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D E M O C R A T I C C O M M U N I Q U É

Extreme Moderation? Critical Political Economy as the Blindspot of Dutch Journalism Studies

Tabe Bergman

By way of content analyses and a Critical Discourse Analysis, this article characterizes the scholarship on Dutch journalism in the 21st century, finding that critical political economy is a blindspot. This article then argues for the salience of critical political economy by way of an in-depth examination of the existing scholarship's own findings, especially on sourcing and "media logic." Finally, this article identifies causes of the neglect of critical political economy in the study of Dutch journalism. It concludes with discussing the consequences.

Keywords: critical political economy, journalism, journalism studies, media logic, Netherlands, social science, sourcing

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As elsewhere in the western world, the academic study of journalism and media has proliferated in the Netherlands over the last decades, as exemplified by the establishment of new and popular university degrees. During the same period the western news media have drawn intensified criticism from academia. Many studies expose the subpar British and American coverage of the war in Iraq (Boyd-Barrett 2004; McChesney 2007: 253-4, note 145; Edwards and Cromwell 2006; Lewis et al. 2006). The ascendancy of the internet, especially social media, and the financial crisis of 2008 have added to the news media's woes — and the vehemence of the academic criticisms.

In Britain and the United States a sizeable number of scholars and other observers have pointed to journalism's political economy as a key explanation for what is often referred to as a "crisis" (e.g. Davies 2009; McChesney 2012; Pickard 2014). Such structural analyses were to be expected, for in those countries critical political economists have long occupied visible positions in academia. Britain boasts for instance Peter Golding, Graham Murdock, James Curran, the Glasgow University Media Group, and Nicholas Garnham. In the US Dan Schiller, Janet Wasko and Robert McChesney, among others, are prominent. In short, though small, a recognizable part of the scholarship originating from these two countries consists of "critical communications research" defined by Lazarsfeld, ironically most famous for his contribution to mainstream social science. Among other features, critical research consists of formulating broad, of society-level theories, a major concern with whether media either stifle or promote basic human values, and a refusal to "adjust... to the seemingly inescapable," for instance the capitalist structure of society (Lazarsfeld 1941: 9-10).

The Netherlands shares many characteristics with Britain and the US. All three countries are western, capitalist democracies with a privately-owned, advertising-dependent newspaper industry, which has suffered many layoffs. The countries have sophisticated and growing public-relations sectors and depend on the same monopolistic news agencies for foreign coverage. The prevailing practice of their professional journalists remains objectivity, which results in much status-quo affirming, he-said-she-said coverage (Cunningham 2003). Like Britain, the Netherlands still has a strong public broadcaster, limiting the influence of private ownership and the profit motive. Nonetheless, the Dutch public broadcaster NPO substantially depends on advertising revenues and in the 21st century has come under sustained ideological attack from (right-wing) politicians because it is not reverent enough, forcing it to reorganize and implement severe budget cuts. In short, as in Britain and the US, commercial interests reign over the Dutch news media (Donders and Raats 2012; Dutch Media Authority 2015, 2019; Prenger et al. 2011; Rutten and Slot 2011).

In fact, in some respects Dutch journalism might be in even more trouble than its British and American counterparts. The news agency ANP, which holds a monopoly, is completely privatized and run for profit. Dutch journalism, especially on the web, depends to a very large degree on foreign news agency copy (Boumans et al. 2018). The concentration in the radio, television and newspaper markets is very high. Two companies, Flemish ones named Mediahuis and De Persgroep, control about 90% of the Dutch newspaper market. Three entities control more than 70% of the radio market: Talpa, NPO and De Persgroep. The same goes for the TV market, which is controlled by NPO, RTL and Talpa (Dutch Media Authority 2019, 10-11). Local political journalism, if it is still worthy of the name, is in dire straits (Bakker 2010a;

2010b; Dutch Media Authority 2015; Landman et al. 2015).

Assessing the state of the Dutch news media, one might expect that critical political economy constitutes at the minimum an identifiable part of the scholarship or even thrives, as it can provide fruitful analytical tools and suggestions for ways towards improving Dutch journalism. Therefore, this article examines the presence of this perspective in the scholarship on Dutch journalism by way of content analyses and a Critical Discourse Analysis. This article finds that, its viability notwithstanding, it is virtually absent from the scholarship. It proceeds with discussing causes of its neglect and, finally, its consequences.

