

Relevant But Long Since Absent: Re-establishing a Political Economy of the Dutch Media

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Based on a literature review and interviews with scholars, this article recaptures and evaluates the political-economic approach to the Dutch media during the 1970s and its subsequent disappearance. The objective of this paper is to contribute to reinstating that approach. Additionally, this article argues for its heightened salience, as the commercialization of the Dutch media has much increased since the 1970s.

Introduction

Based on a literature review and interviews with scholars,¹ this article recaptures and evaluates the political-economic approach to the Dutch media in the 1970s. During that period, this perspective comprised a significant, but certainly not dominant, part of the public and scholarly debates on the Dutch media. Scholars and journalists urgently addressed a core problem of journalism in the 20th century, namely, the tensions that its commercial underpinnings create with its avowed task in a democracy. In the 1980s, the political-economic perspective all but disappeared. This article aims to draw attention to a chapter in the history of the study of the Dutch media that has been forgotten in the Netherlands and is unknown abroad. Additionally, this article argues for the revival of the political-economic perspective, because commercial imperatives currently have a much stronger hold on the Dutch media than they did 40 years ago, for instance, as a result of the introduction of commercial broadcasting at the end of the 1980s and the increased emphasis on profit maximization in the struggling newspaper industry. A reinvigorated political-economic perspective can shed considerable light on the crisis in which Dutch journalism arguably finds itself today (Commission Brinkman, 2009, p. 48; Ummelen, 2009; see also "Discussion" section) and can point to constructive ways forward (Bergman, 2011; McChesney & Nichols, 2010; McChesney & Pickard, 2011). This article is structured as follows: First, it points out that a political-economic critique of the Dutch media did not first arise in the 1970s, but instead has a long historical pedigree; it then examines the political-economic strand that emerged in the late 1960s; subsequently, it

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documents the absence of the political economy approach from the 1980s onward; and it concludes with a discussion that suggests some causes for the disappearance of this approach and argues that it is now more salient than ever.

Political-Economic Critiques before the 1970s

Political-economic criticisms of the Dutch media go back much further than the 1970s. Quite possibly, although this cannot be known for sure without further archival research, many salient criticisms from the period before WWII deserve to be excavated (cf. McChesney & Scott, 2004). The radical-democratic publications at the end of the 19th century and the communist party newspaper might prove fertile hunting grounds. So, too, might union publications. Here, two brief examples illustrate these historical roots. Since the establishment of unions in the Netherlands, the biased manner in which the mainstream press covered strikes was “regularly” the topic of “polemics.” One of the reasons for launching the labor newspaper *Het Volksdagblad* (*The People’s Daily*) in 1985 was the hostile treatment workers claimed to receive in the “bourgeois” press (Van den Berg & Van der Veer, 1986, pp. 1, 6 [note 2]). A second example: The Dutch underground press in WWII blamed the widespread collaboration with the German occupying forces by the mainstream press on the profit motive. The magazine *Vrij Nederland* (1942) editorialized that

It is clear that it should no longer be possible that a spiritually and nationally important possession like a big newspaper can be treated not from the perspective of the public interest, but simply as any other economic undertaking. It is bad enough that our factories have to produce weapons and ammunition for the enemy. That newspaper companies of their own accord offer their services to the enemy in order to further their financial interest is a horrible phenomenon, which should forever be made impossible. (p. 616)

The criticisms articulated by laborers and the underground press can be called “radical,” for “they see the source of the problem not in the incompetence or selfish nature of individuals, but, rather, in the industrial structures and the logic of commerce that make such journalism their necessary product” (McChesney & Scott, 2004, p. 4). Because of the emphasis on structural explanations for journalists’ behavior and news content, this kind of criticism can also be termed “political-economic” (Mosco, 1996). In the 1970s, the term “critical” was commonly employed as a synonym for political-economic. This article uses these terms—radical, political-economic and critical—interchangeably.

The Critical Perspective in the 1970s

In Dutch scholarship, a political-economic strand of media analysis arose in the late 1960s when a small number of young academics grew concerned about the strong trend towards concentration in the newspaper industry (J. Hemels, personal communication). Their interests reflected the spirit of the times. Marxism was in vogue (J. Van Ginneken, personal communication, September 30, 2012). They wanted to do research that was relevant to society to counter the often abstract nature of the prevalent scholarship. Also, the research focused on politics; the influence of economics on the media was a blind spot (J.

Bierhoff, personal communication, May 29, 2012). Intellectually, the critical strand built on work by Karl Marx, The Frankfurt School, and Antonio Gramsci, and could be characterized as a “neo-Marxist, political-economic take on the effect of structural capitalist ownership of media on their hegemonic and status quo confirming content,” in Kees Brants’ formulation (personal communication, November 11, 2011). In his view, the Dutch critical scholars were theoretically more sophisticated than were their American counterparts, yet the Americans have subsequently shown more “perseverance” and have produced more—and more sophisticated—empirical research to back up their claims.

