

**Louvain School of Management**

# **Cooperative's Representation in Media**

**The presence of the Cooperative model in two Belgian  
newspapers**

**Final Dissertation  
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## Résumé

Le modèle coopératif a une longue tradition avec des normes établies reconnues dans le monde entier. Néanmoins, cette forme d'entreprise atypique passe encore inaperçue pour beaucoup, principalement en raison de ses caractéristiques intrinsèques. Les particularités des coopératives peuvent entraver sa formation identitaire et par extension sa légitimité. Ce travail s'est concentré sur le type cognitif de légitimité en corrélation avec le manque d'attention que le public accorde finalement à ce modèle économique. Afin d'enquêter longitudinalement sur la légitimité cognitive absente ou réduite, deux journaux belges - L'Echo et Le Soir - ont été analysés. Tous les articles ayant le modèle commercial coopératif comme sujet de discussion ont été extraits et étudiés à 3 périodes différentes entre 2007 et 2018.

L'enquête a permis de conclure sur une augmentation de la visibilité de ce modèle organisationnel tout au long de la période de 11 ans dans les deux journaux. Il a été démontré que durant des périodes de crise économique, la création d'organisations coopératives est favorisée, d'où la probabilité que l'augmentation de la visibilité de ce modèle sur la durée choisie ait été initialement provoquée par la catastrophe financière et économique de fin 2008. Malgré cette visibilité croissante, des efforts supplémentaires doivent être déployés pour faire connaître ce type d'organisation alternatif. En effet, comme mentionné ci-dessus, un manque d'attention de la population vis-à-vis des coopératives existe toujours. Pour y remédier il faut davantage véhiculer le modèle coopératif à la portée de chacun.

## Summary

The Cooperative model has a long tradition with established standards recognized worldwide. Nonetheless this atypical business form still goes unnoticed by many, mainly due to its inherent characteristics. The cooperative peculiarities may hinder its identity formation and by extension, its legitimacy. This work focused in the cognitive type of legitimacy correlated with the lack of attention that the audience eventually gives to this business model. In order to investigate the absent or reduced cognitive legitimacy in a longitudinal manner, two Belgian newspapers – L'Echo and Le Soir – were researched. All articles having the cooperative business model as subject of discussion were retrieved at 3 different time periods between 2007 and 2018. The investigation allowed to conclude on an increase of the visibility of this business model throughout the 11 years period in both newspapers. A recognized driver in the creation of cooperative organizations are the periods of economic crisis, hence the probability that the increase in visibility of this model along the time span chosen has been initially prompted by the financial and economic catastrophe of late 2008.

Despite this growing visibility, further efforts should be performed to publicize this alternative type of organization since, as mentioned in the beginning, a lack of attention still exists and obtaining it is more about showing and less about doing.

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## 1. Introduction

The Cooperative model is a type of alternative organization with its contemporaneous form existing since the nineteenth century. According with the first ever global census on cooperatives published in April 2014 there are 2.6 Million cooperatives representing over 1 Billion memberships and clients (Dave Grace & Associates, 2014). The report of 2017 of the Belgian Cooperative Monitor (Belgian Coop Monitor, 2017) mentions the existence of 25.405 cooperatives in Belgium in 2015. Seen the long history and global numbers, one could think that the cooperative model would be easily identifiable and awareness on cooperative companies widespread. However the literature shows that the inherent atypical form of this model, as its hybrid for-profit and social welfare components, capped return distribution or adherence to the Rochdale principles, creates obstacles to the identity formation of the model itself and its legitimacy. Focusing specifically on the most problematic - cognitive legitimacy - the lack of attention by the audiences on cooperatives can simultaneously be a cause and a result. With these considerations in mind, the work developed aimed to research the attention given by two newspapers of the Belgian media to Cooperative organizations by collecting published articles at three different time points and assessing qualitative- and quantitatively possible tendencies.

## 2. Origins of the Cooperative organizational model

The act of cooperating is as old as human beings organized to achieve mutual benefits, going as far back as the hunter-gatherer societies and was definitely present when the first tribal organizations started to arise with the emergence of settled societies and the development of agriculture nine thousand years ago (Fukuyama, 2011).

Advancing forward to more recent times, in the nineteenth century the British social theorist Robert Owen coined the word Cooperative from the latin "*co-operare*" - to work together – to class a form of organization of human activities in the economic domain characterized as a project that distinguished itself from the established competition linked to the capitalist system and with philosophical tendencies broadly resumed in the motto of several cooperatives: "All for one, one for all".

Cooperative companies have been around for more than 150 years. The contemporaneous cooperative movement was born in the societies that witnessed the Industrial Revolution as well as its inherent poverty, with a wide historical agreement that the first of its kind was founded by a group of 28 British workers on the 24<sup>th</sup> October 1844 - the cooperative "Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers".

### 3. International Cooperative Alliance (ICA)

Companies with a similar cooperative organizational model already existed before 1844 however one of the reasons why the cooperative “Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers” made its mark was due to its pillar principles that continue nowadays to support the current definition of a Cooperative as is given by the International Cooperative Alliance.



