

The Influence of Media on Given Names

Heidi Vandebosch

Catholic University, Leuven

Mass media, especially television, appears to be playing an increasingly important role in selecting and giving names. The media are providing a pool of potential names, associating them with particular social characteristics and presenting some names as more desirable than others. The practice of "naming after stars" illustrates how media can stimulate the use of certain positively-associated names. Negative name stereotypes may be created or confirmed by the media, especially by television drama, which may, consciously or unconsciously, lead to the depopularization of some names.

Introduction

A large number of communication studies have been devoted to the influence of media on society. Very few, though, have paid serious attention to the possible influence of the media on given names. Reasons for this lack of attention may be because the topic is thought to be trivial or that the effects are "obvious" since everyone knows at least one person who has the same given name as a well-known media figure.

In this article I will characterize the role of the media in the name giving process, drawing upon a number of sources, especially upon a survey conducted in Flanders in 1997, which was designed to determine the reasons for naming.

Although influences on naming from within a particular community have always been strong, there are competing influences from outside the naming community as well and names flow between different language groups, across geographical areas, and from one social group to another. A number of observers, for instance, have pointed to the imitative behavior whereby members of lower social groups give their children names that were first used in higher social groups (Van Nierop 1968; Besnard 1979).

Names 46.4 (December 1998):243-262

ISSN:0027-7738

© 1998 by The American Name Society

In most contemporary Western societies there are few or weakening formal restrictions on the giving of first names (such as requiring that a name be from the saints' calendar). Thus, increasingly, parents seek "unique" or "modern" names for their children. "New" names, now more than ever, are both possible and desirable. These new names may be foreign names, names from other regions, names from other social groups and the like, which have come to parents' attention in a number of ways, including and importantly through the media.

Even among "new" names, however, some names become fashionable while others fall from fashion (for an overview see Besnard 1979). Some writers relate name fashions to naming after higher status persons. They feel that the higher status groups try to distinguish themselves by choosing "special" names for their children. These names are then adopted by lower groups in a kind of onomastic "trickle down" process. Others (e.g., Debus 1988) feel that new names appear in different classes at about the same time and are chosen by "innovators" who exercise influence within their own social group. In either case, it is a widely-held notion that new names are first used by highly visible, admired or influential people; they then spread outward until they lose their special appeal (Lieberson 1984).

An alternative approach (e.g., Maes 1993) suggests that the media play an important role in the naming process, a notion which we will examine here. It should be emphasized that the influence of mass media on given names is more complicated than it might at first appear and it encompasses considerably more than a straightforward "naming after media personalities" would suggest. The influence can be more subtle or even unconscious. Furthermore, it should also be pointed out that media influence is not always positive as "naming after stars" implies; names may acquire negative as well as positive associations through their use in the media and thereby lose the popularity they once had.

The media may influence names in several ways: first, by bringing new names to public attention. Parents often search for "new," "unique" or "uncommon" names for their children, in order to say that their children are special in one way or another. These new names are often brought to parents' attention by the media, either through fictional settings or by media personalities.

Given the facts that news programs often deal with "elite" persons and that even fictional programs such as popular television soap operas, prime time series and movies tend to concentrate on higher class people, it could easily be argued that the media provide an efficient means to diffuse new or "higher class" names to a larger audience.

Because of the international (which nowadays most often means American) character of many forms of media and of media content, many of the putative "new" names are in fact long established English names that are introduced by television, movies and the like.

Second, the media may individualize name associations. Names are often associated with particularly famous (occasionally notorious) individuals and parents may name their children after personalities whom they admire, think are good looking, sympathetic, intelligent and the like. Names of singers, musicians, actors and actresses, sports figures, media personalities such as anchors and weather forecasters, people who appear frequently in the news such as politicians and royalty, and fictional names of television, movie, song or storybook characters often provide parents the inspiration for particular names (see, e.g., Roorda 1994). Sometimes parents say they "just like" some names or that they "sound good" or that they are "unusual." In most cases, though, naming children after media personalities seems to include at least some hope that the children will be like their namesakes in one way or another (Seeman 1983).

