POLICY BRIEF #24

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Tastemakers: how media diets shape the cultural participation of users in Flanders

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Media users not only have access to an ever expanding array of devices and content at the click of a button. Media content can now (often simultaneously) be consumed on many different screens, regardless of the device. Researchers, policymakers, and media organisations are pressured to think of audiences in new ways, in order to capture the complexity of media use in an age of convergence[1]. Highlighting the unique ways in which users nowadays combine media and content into their own unique 'media repertoires' has become key in disentangling that complexity. The value of media repertoires as a concept, and the possibilities for investigating the relation between media use and other parts of society, will be discussed in this Policy Brief.

Highlights
▪ We shed light on the **6 Flemish media repertoires**, including 2 highbrow repertoires that exhibit higher frequencies of use for 'quality' brands
▪ Roughly 50% of the users of highbrow repertoires is highly educated, while 63% of users in the more restricted, traditional repertoire have a lower secondary or no education, indicating a **social stratification of media use in Flanders**
▪ Users of **highbrow/quality oriented repertoires have significantly higher probabilities of participating in cultural activities** relative to other repertoires, indicating a possible mediating role for media in the cultural activities of Flemings

Mobile technologies (specifically: smartphones) have paved the way for media to envelop users at every step. Users are, as such, constantly connected to a wide array of media content and devices at any point in time. As Mark Deuze (2011) puts it: "*no longer do we just live with media, we are now living in media*".[2]

Today's users have also become increasingly fickle in their media consumption, due to the fast paced changes we have seen in the media landscape and specifically the wide-scale adoption of mobile technologies such as smartphones. Researchers are urged to look at media use in its entirety, as users are often using different media simultaneously, and our consumption of media has become increasingly entangled. **Media repertoires**, as a combination of all regularly used media devices and content, offer a rhetorical starting point to capture the unique ways that users combine the media available to them.

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[1] For more information, see: Jenkins, H. (2004). The cultural logic of media convergence. *International journal of cultural studies*, *7*(1), 33-43.

[2] For more information, see: Deuze, M. (2011). Media life. *Media, Culture & Society*, 33(1), 137-148.

Prominent studies such as imec's Digimeter[3] have equally offered models that cluster users based on their media use patterns, detailing the adoption of various new media technologies. In this policy brief, we seek to offer a bird's eye view of the broad strokes of media use patterns in Flanders without giving prominence to a single medium. Our clustering is based on representative data gathered through the **Flemish Participation Survey**[4] (N=3695), which offers a dense dataset on not only media use, cultural participation, physical activities, club life and volunteer work, etc. This makes our clustering method uniquely suited to explore issues of **mediatision in Flanders**, or the influence or effects of media use on other parts of society.[5]
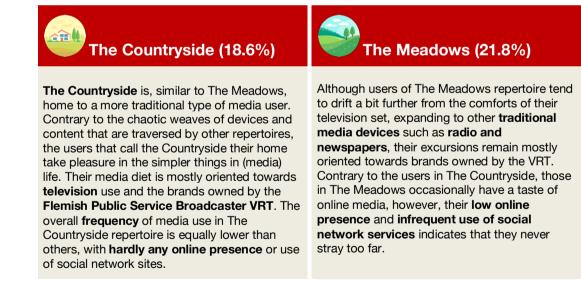
Specifically, this policy brief will take a deep dive into the following topics: **1) mapping media diets of current users**, **2) correlating distinct repertoires with other variables**, e.g. cultural participation, societal attitudes, other activities, and **3) developing communication or media strategies uniquely suited for a specific media repertoire.**

1. *Media repertoires of Flemish users*

Taking cues from research highlighting the pervasiveness of media in our everyday life, we have opted to name the repertoires according to specific landscapes. Clusters were made using **frequency of use for devices** (television, radio, newspapers, computer, console, smartphone, tablet*)*, and **brands** (newspaper and -site brands, television channels, and radio channels*)*. This has led to the identification of 6 distinct media repertoires:

(1) The Countryside,
(2) The Meadows,
(3) The Waterfalls,
(4) The Beach,
(5) The Mountains, and
(6) The Castle.

More than a sum of frequencies and echoing Deuze's (2011) claim, the media repertoire of a person should be envisioned as an environment s/he lives in every day.

The Countryside (18.6%)

The Countryside is, similar to The Meadows, home to a more traditional type of media user. Contrary to the chaotic weaves of devices and content that are traversed by other repertoires, the users that call the Countryside their home take pleasure in the simpler things in (media) life. Their media diet is mostly oriented towards **television** use and the brands owned by the **Flemish Public Service Broadcaster VRT**. The overall **frequency** of media use in The Countryside repertoire is equally lower than others, with **hardly any online presence** or use of social network sites.

