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Booming Business. Communication, Print and Advertisement in the Seventeenth Century

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ABSTRACT

News, print and the associated communications were not just a booming business in the early modern period, but are – research-wise – a “hot topic” at this moment as well. The seven volumes discussed are syntheses of many years of research. The books show overlap due to geography and events, and their stress on news bearing media of various sorts, all within the seventeenth century. Each of the volumes is written by an expert on either the Baltic Sea, Germany, or the Dutch Republic. The foci vary from the exchange of information to the printing of newspapers and books, to the use of advertisements.

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Das Geschäft mit Nachrichten. Ein barocker Markt für soziale Ressourcen by Heiko Droste, Bremen, Edition Lumière, 2018, 321 pp, €44,80 (hardback), ISBN: 9783943245899.



Dreißigjähriger Krieg und Öffentlichkeit. Zeitungsberichte als Rohfassung der Geschichtsschreibung by Holger Böning, Bremen, Edition Lumière, 2nd, revised edition 2018, 438 pp illustrated, €29,80 (hardback), ISBN: 9783943245936.

Early Modern Media and the News in Europe. Perspectives from the Dutch Angle, by Joop W. Koopmans, Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2018, xviii + 361 pp illustrated, €140,00 (hardback), ISBN: 9789004379305.

De boekhandel van de wereld. Drukkers, boekverkopers en lezers in de Gouden Eeuw, by Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen, translated: Frits van der Waa, Amsterdam/Antwerpen, Uitgeverij Atlas Contact, 2019, 624 pp, illustrated, € 39,99 (hardback), ISBN: 9789045034997.

The Bookshop of the World: Making and Trading Books in the Dutch Golden Age, by Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, paperback edition 2020 (first published in hardback 2019), vi + 485 pp. £12.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780300254792.

News, Business and Public Information. Advertisements and Announcements in Dutch and Flemish Newspapers, 1620–1675, by Arthur der Weduwen and Andrew

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Pettegree, Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2020, xii, 668 pp., €199,00 (hardback/e-book) e-ISBN: 978-90-04-42109-7/ISBN: 9789004420823.

The Dutch Republic and the Birth of Modern Advertising, by Arthur der Weduwen and Andrew Pettegree, Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2019/2020, xviii, 320 pp. illustrated, €132,00 (hardback/e-book), e-ISBN: 9789004413818; 978-9789004413801.

In recent decades, research on the topic of communication has gained in popularity. While studies in the mid-20th century focused on “just” newspapers (corantos), the scope has significantly widened.¹ Researchers now include weekly news digests, periodicals, pamphlets, broadsheets, books and even governmental publications in the scope of research on early modern communication.² News encompasses more than just newspapers. As the topic of news is apprehensible to the general public, recent studies even tend to become public history. Hence it is not surprising that several authors are writing in such an accessible way that their books are read by interested non-academics: some authors even cross-over to historical novels.³

In the year 2000, Robert Darnton wrote an article on news and the media in the 18th century. In this contribution, he asked how “news” should be defined. Darnton answers his own question as “[...] a kind of narrative, transmitted by special kinds of media”.⁴ Darnton’s definition of news seems to have a strong focus on the news-bearing media, instead of focusing on the content. Nevertheless, an obvious prerequisite that remains is the availability of “something newsworthy” to be relayed. News media acted as an eye on the world outside. Hence, news needed to come from the proverbial *all over the world*, but in practice it came through a news agent’s extensive network.⁵ This trading network had to supply the news market. The business behind such a network is the focus of Heiko Droste’s *Das Geschäft mit Nachrichten. Ein barocker Markt für soziale Ressourcen*. Droste has spent many years of his career studying the development and interconnectivity of news agents around the Baltic Sea. By mapping out this network, Droste discovered that sending letters was a sign of a friendship that went both ways. He aptly describes how this friendship could be both socially and occupationally beneficial. It was an occupation that demanded a contribution in either privileges or social resources. The trade was a *commercium*, which meant business, to stay in touch with others and exchange information, although it was also in the public interest. The market for information exchange was dominated by what can be seen as a functional-elite: scholars, scientists, artists, tradesmen and learned women. There were two prerequisites for correspondence: a postal network and the development of a written form of communication. It is crucial to realise that the prerequisite of a postal network was not self-evident as it was not – yet – a “state’s” duty to organise. On the contrary, the availability and quality of a postal service depended on the awareness of its importance and its usage by the customers themselves.