In some instances this "naming after media personalities" appears to be an act of commemoration, an attempt to remember or honor a person who has died, or an effort to ease bereavement by symbolic reincarnation (Seeman 1983). This may lead to the somewhat bizarre practice in which children get, for example, the names of dead singers, of dead actors, or even of children who received media attention because they were the victims of an incurable disease (Roorda 1994) or a heinous crime. The recent occurrences of child kidnapping and murder in Belgium known as the Dutroux case, for example, were highly publicized in the media and created a great commotion among the population. The names of the children who were found dead after months of intensive searching, Ann, Eefje, Julie and Melissa, now seem to be more popular than ever before. The parents of newborn twin girls

created a newsworthy event by naming their daughters Julie and Melissa after two of the little girls who disappeared and died together. Despite the terrible things that had been done to these children, their names obviously didn't have negative associations in the minds of at least some parents.

Negative name associations, based on an association of the name with an unpopular (media) personality do occur and occasionally lead to the exclusion of those names from the list of potential given names for children. On an aggregate level this can lead to the depopularization of certain names. An obvious example is the decline in the popularity of the name Adolf after the second world war (Colman, Hargreaves and Sluckin 1980). Parents who give their children names which are associated with unpopular persons are often accused of risking their children's futures. The parents in Amsterdam who named their son Adolf Anton Benito after Adolf Hitler, Anton Mussert and Benito Mussolini did him an ill service indeed.

Third, the media may contribute to the stereotyping of certain names. As pointed out by Sumser (1992), media (most notably television) "not only borrow meaning-laden names, they sharpen them and perpetuate them," because "characters and roles on television drama have been standardized to the point where they have become elements in a language" (607-608). This standardization ostensibly makes it easier for (often inattentive) viewers to understand what kind of persons are involved in a story and in this way to make sense of their actions. According to Sumser (1992), even the names of the characters can be standardized or stereotyped in this way.

Sumser (1992) did not elaborate on the "name encoding" this would require on the part of television writers, but he did explore the extent to which the viewing audience could decode the names, by testing the ability of students to correctly match character roles with the names of the characters in actual television dramas. The students correctly associated names and character traits at a greater than chance level of probability. (There were, however, variations according to the type of character roles and by the gender and ethnicity of the judges.)

In addition to establishing name stereotypes, media may play a role in changing them as well. As suggested by Sumser (1992), the concept

“television genre” implies repetition. Applied to name giving this means that names for characters are chosen not only because of their (original) connotations in real life, but because of their use in other, similar forms of drama. In this way a name that is rather neutral in society, but which is used for notable person in a major program, can become a “type name,” as apparently happened with the name *James*, which was reserved for the butler in recent periods of English drama. The end of a dramatic era can lead to the end of a name stereotype. More recently the “meaning” of *James* has probably been influenced more by the James Bond books and movies than by the earlier period pieces where James was the likely butler.

Evidence such as this leads us to believe that people can “learn” certain name connotations, even stereotypes, through the fictional presentations of the media, by associating names with the character types bearing them. This learning process may be conscious, where parents overtly state that a name was chosen because it was the name of a character on television—as demonstrated by the “naming after” practice—or unconscious, where parents claim the name “just sounded right.”

Media and Name Giving in Flanders: An Empirical Study

During January and February 1997 questionnaires concerning name giving in Flanders were distributed in the maternity departments of Flemish hospitals. The questionnaire inquired about the name of the child and asked parents such things as where they got their inspiration for the name, why they chose the name, if they knew other persons with the name, and which names they avoided. These were followed by questions asking parents about the names of their other children, their own names, and the reasons why they [the parents] bore the names they did. In the second part of the questionnaire parents were asked to rate nine boys' names and nine girls' names on ten semantic differential scales. They also were asked to give a general evaluation of each name and to identify a person this name reminded them of. The last part of the questionnaire asked about their media use and gathered some background information such as their age, education level, occupation and nationality.

248 Names 46.4 (December 1998)

Of the 250 questionnaires distributed to the parents, 132 were completed. This unexpectedly high response rate (over 50%) was probably the result of the personal approach of the research team and the generally interesting topic of investigation.

