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The future of mediapark.brussels: a chance to boost the local media industry

Marlen Komorowski, Ike Picone & Victor Wiard

The Government of the Brussels Capital Region (BCR) foresees within the coming 10 years the development of the mediapark.brussels, an urban and property development project in the Reyers neighbourhood, located in the Municipality of Schaerbeek. Reyers is already the home of the Flemish and Walloon public broadcasters and other media companies located in the area. The mediapark.brussels project aims to strengthen the local media industry through the creation of a lively neighbourhood, agglomerating media activities in a media cluster. With mediapark.brussels, policy-makers strive for increased concentration of media stakeholders in a regional agglomeration, yet the success of government-driven clusters is not guaranteed and many questions are still unanswered. Marlen Komorowski, Ike Picone, and Victor Wiard summarise in this Policy Brief the main findings of the Media Clusters Brussels project.

Media Clusters Brussels – MCB – a collaborative and interdisciplinary research project of the three leading universities of Brussels, namely Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and Université Saint-Louis – Bruxelles (USL-B), was financed by Innoviris under the Anticipate - Prospective Research for Brussels - programme. The project ran for four years and has been completed in December 2018. The main goal of the project was to give concrete advice on the development of the mediapark.brussels at Reyers and its articulation with other clusters in the city. Quantitative and qualitative data from multiple sources have been collected and analysed: a database on media companies in Brussels from Bel-first (VUB), on media workers with data from the National Security Office / National Institute for the Social Security of the Self-employed, an online survey among media workers in and around Brussels (n=577) as well as interviews with journalists (n=14) (ULB) and media workers involved in shared learning initiatives (n=13) (USL-B). The data is complemented by knowledge gathered through the collaborative activities of the project with important stakeholders, including representatives of the BCR and media companies.
More details about the project can be found at www.mediaclusters.brussels.

How does the Brussels' media landscape look like today?

Our research shows that the Brussels' media industry comprises 6,500 media companies employing 15,000 employees. Brussels hosts around 300 self-employed in the industry. The media workforce in Brussels is very diverse, highly skilled and mobile. There are communities formed in Brussels that enable knowledge sharing and exchange, but these communities are not very well known by the local media workforce. With 1,699 million EUR net added value produced, the media industry represents 2.4% of the total economy of Brussels. This makes

Brussels the leading location for media activities in Belgium. When broken down, the audiovisual (AV) sector is the largest sector, with VRT alone representing 11,8% of Brussels' media activities. Media activities form at least four highly significant media clusters within Brussels: an (1) AV media cluster around the public broadcasters at Reyers, a (2) news media cluster in the European Quarter, an (3) AV media cluster in Flagey, Étangs – Porte de Namur, and a (4) media cluster at the canal.
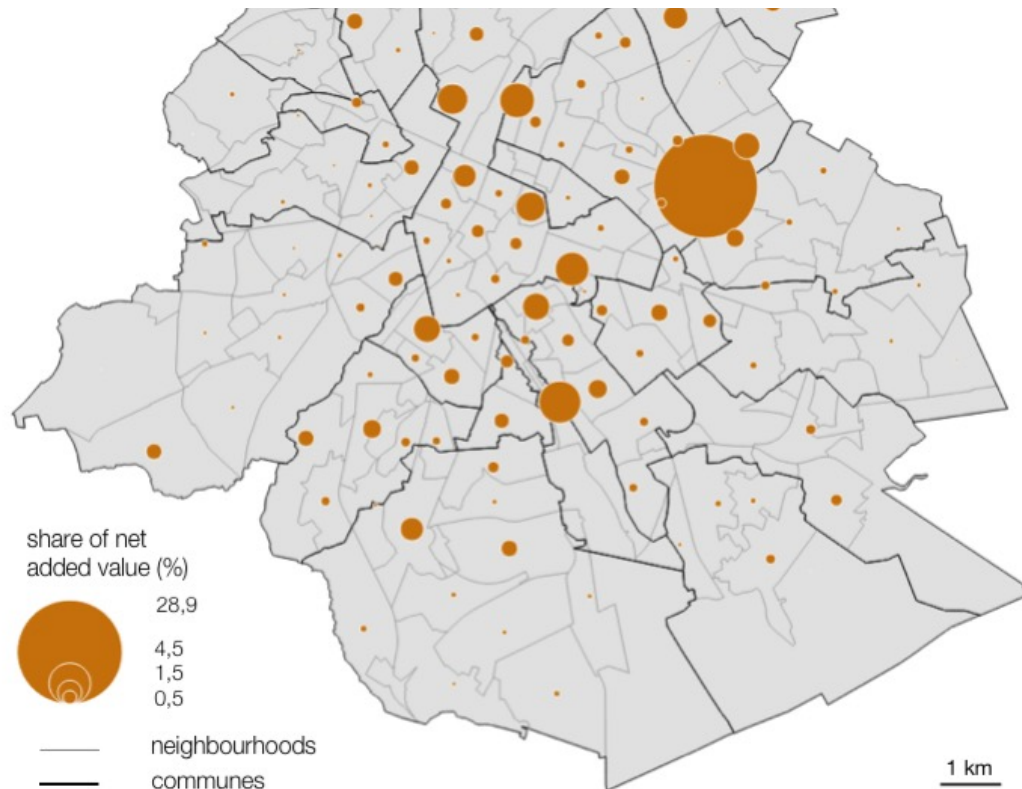
Figure 1: The distribution of media industry activities in the neighbourhoods of Brussels based on share of net added value in Brussels in 2014 (Source: Komorowski et al., 2018).

