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**Comparative Newspaper Coverage in agenda-setting:  
Animal Welfare in Dutch Newspapers**

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## **Abstract**

In the United States most newspapers follow news priorities of the New York Times. Based on this knowledge most scholars use the New York Times index to determine media coverage in agenda-setting (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 2005). How newspapers react to each other in other countries and thereby causing a cascade of responses is unknown. In this case study the similarity between the amounts of media coverage given to the issue animal welfare are compared among three Dutch newspapers. The results show no punctuated increase in attention for animal welfare, although the amount of attention is on the rise for all three newspapers. The attention seems to come in waves with increasing intensity, where low and high levels of attention are equally important. We observed that newspapers tend to peak partly on different times. And those newspaper that have spikes in attention at the same time, differ in tone and framing. Once the attention was growing, we also observed an increasing amount of related topics that are linked to the issue of animal welfare, broadening and fragmenting the debate. Apparently, different newspapers do not pay equal amount of attention to animal welfare at the same time and in the same tone. The debates in newspapers are not focused at the issue at hand; the focus is scattered over time and tone. Therefore, a cascade effect will be limited, as well as the influence of newspapers on the political agenda. The absence of a strong animal welfare policy is telling.

## **Introduction**

How do governments prioritize problems? This question is central in the studies about policy agenda setting (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; 2005). The basic assumption is that governments only decide about issues if it is on the agenda. Hence, controlling the agenda is controlling the policy system. Agenda studies show that the agenda is either hard to influence due to all kinds of frictions and institutional procedures, or uncontrollable due to unexpected crises or hypes. The role of the media is especially important in creating hypes and drawing attention of decision makers to specific issues. In this paper we discuss some elements about how newspapers affect the agenda-setting process.

Agenda-setting analysis show that public policies usually change slowly, but sometimes they change dramatically. Transitions in environmental policies, for instance, seem to go slowly, but some parts, such as laws against hazardous pesticides can come quite suddenly (Bosso 1987). This pattern of long periods of policy stability that are punctuated with short periods of dramatic change is a common pattern in policy making and transitions (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Carmines and Stimson 1989).

Institutional theories and theories about policy communities focus on the stability part of the agenda setting process. Most policies are established and “cherished” in a stable group of policy experts (civil servants, scholars), political

spokespersons, and interest organizations. Such policy communities meet in the same venues, using a common language, and images. Communication studies, crisis literature, and media analyses focus, on the other hand on the question how attention to issues changes suddenly. They analyze how crises, key-actors (the policy entrepreneur), and hypes in the media affect agendas.

The relation between media and the political agenda is a recurring issue in many studies. Do media affect politics or is it vice versa? In the literature one can find different conclusion to this question (Walgrave and van Aelst, 2006). Some scholars like Kingdon (2003) and Kleinnijenhuis (2003) saw hardly any or, at most a weak impact of media on the political agenda. Kingdon (2003) suggests that the impact of the media on the governmental agenda is rather disappointing. "The media report what is going on in government, by and large, rather than having an independent effect on governmental agendas" (Kingdon, 2003, p 59). Kleinnijenhuis (2003) argues that the media follow the political agenda more strongly than the other way around. Others claimed the existence of strong media bearings on the political agenda like Cobb and Elder (1971) and Baumgartner and Jones (1993). Rogers and Dearing (1996, p. 87) concluded that "in some cases, the media agenda has a direct effect in the policy agenda-setting process, although more often, the media agenda has an indirect effect through the public agenda or through prepublication information sharing." They conclude that the relation between media and politics goes in both directions. McCombs (2007) finally stated that the media agenda affects the policy agenda through the public agenda.

