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Neutral news. Forging a small states' transnational media network, 1914-40

Vincent Kuitenbrouwer

Smallness and 'truth'

In 1955 the director of the Belgian press agency Belga, Daniël Ryelandt, gave a speech at the twentieth anniversary celebration of its Dutch 'sister', the General Dutch Press Agency (*Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau* (ANP)). He lavished praise on his good friend Herman van de Pol, the ANP's director, who at the outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 had initiated a plan to create a joint news service comprising the press agencies of the Oslo countries, involving cooperation amongst the four Scandinavian countries, Belgium and the Netherlands. Ryelandt reflected that at that time

the whole of the international news coverage was in hands of the big agencies, who were precisely the press agencies of the three warring countries. [...] News for those agencies had become an instrument to hit a certain target – which of course meant that they derogated from the truth [...]. This was the case with the news from the small states of Europe, who wanted to stay out of the war. News from Sweden, for example came to Belgium via English or German channel – and the other way around – which was not without danger for peace.¹

Ryelandt's speech highlights the key dilemma facing smaller press agencies in an age of mass communication: How were they to defend themselves against the dominance of the agencies of the 'great powers' and thereby help safeguard their neutral home countries against propaganda? The war's outbreak in September 1939 gave this question burning urgency, but it was not new. The dilemma facing 'small' press agencies had emerged in the late nineteenth century, when the advent of telegraphy led to the first global electronic telecommunications network. The largest commercial press agencies of the European countries – Britain (Reuters), France (Havas) and Germany (Wolff) – formed a cartel in 1870, soon dubbed 'The Ring' or the 'Big Three', dividing amongst themselves the distribution of news throughout the entire world. Even the First World War could not cause a permanent break in the cartel's hold. The war did see a rise

in propaganda messages broadcast by belligerent governments via press agencies in their own and other countries, spurring the development of rival institutions in neutral nations. But it took the outbreak of another world war for these self-described 'small', 'neutral' agencies to form a 'cartel' of their own. In the autumn of 1939, the Dutch ANP's Van de Pol set up a communal, small state news service, communicating primarily via an early form of telex technology, which allowed its members to send and receive text-based messages via a special network that gave them a greater international reach. But not long after the first messages were sent in February 1940 did the experiment come to a halt, when Germany, on 10 May, invaded the Netherlands. After 1945, however, the main participants, now baptized as 'Group 39', resumed their cooperation. This alliance, to be extended in the years that followed, still exists, dedicated to the promotion of press freedom and the independence of press agencies.²

This small state news alliance provides an excellent entry point to examine its members' claims that it occupied a key position in spreading the 'truth', countering the 'propaganda' of 'great' powers, and bringing a vital 'small' perspective to global affairs. As such, the correspondence amongst the representatives of these agencies provides insight into how the concept of smallness was enacted within transnational media networks. Key actors, however, rarely used the word 'small' to describe themselves or their activities. They did use 'neutral', however, to refer both to their states' efforts to remain as independent as possible in an era of great power conflict and to the trustworthiness of the news they reported – the opposite of propaganda.³ This contribution does not seek to prove the claim that small states' representatives are more trustworthy than those of self-described great powers. One relevant factor in this respect is that the available source material, kept in the archive of the Dutch press agency ANP, does not contain the actual news reports that were circulated by the small state media network. The collection does, however, include the complete correspondence of the top management of the cooperating agencies. This material allows us to analyse the link between the two meanings of the concept 'neutrality' and connect them analytically to the auto- and hetero-images of small states, particularly in the Netherlands.

In so doing, this chapter places the Dutch press agency ANP front and centre. The ANP was the main driver behind the cooperation amongst small state news agencies on the eve of the Second World War and in the first decade after 1945. The first section will explore the national context in which the Dutch worries about the international press system emerged: as a small country with a large empire, it relied on foreign wired telegraph networks, which led to a colonial communication crisis during the First World War. As a result, actors in the Netherlands pioneered new wireless technologies in the interwar years, which made the country an important hub in global telecommunications. Although the Dutch took far longer than other small states to establish its first national press agency – the ANP was not founded until 1935 – their technological edge gave them a prominent position amongst the members of the Oslo Group, a regional pact of neutral states created in 1930. The second section explores the correspondence between the ANP and the press agencies cooperating with it. In 1939 Van de Pol managed to persuade his colleagues to work together internationally by emphasizing the need to secure national independence. After the war, this complex

relation between internationalism and national interests continued in the work of Group 39, culminating in an initiative for a European organization of press agencies. As such, this chapter offers insights into the forging of a transnational media network that challenged the news cartel that had emerged in the 1870s.