Methodology

A content analysis was performed of articles on Dutch journalism from January 2000 to December 2019 in the two leading journals in the field of Journalism Studies: *Journalism* and *Journalism Studies*. Both published their first edition in 2000. Accessed through the online library of an English University, the two journals were searched with the general keyword “Journalism” and with the words “Netherlands” or “Dutch” in the abstract. For *Journalism Studies*, 20 relevant results were found; for *Journalism*, the number was 19. A content analysis of the in total 39 articles was performed. The texts of the articles (not the reference lists) were examined with the text search function for mentions of fifteen Dutch and Anglo-American authors whose work fits within critical political economy (Table 1). The authors were selected based on their prominence in the scholarship in the studied period. Some of the fifteen authors do not self-identify as critical political economists, but at the minimum some of their works supports such a perspective.

An assumption underlying the content analysis is that a field is partly defined by a set of authors that are taken as canonical. The frequencies with which these fifteen authors are referred to can indicate to what extent the framework of critical political economy is adopted. The articles in the two journals were also examined for the terms “capitalism,” “neo(-)liberalism,” and “political economy.” Here the assumption is that scholars who work within the paradigm of critical political economy will use these terms rather often, as to them they refer to foundational analytical concepts.

The same content analysis was also performed for the latest edition of *Journalistieke Cultuur in Nederland* [*Journalistic Culture in the Netherlands*], which is the authoritative edited volume on Dutch journalism (Bardoel and Wijffjes 2015), and *The Handbook of Journalism Studies* (Wahl-Jorgenson and Hanitzsch 2009), which is similar in length, scope and purpose to the former book. This way, a comparison can be drawn between Dutch and Anglo-American scholarship.

Finally, a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the 39 articles, *Journalistieke Cultuur in Nederland* and other publications on Dutch journalism in the 21st century was performed. CDA can be seen as a continuation of Karl Marx’s method of critique: “CDA views texts as a moment in the *material* production and reproduction of social life, and analyses the social ‘work’ done in texts as a significant focus of materialist social critique” (Fairclough and Graham 2002: 5, emphasis in original). In short, the scholarship was read as potential examples of liberal ideology and social scientific professionalism, with a special focus on potential blindspots resulting from these (Smythe 1977; see Conclusion).

Results

The results show that critical political economy is absent from the scholarship on Dutch journalism. The 39 articles and the book *Journalistieke Cultuur in Nederland* refer to the fifteen political economists and sympathetic authors very rarely or not at all. For instance, Noam Chomsky gets one mention and Robert McChesney five (Table 1). Greg Philo of the Glasgow Media Group is not mentioned once. The Glasgow Media Group itself is mentioned once. The two most critical (as opposed to administrative, see Lazarsfeld 1941) Dutch scholars of journalism are ignored: Cees Hamelink is not mentioned at all and Jaap van Ginneken only once, though not in reference to a critical political-economic take on Dutch journalism. In general, when the authors are mentioned it is in passing and/or with reference to publications that do not take an obvious critical stance.

By far the most extensive mention of critical political economy in the 39 articles is found in *Subsidizing the News?* The relevant passage is cited here integrally:

From a political economy perspective, the increased influence of PR efforts on journalists can be explained by looking at the institutional and (market) structural context in which media organizations operate (Manning 2001). This context includes the strong pursuit of profit, the size of the media organization, the amount and nature of competition on the media market, the influence of advertising and the specific interests of media owners and managers (McChesney 2003). Consequently, the “commercial underpinnings” of the news industry affect the content the media produce (Forde and Johnston 2013) and some scholars believe they are driving the current crisis of journalistic quality (Bergman 2014; McChesney 2008). In a cynical response to the ongoing cutting of newsrooms and investigative journalism, Robert McChesney (2008, 124) signals that “doing journalism is bad for the bottom line”. In short, business norms are believed to prevail over journalism norms. Because “passive discovery” of news through news subsidiaries is the most cost-efficient practice, sources are able to gain power over the news production process. (Boumans 2018: 2266)

The author then suggests that critical assertions as the ones cited above, though applicable to the US and UK, are not true for all countries, including Belgium and the Netherlands. Ultimately he concludes that “PR-ization” is not a concern for the Dutch print media (Boumans 2018: 2277). Even if accepting the empirical findings of a lack of PR-driven news in the Dutch print media at face value, such findings by themselves by no means disqualify the applicability of critical political economy to the Dutch context. For instance, one might recall that sourcing is simply one of the five filters that make up the propaganda model (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Crucially, the author merely measured the (measurable) influence of PR on Dutch news. He failed to consider and explain the actual content of Dutch journalism’s news and commentary, which consistently favors elite interests, for instance in the run-up to the war in Iraq (e.g. Author, 2013). Some of the handful of mentions of “political economy” in the scholarship on Dutch journalism, then, are for making the case that the framework has no salience in the Dutch context.