Fig.1: Logo of the International Cooperative Alliance

The formation of alternative organizations continued to grow in the nineteenth century, not just in number, but also in their types – worker’s cooperative; banking cooperative; agriculture cooperative – and in their geographical dispersion going from England to France, to Belgium, Germany, Denmark and the United States (Dohet, 2018).

Despite their variations in cooperative type and geographical location, they remained connected by sharing the same set of principles guiding the Rochdale cooperative. In order to centralize and standardize these mutual guidelines as well as to promote an identification of this like-minded companies, the International Cooperative Alliance was founded in 1895. The ICA recognized the “Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers” as the forerunner of the modern cooperative and adopted its seven principles (Teresa et al., 2016) (ICA website, 2018):

- 1. Voluntary and Open Membership**
- 2. Democratic Member Control**
- 3. Member Economic Participation**
- 4. Autonomy and Independence**
- 5. Education, Training, and Information**
- 6. Cooperation among Cooperatives**
- 7. Concern for Community**

#### 4. The Cooperative movement in Belgium

By initiative of Nicolas Coulon, the first production cooperative was founded in Brussels on the 16<sup>th</sup> April 1849 – “l’Association fraternelle des ouvriers tailleurs.” Other initiatives took place however ephemeral except for rare exceptions. On the 18<sup>th</sup> May 1873, Belgium legislates on cooperatives. Regardless, it was not until 1881 that the social cooperative movement established itself in Belgium thanks to the creation of the cooperative Vooruit in Ghent reinforced by the creation of the “Parti Ouvrier Belge” (POB) in 1885 where the Belgian cooperatives were its backbone for existence and endurance. Interestingly, contrasting with other countries where a political neutrality is presupposed, in Belgium the Socialist and Christian pillars had the cooperative model as its manifestation.



Fig.2: Flag of Ghent's Cooperative Vooruit (1924).

On the eve of the First World War, the Belgian cooperatives are of a consumer type, with the few ones specialized on production mostly serving as suppliers of the former.

The short period extending from the end of the Great War until the economic and political crisis that occurred on the 1920's, beginning of the 1930's decade, is considered as the golden age for the cooperative model.

With the aftermath of the Second World War, due to inability for modernization and adaptation to a rapidly changing society along with the competition that had developed so far, the cooperative alternative model suffers a considerable breakdown with rationalization and fusions of organizations taking place, as for example the Christian movement cooperative “Le Bien-Être” slowly vanishing between 1960 and 1980 (Dohet, 2018).

Despite the decrease in the amount of cooperatives occurring in Belgium throughout the second half of the twentieth century, this alternative business model is again becoming more and more popular nowadays.

These “new” Belgian cooperatives are closely related to the social economy, representing activities on the production of goods or services that seek the achievement of outcomes of collective general interest and not only just profit, promoting a conciliation between economic activity and social equity.

As published in a work by the SAW-B (Solidarité des Alternatives Wallonnes et Bruxelloises) in 2011, this federation considers that there is a renewed interest for the cooperative model in Belgium and in addition that the increase in popularity should be correlated with the current economic and financial crisis as well as the democratic aspects, and with the alternative dimension of the present cooperative movement (Dohet, 2018).

## 5. Cooperative – An atypical business model

The International Cooperative Alliance endorses a statement on cooperative identity ratified in 1995 by the ICA membership, defining it as:

“An autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.... (Co-operatives are ...) based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. In the tradition of co-operative founders, co-operative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others.”

(Co-operative Identity Statement, International Co-operative Alliance [2014])

Despite these entrenched cooperative characteristics supported by the ICA and considered the global standard, they can be regarded by the external audience in a “not as expected” way of how an organization exists as an entity and conducts business activities. Whilst the more common capitalist business model rests in the continuous search for profit to its shareholders (automatically implying continuous growth of the company itself), cooperative organizations are in this particular regard not normative – hence atypical – due to reasons as its following of fundamental principles (Rochdale Society), the organization’s inclination for the increase of profit for its members (active and investor-like), upper limiting of the company’s profit redistribution to its members and a power of decision linked to the individual and not to his/hers amount of shares (Teresa et al., 2016).

Since cooperative companies embody an atypical type of business, issues arise regarding their perceived legitimacy; as written by Dart (2004), “legitimacy tells us the way we believe things should be, apart from any other rational or functional calculus.” In addition, as mentioned by Huybrechts and Mertens (2014): “Indeed, theoretically adequate or “efficient” organizational models may not be legitimated or institutionalized at all.”

## 6. Organizational Legitimation – Cooperative’s Cognitive Legitimacy

The multiplicity of factors rendering cooperatives as an alternative organizational form promote their resemblance and at the same time differentiation from more generalized organizations or businesses. This near and far complex form from what is usually perceived as a more standard organization accentuates the importance for organizational legitimacy, only way for achieving acceptance from the audiences and ultimately organizational sustainability. Underscoring this inference, we can observe in Dart (2004): “He [Suchman] defines legitimacy as a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are socially desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, value, beliefs and definitions.” Prior to advancing to the kind of legitimacy that most troubles cooperative organizations, it is propitious to highlight the different kinds of legitimacy as identified by Suchman (1995). Following Suchman’s work, organizational legitimacy can be divided in three primary forms:

- Pragmatic Legitimacy:

Simplifying as possible, a pragmatic legitimacy when comparing with the others, reveals itself more tangible, represented by acceptability from the stakeholders of an activity that brings them a gain.