Our baby population consisted of 69 boys and 66 girls. These children were given a total of 111 different name types. (Names which are pronounced the same but written differently were considered the "same" name.) A complete list of the names is given in the appendix.

Sources of the Names

Parents were asked what inspired them to choose the name they did. (They were asked to provide the sources directly and were not prompted by being asked to check possible sources from a list and they could give more than one source, although few did.) The results are shown in table 1. Personal contact was the source mentioned most often, by nearly half of the parents. This was followed by specialized books on first names, mentioned by about one third of the parents. Television was the mass medium mentioned most often, by 14% of the parents. Combined media accounted for slightly more than one third of the responses. A few parents said that they had named their children after family members and a few others said that they had invented the names themselves.

Table 1. Inspirations for the Names

Source	N	%
Personal Contacts	63	48
Books of Names	45	34
Television	18	14
Books/Literature	07	05
Newspapers	04	03
Magazines	04	03
Movies	04	03
All Media	45	34

N = number of parents responding. Total = 132. Multiple responses could be given.

All Media = television + books + newspapers + magazines + movies + music + sports + radio.

Media Influence on Given Names 249

It is well to notice that the media are not the most important sources for the name givers, at least not the most conscious sources; rather personal contacts are. Nevertheless, media taken together are mentioned as often as specialized books of given names. The medium mentioned most often was television, as one would expect. The importance of the media as an inspiration for names, however, may be considerably greater than these figures would suggest, since, in answer to the question "Do you know any other persons with the same name as the one you've given to your child?," nearly half of the parents mentioned only media personalities. (In fairness it should be pointed out that an almost equal number [48%] claimed that they knew only personal contacts with the same name.)

Table 2. Expressed Motives for Name Giving (Minimum 5 Responses)

Motive	N	%
It's a beautiful name.	58	44
It's a short, simple name.	29	22
It harmonizes with the names of our other children.	22	17
It's an original ~ new name.	20	15
It harmonizes with our surname.	18	14
Because of its meaning.	15	11
It is easily pronounceable.	10	08
It sounds Flemish.	09	07
It's an international name.	09	07
It can't be transformed.	09	07
It's the name of a family member.	08	06
It has a good image.	08	06
We like French names.	06	05
It's not too modern.	05	04

Multiple responses were possible.

Motives for the Names

A related question, and one not easily separated from the one above, is "Why did you give this particular name to your child?" Most answers were vague, suggesting that parents are largely unaware of their reasons for choosing a name; most said that they had chosen a particular name because it was a "beautiful name" or it was a "short, simple name." It's not clear what they meant by "beautiful" or "simple" since a name can be thought beautiful because it sounds good, because it has a positive meaning, because it is identified with a beloved person, because it evokes a positive image, or for any number of other reasons. Therefore, the motives for choosing particular names which the parents expressed must be taken as suggestive rather than definitive. These results are shown in table 2.

From the reasons given we can see that the more aesthetic or personally interpretable aspects of a name, such as the way it sounds, the way it is written, and the way it supposedly harmonizes with other names already in the family are frequently mentioned as name giving motives, while other, more traditional, aspects of naming, such as the original meaning of a name or its history within a family are apparently less important. Parents are seeking new, different, more "modern" names for their children, so new that they are frequently inventing the names themselves; at the same time family traditions are playing a lesser role in the naming process. This generational gap is nowhere more apparent than when we looked at the answers given to the questions dealing with their parents' reasons for naming. The questions were "Do you know why your parents gave you your first name?" and "Do you know why the parents of your spouse gave the name they did?" Most respondents gave negative answers to each of these questions. Fewer than half (47%) knew the name giving motives of their own parents and only one third (34%) knew why their spouses were given their names. What is striking, though, is that in each of these instances the most important name giving motive was "family tradition," followed somewhat surprisingly by "named after a media personality." Thus the grandparents of the children being named today might be the bridge generation between the former, more tradition-oriented name giving and the newer, more modern naming of the present.

