

THE DUTCH MEDIA MONOPOLY: A CRITICAL-HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF  
JOURNALISM IN THE NETHERLANDS

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## **Abstract**

Taking the American tradition of political economy of the news media as a starting point, this dissertation examines Dutch journalism throughout the twentieth century, with a focus on the present. The argument is that the conclusion drawn by American scholars like Ben Bagdikian, Robert McChesney, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, namely that the news media's content is biased in favor of elite interests, also holds for the Netherlands. The first part of this dissertation establishes a critical-historical framework that predicts and contextualizes this persistent bias. Subsidiary arguments made are the viability of a "radical" take on Dutch media history (following James Curran's typology) and that Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model explains not only the American media's performance but also the Dutch media's, although not as forcefully. The second part of this dissertation consists of three content analyses that show that this pro-elite bias exists up to the present. Examined are the coverage of the run-up to the war in Iraq in 2003, the coverage of the US troop withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, and press reactions to a proposal in 2011 by the Greek prime-minister to hold a referendum on the euro crisis. The content analyses show that the coverage indeed privileged elite perspectives.

To the people who have made me who I am:  
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And to:  
my friends Ian and Rich  
Without you I would still have written this dissertation  
but life would have sucked

In memory of Alice, 1980-2013

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Those of us who have kept up with critical scholarship on the commercial media system in the United States will be aware that the strongly nefarious influence of commercialism on the quality of news content has by now been accepted as fact by many scholars and is often regarded as a major contributor to the current crisis in journalism in that country (McChesney and Pickard 2011). What were once considered radical works, for instance Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent* and Ben Bagdikian's editions of the *Media Monopoly*, have become part of the canon of media scholars, although they are by no means uncritically accepted by all (McChesney and Scott 2004: 2). The basic points made by Herman and Chomsky are accepted by most scholars of the coverage of foreign affairs, even if they often do not cite the Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model explicitly (Herring and Robinson 2003). Political economist Robert McChesney (2007: 252, note 135) has argued that, although Bagdikian is a liberal and Herman and Chomsky are radicals, their analyses of the media are quite similar. McChesney and Ben Scott (2004) show that the single most common criticism of the American media was always that it was commercial, and thus biased towards the interests of commercial and political elites.

Their commercial underpinnings have given the American media a class bias, as Upton Sinclair already argued right after WWI in *The Brass Check*.<sup>1</sup> Often in unconscious but also in conscious ways, commercial media regularly operate as a vehicle for class propaganda. The professional media often cover elite debates well. But when there is no debate, for instance

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<sup>1</sup> Sinclair (2002: 113) praised Dutch journalists profusely because they did not crucify him publicly for getting a divorce (in the Netherlands). They ignored the private matter, which had become a public scandal in the United States. Indeed, for a long time Dutch journalism resisted gossip and celebrity news. That started to change in the seventies. The nefarious development gained steam in the nineties partly as a result of the advent of commercial television (chapters 2 and 5).

because elites are united (for or against the interests of the population) then the professional media are silent also and fail to fulfill their perhaps most important task: to serve democracy and the public good by acting as a check on corporate and government power. Lance Bennett's indexing theory (1990) shows exactly this: news in the United States generally reflects the range of the debates among policymakers and not or only marginally the concerns and interests of the public. When elites are in consensus on an issue, it will not become a hot news item and perspectives which are not propagated by elites will remain marginal to coverage.

In short, there exists a large and convincing body of scholarship documenting the nefarious influence of political and economic interests on the quality of journalism in the United States. This rich political-economic tradition of media (Mosco 1996; McChesney 2007) can serve as an excellent starting point to examine other media systems which are predominantly commercial in nature and which, as is often said, are in the process of converging into a global model of journalism and a transnational media system which more and more resemble the Anglo-American models (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Despite the existence of a strong public broadcaster in Great Britain, it has been forcefully argued that British journalism too suffers from persistent biases which favor elite interests (Glasgow Media Group 1977, 1980, 1982, 1985; Edwards and Cromwell 2006; Curran 1985, 2002; Doherty 2005; Davies 2009; Robinson et al. 2010).

From the coast of England it is but a short trip to the Netherlands. This dissertation addresses the question whether the conclusions about a persistent class bias in Anglo-American journalism also apply on the other side of the North Sea. Is the crisis in Anglo-American journalism mirrored in the Netherlands? Or have the Dutch news media up until now been (relatively) shielded from the detrimental effects of private ownership and dependence on

advertisers, as a result perhaps of an indeed unique and by and large publicly funded broadcasting system?

The notion that the Dutch media clearly exhibit the same flaws in the reporting of especially foreign affairs and macro-economic issues as their Anglo-American counterparts – and moreover to a comparable degree – is by no means accepted among Dutch scholars and other media commentators (chapter 6). A coherent political-economic perspective is absent from Dutch journalism studies. A recent inventory of the field shows that hardly any research has been done on “economic developments, the influence of commercialism and the public relations industry on journalism.” Studies that map the changing constellations of media ownership over time are scant too. Some studies do mention “competition and commercialization as an independent variable to explain specific content,” but “the existence of market-driven journalism in the Netherlands remains [...] for the time being an assumption” (Brants and Vasterman 2010: 213). This dissertation argues that a political-economic perspective is crucial for understanding Dutch journalism and the crisis it is currently in.

### **A comparative perspective**

Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini’s *Comparing Media Systems* spells out in great detail and with a lot of insight how media systems in Europe and the United States differ from each other. They regard the Netherlands as belonging to the Democratic Corporatist Model, which they argue consists of traits that are often thought to be incompatible, namely a commercial media industry linked closely to politics; a journalism that is professional and objective, and partisan at the same time; and a liberal tradition of press freedom that co-exists with relatively strong state intervention in the media (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 74). In contrast, the Liberal



Model, which is prevalent in the US and Britain, is characterized by a minimum of state intervention (especially in the US) and a high degree of professionalization. Earlier than in the Democratic Corporatist Model and to a higher degree, journalism in the Liberal countries emancipated itself from politics and became market-driven. Commentary is more prevalent in the Democratic Corporatist Model, whereas Liberal journalists focus more on providing “information” (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 75).

Yet the question needs to be addressed to what extent the differences between national media systems as catalogued by Hallin and Mancini result in differences in the content of the coverage of, especially, important political and economic issues. If not only the American press but also the Dutch press covered the run-up to the war in Iraq uncritically, then this would indicate that the differences between the two media systems are less consequential than Hallin and Mancini appear to claim they are. If considerable similarities (i.e. the same flaws) are found in American and Dutch reporting, then this strengthens the argument that the Dutch media system shows a strong trend of convergence towards the Liberal Model as found in Britain and the United States; perhaps even to the extent that the differences between media systems and journalistic styles that do exist, have become quite insignificant.

Of course, the Netherlands are not the United States. The extent to which the commercial foundations of the Dutch media are as nefarious an influence on the quality of the news flow as they are in the United States is therefore debatable. A number of differences between the two countries makes that it will not do to simply transpose the conclusions regarding the American media to the Dutch context. Two differences appear especially relevant. For one, the spectrum of legitimate political opinion in the Netherlands is broader, especially on the left. In principle, “objective” journalists will consider the small leftwing political parties in the Netherlands to be

legitimate sources, whereas the US lacks such a left side to its “legitimate” political spectrum. Second, the Dutch public broadcaster, which is mandated to report in the public interest, is much more prominent and better funded than PBS in the United States (although not than the BBC). Taking these two differences into account, one would expect to see more issues reported from a progressive perspective in the Dutch media than in the American media.

Quite regularly in Dutch scholarship, the news media are compared to their British or American counterparts. The general tenor of these comparisons is that “it is not as bad in the Netherlands” as it is “over there.” This might be so. It is even plausible that this is the case, although such a broad statement is rather difficult to prove empirically. A comparative perspective can be enlightening but it can also obscure certain aspects of reality. In practice, the conclusion that “things are not as bad over here,” often functions as a defense mechanism. The effect is that critical analysis of one’s own society disappears from purview. But does it truly matter if the American news media are indeed worse than the Dutch media if it can be shown that both are severely flawed?

Although a comparative perspective has obvious strengths and benefits (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 302), such an approach can be dangerous in yet another way. Critics of commercial media systems tend to contrast these with media systems in Western-Europe and Scandinavia that have a strong public component. For instance, Radio Netherlands has been called the “jewel of international public broadcasting” (McChesney and Nichols 2010: 110). There can be no question that in certain respects public broadcasting systems have served publics better than commercial ones (for instance by paying less attention to celebrities). Indeed, the problems with commercial media systems can be clarified by contrasting them to the more successful public systems. The danger is that comparisons like these might (intentionally or not)

convey the impression that the solution to the international crisis in journalism can be solved by adopting a broadcasting system similar to the Dutch system, while leaving intact the commercial environment it operates in. In fact, although it is plausible that the news on the Dutch public broadcaster is more informative than the news on commercial American television, the possibility should not be ignored that the news on the Dutch public broadcaster is often severely flawed, too, if only because it depends to a high degree on copy from news agencies like Reuters, AP and their Dutch counterpart ANP. Hallin and Mancini astutely observe that

*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 [which includes the Netherlands] – 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; chapter 2)*

The Dutch public broadcaster might report more critically on Washington than the American media. Yet it remains to be seen whether the news about the Dutch government and Dutch businesses on the public broadcaster is all that critical. Before its budget got slashed, Radio Netherlands might have been the “jewel of international public broadcasting,” but content analyses might very well show that its journalism too is often severely flawed. In general, a strong public broadcaster might be preferable to a completely commercial media system, but in

the end the proof is in the pudding. That is to say, whether public broadcasting systems do indeed serve the public can only be determined by content analyses.

This dissertation is not concerned with establishing whether Dutch journalism is indeed better (or worse) than Anglo-American journalism. It does not highlight the differences but rather the similarities between the Netherlands and the United States. It is concerned with establishing that the same fundamental problems that plague the latter can also be observed in the former.

### **Normative perspective**

This dissertation measures the performance of the Dutch media by a normative yardstick. McChesney and Nichols well summarize what journalism should be:

1. *It must provide a rigorous account of people who are in power and people who wish to be in power, in the government, corporate and nonprofit sectors.*
2. *It must regard the information needs of all citizens as legitimate.*
3. *It must have a plausible method to separate truth from lies, or at least to prevent liars from being unaccountable and leading nations into catastrophes – particularly wars, economic crises and communal discord.*
4. *It must produce a wide range of informed opinions on the most important issues of our times – not only the transitory concerns of the moment, but also challenges that loom on the horizon. These issues cannot be determined primarily by what people in power are talking about. Journalism must provide the nation's early warning system, so problems can be anticipated,*

*studied, debated and addressed before they grow to crisis proportions.* (McChesney and Nichols 2010: 163-4; also Kovach and Rosenstiel 2007)

McChesney and Nichols argue for an activist news media, for a news media that sheds some of the restrictions of “objective” journalism in favor of investigative reporting from a human rights perspective and concern about the public welfare. Some might object that journalism thus defined can contribute to cynicism about public life and even the rise of extremist political movements, especially on the right, for its emphasis is on exposing wrongdoings; it is essentially adversarial. One might counter by arguing that much more is gained than lost by defining journalism in such a way. A journalism that does not continually address the dangers and abuses of concentrated power might be much more dangerous to society than a journalism that holds back out of fear of fomenting disenchantment and radicalism. Indeed, it is the task of journalism to foment disenchantment with the current political and economic systems in Western countries, as these are so patently and structurally unfair and undemocratic.

The here adopted approach that compares the reality of the news industry and content to an ideal (what journalism should do) is also not without its pitfalls. There is no doubt that any media system will always fall short. Yet we can only know where we are when we know where we should be (going). Journalism itself is unavoidably normative, as it is inextricably tied to the values of democracy. As James Carey (2000) wrote, “No journalism, no democracy; but, equally, no democracy, no journalism. Journalism and democracy are names for the same thing.” This dissertation thus evaluates journalism by its own normative yardstick.

## **Dissertation aim and structure**

A scholarly justification for emphasizing the class bias in reporting that results from the commercial underpinnings of the Dutch media is that Dutch journalism studies has only to a limited extent acknowledged the nefarious influence of commercialism and has hardly been concerned with making this case on the content level (Brants and Vasterman 2010). This dissertation takes the conclusions drawn by American communications scholars regarding the strongly nefarious influence of commercialism on the quality of journalism as a starting point and aims to show that these conclusions also can be drawn about the Dutch media system, despite the indeed in some ways benign presence of the public broadcaster and despite other (e.g. political) differences between the United States and the Netherlands.

This dissertation aims to resuscitate the radical perspective on the Dutch media as voiced by critics in the forties and especially the seventies by presenting evidence that shows that by and large the Dutch media have not and do not serve the public interest, but rather the interests of their financiers, the advertisers, and owners, and by extension of political elites. This perspective is radical in the sense that it explains the behavior of the media, specifically media content (the micro-level), by pointing to the structural features of the media (the macro-level). It is also radical in its suggestion that only structural changes in the media system will lead to better journalism (McChesney and Scott 2004). The primary defining feature of the Dutch media is that they are thoroughly commercial. It might plausibly be expected (for instance on the basis of one successful political-economic theory of the media, namely the propaganda model) that their content is structurally biased in favor of the interests of the economic and political elites that own the media and as sources dominate its content.

The most important reason for writing this dissertation is the crisis in which Dutch journalism, and by extension Dutch democracy, finds itself today. The position that one cannot expect good journalism on a consistent basis from a commercial media system is underappreciated in the scholarly, political as well as popular debates in the Netherlands about the media. Efforts to significantly improve the quality of Dutch journalism and democracy can only fail unless it is clearly understood that as long as the Dutch media remain overwhelmingly commercial they will not do what they are supposed to do, but will continue to promote the hardly democratic status quo by providing information which is biased towards elite interests.

This dissertation aims to make the following points. First, it is argued that quite a few existing studies do show that the Dutch media exhibit a clear class bias, and likely have done so throughout the twentieth century and up to the present. Second, the point is made that the study of journalism in the Netherlands, in contrast to the scholarly fields in the US and Britain, lacks a coherent political-economic perspective. Third, it will be established that there is ample reason to assume that, despite the real differences between these three countries, it is likely that the Dutch news media too do not serve the public and or democracy first, but mostly their corporate owners and political elites. For the Dutch media are thoroughly commercialized, a circumstance from which the public broadcaster has not been able to insulate itself. Fourth, content analyses will be presented which aim to show that these expectations based on the history of the Dutch media and a macro-level analysis of the Dutch media landscape, are indeed confirmed on the micro-level.

Part I of this dissertation comprises chapters 2 to 6 and aims to provide the critical-historical framework within which to situate the content analyses. It seeks to establish that suspecting a persistent class bias in Dutch journalism is a priori plausible. Chapter 2 argues for an interpretation of Dutch media history which suggests that the news media in the twentieth

century have, by and large, not served the public interest but instead elites. Chapter 3 recaptures radical critiques of the Dutch media since 1940, and argues that these critiques are even more salient today, because of the increased commercialization of the Dutch media system.

Chapter 4 discusses the broadly held consensus among Dutch political scientists and other observers that Dutch democracy is in a deep crisis, and argues that Dutch media scholarship tends to underestimate the scope of this crisis and therefore also the crisis in journalism. By providing a snapshot of the current Dutch media landscape, chapter 5 argues that the propaganda model is applicable to the Netherlands, although not with the same force as in the US. Chapter 6 discusses the current debate on the Dutch media, showing among other things that a coherent political-economic perspective is all but completely absent, that the crisis in journalism is often downplayed or misunderstood and that proposed solutions do not go far enough.

The content analyses make up part II of this dissertation. They aim to provide the evidence for a class bias on the level of news content. For in order to be convincing, the statement that Dutch journalism is severely flawed needs to be proven in two distinct but complementary ways: on the micro-level, or the content level (part II), and on the macro-level (part I), that is on the level of the structure of the media system.



## PART I: CRITICAL-HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

### CHAPTER 2

#### RETHINKING DUTCH MEDIA HISTORY

This chapter evaluates Dutch media history from WWI up until the nineties and issues of historiography. This history still exerts an important influence on the current Dutch media landscape – as much in what it lacks as in what it is composed of. Highlighted will be the exclusion from the media system of leftwing voices as a result of state policies, the blatant subservience of the media to partisan politics until at least the mid-sixties, and the considerable extent to which the Dutch press throughout the twentieth century and the public broadcasting system since the seventies have been guided by commercial imperatives. The commercialization of the media has vastly increased since the seventies. By the nineties, it was indisputable that Dutch journalism, with the journalism done on the public broadcaster a partial exception, was thoroughly commercialized. This development has not slowed down since.

The main point that this chapter aims to establish is that mainstream scholars of Dutch media and journalism history and other (more critical) observers have provided the essential ingredients for a “radical” reading in the definition of James Curran (2002, 2009, see below). Although these scholars do not themselves support such a reading they have in their work provided evidence to support the position that the Dutch media in the twentieth century have been mostly submissive to, first, politics, and subsequently to economic forces; that they have served mostly elite interests and not the interests of the population at large; and that they have marginalized voices that were deemed to be outside of the political mainstream, especially on the left. In short, although a coherent radical perspective on Dutch media history is non-existent in

the scholarship, there is quite a lot of evidence to support it; more evidence than exists in support of the standard “liberal” reading.

A note of caution: The claim made in this chapter is not that the radical reading of Dutch media history offers the best available framework for understanding that history. That claim cannot be made because there is an insufficient number of historical studies which evaluate media output (Broersma 2011). The claim is that a radical perspective is unjustly ignored (to the point of being non-existent) by the leading scholars, although they themselves provide many of the pieces of the puzzle. They have not put these pieces together, as they to a greater or lesser extent adhere to Curran’s (2002, 2009) liberal narrative of media history, which resembles what James Carey (2011) calls the Whig-interpretation of journalism history. As far as I know, this chapter constitutes the first attempt to argue for the salience of a radical take on Dutch media history. As a result, this chapter has an exploratory nature.

First the discussion turns to issues of historiography. Curran’s typology of the meta-narratives of media history, which forms the theoretical basis of this chapter, will be explained. Then the historiographical developments in the study of Dutch journalism will be sketched out. Then a version of Dutch media history will be presented which highlights events, developments and social-scientific research and scholarship that point to the viability of a radical reading.

### **Meta-narratives of media history**

James Curran (2002, 2009) identifies seven strands of media history writing or “meta-narratives,” which together have characterized the debate on the media in Great Britain. These narratives, which according to Curran have their counterexamples in media history writing in other democratic, industrialized countries, are: the liberal, feminist, populist, libertarian,

anthropological, technological-determinist and radical perspectives. As in the US, in Britain the liberal version of journalism's historical trajectory has been the main narrative. The liberal version tells an optimistic story of progress engendered by the media, a story of journalism's professionalization and thereby emancipation from political powers. Journalism empowered the people and acted as an efficacious check on government.

In contrast to the liberal version, the radical perspective claims that the media have not represented the people or given it any real power. It claims that the media have taken power away from the population, that the media are hardly autonomous but rather mostly submissive to both the state and corporations and that as a result, the media are a tool of elite interests, focusing their reporting on the dominant political parties and thereby marginalizing perspectives outside of that rather narrow spectrum, notably left-wing perspectives. The market has not served as "an engine of freedom, as in the liberal narrative," but as "a system of control" (Curran 2009: 10). Dependence on advertisers, media concentration, and the high barriers of entry to markets all worked towards "the consolidation of unrepresentative, business control" of the media. In short, the media have not served the public interest first, but elite interests.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter is limited to examining the relative value of the liberal and radical versions for understanding Dutch media history, and thus does not address the other meta-narratives. Curran argued that none of the perspectives can claim to tell the whole story of the media, and that therefore some kind of synthesis is required, but it might be that they are incommensurable (Nerone 2011: 12).

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<sup>2</sup> The weakness of the radical perspective in British media history according to Curran (2009: 11) is that it tends to downplay instances in which the media did help bring about "progressive change." Indeed, the Dutch media served a progressive cause in helping to bring about depillarization (see below).

## **Historiography of Dutch journalism**

In the historiography of Dutch journalism, Curran's liberal perspective has been by far the dominant one, even "almost inescapable," and remains so up to the present day (Broersma 2011: 24). In his recent review of the historiography of Dutch journalism, Marcel Broersma described this liberal narrative as "a story of continuous progress in which the development of journalism is interpreted as a long road from 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" (Broersma 2011: 17). This liberal take on journalism history can be traced back to the seventies, when journalists and scholars started to critically evaluate the period of pillarization, which they themselves saw coming to an end.

A short explanation of the typical Dutch phenomenon of "pillarization" might be in order. From the late nineteenth century until the sixties, Dutch society – and its media system too – was rather unique. Its singularity is usually captured with the phrase "pillarization." This meant that Dutch society was subdivided in four "pillars." The four major groups in society (the liberals, the Catholics, the socialists and the Protestants) each had their own sports clubs, schools, political parties and also media outlets, which served as the link between the elite of a pillar and its base. The elites communicated with each other, but there was much less interaction between the members of the different pillars.

Journalists Warna Oosterbaan and Hans Wansink are examples of contemporary observers who adhere to the liberal version of journalism history. They (2008: 24) described the period of "roughly the last quarter of the twentieth century" as "the golden age of Dutch journalism." Evaluations of the state of Dutch journalism in the (latter half of the) nineties and

the first decade of the twenty-first century are frequently somewhat critical. But criticism of contemporary journalism has not led to a re-evaluation of the period that directly preceded it.

There exists a broad consensus among scholars that, as a result of its close relationship to politics between the end of WWI and the sixties, Dutch journalism was not critically following those in power (Bardoel et al. 2002: 16). The assessments of the quality of pillarized journalism have ranged from pretty bad (Wijfjes 2004) to awful (Blokker 2010). The political parties set the news agenda. Journalism's role came close to being nothing more than the messenger boy of political elites addressing their constituencies. A mentality of secrecy was part and parcel of what is sometimes called "pacification politics." Elites did their best to depoliticize sensitive issues and interacted among themselves to hammer out compromises which were then sold to the common man, the masses within the different pillars, through the partisan media. According to Kees Brants, elites, including media elites, withheld information from their constituency in a "conscious" effort to keep that constituency "quiet and internally divided." It can come as no surprise then that Dutch journalism does not have a muckraking tradition to speak of and that pillarized journalism can be characterized as a "lapdog" (Bardoel et al. 2002: 89-90).

According to Broersma, there has come into existence a caricature-version of pillarized journalism. Key proponents of professional and objective journalism, for instance prominent journalist Henk Hofland, have exaggerated journalists' obedience to politics during pillarization (Broersma 2011: 18). The liberal reading of history has also been dominant in scholarship: "The development of journalism is depicted as a tale of oppression and limited professional autonomy before the last quarter of the twentieth century, when emancipation and professionalization take off." Broersma (2011: 18) argues "for a more nuanced history of journalism that takes reflective

styles of journalism seriously and demonstrates the interplay between national specificities and transnational universals.”

The historiography of Dutch journalism has gone through three stages: from institutionally-oriented “press history” to “journalism history” to “the history of journalism” (Broersma 2011). The first stage lasted until the 1980s and comprised isolated scholars who wrote nationally-oriented studies of press institutions which were focused mostly on presenting facts. Analysis and providing an explanatory narrative took a backseat to unearthing sources and quoting at length. Many early press historians openly identified with their pillar. According to Broersma (2011: 20), “this has lead (sic) to committed press histories, which some would call biased, but at any rate they were hardly detached or scholarly.”

The nineties saw the rise of the second generation of scholars. With their interest in “theoretical debates, paradigms and approaches” and in research from abroad, especially the UK and the US (e.g. James Carey and Michael Schudson), these scholars were mostly based at universities (Broersma 2011: 20). The research focus shifted from narrow institutional histories to a broader examination of the relationships between media, culture and society, and to such issues as the changing routines of journalism, and the context in which journalistic production takes place, i.e. the newsroom. These scholars were disdainful of pillarized journalism: “Professionalization as the engine behind modernization thus came to be the dominant framework for journalism history” (Broersma 2011: 21). Classic studies like Frank van Vree’s history of newspaper *de Volkskrant* (1996) and Huub Wijffjes’ authoritative account of Dutch journalism (2004) framed their narrative as one of journalism liberating itself from the all too obvious constraints of pillarization, becoming professional and autonomous, and thereby capable of performing its assigned role in a modern society, namely that of the guardian of democracy.

Yet actual news content as a topic of study has up to the present been mostly ignored by scholars, because of historians' distrust of the methods of social scientists and because content analysis, especially longitudinal analysis, is labor intensive (Broersma 2011: 22). The third and most recent phase of the historiography of Dutch journalism aims to write "a more integrated form of history by systematically analyzing the content of news and integrating it in the institutional and journalistic production context" (Broersma 2011: 21).

In his review of historiographical developments, Broersma does not mention Curran's radical perspective as a possible illuminating perspective on Dutch media history, or as having played a role in Dutch historiography. And although his critique of the liberal vision of journalism history is partly justified, he himself does not escape it completely, for he does not raise the possibility that the "liberals" are wrong in asserting or implying that professional Dutch journalism has performed well its self-designated task of being the watchdog of democracy.

A radical perspective on Dutch journalism history has up to the present been (all but) non-existent. The position taken here is that the many scholars who have denounced pillarized journalism have done so for very good reasons, although Broersma is probably correct in warning against an element of exaggeration in a number of these accounts. Nonetheless, as the subsequent look at journalism history will show, pillarized journalism did fall far short of living up to by now generally accepted notions of its role in a democracy. According to Broersma, the normative nature of these denouncements can prevent an understanding of, and appreciation for, the style of "reflective" journalism as practiced by pillarized journalists in their historical context. He is probably right in certain specific cases, but it is not inevitable that noting the flaws of pillarized journalism by modern standards blinds one to all its features, some of which are indeed preferable to "objective" journalism, which for instance all too easily falls prey to a

dependence on official sources. Only unquestioning believers in the myth of journalistic objectivity are likely to succumb to one-dimensionally denouncing pillarized journalism as advocacy journalism and thus as bad journalism tout court.

## **A critical history of the Dutch media**

### *Between the world wars*

The newspapers before WWI had been first and foremost a means to ideological influence, not an instrument for making a profit (Blokker 2010: 120). But after WWI the newspaper market became more competitive and “commerce” infiltrated “ideology” (Blokker 2010: 124). Until WWII, “small, independent, regional titles” abounded in the Netherlands. Almost all municipalities had at least one publication which appeared two or three times a week and reported solely on that community (Blokker 2010: 13). Absent were owners that were so powerful that they could control the market; there was no boulevard press, no yellow press. The publishers were what could be termed bourgeois: “respectable, a little boring, satisfied and self-satisfied.” Their businesses were mostly family businesses (Blokker 2010: 14).

Pillarization notwithstanding, the Dutch newspapers were a “commercial product” (Bardoel et al. 2002: 363). This was true for Catholic newspapers, whose diverging commercial interests trumped common ideological ones (Broersma 2000: 563, 565), but especially for the so-called “neutral” or “independent” press, that is to say, for the newspapers that lacked a strong ideological identification. In the history writing of the Dutch press its pillarized aspects usually receive by far most of the attention, as they constituted its unique feature. But much of the press was never aligned with any of the pillars. Between the world wars the “neutral” press controlled about half of the total circulation. In 1939, the Protestant and Catholic press together controlled



only about 15 percent of the national market, according to one estimate (Wijfjes 2004: 156). According to another, going by circulation half of the press in 1939 was “neutral,” thirty percent was Catholic or Protestant and a fifth was socialist or liberal (Bakker and Scholten 2009: 317). Despite that the “neutral” press disavowed allegiance to a pillar, it had, according to Brants, “a rather conservative undertone,” presumably a reflection of its commercial nature and the interests of its owners (in Kelly et al. 2004: 145). Commercialism was thus already very much present in Dutch journalism before WWII, but nonetheless, “journalists were generally opposed to the Anglo-American news style, fearing that newspapers would become sensationalist and market-oriented if they took news value as the most important selection criterion. The use of visual tools such as headlines, typographical cues and photographs to make... newspapers more comprehensible was despised as ‘cultural degeneration’” (Broersma 2007: xxiv).

The Dutch broadcasting system was a unique creation, different from both state models (e.g. Britain) and commercial models (e.g. US), and highly reflective of the pillarized character of Dutch society. Until 1940, the pillarized broadcasters were funded exclusively through voluntary contributions by individual citizens (Nieuwenhuis 1992: 205). In the summary of Jo Bardoel, Dutch broadcasting

*was not left to the state or the market, but to social movements that had already established their own organizations in most domains of social life, like politics, education, health care, culture and leisure. The broadcasting organizations within these “pillars” were not only non-commercial but also, confusingly, private associations. So, public broadcasting in the Netherlands was born out of social movement initiatives, organized privately. The radio spectrum was divided equally over the principal social groupings that operated autonomously*

*and were financially self-supporting, thanks to an active supportive membership. Therefore, contrary to other countries, civic participation and involvement with radio and later television has a long tradition. The broadcasting time allotted to the associations was based on the size of their membership and, to a great extent, they were free to fill this time as they chose. With interlocking directorships and ideological or religious feelings, the corporations were clearly part of the “pillar” of their own social movement. Consequently, broadcasting did not have a legitimacy problem in the first decades of its existence. (Bardoel 2003b: 82)*

The “direct access of social movements to radio and television and a public broadcasting system based on separate associations with ideologically or religiously organized members” led to “a diversity of content and an involvement of citizens hardly known anywhere else in the world” (Bardoel 2003b: 93). The Dutch broadcasting system thus initially had admirable structural features, for instance its independence from commercial revenue. Yet the more germane issue here is the quality of journalistic information. This is to some extent still an open question, but for instance the heavy reliance of news shows on national press agency ANP (see below) indicates that one cannot be too optimistic.

The inclusionary aspects of Dutch broadcasting system have been much admired in progressive circles at home and abroad. The broadcasting organizations were privately-owned and represented the main ideological groupings in society, thereby at least in theory providing for ideological diversity. For those who were reluctant to leave broadcasting to the state, the Dutch system showed that an alternative existed. It should not be forgotten though that the Dutch 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 their own radio programs, although they “scrupulously adhered to the formal requirements for getting a broadcast license.” Not just the revolutionary socialists were kept off the air. The government consciously and successfully strove to exclude “all extremist” voices from the airwaves (De Winter 2004: 73). In the thirties, the social-democratic party SDAP was only featured in the newsreels produced by the dominant commercial firm Polygoon after agreeing to buy one of its films. No wonder that within the labor movement attempts were made to produce newsreels, in protest of workers’ depiction in the commercial newsreels (Hogenkamp 1984). The government’s policy aimed at the mainstreaming of the Dutch media was not limited to broadcasting. At the start of WWII, the communist paper *Volksdagblad* was prohibited (Werkgroep Perskoncentratie 1972: 46).

Dutch elites worried about the potential influence of radio and later television on the population. Anti-democratic feelings among Dutch elites have always been, and still are, strong (chapter 4). In 1930 the government instituted radio censorship because the VARA, the broadcaster of the social-democratic SDAP, was seen as dangerous. Censorship was made stricter in 1933; polarizing 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 results were that the VARA lost its radicalism and became more “pragmatic,” and that the other broadcasters too became more careful in their reporting on politics. Political journalism on the radio lost its spontaneity and edge (Wijfjes 2004: 157). In 1934 the laws that prohibited insulting authorities, population groups, God, the royal family or friendly heads of state were made stricter still. This led to many minor convictions and 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 of this censorship regime: almost 700 times (Bardoel et al. 1975: 25). The commission fervently opposed everything that it construed to be an attack on governmental policies, the royal family, God or the nation (Bardoel et al. 1975: 29).

Substantial journalism in the interwar period was scant, according to Huub Wijfjes in his standard history of Dutch journalism. 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). Radio did do some in-depth pieces but produced mostly entertainment (Wijfjes 2004: 156). The authorities did not have that much to fear from the Dutch press either, “at the most a little,” for journalists did hardly any original investigating (Wijfjes 2004: 173-4). Among the press, “there existed in general a great respect for the [justice] authorities.” Attempts to expose wrongs in politics and the court system were the “exception” (Wijfjes 2004: 175).

In the thirties, and especially after 1938, the press did not forcefully speak out against the danger posed by the neighboring Third Reich (Wijfjes 2004: 213). After intervention by the German ambassador, prime-minister Colijn requested the Dutch papers not to condemn the widespread attacks on Jews during the ‘Kristallnacht’ in Germany in 1938. The Dutch papers complied, although they denied that they were letting themselves be bossed around. It is no wonder that at the end of 1939, the Dutch minister of foreign affairs praised the Dutch press for its strong sense of responsibility (Wijfjes 2004: 214). An admirable feature of Dutch journalism in that period was that no market-oriented sensation press comparable to for instance Great Britain’s existed. Also, broadcasting was not marred by market pressures. Yet clearly this did not lead to independent journalism.

A media policy geared towards excluding voices from the left was continued after WWII. Starting after WWI and until 1965, the government denied the communist party CPN the opportunity to address voters about upcoming elections on radio and television, although the communists held seats in parliament. Remarkably, in the mid-fifties it was decided that the extreme-right party NOU would be allowed to propagandize on radio and television. Protests against this blatant double standard put the government in a bind. Fortunately, it turned out that one of the NOU-candidates for a parliament seat had been 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” reason to keep the NOU off the airwaves (Jos van Dijk 2004: 77-8).

#### *National press agency ANP*

The history of the Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau (ANP), the Dutch press agency, provides much support for the assertion that Dutch journalism throughout the twentieth century was severely flawed. The importance of the ANP to the flow of information in the Netherlands, from the thirties onwards to the present day (chapter 5) can hardly be overstated. Regrettably, the organization and its output have hardly been studied. In their authoritative and indispensable introduction to the Dutch media landscape, Piet Bakker and Otto Scholten (2009) do not discuss the ANP at all. The ANP appears to be the blind spot of Dutch journalism studies. The only book-length treatise of the ANP is *Verzorgd door het ANP* (1985) and was written by press historian Joan Hemels and a former managing editor of the press agency, Joop Baggerman. It is based mostly on internal documents (Baggerman and Hemels 1985: 13) and hardly a critical book. For instance, the book does not discuss or even reference the revealing and critical interview that journalist Gerard van Westerloo (1970; chapter 3) had with Baggerman. It

constitutes more a reflection of what the ANP believed itself to be than a critical evaluation of what it actually was. Its preface was written by the then president of the news agency, C.N.F. van Ditshuizen, who flatly asserted that the agency during its 45 year existence had remained unfailingly loyal to its aspirations of reporting in a “completely independent and non-partisan” way (Baggerman and Hemels 1985: 11).

The publishers of the Dutch newspapers established the ANP in 1934 in order to terminate the influence of the then dominant (commercial) press agency Vaz Dias, which had been established in 1904 in Amsterdam by the eponymous journalist (Baggerman and Hemels 1985: 36), and of the other, smaller commercial press agencies. In 1934 Vaz Dias was incorporated in the ANP. Another reason for the establishment of the ANP was that many felt that the Netherlands should have its own national press agency. The establishment of the ANP therefore was felt to serve the national Dutch interest, although it was to be independent of the state (Baggerman and Hemels 1985: 76). Vaz Dias ceded to the ANP the right to provide news to papers and news bulletins to the pillarized radio organizations (Baggerman and Hemels 1985: 87). The position of the ANP was awkward. The pillarized media lived in continual fear that the ANP-news would be “biased.” They therefore put much effective 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 had a conservative bias, but that its tone was as depoliticized and neutral as possible (Koedijk 1996).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A similar dynamics could later be seen regarding the authoritative daily news broadcast on television. It was produced not by the broadcasting organizations, but by journalists who were independent from the pillars. The news show had to appear neutral for fear of offending the pillarized broadcast organizations. As Denis McQuail has noted, these kinds of programs (major sporting events were also not produced by the broadcast organizations) differed from the programs made by the pillarized broadcasting organizations in “being specifically national and

Especially before WWII, but also afterwards, the ties between the ANP and the government were “very close.” In the thirties, the ANP willingly submitted to censorship and gladly functioned as the preferred messenger boy of the government. During WWII, the ANP collaborated so completely with the German occupational forces that it earned itself the widely used nickname “Adolf’s New Parrot.” In the decades following WWII the ANP still prided itself openly on the “exquisite” relationship it had with the royal family and government agencies. It conflated the goals of the authorities with the public interest by assuming that the authorities and the press agency had the same goals (Koedijk 1996: 32-5).

### *World War II*

The German occupation laid bare the basic contradiction within a commercial press system: a privately-run press cannot be counted upon to adequately fulfill its stated mission, namely to serve the public interest. Some courageous acts of resistance notwithstanding, the Dutch press acquiesced in the German domination and served as an uncritical channel of German propaganda. The underground press that arose during WWII argued that the commercial underpinnings of the mainstream press were the main reason for its almost complete collaboration with the Germans. No less of an authority than the government-in-exile in London also regarded the commercial nature of the press as “the main cause of its failure” during the occupation (Wieten 1988: 435). It made it known through the Temporary Press Decree issued in the fall of 1944 that after the war a commission would have the authority to refuse a publishing license to publications which had the sole aim of making a profit. The scarcity of paper right after WWII, which was therefore rationed by the government, had the effect that some leftists,

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unifying and connecting rather than dividing Dutch society” (Avery 1993: 79). In other words, for a long time the daily news program avoided controversy and therefore hard-hitting journalism.

among them (former-)journalists “toyed... with the idea of a radically different press system, in which the allocation of newsprint might be used to create more equal conditions of competition” (Wieten 1988: 450; chapter 3).

Unfortunately, the Dutch government-in-exile’s promise that after the war licenses for publication could by law be withheld if a media outlet was forfeiting its public responsibilities because of its commercial nature, was abandoned shortly after WWII (Wijfjes 2004: 242-4). Pressures from the other side of the Atlantic might have been a contributing reason. The American Hugh Baillie, who headed press agency United Press, traveled to London to visit the Dutch government-in-exile and was promised that after the war the Netherlands would support a “free press” environment (Blanchard 1986: 20). In the context of the Cold War, equating a commercial press with an unfree press and acting on this position must have hardly looked like a realistic option to a Dutch government strapped for funds and deeply beholden to the liberators from Washington.

Nonetheless, the experiences of WWII provided plenty of reason to the papers *Het Parool* and *Trouw* and the magazine *Vrij Nederland* to devise not-for-profit organizational structures, in an attempt to isolate their journalists from market pressures (RMO 2003: 74). Yet these former underground publications could only survive in the postwar marketplace by accepting advertising. The Communist paper *De Waarheid*, having gained credibility because of the often heroic and disciplined acts of resistance by communists during the war, was probably the largest paper in the Netherlands directly after WWII. Its circulation was estimated between 300 and 400 thousand, but the paper lost a lot of ground after the communist takeover of Prague in 1948 (Werkgroep Perskoncentratie 1972: 69). Support for the Communist Party in the Netherlands eroded quickly, as opposed to in countries like Belgium, France and Italy (Roholl



2008). Within a couple of years after WWII, the Dutch press landscape had regained many of its pre-war features. The popular “neutral” newspaper *De Telegraaf*, which had blatantly collaborated with the Germans, was allowed to appear again in 1949.

World War II represented not a break in Dutch history, but an intermezzo. This was the case not only for the Dutch media but for Dutch society in general, including politics. The confessional parties quickly regained their pre-war eminence (Wesseling 1980: 127-8). The press was seen as yet another tool to govern more effectively. The editor-in-chief of the Catholic newspaper *de Volkskrant* in the years immediately following WWII, the autocratic C.P.M. Romme, for instance was of the opinion that the contents of the paper should be geared towards “serving the interests of the country.” This meant keeping news out of the paper if the government so desired (Broersma 2000: 572).

### *Depillarization*

Dutch politics had a firm grip on journalism until the early sixties. In 1961 for instance, the government censored the current affairs program of the Catholic broadcaster by forbidding it from airing an interview with French politician Georges Bidault, who was critical about the colonial war in Algeria and the policies of President De Gaulle (Bakker and Scholten 2009: 136). Yet in the second half of that decade socialist, Protestant and Catholic broadcast journalists were in the vanguard of breaking down pillarization. They started to approach the leaders of their own pillar in a more critical and independent way (Bakker and Scholten 2009: 136).

The dominant position among scholars and journalists alike is that journalism after depillarization generally has been of good quality (chapter 6). As noted, almost all scholars subscribe to the liberal version of Dutch journalism history. The few critical scholars of the

seventies were the exception, yet in the scholarly and public debates on the Dutch media since the seventies their work has been ignored (chapter 3). The standard narrative is that professionalization emancipated journalists from the pillars to which they had been subservient. They started to report independently and “objectively” on the elites to which they had been beholden. For instance, in his standard work, Wijfjes (2004) characterizes journalism in the era after pillarization as “autonomous-critical.” According to Brants, after depillarization politics still set the agenda during election campaigns, but journalism “emancipated” itself. It started to follow politics “critically,” out of concern for democracy (Baroel et al. 2002: 90). Yet this view of an autonomous and critical journalism is unsupported by evidence, that is, by content studies that evaluate the quality of journalism. Neither the first nor second generation of scholars who studied Dutch media history has been much concerned with content. They studied institutions or journalistic practices. Often they distrusted the social-science methods which need to be utilized to conduct large-scale content analyses (Broersma 2011). Yet journalism can only be evaluated fully when the content is also taken into account. The second generation of scholars currently dominates the field. Only recently has there been a trend towards also studying journalistic content (Broersma 2011).

Depillarization and concentration in the newspaper industry are often deemed the two most important developments in the print media since 1960. There were two waves of press concentration: from 1960 to 1975 and from the nineties onwards. In 1950, sixty independent Dutch newspapers existed. In 1970, there were still 54 newspapers with their own, independent managing editor, owned by 35 companies. In 2008, there were only 21 newspapers left with their own, independent managing editor. These papers were owned by only nine companies (Bakker and Scholten 2009: 31). The second wave of consolidations in the nineties led to the newspaper

industry being dominated in 2001 by three publishers, who together controlled ninety percent of the market (RMO 2003: 78).

The crumbling of the Dutch pillars without a doubt changed journalism. Until the sixties, journalists addressed cabinet ministers with “your excellence.” Since that time interviews have become openly confrontational. Journalism underwent a process of distancing itself from the pillars it had been subservient to. Journalists working in the pillarized broadcasting organizations, notably for the Catholic broadcaster, contributed to depillarization by airing programs on controversial topics like abortion. So did *de Volkskrant*. Until the mid-sixties the newspaper was aimed at the Catholic worker, when it adopted a secular-progressive course. Notions of professionalism and objectivity were strengthened. For all their drawbacks (chapter 6) they aided journalists in emancipating themselves from the pillars. The liberal notion of Dutch journalism history is so seductive then because it contains more than a grain of truth. It is nonetheless problematic because of its uncritical acceptance of the position that market-driven journalism grounded in professionalism and “objectivity” can and does provide a viable basis for the production of consistently independent, high-quality journalism. The proponents of the liberal version of Dutch journalism history have been mostly correct in their denunciation of pillarized journalism. Yet some of them have been blind to the beneficial features of pillarized journalism (e.g. its insistence on providing a grand narrative to explain the world) and to the negative sides of professional journalism.

### *The press and the ANP in the seventies*

In the seventies a trend toward investigative journalism emerged. It was practiced by for instance the progressive magazine *Vrij Nederland* and by some national and regional newspapers

and broadcasters. Journalists produced “a large number of articles and programs on corruption, fraud, abuses and other socially unacceptable behavior by entrepreneurs, politicians, and other notables and authority figures” (RMO 2003: 84). Journalism started to report more from the perspective of the citizen than the politician. At first the aim was to contribute to the emancipation of repressed sections of the population, but from the eighties onwards this aim of emancipation was perverted into not much more than a cosmetic way to personalize the news in order to attract more readers. On radio and television a similar development took place. Initially broadcasters made efforts to provide a platform for citizens where they could express themselves regarding political and social issues, but these kinds of programs started to more and more be geared towards entertainment (RMO 2003: 85; Bardoel et al. 1975).

Still in 1970, the ANP identified with the dominant institutions of the Netherlands, especially the government, to a remarkable degree. It would often only publish on a topic after a confirmation by an official source. ANP’s coverage tended to focus on events that could be framed as affirming nationalist values, like a trip abroad by the queen. The coverage often ignored the activities of social movements and other reform-minded organizations, even mildly reformist ones. Activists often complained about this neglect, and referred to the ANP as the “press agency of the status quo.” Managing editor Joop Baggerman admitted in 1970 that the press agency was “rather conservative.” He added that investigative journalism was just not something that the ANP did (Van Westerloo 1970).

Press releases by the Rijksvoorlichtingdienst (RVD), the PR-department of the government, were, according to official ANP-policy, by definition worthy of an article. Employing a Dutch saying, journalist Gerard van Westerloo characterized the ANP and the RVD as “two buttocks in one pair of pants.” Baggerman denied that the agency was subservient to the

government and then, in the same breath, affirmed the ANP's credulous attitude towards the Dutch state by adding that, anyway, governmental spokespersons "of course" would not lie to him. He went on to say that they would sometimes inform him that they could not answer a certain question. Their explanation as to why they would rather not answer would then, again "of course," be off the record. It was official ANP-policy to never publish articles based on sources that wished to remain anonymous, with one glaring exception: when it concerned a government source (Van Westerloo 1970).

The question to what extent the ANP changed from the seventies onwards – it certainly did in some respects – has yet to be studied (Koedijk 1996: 32-5). Nonetheless, it is clear that the ANP more and more adopted the commercial logic. In the late nineties, its "owner-clients" were "acting increasingly like shareholders, whose attitude" was that "the agency is a 'business like any other business.'" The ANP "switched from a 'cost-center' to a 'profit center' mentality, and reduced dependence on shareholders for revenue down to 50 percent, with the aim of further reduction, to 30 percent, by the year 2003" (Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen 2000: 91; see chapter 5).

In the seventies, the independence of journalists vis-à-vis their publishers was formally guaranteed by so-called "redactiestatuten" (RMO 2003: 87). These "editorial statutes," an outcome of the struggles between newspaper owners and journalists (chapter 3), forbade interference in editorial issues by the business side of a publication and guaranteed journalists a certain measure of participation in important decisions like the appointment of a new managing editor or mergers (RMO 2003: 119). These statutes have been credited with slowing down the process of commercialization of the press. For instance, Cees van der Eijk argued in 2000 that the press in the Netherlands was distinct from other countries in that management exerted only "weak" control over the editorial side – because of the editorial statutes which guaranteed

editorial independence (in Gunther and Mughan 2000: 315-6; also Hallin and Mancini 2004: 175). Brants and Hemels too are of the opinion that these statutes have been a considerable blessing for Dutch journalism, stemming the tide of commercialism (personal communications).<sup>4</sup>

Other scholars, perhaps the majority of them, downplay the significance and efficacy of the editorial statutes. Some regard them as mostly a dead letter, certainly during periods when a publication is in bad weather financially (Greven 2004: 13-4; Broersma, personal communication). The influence of these statutes has diminished over time, according to Huub Evers, for instance because managing editors have become more and more responsible for producing profits and journalists have less time to concern themselves with labor issues, as their workload has increased. Foreign owners of Dutch print media, e.g. the Belgian De Persgroep, often have no regard for these statutes, contends Piet Bakker (d'Haenens and Kik 2011: 210-12). The extent of the influence of the editorial statutes is hard to gauge. This dissertation makes the point that whatever their influence, Dutch news content before and after their introduction has been biased in favor of elite interests.

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*. Its state-allocated funds derived from the revenues of commercials, which were allowed on Dutch public radio and television starting in the late sixties (RMO 2003: 77). Despite such positive developments, one should be careful not to overestimate the quality of Dutch journalism in the seventies. The seventies also saw another, less positive development: the coming of age of celebrity and gossip journalism, practiced for instance by the magazine *Story*. Until then,

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<sup>4</sup> It is sometimes asserted that these statutes are unique to the Netherlands, but the Norwegian Editors' Code, which was already adopted in 1953, also guarantees editorial independence. That is to say, at least on the face of it. A scholar has argued that the document "provides the owners with power without responsibility, and the editors with responsibility without power" (Rolland 2007: 7).

boulevard journalism had been almost completely foreign to the Netherlands (RMO 2003: 84), yet as a result of the increasingly commercial nature of the Dutch media, more and more fluff was produced. The quality media too allowed more and more news about the private affairs of public figures onto their pages and in their programs. In the nineties, articles on the personal lives of members of the royal family started to appear on the front pages of reputable papers like *de Volkskrant* (Diependaal 2002).

Cees Hamelink concluded that already in the mid-seventies the provision of information had become primarily motivated by commercial motives. Fulfilling the information needs and rights of the citizen was not the primary aim of the media industry, which had become a significant part of the overall economy (Hamelink 1978: 107-8). Hamelink characterizes the picture of the world that arose from the news as:

*Important are only the countries of the North-Atlantic Treaty. 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 mainly negative events which are all 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: dependence on official sources, content that lacks context and is mainly geared towards providing high-level officials with an outlet for their proclamations, and marginalization of the needs and views of minorities and the underprivileged. In the mid-seventies, three companies

controlled 97 percent of the national newspaper market and 48 percent of the total newspaper market (Hamelink 1979: 293). Hamelink (1979: 296) estimated that “over 50% 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.” He concluded that

*... the ‘free flow of information’ is a much cherished principle in Dutch society. It is, however, a similarly cherished attitude not to conceive of the growing and increasingly concentrated communications industry as its greatest threat. This is supported by the seemingly abundant variety of informational carriers and messages. At closer analysis, however, it appears that Dutch public media generally shows more similarity than differentiation. They rely to a great extent on the same sources and models for their contents. 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.’ (Hamelink 1979: 296)*

Social-scientific research affirms that in the seventies the capitalist nature of the media already led to persistent and expected biases. Harry van den Berg and Kees van der Veer (1986)



found that the press framed a strike at an Akzo-Nobel plant in Breda in 1972 in the same way as the corporation. The press too regarded the enforced loss of jobs as inevitable, as a natural phenomenon against which resistance was rather ludicrous. Overall, the reporting conveyed the following message:

*... the retrenchment is inevitable... cooperation between the Akzo-board, the trade-unions and the government is necessary... the sit-in is a justifiable measure considering the distress caused by the Akzo board of directors... withdrawal of the retrenchment-plans means delay of execution...* (Van den Berg and Van der Veer 1986: 524)

This frame closely resembles one of the dominant frames that according to Herbert Gans (1979), a source of inspiration for Van den Berg and Van der Veer, characterized the American news media, namely that of “responsible capitalism.” Van den Berg and Van der Veer (1986: 502-3) blamed the strongly institutional framework in the Dutch reporting on the requirements of “objectivity, non-partisanship and balance.” The reporting affirmed the authority of union leaders, corporation spokespeople and government sources and marginalized voices from the union base. The ideological spectrum of the reporting was limited on the one end by a frame which legitimized the policy of Akzo, and on the other by a more progressive frame, which emphasized that the laid-off workers should be compensated. Another dominant frame was that of consensus: a plea to unions and corporation to work out a compromise (Van den Berg and Van der Veer 1986: 504-5).

Only two papers deviated from these frames. *De Telegraaf* blatantly took the side of Akzo and the communist paper *De Waarheid* reported from the side of the base of the unions.

The latter paper was the only one to question the necessity of the lay-offs, framing the events as the consequence of the need for Akzo to maximize profits (Van den Berg and Van der Veer 1986: 506). The coverage 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 therefore put "a relatively strong emphasis... upon views of the affair favorable towards employers." Yet the current affairs shows of the pillarized broadcasting organizations presented a view of the affair that could be characterized as "ambiguously favorable towards employees" (Van den Berg et al. 1984: 45).

Van den Berg and Van der Veer predicted that treatment of strikes by the press in the early eighties would be (even) less sympathetic, because of the shift in the dominant ideological climate towards neoliberal notions of free markets and privatization, and the concomitant relative decline of the unions. Preliminary research into the reporting on union actions in 1980 affirmed these expectations, according to the authors (Van den Berg and Van der Veer 1986: 509-10). Another example of the bias towards institutional interests exhibited by the Dutch press in the seventies was its on the whole negative tone in reporting on Salvador Allende's reforms in Chile (Hamelink 1978: 123).

Already in the seventies, the Dutch media depended heavily on a few Western press agencies. In 1976 and 1977, 40 percent of international news in Dutch papers derived from Reuters, AFP, UPI or AP; 15 percent from Dutch foreign correspondents with a contract; and the remaining 45 percent from smaller press agencies like DPA, from news services owned by American papers or magazines or from copy written by desk editors in the Netherlands or travelling reporters (Hamelink 1978: 37; Hamelink 1979: 291).

It might well be expected then that the authors of the seminal book *Perskoncentratie* (1972), who argued for a political-economic interpretation of the Dutch media (chapter 3), were correct when they asserted that the reporting in the Dutch press on the war in Vietnam, especially during the Johnson-presidency, was flawed, that is to say biased towards the official position of the United States (Werkgroep Perskoncentratie 1972: 156). The Dutch governments at the time supported the American presence in Vietnam. It might also be expected that much of the criticism that was voiced by the news media could be classified as procedural (Van Benthem van den Berg 1967: 18-20; Van der Maar 2007: 79-81).

Although extensive research is lacking, there can hardly be any doubt that the Dutch media throughout the Cold War were biased in favor of Washington's version of events. The Dutch press, which was "imprisoned in a strongly pro-American and anti-Russian frame of reference," in the fifties reported distinctly uncritically on racism in the US. Apart from the Communist paper, it mainly ignored the issue, whereas the Dutch population was highly critical of racism in the US, in some polls even more so than peoples in the Third World. After the seminal court case *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), racism in the US was covered more extensively, but was still downplayed, for instance by regarding it as a southern instead of an American problem. The shocking events in 1957 in Little Rock, where the desegregation of education was enforced by federal troops, augured in a more critical stance, although the US retained its privileged status in the Dutch press as "friend and ally" (Roholl 2008).

### *Broadcasting in the sixties and seventies*

Pressures exerted by the business community for the establishment of a commercial broadcasting system led to a political controversy in the Netherlands, which in turn resulted in

the fall of the government in 1965. There was an international dimension to this pressure. The introduction of commercials on television in Europe was partly the result of incessant lobbying efforts by American corporations (Hamelink 1978: 33). Although Dutch media legislation adopted in 1967, the so-called Omroepwet (Broadcasting Act), continued to outlaw a purely commercial model of broadcasting, a limited amount of commercials was from that moment onwards allowed on the public broadcaster.

Also, the broadcasting system was opened up to newcomers. The system was now in principle accessible to new private organizations provided they could muster a large enough number of paying members. This change in the law proved especially beneficial to politically neutral organizations that focused on providing entertainment. Newcomers like the TROS and Veronica had no ideological orientation. They wanted to appeal to a large audience and in the latter case especially to the young. They were, in the words of Denis McQuail, “associations that unequivocally set out to offer what the public was thought to want – more entertainment, music, lively and neutral information, and the like” (in Avery 1993: 82; also Hallin and Mancini 2004: 274). Programs addressed viewers more as consumers than as citizens, according to Bardoel (2003b: 83): “Programmes and programming were increasingly tailored to preferences learned from market research, and the influence of democratic associations more and more became a thing of the past. In addition, the emphasis began to shift from internal competition between broadcasting corporations to external competition with foreign, increasingly commercial entrants.” Citizen participation in the broadcasting organizations disappeared. According to Brants, the Broadcasting Act resulted in a “concealed form of commercialization” (in Kelly et al. 2004: 148). The new broadcasters became popular with the public. To some extent this perhaps

reflected resentment towards the elitist pillarized broadcasters or modern tastes to which the old broadcasting elites did not cater (Bardoel 2003b: 82).

The Broadcast Act created a situation in which the broadcasters became competitors of each other in the fight for ratings. Before that, broadcasters had directed their attention to their own pillar, with the (proclaimed) aim of furthering education and citizenship. According to Herman Wigbold, a prominent Dutch journalist in the sixties, seventies and eighties, the changes in the broadcasting system that made the accession of an organization like the TROS possible had disastrous results. “The problem was the [broadcasting] system itself. It compelled the broadcasting organizations to react to the TROS’s success. Feverishly, they tried to win the masses and at the same time to keep hold of their own members... Entertainment became boring and information weak” (Smith 1979: 225). Although the broadcasters did not depend on advertising income for survival, “Programming standards were subordinated to the struggle for existence fought out by essentially commercial methods,” because in the new system the broadcasters were forced to attract as many as possible paying members to their organizations in order to survive (Smith 1979: 230).

