

# Identity construction in the newspaper “Vooruit” prior to the 1913 general strike

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## Abstract

Identity and framing processes play an important role in understanding the dynamics of social movements. In this talk, I discuss the opportunities of computational content analysis to study these processes using the discourse of the socialist newspaper “Vooruit” about the 1913 Belgian general strike as a case study. The strike of 1913 was Belgium’s third major strike aimed at electoral reform. The unexpected defeat of the left-wing cartel in 1912 resulted in spontaneous riots and strikes by the base of the socialist movement. The Belgian Labour Party managed to pacify these grassroots actions and channel the workers’ grievances into a general strike the following year. The party’s success in incorporating this non-institutionalised form of collective action had a significant impact on the dynamics of contention in Belgium. Previous research has argued the party’s organisational efforts were crucial for the success of the large-scale and peaceful strike. These efforts included, among other initiatives, the establishment of a propaganda committee. This talk presents the methodology to analyse the framing by the socialist newspaper “Vooruit” to (a) create a broader support for the issue of universal suffrage and (b) discipline the workers before the 1913 strike.

## Keywords

Strike history, social movements, newspaper discourse, framing processes, collective identity.

## DATA-KBR-BE: Collective Action Belgium

Newspaper collections are frequently used as a historical source to study collective action and social movements (Earl et al., 2004). The access methods to these documents are, however, less than ideal for scholars using computational research techniques (Oberbichler et al., 2020, 2022). Inspired by the “Collections as Data” movement<sup>1</sup>, the Royal Library of Belgium (KBR) works to make its digitised collections more accessible through [DATA-KBR-BE](#) (2020-2023)<sup>2</sup>. DATA-KBR-BE is an interdisciplinary research collaboration focused on providing data-level access to BelgicaPress, KBR’s digitised historical newspaper collection. To better understand user needs and the potential of the newspaper research data, three case studies have been

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: ‘[Always Already Computational: Collections as Data](#)’ and ‘[Collections as Data: Part to Whole](#)’.

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developed. In the context of this talk, I discuss the research objectives and proposed methodology for the Collective Action Belgium scenario. This research studies how coverage of the socialist newspaper "Vooruit" constructed a collective identity for the social movement towards universal suffrage prior to the 1913 Belgian strike.

In what follows, the relevant background information of the 1913 general strike is discussed. Next, the strike-related research questions are determined and placed within the broader theoretical frame of identity and framing processes. The concept of "identity fields" is considered in detail (Hunt et al., 1994). Lastly, the methodology is stated describing the proposed steps to create the newspaper (sub)corpus and the content analysis techniques.

### **The general strike of 1913**

The 1913 general strike was Belgium's fourth general strike and third major strike towards electoral reform. The strike was the result of the Belgian Labour Party's (Dutch: *Belgische Werkliedenpartij*, BWP) electoral defeat (Bracke, 1971; Brouckmans, 1968; Deneckere, 2012). The socialist-liberal cartel, advocating the issue of universal suffrage, failed to win over the Belgian citizens eligible to vote. The catholic party won the elections by a large margin, taking 101 of the 186 seats (a 51.1% majority) in the House of Representatives. In the days that followed, the base of the socialist movement reacted in protests (e.g. Charleroi, Bruges). The socialist party council, which feared a return to the bloodshed of the 1902 general strike, quickly dispatched delegates to quell the unrest. The BWP leadership managed to relieve tensions by announcing an Extraordinary Congress on June 30, 1912 where they would determine the means necessary to achieve universal suffrage. In general, attendees at the congress were divided into one of two camps. The reformist faction, which had the support of the party council and a number of socialist MPs, sought to use the strike merely as a political threat to pressure parliament into constitutional reform. However, a more revolutionary-minded group demanded an immediate strike to force electoral reform via the masses. In the end, a consensus was reached supporting the reformists' view, but forced them to actually plan for the strike. By November 1912, at the latest, socialist MPs would have to present a constitutional reform bill in parliament that would be supported by "any means necessary, including a general strike".

As a result, a decade after the notorious 1912 protests, the BWP leadership reconsidered the general strike as a tool of protest once more. With its decision, the BWP yielded to the demands made by the party's base rather than those of the party's radical left (Deneckere, 2012, p. 472). While high-ranking BWP members thought the strike to be politically inopportune, the grievances of the working class could not be ignored. Yet, the BWP was adamant that the violence and bloody reprisals of 1902 should not be repeated, which prompted a genuine organisational effort to discipline the workers. In this regard, 1913 is a unique event as the BWP leadership heavily moderated the socio-political conflict (Deneckere, 2012, 517). To persuade the public of the benefits of universal suffrage and to prepare for a non-violent strike, a national strike committee was established. This reduced the strike's expressive potential, but it still stands as a noteworthy example of how the BWP effectively incorporated the general strike as a tool in its protest repertoire.