By itself, the *Handbook of Journalism Studies* mentions critical political economists far more often than *Journalistieke Cultuur in Nederland* and the 39 articles on Dutch journalism put together. For instance, Chomsky is mentioned 17 times, Philo 13 and McChesney 24 (Table 3). One might object that the scholarship on Anglo-American journalism is far more likely to refer to Anglo-American scholars than the scholarship on Dutch journalism. But the latter very frequently refers to Anglo-American scholars, just not critical political economists (cf. Zwier et al., 2006). In addition, the results from the content analysis of the *Handbook* show that the method of searching for key authors and terms is a viable way of identifying the presence or absence of critical political economy in scholarship. An informed reader would identify the same chapters in the *Handbook* as containing critical political economy as did the content analysis.

The results further show that “capitalism,” “neoliberalism” and “political economy” are absent from the vocabulary of scholars of Dutch journalism (Table 2). “Capitalism” is mentioned four times in the 39 articles. “Neoliberalism” only once. The *Handbook of Journalism Studies* alone refers to “political economy” much more often than the Dutch book and the articles combined (Table 4). The term “political economy” lacks a comfortable Dutch translation. This might in part explain why its awkward Dutch version (“politieke economie”) occurs only once in the book *Journalistieke Cultuur*. On the other hand, the journal articles are written in English. Authors could have used “political economy.” Yet, they only did so four times, including twice in the article by Boumans (2018), which as mentioned purports to disqualify the perspective for the Netherlands.

The content analyses thus back up two observations: one obvious, the other perhaps not so much. The obvious one is that in Anglo-American Journalism Studies critical political economy is a small but recognized perspective that mainstream scholars (sometimes) engage with. The other, remarkable observation is that scholars of Dutch journalism consider critical political economy irrelevant.

Finally, strictly speaking it is very hard or even impossible to prove a negative – in this case the absence of critical political economy in Dutch Journalism Studies. Therefore, based on the content analyses presented, perhaps this article can only argue that this perspective is *virtually* absent in the scholarship examined. Nonetheless, it certainly demonstrates that it is undervalued. In addition, there exists a grey area between critical political economy and other approaches. Critical passages might be found here and there in the scholarship.

Yet, the simple fact remains that, to the author’s and Cees Hamelink’s knowledge (personal communication, 18 August, 2019), in the 21st century there has existed no scholar working at a university who describes herself as a critical political economist of Dutch journalism or media. The findings presented in this article cannot come as a surprise, as they mirror existing comments and research. For instance, Frank van Vree, a journalism professor at the University of Amsterdam, said in 2011 that in the Netherlands to date there had been no research done on the relationship between a newspaper’s content and its publisher (Sanders 2011: 6). And as two mainstream Dutch scholars noted in a systematic inventory of Dutch Journalism Studies, almost no research was being performed on “economic developments, the influence of commercialism and the public relations industry on journalism” or changes in media ownership. The scholarship made mention of “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).

Reading the Scholarship: The Relevance of Critical Political Economy

Why would critical political economy be absent from the scholarship on Dutch journalism? A possible explanation could be that the perspective is simply not analytically relevant to the Netherlands. Yet, a Critical Discourse Analysis of the scholarship on Dutch journalism in the first two decades of the millennium shows that it itself has generated ample data that indicate the viability of a critical political economy of Dutch journalism. An additional benefit of the following discussion of the scholarship on Dutch journalism, specifically on sourcing and media logic, is the insights it affords in the ways critical political economy can enrich current analyses. Based on the existing research, the following conclusions can be drawn.

In the Netherlands elite sources dominate too

Which types of sources journalists use and how frequently they do so, constitute defining characteristics of any journalism. As McChesney observed for the US:

The core problem with professional journalism as it crystallized was that it relied far too heavily upon official sources (i.e., people in power) as the appropriate agenda setters for news and as the “deciders” concerning the range of legitimate debate in our political culture. (McChesney 2012, 683-684)

Quality Dutch journalism suffers from the same affliction, some partly conflicting evidence notwithstanding (Boumans et al. 2016). Journalists heavily rely on the private, monopoly news agency ANP and they strongly index the news to the (perceived) power of politicians (Van Hoof et al. 2014; Welbers et al. 2016). Business sources frequently act as de facto co-producers of interviews as opposed to being treated as subjects to be critically interrogated (Velthuis 2015). As mentioned, international news agencies dominate foreign news provision (Boumans et al. 2018).

A study by Kleemans et al. (2015) provides empirical data that illustrates Dutch journalism’s “core problem.” Simultaneously it illustrates several issues with the scholarship itself. The researchers conclude that on the only two daily news shows in the Netherlands (one commercial, one public) from 1990 to 2014 the majority of sources are members of the elites. They are politicians or government officials (36.5%) or represent law enforcement and emergency services (7%) or the corporate world (9.7%). Almost one-fifth of the sources (17.4%) are vox pops, in other words “random citizens.” Only about 3% of the sources are empowered citizens: experts, activists or representatives of citizen action groups (Kleemans et al. 2015, 9). From 1990 to 2014 the percentage of vox pops in the news sharply increased, whereas the percentage of citizens in empowered roles hardly changed (Kleemans et al. 2015, 12).