The legally compelled competition between the broadcasters for members (the more members the more airtime) negatively affected serious public affairs broadcasting. According to Wigbold, “Virtually unrestricted competition has forced the broadcasting organizations to use the same means and the same methods to maintain themselves. One quiz led to another, one Top Ten to the next Top Twenty” (Smith: 227-8). The progressive role that television journalists, especially the Catholic ones, had played in the process of de-pillarization, faded out in the seventies. Television lost its “watchdog function,” according to 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: 227-8). Other scholars who have noted that the Dutch broadcasting system from the late sixties onwards amounted to a commercial system in disguise are Cees Hamelink (1978: 97) and Ad Kooyman. The latter regarded the broadcasters as being subjected to the “terror of the free market principle” (Kooyman 1977: 151-2).

Some evidence suggests that the introduction of commercials on Dutch television went against the wishes of the Dutch public. A prospective commercial broadcaster, OTEM, commissioned a study in 1962 about people’s attitudes towards the introduction of commercial channels. From OTEM’s perspective, the results were disappointing. The study showed that the public preferred the existing situation to commercial exploitation of the airwaves. People held the opinion that were commercials introduced, the revenues should be used to cover the cost of the production of programs, not to make a profit (Bardoel et al. 1975: 37-8).

### *The arrival of commercial broadcasting*

The Dutch media law of 1988 still banned commercial broadcasting, but the writing was already on the wall. The business community piled on the pressure yet again, pointing to European Union guidelines that mandated the liberalization of media markets. The first commercial television station aimed at the Dutch market started broadcasting from Luxemburg at the end of 1989 and thereby, through a legislative loophole, broke open the Dutch market for commercial television channels, which quickly became very popular with the public (RMO 2003: 80). The broadcasting system became more centralized, moving towards a “BBC-like public broadcasting structure.” The relative autonomy of the broadcasting organizations declined. Broadcasting policy now emphasized media responsibility and accountability (Bardoel

2003b: 84). Commercial radio had been allowed on the Dutch cable in the late eighties. In 1992, the ether too was opened to commercial exploitation, as a result of lawsuits against the Dutch state. The Dutch state lost these suits because of EU-directives mandating the liberalization of media markets (Bakker and Scholten 2009: 112-3).

Research suggests that in the nineties commercial imperatives were the dominant driver of the Dutch media. In their 1995 publication, Peter Vasterman and Onno Aerden argued that commercial imperatives, although often indirectly, exerted a significant influence on journalistic practices, for instance by mandating that publications clearly define their target audiences. The authors noted that media companies had to walk the thin line between safeguarding their independence and making sure they receive enough ad revenue (Vasterman and Aerden 1995: 64), for advertisers prefer a publication which at the minimum is not too critical about the consumer society (Vasterman and Aerden 1995: 70). They documented instances of direct interference by commercial interests with journalistic content. For instance, when Cannon, a cinema chain, threatened *Het Parool* with withdrawing its advertising, the newspaper relented and gave in to the company's demand, namely that columnist Theo van Gogh be let go. Van Gogh had written something that had displeased the company (Vasterman and Aerden 1995: 77). Much research showed that "the news is dominated by professional, institutional sources," noted Vasterman and Aerden (1995: 127).

In his dissertation, Peter Vasterman (2004) concluded that increased commercialism and competition among Dutch media outlets in the nineties were important causes of the increased frequency of media hypes. According to him, competition did not lead to more but to less news diversity. The Dutch media appeared more terrified than ever to miss "the" news, and therefore often moved as a pack. Because of, among other things, the speeding up of the news cycle,

journalists had less time than before to check their facts. The rise of infotainment programs, like show business news, put pressure on the “serious” media to also cover the latest break-up of the newest starlet (Bergman 2004).

Jan Greven, former managing editor of newspaper *Trouw* and former head of newspaper publisher PCM, admitted that in the nineties “in some newspaper companies... economic considerations... directly influence... the journalistic process” (Greven 2004: 43). Mirjam Prenger and Frank van Vree (2003) showed through interviews with practicing journalists that at the dawn of the twenty-first century the commercial logic held managing editors in a tight grip. They did not just apply journalistic criteria, but also commercial ones while deciding on policy. The role of the managing editor had changed quite rapidly. He used to concern himself mostly with the content, but management had made him responsible for circulation and profits and other issues which traditionally belonged to the business side of the newspaper industry. These developments illustrate the erosion to which the editorial statutes (see above), which guarantee editorial independence, have been subjected since their introduction in the seventies. They were still in place, but more and more became a dead letter. Prenger and van Vree also found that in the Netherlands around the turn of the millennium PR-people outnumbered journalists.

Greven argued that “Journalists want to play by the rules of the establishment, because they belong to that establishment” (Greven 2004: 26). In 1994 the reputable current affairs program *Brandpunt* postponed broadcasting an item on the row between the Dutch politician Ruud Lubbers and the German Chancellor Helmut Kohl after the head of the network (he happened to be a member of the same political party as Lubbers), had requested this, claiming that the item might damage the network. The current affairs program relented, although its



journalists saw no good journalistic reasons for the postponement (Vasterman and Aerden 1995: 36).

Other research too indicates that Dutch journalism in the nineties was seriously flawed. The newspapers, dependent as they were on Anglo-Saxon news agencies, could be expected to exude a systematic and distinct pro-western bias. Indeed, scholars concluded that the Dutch press reported on the war in Kosovo in 1999 in a way which “marginalized” public opinion and specifically those who were opposed to the war (De Landtsheer et al. 2002: 428). The coverage had a distinct pro-NATO flavor. The press, (including quality dailies *de Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad*) depicted the war “in a very one-sided, polarizing 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 gave some voice to oppositional perspectives, the Dutch press shut out any counter-voices to the pro-NATO story it propagated (De Landtsheer et al. 2002: 426). Yet another study was very critical about the Dutch reporting on the civil wars in former Yugoslavia during the first half of the nineties, and especially on the genocide in Srebrenica, which had been made possible by the withdrawal of a Dutch contingent of UN-soldiers (Wieten 2002).

Anja Koring too concluded that the Dutch public broadcaster’s reporting on the Kosovo-war in 1999 was clearly biased towards the cause of the Kosovo-Albanians, the party in the conflict favored by NATO, and against the Serbs. NATO’s expressed benign intentions for interfering in the conflict were accepted as fact by the Dutch media. A study done by *de Volkskrant* concerning its own reporting on the Srebrenica-massacre drew some harsh conclusions: opinions and preconceived notions had overshadowed fact-finding and the journalists had been too dependent on the official, governmental sources residing in The Hague, the Dutch seat of government (Hamelink 2004: 47-51). After the murder of right-wing politician

Pim Fortuyn in 2002, *Volkscrant*-journalists themselves concluded that they had not done enough fact-finding and that their reporting had lacked depth (Hamelink 2004: 56).

## **Conclusion**

The account of Dutch journalism and media history presented in this chapter does not fall into the trap of a liberal perspective, with its dichotomous take on this history, seeing the quality of Dutch journalism as on the whole bad before 1970 and as in general good or at least adequate afterwards, certainly until somewhere in the nineties, because of the ascendancy of professionalism and “objectivity” as the guiding journalistic norms. This chapter agrees with the many observers who have noted that pillarized journalism was fatally flawed. That is, if we accept that journalism’s main task is to make democracy possible by presenting a true (enough) account of important issues from the perspective of the public interest and functioning as a check on the powers that be. Journalists themselves of course justify their special position in society in very similar terms.

This chapter departs from the liberal perspective in pointing out that both the history of Dutch journalism after 1970 and the available social-scientific evidence and scholarship make plausible that modern Dutch journalism suffers from the same flaws as its Anglo-American counterparts. For instance, Dutch journalism since the seventies has become increasingly focused on trivialities, such as the lives of celebrities, as a result of commercial imperatives having been positioned at the heart of the industry. In covering economic issues and foreign affairs, Dutch journalism has by and large not served the public interest, but rather the interests of domestic political and economic elites.

In assessing Dutch journalism and media history, the liberal lens has until now been overwhelmingly dominant. The few critical scholars in the seventies form the exception to this rule. But apart from the *Werkgroep Persconcentratie* (chapter 3), they never embarked on a comprehensive assessment of this history. After the seventies, their point of view – which at the time was a significant but certainly not dominant voice in the scholarship and public debate – has fallen into disrepute. Or rather, it has been all but completely ignored. The argument made in this chapter is that a radical perspective on Dutch media and journalism history has much to commend itself. This perspective argues that journalism never foremost served the public interest, but represented the world in a way which largely promoted the interests of political and economic elites, both during and after pillarization.

During pillarization, Dutch journalism was subservient to partisan-political interests, and later to the logic of the market place. The dominance of politics was exchanged for the dominance of commerce. This change wrongly led most observers to conclude that Dutch journalism had finally emancipated itself from the powers that be. They were correct in the sense that the overt influence of political interests had been thrown overboard, and journalism did attain a degree of autonomy as a result of the ascendancy of professionalization and adherence to the principles of journalistic objectivity. Yet in emancipating itself from its political masters, Dutch journalism took refuge under the wings of commercial interests, which were already powerful but became the undisputed master of Dutch journalism after pillarization. Dutch journalism had merely exchanged one master for another. It has not yet attained or even come close to the Habermasian ideal of a news media which is autonomous from both the state and commerce.

The radical perspective Curran identifies in British history writing provides a fruitful way for understanding much of Dutch media and journalism history, exactly because it avoids the trap of the liberal version, which assumes that professional journalism serves the public interest. In contrast, this dissertation employs the American tradition of political economy of the news media in order to argue that advertising-funded and privately owned news media are not free, but dependent on their commercial masters. This often indirect dependence exerts a strong effect on news content, once again as during pillarization slanting the news in favor of the interests of political and economic elites. This bias will probably most clearly show in the coverage of foreign affairs and macro-economic issues, for the outcomes of these directly affect elite interests.

Curran might have been correct in pointing out that a synthesis of the meta-narratives of media history he identified is required for anything approaching a comprehensive understanding, if this is even possible. Therefore, this chapter does not argue that the radical perspective is the only or even the most illuminating lens through which to understand this history. For instance, the liberal perspective has much going for it, which partly explains its lasting allure. This chapter does argue that the available historical and social-scientific scholarship shows that the radical perspective is a legitimate one. In the context of this dissertation, this chapter has provided the historical relief to situate the following chapters against.

## CHAPTER 3

### RADICAL DUTCH MEDIA CRITICISM SINCE WWII

Based on a literature review and interviews with scholars, this chapter recaptures and evaluates the political-economic perspective on the Dutch media in the forties and seventies. During these periods, this perspective comprised a significant, but certainly never dominant, part of the public and scholarly debates on the Dutch media. Scholars and practitioners eloquently addressed a core problem of journalism in the twentieth century, namely the tensions that its commercial underpinnings create with its avowed task in a democracy. In the eighties this critical perspective all but disappeared. One result was that the calls made in the seventies for democratization of the media system and society at large receded. In current communications scholarship, the depth of the crisis in Dutch democracy is scarcely acknowledged (chapter 4). The media too perpetuate the myth that Dutch society is a democracy in any meaningful definition of the word. A “bureaucracy” would be a more apt description (Hamelink 2004: 21; chapter 4). This chapter aims to contribute to putting the political-economic perspective back on the map.

Additionally, this chapter argues for the increased relevance of this perspective, because commercial imperatives currently have a much stronger hold on the Dutch media than forty years ago, for instance as a result of the introduction of commercial broadcasting in 1989 and the increased emphasis on profit-maximization in the struggling newspaper industry (chapter 5). A revived political-economic perspective can shed considerable light on the crisis in which Dutch journalism finds itself today (Ummelen 2009) and can point to constructive ways forward (McChesney and Nichols 2010; McChesney and Pickard 2011).

This chapter is structured as follows. First, it is pointed out that a political-economic critique of the Dutch media did not first arise in forties, but has a long historical pedigree. Then the political-economic strand that emerged in the forties is discussed. Its counterpart in the seventies is discussed mainly through a detailed examination of its major publications. This approach, which includes many direct quotes, is chosen in order to recapture not just their content but also their flavor and tone, for they are not in print anymore and never appeared in English. This chapter thus unearths an episode in political-economic research of the media that has been forgotten in the Netherlands and is unknown abroad. Subsequently, the absence of a political economy approach to the study of the Dutch media from the eighties onwards is documented. The concluding discussion suggests some reasons for its disappearance and argues that its salience has nonetheless demonstrably increased as a result of developments in the media industry and Dutch society at large.

### **Radical critiques before the forties**

Political-economic criticisms of the Dutch media go back much further than the forties. Quite possibly, although this cannot be known for sure without further archival research, many salient criticisms voiced in the period before WWII deserve to be excavated. For instance, the communist newspaper *De Waarheid* and the “radical democratic” publications at the end of the nineteenth century (RMO 2003: 71) might prove fertile hunting grounds. So too might union publications. Here one brief mention must do illustrate these historical roots. Since the establishment of unions in the Netherlands, the consistent conservative bias with which the “bourgeois press” covered strikes and other actions by workers was “regularly” the topic of “polemics” (Van den Berg and Van der Veer 1986: 1). One of the reasons for the labor

movement to set up, in 1895, the independent newspaper *Het Volksdagblad* (The People's Daily), was the hostile treatment workers claimed to receive in the extant press (Van den Berg & Van der Veer 1986: 6, note 2).

The criticisms articulated by the early labor movement might be called “radical” because 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 and Scott 2004: 4). Because of the emphasis on structural explanations for journalists’ behavior and news content, this kind of criticism can also be termed “political-economic” (Herman and Chomsky 1988, 2002; Mosco 1996; McChesney 1999, 2007; Bagdikian 2004). In the seventies, the term “critical” was commonly employed as a synonym for “political-economic.” In this chapter the three terms will be used interchangeably.

### **The forties**

The Dutch underground press in WWII well understood that the profit-making motive was the chief reason for the mainstream press’s widespread collaboration with the Germans. The magazine *Vrij Nederland* (December 12, 1942: 616) opined for instance 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.*

Other commentators in *Vrij Nederland* also forcefully argued that the press, because of its special role in a democratic society as exemplified by its legal protection under press freedom laws, should not be an industry. As an editorial stated, a publisher, in contrast to a manufacturer of “clothing, nails, light bulbs” serves and should serve “the spiritual life” of a country (*Vrij Nederland*, 18 November, 1944). Professor J. A. Veraart (1944) singled out the “neutral,” that is commercial, press for criticism. These newspapers, for instance *De Telegraaf*, cared only about profits, which they pursued by giving the public what it wanted, focusing on sensational stories and thereby neglecting “all moral responsibility.” The war had shown the complete “lack of character of much of the neutral press,” as the task and duty of enlightening the people had been abandoned for selling information as if it were “merchandise,” because the for-profit company had to be rescued “at any price.”<sup>5</sup>

The future of the press therefore was one of the most important issues that the Dutch government after the war would have to tackle. Veraart was of the opinion that only a radical restructuring of the press system would provide adequate safeguards to ensure that never again would the press be so shamefully vulnerable to widespread collaboration with a foreign enemy. More generally, far-reaching reform was necessary to give the press the opportunity to truly fulfill its role in a democracy. Veraart advocated for a new law which would forbid the publishing of newspapers and magazines with the object of making a profit. After a transition period of a decade, he proposed, the only legal form through which a publication would be allowed to exist would be a “stichting,” a non-profit organizational structure. Under this

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<sup>5</sup> Press criticism came from two very distinct camps: the left and the religious-conservative right. Both claimed that commercialism of the press had detrimental effects, yet one might suspect that the two camps, despite their similar starting point, would not have been able to reach agreement on how to reform the press system, as they were ideologically so far apart.



imagined law, the profits made by a stichting, if any, could only be used for paying employees, re-investment in the publication or as determined by a commission appointed by a cabinet minister and consisting of three lawyers, three journalists and three representatives of the professional organizations of newspaper and periodical journalists (Veraart 1944: 462).

The last part of Veraart's plan seems distinctly unattractive, for it opens the door to indirect government interference with content – Veraart wanted to give the commission the authority to prevent the establishment of new publications. This construction makes it not inconceivable that the commission would prevent publication of a newspaper or magazine if a majority of its members would be hostile to the newcomer's ideology. Moreover, it would be likely that the members of the commission, as a result of their establishment background, would be hostile to non-mainstream political points of view.

Writing in the seventies, the Werkgroep Persconcentratie (1972: 53) rightly pointed to the limitations of proposals like Veraart's. Even a newspaper that was a stichting would be obliged to take the demands of the advertisers in consideration and thus would still produce a paper that was primarily a product. Indeed, *Vrij Nederland* itself, although anti-German and not aiming to make money, during WWII was replete with ads, mostly from English companies. The magazine was printed in London and its readership consisted mostly of Dutch people who were not residing in the Netherlands at the time. Nonetheless, Veraart's plan had and has considerable merit because it recognized that the only way to get rid of the inevitable detrimental consequences of a commercial press system was to outlaw profit-making motives. Veraart's plan shows that serious people at the time took very seriously the need to radically reform the press system.

The criticisms in the underground press during and right after WWII were echoed by other sectors of Dutch society. Hans van den Heuvel has shown that between 1939 and 1949, there were attempts made to solve a perennial problem related to freedom of the press: the tension between the profit-making motive of papers and their goal of providing an immaterial service. In this debate, two visions were dominant. The first argued that the press needed to be cleansed from journalists and publishers who had collaborated with the enemy, but that the structure of the press could remain intact. The second vision was that of the underground press; it blamed the widespread collaboration on the commercial nature of the press system. To prevent something similar from happening in the future, the press needed not just be independent of the government. In order to be truly free, it should also be free from profit-making motives. Article 7 of the Dutch Constitution, which guarantees freedom of the press (that is to say, forbids prior restraint) was interpreted by the proponents of this second vision as not just being a prohibition on interference by the state, but also as being at odds with the aims of a commercial press. In short, the press did not need to be cleansed of bad apples; the press system needed to be fundamentally reformed.

It might be noted that C. Edwin Baker has made the argument that the First Amendment does not prohibit the government from actively creating the conditions in which a free press can prosper. In this perspective, freedom of the press is seen as a social right, instead of as a right that benefits media organizations (Baker 1989, 2007; also McChesney 1999). That in order to make the Dutch press truly free, the profit-motives of the press would need to be reined in was argued at the time by a few highly-placed people. It was for instance the opinion of the socialist cabinet-minister J. A. W. Burger and of G. J. van Heuven Goedhart. In 1947, the latter, a former cabinet minister and then managing editor of the formerly underground paper *Het Parool*,

expressed the belief that in 25 years it might be generally acknowledged that the media should not primarily serve as a vehicle for profit-making (Van den Heuvel 1981: 115-6).

Clearly this vision lost out. According to Van den Heuvel, the alternative plans for a new media system were either vague or posed a threat to the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of the press. As discussed, Professor Veraart's plan certainly falls into this latter category. Another example is the first temporary press decree, issued by the government-in-exile in London, which also aimed to introduce a licensing scheme. Licenses would be given out or denied based on two criteria. A license could be denied (1) when it was established that a publication aimed solely at making a profit and (2) when a publication was deemed to not satisfy an existing need among the public. The vagueness of the second criterion raised the intractable question of who should be given the authority to decide what the public needed.

Around 1950 the initiatives to have the government require publications to adopt as its legal form the non-profit stichting, had been abandoned. According to Van den Heuvel, the proponents of these reforms, mostly socialists, were never able to bring their vision in line with a rigorous guarantee of the constitutional provisions for press freedom. According to the Werkgroep Perskoncentratie, the "handful" of socialists and communists who realized during and right after the war that the existing "political-economic system" exerted a fundamental infringement on freedom of the press, did not draw up proposals for structural change of the media landscape. The socialists because they had already done away with "the principled fight against the capitalist system" and the communists presumably because they suspected that changes in the media landscape would only make it harder for them to present their case before the public (Werkgroep Perskoncentratie 1972: 72-3).

The press law enacted in 1947 implicitly recognized that the press was an industry, and thereby solidified its basic structure. The initiatives to reform the press system were dead and buried when a law in 1951 dropped a provision that gave the government the authority to disown newspaper companies that had collaborated with the Germans. Since then, Dutch politics has accepted as an immutable fact the commercial nature of the press. To enhance the economic position of the press, that is, in an attempt to take the sharp edges off the “free” newspaper market, the industry was provided with tax breaks (e.g. low postal and phone tariffs), and on occasion subsidies were provided to publications in danger of being taken over or of going bankrupt. The rationale behind these policies was that the state had some role to play, albeit a marginal one, to protect the pluralism of the press (Van den Heuvel 1981: 116-9).

Finally, it might be noted that the radical media criticism in the forties in the Netherlands was not an isolated phenomenon. In France too unsuccessful attempts were undertaken right after WWII to make the press independent from commercial sponsors. As the French Press Federation argued at the time, “The press is not a means of commercial profit. It is free only when it is not dependent on either the government or the money powers, but only on the conscience of its journalists and readers” (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 115, also 116). The forties also saw a wave of media criticism in other countries, for instance the United States (Pickard 2008). These attempts to change the fundamentals of the media system were a consequence and symptom of the social upheaval as a result of the war and its aftermath. The second wave of media criticism in the Netherlands, during the seventies, also took place in a period which was characterized by a surge of resistance against the foundations of the systemic order, and was also mirrored in other countries, for instance the US. Radical scholars in the Netherlands for instance would reference Herbert Schiller’s work on media imperialism.

## **The seventies**

In Dutch scholarship a political-economic strand arose in the late sixties, when a small number of young academics started to worry about the strong trend towards press concentration in the newspaper industry (Hemels, interview).<sup>6</sup> These academics were children of their era. Marxism was in vogue. They wanted to do research relevant to society, partly in reaction to the abstract nature of the dominant communication scholarship. Up until then, the research focus had been on politics; the influence of economics on the media was a blind spot (Bierhoff, interview). The few scholars who made up the critical strand denounced advertising as manipulation, characterizing it with the phrase “the bad breath of society” (Hemels, interview). Intellectually, the critical strand built on work by Karl Marx, The Frankfurt School and Antonio Gramsci and could be summarized as a “neo-Marxist, political-economic take on the effect of structural capitalist ownership of media on their hegemonic and status quo confirming content” (Brants, interview). Although similar to the American tradition of political economy of the media, the Dutch version was theoretically more sophisticated, in Brants’ view. Yet the latter has subsequently shown more “perseverance” and has produced more – and more sophisticated – empirical research in an attempt to back up its claims (Brants, interview).

The political economists of the seventies took the following positions. They denounced journalistic objectivity as a conservative ideology which primarily served the interests of the newspaper owners; they warned against the increasing market-orientation of the Dutch media; they argued that the commercial papers were biased in favor of political and economic elites and

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<sup>6</sup> The extent of the impact that this critical strand had is debatable. According to Brants (interview), the critical scholars stimulated debate on press concentration and also were a factor in prodding the government to enact policy to counter this trend and to 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*. Its government allocated funds ultimately derived from the revenues of commercials, which were allowed on Dutch public radio and television starting in the late sixties (RMO 2003: 77).

against, for instance, unions; they denounced the Dutch partisan, “pillarized” media system, which was in the process of breaking down, as authoritarian; and they argued that regulatory changes in the public broadcasting system in the sixties had resulted in a de facto commercial media system in which the quest for the highest ratings had become dominant. Employing Marxist terminology, and regularly referencing Jürgen Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, these political economists devised plans for restructuring the media landscape so that it would serve the public better. One plan envisioned the semi-nationalization of printing facilities (Werkgroep Persconcentratie 1972: 28). Their aim was to influence government policy (Vasterman, interview). They also urged the organization of Dutch journalists (NVJ) to become more active in winning concessions from the organization of newspaper owners (NDP), including the introduction of editorial statutes, which were to guarantee journalistic independence vis-à-vis management. A distinct weakness of the critical strand was that only few content analyses were undertaken in order to demonstrate that the asserted biases in media content in favor of the interests of political and economic elites did in fact exist. Moreover, these studies were methodologically unsophisticated (Vasterman, interview).

The book *Persconcentratie*<sup>7</sup> (Press Concentration, 1972) was probably the highpoint of this critical strand. It was published by the socialist publisher SUN in Nijmegen and written by the Werkgroep Persconcentratie, an ensemble of journalists and scholars and instructors and students at the journalism school in Utrecht. The school was established in 1966 as the first professional school in the Netherlands. In the late sixties and early seventies, it was a hotbed of leftist thought. The Werkgroep Persconcentratie consisted of more than a dozen people. A

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<sup>7</sup> The ‘critical’ nature of the book was already apparent from the title. The correct way to spell ‘persconcentratie’ was with a ‘c’ and not a ‘k.’ The innovative, phonetic spelling was meant to reflect the innovative political attitudes of the authors. Experimenting with new ways of spelling was characteristic of much of the left at the time.

prominent member was Jan Rogier, journalist at the leftist magazine *Vrij Nederland*. Another member was his colleague at *Vrij Nederland* Rudie van Meurs, who became a much respected investigative journalist. The group also included Ben Manschot, a scholar at the University of Amsterdam and Hans Niemantsverdriet, an instructor at the journalism school. Two other notable authors were journalism students Hanneke Acker and Bert Determeijer. They went on to become journalists at mainstream publications and also instructors at their old school.

The Werkgroep Perskoncentratie provided a coherent political-economic analysis of the Dutch media, arguing 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: 9). The book took an historical approach to the analysis 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: 15). Chapter 2, “Development to a Monopoly Press,” provided an overview of the history of the press. It remains one of the few published texts, if not the only one, which does not explicitly or implicitly frame Dutch press history as a story of “natural” progress from partisanship to professionalism (Broersma 2011). The chapter emphasized the negatives of the market’s influence on journalism, noting for instance that the abolition of the heavy taxes on newspapers in 1869 that opened up the newspaper market resulted in publishers striving “for the hand of the readers mostly in order to receive as a reward the kiss of the advertiser” (Werkgroep Perskoncentratie 1972: 35-6).

The authors discussed the then occurring wave of concentration in the newspaper industry; remarked upon the considerable influence of foreign press agencies and the national

press agency ANP; denounced journalistic objectivity as a mechanism which reproduced the dominant 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 fool itself too" (Werkgroep Perskoncentratie 1972: 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 as a result 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 (Werkgroep Perskoncentratie 1972: 33).

After a discussion of contemporary plans to reform the press system, the authors concluded that none of them got at the root of the problem. Many commentators for instance 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 subtle mechanisms for maintaining "social peace," would most often take the side of the employers (Werkgroep Perskoncentratie 1972: 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, for "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 was 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 (Werkgroep Perskoncentratie 1972: 142).

In *Journalistiek ondersteboven*<sup>8</sup> (Journalism Upside Down, 1974) Kees Brants enunciated and propagated the foundational positions of a political-economic analysis of the media, arguing for instance that journalistic notions of objectivity provided the “cover” under which the journalist “maintained and spread” the “ideology of his bosses.” The book provided a sophisticated analysis of the deleterious effects of objectivity as defined by a commercial journalism, which by its nature transformed information into merchandise, resulting in an on the surface “neutral journalism,” which in fact is “highly partisan” because ideologically “conservative” (Brants 1974: 76). The idealistic mission of journalism was hard to square with its commercial aims, for instance because commercial journalism marginalizes fundamental critiques of society (Brants 1974: 7-8). Brants approvingly cited Jan Rogier, who wrote that “The policy of all daily papers in the Netherlands is in the final instance always determined by the employers and most journalists accept this. As long as the journalists do not revolt, there will be no freedom of the press” (in Brants 1974: 10). Brants’ book amounted to an incisive manifesto on the precarious state of Dutch journalism. Although offering examples of media manipulation, it lacked systematic empirical research to back up its claims, a lacuna which as noted was characteristic of the critical strand in general.

Peter Vasterman, Jan Bierhoff, Jo Bardoel and Ben Manschot (1975) wrote *Marges in de Media* (Margins in the Media), a lucid treatment of the ideological limits and the commercial logic that characterized the pillarized broadcasting system. The book was the very first attempt to

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<sup>8</sup> This book was one of several critical works published in the series ‘Nieuwspoortreeks’ by the Wetenschappelijke Uitgeverij (“Scientific Publisher”) in Amsterdam. Other notable publications in this series were *Media, Macht en Mensen* (Media, Power and People, 1974) by Ben Manschot (see below) and *Gekonkel om de kabel* (Intrigue over cable, 1974) by Jan Tromp (see below).

describe the effect of economic considerations on the Dutch broadcasters and the content they produced. Until then, the literature on broadcasting had focused on the political aspects of broadcasting (Vasterman, interview). This blind spot in the literature was to some extent understandable, as the Netherlands was unique in that the broadcasting organizations were run by the main ideological groupings in society. Yet in the seventies a number of developments challenged the view that politics was paramount. Economic aspects became more and more important to the media, as illustrated by the introduction of glossy magazines and market research, and the folding of many independent newspapers (Vasterman, interview). In the late sixties, regulatory changes allowed commercials on public channels and opened up the broadcasting system to new organizations, with the effect that the organizations were now directly competing for audience shares. Newcomers the TROS and Veronica had no apparent ideological orientation but wanted to appeal to a large audience and in the latter case especially to the young. They were, in the words of Denis McQuail, “associations that unequivocally set out to offer what the public was thought to want – more entertainment, music, lively and neutral information, and the like” (in Avery 1993: 82).

By documenting the failure of three radio and television programs that aimed to give laborers a voice, *Marges in the media* argued that by the mid-seventies one could not realistically expect the broadcasting system to serve the interests of relatively 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. The result of de-pillarization had been that notions of professionalism and objectivity had become paramount to journalists, instead of social engagement, providing context to the news, or serving the information needs of particular

segments of the public. Despite the unique macro-level characteristics of the Dutch broadcasting system, the content that these organizations produced was very similar to the content of other media systems (Bardoel et al. 1975: 61), for instance the American system, partly because the United States had waged a successful “media-imperialist” campaign (Bardoel et al. 1975: 62). Programs “predominantly reflect the world and the societal views of the middle (and upper) classes,” or in other words, “The reality of the lower social classes and their view of it are shown only by exception” (Bardoel et al. 1975: 82, 117, 135). The media were unlikely to change by themselves, because they reflected and were subject to the characteristics of the larger capitalist political-economy and legitimized these. Journalists more often propagated the views of those who paid them than that they freely articulated the needs and views of societal groups. The authors called for further democratization of the media; for a media system that had firm roots in communities (Bardoel et al. 1975: 11) and concluded that avenues for change might be found in a counter public sphere, in a new broadcaster and in putting pressure on the existing broadcasters to change their ways (Bardoel et al. 1975: 179).

In the seventies not just scholars but also many journalists showed themselves critical of the commercial nature of the press. A sense of how entrenched radicalism was among Dutch journalists is provided by the outcomes of a survey in the mid-seventies, which showed that many journalists had lost confidence in the efficacy of private control over the media. More than three out of four journalists were wary of profit-making mandates. They blamed these for the fast proceeding process of industry concentration and argued that this development was detrimental to the quality of journalism (Deuze 2004: 83). The organization of Dutch journalists (NVJ) became more militant in its negotiations with the organization of newspaper owners (NDP). The NVJ even argued that in due course, papers should become independent of advertisers,

analogous to the broadcasters (Werkgroep Perskoncentratie 1972: 20, 24-5). Journalists successfully demanded the adoption of editorial statutes, which were to guarantee editorial independence from the business side. The NDP fought back though, 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. In the end, the NDP came out on top. The in 1977 adopted template editorial statute only established an advisory role for employees (Rogier et al. 1985: 42-3). Yet at *Vrij Nederland*, the fight for democratic control was won. The journalists of that leftist magazine got to decide on the editorial course themselves (Rogier et al. 1985: 39).

The main trade journal, *De Journalist* (The Journalist), published quite a number of critical articles in this period (Brants, interview). For instance, an editorial asserted that advertising had been “a political instrument, a choice for a conservative or at best a choice for a neutral press to the detriment of an engaged or progressive press, which dared to raise doubt about the absolute infallibility” of a societal system in which corporate interests were dominant. The editorial noted the important role that market mechanisms – that is, the censorship perpetrated by the market – had played in the disappearance of many a progressive publication (Hamelink, 1978: 25; cf. Curran 1978). Journalist Paul Brill, who would in later decades make a decided shift to the right of the political spectrum, nonetheless in the seventies argued that “As long as papers are... primarily economic units and function under the laws of the free market economy, cost-reduction, cooperation and concentration will beat out editorial independence, intensive news provision” and the fair presentation of diverse points of view (Hamelink 1978: 98). Newspaper *Trouw* exhorted the minister responsible for press policy to devise plans for a

media system in which economic motives would not be paramount (Van den Heuvel 1981: 115-6).

Journalist Jan Tromp wrote a 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. According to Tromp (1974: 34-5), it would be “unrealistic to expect that commercial channels will provide information that will be relevant for other things than just the promotion of the commercial interests.” Approvingly referencing among others Karl Marx and pioneering American political-economist 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 regarded as “infantile,” for it aimed to keep the people stupid, achieving the opposite of what the media were supposed to do (Tromp 1974: 36-9). Tromp noted that media concentration was no longer a “typical American phenomenon” but could also be seen in England, Germany and indeed in the Netherlands too (Tromp 1974: 44; Hamelink 1979). The solution was to be found in an “egalitarian, truly democratizing use of the medium through... a bottom-up approach.” Cable could potentially serve as an emancipating medium, but only if it was governed through a participatory democratic structure (Tromp 1974: 8, 108). Were citizens allowed to produce their own programs, cable channels could revitalize local political participation, thereby transforming the consumer in a producer (Tromp 1974: 100). In fact, 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” (Bierhoff, interview).

In “The trade value of a spiritual good,” a chapter in a standard textbook on the Dutch media, Jan Rogier, Hans Niemantsverdriet and Joan Hemels 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: 28). The authors blamed the downfall of the social-democratic newspaper *Het Vrije Volk* (The Free People) in part on the lack of interest of advertisers, 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 in the Netherlands (Werkgroep Persconcentratie 1972: 46). In 1961 its circulation, including many regional editions, still comprised 352.000 (Rogier et al. 1985: 31). Yet the paper started to lose money, was bought up in 1972 and became a regional paper focused on Rotterdam. The downfall of *Het Vrije Volk* provides a telling example of the censorship mechanisms, especially of leftwing voices, inherent in a commercial media system (cf. Curran 1978). The chapter last appeared in the 1985 edition of the textbook. It was dropped from the following edition and never reinstated: a sign of the shifting ideological climate (Hemels, interview). The year 1985 might therefore be taken as the definitive end of the critical period.<sup>9</sup>

Where did the more prominent political-economists of the seventies end up? Some went on to distinguished careers in the mainstream media. Tromp became an adjunct managing editor of the progressive quality newspaper *de Volkskrant*. So did Brill, who also became a leading commentator on foreign affairs. Other critical observers embarked on successful academic careers. Jo Bardoel (University of Amsterdam and University of Nijmegen) became a leading authority on Dutch broadcasting policy. Kees Brants (University of Amsterdam and University

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<sup>9</sup> Two more books in the critical tradition deserve at least a brief mention. In *Media, macht en mensen* (Media, Power and People, 1974) Ben Manschot asserted that research in mass communication should not and could not neglect the basic tension in a capitalist society: between capital and labor. In *Minderheden in de media* (Minorities in the Media, 1983), Teun Van Dijk argued that Dutch news was rife with racism.

of Leiden) became a leading authority on political communication. Cees Hamelink (University of Amsterdam and VU University Amsterdam) retained his political-economic orientation and went on to a distinguished academic career in international communication (see below). Joan Hemels, who did not self-identify as a critical scholar but did engage in the debate, had a long 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) he became a professor in media studies at the University of Amsterdam. Jan Bierhoff worked at the journalism school in Utrecht until 1990 and later became director at the European Centre for Digital Communication at Zuyd University in Maastricht. Hans Niemantsverdriet remained an instructor at the journalism school into the eighties, but found himself increasingly marginalized and died in 2007. Ben Manschot was a professor at the University of Amsterdam, with a focus on television, until he passed away in the mid-nineties. Jan Rogier died in the mid-eighties.

By and large the critical observers of the seventies abandoned their radical convictions. Brants (interview) claims to “still believe in the structural dangers of specific media ownership structures, but less in the self-evidence of its (sic) effects.” 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 this issue Brants directly disagrees with political-economists Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, who dispute that their analysis in *Manufacturing Consent* (1988, 2002; Pedro 2011) amounts to conspiracy theory. There is of course 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 and Robinson 2003). Dutch foreign coverage is similarly biased (chapters 5, 7, 8 and 9).

Like Brants, Jo Bardoel also became politically moderate. Bardoel (2010) has confessed to having believed as a young man in the ideal of “total participatory democracy,” yet he has come to the realization that paid professionals are necessary to unearth facts and help to orchestrate public debate. One might wonder though whether paid, professional journalists and participatory democracy are mutually exclusive, as Bardoel suggested. Vasterman and Bierhoff now argue that in the seventies they overestimated the dangers posed by press concentration. This development turned out to also have positive aspects which they at the time did not foresee. For instance, bigger media outlets have more money to spend on improving journalistic quality. Their analyses in the seventies 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 (Vasterman, interview). Since the seventies, journalistic quality has in fact improved, not deteriorated, and the ideological spectrum of opinion presented in the media is wider now than it was in the seventies, according to Bierhoff. Practical considerations (e.g. deadlines) provide a more salient explanation for journalists’ behavior than ideology. 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 (Bierhoff, interview).



## **The eighties and beyond**

The dearth of media scholarship in the Netherlands from an explicit political-economic perspective since the mid-eighties is profound. The media would become a hot topic in public debates in the first decade of the twenty-first century, with many arguing that Dutch journalism was in a deep crisis (Ummelen 2009), but a coherent political-economic perspective which emphasized structural causes has hardly been heard in the public debates (De Haan and Bardoel 2011) or the current scholarship (Brants and Vasterman 2010). References to the critical strand in the seventies have been very rare. The major publications on the Dutch media, for instance Huub Wijffjes' standard work on the history of Dutch journalism (2004), pay it no attention. Ignoring the critical tradition is unfortunate for, whether intended or not, the result is that what remains is a 'winner's history,' in which the fundamentals of the media system disappear out of sight. Such histories tend to downplay the significant influence that commercialism has had on the Dutch media landscape, not just in the last couple of decades but throughout the twentieth century, and eschew the marginalization of leftwing voices through the mechanism of the market.

After the seventies, Jo Bardoel and Mark Deuze have done some work that can be called "critical," according to Hemels (interview). Brants (interview) could not think of a single scholar who continued doing work that fit the critical tradition, except for "maybe" journalism historian Frank van Vree. Yet the case can be made that the only communication scholar who from the eighties until the present day has written consistently from within the critical tradition has been Cees Hamelink.<sup>10</sup> Major themes in his work have been the dangers of the increasing commercialization of the media; the fundamental problems associated with relying on "greedy" transnational corporations as providers of news and information (Hamelink 1984: 127); and the

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<sup>10</sup> Cees Hamelink (interview) considers the following a "good interpretation" of his work.

inequalities in communication opportunities between the developed and the underdeveloped countries. Hamelink has emphasized the importance of the economic groundings of the media, arguing 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: 143-4). Often addressing a general audience (1978; 1980; 1984; 1994; 2004), Hamelink has adopted as one of his basic premises the need for further democratization of media policy, 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 has argued that “scientific work should contribute to the protection and promotion of human rights standards” (Hamelink 1994: 2-3).

Yet Hamelink’s influence on the scholarship and public debate on the Dutch media has been limited. Most of his books, especially his later ones, appeared in English and concerned mainly international communication issues, not the Dutch media specifically.<sup>11</sup> An exception is *Regeert de Leugen?* (Does the Lie Govern? 2004), in which Hamelink argued that the Dutch media were 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. According to Hamelink, 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: 75-6).

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<sup>11</sup> The same holds for Jaap van Ginneken (1998 & 2002), who is arguably a critical scholar.

What Ben Bagdikian said of the American media is therefore also true of media in other countries including the Netherlands: in times of war journalists become propagandists (Hamelink 2004: 82). Hamelink addressed a common first line of defense of many journalists, namely that they just give the people what they want, that it is the democratic market that decides what is important and that this is how it should be. It is commonly argued, wrote Hamelink, that people are more interested in what the American president has to say than what Noam Chomsky has to say. The media do nothing more or less than serve the public, and therefore they write about President George Bush and not about Chomsky. Yet to a significant extent supply creates demand. The public is not given a chance to develop an appetite for what Noam Chomsky or other radical observers have to say; a vicious circle is at work here (Hamelink 2004: 95). Moreover, it is not the task of journalists to give the people what they want. It is the journalist's task to present the news that he or she, following his or her informed and independent judgment, considers to be important and relevant to the public interest.

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 on the media market, a far-reaching improvement is an illusion. The problems are situated in the people and in the system; a fundamental improvement is for both an unrealistic desire." An accurate portrayal of reality is unattainable because although facts and opinion should be separated as much as possible, this is in the end impossible (Hamelink 2004: 51). This last quote illustrates that Hamelink takes a somewhat more moderate position than leading American political economists like Robert McChesney, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, who point to the structure within which journalist work as the culprit, arguing that when good journalism gets done, this is typically

because individual journalists defy the system in which they work. In contrast, Hamelink puts some of the blame on journalists themselves and ascribes to the notion that facts and opinion can and/or should be separated. Perhaps significantly, the tone of Hamelink's analyses in the seventies and eighties was more strident than in his later work.

Probably only one Dutch publication has been primarily devoted to radical media criticism: the short-lived *Extra!* (2001-2004).<sup>12</sup> 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 editors were volunteers. To some extent, the magazine's lack of success and its quick demise were due to the following factors: the inability to attract advertisers or 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 lack of receptiveness of the wider cultural context it operated in. There was a lack of knowledgeable writers who were willing to regularly contribute without remuneration. The social environment it spoke to was not strong enough to sustain a platform for radical media criticism. Support for the magazine came mainly from the Amsterdam squatter movement.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, valuable work was done. For instance, Anna Windgassen and Martin Hulsing (2003; De Wit 2007) elicited comments from the managing editor of newspaper *Trouw*, Frits van Exter, which tellingly explained the paper's lack of skepticism regarding claims that Saddam possessed WMDs. Van Exter defended his paper by arguing that it had chosen to believe Colin

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Deuze (2004) and Kees Brants (2011, with Katrin Voltmer) made mention of the magazine.

<sup>13</sup> The squatter movement has for decades been a fairly strong subculture in the Netherlands, partly because since WWII the country has had to deal with a housing shortage, especially in Amsterdam. Squatting in the Netherlands is legal in some circumstances. Leftwing and anarchist thought are prevalent in the movement.

Powell over Saddam. In other words, the paper had focused on what it deemed the most credible of the powerful sources directly involved in the dispute, giving less credence to other, less powerful but nonetheless more credible sources, for instance United Nations weapons inspectors.

The Netherlands currently boasts no publications that follow the media from a radical perspective, although a new blog has the ambition to grow into such a site ([mediakritisch.wordpress.com](http://mediakritisch.wordpress.com)). An alternative Dutch magazine which on occasion publishes critical articles on the media, especially on the relationship between the media and the royal family, is *Ravage*. Currently it is available only on the web. *De Socialist*, the house-organ of the International Socialists in the Netherlands, also sometimes publishes on the mass media (Blom 2011). The website [www.globalinfo.nl](http://www.globalinfo.nl) is another example of a marginal publication which on occasion practices radical media criticism. In contrast to the United States, the Netherlands has no alternative press to speak of.

## **Discussion**

The disappearance of the critical strand of media research in the eighties coincided with the rise to prominence of neoliberal politics throughout the Western world, although in the Netherlands its ascendance came later and has been less pronounced than in the United States and Great Britain (Chavannes 2009). This ideological shift had a predictable effect. Some radical observers faced the stark choice of conforming to the new ideological climate or remaining critical and losing their job. Although the journalism school in Utrecht functioned as a refuge for a period, there were “no natural employment” opportunities available for “critical” journalists (Bierhoff, interview). Exceptionally, Hans Niemantsverdriet remained steadfast to his beliefs, with the result that he was “marginalized” and that his position became “untenable” (Bierhoff,

interview). Broadening the lens, the marginalization of radical (media) criticism, the modest upsurge in the seventies notwithstanding, can in part be explained historically, namely by the systematic political pressures exerted on the media to refrain from espousing leftwing views (De Winter 2004; Jos van Dijk 2004) before the seventies, and by the commercial logic on which the Dutch media have operated, especially since the seventies. Throughout the twentieth century, Dutch society has never been particularly amenable to leftist views. Despite its progressive reputation abroad regarding issues like abortion and the death penalty, the Netherlands was always one of the most staunchly anti-communist countries in Europe (Scott-Smith 2007). The critical tradition of the seventies was defeated, then, in part, by the very problem it identified: the increasing dominance of capitalist logic and ideology in both the media and higher education.

Another reason for the demise of the critical strand of communication research could be that it was a strange bedfellow within Dutch communication scholarship. The political-economic approach clashed with its social-scientific, dominant paradigm and could perhaps therefore be expected to remain marginal to the field. Social science tends to downplay the relevance of historical explanations and analyses, as C. Wright Mills (1959) already argued, whereas an historical perspective is fundamental to political-economic approaches. Dutch communication scholarship resembles its American counterpart in many ways, for instance in that its orientation is predominantly social-scientific in nature. The publications in the *Tijdschrift voor Communicatiewetenschap*, the flagship magazine of Dutch communication scholarship, are similar to those in the mainstream American journals as to “approach, methods of data collection” and types of media studied (Zwier et al. 2006: 225). Nonetheless, Anglo-American media studies has put more emphasis on power as a factor in explaining the media than scholars in continental Europe, where the social-scientific orientation often is even more entrenched. In

Anglo-American scholarship since the seventies, the critical tradition has been “significant influence” (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 82-3, note 3), certainly more significant than in the Netherlands.

The in this chapter recaptured critical analyses closely follow the political-economic analyses of the American media. Indeed, the main conclusions drawn in this tradition also hold for the Netherlands, although not with the same force. The Netherlands is a Western democracy with a strong pro-American outlook and possesses an almost completely unregulated, advertising-dependent, “objective” press, which is in deep crisis, and a predominantly commercial broadcasting system. The much vaunted public service broadcasting system is crumbling:

*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: 167)

The newspaper industry is highly concentrated. Hundreds of print journalists have lost their jobs in recent years (Rutten and Slot 2011; chapter 5). ‘Churnalism,’ the journalistic practice of turning press releases and other PR-material into “articles” without checking the information, runs rampant in the regional press, to the detriment of citizens’ information needs (Hietbrink et al. 2010; Hijmans et al. 2009; Prenger et al. 2011; chapter 5). A burgeoning PR-

industry is overpowering journalism (Prenger et al. 2011). Press agency ANP, arguably the most important information provider in the Netherlands, is privately-owned and run for profit, as is its small competitor Novum Nieuws. In fact, social-scientific studies, done after the critical tradition of the seventies was forgotten, to a significant extent endorse the assertions of critical scholars in the seventies that the Dutch news is biased in favor of the interests of political and economic elites. This is especially true of foreign affairs coverage (Rietman 1988; De Landtsheer et al. 2002; Walgrave and Verhulst 2005; Vliegthart and Schröder 2010; see Hamelink 2004). Arguably the propaganda model explains Dutch media content too, although likely not with full force (chapter 5). Many political-economists of the seventies have disavowed their former analyses, yet it is logical to assume that political-economic analyses of the seventies not only were substantially valid then (the by now archaic-sounding Marxist language and lack of empirical research notwithstanding) but are far more valid now. In this day and age of hyper-commercialism and neoliberalism, a communications field that lacks a coherent political-economic perspective lacks balance.



## CHAPTER 4

### DUTCH MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

This chapter discusses the strong elitist strands in Dutch politics and journalism. It relates this elitism to the often uncritical (or not critical enough) perceptions of Dutch democracy that guide journalistic practice. Explicitly or implicitly, these perceptions are also held by many media scholars. Discussed are critiques of the state of Dutch democracy put forward by mainstream political scientists and a few prominent, mainstream journalists. The argument is made that Dutch media studies, without justification and at its peril, ignores or downplays these fundamental critiques of Dutch democracy. Dutch media studies underestimates the extent to which the media are complicit in the de-politicization of society and the extent to which they uphold the far from democratic status quo. Some scholars do show concern about the consequences of the crisis in journalism for democracy, but it is rarely acknowledged that in practice, Dutch democracy is hardly democratic to begin with. Adopting the ideal of real or participatory democracy, as did the radical scholars in the seventies (chapter 3), would add a purpose and thus dynamism to Dutch media studies and would enrich its analyses.

The sorry state of Dutch democracy has been well established by leading political scientists, but media scholars refrain from calling for further democratization of the Netherlands or its media system. By and large they ignore or downplay the fact that Dutch democracy is in a severe crisis. Considering the intimate link between media and democracy, this crisis should be a central starting point for media studies. The purpose of this chapter then is to argue that an analysis of the Dutch media should begin with a critique of Dutch democracy; for only then does the full failure of the media system come to light. Additionally, this chapter provides the

background for understanding the content analysis on the press reception of the proposal by Greek prime-minister George Papandreou to hold a referendum on the euro crisis (chapter 9).

### **The elitist Dutch media**

Some scholars have acknowledged that Dutch journalism is an activity by elites for elites. The process of public opinion formation is performed mostly by elites, including journalists, as Joke Hermes wrote: “News professionals form an information-elite” and provide a view of the world in which, at best, citizens are depicted as “consumers” and at worst as “children.” And everybody knows, she noted ironically, that “one should never take seriously the whining of children – that only makes things worse” (Hermes 2005: 25). Dutch television depicts “ordinary” people “on the sidelines and in the stands,” (Hermes 2005: 10) or when they “have a problem or are a problem” (Hermes 2005: 11).

Mark Deuze 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. This average journalist likes to think he has left-leaning political beliefs and values a skeptical attitude towards big business and the government. He also values speedy reporting and providing analysis of, and background to, the news (Deuze 2002: 92-4). Other scholars found that although political reporters in the Netherlands were and are to the left of the average citizen, there is no proof that this has influenced their reporting (Bardoel et al. 2002: 130). According to Deuze again, the Dutch journalist regards himself as operating “free of commercial pressures,” but his “main goal is to reach and maintain as many subscribers as possible.” He has a “negligible” amount of contact with ethnic minorities and does not communicate with his audience. He is “definitely an ambitious (or even: pretentious) professional” (Deuze 2002: 92-4).

The Dutch journalist anno 2010 has been described as a man of fifty years old, with a college education and left-of-center political beliefs. He values “objective” reporting and abhors the influence of commercial imperatives on his profession. He blogs nor uses social media as part of his job. Although he values the feedback he gets, the public should in his eyes not get more influence on news content. He believes that journalism should serve the public interest by acting as a check on politics, but he also believes that journalist should not become activist. According to him, it is not the task of journalism to advocate the rights of the weaker groups in society or to put issues on the political agenda (Pleijter et al. 2010).

At least one serious problem follows from such a role perception, which might be summarized as adhering to journalistic professionalism and objectivity. In James Carey’s (2000) words:

*Journalists can be independent or objective about everything else but they cannot be aloof about democracy, for it forms the ground condition of their craft. Without the institutions of democracy, journalists are reduced to propagandists or entertainers. The passion for democracy is the one necessary bond journalists must have with the public and their colleagues in other crafts—law, teaching—who are equally dependent on democratic institutions.*

It might be expected that professional journalists in the Netherlands lack a “passion for democracy,” and that this will be reflected in news content, for instance by ignoring or downplaying the crisis in Dutch democracy. Indeed, according to Hermes, the Dutch media do not stimulate active citizenship among ordinary people. Journalism is tightly interwoven with political elites and shares with politicians the conviction that “reason and emotion, politicians

and the people are each other's opposites... Politics nor journalism understands or stimulates a broad notion of citizenship" (Hermes 2005: 28). The report *Medialogica* also concluded that as a result of the ways politics is reported on, the media impede instead of foster notions of citizenship (RMO 2003: 97). Research has shown that Dutch media rely heavily on "mostly 'white' sources in government and business," resulting in the marginalization of minorities, although some dispute these findings (Bardoel et al. 2002: 451; also Heijne 2012).

Jo Bardoel and Leen d'Haenens have made similar points to those raised by Hermes. They wrote 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" (Bardoel and d'Haenens 2004: 190). They understood that commercialism, instead of just providing the people with what they want, in fact leads to the marginalization of the citizen in the communication process:

*The media's existing political and market-oriented accountability mechanisms do insufficient justice to the public as a full partner in the social communication process. The traditional social contexts (such as the system of sociopolitical compartmentalization) [i.e. pillarization] in which the Dutch press and broadcasting media were once embedded no longer work, and journalists have freed themselves from this context through a process of professionalization. The public, or the citizen, has gradually evolved into a media consumer, with the complicity of audience research. In the meantime, media conglomerates have emerged that have considerable influence on public opinion, and their conduct is increasingly in conformance with the market. With this,*

*the autonomy of media professionals is diminishing, whether they be journalists or publishers. Consequently, a greater involvement of citizens in the media might well offer an answer to these problems. (Bardoel and d'Haenens 2004: 191)*

Indeed, the progressive commercialization of the Dutch media over the last decades has eroded the role of the citizen, new media technologies notwithstanding:

*... the position of the citizen in relation to the media has become structurally substantially weaker over the last 30 years. In the press sector, in the Netherlands and elsewhere, this weakening of their position can be attributed to growing commercialization and the central role of a limited number of press organizations that are developing into veritable (multi-)media conglomerates. In Dutch broadcasting there is an additional factor – namely the growing influence of the state on a broadcasting system that has emerged from civil society – which has been just as ineffective in advancing the relationship with the citizen. In the press sector, the ‘traditional’ period, in which there was room for newspaper editors who in the end allowed the newspaper’s political and cultural interests to prevail over entrepreneurial considerations, has given way to the primacy of profitability and ‘shareholders’ value’. In the broadcasting sector, the exclusive rights of public broadcasting, which arose out of popular movements that gradually fell under the influence of the state, have been replaced by a dual system in which public broadcasting is severely regulated and commercial broadcasters have until now had little reason to be concerned about their responsibilities. (Bardoel and d'Haenens 2004: 187-9)*

The disdain among mainstream journalists for true, participatory democracy in which citizens actually have – besides the right to vote for a handful of mostly similar political parties – a say about the issues that pertain to their lives, was nicely illustrated by the press reactions to Gerard van Westerloo’s brilliant exposé of the sorry state of Dutch democracy in *Niet spreken met de bestuurder* (2003). In it, Van Westerloo interviewed eleven leading political scientists in the Netherlands who all acknowledged that Dutch democracy exists in theory rather than in practice. In a review, *NRC Handelsblad* denounced Van Westerloo as a “romantic” and asserted that politics had not been taken away from the public; the public had given it away to professional politicians. The widespread disdain for politicians among the public the paper explained by, again, blaming the public: the individualized citizen “demands quick, cut-to-size solutions to every problem.” In short, the citizen demands the impossible of well-meaning politicians and blames them for it when they do not deliver, try as they may (Bergman 2003). *Trouw* acknowledged the accuracy of Van Westerloo’s analysis. The newspaper proceeded to offer a solution. After noting that the citizens could not provide a way out, because they are incapable of making up their minds, the paper proposed that the politicians themselves should go and look for opposing voices; that they search for counterweights to their own power unchecked by rigorous democratic mechanisms. In short, *Trouw* argued that only “political leadership” could provide a way out of the undemocratic concentration of power that has accrued to that same leadership (Bergman 2003).

Dutch journalism today thus holds a rather negative image of “ordinary people,” just as elites have done throughout Dutch history. As the political power of the masses expanded, “fear and worry” arose among elites over the masses’ “fickleness,” noted Hermes (2005: 8). Yet

Hermes incongruously cited with apparent approval the conclusion of the report *Medialogica* that the media perform their function of watchdog of democracy well (Hermes 2005: 21).