As in the work of Suchman (1995), “(...) thus, at the simplest level, pragmatic legitimacy boils down to a sort of exchange legitimacy – support for an organizational policy based on that policy’s expected value to a particular set of constituents.” Further deconstructing it, would be like looking to the organization’s activities and thinking “what do we gain with it?”

- Moral Legitimacy:

This legitimation type distantiates from the self-interest perception embodied by a pragmatic thought and approaches a more social environment setting, being closer to a normative way of proceeding – “(...) when activities are undertaken as they should be, in reference to broader norms in the sociopolitical environment”(Dart, 2004) .

Since moral legitimacy is in itself “sociotropic” (Suchman, 1995), the appreciation of what is the right thing to do is seen and judged by a general audience making it more resistant to individual manipulations.

- Cognitive Legitimacy:

Finally the cognitive form is the most profound and difficult to obtain type of legitimacy. Whilst the pragmatic form relates to each individual demand and the moral form to humane ideals, cognitive legitimacy is rooted in the establishment of “what is usual? What is the standard?” Cognitive legitimacy can be divided in two main topics: comprehensibility and taken-for-grantedness.

Comprehensibility for legitimation originates from what the day-to-day reality is combined in the larger belief systems. Suchman (1995) wrote “(...) stems mainly from the availability of cultural models that furnish plausible explanations for the organization and its endeavors.” Taken-for-grantedness is the most dormant part of the cognitive form and simultaneously the most powerful of all sources of legitimacy. It is a conventionalized way of accepting and/or assuming an organization without question. As in Suchman (1995) “(...) institutions not only render disorder manageable [comprehensibility], they actually transform it into a set of intersubjective “givens” that submerge the possibility of dissent.”

When considering the cooperative model and the overall legitimacy needs of an organization, the cognitive form is the most crucial and challenging to obtain.

Exemplifying, the simultaneous coexistence of a for-profit and social engagement components inside a cooperative organization strengthen the assertion that, as mentioned in Huybrechts and Mertens (2014), “cooperatives appear as “hybrid organizations” that do not enter within extant organizational taxonomies and this face a major legitimacy challenge.” This hybridization distances the cooperative model from the “taken-for-granted”. In addition it obscures its form, content and objectives, hindering its comprehensibility.

Finally, Suchman (1995) suggests different methods to gain cognitive legitimacy:

- Organizational persistence, allowing the business to obtain audience comprehensibility and taken-for-grantedness by merely persisting.
- Standardization, bringing the idea of isomorphism by making the organization as similar as possible to what is seen as the “standard model”;
- Popularization, aiding to the comprehensibility part of cognitive legitimation, recurring to advertising, scientific research, lobbying and further.

Independently of the hybrid nature of a cooperative organization, it is important to notice that the comprehension and awareness of its form suffers from a generalized disregard by the audiences. In other words, “the most problematic type of legitimacy for cooperatives and social enterprises in general is undoubtedly cognitive legitimacy [...]. This is due to the poor knowledge of cooperatives in many countries” (Huybrechts, 2014).

In a more distinct way, the recognized lack of attention on cooperatives (LeVay, 1983) jeopardizes the realization of cognitive legitimacy due to an underperforming popularization.

## **7. Methods and Results**

In order to further investigate the attention given to cooperatives, in this work mostly Belgian ones, a research was performed to assess their presence in the media.

## Belgian Newspapers:

Two Belgian daily newspapers were chosen: L’Echo and Le Soir. The choice for this two journals was two-fold. Due to their resemblance – both are Belgian, published daily, of easy access, and with a long-standing history (both had their first edition in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century); and at the same time due to their different interests – L’Echo is a newspaper that mainly focuses on national and international economic and financial subjects, whilst Le Soir targets a more broad range of matters, going from the current national and international news, politics, economics, to society and the world in general.

## Articles on Cooperative organizations – time periods

Following the choice of the media, published articles referencing cooperative organizations were chosen within distinct time periods. The emergence of cooperatives can occur in waves (Teresa et al., 2016), hence also affecting their popularity, with different reasons as an economic crisis event or periods of marked ideological contestation, prompting their presence in the news. In light of this, a period of eleven years was preferred, starting in the transition 2007/2008, bearing in mind the setting of late 2008 with the American sub-prime mortgage situation culminating in a generalized international financial and economic crisis until the beginning of 2018 where the markets in overall already presented marked recoveries. Further into detail, three time periods were selected, further subdivided into time spans of 6 months: from 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 2007 to 1<sup>st</sup> half of 2008, 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 2012 to 1<sup>st</sup> half of 2013, and 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 2017 to 1<sup>st</sup> half of 2018.

## Keywords:

The databases of both newspapers were researched. Within the time periods above mentioned and using the keywords “Coopérative” or “Coopératives”, any article possessing as subject the cooperative thematic was retrieved. Exemplifying the selection of content, this would include from an article related to a company in particular or governmental considerations on cooperative regulation, to particular business activities performed between cooperative organizations, articles of opinion from experts on alternative business forms and more.