Sending letters to others with newsworthy information could result in this information ending up in newspapers. Here the newsworthiness could differ: it could, for example, make a difference whether the news came from public offices or private people. Public officeholders, especially, could feel the urge either to serve the public interest, with news contributions, or honour the friendship with the publisher. On the other hand the senders of news(letters), news agents, had their own goals, to gain information to suit their own (business) interest. Since public officeholders often became news agents, there was no strict division between providers of news and news agents. Droste explains that an

(/his) analysis of the market is dominated by an analysis of the interests of the news agents; only after mapping their interests and consequent investments is it possible to look at others that shared this interest (147): in other words, merchants or local businesses that could profit from the information. These are difficult to ascertain, as such interests are rarely so straightforwardly formulated in remaining documents. With the scarce and scattered examples Droste did find, he explains thoroughly how the news agents worked. His study should be seen as a cornerstone in understanding early modern information exchange, and should be translated for the benefit of non-German readers. Furthermore, it would be worthwhile to test and compare this approach for other European areas, since news travelled widely.

Das Geschäft mit Nachrichten is a well-written study with a solid theory on the development of social networks, heavily substantiated by thorough archival research around the Baltic Sea. Only through acquiring this extensive overview and, most likely, initially some fortunate discoveries, was Droste able to connect the dots and reconstruct the network. Furthermore, this reconstruction leads to the understanding that communication activities resulted in symbolic capital, credits and an arrangement between, for example, tradesmen and princes. As such, it led to an international network, a higher social position, increasing the chances of obtaining other positions (e.g. in a council), protection, monopoly and tax-privileges. Relationships between agents did not need to be among equals; nevertheless, when messages were exchanged, the sender would expect something in return. Princes could benefit from the social contacts and knowledge that these networks offered, although the governmental and diplomatic networks remained long separated from the news trading networks. It is interesting to note that most of the correspondences were sent anonymously; that is, no name was mentioned in case the letter fell into the wrong hands. However, it must have been evident to the receiver who had delivered the information.

While Droste has a clear focus on the prerequisites to create a news market, Holger Böning focuses on news distribution through German newspapers in the Thirty Years' War. His voluminous *Dreißigjähriger Krieg und Öffentlichkeit. Zeitungsberichte als Rohfassung der Geschichtsschreibung* look through the perspective of newspapers at the developments of the Thirty Years' War. The title seems somewhat deceptive: the focus in fact is on cases from 1609, 1618–1621, 1626 and 1633. The reason for starting with 1609 is, interestingly enough, that surviving newspapers already show developing conflicts. Hence Böning argues that the "Thirty" Years' War had commenced much earlier than most historians generally assume, in 1609 when issues arose with the Bohemian *Landstände* (estates) and a problematic War of Succession in Jülich. Böning's first examples encompass a thematic description of political-institutional situations, military encounters, and foreign policy, but also how inhabitants experienced the situation. The latter – randomly picked – cases, 1626 and 1633, have a strong focus on *Kriegsberichterstattung*, an anachronistic term indicating reports on the military, war and conflict.

The 1609 conflict in Bohemia showed the newspaper reader that there were issues with freedom of religion, as the Lutheran *Landstände* were in conflict with the Catholic Emperor and King of Bohemia Rudolf II. Rudolf II had moved the seat of the empire to Prague. The main problem they faced was raising money for an army that would fight Protestants. The tension rose to such an extent that Jesuits fled from Bohemia, according

to the *Aviso* printed in Wolfenbüttel (53). The conflict seemed to be solved by the *Majestätsbrief* (Letter of Majesty) – one for Bohemia and one for Silesia – which was designed to guarantee freedom of religion. News like this was printed in the *Aviso* only days after the event took place, which must have implied a tight news-network. It should be stated that Böning does not go into the way the news was distributed. However, his study is illustrated with many quotations from contemporary newspapers (in the original spelling; and it must be said that, unfortunately, lengthy quotes are not consistently indented).

The second massive, international conflict was the struggle over the succession in Jülich and Cleves. It was not straightforward who was eligible for the succession in the first place. When the Houses of Brandenburg and Pfalz-Neuburg made their seemingly plausible claims, it became a struggle between Protestants and Catholics respectively, each drawing in the support of multiple princes and territories. The newspapers seem to give a blow-by-blow report on the struggle, negotiations and advice given to the emperor.

Several other issues were discussed in the newspapers of 1609. Donauwörth had been placed under an Imperial Ban. In this Free City, the Lutheran majority had barred the Catholics from their annual processions, which agitated the Catholic Emperor. Duke Maximilian I then (wrongfully) executed the ban by absorbing Donauwörth into Bavaria. The United Provinces, who had been revolting against their Spanish overlord since 1568 and had declared themselves independent in 1581, were another topic to be discussed, as 1609 marked the year the Twelve Years' Truce commenced. Spain became a worthwhile topic to discuss not only because of this Dutch conflict, but also because of its enormous wealth through its overseas expansion. Both the French and English were involved in attempts to negotiate a peace between the United Provinces and Spain and their involvement, and their foreign policies, were part of weekly discussions. While internal religious conflicts seemed to dominate the German news, it should not be forgotten that at the same time the war with the Turks in the East had only ceased in 1606 and was still regarded as an imminent danger.