### **Dutch democracy in crisis**

Dutch political elitism has deep historical roots. According to prominent sociologist J.A.A. Van Doorn, the politicians of the four main groupings in Dutch history (Catholics, Protestants, socialists and liberals) had at least one thing in common in the nineteenth century. Namely, for better or worse, a “remarkable elitism” that was even more pronounced than in many other countries (Van Doorn 2009: 268). In 1922, still almost a quarter of the *social-democratic* members of parliament were noblemen or patricians (Van Doorn 2009: 272). The idea that “democracy weakens the moral consciousness of the people,” as a Dutch academic wrote in the 1880s, reflected the general attitude of the educated classes at the time (De Jong 1967). This elitism has hardly disappeared. The bourgeoisie that guarded “the general interest as it saw it” has been succeeded by “institutions that pretend to do same. The mass of the electorate does not play a role.” Political parties have left their ideological differences behind; supranational organizations like the European Union and NATO now control crucial issues like defense and monetary policies (Van Doorn 2009: 398-9). This relegation of power to the EU is ongoing, a development which deeply worries, among others, Jürgen Habermas (Sommer 2011a). In Brussels civil servants hold the power, and they are far removed from, and unresponsive to, the voters (Sommer 2011b).

The crisis in Dutch journalism is closely tied to the crisis in Dutch democracy. Yet scholars who are critical of certain aspects of journalism often do not extend that criticism to Dutch democracy. Most observers of the Dutch media seem to assume that Dutch democracy is

fine the way it is, the occasional phrase emphasizing the crucial importance of the media to the state of democracy notwithstanding; or they contrast the current state of Dutch democracy to for instance the seventies when, they assume, the state of Dutch democracy was fine. One of the few exceptions is the 2009 report *De volgende editie (The Next Edition)*. It was written by the Temporary Commission on Innovation and Future of the Press, an advisory commission that was created by the minister of Education, Culture and Science. The report off-handedly spoke of a “crisis of journalism and possibly also a crisis of democracy” (Temporary Press Commission 2009: 48). Another exception is Cees Hamelink, who realized that it is a “big contemporary political lie” to say that Dutch society is a democracy. A “bureaucracy” is a more apt description (Hamelink 2004: 21).

All this is well understood among leading Dutch political scientists. Jos de Beus (2002) for instance speaks of an “audience democracy.” He has said that, “The legitimacy of Dutch democracy is a wholesale form of self-deceit and deception” (Hamelink 2004: 138, note 4). It is a lie that the media only rarely expose, according to Hamelink: “Usually they politely report on the day-to-day operations of the system and neglect to ask fundamental questions about the system itself” (Hamelink 2004: 21).

Hamelink and the authors of *The Next Edition* are exceptional in making mention of the deep crisis in Dutch journalism. Yet they are part of the broad consensus of observers of the Dutch political system. As Van Doorn put it in 2008, it is “practically unanimously” accepted that Dutch democracy is in a “stubborn crisis.” This realization is current “not only in circles of experts and insiders, but also among the electorate” (Van Doorn 2009: 491).

As to the main causes of the sorry state of Dutch democracy, there is widespread disagreement. Van Doorn for instance blamed the process of individualization. Yet he also noted



that the “malaise in politics” can primarily be explained by the “economization of politics,” starting in the eighties with the rise of neoliberal ideologies and characterized by among other things the privatization of many government agencies: a reversal of the attempted politicization of the economy in the progressive seventies, which aimed, to a considerable extent, to bring the economy under political and therefore, at least in theory, public control (Van Doorn 2009: 492).

Those days, of a “societal contract between capital and labor,” with the government performing the role of mediator if necessary, have been replaced by a “consumer society” in which the individual consumer is no match for his “attackers,” namely “salespeople, advertisers and market analysts,” who together are far more powerful than the government. The result is that “social-democracy” has been “sidetracked.... the formerly active citizen has been replaced by the passive consumer who is not interested in politics” (Van Doorn 2009: 500). Parliament and political parties have lost much of their significance. Observers have noted the “‘replacement of politics’ from parliament and parties to institutions and arenas” that are not part of the formal democratic process. Political power has moved to the European Union and the civil service, although at least one observer has claimed that politics has not moved elsewhere: “It has evaporated” (Van Doorn 2009: 428, 444). Almost 320.000 Dutch voters, 2.6 percent of the electorate, are member of a political party. But only fifty to sixty thousand party members are politically active (SCP 2011: 193). Nonetheless, a majority of the Dutch population considers itself to be interested in politics and claims to regularly read about politics (SCP 2011: 197).

According to Van Doorn, the current political debate routinely shuns “political-ideological terms” in favor of a framework of efficiency. This mechanism could clearly be seen for instance in the debates on the privatization of the Dutch railroads (Van Doorn 2009: 471). The democratic process itself is often seen as inefficient, because debates cost time and might

lead to controversy (Van Doorn 2009: 472). Thus, paradoxically, in Dutch politics “political principles and ideological preferences play a marginal role.” Rather, politics has become a “technocracy with a human face” (Van Doorn 2009: 471). Election campaigns focus more and more on the character of the politician, who is aided by well-paid media trainers and PR-advisors (Van Doorn 2009: 452). Parliament does not fulfill its role anymore as a check on the executive branch; the executive and legislative branches have merged together (Van Doorn 2009: 461; also Chavannes 2009: 28). Guido Enthoven concluded in his dissertation (2011), which covered the last quarter of a century, that the executive branch often informs parliament wrongly, only partially, or not at all. The obvious result is that parliament is simply unable to do what it is supposed to do: to provide a check on the executive. It is therefore no wonder that the majority of the Dutch population for years has favored a strengthening of democratic mechanisms, for instance direct elections of mayors and referenda on important topics (SCP 2011: 69-70).

Sociologist Willem Schinkel (2012) argues that the current political parties have largely done away with their ideological differences. Politics has become “problem management.” All the parties accept and work within the same neoliberal framework. This even goes for the so-called Socialist Party (SP), whose leader told the leader of the market-friendly VVD in a debate that both want the same thing, namely “to get the economy going again as quickly as possible.” Politicians pretend that politics is “neutral,” that ideology is something of the past, whereas in reality, according to Schinkel, the political system is “closely tied” to the economic system called neoliberalism, which is in fact strongly ideological. The contempt for democracy among the ruling political elites, in the Netherlands and Europe in general, both on the left and the right, is “enormous.” This was shown according to Schinkel by politicians’ strongly dismissive reactions to Papandreou’s proposal to hold a referendum on the euro crisis, as well as by the political

reactions to earlier referendums on the EU Constitution. Democracy as a concept is hardly examined, thought about or debated in the Netherlands and therefore Dutch democracy is “almost undemocratic.” In the Netherlands “democracy is mostly a lifestyle, an attitude of capitalistic freedom of choice and moral superiority” (De Rek 2012).

Not just scholars but prominent journalists too have commented on the sorry state of Dutch democracy. Hendrik Jan Schoo, the social-democrat who was publisher of the leftist magazine *Vrij Nederland*, editor-in-chief of the rightwing magazine *Elsevier* and adjunct editor-in-chief of *de Volkskrant*, noted for instance that depillarized journalism has done away with grand narratives, which before provided the frameworks that gave meaning and context to the news. Instead, journalism now unthinkingly reflects the dominant ideology in the Netherlands and on almost any topic gives prominence to experts and technocrats, to the “information-elite.”

According to Schoo, the diversity of the press is an illusion; in fact the press is “very uniform” (Schoo 2008: 52-3). The orientation of the media is “rather governmental” (Schoo 2008: 132; also Greven 2004). Dutch journalism sides with the judicial “magistrates and the system they serve” (Schoo 2008: 134). Dutch journalism is an inwardly turned profession to such an extent that the negative consequences are obvious. Journalists are interested mostly in what their colleagues have written. Media content across the board is very similar, for it is based on the “same sources, the same spokespeople, the same ideas, the same angles, the same master narrative.” Moreover, journalists justify their products by borrowing authority from their authoritative sources, which results in an overdependence on official sources (Schoo 2008: 50-1).

Dutch elites do not believe in democracy, Schoo rightly noted. That is to say, they believe in democracy only if it means that it is securely controlled by “sensible people” who know when it is time to exclude the population at large and hammer out some compromise among

themselves. These “sensible people” live in fear of the excesses of any kind of direct or real democracy (Schoo 2008: 122). The Dutch Queen, Beatrix, who has been the official head of state since the beginning of the 1980s, has a reputation of interfering with governmental issues, although solid evidence for the persistent reports of this interference is hard to come by (Schoo 2008: 141-2). Dutch democracy is “patronizing” and “very indirect,” it is a political system dominated by regents, with relatively few elected offices. In 2002, the magazine *The Economist* described its essence as “Daddy knows best” (Schoo 2008: 251).

All this is reminiscent of the elitist notions of democracy as propounded in the United States by many intellectuals, for instance Walter Lippmann, who believed that, in Noam Chomsky’s paraphrase:

*Now there are two ‘functions’ in a democracy: The specialized class, the responsible men, carry out the executive function, which means they do the thinking and planning and understand the common interests. Then, there is the bewildered herd, and they have a function in democracy too. Their function in a democracy is to be ‘spectators,’ not participants in action. But they have more of a function than that, because it’s a democracy. Occasionally they are allowed to lend their weight to one or another member of the specialized class. In other words, they’re allowed to say, ‘We want you to be our leader’ or ‘We want you to be our leader.’ That’s because it’s a democracy and not a totalitarian state. That’s called an election. But once they’ve lent their weight to one or another member of the specialized class they’re supposed to sink back and become spectators of action, but not participants. That’s in a properly functioning democracy.*  
(Street 2011)

Or, in the words of a Dutch theorist of socialism, Anton Pannekoek (1927: 15), “Do the voters, on election day, really choose appropriate representatives, who will carry out in their name the mandates for which they were elected? No; they only choose from among various persons previously selected by the political parties who have been made familiar to them in the party newspapers.” As Chavannes has remarked, it is a “reigning miscomprehension” that voting once every four years for people you do not know constitutes democracy (Chavannes 2009: 76). Therefore it can only be small consolation that compared to many other countries, Dutch voters still turn up in reasonably high numbers for parliamentary elections. From 1989 to 2010 the percentage of voters was on average close to 80 percent for parliamentary elections. In 2010 it was 75 percent. The percentage of voters at local, provincial and European elections typically is dozens of percentage points lower (CBS).

The rise of rightwing-populist politics in the first decade of the 21st century, according to Schoo, can partly be explained as a revolt against the lack of truly democratic structures in the Netherlands (Schoo 2008: 180). The coalitions of social-democrats (PvdA) and liberals (VVD) in that decade signified the establishment of a “(neo)liberal consensus.” These parties thus moved even further to the middle of the political spectrum, where the traditionally large Christian-Democratic party was already lingering, along with the small left-liberal D66. This shrinking of the political spectrum, this erosion of interparty differences, made more salient the distinction between elite and population. As a counter reaction, the Socialist Party gained strength on the left-side of the spectrum and so did a number of “populist” politicians on the right, among whom of course Pim Fortuyn, the charismatic right-wing politician who was murdered in 2002 (Schoo 2008: 180).

Although these neoliberal policies were hardly popular with many people, wrote journalist and professor Marc Chavannes in his book *Nobody Governs*, the government insisted that the market could do just about anything better. “The government did not believe in the government anymore.” Not just for instance public transportation, the utilities companies (gas and electricity have since become more expensive), and to an extent the health care sector have been privatized, but to a significant extent politics itself. The Netherlands have become a “market state” (Chavannes 2009: 10-1) where “market dogmatism” rules (Chavannes 2009: 66). The boundaries between what is public and what is private are disappearing. The Dutch state, “with almost East-German diligence” and more thoroughly than the countries surrounding it, sold off many of its operations, for instance, the royal airline KLM, the postal service PTT and the state-controlled bank Postbank (Chavannes 2009: 35).

More and more Dutch companies are taken over by foreign ones, among them big publishers like Elsevier and VNU (Chavannes 2009: 89). The foreign hold over the economy is more extreme only in Hungary, where in 2005 almost 80 percent of the stock in Hungarian companies was held by foreigners. In the Netherlands this percentage was 69 percent, far ahead of comparable countries like Norway and Sweden, and also far ahead of France and Great Britain. The Netherlands are in the grip of an “extreme form of casino capitalism,” with the big economic players being foreigners who naturally feel no loyalty to the country or its inhabitants (Chavannes 2009: 91-2). According to Privacy International, the Netherlands, together with the US and Great Britain, is one of the foremost “big brother countries.” The balance between the right to privacy and the tracking down of criminals and terrorists has been shattered in favor of the latter pursuit (Chavannes 2009: 229).

The most notable aspect of the worldwide financial crisis, according to Chavannes, was that the majority of “ordinary people” did not need this wake-up call. They had already realized the undesirability of an extremely freewheeling form of capitalism, of “market dogmatism as a cover for egomaniacal capitalism,” with its contempt for “social cohesion” (Chavannes 2009: 120). Many people understood, but did the media? Certainly there was no widespread, but only occasional, resistance in the mainstream media against the imposition of the market on Dutch society. This, yet again, shows the wide gap that separates most of the Dutch people from the media that are supposed to serve them.

It deserves emphasis that the disparaging remarks about Dutch democracy cited above are not made by radicals but by mainstream observers, from traditional social-democrats to those of a more conservative bend. Chavannes (2009: 125) for instance advocates an “inclusive capitalism.” Thinking about a solution to the obvious problems with the Dutch media (e.g. budget cuts, the disappearance of much local journalism) is an urgent task, according to Chavannes. He seems to acknowledge that the government might have to step in, for he writes disparagingly of the overwhelming opposition to a proposal by the Temporary Press Commission to subsidize innovation in media companies from a citizen tax on internet connections. According to Chavannes, “it is time to start thinking about journalism in the service of the public cause, unhindered by existing habits and structures” (Chavannes 2009: 252).

Joris Luyendijk, perhaps the best-known Dutch journalist, drew five conclusions in his ethnographic study of Dutch politics (2010). First, he wondered whether politicians, PR-people, lobbyists and journalists should not be seen as one “tribe,” instead of four separate groups. He noted the phenomenon of the revolving door. “Crudely speaking, journalism seems a vestibule of the better paying public relations and politics a jump-off point to the also better paying lobbying”

(Luyendijk 2010: 23). The reality that journalists need PR-people makes them vulnerable to the routine threats leveled against the former by the latter, a practice that is regarded as normal by everyone involved, that is, by the whole tribe. One politician said to Luyendijk that complaints to managing editors do sometimes lead to the promise of “more positive reporting” in the future (Luyendijk 2010: 69). Luyendijk’s second conclusion was that “the Netherlands has one of the most closed-off political cultures in the West.” Lobbyists for instance are not required to register, as they are in the United States. He could also find no data on how members of parliament voted on bills or if they had ties to corporations or ngo’s or where they went to work after leaving parliament (Luyendijk 2010: 25-9).

The biggest taboo that Luyendijk encountered in The Hague was the question whether the power in fact still lies there as opposed to in the capital of Europe, Brussels, as a result of the European Union gaining power vis-a-vis national governments. Some got almost angry when confronted with the issue and most were unwilling to confirm the answer that only the lobbyists seemed to give without hesitation: the power lies in Brussels of course. Lobbyists spend 90 percent of their time influencing civil servants in The Hague and politicians in Brussels and only ten percent on politicians in The Hague, “the little puppets,” in Luyendijk’s phrase. In contrast, the news is for 90 percent concerned with politics in The Hague and only for 10 percent with civil servants and EU-politics. The news thus day-in-day-out confirms the, by and large, illusion that Dutch politics is still important. This illusion serves the interests of journalists, lobbyists, pr-advisors and politicians alike: that is to say, the whole “tribe” (Luyendijk 2010: 51-2).

Luyendijk’s third conclusion was that the members of parliament lack the means and the logistical support to do their job well, with the result that they have become dependent on their civil servants and, indirectly and directly, on lobbyists. Politicians are not the makers of policy,



but the public face of policy made by civil servants and lobbyists (Luyendijk 2010: 50). Many questions asked by members of parliament in session originate with lobbyists (Luyendijk 2010: 57). Luyendijk's fourth conclusion (2010: 73) was that the methods that PR-people use to influence the news and polish the image of their clients are indeed effective. His final conclusion was that for the participants, there is no escape from getting entangled in the little milieu that makes up Dutch politics: journalists need their sources tomorrow too. It should be noted though that this is true in a narrow sense only, that is to say, it is true when one accepts as legitimate some of the more dubious prescriptions of objective journalism.

Luyendijk made more germane observations about Dutch politics and journalism. He noted for instance that news is often not about the issues, but about the political game. The media do not check if what politicians say is actually correct. Luyendijk explained the inordinate amount of attention to right-wing politicians, also by the public broadcaster, by pointing out that they (especially PVV-leader Geert Wilders) guarantee high ratings, which determine how much advertisers are willing to pay (Luyendijk 2010: 96). Journalists focus on getting an interview with a high-profile politician, or on obtaining a new report a few hours before their colleagues. As Luyendijk correctly notes, these kinds of practices are closer to PR than to journalism (Luyendijk 2010: 96). The best metaphor for political news, he concluded, is the soap opera, for it attempts to answer questions like: who is upset with whom today? (Luyendijk 2010: 98)

Because of their too uncritical attitude towards Dutch democracy, many media scholars do not appreciate the extent to which the media serve as perpetrators of the hardly democratic status quo, that is, as an anti-democratic force. They fail to see that what McChesney wrote about "the global media system" applies to the Netherlands with full force; namely it "buttresses what

could be termed ‘neoliberal’ democracy, that is, the largely vacuous political culture that exists in the formally democratic market-driven nations of the world” (McChesney 1999: 110).

Journalism, especially objective journalism, mostly takes its cues from the wider political-economy. In the United States and elsewhere, McChesney observed, “A depoliticized citizenry marked by apathy and cynicism” is first and foremost “an important and necessary by-product” of “neoliberal democracy.” McChesney defined the latter term (which is really a contradiction in terms) as “trivial debate over minor issues by parties that basically pursue the same pro-business policies regardless of formal differences and campaign debate. Democracy is permissible as long as the control of business is off-limits to popular deliberation or change; that is, as long as it isn’t democracy” (McChesney 1999: 111).

The media are not the main cause of the depoliticization of the Dutch public sphere. Kees Brants has suggested that the Dutch political system itself was a far more important factor in the process of depoliticization than the media. According to him, Dutch voters perhaps have more trouble distinguishing between political parties than voters in two-party systems like the United States, because of the trend of Dutch political parties to adopt similar policy positions, resulting from the “consensus character” of the Dutch “polder model” of politics, which emphasizes harmonious cooperation between the different groups in society, and the need to form coalition governments (Bardoel et al. 2002: 91). A result is that the category of undecided voters has increased strongly; another that fewer and fewer people are a registered member of a political party. Yet, although not the main culprit, the commercial media are hardly without blame. As McChesney (1999) has observed, commercial media tend to promote the attitude that politics is unimportant and that social change is impossible.

Even taking into account that the Dutch political spectrum is significantly broader than the American one, McChesney's observations are directly relevant to the Netherlands. Advocating private control over the economy (and, more germane to this dissertation, private control over the media system with the public broadcaster as the only, increasingly marginalized exception) is the mandatory entrance fee that Dutch politicians pay to be allowed to enter the public arena, certainly since the eighties. McChesney's remarks become more salient when one realizes that much power has left The Hague for the hardly democratic European Union. Quibbling over minor issues is often the only thing left to do for Dutch politicians – not saying anything of course hardly being an option. Moreover, as the overview of the media landscape has shown, the Dutch media system is often not just controlled by commercial interests, but by international corporations, which naturally care nothing at all for the state of Dutch democracy.

Some major negative consequences of this glaring democratic deficiency have not come about because of a number of factors which, by objective standards, make the Netherlands one of the most livable countries in the world. For one, the country has until now hardly felt any adverse effects from the financial crises in recent years. According to a 2011 report by the Social and Cultural Planning Agency (SCP), the quality of life in the Netherlands had in fact improved during the last ten years. After Luxemburg, the country has the highest income level in the European Union and in 2010 the country had the lowest score on the so-called misery-index, which combines inflation, budget deficit and unemployment. Unemployment in 2010 was about five percent, the lowest number in the European Union (SCP 2011: 335-7). These and other factors make that the Dutch, despite rather widespread dissatisfaction, still have a lot of faith in their institutions and politics compared to other Europeans. This might change already in the near future. For the SCP-report warns that the consequences of the economic crisis will be felt in

the Netherlands too, starting in 2012. It predicts that disposable income will drop for the next three years. And although social inequality is not as big as in many other countries, it is still “persistent in many areas” (SCP 2011: 344-6).

## **Conclusion**

If the media are indeed the watchdog of democracy, then they are guarding a house that has long since burned down, if it ever stood upright. In fact, the media perpetuate a situation which is hardly democratic, by not consistently calling for more democratic mechanisms to be put in place. Media scholars do show some concern with democracy, but almost never do they start from the damning analysis put forth by for instance political scientists, a few journalists and other observers of Dutch democracy, who are nonetheless quite convincing in their fundamental critiques. In fact, it is widely accepted that Dutch democracy is in a deep crisis. Yet the field of media studies cannot adequately analyze journalism until it makes this critique its own and uses it as the normative starting point by which to judge the media. To those who do, it becomes immediately clear that the media are not performing their basic function of helping sustain a democratic culture in which politicians and other powerful people can be held accountable, and in which the citizenry is engaged. Instead, the media promote and solidify an environment in which the distance between politics and the citizen is almost insurmountable; in which the citizen is at best an interested spectator. A journalism that serves power is a symptom of a society in which power is concentrated in few hands, formal and somewhat effective democratic structures notwithstanding. One might question therefore whether a journalism that performs its functions well is possible in such a society. Arguable, it is not. Regardless, the point here is that analyses

of the Dutch media which disregard the decrepit state of Dutch democracy will tend to underestimate the extent to which Dutch journalism neglects its duties.

As a field, Dutch media studies has accepted and internalized the narrow version of democracy in place now as the best attainable. This has affected its analysis of media performance; for it has blinded itself to the extent to which the media do not perform the function that they are supposed to, but instead function as defenders of the status quo. One might regard the private media as a captive of the undemocratic conditions prevailing in the Netherlands. As McChesney (2007: 78-9) has argued “Not only [does] democracy require viable media and journalism to prosper; so, too, [do] media and journalism require healthy democracy and strong popular politics to survive and be effective as progressive institutions. It [is] a close and symbiotic relationship.” It is one of the main tasks of communication scholars to continue to point this out.

## CHAPTER 5

### A DUTCH PROPAGANDA MODEL

This chapter makes the case that a theoretical model in the political-economic tradition of media criticism, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's propaganda model, is by and large germane to the study of contemporary Dutch journalism. It is not argued that the propaganda model is the only (or even best: Kennis 2011) framework for studying the Dutch media. Rather, it is argued that the propaganda model provides one fruitful framework with which to examine the Dutch media. After arguing for the continued relevance of the propaganda model and a short discussion on the applicability of the propaganda model outside of the US, existing research will be presented which indicates the viability of applying the model to the Netherlands. Then the current Dutch media landscape will be discussed. Subsequently it will be shown that the second order prediction of the propaganda model, namely that the model itself will be neglected in scholarship and the public debate, also holds for the Netherlands. In the conclusion, an overall evaluation will be made as to the extent to which the propaganda model can be expected to apply to the Dutch media too. The propaganda model provides the theoretical basis for the studies of the coverage of the Iraq-war in chapters 7 and 8, and for the study of the press's reaction to the proposal in 2011 for a Greek referendum on the euro crisis (chapter 9).

#### **The propaganda model's continued relevance**

The propaganda model as described by Herman and Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent* (1988, 2002) identified five filters which distort the news, most obviously foreign and economic news, in concord with the interests of political and economic elites. This bias results from private ownership of the media (the first filter), the dependence on advertisers (the second filter), the

sourcing practices of professional/commercial journalism (the third filter), the ability of powerful institutions and persons to discipline the media through flak (the fourth filter) and the prevailing ideological climate (the fifth filter). As a result, crimes by enemy states are highlighted, whereas crimes by friendly governments are ignored or downplayed. Through the study of paired examples, that is of crimes which are similar in many ways except that some are perpetrated by friendly governments and others by enemy governments, Herman and Chomsky showed that the media consistently focus on, in their ironic terminology, “worthy victims” at the expense of “unworthy victims.”

The media stick closely to official explanations and points of view: alternative views are filtered out and marginalized. The media set the limits of debate and reflect by and large only the debates that rage among official and therefore supposedly credible sources: political and economic managers. Rather than discuss the debates about the propaganda model (LaFeber 1988; Entman 1990; Hallin 1992; Golding and Murdoch 1996; Herman 2000; Corner 2003; Herring and Robinson 2003; Klaehn 2003b; Lang and Lang 2004a and b; Klaehn 2009; Kennis 2011; Pedro 2011a and b), it is emphasized here that many of its conclusions are hardly controversial within academia. Much research exists that, either explicitly or implicitly, supports the model’s main conclusions, especially for the US media (Source Watch) but also for media in other Western countries (Klaehn 2009: 49), like Canada (Klaehn 2005) and Spain (Sierra and Vasquez 2006).

“Leading US academics,” Eric Herring and Piers Robinson (2003) wrote, for instance Daniel Hallin (1986) and Lance Bennett (1990), consider the coverage of foreign events in the US media as not just flawed, but as flawed in similar ways as described by the propaganda model.

*The standard liberal myth of the news media in the West – that it is independent of elite interests and provides the people with the information necessary to ensure that they can hold elites and in particular governments to democratic account – is rejected widely by academics who study the news media and US foreign policy... the most common and empirically substantiated perspective is that, with respect to coverage of US foreign policy, on balance, the US media serve elite interests and undermine democracy. The media do this by portraying the world in a way that tends to shape the perspective of those entering the political elite, generate public consent for or at least acquiescence to US foreign policy and make it difficult for the public to have access to information necessary to challenge the interests of the elite. (Herring and Robinson 2003: 554-5)*

In recent years, journalism worldwide has been deeply affected by a range of developments, for instance increased emphases on the bottom line, media concentration, budget cut-backs both in commercial journalism and public broadcasting, and the rise of digital technologies. This would lead one to suspect that the propaganda model now provides a more salient explanation of media performance than when it was introduced (Herman and Chomsky 2002, 2008; Kennis 2011; Mullen 2009a; Pedro 2011a and b). The just mentioned developments have also been observed for the Netherlands. For instance, digital technologies have not made for a more vigilant or vibrant journalism (chapter 6).

### **Applying the propaganda model outside the US**

Some scholars have postulated that the propaganda model is not applicable outside the US because of differences in “media systems and political structures” between the US and other



countries (Corner 2003; also Sparks 2007; Goodwin 1994). For instance, national socialist and social-democratic parties have for a long time now had very little sway in the US (although the influence of socialist thought should not be underestimated, Nichols 2011), as opposed to in many European countries. The range of legitimate debate is wider in Europe; therefore its media content can be expected to be ideologically more diverse. As Pedro (2011b: 1909) has argued “In the United States, as the hegemonic center of the world system where capitalism and the mechanisms of power are more developed, the influence of [the] filters is greater, but in other countries with similar characteristics, this influence is also evident.” The US has a weak tradition of public broadcasting, again as opposed to many European countries. Differences in regulatory regimes and in the “range and profile of the press system” might also diminish the relevance of the propaganda model outside the US (Corner 2003: 367-8). All these objections are germane to the Netherlands to some extent and they will be addressed further down.

The Dutch media system, classified by Hallin and Mancini (2004) as belonging to the Democratic Corporatist Model, is converging towards the Liberal Model, of which the US is the prime example – although it might be noted that Paul Starr (2012) claims to discern the opposite development; that the US media are becoming more like the European media. Nonetheless, this convergence of models of journalism and media systems towards the Liberal Model is widely acknowledged. As Hallin and Mancini write:

*The differences among national media systems... are clearly diminishing. A global media culture is emerging, one that closely resembles the Liberal Model... The homogenization of media systems involves, most centrally, the separation of media institutions from the strong ties to the political world that distinguished both the Democratic Corporatist [including the Netherlands]*

*and Polarized Pluralist from the Liberal Model. This transformation has many causes. We have stressed a distinction between forces external to European society, including direct influence from the United States and the impact of technological innovation, and forces that are essentially internal to European society, though certainly linked to the process of globalization. The most important of these internal forces [...] are 'secularization' – that is, the decline of the political faiths connected to organized social groups that once structured much of European politics and culture, and the shift from a collectivist to a more individualist political culture – and commercialization. (Hallin and Mancini 2004: 294-5)*

Does the Dutch legacy of partisan, pillarized journalism still influence journalistic practices? And to what extent does it affect media content? According to Hallin and Mancini (2004: 145, 160), this legacy still has “important” effects. According to Cees van der Eijk too, political differences between Dutch papers still exist – or at least existed until a little over a decade ago – and have a noticeable effect on content (in Hallin and Mancini 2004: 182-3). Indeed, scholars found that during the 2006 parliamentary election campaign, the national papers still paid relatively more attention to the political party that they were once closely aligned to than to other parties. But the papers covered the same issues (Takens et al. 2010). Ideological differences between the papers have endured, but not too much should be made of these. According to Brants, although the newspapers exhibit political preferences in comments and columns, “clear party political positions and certainly ‘coming out’ at election time are a thing of the past” (Kelly et al. 2004: 147).

For all its merits, Hallin and Mancini’s book (2004) is limited because it does not, except in the broadest terms, assess the quality of media content resulting from the differences in media

systems. How different the Dutch and American media report on macro-economic issues and foreign affairs is therefore still an unanswered question.<sup>14</sup> For instance, it is generally acknowledged that the American media covered the war in Iraq badly. It might well be that the coverage in the Dutch press was bad also (chapters 7 and 8). If so, this would perhaps come as a surprise to someone who based his expectation mostly on Hallin and Mancini's classification, which highlights the differences between media systems. Someone who analyses the Dutch media from a critical framework which emphasizes the extent to which the Dutch system has become commercialized too, and who took into account the pro-war position of the Dutch governing parties, would hardly be surprised.

According to Teun van Dijk, each of the five filters can be applied to the Dutch media as well, with some qualifications. He noted for instance that the propaganda model is a very general model and that it needs to be kept in mind that the Netherlands is by no means as powerful as the United States (Teun van Dijk, personal communication),<sup>15</sup> with the consequence that the stakes are not as high, for to people in power it matters more what the average American thinks than what the average Dutch person thinks. In the end, the proof is in the pudding (Klaehn 2003a: 377-8). If the propaganda model's prediction of a clear bias in news content in favor of political and economic elites as exemplified by the worthy/unworthy victims dichotomy also hold for the Netherlands, then that would mean that, despite the differences between the American and Dutch media, the model still holds explanatory power for the Netherlands.

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<sup>14</sup> In answering, it should be remembered that the Dutch media depend on the same press agencies as the American media.

<sup>15</sup> As an aside: in May 2010, the most-accomplished Dutch novelist, Arnon Grunberg, advised readers, ironically on the front page of *de Volkskrant*, to read *Manufacturing Consent* if they wanted to understand how journalism works. This rare mention of *Manufacturing Consent* in the mainstream Dutch press did not show up in the Lexis-Nexis database (see below). The probable reason is that Grunberg's column is written on a freelance basis, which would mean that the rights to the text belong to him.

## Research supporting a Dutch propaganda model

Existing research implicitly indicates that the propaganda model is a viable model for explaining the Dutch media, especially regarding foreign coverage (Wieten 2002; De Landtsheer et al. 2002; Walgrave and Verhulst 2005; Vliegenthart and Schröder 2010). According to Peter Burger (personal communication), most of the existing social-scientific studies have found that in their reporting the Dutch media “follow power,” that is to say that they predominantly reflect the viewpoints voiced by elites. A study found *NRC Handelsblad*'s coverage of the first and second Intifadas to be biased in favor of the Israeli version of events. The researchers speculated that the bias originated in the steadfast support of the Dutch government for Israel. This appears a plausible explanation, as “objective” journalism, which is historically linked to commercial journalism (chapter 6), depends to a large extent on official, powerful sources for ascribing meaning to events. Professional journalists feel it would be unprofessional to (appear to) take a stand that contravenes official sources. The “frame” that most of these sources advance will typically be the dominant one in the media too. A clue as to the value of this explanation is that *NRC Handelsblad* was found to be less biased towards the Israeli point of view during the second Intifada, perhaps a reflection of the changing political climate in the Netherlands, which is still predominantly pro-Israel but became more sympathetic to the Palestinian version of events (Deprez et al. 2011: 39-41).

The same conclusion, that the Dutch media are biased in favor of Israel, was reached by Jacqueline de Bruijn, who in 2002 studied current affairs and news programs on both the public and commercial broadcasters. For instance, she found that Palestinians typically commit “bloody” or “terrorist” attacks, whereas they themselves typically “lose their life” as a result of Israeli “actions” or “incidents.” Radical journalist Stan van Houcke revealed that Dutch

correspondents in Israel are guilty of self-censorship in favor of the Israeli cause, because the correspondents often support that cause and/or have personal ties to Israelis (Hamelink 2004: 45-6.)

As far as I know, only one study has explicitly replicated research by Edward Herman or Noam Chomsky for the Dutch media. Lex Rietman, who subsequently became a correspondent in Spain, wrote his MA-thesis (1988) at the University of Nijmegen on the reporting in Western-European newspapers, including three Dutch papers, of the elections in El Salvador and Nicaragua in 1984. Herman had found that the *New York Times* parroted the American government line, praising the elections in El Salvador as fair while denouncing those in Sandinista-led Nicaragua, while human rights organizations and independent foreign election observers, which can be regarded as more reliable sources than Washington, had reached the opposite conclusions.

Rietman found that *NRC Handelsblad* and *De Telegraaf* exhibited the same flaws as the American newspapers. *De Volkskrant* did a lot better than either, but its reporting also was significantly flawed. According to Rietman, the reason that *de Volkskrant* performed relatively well, was the expertise of its then correspondent for Latin-America, Jan van der Putten. Overall, the study supported the contention that the predictions of what Herman and Chomsky would call the propaganda model also held for the Dutch coverage. Of the fifteen Western-European newspapers studied, only *The Guardian* came close to giving a fair representation of the actual situation in both countries. The coverage in the French newspaper *LeMonde* was found to be especially bad (Rietman 1988; Bergman 2003b; Rietman, personal communication).

According to Rietman, who has worked as a foreign correspondent for more than a dozen years, there were always plenty of good reasons to severely criticize the Dutch media. The day-

to-day practices of journalists were and are “miles” removed from the noble ideals that inspire so many young people to enter the profession. Yet the quality of the Dutch media has never been as bad as these days. The crisis in Dutch journalism is real and urgent (Rietman, personal communication).

Other research shows that the coverage of domestic affairs also leaves much to be desired (e.g. Ummelen 2009, see chapter 6). The situation in the Dutch local press is dire. Piet Bakker found that competition in local markets has all but disappeared. Hijmans et al. (2009: 9) found that in one regional paper, 84 percent of the national news was based in whole or in part on information provided by third parties, through press agencies or press releases. Close to 70 percent of the coverage derived in whole from Dutch press agencies. A former editor-in-chief of a regional paper estimated that about half of the content of regional papers consists of PR-material (Prenger et al. 2011: 93). It is common practice in the Netherlands that pr-people get to see articles before publication, ostensibly to check for factual errors, but often some sort of negotiation ensues which does not restrict itself to issues of fact. Local journalists accept many ‘suggestions’ for improvements, including changes in quotes (Prenger et al. 2011: 114-5).

Another study, on the reporting of the 2010 local elections, concluded that the regional press almost completely neglected to delve into the issues. The neglect was so profound that the researchers could not gather enough articles with which to perform a content analysis. The local papers mostly just followed the news agenda as set by the politicians, writing (often short) news stories based mainly on the proclamations of those politicians. The scholars noted that the papers seemed thoroughly uninterested in the concerns of citizens:

*Regional journalism pretends to be the ear and eye of the region. This election study makes probable that the media certainly do not reside in the capillaries of local democracy and that local democracy is hardly supported by local media. Here lays a big challenge for journalism. A very big one.* (Hietbrink et al. 2010: 48-9)

After that critical salvo, the recommendations by these scholars for better journalism, although well-intended, can only be regarded as woefully inadequate. They amount to exhortations to journalists to do better journalism – do not let politicians dominate the news agenda, use more and more diverse sources, and so on (Hietbrink et al. 2010: 50). Yet most journalists know what they should be doing. The structure in which they work prevents them from acting on their better judgment.

The following detailed look at the Dutch media landscape, organized by the five filters, reveals the extent to which the media industry has become concentrated and commercialized. The backbone of the discussion is provided by the 2010 annual report of the Dutch Media Authority, an independent regulatory agency, and the standard textbook introduction to the Dutch media by Piet Bakker and Otto Scholten (2009), *Communicatiekaart van Nederland*.

### **Ownership: The press**

The propaganda model's "crucial structural factors derive from the fact that the dominant media are firmly embedded in the market system" (Herman 2000: 102). Therefore, the first filter, ownership, is most important. At first glance, one might assume that this filter, and also the second one, the reliance on advertisers for funding, are hardly germane to the Netherlands, which has a strong tradition of public broadcasting. Yet a closer look reveals that the Dutch media

system including the public broadcaster is, and has been for a while (chapter 2), deeply entrenched in the market system. That is to say, with the exception of the public broadcaster the Dutch media too “are profit-seeking businesses, owned by very wealthy people (or other companies); and they are funded largely by advertisers who are also profit-seeking entities, and who want their advertisements to appear in a supportive selling environment” (Herman 2000: 102).

The Dutch print media, including the agenda-setting quality newspapers and press agency ANP, are privately owned. On top of that, the newspaper industry is highly concentrated. With a combined market share of 71.2 percent, three corporations dominated the Dutch newspaper market in 2009. Adding the fourth biggest company, Metro Holland, results in a combined market share of 80.4 percent (Dutch Media Authority 2011: 40). The publicly traded Telegraaf Media Groep (TMG) is the largest publisher with a market share of 29.5 percent. Its newspapers *De Telegraaf* and *Spits!* have a combined circulation of over a million (Dutch Media Authority 2011: 43). *De Telegraaf* had the highest circulation of all the papers and *Spits!* the fourth biggest circulation. *De Telegraaf* is known for its populism and conservatism. Much of the free newspaper *Spits!* (‘free’ means that it is completely dependent on advertising revenue) consists of ANP-copy. Moreover, according to journalists working at that paper, PR-material is a “very important” resource, just as it is for the other big free newspaper *Metro*, which also uses a lot of ANP-copy (Prenger et al. 2011: 5). TMG also owns five regional newspapers, the popular shock blog [geenstijl.nl](http://geenstijl.nl), the Dutch social network site Hyves (which has more Dutch users than Facebook) and four radio stations, among which the popular Sky Radio.

The family Van Puijenbroek holds about a third of the shares of TMG, and is de facto in control of the company. The family also owns Van Puijenbroek Textiel, which has been a steady



supplier to the Dutch army since 1925. The military orders have provided the backbone to the financial health of the company, but its prosperity can also partly be attributed to “feudal exploitation” of for instance farmers who rented their land. In the thirties, the family was sympathetic to Mussolini’s fascism and supported right-wing authoritarian organizations. The family’s hostility towards workers and unions was of a vindictiveness rarely seen, even among practicing Roman-Catholics. At the end of WWII, when food was scarce, the family sometimes distributed potatoes to the poor. But it refused to hand out sustenance to workers who had participated in a strike forty years earlier (Van Amerongen and Brouwer 1995a).

In the early fifties, the family took over *De Telegraaf*, which was in dire straits, presumably in an effort to thwart the social-democratic party PvdA, which the family suspected of aiming to nationalize its textile factories. The paper also took to defending war-time collaborators. For decades the ties to politicians in The Hague remained tight. The paper has combined conservative politics (as shown by diatribes against immigrants, leftwing politicians and unions) with a clear eye on the bottom line. The fire wall between the commercial and editorial sides has been a lot lower than at other papers (Van Amerongen and Brouwer 1995b; also Teun van Dijk 1983). Tjitske Akkerman (2011: 931) found that, contrary perhaps to common perception, *De Telegraaf* does not exhibit an anti-elite bias, but in fact is “overall even more oriented towards elitist perspectives than the quality press.” She suggested that the differences between the popular and quality newspapers are perhaps more one of style than content. *De Telegraaf* was found by Akkerman (2011: 938-9), and in another study, to heavily index its reporting to the views of the governing coalition.

The second biggest newspaper publisher active in the Netherlands, the publicly traded Mecom, based in London, owns nine regional newspapers via controlling shares in the

corporations Koninklijke Wegener NV and Media Groep Limburg BV. Mecom also owns media in Poland, Norway and Denmark (Dutch Media Authority 2011: 29). The third biggest newspaper publisher is Persgroep NV, a Belgian company. It is also owner of the biggest paper in Belgium, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, and holds a fifty percent interest in several commercial television stations in Flanders. In the Netherlands, it owns the national papers *Trouw*, *Algemeen Dagblad* and *de Volkskrant*, a large number of regional papers, and a radio station (Dutch Media Authority 2011: 25).

In 2009, the quality national papers *NRC Handelsblad* and the recently established *nrc.next* were sold to Lux Media BV, which is owned by the private equity fund Egeria. This fund holds interests in a number of Dutch companies valued between 50 and 200 million euro, and was set up in 1997 by, among others, the Brenninkmeijer family, which owns the well-known department store C&A. The Van Puijenbroek family, which as mentioned owns a controlling share in TMG, also has invested money in Egeria and therefore is an indirect co-owner of national newspapers *NRC Handelsblad* and *nrc.next* (Dutch Media Authority 2011: 26). *NRC Handelsblad* has reportedly been put under increased pressure to turn a more handsome profit, which might be an explanation for the paper's recent move towards more popular content (Brouwer and Klaassen 2011).

Of the four Dutch general interest magazines, the two biggest, *Elsevier* and *HP/De Tijd*, both right-leaning, have a market share of about 75 percent. The left-leaning *Vrij Nederland* and *De Groene Amsterdammer* together hold the rest of the circulation (Dutch Media Authority 2011: 48).

As a result of the financial crisis and economic recession, revenue from advertising has dropped dozens of percent, posing a severe threat to the profitability of many papers. The online

versions of papers attract many visitors, but are hardly profitable. In 2008 and the following year, hundreds of jobs were lost in the newspaper industry: 500 at the Telegraaf Media Group and 450 at the publisher Wegener. Of 420 journalists employed at the papers of the *Algemeen Dagblad*, 124 had to look for new work (Bakker and Scholten 2009: 16, 38). In the first decade of the twenty-first century, 5.310 jobs were lost in the newspaper industry. In 2010 the industry still provided 8.570 people with a job (Rutten and Slot 2011: 13-4).

Managing editors of newspapers have more and more become adjuncts to the publisher – partly as a result of the pressures resulting from the dire financial situation of newspapers. This means that the business side has won in influence at the cost of the editorial side, with the inevitable result that market considerations have even further infiltrated the daily practice of journalism (Blokker 2010: 154). A consequence is that there were never fewer Dutch journalists covering the European Union. Newspapers *de Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad* went from three correspondents each in Brussels to one each (Witteman and de Pous 2011). Another consequence: Two editors-in-chief of university newspapers have predicted the end of independent university journalism, because PR-departments at universities keep tightening their grip over those publications. University-mandated censorship has not been uncommon over the last five years (Strikkers and Jansen 2011).

In keeping with tradition, but enhanced by the dominant neoliberal climate, the press is hardly regulated. A few permanent policy measures are aimed at ameliorating the effects of the market on print journalism. For instance, the press sector is subsidized by a low VAT-rate for newspapers. The Stimuleringsfonds voor de Pers provides some protection of press pluralism (Bakker and Scholten 2009: 35). The public fund subsidizes research and offers temporary financial assistance to publications that are in dire straits and start-up publications which will

enhance diversity, for instance because they target minorities. Increasing media literacy among citizens has been an official policy goal of the Dutch government since 2006 (Ramaer 2011). But in assessing media policy, Brants wrote that “the dominant policy rule is still one of government keeping its distance and, as far as possible, letting the market do its work” (Kelly et al. 2004: 154). Indeed, media policy in the Netherlands has traditionally been an exercise in modesty, as Bardoel put it, because of freedom of speech and press concerns and because an ideological consensus on the issue has been lacking. Dutch media policy can be characterized as somewhere in between the Anglo-American reticence to disturb the market and the more interventionist attitudes prevalent on much of the European continent (Bardoel 2003a: 15). Concretely, media policy has been mostly geared towards “accommodating existing actors.” Bardoel argued that media policy by definition cannot be far-reaching because of the guarantee of freedom of the press (Bardoel 2003a: 14).

Freedom of the press is a priceless asset to any society, which is exactly why it is instrumental that we do not confuse limited and simplistic versions of this great good with the real thing. This is exactly what has happened in the Netherlands, for in that country it is usually considered a “defensive right against the government” (Nieuwenhuis 1992: 196). Freedom from the state is indeed a crucial component of any real conception of freedom of the press, but by itself it does not suffice to create the conditions for a vibrant democracy. By now, this point has been understood by many observers, perhaps most famously by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1989), who argued that a viable public sphere needs to be free from both state and corporate interests.

The current crisis in journalism has brought about policy measures that are quite out of the ordinary. In 2010, eight million euro in government subsidies was allocated for innovation in

the press sector. Newspapers could also hire young journalists to the tune of four million euro in subsidies (d'Haenens and Kik 2011: 204). Some papers refused to take advantage of this subsidy, as they said to fear government interference with news content. A more fruitful way of looking at this issue is that the principles of these measures are sound, but their volume woefully inadequate. The subsidies amount to marginal public support for a commercial media system that is breaking down.

In summary, the Dutch newspapers are securely in the hands of domestic and foreign elites, be they persons or big corporations that strive – are legally obliged to strive – to maximize profits. The newspaper sector is highly concentrated and dependent on advertising revenue.

### **Ownership: The press agencies**

The situation regarding the press agencies in the Netherlands is rather unique. The two agencies, ANP and Novum Nieuws, are both privately owned and run for maximum profit. In all other European countries, a national press agency exists which is somehow controlled by other media companies (cf. AP in the US). No other European country has two press agencies that are in competition with each other. In about half of all European countries, the national press agency receives direct or indirect state subsidies, or the print industry receives substantial state support, but not in the Netherlands (Rutten and Slot 2011: 4). It is estimated that worldwide, about three fourths of press agencies receive direct or indirect state subsidies (Rutten and Slot 2011: 48). A widely-discussed government-issued report on the press agencies documented how the two press agencies are completely subject to the logic of market, stated that news has attributes of a public good, and repeatedly brought up the issue of possible state support (Rutten and Slot 2011). In a reaction the responsible minister said that she saw no compelling reason to reconsider the hands-

off approach that for the last decades has characterized Dutch government policy towards the news provision in society (Van Bijsterveldt-Vliegenthart 2011).

The biggest press agency, ANP, still plays a pivotal role in the Dutch news system. In 2003, the private equity firms NPM Capital en Gimv acquired a majority stake in the ANP. In 2007 they bought the remaining shares from the Dutch newspaper publishers. As one observer wrote, the ANP forms a “perfect communication link between the multifaceted interests of NPM Capital and the outside world.” He noted that the ANP is very much aware that it is in the business of producing profits, which makes it remarkable that the ANP has retained its reputation of independence and objectivity (Dukker 2010). Among Dutch journalists the output of the ANP is still regarded as of high quality (Vermaas and Janssen 2009: 13). The ANP does not just deliver news to the media, but also to corporations like Shell and Fortis-bank. The agency has about three thousand customers, of which only about twenty are newspapers (Vermaas and Janssen 2009: 17), although the ANP’s revenue still derives for about two thirds from media organizations. Over the last five years, it has increased its output in text and images by forty percent (Rutten and Slot 2011: 24-5) whereas the number of editors and journalists working for ANP has been reduced in order to cut costs (Vermaas and Janssen 2009: 13). In 2010, V-Ventures took over the ANP.

ANP Pers Support, which is part of ANP, claims on its website that it “distributes press releases of companies, organizations, the government... to the media.” This public relations material is not just distributed domestically, but also to “137 countries and in 25 languages” via PR Newswire (ANP; Rutten and Slot 2011: 25), a diversification practice not uncommon at European news agencies (Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen 2000: 100). Reportedly, these texts include a disclaimer which states that the ANP is not responsible for the content (Boom 2009). Yet the

website of ANP Pers Support lures customers by pointing out that press releases sent with the help of the ANP are clearly marked as deriving from the agency. This the media will take as proof of their reliability, because “ANP Pers Support checks each and every press release” it sends out (ANP).

The claim about exhaustive fact-checking is improbable, but more importantly beside the point. What matters is that ANP, by reputation the flagship of objective Dutch journalism, is deeply entrenched in the logic of the market. Checking public relations hand-outs of powerful actors in society for factual accuracy is hardly journalism. In effect, ANP Pers Support aids powerful organizations to propagandize more effectively. The ANP teaches businesses how to write effective press releases (ANP Pers Support; Rutten and Slot 2011: 33). Indeed, “the boundary between commerce and independent news gathering” has been all but eradicated (Boom 2009).

Dutch newspapers are ‘unusually dependent’ on press agencies, especially the ANP (Gunther and Mughan 2000: 315-6; Temporary Press Commission 2009: 49-50; Vermaas and Janssen 2009: 12; Rutten and Slot 2011: 30-1). The Dutch press depends for much of its foreign news on foreign press agencies. According to one study, between 2006 and 2008 about a third of the content on foreign affairs derived from these agencies, mostly AP and Reuters. Sixty percent of all articles, although only a third of the total length, had as designated source a press agency. These numbers very likely severely downplay the influence of the press agencies, as editors in the Netherlands and correspondents abroad base much of what they write under their own name on copy provided by press agencies. Moreover, the agencies exert a strong indirect influence by setting the news agenda, not just for the foreign desks, also for correspondents (Luyendijk 2006). Only three papers, *de Volkskrant*, *NRC Handelsblad* and *De Telegraaf* featured a respectable

amount of copy by their correspondents, between about thirty and fifty percent (Nederlandse Nieuwsmonitor 2010: 4-5). These are the only three papers in the Netherlands of which it can still be said that they do their own foreign reporting.

The ANP has retained its dominant agenda-setting function within the Dutch news system up until the present. In fact, its dominance has only increased (Vermaas and Janssen 2009: 32). Especially the recently introduced free newspapers *Metro* and *Spits!* depend to a great extent on the ANP. Surveyed journalists estimated that 60 to 90 percent of the content of *Metro* and *Spits!* derives from ANP or from Novum Nieuws, with the news outlets routinely adding little or nothing to the press agency copy (Vermaas and Janssen 2009: 21-2). This dependence becomes more salient when the high circulation of these free papers is taken into account. In 2009, *Metro* was the second largest newspaper in the Netherlands behind *De Telegraaf*, with a circulation of just over half a million. With a circulation of more than four hundred thousand, *Spits!* was the fourth largest paper (Dutch Media Authority 2011: 43).

The foreign news that the ANP disseminates originates from Western press agencies: DPA, AFP and mostly Reuters. A study done in 1992 concluded that the ANP depended for 80 to 90 percent of its foreign news on international news agencies (Vermaas and Janssen 2009: 10). In the global news flow the “Euro-American dominance” is “overwhelming” and the ANP is part of that dominance (Boyd-Barrett 2000: 12). It might be well expected then that its content suffers from a pro-Western bias.

The second Dutch press agency, Novum Nieuws, started in 1999 and has conquered a small segment of the market (Rutten and Slot 2011: 26). The agency focuses on providing entertainment news and radio bulletins. Twenty jobs were lost in 2008 but the agency regained ground after that (Rutten and Slot 2011: 34). Novum’s foreign desk translates and edits copy



from Associated Press for its subscribers. The competition between the press agencies ANP and Novum has had at least one effect: the ANP now also produces entertainment news (Vermaas and Janssen 2009: 23; Rutten and Slot 2011: 74). The GPD can be regarded as the third Dutch press agency, although it is not a press agency in the conventional meaning of the term. Founded in 1936, the GPD provides news stories and feature articles to regional newspapers and is run on a not-for-profit basis. It is often characterized as a “central desk of the regional papers” instead of as a press agency. It was never in direct competition with the ANP. In the last couple of years it has had to reduce costs by forty percent (Vermaas and Janssen 2009: 14). It also has had to let go much of its staff, yet output has remained constant. About two dozen correspondents, mostly freelancers, report from abroad (Rutten and Slot 2011: 29). Both at ANP and GPD it is felt that the result of even more cutbacks would be that they could not provide quality journalism anymore (Rutten and Slot 2011: 34). The GPD will close down at the end of 2012 because of lack of resources after the departure of a big client.

The conclusion is clear. As the press agencies are privately-owned and commercially-run, one would expect that on their count at least, the propaganda model is germane to the Netherlands, in fact more so than in many other countries, including the US.

### **Ownership: Broadcasting**

In 2007, the foremost expert on Dutch broadcasting, Jo Bardoel, summed up its current state:

*The Dutch system of “segmented pluralism,” in which social groups and civil society play a vital role represents an interesting alternative to media systems relying mainly on either the state or*

*the market. But at the beginning of a new century, this unique Dutch model is eroding rapidly and is starting to resemble a more European or even global media model in which liberal policies and commercial media markets dominate. Over the past two decades the Dutch media have changed almost completely, and public information has shifted from a merit-good to a market commodity, mainly as a result of liberalizing national and European broadcasting and telecommunications policies. Consequently, the Dutch television sector has become increasingly internationalized. In the television market, three groups – one public and two commercial – dominate over 85% of the market. Much has been left to market forces.... (Bardoel 2007: 199-200)*

The result is that “the Netherlands now has one of the most competitive, although not profitable, television markets in Europe” (Bardoel 2007: 200). As two other scholars conclude,

*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 and Raats 2012: 167)*

Policies promoted by the European Commission (EC) result in private interests increasing their (informal) influence on the process of the formulation of public broadcasting strategies. The interests of stakeholders aside from private media companies are

underrepresented. The EC's "multi-stakeholder policy practices are far from inclusive and fail to meet several aspects of deliberative democracy. Essentially, they have been created in response to market pressures (and, hence, over-focus on market questions) and rarely take as their starting point the improvement of public service broadcasting as a democratic policy project" (Donders and Raats 2012: 162)

Just like the newspaper market, the television market is dominated by three players: the public broadcaster, RTL Nederland and SBS Nederland. Together they control more than three quarters (76.4 percent) of the market. With 33.9 percent the public broadcaster is the biggest, followed by RTL Nederland (24.2 percent) and SBS Nederland (18.4 percent) (Dutch Media Authority 2011: 50). RTL Nederland is owned by the biggest television company in Europe, RTL Group, which holds interests in 45 television channels and 31 radio stations. RTL Group in its turn is owned by the global media behemoth Bertelsmann AG, which is one of the few remaining big players in the United States. RTL Nederland exploits a handful of television channels and three radio stations, among which two very popular ones (Dutch Media Authority 2011: 31-2).

SBS Nederland, with three channels the third biggest television broadcaster, is owned by the international media conglomerate ProSiebenSat.1 Media, which is based in Germany and owns thirty television stations and eighteen radio stations in fourteen countries. The American investment funds KKR and Permira hold a controlling interest in ProSiebenSat.1 Media. The Telegraaf Media Groep controls six percent of the shares of ProSiebenSat.1 Media (Dutch Media Authority 2011: 34). Thus, a large majority of the broadcast channels are owned by a very small number of big corporations and run for profit. For the most part then, the first filter applies to Dutch broadcasting.

The commercial stations have until now failed to do good journalism. In fact, by and large they have failed to do journalism at all. Only the channel RTL 4 broadcasts a daily news show, called RTL Nieuws, which is well-regarded. The other channels produce no serious daily news show, and hardly any other programs which might be termed journalistic. A government-commissioned report, *De volgende editie* (RMO 2003), noted that the commercial stations make “relatively few” journalistic programs. This is an understatement. As examples of journalism on the commercial stations the report mentioned BNR Nieuwsradio, RTL4 Nieuws and RTL-Z. As mentioned RTL4 Nieuws is the only serious daily news show on the commercial channels. The radio channel BNR and the television channel RTL-Z are geared towards business audiences. They mostly do business journalism, that is, they report about business from the perspective of business people. They are steeped in the ideology of private enterprise and neoliberalism.

