



# History-Based Arguments about the COVID-19 Pandemic in Flemish Media

Quantitative data 1/1/2020-13/3/2020

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## 1) Aims, scope and methodology

The data included in this file offer a preliminary view on how Flemish media uses history to analyse the on-going COVID-19 crisis. The goal is to provide basic information on which types of historical examples were prevalent before and at the beginning of the gradual outbreak of a new infectious disease in Flanders. The data in this file form only a part of a larger monitoring effort of the Flemish media. The analysis based on this larger process is currently in preparation, with the full results expected after the end of the crisis period – which is undetermined at this point.

Three Flemish media outlets are looked at:

- VRT NWS (<https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/>) is the main information channel of the Flemish national broadcasting company. It is government-owned and -funded, but has an independent news redaction. VRT NWS is the main provider of televised news in Belgium, with only one private company offering a comparable TV-news service. The VRT NWS website offers rolling cover of events, but also aims to provide more in depth-analyses of these events, as well as background information. In addition to its coverage of contemporary events, it also places a lot of stress on historical remembrance, with entire sections of its homepage dedicated to, for example, World War I and II.
- De Standaard (<https://www.standaard.be/>) is one of two publications that are considered ‘high-end’ newspapers in Flanders. The journal stems from a Catholic background, although this affiliation has lost most of its importance. It considers itself a centrist publication, tending to a broad but somewhat more conservative audience. It has both an online and a paper presence in Flanders. De Standaard is privately owned by a larger Flemish media concern, Mediahuis.
- De Morgen (<https://www.demorgen.be/>) is considered the centre-left counterpart to De Standaard. The newspaper is historically situated in a socialist background and maintains a ‘progressive’ editorial position. Its audience is generally younger and more left-leaning than that of De Standaard, but it is also smaller. Like its counterpart, it has both an online and a paper presence, and is owned by a (different) privately owned media concern, DPG Media.

Only the online publications of these outlets were monitored. The only search query was ‘virus’; no specific historical search queries were applied (e.g. ‘Spanish Flu’ or ‘Plague’). The results of this query were subsequently checked for historical references, after which specific historical cases were identified.

Articles about, for example, PC viruses or the seasonal flu also appeared in the search results. Such results were not filtered out of the overall dataset, as the numbers of non-Corona related articles were small enough to not distort the overall picture. Similarly, ‘rolling cover’, ‘live updates’, satirical pieces and cultural advice pieces are included in the total numbers, as are query results that only linked to audio- or video-files. However, given their different nature from journalistic articles or written op-eds, their content was not checked for historical references. For a full overview, see the related ‘Raw data’ file on [www.corvushc.be/reports](http://www.corvushc.be/reports).

The historical references included are indeed historical – defined as ‘something from the past’, including the very recent past. Purely medical references to viruses were left out. So if an article mentioned that the Corona-virus is similar to the SARS or MERS viruses, this did not qualify as a historical reference because of the lack of temporal connotation. However, if that article mentioned that the Corona-virus is similar to earlier epidemics of the SARS or MERS virus, this did qualify.

The monitored period was 1 January 2020 – 13 March 2020. During this period 1258 articles contained the keyword ‘virus’. VRT NWS produced 540 results (42,92%); De Standaard 508 (40,38%); De Morgen 210 (16,69%). Of these results, 294 articles (23,37%) contained historical references.

## 2) General attention to the virus

	1/1/2020-31/1/2020	1/2/2020-29/2/2020	1/3/2020-13/3/2020	Total
VRT NWS	59	178	303	540
De Standaard	70	192	246	508
De Morgen	35	72	103	210
Total	164	442	652	1258

Table 1: Number of articles containing ‘virus’

	1/1/2020-31/1/2020	1/2/2020-29/2/2020	1/3/2020-13/3/2020	Total
VRT NWS	10,92%	32,96%	56,11%	100%
De Standaard	13,77%	37,79%	48,42%	100%
De Morgen	16,66%	34,28%	49,04%	100%

Table 2: Articles containing 'virus', as a percentage of the total of articles containing 'virus' per news outlet

	1/1/2020-31/1/2020	1/2/2020-29/2/2020	1/3/2020-13/3/2020
VRT NWS	35,97%	40,27%	46,47%
De Standaard	42,68%	43,43%	37,73%
De Morgen	21,34%	16,28%	15,79%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 3: Articles containing 'virus', as a percentage of the total of articles containing 'virus' per period