The Dutch political economists of the 1970s took the following positions: They denounced journalistic objectivity as a conservative ideology that primarily served the interests of newspaper owners; they warned against the increasing market orientation of the media; they argued that the commercial papers were biased in favor of political and economic elites and against labor and dissenters; they denounced the partisan, pillarized² media system, which was breaking down, as authoritarian; and they argued that recent regulatory changes in the public service broadcasting system had resulted in a veiled commercial system in which the quest for high ratings was paramount. Employing Marxist terminology and regularly referencing Jürgen Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), these political economists devised plans for restructuring the media landscape so that it would serve the public better. One plan envisioned the seminationalization of printing facilities (Werkgroep Persconcentratie, 1972, p. 28). The critical scholars tried to influence media policy (P. Vasterman, personal communication, May 30, 2012). They urged the organization of Dutch journalists to increase its efforts to win concessions from the organization of newspaper owners, including the introduction of editorial statutes, which were to guarantee journalistic independence vis-à-vis management. This effort was successful. A distinct weakness of the critical strand was that only few content analyses were undertaken to demonstrate that the asserted biases in media content in favor of the interests of political and economic elites did, in fact, exist. Moreover, the studies that were done were methodologically unsophisticated (ibid.). A third possible objection to the critical strand is the whiff of leftwing dogmatism that pervades its publications.

The book *Persconcentratie*³ (*Press Concentration*, 1972) was probably the high point of the critical strand. It was written at the request of the Amsterdam division of the NVJ, the organization of Dutch journalists (J. Hemels, personal communication, October 5, 2012) and published by the socialist publisher SUN in Nijmegen. The Werkgroep Persconcentratie, an ensemble of journalists, scholars, and

² From the late 19th century up until the 1960s, Dutch society, including its media system, was rather unique. Its singularity is usually captured with the term “pillarization.” Dutch society was subdivided into four “pillars.” The major political groups in society—liberals, socialists, Catholics, and Protestants—each had their own political parties, schools, and sports clubs, as well as media outlets that served as the link between the elite of a pillar and its base. The elites communicated with each other for the purpose of policy formation, but there was much less interaction between the members of the different pillars. Such interaction was, in fact, discouraged.

³ The critical nature of the book was already apparent from the title. The correct way to spell *persconcentratie* is not with the letter *k* but with the letter *c*. Experimenting with new ways of spelling was characteristic of parts of the political left at the time.

instructors and students at the journalism school in Utrecht authored the book. The school was established in 1966 as the first professional journalism school in the Netherlands. Around 1970 it was a hotbed of leftist thought.⁴ The *Werkgroep Perskoncentratie* consisted of more than a dozen people. A prominent member was Jan Rogier, a journalist at the leftist magazine *Vrij Nederland*. Another member was his colleague, Rudie van Meurs, who would become a much-respected investigative journalist. The group also included scholar Ben Manschot and Hans Niemantsverdriet, an instructor at the journalism school. Two other authors, Hanneke Acker and Bert Determeijer, were students. They went on to become journalists at mainstream publications and instructors at their old school.

The *Werkgroep Perskoncentratie* provided a coherent political-economic analysis of the Dutch media. The argument was made that the "bourgeois press" had become "an instrument . . . in the service of the existing power relations." The result was that the press was not able to perform its self-proclaimed function of serving the public and democracy. Its actual function was to hide reality from the public (*Werkgroep Perskoncentratie*, 1972, p. 9). The authors took an historical approach to the study of the media, "because only a thorough analysis of the genesis and development of the press and its function offers insight in the contemporary problem of the press and can clarify what needs to be done" (*Werkgroep Perskoncentratie*, 1972, p. 15). Chapter 2 of the book, "Development to a Monopoly Press," provided an overview of the history of the press. It remains an exceptional text in that it does not frame Dutch press history as a natural and desirable progression from partisanship to professionalism (Broersma, 2011). The chapter emphasized the negatives of the market's influence on journalism. The abolition in 1869 of the heavy taxes on newspapers opened up the market. Publishers strove "for the hand of the readers primarily in order to acquire as a reward the kiss of the advertiser" (*Werkgroep Perskoncentratie*, 1972, pp. 35–36).

The authors discussed the then-occurring wave of concentration in the newspaper industry; remarked upon the considerable influence of foreign press agencies and the Dutch national news agency (ANP)⁵; denounced journalistic objectivity as reproducing capitalist ideology; and discussed Marx's concept of ideology, noting that "he was one of the first who clearly saw that not just a person can fool himself, but that a society as a whole can do so too" (*Werkgroep Perskoncentratie*, 1972, p. 131). Journalists, the authors charged, wrongly regarded the press as basically autonomous from larger societal forces and therefore failed to see that its conduct was in fact determined by, and in turn upheld, the wider political economy. Journalists needed to realize that they were laborers; they needed to make common cause with the rest of the labor force in the struggle against employers (*ibid.*, p. 33).