According to Ad van Liempt, Dutch viewers who want “high-quality information” out of habit still tune into the public broadcaster, which makes it unprofitable for commercial broadcasters to produce serious news shows. Yet more structural factors than popular taste are in play. By its nature, commercial television is hardly prepared to invest in an “informative program” for which no certain sizeable audience exists (Bardoel et al. 2002: 300). The introduction of commercial television thus has not, as perhaps might have been hoped for, led to increased competition to do good journalism, with the competition between RTL4 Nieuws and the daily news show on the public broadcaster being a possible exception. The effect of the presence of the public broadcaster has mainly been that commercial broadcasters have hardly invested in doing journalism.

The presence of a public broadcaster with a market share of about a third poses the strongest challenge to the propaganda model’s application to the Netherlands. Yet “economic

interests” have always played a “large, if not decisive role in the history of [Dutch] television” (Bakker and Scholten 2009: 126-7). Following Alex Doherty’s revision of the five filters of the propaganda model to incorporate the BBC, the argument here is that the Dutch public broadcaster too “is not free at all, but is merely subject to different forms of control” (Doherty 2005: 2). The public broadcaster might not be a profit-seeking enterprise, but of necessity it has been much preoccupied with cost-saving, especially of late. It too is a victim of the “commercial logic” of cost saving and output maximization (Davies 2009). The wider societal and journalistic context it operates in has overwhelmed and neutralized it. Political economists traditionally and with good reason ascribe a lot of significance to ownership in analyzing the media. Especially American political economists might tend to overestimate the relevance of the public ownership of broadcasting organizations in Europe. In the case of the Netherlands, the effect of the existence of a publicly funded broadcaster is probably smaller than they would expect.

The Dutch broadcasting organizations are privately owned but publicly funded and hence do not aim to make a profit. Yet the people in charge of these organizations are drawn from elite sectors of society. For instance, those in charge of the social-democratic broadcaster VARA hold such other jobs as lawyer or professor, or hold leading positions at an environmental group, a publisher, a pension fund. Some are involved in one capacity or the other with the social-democratic party PvdA, for instance by occupying a seat in the Dutch senate (VARA). As Doherty (2005: 2) observed regarding the BBC, “For the most part, the members of the board are drawn from a narrow elite sector of society with intimate links to government and big business...” This goes for the Netherlands too. The main difference with Britain is that the Dutch state has no say in who gets appointed to lead the broadcasting organizations. Yet from the composition of its leadership, one would not expect the VARA to challenge the fundamental

premises of Dutch economic or foreign policy. In fact, some of the leading figures at the VARA are directly involved in running the Dutch state.

Dutch public television since the seventies has operated on a “hidden commercial logic” (chapter 2). With the advent of commercial television in the Netherlands in 1989, the pressure on the public broadcaster to pay attention to ratings has undoubtedly increased. A 2003 report lamented this development, arguing that commercialization 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 behavior of the public broadcaster. The report advised that the broadcaster not just be independent of the government, but also of “commercial interests,” strongly implying that it currently is not (RMO 2003: 45, 48). It is generally accepted that the public broadcaster is more interested in ratings than in an “Enlightenment-inspired cultural-pedagogic mission,” although this is its societal justification (Kelly et al. 2004: 152).

Even public affairs programs pay a lot of attention to ratings. When discussing who to invite, the editors of the political program *Buitenhof* always consider how a prospective guest did in the ratings the last time around (Luyendijk 2010: 58). In 2003, the managing editor of *NRC Handelsblad*, Folkert Jensma, observed that the broadcast organizations are rapidly losing their traditional identities. “What is left are marketing concepts that appeal to emotions” and a policy of buying programs that is mainly motivated by considerations of ratings and target audiences (Jensma and Laroes 2003: 18). As ideology has been replaced by journalistic professionalism, journalistic quality is the sole criterion by which journalists judge their work, according to Jensma. Aside, that is, from circulation figures, which “many journalists” these days consider “a measure of personal success” (Jensma and Laroes 2003: 20).

The authoritative daily news shows on the public broadcasters, the Journaals, are not produced by the broadcasting organizations, but by the NOS. The people who run the NOS also belong to elite sectors of society. The NOS is publicly funded but independently run. It has a statutory obligation to produce news in the public interest (Bardoel and d'Haenens 2008: 347). Wijfjes has argued that over the years the Journaal transformed itself from a “news-following” to a “news-making” outlet. Whereas until at least the seventies the Journaal tried to be neutral and objective, at the beginning of the twenty-first century “its main aim seems to be [...] connecting personal and emotional stories of people in the news to reactions of the authorities and institutions.” Thus the Journaal had shed its “objectivity” and had adopted an interpretative style of journalism (Wijfjes 2005: 27). The danger of Wijfjes’ analysis is that its veracity might disguise its limitations. His analysis might seem to contradict this dissertation. Yet the changes in the journalism of the Journaal which Wijfjes identifies are mostly stylistic. The dependence of the Journaal on mainstream news sources and on good relations with most politicians, for instance, has not changed.

The Journaal’s journalism is hardly distinguishable from the journalism done on the commercial channels. Aside from some real differences, there were “striking similarities” between the way the public broadcaster and the commercial channels reported on the parliamentary elections in 1994 and 1998, according to Cees van der Eijk: “Both reacted to the parties rather than trying to initiate news stories, and both devoted considerably more time to the ‘hoopla’ and ‘horse race’ aspects of the campaign than to the discussion of its policy or issues. In addition, both paid considerably more attention to the larger parties than to the smaller ones, and both focused heavily on the [...] leaders of the parties” (Gunther and Mughan 2000: 325).

On the significance of these observed similarities between the coverage on the public broadcaster and the commercial channels there is some room for legitimate disagreement. Should the similarities be seen primarily as a condemnation of the public broadcaster or conversely as a sign that commercial broadcasting's coverage is actually pretty good? Either way, Van der Eijk has noted that the decline of attention to campaign issues on the public broadcaster in favor of more attention to the horse race set in before the arrival of commercial television (Gunther and Mughan 2000: 325-6).

In short, the possibility raised here is that the public broadcaster has not been able to escape what McChesney identified as the "core dilemma" of public broadcasters everywhere: their relationship to the wider capitalist political economy (McChesney 1999: 243). The capitalist logic has to a large extent overtaken the public service mission of the Dutch broadcaster. Regrettably, the following remark by Jürgen Habermas thus applies to the Netherlands: It would be unwise to "harbor any illusions" about a public sphere in which a public broadcaster is present but in which "commercialized mass media set the tone" (McChesney 1999: 245).

With a combined market share of about 60 percent, the radio-market is controlled, yet again, by three big players: the public broadcaster, the Telegraaf Media Groep (TMG) and RTL Nederland (Dutch Media Authority 2011: 58). As noted, TMG is also the dominant player in the newspaper industry, and RTL Nederland is the biggest commercial television broadcaster. In the mid-twentieth century, radio was still the "quintessential family medium," but in the twenty-first century, radio has devolved into the ultimate "target audience medium," obsessed with "formats, target groups and market shares." The public broadcaster is not exempt from this process. Reacting to the rating successes of the commercial channels, public radio started from the



eighties onwards to gear its programming more and more towards satisfying the market (Bakker and Scholten 2009: 88). Had the public radio channels in 1990 still a market share of 70 percent, by 1994 this had declined precipitously to 42 percent (Bakker and Scholten 2009: 95). On the other hand, public radio has also seen an, albeit small, counter-movement away from imitation of the commercial channels and towards making, or at least considering to make, programs that the commercial channels find unprofitable: educational and cultural programs and programs that discuss minority-issues (Bakker and Scholten 2009: 98).

The reshuffling of the FM-frequencies of the commercial radio stations, which was concluded in 2003, had as its aim to stimulate content diversity. It had the opposite effect. Because of the heavy debts that the stations had to assume in order to be able to afford a license, making as much money as quickly as possible in order to get out of debt became paramount. The stations therefore typically gear their programming towards the same, lucrative group: twenty to thirty-four year olds. Advertisers hold a lot of power, as the price for spots keeps going down (Bakker and Scholten 2009: 103). The reputable internationally-oriented news channel Radio Netherlands has been called the “crown jewel of international public broadcasting” (McChesney and Nichols 2010: 110). An assessment of the quality of its journalism is hardly relevant anymore, for its budget has been gutted: from 44 million to 14 million euro a year (Van den Dool 2011).

### **The second filter: Advertising**

The Dutch press depends on advertising revenue to stay afloat in the market place. The second filter therefore applies to the press, and of course to the commercial broadcasting channels. But it applies also in part to the public broadcasting organizations. Although the

majority of the funds that they operate on are public funds, they receive about a quarter to a third of their budget from the revenue of the commercials they air (Dutch Media Authority 2011: 37). More importantly, the environment that the public broadcasters operate in consists of commercial media like the commercial broadcasters, the ANP, the newspapers, and of international press agencies like Reuters and AP and other global agenda-setting media like CNN and the *New York Times*. In other words, the information that provides much of the raw material for the news output of the public broadcasters stems overwhelmingly from thoroughly commercial sources.

The negatives Herman and Chomsky (and others) have identified with an advertising supported media system therefore apply to the Dutch media too. As they wrote, “With advertising, the free market does not yield a neutral system in which final buyer choice decides. The *advertisers’* choices influence media prosperity and survival” (Herman and Chomsky 1988: 14, their emphasis). For instance, the social-democratic newspaper *Het Vrije Volk* disappeared in the seventies partly because it could not generate enough ad revenue (chapter 3), analogous to the fate of the *Daily Herald* in Britain (Herman and Chomsky 1988: 15). The market exerts control over which kinds of publications survive and which fold. The Netherlands has no labor papers. Big business is covered much more than for instance unions. The content analyses will indicate that the press is more rightwing than the population at large. Advertisers prefer to avoid sponsoring programs that interfere with the “buying mood” and this partly explains why the Dutch commercial channels hardly do any hard-hitting journalism. Because advertisers need to be retained, Dutch managing editors have been made responsible for circulation or ratings. Instances of direct interference by advertisers are known (chapter 2). The press has no respect for democracy (chapters 4 and 9), except for the “democracy of the market place.” As Herman and

Chomsky (1988: 16) wrote, “The idea that the drive for large audiences makes the mass media ‘democratic’ thus suffers from the initial weakness that its political analogue is a voting system weighted by income!”

Tellingly, the public broadcaster, strapped as it has been for funding, has resorted to seeking and receiving money from private and state sponsors in exchange for sympathetic air time. *NRC Handelsblad* (2003n) reported that public broadcasting organizations had accepted at least 35 million euro from organizations and the state, in exchange for coverage, and in some cases for direct influence on the content of the shows. For instance, an organization that battles cancer sponsored a documentary and in return was featured in it. The daily news show of the public broadcaster agreed to hire an editor who was funded by an organization dedicated to advancing science, and which itself received subsidies from the state. The daily news show changed its mind about the hire after the deal became public knowledge. Public current affairs shows have accepted money from an embassy and from a number of organizations in order to off-set the costs of producing items on foreign countries (Van der Vleuten 2003; Dohmen 2003).

A weather man on a commercial channel received funding from the state to produce an item at a tennis club which purportedly provided a shining example of successful integration of minorities into Dutch society (Pol and Swankhuisen 2008). No wonder that *NRC Handelsblad* called the public broadcaster a “public-private hybrid” (Van der Vleuten 2003). In 2006 and 2007, the state provided almost 12 million euro to commercial and public channels to have them produce programs in cooperation with ministries. A documentary series on European history received 400 thousand euro in state subsidies. In 2008, the practice of state agencies funding programs was discontinued because, as the minister of media and culture remarked, television

viewers should be able to rest assured that programs are produced independently (Van Hoek 2008; Hell 2008).

### **The third filter: Sourcing**

Commercial media prefer “a steady, reliable flow of the raw material of news” (Herman and Chomsky 1988: 18), with the result that journalists spend much time at press conferences and other “pseudo news events” orchestrated by official sources, which are on the whole deemed reliable. The third filter, sourcing, is also germane to the Dutch situation. Institutional sources are prominent in reporting (Vasterman and Aerden 1995). This institutional bias has been documented for the daily news program *Het Journaal* on the public broadcaster. In an analysis of the coverage of political campaigns, Philip van Praag jr. (Bardoel et al. 2002) condemned the *Journaal* for focusing during election campaigns almost exclusively on the political parties which were assumed to end up taking part in the governing coalition. He found that “Small parties and big oppositional parties which probably will not be part of the next cabinet are hardly deemed interesting by the *Journaal*. The editors apparently do not regard it as their task to inform the voters as best as possible about [all] the possible choices during the elections.” One would expect that the relatively broad political spectrum in the Netherlands leads to diverse news, but Van Praag jr.’s study indicates that the media can undo this effect.

The journalists of the public broadcaster too strive for “objectivity” and depend on access to official sources. They hold the same journalism degrees as the journalists working for the commercial media. Remarkably, Laroes himself said in 2003 that political journalism in the Netherlands was not “objective” but biased towards a progressive point of view (Hulsing 2003; also Jensma and Laroes: 39). Subsequent research shows that certainly these last years, this has

not been true. A study done by *NRC Handelsblad* concluded that the public broadcaster has shifted heavily to the right. From September through November 2010, 47 of the top hundred guests on public broadcasting talk shows were from the right, and only 17 from the left. A similar study in 2008 already showed that the public broadcaster was “more rightwing” than is “generally assumed” in the Netherlands; 35 of the top hundred guests came from the right and 28 from the left (Beerekamp 2010). According to Luyendijk (2010: 81) too, the press is more rightwing than leftwing.

Dutch journalism, especially the quality press and the press agencies, is highly professionalized, with many journalists holding BA or MA degrees, often in journalism. In other words, the dominant ideology among Dutch journalists is “objectivity.” In interviews six Dutch editors argued that it was not the task of journalists to shape public opinion (Charles 2009: 65). From this conception of what journalism should be stem all kinds of well-documented problems, especially an overdependence on official sources, in part resulting from the need for a steady and reliable news flow that carries a reduced risk of flak (chapter 6). It is a generally accepted notion among Dutch scholars that political reporters and politicians are caught in a symbiotic relationship; they feed off and depend on each other (Bardoel et al. 2002: 85; Luyendijk 2010). Some have argued that recently the relationship has changed from a symbiotic one to one of “mutual distrust” (Brants et al. 2010: 30). Yet there is no reason to assume that these characteristics are mutually exclusive. Journalists have moonlighted for government agencies, raking in a lot of money by for instance giving advice and seminars or acting as discussion moderators (Bakker and Scholten 2009: 326).

By the turn of the century the ratio of PR-people to journalists was about 1 to 1, with PR-people already outnumbering journalists (Prenger and Van Vree 2003). Since, the PR-industry

has grown dramatically. In 1999 the number of employees was estimated at fifty-five thousand, including those working in advertising. Currently about 135 to 156 thousand people work in some kind of communications function, a rather conservative estimate according to researchers. Moreover, that number excludes those in advertising. Yet “many tens of thousands” in that sector are not involved in influencing the media; they work for instance in internal communication functions. The number of journalists is currently estimated at ten thousand, plus another five thousand journalists who also accept commercial assignments. The exact ratio of PR-people versus journalists is unclear (Ramaer 2011a; Prenger et al. 2011: 36). Extrapolating on the basis of the study by Prenger et al. 2011, it appears that an estimate of at least three PR-people for every journalist is reasonable. Basing herself on the same study, Joke Hermes (2011: 12) estimated the ratio of public relations officers to journalists to be 5 to 1. Although cross-national comparisons are tricky as result of different definitions and research designs, it might be noted that in the US, the ratio PR-people versus journalists is about four to one (McChesney and Nichols 2010).

Lack of clarity about the precise numbers notwithstanding, Prenger et al. (2011: 136) concluded that in the Netherlands the PR-industry has gained much power over the last decade, that it is commonly accepted among practitioners that PR has the upper hand these days and that journalists are not autonomous but that “journalism is making itself the mouthpiece of commercial and governmental interests.” As a Dutch war reporter who regularly went to Afghanistan said of the relationship between war correspondents and government spokespeople: “They won” (Prenger et al. 2011: 95). Additionally, there are by now more freelance journalists than journalists who hold a steady contract at a newspaper. Freelance journalists have less clout vis-à-vis PR-agents (Prenger et al. 2011: 126).

Billions of Euros are spent annually on advertising in the Netherlands. The government spends hundreds of millions of Euros annually on public relations. The precise number is not known (Bakker and Scholten 2009: 301), but clearly “politics” has become “marketing.” Ministries brand themselves just like Coca-Cola does (Prenger et al. 2011: 22). A report to the government concerning the future of Dutch journalism brought up the issue of the large propaganda apparatus, funded by the tax payer, which the government employs to “guide” journalism in acceptable channels (Temporary Press Commission 2009: 47-8). The total circulation of publications in the Netherlands that operate to some extent on journalistic principles is about fifty million. The total circulation of publications produced by the government, businesses and non-profits and so on is ten times as large, namely half a billion (Prenger et. al 2011: 20). Video News Releases (VNRs) are produced more and more in the Netherlands by businesses and government agencies. These are (partially) used in Dutch media, but to what extent is not known (Prenger et al. 2011: 116).

As in other countries, for instance in Britain (Davies 2009), Dutch journalists are constantly fighting a losing battle while sorting out the steady stream of government and corporate propaganda, with precious little time left to pursue original story ideas. The domestic desk at ANP receives more than nine hundred press releases on a typical day. An estimated couple of thousand press releases are sent every day to the Dutch media (Prenger et al. 2011: 47-8). Many journalists seem to have accepted the PR-industry as an immutable fact of their professional life. Although there still exists resentment, especially among journalists towards PR-people, the groups are “antagonists no more.” They still have confrontations and differences of opinions, but these are “neither predominantly negative nor fundamental” (Neijens and Smith 2006).

In *Manufacturing Consent*, Herman and Chomsky made much of the proliferation of rightwing think tanks since the seventies which aim to guide the public debate. This development has not penetrated the Netherlands to a significant extent. One example that does come to mind is the Centrum Informatie en Documentatie Israel (CIDI), which defends Israeli policy to anyone who will listen. It is unclear though where the organization gets the bulk of its funding. A rightwing think tank which is active in the Netherlands is the Edmund Burke Stichting. Again, it is unclear who its main donors are. Herman and Chomsky also pointed to the role of “independent experts” as sources for journalism. As to the frequency with which they are cited in Dutch journalism, no studies have been done as far as I know. Hijmans et al. (2011; chapter 6) did not find many traces of PR-material in the two main quality papers, but more than a third of the domestic news in *de Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad* was found to derive completely or partly from press or PR-agencies or other media outlets. The PR-practice of establishing front groups until now is probably a rather marginal phenomenon in the Netherlands, with perhaps a few exceptions (Prenger et al. 2011: 40). The extent to which the Dutch media depend on PR-handouts is unclear, and therefore more research is needed (Prenger et al. 2011: 15).

### **The fourth filter: Flak**

Powerful organizations and individuals are well-equipped to produce flak when they deem certain media content objectionable. The regular public criticisms voiced by politicians about the media (chapter 6) can be assumed to have some influence on Dutch news content. But flak is also exerted in private. For instance, half of the editors-in-chief of the national newspapers admitted that they get calls from politicians and that they on occasion heed their requests to, for instance, keep information out of the paper (Prenger 2007). Dutch journalists do not infrequently



resort to self-censorship, for instance when their story is at odds with the dominant political and ideological climate (the fifth filter); when sources show themselves unwilling to cooperate; when a story does not fit the medium's format; or when politicians or advertisers turn on the pressure (Bakker and Scholten 2009: 326). PR-people often resort to intimidating tactics; they regard criticizing journalists as an integral part of their work (Prenger et al. 2011: 45). Journalists have reported instances of attempts by advertisers to influence content by threatening to withdraw advertising (Prenger et al. 2011: 109).

As to the public broadcaster, there always looms the possibility of politicians trying to cut funding, for instance because they perceive the news reporting as biased against them. Criticisms voiced by politicians dominate the public debate on the media (chapter 6). The government has made severe cuts in the annual budget of the public broadcasters starting in 2013. Right-wing politician Geert Wilders, who feels persecuted by what he calls the "left-wing church," including the public broadcaster, has pushed for these severe budget cuts. According to Hans Laroës, who from 2002 to 2011 was the managing editor of the *Journal*, the public broadcaster was deprived of 30 million euro in funding as a punishment. Rightwing politician Mat Herben (LPF) had taken offense to an anchor saying that she was unhappy with the rise to popularity of LPF-leader Pim Fortuyn. Laroës wondered why there was no outburst of protests against this blatant political interference with the public broadcaster (Jensma and Laroës: 43). Yet it has been argued that the budget reduction had nothing to do with the anchor's comment, despite what Herben asserted (Huygen 2002).

### **The fifth filter: pro-market ideology**

As to the fifth filter, ideology, there is no doubt that the Dutch media are constrained by the prevailing ideological climate in the Netherlands. During the Cold War the media generally adopted a pro-American attitude (e.g. Roholl 2008). In fact the Netherlands was one of the staunchest anti-communist countries in Europe. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the dominant ideology in the Netherlands has moved more and more towards belief in the market as the solution to all or at least most problems (chapter 4). The political spectrum has definitely moved to the right in the last decades; the most dramatic illustration being the rise to prominence of Geert Wilders' rightwing PVV. Another example is the – perhaps more significant – move to the center (which in turn has shifted to the right) by the PvdA, analogous to Labour's move to the center in Britain in the nineties. A wave of privatizations in the eighties and nineties resulted in, among other things, the privatization of the postal system and the partial privatization of the railroads. In the mid-nineties, the already privatized Dutch PTT (renamed KPN) went to the stock market, although this has not meant the complete absence of regulation of telecommunications (Bakker and Scholten 2009: 218; chapter 4).

Journalists thus function in an increasingly neoliberal environment. Commercial media organizations criticize the government for its media policy, because public funding for broadcasting is perceived as unfair competition. Currently, the issue is whether the public broadcaster should be allowed to maintain news websites, as this is deemed to amount to unfair competition. Some even question whether the Netherlands still needs a public broadcaster. They argue that the commercial broadcasters have shown to be able to do journalism of the same high quality as the public broadcaster. The public debate about the media is almost always framed as assuming a left-wing bias instead of a right-wing, pro-corporate bias (chapter 6).

News programs constitute a small (though prominent) part of the output of the public broadcaster. Many other programs are either meant to be “just” entertainment and/or explicitly or implicitly reaffirm a few central myths of Dutch society. Much in the way Herbert Gans (1979) argued concerning journalism the United States, the Dutch public broadcaster reaffirms day-in-day out the legitimacy of the nation state and the political system. Hardly a force for further democratization of society (quite the opposite) the public broadcaster legitimizes the status quo by stimulating nationalism through for instance broadcasts of games of the national soccer team, and the trials and tribulation of the members of the royal family. Longtime editor-in-chief of the *Journal*, Hans Laroës, asserted that the editors and journalists of the *Journal* belong to the establishment, admitting that there is “a lot of distrust” towards the *Journal* in Dutch society (Van Westerloo 2003b).

### **The propaganda model ignored**

The “second order prediction” of the propaganda model is that the model itself will be ignored in scholarship and the public debate. This prediction holds for the Netherlands. As to the press, a search for “propaganda model” from January 1, 1988 until January 1, 2012 in Lexis-Nexis yields not a single result for the quality newspapers *de Volkskrant*, *NRC Handelsblad*, *Trouw* or the popular *De Telegraaf*. In the same period, *Trouw* mentions “manufacturing consent” in one article, in reference to the then released documentary *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* (Tan 1993). *De Volkskrant* (2006) also mentioned the term in one article, in reference to a Turkish translation of the book, which led to a court case. *NRC Handelsblad* mentioned the term in four articles. The latest one was a passing reference in a book review of Al Gore’s *The Assault on Reason* (Oosterbaan 2007). Another mention was made

in a letter to the editor (Kalken 2007). The third mention occurred in an elaborate profile of Chomsky in *NRC Magazine*, commemorating his seventy-fifth birthday (Koenen 2003). The fourth mention was in a review of the documentary *Manufacturing Consent* (Beerekamp 1993). During that same period, Noam Chomsky was mentioned in 121 articles in *NRC Handelsblad*; in 51 in *Trouw*; in 92 in *de Volkskrant*. *De Telegraaf* (2005) mentioned him in one article, which described him as “controversial” and “ultra-leftwing,” and warned that he is “known to be a friend of Holocaust deniers.” Edward Herman, the main architect of the propaganda model, was not mentioned in *De Telegraaf*, *NRC Handelsblad* or *de Volkskrant*. *Trouw* mentioned him once, in passing and dismissively (Crijnen 2002).

In Dutch scholarship too, the propaganda model is ignored, despite that its assertions about the coverage of foreign policy in a privately-owned media system are consistent with the main thrust of the scholarship in the Netherlands and abroad. In the *Tijdschrift voor Communicatiewetenschap* the propaganda model is mentioned in two articles from 2005 until 2012, in three articles in the *Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis* for that same period and in four articles in the journal *Sociologie* from 2002 to 2012. The term “manufacturing consent” does not occur in those three journals at all (boomlemmatijdschriften.nl). The Flanders-oriented *Tijdschrift voor Sociologie* does not mention either the propaganda model or manufacturing consent in the period from 2005 until 2012 (www.acco.be). *Manufacturing Consent* was never translated into Dutch.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, the Dutch media market is highly concentrated, run for profit and thoroughly commercialized. With the exception of the public broadcaster, the Dutch media are

owned by rich families or corporations, the latter often being foreign or if domestic often with strong ties to and interests in the global economy. The public broadcaster is run by representatives of elite sectors of society. Regulation of the print industry is marginal at best. Commercial channels are hardly regulated at all. Notwithstanding the public broadcaster, the two first filters of the propaganda model, ownership and dependence on advertisers, therefore definitely apply to the Netherlands, although likely not as stringently as in the US, where the public broadcaster is a marginal feature of the media landscape. The third filter, sourcing, is also applicable to the Dutch context, as notions of professionalism and objectivity Anglo-American style are the dominant journalistic ideology. Again though, the filter cannot be expected to function as strongly as in the US, in part because the political spectrum in the Netherlands is broader. The official sources that journalists routinely pick from are ideologically more diverse, although in practice this advantage might be tempered by the fact that the small leftwing parties GroenLinks and the SP have not been part of a governing coalition for a long time.

The same goes for the last two filters, flak and pro-market ideology. Politicians and corporate interests have been successful in disciplining the media to a significant extent. The relative absence compared to the US of (rightwing) think tanks and other organizations which specialize in criticizing the media and influencing the public debate, would lead to the expectation that in the Netherlands the fourth filter is not as forceful a mechanism as in the US. The fifth filter applies too, but again one would expect it to be not as forceful as in the US, in part because of the wider political spectrum in the Netherlands and in general because belief in the market is less deeply entrenched in the Netherlands. Because of factors like the rise of the PR-industry and the financial troubles of the newspaper industry, the relevance of the propaganda model to the Netherlands can be expected to have increased over time, due to

developments in journalism and the wider economy, and the global convergence towards the Liberal Model. The second order prediction of the propaganda model, that it will be ignored in scholarship and the public debate, holds for the Netherlands.

In short, the expectation arising from this mapping of the Dutch media landscape is that journalism in the Netherlands leaves much to be desired, and that it will exhibit the same kinds of defects as its counterpart in the US, which can be summarized as a clear bias in favor of political and economic elites. Dutch journalism can be expected to perform better than American journalism, but the extent to which is debatable. Only content analyses can provide an answer.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE CURRENT DEBATE ON THE DUTCH MEDIA

The following discussion on the current debate on the Dutch media and journalism aims to make the following observations. First, the notion that Dutch journalism is in crisis is widely accepted, although to varying degrees and not by all commentators. The crisis in journalism is usually considered to be quite recent and to stem from the financial crisis in the news industry, which in turn is often thought to have come about as a result of factors like the introduction of digital technologies, economic hard times, the de-politicization of society, increases in individualistic attitudes, the reading habits of the young, and so on. Rarely if ever is the argument made that the crisis is consistently reflected in the content of the quality media. Those who do argue that the crisis is also in the content, often blame the public for low-quality and irrelevant news fare. Often the soothing observation is made that Dutch journalism at least is not as bad as its counterparts in other countries, for instance the US and Great Britain.

Second, this chapter observes that both the media and the scholarship rarely if ever acknowledge that the news might be structurally biased in favor of corporate and political elites. Yet much research shows and many scholars argue points which, when assembled together, affirm the salience of a critical political-economic perspective on the Dutch media (chapters 2 and 5). The field of journalism studies in the Netherlands has produced plenty of rather narrowly designed studies but lacks “coherent visions” and therefore needs a more “dynamic, comprehensive perspective,” which takes into account both journalistic practices and recent transformations in the public sphere, according to Frank van Vree (2010: 215, 218). This dissertation aims to provide one such framework. Although it does not examine journalistic practices first-hand, it does situate them in a more comprehensive framework. The argument is

that journalistic practices by themselves do not provide a first order explanation for journalism, but a second order explanation behind the wider political-economy. Chapter 4 argued that a more sophisticated and critical understanding of democracy can provide journalism studies with the dynamism that Van Vree called for.

The third observation that this chapter makes is that in the current debates the increasing impact of commercial imperatives on the Dutch media is widely acknowledged, as are the detrimental effects of this development on the conditions in which journalists do their work. Yet almost never is the logical conclusion drawn that therefore the commercial underpinnings of the news media need to be gotten rid of, or at least severely curtailed, through state policy. Fourth, structural explanations for the crisis in journalism are often downplayed, in contradiction to the widespread acknowledgment that the media industry is more and more guided by commercial imperatives. Some observers argue that journalists themselves and their journalistic methods constitute (a significant part of) the problem. Fifth, the solutions that are commonly proposed to amend the crisis in journalism do not get at the heart of the problem, the commercial underpinnings of the Dutch media system, but almost always amount to proposed changes in journalistic practices or more rigorous adherence to existing ones. These proposed solutions reveal that the nefarious influence of the commercial nature of the media system is underestimated. Sixth, despite much initial optimism among certain observers, digital technologies have until now not proven to be a panacea for Dutch journalism. Moreover, there exists no compelling reason or evidence to assume that advancements in technology by themselves will produce quality journalism and a vibrant public sphere.



## **Dutch journalism in crisis**

The contention that Dutch journalism is in crisis is not especially controversial. The Dutch organization for journalists, the NVJ, already made this point in 2000 (Bardoel et al. 2002: 357). The report *Pluriforme informatie in een pluriforme samenleving* (2000), prepared by scholars at the University of Nijmegen, concluded that the media have become part of the establishment and that ethnic minorities feel that they are routinely represented in a negative way; in other words that Dutch journalism is “white.” One of the causes could well be the “increasing pressure of competition and commercialism” on the media (Evers 2008: 36, 39). In 2009, it appeared that journalism had become an “endangered species.” As a result of declining circulations and the economic crisis, newspapers are in trouble financially and the public broadcaster is facing severe budget cuts (Bakker and Scholten 2009: 316).

Some commentators have been blunt in their appraisal of contemporary Dutch journalism. It appears that journalism, which thought of itself as a “queen” has become a “maid” or perhaps even a “whore,” wrote Bert Ummelen (2009: 2) in a recent, critical and somber volume on Dutch journalism. Instructors at the journalism school in Tilburg and at Leiden University initiated a class in fact-checking because they suspected that “there was something fundamentally wrong with journalism” (Ummelen 2009: 2, 82; also Silverman 2009).

The NVJ estimated that about a quarter of the jobs in the Dutch newspaper industry was cut between roughly 2005 and 2008 (Temporary Press Commission 2009: 31). According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2009: 20), between 1997 and 2007 employment in the Dutch newspaper industry declined 41 percent. Across all kinds of media organizations increased emphasis on the bottom line is visible (Rutten and Slot 2011: 38, 68-9). Investigative journalism in the Netherlands, such as it was, has withered away. The reasons for

the very small number of investigative journalists in the Netherlands are lack of money and lack of broadcasting opportunities, according to journalist Anique van den Bosch – not lack of interest (Feldmann 2010). Ad van Liempt (2011) argued that newspapers and magazines provide less and less space for investigative journalism. He noted that investigative journalism gets done more and more by freelance journalists at their own risk, without institutional support from newspapers or magazines. Van Liempt lamented that current affairs and news shows don't do investigative journalism, a dereliction of duty which he blamed on market pressures. The commercial channels produce only one serious daily news show, RTL4 Nieuws. The public channels have to reach two contradictory goals at once: get the highest ratings possible and also offer a serious alternative to the entertainment fare on the commercial channels (Wallage et al. 2007: 39-40).

It is widely acknowledged that since the eighties commercial pressures on the Dutch media have increased significantly (e.g. Van Dijk 2010: 7). These pressures have had negative effects. Els Diekerhof found that journalists frequently do not check whether their sources tell the truth. Journalists offered a number of reasons for this dereliction of duty: opinions do not need to be checked because they are “true by definition”; the authorities have no interest in lying (e.g. because they cannot afford to be found out); and lack of time. Also, journalists claim to know when someone is telling the truth, based on intuition and experience (Ummelen 2009: 76). These rationalizations provide a disillusioning look into current journalistic practices in the Netherlands.

Jaap van Ginneken considered the commercial nature of the media as one of the main causes of the bleak state of affairs. He pointed out that the Dutch media system has become thoroughly commercialized: advertisers' monies and not as in the past public funds have become

the most influential source of media income. “Consumption propaganda” easily drowns out “critical analyses.” As a consequence, Van Ginneken contended, the Dutch media “failed” to cover the run-up to the war in Iraq well (Ummelen 2009: 103, 105, 108). Chapter 7 aims to provide the empirical basis for this assertion.

Van Ginneken, one of the most critical of the Dutch media scholars, is not principally opposed to a commercial media system. He asserted that in and of itself “there is nothing wrong with commercialism and advertising,” as long as the “diversity” of the media remains “guaranteed” (Ummelen 2009: 103). His position is rather curious, for Van Ginneken shows a keen awareness of some of the problems that the 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. Moreover, Van Ginneken realizes that the consequences have been deplorable. Investigative journalism is all but dead; radical critiques of society have all but disappeared from the media; and less educated sections of the public feel increasingly alienated from the mainstream media. This alienation has been a factor in the rise of rightwing populism in politics. Still, it appears that Van Ginneken is of the opinion that a regulated commercial system can consistently produce high-quality journalism.

### **The crisis downplayed**

Not often is the explicit position taken that the crisis is in journalistic content. Even rarer, close to non-existent, is the assertion that Dutch media content exhibits a persistent bias in favor of elite interests. An exception is the rightwing-populist party of Geert Wilders (PVV), which wrongly claims that the media are biased in favor of the leftwing elite. For instance, the PVV has

raised the issue in parliament that media tycoon Derk Sauer, who was a socialist in a distant past and now owns a small stake in the company that publishes the newspapers *NRC Handelsblad* and *nrc.next*, reportedly concerns himself with the editorial content. According to the PVV, the paper almost exclusively employs “extreme left-wing columnists” (Klis 2011; also Bergman 2011a). In reality, *NRC Handelsblad* is a liberal-centrist newspaper. It is disconcerting that in the debate on the Dutch media, the accusation that the media are leftwing drowns out the assertion that the media are biased towards the interests of political and corporate elites, certainly in their coverage of foreign affairs and macroeconomic issues. This assertion is in fact supported by research, whereas the PVV’s assertions are not (chapter 5). The government is often criticized for its media policy, because public funding for broadcasting is perceived as unfair competition (Zwagerman 2010). A frequent issue is whether the public broadcaster should be allowed to maintain news websites, as this is deemed to amount to unfair competition. Some even question whether the Netherlands still needs a public broadcaster. They argue that the commercial broadcasters have shown to be able to do journalism of high quality.

A critical scholar in the seventies, in 2003 Bardoel wrote that the market is often “a good mechanism to direct the traffic of goods and services, including those of a symbolic nature,” i.e. information, for the market is “very flexible and therefore capable to service people quickly and without prejudice.” Yet he also noted some drawbacks to the market, for instance that the tendency towards market concentration limits freedom of choice, and the market-driven occurrence of media hypes and pack journalism (Bardoel 2003a: 9, 10). Bardoel dismissed government policy as ineffective and his reasoning is instructive. He basically threw in the towel before the fight and before answering the question whether it is justified or desirable that commercial interests have any sway over journalism. He argued that it is just a fact of life these

days that commercial interests are too strong vis-à-vis the state and that therefore we should not expect too much from government. Instead we should strive for a “balance” between the competing forces of the market, the profession, society and the government (Bardoel 2003a: 14). To his credit, he argued that the needs of “society” should have the upper hand over the state and the market. He also called for a more encompassing press policy, more specifically, for a policy that “creates the conditions” in which good journalism can thrive (Bardoel 2003a: 21).

Marcel Broersma has asserted that “much good journalism is still being produced” by the quality news outlets (Ummelen 2009: 38). According to Piet Bakker, Ad van Liempt and Pieter Broertjes too, the “crisis in journalism” is not primarily a crisis of journalistic content, but is “organizational,” namely the result of a lack of leadership within journalistic organizations, and “innovative” (Bakker et al. 2010). Other observers also argue that there is not much if anything wrong with the content. Among them is even Femke Halsema. In 2010, as the leader of the small progressive-green party GroenLinks, she called the quality of Dutch journalism, “in general, high” (Halsema 2010). Huub Wijfjes too seems to accept as a fact that Dutch journalism is of good quality, although again recent developments might threaten this traditionally high standard. In his authoritative work on Dutch journalism (2004), he mentioned fundamental critiques of Dutch journalism on several occasions, but typically countered by saying that of course they were much exaggerated. In the book, which runs over 500 pages, he cited hardly any (critical) studies done on Dutch journalism. Similarly, the 2003 report *Medialogica* opined that the Dutch media still diligently perform their function of “watchdog of democracy” (RMO 2003: 37). In their mostly excellent book, journalists Warna Oosterbaan and Hans Wansink (2008: 26) made one major mistake. They assumed without question that in the last decades the Dutch quality press has been doing its job well, certainly until very recently. They (2008: 24) dubbed the last

twenty-five years or so of the twentieth century the “golden age of newspaper journalism,” analogous to Daniel Hallin’s (1994: 170-80) notion of the period of high modernism in American journalism.

In an overview of the field of Dutch journalism studies, Brants and Vasterman (2010: 213) asserted that hardly any studies have examined “economic developments, the influence of commercialism and the public relations industry on journalism” or have mapped the changing constellations of media ownership over time. In other words, a coherent political-economic perspective of journalism is absent in the literature. Some studies do mention “competition and commercialization as an independent variable to explain specific content, but actual research into the causality between developments in the media market and content has until now been scarce. The existence of market-driven journalism in the Netherlands remains therefore for the time being an assumption.”

If indeed only an assumption, it’s a very plausible one. At issue here is what constitutes “proof” of market-driven journalism. When economic hard times force the newspaper industry to lay off hundreds of journalists, then the common sense assumption is that content will suffer as a result. Moreover, this dissertation asserts that there is already ample but scattered empirical proof for this assumption, and aims to provide fresh evidence for the connection between the political economy of journalism and its content by showing that the pro-elite biases that one would expect as a result from private ownership of an advertising dependent media system are indeed present in the coverage of foreign affairs and macro-economic issues. It is quite possible that from a strict social-scientific perspective, noting that the content reflects the biases one would expect from a private, advertising dependent media system, does not constitute sufficient “proof” that the latter causes the former. In that case, the question that Brants and Vasterman would have to

address is, “What does constitute sufficient proof of the existence of market-driven journalism?” Also worthy of noting is that in the past, they themselves have stressed the detrimental effects of journalism’s dependence on market forces (chapter 3).

Huub Evers assumed in 2008 that “until recently” the mainstream media performed their job of informing citizens well. He went on to question whether in the digital age journalists are still necessary, as citizens could now gather their own news. Evers noted that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Dutch media have been heavily criticized, perhaps more than at any other time, by some for having a leftwing slant. He neglected to mention the possibility that the media have a right-wing, pro-corporate bias, although this is the bias that one might expect from a privately owned, advertising dependent media system that depends largely on official sources (Evers 2008: 35). Piet Bakker too (2008: 21) assumes that there is not much wrong with the quality of the “quality press.” He even asserted that were *NRC Handelsblad* to become an even better paper, this would not result in more readers because “the quality is ‘too good’ for many non-readers.” Instead of improving content, Bakker suggested that journalists “adapt” and become more commercially oriented. Looking to the future, Bakker (2008: 27-8) predicted that journalistic quality will drop and that even less investigative journalism will be done.

According to a number of media scholars, considerations of “competition and marketing strategies” had already a decade ago become “determining mechanisms” in the media, including the public broadcaster. The main developments in the Dutch media landscape since the sixties they characterized as “de-pillarization, commercialization and professionalization” (RMO 2003: 95). Yet these scholars asserted that the effects of these developments on the quality of news content have not been bad in every respect. In their opinion, the contemporary Dutch news consumer gets more information than ever before about the contents of politics and about the

motivations of politicians and parties. Moreover, this information is more accessible than ever before, because it is presented in a form which makes it easy for the news consumer to relate the information to his own life (RMO 2003: 96). Thus, although the commercial imperatives driving the Dutch media are widely acknowledged, many observers resist the conclusion that this development has had consistently strong negative effects on news content. Yet they provide no evidence for their position that the quality of news content on the whole is (or ever was) of a level that can sustain a vibrant democracy.

Many observers highlight recent threats (e.g. the internet, but also heightened commercial pressures) to the media system and thus to the quality of the news flow, often out of a sincere concern for the quality of the news and democracy as they define it (chapter 4). They implicitly or explicitly assume that the situation as it existed before, say in the seventies, eighties or even nineties needs to be preserved. Although some features of those decades are indeed preferable over the current situation, these observers do not seem to realize that they are in fact advocating for the continuation of a severely flawed journalism generated by a mostly commercial media system. They assume that the quality of journalism in those decades was good, but they provide no evidence that proves this assertion. Instead of trying to preserve a far from perfect, indeed an in effect antidemocratic media system (chapter 4), they should see this period of crisis as an opportunity to finally devise a well-functioning media system.

Research that aims to compare the version of events in the commercial media to a more credible, alternative version, the kind of criticism that for instance Chomsky and Herman specialize in, hardly gets done in the Netherlands. In fact, I know of no example, except for an MA-thesis (Rietman 1988, see chapter 5). Some scholars even seem to despair of such a project on epistemological grounds. For instance, on the grounds that representations of reality cannot be



classified as more or less accurate, Broersma disparaged media critics because they fault journalism for not portraying the world accurately. There are only different representations of reality, apparently all equally valuable (or useless). According to Broersma, journalism's

*... supposed ability to mirror reality by verifying true facts remains the basic assumption underlying press critique [but in order] to go beyond the unbearable limitations of journalism and understand how it works, we should not approach journalism as a descriptive discourse but on the contrary as a performative discourse designed to persuade readers that what it describes is real. By successfully doing so, journalism transforms an interpretation into truth – into a reality the public can act upon. (Broersma 2010: 21)*

In his account, journalistic styles are the most substantive feature of journalism, and journalism is best explained by studying them. This kind of relativism renders media criticism moot. The irony of a professor in journalism studies openly rejecting the central premise underlying and justifying journalism and democracy – namely that reality can be represented in an accurate enough way so as to provide a viable roadmap upon which informed (policy) decisions can be based – is acute. Contrary to his claim, one does not need to believe that journalism can provide “purely objective fingerprint copies of reality.” This journalism obviously cannot do (nor can social science). All one needs to believe (and lived experience bears this out) is that there are more and less accurate portrayals of reality, that some are accurate enough to serve as a viable basis for making decisions, and that particular representations of reality benefit certain groups in society and disadvantage others (Broersma 2010: 24).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Lichtenberg (1996) for an illuminating defense of the concept of objectivity, if not journalistic objectivity.

In a prominent textbook, Bakker and Scholten (2009: 322) summarized the recent criticisms leveled against Dutch journalism as follows: (1) journalists, mostly those working for gossip publications, invade (famous) people's privacy in their quest for sensational stories, (2) the reporting is "one-sided, unreliable, incorrect and/or incomplete," in short, not objective. A salient perspective is lacking here: the possibility that the biases in Dutch news by and large are not random, but that they structurally favor economic and political elites. Bakker and Scholten mentioned the devastating report on the media's performance regarding events in Srebrenica in 1995, when a Dutch UN-contingent failed to protect the locals from Serb troops, with the infamous massacre as result. The picture arising from the report was one of the media providing "too much emotion, too few facts, too many opinions, too little analysis." Crucially, Bakker and Scholten did not note that the bias in the reporting on Srebrenica reflected the version of reality that dominant political circles were propounding and thus their interests and not those of the public (Bakker and Scholten 2009: 324). A solid case can be made that this is quite generally true of the coverage of foreign affairs in the Dutch media (chapters 5 and 7).

A recent overview of the debate on the Dutch media from 1987 to 2007 found that criticisms by politicians have been dominant, although in the nineties elements of a political-economic approach perspective were present in the debates:

*the media debate in the Netherlands has roughly developed in two phases. The first, in the 1990s, was marked by issues that affected the media's structure. Four large issues dominated the debate: media concentration, the legitimation of public service broadcasting, decreasing circulation figures and the advent of online technologies. In the second phase, from 2000 onwards, the debate shifted to media performance issues, where the role of the media was*

*increasingly questioned. Nevertheless, the structural issues did not fade away, but became less paramount in the discussion. The discontent over media performance amounted to four issues: biased media coverage, increasing infotainment and sensationalist aspects in news coverage, the media having too much power and lastly, the media failing to perceive and address the public's concerns. While the first three criticisms have been voiced mainly by politicians, the last is increasingly heard from members of the public. (De Haan 2011: 191)*

These politicians did not call for constructive initiatives like more public funding in order to save Dutch journalism. On the contrary, the trend has been towards steep funding reductions of public broadcasting and towards an even more rigid hands-off approach towards the press. State involvement went out of fashion; not governance but self-governance has increased (De Haan 2011: 189).

*... governance in its fullest sense of a shared responsibility of all the involved actors (political institutions, umbrella media organisations, media and the public) is still not valid. Media organisations prefer to arrange it themselves without involvement or collaboration of other actors — so, we might better speak of self-governance. (De Haan 2011: 208)*

Many Dutch politicians publicly express opinions along the lines that the media “do little good for democracy.” Such criticisms, for instance by minister Piet Hein Donner (Brants et al. 2010: 25-6) function as attempts at influencing the media to more uncritically reflect politicians' narratives. In short, they amount to a substantial campaign of flak, taking advantage of the relatively easy media access that politicians enjoy.

Brants and Voltmer (2011: 3, 8) have argued that politics is in the process of involuntarily ceding control over the public to the media. In their words, “new journalistic roles and the new trend of adversarial and interpretative journalism are posing a fundamental threat to politicians’ traditional role as shapers of political news and leaders of political opinion.” As an assertion of a trend that is only just emerging, the statement cannot be proven or disproven. Nonetheless, it is not likely that Brants and Voltmer are correct. While gesturing towards Lance Bennett as an example of a scholar holding a different opinion from them, they ignored research done in the political-economic or critical tradition. They overestimated the importance of what are more likely quite superficial changes in journalistic mannerisms (e.g. adopting an “adversarial” tone in an interview with a politician or ending a news item on an ironic note) than a fundamental shift in the power relations between journalists and politicians. Brants and Voltmer focused on form at the expense of content. They did not step outside of the relationship journalist-politician in order to study the possible fallacious assumptions or factual errors which both journalist and politician are victim of. They focused on what is being said in the mainstream debates, but ignored what is being ignored.

More generally speaking, it is typical of Dutch scholarship to not transcend the relationship between mainstream politics and journalism. The scholarship is caught in the dichotomy posed by mainstream politician versus mainstream journalist, ignoring alternative narratives. Therefore it can underestimate the extent to which they are alike. Conversely, the strength of much work in the political-economic or critical tradition, especially as done by Herman and Chomsky, is that it provides well-documented alternative versions of news events that differ from the versions propagated in mainstream politics and (therefore) in mainstream journalism, thereby showing their common errors. Dutch scholarship fails to apply such a

yardstick, and as a result can fail to realize the extent to which political definitions influence mainstream reporting.

Studies into journalistic content, especially regarding foreign affairs coverage, disprove the existence of the shift that Brants and Voltmer purport to document. As noted, the consensus among experts in foreign affairs coverage is that the Western media, to a greater or lesser extent, privilege elite discourse (chapter 7), that the coverage is primarily “elite-driven,” (Robinson et al. 2010), a conclusion which is borne out for the Netherlands too (chapters 7 and 8). The Iraq-studies in this dissertation certainly provide no reason to assume that Dutch journalism has succeeded in stepping outside of the debate as held in elite circles. Dutch journalism has not been able to challenge the fundamental premises of that debate, for instance the assumption of benign intent on the part of the US, British and Dutch governments. More generally, it makes sense to assume that journalism is in the process of becoming not more but less independent from the government, for instance as its public relations operations have professionalized, whereas newspapers have had to contend with major cut-backs in staff.

Brants and Voltmer’s study (2011) purports to document this shift in power relations between media and politics. They concluded that “the political interview has become a place of tough interrogation, a minefield that for the politician bears considerable risks – often with severe consequences.” Yet they also concluded that “...in spite of the pressure exerted by increasingly professional and adversarial journalists, politicians manage quite successfully to maintain control over the content and interaction in political interviews” and that, “The traditionally consensus-oriented political culture in the Netherlands seems still to be at work and has restrained the emergence of journalistic adversarialism.” Finally, they recounted how, according to a prominent journalist, it is common practice for the Dutch prime-minister to

exclude topics from discussion before he consents to an interview (Brants and Voltmer 2011: 142-3). It seems that the “primacy of politics” is still alive and well, even in this “postmodern democracy.”

### **Ignoring or downplaying structural explanations**

An important feature of the debate on the Dutch media is the outright dismissal, downplaying or ignoring of structural explanations for why the media act the way they do. An example is journalist Henk Blanken’s book (2009) on Dutch journalism in the digital age. It is perhaps the most respected treatise on the topic in the Netherlands. For instance, it has been required reading for MA-students in journalism and new media at Leiden University. According to Blanken (2009: 21), the British and American media are in a far direr situation than the Dutch media, for they are often in the hands of media barons like Rupert Murdoch, who only care about making as much money as possible.

Blanken conceded that commercialism has become and is becoming a more and more important driving factor of the media’s behavior, also in the Netherlands. But Blanken blamed the public for the output of the commercial media. He seemed to argue that the public and not commercialism is the main culprit: “The masses want to know everything about the elite, whether that is the royal family, a member of parliament or a soap opera starlet. Despite that commercial pressure, the press far more often than not sticks to its own rules” (Blanken 2009: 47). In his opinion, Dutch journalists regulate themselves successful. They get no help from the public. On the internet, citizens freely speak their mind, in disregard of for instance the Code of Bordeaux, the ethical guidelines drawn up by the International Federation of Journalists. All the

silly and weird things that citizens apparently say on the internet result in “damage” to the reputation of freedom of speech (Blanken 2009: 53).

Therefore, journalism needs to protect itself from the public – apparently as opposed to from the corporations that own the media and the political sources and their PR-operations that journalism depends on. Because in these digital times, the media are “regulated” not by the government or corporations but by the readers, who do this “with their feet” (Blanken 2009: 179). The trust in the media has declined since the sixties, noted Blanken, and especially after the introduction of commercial television. Journalism has been criticized because it “popularized” in order to get higher ratings. In order to regain the trust of the people, journalists should be more transparent and explain themselves better to the public, for instance through codes of conduct. These codes should not be mandated from above, but should arise “bottom-up” from society. The responsibility of media content does not rest anymore with the media organization, but with the individual journalist, whether a professional or a blogger (Blanken 2009: 178-81). This near total disregard for the structure in which journalists work, which shapes their output to a very considerable extent to say the least, makes Blanken’s “solution” inadequate.

Blanken focused too much on new technologies and too little on the fact that good journalism requires money and institutional support and also too little on the influence of the wider political economy on journalism (McChesney and Nichols 2010; but see Blanken 2010). He did write that in the digital age, the task of journalists is still to find the truth and convey it and that this requires among other things craftsmanship, reliable sources and “significant amounts of money” (Blanken 2009: 14). Yet his main message to journalists and other individuals was: the media are changing, just accept it. He ignored the issue of the quality of content before and after the arrival of digital technology. His focus on the individual and on

technology eclipses the relevance of the commercial constraints in which journalists do their work and of the wider political economy in which the media industry is embedded. In contrast, Hamelink (2004: 117) did recognize this basic point: “Much human behavior is determined by the institutions within which people function.”

Blaming the public for the proliferation of bad news implicitly adopts a core assumption that underpins the commercial media system, namely that journalists should measure how well they are doing their job by ratings or the numbers of readers they produce for their bosses and advertisers. In fact, the partly true observation that the public often wants or at least watches and reads worthless fare from the perspective of engaged citizenship is irrelevant. Journalists are not supposed to give people what they want, they are supposed to provide the information that citizens need to understand how the world works. Only for journalists working within a commercial media system does it make sense to say that they are in the business of giving people what they want. Taking that position means that those journalists accept that they primarily exist to produce as high a ratings or as many readers as possible – which is true, but not desirable and not conducive to the production of high-quality journalism. Those journalists denounce their role in a democracy and the public sphere; they implicitly denounce the public justification for their profession, although they claim to uphold it.

Ratings and circulation are no reliable measures of the quality of journalism. As long as journalists have to satisfy the demands of their private owners, whose aim it is to make a profit, their claims to independence are hollow. Good journalism will still get done. In the editorial rooms of quality papers investigative journalism and good commentary gets done. Notions of professionalism and objectivity (“find the facts”) create pockets of resistance against the terror of the market place. The problem is that they are just that, mere pockets of resistance. These



exceptions should blind no one to the fact that the system within which journalists work is not conducive to consistently critical, independent journalism. Much of the quality journalism that gets done in the mainstream media comes about despite of the system, not as a result of it. From the perspective of democratic values, pockets of resistance are insufficient.

Moreover, the observation that journalists are only giving the public what it wants ignores the crucial issue that the steady supply of bad news does not simply satisfy a demand that has sprung up without the media's complicity. The media's supply also creates and stimulates demand. This applies especially to young children, who cannot be blamed for buying into the myths and hypes about celebrities and so on that the media present them. The media bear a significant amount of responsibility for the "low taste" and irrelevant interests of parts of the public (Herbert Schiller 1989). People choose from the menu provided to them by the media since they were very young. To some extent, people can be forgiven that they do not realize that other food-stuff exists. The media is in no way solely responsible for the public's tastes, but it is responsible for the menu that it presents the public, which consists mostly of unhealthy dishes, with a few exceptions. Only after the media for at least a generation has offered a mostly healthy menu, would they have a right to complain that people continue to refuse to eat their vegetables (Meehan 2005).

In fact, among the public there appears to exist considerable awareness that the media do not reflect or promote its interest, but the interests of elites. In a review of the public debate on media in the Netherlands in the period 1987 to 2007, Yael De Haan and Jo Bardoel (2011: 237) concluded that the public's main criticism was in fact that the media did not "recognize and address the public's concerns." Ironically, they also found the public's voice to be marginal in the debate on the media, at least the debate in the press and a trade journal.

Even the small magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer*, situated on the far-left side of the media spectrum, does not give full play to the detrimental influence of the structure of the media industry on journalism. The magazine's editor-in-chief Xandra Schutte (2011) did assert that the crisis in journalism is also a crisis in content, which in part is caused by the demand to make a profit, a demand that has come to more and more dominate the Dutch media landscape. Yet the crisis in journalism she saw as "more fundamental and existential" than as caused by structural factors such as ownership. She seemed to blame the public or human nature as accounting for much of the bad news; people apparently have a natural and insatiable desire for a constant stream of news. She seemed to regard this apparent desire for "news" in its current incarnation not as something created and taught by the market, at least to a very considerable extent, but mostly as an intrinsic desire of human beings. According to her, journalists should become more original in their news selection and reflect more among themselves on what "news" really is. She thus argued that a solution can be found without changing the structures in which journalists work. Schutte's essay illustrates how far the left side of the debate has moved to the right since the seventies (chapter 3).

