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Beschaafde vooruitgang. De wereld van de Leeuwarder Courant 1752-2002

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SUMMARY

Civilized progress

A history of the *Leeuwarder Courant* 1752–2002

The *Leeuwarder Courant* (LC), founded in 1752, is the oldest newspaper in the Netherlands still published nowadays. This thesis examines its remarkable success. It focuses on the newspaper as a business, the readers and society in general. But it also deals with the representation of reality in the LC. Its content and style, which determine the identity of a newspaper, are examined through a content analysis and by researching the records of the LC.

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The LC as a business

To its publishers the paper was foremost a business. Until the end of the nineteenth century they didn't invest a lot in technical improvements or in the editorial quality of the LC. They wanted to maximize their profits, although after 1805 huge taxes limited the earnings of the company. In the 1880's, however, they were forced to invest since serious competitors entered the newspaper business. The LC wanted to maintain the widest circulation in the Province of Friesland.

An editorial staff was appointed, various contributors were hired and the LC subscribed to the service of press agencies. The company bought new printing presses and typesetting machines, and it also hired more printers and compositors. An increase of the number of subscribers was necessary. A newspaper company which did not invest, could not survive; the newspaper would become unattractive to the readers, would lose subscribers, which would make it impossible to invest and improve, and so on. Two price reductions in 1913 and 1926 caused a substantial increase in readership. In 1886 4430 people subscribed to the LC and their number increased to 24.000 people on the eve of World War II. In 1945 the LC, which had continued publication and had accepted a pro-German editor in chief, was banned from publication. To avoid this banishment, it merged with the foundation *Je Maintiendrai Friesland*, which had published an illegal newspaper. The old company became a contract printer. Due to the ideas of *Je Maintiendrai*, which supported the freedom of the press,

the new company invested a lot in the editorial quality of the *lc*. The newspaper remained in essence a commercial product, but maximizing profits was less important than before the war.

The content of the *LC*

548 The business sense of its publishers led to cautiousness towards government and politics. Until 1848 (and during the French and German occupation) the newspaper was threatened with censorship and sanctions. In addition the *LC* wanted to remain attractive to readers and advertisers with different backgrounds and opinions. It did not strive for political goals, but tried to be 'neutral', although this concept changed throughout history.

At the end of the nineteenth century 'moral communities' arose. The *LC* avoided a party political choice. It tried to counter the segmentation of society by giving the different groups in society a proper place in the pages of the newspaper. It covered all kinds of meetings, reviewed other (political) newspapers and published letters to the editor containing a wide spectrum of political views. The *LC* represented the 'pillarization', as this process was named, in itself. After World War II it focused even more on internal multiformity.

The *LC* tried to unite the public through a cultural programme which underlay its representation of reality. It spread the bourgeois cultural ideal and its style of living. The paper built its identity on the ideas of the Enlightenment: the reader could educate himself by reading the newspaper and thus become a full member of society. The *LC* wanted to spread knowledge and information. Citizens could use this to fulfill their obligations to society. The newspaper's aim was to civilize its readers. It propagated bourgeois conventions and values, like religious tolerance, peace and order, politeness, modesty and decency. Only events that were consistent with these values in content and style were covered. The *LC* excluded, in its representation of society, groups that did not respect the bourgeois style of living.

Most of its readers appreciated the *LC*'s bourgeois ideals. Its solid and respectable character, with a little 'snob-appeal', made the *LC* after 1869, and after the price reductions of 1913 and 1926 attractive to many readers. In the 1960's en 1970's it reached a broad public (in 1975 it had 100.000 subscribers). The *LC* tried to satisfy its readers, but remained faithful to its own principles.

The style of the LC

In the eighteenth century the LC used a spectatorial style. It printed bare enumeration's, news and eyewitness reports which looked like ordinary letters. They were personal impressions, written like narratives – with an introduction, a middle piece and an ending – and sometimes completed with moralistic remarks. In the nineteenth century the LC started to use official jargon. Its style became distinguished and concise. Characteristic was the remarkable increase in using reports to cover various meetings. These long articles, almost like minutes, tried to provide a conscientious representation of reality.