⁴ See www.svjgeschiedenis.nl

⁵ Certainly until the early 1970s, the ANP identified with the dominant institutions in the Netherlands, especially the government, to a remarkable degree. ANP's coverage tended to focus on events that could be framed as affirming nationalist values, for instance, a trip abroad by the queen. The coverage ignored the activities of social movements and other reform-minded organizations, even mildly reformist ones. Activists often complained, referring to the ANP as the "press agency of the status quo." Managing Editor Joop Baggerman, in 1970, admitted that the press agency was "rather conservative." He added that investigative journalism was just not something that the ANP engaged in (Van Westerloo, 1970; also Koedijk, 1996).

After a discussion of contemporary plans to reform the press, the authors concluded that none of them got at the root of the problem. Many commentators built their analyses on these questionable assumptions: that employers and employees have the same interests; and that the state is a neutral institution whose support for the media would have no drawbacks. In fact, the authors pointed out, the state was "intimately entangled in monopoly capital." Therefore, the state, which had at its disposal an array of "increasingly subtle control mechanisms" for maintaining "social peace," could be expected to regularly take the side of the employers (Werkgroep Persconcentratie, 1972, p. 155). In an apparent reference to Habermas, the authors proposed that an alternative or counter public sphere be set up as an antidote to the public sphere dominated by the capitalist media. It would be foolish to assume, they argued, that a well-functioning, independent media system is possible in a capitalist society: "A socialist press is only to be realized in a socialist society." Nonetheless, it wasn't all black and white. A "large number of relatively independent" media organizations were preferable to a monopolistic market. Thus, there was room for improvement within the capitalist structure. Initiatives that stimulated editorial rooms to be "as autonomous as possible" should be supported (*ibid.*, p. 142).

A second major publication in the critical strand was *Marges in de Media* (*Margins in the Media*, 1975). Authors Jo Bardoel, Jan Bierhoff, Ben Manschot, and Peter Vasterman provided a lucid treatment of the ideological limits and commercial logic that characterized the broadcasting system. The book was the first attempt to describe the effect of economics on broadcasters and the content they produced. Until then, the literature had exclusively focused on political aspects (P. Vasterman, personal communication, May 30, 2012). This blind spot was to some extent understandable, as the Netherlands was unique in that the broadcasting organizations were run by the main ideological groupings in society, which through their political parties also dominated parliament and the executive branch (see footnote 2). In the 1970s, a number of developments challenged the view that politics was paramount. Economic aspects became more important, as illustrated by the introduction of glossy magazines and market research and the folding of many independent newspapers (*ibid.*). In the late 1960s, regulatory changes allowed for commercials on public television and opened up the broadcasting system to new organizations, with the effect that all broadcasters were forced into direct competition with each other for ratings and members. Newcomers like the Televisie en Radio Omroep Stichting (TROS) and Veronica had no apparent ideological orientation. They were "associations that unequivocally set out to offer what the public was thought to want—more entertainment, music, lively and neutral information, and the like" (McQuail, 1993, p. 82).

By documenting the failure of three radio and television programs that aimed to give laborers a voice, *Margins in the Media* argued that, by the mid-1970s, one could not realistically expect the broadcasting system to serve the interests of underprivileged sectors of society, for it primarily functioned according to a commercial logic. Broadcasters had retained some semblance of serving their traditional constituencies, but this impulse was trumped by the increasing demands of the market. De-pillarization meant that notions of professionalism and objectivity became paramount to journalists at the expense of social engagement, providing context to the news, and serving the information needs of particular segments of the public. Despite the unique systemic characteristics of the broadcasting system, the actual content produced was very similar to that in other countries. In other words, American "media-imperialism" had succeeded (Bardoel, Bierhoff, Manschot, & Vasterman, 1975, pp. 61–62). The authors called for further democratization of the media, for a media system that had firm roots in communities

(*ibid.*, p. 11). Constructive ways forward could be establishing a counter public sphere and a new broadcaster, as well as putting pressure on the existing broadcasters to change their ways (*ibid.*, p. 179).⁶

A sense of how prevalent radicalism was among Dutch journalists is provided by a survey in the mid-1970s, which showed that the large majority of them had no confidence in the efficacy of private control over the media. More than three out of four journalists were wary of profit-making mandates, which they regarded as the cause of industry concentration, a trend they believed to be detrimental to their profession (Deuze, 2004, p. 83). The Netherlands Association of Journalists (NVJ) became more militant in negotiations with the organization of newspaper owners (NDP) and even argued that, in due course, newspapers should become independent of advertisers (Werkgroep Persconcentratie, 1972, pp. 20, 24–25). The adoption of editorial statutes, which were to guarantee editorial independence from the business side, was successfully demanded. The NDP fought back, especially against the demand made by some NVJ-members that decision-making power should solely rest in the hands of the journalists themselves, not with management. On that issue, the NDP came out on top. The 1977-adopted template editorial statute only established an advisory role for employees (Rogier, Niemantsverdriet, & Hemels, 1985, pp. 42–43). Yet at *Vrij Nederland*, the fight for democratic control was won. The journalists at that leftist magazine got to decide on the editorial course themselves (*ibid.*, p. 39).