## **7.1 Quantitative and Qualitative analyses**

### **7.1.1 Quantitative analysis**

#### ➤ Newspaper l’Echo

From the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 2007 to the 1<sup>st</sup> half of 2018, the newspaper l’Echo published a total amount of 121 articles containing the cooperative model as subject of interest.

When progressing from the beginning to the end of the complete time window in study, it is possible to observe an increase on the amount of articles, with only 3 in end of 2007 and 26

during the first half of 2018. Nevertheless it is also interesting to notice that the amount of articles remained stable from the second half of 2012 onwards.

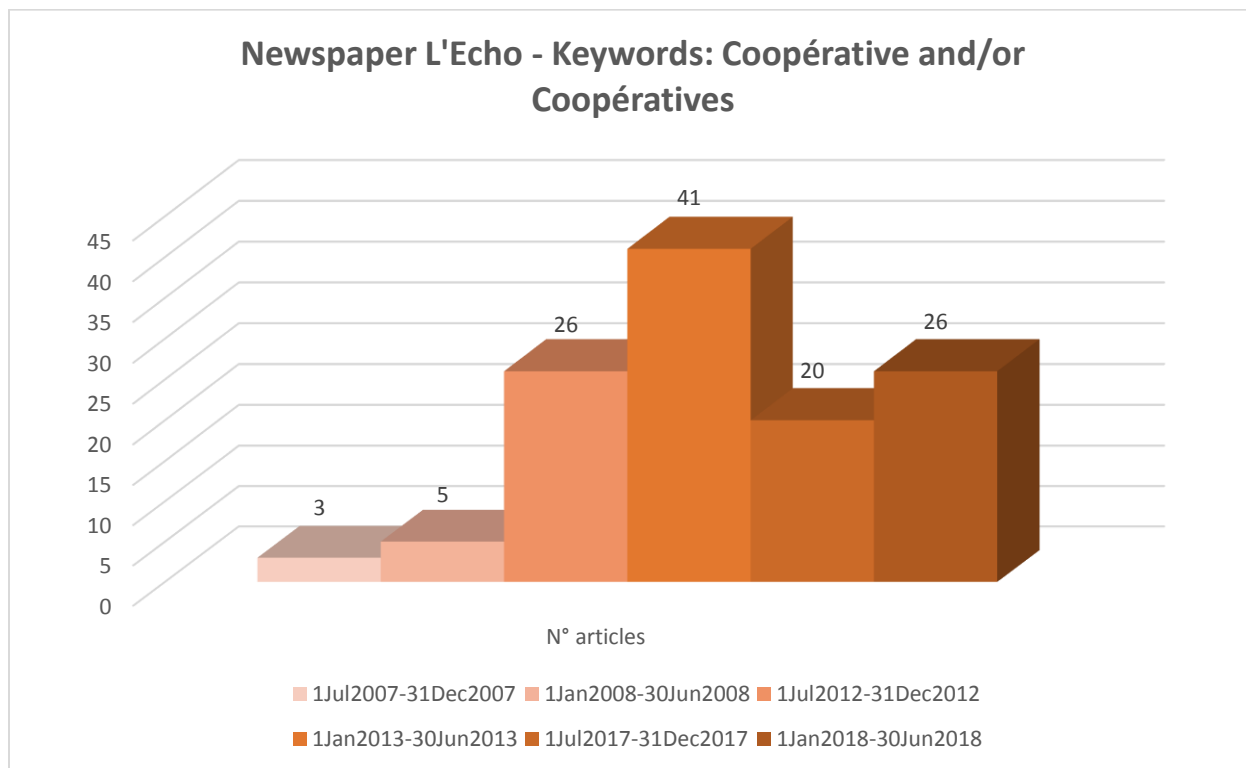


Chart 1: Newspaper L'Echo - Articles on Cooperatives from the 2<sup>nd</sup> half 2007 to 1<sup>st</sup> half 2018.

In the meanwhile, from the six time-spans observed, the period 1<sup>st</sup> January 2013 to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2013 was the one where the attention given to cooperatives was the most pronounced. It is worth mentioning that this particular time window stands out especially due to the amount of articles published in L'Echo relating to the creation and endeavors of the Belgian cooperative bank NewB. In this period, from the 41 articles on cooperative organizations, approximately 40% of them (17 articles) were related to cooperative banking in general and NewB in specific.

### **New B, un manifeste pour une banque différente**

Plus de 13.000 coopérateurs ont adhéré au projet en deux jours.

27 MARS 2013

### **Une banque coopérative en création**

18 MAI 2013

### New B limitera son activité bancaire au métier de base

La future banque coopérative faite "par et pour le citoyen" a bétonné ses principes démocratiques. A terme, il lui faudra plus de 70 millions.

15 JUIN 2013

Fig.3: Articles about cooperative banking and NewB published in the 1<sup>st</sup> half 2013.

#### ➤ Newspaper Le Soir

Retrospectively thinking, one could infer that Le Soir would probably present more articles on cooperatives simply due to its more broad nature of matters it publishes, and this was indeed the case.

