superimpose the newsreader on a full-screen inset, usually a geographical map, a major figure's picture, his or her name, and a few key words. This pedagogically exemplary approach assigns the journalist a less prominent role, while giving greater importance to a synthetic and

contextual visualization of information which, despite its graphic and semantic complexity, does not distract but rather strengthens or even duplicates the presenter's oral message. But, of course, any sense of warmth and comfort that could emanate from a concrete and identifiable set is lost.

Whatever the environment, the newsreader's text is generally supported by an *inlay*. Text or image or both, an inlay is meant to be synthetic, symbolic and illustrative. In some unfortunate cases, the inlay is more likely to divert the viewer's attention than to reinforce the content of the message. For example, on RTL-TVi, the text is sometimes reduced to a single enigmatic word, and its connection with the image above it then resembles a riddle or a puzzle. Possibly, the intended effect is this: if viewers are hooked by the riddle, they will try to resolve the ambiguity, and their eagerness to find a solution will cause them to listen intently to the newsreader. Unfortunately, it could also be the case that this process merely betrays excessive fascination with sophistication. The latter assumption is supported by the fact that perception of the inlay is further impeded by the addition of distracting elements: e.g. a background made up of blue squares whose upper side is lined with a thin white stripe (3D effect), which generates considerable 'noise' — requiring the picture to be extracted from the background before identification can take place. Only RTL-TVi uses block letters for the subtitles of interviews, a practice which impairs legibility as the average viewer's eye is not used to reading block letters.⁴ Finally, VTM and FR3 are the only channels never to use any insets, apart from the names of the newsreaders and occasional guests.

Four stations systematically offer short segments called '*news in brief*'. This is a violation of the very principle of information because such a format proves inadequate from the triple point of view of perception, understanding and recall. These miscellaneous 'bits' condense, into a few seconds, events that are often extremely complex (coups, strikes, elections) and extremely varied (local news alternating with political and social events). The key words are: quick succession, brevity, diversity, shallowness, all seasoned with stereotypical images and background music (at least we could be spared the music!): this of course makes for confusion, so that what is actually remembered is not only fragmentary but also often erroneous. Let us assume, for example, that among this overwhelming flow of information, the viewer only remembers a coup

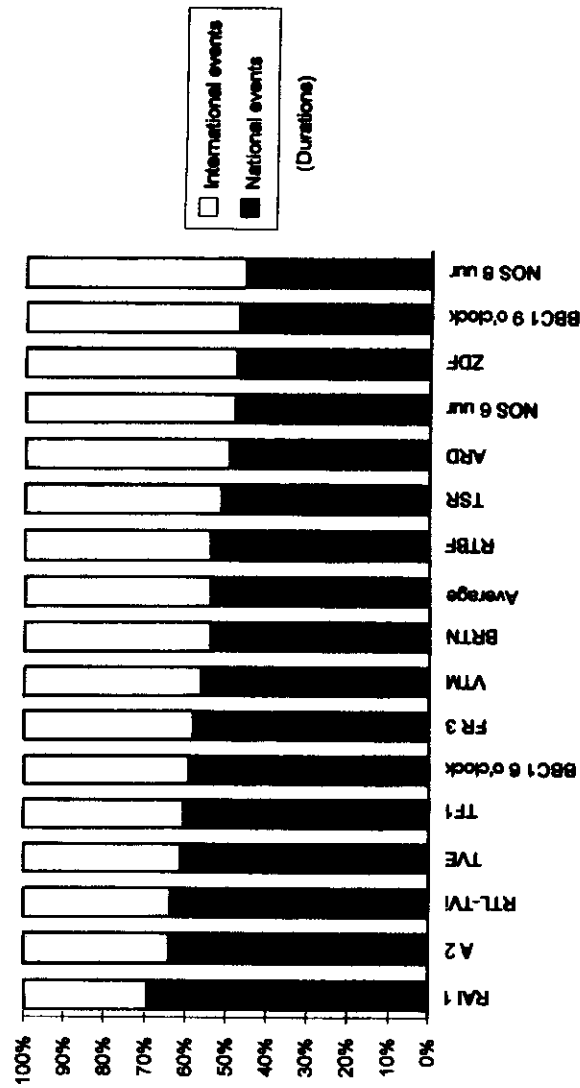
and a bus accident: confusion might make the viewer link images of outrageously mutilated bodies to one or the other event, when they may be connected to a third story.