The main trade magazine, *De Journalist (The Journalist)*, published quite a number of critical articles (K. Brants, personal communication, November 11, 2011). One article asserted that advertising had been “a political instrument, a choice for a conservative or at best a choice for a neutral press” and against an “engaged or progressive press” that had the audacity to question the corporate foundations of society. The article noted the important role that market mechanisms had played in the disappearance of many a progressive publication (Hamelink, 1978, p. 25). In the 1970s, journalist Paul Brill, who would in later decades make a decided shift to the right of the political spectrum, nonetheless argued that “As long as papers are . . . primarily economic units and are functioning under the laws of the free market economy, cost-reduction . . . and concentration will beat out editorial independence, intensive news provision” and the fair representation of a broad spectrum of opinion (Hamelink, 1978, p. 98). Newspaper *Trouw* urged the minister responsible for press policy to devise plans for a system in which economic motives would not be paramount (Van den Heuvel, 1981, p. 116).

Journalist Jan Tromp wrote a critical book about the advent of cable in the Netherlands. In *Gekonkel om de Kabel (Intrigue over Cable, 1974)*, he agitated against the threat of commercial interests taking over this new technology. Tromp sardonically trashed claims that providing accurate and relevant information with the aim of furthering democracy could be commensurate with profit aims. Approvingly referencing Karl Marx and Herbert Schiller, Tromp asserted that under capitalism the media legitimize and reinforce the exploitations that are the essence of that economic system. Commercial broadcasting he

⁶ Other notable publications in the critical strand are: Kees Brants’ *Journalistiek Ondersteboven (Journalism Upside Down, 1974)*; *Media, Macht en Mensen (Media, Power and People, 1974)* by Ben Manschot; and *Gekonkel om de kabel (Intrigue over cable, 1974)* by Jan Tromp (see following). These three books were published in the series *Nieuwspootreeks* by the Wetenschappelijke Uitgeverij (Scientific Publisher) in Amsterdam.

regarded as “infantile,” for it aimed to keep the people “stupid” and thus achieved the opposite of what the media were supposed to do (Tromp, 1974, pp. 34–39). Tromp noted that media concentration and conglomeration was no longer a “typical American phenomenon” but could also be seen in England, Germany, and indeed in the Netherlands (Tromp, 1974, p. 44). The solution was to be found in an “egalitarian, truly democratizing use of the medium [of cable] through . . . a bottom-up approach.” Cable could serve as an emancipating medium, but only if the “People” with a capital ‘p’ took control (Tromp, 1974, p. 8). Were citizens allowed to produce their own local programs, they would transform themselves from consumers to producers, and political participation would be revitalized (Tromp, 1974, pp. 99–100). On a local level, for instance, in Zaltbommel and Enschede, citizen collectives experimented with making their own television programs. After a number of years, these initiatives collapsed, in part, because “commerce had other interests” (J. Bierhoff, personal communication, May 29, 2012).

In “The Commercial Value of a Spiritual Good,” a chapter in the standard textbook *Media in Nederland*, Rogier et al. asserted that, in a commercial media system, the “journalistic policy” of a paper is in the end subservient to the “economic laws” by which the newspaper company has to abide (Rogier et al., 1985, p. 28). The authors blamed the downfall of the social-democratic newspaper *Het Vrije Volk* (*The Free People*), in part, on the lack of advertiser interest due to the relative poverty of its readers. Nonetheless, the paper was widely read. Between the world wars it was for a while the largest paper in the Netherlands (Werkgroep Persconcentratie, 1972, p. 46). In 1961, its circulation, including many regional editions, still numbered some 352,000 (Rogier et al., 1985, p. 31). Yet the paper started to lose money, was purchased in 1972, and became a regional paper focused on Rotterdam. The dismantling of *Het Vrije Volk* can be seen as an example of the censorship mechanisms, especially of leftwing voices, inherent in a commercial media system (Curran, 1978). The chapter last appeared in the 1985 edition of the textbook. It was dropped and never reinstated—a sign of the shifting ideological climate (J. Hemels, personal communication). The textbook’s editors, Jo Bardoel and Jan Bierhoff, cut the chapter, in part, because they felt that the critical analysis it offered was stated too categorically. They no longer were of the opinion that such certitude was warranted (J. Bierhoff, personal communication, September 29, 2012). The year 1985 might therefore be considered as the end of the critical period.⁷

It deserves emphasis that there was an international dimension to the Dutch critical strand. Changes in the political and cultural climate throughout the West, from the “Sixties” to the probusiness backlash in the 1980s, underpinned the strand’s rise and fall (J. Van Ginneken, personal communication, September 30, 2012). Dutch radicals were influenced not just by the international ideological climate but also by specific scholars from abroad. A memorable example of such foreign inspiration was Herbert Schiller’s visiting professorship at the University of Amsterdam in academic year 1973–1974. He enjoyed the experience and engaged in “active exchanges with students” (D. Schiller, personal communication,

⁷ The extent of the critical strand’s impact at the time is debatable. According to Brants (personal communication, November 11, 2011), the critical scholars stimulated discussion on press concentration and also were a factor in prodding the government to enact policy to counter this trend and provide support to struggling media outlets. The concerns about press concentration led to the establishment in 1974 of a public fund for the press: the so-called *Bedrijfsfonds voor de Pers*, later renamed the *Stimuleringsfonds voor de Pers*.