During the eleven years' time window, ranging from the second half of 2007 to first half 2018, this newspaper published 366 articles concerning cooperative organizations. Differently from what was observed with L'Echo, in Le Soir there was a more visible progression on the amount of articles addressing cooperative organizations throughout the selected time period, going from 38 articles in the end of 2007 to 91 articles in the first half of 2018. In perspective, at the end of the time period, Le Soir had doubled the number of articles published on the cooperative model.

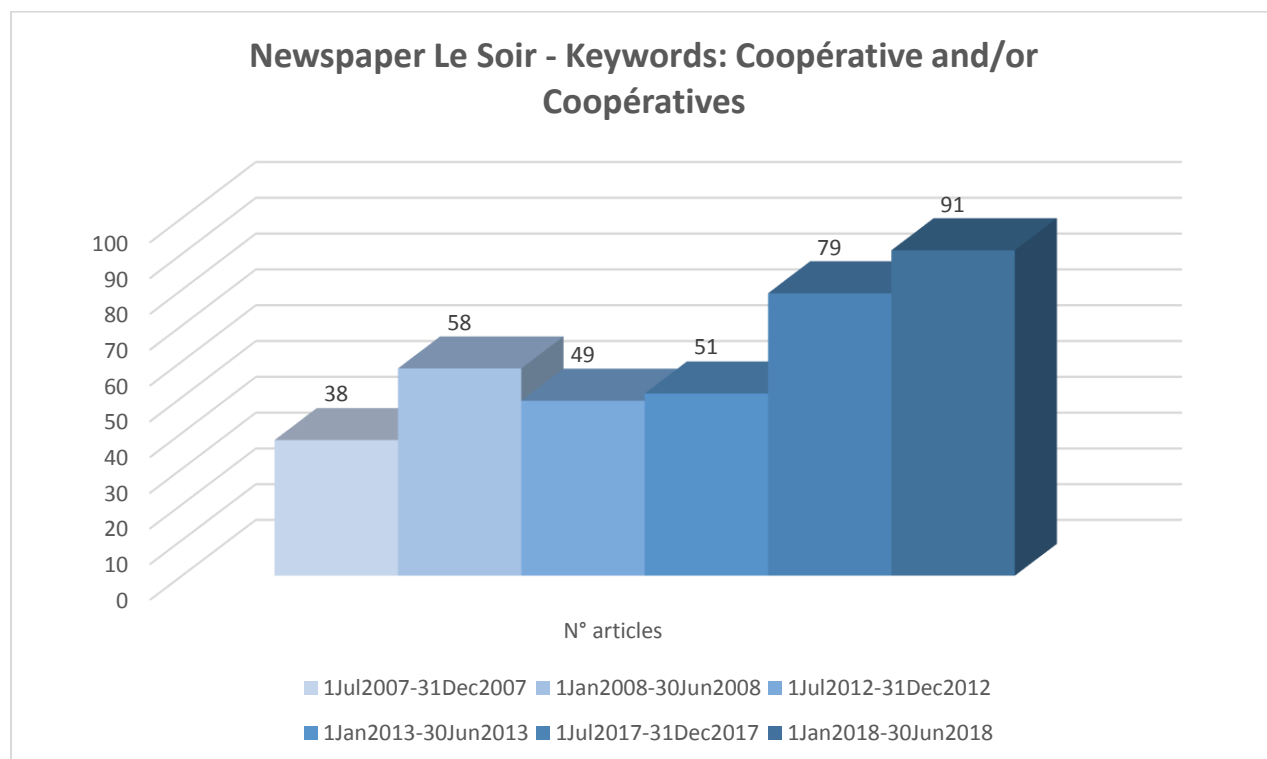


Chart 2: Newspaper Le Soir - Articles on Cooperatives from the 2<sup>nd</sup> half 2007 to 1<sup>st</sup> half 2018.

From the first four initial periods – late 2007 to beginning of 2013 – the time span 1<sup>st</sup> January to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2008 presents the highest amount of articles on cooperative organizations. Differently from the period in 2013 where a tendency was remarked with forty percent of L’Echo’s articles on cooperatives revolving around banking organizations, in this period of 2008 for the newspaper Le Soir, there was no recurring cooperative topic that could be discerned.

➤ Newspaper L’Echo versus Newspaper Le Soir

As above mentioned, the idea that the daily Le Soir could present the propensity to have published more articles on cooperative businesses comparatively to L’Echo seen its larger spectrum of subjects, was confirmed by the research. When comparing these two daily newspaper in the same time period – second half of 2007 until first half of 2018, L’Echo published 121 articles, whilst Le Soir published 366 pieces. In other words, in the same time frame, Le Soir published practically three times more articles relating to the cooperative model thematic.