In contrast to the author of this article, the researchers place “corporate sources” in the category “civil society sources” instead of “elite sources.” The peculiar classification can be read as a small example of Dutch Journalism Studies’ tendency to misjudge economic forces. Separating the corporate world from politics by designating “corporate sources” as non-elite is problematic. Politics and business are decidedly interconnected in the Netherlands, home to huge

multinationals including Philips, Unilever and Shell. The Dutch state has long been dedicated to privatization and “free trade” under the protective American umbrella. Corporate lobbyists hold much power. The revolving door between corporations and the state spins round and round (Chavannes 2009; Luyendijk 2010; Van Doorn 2009; Van den Dool 2012).

Even after adding corporate sources to the category of elite sources, the findings by Kleemans et al. still underestimate the official orientation of Dutch television news. Mentioned only in passing is that a full third of the examined news items contains no source at all. This must mean that a substantial amount of the information in those items derives from news agencies, other mainstream media or official announcements (Kleemans et al. 2015, 8).

“Nowadays, the primary goal of news is to increase market shares,” Kleemans et al. note. Nonetheless, they ground their study solely “in theories of journalistic routines” (Kleemans et al. 2015, 3-4). Their neglect of critical political economy unduly limits their analysis, especially when it comes to explaining and identifying solutions for the persistent dominance of elite sources. The researchers observed that “changing [journalistic] routines means changing the very core of the profession. This takes time and requires a feeling of necessity” (Kleemans et al. 2015, 15). The statement suggests that journalists could simply change their ways of working if only they desired so. In short, it suggests that journalists are autonomous.

The researchers ignore the crucial reality that professional routines not just protect journalists from outside interference. They simultaneously serve the interests of media owners and politicians. Professionalism, notably objectivity, is a double-edged sword, providing *both* autonomy and restraints (Cunningham 2003; McChesney 2003). Acknowledging this reality would trace the root of problematic sourcing practices up to the level of ownership, and ultimately capitalism. It is a manoeuvre that Dutch Journalism Studies is unlikely to perform, to the detriment of analytical salience. By not “rising above” the analytical level of the journalistic profession, researchers become myopic to the constraints put in place by private ownership. They continue to look for solutions where they will not be found: on the level of the profession. Because they do not look for ownership effects they do not see them. In contrast, critical political economy *can* explain why changes in “news sourcing routines” have “remained very limited” (Kleemans et al. 2015, 15). Even if they wanted to, and one might expect that quite a few do, professional journalists simply are not free to alter reigning sourcing practices.

In short, the extant scholarship on sourcing confirms the existence of a symbiotic relationship in the Netherlands between corporate and political elites on the one hand and professional journalists on the other. Such a relationship has long been identified by critical political economists as a crucial part of the problem with commercial journalism. For instance, Herman and Chomsky (1988) identified sourcing practices as the third of five filters that distort the news in favour of elites. In passing it might be noted that the other four filters (concentrated, private ownership; dependence on advertisers; flak or negative feedback; and pro-market ideology) also apply to the Netherlands, although not with the same force as in the US (Author, 2013). Unacknowledged by scholars themselves, then, their own findings on sourcing validate a critical political economy of Dutch journalism.

'Media logic' is a flawed concept

Quite a few scholars argue that over the last decades the news media in the Netherlands have gained power vis-à-vis politics and are even setting the political agenda (Brants and Van Praag 2006). In other words, they propose that the concept “media logic” explains the relationship:

The role of journalism in a strongly competitive media market is both dominant and increasingly of an entertaining nature; they [sic] tend to frame politics in conflict terms, and more and more politicians and political parties have to and do adhere to the production routines and selection criteria of the media, especially television. Politicians in the Netherlands have been used to such media logic and probably have come to terms with it. (Van Aelst et al. 2008, 506)

And if the news media are not dominant, then at least they are an equal partner of politics: “More than one holding the other in an oppressive clutch, journalists and politicians are engaged in a power play, a dance almost: an intricate relationship of give and take, of withholding, bargaining and negotiating, of smile, poker face and anger” (Van Aelst et al. 2008, 507). This particular view of the power balance in Dutch society is problematic. For instance, in advancing “media logic” as a central explanatory concept, scholars far from adequately conceptualize economic power. They do not separate it out from media power, nor do they place it in opposition to the news media’s – and the public’s – interest in independent, critical journalism. Rather, economic power is only referred to in attenuated form, as the requirement of media companies in a competitive market to reach as many consumers as possible. This requirement is seen as only one of several factors that drive media logic (Takens et al. 2013; Van Santen and Vliegthart 2013).