Who benefits from this practice? Some viewers' attention can be caught by an event when it happens to intersect their sphere of interest, provided they manage to remain attentive throughout. Other viewers may simply indulge their hunger for dramatic images, whatever their meaning. But journalists themselves, frustrated as they are by selection constraints and fearful of covering fewer events than their counterparts in the written press, find an opportunity here of easing their gatekeeper's⁵ conscience by broaching important topics which could not be included in the main body of the broadcast.

The credibility of the message is one of the priorities in every newsroom. And the *newsreader's* personality plays an important part in it. Most are journalists, even though some channels give greater importance to the speaker's elocution and appearance and, like VTM and NOS, prefer presenters, in the primary sense of the word. Most news broadcasts have one newscaster and resort to outside contributors only for sports or specialized topics (politics, science, etc.). Only three news programmes are presented by a 'pair' of newscasters. Although it may be that a listener's attention is affected by the monotony of a single speaker's voice, this should not be a problem for TV news, as variety is guaranteed by alternating reports and studio comments. But, since real neutrality is impossible, the viewer may appreciate attempts at pluralism. To this extent, the presence of two newsreaders may be justified.

The way the newscaster is *framed* varies considerably from one station to another. For the sake of clarity, we have adopted three convenient categories of close-ups: *face and shoulders*, *face and chest*, *from head to waist*. In reality, significant nuances are to be found in each category and it could be said that each programme has its own preferences. NOS 8 uur alternates two kinds of framing. The private Belgian channels are alone in showing face and shoulders only. In the 1970s, Jon Baggaley (1980) examined how framing can affect the way a message is perceived. Close framing, he explains, can betray the speaker's nervousness and communicate it to the viewers. On the other hand, if this restlessness is obvious in the movements of the hands, then head and shoulders close-ups are appropriate: there are no clear-cut rules. It is true, however, that the tighter the framing, the greater

FIGURE 4
Distribution according to Substance: National and International Events



the emphasis on individuality. The newsreader then takes precedence over the news itself, contrary to the German example discussed earlier. *Teleprompters* make it possible for newscasters to look viewers straight in the eye, which is both popular and comforting, as the anchor can read his or her text while gazing at the camera lens. Yet, when guests or experts are on the set, other techniques are required. Baggaley's experiments demonstrate that a person's credibility increases when he or she is shot from a three-quarter angle: the viewer witnesses a dialogue between journalist and expert; the latter does not address the viewer directly, since his or her discourse assumes the form of well-informed answers to the newsreader's ostensibly naïve questions. Frontal framing then suits the anchor who, unlike the knowledgeable expert, serves merely as a relayer of information.

As newscasters are always seated, the wider close-up (from top of the head to waist) generally shows the 'desk' behind which they sit, and which carries some symbolic value. We have noted two interesting points. Notes and/or a computer screen or keyboard are sometimes conspicuously visible. Most newsreaders occasionally look, or pretend to look at their notes, but these are deliberately and regularly given prominence in eight news programmes. Four programmes distinctly show a computer screen or keyboard. Notes and computers return us to the issue of the newscaster's credibility, and some observations are particularly interesting in this respect. For example, ARD's anchor conspicuously reads his text from notes that are in full view of the audience. He looks up from time to time to glance at the camera. This is characteristic of a special concept of journalism where the newsreader functions only as a relayer of information. Credibility here rests upon the seriousness and professionalism with which the text was prepared and of which the written version gives proof. On all the other channels, confidence and competence radiate from a seemingly omniscient anchor, capable of speaking knowledgeably and judiciously while looking the viewer straight in the eye. Even if the viewer knows how teleprompters work, it is difficult for them not to trust such a self-assured person. Furthermore, credibility is positively enhanced when written notes are occasionally consulted to make a quotation, pronounce a name, or state accurate figures. Thus, notes and computers reinforce the omniscient newscaster's credibility, as they testify to the quality of his or her preparation and trustworthiness.