This long introduction into the prequel of the Thirty Years' War convincingly shows that there were enough elements present to reconsider the current perception that it was a war of just thirty years. The Peace of Augsburg was on the verge of breaking down; the newspapers reported many incidents that each could have marked its final collapse. By 1618, Böning remarks, it had become a dangerous melange of *Ständische* interests, confessional conflicts and power-prestige by the emperor. In Prague, the conflicts reached a climax and resulted in the *Fenstersturzes* (defenestration) of two Catholic representatives of the emperor. The *Fenstersturzes* was not the end of the conflict and soon after troops assembled on both sides, Protestants and Catholics alike. Attempts to negotiate a truce were to no avail, not least because Emperor Matthias passed away.

What becomes very clear from the descriptive, thematic texts Böning provides – the newspapers illustrating the grand narrative – is that the typical newspaper reader would have been extremely well-informed. While the volume does not provide any insights into who read the newspapers, or how widely they were distributed, it does give a good impression of the vibrant and detailed news that was instantaneously spread throughout the Holy Roman Empire. One could reconstruct the whole war based on the reports printed in the newspapers, especially since these seem well-balanced and not significantly biased towards one or the other religion. If opinions were expressed, these were, generally

speaking, from the correspondent and not from the one printing the news. The contemporary reader must have felt as though he or she was sitting front-row while reading, for example, about the military campaigns in 1626 and 1633.

The German word *Öffentlichkeit*, which features in the title, could be translated as either public, publicity or public knowledge.⁶ Böning returns to this concept in the final chapter of his work, where he remarks that this anachronistic term does not even seem to be inappropriate for the first half of the seventeenth century (423). He comes to this conclusion as basically everything that was going on was observed, commented on and debated, while there was little to no censorship in that period. Böning shows, with his impressive study, that the German people could have been well informed about the ongoing affairs of the Thirty Years' War. Nevertheless, one needs to realise that the observations and reports were often not written by professional news agents.

While the networks developed around the Baltic Sea were very active and efficient, the Dutch managed, proverbially, to elevate it to an art. For when news agents had gathered the news, they could use it to their advantage and sell it in written or printed form. Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen show that the Dutch copied an existing business model, that of German newspapers, and radically altered it to a cost-efficient variant. In their *Bookshop of the World* and the Dutch – very accurate – translation *Boekhandel van de Wereld*, they discuss various aspects of the business of printing texts, whether these were books, newspapers, pamphlets or governmental publications. Despite having to explain the complexities of a distant time, this work (and its translation) is very accessible. For both interested academics and non-academics, the authors have succeeded in making it a pleasure to read both the English and the Dutch versions. It encapsulates the seventeenth century's printing business in an understandable, introductory way.

Pettegree and der Weduwen argue that news pamphlets from the Southern Netherlands had a political bias and were (thus) incomplete. In contrast, the Dutch from the Northern Netherlands tried to balance their news messages more. Nonetheless, the handwritten newsletters, the broadsheets-*aviso* and the pamphlets are all defined as newspapers.⁷

While the variety of newspapers must have meant work for many printers, this, ironically, immediately directs attention to the downside of the Dutch success. Economically, one could focus on the success and rapid decline of many print shops – or the success of the happy few. Culturally, it should be noted that as much was printed and read, it also led to the loss of most of these texts. The texts that were read the most have not survived; while rare, expensive volumes and texts were more likely to persist over time.

As an example of such loss, one could look at the few remaining printed ordinances (that is, rules/laws) and broadsheets left in their original form.⁸ Almanacks are another example of (often) lost books. These were printed in thousands of issues, but because of their frequent use and uselessness after the year had passed, very few have survived over the centuries. Pettegree and der Weduwen studied advertisements in newspapers to find out about public announcements of new book sales – often in the *Oprechte Haerlemse Courant* – and auctions. This inquiry enables them to estimate the number of lost printed materials as at least 300,000,000 titles.⁹ With what *does* remain, we run the risk of having a distorted perception of the (book)printing reality: the idea could arise that only richly

decorated and voluminous works were printed. Another such misrepresentation is the focus on male printers. Undoubtedly the largest proportion of printers were male, but the role of women should not be underestimated. Women aided their husbands in business, and when widowed they often continued their husband's work.