Disliked Names

While it is often difficult for people to articulate the reasons why they like some names but not others, they usually have less difficulty when they are asked which names they wouldn't want to give to their children and their reasons for disliking them. Table 3 shows the major reasons given for why certain kinds of names were disliked. (Possible comparisons between the information shown in tables 2 and 3 will not concern us here, but they are intriguing and suggest areas for further research.)

Table 3. Disliked Names (Minimum 6 Responses)

Disliked Names	N	%
English ~ American names	25	21
Old fashioned names	22	19
Names of media personalities	21	18
Popular names	19	16
Foreign names in general	16	14
Long names	16	14
Flemish names	14	12
French names	11	09
Hard to pronounce names	11	09
Traditional names	10	08
Names ending in -y	09	08
Diminutive forms	08	07
Special names	07	06

Multiple responsible were possible.

Concerning the names which were expressly disliked, those ending in -y (and these are largely English names such as *Wendy*, *Kimberly* and *Nancy*) stand out as do those which are disliked for more overtly patriotic reasons, as indicated in responses such as "We live in Flanders

so we have to give our children Flemish names, [instead of those with other origins]." Further there are the "difficult to pronounce" and "do not sound pleasant" arguments and English names in particular seem to be seen as rather ordinary, especially those names ending in -y, which are seen to be particularly unattractive. The expressed dislike for English names by many respondents may be at least partially the result of the fact that many media names are in fact English names. Some parents find media names unattractive because they are overly popular at a particular point in time (as noted below) and they are therefore inadequate or inappropriate for representing the unique lives of their children.

Name Images

Also as part of the questionnaire the parents were asked to evaluate nine boys' names and nine girls' names on a number of semantic differential scales. The names were chosen so that they represented certain types of names: popular names such as *Thomas*, *Laura* and *Sophie*, which were among the top ten names in Flanders in 1995; classic Flemish names such as *Jan* and *An (Ann)*; typically English or media names such as *Brandon* and *Kimberly*; the less frequently given names *Sennert* and *Renske*, which were given only once each in 1995 (according to the list of baby names published by the newspaper *Het Belang van Limburg* on 12 January 1996); the names of the media personalities Gilles, the Flemish soccer player, and Bieke, the Flemish actress; other Flemish media names such as *Bob*, the name used in an advertising campaign against drunk driving and *Melissa*, the name of the girl mentioned above who was kidnapped and murdered and appeared frequently in the news; the names of characters from classical literature, including *Lancelot* and *Isolde*; media names not typically English (*Naomi* and *Jordy*); and *Maarten*, a moderately given first name in Flanders in recent years.

Each of these names was rated on a seven-point scale, with polar adjectives at either end of the scale. On the first four scales the parents indicated how they thought the name sounded: attractive or unattractive, modern or old fashioned, special or ordinary, familiar or unfamiliar. The four remaining scales were used to rate the characteristics the respondents attributed to the (imaginary) bearers of the names:

intelligent or unintelligent, rich or poor, sympathetic or unsympathetic, attractive or unattractive. Parents were then asked to express their overall impression of the name by assigning to it a score which ranged from zero to ten, where zero meant that they didn't like the name at all and ten meant that they liked the name very much. The results are shown in tables 4a and 4b.

In the last part of the name evaluation section, parents were asked if they immediately thought of any one particular person when they heard a certain name. If they did, they were asked to identify the person and indicate how much they liked the person, on a scale ranging from "not at all" to "very much."

Thomas and *Laura* received the highest global evaluations; other ratings, however, show that they sound rather ordinary, are not too old fashioned but not too modern, either, and they are quite familiar to the parents. Their bearers are seen as generally sympathetic and attractive. In contrast, the two least liked names, *Isolde* and *Lancelot*, are rather unattractive, old fashioned and unfamiliar. *Isolde* is also rated negatively on personal characteristics. *Lancelot* fares a bit better and men named Lancelot, while seen to be generally unattractive and unsympathetic, are also smart and rich, perhaps reflecting the medieval knight of literature, since *Lancelot* has become the prototypical name for a knight, much as *James* was the name of the prototypical butler.