Brants and Van Praag’s own re-evaluation of the analytical usefulness of “media logic” is a case in point. In a partial reversal of their earlier arguments, they now propose that the news media are not dominant anymore, if indeed they ever were. Instead, the public reigns:

The angry citizen, the floating voter, and the turned off and tuned out public have become powerful actors in between and in fact over politicians and journalists. No longer do the political elite or the journalistic bearers of the public sphere have the sole right to ‘the’ truth. Politicians and journalists have indirectly conceded much power by continually anticipating the public’s wishes: without being coerced, politicians and journalists increasingly do what they expect the public want. (Brants and Van Praag 2015: 10)

The main problem with this argument is that ownership and dependence on advertisers – more broadly, capitalism – are again not even mentioned as potential factors influencing journalism. Neither is the fact that consumer wishes are substantially shaped by advertisers. If under media logic news consumers are given what they want instead of what they need, then that is only true with at least one big caveat: as long as what people want does not conflict with what advertisers want. In short, Brants and Van Praag neglect to address a crucial question: To what extent do *economic* forces influence both politics and the media? The omission constitutes another example of the tendency of Dutch Journalism Studies to abstract away from the economy as a power player in society.

Brants and Van Praag admit that democracy in the Netherlands is quite limited. One would assume that therefore so is citizens' agency. But the authors argue that:

Instead of a representative democracy, where they can merely applaud, boo or be silent, there appears a more agonistic populist democracy, where segments of the public indirectly or loudly begin to steer the attitudes and performance of many a politician and journalist. (Brants and Van Praag 2015, 10)

Digital media and interactive TV shows specifically have certainly increased the *visibility* of "ordinary" people. But has, for instance, the indeed "fragmented" public (Brants and Van Praag 2015, 11) gained influence over the crucial economic and foreign policy decisions that shape their lives? To ask the question is to answer it. In fact, the rising public anger against elites in the Netherlands, as illustrated by the popularity of the far-right, can in part be explained by people realizing that their power, such as it was, is seeping away to the hardly democratic European Union and transnational corporations (Chavannes, 2009). Journalists too have lost power, as the PR-industry has grown and professionalized. In the US PR-workers outnumber journalists four to one (McChesney 2012, 686). In the Netherlands the same problem exists. An estimate of at least three PR-workers for every journalist is reasonable, in fact conservative (Prenger et al. 2011).

Neoliberalism, which shifts more and more power to private corporations, has hit the Netherlands too. In the progressive 1970s attempts were made to politicize the economy, but since then the opposite has happened: the economization of politics. In the current "consumer society" individuals are overwhelmed by their "attackers": "salespeople, advertisers and market analysts" (Van Doorn 2009, 500). Much media content has a depoliticizing and thus marginalizing effect. Digital technologies in principle enable personal empowerment, but many internet researchers now warn against the power amassed by giant internet companies (Powles 2016). In short, claims that nowadays the public reigns in any meaningful way are dubious at best.

Brants and Van Praag themselves concede that speaking of a "public logic" might be unwise:

The inevitable conclusion will have to be that there is not one structural power, not one single dominating logic, but an often unpredictable interaction between public, media, and politics, with mutual influence and changing positions of power. With political logic *passée* [sic] and ambiguous proof of media logic, it is better to stop talking about logics in political communication altogether. Except, may be [sic], as a historical category. (Brants and Van Praag 2015, 11)

At the risk of sounding repetitive, the authors exclusively concentrate on three societal forces: politics, journalism and the public. They do not even consider economics as an independent variable. Surely this is a major blindspot. Of course, there is always value in pointing out the danger posed by simplistic analyses that attempt to identify one factor as the only one that ultimately matters. Yet their own analysis remains too noncommittal. The authors refrain from even suggesting a likely hierarchy among the three societal players they do identify (the public, politics and the media), although much prominent research shows that the media set the public

agenda and politics sets the media agenda (Bennett 1990; McCombs 2005).

The scholarship evidences unreflective optimism

Research on Dutch journalism ignores the central tenets of critical political economy. Instead, scholars appear to subscribe to relatively sanguine assessments, such as:

In the Netherlands... the fading of pillarization since the 1960s has considerably weakened the long tradition of organized pluralism (with a strong parallelism of politics and media). In a more recent development, since the 1980s, democratic-corporatist countries have moved in the direction of the liberal – Anglo-Saxon – model... showing signs of commercialization, mediatization and tabloidization. But there is still a strong tradition of substantive reporting in the Netherlands... and public trust in news media, albeit with a downward trend... still is relatively high, compared to other countries. (Van der Wurff and Schönbach 2014, 125; emphasis in original)

