LIBERAL OR RADICAL? RETHINKING DUTCH MEDIA HISTORY

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Abstract

What James Curran calls the liberal meta-narrative of media history is the standard framework employed in describing the trajectory of the Dutch media. Yet much evidence indicates that throughout the twentieth century the Dutch media have more commonly served elite interests than the public interest. Initially the media were subservient to politics, later the market became dominant. This paper criticises the liberal reading of Dutch media history and argues for the viability of a radical reading. After a review of historiographical issues, a critical history of the Dutch media from the thirties onwards is presented, with a focus on the period since the sixties.

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Introduction

This paper makes the case that the extant scholarship contains the essential ingredients for a "radical" reading of Dutch media history (Curran 2002; 2009, below). Although scholars typically do not endorse such a reading but rather a "liberal" one, they have presented compelling evidence to support the position that the Dutch media were submissive first to politics and subsequently to economic forces; that they often served elite interests and not the interests of the population; and that they structurally marginalised voices outside the political mainstream, especially on the left. In other words, although an explicit radical perspective on Dutch media history is (virtually; below) non-existent in the scholarship, quite a lot of evidence supports it. This paper is structured in the following way. A brief explication of James Curran's meta-narratives of media history is followed by a review of historiographical developments in the study of the Dutch media. Then a version of Dutch media history from the thirties onwards is presented which highlights events, developments and research that point to the viability of a radical reading, including the systematic marginalisation of leftwing voices. The main focus is on the sixties and beyond because the liberal reading's primary weakness concerns too positive an evaluation of the performance of the news media in that period. The last section before the conclusion summarises research that indicates the pervasiveness of market considerations and institutional reporting in the nineties and at the start of the new millennium.

The Historiography of the Dutch Media

James Curran (2002; 2009) identifies seven strands of media history writing. These "meta-narratives" are the liberal, feminist, populist, libertarian, anthropological, technological-determinist and radical perspectives. This paper is limited to examining the relative value of the liberal and radical meta-narratives for understanding Dutch media history and therefore does not address the other five. The liberal version tells an optimistic story of progress facilitated by the media, a story of the news media's development from partisanship to professionalism and emancipation from politics. Journalism is seen to have empowered the people and to act as an efficacious check on government. In contrast, the radical perspective claims that the media have taken power away from the population and are submissive to both the state and corporations. The media function as a tool of elite interests by highlighting the views and doings of the established political parties and marginalising perspectives outside of that rather narrow ideological spectrum, especially leftwing perspectives. In the radical reading the market serves "not as an engine of freedom, as in the liberal narrative" but as "a system of control" (Curran 2009, 10).

In his review of the historiography of Dutch journalism, Marcel Broersma (2011, 17) describes the liberal meta-narrative as "a story of continuous progress in which the development of journalism is interpreted as a long road from a partisan press to press freedom, including the establishment of an autonomous profession independent of political and economic powers that obeys more or less the objectivity regime and the practices and formal conventions resulting from it." That teleological tale is not just the prevailing framework in Britain (Curran 2009) and the United States (Carey 2011) but also in the Netherlands (Broersma 2011, 24). It emerged in the seventies, when journalists and others began to critically evaluate the partisan journalism of the era of "pillarisation," which was then coming to an end.

Pillarisation, a strong form of segmented pluralism, began in the late nineteenth century. The four major groups in Dutch society (the Catholics and the Protestants, the Socialists and the free-market Liberals) each set up their own "pillar." That is to say, they started their own organisations like sports clubs, schools, political parties and so on. Together, or so the theory went, the four pillars upheld the "roof" of the Dutch nation state. Media outlets were an integral part of pillarisation. The objective of a pillarised media outlet was to promote its pillar's worldview and thereby maintain group cohesion. Journalism was partisan and focused on providing commentary and context; in other words on explaining how the day's events fitted in and justified a pillar's worldview. Journalists were submissive to that pillar's political elite, not just because of exerted pressure but often because they held the same beliefs. Frequently the same people that ran a political party also directed that pillar's main media outlets. The broadcasting system was run by private organisations that had been set up by the four main groups in society: there was a Socialist, a Liberal, a Catholic and a Protestant broadcaster. Each pillar's elite employed the media to maintain the support of – and authority over – the pillar's base. The elites communicated among themselves in the process of policy formation but there was much less interaction between the ordinary members of the different pillars. Such interaction was in fact discouraged. It is tempting, and to some degree justified, to view the Dutch pillarised media as an admirable, inclusionary system that guaranteed a platform to the leading social groups. The broadcasting system in particular was unique in that it was directed by neither the state nor the market. Nonetheless, Dutch media and politics were authoritarian and top-down. Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini's perceptive remarks also apply to the Democratic Corporatist Netherlands:

> *there is […] a tendency for media critics in each system to believe that the grass is surely greener on the other side of the fence. Thus in the Liberal countries, media critics often look to the Democratic Corporatist system – particularly to Scandinavia, with its tradition of media tied to organized social groups – as a more democratic alternative to the commercial media that dominate their own system. But what British or Americans might see as a wonderful form of pluralism, the Scandinavian researchers will see more as a form of control of the media by the elites of established interests in society* (Hallin and Mancini 2004, 83).

According to Broersma the historiography of Dutch journalism went through three stages. The first stage lasted until the eighties and comprised isolated scholars (often former journalists) who wrote nationally-oriented, institutional histories of media organisations that focused on presenting facts. Analysis and providing an explanatory narrative took a backseat to unearthing sources and quoting at length. Broersma does not mention it, but already in the seventies a small number of "critical" observers endorsed a radical interpretation of Dutch media history. They were dismissive not just of pillarised journalism but also of the emerging professional, market-driven journalism (e.g. Brants 1974; Bardoel et al. 1975). A chapter in the book *Perskoncentratie*, entitled "Development to a monopoly press," remains one of the few, if not the only, sustained discussions of the history of the Dutch press that rejects the liberal framework (Werkgroep Perskoncentratie 1972). The critical perspective on the Dutch media petered out in the eighties and was forgotten (Bergman 2013).

Broersma's account confirms that a radical perspective has been (virtually) absent from the scholarship. The nineties saw the rise of the second generation of scholars. They were interested in "theoretical debates, paradigms and approaches" and research from abroad, especially Britain and the United States (e.g. James Carey and Michael Schudson) and in contrast to the first generation they often worked at universities (Broersma 2011, 20). The field's focus shifted from institutional histories to journalistic routines, professionalism and the newsroom (Broersma 2011, 23). Since the eighties the liberal frame of media history prevails in Dutch scholarship (Broersma 2011, 18). The second generation disdained pillarised journalism. Canonical studies like Frank Van Vree's history of newspaper *de Volkskrant* (1996) and Huub Wijfjes' history of journalism (2004) adopted a liberal framework. Journalism was seen as having liberated itself from the all too obvious political constraints of pillarisation, becoming professional and autonomous, and thus finally capable of performing its assigned role in a modern society, namely that of the guardian of democracy. The third generation of scholars emerged in the new millennium and aims to write "a more integrated form of history by systematically analysing the content of news and integrating it in the institutional and journalistic production context." These scholars examine "form and style conventions that allude to journalistic norms and broader cultural discourses and determine how news is structured and how social reality is organised" (Broersma 2011, 21-22).

The liberal version of media history has much going for it. There can be no doubt for instance that pillarised journalism fell far short of liberal (and also radical) notions of journalism's role in a democracy (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007; Christians et al. 2009). As many scholars have documented, Dutch journalism until the sixties was not critically reporting on those in power (Bardoel et al. 2002, 16). The political parties set the news agenda. A mentality of secrecy among elites was part and parcel of what is commonly referred to as "pacification politics." Elites withheld information from their constituencies in a "conscious" effort to keep them "quiet and internally divided." The politicians of the different pillars worked together to hammer out compromises which were sold to the public (or better: publics) with the crucial assistance of the pillarised media. Journalism during pillarisation has been aptly characterised as a "lapdog" (Bardoel et al. 2002, 89-90).

Broersma criticises the liberal version of media history. He argues that it caricaturises pillarised journalism by exaggerating journalists' obedience to politics. According to him, the presentist and normative nature of the denouncements of pillarised journalism has impeded a thorough understanding of its style and historical context. Therefore he pleads (2011, 18) "for a more nuanced history of journalism that takes reflective styles of journalism seriously …" Broersma's criticism of the liberal perspective has merit but is incomplete. He neglects to address the possibility that its proponents are wrong not just in their perhaps overly vehement denunciations of pillarised journalism, but also in their assumption that its successor, professional journalism, has adequately performed the task of watchdog of democracy. Additionally, it is not inevitable that noting the flaws of pillarised journalism by liberal (or radical) standards leads to a myopic view that only sees the negatives of that form of journalism, although firm proponents of professionalism and objectivity will be particularly susceptible to succumbing to such blanket denunciations.

