

Media History in the Netherlands

SOME OBSERVATIONS¹ (1993)

Research into the history of the mass media in the Netherlands is rooted in a long and firm tradition, going back as far as the middle of the nineteenth century. Although the number of scholars and publications has grown considerably during the seventies and eighties and professional networks have been established, fundamental discussions on scope, subject-matter and methods – like the debate on Cultural Studies in various Anglo-Saxon countries, Journalism History in the USA and *Kommunikationsgeschichte* in Germany and Austria – did not develop well in the Netherlands. Media History is still dominated by a political and institutional approach, even though a more comprehensive and coherent approach of communication history slowly gains ground, due also to developments in the humaniora as well as in the field of history and social studies.

Since the 1960s the quantity of information available has grown tremendously. It is perhaps this development, designated as the fourth stage of the industrial revolution, which is responsible for the current unprecedented interest in the history of the mass media. The technological innovations themselves act as a stimulus, for there is no question of the fact that historical material like newspapers, tapes, films and video has become much more accessible in the last few years.

The upsurge of interest in the history of the media is evident from the growing number of publications on the subject, the appeal it holds for university students, and the activities of all manner of organisations and institutions. In the space of just fifteen years media history in the Netherlands has assumed the dimensions of a real discipline. The following pages outline this development, describing the organisations and institutions concerned with this area of the research conducted. A truly comprehensive survey is of course impossible, the area being too wide and the publications too numerous.²

Institutions and organisations

In 1978 a special body, the 'Committee for the promotion of research on press history', was set up under the auspices of the Social Science Council of the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences, not only to bring the research up to date but also to stimulate the preservation of sources and their collection in archives. It will be unnecessary to add that the latter kind of work is indispensable to research. Even if for no other reason the extension of the committee's terms of reference to the media *in general*, so that it has since been renamed 'Committee for the promotion of

research on media history' (CBMO) in 1989, was welcomed by the research community, for the preservation of tapes, films and photographs has become a matter of urgency owing, amongst other things, to their fragility.

The CBMO worked closely together with the main institutions active in this area: the *Rijksvoorlichtingsdienst* (the Netherlands government information service), the audiovisual aids scientific institute *Stichting Film en Wetenschap* (Film Research Foundation), the Netherlands Broadcasting Museum, the Netherlands Filmmuseum and the public broadcasting production company NOB. It was mainly at their request that the government made extra funds available for the preservation and reconstruction of tapes, films and photographs. It is the task of the CBMO to coordinate and stimulate their various activities. The projects undertaken by the individual institutions, including the *Nederlands Fotoarchief* and the famous International Institute of Social History, municipal and regional archives, documentation centres and museums, are of equal importance.

Activities in the field of media history relate not only to preservation and accessibility, but also to the promotion of research. Not only the CBMO and its working groups hold regularly conferences, but also the Broadcasting Museum, for example, has organised a few symposia on the importance of archives and of programme history. It publishes a modest quarterly, *Aether*, and has set up a research committee. More substantial, however, was the publication, in 1989, of the annual *Jaarboek Mediageschiedenis*, despite the fact that it is as yet restricted to broadcasting and film history and not to *communication* history.

Finally, the Vereniging Geschiedenis, Beeld & Geluid (the Association History, Image and Sound), a very active organisation with a membership of some three hundred film and broadcasting historians. Closely associated with most of the projects described above, the association itself organises regular symposia and congresses, sometimes in cooperation with other institutions and organisations, such as the association of photography historians *Stichting Foto- en Tijdsbeeld* or CBMO. The association is affiliated to the International Association for Media and History (IAMHIST).

Although media history developed into a thriving discipline, its position in education is not very strong. Its oldest branch, the history of the press, is being taught hardly anywhere, just like the history of radio and photography. The study of film and television has, however, made progress in the faculties of arts: at the University of Amsterdam, for example, a department for film and television studies was set up in 1991. A striking phenomenon is the lack of substantial research within the framework of communication studies. Contrary to their fellows in other countries and in other social sciences, Dutch scholars of mass communication seem to ignore the historical dimensions of their discipline.