Independent from the issue about the nature of the relationship between media and politics is the question of cascades and positive feedback between media sources. The assumption here is that different media sources respond to each other, borrowing news items from each other and republishing articles. Responding and republishing each other's items can trigger reactions in politics and expert arenas. The consequence is a cascade of reactions and overreactions. These processes can cause a sudden impact on policy making and generate unexpected big policy-changes

The combination of stable periods with low attention, and the few short term periods with high attention and big policy change is expressed in a leptokurtic distribution of change. This distribution has a high peak around the zero (these are the incremental changes) and fat tails (the exceptional big policy changes). Once newspapers respond to each other, we expect more cascades, but also more small or zero changes in attention. If newspapers respond lesser to each other, than there are no big sweeping changes in attention.

In this paper we analyze whether Dutch newspapers respond to each other, and thus generate cascades, which, in turn affect policy making processes. This research question is triggered by the observations of US scholars, saying that the New York Times has a dominant agenda setting position to all other media sources. It has generally been assumed that most newspapers follow news priority of the New York Times. Front-page stories in the New York Times will

result in similar front-pages stories in thousand of newspapers the next day (Dearing and Rogers, 1996). Therefore, a high degree of similarity between the amounts of coverage given to an issue seems to occur. The newspaper articles seem also to agree in how to frame an issue (Dearing and Rogers, 1996). However, the national media is not telling exactly the same thing about an issue but they do so generally.

In most American studies the New York Times is used to determine media coverage as most newspaper coverage seems to be similar (Baumgartner and Jones 1993 etc). This trend of choosing one newspaper to determine media coverage seems to extend to other countries as well. However, whether newspapers follow each other in their news priorities and frame issues in a similar way in other countries is unknown. We believe this issue is especially important when certain European countries are involved. Many European countries have strong ideologically coloured newspapers, from liberal to communist, from Catholic to Protestant, and from intellectualistic to populist. And many of them are equally important to agenda setting.

The similarity in coverage and the way an issue is framed in the media is important because it is an essential factor in determining the amount of power the newspapers have on the political agenda (Walgrave & Van Aelst 2006). The influence newspapers have on the political agenda has a direct impact on the cascade effect on which theories as the punctuated equilibrium are based on. If national newspapers do not follow news priorities of one national prominent newspaper, the influence of the newspapers on the political agenda will be smaller which diminishes the cascade effect.

## **Methodology**

In this case we compare the similarity between the amounts of coverage given to the issue of animal welfare in the Netherlands. In our analysis we covered the newspapers Trouw and NRC Handelsblad between 1991 and 2007. These are national newspapers, both considered to be reliable. Trouw is originally a Protestant newspaper, and still a lot of its subscribers are Protestant. NRC is a liberal newspaper. The largest newspaper in the Netherlands is the more populist Telegraaf. We also analysed this newspaper, although the electronic archive goes back only to 1999.

We run a quantitative content analysis of news articles. To determine the degree of stability and change in attention for animal welfare the punctuated equilibrium model of Baumgartner and Jones is used. Whether the changes in attention are leptokurtic is measured with a Kurtosis-, Skewness statistic, and a Shapiro-Wilk test. The Shapiro-Wilk test is used to test whether or not a population (in this case the changes of attention) is normally distributed. This test is used in samples smaller than 50.

Furthermore, we also recorded the section where the article in the newspaper has been inserted. We believe that this is a first pointer about the tone of the articles.

In addition we also analysed the content of the different news articles: which words, frames, notions and so on have been used.

### **The amount of attention**

Figure 1 shows the attention paid to animal welfare from 1991 until 2007 for all selected newspapers.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

All newspapers show an increase in attention for the issue of animal welfare. There are however, important differences. The Telegraaf paid less attention to animal welfare than to the other two newspapers. Initially Trouw and NRC show a rather similar pattern. There are spikes in 1997, 2001, and 2003. However, Trouw has compared to NRC a large spike in 2007. The trend of attention for animal welfare in the Telegraaf does not show similarity to the other newspapers. It showed a high level of attention in 2004, whereas the other newspapers saw a decline in attention in that year. The yearly changes in percentage are shown in figure 2.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