The Meadows (21.8%)

Although users of The Meadows repertoire tend to drift a bit further from the comforts of their television set, expanding to other **traditional media devices** such as **radio and newspapers**, their excursions remain mostly oriented towards brands owned by the VRT. Contrary to the users in The Countryside, those in The Meadows occasionally have a taste of online media, however, their **low online presence** and **infrequent use of social network services** indicates that they never stray too far.

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[3] https://www.imec-int.com/nl/digimeter2018
[4] For more information on the Flemish Participation Survey, see the website of the Knowledge Centre Culture and Media Participation: www.cultuurenmedia.be
[5] For an overview of mediatisation research, see: Livingstone, S., & Lunt, P. (2014). Mediatization: An emerging paradigm for media and communication studies.

The Waterfalls (19.4%)

The Waterfalls is home to users that enjoy exploring the different opportunities that converged media environments have to offer. They tend to have a **very diverse use** of **different media devices and brands** and take frequent excursions into the online. This is perhaps best highlighted by their **intensive use of social network sites**. Users in the Waterfalls repertoire tend to orient their media use towards **commercial broadcasters** and channels *(VTM, Vier, 2BE, …)*, further solidifying them as **multimedia thrill-seekers**.

The Beach (14%)

While similar to the users of the Waterfalls repertoire in their tendency to explore the wide array of possibilities that converged media environments have to offer, The Beach dwellers diverge in one specific regard: their **(lack of) newspaper use**. News consumption is much lower for the users of the Beach repertoire, who are more than happy to soak up the rays of their **high online media use** and **social network sites**. These users tend to go where the **entertainment** is, orienting themselves towards content from **commercial broadcasters** and channels, and enjoy long scrolls on the beach.

The Mountains (15.2%)

While other users are enjoying the quiet life of the Countryside, or soaking up the sun on The Beach, users in the Mountains repertoire want to see it all. These are the **prototypical omnivores**, combining a wide variety of devices with the most varied types of content. Mountain dwellers tend not to confine themselves to one specific thing, and enjoy tasting both content from **commercial broadcasters**, VRT *(Een, Canvas)*, as well as what would typically be considered more **'highbrow' content** *(f.e. quality newspapers: De Standaard, De Morgen, De Tijd)*. While their use of social network sites is lower compared to the more intensive users in the Waterfalls or Beach repertoires, the Mountain dwellers nonetheless exhibit a **high online presence**.

The Castle (10.9%)

The inhabitants of the Castle enjoy the finer things in life. Not too dissimilar from other more restricted repertoires such as The Countryside or The Meadows, the users of the Castle repertoire tend to stick to a more limited set of media devices and exhibit a **lower frequency of media use**. Contrary to those in the Countryside however, users in The Castle have a much more **limited use of television**, orienting themselves instead to what would be considered more **'highbrow'** brands , such as quality newspapers *(De Standaard, De Morgen, De Tijd)*, classical music *(Klara)*, or more culture oriented channels such as *Canvas*. High up in their castle, these users rarely tread into the wide open space of the worldwide web, exhibiting an **average online presence** and **limited use of social network sites**.

2. Delving deeper: exploring media repertoires

Extant research has often drawn interesting links between the socio-economic status of respondents and their cultural participation. Indeed, tracing the specific repertoires of the population offers a stepping stone to the exploration of deeper issues related to media use, and the mediatisation of society in particular.

More specifically, we find that the differences between repertoires based on their socio-demographic profiles are mostly related to **age** and **education**. For instance, we find that current Flemish media repertoires still reflect a polarisation between 'commercial' and 'quality' content. While we make no judgement of the content itself, we use these terms (as well as 'lowbrow' and 'highbrow') to exemplify the distinctions between media content that users still appear to be making in their media diets.

While it could be assumed that the convergence of media and wider availability of devices and contents has led to a democratisation of media or rise of the omnivore (a consumer with eclectic tastes in terms of both devices and platforms, as well as 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' content), our results show that this is not entirely the case. 'Highbrow' or 'quality' brands remain **limited to a smaller subset of repertoires**. More specifically, about 1 in 5 respondents or 26,5% of the population can be considered to have a 'highbrow' repertoire, indicating that democratisation of 'highbrow' content has yet to arrive.

No or lower education	31,6	7,0	1,0	4,7	1,0	2,1
Lower secondary education	31,5	19,9	11,0	11,6	7,3	9,6
Higher secondary education	27,2	38,7	30,9	31,8	17,8	23,3
Higher education	9,3	33,2	26,1	23,1	65,0	53,1
Student	0,4	1,3	31,0	28,8	9,0	11,9

Table 1: percentage within the level of education by media repertoire

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, we equally find that **'highbrow' repertoires** *(The Mountains, The Castle)* consist of a **higher percentage of highly educated users**. These results not only indicate a polarisation of media content, but equally highlights the social stratification of media use. On the other end, we find that The Countryside (which can be considered scarcer in terms of diversity of brands and devices) has a higher concentration of lower educated users (31,6% no or lower education; 31,5% lower secondary education).