The prevailing position among scholars (not to mention journalists; e.g. Oosterbaan and Wansink 2008) is that since the crumbling of the pillars, and at least until quite recently, journalists have reported independently and objectively on the elites to which they are no longer beholden. For instance, Huub Wijfjes (2004) characterises journalism after depillarisation as "autonomous-critical." According to Kees Brants, politics still set the agenda during election campaigns but journalism "emancipated" itself. It started to follow politics "critically," out of concern for democracy (Bardoel et al. 2002, 90). Indeed, depillarisation changed journalism for the better – but only in some respects and to a limited extent. Professionalism and objectivity became paramount. For all their drawbacks (Mindich 1998; Luyendijk 2009) they assisted journalists in emancipating themselves from overt political constraints. The liberal notion is so seductive then because it contains more than a grain of truth. At the same time it is problematic because it rests on the assumption that journalism grounded in professionalism and objectivity and institutionalised in an oligopolistic media industry provides a viable basis for independent journalism. Much scholarship has been devoted to debunk this notion (McChesney 1999; 2004; Herman and Chomsky 2002; Bagdikian 2004). Moreover, the position that journalism since depillarisation has been, in effect, autonomous and critical has little evidence to support it. Content analyses generally show the opposite, namely an institutionally-oriented journalism that primarily serves the interests of political and economic elites (below). Because of their emphasis on the problematic aspects of journalism during pillarisation, the proponents of the liberal version of media history underestimate the negatives of the market-driven, professional journalism that replaced it.

The following section discusses Dutch media history from the thirties onwards with the aim of demonstrating the viability of a radical reading. The focus is on the period after pillarisation, because the liberal narrative's main weakness is its contention that journalism since then has adequately performed its role. An important reason for nonetheless discussing the media during pillarisation is the insight this provides in the systematic policies of marginalisation of leftwing voices. Such marginalisation constitutes a central component of a radical reading and has arguably exerted a lasting impact on the Dutch media landscape. An additional reason is to demonstrate the considerable extent to which the pillarised media were already subject to market forces.

Dutch Media History: A Critical Look

The Press and ANP before WWII

The history of the national press agency (ANP) supports the assertion that Dutch journalism catered to the powers that be. In 1934 newspaper publishers established the ANP in order to terminate the influence of the existing commercial agencies. Another reason for setting up the ANP was the sentiment that the Netherlands ought to boast its own national press agency. Such an agency was considered to be in the national interest, although the ANP was to be independent of the state (Baggerman and Hemels 1985, 76). The ANP's position in the media landscape was precarious. The pillarised media lived in continual fear that the ANP-news would be "biased." They therefore put much pressure on the agency to remain "objective," for instance by scrupulously providing roughly equal time to news about each of the pillars. The result was that the ANP-news came overwhelmingly from official sources and exhibited a conservative bias, but that its tone was as depoliticised and neutral as possible. The ties between the ANP and the government were "very close." The ANP gladly functioned as the preferred messenger boy of the government and willingly submitted to censorship (Koedijk 1996, 32). During WWII the ANP collaborated so thoroughly with the German occupiers that it earned the widely-used nickname Adolf's New Parrot. In the decades following WWII the ANP still openly prided itself on its "exquisite" relationships with the royal family, the diplomatic community and the government and other large organisations (Koedijk 1996, 32-33).

Pillarisation notwithstanding, the newspapers were a "commercial product" (Bardoel et al. 2002, 363). The diverging commercial interests of the Catholic newspapers for instance overrode their ideological affinity (Broersma 2000, 563-565). Moreover, much of the press never aligned with a pillar. Between the world wars the "neutral" press controlled about half of the total circulation (Wijfjes 2004). The neutral press's "undertone" was "rather conservative," presumably a reflection of its commercial character and its owners' interests (Kelly et al. 2004, 145). The authorities did not have much to fear from the press, "at the most a little." Among the press corps "there existed in general also a great respect for the [justice] authorities." Attempts to expose wrongs in politics and the court system were the "exception" (Wijfjes 2004, 173-175).