TABLE 4
Distribution of Segments (Average of the 17 Broadcasts Considered)

5.7	'Political' items
2.1	'Social' items
1.9	'Miscellaneous' items (<i>faits divers</i>)
1.5	'Economic' items
1.1	'Sports' items
0.9	'Cultural' items
0.1	'Other' items (science, health, etc.)
Total: an average of 13.3 items per broadcast	

Substance

The time allotted to national events ranges from about two-thirds of the broadcast on RAI UNO, A2 and RTL-TVi to one half, and less, on ZDF, BBC1's 9 o'clock news and NOS 8 uur and 6 uur, ARD and TSR. Figure 4 shows the proportions of 'national' and 'international' events in terms of duration. Interestingly, more time is generally devoted to a single 'national' event than to an 'international' event, for example: 1 minute 51 seconds vs 1 minute 21 seconds on RTL-TVi, 1 minute 43 seconds vs 1 minute 18 seconds on VTM. However, this is not always the case. The BBC and especially FR3 display the opposite tendency (1 minute 33 seconds for a 'national' story vs 2 minutes 11 seconds for an 'international' story on FR3). The average measures for the seventeen newscasts analysed neutralize these tendencies, with figures of 1 minute 45 seconds for a 'national' vs 1 minute 49 seconds for an 'international' event.

Computation and classification of the various segments shows that *political information* is predominant (see Table 4).

All in all, 'political' subjects account for almost half the total topics covered, from about one third (VTM, TF1, A2, and RAI UNO) to two thirds (TV5 Europe). Such a finding warrants further and distinct investigation. Clearly this does not meet an actual demand (the European general public shows little interest in politics, see later). Does television deliberately play an active part in the democratic process, by informing the public about political matters against its own will? Or is this profusion linked to a plentiful supply and to the efficiency of the communication channels between political institutions and the media? Resolving these questions would require an analysis of phenomena such as

lobbying, politicization of editorial staffs, etc. which is beyond the scope of this study.

The Maastricht Summit

Subgroups defined within the larger 'national' and 'international' sets enable us to note that, on average, BBC1 devotes no less than a quarter of its 9 o'clock news to stories directly connected with EC institutions.

The Maastricht Summit occurred during the study period, and it is no surprise that European affairs should be given extensive coverage. However, TV5 Europe's news, for example, devotes slightly more than 12 percent of its airtime to Europe, A2 11 percent, TF1 6 percent, RTBF 4 percent, to mention only those stations which one would assume to be especially interested in European affairs. Curiously enough, the Swiss TSR, which devotes 7 percent of its news programme to the EC, seems to show greater interest than many channels broadcasting from member countries.

It was decided to analyse in detail the TV news of 11 December 1991, the day after the closing of the historic Maastricht Summit. The results are discussed in the following paragraphs.⁶

The *time* devoted to the event varied widely — from 3 minutes 37 seconds on RTBF to 29 minutes 14 seconds on A2. As news programmes differ significantly in length, and some were much longer than usual, it was necessary to compare these figures with the total duration of each broadcast. Figure 5 shows these ratios in terms of the overall duration. It is noticeable that apart from FR3, the Summit was given greatest prominence by the British and Dutch channels. For the British channels, this can be explained by the fierce controversy that arises in the UK each time European affairs are discussed, as well as by Prime Minister Major's leading part in the Summit. For the Dutch channels, interest derived from the fact that the Netherlands and Prime Minister Lubbers hosted the meeting.⁷ The lack of concern displayed by some other channels is much more difficult to explain. On the Belgian public channel RTBF, for example, the Summit only ranked fourth in relation to the main events of the day, even though the RTBF's premises are very close to the EC headquarters. One explanation may be indicated by the results of several investigations carried out