Tradition and innovation

It may thus be concluded that the Netherlands has now been brought up to date, at least from the organisational point of view. Fundamental discussions on scope, subject-matter and methods of the various branches of communication history did, however, not develop well during the 1980s. This lack of reflection and debate was due not only to the relatively small number of historians involved, but also to the fact that there was no exchange of views and research results

between specialists in various fields. Within the historiography of film and photography, for example, aesthetic and arthistorical conventions did develop, while there was no room for a more media-oriented approach. Other fields, like the history of the press, radio and television, were dominated by a political and institutional approach: in some circles media history was in fact equated with institutional history. Nor is this so surprising, given the fact that the social function of mass communication, for instance, and the information thus conveyed has as yet received only passing attention. The legacy of media research, conducted before the upsurge of interest during the last decade, consisted partly of some authoritative works, laying a firm and useful basis for further research, and many other academic studies focused on the history of specific institutional or political aspects, and partly of works written for special occasions, often richly illustrated and intended for a wider public.

The institutional approach to the history of the media was rooted in a long tradition, going back as far as to the first press historians around the middle of the nineteenth century, although it is possible to discern a clear change in the historiography around 1960. The publication, in that very year, of H.J. Scheffer's study on the history of a nineteenth century newspaper – *Het Rotterdamsch Nieuwsblad* – marked the beginning of the development of press history as a proper specialism. The oeuvre of Scheffer, awarded the De la Court prize of the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences in 1988, exemplifies the value of the traditional institutional approach to press history as practised during the 1960s and 1970s.

A second turning point with regard to the study of the history of the media could be placed around 1980. The number of publications on the press grew enormously, while its scope became wider, ranging from critical biographies and histories of individual newspapers and organisations to works on national and international press policies. While some studies stressed the political framework in which the press functioned, others concentrated more specifically on the correlation between the content and the political and social environment. Research of this kind has much to do with the formation of images, although *imagology* – the research into the construction and pragmatics of images, a field that has for some decades been incorporated in the study of literature and has recently acquired an interdisciplinary character – has to date with little response in the Netherlands.

Alongside this acceleration and expansion of the study of the press, the history of radio, television and film became object of serious investigation. Around 1980, research into the history of radio and television was still in its infancy, although the political and institutional aspects of the Dutch broadcasting system had been covered fairly comprehensively at that moment.³ Now the situation has improved, even though it is remarkable that historians still show little interest in television and radio programming. Just as with the history of the press, it would seem that the first steps now have been taken on the path to a more integrated approach to the history of broadcasting. It is to be hoped that the trend will also encompass the as yet underdeveloped area of television history. In that respect some recent exploratory studies of television, focusing on journalistic patterns, viewers' attitudes and the influence of television on Dutch politics and culture, are promising.⁴

Whereas press photography, with a few exceptions,⁵ has attracted little systematic research, film history has developed into a thriving discipline. This would seem to be attributable to a number of factors, such as its affinity with art history and dramaturgy, the many interested

non-professionals and the fact that films constitute such a specific, clearly defined subject for research.

Consequently, a large number of books and articles has appeared in the past few years, ranging from highly detailed encyclopaedic studies to works of a general nature. Examples include a collection of articles on Dutch films and cinema up to 1940,⁶ a history of Dutch documentary films between 1920 and 1940 by Bert Hogenkamp and a recently published dissertation on the introduction of the sound motion picture in the Netherlands by Karel Dibbets.

A conspicuous feature of the burgeoning of audio-visual history in the Netherlands is that it has produced an overwhelming amount of studies on companies, broadcasting associations, filmmakers, political and cultural regulations, economic and technical aspects, but virtually no in-depth analysis of the content or research into its cultural significance.

New perspectives

The area covered by research into the history of the media has greatly expanded since the end of the 1970s, even though the bulk of it is still concentrated one-sidedly on organisations and institutions and subject relating to media regulations. Only very few studies are based on a synchronic approach centred on the formation, structure and reception of images, texts and ideas. Diachronic studies of aspects of media history, such as changing styles and conventions, attitudes and subculture or image transformations, are virtually non-existent, as are studies in the field of communication history, which is to say comprehensive studies of the significance of press, film, radio and television for culture and society. These are major deficiencies, although it should be remarked that these imperfections are by no means typical for media history in the Netherlands alone.