The Press and the ANP since the Seventies

Still in 1970 the ANP strongly identified with the interests of the Dutch state. Press releases by the government's pr-department were by definition worthy of an article. In an interview managing editor Joop Baggerman denied that the agency was subservient to the government. But in the same breath he affirmed the ANP's credulous attitude towards the state by adding that governmental spokespersons "of course" would not lie to him. He revealed that they would sometimes inform him that they could not answer a certain question. Their explanation as to why would, again "of course," be off the record. It was ANP-policy to never publish articles based on sources that wished to remain anonymous, with one exception: when the source in question was governmental. ANP's coverage tended to focus on events that affirmed nationalist values, like a trip abroad by the queen. The coverage ignored the activities of social movements and other progressive organisations, even mildly reformist ones. Activists often complained about this neglect, referring to the ANP as the "press agency of the status quo." Baggerman admitted that his agency was "rather conservative," adding that investigative journalism was just not something that the ANP did (Van Westerloo 1970). Research on the ANP is scant, but it is clear that since the seventies the agency more and more abided by the commercial logic. In the late nineties its owners, the newspapers, were "acting increasingly like shareholders," treating the ANP as a business like any other. In response the ANP adopted a "profit center mentality" (Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen 2000, 91). In 2003 the private equity firms NPM Capital and GIMV acquired a majority stake in the news agency (ANP 2012).

Investigative journalism spiked in the seventies, which was also arguably the most progressive period in Dutch politics. Depillarisation was well underway and full-fledged market-driven journalism had yet to emerge. In this transitional period journalists produced "a large number of articles and programs on corruption, fraud, abuses and other socially unacceptable behavior by businessmen [and] politicians ..." (RMO 2003, 84). They reported from the perspective of the citizen, with the explicit aim of contributing to the emancipation of the disadvantaged (Kooyman 1977). Yet in the eighties this citizen perspective degenerated in a trope aimed at personalising the news in order to bind readers to the paper (RMO 2003, 85). The seventies also witnessed the coming of age of celebrity and gossip journalism. As a result of the increasingly commercial nature of the media, fluff became more prevalent (RMO 2003, 84). Even the quality media started to feature "news" about the private affairs of public figures on their pages and in their programs.

Throughout the twentieth century market imperatives contributed to the dismantling of many leftwing publications, like the social-democratic newspaper *Het Vrije Volk* in the early seventies (Hamelink 1978, 25; cf. Curran 1978; Rogier et al. 1985). Cees Hamelink (1978, 107-108) concluded that in the mid-seventies information provision was first and foremost a commercial undertaking. Fulfilling the information needs and rights of the citizen were not the primary aim of the media industry, which constituted a significant part of the economy. What might be termed a Dutch media monopoly emerged; it endures until the present day (Dutch Media Authority 2011). In 1975 three companies controlled 97 percent of the national newspaper market (Hamelink 1979, 293). Hamelink (1979, 296) estimated that "over 50 percent of the total production and distribution of communications goods and services is controlled by some 30 corporations. These corporations have a number of interrelationships with each other and with other large industrial and financial firms, by way of investments, interlocking directorates or joint-ventures." Hamelink characterised the picture of the world that arose from the news:

> *Important are … only the countries of the North-Atlantic Treaty [NATO]. The official spokespersons of those countries describe what is happening in the world. Important events are mostly those which concern politicians, soldiers, and criminals. The world revolves around (white) men. Women are housewives. Colored people are problems. The world is a kaleidoscope of mostly negative incidents that are all completely unrelated to each other* (Hamelink 1978, 127).

Hamelink's description fits with a political-economic diagnosis of what is typically wrong with the content provided by professional journalists in a commercial news system: an overreliance on official sources, a lack of historical and sociological context and marginalisation of the needs and views of minorities and the underprivileged. Indeed, Teun Van Dijk (1983) concluded that the Dutch news was rife with racism.

Content analyses confirm that in the seventies the capitalist nature of the media and the professionalisation of journalism resulted in persistent biases. Harry Van den Berg and Kees Van der Veer found that the press framed a strike in 1972 at a plant owned by Akzo-Nobel in the same way as the corporation. The press too regarded the loss of jobs as "inevitable." The researchers (1986, 503) blamed the institutional orientation of the reporting on the requirements of "objectivity, impartiality and balance." The reporting affirmed the authority of union leaders, corporation spokespeople and government sources, and marginalised voices from the union base. The ideological spectrum of the reporting was limited on the one end by a frame which legitimized Akzo-Nobel's policy and on the other by a more progressive frame, which emphasised that the laid-off workers should be compensated. An additional common frame was that of consensus: a plea to corporation and unions to work out a compromise (Van den Berg and Van der Veer 1986, 504-505).