In 1893 the first editor in chief was appointed. Journalism slowly became a profession. The LC build up a network of correspondents who gathered news in all Friesland. Now, apart from reporting, the paper also started to interpret the news. It used a restraint and detached style, which created a distance between the reader and the news. The genres and the official jargon the LC used, didn't appeal to public sentiment. They appealed to reason. Now the most characteristic genre was the summary. In their foreign news summary at the front-page, for example, the LC summed up what had happened and tried to clarify the often complicated world. It wanted to educate its readers, not to entertain them. Later, under the influence of competition and the expansion of its readers public to the lower middle classes and the working class, the LC tried to be more light-hearted and enjoyable. It introduced comics and serials, human interest stories and interviews, photographs and headlines.

After World War II the LC focused on hard news. Lack of printing paper forced it to select more carefully what was published. The sentences became shorter and the language more concise and clear. It started to use the Anglo-Saxon layout in which news value determined on which page an article was published. A headline summarized the most important information in each article. More often reporters gathered news stories, reports and interviews in Friesland. Their number increased from 45 journalists in 1977 to 90 in 1993. The LC gave more and more attention to the interpretation of news. The editors in chief gave their views and in leading articles, analyses and background stories the newspaper explained the way in which newsfacts interrelated. It also gave more attention to photography and human interest stories like interviews. The reader could identify himself with the subject of an article or with the people it was about. The LC nevertheless remained a distinguished newspaper, due to its conservati-

ve layout, its balanced coverage and judgment, and the news selection it made.

A community of readers

In the *LC* usefulness, education and, less prominent, distinguished entertainment were focal points. The newspaper tried to be useful to its reader's private life by providing him with news and information. It wanted to educate by publishing solid articles about various subjects, in particular cultural affairs. It also entertained its readers by for example funny news, serials and comics. The purpose of this more light-hearted side, was to make the newspaper more attractive, which made serious articles readable.

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The *LC* created a public sphere in which citizens could acquire knowledge about a subject, discuss it with their fellow citizens and form an opinion of their own. The public sphere was limited by law and by the bourgeois conventions and values. After the founding of the '*Bataafse Republiek*' in 1795, and especially after the liberal constitution of 1848, politics entered the public sphere. De *LC* started to publish reports of parliamentary, provincial and city council proceedings. From 1830 it also published letters to the editor. Public debate entered the newspaper.

The *LC* itself did not take a political stand. It judged the news from a moral point of view. The bourgeois values it honoured, determined what was published. The newspaper did not enter private life – it did not use interviews for a long time – because it considered this indecent. But the conventions and values the newspaper honoured, changed throughout the years. During its history the *LC* carefully adapted to social change, in accordance with its identity. The *LC* made, as a consequence of this policy, the social changes acceptable.

During the nineteenth century the *LC* more and more focused on Friesland. It considered the construction of a Frisian identity as a cultural process, which was not in contradiction with the founding of the Dutch national state. The conservation and development of Frisian culture was, according to the *LC*, an important contribution to national culture. The *LC* emphasised the common history and language of the Frisians. From 1945 it argued in favour of equal rights to the Frisian and Dutch language. It confirmed, by the major attention it gave to Frisian subjects, the geographical unity of Friesland and informed Frisians with different social, religious or political backgrounds about each others existence. It created an imagined community whose members believed they belonged to each other.

The success of the *Leeuwarder Courant*

Only multiple factors (social, business and journalistic) can explain the success of a newspaper. In the first place society determined the limits of the paper's existence. The government could suppress it or it could lose the public's favour. The *LC* tried to avoid this by being neutral in politics. It had no (political) party interest which would frighten readers, and it did not try to please the public either. It chose a moral point of view to judge reality. This was a successful strategy.

Secondly business matters played their part. The publishers of the *LC* were talented business men. They invested prudently, but acted at crucial moments. They were determined to preserve the continuity of their newspaper. Willem Sprenger in 1879 transformed the *LC* into a daily, while his son faced competition by means of investments in an editorial staff and the printing equipment. Two well timed price reductions caused an increase of subscribers at the right moment. After World War II investments in editorial quality made it possible to face the competition of those days.

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Last but not least, journalistic factors influenced the success of the *LC*. It searched and found during its 250 years of existence a subtle balance between change and continuity. It carefully sampled the wishes of its readers, but remained faithful to its own identity. It did not descend to the level of its new readers, but tried to challenge them with thorough articles. The readers were expected to make quite an effort. The *LC* supported progress, but only when it came in a civilized way.