Regarding newspaper coverage, Bracke (1971) demonstrated that during the strike, socialist news media such as the "Vooruit" overwhelmingly supported the reformist point of view. This can be explained by the fact that the socialist press had to follow rules and directives

decided by the top of the party (1971, p. 162; Brouckmans, 1968, p. 29). This is why, according to Bracke, there was limited anti-capitalist newspaper coverage. To gain broader public support, the BWP wanted to frame the strike as a political one rather than an economic one. The party control over the media obscures the fact that there was actual division within the socialist party, including its base, about the nature of the strike. As mentioned, reformists and revolutionaries had different opinions on the protest. Given that the 1913 strike was a continuation of the 1912 electoral defeat, it is worthwhile to investigate how the discourse of the socialist media evolved over this period and attempted to make actors identify and participate in the movement. Two distinct research perspectives are investigated in this 1912–1913 time frame. First, how did the socialist media frame the topic of universal suffrage in order to gain broader support for their constitutional reform campaign? Is it possible to determine, as Bracke and Brouckmans claim, a shift in socialist news reporting that is less hostile to capitalism? If so, how are both the issue of universal suffrage and the strike framed towards these groups, such as the industrialists? Second, how was the cohesion and commitment to the general strike of 1913 sustained for almost a year? How did the newspaper's framing influence collective identity processes and convince workers to participate in a movement with political goals instead of economic? Additionally, how was the peaceful nature of the strike motivated to the workers?

### **Framing collective identity**

In recent decades, there has been considerable attention to the role of identity processes in explaining social movement dynamics (Benford & Snow, 2000; Flesher Fominaya, 2010; Hunt & Benford, 2004; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Identity is a contributing factor for movements to convince and sustain participants' commitment over time. To study the 1913 strike, this talk distinguishes between the concepts of collective and social identity. Collective identity can be understood as the shared beliefs between members of a single group, as opposed to social identity, which refers to an individual's personal beliefs about belonging to one or more groups (Davis et al., 2019). At an organisational level, collective identity can be characterised as the qualities that a social movement ascribes to both itself and other actors. Both social and collective identity are influenced by framing processes. The concept of framing, developed by sociologist Erving Goffman (Goffman, 1974), focuses on the selection and construction of communicative information. *"To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described"* (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Frames are dynamic interpretive schemas that influence and are influenced by collective identity processes (Benford & Snow, 2000).

To operationalize both framing and collective identity in the context of the 1913 strike, I draw on the concept of "identity fields" (Hunt et al., 1994). The identification and clustering of actors within a specific social movement context is a key goal of the social movement framing. According to Hunt et al. (1994, p. 186), the socially constructed categorisation of these actors can be divided into three identity fields. These are: (1) "protagonists", or actors who support and take part in the social movement; (2) "antagonists", or actors who oppose or are the focus of the movement; and (3) "audience", or a group of people who are neutral or not currently involved. Since the identities created within each of these three categories overlap and change over time, they are referred to as "fields." By examining how the discourse of the "Vooruit" categorises the

various actors into these three identity fields, which characteristics are used to frame these actors, and possibly how these frames evolve over time, the concept offers a method to analyse the aforementioned research questions.

To do so, digitised editions of the "Vooruit" from 1912 to 1913 are first extracted. This period of time was chosen because it enables a clear examination of how the "Vooruit" discourse changes as the 1913 strike approaches. Key events that had a significant impact on the organisation and the strike's course during these years will be examined in depth. The segmentation method created in the context of DATA-KBR-BE will be used to segment the digitised editions of the newspaper into their individual articles (Ali et al., 2022).<sup>3</sup> To improve the validity of computational content analysis, existing OCR-generated text will be evaluated for accuracy (Traub et al., 2015; van Strien et al., 2020). Subsequently, a subcorpus of articles will be created that refer to either the 1913 strike or the debate over universal suffrage. To create this subcorpus, a manual sample will be annotated. This sample will be used to validate text classification techniques and tools that accomplish article content detection in a (semi-)automatic way (Aurich, n.d.; Zervanou et al., 2013). The current objective is to determine which of these methods is most suited for Collective Action Belgium. Once the subcorpus has been created, corpus statistics techniques will be performed to determine the key actors associated with universal suffrage and the 1913 strike. In the following steps, the framing of these actors by "Vooruit" will be analysed using collocation techniques in order to determine their dynamic position in one of three identity fields.

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<sup>3</sup> See also <https://tw06v072.ugent.be/kbr/> [31/10/2022]

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