In short, scholars take the position that Dutch journalism has its problems but still functions adequately, certainly in comparative perspective (cf. Boumans 2018). Likely no scholar would advise people *not* to watch the public news broadcasts, aside, that is, from the marginalized Cees Hamelink (Van de Beek 2017). Crucially, the prevailing moderate optimism among scholars is *not* based on a thorough evaluation of news content. For in the Netherlands, as opposed to the US and Britain, “The systematic review of journalistic work by professionals or experts is hardly known” (Van der Wurff and Schönbach 2014: 125-126). In other words, the assumption that quality journalism in the Netherlands is in fact of good quality is merely an assumption. Dutch Journalism Studies has simply not empirically examined whether the content of quality journalism in the Netherlands exhibits a structural pro-elite bias and thus can be challenged on the same grounds on which critical political economists and others have criticized British and American journalism, notably foreign affairs coverage (Bennett 1990; Hallin 1989; Herring and Robinson 2003).

It bears emphasis that scholars have, of course, criticized the Dutch news media, especially in the 21st century. Much of the criticism has come from a cultural studies perspective, for instance regarding the representation of minorities and women, but the marginalization of citizens in the media has at least been noted (e.g. Bardoel and D’Haenens 2004). Another category of criticism concerns the increasing commercialization of the news (Costera Meijer 2003: 15). But criticizing commercialization is hardly the same as employing a critical political-economic framework. As McManus insightfully argues:

To be concerned with commercialization implies that absent such taint, profit-seeking news media can act in the public interest. So a definition of commercialization carries with it the controversial assumption that business-based journalism can, in fact, serve the public under certain conditions. (McManus 2009: 219)

This is not a controversial assumption among scholars of Dutch journalism. A number of them have expressed concerns about commercialization, but they stop far short of questioning the

commercial nature of the news media.

Causes of the neglect of critical political economy

There exists no simple answer to the question why Dutch Journalism Studies ignores critical political economy. Many factors play a role and it would be presumptuous to pretend to know their relative importance. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify a number of likely factors. First, in the Netherlands the study of communication including the news media has traditionally been, and remains, predominantly the domain of social science (Brants and Vasterman 2010). Social scientists tend to resist critical approaches for a number of reasons. For instance, they focus on generating quantitative data instead of questioning ideological assumptions. They also tend to discount historical analyses. Their narrow research designs tend to obscure society's macro-level power relations (Gitlin 1978; Mills 1959).

Second, the advancing neoliberalization of Dutch universities works against incorporating the structural effects of commercial power over media in academic analyses, albeit no doubt in a myriad of subtle ways (Roos 2015). According to Cees Hamelink, who is in a position to know, academic freedom at Dutch universities has diminished over the last decades and has been replaced by more hierarchical relationships (Van de Beek 2017). A characteristic of the scholarship on Dutch journalism is a high degree of professionalism. It has many beneficial features but also includes a publish-or-perish attitude and a focus on attracting outside funding from, for instance, media industries or organizations like the European Union. In such circumstances critical political economy is unlikely to flourish. The requirement to publish a lot of research in international, peer-reviewed journals favours following trodden paths and aligning oneself with mainstream expectations as to what constitutes good research. Critical concern with Dutch journalism and democracy in and of itself, such as it is, might well be subordinated to doing research that advances international theory building. Publication pressure also forms a disincentive to engage with the world outside the university. Op-eds get no one tenure, especially when written in Dutch.

Third, in the Netherlands, as elsewhere, academic departments that study and teach journalism often have ties to the news industries. The industries need the departments to train prospective interns and employees, and former and working journalists not infrequently teach in those departments. Scholars need access to media organizations and working journalists to place their students, and often to do research as well. Such professional ties promote the marginalization of critical research. In other words, critical political economists, who challenge the commercial structure of the news industry, are unlikely to get offered positions in departments that prioritize cordial relations with the industries.

Fourth, some scholars, possibly influenced by postmodernism, regard social reality as infinitely complex or even fundamentally unknowable, and employ this as an argument to marginalize critical political economy (cf. Godler 2016). Others see critical political economy as simplistic and therefore not academically rigorous. Critical political economy is certainly not rocket science, nor the be all and end all of media analysis. And reality *is* infinitely complex. Yet who among those living in the actual world could deny that money and unequal power relations constitute, at the minimum, very significant factors in shaping society's institutions, including the media? Simply dismissing the economic power exerted over the media, although admittedly

the process often is intangible, does not make that power or its consequences disappear. The point made here is not that economic power constitutes the *only* analytical factor that matters. Rather, the point is that it constitutes an (increasingly) important factor, and arguably the single most important one. To make a liberal argument: at the very least, critical political economy should be included in the range of perspectives employed to examine and teach Dutch journalism.