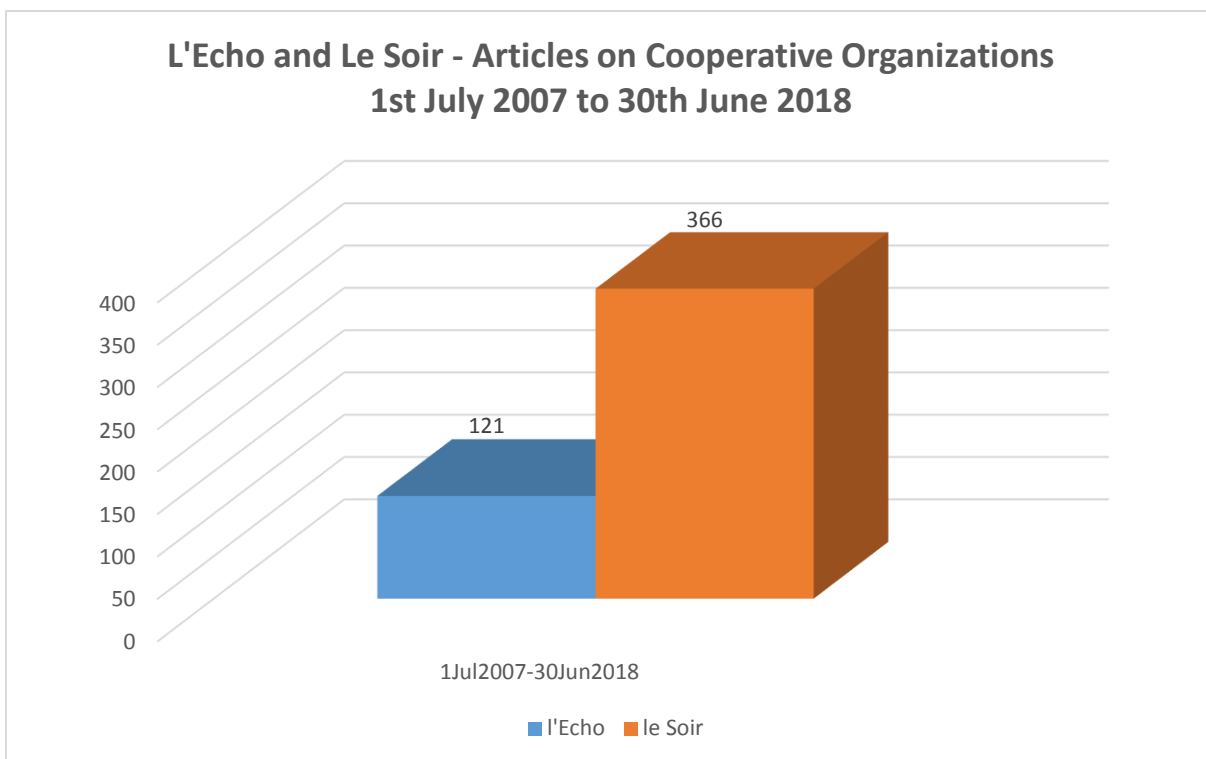


Chart 3: L’Echo and Le Soir - Articles on Cooperatives from the 2<sup>nd</sup> half 2007 to 1<sup>st</sup> half 2018.

### 7.1.2 Qualitative Analysis

#### ➤ Newspaper L’Echo

Due to the nature of L’Echo, within the time period studied, the articles retrieved relating to cooperative organizations had a bigger likelihood to gravitate towards cooperative businesses that specialized in economics or financing; organizations already having a relevant impact in the national panorama and articles dealing with sustainable investing and cooperative regulation. Predominantly these would be relating to companies of considerable size; banking type cooperatives; and ethical investments. Nonetheless it is of no disregard the increased visibility of newly formed cooperative businesses towards the end of the studied time period.

- Articles published from 1 July 2007 to 30 June 2008

As already observed through the quantitative analysis, L’Echo published a reduced amount of articles on the cooperative topic – 8 in total.

In this twelve months length, the articles are largely about the status of specific cooperatives, and interviews with relevant professionals on the field of cooperatives, as the interviews with Eva Corral chief of the Copa-Cogeca in 2007 or with Jacques Forest, CEO of the insurance cooperative P&V assurances in 2008:

**Eva Corral Chef d'unité à la Copa-Cogeca, fédération européenne des producteurs et coopératives agricoles**

3 JUILLET 2007

**«Il nous reste un trésor de guerre»**

Jacques Forest, le patron de P & V, défend l'indépendance de son groupe, qu'il voit grandir encore après l'intégration d'ING Insurance.

23 MAI 2008

Fig. 4: Interviews to experts on the cooperative model in July 2007 and May 2008.

- Articles published from 1 July 2012 to 30 June 2013

The twelve months from mid-2012 to mid-2013 present the highest amount of published articles on the cooperative model by L’Echo comparing to the other two periods selected in this work – 67 articles. As abovementioned, one of the main reasons for this peak was the topic on cooperative banking, more specifically the developments at the time concerning the formation of the Belgian bank NewB accounting for approximately 40% of the total amount.

Outside this main subject, the remaining articles extended along a diverse amount of subjects, ranging from investment decisions taken by the cooperative Cera, or ongoing litigation dossiers – the 2008 crisis had provoked the downfall of Dexia bank negatively affecting the cooperative Group Arco that had much invested in the former - pieces on renewable energy and more specifically emerging cooperatives in the wind power sector, pieces in the cooperative dairy sector and also articles focusing on sustainable investing.