### 3) Inclusion of historical references in virus-related content

	1/1/2020-31/1/2020	1/2/2020-29/2/2020	1/3/2020-13/3/2020	Total
VRT NWS	17	29	26	72
De Standaard	27	57	48	132
De Morgen	23	34	33	90
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>294</b>

Table 4: Number of articles containing 'virus' that include a historical reference

	1/1/2020-31/1/2020	1/2/2020-29/2/2020	1/3/2020-13/3/2020	Total
VRT NWS	28,81%	16,92%	8,58%	13,3%
De Standaard	38,57%	29,68%	19,51%	25,98%
De Morgen	65,71%	47,22%	32,03%	42,85%
<b>Total</b>	<b>40,85%</b>	<b>27,14%</b>	<b>16,41%</b>	<b>23,37%</b>

Table 5: Articles containing 'virus' that include a historical reference, as a percentage of the total number of articles containing 'virus' per period and per outlet

	1/1/2020-31/1/2020	1/2/2020-29/2/2020	1/3/2020-13/3/2020	Total
VRT NWS	23,61%	40,27%	36,11%	100%
De Standaard	20,45%	43,18%	36,36%	100%
De Morgen	25,55%	37,77%	36,66%	100%

Table 6: Articles containing 'virus' that include a historical reference, as a percentage of the total amount of articles containing a historical reference per outlet

	1/1/2020-31/1/2020	1/2/2020-29/2/2020	1/3/2020-13/3/2020
VRT NWS	25,37%	24,16%	24,29%
De Standaard	40,29%	47,5%	44,85%
De Morgen	34,32%	28,33%	30,84%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 7: Articles containing 'virus' that include a historical reference, as a percentage of the total amount of articles containing a historical reference per period

#### 4) Historical cases referenced

	VRT NWS				De standaard				De Morgen				Combined media			
	1/1-31/1	1/2-29/2	1/3-13/3	Total	1/1-31/1	1/2-29/2	1/3-13/3	Total	1/1-31/1	1/2-29/2	1/3-13/3	Total	Total 1/1-31/1	Total 1/2-29/2	Total 1/3-13/3	Total 1/1-13/3
2 <sup>nd</sup> century smallpox	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
6 <sup>th</sup> century Justinian Plague	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
14 <sup>th</sup> century Plague	-	3	-	3	-	3	2	5	-	1	2	3	-	7	4	11
Early modern Plague	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	1	-	1	-	1	1	2
18 <sup>th</sup> century Cattle Plague	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
19 <sup>th</sup> century Plague	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
1889 Russian Flu	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
1918-1919 Spanish Flu	1	2	-	3	2	4	4	10	-	4	4	8	3	10	8	21
1935 discovered Q-Fever	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	1	1
1950's Flu	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
1968 Hong Kong Flu	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
1970's legionnaires disease	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
1980's AIDS	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	2	-	3	-	3	-	4	1	5
1992 Mad Cow Disease	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	2	-	-	2	2
2002-2003 SARS	16	12	11	39	20	15	11	46	21	17	6	44	57	44	28	139

2004 H5N1/Avian Flu	-	1	-	1	1	-	1	2	1	4	3	8	2	5	4	11
2008 Financial crisis	-	5	5	10	-	5	8	13	-	2	11	13	-	12	24	36
2009 H1N1/Mexican Flu	-	2	3	5	4	8	2	14	-	5	5	10	4	15	10	29
2012-2013 Flemish Mumps epidemic	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
2012 MERS	5	1	1	7	4	1	1	6	4	2	1	7	13	4	3	20
2013 Ebola	-	2	1	3	7	5	2	14	4	5	2	11	11	12	5	28
2014 Polio	-	-	-	-	2	2	-	4	-	-	-	-	2	2		4
2015 ZIKA	-	-	1	1	2	2	-	4	3	1	-	4	5	4	1	9
2019 German Flu	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
2019 Swine Plague	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
Other	1	11	15	27	4	30	30	64	3	15	16	34	8	56	61	125
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>191</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>182</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>454</b>

Table 8: Total number of historical cases referenced in articles containing 'virus'

Other VRT NWS: the Middle Ages; five centuries ago; 18<sup>th</sup> century medical technology; 19<sup>th</sup> century racism and geopolitics; World War I; World War II; 1949 founding of People's Republic of China; 1970's oil crisis; 1979 Iran hostage crisis; 1986 Chernobyl disaster; 1987 stock market crash; 1991 Gulf War; undetermined decades earlier; 9/11; a decade earlier; 2010 development of Boeing Dreamliner; 2010 Eruption Eyjafjallajökull; 2015-2016 terror attacks in France and Belgium; 2016 Brexit.