No Dutch scholars are calling for the establishment of a non-commercial media system. But some argue for more government regulation. Bart Brouwers, former managing-editor of the free newspaper *Spits!* has said that as a result of the crisis in the newspaper industry, journalism is in crisis too. Yet he professed to believe that digital technologies will democratize journalism, if only it can adapt itself to the new circumstances. In fact, according to him, journalists should heed the commercial imperatives of the organizations they work in more (Ummelen 2009: 109-116). Conversely, in an article on the threat to journalism and democracy posed by a profit-seeking media, Brouwers opined that there is something to say for the government stepping in,

and through direct and indirect subsidies have funds flow to editorial rooms, in a way which does not compromise editorial independence (Brouwers 2008; also Blanken 2010). How Brouwers squares his call for far-reaching government support with his professed faith in the democratizing tendencies of digital media, which would make such support unnecessary, is unclear. Another exception is Jan Marijnissen, leader of the Socialist Party, who in 2009 called for state support for the press, as the press has become the “plaything of commercial interests” (Marijnissen 2009). Indeed, of all available options, the line of reasoning which emphasizes that some sort of government action is needed seems the most fruitful in trying to figure out how to solve the crisis of Dutch journalism.

One explanation for why many observers overestimate the quality of Dutch journalism might be the positive contrast it provided during the Cold War to the communist, state-controlled media systems in Eastern-Europe and the Soviet Union. Compared to a blatantly unfree media system geared solely towards advancing the interests not of the state as a whole but of a small party-elite, the Western systems with their guaranteed freedom of speech and in some respects real diversity of opinion, must have appeared to many as “as good as it gets.” It remains a fact though that a commercial system is only free in the sense that it is free from overt state interference, but it is not free from interference by corporate interests. “Interference” might not be the right word, for it suggests that the influence is direct. What usually happens is that journalists in commercial settings internalize the corporate values that are inherent in the structure of the organization they work for. This trick that they play on their own mind allows them to think that they act freely. Nevertheless, the frequency of overt and crude interventions from senior editors and management against stories that go against the grain or are too critical, should not be underestimated as a disciplining mechanism, at least in the US (Kennis 2011).

## **Inadequate solutions**

Because many observers downplay the depth and breadth of the crisis in journalism or misunderstand its nature, it is no wonder that the proposed solutions often do not go far enough or are not really solutions at all. Take the prominent journalist Jan Blokker. He is of the opinion that instead of speaking of a newspaper crisis we should speak of a “crisis of journalists” (Blokker 2010: 7). Blokker seems to believe that the crisis can be solved by journalists themselves changing their behavior, without changing the structure they work in. If only they lose their timidity and become proud professionals, all will be well. Blokker identified a few moments in history at which Dutch journalists had the opportunity to “start their own, independent life” but failed to do so (Blokker 2010: 8). He never quite explained why Dutch journalists refused and have continued to refuse to do good journalism. For some reason Dutch journalists are naturally passive creatures and that’s just the way it is. His emphasis on the personal psychology of ‘the’ Dutch journalist blinds him to the structural restraints within which journalists work, although he does give some credit to the view that emphasizes the detrimental effects of commercialism on Dutch journalism.

A few other examples of observers who have proposed inadequate, that is non-structural, solutions to end the crisis in journalism are Luyendijk (2006), Jensma (Jensma and Laroes 2003) and Oosterbaan and Wansink (2008). Prenger et al. (2011: 111, 124-5) proposed fifteen ways to make journalists less dependent on the PR-industry. Only one of these concerned a structural solution: The authors argued for “limiting” the cut-backs on news rooms. Yet they also asserted that the bad economic circumstances cannot be used as an excuse to neglect professional standards. Many of the proposed reforms amount to suggestions for better self-regulation among

journalists and/or more transparency toward the public. Some observers, for instance the authors of the report *De volgende editie* (RMO: 2003), have called for some form of government-subsidies to alleviate the crisis in the press, but this proposal is seen as controversial. As part of a government initiative, a small number of young journalists paid by the state have started to work at newspapers (d'Haenens and Kik 2011: 204). A few papers refused to participate because they feared loss of journalistic independence. José van Dijck (2010: 9) has argued that government subsidies are a bad idea, as the media should avoid even the appearance of dependence on the state.

### **Luyendijk, professionalism and objectivity**

The book that this last decade has done more than any other to put the media's performance on the media's agenda has been the insider account and bestseller *Het zijn net mensen* (2006; see Luyendijk 2010b for a summary in English), by former Middle-Eastern correspondent Joris Luyendijk. The book was chosen as one of forty texts that belong to the canon of Dutch journalism (Van Liempt 2010). Luyendijk provided an accessible and sophisticated critique of journalistic objectivity and concluded that the mandates of objectivity often prevent journalists from providing an as accurate as possible account of the events they cover, especially in dictatorships in the Middle-East. But his book had a few severe limitations. For instance, Luyendijk often wrote pessimistically about the possibility that an accurate enough picture of the world (that is, a representation of the world that could serve as the basis for meaningful social or political action) can be conveyed through language. The consequence of this emphasis was that he (whether he intended this or not) seemed to say that there was not a whole lot that could be done to improve journalism. If language is a severely flawed way to

convey reality, then good journalism might be almost impossible. Luyendijk did off-handedly point to the commercial nature of the media as a factor in explaining its behavior, but he failed to give this factor its due weight and seemed to apportion a lot of blame to the public for the bad news fare it received from the media. Moreover, Luyendijk failed to draw out the historical connection between the ideology of objectivity and a commercial press system. He understood the drawbacks of journalistic objectivity as a method for truth-finding, but he seemed unaware of the extent to which objectivity and professionalism serve the ideological interests of media owners and elites in general.

Many scholars have made these connections. McChesney for instance identified three built-in biases that characterize the news produced by professional journalists. The first bias is its dependence on official sources. The effect is that political and business elites set the media agenda. Because these sources cannot be antagonized, the media often act as mere stenographers of the powerful, not custodians of the public interest. Secondly, journalists avoid taking a stand on issues. They do not put the events of the day in a context which gives them meaning, for this would be interpreted as taking sides, as unprofessional behavior. Instead of serving democracy, the media thus contribute to the depoliticization of society, which is in the interest of those who favor the status quo, including the media owners.

The third bias might be the most important one. According to McChesney, "...far from being politically neutral, [professional] journalism smuggles in values conducive to the commercial aims of owners and advertisers and to the political aims of big business." Crime and gossip stories abound, because they "are inexpensive to cover and rarely antagonize people in power." Indeed, the trend towards more gossip news has been observed for the Dutch media too. Irene Diependaal (2002: 183) has chronicled how the Dutch media, including quality dailies,

have focused more and more on gossipy news about the royal family, at least in part as a result of commercial pressures. In professional journalism, stories criticizing big business are very rare. When government operations are criticized, stories tend to focus on government initiatives that benefit the less privileged over the wealthy. Story selection by professional journalists, whether they realize this or not, is less guided by the concerns of the majority of the population and more by avoiding criticism of the status quo (McChesney 2004: 68-73; also Mindich 1998; Bagdikian 2004; Gans 2003; Cunningham 2003; Bennett et al. 2007; Tuchman 2008; Handley 2012).

### **Flat Earth News in the Netherlands too?**

The book *Flat Earth News* (2009) by Nick Davies, the 2008 European journalist of the year, sparked a quite lively discussion in the Netherlands. It was selected as one of the forty essential media texts for Dutch journalists and journalists-to-be (Van Liempt 2010). *Flat Earth News* is a well-documented, critically acclaimed and devastating critique of the British quality media, with grave implications for the Dutch situation. The similarities between the situation in Great Britain and other Western countries made at least Davies conclude that “almost all journalists across the whole developed world now work within a kind of professional cage which distorts their work and crushes their spirit” (Davies 2009: 3). Davies was perceptive in many ways, not in the least in his recognition that the requirements of “professionalism” and “objectivity” often function as restrictions on journalists who should have one main goal: to find out what the truth is and report it. With some exceptions on the margins, the media do not bother to do this anymore, as they are too busy reporting what others claim to be the truth. These “others” Davies identified as predominantly PR-agencies, news agencies and institutional (governmental) sources.

The main reason why journalists are so vulnerable to these imperfect and often self-interested sources, according to Davies, is that the media exist first and foremost to make money: “It is these forces of commercialism which now provide the greatest obstacle to truth-telling journalism” (Davies 2009: 16). Davies went as far as to suggest that the picture of the world supplied by the British media is often so wildly off the mark that it has caused British society to suffer from a “group psychosis” (Davies 2009: 45).

Even the respected BBC has to obey the same cost-cutting and output-maximizing logic as the commercial media outlets (Davies 2009: 67). It might be that the BBC is even less critical towards the government than the commercial broadcasters. This certainly was the case during the run-up to the war in Iraq, one of the biggest news stories of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Justin Lewis found that, despite accusations by the government that the public broadcaster was undermining the war-effort, the BBC’s coverage depended to a far greater extent on government sources than ITN’s, Channel 4’s and Sky’s. The BBC gave less attention to Iraqi and independent sources than the commercial channels. All in all, the BBC was clearly too sympathetic to the government, not too critical (Davies 2009: 35; Lewis 2003). The BBC’s coverage has also been found to be biased in favor of Israel and against the Palestinians (Davies 2009: 125), just to pick one topic, and more generally to serve as “an extension and subtle protector of established authority” (Pilger 1995; also Glasgow Media Group 1977, 1980, 1982, 1985; Eldridge 2000; Doherty 2005). As a former BBC-executive frankly stated, “News is a way of making money, just as selling bread is a way of making money. No one believes that news and journalism are simply a service to democracy” (Davies 2009: 135).

Davies concluded that the “heart of modern journalism [is] the rapid repackaging of largely unchecked second-hand material, much of it designed to service the political or



commercial interests of those who provide it” (Davies 2009: 60). The news exhibits “a structural bias towards the political and moral beliefs of the most powerful groups in society.” Indeed, “there is no need for a totalitarian regime when the censorship of commerce runs its blue pencil through every story” (Davies 2009: 152). Given the dire picture painted by Davies, it is understandable that he professed to be pessimistic about possibilities for change, “I am afraid that I think that the truth is that, in trying to expose the weakness of the media, I am taking a snapshot of a cancer. Maybe it helps a little to be able to see the illness. At least in that way we know in theory what the cure might be. But I fear the illness is terminal” (Davies 2009: 397). Humans inevitably die, but society can in principle always be reformed. Consistent quality journalism can only be brought about by a structural change in the media system, that is, by getting rid of the commercial underpinnings of the current system.

There are good reasons to suspect that, as Davies himself argued, his analysis will by and large also hold up for the media in other Western countries, including the Netherlands. There are also some indications that the Dutch media will not be quite as bad as the British media (chapter 5). It might be that in important respects a focus on the differences between the two societies is a red herring. Not infrequently in the Dutch debate the observation will be made that at least Dutch journalism is not as bad as in for instance the United States or Great Britain. This could very well be true, although it is hard to prove. More importantly, if the Dutch news is better than its Anglo-American counterparts, then this can still mean that the Dutch news is severely flawed. Cross-national comparisons can deflect attention away from this possibility.

A study replicating for the Netherlands research done for Davies’ book aimed to gauge the dominance of press agencies and the public relations industry over independent journalistic research. It showed that the Dutch papers did somewhat better than the British papers. The

results according to the researchers were “less dramatic” than those found in Britain, but were nonetheless worrisome. The “pr-industry” was found to form a “realistic threat” to journalistic independence (Ummelen 2009: 43). Some might object here that journalism never was independent from the important institutions in society and that therefore to assume the possibility of independence might amount to a mythical belief. They would be right, or at least have raised a fair point. Complete independence is by definition impossible, as journalism always functions within, and is therefore influenced by, the society it reports on. Nevertheless, the argument here is that a journalism that is not dependent anymore on corporate money to survive, will have come a lot closer to the imagined ideal of true independence – and will therefore perform its function in a democracy a lot better.

Marcel Broersma, who disputed some of the results, implications and research design of the studies cited in Davies’ book and the follow-up study in the Netherlands, nevertheless himself stated that “journalism is in crisis” (Ummelen 2009: 23). In the Netherlands too, conceded Broersma, the “modern robber knights of capitalism,” through their emphasis on the bottom line, have had “disastrous” effects on journalism. His comments bring to mind the president of the Dutch Association of Journalists (NVJ), Huub Elzerman, who in 2010 denounced the private equity firms that several years before had brought ruin to prominent Dutch newspaper publisher PCM. Elzerman referred to those firms as “robber knights,” and asserted that they should not just care about the bottom line in disregard of everything else (Elzerman 2010; also Ramaer 2010b).

Yet Broersma insisted on putting much of the blame on journalists themselves, not just on the larger commercial structure they work in, and asserted that focusing too much on the structure can have the effect of impeding the search for solutions. These solutions, according to

him, can only be found by apportioning a significant extent of the blame to journalists as individuals and the profession of journalism and its rules (Ummelen 2009: 28). Thus, his is more a sociology of news approach than a political-economic one. This approach is valuable, but because of the narrow perspective it takes (namely focused on media organizations and not on for instance the nature of capitalism) it tends to underestimate the extent to which professional rules and especially the ideology of objectivity are often connected, although in complicated ways, to the rise of commercial media systems (Dan Schiller 1983).

As McChesney and Scott (2004: 14-5) argued regarding the United States, professionalism arose in the first decades of the twentieth century as a compromise between newspaper owners on the one hand and journalists and the public on the other. The owners needed to mend the loss of public credibility of their papers in the newly concentrated media markets, and their employees craved more independence. In the Netherlands, depillarization went hand-in-hand with the rise in importance of objectivity and professionalism as the guiding principles of Dutch journalists. Indeed, they served a valuable purpose in liberating the journalist from subservience to the pillars. This liberating effect should not obscure that they also had detrimental effects. Professionalism and objectivity have valuable features, like an emphasis on factual accuracy and investigative reporting, but as noted they also tend to produce news that relies heavily on official sources and reinforces the status quo.

To briefly return to Broersma's point, the cultures of professionalism and objectivity and the resulting relative autonomy of journalism are indeed relevant when studying the media, but to a significant extent they can be explained by the commercial context in which they arose. The commercialization of the Dutch media has become so pervasive that it would be hard to overestimate its influence. Nevertheless, it is true that professionalism and objectivity are

relatively autonomous factors which in and of themselves help partly explain the media's behavior. Broersma's analysis highlights these factors, whereas this dissertation highlights the commercial underpinnings of the media system.

In a study inspired by Davies's book, Ellen Hijmans et al. (2011) found that more than a third of the domestic news in the two most respected Dutch newspapers, *de Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad*, derived completely or partly from press or PR-agencies or other media outlets. The good news was that PR-material appeared hardly present in the Dutch papers. But it makes sense to assume that in reality perhaps close to or more than half of domestic news in these newspapers derives partly or in whole not from the papers themselves. Of 18 percent of articles in *de Volkskrant* and 5 percent in *NRC Handelsblad* it was unclear where they originated. It should also be emphasized that these are the best papers in the Netherlands. More importantly, although the ratio was lower than the one found by Davies for the British quality press (70 percent not-original news), it should be realized that (foreign) press agencies and other sources usually set the framework for the subsequent "original" (often additional) reporting. The reporting done by the papers themselves cannot differ fundamentally, for instance in an ideological sense, from the material provided by press agencies and so on. This would result in too much cognitive dissidence; at the least this kind of reporting would require much extra work, because the required level of evidence and documentation would be much higher than for a conventional journalistic product.

In another study also inspired by Davies's book, Hijmans et al. (2009) found that in four Dutch newspapers, three national ones including *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant*, and a regional paper, 32 to 52 percent of all articles on domestic news were partly or completely based on material provided by third parties, e.g. through press releases or press agencies. The lower

percentage was derived at by only looking at the article itself; the higher percentage by checking how the article came to be written. Moreover, about 40 percent of the articles were not accredited to an author or press agency. The researchers therefore credibly spoke of the tip of an iceberg. About ten percent of the articles were credited to a press agency (Hijmans et al. 2009: 1-2, 5). As in the study mentioned above, the researchers found hardly any traces of PR-material in the studied articles. Yet the researchers also noted that truth-finding was not a significant part of journalists' daily work and that the newspapers did not set the news agenda but reacted to "the news" as defined by press agencies and respected sources (Hijmans et al. 2009: 14; also Diekerhof in Ummelen 2009).

Exceptionally, Hijmans et al. (2009, 2011) explicitly referred to the political-economic research tradition of communications studies, in this case to Oscar Gandy's notion of "information subsidy," as a way of explaining why media often accept material from PR-agencies. It is a cost-efficient *modus operandi*, but of course not a desirable one, when reasoned from a concern with a vibrant media system. When papers accept PR-material, their "lust for profit-maximizing compromises the independence of the press" (Hijmans et al. 2011: 79).

It takes verbal acrobatics to avoid engaging with the likely possibility that the news in the Netherlands is "flat" too. Henk Blanken asserted that 'if' the deadly disease that the British quality newspapers suffer from will infect the Netherlands too, then the press would lose its credibility. Thus Blanken deferred addressing the issue of the quality of the Dutch media to some undefined moment in the future, when and if the disease crosses the North Sea. That in all likelihood the infection has already occurred he chose to ignore, although he himself acknowledged that also in the Netherlands the PR-sector is bigger than the journalism sector. He might have added that the Dutch media are, again like in Britain, dependent on the same press

agencies that Davies criticized so heavily, AP and Reuters, and he might have mentioned that the ANP too, like those agencies, mostly does not try to figure out the truth but reports what people in power say, often without checking the veracity of those statements (Blanken 2009: 200-202).

### **Discussing the future of Dutch journalism**

A discussion in 2010 on the website [denieuwereporter.nl](http://denieuwereporter.nl), the online forum for Dutch journalism scholars, shed light on the characteristics and limits of the debate on the Dutch media. The discussion was on the future of journalism and was prompted by a speech that Jo Bardoel gave when accepting a professorship at the University of Nijmegen. He argued that journalism has a PR-problem. He did not mean to say that journalism was threatened by the PR-industry, but that journalism should do better PR for itself, in order to restore its battered image in the eyes of the public. The problem is not that journalism doesn't perform its tasks, but that it does a bad job of "selling" itself. Also, it should professionalize even further and journalists' behavior should be more stringently "ethical." Journalists need to be more ethical according to Bardoel because the commercial logic is infiltrating journalism more and more. In order to brand itself, good journalistic productions should start carrying a "label" to indicate their quality and maker. Who would assign this label Bardoel did not say, but in a subsequent comment he clarified that it certainly should not come from the government. Bardoel's speech is another example of the weakness of proposed solutions to the crisis in journalism. His plea for higher ethical standards to combat increasing commercialism is inadequate. A structural problem requires a structural solution.

Hardly ever is it proposed that the solution to the crisis in journalism can be found in taking away the root problem: its commercial nature. This becomes even stranger when one

recalls that many observers are aware of the detrimental effects of commercialism on journalism, like Bardoel himself. According to him, the commercial media system that initially replaced the pillarized one reflected “the whole spectrum of opinions and tastes.” This situation is now threatened by the hyper-competitive commercial media environment which gives expression mainly to extreme opinions, neglecting the reasonable middle (Bardoel 2010). Yet many extreme opinions are excluded from the public sphere by the Dutch media monopoly. For instance, there are no publications or radio or television programs in the Netherlands which are consistently critical of capitalism, although anti-capitalist attitudes are strong all over the world. A BBC poll in 2009 found that there is widespread dissatisfaction with capitalism. Only in two of the 27 countries studied (the Netherlands was not included) did more than one in five surveyed claim to be satisfied with capitalism as a system. These countries were the US and Pakistan. Almost one in four said that the system is “fatally flawed.” Almost half of the French respondents said to feel this way. By far most of the respondents said that governments should do more to combat the negative aspects of capitalism (Robbins 2009; also Bergman 2011a).

The reactions to Bardoel’s speech were on the whole critical. Mark Deuze’s piece was the most insightful. He argued that journalism does not use criteria of public interest which stimulate citizen participation in the public sphere, but other criteria like “is it being said or confirmed by Someone who Has Power” or by someone who has the right educational credentials? Professional journalism, like politics, thus functions to exclude the people from the public debate. To citizens all that is left is the “role of stupid outsider” in an “audience democracy.” These days, the powers that be do not hate journalists and that says a lot about journalism, according to Deuze, who added that media scholars are often not critical enough about journalism. He accused Bardoel of not wanting to offend the media industry, which will

give his students a job. It is journalism as a profession that is the problem – that is to say, not the journalists themselves but the industry within which they operate, for the industry makes it impossible for them to do their work properly (Deuze 2010).

Deuze's contribution was exceptional in its bluntness and in the critical positions he took. But then Deuze is hard to pin down. Much of his other work hardly exudes a political-economic perspective. He has argued for instance, following Zygmunt Bauman, that we live in "liquid" times (Papacharissi 2009: 17), in which it is hard to arrive at consensus definitions of anything. Deuze has professed little faith in communal action and the state, for presumably in the twenty-first century we have entered "the second liquid phase of modernity, when all existing modern social, economical, and political institutions – the church (or mosque, temple), the family, journalism, the nation state – have become... 'zombie' institutions," with which we engage as individuals, not as part of a group (Papacharissi 2009: 23). Deuze does not seem to be particularly anxious about this zeitgeist that he identifies. The all-important question he does not address is, Where does this zeitgeist come from and who benefits? Deuze admitted that "part of what will happen will reproduce existing power relationships and inequalities for sure," but "we are also witnessing an unparalleled degree of human agency and user control in our lived experience of mediated reality" (Papacharissi 2009: 26). Elsewhere, Deuze wrote that "Society governed by media life is one where reality is, like many if not most websites, permanently under construction – but not only by unseen yet all-powerful guardians in the panoptic fortresses of governments and corporations that seek to construct a relatively cohesive and thus controllable reality, but also by all of us." Again, he appears to emphasize individual agency over structural restrictions. His definition of "media life," namely that people live "in" as opposed to "with" media, seems to imply that the study of institutions and media content are relatively



irrelevant, because “the governing principle of media life is completely mediated self-creation in the context of always-available global connectivity” (Deuze 2012: 145).

Deuze’s analyses have vacillated between optimism about the “co-creative and networked potential of our contemporary digital culture” on the one hand and on the other the “overwhelming loss of power” that journalists experience as a result of the “digital (r)evolution,” not just vis-à-vis the public, but also and more problematically vis-à-vis their employers, whose practice of hiring more and more freelancers is threatening to create a “journalism without journalists.” This might well be the “nail in the coffin of democracy” (Deuze 2008a). He has also argued that: “For all its success, citizen journalism remains dependent to a significant extent on mainstream news organizations, whose output it debates, critiques, recombines, and debunks by harnessing large and distributed communities of users” (Deuze et al. 2007: 335).

Deuze supports crucial elements of a critical perspective on the mainstream media (Hulspas 2007), but he would deny that the current situation requires far-reaching media policy. Yet there is only one institution in society which has the power and the legal right to promote the public interest in a vibrant democracy and public sphere, namely the state, as Joel Bakan (2004) has forcefully argued. The only hope in the foreseeable future lies in taking back the state from corporate interests and making it do what it is intended to do, and what many people want it to do according to the previously cited BBC-poll, namely reign in the stranglehold of corporate interests over society at large and the media in particular.

The other contributions to the discussion on the future of journalism on *De Nieuwe Reporter* were disappointing. Journalist Hans Wansink basically said that because Bardoel was not a journalist himself, he did not know what he was talking about, thereby nicely illustrating Deuze’s point that professional journalism functions to exclude outsiders, that is, everyone else.

Henk Blanken noted that journalists should deliver a better product in this new media age, in which the authority of specialists is undermined. Journalists should spend less time typing up press releases and more time doing research. A valuable sentiment, but Blanken had nothing to say about how journalists (who would like to do what Blanken proposed) can find the time to do this. As remedies for the crisis in journalism Blanken proposed: further professionalization, more transparency and PR-efforts geared not towards the profession as a whole but to promoting specific journalistic products or journalists.

Jaap Stronks, an “online-strategist,” rightly commented that Bardoel’s proposed solution for the crisis in journalism was analogous to advising a terminally ill patient to take it easy and perhaps take some extra vitamin C. Apart from that, his contribution remained rather vague. Apparently he believes that we would do well to abolish the term “journalism,” although not journalism itself. Journalist Bert Brussen argued that education of a high caliber is the “only real remedy” for creating good journalism. Journalist Hugo Arlman, after denouncing media scholars for not knowing what they are talking about, made a good point when he wrote that in the debate on the future of journalism the “citizen” is often designated the role of *deus ex machina*, arguing that in the age of new media too professional journalists will be needed to make sense of the information overload. The citizen has not enough time to do this for himself – he still has to do the laundry. Sadly the quality of journalism is low these days because of time pressures, argued Arlman. Indeed, but he did not follow this fruitful train of thought towards possible structural ways for rectifying this situation.

Bardoel, in a reaction to the reactions to his speech, accused “prophets of the new [media] platforms” like Blanken, Deuze and Brussen of naivety, as they seem to want to do away with journalism all together and have citizens dominate the public sphere. Bardoel confessed to

having shared as a young man in this ideal of “total participatory democracy” but that he had come to the realization that paid professionals are necessary to unearth facts and help to orchestrate public debate (Bardoel 2010b). It would seem though that a professional journalism and participatory democracy (of course not “total”) can go hand-in-hand. They are not by definition mutually exclusive. In fact, professional journalists might well be a necessary precondition for vibrant, participatory democracy. Participatory democracy simply means that citizens hold actual power to influence the conditions of their life: that is to say that they are co-owners of their workplace, have a vote in management decisions and that they can exert meaningful political influence.

### **The impact of digital media on journalism and democracy**

After years of much optimism, in international scholarship the position appears to win ground that digital media have not and will not by themselves save journalism, let alone invigorate democracy (Hindman 2009, Gladwell 2010; McChesney and Nichols 2010; Morozov 2011, Bellamy Foster and McChesney 2011; Pedro 2011b; Curran 2012). James Compton and Paul Benedetti (2010) argue that there exists “little empirical evidence” that citizen journalism will evolve into a viable alternative to professional reporting. In other words, if the potentials of the internet are to be realized, policy measures will be needed. For the American media, the immense influence of policy on their development has been amply documented (John 1995; Starr 2004). As James Curran (Fenton 2010: 25) argues, “While the internet is potentially a transforming technology, its impact is contingent on the wider societal context.”

How about the Netherlands? Until recently, the perspective of “digital utopianism” was dominant in the Dutch debate on the impact of digital media (Van Vree 2010: 220). Mark Deuze

and Henk Blanken's book *PopUp* provides a case in point. The authors (2007: 16) overestimated the positive influence of the internet, where, "the customer is truly king." Although they gave some due to commercialization as a detrimental factor, their proposed solutions clearly showed that the authors assigned too little weight to the structural restraints that guide journalists' behavior and for which only a structural change can produce a viable solution. The authors advised journalists to be more transparent, more flexible, to have more dialogue with the public and so on. Notably absent were solutions on the policy level. Indeed, the authors made it clear that they did not have much faith in the state. Ignoring the state neatly fits into the authors' view of the contemporary era as a "liquid modernity," in which certainty does not exist and people do not collectively fight for their interests. They advised journalists to simply accept that they might never again have a secure labor contract (Deuze and Blanken 2007: 232).

The optimistic position that digital media will produce a more vibrant journalism and invigorate democracy in the Netherlands is not borne out by the available evidence. There are no strong indications that social media or the internet have led to more political involvement among Dutch citizens. Aalberts and Kreijveld (2011) have shown that social media have not fulfilled the potential that they according to many optimists have, namely to do away with the gap that separates politician from citizen and, in general, to reinvigorate Dutch democracy. They found that those who use social media as a platform for civic discussions and activities were already politically engaged in other ways beforehand. Citizens are still mostly informed about politics by old media (Aalberts and Kreijveld 2011; also Van de Burgt 2011).

Tom Bakker and Claes de Vreese (2011: 454) have noted that according to many studies, the internet has no "strong positive or negative effects... on (offline forms of) political engagement," although they themselves argued that "most effects of media use on political

participation are *positive* in nature” (their emphasis). Their own study could not determine though what the causal direction was in the relationship between media use and political participation. Perhaps people who are motivated to be politically active, simply use media more often (Bakker and De Vreese 2011: 465).

Some positive features of the Dutch digital landscape should be noted. The digital divide barely exists in the Netherlands (*de Volkskrant* 2010) and internet access is widespread. According to a 2010 study, 93 percent of the Dutch have internet access at home, although up to a quarter of the Dutch are still not online. Interestingly, the lower educated spend more time on the internet than those who are better educated (Van Es 2010). Schoenbach and De Waal (2011) found that the feared fragmentation of the public sphere had not come about in the Netherlands. Only a small part of the population (less than 10 percent) avoids news and background information on topical issues. Piet Bakker (2008: 14) too asserted that the numbers do not bear out fears that new media are causing the total fragmentation of the audience. For instance, the daily news show of the public broadcaster still gets very high ratings. According to Anke Wonneberger, the Dutch currently sit down longer to watch serious news shows on TV than they did twenty years ago, despite the proliferation of channels during that period (*de Volkskrant* 2011b).

Schoenbach and De Waal found that television and paid newspapers are people’s most important sources for both news and background information. Free dailies and internet sites are used for getting a quick news fix only, not for background information. They found that the internet can stimulate people to use traditional news media for news and background information. Therefore, “the internet is able to (indirectly) confront people with information about society which transcends their initial, personal interest” (Schoenbach and De Waal 2011:

vii-viii, 11). Time spent on the internet was found to be positively correlated to the number of news sources being consulted, but the researchers raised the possibility that the young might become less interested in background information to the news because they get their news mostly from sites that do not offer this type of information and therefore they might not develop a need for it.

A clear positive effect on journalism cannot be detected. Piet Bakker (2008: 9) noted that the evidence for the assertion that citizen journalists will one day produce a viable substitute for the work of professionals, making them superfluous, has been scant. The notion that professional journalism will be made redundant by “blogs and user-generated content” Bakker correctly called a sign of a “simplistic, a-historical approach.” Tom Bakker and Chris Paterson (2011) found citizen journalism and participatory journalism to hardly play a role in the Netherlands. The traditional media outlets still securely dominate the media provision in the Netherlands (Schoenbach and De Waal 2011: 39-41). The daily news show of the public broadcaster was found to be by far the most important news source for the Dutch, followed at a respectable distance by the daily news show of the commercial broadcaster RTL4 (Schoenbach and De Waal 2011: 10). The top ten of news sites is dominated by the sites of the traditional newspapers, e.g. *De Telegraaf*, and the public broadcaster. The migration of content to the internet has thus hardly stimulated more diversity of points of view (Dutch Media Authority 2011; Bakker and Scholten 2009). Only one percent of social media users are politically active on social media sites; the vast majority of voters get their information from old media like newspapers and television (*de Volkskrant* 2010a).

Yael De Haan's conclusion (2011: 209) therefore appears valid: "... even though new technologies have provided possibilities for relating and interacting with the public, at this point the public predominantly continues to assume the role of receiver."

## **Conclusion**

Before summarizing the main arguments made in this chapter, a few words of clarification might be in order. Readers might have noticed a tension in this discussion on the current debate on the Dutch media, for two seemingly contradictory points have been made. While it is claimed that the debate lacks a coherent political-economic perspective, many critical remarks have been cited which support exactly this perspective. How can this be squared? Scholars and other commentators hold different pieces of the critical puzzle or have done research of which the conclusions support a critical perspective. Yet these pieces are not put together in a coherent political-economic framework. There are at present few Dutch scholars or other commentators advancing such a picture of the Dutch media. Jaap van Ginneken and Cees Hamelink support this framework, yet they have focused mostly on international communications. Since the eighties, Hamelink has only rarely addressed the issue of the quality of the Dutch media head-on and in a prolonged fashion. No regular participant in the debate on the Dutch media rejects the commercial underpinning of the media system and argues that the crisis in journalism can only be brought to an end by the influx of large amounts of public money.

Dutch journalism is widely seen as being in crisis, but as to the causes and the solutions there is hardly any agreement. The commercialization of the Dutch news media is generally recognized to be a problem and to pose a threat to the quality of journalism. The quality of the

“quality” news media is still mostly regarded as high or at least adequate, although the research points to the opposite direction. When assigning responsibility for news content, the public is quite often singled out. Assertions that Dutch journalism at least is not as bad as in the US or Great Britain, while plausible, can also serve as a deflection from the vastly more important issue of whether Dutch journalism as such performs its task in a democracy well. Although research supports the assertion that Dutch news is structurally biased in favor of corporate and political interests, this point of view is all but absent from the debate. A common feature of proposed solutions is that they do not go far enough; they focus on the individual behavior of journalists and on industry-wide measures like more transparency towards the public and even doing better “pr” for journalism.

Rarely do observers look to the state to provide a solution to the crisis. When they do, they only foresee limited support. It is generally assumed that the state should not or cannot play a major role in designing the media landscape, because it is thought that this will necessarily entail restrictions on freedom of the press. Yet as noted, there are powerful historical precedents which undermine this position (John 1995). Moreover, prominent legal scholar C. Edwin Baker has repudiated the myth that guarantees of freedom of expression and of the press preclude a strong role for the state in creating the conditions for a vibrant public sphere.

That the commercial imperatives that guide the news industry are detrimental to the quality of journalism is often admitted. Conversely, the proposed solutions indicate that the structural nature of the crisis is nonetheless downplayed. Hardly ever, if at all, is the argument made that only by getting rid of or severely curtailing these commercial imperatives could the Netherlands have good journalism. Finally, it seems clear by now that digital technologies will not in and of themselves create a vibrant Dutch journalism and public sphere.



## PART II: CONTENT ANALYSES

### CHAPTER 7

#### THE PRESS ON THE RUN-UP TO THE WAR IN IRAQ

This chapter examines how the Dutch press reported on one of the biggest stories of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the US-led war on Iraq, which by and large was supported by the Dutch government. Specifically, five aspects will be studied. The first concerns the issue of WMDs. Did the Dutch press, as the first part of this dissertation predicts, report with less than adequate skepticism on the alleged existence of these weapons in Iraq? In hindsight we know that Iraq did not possess these weapons. More importantly, at the time there was no concrete evidence that it did. Moreover, many sources who on the face of it were more credible than the US government (e.g. UN weapons inspectors and other experts) argued that the chances of Iraq having these weapons and posing a threat to the West or the Middle-East were minimal at best. Which version did the Dutch press highlight? To figure this out, all the mentions of WMDs in two quality Dutch newspapers and the most popular newspaper in the months before the attack on March 20, 2003, are examined using a quantitative content analysis.

Second, by looking at all the articles in these newspapers mentioning “Iraq” and “oil” it will be examined to what extent the Dutch press ascribed to the US the opportunistic intention of aiming to control Iraq’s vast oil reserves. The propaganda model predicts that a privately owned, advertising dependent press will almost always accept the proclaimed motives of its own and allied governments at face value, despite evidence to the contrary.

Third, it will be examined how the press reported on the role of the oil company Royal Dutch Shell. Did the press highlight that the Dutch government’s pro-American stance could have been informed by the desire to promote Shell’s vast potential economic interests in Iraq?

Now it is known that the jointly Dutch-British owned Shell negotiated with the British government before the invasion took place about its future in a post-Saddam Iraq, but similar reports were already circulating at the time. Shell has since signed contracts worth billions of dollars for exploiting gas reserves in Iraq. Did the Dutch press, as the propaganda model predicts, marginalize this aspect of the Iraq-issue, accepting proclamations of benign intent emanating from The Hague, London and Washington at face value, in disregard of logic, historical background and the available evidence at the time?

Fourth, the Dutch press's reception of Colin Powell's speech to the Security Council in February, 2003 – the pivotal attempt by the US administration to make its case – will be studied, using a qualitative analysis. Powell's speech was riddled with misleading statements, we now know, but at the time there already existed much evidence that suggested that this was the case. How much credibility did the Dutch press attach to Powell's speech? Fifth, all the editorials in the three papers from mid-February until the invasion will be examined in detail for the features of the Iraq-crisis they highlighted and for those which they ignored.

The overarching question that this chapter addresses is whether the Dutch press served the needs of the Dutch public for independent, critical evaluations of claims made by the governments that wanted to go to war with Iraq. Or did the press serve the aims of those who supported a war, aims which coincided to a large degree with the interests of Dutch political and economic elites? By now it has been established beyond doubt that this war was fought on specious grounds, with top US officials making many misleading statements in the run-up to the war (Special Investigations Division 2004). But it needs to be highlighted that at the time information from – by journalism's own standards – credible sources, was available which challenged the central claims emanating from Washington and London. Moreover, justifying a

war requires the highest levels of evidence, as by its nature it is a catastrophic event. A high burden of proof clearly lay with Washington and London.

The first part of this dissertation has provided the broad historical and critical framework within which this particular study of the coverage of the war in Iraq should be situated. The research presented in this chapter also fits into the literature on the reporting of foreign events in the Western media, and in particular into the literature on the reporting on the war in Iraq. This chapter proceeds by providing some necessary historical and political background. Also discussed will be the public debate in the Netherlands concerning the Dutch media's coverage of the war in Iraq, after which this study will be embedded in the academic literature on the coverage of foreign affairs in Western media in general and in the coverage of the Iraq-crisis in particular. Then the content analyses will be presented, followed by a conclusion.

### **Dutch support for the Iraq war**

The United States has long regarded the Netherlands as one of its most loyal European allies –and rightly so. Since WWII, which for the Dutch ended in May 1945 with the liberation from the Germans by the American and Canadian armies, foreign policy has been geared towards remaining in Washington's good graces.<sup>17</sup> Giles Scott-Smith has succinctly and yet comprehensively summarized the causes for the blossoming of Dutch-American relations after WWII:

*After the Second World War the Netherlands abandoned its long-standing neutrality in foreign affairs to join the Western alliance. Despite some misgivings among its political elite, there was*

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<sup>17</sup> During that same period, the Netherlands has been a staunch proponent of European integration. But that organization did not and does not have a unified foreign policy. In that area, which is the concern of this chapter, the Netherlands has followed the US.

*a broad understanding that the enforced decolonization of the East Indies (in which the United States played a crucial role) pointed to a re-anchoring of Dutch foreign relations around a transatlantic axis. From the perspective of the United States, the Netherlands was an ideal ally. The Dutch were politically close to the UK and were opposed to European affairs being dominated by either a renewed France or a resurgent Germany. Despite a brief wave of support for the Communist Party in the immediate post-war years, the Dutch body politic, dominated as it was by the democratic socialists [i.e. social-democrats] and Christian parties, was resoundingly anti-communist in outlook. The Netherlands was also positive towards a US-led free-trade regime, and during the Cold War was wholly committed to building a managed post-war economic and political order based around international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Because of their long tradition of democratic rule, free-market economics and intellectual exchange, the Dutch were ‘perhaps closer ideologically to the United States than any people in Europe.’ (Scott-Smith 2007: 290; also Wesseling 1980: 130-1; Roholl 2008)*

As the American ambassador in the Netherlands, Clifford Sobel, put it in 2005 in a secret cable, which was later released by Wikileaks: “Along with the British, the Dutch form a strong, reliable transatlantic anchor in Europe.” British prime-minister Tony Blair reportedly regarded Dutch assistance as “essential” to realizing his policies in Europe (Sobel 2005).

The ties between the Dutch on the one hand and the British and Americans on the other are indeed strong. The Dutch and British navies work together intensively and the Dutch sent troops to Iraq after the fighting was over and to Afghanistan. In Sobel’s words, “the Dutch

remain a strong supporter in the war on terrorism” in the latter country. According to the ambassador, “the Dutch were instrumental in providing early logistical support to US forces in Iraq,” for instance by “permitting transshipments through Rotterdam when other ports in Europe would not.” Indeed, “the Dutch have one of the largest, most geographically diverse deployments of military forces in the world, with more troops deployed as percentage of their total forces than any other ally” – all of course in support of US interests, however indirectly on occasion, or at least not in contradiction to those interests (Sobel 2005). Dutch forces cooperate intimately with American and British forces, also in times of peace (Davids 2010: 88). The Netherlands supported the following military missions in which the US was a prime participant: The First Gulf War (1990-1) and the wars in Kosovo in 1999 and Afghanistan since 2001 (Davids 2010: 397).

As presented by ambassador Sobel, the list of services rendered by the Dutch is impressive. The Dutch prefer American military equipment to European weaponry. In 2003 they strongly and successfully urged the European Union to designate the Palestinian Hamas as a terrorist organization. Only after “active urging” by the US the Dutch abandoned the predominant positions in the EU regarding a weapons embargo against China and Turkish accession to the EU. The Dutch worked diligently to convince the EU of the wisdom of the American positions on these “issues of great importance” (Sobel 2005; also Beunderman 2011). Perhaps most importantly, “the Dutch share with the British a vision of a market-friendly Europe driven by free trade” (Sobel 2005).

The economic ties between the US and the Netherlands are extremely tight and important to both countries, especially considering that the Netherlands is a small country with only about seventeen million inhabitants. The Dutch are “the third largest investor in the US and the fourth

largest recipient of US investment world-wide” (Sobel 2005). There are some contentious issues between the two countries, like drugs policy. Also, the Dutch have the annoying habit of considering themselves protectors of the international legal order. But this defect is not fatal, according to Sobel, for “while their legalistic approach can be frustrating, they are flexible.” In fact, the positive perception of the Netherlands worldwide makes the country a very useful ally of the US, according to the ambassador. In his words:

*Coaxing the Dutch into the spotlight can take effort, but pays off royally. Dutch credentials, credibility, and capabilities make them effective leaders across a wide-range of geographic regions and substantive issues.... The Dutch are actively and favorably involved in Afghanistan, Africa, Iraq, the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caribbean, Indonesia and elsewhere. They are our best partner in developing pilot projects in the counterterrorism area, and are world leaders in development, free trade, international law and human rights. In pursuit of US interests in all these areas of interest and leadership, we should build upon our successes to date to take the Dutch to the “next level.” (Sobel 2005)*

In short, the US and the Netherlands have been great allies since WWII. It might therefore well be suspected that the Dutch news media exhibit a persistent pro-American bias (e.g. Roholl 2008) and that this bias colored the reporting and commentary on the war in Iraq. The Dutch involvement in the war in Iraq was intensively studied by the Commission Davids, which in 2010 conducted a government-sanctioned but independent inquiry into the topic, after the Dutch government had for years resisted calls for such a study. The commission, headed by former chief justice of the Dutch Supreme Court W. J. M. Davids, had access to classified

documents and produced the most elaborate study of the topic to date. One of its most widely reported conclusions, for instance in *The Guardian*, was that the invasion of Iraq constituted a violation of international law (Hirsch 2010). This chapter relies heavily but by no means exclusively on the Davids-report for the background information needed to contextualize the Dutch reporting of the run-up to the war. Although the Davids-report is the most thorough study on the Dutch involvement in Iraq, investigative journalists have challenged some of its conclusions (see below).

The picture that arises from the Davids-report is one of a Dutch government manipulating and selectively informing parliament and the public, ignoring experts (e.g. law professors) and its own intelligence services, and providing not just ideological but also material support for an illegal military action, which lacked a UN-mandate. Against the wish of the majority of the Dutch people, the government followed the US and Great Britain not blindly and naively, but deliberately and not without a certain measure of resolve. A longstanding foreign policy tradition and perceived political interests (which in practice are inextricably intertwined with economic interests) dictated this course, which was basically already set in stone in the early fall of 2002. The government was prepared to provide “active” military support, but did not do this out of domestic considerations, that is, the large opposition to the war, including from the bases of the political parties that made up the governing coalition.

Formally the Netherlands did not have a government in the months leading up to the invasion, as the governing coalition consisting of the Christian-democratic CDA, the free market VVD and the right-wing LPF had fallen apart in the fall of 2002. The CDA, which supported the Americans without hesitation (as did the VVD), was negotiating with the social-democrats (PvdA) about forming a new coalition. The PvdA long resisted the war, but declared itself in

favor on the day of the invasion. In practice, this situation meant that the pro-war CDA and VVD were still in control of the day-to-day running of the government.

The Dutch law professors that entered the public debate before the invasion “virtually anonymously” were of the opinion that UN Security council resolution 1441 was not an adequate legal basis for an invasion (Davids 2010: 66). The Commission Davids took the position that the Dutch intelligence services based themselves mostly on British intelligence, which had come to be regarded as reliable because of intense cooperation over the years. The Dutch intelligence services did not generate much original information (Davids 2010: 298, 341). Yet the commission also concluded that the intelligence services were more cautious about the existence of WMDs in Iraq than was the government in its communications to parliament. The government did not welcome “too nuanced” reports; it mostly quoted the information that suited its pro-war course (Davids 2010: 298, 341). The military intelligence service was sure all along that Iraq did not have nuclear weapons (Davids 2010: 303).

As to the reasons for supporting the war, the Commission Davids concluded that “geopolitical considerations,” that is, a desire not to rupture the longstanding alliance with the US, were the most important. Also a part played an affinity with “the American idealism” and residual gratitude for the liberation in WWII (Davids 2010: 210). As the run-up to the war unfolded, the government itself often emphasized that not the supposed WMDs but the non-compliance by Saddam with UN-resolutions stretching back more than a decade was the primary reason for the Dutch government to support the war. This was rather odd of course, as the US and Britain, at least before the invasion, and before it was definitively known that there were no WMDs, argued that the threat emanating from those supposed WMDs was the main reason for the invasion. Indeed, the Dutch Secretaries of State and Defense did make the same point in the



run-up to the war (Oranje 2004). The Dutch government considered a UN-resolution explicitly authorizing the use of force against Iraq desirable but not necessary. The prime-minister told parliament days before the invasion that the government supported an invasion “politically.” Yet because of the lack of a UN-resolution, support among the Dutch for an invasion was too weak for the government to also provide its “own active military contribution” (Davids 2010: 104). Thus the government decided to support the war “politically but not militarily.” The Netherlands took the position that regime change was illegal under international law. Therefore regime change was not the stated reason why the Netherlands supported an invasion. On March 17, the Secretary of State assured a cabinet meeting that the pending invasion was about disarming Saddam, although clearly regime change was the American aim (Davids 2010: 212).

Opposition among the Dutch population to the approaching invasion was substantial to large. One poll showed that in January 2003, more than 70 percent of the Dutch opposed an invasion even if a UN-mandate were to be attained. Nine out of ten opposed an invasion without such a mandate. Members of all the major political parties were in majority against a UN-supported invasion. Other polls showed that the opposition was not that overwhelming, but on the whole the polls conclusively made clear that a majority of the population adopted a skeptical attitude towards the war and especially towards the American intentions (Davids 2010: 70-1). Many Dutch people opposed the eventual “political support” provided by their government to the US, namely 46 percent. Forty-three percent supported this decision by the government. A large majority of the population (71 percent) was against providing military support to the US. According to the Commission Davids, the polls in the run-up to the war had made one thing crystal clear: the Dutch would only support the invasion, be it politically or militarily, on the condition that it received international legitimacy (Davids 2010: 73, 77, 529). The Netherlands

was not unique in this regard. Many European populations were in majority against a war (*de Volkskrant* 2003l).

A few other background issues need to be addressed before moving to the content analyses. Up to this day, the government insists that Dutch military personnel did not take an active part in the invasion or its preparations. But some journalists claim that this is false. The magazine *Vrij Nederland* reported in April 2003 that the Dutch were involved in the military actions against Iraq. It cited the head of the union of military personnel as saying that the Dutch did participate in what he called the “illegal” war and that “no active military support” is nothing but governmental rhetoric that “nobody outside of the Netherlands believes in” (Hulshof 2003: 13).

The question of whether the Netherlands supported the Bush administration not just politically but also militarily seems mostly one of semantics. The wordplay (“active” being the operative word in the phrase quoted above) by Dutch politicians was deemed necessary to make a coalition possible between the social-democrats (PvdA) and the Christian-democrats (CDA). This point was made for instance by LPF-politician Matt Herben, a military specialist and proponent of the war, who exclaimed that: “The Netherlands does not provide an active military contribution? Nonsense! We do not participate in the fighting, that is true. But we do provide logistical support and intelligence” (Hulshof 2003: 13). One of the highest officials in the defense department in November 2002 confirmed the involvement of a Dutch submarine before the cameras of RTL4 Nieuws, but his department later dismissed this acknowledgment as a “slip of the tongue” (Hulshof 2003: 12; Jaspers 2005: 3). Investigative journalist Kees Schaap claims to possess the evidence that the Dutch intelligence agencies knew since 1998 that there were no WMDs in Iraq. He made a documentary which was broadcast on public television (De wereld

draait door 2010). Almost a decade later, the issue of alleged Dutch military involvement in the war in Iraq has not been definitively agreed upon. The Davids-report claimed to have found no evidence supporting the assertions of the investigative radio show Argos and other journalists about secret Dutch military support for the war in Iraq. Yet the commission refused to consult the evidence amassed by Argos, presenting as rationale that it would not use or check anonymous sources because it could not know whether the information was acquired in a legitimate fashion.

The Netherlands provided Turkey with Patriot-missiles to defend that country in the case of retaliation by Saddam after the US attacked. In any reasonable definition, for instance a legal one, this means that military support was provided. It was like the US was about to rob a bank and the Netherlands made sure that America's friends would not be hurt because of it. Any judge would call that complicity and aiding and abetting. The distinction between political and military support that the Dutch government made was highly artificial; not surprisingly, the subtlety eluded the US. The Netherlands did provide what it questionably termed "defensive military support," for instance the Patriot missiles in Turkey. No wonder that the US counted the Dutch among the "coalition of the willing" (Davids 2010: 530, 532). The Patriot missiles were officially meant to protect the citizens of two Turkish cities, but the government did not inform parliament that an American airbase was close by (Davids 2010: 99). According to the Commission Davids, the Patriots had offensive significance. In order to protect American airplanes, Turkey might have given US troops permission to attack Iraq from that country (Davids 2010: 370). Also, from February 2003 onwards, the Netherlands allowed and assisted US military convoys to pass over Dutch territory on the way to the Middle East (Davids 2010: 99).

These observations about the Dutch complicity in the war and the preparations for it make the whole debate about whether the Netherlands secretly provided “active” military support before or during the invasion, relatively moot. The case was made primarily by journalists working for the investigative radio program Argos. They based themselves on sources that were only willing to talk if their identity was kept anonymous. Lacking documents proving their assertions, the news show reported that small numbers of commandos, F16-fighter planes and a submarine were involved in the run-up to the war. Although not conclusively proven, it deserves mention that, as media critic Martin Hulsing observed, the revelations by Argos were mostly ignored by the Dutch agenda-setting media, with the small but reputable magazine *Vrij Nederland* coming closest to being the exception. An Argos-journalist told Hulsing that the newspaper *de Volkskrant* and a handful of current affairs programs of public broadcasters had called to make enquiries, but that more than a month after the Argos-broadcast, they had done nothing with the story. According to the journalist the probable reason for this was that the department of defense had denied the Argos-story wholesale. The media seemed to have trusted the department over the veteran journalists of Argos (Hulsing 2003).

### **The Dutch debate on the coverage**

The American media covered the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, and the war itself, badly. For instance, the media were far too uncritical of the claims made by the American administration that Iraq had WMDs (Moeller 2004; Boyd-Barrett 2004; Livingston and Robinson 2006; see McChesney 2007: 253, note 145 for a long list of critical works). The *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* later apologized, although these apologies are perhaps more aptly called

apologias (Marks 2008: 308; Boyd-Barrett 2004). CNN-anchor Wolf Blitzer apologized too, admitting on the Daily Show with Jon Stewart that the media had not been critical enough.

Conversely, many prominent Dutch journalists are of the opinion that the Dutch media have nothing to apologize for. For example, foreign affairs commentator for *de Volkskrant* Paul Brill agreed that the media could have done better in covering Iraq. But he claimed that because they had not in fact researched whether there were WMDs in Iraq, they had also not falsely claimed that they were there, as the *New York Times*' Judith Miller had done. Thus there was no need for an apology. Besides, he claimed, the quality newspapers *de Volkskrant*, *Trouw* and *NRC Handelsblad* had in editorials argued against the war (Reijnders 2007). One might object that writing cautioning editorials, to the extent this was done (see below), is not the same as doing critical journalism.

Piet Hagen, a one-time managing editor of the trade publication *De Journalist*, agreed with Brill that there was no reason to apologize, for the newspapers had before the invasion published all the important arguments against the war (Reijnders 2007). Yet as the ombudsman for *NRC Handelsblad*, Hagen had himself observed that the coverage of the Iraq-war was based mostly on the copy of three press agencies: AP, Reuters and AFP. Also, he estimated that three quarters of attributed facts derived from Western sources (Hagen 2003). Clearly the pro-western bias resulting from this dependence on the press agencies is the more important issue when gauging the Dutch coverage, not whether arguments against the war were presented. Moreover, crucial questions are how prominent these arguments were in the coverage, whether dubious claims made by the US administration were reported skeptically, and how much opportunity the papers provided to the many dissenting voices during the drive for war. Did the press report

critically on the Powell-speech? Did the reporting and commentary support the notion that Iraq had WMDs?

The public debate in the Netherlands on the approaching invasion was, according to the Commission Davids, characterized by a critical attitude of the US and the Bush-administration in particular. The commission cited columns by Anet Bleich in *de Volkskrant* as illustration (Davids 2010: 65). This conclusion, apparently based on impressionistic evidence, should probably be interpreted as an acknowledgment that the amount of criticism of the US in the media in this period was high relative compared to the recent and especially distant past, as the Dutch news media have arguably consistently exhibited a pro-American bias since WWII (e.g. Roholl 2008). Despite the assertions in the Davids-report, there can be little doubt that the Dutch media consequently exhibits a pro-American bias, especially on the topic of foreign affairs, although in recent times perhaps less pronounced than in the past.

Henri Beunders, a professor of media and culture at Erasmus University in Rotterdam and a former journalist with *NRC Handelsblad*, correctly asserted (2005) that the Dutch media did hardly any original newsgathering regarding the war in Iraq, but that they did produce a large amount of columns and analyses. Yet when turning to the question whether the Dutch media during the run-up to the war had let themselves be fooled by American propaganda, Beunders made a remarkable claim. He provided only one concrete example of media content that apparently might be considered by some as requiring an apology. Namely, *NRC Handelsblad* concluded in an editorial on March 20, 2003, that “Now that the war has started, President Bush and prime-minister Blair should be supported. That support cannot remain stuck in verbal frivolity. That means political support – and if necessary also military” support.

In other words, *NRC Handelsblad* argued that although the rationales for going to war could not be deemed uncontroversial, now that the US and Britain had actually started the war, the Netherlands should support them come what may, no matter international law or morality. The quote reveals deep-seated attitudes of submission to Western centers of power. It is as if *NRC Handelsblad*, or Beunders for that matter, could not imagine taking a position outside of the Washington/London/The Hague consensus. When the US aggressively starts a war, then it should be supported no matter what the facts are and how many lies it employed to start that war. Might over right.

According to Beunders (2005), on the whole the Dutch media wrote “critically” about the coming war. Especially the columnists kept up that critical attitude after the fighting had started; almost all of them were against the war. The Dutch coverage he deemed incomparable to the coverage by the American media. According to him, the latter was characterized by a belligerent tone – which was completely understandable, because of the trauma of 9/11.

Statements by some Dutch journalists provide valuable clues into what might have gone wrong with the coverage. According to a former political reporter of the *Algemeen Dagblad*, the reader was thought to be more interested in domestic and sports news; the newspaper had not focused its reporting on Iraq for commercial reasons. Harm Taselaar, managing editor of RTL Nieuws, the second serious daily news show in the Netherlands, explained that correspondents flown into a crisis area sometimes lack the expertise to report the unfolding story, as domestic issues are the priority of the news show. What happens then is that the correspondent gets the information from the editors in the Netherlands, which they in turn get from Reuters and AP. According to Taselaar, “We sell our news. That includes people on the spot. It’s that cynical” (Reijnders 2007).

The main tenor of the discussion in the Netherlands about the coverage of the war in Iraq was that although mistakes were made (Is not all reporting flawed?), not enough reason to apologize existed, and no news outlet did. Yet some have been highly critical of the Dutch media performance. Historian Maarten van Rossem claimed that the press fell for Powell's obviously bogus performance in the Security Council – a performance which according to him even a high school student could easily see through (Reijnders 2007). Cees Hamelink (2004, 2010) and Jaap van Ginneken (Ummelen 2009) have claimed that the run-up to the war was badly covered, but provided no systematic data to back up the claim. Arnold Karskens was the only Dutch reporter in Baghdad during invasion. In his opinion, the Dutch press again revealed itself to be very obedient. It lacked the courage to report dissident opinions and to collect facts in Iraq itself. The shooting of Iraqi civilians by Dutch soldiers was kept out of many papers and television programs for years, "Because that is not who we are. Only Americans commit war crimes in Iraq" (Karskens 2007).