FIGURE 5
The Maastricht Summit on Evening Newscasts of 11 December 1991

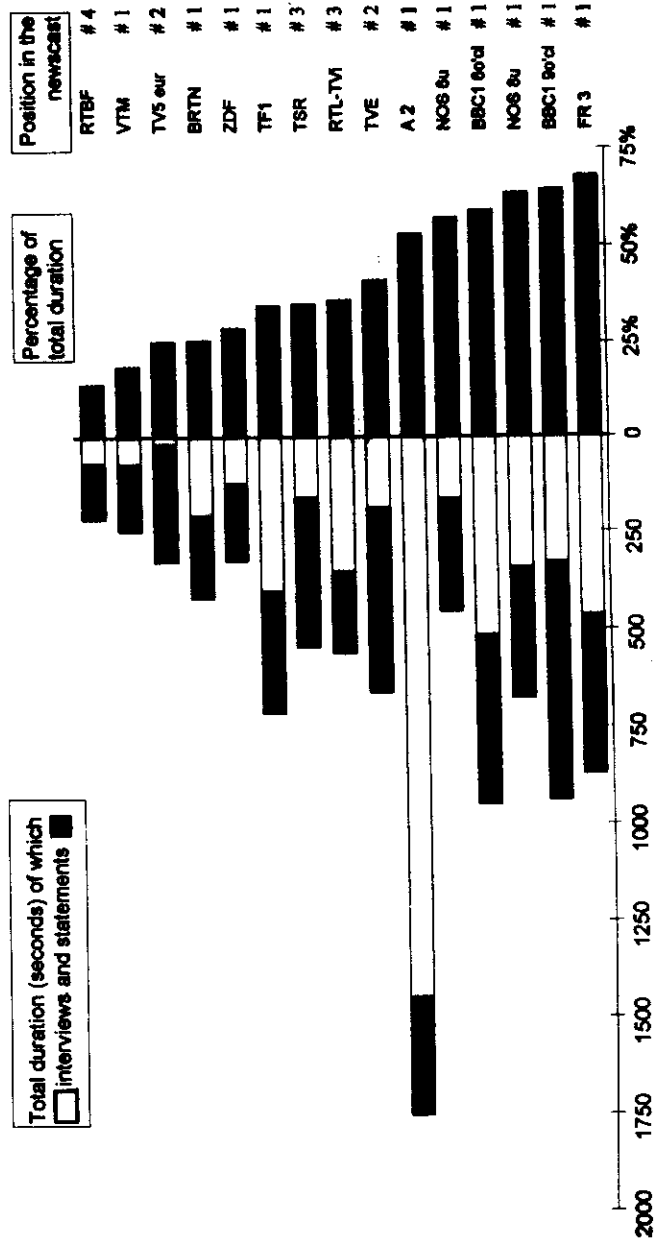


TABLE 5
Interest in Politics

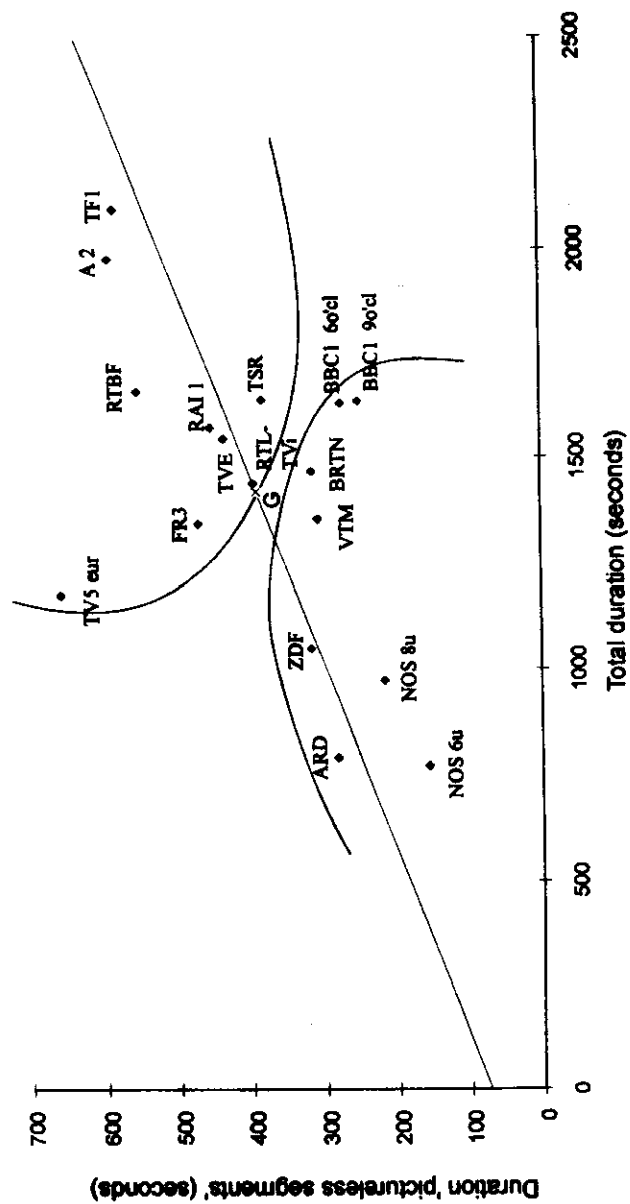
	FRG	UK	NL	F	B	SP	I	Average	EC
<i>Interest in Politics</i>									
Not much	33	31	37	37	33	22	41	33	33
Not at all	12	15	11	23	31	45	29	24	22
Total	45	46	48	60	64	67	70	57	55
<i>Interest in EC Politics</i>									
Not much	35	32	43	31	34	21	32	33	32
Not at all	13	20	15	17	25	37	20	21	19
Total	48	52	58	48	59	58	52	54	51