Other De Standaard: 2<sup>nd</sup> century roman emperor; 2<sup>nd</sup> century Church Father; for centuries; silk road; 16<sup>th</sup> century antisemitism; 1872 Friedrich Engels; 19<sup>th</sup> century racism; 1923 Tokyo earthquake; Nazi propaganda; Holocaust; World War II; 1947 La peste by Camus; last 70 years; my grandparents; 1967 Milton Friedman; 1975 series Survivors; 1980's Soviet Union; 33 years; previous black Mondays; 1989 Chinese protests; 1991 fall of the USSR; 1991 Gulf War; 1999 Belgian dioxin crisis; 20 years ago; 9/11; 2002 Ben Bernanke; 2005 congressional budget office study; 2005 hurricane Katrina; 2008 Cyclone Nargis; 2008 year of the rat; 2009 Dengue research; ten years; 2011 Fukushima disaster; 2011 Utoya attack; 2011 Eurozone crisis; 2011 Belgian governmental formation; 2015-2016 terror attacks in France and Belgium; 2015 refugee crisis; 2016 Brexit; 2017 Hurricane Vaia

Other De Morgen: for as long as mankind can remember; the Middle Ages; the Inquisition; Eighty Years War; 19<sup>th</sup> century migration to US; Potemkin Towns; World War I; last 100 years; 1934 drug chloroquine; Nazi propaganda; World War II; Moon landing; JFK Murder; 1970's oil crisis; 40 years; 1986 Chernobyl; 1991, Gulf War; 1990's Belgian Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene; 30 years; past decennia; Classes by Harvard professor Drew Harris many years ago; twenty or so years ago; 2004 Tsunami; 2005 Muhammed cartoons; 2008 Chinese earthquake; 2011 Eurozone crisis; a few years ago; 2014 ISIS terror; 2015 refugee crisis; 2015-2016 Paris and Brussels terror attacks; 2016 Brexit; earlier incidents; 2018 World Cup football.

	1/1/2020-31/1/2020	1/2/2020-29/2/2020	1/3/2020-13/3/2020	Total
VRT NWS	1,35	1,48	1,46	1,44
De Standaard	1,77	1,38	1,33	1,44
De Morgen	1,56	1,76	1,60	1,65
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,59</b>	<b>1,51</b>	<b>1,44</b>	<b>1,54</b>

Table 9: Average number of historical cases, per article containing historical references