Only two newspapers deviated from these frames. The widely-read, populist-conservative *De Telegraaf* unequivocally took the side of Akzo-Nobel and the marginal communist paper *De Waarheid* reported overtly from the perspective of the union base. The latter paper was alone in questioning the necessity of the lay-offs, framing the story as a consequence of the need for Akzo-Nobel to maximize profits (Van den Berg and Van der Veer 1986, 506). Preliminary research into the reporting on union actions in 1980 confirmed the researchers' expectations that the press's treatment of strikes was becoming (even) less sympathetic, because of the political climate's shift towards neoliberal notions of free markets and privatisation and the concomitant decline of unionism (Van den Berg and Van der Veer 1986, 509-510).

The coverage of the Akzo-Nobel strike on the public broadcaster's daily news show was "characterized by the fact that official informants of respectable bodies are allowed to speak their mind" and put "a relatively strong emphasis … upon views of the affair favourable towards employers." The current affairs shows of the pillarised broadcasters presented a view of the strike that could be characterised as "ambiguously favourable towards employees, with their desperate complaints, emotional accounts, etc." (Van den Berg et al. 1984, 45). Van den Berg and Van der Veer (1986, 502) speculated that labour reporting in the Dutch media frequently employed a frame that regarded the economic system beyond discussion. The media's favourable attitude towards the interests of capital also shone through in the negative reporting on Salvador Allende's reforms in Chile (Hamelink 1978, 123).

Extensive research is lacking, but there can hardly be any doubt that throughout the Cold War the Dutch news exhibited a distinct bias in favour of Washington. The press, "imprisoned" as it was "in a strongly pro-American and anti-Russian frame of reference," reported uncritically on racism in the United States (Roholl 2008). Apart from the communist newspaper the press mostly ignored the issue, whereas polls showed that the Dutch population was highly critical of racism. After the seminal court case Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954 the press paid more attention to racism in the US, but continued to downplay the problem, for instance by framing it as a southern instead of an American issue. The events in 1957 in Little Rock, Arkansas, where federal troops enforced the desegregation of education, augured in a more critical stance, but the US retained its privileged status in the Dutch press as "friend and ally" (Roholl 2008). The reporting on the war in Vietnam, supported by the Dutch government, was likely also biased towards the official position of the US, especially during the Johnson-presidency (Werkgroep Perskoncentratie 1972, 156). Much of the criticism that was present in the media might well have been procedural, that is to say focused on tactics and not ends (Van Benthem Van den Berg 1967, 18-20; Van der Maar 2007, 79-81). The Western-European press, including three Dutch papers, by and large adopted Washington's stance towards elections in Central-America in the eighties, despite the abundance of credible, alternative narratives provided by for instance independent election observers (Rietman 1988).

The Decline of Public Service Broadcasting

The pillarised broadcasting system, consisting of private organisations without monetary aims that represented the main ideological groups in society, was a unique creation. For those unwilling to leave broadcasting to the state or the market, the Dutch model showed that alternatives existed. Until 1940, the broadcasters were exclusively funded with voluntary contributions from individual citizens (Nieuwenhuis 1992, 205). According to Jo Bardoel (2003, 93), the "direct access of social movements to radio and television and a public broadcasting system based on separate associations with ideologically or religiously organised members" resulted in "a diversity of content and an involvement of citizens hardly known anywhere else in the world." Nonetheless, it should be remembered that the broadcasting system also excluded groups, especially on the left. Through strong "political-authoritarian repression … exercised by the confessional political elite" in the interwar period, the "revolutionary socialists" were prevented from airing radio programs, although they "scrupulously adhered to the formal requirements for getting a broadcast license." Not just the revolutionary socialists were thwarted. The government succeeded in excluding "all extremist" voices from the airwaves (De Winter 2004, 73).

In 1930 the government instituted radio censorship because the VARA, the broadcaster connected to the social-democratic political party SDAP, was seen as dangerous. Censorship was made stricter in 1933; polarising items on politics were prohibited. Prime-minister Hendrik Colijn threatened the VARA with taking away its air time altogether. Socialist hymns were prohibited and the broadcaster was taken off the air for one day. The result was that the VARA lost its radicalism and became more "pragmatic." The other broadcasters too became more careful. Political journalism on the radio, which was scant anyway, lost "all [its] sharp edges and all spontaneity" (Wijfjes 2004, 157). In 1934 the laws that prohibited insulting authorities, population groups, God, the royal family or friendly heads of state were again strengthened. This led to many minor convictions and to multiple confiscations of presses on which communist or national-socialist papers were printed (Wijfjes 2004, 208). The censorship commission, which remained in place until WWII, prohibited more than a thousand programs completely or partially. The VARA was by far the most common victim: almost 700 times (Bardoel et al. 1975, 25).