What are the plans of the Government of the Brussels Capital Region?

The plan to develop the mediapark.brussels goes back to the Regional Development Plan updated in 2002 and the Sustainable Regional Development Plan approved in 2013. In 2010, the Government of the Brussels Capital Region adopted the "Reyers Master Plan". In this plan, five major projects were formulated, covering the construction of new office buildings, housing, streets and parks in and around the area of Reyers. Today, four major partners are leading the project: The Government of the Brussels Capital Region, the Municipality of Schaerbeek and the public broadcasters on the site VRT and RTBF. The Brussels Capital Region acquired (by 2017) the site of the two public broadcasters on Boulevard Reyers, managed by the Urban Development Corporation (SAU – MSI). The partners appointed several architectural offices in charge of the different building projects. The steps planned until the finalisation of the entire Reyers project include the adoption of a new Master Plan, the demolition of the old and construction of the new buildings and areas, approximately by 2030. The main vision for the mediapark.brussels project is, to create an "innovative media ecosystem for Brussels". The mediapark.brussels district is supposed to be "creative, open and pleasant to live in", but it is mostly depicted as a "strategic project to promote the development of broadcasting, the media and the creative industries in Brussels."
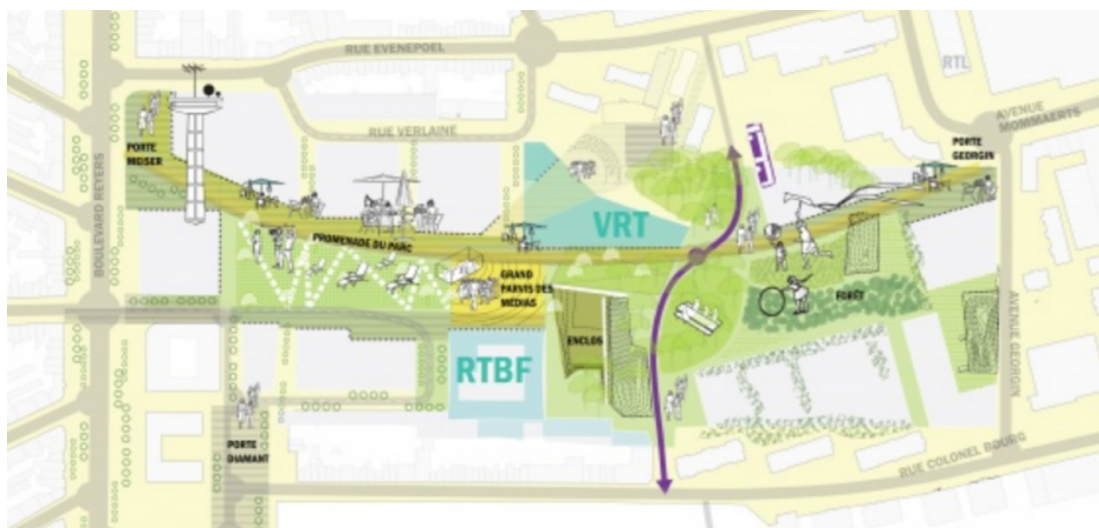
Figure 2: Plan for the future outline of the Reyers area (Source: Komorowski et al., 2018).

Is the mediapark.brussels project going to be a success?

As discussed above, Brussels is home to the largest concentration of media activities in Belgium. The metropolis may be considered a media cluster, but a closer look at the data shows, that it is actually home to several specialised clusters in certain neighbourhoods. The audiovisual cluster in Reyers is the most significant in terms of share of net added value and number of employees, and it therefore comes as no surprise that the Government of the Brussels Capital Region decided to make it the focal point of its media-related policy efforts. However, the success of media cluster development is controversial and the importance of the creation of proximity has been questioned by academics. Based on the insights of our data, we can look beyond proximity and take into considerations other structures and dynamics of Brussels' media industry for policy efforts.