Also from table 4 we can see some potentially important differences in name evaluations by parents of more and less education (which we assume roughly correspond to higher and lower social groups). Dutch and Flemish names such as *Thomas* and *Jan* are more appreciated by the more educated parents, who see them as less old fashioned and less ordinary than do the less educated parents. On the other hand, English (or at least English-sounding) names such as *Brandon*, *Jordy*, *Kimberly* and *Melissa* received more positive evaluations from the less educated parents, who have better images of the persons bearing these names.¹

These impressionistic results were confirmed by Pearson correlation coefficients, which measure the strength of the relationship between variables, in this case between the education variable and the overall global evaluation of the names. Significant relationships were found for the names *Brandon*, *Jan*, *Thomas*, *Jordy*, *Kimberly*, and *Melissa*.

Table 4a. Name Evaluations - Male Names

Global	Name Sounds:				Person is:			
	Beautiful	Old fashioned	Ordinary	Familiar	Intelligent	Wealthy	Sympathetic	Attractive
<u>Thomas</u>	6.35	Maartin 4.46	Jordy 5.83	Sennert 5.68	Thomas 4.62	Lancelot 4.22	Thomas 4.86	Maarten 4.21
Maarten	5.52	Thomas 4.05	Brandon 5.70	<u>Lancelot</u> 5.21	Maarten 4.50	Sennert 4.14	Maarten 4.70	Thomas 4.16
Gilles	4.27	Gilles 4.02	Sennert 5.13	Jordy 4.85	Bob 4.44	Maarten 4.07	Jan 4.58	Sennert 4.09
<u>Jan</u>	4.19	<u>Jan</u> 3.85	Gilles 4.19	Brandon 4.83	Gilles 4.13	Bob 4.06	Bob 4.44	Bob 4.01
<i>Brandon</i>	3.70	Brandon 3.64	Maartin 4.00	Gilles 4.14	<i>Brandon</i> 4.12	Brandon 4.06	Brandon 4.04	Brandon 4.01
<i>Jordy</i>	3.64	<u>Bob</u> 3.55	<u>Thomas</u> 3.88	<u>Maarten</u> 3.26	Jan 4.09	Gilles 4.05	Jordy 3.91	Jan 4.00
Bob	3.53	Sennert 3.50	<u>Lancelot</u> 2.65	<u>Thomas</u> 2.87	Jordy 4.00	Thomas 4.03	Gilles 3.77	Gilles 3.91
Sennert	2.37	Jordy 3.46	<u>Bob</u> 2.27	Bob 2.28	Lancelot 3.75	Jan 4.00	Sennert 3.76	Lancelot 3.90
Lancelot	1.81	Lancelot 3.24	<u>Jan</u> 2.16	Jan 1.84	Sennert 3.20	Jordy 3.87	Lancelot 3.56	Jordy 3.83

Bold = Media Name

Underline = Significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between more and less well educated parents with higher rating by more highly educated.

Italics = Significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between more and less well educated parents with higher rating by less highly educated.

Table 4b. Name Evaluations - Female Names

Global	Sound		Person is														
	Beautiful	Old fashioned	Ordinary	Familiar	Intelligent	Wealthy	Sympathetic	Attractive									
Laura	6.83	4.30	Naomi	5.39	Naomi	5.25	An	4.69	Laura	4.66	Naomi	4.30	Laura	4.93	Naomi	4.29	
Sofie	5.32	4.18	Sofie	4.64	<u>Renske</u>	5.13	Laura	4.61	An	4.48	Laura	4.14	An	4.88	Laura	4.27	
An	4.88	Naomi	3.95	Melissa	4.42	Isolde	4.72	Sofie	4.43	Sofie	4.23	Sofie	4.14	Bieke	4.68	An	4.19
Naomi	4.44	An	3.92	<u>Renske</u>	4.33	Laura	3.74	Kimberly	4.38	Naomi	3.99	Bieke	4.13	Sofie	4.48	Kimberly	4.08
Bieke	3.95	Melissa	3.87	Laura	3.94	Kimberly	3.65	Melissa	4.35	<i>Bieke</i>	3.72	An	4.10	Naomi	4.18	Melissa	4.05
<i>Melissa</i>	3.57	Bieke	3.78	Bieke	3.64	Melissa	3.65	Naomi	4.26	Renske	3.58	Renske	4.00	<u>Renske</u>	4.17	<i>Sofie</i>	4.05
<i>Kimberly</i>	3.18	Kimberly	3.68	Sofie	3.02	Bieke	3.31	Bieke	4.07	Melissa	3.50	Isolde	3.93	Melissa	3.88	<i>Bieke</i>	4.01
Renske	2.49	<u>Renske</u>	3.50	Isolde	2.67	Sofie	2.66	Isolde	3.55	Isolde	3.48	Melissa	3.88	Isolde	3.55	Renske	3.85
Isolde	1.46	<u>Isolde</u>	3.49	An	2.42	An	2.13	<u>Renske</u>	3.26	Kimberly	2.88	Kimberly	3.78	Kimberly	3.34	Isolde	3.72