The descriptive statistics of the changes in attention from year to year show no punctuations, although figure 1 has some clear spikes. All three newspapers show separately a relatively normal distribution of shifts in attentions (table 1). The Kurtosis nor the Shapiro-Wilk tests show a punctuated pattern. If we accumulate the numbers of the newspaper articles of all 3 newspapers together, or only of the NRC and Trouw we still do not find punctuations. And, finally, we did not find an abnormal distribution by putting all the changes of all three newspapers in one analysis (period 1999-2007; n=24). Figure 3 shows the Q-Q plot.

Table 1: descriptive statistics

	N	Mean	Skewness	Kurtosis	Shapiro-Wilk (sign)
NRC 1991 – 2007	16	0.46	1.58	1.86	0.79 (0.002)
Trouw 1992-2007	15	0.39	0.66	-0,99	0.88 (0.043)
Telegraaf 1999-2007	8	0.32	0.84	0.26	0.93 (0.596)
NRC&Trouw acc. 1999-2007	8	0.38	0.69	-0.89	0.90 (0.277)
All 3 acc. 1999-2007	8	0.35	0.90	-0.46	0.86 (0.126)
All changes of all 3 newspapers in 1 population 1999-2007	24	0.40	0.79	-0.32	0.90 (0.026)

FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

To conclude thus far: there are no punctuations in the media agenda. The increasing media attention for animal welfare issues in the last decade comes with both small and big changes: not by a clear pattern of long periods of stability and change. However, we should be cautious drawing this conclusion because the period of analysis is relatively short. The NRC, covering a longer period has already a higher Kurtosis than the other two. We observe a limited cascade effect. Trouw and NRC seem to follow the same development, although Trouw has given more attention to animal welfare in the last two years than the NRC. The Telegraaf on the other hand, the largest newspaper in the Netherlands, shows an entire different pathway. The cascading effect becomes even more nuanced if we take the tone of the debate into consideration in the next section.

## Sections

Most newspapers are divided in subsections. We wondered in what section newspapers would put animal welfare issues. If there are differences, then this would imply that newspapers perceive an issue differently, although the amount of attention between newspapers might be the same. In our analyses we had to skip the Telegraaf because it had too many missing values to make a comparison with the other newspapers. So only the sections of NRC Handelsblad and Trouw are used.

FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

Figure 4 shows the number of articles per section in Trouw. This figure shows only the sections, which contained 5 articles or more. Most articles related to animal welfare were published in the section 'Economic'. After 'Economics' most articles related to animal welfare were published in the section 'The Netherlands'. The section 'Inland' is a similar section as 'The Netherlands'. (Name was changed). However, the section 'Inland' and 'The Netherlands' together are still less than the section 'Economics'. The third section is a special section, which is typical for Trouw. The section 'Philosophy' called 'DeVerdieping' in Dutch, publish background stories, reports, and interviews with a specific

ideology. The aim of the news paper is not to go along with hypes but to analyze and report background information of important developments in the world.

## FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

Figure 5 shows the number of articles per section in the NRC. Most articles related to animal welfare were published in the section 'Economic'. After 'Economic' the most articles related to animal welfare were published in the section 'The Netherlands' and after that in the section 'Opinion'.

Both newspapers published most articles related to animal welfare in the section 'Economic' and after that in the section 'The Netherlands'. Although, NRC published slightly more articles in the sections 'Economic' and 'The Netherlands'. After that, most articles were published in the section 'Opinion' by NRC and 'Philosophy' by Trouw. The tone of these sections differs. Trouw focuses more on morality and ethical elements in the debates about animal welfare than NRC does. Nrc highlights more the economic consequences of specific events or policies. Furthermore, Trouw published more articles related to animal welfare on the front page, than the NRC. It does not publish articles in the section 'Science and Education', though, in contrast to NRC Handelblad. Both newspapers considered animal welfare as a Dutch topic and did not place it in an international context.