Fifth, research collaboration, a regular feature of the scholarship on Dutch journalism, combined with the already mentioned pressure to publish, contributes to producing “more-of-the-same” research. Collaboration works against questioning established paradigms. PhD-programs train students to do research that resembles their professors’. Dissertations are not infrequently part of larger projects, with topic and methods predetermined. Students and professors often co-publish based on dissertation research. The emphasis on collaboration no doubt improves research quality. But it also contributes to an environment in which students and early-career scholars have little choice but to work under the strict auspices of established professors and adopt their perspectives and methods.

Sixth, ironically, the relatively benign political economy of the Netherlands forms a significant barrier against questioning the political economy of the Dutch media. As surveys consistently show, the Netherlands is one of the most liveable and happiest countries in the world (e.g. Helliwell et al. 2015). One might understand why in such a fortuitous society the social contract justifying the existing order is rarely questioned. The social contract that underpins the modern Dutch welfare state was established at the beginning of the Cold War and says that economic elites, including media owners, are to keep their power, possessions and profits, as long as they, in collaboration with the state, ensure that workers have a decent life, including a comfortable wage and access to good health care and education. Analyses critical of private ownership are marginalized because they directly challenge Dutch society’s foundation. In short, the notoriously liberal Dutch feel they can ignore critical political economy *because* their society is so liberal. Why rock the boat when capitalism, including private ownership, is obviously working so well for so many citizens?

One might also understand why, especially from the end of WWII until the 1980s, Dutch scholars virtually never engaged with critical political economy, apart from a brief and modest upsurge in the 1970s. Back then, the hold of commerce over Dutch journalism was much weaker and public broadcasting much stronger than nowadays. Some newspapers were owned by non-profits. Ownership *was* a relatively weak factor, certainly compared to the US, perhaps about as weak as possible in any capitalist society. From the 1970s on editorial statutes guarantee, on paper at least, the non-interference by management with editorial decisions. Editors-in-chief used to be journalists first and managers second. During pillarization, which began to break down in the 1960s, but lingered, newspapers were politically partisan. It was tempting – although never justified, for the press always was commercial – to conclude that politics was primary and economics a distant second, at best. As pillarization gave way to professionalization, it made some sense to focus on the real gains for journalism, including more independence from politics, and to ignore or downplay not only the losses for journalism but especially the problematic continuities, including the press’s dependence on advertising.

Nowadays critical political economy is more relevant than ever to the analysis of the Dutch news media. Media owners, often foreign companies focused on maximizing short-term profits, are in the process of breaking down the relatively benign working relationship between journalists and owners (Sanders, 2011). To the extent that owners have simply reneged on their side of the bargain, scholars' traditional diagnoses do not hold anymore. The extent of the crisis in which Dutch journalism finds itself these days might be hard for Dutch scholars to fully recognize and accept, because it prompts a reconsideration of their social-democratic politics. Nonetheless, it might be past due for those concerned with the fate of Dutch journalism to, at a minimum, engage with the research tradition that has documented the many instances when the social-democratic analysis was always faulty, and places these front and centre: critical political economy.

Finally, and room for disagreement as to the extent of the force of the following explanation certainly exists, culturally the Netherlands remains a consensus society, in which going against the grain is discouraged. As a popular Dutch saying goes: "Just act normal. That is already crazy enough." Dutch culture is in part characterized by a conservative, conformist mind-set that can be hard to discern, especially for foreigners, obscured as it is by liberal attitudes towards drugs, prostitution, gay marriage, and other social issues. One might call this mind-set a predisposition to "extreme moderation." It indicates an attitude of extreme resistance to what are considered "extremes," and a "common-sense" preference for the middle of the road, as constructed of course by mainstream society.

Extreme moderation is similar to the prevalent cultural mind-set in Denmark, another Democratic Corporatist society, called "hygge." The concept has recently attracted attention from social scientists. It roughly translates as "cosiness" or "conviviality" in English and "gezelligheid" in Dutch. "Gezelligheid" indicates to many Dutch people a cultural phenomenon that they tellingly claim as typically theirs. Seen as a likely partial explanation for the high levels of happiness in Denmark, hygge can be defined as an egalitarian and relaxed attitude that prioritizes harmony in human relationships. But it has a dark side. "Normative to the point of coercive" it constitutes a "relentless drive towards the middle ground" and depends "on keeping things light and breezy" (Booth 2016). The Dutch equivalent, extreme moderation, might to some extent explain why Dutch scholars steer clear of critical political economy.

Conclusion

As this article has shown, despite the obvious similarities between the news media, their output, and the societal context in which they operate in the Netherlands, the US and Britain, and despite the research affirming that similar, severe problems plague journalism in all three countries, scholars of Dutch journalism ignore critical political economy. From a global perspective, these findings are surprising as the field of critical political economy has grown (Mosco, 2008; Wasko, 2014).