Bold = Media Name

Underline = Significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between more and less well educated parents with higher rating by more highly educated.

Italics = Significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between more and less well educated parents with higher rating by less highly educated.

To determine whether “media names” are seen differently by more and less educated parents, we first determined those names which parents considered to be associated with the media. To do this we looked at answers to the question “Does this name remind you of one person in particular? If so, who is this person?” When the majority of parents immediately thought of a media personality when they were presented with a particular name, this name was considered a “media” name. If it was unclear whether or not a particular name was indeed a media name (when half the parents thought of a media personality and half thought of someone else), it was labeled “ambiguous.” Media names thus found were *Gilles*, *Brandon*, *Lancelot*, *Bieke*, and *Naomi*. *Thomas*, *Maarten*, *Jan*, *Laura*, *An*, *Sofie* and *Melissa* were non-media or “common” names and *Bob*, *Sennert*, *Jordy*, *Kimberly*, *Renske*, and *Isolde* were ambiguous.

Although only one of the media names (*Brandon*) was evaluated significantly differently by the more and less well-educated groups, the results suggest that, in general, lower ranking groups have a greater preference for media names than do higher ranking groups. The only apparent exception to this tendency is the name *Gilles*, which was often associated with Gilles De Bilde, a Belgian soccer player. (There is, however, a likely explanation for this exception. Just before the survey was conducted Gilles De Bilde received a great deal of criticism by the media for hitting a player on an opposing team. This criticism may have influenced the parents’ evaluation of the name.) Although most of the more educated parents were also reminded of De Bilde when they were presented with the name *Gilles*, there were also a large number who thought first of a personal contact, unlike parents in the other group. A t-test confirmed that, while there were virtually no differences for the other names, *Gilles* was perceived more positively if it reminded the respondents of a personal acquaintance than it did a media personality. It would, of course, be interesting to see if men and women evaluated the names differently; unfortunately this is impossible with the data we have because the great majority of the parents we interviewed, since they were in maternity wards, were females.

Evaluation of Names and Namebearers

As we indicated earlier, there is a positive correlation between the way people evaluate names and the way they evaluate persons bearing those names; the more one likes a name, the more one likes (at least some characteristics of) the person bearing the name. People operate on the bases of the name pictures in their minds; therefore they expect and perhaps even force name bearers to live up to their names, to behave as the evaluation of their names suggests. (It may be true as well that the name pictures people carry in their minds are created or at least influenced by evaluations of particular name bearers.) Our data show that people who immediately think of one person in particular when they are presented with a certain name (and for whom the name, consequently, sounds “familiar”), tend to evaluate that name more positively than people who did not mention that the name reminds them of a specific person. Moreover, the more they say they like that particular person, the more positively they evaluate the name. This is especially true for media names (those names bolded in tables 4 and 5), for which the highest correlations are found between the global evaluations of a name and the evaluation of the person the parent immediately thought of upon hearing the name. This is a likely illustration of the influence of media (personalities) on name images and name evaluations. Greater awareness of media names often leads to more positive evaluations of the name, especially when the media personality bearing the name is well-liked.