Source: Eurobarometre, Commission for the European Communities, March 1991.

over the past few years into the public's interest in politics in general and in European affairs in particular. These studies reveal that there is little interest in those countries where adherence to the community is no longer questioned. However, this explanation does not go far enough, even though it is in keeping with the high level of concern found in the UK. Indeed, the most recent EC figures (1991) show Belgians to be among those least interested in the politics of the EC. But the difference between Belgium and some other EC countries is not significant (see Table 5). For example, 59 percent of Belgians claim to have little or no interest in the subject, but 58 percent of the Dutch and Spanish population also share their lack of concern.

This part of our study also assessed the importance of *statements by key figures*. The Maastricht Summit is both a very technical and very controversial subject, which generally leads journalists to resort to statements by participants or experts, proponents and opponents, whether these were expressly asked for (interviews) or spontaneous (press conferences). The proportion of segments which included statements varied widely from channel to channel (see Figure 5); the peaks recorded for A2 were a result of the interview that President Mitterrand gave the channel. From a qualitative point of view, statements are made by two categories of persons. In most cases, journalists call on their country's political leaders to provide *explanations*: Head of State (A2, ZDF), Prime Minister (BRTN, NOS, TVE), Foreign Minister (VTM, NOS, ZDF), Finance Minister (RTL-TVi), or members of the national Parliament or of the EC Commission. With a more *polemical purpose*, key personalities from the opposition, the unions, the

FIGURE 6
Duration 'Pictureless Segments' as a Function of Total Duration:
'Germanic' and 'Romance' Clusters



corporate world, and various other groups are given an opportunity to express their views. TF1 was the only station to favour polemics: it invited Edouard Balladur, from the opposition RPR party, who spoke for almost twice as long as European Commission President Jacques Delors, who was heard live from Strasbourg (computer graphics initially introduced him as 'President of the European Parliament!'). The BBC 6 o'clock news opted for abundance: no fewer than fifteen figures from the majority and the opposition, foreign politicians, home and foreign executives, unionists, experts, etc. were heard.

Finally, it should be noted that most stations gave prominence to the British position and that most explanatory syntheses made prolific use of computer graphics.

Correlation Groups

Various groupings were considered: on the basis of general criteria (status of station, country, language) and of correlations provided by the experimental data. Bivariate analysis produced two groups whose elements exhibit several significant levels of correlation. These groups might be labelled the 'Romance-culture' group and the 'Germanic-culture' group, with the former group consisting of the stations broadcasting from Spain, France, Italy and French-speaking Belgium and Switzerland and the latter group consisting of German, British, Dutch and Dutch-speaking Belgian channels.

Averaging 27 minutes 40 seconds, 'Romance' news programmes are much longer than 'Germanic' newscasts (20 minutes 9 seconds). Nevertheless, the number of events covered was on average lower in the latter group, so the time devoted to each story is exactly equal in both sets, notwithstanding a high level of in-group variance. Segments in the studio are noticeably longer in 'Romance' countries (29 percent vs 22 percent) and 'Romance' newscasts focus greater attention on national affairs (60 percent vs 52 percent of total duration). Figure 6 positions each broadcast in relation to two variables: 'pictureless' segments (newsreader on the set) as a function of total duration. This gives a clear view both of the groups defined above and of their distinctive characteristics: 'Germanic' newscasts are generally shorter ('Germanic' cluster more on the left); 'Romance' newscasts devote proportionately more time to 'pictureless' segments ('Romance' cluster higher up).

From these findings, we may postulate a fundamentally different approach to TV news in these two groups. The 'Germanic'

newsreaders' unobtrusiveness, the brevity and sobriety of their comments, make them mere relayers of information. To use again the analogy with the written press, 'Germanic' newsreaders can be compared to the headlines and introductory paragraphs. The actual substance of the information is left to field correspondents. 'Romance' newsreaders are given more prominence and they emerge as real individuals. Both first and second names are usually given, either in an inlay or an offscreen announcement. They leave their mark on the news; give *their* broadcast its own style. Lengthy transitions, plays on words, almost subjective comments, or even the detailed announcement of the evening programme make them comparable to editorial writers and comperes. The bivariate analysis (correlation of variables plotted two at a time) clearly shows that FR3 and RTL-TVi are often very close to the centre of gravity (i.e. the average measures).