Admittedly, the Bible was the most printed (and read) book in the Republic and was printed in many forms and sizes. As such, it was challenging to compete. The spiritual wellbeing of the flock was of great importance; hence pastors were among the most active authors. Not only did they publish theological books, but their sermons were printed and sold as well. Printing pamphlets was one of the "safe" business models. On the one hand, if one had printed too few, one could easily "set" up another set of the eight pages to print them again. On the other hand, if one had printed too many, one could quickly sell them in a larger geographical area. Pamphlets were very convenient to ventilate one's political opinion, more than once leading to political polemics. These polemics could be sensational, for example in the case of the dispute between Van Oldenbarnevelt and Prince Maurice: each new item sparked another and would result in more publications.¹⁰

Whether or not printers could earn enough to survive depended on their ability to have an efficient distribution network and the ability to publish works that were not merely aiming at elite customers. While the city of Antwerp faced marauding Spanish troops in 1584–85, many wealthy businessmen and scholars fled to the Northern Netherlands, moving their businesses and activities. This intellectual impulse stimulated the Dutch printers' business tremendously.

Because of the fierce competition, the printers were eager to secure their position. One of their strategies was *not* to print for their own market alone but export many books. While several countries censored publications, printing in the Low Countries was relatively easy, and could result in books with a fake imprint to enable their export to, for example, England. Another option to secure one's business was by obtaining an appointment as the official printer for a government, e.g. to print ordinances or official forms. The most lucrative business was, obviously, securing an appointment as state's printer. Mainly because it guaranteed an income, the best part of the job was that it would not take up too much time and could hence be regarded as a side-job. However, the position did come with a downside. The Dutch Estates-General were not paying too regularly, resulting in considerable debts. As a result of this payment arrears, some printers withdrew from the honour as it was not worth the effort.

Printers in university cities were lucky as those defending their dissertation were required to print several copies as well as public announcements regarding their defence. Successful teachers, e.g. in mathematics or aspects relevant for seafaring, could also count on their work being distributed widely. Nonetheless, basic school materials for elementary schools would also be printed with ease, as there was no "national" school programme and teachers were in dire need of suggestions.

While the Dutch Republic was very active in establishing overseas trading posts, the publishers found out new ways of earning money. The creation of maps, and printing books such as the *Atlas Maior* by Joan Blaeu, were such innovative ways. Another one was that of travel stories. Even when a journey to the East was unsuccessful, such as the journey by Captain Willem IJsbrantsz Bontekoe, the story could be made into a bestseller. While approaching Java their stock of brandy caught fire, resulting in an explosion of the ammunition. The remaining crew floated at sea for several days – threatening to eat the

ship's boys – until they ended up at Sumatra. Again they faced death when the local inhabitants attacked them, but they were able to escape to Java thanks to the passing by of a VOC-ship. Hardship kept following Bontekoe as he was on board a ship to China that was hit by a hurricane. Seven years later, Bontekoe arrived home in Hoorn. When Jan Jansz. Deutel heard about the story of his hardship, he asked Bontekoe to write it down and turned it into an exciting story of ordeals, godly intervention and salvation which was published at least 30 times between 1646 and the end of the century.

The printing presses in the Low Countries seemed never to have ceased production. An inventory of the Dutch and Flemish Newspapers published between 1618 and the 1700s shows not only a broad choice of newspapers, but also indicates that most of these newspapers' businesses survived for a very long time.¹¹ These newspapers could be published up to several times a week. Between the 1680s and 1690s, eleven newspapers were issued every week, with varying numbers of editions. It was certainly something for the more wealthy readers to hold a subscription to multiple newspapers.

While der Weduwen's inventory of newspapers remains an overview, Joop Koopmans has published an in-depth study of news in Europe. A selection of earlier published papers has now been collected together in *Early Modern Media and the News in Europe, Perspectives from the Dutch Angle*. In this work, Koopmans mainly focuses on the *Europische Mercurius* and other *Mercurius* publications, which were compilations of news items that could be published monthly, each half-year or yearly as an overview of important events. These *nieuwsboeken* ("newsbooks") should be translated, according to Koopmans, as "news digests" or "news periodicals". The great benefit of such news digests was that rumours that proved wrong – and so, "fake news" – could be removed before printing them, providing a more reliable source of information to readers. The news digests often had illustrated frontispieces and engravings within, indicating a good working relationship between the publisher and artists (engravers) to relay the news to their well-educated audience.