The leading commercial newsreel producer featured the SDAP only in exchange for the purchase of one of its films (Hogenkamp 1984). Commercial news reels avoided party politics, foreign events, and controversial issues and riots. Much of the coverage concerned "national" and "neutral" topics that "were of interest to everyone": the royal family, human interest stories and celebrities (Wijfjes 2004, 153). Out of frustration over workers' depiction in the commercial newsreels, the labour movement attempted to produce its own newsreels (Hogenkamp 1984).

Policies geared towards excluding voices from the left remained in place after WWII. Until 1965, the government denied the communists the opportunity to address voters about upcoming elections on radio and television, although they held seats in parliament. Remarkably, in the mid-fifties it was decided that the extreme-right NOU-party would be allowed to propagandise on radio and television. Protests against this double standard put the government in a bind. Fortunately for the government it turned out that one of the NOU-candidates for a seat in parliament was a collaborator during the war and as a punishment had been stripped of his right to run for public office. The government now had a 'legitimate' (not a direct quote) reason to keep the party off the airwaves (Jos Van Dijk 2004, 77-78).

Pressures exerted by the business community for the establishment of commercial broadcasting led to a political controversy in the Netherlands, which in turn resulted in the parliamentary coalition breaking up in 1965. Legislation adopted in 1967 continued to outlaw commercial broadcasting, but a limited amount of commercials was now permitted on public television. Some evidence suggests that the introduction of commercials went against the public's wishes. In 1962 a prospective commercial broadcaster, OTEM, commissioned a study on people's attitudes towards commercial broadcasting. From OTEM's perspective the results were disappointing. The public preferred the existing situation to commercial exploitation of the airwaves and held the opinion that if commercials were introduced, the revenues should be used to cover the cost of the production of programs, not to make a profit (Bardoel et al. 1975, 37-38).

The 1967 legislation opened up the broadcasting system to new organisations. This change proved especially beneficial to politically neutral broadcasters that focused on providing entertainment. Successful new broadcasters like the TROS and Veronica courted large audiences. 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, 82). The legislative changes resulted in a "concealed form of commercialization" of the broadcasting system (Kelly et al. 2004, 148; Kooyman 1977). The enforced competition between the broadcasting organisations for paying members (the more members, the more airtime) negatively affected serious current affairs broadcasting. The progressive role that television journalists had played in the process of depillarisation faded out in the seventies. Television lost its watchdog function. In the words of journalist Herman Wigbold: "There was a growing affinity between the new power elite – more open, more democratic, more tolerant than the old power elite but still an elite – and the television journalists" (Smith 1979, 227-228). Citizen participation in the broadcasting organisations disappeared (Bardoel 2003, 83). Hamelink (1979, 296) concluded that

> *… Dutch public media generally shows more similarity than differentiation … For almost half of their information flow they relay messages that were manufactured and packaged according to the tastes of the average USA supermarket consumer. What they produce nationally – with important though marginal exceptions – tends to have the same orientation: mainly guided by the expected exchange-value of the informational commodity. The implication is that even in the Netherlands with traditionally strongly divisive political and religious identifications – on which a (theoretically) pluralist media system was built – public communications is characterized by its devotion to the politics of the "global shopping center."*

The media law of 1988 still banned commercial broadcasting but the writing was already on the wall. Again the business community piled on the pressure, pointing to European Union guidelines that mandated the liberalisation of media markets. The first commercial television station aimed at the Dutch market started broadcasting from Luxemburg in 1989 and thereby, through a legislative loophole, broke open the market (RMO 2003, 80). Commercial radio gained access to the cable in the late eighties. In 1992, the ether too was opened to commercial exploitation (Bakker and Scholten 2009, 112-113). Since, serious journalism on the commercial channels has been conspicuous only by its absence, with the exception of one daily news show.

With the advent of commercial broadcasting the pressure on the public broadcasting organisations to pay even more attention to ratings increased. The public broadcasters are undoubtedly more concerned about ratings than fulfilling the "Enlightenment-inspired cultural-pedagogic mission" that constitutes their societal justification (Kelly et al. 2004, 152). An authoritative report lamented this development, arguing that commercialisation did not just threaten the press but also the public broadcaster. It would be better if ratings played a "much less dominant role" in determining the behaviour of the public broadcaster, the report argued; for public service broadcasting should not just be independent of the government but also of commercial interests (RMO 2003, 45, 48).