### **New B limitera son activité bancaire au métier de base**

La future banque coopérative faite "par et pour le citoyen" a bétonné ses principes démocratiques. A terme, il lui faudra plus de 70 millions.

15 JUIN 2013

### **Garantie Arco: le suspense continue**

Le conseil d'Etat a rejeté en grande partie les recours contre la garantie accordée aux coopérateurs d'Arco. Il a toutefois soumis une question préjudicelle à la Cour constitutionnelle pour savoir s'il y avait une discrimination entre les actionnaires d'une société coopérative agréée et les actionnaires d'une société.

25 MARS 2013

### **Investir éthique directement, c'est possible**

Celui qui veut placer son argent dans des produits financiers socialement responsables peut entrer dans le capital d'organismes actifs dans ce domaine, voire investir dans l'économie sociale.

27 JUILLET 2012

Fig. 5: Extracts of news related to cooperative organizations between mid-2012 and mid-2013.

Also of note, in February 2013, L'Echo publishes an article announcing the launch of the first university certificate in social enterprise management by the "Centre d'Économie Sociale de HEC-ULg" in Liège. From the entire batch of articles published in L'Echo concerning cooperative organizations between mid-2007 and mid-2018, this was the only one about academic specialization on the field of social entrepreneurship.

### **Un certificat en management social à Liège**

14 FÉVRIER 2013

Fig. 6: Social management certificate at University of Liège.

- Articles published from 1 July 2017 to 30 June 2018

In spite of the number of articles published in this period being very similar to the first half of the previous one (referring to July-December 2012), from a qualitative approach their content

is much less about a type of cooperative (as in the banking type) and more about the creation of new cooperative structures of various types or about promoting and updating on existing ones.

Within the different types of cooperatives, new ones are announced to be formed in industries like communication, online pharmacy, wine, beer or champagne production, sugar production or entertainment.

#### **Les 4.200 pharmaciens s'allient pour répondre à l'e-pharmacie**

Les pharmaciens indépendants et leurs organisations professionnelles ont mis sur pied la coopérative Pharmacy OnLine (POL). L'objectif est à la fois de répondre au défi concurrentiel posé par les sites d'e-pharmacie et d'assurer une accessibilité maximale de leurs officines à tous les patients.

7 NOVEMBRE 2017

#### **Au Pays de Herve, après le fromage, le cidre et le sirop, bientôt le vin**

17 NOVEMBRE 2017

#### **une spin-off Pour produire de la bière**

25 MAI 2018

Fig. 7: Extracts related to new cooperative organizations between mid-2017 and mid-2018.

From the articles published in the first half of 2017, it is of notice the piece on the creation of the first Scop - "Société Coopérative et Participative" - in the Wallonia region.

#### **Des travailleurs lancent une première Scop en Wallonie**

23 DÉCEMBRE 2017

Fig. 8: First Scop in Wallonia – In L’Echo, December 2017.

#### ➤ Newspaper Le Soir

The daily Le Soir contained a database of three times more articles than L’Echo articulating on cooperative organizations in the same time period of 11 years. Taking into account the inherent broader spectrum of the journal, the publications collected possessed a much larger range regarding the topics of discussion.

In a general view, throughout the time frame in study, Le Soir published a greater quantity of articles publicizing developments and events related to cooperative organizations, the creation of new cooperative businesses independently of their size and weight in the Belgian national panorama (differently from L’Echo), expansion, fusion and renewal of organizations, hints on

ethical investing and fiscal recommendations as well as news regarding cooperative businesses outreach on the search for new members or investments.

- Articles published from 1 July 2007 to 30 June 2008

During this time period, Le Soir had the largest part of its pieces informing on events occurring within the cooperative companies themselves or outside relations. Putting it in perspective, from the 96 articles collected, more than two thirds related to newly born projects within a cooperative, companies' growth, and partnerships with other groups or their address to the audiences. Pertaining specifically to the creation of new cooperative businesses, 16 pieces were gathered. A few articles were also present concerning the promotion and stimulation of the cooperative model by political parties and, as already seen in L'Echo's, suggestions on how to invest with a socially responsible regard.



### **Charleroi Comment** **redynamiser le PS carolo ? : La** **feuille de route socialiste**

... est de les revitaliser. Et d'en faire les **coopératives** d'autrefois, afin d'effectuer des achats groupés auprès des fournisseurs d'énergies ou de télécommunication. « Bref, reprendre l'instrument du

XIX e siècle pour faire...

samedi 14 juillet 2007 PASCAL LORENT ; Journal Le Soir

### **Des dizaines de possibilités d'investissement éthique**

... des initiatives en dehors du monde bancaire, mais offrant toutes les garanties de sécurité. Ces groupements sont beaucoup plus ambitieux sur le plan environnemental et social. On citera, par exemple, la **coopérative**...

mercredi 9 avril 2008 BERNARD DEMONTY ; Journal Le Soir

Fig.9: Pieces on stimulation of cooperatives by the Belgian socialist party; and cooperatives as a part of sustainable investing.

- Articles published from 1 July 2012 to 30 June 2013

Regarding the period mid-2012 – mid-2013 the tendency continued on the tenor of the articles published in the newspaper Le Soir.