Journalist Henk Hofland argued that the Dutch press could have known at the time that the proffered reasons to go to war were bogus. An investigative documentary by Kees Schaap for the public broadcaster VARA confirmed through interviews with former UN weapons inspectors, including Dutch citizens, that the Dutch government knew already in 1998 with almost 100 percent certainty that Iraq had been disarmed. According to former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter, Dutch secret agents participated in inspections and therefore the Dutch secret service knew full well that Iraq had no more WMDs. Among the inspectors themselves, the most expert and credible sources on this issue, it appears that it was understood that Iraq (very likely) did not have WMDs. Certainly they never found evidence that there were WMDs. As Hans Blix has emphasized, the inspectors never claimed that Iraq had WMDs (Schaap 2004).



## **Research on the coverage of foreign affairs**

Cees Hamelink wrote in reference to the coverage of the war in Iraq that “with some exceptions, the majority of the Western mainstream media was helpful to the invaders,” for they “gave the war protagonists [...] ample space to mislead the public. Most of these media acted with little professional inquisitiveness and adopted conveniently the frame of interpretation that was fabricated by spin-doctors. This should surprise no one since it was just a repetition of what happened during the Panama invasion, the Gulf War of 1991, the NATO intervention in Kosovo, and the military operations in Afghanistan” (Hamelink 2010: xxii). To Hamelink it was a “fact that there is in most societies an elite political consensus that frames contemporary history in accordance with elite interests. Media (and certainly the mainstream international media) are, in many countries, part of that elite and share its consensus.” The only hope is structural change, for “the institutional context of media coverage with its pressures of political preference, economic interests, and the dictates of time and competition shows no signs of radical change in the years ahead” (Hamelink 2010: xxiii).

A review of the academic literature on the coverage of foreign affairs by Western media would lead to the expectation that Hamelink’s comments are applicable to the Dutch media too. In their attempt to show that the propaganda model is essentially in concord with the main thrust of the scholarship on the coverage of foreign affairs, Herring and Robinson (2003) argue that “leading US academics,” for instance Daniel Hallin and Lance Bennett, consider the coverage of foreign events in the US media to be flawed in similar ways as the propaganda model:

*The standard liberal myth of the news media in the West – that it is independent of elite interests and provides the people with the information necessary to ensure that they can hold elites and in*

*particular governments to democratic account – is rejected widely by academics who study the news media and US foreign policy... the most common and empirically substantiated perspective is that, with respect to coverage of US foreign policy, on balance, the US media serve elite interests and undermine democracy. The media do this by portraying the world in a way that tends to shape the perspective of those entering the political elite, generate public consent for or at least acquiescence to US foreign policy and make it difficult for the public to have access to information necessary to challenge the interests of the elite. (Herring and Robinson 2003: 554-5)*

Indeed, the pro-elite bias in foreign news coverage has been amply demonstrated for the American media (Hallin 1986; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Bennett 1990; Zaller and Chiu 1996; Bennett et al. 2007) and research on the Dutch media points in the same direction (Rietman 1988; De Landtsheer et al. 2002; Wieten 2002).

Two developments have led some scholars to question the continued salience of elite-driven models of coverage of foreign affairs. First, some have argued that the end of the Cold War caused an ideological vacuum which opened up space for an increase in media independence (Entman 2004). There exists some research to support this claim and the more general claim that journalists are autonomous to at least a considerable degree (Robinson et al. 2010: 43-4). Others have argued for the continued relevance of hegemonic models of media performance in foreign affairs coverage by pointing for example to the “war on terror” as replacing the Cold War frame, the increased concentration of the global media industry, the professionalization of public relations, the heightened workload of journalists and to the crisis in journalism (Herman and Chomsky 2002; McChesney and Nichols 2010).

Second, the argument has been made that advances in digital technology have increased the opportunities for journalists to challenge elite perspectives, as for instance the internet has provided them with a vast array of diverse sources at their fingertips (Robinson et al. 2010: 27-29). Although new technologies have possibly on occasion aided journalists in subverting official narratives, there is scant evidence to support the claim that these technologies have structurally led to better journalism. In fact, the opposite might be the case, as the 24/7 news cycle has led to an increasing emphasis on speed and thus to pressure on journalists to even more quickly churn out their product (Davies 2009). Alongside of advances in technologies, governments have honed their “media-management techniques” (Robinson et al. 2010: 29). All in all, despite some dissent and some contradictory evidence, in the literature on the coverage of foreign affairs the notion is still dominant that on the whole the Western media do not report independently, but mostly serve elite interests (Kennis 2011: 22-69).

The disagreement is between scholars who emphasize the extent of the conformity and those who put more emphasis on the exceptions, sometimes using straw-man-tactics that make it seem as if for instance the propaganda model allows for no exceptions at all. This study merely attempts to make the – perhaps rather mundane – point that the press reporting and commentary in the Netherlands, which has a reputation for being one of the most progressive countries in Europe and perhaps the world, in the run-up to the war in Iraq suffered from the fundamental flaw of privileging elite perspectives over dissent and public opinion, with severely detrimental effects on the credibility of the international legal order, not to mention the disastrous consequences for the people of Iraq.

As the first part of this dissertation has argued, the Dutch media landscape is in its basic features similar to its counterparts in the US and Great Britain. Moreover, as it has been long-

standing Dutch government policy to support the US in its foreign endeavors, one would expect that the Dutch media in the case of the war in Iraq too were biased in favor of US interests – interests which largely coincided with Dutch economic interests (e.g. Shell or other corporations in Iraq or Dutch investments in the US) and political interests (namely preserving the alliance with the US).

### **Research on the coverage of the Iraq-war**

The US media's coverage of the run-up to the war in Iraq and its occupation has been found to be severely flawed. In other Western countries, for instance England, major flaws have also been detected (Lewis et al. 2006; Cromwell and Edwards 2006). But it has also been argued that on occasion the media performed better than might have been expected on the basis of the propaganda or indexing models (Robertson 2004). Robinson et al. (2010) emphasized "pockets of resistance" in their review of the British media's coverage after the fighting began. Some papers opposed the war even after the invasion (Robinson et al. 2010: 8). Robinson et al. considered it significant that even in times of war, when a society and thus also the media tend to fall in line, they still found these "pockets of resistance." For "the prevailing academic orthodoxy" is that media are not independent during war (Robinson et al. 2010: 13). Indeed, it can be expected that the coverage during the run-up to the war would be more critical than during the actual fighting.

Florian Zollmann made the case that, if not for limitations in the study by Robinson et al., for instance the neglect of the role of the corporations "who own, fund and control the media," the researchers "would have found even more evidence in support of the elite-driven model" (Zollmann 2011: 264). Moreover, much of what Robinson et al. regarded as critical coverage

could be classified as “procedural criticisms,” in other words as dissent over means and not aims (Zollmann 2011: 263).

Mainly at issue here is again the extent of relative autonomy of the news media from elite interests. Important to bear in mind in this regard is that the Iraq-war was an exceptional case. Rarely if ever was a drive for war openly challenged by this many ordinary people, experts, international organizations and governments. The drive for war was led by only two governments and certainly in Britain faced considerable domestic opposition, including from highly placed sources like Foreign Secretary Robin Cook. The characterization in December 2011 by the Dutch public broadcaster that the Iraq-war was “the most controversial war of the last ten years” is somewhat of an understatement. At first glance then, the run-up to the invasion of Iraq presents a tough challenge to for instance the propaganda model and in general to claims that the media are submissive to elite interests (Robinson et al. 2010: 61; Kennis 2011). Journalists had ample information and credible sources at their disposal that undermined elite narratives stemming from London and Washington. There was considerable elite disagreement in the Netherlands, with two (albeit small) leftwing political parties opposing the looming war. The large social-democratic party PvdA, although not as vociferously, also did not support the war, at least until the day of the invasion. A higher than usual degree of media independence might therefore be expected in the coverage.

### **Research on the Dutch media’s coverage of the Iraq-war**

Research on the Dutch media’s coverage of the war in Iraq is scant (Vliegenthart, personal communication). To my knowledge, there are only two studies that address the issue.<sup>18</sup> The first one, a computer assisted comparative content analysis covering the period September

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<sup>18</sup> Aside from a number of MA-theses, e.g. Gould (2007).

2002 to August 2003, concluded that of the newspapers in the four countries studied – the US, UK, Germany and the Netherlands – the “Dutch newspapers report[ed] considerable (sic) more positive about the war” than the papers in the other three countries (Vliegthart and Schroder 2010: 77). The researchers also concluded that “protest coverage [was] the least present in the country with relatively weak protest (the Netherlands); in all other countries the protest frame occur[red] in between 10 and 13 percent additional articles” (Vliegthart and Schroder 2010: 76). The researchers offered a few explanations for these perhaps surprising findings, and for the comparatively low volume of Dutch coverage of the war. One was the election campaign going on at the time in the Netherlands, in which “Iraq” was an issue but not a predominant one. The other explanation offered was that “the Dutch government played a much less central role in both the event itself and the international debate surrounding it” than the American, British and German governments. According to the researchers (2010: 78), “The combination of those two factors is likely to have caused the Iraq issue to be less salient and less controversial in the Dutch media as compared to the other three countries.” Also, formal political opposition to the Dutch government’s support for the (upcoming) war was relatively low in the Netherlands (Vliegthart and Schroder 2010: 66). Only the two small leftwing parties GroenLinks and SP were unambiguously against the war. The attitude of the large social-democratic PvdA was somewhat skeptical, but it ultimately went along with the Christian-democratic CDA in supporting the war “politically but not militarily” (Vliegthart and Schroder 2010: 65).

The other study, a conference paper which lacked intercoder-reliability measures (Walgrave and Verhulst 2005: 6), also concerned a cross-national comparison, this time between American, Dutch, British, Spanish, Italian, Belgian and German newspapers. The research focused on the period January 1 to March 20, 2003, and found that of articles that could be

classified as either pro- or anti-war, the Dutch newspapers *de Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad* carried more anti-war articles and *De Telegraaf* more pro-war articles (Walgrave and Verhulst 2005: 11). The Dutch press tended to oppose the war, according to this study, but the number of pro- and anti-war arguments balanced each other out (Walgrave and Verhulst 2005: 11-12). It also found that “only in the Netherlands [did] all newspapers seem to neglect opposition against the war” (Walgrave and Verhulst 2005: 13). All the studied newspapers, except for the Spanish ones but including the Dutch papers “tended to consider war as inevitable and went along with the war logic” (Walgrave and Verhulst 2005: 14). Although Dutch public opinion was predominantly against the war, as was the case almost all over the world, the Dutch press “reported almost as much about positive than (sic) about negative public opinion.” Conversely, the American and British papers at least made clear that public opinion was predominantly opposed to the war (Walgrave and Verhulst 2005: 15). The researchers drew a for this dissertation very pertinent conclusion:

*In many respects, countries’ coverage differed in terms of the appreciation of the war. We are surprised, though, by the limited size of these differences. By and large, war coverage in the countries is roughly similar. It seems as if a global news agenda imposed itself on all newspapers in all countries. Most striking, though, is the fact that the US media, or at least the newspapers we selected [NYT, WP, USA Today] do not differ dramatically from the others. We expected the US media, due to the bellicose course its president had adopted and due to the weak domestic opposition to the war, to be situated at the pro-war extremes for all measures.... This was not the case in the run-up to the 2003 Iraqi war, or at least not dramatically more than in other countries. Our analyses showed that the US media were always situated at the pro-war*

*side in the scales but seldom did they adopt the most extreme position.* (Walgrave and Verhulst 2005: 16)

Walgrave and Verhulst thus provide evidence for one of the claims of this dissertation, namely that, although the Dutch media system is different from the American one, this has relatively little impact on certain types of news content, in this case foreign news and probably also coverage of macro-economic issues. Although they stressed the relative cross-national homogeneity of content, they also found that “government position determines, at least to some extent, media coverage” (Walgrave and Verhulst 2005: 17-18).

The justification for doing another study of the coverage in the Dutch press is that the two extant studies were rather marginally concerned with the Dutch press, making only a few assertions about the nature of the Dutch coverage *an sich*. A qualitative study as the following study is in part, affords for much more detail. Also, the two studies left unexamined certain elements which are crucial to a more comprehensive view of the Dutch coverage, e.g. the reception of the Powell-speech and the issue of WMDs. The studies also did not provide the extensive background to the conflict which is crucial for contextualizing the coverage. Only when the crude nature of the American and British war propaganda is laid bare, can the extent of the lack of critical media coverage be gauged. Also, there were a few methodological issues with the studies. As noted, the study by Walgrave and Verhulst lacked an intercoder-reliability measure. The other study did have one, but it was rather low (Vliegenthart and Schroder 2010: 70-1). The Iraq-war was one of the most important stories in the first decade of the twentieth century. Its coverage in the Netherlands deserves a more comprehensive look than was provided by the two studies already done.



## The selection of newspapers

The following studies concern three national Dutch newspapers: *De Telegraaf*, *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant*. The latter two are regarded as the two best newspapers in the Netherlands. Their reputation is equivalent to that of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* in the US, with *USA Today* being the closest equivalent in the US to *De Telegraaf*. Politically, *NRC Handelsblad* is considered a centrist or right-of-center newspaper, and it is considered to put a lot of emphasis on journalistic objectivity and professionalism. *De Volkskrant* started as a paper for the Catholic worker and transformed in the sixties and seventies into a secular newspaper with left-of-center, progressive views.

In the first quarter of 2003, *De Telegraaf* was by far the most widely read paper in the Netherlands, with a circulation of over 760.000 (Table 1). It has a reputation of being populist-conservative. Although populist, it is not a tabloid like *Bild* in Germany or *The Sun* in Britain. With a circulation of almost 330.000 *de Volkskrant* in 2003 was the second biggest national paper in the Netherlands. *NRC Handelsblad* was the fourth biggest, with a circulation of about 265.000. Taken together, the three papers held about seventy percent of the total circulation of national newspapers in the Netherlands during the run-up to the war in Iraq. Moreover, these three papers probably had the largest networks of foreign correspondents compared to the other papers.

In 2003, the Netherlands had eight national newspapers. *Trouw* is considered the third quality paper in the Netherlands and has a conservative reputation. The *Reformatorisch Dagblad* and the *Nederlands Dagblad* are religious papers with very small circulations. *Het Financieele Dagblad* is a business paper, also with a very small circulation. The *Algemeen Dagblad* had the largest circulation after *De Telegraaf* and *de Volkskrant* and has a non-partisan reputation. Like

*De Telegraaf*, it was never part of the “pillarized” press. It is not considered a quality daily. The *Algemeen Dagblad* was not included in this study because its contents for 2003 are not available online or in databases.

**Table 1: Average daily circulation of Dutch national newspapers, first quarter of 2003**

De Telegraaf	761.310
de Volkskrant	329.089
Algemeen Dagblad	303.471*
NRC Handelsblad	266.025
Trouw	122.380
Reformatorisch Dagblad	59.352
Het Financieele Dagblad	56.585
Nederlands Dagblad	34.360
Total	1.932.572

\*The Dutch HOI Institute for Media Auditing does not have the circulation figures of the *Algemeen Dagblad* for the first quarter of 2003. The number in the table is the average daily circulation over the whole of 2003. See: <http://www.politiekcompendium.nl>, Consulted on December 6, 2011.

This chapter examines the coverage in three of the four biggest papers at the time in the Netherlands, including the two quality papers, with the gap in circulation between number four (*NRC Handelsblad*) and number five (*Trouw*) being large. Only the first four papers can be considered to have any significant influence on public opinion. *De Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad* can be taken to represent the best print journalism done in the Netherlands. A study of all the Dutch papers, one might conjecture, would probably show that “the” Dutch press did

worse than these two papers. One might also assume that the coverage by *de Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad* constituted not just the best print journalism in the Netherlands, but the best journalism overall, as print journalism is known to be more in-depth and capable of displaying far more complexity than television or radio journalism. Moreover, *de Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad* perform an agenda-setting function for the rest of the media, print and broadcasting, both public and private.

### **Study I: WMDs: Are they there?**

A central question in the run-up to the war in Iraq was whether the country had in fact WMDs which posed a threat to other countries. How critically the Dutch media wrote about their alleged presence is studied by examining all the mentions of “WMDs” (“massavernietigingswapens”) in the three newspapers. The question that will be addressed is: Did the Dutch press, as the first part of this dissertation suggests, report with less than adequate skepticism on the alleged existence of these weapons in Iraq?

### **Methodology**

From the database Lexis-Nexis all the texts in the three papers containing the word “massavernietigingswapens” (WMDs), including news articles, editorials, columns and wire reports, were retrieved for the period January 1, 2003 to March 20, 2003, the day the invasion started. The period studied is thus quite long. All the mentions of WMDs in this period were examined, which means that issues concerning sampling are not relevant to this study. A “mention” was defined as the paragraph in which the word occurred, the paragraph directly above it (if applicable) and the one directly underneath (if applicable). When the word occurred

twice in a paragraph, this was counted as one mention. When the word occurred in two subsequent paragraphs, the one mention consisted of three or four paragraphs.

The researcher coded the mentions in four categories (Appendix A). The first three of those categories are: (1) the WMDs are (likely) present in Iraq; (2) the WMDs are not in Iraq; and (3) there is insufficient evidence of their presence. The fourth category consists of mentions which left open both the possibility that the weapons were in Iraq and that they were not; mentions which did not make a clear claim as to whether they were there or not; and mentions which did not pertain to WMDs in Iraq, but for instance referred to North Korea's WMDs (See Appendices A and B for coding categories and coding instructions). A different native Dutch speaker recoded the results for each of the three papers. The acquired intercoder-reliability measure was 0.93 for both *De Telegraaf* and *NRC Handelsblad*. For *de Volkskrant* that measure was 0.92. Results above 0.90 calculated with this formula are widely considered more than acceptable (Wimmer and Dominick 2006: 169).

The way this study is set up is that when a source is cited which states that Iraq has WMDs and this statement is not contradicted by the journalist or another source, then this is counted as an affirmative mention. Because the term "WMDs" originated with the US government, one might argue that the results will be biased in the sense that the found number of uncritical mentions will be inflated. On the other hand, the term "WMDs" was used by proponents and opponents alike and there was no other term in use in the public debate. Therefore, a possible bias resulting from examining the mentions of "WMDs" cannot be expected to be very significant.

## Results

As table 2 shows, *De Telegraaf* was almost four times more likely to support the notion that Iraq had WMDs than to cast doubt on their existence. *NRC Handelsblad* was more than five times more likely to write as if Iraq had WMDs than to assert that it did not. Thus, the coverage by the quality daily *NRC Handelsblad* was about as uncritical as that of the popular *De Telegraaf*. An explanation might be *NRC Handelsblad*'s emphasis on "objectivity," which results in the paper privileging official sources and a reluctance to "editorialize" even when those sources make highly questionable claims. An explanation for the coverage in *De Telegraaf* not being more uncritical was the habit of the US correspondent for *De Telegraaf* of writing of Iraq's "alleged WMDs." Mentions like as these were coded in category 4. For *de Volkskrant*, the results are somewhat better, but also in that progressive, left-leaning paper the coverage was biased in favor of US interests.

The pro-American bias in the reporting is clearly shown by the fact that the passages which asserted or clearly assumed that Iraq (likely) had WMDs are high in absolute numbers: around 40 percent for *NRC Handelsblad* and *De Telegraaf* and about 30 percent for *de Volkskrant*. Moreover, denials that Iraq had WMDs not infrequently came from Saddam himself or his officials. These sources would – justifiably – be regarded as not credible by almost all readers. Iraqi denials might even be considered as suggesting that Iraq did have WMDs: "Never believe anything until it has been officially denied." The most remarkable finding might be the low percentage of passages (around 10 percent for *NRC Handelsblad* and *De Telegraaf*, less than 20 for *de Volkskrant*) that either denied that Iraq had WMDs or asserted that insufficient evidence existed that it did. In other words, the likely possibility that Iraq had no WMDs was marginal to the coverage.

A limitation of this study is the broad category of Balanced/Neutral/Irrelevant mentions, which for all three papers counts for half of the mentions. It would be incorrect however to point to this category and argue that the Dutch press in fact did perform its function reasonably well. Many of the mentions in that category simply did not make any assertion either that Iraq had WMDs or that it did not. Independent experts, including the UN weapons inspectors, asserted that there was insufficient evidence that pointed to Iraq having WMDs. Only the US and Britain argued that it did, although they presented no evidence. Even if the passages claiming that Iraq possessed WMDs had been balanced out by a similar number of passages claiming that it did not, then this could still be regarded as a propaganda victory for the US and Britain.

**Table 2: Mentions of WMDs in the Dutch press in the run-up to the war in Iraq**

	WMDs There	WMDs Not there/ Insufficient evidence	Balanced/ Neutral/ Irrelevant
NRC Handelsblad	43%	8%	49%
de Volkskrant	32%	17%	51%
De Telegraaf	39%	11%	50%

**Study II: US intentions: mentions of ‘oil’**

How often did the Dutch press mention the accusation that US policy was (mainly or to a considerable extent) driven by the aim of controlling Iraqi oil? The propaganda model predicts that ascribing nefarious intentions to the actions of friendly governments was a marginal occurrence, and also that in a commercial media system the actions of large corporations do not receive the scrutiny they deserve. From Lexis-Nexis were retrieved all the articles of more than a

hundred words in the three newspapers in the period from January 1 to March 20, 2003, which mentioned “Iraq” and “war” and “US,” “United States” or “America.” For *NRC Handelsblad* the number of articles was 525, for *de Volkskrant* 406 and for *De Telegraaf* 209. Then “oil” was added to the search criteria. For *NRC Handelsblad* this yielded 90 articles (17%), for *de Volkskrant* 66 (16%) and for *De Telegraaf* 28 (13%).

Taking a closer look at the articles on the Iraq-war that also included the word “oil,” it becomes clear that ascribing negative intentions to the US, in this particular case that the war was mostly or partly about oil, was hardly a feature of the Dutch coverage. Of the 90 articles over a hundred words long in *NRC Handelsblad* that included the words “Iraq,” “war” and “US,” “United States” or “America,” and “oil,” 42 mentioned at least once the claim that the US was in it for the oil. This means that of the total number of articles in *NRC Handelsblad* over a hundred words long which mentioned “Iraq,” the “US” and “war” in the months before the invasion, only 8 percent made mention of the claim that oil was a motivator of US policy. For *de Volkskrant* these numbers are: 31 out of a total of 406 (8%) and for *De Telegraaf* seven out of 209 (3%). The average for the three newspapers combined is 7% (80 articles out of a total of 1140).

**Table 3: Number of mentions of “oil” in articles on Iraq**

	Articles on Iraq-war	War-articles that include ‘oil’	Articles that link war to oil <sup>19</sup>
De Volkskrant	406	66 (16%)	31 (8%)
De Telegraaf	209	28 (13%)	7 (3%)
NRC	525	90 (17%)	42 (8%)

<sup>19</sup> The numbers in this column lack an intercoder-reliability measure because of the uncomplicated nature of determining whether a link is made in an article between the war and oil interests.

Totals	1140	184	80 (7%)
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If anything, these percentages give an exaggerated impression of the relative emphasis that the Dutch press put on US oil interests as a salient explanation for the Iraq-issue. Not infrequently the mentions in the 80 articles amounted to nothing more than blanket or partial denials that oil played a role, sometimes in vehement tones. For instance, in *NRC Handelsblad* Sjoerd de Jong (2003) denounced “the “pseudo worldly wisdom” that the war is about oil as a “vulgar-Marxist explanation,” which to many people might be “soothing” but in fact is “paltry.” One wonders how De Jong would evaluate the frank assessment by the prominent American Marxist Alan Greenspan. The former head of the US Federal Reserve stated in his memoirs (2007) that

*Whatever their publicized angst over Saddam Hussein’s ‘weapons of mass destruction’, American and British authorities were also concerned about violence in the area that harbours a resource indispensable for the functioning of the world economy. I am saddened that it is politically inconvenient to acknowledge what everyone knows: the Iraq war is largely about oil.* (Robinson et al. 2010: 38)

The notion that oil might have had something to do with US foreign policy is not just held by Marxists like Greenspan or the misguided public. Many powerful people are more “Marxist” than De Jong, at least in private. For instance, H.W. Bush told the king of Jordan right before the first Gulf war that “I will not allow this little dictator to control 25% of the civilized world’s oil” (Queen Noor 2003: 310). American policymakers have repeatedly made clear in



internal documents since at least the 1950s that US foreign policy towards the Middle-East is to a large extent guided by concerns over the control of the oil reserves in that region (Chomsky 2009). As *The Guardian* reported in January 2003, “It is not just wild-eyed western peaceniks that believe oil is at the center – or close to the center – of the pending conflict. It is quite a commonly held view even in the conservative business world but few are willing to express such things publicly.” The American vice-president Dick Cheney himself wrote a report in 2001 in which he made the case for a foreign policy geared towards ensuring that the US would continue to have access to energy supplies (Macalister 2003c). British cabinet ministers told *The Guardian* that oil was more important a factor than WMDs for going to war. British foreign minister Jack Straw stressed a few months before the war the importance of retaining access to energy sources as a priority of foreign policy (Alberts and De Graaf 2003).

Nonetheless, Russia-expert Jan Limbeek (2003) wrote an op-ed in *de Volkskrant* entitled “War Iraq really isn’t about oil,” in which he noted that “even a few American policymakers” had hinted that “oil is the most important motive” for attacking Iraq. Curiously, Limbeek suggested that they might have done so “out of tactical considerations,” given the “unwavering national and international conviction that oil is the true motivation.” Frans Verhagen (2003), an in the Netherlands well-known expert on the United States, argued in an op-ed that “the war in Iraq, then, is not about oil but about an ideal that will appeal to the Dutch especially: a better world.”

The US correspondent for *NRC Handelsblad*, Marc Chavannes, wrote an article of over three thousand words exploring the Texan roots and personal motivations of George W. Bush. The closest he came to addressing oil as a motivation for the war in Iraq was a quote by American author Michael Lind, buried deep inside the article. Lind said about Bush’s

Undersecretary of State Paul Wolfowitz: “Wolfowitz is a brilliant intellectual and a gifted diplomat. And he has close ties to Israel. His doctrine of unipolar dominance is a serious theory, based on a reading of history. It is not a rationalization of vulgar business interests” (Chavannes 2003a). In another article, Chavannes wondered in the lead whether the US would succeed in bringing democracy to Iraq, or whether the war would turn out badly – for the US. The headline of the article, which consisted of Chavannes interviewing experts at US think tanks, was a quote: “We are going to liberate Iraq, we are going to civilize it.” That the US had its eye on Iraq’s oil was curtly dismissed by neoconservative Richard Perle: “The lies about America’s desire for oil will be exposed.” Yet Perle predicted that the French would give up their resistance against a war because they would want their share of the Iraqi oil: “It’s that cynical,” according to Perle, by which he meant to say that the French are that cynical, not the US, which was “going to liberate Iraq.” The obvious double standard used by Perle elicited no comment from Chavannes (2003b).

Foreign desk editor of *NRC Handelsblad* Carolien Roelants started a news article with the sentence: “The US is going to bring democracy and freedom to Iraq, but first a military occupation.” Later in the article she briefly mentioned that US officials deny that it’s all about the oil (Roelants 2003). On other occasions, claims that oil was the “real” or underlying US motivator were made by sources which can be seen as having low credibility, for instance by Saddam himself, other Iraqi officials, or regular Arabs.

The notion that the US was in it for the oil was of course not completely absent from the coverage. Some articles which eloquently argued this point were printed (e.g. by Marcel van Dam and J. Meijer). But on the whole this perspective was marginal to the coverage, as indicated by the following numbers. Of the 80 articles in the three papers combined which mentioned (affirmatively or dismissively) oil as an explanation of US policy, only fifteen (one in *De*

*Telegraaf*, eight in *de Volkskrant* and six in *NRC Handelsblad*) did so either in the lead or the headline or both. On the total of 1140 articles, this amounts to a little over one percent. Some of these fifteen mentions were (partial) denials that oil was one of Washington's motivations.

Of the seven articles in *De Telegraaf* which mentioned oil as an explanation for US policy, a letter writer, Saddam Hussein, London mayor Ken Livingston and an unnamed member of the Kurdish political party in Turkey claimed that oil did matter to the Americans. The editor-in-chief of *De Telegraaf*, Kees Lunshof, addressed the issue twice. In a column of which the headline characterized the demonstrators against the upcoming war as "naïve" he asked rhetorically what would be wrong with toppling Saddam so as to stop him from controlling Iraq's oil. In another column Lunshof again mentioned that leaving Saddam in power meant that he would continue to control Iraq's oil, thereby again, although this time implicitly, indicating that it would be acceptable to start a war to fix this undesirable situation (Lunshof 2003f; 2003g).

The last of seven mentions in *De Telegraaf* of oil in connection to US war aims amounted to at least a partial denial of its salience. Dick Leurdijk, an expert with the prestigious Dutch Clingendael Instituut, comparable to the American Brookings Institute, claimed in an article with the headline "Europe underestimates problem of terror" (a quote of Leurdijk's) that Iraq's oil riches were "at the most an extra reason" for the US to attack Iraq. These seven mentions in *De Telegraaf* were very brief and did not occur in the headline or lead, with the exception of Leurdijk's dismissive comment, which occurred in the first paragraph.

All in all, this discussion shows how marginal the question of US oil interests was to the coverage of the run-up to the war in Iraq. The Dutch press treated the position that the US wanted to go to war because of Iraq's oil as either nonsensical (and therefore irrelevant and rightly ignored) or as a dubious assertion at best – the stuff of editorials and op-eds. As shown,

*De Telegraaf* all but completely ignored the issue of America's oil interests. *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant* also marginalized the issue, but when it was discussed this point of view was treated as a contested opinion, not as a common sense assumption. Washington's own assertions as to why the war was necessary, for instance because Iraq possessed WMDs or to bring democracy to the Middle-East, appear to have been regarded as having more credence than the oil-argument.

This study affirms Walgrave and Verhulst's (2005) conclusion that the Dutch papers neglected opposition to the war, for the main argument of the many opponents to the war was that the US wanted to invade Iraq to take control of its oil riches. An additional indication of the marginalization of dissident perspectives is the treatment of the former weapons inspector Scott Ritter, who in early 2003 was a well-known activist against the war. The "non-treatment" would be a more apt phrase. From January 1 to March 20, 2003, Scott Ritter was mentioned only twice in the three newspapers, both times in passing: once in *de Volkskrant* and once in *NRC Handelsblad*. The mentions did not concern Ritter's criticism of Washington's drive for war. *De Volkskrant* stated that Ritter and a few other UN weapons inspectors had admitted to having spied for the US and Israel while working in Iraq in the nineties (Ghattas 2003). In the other instance, Ritter's 1999 book was referenced in *support* of claims made in Powell's speech (Knip 2003b). The mainstream press in Britain too "almost completely ignored" Ritter in the run-up to the war (Edwards and Cromwell 2006: 41). The Dutch papers also did not provide a platform for prominent opponent of the war Maarten van Rossem. He received a few mentions but was not given a chance to explain his antiwar position. This is not to suggest of course that there was no criticism at all. For instance, well-known opponent of the war Marcel van Dam had a regular column in *de Volkskrant*.

### Study III: Shell's role

Assumptions that economic interests play an important role in the formation of Western states' foreign policy, and that business interests have always (successfully) attempted to influence state policy, are reasonable. As Chomsky (2009) put it:

*In thinking about international affairs, it is useful to keep in mind several principles of considerable generality and import. The first is the maxim of Thucydides: the strong do as they wish, and the weak suffer as they must. It has an important corollary: every powerful state relies on specialists in apologetics, whose task is to show that what the strong do is noble and just, and if the weak suffer it is their fault. In the contemporary West, these specialists are called "intellectuals," and with only marginal exceptions, they fulfill their assigned task with skill and self-righteousness, however outlandish the claims, a practice that traces back to the origins of recorded history.*

*A second leading theme was expressed by Adam Smith. He was referring to England, the greatest power of his day, but his observations generalize. Smith observed that "the principal architects" of policy in England are the "merchants and manufacturers," and they make sure that their own interests are well served by policy, no matter how "grievous" the effect on others, including the people of England, but most severely those who suffer "the savage injustice of the Europeans" elsewhere.*

The assumptions about the merchants and manufacturers being the principal (or at least important) architects of foreign policy are not just reasonable. Evidence that has by now accrued points out that Shell's interests were indeed on the minds of British and Dutch policymakers.

Already before the war in Iraq started, namely at the end of 2002, the Blair-government consulted with BP and Shell to ensure that they would get a piece of the large and looming Iraq-pie. Internal documents show that a high official in the British State Department said that “Shell and BP could not afford not to have a stake in [Iraq] for the sake of their long-term future... We were determined to get a fair slice of the action for UK companies in a post-Saddam Iraq” (Bignell 2011). In fact, reports that BP and Shell were lobbying the Blair-government already circulated before the invasion took place, with the corporations denying the reports. Also, Shell was reported to be active in trying to access Iraq under Saddam. An observer of the oil industry said in mid-March 2003 that Shell had been putting a lot of effort in secretly lobbying the Saddam regime to be let back in the country. This was denied by the corporation (Shah 2003).<sup>20</sup>

In 2011, Royal Dutch Shell was the second biggest corporation in the world by revenue, topped only by Walmart (CNN 2011).<sup>21</sup> In 2002, it was the eighth largest public company in the world (Forbes 2002). It cannot come as a surprise therefore that, according to the American ambassador in The Hague in a secret cable (Staps 2011), Shell exerts a large influence on Dutch foreign policy. Indeed, more circumstantial evidence is provided by the fact that high level Dutch politicians had strong connections to the oil company. Right before the start of the war in Iraq, in February 2003, Wim Kok accepted a job at Shell after his government had collapsed and he was

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<sup>20</sup> Across the Atlantic too, preparations for an Iraq-after-Saddam were underway. Citing unnamed oil industry employees, the *Wall Street Journal* reported in January 2003 that American oil companies were meeting with officials in the White House and other high level US officials regarding the exploitation of Iraq’s oil reserves after the war. The oil companies, including vice-president Dick Cheney’s former employer Haliburton, and Exxon Mobil, denied the report, as did the US Administration (Herrick 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Royal Dutch Shell was formed in 1906 out of a merger between the English oil company Shell and the oil company Royal Dutch. Sixty percent of the company fell into the hands of the Dutchman Henri Deterding, who also became managing director (Sampson 1975: 48). The Netherlands officially remained neutral during WWI, but Deterding ingratiated himself and his company with London by proclamations of allegiance to the British struggle and by refusing to squeeze extra profits from the British navy for shipments of oil, something he easily could have done under the stringent war conditions (Sampson 1975: 52). In 1928, the three major global oil companies, Exxon, Shell and BP, made a secret cartel agreement. Other major oil companies later agreed to abide by it too (Sampson 1975: 73-4).

no longer prime-minister. He left the company in 2011. Wouter Bos worked for Shell until 1998 before he became the leader of the social-democratic PvdA, a position he held in the crucial period before the invasion. These are only the two most prominent PvdA-politicians to work for Shell (Van den Dool 2012). On the other side of the North Sea, the same revolving door has been swinging more or less constantly and for a long time. For instance, it has been common for highly placed civil servants in the Foreign office to take accept posts at oil companies, including Shell (Platform 2007).

The revolving door between the Dutch government and Royal Dutch Shell goes all the way back to at least the thirties. Dutch prime-minister in the thirties Hendrik Colijn was a former director of Royal Dutch Shell. A governor of the Dutch East Indies in the thirties, B.C. de Jonge, was also a former head of Shell (Wesseling 1980: 127). Shell's activities naturally include trying to influence politics, from the past to the present. A review of released Wikileaks cables by Dutch journalist Marcel Metze, shows that the corporation works day-in-day-out with politicians in an attempt to influence them. As Metze (2012) concluded, "Oil is politics." And politics is oil. In the decades following WWII, the Catholic political party KVP cultivated intimate family and business ties with big Dutch corporations like Unilever, Philips and Shell.<sup>22</sup>

Shell has long been intimately involved in the process of foreign policy formation. This was a natural development, as in the twentieth century steady and affordable supplies of oil have been crucial to the survival of states. The "diplomatic significance" of the major oil companies, including Shell, "rested on the fact that Western governments had delegated to them, by accident or design, most of the task of ensuring the supply of the most critical commodity." For instance, during the dispute between OPEC and the Western oil consuming countries in the early

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<sup>22</sup> In 1968, a union leader famously declared that the Dutch economy was in the hands of a close-knit group of two hundred people (Van Amerongen and Brouwer 1995b).

seventies, it fell to representatives of these companies, “led by Piercy of Exxon and Benard of Shell,” to negotiate a new oil price with OPEC in the Fall of 1973 in Vienna. The media virtually ignored the meeting, at which “there were no diplomats present” and “which must rank as one of the most critical encounters in the history of oil.” The negotiations failed, and the oil crisis was on (Sampson 1975: 14-6).

Shell’s involvement in Iraq stretches back to the time when Iraq was not yet an independent country, but was under British control after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in WWI. The exploitation contracts were very favorable to the foreign oil companies and thus not so to Iraq, which made many attempts to change the terms of the contracts. In 1972, this struggle was concluded when Saddam nationalized Iraq’s oil industry, which meant that Shell and the other foreign oil companies had to leave the country. Under Saddam, Dutch companies had very little access to Iraq, although there was plenty of interest for doing business in Iraq among Dutch companies. Iraq preferred companies from countries that were less critical of its regime, like France, Russia and China. In April 2002, the Netherlands reopened its embassy in the country, partly in an attempt to promote economic interests (Davids 2010: 204-5). According to a report by Friends of the Earth Netherlands, “In the case of Iraq, Shell doesn’t seem to have interfered with Dutch and UK politics so much,” because this was not necessary. The British and Dutch governments seemed to be already sensitized to the economic opportunities that a post-Saddam Iraq offered (Ten Kate 2011: 44).

Shell must have regarded the 2003 invasion as a tremendous opportunity to again exploit some of the biggest oil and gas reserves in the world. Therefore it cannot come as a surprise that Shell wasted no time after Saddam was disposed of:



*“Shell has carried on quiet negotiations with Iraqi officials outside Iraq for five years,” American diplomats wrote in a cable on Sept. 9, 2008, after a briefing from Shell officials in Basra. That timeline, which was confirmed by numerous officials involved in the negotiations, indicates that Shell began discussing a gas deal with Iraqi leaders in 2003, long before the country had ratified a constitution or elected a government, while it was formally under U.S. control. (Lando and Van Heuvelen 2011)*

The truism that in the formulation of foreign policy economic factors are part of the equation was articulated by a former Dutch Secretary of State, Josias van Aartsen, only weeks before the invasion in 2003. He said that in March 2002, during a visit to Washington, he had already discussed what an Iraq after Saddam would look like: “Of course you also do that because you know that Dutch economic interests are at play. [...] I would have been a lousy Secretary of State if I had not taken those economic interests with me in the back of my mind” (Davids 2010: 203). In February 2003 he said that economic interests play an “indirect” role in the formation of Dutch foreign policy towards Iraq (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003p).

The Dutch government’s long-standing pro-Washington policy was already structurally in favor of Shell and big business in general. One of the reasons for the Dutch-US alliance after WWII was that their foreign policy aims coincided, the Dutch aims being “safety and free trade” (Wesseling 1980: 130). In other words, the promotion of Dutch business interests abroad, “free trade,” was part and parcel of foreign policy. The Netherlands and the US have long had intimate economies. In 2002 for instance, the economic ties between the two countries were worth hundreds of billions of dollars and provided for hundreds of thousands of jobs (OECD). Up to

the present, US-Dutch economic ties continue to be tight, as a 2011 report by the Dutch embassy in Washington shows.

Shell has a huge interest in harmonious trans-Atlantic diplomatic and economic relations. As Shell chairman Sir Philip Watts said in March 2003, “With a [US] Dollars 30bn footprint in the United States and a similar presence in Europe, we have a vested interest in the best possible relations on both sides of the Atlantic” (Macalister 2003b). A month earlier, Watts commented in *The Guardian* on the prospects for Shell in Iraq after the toppling of Saddam. According to him, Shell was in “a good position” to profit from Iraq’s oil fields after such a war. But Watts flatly denied that oil was the underlying motivation for such a conflict, deflecting further inquiry by saying: “I don’t think it’s helpful to pursue this line of questioning” (MacAlister 2003a). *The Independent* quoted Watts as denying that Shell had deliberated with any government about the future of the corporation in an Iraq after Saddam, but: “You would be very surprised if we hadn’t made our calculations” (Harrison 2003).

After Powell’s speech to the Security Council, Shell-executive Jeroen van der Veer said that Shell did not want a war and declined to discuss opportunities for contracts in Iraq: “To now talk about what will happen to the loot, I regard as a bit primitive.” But he went on to state that Shell was hoping for a level playing field for his company: “We want a fair chance in Iraq” (De Graaf and Van der Walle 2003). Shell-officials went to Downing Street in March 2003, before the invasion had begun, to press the case that after the war “there should be a level playing field for oil companies so that everybody has got a fair opportunity” (Newman 2003). As *NRC Handelsblad* noted, Shell’s profits in 2003 would be “determined” by “war” and “terrorism” (De Graaf and Van der Walle 2003).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Although Shell’s reputation in many quarters, especially among investors, has long been stellar, its corporate malfeasance has a long history. In recent years, cables leaked by Wikileaks have shown that Shell infiltrated

Did commercial interests (e.g. Shell's) play a direct role in the Dutch government's decision to support the US regarding its war plans? When the Dutch Secretary of State visited Washington in early February 2003, a file drawn up in preparation of the talks stated: "Regarding oil sector, NL believes that situation of 'level playing field' should be created for the private sector, which we trust is the US approach." The report on the actual talks does not refer to the issue of Dutch commercial interests (Davids 2010: 206). Nonetheless, the call for a level playing field was also the position that Shell took towards a post-Saddam Iraq. Although the Department of Foreign Affairs tried to lobby for Shell, the Commission Davids found no evidence of internal government discussion about these interests. According to the Commission it was doubtful already at the end of 2002 whether Dutch companies would be able to gain much access to Iraq after the invasion (Davids 2010: 207). It is known that British ambassador Colin Budd assured a high-level Dutch government official in March 2003 that Blair had already discussed Shell's interests with Bush (Ten Kate 2011: 44).

For the purposes of this study it is not necessary to prove definitively that economic interests informed the government's decision to support the war. All that needs to be shown is that the war was in the interests of Dutch political and economic elites. As the Commission Davids wrote, "It was nevertheless the case that the Dutch business community stood to gain from the existence of a level playing field in postwar Iraq" (Davids 2010: 530). The propaganda

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Nigerian government departments and that it provided the US with intelligence and also requested intelligence from the US (Smith 2010). *The Independent* reported that internal documents and court statements indicate that Shell in the nineties colluded with the former military government in Nigeria in violently repressing local protests against its activities (Rowell 2009). Although more oil is spilled annually in the Niger Delta than in the much reported on BP-spill in the Mexican Gulf in 2010, the disastrous consequences for the indigenous population rarely make headlines in the Western media. The indigenous population and environmental groups blame the oil companies operating in the area for most of the leakage and the resulting damage to people and environment (Vidal 2010). Shell has denied blame in all these instances. In the mid-nineties it started a huge public relations campaign to counter the negative publicity as a result of its involvement in Nigeria and the controversial sinking of the Brent Spar oil platform in the North Sea (Corporate Watch). In 2004, Shell admitted to having lied to its shareholders for about two years by having pretended in public that its oil and gas reserves were much bigger than they actually were (Gardiner 2004).

model then predicts that the media will reflect and endorse these elite biases. Shell profited from the invasion. In 2011, it signed a contract with the Iraqi government worth billions of dollars to exploit gas fields in the south of Iraq. The parties had already in 2008 reached a preliminary agreement to that effect, but the unstable situation in Iraq had prevented the deal to come into effect (*de Volkskrant* 2011a). Did the Dutch press in 2003 connect Shell's interests to the war in Iraq? How often did the Dutch press connect Shell's economic interests to the pro-American position that the Dutch government took?

## **Results**

A Lexis-Nexis search for "Iraq" was performed for the three papers between January 1, and March 20, 2003. Subsequently all the articles were retrieved which mentioned both "Iraq" and "Shell." For *De Telegraaf* these numbers were 531 and six respectively; for *NRC Handelsblad* 1122 and 20; and for *de Volkskrant* 944 and 8. For the three papers combined, this means that 1.3% of the total number of articles that mentioned Iraq also mentioned Shell (34 out of 2597). Of those 34 articles, only ten made an explicit link between Shell's interests and the coming war. Seven of those articles appeared in *NRC Handelsblad*, two in *de Volkskrant* and one in *De Telegraaf*. The one mention in the last paper constituted a brief denial by Shell-executive Jeroen van de Veer in a 125 word article that the corporation was at that time deliberating with the Dutch or British governments or the Iraqi opposition. *The Independent* would later prove this assertion to be false. Van der Veer denied that the "war loot" was "already being divided" but professed the hope that the future Iraqi government would give his company "a fair chance" to again do business in the country (Van Beuningen 2003). Only one of the ten articles which

linked Shell's interests to a war in Iraq explicitly linked the Dutch government's support for the war to the interests of Shell (Klok 2003).

**Table 4: Mentions of “Shell” in Dutch articles on Iraq**

The Netherlands	Iraq	Iraq and Shell	War linked to Shell's interests <sup>24</sup>
De Telegraaf	531	6 (1.1%)	1 (0.2%)
De Volkskrant	944	8 (0.85%)	2 (0.2%)
NRC Handelsblad	1122	20 (1.8%)	7 (0.6%)
Totals	2597	34 (1.3%)	10 (0.4%)

**Table 5: Mentions of “Shell” in British articles on Iraq**

Britain	Iraq	Iraq and Shell	War linked to Shell's interests <sup>25</sup>
The Independent	1614	N/A*	4 (0.2%)
The Guardian	1466	N/A	3 (0.2%)
Totals	3080	N/A	7 (0.2%)

\*This column is not relevant for the English papers, because unlike in Dutch “shell” is a word in English.

A comparison with two British quality newspapers is instructive. In the same time period, only three articles in *The Guardian* suggested that Shell had a clear interest in the toppling of Saddam, and four in *The Independent* did so, for a total of seven articles. The total for the two

<sup>24</sup> The numbers in this column lack an intercoder-reliability measure because of the uncomplicated nature of determining whether a link is made in an article between the war and Shell's interests.

<sup>25</sup> The numbers in this column lack an intercoder-reliability measure because of the uncomplicated nature of determining whether a link is made in an article between the war and Shell's interests.

Dutch quality papers was nine. These numbers echo Walgrave and Verhulst's observation (2005) that the coverage of the (run-up to) the war in Iraq was very similar across national boundaries. To the studied newspapers in the Netherlands and Britain, the notion that Dutch political support for the Iraq-invasion might be connected to the interests of Shell was close to unthinkable or at least could not be written. In this case, the propaganda model applies to both countries.

#### **Study IV: Reception of the Powell-speech**

Secretary of State Colin Powell's speech before the UN Security Council on February 5, 2003, was one of the most important events in the run-up to the war. Powell laid out the American case for going to war with Iraq. He claimed that the US knew for a fact that Iraq had WMDs, but he did not present evidence that could be verified. In other words, he did not disclose the identity of his sources and hinted that there was more evidence than presented by him: "I cannot tell you everything we know." But he emphatically claimed that his claims were factual: "Every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources. There are not assertions. What we're giving you are facts and conclusions based on solid intelligence." According to Powell then, not only had Iraq not disarmed, it was also trying to make more WMDs, including nuclear weapons. Iraq's weapons programs posed "real and present dangers" to the whole world, if only because Iraq was cooperating with Al Qaida. Iraq was thwarting the UN-inspectors and had not proven that it had destroyed all its forbidden weapons, in material breach of UN-resolution 1441. Iraq was behaving suspiciously, as if it were hiding something, the argument went. Powell claimed that "leaving Saddam Hussein in possession of weapons of mass destruction for a few more months or years is not an option, not in a post September 11th world."

Powell's presentation amounted to a partisan source making statements on the basis on anonymous sources – statements which flatly contradicted what the independent experts, the UN weapons inspectors, were saying, namely that there was no concrete evidence of Iraqi WMDs. The burden of proof for justifying going to war must be very high. In no way did Powell's assertions meet this burden, for he hardly provided anything that could be labeled evidence. What he did was assert that the US possessed evidence. This was so obvious that in the week before his speech, Powell already made known that he would not present conclusive evidence to support this central claims. This was of course a neat public relations move, aimed to take at least some of the wind out of the sails of the pundits.

Nonetheless, the Dutch government claimed to be impressed by the “evidence” marshaled by Powell. Prime-minister Jan Peter Balkenende said that Powell had undeniably presented proof. Secretary of State Jaap de Hoop Scheffer called the speech “convincing” and briefed parliament to the effect that much of what Powell had said dovetailed with information provided by Dutch intelligence sources.<sup>26</sup> The Commission Davids concluded that the military intelligence service MIVD reacted in an affirmative, positive way to the Powell-speech (Davids 2010: 304) and that the Dutch secret service AIVD too was not critical about the speech (Davids 2010: 342). Yet according to journalist Joost Oranje (2004), the government did not inform

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<sup>26</sup> The Dutch government clearly possessed the information to challenge the Powell-speech. The intelligence service AIVD reported to the Dutch government on February 7 that there was no evidence for Powell's assertions about a direct link between Al Qaida and Saddam (Davids 2010: 296). The Dutch State Department knew that the British report that Powell had referred to was based on a student thesis. A week after the speech UN-weapons inspector Hans Blix told the Dutch UN-representative that the “decontamination trucks” that Powell had warned against in actuality were water trucks (Davids 2010: 193). It was not the first time that Blix had warned the Dutch to not draw stark conclusions based on intelligence provided by national intelligence services. The information that the weapons inspectors had received from these agencies had been shown to be unreliable. Referring to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the Dutch intelligence service AIVD by the end of February reported that contrary to Powell's claims, the aluminum tubes that Powell had argued Iraq was trying to obtain could not be used to enrich uranium, a process which is a possible step towards producing an atomic weapon. The Dutch government neglected to inform parliament about these substantial doubts about Powell's speech; the inspections were deemed inadequate, the belligerent course of the US and Britain continued to be supported (Davids 2010: 194, 289-90).

parliament in 2003 that the Dutch military intelligence agency MIVD “regularly” reached “different conclusions” than the US or Britain. Journalist Kees Schaap (2004) and former weapons inspector Scott Ritter have argued that the Dutch intelligence services knew already at the end of the nineties that Iraq had no more WMDs.

The mainstream media discredited the Powell-speech explicitly and extensively only when it was too late. In August 2003 AP-reporter Charles Hanley challenged many of the claims made by Powell. He correctly noted that in his speech Powell had not provided any solid proof for his claims, as his claims were based on anonymous sources. Hanley wrote, “The defectors and other sources went unidentified. The audiotapes were uncorroborated, as were the photo interpretations. No other supporting documents were presented. Little was independently verifiable.” The initial reaction of many American journalists to the Powell-speech had been on the whole supportive. The number of war supporters among editorial writers at large papers immediately increased twofold (Hanley 2003; also FAIR 2003). The observation that Powell’s presentation was based on anonymous sources is important because it indicates that the media based their faulty judgments on their estimation of the credibility of Powell himself, that is, on their regard for the messenger, and not on sober reflection and verification of the message. The American media often mistakenly characterized Powell as a “moderate” or a “dove” (Solomon 2003; Naureckas 2003).

Because the Powell-speech was not (immediately) independently verifiable, one could make the argument that it was impossible for Dutch editors to make a reasonable guess overnight as to the veracity of Powell’s claims and that therefore they necessarily went with their “gut feeling” and their estimation of Powell’s credibility, probably caught in a (false) dichotomy with Saddam’s credibility. Yet it was quite possible to find credible sources that immediately



dismissed Powell's speech. "Colin Powell came up with absolutely nothing," said a Danish member of the EU-parliament right after the speech, admittedly in Baghdad (Hanley 2003). In the Netherlands, historian and media celebrity Maarten van Rossem made it very clear that he was less than impressed by Powell's "evidence" (Reijnders 2007). Public statements made by Powell himself and other Bush administration officials in 2001 to the effect that the sanctions were working and that Saddam posed no threat to the US were freely available on the website of the State Department (Marks 2008: 304-5).

Only two days after the speech, a lecturer in political science at Cambridge University, Glen Rangwala, posted an elaborate rebuttal of Powell's claims on the site grassrootspeace.org. On the day of the UN-presentation he had already revealed that a British government report purporting to prove that Iraq possessed WMDs was largely plagiarized from a graduate student thesis. Powell still referred to this report in his speech, calling it a "fine paper... which describes in exquisite detail Iraqi deception activities." The British foreign secretary Robin Cook, who resigned in protest days before the war, also questioned the existence of WMDs in Iraq (Lewis et al. 2006: 189). Other critical sources not lacking in credentials were available too, like lefty-stalwarts Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn, to British journalists Robert Fisk and John Pilger and Dutch journalist Stan van Houcke.

Information raising grave doubts about Powell's claims made it into the mainstream media. The magazine *Newsweek* reported on February 24 that the well-known Iraqi defector General Hussein Kamel, who had headed the Iraqi weapons program, had stated to UN-inspectors in 1995 that Iraq had destroyed all its chemical and biological weapons and banned missiles. On February 26, the original UNSCOM-IAEA document was obtained by Rangwala and posted on the internet. Kamel was quoted as saying: "All weapons – biological, chemical,

missile, nuclear, were destroyed.” What made this internal document all the more salient was that government officials had on numerous occasions used the defection of Kamel to argue the case that the inspections did not work. Powell for instance claimed in his speech that “It took years for Iraq to finally admit that it had produced four tons of the deadly nerve agent, VX. A single drop of VX on the skin will kill in minutes. Four tons. The admission came only after inspectors collected documentation as a result of the defection” of Kamel. He did not mention Kamel’s testimony that all the weapons had long been destroyed. The *New York Times* repeatedly used Kamel’s defection to argue the case that Iraq had WMDs, always neglecting to mention that according to Kamel himself they had been destroyed (FAIR 2003b).

Already in October 2002 the *Washington Post* published an article headlined “For Bush, Facts are Malleable,” in which Dana Milbank documented that Bush had regularly made false, imprecise or misleading statements about Iraq and its alleged possession of WMDs, its alleged ties to Al-Qaeda and other issues. Bush’s “rhetoric has taken some flights of fancy in recent weeks,” wrote Milbank. The month before, ABC, NBC and the *Washington Post* had reported that photos Bush had presented at a war summit with Blair and which purportedly showed that Iraq had a nuclear facility, were fraudulent (Artz and Kamalipour 2005: ix-x). A report released to the US House of Representatives in March 2004 documented 161 statements made by top US officials George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice prior to the start of the war – statements which based on the information available at the time to American intelligence agencies were “misleading” (Special Investigations Division 2004: i, ii).

The UN-weapons inspectors never said that there was proof that Iraq had WMDs. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) showed itself to be skeptical too. Already before the Powell-speech the agency rejected claims by President Bush that Iraqi secret agents disguised

as scientists had tricked the UN-weapons inspectors (Nijdam 2003a). On March 7, the IAEA stated that the rumors about aluminum tubes, magnets to enrich uranium and Iraq importing uranium from Niger were false (Davids 2010: 308). Powell's speech was also questioned by high-profile institutional sources. Russia, China and France, holders of permanent seats in the Security Council, made it clear right after the speech that they were not convinced. In mid-March German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder argued in a television address against war, because there was no proof of WMDs in Iraq, and because it was first and foremost the task of the UN to solve the issue. He proposed that the UN-inspectors continue their work (Artz and Kamalipour 2005: 32). In the US, prominent Republicans like former Secretary of State James Baker came out against the war, as did well-known generals Norman Schwarzkopf and Wesley Clark (Artz and Kamalipour 2005: viii). In short, outside of the Netherlands there were plenty of sources, independent experts, UN-experts and governments, which disputed the Powell-speech. Dutch journalists could pick which of these perspectives from abroad they would highlight.