The Dutch Media in the 1990s

This section summarises scholarship and research that demonstrates that in the nineties commercial imperatives were the dominant driver of the Dutch media and that news content was frequently biased in favour of political and economic elites. Peter Vasterman and Onno Aerden (1995, 127) noted that much research showed that "the news is dominated by professional, institutional sources." They (1995, 64, 70) argued that commercial imperatives, although often indirectly, exert a significant influence on journalistic practices, for instance by mandating that publications clearly define their target audience. Media companies were navigating the thin line between safeguarding their independence and making sure they receive enough revenue, for advertisers prefer publications that are not too critical of the consumer society. Vasterman and Aerden (1995, 77) documented instances of capital's direct interference with journalistic content. For instance, when the cinema chain Cannon threatened *Het Parool* with withdrawing its advertising, the newspaper gave in to the company's demand, namely that columnist Theo Van Gogh be let go. The controversial filmmaker had written something that displeased the company. Former publisher and journalist Jan Greven (2004, 43) admitted that "in some newspaper companies … economic considerations … directly influence … the journalistic process."

Vasterman (2004) demonstrated that commercialisation and competition were important causes of a spike in media hypes. The media seemed more terrified than ever to miss 'the' news and therefore often moved as a pack. Because of developments like the speeding up of the news cycle, journalists had less and less time to check their facts. The rise to prominence of infotainment programs put pressure on the serious media to also cover the latest break-up of the newest starlet. Mirjam Prenger and Frank Van Vree (2003) showed that at the dawn of the twenty-first century the commercial logic held editors-in-chief of newspapers in a tight grip. Management had made them responsible for circulation, profits and other issues which traditionally were the prerogative of the business side. Prenger and Van Vree also found that in the Netherlands pr-practitioners outnumbered journalists.

Mark Deuze (2002) found that the typical Dutch journalist at the start of the twenty-first century was a white male, about forty years old, with a university or professional degree. Politically he considered himself leftwing. He valued a skeptical attitude towards big business and the government and he valued speedy reporting and providing analysis and context. He regarded himself as operating "free of commercial pressures," but his "main goal" was "to reach and maintain as many subscribers as possible." His contact with ethnic minorities was "negligible" and he hardly if at all communicated with his audience. He was "definitely an ambitious (or even: pretentious) professional" (Deuze 2002, 92-94). In 2000 scholars at the University of Nijmegen concluded that the media had become part of the establishment and that ethnic minorities felt that they were routinely represented in a negative way; in other words, that Dutch journalism was "white" (Evers 2008, 36, 39). Jo Bardoel and Leen d'Haenens (2004, 190) argued that "… journalism is evidently more successful in explaining the policies of the 'elite' to the citizen, but is clearly less successful when it comes to explaining the needs and requirements of the citizens to the political elite. In this sense, the media professionals – who themselves come primarily from the social-economic middle class – have obvious shortcomings." Media reporting was deemed to impede rather than foster citizenship (RMO 2003, 97).

The daily news program on the public broadcaster exhibited an institutional bias, according to Philip Van Praag Jr. During election campaigns the program focused almost exclusively on the political parties that were likely to take part in the future governing coalition. Van Praag found that "Small parties and big oppositional parties which probably will not be part of the next cabinet are hardly deemed interesting … The editors apparently do not regard it as their task to inform the voters as best as possible about the possible choices …" (Bardoel et al. 2002, 315).

The reporting on foreign affairs continued to display a systematic pro-Western bias. A quality newspaper's coverage of the first and second Intifadas exhibited a bias in favour of the Israeli version of events (Deprez et al. 2011; also Luyendijk 2009). Current affairs and news programs on both the public and commercial broadcasters were also found to be biased in favour of Israel (Hamelink 2004, 45-46). The press reported on the war in Kosovo in 1999 in a way which "marginalized" public opinion and opponents of the war (De Landtsheer et al. 2002, 428). The coverage had a distinct pro-NATO flavour. The press, including quality dailies *de Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad*, depicted the war "in a very one-sided, polarising way," with all the blame being assigned to the Serbs (De Landtsheer et al. 2002, 426). In contrast to the British and Italian press, which provided some room for oppositional perspectives, the Dutch press shut out counter-voices to the pro-NATO narrative (De Landtsheer et al. 2002, 426). The reporting on the Kosovo-war by the public broadcaster was also clearly biased in favour of the Kosovo-Albanians, the party in the conflict favoured by NATO. The media accepted as fact NATO's public justifications for interfering in the conflict (Hamelink 2004, 47).