September 29, 2012). Schiller first met Cees Hamelink in that period. They established a friendship and working relationship that lasted until the former's death in 2000 (C. Hamelink, 2001, p. 11). Schiller's work was also an early influence on Jaap van Ginneken (personal communication, September 29, 2012). As already noted, Dutch scholars built on critical work done in Germany, for instance, by Habermas and the Frankfurt School in general. The German influence was facilitated by the shared border between the Netherlands and Germany, as well as by the similarities between the Dutch and German languages, at a time when English was not quite yet the lingua franca of academic communication that it later became. Conversely, the Dutch critical strand did not influence international scholarship, because its publications were in Dutch and because of its short lifespan.

Where did the political economists of the 1970s end up? Jan Tromp and Paul Brill became prominent journalists and editors at the progressive quality newspaper *de Volkskrant*. The former adopted a center-left political orientation, whereas the latter moved over to the center-right. Other critical observers embarked on successful academic careers. Jo Bardoel (University of Amsterdam and University of Nijmegen) became a leading authority on broadcasting policy and Kees Brants (University of Amsterdam and Leiden University) a leading authority on political communication. Joan Hemels, who did not self-identify as a critical scholar but did engage in the debate, had a prolific career as a press historian at the University of Amsterdam. Peter Vasterman taught at the journalism school in Utrecht and after finishing his dissertation on media hypes (2004), became an assistant professor in media studies at the University of Amsterdam. Jan Bierhoff worked at the journalism school in Utrecht and later became director at the European Centre for Digital Communication at Zuyd University in Maastricht. Ben Manschot was an associate professor at the University of Amsterdam, with a research focus on television, when he passed away in the mid-1990s. Jan Rogier died in the mid-1980s. Hans Niemantsverdriet remained an instructor at the journalism school into the 1980s, but he found himself increasingly marginalized (J. Bierhoff, personal communication, May 29, 2012). He died in 2007.⁸ The journalism school in Utrecht functioned as a refuge for a period, but there were "no natural employment" opportunities for critical journalists (*ibid.*).

Most political-economists of the 1970s abandoned their radical convictions.⁹ Kees Brants, author of the critical *Journalistiek Ondersteboven (Journalism Upside Down, 1974)*, claims to "still believe in the structural dangers of specific media ownership structures, but less in the self-evidence of its (sic) effects." In his opinion, the editorial statutes provided an effective barrier against the capitalist media structure exerting a strong influence on content. In this reading, the critical tradition could dissolve, because it had largely accomplished its goals (K. Brants, personal communication, November 11, 2011, July 6, 2012).¹⁰ In retrospect, the "weakness" of the critical strand was "the underlying disposition to a conspiracy theory, that capitalist media systems are built on profit-maximization and, hence, produce capitalist content." On

⁸ See www.svj.geschiedenis.nl

⁹ I do not mean to suggest that the change in perspective that many critical observers adopted resulted from opportunism. In other words, I do not question their motivations. Rather, I simply note that they moved toward the political center.

¹⁰ Others regard the statutes as a dead letter, especially in tough economic times (Greven, 2004, pp. 13–14; M. Broersma, personal communication, January 10, 2012).

this issue, Brants directly disagrees with, for instance, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, who dispute that their analysis in *Manufacturing Consent* (1988, 2002) amounts to a conspiracy theory. There is certainly nothing secretive about the legally mandated obligation of corporations to strive for profit-maximization, and the propaganda model does not assume that journalists consciously produce news that benefits elite interests (Pedro, 2011). Herman and Chomsky's elaborate content analyses show that the American media are biased in favor of elite interests, a conclusion which is, in fact, quite common among scholars who study foreign affairs reporting in the American media (Herring & Robinson, 2003). Dutch foreign coverage is similarly biased (see "Discussion" section).