	VRT NWS				De Standaard				De Morgen				Combined media			
	1/1-31/1	1/2-29/2	1/3-13/3	Total	1/1-31/1	1/2-29/2	1/3-13/3	Total	1/1-31/1	1/2-29/2	1/3-13/3	Total	Total 1/1-31/1	Total 1/2-29/2	Total 1/3-13/3	Total 1/1-13/3
2 <sup>nd</sup> century smallpox	-	2,2	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,5	-	0,2
6 <sup>th</sup> century Justinian Plague	-	2,3	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,5	-	0,2
14 <sup>th</sup> century Plague	-	7	-	2,9	-	3,8	3,1	2,6	-	1,7	3,8	2	-	3,8	2,6	2,4
Early modern Plague	-	-	-	-	-	-	1,6	0,5	-	1,7	-	0,7	-	0,5	0,6	0,4
18 <sup>th</sup> century Cattle Plague	-	-	-	-	-	-	1,6	0,5	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,6	0,2
19 <sup>th</sup> century Plague	-	-	-	-	-	1,3	-	0,5	-	-	-	-	-	0,5	-	0,2
1889 Russian Flu	-	-	-	-	-	1,3	-	0,5	-	-	-	-	-	0,5	-	0,2
1918-1919 Spanish Flu	4,3	4,7	-	2,9	4,2	5,1	6,3	5,2	-	6,7	7,5	5,3	2,8	5,5	5,2	4,6
1935 discovered Q-Fever	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1,9	0,7	-	-	0,6	0,4
1950's Flu	-	2,3	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,5	-	0,2
1968 Hong Kong Flu	-	2,3	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,5	-	0,2
1970's legionnaires disease	-	-	-	-	-	1,3	-	0,5	-	-	-	-	-	0,5	-	0,2
1980's AIDS	-	-	-	-	-	1,3	1,6	1	-	5	-	2	-	2,2	0,6	1,1
1992 Mad Cow Disease	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3,8	1,3	-	-	1,3	0,4
2002-2003 SARS	69,6	27,9	28,9	37,5	41,7	19	17,2	24,1	58,3	28,3	11,3	29,4	53,3	24,2	18,1	30,6
2004 H5N1/Avian Flu	-	2,3	-	1	2,1	-	1,6	1	2,8	6,7	5,7	5,4	1,9	2,7	2,6	2,4
2008 Financial crisis	-	11,6	13,2	9,6	-	6,3	12,5	6,8	-	3,3	20,8	8,7	-	6,6	15,5	7,9
2009 H1N1/Mexican Flu	-	4,7	7,9	4,8	8,3	10,1	3,1	7,3	-	8,3	9,4	6,7	3,7	8,2	6,5	6,4
2012-2013 Flemish Mumps	-	-	2,6	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,6	0,2
2012 MERS	21,7	2,3	2,6	6,7	8,3	1,3	1,6	3,2	11,1	3,3	1,9	4,7	12,1	2,2	1,9	4,4
2013 Ebola	-	4,7	2,6	2,9	14,6	6,3	3,1	7,3	11,1	8,3	3,8	7,4	10,3	6,6	3,2	6,2
2014 Polio	-	-	-	-	4,2	2,5	-	2,1	-	-	-	-	1,9	1,1	-	0,9
2015 ZIKA	-	-	2,6	1	4,2	2,5	-	2,1	8,3	1,7	-	2,7	4,7	2,2	0,6	2
2019 German Flu	-	-	-	-	2,1	-	-	0,5	-	-	-	-	0,9	-	-	0,2
2019 Swine Plague	-	-	-	-	2,1	-	-	0,5	-	-	-	-	0,9	-	-	0,2
Other	4,3	25,6	39,5	26	8,3	37,8	46,9	33,5	8,3	25	30,2	22,8	7,5	30,8	39,4	27,5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100 %</b>	<b>100 %</b>	<b>100 %</b>	<b>100 %</b>	<b>100 %</b>	<b>100 %</b>	<b>100 %</b>	<b>100 %</b>	<b>100 %</b>	<b>100 %</b>	<b>100 %</b>	<b>100 %</b>	<b>100 %</b>	<b>100 %</b>	<b>100 %</b>	<b>454</b>

Table 10: Number of historical cases, as a percentage of the total historical cases referenced in that period