Additionally, the media cluster development in Brussels can only be understood in the context of the political complexity of Belgium as a country in general and of the metropolitan area of Brussels in particular. The public competences are separated between the (language) Communities, who are in charge of individual aspects of public life, including culture, media and education, and the Regions, which are in charge of territorial aspects of public life, such as urbanism and the economy. It is within the competence of the Brussels Capital Region that the mediapark.brussels project has taken shape. The urban planning focus of the cluster has not encouraged the involvement of other regional agencies or Community policymakers, leaving its cultural and economic perspectives in the hands of the media industry stakeholders involved in the project.

In conclusion, the mediapark.brussels project might boost an already dynamic sector, but it's possible success will depend greatly on its configuration, defined by the choices the Government of the Brussels Capital Region and the other stakeholders will make in the near future.

How can the mediapark.brussels project become successful?

The findings of the research suggest, that policy makers should consider several points when making decisions for the future development of the mediapark.brussels:

1. Future developments should not only focus on media companies, but also look at the needs and potential benefits of developing the local media workforce and media communities. The needs of the Brussels media workforce point to the importance of easy accessibility of the mediapark.brussels and the benefits from installing communities at the side that enable collaboration and knowledge sharing.
2. While the focus is on mediapark.brussels, stakeholders should also be aware of the other media clusters that exist in Brussels. Will they be given equal opportunities to

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develop or should everything be focused on the mediapark.brussels project? What can be done to avoid the siphoning of other local media clusters in the Brussels area?

3. Media clusters can take several forms depending on the strategies of the various stakeholders involved. These strategies might also diverge among stakeholders, which may lead to tensions. To address and solve these tensions will be essential in order to maintain the overall coherence of the project. The actors of the project will therefore have to find a balance between urban development and community building, between infrastructure building and attractive programming, between supporting the local industry and attracting international stakeholders, and between diversifying its activities and reinforcing the audiovisual specialisation of Reyers.

4. The competences of the Government of the Brussels Capital Region, which are limited to urban and economic development, with no say on cultural policies related to media, have naturally shaped mediapark.brussels into a real estate project for the most part. This is not necessarily problematic, but it is important to acknowledge this in order to make a thorough assessment of the opportunities and challenges afforded by mediapark.brussels. However, the project might benefit from a more systemic involvement of all of the media industry stakeholders beyond those more closely connected to Reyers, as well as other administrations at Community and federal level, in order to coordinate strategies to make the cluster the strongest possible tool to support the local media industry.

5. Public authorities at regional, community and federal level should collaborate to refine the sectoral data on media companies and workers and invest in harvesting more detailed data at local level. The work of Media Clusters Brussels can be used as a starting point to set up an observatory of the media industry, which could compile and analyse information systematically regarding the impact of the media industry in the metropolis in general, and of the cluster at mediapark.brussels in particular.

Want to know more?
You can find all publications of the MCB project at www.mediaclusters.brussels.

Komorowski, M., Wiard, V., Derinöz, S., Picone, I., Domingo, D. and Patriarche, G. (2018). A mediapark in Brussels? The media industry and its regional dynamics. Brussels Studies, Synopses, no 129, Online since 12 November 2018 at https://journals.openedition.org/brussels/1938

Marlen Komorowski (marlen.komorowski@vub.be) is a doctoral candidate at VUB and works at imec-SMIT. Within the Media Clusters Brussels project (MCB), Marlen was in charge of the project's organisation and led the analysis at the media organisations level. **Prof. Dr. Ike Picone** (ike.picone@vub.be) is senior researcher at imec-SMIT and research professor at the department of Communication Sciences of the VUB. He was project leader of MCB. **Victor Wiard** (vwiard@ulb.ac.be) is doctoral candidate at ULB and researched for the MCB project the media workers in Brussels and the evolution of media work. He is now involved in a new research project at USL-B called ALG-OPINION.

*The **Media unit** of SMIT, a research group at imec and VUB, consists of 45 junior and senior researchers. The researchers are specialist in various policy, market, and user research methods. Their work spans the fields of national and European media and competition policy, cultural diversity, public broadcasting, the sustainability of creative industries, immersive media, data and valorisation, privacy, media literacy, and digital inclusion. The unit is headed by Prof. Dr. Karen Donders (karen.donders@vub.be). The unit is also in charge of **Mediahub Brussel**, that is investing in education, innovation and collaboration in the Flemish and Brussels media sectors. The Mediahub Brussel is supported by the Flemish Government.*