In other words, this article has identified a blindspot. This was done, of course, with a respectful wink to critical political economist Dallas Smythe, who famously identified a blindspot in the Marxist literature on the mass media industries. Arguing that, "Western Marxist analyses have neglected the economic and political significance of mass communications systems," Smythe charged "radical social critics who use Marxist terminology" with framing mass communications

primarily or even solely as producers of “ideology.” Smythe continued that “the proof of [ideology’s] existence is found by such writers to be the necessity for it to exist so that certain other phenomena may be explained” (Smythe 1977: 1). So it is with Dutch journalism studies. Scholars’ liberal political ideology requires that the Dutch news media, despite their flaws, by and large function as they should in a parliamentary democracy. The blindspot, then, ultimately results from their political bias. Identifying the blindspot is a crucial first step towards improving Dutch media and democracy.

For, what are consequences of this blindspot? First, the scholarship fails to adequately decentre and contextualize journalism. In a word, the phrase “Journalism Studies” is taken too literally. The scholarship as a whole underappreciates the influence of economics on both politics and the news media and explicitly or implicitly exaggerates the autonomy of the journalistic profession. A major challenge for Dutch Journalism Studies, then, consists of integrating industry and societal levels of analyses with the organizational, professional and individual levels that in certain ways it has studied extensively and expertly. Here critical political economy could lend a hand.

Second, the scholarship lacks firm normative foundations, and in part as a result coherence and societal relevance. It starts from the theory, not for instance the suffering of people in Iraq resulting from an illegal war abetted by the western news media, including the quality newspapers in the Netherlands (Author 2013). Critical political economy’s explicit aim of doing research that intervenes in society could guide and unify a body of research that at the present constitutes more a collection of trees than a forest. Marrying rigorous social-scientific methods with a firm commitment to promoting substantive democracy in society, including the news media themselves, could create a powerful engine for socially relevant scholarship. For instance, a normative concern with class inequality could lead to empirical studies to show – or disprove – that the Dutch news displays a structural bias in favour of the interests of business and established politics.

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Table 1

	Ben Bagdikian	Noam Chomsky	James Curran	Nick Davies	Nicholas Garnham	Jaap Van Ginneken	Glasgow Media Group	Peter Golding
<i>Journalism</i>	0	1	3	5	0	0	0	1
<i>Journalism Studies</i>	0	0	1	8	0	1	1	1
<i>Journalistieke Cultuur</i>	0	0	1	3	0	1	0	0
Totals	0	1	5	16	0	2	1	2

Table 1 continued

	Cees Hamelink	Edward Herman	Alan McManus	Robert McChesney	Graham Murdock	Greg Philo	Colin Sparks
<i>Journalism</i>	0	1	3	0	0	0	4
<i>Journalism Studies</i>	0	0	2	5	9	0	5
<i>Journalistieke Cultuur</i>	0	0	0	2	0	0	2
Totals	0	1	5	7	9	0	11

Numbers of mentions of fifteen Dutch and Anglo-American political economists in 39 articles (in the full text, including in-text references) that address Dutch journalism in *Journalism* and *Journalism Studies* from January 2000 to December 2019, and in the book *Journalistieke Cultuur in Nederland* (2015).

Table 2

	‘capitalism’	‘neo(-)liberal(ism)’	‘political economy’
<i>Journalism</i>	2	0	1
<i>Journalism Studies</i>	2	1	3
<i>Journalistieke Cultuur</i>	2	1	1
Totals	6	2	5

Numbers of mentions of three key political-economic terms in 39 articles (in the title, abstract, key words and full text including in-text references) that address Dutch journalism in the journals *Journalism* and *Journalism Studies* from January 2000 to December 2019, and in the book *Journalistieke Cultuur in Nederland* (2015).

Table 3

	Ben Bagdikian	Noam Chomsky	James Curran	Nick Davies	Nicholas Garnham	Jaap Van Ginneken	Glasgow Media Group	Peter Golding
<i>Handbook of Journalism Studies</i>	9	17	19	0	20	0	7	17

Table 3 continued

	Cees Hamelink	Edward Herman	Alan McManus	Robert McChesney	Graham Murdock	Greg Philo	Colin Sparks
<i>Handbook of Journalism Studies</i>	0	17	8	24	7	13	15

Numbers of mentions of fifteen Dutch and Anglo-American political economists in the *Handbook of Journalism Studies* (2009) in the full text, including in-text references.

Table 4

	‘capitalism’	‘neo(-)liberal(ism)’	‘political economy’ (of media)
<i>Handbook of Journalism Studies</i>	14	15	20

Numbers of mentions of three key political-economic terms in the *Handbook of Journalism Studies* (2009).