In order to sell the news, the publishers tended to include the rest of "Europe". This could be by including the word *European* in the title, which was thought to be a good marketing strategy. The news itself could come from all over Europe, leading to newspapers with a focus on European affairs. This was visible through the explicit mentioning of the geographical names from which the news arrived but also in images that would attract the attention of the reader.

While princes subsidised most German newspapers, and Droste shows that the Swedish crown had an interest in seeing the news in print, the Dutch, lacking such a financial backup-system, needed to find a solid payment model that would earn a return on investments. Der Weduwen and Pettegree show in their *The Dutch Republic and the Birth of Modern Advertising* that the Dutch found such a payment model through advertisements. Following the Dutch, the bi-weekly *Ghendtsche Post-Tydingen* (1667 onwards) published one advertisement in every fifth issue. *The Birth of Modern Advertising* should be seen as an academic analysis, while the *News, Business and Public Information, Advertisements and Announcements in Dutch and Flemish Newspapers, 1620–1675* is more of an appendix-inventory holding 6,000 translated advertisements. Intriguingly enough, the analysis covers 25 years *more* than the appendix.

Pettegree and der Weduwen show that already in March 1621, some short advertisements about newly published books can be found in the *Tijdinghen uyt verscheyde Quartieren*. The purpose of printing advertisements was to inform customers about new titles; but, interestingly enough, it can also provide insights into the trade of – now, to us, lost – books. Koopmans argues in the above-mentioned *Early Modern Media* that local topics and domestic products dominated advertisements; hence they provide insights in what was important to people at a particular moment in time and in a specific place (121, 132–135). This claim is substantiated by Pettegree and der Weduwen’s analysis, which shows a large number of announcements of (book-)auctions. As the newspapers did have national distribution, the advertisements did not deal with local affairs. Auctions did tend to attract people from the wider region. Such sales did not necessarily mean that personal libraries were sold; they could mean selling a shop’s stock or a combination of both. This approach would indicate a strong connection between booksellers, publishers and, potentially, the auctioneers if the latter were involved. The ultimate aim of such cooperation would be to maximise profits and prevent stocks from building up.

Interestingly enough, the advertisements did not mention book prices during the seventeenth century. The price of a book could depend heavily on the buyer, for example colleagues could be eligible for a discount. The size, number of pages, quality of the binding (if any) were all decisive factors in establishing the price. An exception to the rule was a publication by Jacobus Scheltus. Scheltus was the official state’s printer of the Estates-General in The Hague. In an advertisement, he explicitly mentioned the price of the *Derde Deel van’ t Groot Placcaet Boeck* [Third part of the Large Book of Placards] (217–218). Since he held the monopoly on these publications, he could freely set and publish the prices of these books as he did not risk his business over it.

Advertisements were not merely aimed at selling books. People used them to advertise their services, find a job, create awareness of theft – often of horses (chapter 5, *Modern Advertising*). Furthermore, they were even used to track lost children or trace family members of a corpse that had been found. Creating awareness of stolen goods, by providing an accurate description, could prevent the trade in stolen goods and increased the chance of finding it back because of the rewarded bounty. Far less sensational was the information published on behalf of the government. In 1674 the distribution of state bonds was the topic of advertisements. It should be stressed that the Dutch government did not use newspapers too often, they generally used the city crier to relay any official messages throughout the cities, towns and their vicinity. Perhaps this should be seen as one of the most remarkable achievements of all: that most printers and bookshops managed to survive without the government playing a substantial role in their businesses throughout the seventeenth century.

Notes

1. Dahl, *Dutch Corantos*; Dahl, “English Corantos and Newsbooks”.
2. Davies and Fletcher, *News in Early Modern Europe*; Dingemanse, *Rap van tong*; Vroomen, *Taal van de Republiek*; Deen, *Publiek debate en propaganda*; Bellingradt, *Flugpublizistik und Öffentlichkeit*; Bellingradt, *Fliegender Wandel*.
3. E.g. Langner, *Die Herrin der Lettern*.

4. Darnton, “Presidential Address”, 1.
5. Raymond and Moxham, *News Networks in Early Modern Europe*.
6. Bellingradt, *Flugpublizistik und Öffentlichkeit*.
7. Lamal, “Avvisi of handgeschreven nieuwsbrieven”; Lamal, “Nieuws en informatienetwerken”; Raymond and Moxham, *News Networks*.
8. See also: Pettegree, *Broadsheets*.
9. Bruni and Pettegree, *Lost Books*.
10. Reinders, *Printed Pandemonium*; Vroomen, *Taal van de Republiek*; Deen, Onnekink and Reinders, *Pamphlets and Politics*.
11. Der Weduwen, *Dutch and Flemish Newspapers*.

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