Another study criticised the reporting on the civil wars in former-Yugoslavia, particularly the genocide in Srebrenica, which was preceded by the withdrawal of a Dutch contingent of UN-soldiers (Wieten 2002). A study done by *de Volkskrant* concerning its own reporting on the Srebrenica-massacre found that opinions and preconceived notions had overshadowed fact-finding. The newspaper had depended too much on official, governmental sources in The Hague, the seat of government (Hamelink 2004, 47-51). After the murder of rightwing politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002, *Volkskrant*-journalists concluded that they had not done enough fact-finding and that their reporting had lacked depth (Hamelink 2004, 56). Finally, the press coverage in the run-up to the 2003 war with Iraq did little to undermine Washington's mendacious narrative, whereas a firm majority of the population opposed that illegal war (Walgrave and Verhulst 2005; Vliegenthart and Schröder 2010; Commission Davids 2010; Bergman forthcoming). Since, the crisis in Dutch journalism has only deepened (Commission Brinkman 2009; Ummelen 2009; Bergman 2013).

Conclusion

James Curran's radical perspective constitutes a fruitful tool for understanding the historical trajectory of the media in the Netherlands (and possibly also in other continental European countries), because it avoids the trap of the liberal perspective, which assumes that professional, market-driven journalism on the whole serves the public interest. Until the sixties the Dutch media were subservient to political interests. The primacy of politics was exchanged for that of commerce. This development led to some improvements in journalism. By adhering to the principles of professionalism and objectivity, journalism attained a substantial degree of autonomy from politics, certainly in comparison to the age of pillarisation. Yet in the process of semi-emancipation from politics, journalism became more and more beholden to commercial interests, which were already powerful before WWII. A radical reading of Dutch media history coincides with a liberal reading by agreeing that pillarised journalism served the powers that be. But it starkly departs from the liberal perspective by pointing out that the available research and scholarship make plausible that Dutch journalism since the seventies has suffered from the same structural flaws as its professional, market-driven Anglo-American counterparts, although likely not to the same degree.

This paper points to a puzzling paradox: Why do historical interpretations of the Dutch media adopt a liberal framework in the face of so much evidence pointing to the viability of a radical reading? Evidence, moreover, that has been presented by the same scholars who reject a radical reading. There are no clear-cut answers, but one can speculate. Characteristic of the scholarship is that it has been unable to transcend the paradigm of pillarisation vs. professionalism: Journalism during pillarisation was obviously flawed, the professional journalism that succeeded it was an improvement, and therefore by implication also adequate on its own terms. It should also be remembered that market-driven journalism comes is many degrees. In the Netherlands it ascended gradually (certainly compared to other countries) and only truly came into its own in the nineties. It should also be kept in mind that the trend of specialisation in academia has resulted in fragmented scholarship that is less likely to look beyond the boundaries of a single discipline. Another possible reason for the too positive evaluation of modern Dutch journalism might be that it compares favourably to its British and American counterparts. What has been lacking from the scholarship (the modest political-economic strand in the seventies being the exception that proves the rule) has been the willingness to measure modern Dutch journalism by a normative standard that transcends narrow temporal or geographic comparisons (pillarisation vs. professional journalism; the Netherlands vs. the US). For all their perceptiveness and exemplary scholarship, scholars have analysed the Dutch media from within a social-democratic framework infused with a strong dose of moral relativism. WWII and the Cold War taught many to distrust any and all kinds of "extremism." Scholars' prevailing political centrism can be gleaned from the virtual absence in the scholarship of the recognition of the deep and current crisis in Dutch democracy, which is nonetheless well-documented (Van Westerloo 2003; Van Doorn 2009; Schinkel 2012). This crisis puts the lie to claims that the Dutch media, by upholding the "almost undemocratic" (De Rek 2012) status quo, have served 'democracy' in any meaningful definition of the term. An attitude of tolerance and relativism and arguably nationalist sentiments undergird much of the scholarship. Though such an attitude brings into sharp focus certain aspects of reality, it tends to exclude the viability of a radical reading of Dutch media history from its purview.

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