It would be beyond the scope of this article to proceed to a discussion of methods, but there can be no doubt that the history of the media stands to gain from an integrated approach and from research which is more broadly based. Only a more comprehensive approach can do justice to the nature and characteristics of the mass media, which after all are producers of non-material goods, conveyor of images and opinions. The point at issue is not of course that the investigation of separate aspects should be declared taboo, but rather that what is needed is a new perspective: no matter what aspect is studied, its interrelationship with other elements of the communication process should always be made clear.

Considering recent trends in research there is some reason to be optimistic. Although fundamental discussions on scope and methods did not develop well in the Netherlands, a more comprehensive and coherent approach of communication history seems to gain ground slowly, due also to developments in the *humaniora* as well as in the field of history and social studies, developments that show themselves in a tendency towards multidisciplinary, a growing attention for language and culture and a shift away from all kinds of scientism.

At that point justice can be done to the results of traditional research, ostensibly underestimated and judged unfavourably in this survey. For, the huge number of onesidedly institutional and encyclopaedic studies will appear to be a solid base to a more integrated cultural approach to the history of the media.

Notes

1. This article is a summary of an earlier review, 'Tradition and Innovation in the Historiography of the Mass Media', in: N. van Sas & E. Witte, *Historical Research in the Low Countries*, NHG, The Hague 1992, pp. 89-100, and the article to be published, 'Een discipline in beweging: van persgeschiedenis tot mediageschiedenis', in: J.C.H.Blom & H.B.M. Wijffes (red.), *Mediageschiedenis: kansen en perspectieven. (Eindrapport CBMO van de Sociaal-Wetenschappelijke Raad)*, KNAW, Amsterdam 1995, pp. 37-69.
2. Bibliographies appear annually in *GBG-Nieuws* and the *Jaarboek Mediageschiedenis*; for articles see the general *Repertorium van boeken en tijdschriftartikelen op het gebied van de geschiedenis van Nederland (1940-)*. For a bibliographical survey on the last decade, see Van Vree, 'Tradition and Innovation'; Joan Hemels, 'Das audiovisuelle Kulturerbe als Forschungsgebiet der Kommunikationsgeschichte in den Niederlanden', in: S. Quandt, *Fachjournalismus im Gespräch*, Giessen 1991, pp. 79-98, and Joan Hemels, 'Kommunikationsgeschichte in den Niederlanden: Aufschwung oder Veitstanz', in: *Medien & Zeit*, 7/12, 1992, pp. 19-25.
3. Cf. the works of J. de Boer, *De plaats van de omroep in het openbare leven in Nederland tot 1940* (1946); D. Verkijk, *Radio Hilversum 1940-1945* (1974), and J.H.J. van den Heuvel, *Nationaal of verzuild (Omroepbestel 1923-1947)* (1976).
4. Some results of this kind of research can be found in *Jaarboek Mediageschiedenis III* (1991) and in H. Kleijer, A. Knetter, F. van Vree (eds), *Tekens en Teksten*, Amsterdam 1992. Stimulating is a collection of articles on the history of the former liberal-protestant broadcasting association, the *VPRO*, champion of the avant-garde since the 1960s: J. van den Heuvel e.a. (eds), *Een vrij zinnige verhouding De VPRO en Nederland 1926-1986*, Baarn 1986.
5. Last year *GBG*, *CBMO* and 'Foto & Tijdsbeeld' organized a joint conference on the problems and possibilities of the history of photography, with World War II serving as an exemplary theme.
6. Karel Dibbets & Frank van der Maden (eds), *Geschiedenis van de Nederlandse film en bioscoop tot 1940*, Amsterdam 1988; K. Dittrich van Weringh, *Der niederländische Spielfilm der dreissiger Jahre und die deutsche Filmemigration*, Rodopi, Amsterdam 1987.