In the Netherlands itself too, credible sources panned Powell's speech and, more generally, were critical of the coming war. In an article which explored the trend of "anti-Americanism" being on the rise in the Netherlands, *NRC Handelsblad* noted that former prime-minister Dries van Agt had spoken out against the war and that former Secretary of State Hans van den Broek too was "skeptical" regarding Washington's position regarding Iraq. Both had been politicians for the right-of-center Christian-Democrats, and when in office had been supporters of strong US-Dutch ties (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003a). Some critics claim to have been marginalized by the media: historian Maarten van Rossem for instance. As an expert on the United States, he was for a long time a regular fixture of current event programs. After 9/11 he found that he was less often invited, as a result of his comments which put the significance of the

attacks in historical perspective. His comments were regarded by some as making light of the terrorist attacks. According to Van Rossem, the reification of 9/11 in the Dutch media was a cause of their uncritical stance towards the US plans to go to war in Iraq. He was not the only one who received blowback for an attitude which some label “anti-American.” A foreign desk editor at the newspaper *Algemeen Dagblad* received a visit from his managing editor after he had written an article about the dangers of starting a war with Iraq. The managing editor asked him: “So, you believe that that bastard in Baghdad should be allowed to stay where he is?” (Reijnders 2007)

Journalist Stan van Houcke was another relatively lonely, critical voice. In response to the argument that it was at the time impossible to find out the truth, he argued that he and his “American colleagues of the alternative press” knew right away that Powell had put on a little play which lacked substance (Reijnders 2007). The Dutch magazine for media criticism *Extra!* published an article criticizing the reception of the Powell-speech in the Dutch press. The mainstream press knew too. On March 8, in the middle of a long article, *NRC Handelsblad* concluded in an off-handed manner that “many of the accusations” made by Powell had already been “shown to be false” (Knip 2003c). But the mainstream press neglected to prominently challenge Powell’s assertions. Dutch journalists had high-profile domestic sources at hand which were against the war, namely the smaller leftwing political parties SP and GroenLinks and former weapons inspectors who were Dutch nationals. The large oppositional party PvdA also displayed some skepticism. It spoke of partly “old” evidence which lacked coherence and argued that in the end it was up to the UN to determine whether Iraq had violated any resolutions (*De Telegraaf* 2003a).

In fact, Powell's speech had already been discredited by independent and expert sources before it even took place. For instance, in the book *Target Iraq*, published in the fall of 2002 and written by Norman Solomon and Reese Erlich, experts, activists and academics debunked the central claims that Powell would make in February 2003 with a thorough dissection of a speech by George Bush given in October 2002. The claims that were refuted included supposed links between Al-Qaida and Saddam; Saddam's supposed complicity in 9/11; that there was any proof whatsoever that Iraq had WMDs; and specifically that Iraq had nuclear weapons and that it was somehow a threat to the region and the world. These experts included Francis Boyle, a law professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, editor of *Middle East Report* Chris Toensing, authors Rahul Mahajan, As'ad Abu Khalil, Susan Wright and Phyllis Bennis, and author and professor Stephen Zunes (Solomon and Reese 2003: 125-54). All these sources were but a simple internet search or a phone call away. Conservative Americans academics John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt and the left-wing Australian academic Scott Burchill eloquently debunked the need for war and US propaganda before the Powell-speech. An expert in possession of a wealth of knowledge turned activist, former weapons inspector Scott Ritter, in 2002 put out a slim book together with William Rivers Pitt, which made the case that Iraq could not have any WMDs. But the Dutch press ignored Ritter.

Dutch journalists knew, could have or should have known before the Powell-speech that there was no evidence that Iraq had WMDs, that an invasion was considered illegal by almost all independent legal scholars (Bring and Brostrom 2005; Commission Davids 2010), that most people in the Netherlands too were against the war and that the Bush administration had no moral authority to oppose the supposed proliferation of WMDs, because it was itself a frequent violator of international law and was undermining WMD-treaties (Solomon and Reese 2003: 51-

2). In short, the facts and relevant historical background merited an extremely skeptical attitude to anything the US or Powell would say.

In his presentation to the Security Council on February 14, Hans Blix criticized Powell's speech. In his opinion, the inspections worked sufficiently well enough that a war would not be necessary. France argued that Iraq was far from an imminent threat to the world, but the Dutch Secretary of State kept to his bellicose course (Davids 2010: 195). On March 7, Blix reported to the Security Council that Iraq's cooperation was now "active," although not "immediate." He said that there was no evidence of Iraq's possession of mobile production facilities for biological weapons, and also not of underground storage facilities. According to the Commission Davids, the Dutch government had already made up its mind that there would be war soon. In its reaction to Blix the government emphasized that Saddam still did not do what he was supposed to and that he should change his obstructive behavior quickly, although his "active" cooperation was acknowledged. It would be hard to imagine what more the government could have wanted of Iraq, according to the Commission Davids. The answer might well have been that the build-up of American and British troops was completed and that an invasion had to take place in spring, because in the summertime it would be too hot (Davids 2010: 198-9).

The evidence to challenge Powell's claims was available virtually immediately after the speech. As the Commission Davids concluded, it was soon clear that the Powell-speech was unreliable (Davids 2010: 203). Certainly the speech, including the claims of WMDs, had fallen apart before the invasion began, to any diligent observer. A solid case could be made for extreme skepticism before the speech had even taken place. This is a crucial point, because some will argue that if the media reported on the speech in a more or less "balanced" way, then they would have done their jobs well. Yet this was no case of diverging opinions on a topic that reasonable

people can disagree about. This was a case of a transparent propaganda campaign based on lies coming from obviously self-interested sources on the one hand versus independent UN-weapons inspectors and a whole range of other expert sources and activists on the other whose self-interest was hardly obvious. In fact, many of them had more to lose by dissenting from Powell than by agreeing with them. An analogy might be drawn with the reporting by the *New York Times* on the lynchings of African-Americans in the 1890s, as described by David Mindich (1998). The *New York Times* regularly condemned the lynchings, but also quoted the perpetrators as claiming that the victims had been guilty of rape. Thus the newspaper wrote a “balanced story”, a story of “he said/she said,” leaving it to the reader to make up his own mind. But the *New York Times* failed to provide one crucial bit of information: the rape allegations were lies.

On the merits of the case then, there was hardly a reason to assign any credibility to the Powell-speech. A positive or even “balanced” reception could be explained by noting that Powell and his claims coincided with and reinforced existing biases among the editors: a pro-American bias, a tendency to lend more credence to powerful “official” sources over “activist” sources and to Powell over Saddam (however irrelevant that paradigm), and a tendency to align with or at least give too much credibility to their own Dutch government’s position. On the most general level, war with Iraq, or at least support for US policy – what some have dismissively called “reflexive Atlanticism” – coincided with Dutch elite political and economic interests. The propaganda model predicts that these interests will be reflected in the reporting.

The small business paper *Het Financieele Dagblad* provides an example of this bias. It opened an editorial entitled “Credible” with the estimate that Powell had presented a “powerful message” to the Security Council by providing “strong and disturbing clues” that Iraq still had WMDs. Although Powell had not shown beyond a doubt that Saddam had ties to Al-Qaida, the

newspaper took his ‘evidence’ as to those supposed links seriously and called them “unnerving” (De Jongh and Dirk Hekking 2003). In another article, under the English-language headline “Send in the marines,” the newspaper noted that the financial markets could not wait for the Americans to start the war – for the uncertainty as to whether there would be a war or not was a source of tension that the markets preferred to do without (Haenen 2003).

## **Methodology**

This fourth study examines the reception of the Powell-speech in the Dutch press. For the same three newspapers, op-eds, columns and editorials containing the word “Powell” from February 5 to February 12, thus from the day of Powell’s speech at the UN until a week after, were retrieved from Lexis-Nexis. This study is qualitative in nature and thus has an inherent subjective element. No intercoder-reliability measure was established. An advantage of a qualitative study is that it can provide more details and telling examples as to how the papers wrote about Powell’s claims. From the retrieved articles were selected the editorials, op-eds and columns which made one or more evaluative judgments regarding the speech. For *De Telegraaf* this left three articles and for *NRC Handelsblad* six. *NRC Handelsblad*’s online digital archive was used to determine which texts were columns, editorials or op-eds; the paper’s own classification was followed. For *De Telegraaf* Lexis-Nexis provided this information. For *de Volkskrant* one column and one editorial were found to explicitly assess Powell’s speech.

## **De Telegraaf on Powell**

*De Telegraaf* addressed Powell’s speech in two editorials. Both were strident in their support of the American Secretary of State. The first one, which was published the day after the speech,



unequivocally took the position that Powell had more than proven his case. Under the headline “Convincing” the first sentence stated that Powell had “convincingly shown that the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein up to the present day has completely disregarded the demand of the world community to disarm.”

**Table 6: Editorials, op-eds and columns in the Dutch press that supported the Powell-speech**

	Supportive Editorials	Supportive Op-eds	Columns	Totals
De Telegraaf	2(2)	0(0)	1(1)	3(3)
De Volkskrant	1(1)	0(0)	1(1)	2(2)
NRC Handelsblad	1(1)	2(2)	1(3)	4(6)
Totals	4(4)	2(2)	3(5)	9(11)

There could hardly be any doubt, according to the editorial, that Saddam had WMDs, for Powell “presented enough credible clues that Iraq does indeed possess those weapons, and components of those weapons, and moreover the means to deploy those weapons over long distances.” According to the editorial it was becoming clearer and clearer that there was only one viable option left: to have the Americans lead the effort to disarm Iraq (Lunshof 2003a).

The second editorial, published the day after the first one, aggressively attacked the Dutch political parties on the left for their “naïve” and “inept” reactions to Powell’s speech. The Socialist Party (SP) was singled out for its “anti-Americanism.” The SP’s crime was that it did not trust anything Powell had said. The party was conveniently ignoring that “the US cannot afford to tell nonsense.” The editorial lamented that the SP and the other political parties on the

left, PvdA and GroenLinks, were failing to comprehend how much of a threat Saddam posed (Lunshof 2003b).

A column written by Rob Hoogland crudely made fun of France and Germany's opposition to the American plans for war. In a fictional phone conversation between Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schroeder, Hoogland had the French leader say that, frankly, Powell's speech was completely convincing. "Chirac" said: "People who still do not believe that Saddam has nothing to hide, are insane." Typically, the German Chancellor was one step ahead of the French leader. If the inspectors were indeed to find weapons in Iraq, then France and Germany still had one option left. They could insist that they wanted to have verified that Saddam's fingerprints were on the weapons before they would have to concede that they had been wrong (Hoogland 2003). In summary: in its two editorials and one column after Powell's presentation at the UN, *De Telegraaf* unambiguously and uncritically supported Powell, his speech and his "findings."

A news article written by the American correspondent for *De Telegraaf*, Pieter Nijdam (2003a), in anticipation of the Powell-speech, deserves a special mention. A "recently retired high-level CIA-official" anonymously explained that it would be hard for Powell to convince the Security Council of the presence of WMDs in Iraq, because the US had good reasons to not present all the evidence. For instance, if Powell were to reveal unambiguous satellite photos which showed illicit Iraqi storage locations, the Iraqis would know they were found out and would hide their weapons in another location. The US would also be reticent to share such satellite photos because countries like China and Russia and terrorist organizations would benefit by learning more about the capacities of the US intelligence services and how they operated.

The article raised no doubts about whether Iraq actually had WMDs. This was assumed to be true. The issue at stake was whether Powell would be able to provide convincing evidence. The other sources Nijdam cited in the article were also US officials: Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and unnamed officials at the UN. One might speculate that the “retired CIA-official” had in fact not retired at all, but was on a mission to influence public opinion by giving an interview to the Netherlands’ most widely read newspaper. Certainly these kinds of covert propaganda techniques were used by the US government and private contractors as part of a huge campaign to sway public opinion towards support of the war (Boyd-Barrett 2003; Bamford 2005; Isikoff and Corn 2006).

### **De Volkskrant on Powell**

*De Volkskrant* discussed Powell’s speech in an editorial the day after. The American Secretary of State had not provided “incontrovertible evidence” that Iraq possessed WMDs, according to the paper, but the “presented evidence” was nonetheless “incriminating.” The possibility that the audio tapes and images had been manipulated was dismissed by *de Volkskrant*, because in an “open, democratic society like the US” such deceit would be too likely to get discovered. Certainly Powell had proven that the Iraqis were trying to mislead the weapons inspectors and even that they are succeeding; the inspectors were losing the struggle against Saddam. The editorial seemed to assume that Iraq possessed WMDs, for it concluded that the Security Council needed to find a way “to force the stubborn Saddam to disarm while preventing war.” Yet the paper also argued that there was no “clear casus belli” for the pending war (*de Volkskrant* 2003a).

In his column, Paul Brill characterized Powell's "performance" as "armored." Brill not so much discussed Powell's speech itself, but focused on the televised reactions to the speech by politicians and commentators. He noted that the "weapon and security experts" on the Dutch current affairs shows that evening were on the whole "impressed" by Powell's speech, which Brill characterized as more compelling "than most had expected." Sadly politicians had not shown themselves as open-minded as the experts, for they stuck to their old positions. Brill chastised a member of parliament for the socialist SP for trivializing Powell's speech as a "sideshow" (in Brill's phrase) to the efforts of the weapons inspectors. The socialist politician just did not seem to understand, according to Brill, that the essential point was that the inspectors kept coming up with nothing because of Iraq's lies and deceptions (Brill 2003).

Both articles thus supported the assumption that Iraq still had WMDs and if anything praised Powell's speech, although noting that Powell had not presented a smoking gun. The editorial dismissed the possibility that Powell had manipulated his data and Brill's column criticized a politician for placing more trust and authority in the weapons inspectors than in Powell. On the whole, the articles were favorably disposed towards Powell's speech.

### **NRC Handelsblad on Powell**

*NRC Handelsblad* opened its editorial entitled "A solid argument" with the observation that Powell's presentation had been "strong and impressive." This observation was directly followed by the caveat that Powell had not presented a smoking gun. Later on the speech was characterized as "having the force of an enumeration which shocks as a result of its quantity, presentation and details" and as "a solid story." Powell might not have convinced all the skeptics, but it was now reasonable to assume that Saddam was guilty, the paper opined, wrongly

predicting that global public opinion would now shift to the American side. Despite all the praise for Powell, the newspaper wrote about Iraq's "alleged" WMDs and the "alleged Iraqi threat." Powell's information still needed to be verified on the ground the paper argued, calling for a thorough investigation by the UN unhindered by stringent deadlines. Yet such an investigation could not take too long, because delays would only favor Saddam. Powell had made some compelling points, the paper wrote, but "it remains hard to prove that America has to preemptively defend itself with an attack against an alleged Iraqi threat." The editorial concluded nonetheless that Powell had strengthened America's case for war (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003b).

Two op-eds in *NRC Handelsblad* clearly supported Powell's speech. A. van Staden, director of the prestigious research institute Clingendael and professor at Leiden University, called Powell's "performance" before the Security Council "impressive." He argued that containment was not an option because it was likely that Iraq could still produce chemical and biological weapons. Terrorists might very well obtain these weapons (Van Staden 2003). The second op-ed, written by Ivo Daalder and James M. Lindsay of the Brookings Institute in Washington, opened with the authors claiming that Powell had put together a "powerful indictment against Iraq." Powell had "convincingly shown that war is justifiable." Iraq was in violation of resolution 1441 by deceiving the inspectors and "by refusing to come clean as to its WMDs." Although not all the aspects of Powell's indictment held up, on the whole he had been "convincing" (Daalder and Lindsay 2003). In a column Elsbeth Eddy argued that "at the minimum" Powell's speech had shown that "Iraq systematically and willingly thwarts the weapons inspections." She denounced containment as a viable option because "a military dictator could be kept in check, but not a crazy tyrant." In her estimation, Iraq posed a "clear and

acute danger,” including to the Netherlands: “We too are in danger” (Ettly 2003). She thus assumed that Iraq possessed WMDs, for how else could it pose a threat to the Netherlands?

An article that was on the whole critical of Powell’s speech was a compilation of the responses to a readers’ query on the website.<sup>27</sup> The prompt was: “Was Powell’s evidence convincing?” Most of the participants in the discussion were ardent opponents of the war, according to the editor who made the compilation. In the readers’ quotes Powell’s speech was denounced as “war propaganda” and the US was accused of selfish intentions (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003c). In the middle of a science column Karel Knip (2003a) showed himself critical of Powell’s speech. He undermined Powell’s assertions about the amount of anthrax that the US estimated Iraq possessed. The numbers keep changing, although “always are they big and threatening,” Knip noted, referring to Glen Rangwala of Cambridge University, who had compiled the numbers on his website. In another article, a news analysis the day after the Powell-speech, Knip (2003b) showed himself more supportive of Powell’s speech. He summarized the speech as containing “a lot of old news” and no smoking gun, but also as providing “new” and “salient” information and “a series of clear clues which convincingly demonstrate that Iraq is violating Security Council Resolution 1441.”

In summary: of the six op-eds, editorials and columns in *NRC Handelsblad* which evaluated Powell’s speech in the week after his presentation, four predominantly supported the Secretary of State, including an editorial and two op-eds. Two articles argued mostly against him and the American plans for war. It is of course ironic that one of the texts with predominantly negative judgments on Powell came from readers and not from the editors. Powell’s speech did indeed amount to “war propaganda.” The other critical article was a column on the science pages.

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<sup>27</sup> The compilation was coded as a column, see table.

## **Study V: Editorials on the Iraq-crisis**

An additional way to examine the larger question of how the Dutch press performed in the run-up to the war in Iraq can be provided by studying the newspapers' editorials. Editorials can be hard to interpret because, at least at *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant*, they were the result of the collaborative efforts of top-level editors, and therefore tended to be nuanced "this-and-also-that" arguments. In contrast, the editorials in *De Telegraaf* were signed by editor-in-chief Kees Lunshof. This explains in part why these editorials were much more straightforward, not to say one-dimensional. In deciphering these editorials therefore, there is some room for legitimate disagreement. Yet some of the characteristics of the editorials are quite unambiguous, for instance as to what they do not consider.

The editorials provide insight into what the highest echelons of Dutch journalism considered the most salient aspects of the Iraq-crisis. Editorials do not necessarily reflect the majority opinion at the respective papers, but they do reflect the aggregate opinions of the most influential editors. Although probably not avidly read by the average news consumer, editorials function as a way for influential editors to communicate the 'opinion of the paper' to lower ranked editors and reporters and perhaps to elite elements, for instance politicians, among the readership.

## **Methodology**

All the editorials in the three newspapers which mentioned the word "Iraq" from February 15 to March 20, 2003, the day of the invasion, were retrieved from Lexis-Nexis. This yielded eighteen hits for *NRC Handelsblad*, seven for *De Telegraaf* and ten for *de Volkskrant*.

Editorials that did not comment on or only tangentially mentioned the upcoming war were discarded. This left six editorials each for *De Telegraaf* and *de Volkskrant* and twelve for *NRC Handelsblad*. The selected editorials were coded for the absence or presence of, among others, the following themes/statements: the Iraq-crisis has detrimental effects on transatlantic relations or the relations between European states, or on the credibility or efficacy of international organizations like the United Nations (Disunity); the salience of the Iraq-crisis to Dutch domestic politics; Iraq (likely) has WMDs or will acquire them if a war is not started; Iraq (likely) does not have WMDs or there is no proof that it does; Iraq's oil riches are a factor in the drive for war; an invasion without Security Council approval is (deemed) illegal under international law; the invasion and ensuing war/occupation will negatively affect Iraqi civilians; public opinion is against the war.

As to the coding category 'imperialism,' the numbers in table 7 indicate the frequency with which the term was present in the editorials as a way of describing US policy towards Iraq. As to the categories 'Saddam,' 'Bush,' 'Schroeder' and 'Chirac,' the numbers indicate the frequency with which these key political players were pejoratively characterized, e.g. in Saddam's case as a 'dictator.' Thus, these categories were not meant to indicate criticism of policies, but concerned distinctly negative characterizations of powerbrokers, e.g. when *de Volkskrant* (2003e) wrote that Chirac had displayed "an unheard of rudeness and astounding paternalism." The category 'war for democracy' indicates how often the papers supported Washington's assertion that the war was fought to bring democracy to Iraq or the Middle East. The category 'Shell' indicates how often the oil company was mentioned in the editorials. The categories 'criticism of Powell' and 'criticism of The Hague' indicate how often critical mention



was made of the Secretary of State’s UN-speech and of Dutch government support for the looming war respectively (See Appendix C for coding sheet).

The editorials were coded by the researcher and recoded by native Dutch coder for an agreement of 0.95 as calculated with the Hosti-formula. A number above 0.90 is generally considered more than reliable (Wimmer and Dominick 2006: 169). Four categories yielded a disagreement of more than one. For the Disunity category the researcher found eighteen mentions in total, the coder found fourteen. For the claim or assumption that Iraq had WMDs, both found sixteen mentions, but not all in the same articles. For the category stating that an invasion would be illegal, the researcher found five mentions, the coder found two. As to references to public opinion, the researcher found nine, the coder six. The results by the coder thus are more critical of the papers than the coding by the researcher. Even if these four categories were excluded from the study, the conclusions would be the same.

**Table 7: Themes in Dutch newspaper editorials on the run-up to the war in Iraq**

	N	Dis- unity	Dutch impact	WMDs present	No WMDs	Oil	Imperialism	Int. Law	Iraqi civilians	Public opinion
VK	6	4	1	4	1	0	0	1	0	1
NRC	12	10	1	7	1	0	0	4	1	8
TG	6	4	2	5	0	0	0	1	0	0
Totals	24	18	4	16	2	0	0	6	1	9

**Table 7: Themes in Dutch newspaper editorials on the run-up to the war in Iraq**

(continued)

	N	Shell	Pejorative Saddam	Pejorative Bush	Pejorative Schroeder	Pejorative Chirac
VK	6	0	0	0	0	1
NRC	12	0	4	0	1	2
TG	6	0	2	0	0	0
Totals	24	0	6	0	1	3

**Table 7: Themes in Dutch newspaper editorials on the run-up to the war in Iraq**

(continued)

	N	War for democracy	Criticism of Powell	Criticism of The Hague
VK	6	0	1	0
NRC	12	1	1	0
TG	6	0	0	0
Totals	24	1	2	0

### **Disunity**

A major theme in the editorials in all three newspapers, perhaps the most prominent one, was concern over the strife within the European Union and between Europe and the US caused by the Iraq-crisis. An editorial in *NRC Handelsblad* titled “Requested: Unity” warned that “a divided European Union and ditto Security Council... is the specter that keeps re-appearing.”

The newspaper went so far as to claim that “the continued existence of international institutions like NATO, the EU and the UN is threatened by the issue-Iraq.” A unified front was necessary because only thus could maximum “diplomatic and military pressure” be applied to Iraq and could it be forced to disarm (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003d). The “authority” of the UN was “at stake.” The “scenario of a nightmare” would be if the UN remained divided and the US would go at it alone, another *NRC*-editorial argued. It expressed the hope that the US would be able to, through “pressure, influence and money” (in other words: blackmail and bribery), get the required nine votes from the smaller countries in the Security Council, provided there would be no veto from a permanent member of the council.

*NRC Handelsblad* seemed to regard it as more important that a unified position would be found than what that position actually would entail. The emphasis often was on the formalistic aspects. If only the UN could agree on the war, then the paper would be able to support it without hesitation. And if only the EU could overcome “the stranglehold of the individual member states,” a unified European foreign policy would become a reality (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003e). Although one could sympathize with the policy positions of Gerhard Schroeder and Jacques Chirac, the French and German leaders reminded *NRC Handelsblad* of Don Quichote and Sancho Panza, for they seemed to be “fighting windmills.” They had not come up with a plan which could unify Europe; they had not devised a “European approach” which the US would have to take seriously. As a result, although “nobody wants a war” it seemed that “credible alternatives” were quickly disappearing (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003f).

*De Volkskrant* too showed itself much concerned with the possible “bankruptcy” of the UN which would result from the two camps, France and Germany on the one side and the US on the other, sticking to their positions. Both camps were to blame, according to the paper. The US

had failed to make a compelling case for the necessity of war, whereas France and Germany were downplaying the requirements of UN-resolution 1441, which ordered Iraq's compliance with disarmament. Both sides should try to come to an agreement, because the stakes were high, namely "the future of the Western partnerships." Right now, these partnerships were "disintegrating" and "chaos" was ruling over "cohesion." The stark choice that the two camps faced was one between "world order" and "disorder" (*de Volkskrant* 2003c).

On another occasion, *de Volkskrant* warned that the Security Council would possibly not come to an agreement on the necessity for a war with Iraq. That would be "a political catastrophe." "The darkest scenario" would be if the US and Britain were to go to war by themselves, with the possible result that "NATO falls apart and the European Union ruptures" (*de Volkskrant* 2003f). In yet another editorial, again employing language that certainly almost a decade later appears hyperbolic, the paper wrote in reference to the EU that "There is no leadership, no functioning center of power – the Union has been completely atomized." The politicians of Europe, their speeches about the necessity of a strong and unified Europe notwithstanding, had failed. The Iraq-crisis had shown that in reality Europe was "weak and divided" (*de Volkskrant* 2003e).

*De Telegraaf* blamed France and Germany for creating "enormous divisiveness within the European Union, NATO and the Security Council" by opposing the US war plans (Lunshof 2003c).

### **Dutch politics**

Editorials in all three papers addressed the effects that the Iraq-crisis was having on Dutch politics. In the run-up to the invasion, the Christian-democratic CDA and the social-

democratic PvdA were involved in drawn-out negotiations with the goal of forming a coalition government. One of the points they were in disagreement on was the looming war. The CDA supported the war, as did the pro-free-market VVD. The PvdA had doubts, arguing that a war could not now be justified. Its position was somewhat ambiguous. It rejected the “political support” that the CDA-led government proclaimed for the US a couple of days before the start of the war, yet on the day of the invasion it declared itself in support of the war.

All three papers took the position that a coalition between the two parties would be ill-advised, as they disagreed on an issue as fundamental as the war against Iraq. According to *De Telegraaf*, it would be “totally absurd” for CDA and PvdA to continue to negotiate a coalition agreement as long as the two parties differed so much in their stance towards a war with Iraq (Lunshof 2003d). *De Volkskrant* too argued that as the parties disagreed on such a fundamental issue as “war and peace,” there hardly was a viable basis for fruitful cooperation. Somewhat surprisingly, *de Volkskrant*’s editorial on the day of the invasion dealt almost exclusively with the continuing negotiations between PvdA and CDA (*de Volkskrant* 2003g).

### **US intentions: oil and imperialism?**

As the propaganda model predicts, a privately-owned, advertising-dependent press will almost always assume or assert that the intentions of its own government and allied governments are benign. An indication of the bias in favor of the American and Dutch governments displayed by the Dutch press is provided by the fact that the most common objection to the war, namely that the US was simply trying to secure access to and control over Iraq’s oil reserves, was totally ignored in the editorials. In fact, the words “oil” or “Shell” were never mentioned in relation to US aims. Also, none of the editorials in the three newspapers mentioned the words

“imperialism.” And that while commentators like *New York Times*-columnist Thomas Friedman (2003) and Dutch intellectual Arend-Jan Boekstijn (2003), who were supposedly situated much further to the right on the political spectrum than certainly *de Volkskrant*, had no qualms about proclaiming that oil or other imperial needs played a role. In fact, a report by the neoliberal think tank Project for a New American Century (PNAC) commissioned in 2000 by among others Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz, leading forces in the Bush Administration and strong proponents of war, argued openly that the US needed to take long-term control of the oil in the Persian Gulf and of the region itself (Artz and Kamalipour 2005: xi-xii).

Richard Perle, another neoconservative and advisor to Rumsfeld, reportedly made clear in early February 2003 that there was likely nothing Saddam could do to avoid an American invasion, except for stepping down. Letting the weapons inspectors do their job unhindered would not do. According to Perle, Bush was “on a very clear path” to war (Artz and Kamalipour 2005: xii-xiii). Thus, there existed evidence that indicated that oil and the needs of empire played at least a significant, if not overriding, role in Washington’s drive for war, and that the concern for WMDs was overblown at the least, if not bogus. Moreover, as was of course well-known at the time, family members of George W. Bush, he himself, and some of his closest colleagues (most notably Condoleezza Rice and Dick Cheney) had intimate ties with the American oil industry (Yeomans 2004: 155-75), which supported the Bush-campaign of 2000 with two million dollars (Yeomans 2004: 163).

The editor-in-chief of *De Telegraaf*, Kees Lunshof, steadfastly supported the American plans for war and argued for Dutch support for these plans. US war aims were taken at face value: to disarm “the murderous dictator” Saddam. As *De Telegraaf* argued on March 17, “A war against Iraq therefore is legitimate and morally acceptable. For twelve long years Saddam

Hussein defied all the orders by the world community to rid him of his WMDs... Allowing this man to possess or produce WMDs, which he will certainly use when it suits him, is amoral.” The editorial concluded that if the world would not join the US and its allies in their righteous endeavor to rid the world of Saddam, then these countries should go to war with Iraq by themselves (Lunshof 2003e).

*NRC Handelsblad* also did not question the rationales provided by the US for going to war: to ensure the security of the US by getting rid of Saddam’s WMDs and to bring democracy to the Middle-East. In fact, the paper hailed the American “ambitions” as “breathtaking.” With “the rest of the world” still debating the issue of war with Iraq, the US was already planning the “phase after the next phase” (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003g). Another editorial referred to the events of 9/11 as explaining Washington’s penchant for pre-emptive war and Bush’s war preparations against Iraq. It argued that the Dutch could never understand what it must have felt like to be the victim of such a “flagrant act of aggression” (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003h). *NRC Handelsblad* did argue in two editorials that the US “motives” for attacking Iraq were not in order, but the context made clear that what was meant by “motives” was that the US had not made a credible enough case that the attack on Iraq was a “legitimate retribution” for the 9/11 attacks, in other words that the US had not presented a convincing “casus belli.” The paper did not suggest that the US might have other intentions than those which were publicly stated (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003h and 2003i).

*De Volkskrant* also did not critique US proclamations that safety concerns were the motivation for an attack on Iraq. Nor was Bush characterized in a pejorative way. The paper did chastise French leader Jacques Chirac for exacerbating the divisions within Europe by criticizing Eastern-European countries’ support of the US. *De Volkskrant* declared that Chirac’s behavior

was of an “unprecedented rudeness and an astounding paternalism.” Certainly the Americans had not behaved as badly as that, according to the paper (*de Volkskrant* 2003e).

### **International law**

The Netherlands has played an important role in the development of international law. The founding father of the field, Grotius, was Dutch and the country is home to a number of international courts, like the International Criminal Court in The Hague. The Yugoslavia tribunal is in The Hague also. Yet the editorials in *de Volkskrant* ignored the salient fact that almost all the international law experts claimed, at the time and subsequently, that an invasion by the US would be illegal without a mandate provided by the Security Council (Marks 2008: 305; Davids 2010). The paper did publish a news article on March 18 in which three legal scholars argued that an invasion would be illegal (De Boer 2003).

*De Telegraaf* quoted PvdA-leader Wouter Bos as saying that war would be “illegitimate” but did not elaborate. *De Telegraaf* claimed that based on Resolution 1441, which stated that Iraq would face “serious consequences” if it did not fully cooperate with the UN-inspectors, the invasion would be “legitimate” (Lunshof 2003d). This assertion was contrary to the position that almost all legal observers took. Howard Friel and Richard Falk (2004) have found that the editorials in the *New York Times* consistently ignored the issue of international law in the run-up to the war in Iraq and during other foreign policy crises. The same can be said about *de Volkskrant*. *De Telegraaf* even asserted as uncontroversial an almost universally rejected version of international law which favored the US.

*NRC Handelsblad* did address the issue of international law. One editorial argued that the UN needed to support a possible war, because this is what “the international rule of law”



prescribed (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003j). The resistance against Bush's plan to start a preventive war without a "clear casus belli" was understandable, *NRC Handelsblad* argued (2003g). The paper noted that Resolution 1441 did not explicitly sanction war as a legitimate path, and opined that "a preventive war without UN-support" would form a "huge problem" for the "international rule of law" (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003k). Although the US as a result of 9/11 had changed its security policy for good reason, it should not resort to a preventive war. States had the right to defend themselves, but Iraq had not attacked the US. Only the UN could provide the legitimacy under international law. If the US were to go at it alone, then this would mean a "disastrous" blow to the "authority of the UN" and would "create a dangerous precedent."

According to the paper, the fact that the world was teetering on the brink of war was first and foremost the fault of Saddam, as he kept refusing to disarm, yet Washington had not made a convincing case that war was justifiable (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003h). Although the *NRC*-editorials did not mention that there was a near complete consensus among legal scholars that the US going to war without express permission from the Security Council would be illegal, the paper did publish several op-eds by legal experts who claimed that an American invasion would be illegal.

## **Public opinion**

*De Telegraaf* ignored public opinion, which was overwhelmingly against the war, both in the Netherlands and abroad, apart from a brief expression of hope that the world would still come around to the American position (Lunshof 2003e). *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant* did make mention of the global opposition to the war. The former paper frequently referred to opposition to the war, although often rather briefly, writing for instance that Gerhard Schroeder deserved "respect" for his insistence on a peaceful solution to the Iraq-issue, although this

political course partly arose from “political opportunism.” Schroeder’s position was in line with the public sentiments in Europe, *NRC Handelsblad* noted, but it also warned that Schroeder had the duty to nurture Germany’s diplomatic relations with the US and to behave more like a “statesman” than a “demagogue” (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003l). The paper opened an editorial with the sentence: “The problem of a war with Iraq is public opinion – specifically outside of the US.” The worldwide opposition to the war was “understandable,” according to the paper, as the US had not made a solid case for war (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003g).

One of the editorials in *de Volkskrant* mentioned public opinion. Global protests of “more than six million people” must “not be ignored,” the paper opined, adding that opinion polls too showed widespread resistance to an American war with Iraq. “Most” of the protestors were against the war and not in favor of Saddam, according to the paper, predicting that France and the protestors, would probably get what they wanted, namely that the UN-inspectors would get more time to search for WMDs (*de Volkskrant* 2003j). In conclusion, the issue of public opinion played a small role in the editorials penned by *de Volkskrant* and a significant role in *NRC Handelsblad*’s editorials. *De Telegraaf* ignored public opinion.

### **Iraqi civilians**

The propaganda model predicts that victims of aggression perpetrated by a commercial media’s own government or by allied governments will be ignored or that their plight will be downplayed. They are in Herman and Chomsky’s ironic terminology “unworthy victims.” Indeed, this holds for the Dutch press. *De Volkskrant* totally ignored the question whether the Iraqis themselves wanted the US to invade. In fact, the paper ignored the issue of Iraqi citizens completely, never mentioning them, their current situation or their potential plight as a result of

an American attack and occupation. *De Telegraaf* justified war by pointing out that Saddam repressed his own population, but otherwise ignored the Iraqis too (Lunshof 2003e). What they themselves wanted was deemed irrelevant.

On the day of the invasion, *NRC Handelsblad* used Saddam's repression as a justification for war. It also wrote that the human rights of the Iraqis should be honored, that they should be free and should be able to profit from the abundance of natural resources in their country. In direct answer to Bush's question (Are you with the US or with the terrorists?), the paper answered that the Americans and Brits were "fighting for the good cause." What was important now was that the Iraqi people would suffer as little as possible during the war and the rebuilding of Iraq after the war (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003i). In addition to these couple of sentences devoted to the Iraqis, the paper wrote an editorial on the fate of the Kurds, who were again likely to become the victims of the geopolitical struggles of the great powers (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003m). In short, the plight of Iraqi civilians played a virtually non-existent role in the three papers' editorials.

### **Criticism of the US**

*De Telegraaf* leveled no criticism at the US. *NRC Handelsblad* did. One editorial argued that there was no legal basis for an attack on Iraq, as there was no proof that Iraq had attacked the US. Only the UN could provide the US with the legal mandate to go to war and it had not done so. If the US would decide to go to war without a mandate, then this would be a "severe" blow to the international legal order. But the paper also claimed that the primary man responsible for the crisis was Saddam Hussein, for he kept refusing to disarm, and that countries like France, Germany, Russia and China too were "not increasing the authority of the UN and the Security

Council by so openly displaying the division” between them and the US (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003h). *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant* did not criticize the Powell-speech, but both made one short reference each to Hans Blix’s criticism of that speech (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003o; *de Volkskrant* 2003f).

In an editorial published on the day of the invasion, *NRC Handelsblad* again rejected the “Bush-doctrine, which makes a preventive war possible on the basis of indirect clues.” The US had not made a convincing case to go to war, for war should be the last option and there were still others available. In the end though, “the Americans and the British are fighting for the good cause.” The UN had been unable to disarm Iraq. Saddam had committed genocide and was a proven danger to the region, for he had attacked Iran and Kuwait. With the help of the Americans, the Iraqis could now be free of oppression. Yet Washington had made mistakes. For instance, it should have acquired more international support for its endeavor, it should have given the inspectors more time, and if only Bush had presented credible evidence of ties between Iraq and Al-Qaida. Nonetheless, according to the paper, all of those objections had now lost much of their salience: “Now that the war has begun, President Bush and prime-minister Blair should be supported. That support cannot remain stuck in verbal permissiveness. That means political support – and if necessary also military” support (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003i).

Is this not a frank declaration of allegiance to Western power – an allegiance which, when push comes to shove, trumps concerns about human rights and international law? When traditional allies and global powerhouses the US and Britain go to war with Iraq, international law suddenly becomes irrelevant, as does (lack of) evidence of WMDs. Does the editorial not say that when the US decides to start a war, even on specious grounds, the Netherlands must fall in line, no matter legalistic or humanitarian qualms? To *NRC Handelsblad*, in the end it was of

no consequence that the case to go to war was shaky at best. When the US goes to war, the Netherlands should follow.

*De Volkskrant* leveled some criticism at the US. It noted that the report by Hans Blix in the middle of February had created problems for Bush, because it would not convince the Security Council that an attack on Iraq was necessary. The “European critics of Bush” were right in arguing that everything possible had to be done to prevent war, the paper opined (*de Volkskrant* 2003f). The paper argued that the US should broker a solution to the ongoing strife between Israel and the Palestinians, as opposition in the Middle East to a war with Iraq was fierce. In that region, a clear double standard was presumed to be employed by the Americans. Saddam was being threatened with removal from power, whereas the US allowed Israel to continue to suppress the Palestinians. This was of course a “simplistic” view, *de Volkskrant* noted (2003k), but one that was exploited by “the Bin Ladens of this world.”

If Washington, which had failed to make a convincing case for war, were to go to war by itself without UN-approval, then this would mean the “bankruptcy” of the UN, *de Volkskrant* warned, extending the same warning to France and Germany. Their continued opposition would also mean the “bankruptcy” of the UN. The three countries thus carried a heavy responsibility. And although the US had not made a convincing case for war, France and Germany had been too cavalier as to the requirements of Iraq laid down in resolution 1441. In short, the Americans had to muster more allies and they should not go to war by themselves, whereas the French and the Germans should agree to a specific date at which the inspections would be considered to be completed. The choice that the three countries faced was one of “world order” versus “disorder” (*de Volkskrant* 2003c). The disarming of Iraq through inspections was preferable to war, the

paper argued, but the inspections would only work if the Americans would keep pressuring Saddam through a military build-up (*de Volkskrant* 2003d).

## **WMDs**

*NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant* rather frequently assumed or stated that Iraq had not disarmed (*NRC Handelsblad* 2003j and 2003e; *de Volkskrant* 2003e, 2003c and 2003d).

Certainly such statements or assumptions were more frequent than statements to the effect that there was not enough evidence to assume that Iraq had WMDs. *De Volkskrant* (2003c) made clear that inspections as a means to disarmament were preferable to war, but also noted that the inspections would only work if the US forces kept putting pressure on Iraq. On another occasion (2003f) the paper editorialized that everything possible should be done to prevent a war, but that on the other hand the inspections could not be allowed to drag on forever. The *Telegraaf*-editorials took it as a fact that Iraq had not disarmed, and that it thus possessed WMDs.

## **Conclusion editorials**

The editorials provide insight into what the highest echelons of Dutch journalism considered the most salient aspects of the Iraq-crisis. Issues like the illegality of the war under international law, the suffering of Iraqi civilians as a result of an invasion and occupation and the vehement worldwide public sentiments against a war were clearly deemed of only secondary concern at best. The most important aspect of the crisis was deemed to be the threat which the divisions in the EU, NATO and the UN allegedly posed to these same institutions. The papers had no doubt that the proclaimed US intentions were indeed its true intentions. More opportunistic explanations like oil and the demands of maintaining the American empire were

not even mentioned. Bush was not characterized pejoratively. Conversely, the integrity of politicians of other countries, e.g. Gerhard Schroeder and Jacques Chirac, was on occasion questioned.

For the most part, the papers assumed that Saddam indeed had WMDs and was deceiving the UN-inspectors. Their incorrect assumption that Saddam (likely) had not disarmed, made them vulnerable to the arguments put forward by the White House. *De Telegraaf* uttered no criticism of the US, but *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant* did to a limited extent. The latter paper mostly “balanced” criticism of the US with criticism of France and Germany. *NRC Handelsblad* was probably the most critical of the three papers, especially in regard to the illegality of a preemptive strike. Yet the Dutch government’s support for the looming war was criticized by none of the papers.

This discussion of the editorials in *de Volkskrant*, *NRC Handelsblad* and *De Telegraaf* shows that the propaganda model holds for the Dutch press too. Iraqi civilians were deemed “unworthy” victims and the intent of the Dutch and American governments were not questioned; their proclamations as to why they wanted to go to war were taken at face value, although *de Volkskrant* and especially *NRC Handelsblad* maintained that the case had not been convincingly made. This discussion also shows that especially *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant* focused mostly on the debates within elite political circles on the Iraq-issue, almost completely excluding other perspectives, like that of the legal profession and the many critics of the US, and also of some self-proclaimed “friends” of the US, who claimed the war was about oil and empire. The editorials were an exercise in inside-baseball. They focused on dissecting the diplomatic maneuvers at the highest levels at the White House, and the UN, and in The Hague and the large capitals in Europe.

The positions that the editorials took were squarely within the limits set by those institutional actors. *De Telegraaf* supported the US unconditionally. The positions of *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant* were more nuanced and therefore a bit more difficult to pin down. Yet the editorials gave the distinct impression that these papers were more favorably disposed towards the US than to any other party to the conflict. The emphases in *de Volkskrant* and *NRC Handelsblad* on the importance of unity within the UN and the EU, on continued integration of the EU countries and on the preservation of transatlantic relations echoed long-standing Dutch policies, and certainly not the opinions of the majority of the Dutch population, which rejected the EU-constitution in 2003 and in majority was opposed to the Iraq-war. The editorials thus indicate that the opinions of the editors of *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant* were much closer to Dutch and Western political and economic elites than to public opinion. *NRC Handelsblad*, *de Volkskrant* and *De Telegraaf* hardly reflected, let alone promoted, the concerns of the public at large; they mostly argued against them. The editorials in *de Volkskrant* were the least outspoken, but on the day the war started, the paper wrote non condemnation, but devoted an editorial to the implications of the war for Dutch domestic politics.

On the day of the invasion, *NRC Handelsblad* explicitly proclaimed itself to be on the side of the US and Britain (as *De Telegraaf* had consistently done), despite the legal objections to a preemptive war that the paper had identified. One is reminded of American ambassador Sobel's estimation that the Dutch emphasis on the requirements of international law could be irksome, but that in the end, fortunately, the Dutch were "flexible" in this regard and that the US in fact profited from having an ally which had the reputation of being a stickler for international law. *NRC Handelsblad* argued that the Netherlands should not just provide political but if necessary also military support to the US. And although the editorials in *De Telegraaf* did not



explicitly address the issue of Dutch military support, their unabashed defense of the American cause and their praise for the Dutch government's support of the US can hardly leave any doubt that the paper would, at the least, not have been opposed to active Dutch military support.

### **Chapter conclusion**

It has been correctly pointed out that the US media “had a responsibility to test the Bush administration's claims regarding Iraqi WMDs and Al Qaeda links, to report factual inconsistencies, and to remind us of previous inconsistent statements by members of the administration. In addition, they should have given due weight to opposing views on the case for war, including those who argued that the invasion of Iraq would be a violation of the most fundamental norm of international law” (Marks 2008: 298). Additionally, it is fair to say that in the context of the Iraq war, giving “due weight” to the legal objections to such a war, meant that the media should have consistently highlighted that the near consensus among independent legal scholars was that an American invasion would be illegal. Media that consider it their task only to report what people in power say, while providing little context and without checking statements made by the powerful, do democracy a disservice. They are not engaged in assisting people to exert their responsibilities as citizens, but are handmaidens to power. With some exceptions, the American media failed to perform these tasks basic to journalism and democracy.

The Dutch press failed too. It too showed a severe lack of skepticism regarding crucial issues like the alleged presence of WMDs and Powell's speech. The press mostly fed the notions that Iraq had WMDs and that Powell had made a convincing case for war. Even if the press had been “balanced” in its account of these issues by affording roughly as much space and prominence to both skeptical and affirming stories on Powell and WMDs, then that would still

have meant a dereliction of duty. For there was never any concrete evidence for the existence of WMDs and Powell's speech did not square with the available evidence at the time. The pieces of the puzzle from which a coherent and strong case against the war could be constructed, were available to the press at the time. Some might object that one can hardly expect the press in the Netherlands, such a small country with limited resources, far removed from Iraq, to have been able to do good journalism. Yet with the vast capabilities of digital technologies, chief among them the internet, being what they were in early 2003, there was no excuse. Information from credible sources that convincingly challenged or at least questioned the rationales put forth for war, were easily available, not just on the web but also through traditional channels.

One remarkable aspect of the coverage in the three Dutch papers is the almost complete lack of evidence that Dutch journalists took advantage of the internet to research the truth about the Iraq-issue. The lone exception that this study found was *NRC Handelsblad's* reference to Glen Rangwala's critical web postings. The picture that arises from this study is one of a press addicted to the proclamations of official sources and Anglo-American press agencies, the accidental foreign correspondent notwithstanding, and of a press which was almost completely incapable of putting issues on the agenda that were not pushed by institutional sources. Another eye-catching feature is that of a press enamored with Washington, even with a Washington in which a Republican, radical-fundamentalist president occupied the White House. Among the Dutch, George W. Bush was probably the most unpopular American president in decades. The pro-American bias of the Dutch press coincides with a longstanding and cherished fundamental of Dutch foreign policy: support for the United States, the liberators in WWII. This bias was clearly present in all three papers. This was to be expected in the populist-conservative *De*

*Telegraaf* but the bias also existed in *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant*, the latter being the mainstream paper in the Netherlands that is the furthest to the left on the political spectrum.

This study indicates that the differences between the Dutch papers, although they might seem big, especially to journalists, should not be exaggerated, at least not when the topic is foreign affairs. To be sure, the editorials and reporting in *De Telegraaf* were in a class of their own regarding their one-dimensional celebration of Washington. Yet all three papers were favorably disposed to the Powell-speech, all reported mostly uncritically about the alleged presence of WMDs in Iraq, and all failed to link the interests of Shell to the pro-war position of the Dutch government. The intentions of the US (let alone The Hague) were mostly left unexamined. Control over Iraq's oil, although a likely explanation and certainly the most prevalent among the many opponents of the war, was marginalized as an explanation. International law was ignored in the editorials, except by *NRC Handelsblad*. While a high-minded journalist at *NRC Handelsblad* denounced the "vulgar-Marxist" notion that this war was about oil, American and British oil companies, including Shell, were already negotiating with Washington and London about how to exploit the oil reserves in post-Saddam Iraq. Ironically, Dutch public opinion had a better grip on reality than the professional journalists who were supposed to enlighten public opinion in the service of democracy.

It was might, not right, that was pushing for war in Iraq, and then not even a broad coalition of global power houses, but "only" London and Washington, supported by a few other governments, in opposition to almost the whole of the rest of the world: governments, independent law experts and weapons inspectors, international institutions and organizations and peoples alike. The case for war was extremely shaky, yet the Dutch press often uncritically relayed and even supported bogus claims about WMDs and other transparent rationales for war,

and mostly argued that Powell had made a solid case for war. The Dutch press assigned more credibility and space to the clearly partisan (because party to the conflict) American officials than to independent experts.

In short, the Iraq-coverage in all three papers was severely flawed. The main point to be made though is that these flaws were not random. The biases in the Dutch press are, on the whole, in favor of vested political and economic interests, precisely as the propaganda model and the tradition of political-economy of the media in general predict. These biases were consistent with longstanding Dutch official policies: mainly, a concern with nourishing the transatlantic ties with Washington, which are deemed instrumental in maintaining “safety and free trade.” At times this concern reached almost hysterical heights in the usually sedate editorials of the two quality dailies. In stark contrast, the plight of the Iraqis as result of an invasion and occupation was deemed a very minor aspect of the Iraq-issue, let alone the question whether they in fact wanted to be “liberated.”

The findings of this study are in concord with the main findings regarding the coverage of the run-up to the war in the US and Great Britain. They are also in concord with the two studies done previously on the Dutch coverage and with the critical-historical framework laid out in part I. Just like the American and British press, the Dutch press too showed itself biased in favor of political and economic elites and often against the interests of the Dutch population at large. Although it is not often acknowledged, this could well be the most salient characteristic of mainstream Dutch journalism’s coverage of foreign affairs and macroeconomic issues. It is certainly a most worrisome characteristic.

## CHAPTER 8

### THE MEDIA ON THE US WITHDRAWAL FROM IRAQ

This chapter examines the coverage of the US troop withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011 in three Dutch newspapers and on the two serious daily news shows. The newspapers are the same as the ones studied in the chapter on the run-up to the war, namely *De Telegraaf*, *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant*. In the third quarter of 2011, *De Telegraaf* was the paid-for Dutch newspaper with the highest circulation (over 550 thousand). *De Volkskrant* (about 230 thousand) and *NRC Handelsblad* (about 185 thousand) were still the most read quality national dailies, according to online numbers compiled by the HOI institute for Media Auditing. The news shows studied are the signature newscast on the public broadcaster, the eight o'clock Journaal, and the six o'clock newscast on the commercial broadcaster RTL4.

The coverage is examined as much for what it contained and as for what was ignored. As Jeffery Klaehn (2009: 51) has noted, to the propaganda model, “omissions are of central importance and connect to the boundaries of debate.” The propaganda model exposes the media for applying a double standard. Official enemies of the state get a much harsher treatment than official allies and corporate interests. The needs and opinions of the population at large are often deemed less important than repeating the narratives spun by institutional sources. As Ben Bagdikian (2004: 25) put it, news biases exist in, and can be gleaned from, the “imbalance [...] in what is chosen – or not chosen – for print or broadcast.” This chapter attempts to establish whether these broad conclusions also hold for the Dutch coverage of the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. After a short overview of major events in Iraq after the US invasion, first the press coverage will be discussed and then the television coverage.

## **Iraq after the invasion**

The US and British forces swiftly defeated Saddam's army, causing much destruction and "collateral damage." President Bush wasted no time declaring an end to formal combat, in a public relations bonanza on the deck of a US warship. "Mission Accomplished," he declared. Only a few months after the fall of Bagdad, the Netherlands sent 1200 military personnel to Iraq. The contingent stayed in the province Al Muthanna until early 2005, suffering two deadly casualties and killing a number of Iraqis (Jaspers 2005: 1). The Dutch government claimed that the contingent was not part of the occupation forces. This was only formally true, but not in practice. The Dutch contingent fell under the command of a British military official (Davids 2010: 266). The hyped WMDs were never found. There exists plenty of evidence to suggest that the claim that Saddam had WMDs was consciously promoted by the US and Britain as a means to build support for a war. Certainly evidence to the contrary was recklessly ignored at the time. In an interview with *Vanity Fair*, Paul Wolfowitz appeared to acknowledge that the WMDs-story was first and foremost a cover designed by the neoconservatives to promote a war they had already set their minds on before 9/11.

The insurgency against the Western occupiers triggered a vicious civil war between Iraq's Sunnis and Shi'ites. Revelations about torture perpetrated by US soldiers in Baghdad's infamous Abu Ghraib prison (infamous because of the crimes of Saddam) and other war crimes (Brecher et al. 2005) further undermined the already dismal image of the United States in the Middle East. A couple of millions of Iraqis fled the violence. The estimates of the numbers of deaths vary wildly, but based on the various studies and estimates done, it is safe to say that at least more than a hundred thousand Iraqi civilians died from the violence, with other studies claiming that hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost (FAIR 2011). These deaths were in addition to the

humanitarian disaster caused by the economic sanctions against Iraq in the nineties, which according to the UN cost half a million children their lives and did nothing to unseat Saddam (Edwards and Cromwell 2006: 13-31). Infamously, Madeleine Albright, Bill Clinton's Secretary of State, claimed that Washington considered this "worth it" (Mahajan 2001).

An unprecedented number of journalists have been killed in Iraq, often by US forces. Some observers have raised the possibility that US forces have deliberately targeted the representatives of the "free press" (Paterson 2011). It would seem the ultimate irony that representatives of Western media outlets, which did so much to provide the ideological cover for the illegal invasion, would find themselves and their supporting staff targeted for their lives or imprisoned by Washington. When the violence had died down significantly, the major American, British and Dutch oil companies, including Shell, secured contracts worth billions of dollars and moved into the country (Ten Kate 2011: 44-5).

Against the wishes of Washington, the Dutch government helped Shell to continue its operations in Iraq's neighbor Iran until the oil company got access again to Iraq itself (Metze 2012). In December 2011, American forces withdrew from Iraq. Sectarian violence continued, many Iraqis still lived in degrading conditions, and prime-minister Nouri al-Maliki hardly acted as an enlightened democrat. Iraq still faced serious problems (Van Vliet 2011) or was a "failed state" (Hofland 2011). It would be naïve to assume that the American troop departure meant that Iraq was now truly sovereign. At the American embassy, which boasted a budget of billions of dollars, worked sixteen thousand people, five thousand of them armed guards (Roelants 2011).

## **Press coverage of the US withdrawal**

The first salient feature of the Dutch coverage of the US troop withdrawal in mid-December 2011 is its paucity. Aside from a number of news stories, the three Dutch newspapers published only fourteen articles that provided context to, or some kind of evaluation of, the war in Iraq and the US withdrawal (letters to the editor were excluded). In *NRC Handelsblad* and *de Volkskrant* each six such articles were found. Some of these articles were only partially devoted to the topic. A number of reasons might have caused this rather surprising lack of coverage. For one, the withdrawal had been a long time coming. Before the withdrawal even took place it was to some extent already old news. Among editors especially, there might have been a feeling of weariness about news from Iraq. Also, the topic by now lacked a Dutch political dimension. The Dutch soldiers had already left Iraq in early 2005. The withdrawal could therefore with some justification be seen as an American-Iraqi affair. Moreover, in December 2011 other foreign events could be deemed more important than the withdrawal, e.g. unrest in Syria. Nonetheless, the US withdrawal provided a perfect news hook to evaluate almost a decade of US and Dutch involvement in Iraq.

The amount of attention in *De Telegraaf* was especially meager. Only two articles provided an evaluative perspective on the war and the withdrawal. One of these articles (*De Telegraaf* 2011a) amounted to a vehement defense of the decision by George W. Bush to invade Iraq. According to the article, in the weeks after 9/11 Bush possessed some evidence that pointed towards the possibility that Al Qaeda possessed WMDs. Bush then asked himself, according to the article, “which states would in principle be able and willing to provide Al Qaeda with a bomb?” The answer was Iraq, according to the article, because Saddam “was crazy enough to cooperate with Al Qaida” and “producing WMDs was part of the core business of the Arabic



tyrant.” In short, Bush’s intentions had been pure, namely he had wanted to protect his country from further terrorist attacks. Two core assumptions that this article makes, namely that in 2003 it was reasonable to assume that Saddam had WMDs and moreover that he would give them to Al Qaeda, a religious organization which despised the Saddam’s secular regime, have no merit.

## **Methodology**

The Dutch press coverage is discussed by examining the absence or presence of a number of themes. The articles were coded by the researcher (See Appendix D for coding sheet). Recoding by a native Dutch speaker, who received a brief instruction beforehand, yielded an initial intercoder-reliability measure of 0.94 as calculated with the Holsti-formula. A measure of 0.90 or higher is generally considered more than reliable (Wimmer and Dominick 2006: 169). By discarding a few categories on which substantial disagreement existed and after a discussion on the instances where categories were coded differently, the degree of agreement was raised to a perfect 1.00. This is exceptional, but not remarkable in the context of this study. Almost all the categories were descriptive and, moreover, merely concerned simply identifying whether a statement was present or absent in the text.