Age equally appears to be an **important indicator** for the composition of a person's media repertoire. **More diverse repertoires** with a higher online presence and more intensive use of social network sites are home to **younger users**. Similarly, **older users show a tendency towards the Countryside repertoire**, where 62,3% of Countryside users is over 65.

Age	15-17	0,1	0,7	11,7	12,9	0,7	3,9
	18-34	0,9	5,3	51,6	48,1	24,7	25,3
	35-54	16,1	39,4	30,1	32,0	43,2	36,9
	55-64	20,5	28,6	4,9	4,7	17,7	21,3
	65+	62,3	26,0	1,7	2,3	13,7	12,5
Mean age		67	55	32	34	46	45

Table 2: percentage within age category by media repertoire

While media use has often been conflated with cultural participation, disentangling both might offer fruitful insights into the influence media diets have on our engagement with other parts of society (for example culture, politics, sports). Specifically, we have researched the way in which the **media repertoire of users might mediate their cultural participation**, although the mediating effects of media are not necessarily limited to cultural activities. An excerpt of this analysis is presented below, comparing the odds of participating in cultural activities on a frequent basis (more than 2 times in the last 12 months) to the reference category of the Countryside repertoire.[6]

Frequent participation	Museum		Art Museum		Festivals & Conc.		Classical Festivals & Concerts		Stage performances (Popular)		Stage performances (Art)	
ref: Countryside (cl. 1)	B(exp)	sig.	B(exp)	sig.	B(exp)	sig.	B(exp)	sig.	B(exp)	sig.	B(exp)	sig.
Meadows (cl. 2)	2,86	***	1,948	*	3,864	*	2,182	**	2,754	**	3,701	***
Waterfalls (cl. 3)	2,564	***	1,657		6,89	**	1,684		3,808	***	3,296	***
Beach (cl. 4)	1,416		1,227		4,434	*	1,282		2,494	*	2,309	**
Mountain (cl. 5)	9,355	***	7,413	***	13,083	***	3,974	***	3,858	***	5,839	***
Castle (cl.6)	8,091	***	9,035	***	7,472	***	5,280	***	3,359	**	6,379	***

Table 3: controlling for (gender, age, income, education, socio-economic status parents)

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[6] Odds were calculated using a logistic regression model of media repertoires and cultural participation *(incidental, frequent)*, and controlling for sociodemographic variables *(gender, age, education, subjective income, and socio-economic status of parents)*.

Our results indicate that out of the 6 Flemish media repertoires, users of **the Countryside have the lowest relative odds of frequently taking part in cultural activities compared to the other repertoires**. Moreover, both of the highbrow repertoires (The Mountains, The Castle) exhibit the highest odds of frequently participating in all cultural activities (aside from popular stage performances).

Interestingly, we **find significant differences between both highbrow repertoires** indicating that the specific composition of the repertoire articulates cultural participation in a different way. While the omnivorous Mountain dwellers have systematically higher odds of frequently participating in 'popular' forms of cultural participation, the Castle repertoire (more exclusively oriented towards highbrow media) "outperforms" the Mountain dwellers when it comes to participation in artsy or classical cultural activities.

3. The value of media repertoires for policy and stakeholders

1.	**Life after audiences**

In this policy brief, we opened with the 'obituary' of the media audience, as **no specific media channel today can claim to hold a monopoly on the attention of users.** Today's media landscape has been shattered into a wide array of options for users to pick and choose from, which has forced audience researchers to think of new ways to explore media use in an 'age of convergence'. **Media repertoires offer a way forward**, by showing how clusters can incorporate the entire pattern of media use, rather than highlighting a single medium. This brings specific advantages:

- It goes **beyond frequencies of use for a single medium** and highlights which media are often used together by groups of people.
- It opens **possibilities to more deeply explore the social stratification of media use**, by linking sociodemographic profiles to media repertoires.

It provides a **stepping stone to explore the mediatisation of society**, by providing a concrete variable in the form of a media repertoire which can subsequently be linked to other parts of society.

2.	**Media literacy beyond media**

Lastly, the issue of mediatisation further highlights the importance of media literacy initiatives. In times where media are so pervasive that they become a part of nearly every aspect of our lives, **issues on the level of media literacy cause ripples far beyond the domain of media itself,** as shown by the overlap between the social stratification of both media and cultural participation. While there is no direct causation between media use and cultural participation, **inequalities in media use may amplify inequalities in other parts of society.**

In that sense, **access is not enough,** as indicated by the concentration of 'highbrow' brands in high SES repertoires. Policies aimed at lowering the barriers to cultural participation should therefore **(1) identify the demographics** that would benefit from increased incentives for cultural participation, **(2) locate these demographics within their respective repertoire**, and **(3) aim incentives at the media channels that form an integral part of these repertoires** in order to alleviate inequalities in participation.

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