Table 5. Relationships Between Evaluation of Names and Namebearers. Pearson (r) Between Evaluation of Name and Person Immediately Suggested by Name ($\alpha=0.05$)

Gilles	0.57100	Bieke	0.60190
Lancelot	0.53756	Laura	0.53756
Brandon	0.45294	Sofie	0.47581
Jan	0.33198	Naomi	0.41627
Thomas	0.30485	Melissa	0.36443
Bob	0.27181	An	0.28535
Jordy	0.28471	Kimberly	0.27811
Maarten	ns	Isolde	ns
Sennert	ns	Renske	ns

Media Names are in Bold. ns = Non-significant

Name Stereotypes

An important question is whether the personal characteristics that were ascribed to the bearer of a name are the results only of the association of the name with a particular person or whether they are expressions of a more general name image.

We can look at the first names with the most extreme positive or negative values on the personal characteristics scales (*Thomas, Lancelot, Jordy, Laura, Kimberly, Naomi, Isolde*) and compare the scores that were given by people who weren't reminded of any one person in particular with the scores that were given by people who were so reminded. What we find is that people who don't have anyone particular in mind when they hear a name have essentially the same name picture in their heads as those who do: Thomas is smart, sympathetic and attractive; Lancelot is well off but unsympathetic; Jordy is poor, somewhat lacking in intelligence and relatively unattractive; Laura is smart and sympathetic; Isolde is unattractive, etc. It is remarkable that two of the most stereotyped names, *Naomi* and *Lancelot*, are media names. Super model Naomi Campbell and knight Lancelot appear to have influenced the name picture considerably.

Conclusion

New names are often brought to public attention by television, movies, magazines, newspapers and other media, which one could call the "first name agenda-setting" role of the media, whereby an audience learns of the availability of the names, through either the fictional or non-fictional contents of the media.

Media not only present names to the public, they also make them meaningful. If names are known to prospective parents, and if they evoke positive images, they will be diffused. Often these positive images are based upon an association of the name with one or more well known media personalities, which leads to an increasingly widespread practice of naming children after actors or actresses, sports personalities and the like. Much of the time parents, either deliberately or unconsciously, choose these names in order to induce wished-for qualities into their

children (Seeman 1983). Thus, name associations, and often name stereotypes as well, can be influenced by the image of a single famous person bearing the name. It is, however, also possible that namers are affected by the picture of a range of standardized media characters bearing a particular name. Television drama in particular is seen to stereotype names to the extent that they become type names, easily recognizable by their audience.

While positive name associations encourage the selection of names, negative name associations may lead to a reduction in their use and even to their exclusion; unfavorably evaluated personalities or types can cause this reaction on a scale such that some names can quickly lose their popularity.

Available research on the influence of media on the giving of names is meager and what exists is often little more than an enumeration of anecdotal statements from parents mentioning that a media personality was the inspiration for their name choice. More systematic research into the relationship between given names as found in and as used by the media and actual practices of name giving is crucially needed. Content analyses and name statistics are important ways to measure the quantitative importance of this (often unconscious) media influence. It is important, furthermore, to consider the influence and possible interactions of social group, gender, age and the like on the evaluation of names. Also to be taken into account, of course, is the influence of personal experience on name selection and name evaluation.

This study of name giving in Flanders addresses itself to only a few of these research problems. Our data, although limited, show that media (especially television) are indeed important sources of inspiration for parents seeking names, since more than one third of the parents interviewed said they had heard of the names they gave their children in this way. Curiously, at the same time an almost equal number said that they disliked media names. A resolution of this issue awaits further research.