Jo Bardoel also became a political moderate. He once believed in the ideal of "total participatory democracy," but he has come to realize that paid professionals are necessary to unearth facts and help orchestrate public debate (Bardoel, 2010). One might wonder, though, whether there is, by definition, no place for professional journalists in a (never "total") participatory democracy. Peter Vasterman and Jan Bierhoff now argue that, in the 1970s, they overestimated the dangers posed by press concentration. This development turned out to also have positive aspects. For instance, large media outlets have substantial resources available to spend on improving journalistic quality. Their analyses in the 1970s were one-sided and one-dimensional and therefore of only limited value, Vasterman and Bierhoff now believe. Although commercialism plays a role in directing the behavior of the media, it is only one of many factors (P. Vasterman, personal communication, May 30, 2012). Since the 1970s, journalistic quality has improved, not deteriorated, and the ideological spectrum of opinion presented in the media is broader now than it was in the 1970s, according to Bierhoff. Practical considerations (e.g., deadlines) provide a more salient explanation for journalists' behavior than ideology or structural constraints. Uncritical reporting can often be explained by simple laziness, instead of by the structure in which journalists operate. Moreover, the effects of the media on the public are not as direct as once assumed. The public has emancipated itself from the powers that be and is not easily duped (J. Bierhoff, personal communication, May 29, 2012).

The 1980s and Beyond

Since the mid-1980s, the dearth of scholarship on the Dutch media from an explicit political-economic perspective is profound. A coherent political-economic perspective that emphasizes economic factors and structural causes in explaining media behavior has hardly been present in the public debates (De Haan & Bardoel, 2011) or in the scholarship (Brants & Vasterman, 2010). The critical strand of the 1970s has been forgotten. This is unfortunate, for the result is that what remains is a winner's history in which the foundation of the media system disappears. Such a history tends to downplay the significant influence that commercialism has had on the Dutch media landscape, not just in the most recent decades but throughout the 20th century, and it ignores the marginalization of leftwing voices through the mechanism of the market. Moreover, a solid argument can be made that Dutch journalism is currently in crisis, and that the single most important cause is the increased commercialization of the media (see "Discussion" section). A political-economic analysis should therefore be part of the debates on the future of Dutch journalism.

Only a couple of scholars stuck to their critical perspective after the 1970s. Cees Hamelink is the most obvious case in point.¹¹ Major themes in his work have been the dangers of the increasing commercialization of the media; the fundamental problems associated with relying on profit-driven transnational corporations as providers of news and information; and the inequalities in communication opportunities between the developed and the underdeveloped countries. Hamelink has continued to argue that the “economic order” is intimately intertwined with the “information order,” with the consequence that “fundamental changes in the way in which information is produced and spread are only possible when the monopolized economic power is redistributed” (Hamelink, 1978, pp. 143–144). Often addressing a general audience, Hamelink has adopted as one of his basic premises the need for further democratization of media policy making, observing that, in the formation of global communication policy, the interests of the bulk of the world population are hardly taken into account. Asserting a key tenet of a political-economic approach to the study of communication, namely an explicit moral framework (Mosco, 1996), Hamelink (1994, pp. 2–3) has argued that “scientific work should contribute to the protection and promotion of human rights standards.”

Despite his international prominence, Hamelink’s influence on the scholarship and public debate on the Dutch media is limited. Most of his books, especially his later ones, appeared only in English and concerned mainly global communication issues, not the Dutch media specifically. An exception is *Regeert de Leugen? (Does the Lie Govern?)* (2004) in which Hamelink argued that the Dutch media are ill-equipped to unmask the many lies that float around in the information society. In fact, the media often provide liars with an uncritical platform. The biases found in the media are not random. The media usually adopt the framing of events by the government, for instance, because the “media-elite” has bought into the worldview that political and economic elites espouse. To a media outlet, “it can be risky” from an economic perspective to take unpopular positions. Moreover, lack of time and competitive pressures work to exclude other perspectives, as investigative journalism costs time and money (Hamelink, 2004, pp. 75–76). It would be foolish, according to Hamelink, to expect the media to significantly improve in the absence of structural changes in the media system:

As long as the media have to function under the pressure of the clock and the competition in the media market, a far-reaching improvement is an illusion. The problems are situated in the people and in the system and fundamental improvement is for both an unrealistic desire. (p. 51)

This quote illustrates that Hamelink takes a somewhat more moderate position than do political economists like Robert McChesney, Edward Herman, and Noam Chomsky, all of whom point to the structure within which journalists work as the culprit, arguing that when good journalism gets done, it is typically because individual journalists defy the system in which they work. In contrast, Hamelink puts some of the blame on journalists themselves. Perhaps significantly, the tone of Hamelink’s analyses in the 1970s and 1980s was more strident than that of his later work.

¹¹ Cees Hamelink (personal communication, July 1, 2012) considers the following a “good interpretation” of his work. In Joan Hemels’ opinion, Jo Bardoel and Mark Deuze have—since the disappearance of the political-economic strand—done some work that can be called critical.