Conclusion

All the news programmes examined clearly have many features in common, both in form and substance. Credits, headlines, coverage of national and international events, studio comments alternating with field reports, such ingredients are ubiquitous. Conformity is certainly dominant in the format of this essential television feature, this core of the evening's programmes.

However, our analysis shows that significant nuances exist between the various channels. These differences could hardly be explained by simple *cultural* peculiarities. Only time slots could be explained that way, as newscasts are usually aired around meal times.

Some discrepancies in terms of substance can also be accounted for if we take into consideration the type of programmes that immediately precede or follow the news. Thus, a low proportion of political, economic, local or sports events may result from proximity of programmes specially devoted to one of those subjects.⁸

The position that a given station occupies in the market and its target audience are clearly factors that influence TV news producers. Or, at least, these factors allow them to justify some of their extravagances. However, to extrapolate any analysis of the various viewerships' divergent sensibilities from the results of this study would be to acknowledge that the programmes meet a genuine public demand and this, no doubt, would not meet the requirements of scientific rigour.

Notes

1. This study was presented at the IREP symposium (Institut de Recherches et d'Etudes Publicitaires) in June 1990, referred to in 'La télévision: de l'audience à l'efficacité de la publicité', *Télégramme, lettre mensuelle d'information sur l'actualité media* (1990).
2. Viewers aged fifteen and above, according to the CIM's (Information Centre on the Media) figures, Brussels, October 1992.
3. In September 1992 (that is, after our study was conducted) 'A2' and 'FR3', the two French public television stations were renamed 'France2' and 'France3'.
4. The practice of printing important texts and speeches in block capitals dates back to an era when all typing was done on typewriters, on which emphasis could only be achieved through underlining or using block letters. Word processors and, to an even greater extent, the whole range of possibilities offered by computer graphics, enable the user to modulate the size of type so as to enhance readability or to draw the reader's attention, without resorting to block capitals that are such a strain on the eyes when one has to read sentences.
5. In the sense that White (1950) uses the word.
6. For technical reasons, neither RAI UNO nor ARD could be included in this section of the study. Newscasts were so long that overlaps occurred and the material was accordingly unusable.
7. *Methodological remark*: In order not to distort the figures provided by Dutch news programmes, summit-related stories were recorded as 'national' only if they dealt with local implications of the organization of the summit (infrastructure, logistics, security, residents' reactions, and so on). Segments dealing with the negotiation and the treaty proper were classified as 'international', just as in the other countries.
8. Regional news sometimes precedes or follows the newscast on RTBF, BBC1, FR3; political news on ZDF; economic news on BBC1; sports news on BRTN, RTBF, VTM, ZDF.

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Towards Utopia — Or Another Anschluss? East Germany's Transition to a New Media System

*Richard Kilborn**

This article reflects on the processes of media transition in East Germany after the collapse of communist control and considers what forces have been chiefly instrumental in bringing about the changes which have occurred. Since the decisive turning point (*Wende*) in November 1989, the whole media system in the East has been transformed, but this article focuses particularly on the press and on television. A brief survey is provided of the media set-up in the old German Democratic Republic (GDR) and some indication is provided of the ways in which the East German situation differed from that of other communist states. The period between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the signing of the Unification Treaty is one that can be seen to be of special importance for media developments in the East. It was during this time that it seemed that the 'indigenous' media might be capable of certain self-generated reforms. Since the formal union of the two Germanies, however, it has become increasingly clear that the restructuring of broadcasting in particular has been carried out almost exclusively on West German terms. This, together with the alarming degree of concentration in the East German newspaper market, is a source of continuing concern for many commentators in both East and West.

Introduction

Significant, even revolutionary, moments of change in the socio-political developments of a country or region are nowadays almost always accompanied by a debate as to what role the media may have played in promoting or resisting these changes. To what extent did the media fire the engine of revolution? How deeply implicated were they in the former, possibly now discredited, system? And what attempts have been made by the powers which now hold sway to regulate the media in accordance with a new set of priorities and imperatives?

Given the dramatic changes which have recently taken place in

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