### **Tone and framing**

In 1997 and 2001, animal welfare was mostly related to the animal diseases outbreaks. Although animal welfare was not an issue on its own, the crises made people aware of the animal welfare problems in the highly intensified livestock sector. The tone was very dramatic and the outbreaks were seen as real crises: a war against animal diseases.

The peak of attention in 2003 was related to policy changes in the agriculture sector, in reaction to the previous outbreaks. Politicians in the Netherlands and the EU believed that after the dramatic animal disease outbreaks a change was needed in the livestock sector. The reform of the Common Agriculture Policy of the EU gave the opportunity to pay more attention to animal welfare. Furthermore, during the national debate organized by the Dutch minister of agriculture, Veerman about the future of Dutch agriculture, sustainability was the main topic. And animal welfare was seen as an important element of sustainable agriculture. Until 2004, animal welfare was a topic related to the animal diseases outbreaks or part of the policy reforms, while from 2004 onwards animal welfare became an agenda issue on its own.

In 2004, Telegraaf was the only newspaper, which showed a peak in attention. The Telegraaf started to publish articles about animal welfare not only related to the livestock sector but to pets, circus animals, and laboratory animals as well. The topics related to animal welfare became very divers from animal abuse to natural behavior.

From 2004 onwards, different frames related to animal welfare appeared in the newspapers. Trouw summarized the different topics related to animal welfare quite objectively. In each article Trouw focused on the negative and positive points of a certain issue. For example, in an article about the welfare of circus animals an animal trainer and an animal protector were interviewed. Telegraaf used more strong phrases and framed most issues related to animal welfare negatively, especially in 2007. For example, the citizen's initiative 'Stop wrong meat' was framed negatively; words like 'environmental mafia' and 'another way to tease citizens' were used.

In 2006 and 2007, we observed an increase in the variety of topics related to animal welfare. Table 2 illustrates how the animal welfare debate broadend to all kinds of different sub-topics. This trend is partly related to the arrival of the Animal Party in Parliament. This party is the first political party in the world which represents the interests of non-humans. The Animal Party has appeared to be very good in linking animal welfare issues to all kinds of different policy problems. NRC was the only newspaper, which did not show an increase in attention and topics in 2006. Hence, the media reacted differently because the attention for the issue of animal welfare differed between the various newspapers.

Table 2: themes related to animal welfare in Dutch newspapers

<b>Year</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>attention in N=NRC, T=Trouw, Tg=Telegraaf)</b>
1997	Classical Swine Fever outbreak Manure policy Animal Transportation	N, T, N N
2001	Foot and Mouth disease outbreak	N, T, Tg
2003	Wild-life protection CAP reform Dogs- and Cats law Animal rights Animal transportation Biological farming Future of agriculture Animal protection policy	N, T N, T, Tg N T T T T Tg
2004	Quality labels on food products Accountability farmers/industries Dog tail cutting Accountability farmer organizations Dairy farming	Tg Tg Tg Tg Tg
2006	The Animal Party Circus animals Mega pig stables Industrial farming Pig-breeding industries Pig castration Horse riding The milking of dromedaries	N, T, Tg N, T N, T T T Tg Tg Tg
2007	The Animal Party Poultry industry	N, Tg N, T



Pig-breeding industries	T
Animal transportation	N
Citizens initiatives	N, T, Tg
“Cows and pastures”	T
Islamic slaughter rituals	T
Animal experiments	T
‘Animalday’	Tg
‘animal protection heroes’	Tg

In conclusion, in 1997 and 2001 animal welfare was one subject related to the animal diseases outbreaks. The crises generated protests about the way animals were treated in the livestock sector. In reaction to this in 2003 new policies came about in the Netherlands and the EU. Animal welfare was one subject of the debates about the future of the livestock sector. From 2004 onwards, animal welfare became a substantive agenda issue. All newspapers started to publish articles in which animal welfare was the main topic and the variety of topics related to animal welfare increased. Nevertheless, the attention for animal welfare developed not parallel and the frames of the articles were different between the newspapers.