Another scholar who remained critical is Jaap van Ginneken. Although he already had a job at the University of Amsterdam in the 1960s, he only finished his dissertation in 1989, after a long period working in Paris as a journalist. In some of his publications (e.g., see 1977) during that period, he perhaps identified too closely with socialist and communist movements. When he finally received his PhD, he was "too tainted as a radical to become full professor So I settled for keeping a part-time job at the university, and pursuing my own (mostly book) projects along the side, again living in France most of the time . . ." (J. Van Ginneken, personal communication, September 30, 2012). Initially, Van Ginneken "identified rather closely" with American political economists of the media like Herbert Schiller. Yet he later realized that the situation in the Netherlands was different from that in the United States, where "the use of power is much more open and naked." He also came around to the view that "political economy is only one part of the story" (ibid.). His *Understanding Global News* (1998) and *Screening Difference* (2007), although texts in the critical tradition, examine the media not just from a political-economic perspective but also adopt a whole range of approaches, including linguistic and philosophical.

As with Hamelink, the study of the Dutch media has been a small component of Van Ginneken's work. An exception is a short essay published in an edited volume (Ummelen, 2009) in which he points out that the Dutch media system has become thoroughly commercialized. Advertisers' monies have become the most influential source of media income, with the result that "consumption propaganda" easily drowns out "critical analyses." Van Ginneken shows a keen awareness of some of the problems that the current Dutch media system faces: increased pressure on not just the press but also the public broadcaster to adopt the commercial logic; dependence on foreign media, especially Anglo-American, and capitalist investors; the speeding up of the news cycle; and the increasing focus on gossip and celebrity news. Yet he now takes a relatively mild position toward the commercial underpinnings of the news media. According to Van Ginneken, "there is nothing wrong with commercialism and advertising," as long as the "diversity" of the media remains "guaranteed" (Ummelen, 2009, p. 103).

A third scholar who has retained his critical perspective, Teun van Dijk, was only tangentially connected to the critical strand that arose in the 1970s. He nonetheless deserves mention, because his academic trajectory illustrates the marginalization of the critical perspective in Dutch scholarship since the 1980s. In 1980, Van Dijk started to study racist discourse. His conclusion in *Minderheden in de Media* (*Minorities in the Media*, 1983) that racism was prevalent in the Dutch news generated a lot of flak:

The study of racism was generally met with downright hostility in the Netherlands. Financial support for this kind of research was very hard, if not impossible to get, also for my assistants and PhD students working on this topic. The Dutch elites, not least the scholars and journalists, did not want to be "accused" of racism—and further ignored the data that proved otherwise. (Teun van Dijk, 2004, p. 24)

In an attempt to promote critical scholarship, Van Dijk played a leading role in establishing CRITICS (Centers for Research Into Texts, Information and Communication in Society) in the early 1990s. The organization was supported by, among others, Cees Hamelink and John Downing. Although the initiative would ultimately languish, Van Dijk's involvement shows his commitment to the critical

perspective. Van Dijk left his position as professor of discourse studies at the University of Amsterdam to take a job at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona. His decision to leave the Netherlands was primarily a personal one. Yet “the attacks of my work on racism—and more generally the lack of interest in CDA (critical discourse analysis) in the Netherlands—were another good reason to leave” (T. Van Dijk, personal communication, September 29, 2012). As with Hamelink and Van Ginneken, Van Dijk’s work since the 1980s hardly addresses the Dutch media specifically.

The Netherlands currently boasts no publications that analyze the mainstream media from a radical perspective, although articles in that vein do, on occasion, appear on little known web sites (www.mediakritisch.wordpress.com; www.ravagedigitaal.org; www.globalinfo.nl). In contrast to the United States, the Netherlands has no alternative press—an obvious source of media criticism—to speak of. A publication that, exceptionally, was primarily devoted to radical media criticism was the short-lived *Extra!* (2001–2004).¹² Named after the magazine published by the American media watchdog, Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR), it was set up by activists Edwin Grooters, Martin Hulsing, and Patrick Pubben. The circulation was in the hundreds of copies. The editors were volunteers. The magazine’s lack of success and its quick demise was, to some extent, due to the following factors: the inability to attract advertisers or sufficient funding from other sources; its amateurish lay-out; a lack of organizational skills on the part of the editors; and the sometimes tense dynamics within a small editorial board. When Martin Hulsing, who was the driving force behind the magazine, quit for personal reasons, the magazine was dead. Taking a broader perspective, the magazine failed because of the unreceptiveness of the wider cultural context in which it operated. There was a lack of knowledgeable writers who were willing to regularly contribute without remuneration. Much of the support for the magazine came from the Amsterdam squatter movement. The social milieu it primarily spoke to was not strong enough (i.e., lacked the resources) to sustain a high-quality platform for media criticism. Nonetheless, a considerable amount of insightful work was produced (e.g., see Windgassen & Hulsing, 2003).