260 Names 46.4 (December 1998)

Appendix

Male Names From the Flanders Study (53 Name Types, 69 Name Tokens)

Alec	Jarne	Sebastien
Anton	Jens	Senne
Arne	Jeroen (3)	Shane
Ben	Jesse	Simon (2)
Benito	Jonas (2)	Steffen
Benjamin	Jordy	Stefli
Bram (2)	Kenny	Stijn (2)
Brent	Kevin (3)	Thomas (3)
Cédric (2)	Killian ~ Kylian (2)	Tim
David	Lars	Tom
Dirk	Laurens	Toon
Elias	Leroy	Victor
Emiel	Matteo	Vito
Gauthier	Nathan	Ward
Glen	Rob	Wim
Jacobus	Robin	Wout
Jaimy	Ruben (3)	Wouter (2)
Jari	Sam (2)	

Female Names from the Flanders Study (58 Name Types, 66 Name Tokens)

Alicia	Hannan	Marie
Annabelle	Hanne	Marie-Julie
Astrid (2)	Heike	Maureen
Axelle	Helene	Maya
Betty	Ilian	Melissa
Brenda	Ilona	Michelle
Caroline	Iris	Morgane
Celine ~ Selien (2)	Isha	Nikki
Charlotte	Katrien	Phaidra
Chloé (2)	Katrijn	Rani
Céleste	Kelly	Saartje
Dorien	Kiani	Sara (2)
Eline	Kim	Shana
Elke	Kimberly	Sigal
Emelie ~ Emilie (2)	Laure	Soetkin
Erin	Laurie	Virginie
Esin	Leni	Yasmina
Esther	Lynn ~ Lynne (2)	Yusra
Eva	Manon	Zaryn
Evelien ~ Eveline (3)		

Note

1. One wonders the extent to which this practice of naming children after media personalities is the same in all social groups. Media preferences and media use vary according to socio-economic status, which implies that not everyone is exposed to—or influenced by—the same media personalities. Further, popular mass media products often get the (usually pejorative) label “mass culture” (De Meyer 1995). These two tendencies may combine and lead to distinctive “naming after media personalities” practices in higher and lower social groups, with members of higher groups avoiding those media names that are too closely linked with popular culture, since people also try to choose names which are appropriate for their social group (Liebersson and Bell 1988).

Debus (1988), however, found no significant differences between classes in the degree to which they named their children after film, radio and television figures, although girls were more likely than boys to be given names that originated in the media. According to Debus, this name giving motive was less important than the “original meaning,” the “uncommon, unusual” or the “family traditions” motives in choosing names (1988). Unfortunately, Debus did not mention which media names were used by which groups; this would make a fascinating subject for further research.

References

- Besnard, Philippe. 1979. “Pour une étude empirique du phénomène de mode dans la consommation des biens symbolique: le cas des prénoms.” *Archives Européennes de Sociology* 20:243-51.
- Colman, Andrew M., David J. Hargreaves and Wladdyslaw Sluckin. 1980. “Psychological Factors Affecting Preferences for First Names.” *Names* 28:113-29.
- Debus, Friedhelm. 1988. “Aufgaben, Methoden und Perspektiven der Sozioonomastic.” In Rentenaar, R. and E. Palmboom, eds. *De naamkunde tussen taal en cultuur*. Amsterdam: P.J. Meertens-Instituut voor Dialectologie, Volkskunde an Naamkunde. Pp. 41-77.
- De Meyer, Gust. 1995. *Populaire cultuur*. Leuven-Apeldoorn: Garant
- Liebersson, Stanley. 1984. “What’s in a name?...some sociolinguistic possibilities.” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 45:77-87.
- _____ and Eleanor O. Bell. 1988. *Children’s First Names: An Empirical Study of Social Taste*. American Sociological Association.

262 Names 46.4 (December 1998)

- Maes, Noël. 1993. *Een voornaam voor het leven: hedendaagse voor-naamgeving in Vlaanderen*. Zellik: Roularta.
- Roorda, Peter. 1994. *De voornamen van nu. Waarom geven ouders hun kind nu juist die naam?* Utrecht: Scheffers.
- Seeman, Mary V. 1983. "The Unconscious Meaning of Personal Names." *Names* 31:237-44.
- Sumser, John. 1992. "Not Just any Tom, Dick or Harry: the Grammar of Names in Television Drama." *Media, Culture and Society* 14: 605-22.
- Van Nierop, Maarten. 1968. *Wat schuilt er in een naam?* Hasselt: Heidelberg.
- Weitman, Sasha. 1981. "Some Methodological Issues in Quantitative Onomastics." *Names* 29:181-96.