## Conclusion

We started this paper with the question about how newspapers react to each other and overreact, causing cascades of attention which can lead to dramatization of issues and political hypes. We analyzed the role of three Dutch newspapers and we were especially interested in the similarity of their responses to each other. The case analysis focused on the attention for animal welfare issues.

Our first observation concerns the rather different patterns of attention between the various newspapers. Especially the largest and most populist newspaper, the Telegraaf differed substantively from the other two newspapers, Trouw and NRC. The Telegraaf saw a rise in attention to animal welfare issues, when the attention in the other two newspapers was declining.

We also observed a different framing of issues between Trouw and NRC. Although the patterns of attention seemed to be similar the emphasis of the articles about animal welfare was different. NRC considered animal welfare more than Trouw as an economic item, whereas Trouw paid more attention to the morality and ethics about the issue.

Finally we saw that once the amount of attention was increasing, newspapers started to link all kinds of different new issue to the animal welfare debates. Before 2004, animal welfare debates were mainly part of animal disease control issues, but then it started to become also part of transportation issues, sustainability, circus animals, the future of agriculture, and so on. The arrival of the animal party in Dutch Parliament has helped to broaden the animal welfare debates. However, the consequences of this trend are unclear. The broadend debate could either generate more attention to animal welfare issues, or it could

evolve in a scattering of the debate over so many issues, that the attention will be watered down. We observe that newspapers highlight different issues.

Apparently newspapers tend to peak partly on different times, and highlight different elements in the debate. This has some consequences for the analysis of media data in agenda-setting projects. We observed no punctuated increase in attention for animal welfare, although the amount of attention is on the rise for all three newspapers. The attention came in waves with increasing intensity, where low and high levels of attention were both important (i.e. big changes in attention were no exception). Hence, the changes in media attention were normally distributed. It seems that beside a punctuated pattern of change we came across in this case a somewhat different pattern of change; at least concerning the role of the media. It is a pattern of waves of attention

Although this observation needs more research, we believe that this pattern of attention's change is caused by the institutional make-up of the Dutch media. In contrast to the US context we saw that newspapers do not pay equal amount of attention to animal welfare at the same time and in the same tone. The debates in newspapers are not focused at the issue at hand; its focus is scattered over time and tone, and it is linked to various side-issues. Therefore, a cascade effect will be limited, and it needs more spikes in a short period to create a real hype. The scattered focus also constrains the influence of newspapers on the political agenda. The absence of a strong animal welfare policy is telling.