	VRT NWS				De standaard				De Morgen				Combined media			
	1/1-31/1	1/2-29/2	1/3-13/3	Total	1/1-31/1	1/2-29/2	1/3-13/3	Total	1/1-31/1	1/2-29/2	1/3-13/3	Total	Total 1/1-31/1	Total 1/2-29/2	Total 1/3-13/3	Total 1/1-13/3
2 <sup>nd</sup> century smallpox	-	3,4	-	1,4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,8	-	0,3
6 <sup>th</sup> century Plague of Justinian	-	3,4	-	1,4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,8	-	0,3
14 <sup>th</sup> century Plague	-	10,3	-	4,2	-	5,3	4,2	3,8	-	2,9	6,1	3,3	-	5,8	3,7	3,7
Early modern Plague	-	-	-	-	-	-	2,1	0,76	-	2,9	-	1,1	-	0,8	0,9	0,7
18 <sup>th</sup> century Cattle Plague	-	-	-	-	-	-	2,1	0,76	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,9	0,3
19 <sup>th</sup> century Plague	-	-	-	-	-	1,8	-	0,76	-	-	-	-	-	0,8	-	0,3
1889 Russian Flu	-	-	-	-	-	1,8	-	0,76	-	-	-	-	-	0,8	-	0,3
1918-1919 Spanish Flu	5,9	6,9	-	4,2	7,4	7	8,3	7,6	-	12,5	12,1	8,9	4,5	8,3	7,5	7,1
1935 discovered Q-Fever	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	1,1	-	-	0,9	0,3
1950's Flu	-	3,4	-	1,4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,8	-	0,3
1968 Hong Kong Flu	-	3,4	-	1,4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,8	-	0,3
1970's legionnaires disease	-	-	-	-	-	1,8	-	0,76	-	-	-	-	-	0,8	-	0,3
1980's AIDS	-	-	-	-	-	1,8	2,1	1,5	-	8,8	-	3,3	-	3,3	0,9	1,7
1992 Mad Cow Disease	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6,1	2,2	-	-	1,9	0,7
2002-2003 SARS	94,1	41,4	42,3	54,2	74,1	26,3	22,9	34,8	91,3	50	18,2	48,9	85,1	36,7	26,2	47,3
2004 H5N1/Avian Flu	-	3,4	-	1,4	3,7	-	2,1	1,5	4,3	12,5	9,1	8,9	3	4,2	3,7	3,7
2008 Financial crisis	-	17,2	19,2	13,9	-	8,8	16,7	9,8	-	5,9	33,3	14,4	-	10	22,4	12,2
2009 H1N1/Mexican Flu	-	6,9	11,5	6,9	14,8	24,6	4,2	10,6	-	15,6	15,2	11,1	6	12,5	9,3	9,9
2012-2013 Flemish Mumps epidemic	-	-	3,8	1,4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0,9	0,3
2012 MERS	29,4	3,4	3,8	9,7	14,8	1,8	2,1	4,5	17,4	5,9	3	7,8	19,4	3,3	2,8	6,8
2013 Ebola	-	6,9	3,8	4,2	25,9	8,8	4,2	10,6	17,4	15,6	6,1	12,2	16,4	10	4,7	9,5
2014 Polio	-	-	-	-	7,4	3,5	-	3	-	-	-	-	3	1,7	-	1,4
2015 ZIKA	-	-	3,8	1,4	7,4	3,5	-	3	13	2,9	-	4,4	7,5	3,3	0,9	3,1
2019 German Flu	-	-	-	-	3,7	-	-	0,76	-	-	-	-	1,5	-	-	0,3
2019 Swine Plague	-	-	-	-	3,7	-	-	0,76	-	-	-	-	1,5	-	-	0,3
Other	5,9	37,9	57,7	37,5	14,8	52,6	62,5	48,5	13	44,1	48,5	37,8	11,9	46,7	57	42,5

Table 11: Number of historical cases, as a percentage of the total number of articles with historical references in that period

	VRT NWS				De standaard				De Morgen				Combined media			
	1/1-31/1	1/2-29/2	1/3-13/3	Total	1/1-31/1	1/2-29/2	1/3-13/3	Total	1/1-31/1	1/2-29/2	1/3-13/3	Total	Total 1/1-31/1	Total 1/2-29/2	Total 1/3-13/3	Total 1/1-13/3
14 <sup>th</sup> century Plague	-	1,7	-	0,6	-	1,6	0,8	1	-	1,3	1,9	1,4	-	1,6	0,6	0,9
1918-1919 Spanish Flu	1,7	1,1	-	0,6	2,9	2,1	1,6	2	-	5,3	3,9	3,8	1,8	2,3	1,2	1,7
2002-2003 SARS	27,1	6,7	3,6	7,2	28,6	7,8	4,47	9,1	60	22,7	5,8	21	34,8	10	4,3	11
2004 H5N1/Avian Flu	-	0,6	-	0,2	1,4	-	0,4	0,4	2,9	5,3	2,9	3,8	1,2	1,1	0,6	0,9
2008 Financial crisis	-	2,8	1,6	1,9	-	2,6	3,3	2,6	-	2,7	10,7	6,2	-	2,7	3,7	2,9
2009 H1N1/Mexican Flu	-	1,1	1	0,9	5,7	4,2	0,8	2,8	-	6,7	4,9	4,8	2,4	3,4	1,5	2,3
2012 MERS	8,5	0,6	0,3	1,3	4,7	0,5	0,4	1,2	11,4	2,7	1	3,3	7,9	0,9	0,5	1,6
2013 Ebola	-	1,1	0,3	0,6	10	2,6	0,8	2,8	11,4	6,7	1,9	5,2	6,7	2,7	0,5	2,2
Other	1,7	6,2	5	5	4,7	15,6	12,2	12,6	8,6	20,8	15,5	16,2	4,9	12,7	9,4	9,9

Table 12: Number of the most mentioned historical cases, as a percentage of the total number of articles containing 'virus' in that period