Discussion

The disappearance of the Dutch critical perspective coincided with the rise to prominence of neoliberal politics throughout the Western world, although in the Netherlands, its ascendancy came later and has been less pronounced than in, for instance, the United States and Great Britain (Chavannes, 2009). In the 1980s, many radical observers moved toward the political center. The few scholars who retained their radicalism largely abandoned the study of the Dutch media. The critical tradition was defeated, in part, by the central problem it identified: the (increasing) dominance of capitalist logic and ideology in the media, higher education and society at large. Taking a broader perspective, the marginal existence of radical (media) critiques in the Netherlands in the 20th century, the modest upsurge in the 1970s notwithstanding, can partly be explained by the political pressures exerted on the media to refrain from espousing radical leftwing views during pillarization (De Winter, 2004; Jos van Dijk, 2004) and by the commercial logic on which the Dutch media have operated, especially since the 1970s. Moreover, despite its progressive reputation abroad regarding issues like abortion and the death penalty, Dutch

¹² See www.extra-media.nl. Mark Deuze (2004) and Kees Brants (2011, with Katrin Voltmer) mentioned the magazine.

society in the 20th century has hardly been amenable to radical leftwing politics and analyses, certainly in comparison to countries like France and Italy. Although the Dutch Communist Party enjoyed a brief upsurge in popularity directly after WWII, established Dutch politics was “resoundingly anticommunist in outlook” (Scott-Smith, 2007, p. 290) and remained so. The Netherlands, which until WWII had attempted to remain neutral in foreign affairs, became a loyal ally to the United States, especially in matters of foreign policy (Wesseling, 1980, pp. 130–131).

Another cause of the demise of the critical strand and its permanent disappearance could be that it was a strange bedfellow within Dutch communication scholarship, which resembles its American counterpart in many ways, for instance, in that its orientation is predominantly social-scientific. The publications in the *Tijdschrift voor Communicatiewetenschap*, the flagship journal of Dutch communication scholarship, are similar to those in the mainstream American journals, for instance, as to methodology (Zwier, Beentjes, & Gutteling, 2006, p. 225). The political-economic approach clashes with that dominant paradigm. The social sciences tend to downplay the relevance of historical explanations and analyses, whereas an historical perspective is fundamental to political-economic approaches. Moreover, political economists adopt a holistic approach to the study of the media, typically regarding the media as reflecting society’s power structures. In contrast, social science tends to slice up reality in manageable pieces that lend themselves to be examined with its methodologies. Social science typically produces small, fragmented truths and tends to lose sight of Hegel’s dictum that the “truth is the whole” (Baran & Sweezy, 1966, pp. 1–3; Mills, 1959). This explains the paradox that a significant amount of social-scientific studies on the Dutch media provide support for the viability of a political-economic framework, which nonetheless is absent from the scholarship.

Anglo-American scholars have probably put more emphasis on power as a factor in explaining the media than have their Dutch counterparts. Since the 1970s, the critical tradition has exerted a “significant influence” in Anglo-American scholarship (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, note 3, pp. 82–83), whereas in the Netherlands it virtually disappeared. The Dutch critical analyses of the 1970s closely follow the political-economic analyses of the American media. Indeed, it stands to reason that the main conclusions drawn by American political economists also hold for the Netherlands, although not with the same force. The Netherlands, a Western country with a pro-American outlook, possesses a minimally regulated, advertising-dependent, “objective” press and a predominantly commercial broadcasting system. The much vaunted public service broadcasting system is breaking down:

It is fair to say that public service broadcasting in the Netherlands has been under severe pressure for the last decade, with criticism of both its pluralistic structure (and plans to merge several broadcasting organizations gaining ground) and the holistic nature of its remit. As a result of severe political and private sector criticism, there have been stringent budget cuts and demands to limit the public broadcasters’ internet and mobile activities are gaining ground. (Donders & Raats, 2012, p. 167)

Other developments as well support the viability of a political-economic perspective and the contention that Dutch journalism is in crisis: The newspaper industry is highly concentrated; many print journalists have lost their jobs in recent years (Rutten & Slot, 2011); and “Churnalism” runs rampant in

the regional press, to the detriment of citizens' information needs (Hijmans, Buijs, & Schafraad, 2009; Hietbrink, Keulen, & Van Voorst, 2010). A burgeoning PR industry is overpowering journalism (Prenger, Van der Valk, Van Vree, & Van der Wal, 2011). Press agency ANP, still arguably the most important information provider in the Netherlands, is privately owned and run for profit, as is its small competitor, Novum Nieuws. Social-scientific studies performed after the critical tradition of the 1970s was forgotten, to a significant extent, endorse the assertions of critical scholars in the 1970s that Dutch news is biased in favor of the interests of political and economic elites. This is especially true of foreign affairs coverage (De Landtsheer, Palmer, & Middleton, 2002; Rietman, 1988; Vliegthart & Schröder, 2010; Walgrave & Verhulst, 2005). Arguably, the propaganda model explains Dutch media content too, although likely not with full force (Rietman, 1988). Many Dutch political economists of the 1970s have disavowed their analyses, yet it is logical to assume that they were substantially valid then (the by now archaic-sounding Marxist jargon and lack of empirical research notwithstanding). It also stands to reason that these analyses are much more valid now due to the increased commercialization of the Dutch media. In this day and age of hyper-commercialism and neoliberalism, a communication field that lacks a coherent political-economic perspective lacks balance.

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