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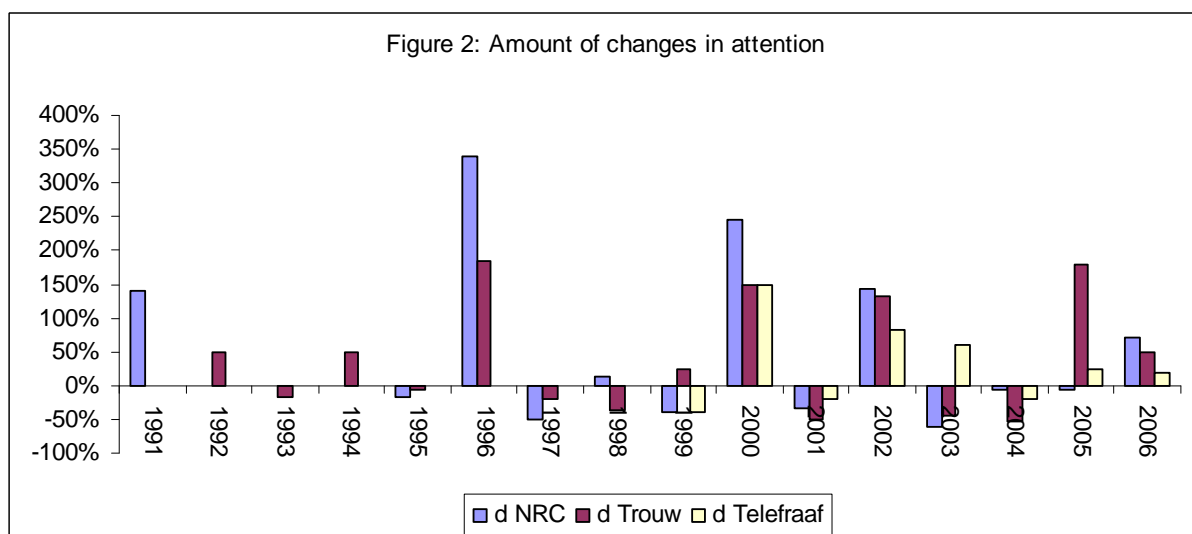
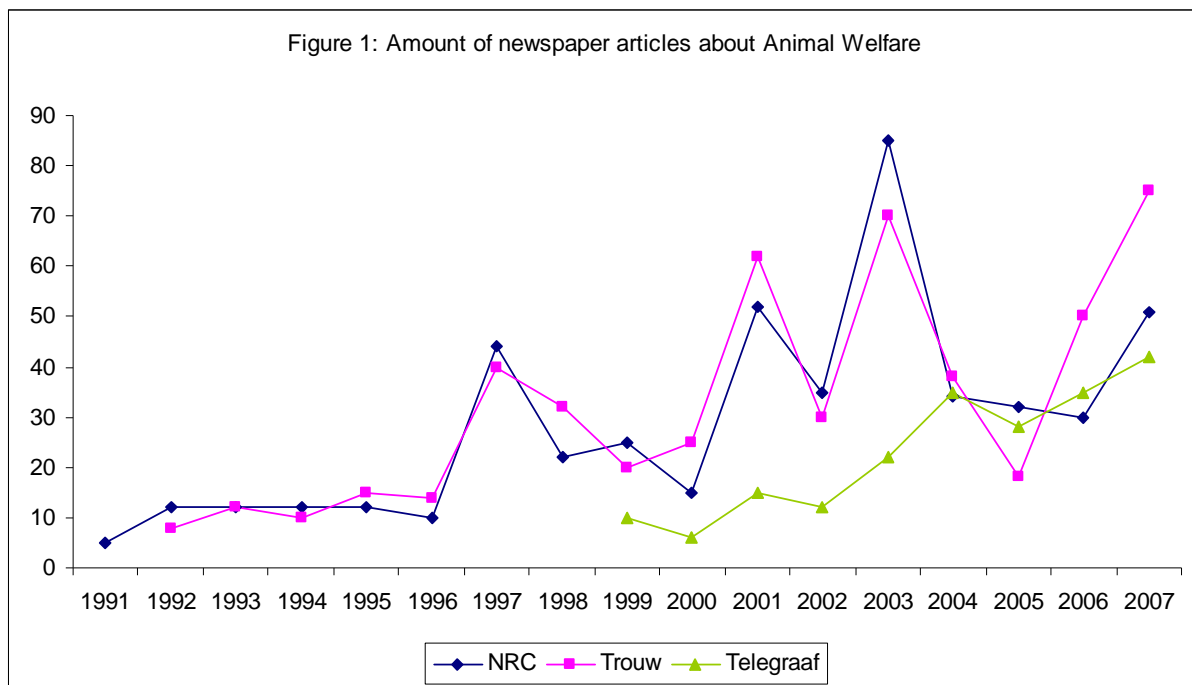


Figure 3. Normality Plot (Q-Q)