In this time span, from the 100 articles collected, more than half dealt with the developments of cooperatives inside their boundaries as for example their expansion or innovative approaches. A total of 16 articles informing on the creation of new cooperatives were published, equal amount to the observed in the years 2007/2008. In this period, more articles were also produced updating on the association or joint collaborations between cooperative entities.



Fig. 10: Fusion of cooperative organizations.

- Articles published from 1 July 2017 to 30 June 2018

As in the two previous time periods, the articles produced by Le Soir regarding cooperative enterprises focused mostly on average events occurring in the Belgian cooperative environment. Following the prior tendency, from a total of 170 extracts collected, approximately half treated cooperative eventualities, developments on new and ongoing projects, interactions between cooperatives and their members or with external parties.

During these twelve months, 23 news pieces were published on the formation of new cooperative businesses, slightly increasing comparing to the period 2012/2013. Despite the similarity on the news contents and reduced increase in the amount of articles on new cooperatives it is of regard the appearance of more articles informing on the growth of cooperative businesses or about endeavors seeking to promote the investment on cooperative enterprises.



## En pleine croissance

...Un frigo de 2.000 m2 En pleine croissance Après un long passage à vide jusqu'en 2014, le Marché matinal de Liège, à Droixhe, a repris des couleurs. « Nos 30.000 m2 d'entrepôts sont occupés mais nous pouvons encore construire sur une partie du site de 13 ha », explique William Heynen. Avec plus de 100.000 visiteurs par an, 58 exploitants et 500 personnes occupées, le Marché matinal est redevenu un point central d'approvisionnement pour les commerçants du secteur agroalimentaire. Après avoir investi deux fois 400.000 euros, la société **coopérative** (partenariat public-privé) étudie l'érection

d'un entrepôt...

samedi 14 octobre 2017 Journal Le Soir



## Mieux investir ses sous

... néfastes; placer son argent dans une institution plus respectueuse de la Planète; l'investir directement dans des activités «durables» comme des **coopératives**. ...

lundi 6 novembre 2017 Journal Le Soir

Fig. 11: Growing cooperative; and investing in cooperative enterprises.

## 8. Conclusions

In the period of 11 years starting in July 2007 and finishing in June 2018, it is possible to affirm an increase in visibility of the cooperative business model.

While fewer articles were published on cooperatives between July 2007 and June 2008 in both newspapers (8 in L'Echo and 96 in Le Soir), an evolution was observed with L'Echo publishing 46 articles between July 2017 and June 2018 and Le Soir producing 170 articles, leading to a rise on pieces concerning cooperatives of almost six times and two times more respectively. When comparing the two newspapers, indeed L'Echo published much less on the cooperative model but its increase during the studied time span was further accentuated.

It could be inferred that the increase on the amount of articles had been directly influenced by the economic crisis of 2008 and its aftermath. These events provoked national turmoils whilst prompting the origin of anticorporate feelings, leading to movements that can ultimately lay

the foundations for cooperative organizations (Schneiberg, 2008), whilst not disregarding the potential economic resilience associated to cooperatives.

All these ingredients might have helped establishing the popularity of the cooperative alternative model justifying their increasing presence on L'Echo and Le Soir from mid-2007 until mid-2018.

From a qualitative perspective, the themes of the collected articles in both newspapers presented a tendency to go from news acting as a maintenance of the cooperatives business status in 2007 to more promotional and inciting news on cooperatives and their growth by 2018. This tendency observed throughout the eleven years' time span might have helped the search for cognitive legitimacy in the cooperative businesses since the content and evolution on the tenor of this articles evidenced the persistence of certain cooperatives (organizational persistence), demonstrated that they do have characteristics that are similar to the more normative businesses as for example the creation of joint collaborations and cooperative expansion (standardization) and especially in the later years more news appeared treating on the creation of new cooperatives or on how to invest in this business models helping the cooperative model to become more popular (popularization).

Despite the positive delta on cooperative visibility demonstrated by both quantitative and qualitative analyses on the two newspapers, in overall, the cooperative model still suffers from lack of attention when comparing with more normative business models.

More efforts should be deployed to publicize this alternative organizational form since, as implied before on the need for organizational legitimation and affirmed by Suchman (1995), "(...)thus, promulgating novel legitimacy claims is less a matter of management than of evangelism", reinforcing the importance of media visibility in order to attain comprehensibility and taken-for-grantedness from the audiences. Due to the limitation of this research it is not possible to ascertain how many from all the collected articles resulted from pure newspapers' initiative or lobbying from cooperative businesses seeking divulgation of their work, however the former hypothesis is unfortunately most likely.

Based on the information collected and analyses performed, the events relating to the cooperative business model concerning its visibility, creation and expansion increased from 2007 to 2018.

Despite some interfering characteristics of a cooperative as its hybrid personality, initial low resources and sometimes unintelligible constitution, nowadays the audiences have an easier access to information and feel more concerned with themes that also relate to many cooperative initiatives as for example sustainability, environment and healthy behavior. With this in mind, only the future will show if the "coming and going" of cooperatives will continue or if a "breed" of more resilient ones is here to stay.

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