## **Casualties and refugees**

The coverage in the Dutch press downplayed the extent of the nefarious impact of the invasion and occupation on the Iraqi people (Table 8). These caused a couple of million Iraqi refugees, but this was ignored in the coverage. The official number of American wounded was provided on occasion, but an estimate of Iraqi wounded was not. The number of Iraqi deaths is still hotly debated, but there is widespread agreement that the number is higher than one hundred

thousand, whereas about 4500 American troops lost their lives. The Dutch papers provided estimates of the number of Iraqi deaths in the range of “tens of thousands” (Elshout 2011a) to “150.000 human lives” (Vreeken 2011). The higher estimates of hundreds of thousands, e.g. in the medical journal *The Lancet* (Burnham et al. 2006), were not mentioned.

**Table 8: The Dutch press on the US withdrawal from Iraq 2011: Casualties and refugees**

Number of articles that mention...	NRC	VK	TG	Total
The official number of American deaths	3/6	2/6	1/2	6/14
An estimate of Iraqi deaths	2/6	2/6	1/2	5/14
The official number of wounded Americans	1/6	1/6	1/2	3/14
An estimate of the number of wounded Iraqis	0/6	0/6	0/2	0
An estimate of the number of Iraqi refugees	0/6	0/6	0/2	0

### **Background to the invasion**

The coverage in 2011 almost completely ignored the events in early 2003 which culminated in the US invasion (Table 9). That is to say, key facts which reflected badly on the Dutch and US governments were all but ignored. No mention was made of the Powell-speech before the UN, of worldwide resistance against the invasion, including among the Dutch population, or of the opinion of almost all legal experts at the time, and subsequently, that an invasion would be illegal. It should be remembered that only the year before, in 2010, the Commission Davids concluded in its authoritative report that the invasion had been illegal, and thus implicitly that the Dutch government had provided support for a crime for which Nazi-leaders were hanged at Nuremberg. Yet only one article in *NRC Handelsblad* (2011a), an

editorial, referred to Dutch government support for the US-led war. The editorial stated that the report by the Commission Davids “clearly showed how lightly a loyal ally [of the US] can let itself be dragged along.” The report was in fact much harsher than that, concluding that evidence that Iraq did not have WMDs was ignored by the government (chapter 7). The only remark in the editorial that can be construed as criticism was the observation, without explanation, that the Dutch political support of the invasion lacked “factual arguments.”

The Dutch commentary framed the US withdrawal from Iraq as mostly an American story, ignoring Dutch complicity. This neglect seems unjustified at least to some extent, as what the Dutch government does or did should be more salient to the Dutch press than what the US government did or does.

**Table 9: The Dutch press on the US withdrawal from Iraq 2011: background on the 2003 invasion**

Number of articles that mention....	NRC	VK	TG	Total
That US claims that Iraq had WMDs were wrong	2/6	1/6	0/2	3/14
That US claims of ties between Saddam and Al Qaeda were wrong	0/6	1/6	0/2	1/14
That the invasion was deemed illegal by almost all experts	0/6	0/6	0/2	0
The Powell-speech before the UN in 2003	0/6	0/6	0/2	0
The Dutch government’s support for the war	1/6	0/6	0/2	1/14
That (global) public opinion was overwhelmingly against the invasion	0/6	0/6	0/2	0

Only three out of fourteen articles noted that the main American argument for war, namely that Saddam's WMDs posed a threat, was wrong. An editorial in *NRC Handelsblad* (2011a) remarked that the "totalitarian sadist" Saddam "did not possess WMDs" and that "the lack of this alibi for the military intervention" had "a negative effect on the unity of the international community." But the editorial remained silent on the fact that the (very likely) absence of WMDs was already clear to many experts in 2003 or on the possibility that the US administration consciously lied or enhanced the truth in order to garner support for an invasion. *NRC*-columnist Henk Hofland (2011) wrote the most critical assessment of the American occupation of Iraq, asserting that Bush's decision to unseat Saddam started a "flood of lies and enormous mistakes." He then succinctly noted that "in contrast to what Bush and those around him kept saying [Saddam] had no WMDs." The only other reference to WMDs in *NRC Handelsblad* occurred in a news story (2011b, not coded), which noted that American president Barack Obama neglected to address the absence of WMDs, "which Iraq possessed according to then president Bush, which later turned out to be wrong." In *de Volkskrant*, Arie Elshout (2011b) noted in a factual tone of voice that the WMDs "were not found." The only other mention of WMDs in that newspaper in December 2011 was in an article (not coded) on the organization Independent Diplomat, in which it was briefly noted that Britain went to war with Iraq without hard evidence that that country had WMDs (Van Bommel 2011).

In short, the background on the Iraq-war provided in the coverage in 2011 clearly presented a rather rosy version of the history of the run-up to the invasion from the perspective of the Western belligerents.

## Reasons for and consequences of the invasion

This bias was even more pronounced in relation to the reasons for the 2003 invasion (Table 10). Oil interests, specifically the interests of Shell, and ‘imperialism’ as a description of US policy were completely absent from the coverage.<sup>28</sup> Conversely, declarations of benign intent were clearly present. For instance, an interview in *NRC Handelsblad* with an American diplomat opened with his (unchallenged) observation that the American aims towards Iraq were well-intended (Valk 2011). *NRC*-editor Carolien Roelants (2011) opened her evaluation of the US occupation with the statement that “the invasion of Iraq has not, as promised, brought democracy to the region.” As in 2003, she took the American rhetoric of aiming to bring democracy to the region by attacking Iraq at face value, only noting that things did not work out that way.

**Table 10: The Dutch press on the US withdrawal from Iraq 2011: reasons and consequences**

Number of articles that mention....	NRC	VK	TG	Total
Oil as a possible reason for war	0/6	0/6	0/2	0
That the war served Shell’s interests or that Shell negotiated before war with London about Iraq	0/6	0/6	0/2	0
‘Imperialism’ as a possible reason for war	0/6	0/6	0/2	0
That Iraq is now free or sovereign or democratic	2/6	2/6	0/2	4/14

Benign intent on the part of the US was quite regularly stressed. Carolien Roelants (2011) cited American Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta as saying that America’s “mission to make

<sup>28</sup> The only time that ‘Shell’ and ‘Iraq’ were mentioned in the same article in the three newspapers concerned an upbeat interview in *De Telegraaf* (2011e) with the head of Shell in Iraq. The interview mentions for instance that Shell invests in a community project in Iraq.

that country sovereign and independent has been accomplished” and then commented that “indeed, Iraq is independent.” In an interview in *NRC Handelsblad*, American writer Karl Marlantes asserted unopposed that the war in Iraq was caused by “stupidity” and not the result of some kind of “conspiracy” (Donkers 2011). Again, US intentions were not questioned. Rather the war in Iraq was, just like those in Vietnam and Afghanistan, seen as the result of honest mistakes. *Volkskrant*-columnist Paul Brill (2011) also in agreement cited Panetta as saying that Iraq is now “free and sovereign.” Brill asserted that historians will continue to debate whether the positives resulting from the US invasion have outweighed the negatives. On the plus side, he wrote, a “murderous dictator” was unseated, but the intervention itself also caused death and destruction. On the plus side again, the US freed the region of Saddam, but as a negative result Iran increased its influence. Another negative he identified was the damage to the US image as a result of the war.

*NRC Handelsblad*'s editorial (2011a) argued that “positive reflections on the ‘war on terror’” by Panetta and Obama were “understandable,” for “Iraq has not become another Vietnam. The Americans have left with their heads held high.” In *de Volkskrant*, Arie Elshout (2011b) offered the same analysis. The US withdrawal had been nothing like the withdrawal from Vietnam, with its chaotic helicopter scenes in Saigon. He too cited in agreement Obama’s remark that the US troops were leaving Iraq with their heads held up high. Yet the last US ground troops left Iraq suddenly, very early in the morning and without giving notice to the Iraqis, out of fear for attacks. Elshout (2011b) accepted as a fact that the American neoconservatives truly wanted to bring democracy to Iraq, only remarking that they by now must have realized that “democracy cannot be imposed upon a strange people.” Elshout framed the US troop withdrawal as a story of Obama delivering on one of his campaign promises. Yet he did

note that Obama's and Panetta's claims of "all's well that ends well" betrayed a degree of historical "revisionism" which the general public might not be willing to accept.

*NRC Handelsblad* (Roelants 2011) and *De Telegraaf* (Van Vliet 2011) framed the US withdrawal as a victory for Iran, because the Shi'a government there was strengthening ties with the government in Iraq in which Shi'a now had a majority say. Paul Brill made the same point in *de Volkskrant*. Noting the high costs of the war, Roelants wrote that "for that amount the great violator of human rights and aggressor Saddam Hussein was gotten rid of in 2003." She ignored the issue of the absent WMDs altogether. The US itself did not gain much from the war, she asserted, for contrary to the US government's plans at the time, Iraq did not develop into a democracy vibrant enough to infect the whole region.

### **US misconduct in Iraq**

American misconduct in Iraq has been well-established but was ignored by the Dutch press in its retrospectives on the US occupation (Table 11). Only one, somewhat oblique, reference to US war crimes was made. In discussing the US, its involvement in Iraq and its "culture of lies," Henk Hofland (2011) mentioned a book by Vincent Bugliosi, entitled *The Prosecution of George W. Bush for Murder*. As mentioned, Henk Hofland's column was the most critical assessment of the US withdrawal. Although he wrote it in *NRC Handelsblad*, the fact that he also writes for the leftwing magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer* indicates that his position is close to the fringes of what can be expressed in the Dutch mainstream media. The torture practices in Abu Ghraib went unmentioned in the Dutch press.

**Table 11: The Dutch press on the US withdrawal from Iraq 2011: US misconduct in Iraq**

Number of articles that mention...	NRC	VK	TG	Total
That the US committed war crimes in Iraq	1/6	0/6	0/2	1/14
That the US tortured people in Abu Ghraib prison	0/6	0/6	0/2	0

**Bush versus Saddam**

Articles frequently referred to Saddam in pejorative ways (Table 12). He was called a “ruthless dictator,” a “great violator of human rights and an aggressor” and of course “dictator” (Hofland 2011; Roelants 2011; Elshout 2011b). George W. Bush was not characterized pejoratively. Yet he could have been called, for instance, a “violator of international law” or a torturer. Or he might have been referred to as a “religious zealot” or a “religious fundamentalist” (Domke 2004). It is rather remarkable that the press in the Netherlands, a country which strongly prefers Democratic presidents, was so meek in criticizing an extremist Republican president.

**Table 12: The Dutch press on the US withdrawal from Iraq 2011: Bush versus Saddam**

Number of articles that mention...	NRC	VK	TG	Total
A pejorative characterization of Saddam	4/6	2/6	2/2	8/14
A pejorative characterization of Bush	0/6	0/6	0/2	0

**Public opinion**

Public opinion on the occupation and withdrawal was marginally covered in the Dutch press (Table 13). Only a few references were made to Iraqi public opinion. That the majority of the American people is now of the opinion that the war in Iraq was immoral was ignored. The



position that the war was morally wrong (CNN/ORC; Montopoli 2010) was hardly present in the Dutch coverage. Again the Dutch press was less critical of power abuses than the population at large. The same was the case in 2003 (chapter 7) and in the fifties regarding the issue of racism in the US (Roholl 2008).

**Table 13: The Dutch press on the US withdrawal from Iraq 2011: public opinion**

Number of articles that mention...	NRC	VK	TG	Total
The opinion of the Iraqi people on the war/US departure	0/6	2/6	1/2	3/14
The opinion of the Dutch people on the war/US departure	0/6	0/6	0/6	0
The opinion of the American people on the war/departure	0/6	0/6	0/2	0

### **Broadcasters on the US withdrawal**

The commercial broadcaster RTL4 produced three items on the US withdrawal. The public broadcaster's Journaal produced only one. The Journaal's item, which was broadcast on December 18, started with the presenter asserting that the "most controversial war of the last ten years" had ended. "The regime of Saddam Hussein was unseated," according to the item, but "the toll for both the US and Iraq was high," a remark that seemed to suggest that Americans and Iraqis had suffered in roughly equal measure. The item continued to state that "tens of thousands of Iraqis" had lost their lives, an unusually low estimate, and "4500 Americans."

The item showed an emotional American soldier applauding by the side of the road, as he watched how the last US troops were leaving Iraq. "A job well done," he told the camera. The item continued to state that "according to the Iraqis, the Americans were nothing less than occupiers," but that "Americans regard the departure as the end of a successful action." Yet

according to an opinion poll by CNN/ORC in mid-December, 2011, seventy-seven percent of Americans were of the opinion that the US achieved only some or a few of its goals, while only twenty-two percent believed that the US achieved most of its aims. The poll also showed that half of the US population believed that the war was morally wrong, a perspective absent in the Dutch coverage of the withdrawal. A CBS News poll held in August 2010 showed that according to most Americans the US hardly achieved anything in Iraq and that the US should never have invaded Iraq (Montopoli 2010).

The Journaal-item asserted that “the outcome of the war was less positive to the Iraqis” than to the Americans. An Iraqi man said that he was glad that the Americans were leaving, as they had killed so many of his compatriots. According to the item, at least one thing was clear, namely that the Americans were leaving behind a different Iraq than the one they encountered in 2003, namely “a fledgling democracy” that will have to chart its own course but in which “violence is still a daily occurrence.” The on-air sources were a US soldier and an Iraqi civilian, in that order.

As with the Dutch press, the public broadcaster ignored certain salient issues which would have put US involvement in Iraq in a distinctly less favorable light. The illegality of the war was ignored, the issue of the missing WMDs was ignored, the millions of Iraqi refugees were ignored and American war crimes were ignored. Dutch complicity in the war was ignored and the role of oil interests was ignored. Conversely, the observation that with Saddam the US had removed a tyrant put a positive spin on the invasion and had the effect of redeeming the US’s role. The paucity of attention paid to the US withdrawal by the public broadcaster is rather remarkable. Its daily eight o’clock news show usually run to about 25 minutes, uninterrupted by commercials. The Iraq-item ran for only 1.31 minutes.

RTL4 broadcast its main item on the US troops leaving Iraq on December 14. Presented by the US correspondent Erik Mouthaan, it was considerably longer than the public broadcaster's item (2.39m). The on-air sources were, in order of appearance: Obama, a US soldier, George W. Bush and another US soldier. Although all the on-air sources were Americans, the item was nonetheless distinctly critical. It recounted that the promised WMDs were not found, that the US did not appear to have a plan drawn up for a post-Saddam Iraq, that a civil war had broken out and a "terror campaign" against the "occupier." Mouthaan spoke of "abuse of power and torture," while pictures from Abu Ghraib flashed across the screen. The estimate of Iraqi deaths given was 150.000 to 300.000, by far the highest estimate in the Dutch media. The high costs of the war to the US (thousand billion dollars) were mentioned and the fact that "16.000 diplomats and CIA officers" remained in the country, guarded by "controversial" American security firms. The item concluded with Mouthaan correctly asserting that most Americans now saw the invasion and occupation as not having been worth it. An American soldier was shown saying that he did not know the answer to the question whether the deaths of his fellow soldiers were "justified."

RTL4 Nieuws broadcast two more Iraq-items, both on December 18. These items were far from critical. The first one (length: 1.36m) stated that the US had toppled the dictator Saddam, had arrested him and put him on trial, after which he was executed. No other possible motives than disposing of a dictator were suggested as having contributed to the decision to go to war. The US paid a heavy price, the item noted, namely 4500 deaths. Iraqi deaths were not mentioned. The item concluded by mentioning that some feared that the American departure might lead to another civil war in Iraq. The sources which talked on camera were, in order of appearance: three US soldiers and finally an Iraqi civilian. The other item broadcast on

December 18, during a different news broadcast that day, was only 43 seconds long. It too mentioned only US deaths. Two sources talked on camera, both US soldiers. The last soldier spoke of “a job well done.”

## **Conclusion**

This study confirms that, as the propaganda model would predict, the Dutch media suffer from a persistent pro-American bias. The Dutch coverage of the US withdrawal from Iraq was notable for its scarcity, uncritical treatment of the US government and for ignoring of the Dutch complicity in the invasion. The main issues that had made that war “one of the most controversial of the last ten years” were all but ignored: the illegality of the war, the large scale global resistance, the plausible assumption that oil was a reason for the invasion and in general the interests of Western oil corporations in gaining access to Iraq, and the absence of WMDs. The extent of Iraqi suffering was downplayed. Saddam was vilified, but Bush was not. US intentions were generally assumed to have been benign, for instance to bring democracy to the Middle-East. Not infrequently the US withdrawal was framed as a victory for Iran.

It is sometimes asserted that digital media provide journalists with extra opportunities to make a broader range of sources heard. This study discovered not a single indication that the internet had any influence on news content. It remains what it always has been, on the whole biased in favor of the interests of Dutch and American political and economic elites.

## CHAPTER 9

### THE PRESS ON THE GREEK EURO-REFERENDUM

This chapter examines the reaction in the Dutch press to the proposal by Greek prime-minister George Papandreou to hold a referendum on the euro crisis. The unexpected disruption of European politics as usual resulting from Papandreou's proposal in late 2011 presents an excellent opportunity to examine the depth of the commitment to democratic deliberations among Dutch journalists. That Papandreou's motivation for proposing the referendum was to some extent political and not purely out of concern for democracy is irrelevant (Roos 2011). Chapter 4 established that elitist strands run deep among leading sections of Dutch society, including or especially among journalists working for quality newspapers. This chapter functions as a test of that assertion. The results of this content analysis will say something about the extent to which Dutch journalism identifies with the average person or with elites and about the extent to which journalism promotes or thwarts real democratic processes.

During the euro crisis, dominant political and economic elites were heavily invested in forcing austerity measures upon Greece, preventing the collapse of the common currency and preventing the country from having to leave the euro zone. Financial interests tried to guarantee that Greece would repay its loans. Prominent countries France and Germany, and also the Netherlands, aimed to discipline Greece into accepting the severe austerity measures and to force it to further liberalize its economy. Loans that Greece urgently needed were used as leverage. In Greece, the austerity measures led to riots and strikes. Unsurprisingly, politicians throughout Europe, including in the Netherlands, condemned Papandreou's proposal for a referendum on the implementation of the austerity measures, revealing their shallow commitments to democratic politics and their preference for technocratic solutions. German

finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble went so far as to suggest that Greece would be better off were it led not by political parties but by a technocratic government (Valenta 2012).

The likely effects of the austerity measures were widely understood to be detrimental to the living conditions of many Greek citizens. Greece had a right to consult its citizens on the far-reaching policies. Did the Dutch press highlight the democratic rights of the Greeks or the perceived need to rescue the euro? In other words, did the press value national democratic processes over the needs of European capitalism or vice versa? (Roos 2011)

## **Methodology**

Four Dutch newspapers were studied regarding their commentary on Papandreou's proposal from November 1, 2011, the day after Papandreou made his proposal public, to November 7, 2011. These papers were the quality papers *NRC Handelsblad*, *de Volkskrant* and *Trouw*, a paper with a small circulation and a confessional-conservative reputation. The fourth paper was the populist-conservative *De Telegraaf*, the largest paid-for newspaper in the Netherlands. News articles were excluded. The focus was on op-eds, editorials and other articles in which an opinion was expressed about the referendum proposal. Articles which mentioned the proposal only in passing, without providing evaluative language, were also excluded. Interviews were counted as non-news articles when they expressed an opinion about the issue.

The articles and letters to the editor were coded by the researcher for supporting the plan for a referendum, denouncing it or neither clearly supporting or denouncing it. A native Dutch speaker recoded the articles and letters after receiving a short instruction (See Appendix E for coding sheet). The recoding yielded an intercoder-reliability measure of 0.87 as calculated by the Holsti-formula (0.84 for the non-news articles and 1.00 for the letters to the editor). This is

somewhat lower than the desired 0.90, but measures above 0.80 are “acceptable in most situations” (Wimmer and Dominick 2006: 169). A possible reason for the relatively low intercoder-reliability measure is that the total number of non-news articles plus letters to the editor was small (namely 46), with the consequence that disagreement on only one article already lowered the intercoder-reliability measure substantially. This chapter first discusses the articles which agitated against the proposal for a referendum, and subsequently the articles which defended a referendum. Readers’ reactions will be discussed in the last segment of this chapter.

### **Against the referendum**

Three of the four studied newspapers (*NRC Handelsblad*, *Trouw* and *De Telegraaf*) overwhelmingly agitated against a referendum, often dressing up their denunciations in stark formulations. In two editorials, *De Telegraaf* called Papandreou’s proposal “insane” (2011c) and “foolhardy” and a “desperate offensive move” (2011b). According to the paper, Europe was fed up with the Greek “antics,” (2011b). World leaders had had it with the “deceiving” and “blackmailing” Greeks (2011c). The subsequent extreme pressure put on Papandreou to relent by for instance German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French president Nicolas Sarkozy, was justified because the proposal had thrown the euro zone and the financial markets in “complete chaos” (2011b). The proposal for a referendum threatened “the future of Europe and the euro” (2011c). A third editorial in *De Telegraaf* (2011d) heaved a big sigh of relief at the news that the referendum, that “idiotic proposal,” would not be held. Thankfully, the editorial asserted, the Greeks had regained “some of their mental faculties.” The editorial went on to suggest that it should be possible to remove countries from the euro zone that “structurally mess up their

finances.” A column in *De Telegraaf* (2011f) referred to Papandreou as a “loser,” who had made a fool of Europe before he “finally” relented.

In a column, an editor of *Trouw* explained that the paper had not written an editorial when Papandreou announced his proposal because it had chosen to focus on a domestic immigration issue. Had the paper written such an editorial, it would have argued against the proposal, for the future of the euro “is too important to submit to the citizen.” Referenda “can of course be a beautiful democratic instrument” but not when the topic is complex, as in this case. Moreover, calling for a referendum suggests that current policymaking is not already democratic. Yet the politicians that will decide the future of the euro were elected by the people (Schoonen 2011). The *Trouw*-editors thus believe that the current situation is in fact a democracy, whereas a strong case can be made that it hardly is (chapter 4).

An op-ed in *Trouw* opened with the assertion that Papandreou had proposed his referendum “in a fit of insanity... as if the crisis in Europe is not already deep enough.” The author went on to catalogue the consequences: the stock markets plummeted, government leaders were “aghast” and “populations lost even more faith in a good ending” (*Trouw* 2011b). Yet another op-ed in *Trouw* argued that Papandreou had shown “recklessness” by proposing the referendum. For the “disastrous initiative” threatened to frustrate the rescue plan for Greece (*Trouw* 2011a).

*NRC Handelsblad* addressed Papandreou’s proposal in four editorials. The first one, headlined “a very risky referendum,” opined that “a more dangerous decision can hardly be imagined.” Fortunately, if a referendum were to be held, this would be done quickly. At least the “uncertainty” would be short. That was the only good news. Papandreou had caused a “shock wave” to travel through Europe, had put his credibility on the line and would have plenty to



explain at the upcoming G20-summit in Cannes. Of course, the editorial asserted, nations have the right to organize their democracy the way they see fit and therefore the “outrage” in the Dutch parliament to some extent smacked of “hypocrisy.” Left-leaning parties like the PvdA and GroenLinks had earlier proposed to introduce referenda in Dutch politics. They had no right therefore to protest too loudly now that the Greeks, “albeit much too sudden, threaten to choose a referendum.” Yet, according to the editorial, the Greek initiative exemplified why representative democracy is preferable over democracy by referendum; for the Greeks would likely vote against the European aid package, which was nonetheless necessary (*NRC Handelsblad* 2011c).

Another *NRC*-editorial called Papandreou’s proposal a “time bomb” placed under the policy measures aimed to rescue the euro. The editorial praised as a “logical reaction” the announcement by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French president Nicolas Sarkozy that Greece would not qualify for new loans as long as it did not agree to the austerity measures (*NRC Handelsblad* 2011d). The third *NRC*-editorial, headlined “Zigzagging Papandreou,” opened by stating that “what has the appearance of a brilliant political strategy later sometimes turns out be nothing more than a blunder which unexpectedly paid off.” Time would tell whether Papandreou’s “zigzagging” movements around a referendum would fall into this category, the editorial continued. Yet the editors suggested that Papandreou had likely been playing “panic football.” The two main political parties in Greece, Papandreou’s socialist Pasok and the conservative ND, should “muster the courage to defy the popular fury and acknowledge that further [budget] cuts are unavoidable” (2011e). The fourth *NRC*-editorial opined that Greek politics had shown its “most unpredictable side” that past week. The editorial called Papandreou’s proposal “unblessed” (2011f).

**Table 14: Articles in the Dutch press on Papandreou’s referendum proposal**

Number of articles	Positive	Negative	Neither predominantly positive or negative	Total
Trouw	1	6	1	8
De Telegraaf	0	5	2	7
NRC Handelsblad	2	6	0	8
De Volkskrant	4	5	5	14
Total	7	22	8	37

Commentary on Papandreou’s proposal in *de Volkskrant* was evenly divided between positive and negative appraisals. Paul Brill opposed the referendum. The foreign affairs commentator observed that when viewed from a distance the consternation in the European capitals following Papandreou’s proposal was somewhat “pathetic,” as the anger and irritation displayed by politicians showed yet again that too much citizen participation in “crucial European decisions” is not appreciated. Yet, asserted Brill, the “harsh reality” was that the “luxury of taking a few steps back was not available.” There was simply “no time for democratic antics.” Brill suggested that Papandreou’s possible intention was to threaten Europe with a likely ‘no’ at a referendum. If that were indeed the case, then this would be “very objectionable.” A referendum was the wrong move to make, according to Brill, because it would only increase the uncertainty existing in Europe at the moment. The plan to rescue the euro was not perfect, but it was all Europe had to avert a debt crisis (Brill 2011a).

In another article, Brill hailed the retraction of the referendum proposal and wrote that Merkel and Sarkozy had “rightly” halted further aid to Greece (Brill 2011b). An op-ed in *de*

*Volkskrant* written by two professors in economics argued that the “Greek referendum fiasco” might lead to a new government of national unity. If so, this would be the happy denouement of the drama that was unfolding in Greece. For Greek leaders had been arguing among themselves and hence had not been able to convince the Greeks of the “need for reform.” Certainly Papandreou had lost the confidence of the European countries (Eijffinger and Mujagic 2011).

### **In favor of the referendum**

Arguments in favor of the referendum were clearly in the minority in the Dutch press. Moreover, in the instances such arguments were made, they were not infrequently made not by journalists, but by other observers, for instance academics. For instance, in three interviews the referendum-proposal was presented as a worthy initiative. In *Trouw*, philosopher Hans Achterhuis pointed out that it was “very strange” that Dutch parliamentarian Ronald Plasterk had rejected the proposal for a Greek referendum. Plasterk had said that the crisis needed to be solved by experts and not by citizens, but, according to Achterhuis, “we know from experience these last years that the solutions of experts do not work” (Steenhuis 2011). In *de Volkskrant*, political scientist Bastiaan van Apeldoorn said that it was wrong of politicians to criticize the referendum and that the frequent criticisms showed that European politicians generally regarded democracy as “bothersome.” He noted that “whether you like it or not, every population has the sovereign right to take its fate into its own hands. For instance by refusing to pay back its debts. A country can make choices, and it is not crazy at all to submit that choice through a referendum to the people.” According to Van Apeldoorn politicians who rejected the proposal for a referendum were basically saying “we are democrats, but not right now” (Persson 2011).

In another interview in *de Volkskrant*, Greek parliamentarian Panagiotis Kouroumplis said that he regarded the timing of the proposal for a referendum to be unfortunate. He was nonetheless in favor because in a democracy it is “always a good idea” to consult the citizens. Kouroumplis then posed the question, “Why are the European leaders so afraid of the voice of the people?” His own answer was that they fear that the protests would spread from Greece to their own countries: “The citizens should not let the [European] Union be hijacked by the capitalist system. Politics and democracy should prevail” (Van der Ziel 2011). In an op-ed in *NRC Handelsblad*, a professor of cultural economics argued that the euro policies were sidelining democracy and that the Greeks were understandably protesting. Papandreou’s proposal had been an attempt to at least “uphold somewhat of a democratic appearance.” What would the Dutch do if foreign powers were about to do away with for instance their collective bargaining agreements? (Klamer 2011)

Some journalists wrote favorably of a referendum. The *NRC*-correspondent in Greece, Marloes de Koning, noted that were the referendum proposal to lead to Papandreou’s downfall, then at least to many Greeks he would be considered a “true democrat, instead of the puppet of Brussels and the financial markets, which he appeared to be until now” (De Koning 2011). *Volkskrant*-columnist Sheila Sitalsing addressed the issue in two columns. She ironically referred to Plasterk, who had said that a referendum would not be in the interest of the Greek people, as a “great democrat.” Sitalsing observed that “apparently one can have too much democracy in Europe. Or the wrong kind of democracy” (Sitalsing 2011a). In the second column, which was written after the proposal had been taken off the table, Sitalsing lambasted Plasterk again, saying that he had forever lost the right to wax about the deficiencies of European democracy, “Just like

the rest of Europe’s elite which anyway has never been a fan” of democratic deliberations. The citizen was being regarded as a “risk” (Sitalsing 2011b).

### Readers’ reactions

In two articles, editors discussed readers’ reactions to the referendum proposal. In *Trouw*, editor Willem Schoonen noted that most letter writers and those who reacted on the newspaper’s website were sympathetic towards Papandreou and the referendum. Most of their anger was directed at the politicians who criticized Papandreou. As noted, Schoonen (2011) went on to explain that had his paper written an editorial, it would have argued that “the euro is too important to submit to the citizen.” In *De Telegraaf*, Johan Jansen discussed readers’ reactions on the newspaper website. Forty-five percent of the reactions were positive and 53 percent negative, according to Jansen. Nine letters to the editor in the four newspapers addressed the proposed referendum, seven of them in *de Volkskrant* and two in *Trouw*. Four out of nine letters argued for a referendum and only one against.

**Table 15: Letters to the editor on the proposed Greek euro referendum**

	Positive	Negative	Neither predominantly positive or negative	Total
Trouw	1	0	1	2
De Telegraaf	0	0	0	0
NRC Handelsblad	0	0	0	0
de Volkskrant	3	1	3	7
Total	4	1	4	9

## Conclusion

The dominant position in the Dutch press coincided with the dominant position among Dutch and European politicians: an unmistakably negative attitude towards a Greek referendum. Editorials and prominent columnists were vehement in their opposition to the referendum. The popular *De Telegraaf* was uniform in condemning the “idiotic” proposal. The quality newspapers *NRC Handelsblad* and *Trouw* too overwhelmingly condemned Papandreou’s move. They argued that the future of the euro was deemed too important to leave in the hands of the citizens. Prominent *Volkscrant*-commentator Paul Brill also condemned the initiative. According to him, now was not the time for democratic deliberations. Yet his newspaper was the only one in which positive and negative evaluations were evenly present. Papandreou’s proposal was defended mostly in interviews with non-journalists, by *Volkscrant*-columnist Sitalsing, and in letters to the editor.

The results of this study indicate that democratic sentiments are only shallowly entrenched among leading Dutch journalists. The irony of course is that journalists justify their profession (as do politicians) by claiming that they serve and make possible democracy. Yet democracy is only deemed a good thing unless it clashes with more important issues, like the future of the euro. The Dutch press regards the citizens more often as a risk that needs to be neutralized than as a viable autonomous participant in democratic decision making. Throughout the twentieth century, corporations and governments have, in Alex Carey’s (1995) felicitous phrase, put much effort in “taking the risk out of democracy.” Judging by this study, Dutch journalism needs no more convincing that this is necessary. The negative bias in the Dutch press towards the referendum was so blatant that the president of Media Ombudsman, a non-profit organization consisting of professional journalists that promotes ethical behavior, wrote an op-ed

excoriating the reporting and commentary on Papandreou's proposal, including on the public broadcaster, for revealing the superficiality of the media's commitment to democracy (Van Groesen 2011).

## CHAPTER 10

### CONCLUSION

This chapter summarizes the conclusions drawn in this dissertation, discusses some of their implications and also avenues for further research. Additionally, an attempt is made to sketch out the broad outlines for starting to answer the question how the documented weaknesses of Dutch journalism might be ameliorated.

The ideological paradigm from within which almost all scholars until now have examined journalism in the Netherlands has been social-democratic or “liberal” in the American meaning of the word. Consistent with this ideological orientation, the main thrust of the scholarship has concluded, or has adopted as an untested assumption, that Dutch journalism since the seventies has by and large adequately performed its function in a democracy. Only recently, that is to say over the last decade, has criticism of Dutch journalism become somewhat sharper, as a result of for instance the introduction of digital technologies and economic problems in the newspaper industry. Yet a coherent political-economic perspective has been absent from the scholarship except during the seventies.

The first part of this dissertation attempted to reframe the scholarship on Dutch journalism. The aim was to demonstrate the viability of a critical or political-economic outlook on Dutch journalism, at the expense of a liberal perspective. The examination of Dutch media history concluded that in the historiography the liberal reading has been dominant up until the present, but that, just as in Britain, a radical reading of this history likely provides a viable alternative. The critical scholars in the seventies, drawing inspiration from Marx and Habermas, proposed to look at Dutch journalism as a reflection of the wider political economy. They concluded that journalism primarily functioned as a tool in the hands of the powers that be. Their



analyses closely matched those of American political-economists like Bagdikian, Herman and Chomsky and McChesney. These scholars' emphasis on the detrimental consequences of commercially-driven journalism and journalistic professionalism was quite astute, yet they failed to provide enough evidence on the content or micro-level to show that journalism was indeed biased in favor of the interests of political and economic elites. This dissertation takes the position that the extent to which Dutch journalism is market-driven has increased manifold since the seventies and that therefore the salience of the critical perspective existing in the seventies has also increased manifold.

A clear symptom of how the ideological outlook of most scholars has influenced their work is their explicit, but more often implicit, assessments of Dutch democracy. On the whole, the scholarship assumes that Dutch democracy functions just fine. Yet the scholarship on Dutch democracy produced by political scientists, sociologists and others shows its deep, fatal flaws. One might contend that de facto "Dutch democracy" does not exist. Yet as noted this is hardly acknowledged in the scholarship on Dutch journalism, with the result that the extent to which journalism is derelict in its duties remains out of sight. The discussion of the current debate on the Dutch media presents a paradox. A coherent political-economic framework is absent from the scholarship and the public debates, yet mainstream scholars and observers hold all the pieces of the puzzle which, when assembled together, indicate the viability of such a perspective.

The main conclusion drawn in this dissertation is that Dutch journalism suffers from the same flaws that political-economists have identified for Anglo-American journalism, and that these flaws stem from the same cause: the commercial underpinnings of the media industry. Dutch journalism does not perform well its main function in a democracy. That is to say, it often fails to present independently verified information that provides an accurate picture of the

important political and economic realities upon which citizens can base decisions aimed at furthering the common good. Certainly as regards to foreign policy and macro-economic issues, Dutch journalism primarily uncritically replicates the worldview of the dominant economic and political powers in the Netherlands and, by extension, the West, especially the US. Throughout the twentieth century and into the current one, Dutch journalism has been serving more as a handmaiden to power than as a watchdog.

Although differences between media systems are real and substantive, this dissertation suggests that, regarding news content on foreign affairs and macro-economic issues, we can take the Netherlands out of Hallin and Mancini's Democratic Corporatist model and put it into the Liberal Model. In other words, the differences between the media systems are not significant enough to lead to truly different coverage of international political and economic issues. Moreover, the similarities between the media systems are far more significant than the differences. The Dutch media industry too, like its American counterpart, is highly concentrated and in the hands of economic elites who first and foremost aim to make a profit. Dutch journalism too is advertising dependent, has to contest with a much stronger pr-industry, is highly professionalized, adheres to the demands of "objectivity" and functions within a predominantly neoliberal ideological climate. Therefore, a successful theoretical model devised by American political economists, the propaganda model, can be used as a fruitful framework to study Dutch journalism, although the five filters are likely not as forceful mechanisms of censorship as they are in the United States. The Dutch public broadcaster, which is facing severe budget cuts and politically-mandated reorganizations, is too weak to function as an effective counterweight to the prevailing commercial logic. The Dutch political spectrum extends further to the left than the American political spectrum, yet regarding economic and foreign policy

issues, Dutch media content is flawed in the same way as American media content, the content analyses in part II suggest. Media content in the Netherlands is biased in the interests of political and economic elites. It is likely that the bias is less outspoken than in the US. Yet this dissertation argues that a focus on the similarities between Dutch and American journalism is more illuminating than insistence on the differences.

In short, this dissertation makes four theoretical contributions. First, the American tradition of political economy, specifically the propaganda model, provides a viable framework for the study of Dutch journalism, for Dutch journalistic output too is biased in favor of elite interests. Second, a radical reading of Dutch media history is viable. Third, work done by Dutch critical scholars in the seventies has since been unjustly ignored and is now more illuminating than before. Fourth, Dutch media scholars need to more critically engage with the concept of democracy.

The content analyses in part II illustrate that Dutch journalism produces news and commentary that, as part I predicts, by and large favors vested political and economic interests. The quality press and the largest circulation newspaper covered the run-up to the war in Iraq in ways that, to say the least, did not consistently or effectively challenge the vast but often crude propaganda campaign emanating from Washington, London and also The Hague. Often the version of reality as concocted by the main belligerents was given credence, both in the reporting and the commentary. Absent from the coverage of the US troop withdrawal for Iraq in late 2011 was much information that shed a negative light on the invasion and occupation. What was reported was a highly selective version of events: a version that benefitted political and economic elites. The main thrust of the commentary on Papandreou's proposal for a referendum on the euro crisis was that democracy might be a good thing in principle, but that "Europe" and the euro

should be left to the experts and politicians. The commentary revealed the in effect anti-democratic beliefs among prominent Dutch journalists. A limitation of the content analyses is that output by the public broadcaster was not examined. More studies, both of recent and historic media content should be performed. Specifically, content produced by the public broadcaster and the ANP needs to be examined.

An important implication of this dissertation is that the existence of public broadcasting in a capitalist environment cannot effectively counter the negatives of a commercial media system. A strong public broadcaster might take the sharp edges off a commercial media system, but cannot function as an effective counterweight. More likely, a public broadcaster becomes an accomplice to the commercial media system around it. Another implication of this dissertation concerns the impact of digital technologies. Although this dissertation did not examine their impact directly, it seems a reasonable assumption that “by themselves” they have not and will not undermine existing power relations. Without changes in society, Dutch mainstream journalism will continue to suffer from its pro-elite bias. One might even argue that in the foreseeable future the bias will become more pronounced, as a result of for instance the financial troubles of the newspaper industry and the further expansion and professionalization of the PR-sector.

The content analyses of two events in late 2011, Papandreou’s referendum proposal and the US troop withdrawal from Iraq, show that this pro-elite bias currently still exists in the mainstream press. In fact, with all the documentation regarding the Iraq-war available online, and with the fog of war dissipated, it is rather remarkable that the Dutch press continued to exhibit such a clear pro-American bias. As the media industry is an integral part of the power structure in society, the expectation must be that digital technologies will not diminish the pro-

elite bias in mainstream journalism. In other words, the propaganda model will remain viable until journalism is no longer an integral part of the market. Although digital technologies provide excellent, low-cost opportunities for promoting a counter-narrative to mainstream journalism, this potential has until now not been realized in the Netherlands. There has been no upsurge in alternative journalistic outlets. This is another indication that technology by itself constitutes a rather weak factor.

The Netherlands is a small country, but the conclusions of this dissertation reverberate across national boundaries. To what extent the coverage of foreign affairs and macro-economic issues in other continental European countries also suffers from a persistent pro-elite bias, needs to be studied more. Specifically, showing that the propaganda model applies to the Netherlands too, begs the question to what extent the model can also be applied to other European countries, for instance Germany, Belgium, Norway, Sweden and Denmark. Those countries are similar to the Netherlands in many ways, for instance in the existence of a strong public broadcaster and a political spectrum that extends further to the left than in the US. The hypothesis resulting from this dissertation is that the propaganda model can also be applied to the study of journalism in those countries. The testing of this hypothesis constitutes a project that scholars familiar with those countries should undertake. The same applies to the viability of a radical reading of media history in European countries other than Great Britain and the Netherlands. Also, more historical research could be done to unearth critical analyses of the commercial media in the Netherlands and other European countries.

This dissertation took critical scholarship from the US as a diagnostic tool and concluded that the disease identified in that country is also prevalent in the Netherlands. For a cure, this dissertation also looks to the US. In the early American republic, huge federal subsidies for the

delivery of newspapers through the post office had a big impact on the public sphere, for they made cheap information from a wide variety of sources available to many for a only a small fee. The federal government recognized that it had an important role to play in creating the conditions in which American democracy could blossom (John 1995).

In theory, the solution to the crisis in journalism is rather obvious. The same structural problems on both sides of the Atlantic call for the same structural solutions. A well-functioning media system can only be built on top of non-commercial foundations, as critical observers in the Netherlands in the forties and seventies understood. The Netherlands is a rich country and the existence of high-quality information on issues pertaining to the public good is generally acknowledged to be essential to the functioning of a democracy. Dutch society spends billions of euros on health care and education. These expenses are accepted by almost all as necessary and praiseworthy. The Netherlands boasts many public libraries because the Dutch believe, or at least used to believe, that the free flow of information is essential to a democracy. Where are the billions in public funds that should ensure a free, independent, high quality news system? It will not do to just wait and see (anxious or hopeful as the case may be) how the developments in the media industry and digital media in particular play out.

Exactly which mechanisms for infusing journalism with public funds (always guarding against possible state influence on news content) are the most suitable for the Netherlands, should be decided through open, democratic debates, for “it is the democratization of media policymaking and the democratization of politics in general” that we need to strive for (McChesney 2007: 4). In the Netherlands, as in the United States, media policy has been and is a far cry away from being set by citizens themselves. As the Dutch case shows, a public broadcasting system, even a strong one, by itself is no guarantee for a news flow that makes

democracy possible. Dutch scholars, policymakers and the public at large must reassess the importance and relevance of the state to media policy, for media systems are to a very significant extent the result of the policies that create them. It might well be that only a directive that forbids news to be produced by profit-making organizations can guarantee a journalism that is independent from the powers that be. This would not mean the end of professional journalism in the sense of the end of trained journalists getting paid for their work. It only means that those journalists would be working for organizations that do not aim to make a profit and are run by the journalists themselves. As American journalist George Seldes has argued, true freedom of the press consists of “letting the editorial staff run the newspaper” (Christians et al. 2009: 92).

How does a society pay reporters and at the same time guarantee their independence? An ideal solution to this problem does not exist, but this should not inhibit politics from finding a workable one. Digital media are significant because as a result of low distribution and production costs, there now exists the possibility for a relatively low cost, bottom-up media system. The internet is valuable chiefly because it provides a convenient and cheap platform on which to construct a counter public sphere. The opportunity is there, but it will not become reality until it is made into a reality through policy. The free flow of information can only exist in the presence of policies that ensure that journalists serve not the public but the public interest. The distinction is crucial but lost to many born and raised in a commercial media system which naturally conflates what it should provide with what the public is said to want.

Trained and paid journalists might well be needed in the future too, but journalistic objectivity has its problems. Perhaps more importantly, the paradigm between objective and advocacy journalism is untenable and misleading. An explicit point of view and providing context to the news does not exclude respect for the facts. Those who are truly concerned with

changing the world better respect the facts, for the better the picture of the current situation, the more chance of success in changing it. Theo van Stegeren was spot on when he said that the dichotomy between partisan and objective media can be overcome. He gave the example of the British journalist Greg Palast, who openly takes a stand on issues and is “biased” in the sense that he attacks injustice. But he also does extensive research and provides opportunity for parties he disagrees with to present their case (Reijnders et al. 2007: 47). Another model for what the new journalist should be is an ‘old media’ journalist working for a commercial media outlet, namely Robert Fisk of *The Independent*. He too has transcended the objective/subjective dichotomy. His reporting and commentary stem from a clear, “ideological” perspective: that of respect for democracy and human rights. It’s the perspective of compassion. Nonetheless, Fisk respects the facts just as much as an “objective” reporter; perhaps even more so, for he routinely attempts to move beyond public statements by attempting to evaluate their veracity.

As to the future, some challenges are peculiar to the Dutch media. For instance, because of the small internal market, they are particularly susceptible to the influence of foreign press agencies like Reuters and AP and other Anglo-American agenda-setting media. Also, the Dutch state has ceded much power to Brussels. It seems unlikely that Dutch politics by itself can make significant changes in the media landscape, in disregard of European Union stipulations. Therefore, fundamental reform of the Dutch media system is more likely to come about as part of a pan-European effort. Finally, it should be kept in mind that the Dutch media system had and still has positive features which need to be protected and expanded on. For instance, the traditional broadcasting system run by representatives of the major groupings in society did to a certain extent allow for real diversity in points of view, while simultaneously limiting state interference.



The present conundrum is that legislation that establishes sufficient public monies for a mainstream journalism worthy of a true democracy will likely only be implemented in a true democracy. A journalism that replicates and affirms the status quo is but a symptom of the existing power relations. Only when those relations change fundamentally will journalism change too. On the other hand, the implementation of a true democracy likely can only come about when large segments of society are made aware – through the media – of the costs of a malfunctioning journalism and the need for further democratization of media and society. This intractable issue has no single solution. Different tactics should be adopted simultaneously. Reform of the media system will create more room for critical journalism, with the result that opportunities for a fundamental change in power relations will become more viable. Conversely, democratization of Dutch society will stimulate a more critical journalism.

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## APPENDIX A: CODING SHEET WMDs STUDY

### Coding sheet WMDs

This passage...

1. Asserts or clearly assumes that Iraq (likely) possesses WMDs or that it is about to attain them.
2. Asserts or clearly assumes that Iraq (likely) does NOT possess WMDs.
3. Asserts that there is not enough evidence to conclude that Iraq possesses WMDs or that it is about to attain them.
4. Keeps open in a more or less balanced way, for instance by presenting two opposing sources, these two possibilities: that Iraq has WMDs and that it does not. (Here, 'does not' includes assertions that there is not enough evidence to prove that Iraq possesses these weapons.)  
OR Mentions the issue of WMDs in Iraq but does not express a clear stance as to their presence or absence.  
OR: does not address the issue of WMDs in Iraq, but for instance discusses North-Korea's WMDs.

## APPENDIX B: CODING INSTRUCTIONS WMDs STUDY

### Instructions for coders

This study is about how the Dutch press in the months before the invasion of Iraq on March 20, 2003, by the United States and Great Britain, reported on the issue of the possible presence of WMDs in Iraq. What we are trying to find out is how often the press supported assertions that there were WMDs in Iraq, how often it supported assertions that they were not there and how often and in what ways the press kept open either possibility.

Access the Lexis-Nexis database. Go to Power Search. Type in these dates: January 1, 2003 to March 20, 2003. Select *De Telegraaf*, *NRC Handelsblad* or *de Volkskrant* and search for ‘massavernietigingswapens.’

Focus on the mention(s) of WMDs in bold in the article. Do not read the whole article, but focus on the mention. A ‘mention’ is defined as the whole paragraph in which the word WMDs is found, plus the paragraph right above it and the one right below it. When the word WMDs is mentioned in the first paragraph of an article, then the relevant passage is that paragraph and the paragraph right underneath it, and the headline. When the word WMDs is mentioned in the last paragraph, then the relevant passage is that paragraph and the one right above it.

On some occasions, the word WMDs will appear in two succeeding paragraphs. In that case, code the passage as follows: take into account the paragraph above the first mention of the word WMDs and the paragraph below the last mention. The passage thus becomes four paragraphs.

Always scroll through the whole article to see if there are mentions of WMDs that do not fall within the passage of the first mention. When there is such a later mention, i.e. a mention that occurs not in the paragraph directly below the paragraph in which the first mention occurs, then code this second mention too.

Read the whole passage and judge it in its entirety when assigning a code to the mention. There are four possibilities: a mention can be coded as 1, 2, 3 or 4. A coder must assign each mention to only one category. When in doubt, pick the category that most closely fits your interpretation of the passage.

Whether you believe a statement is false or not, or whether for instance you deem certain sources to be very credible or not credible at all, is irrelevant, just as what you now might know about the issue of WMDs in Iraq. Only determine what, if anything, the passage claims about the absence or presence of WMDs in Iraq.

### Detailed explanation of the coding categories

**Category 1:** Coding category 1 should be assigned when the passage clearly assumes or asserts only that Iraq (likely) possesses WMDs or will possess them in the near future. In other words, category 1 is unambiguous: the presence of WMDs is clearly assumed or stated, and no doubt is cast on this statement or assumption.

A passage in which a source is cited which asserts that there are WMDs in Iraq and this statement is not undermined in the rest of the passage should be coded as 1. Thus, and this holds also for the other categories, a coder should make no distinction between whether an assertion or assumption is made by a source or the author of the article.

Note again that it is irrelevant whether the coder deems the source of the information credible or not. This study is about how newspapers covered the issue of WMDs in Iraq, it is not

meant to test the ability of the coders to evaluate the credibility of sources, or to test their knowledge of the issue of WMDs and the war in Iraq.

**Category 2:** Coding category 2 is the mirror image of category 1. Category 2 is meant for passages which clearly state or assume only that there are (likely) no WMDs in Iraq. It is an unambiguous frame. If there is information in the passage which casts doubt on the absence of WMDs in Iraq, then this passage should not be coded as 2. Only when the information in the passage asserts or clearly assumes that there are no WMDs in Iraq should category 2 be assigned. Also, if a passage cites one or more sources that clearly deny the presence of WMDs in Iraq, and there is no doubt cast on these assertions and no sources are cited which contradict these assertions, then the passage should be coded as 2.

**Category 3:** Coding category 3 should be assigned to passages which emphasize only that there is not enough evidence to conclude that there are WMDs in Iraq. Thus, when a passage emphasizes that there is not enough evidence to conclude that there are WMDs in Iraq, or that it will get these weapons in the near future, then that passage should be put in category 3.

**Category 4:** Coding category 4 should be assigned when none of the first three categories fit. For instance, a passage keeps open the possibility that there are WMDs in Iraq, but also the possibility that there are not or that there is not enough evidence to conclude that there are. For instance, if a passage asserts that there is not enough evidence to conclude that there are WMDs in Iraq, but also cites a source which asserts that there are WMDs in Iraq, then the passage should be coded as belonging to category 4, because opposing assertions – that there are and that there are no WMDs in Iraq or that sufficient proof is lacking – are present in the passage.

When a passage contains a word like ‘alleged’ or ‘presumed’ in direct reference to WMDs, or when there appears a phrase like ‘Iraq’s possible possession of WMDs,’ then the presence of a word like that takes precedence over other text elements in the passage which might indicate higher or lower levels of doubt regarding the presence or absence of WMDs. In other words, when such a word or phrase is present in direct reference to WMDs, then a passage should be coded 4, because a phrase or word like that indicates that the presence and absence of WMDs are both kept open as distinct possibilities.

When a passage addresses the issue of WMDs in Iraq, but does not make a clear statement as to whether they are there or not then this passage should be coded as 4, because the reference leaves open both the possibility that WMDs will be found and the possibility that they will not be found, for instance because they are not there. An example of a mention that belongs in category 4 would be a passage that refers to the “search for WMDs in Iraq” but does not make any other statements on the issue.

An assertion that Iraq has not proven that it has not destroyed its WMDs also fits into category 4, because an assertion like that does not directly address the issue whether Iraq has WMDs or not. Statements about Iraq not cooperating with the United Nations also belong to category 4. When a passage only makes one or more assertions like this, then it belongs in category 4.

Category 4 is also for passages in which the word WMDs does not refer to the presence or absence of WMDs in Iraq. For instance, the passage might refer to WMDs in connection with North Korea or another country, or the passage might discuss the problem of the existence of WMDs on earth, without referencing Iraq.



APPENDIX C: CODING SHEET EDITORIALS IRAQ 2003

Name coder:

Article headline (first two words):

Newspaper:

Article date:

This article mentions....	NRC	VK	TG
That the Iraq-crisis is causing disunity in Europe, the UN or between EU and US			
The impact of the Iraq-crisis on Dutch politics			
or clearly assumes only that Iraq (likely) has WMDs or will acquire them if a war is not started			
Only that Iraq (likely) does not have WMDs or that the evidence is lacking			
Oil as a possible reason for war with Iraq			
The word 'imperialism' as a possible reason for war			
That an invasion would be illegal under international law			
Concern about the negative consequences of a war to Iraqi civilians			
That public opinion is mostly against a war			
That Shell has an interest in war with Iraq			
A pejorative description of Saddam			
A pejorative description of Bush			
A pejorative description of Chirac			
A pejorative description of Schroeder			
That a reason for war is to disarm Iraq			
That a reason for war is to bring democracy to Iraq/the Middle East			
Criticism of the Powell-speech before the UN			
Criticism of the Dutch government's support for the US			

## APPENDIX D: CODING SHEET PRESS ON US TROOP WITHDRAWAL

**Name coder:**

**Article title (first two words):**

**Newspaper:**

**Article date:**

This article mentions...	NRC	VK	TG
That US claims that Iraq had WMDs were wrong			
That US claims of ties between Saddam and Al-Qaida were false			
That the invasion was deemed illegal by almost all experts			
That the US committed war crimes in Iraq			
That the US tortured people in Abu Ghraib prison			
Oil as a possible reason for war			
That the war served Shell's interests or that Shell negotiated already before the war with London about its future in Iraq			
That the US aimed to spread democracy in Iraq/Middle-East			
'Imperialism' as a possible reason for war			
The official number of American deaths			
An estimate of Iraqi deaths			
A pejorative characterization of Saddam			
A pejorative characterization of Bush			
An estimate of the number of wounded Iraqis			
The official number of wounded Americans			
An estimate of the number of Iraqi refugees			
The Powell-speech before the UN in 2003			
The Dutch government's support for the war			
That public opinion was overwhelmingly against the invasion			
The opinion of the Iraqi people on the war/US departure			
The opinion of the American people on the war/US departure			
That the US have removed a tyrant			
That Iraq is now 'free' or 'sovereign'			
Iraq is a failed state /has major problems e.g. security			

## APPENDIX E: CODING SHEET GREEK REFERENDUM PROPOSAL

**Name coder:**

### Non-news articles on Papandreou and/or his call for a referendum

<b>Trouw</b>	Mostly Negative	Mostly Positive	Neutral	Notes
Oppositie wint de scalp				
Democratie? Een				
Politiek pokerspel				
Einde van een				
Grieken hebben ook				
China en Griekenland				
Macht verschuift				
Papandreou gokt				
De macht van het				
Aan politici				

<b>NRC Handelsblad</b>	Mostly Negative	Mostly Positive	Neutral	Notes
Europa kan het weer niet				
Zigzaggende Papandreou				
De juiste man maar nu niet meer				
Redding van euro				
Griekse tijdbommen in				
Een zeer riskant referendum				
No headline: zou het nog kunnen				
Politieke zelfmoord of				

<b>Telegraaf</b>	Mostly Negative	Mostly Positive	Neutral	Notes
Whiskey				
Gevolgen				
Leiders				
Chaos				
Ons is ook niets				
Hoog spel				
Griekse malaise				

<b>de Volkskrant</b>	Mostly Negative	Mostly Positive	Neutral	Notes
Griekse politieke zeden				
Geachte redactie 7 nov.				
De Duitsers willen ons				
Eendracht 5 nov.				
Krant onderschatte				
Bijstand voor Berlusconi				
Sport in shock				
Geachte redactie 4 nov verbijsterd				
Geachte redactie 4 nov kamikaze				
Grieks bochtenwerk				
Ondergang				
De premier en het referendum				
Griekse manoeuvres				
Failliet van de democratie				
Put-opties				
Mist de G20 eigenlijk				
Ander commentaar				
Komt een Griek bij de dokter				
Ommekeer in de eurocrisis				
En de goden stuurden				
Wat de Grieken doen				
Papandreou's list				
Vulkaan				
Papandreou poogt				
Is een referendum over				

Een Gouden Palm waard				
Het is de politieke crisis				
De EU lijkt meer op de USSR				