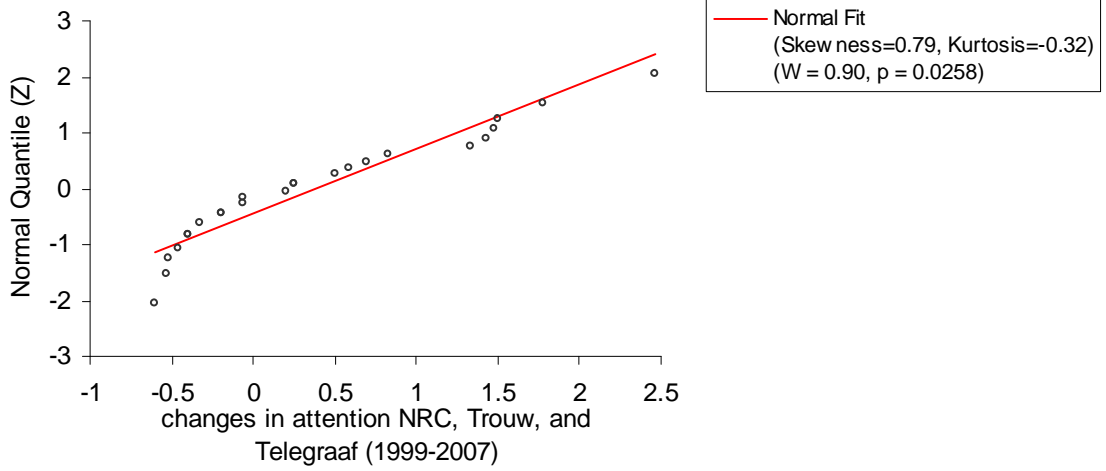


Figure 4: Attention to animal welfare in Trouw per subsection

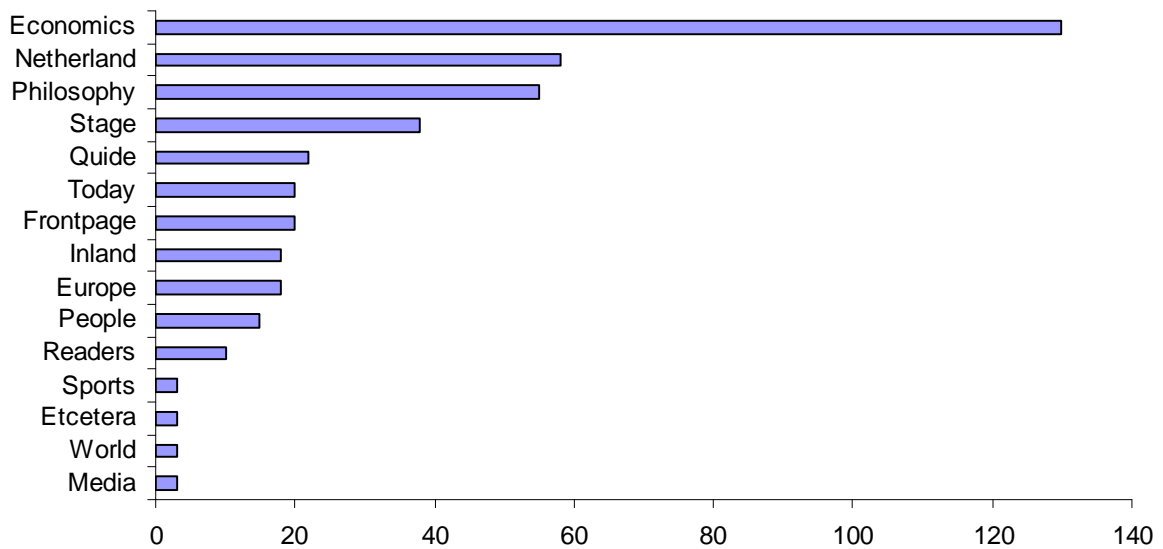


Figure 5: Attention to animal welfare in NRC per subsection