The origins of the Dutch international communications network

In the second half of nineteenth century the advent of telegraphy revolutionized the international news market. Only the major press companies of the time – Reuters, Havas and Wolff – could muster enough capital to construct transoceanic telegraph cables that connected all parts of the world. Instead of competing with one another, the ‘Big Three’ formed a cartel and divided the world into spheres of influence, ensuring their monopoly in supplying national newspapers with international news.⁴ In many ways, Reuters was the most prominent agency at the time, as it had a monopoly on news distribution over the entire British Empire as well as northwestern Europe. It created the first global telegraph network, known as the ‘all red route’, referring to the colour demarcating the British Empire’s territories on world maps. Lacking the capital to construct an independent telegraph line between the Netherlands and its main colony in Southeast Asia, the Dutch government decided to link the Dutch East Indies (current-day Indonesia) to Reuters’s global network in the 1870s. In peacetime this communication line provided an efficient way for the Dutch to organize a telegraph connection with their main colony, but in wartime it revealed its vulnerability. A first warning for the Dutch government came during the South African War (1899–1902), when the British imposed restrictions on telegraph communication from the East Indies, banning coded messages.⁵

In the early twentieth century growing geopolitical tensions also manifested themselves in the increasing strains amongst the members of the press agency cartel. Many Germans, believing that Reuters was using their dominant position in the cartel to slander their country, called for their press agency to adopt a more assertive strategy.⁶ In many ways, this hostility foreshadowed what was to come in the First World War, when Germany and Great Britain engaged in an unprecedented propaganda battle. Though officially neutral because it was not directly involved in the military conflict – and therefore escaped the slaughter of the Western front – the Netherlands was severely affected by the First World War, which exposed the vulnerabilities of its position in the international system. One especially problematic facet of the situation in the eyes of Dutch officials was the war’s disruptive effect on its bonds with the Dutch East Indies. The British in particular, whose dominant navy ruled the waves, imposed severe restrictions.⁷ Most pressing was British dominion over the Dutch colonial telegraph lines, which they completely controlled after cutting the German line at the beginning of the war. Hence Reuters, which at the time cooperated closely with the British authorities, had full rein over the main Dutch colonial communications network for the conflict’s entirety. The British imposed all sorts of restrictions to control the information passing through the network, even going so far, in October 1917, to

block telegraphic communications outright.⁸ This blackout caused great uncertainty amongst Dutch governing elites in the metropole and the periphery alike.⁹

Dutch woes during the First World War were not limited to the colonial communications crisis. The domestic press was under pressure as well. The Central Powers' press agencies, actively seeking to break the Reuters monopoly, engaged in a media campaign whose targets included the Netherlands, where public opinion, they argued, was being tainted by British and French propaganda. The Austrian government even hired a spin doctor who quite successfully influenced a broad group of journalists in the Netherlands.¹⁰ Both Allied and Central Powers efforts to influence public opinion, and thereby government policy, alarmed Dutch officials, who lacked the legal instruments and institutions such as a rival information service to stop them. Their concerns aligned with wider fears that open support in the Dutch press for one of the warring blocs could cause diplomatic problems and imperil the Netherlands' neutral position through political pressure. The Dutch government wanted to avert such a situation but shied away from direct intervention through censorship laws. Instead, prominent officials asked the president of the journalists' union, L. J. Plemp van Duiveland, to discreetly instruct newspaper editors about what to publish and what support they should give to the effort to steer the country through the war without getting caught up in the fighting.¹¹

When the First World War ended the direct military threats to Dutch neutrality waned, but other effects lingered for much longer. The Netherlands' international prestige suffered due to the victorious Allies' grievances about its behaviour during the war. The country, which in the first decade of the twentieth century had prided itself as a champion of international law, was now accused of "moral bandwagoning" and [...] war profiteering.¹² International isolation was deemed a serious threat, exemplified by Belgian demands for territory as compensation for Dutch conduct during the war.¹³ As a counter to this isolation and a measure to defeat Belgian designs, Minister of Foreign Affairs H. A. van Karnebeek argued that the Netherlands should join the League of Nations and, more generally, ought to pursue a more assertive foreign policy, which he dubbed an 'autonomy policy to distinguish it from prewar and wartime "neutrality"'.¹⁴

This assertiveness in staking out a place for the Dutch in the world could also be seen in the field of telecommunications. The country's dependency on wired telegraphy in the First World War prompted initiatives to develop wireless telecommunications technologies. A crucial breakthrough was achieved in 1916 when C. J. de Groot, a colonial engineer on leave in the Netherlands, published his PhD thesis which argued for the theoretical possibility of a direct wireless connection between the Netherlands and the East Indies, without interference from any of the war's belligerents. The Dutch government instantly supplied him with lavish funds to set up infrastructure for longwave transmissions. In the years that followed, De Groot designed two huge radio stations that were finished in 1919 and 1923, respectively: Radio Malabar (also known as Radio Bandung) in Java and Radio Kootwijk in the sparsely populated region of the Veluwe in the Netherlands.¹⁵ Although longwave technology had clear limits at the time – it was not well suited for radio broadcasting, for example – these stations did facilitate a regular radio-telegraphy service that was managed by the (state-owned)

Post Office in the Netherlands and the East Indies and was known under the acronym PTT (for the three services it provided: Post, Telegraphy and Telephony).¹⁶ Moreover after the Dutch company Philips took over the *Nederlandse Seintoestellen Fabriek* (Dutch Transmitter Factory (NSF)) in 1925, it became a leading global manufacturer of radio equipment.¹⁷ In this way, the Netherlands became an international hub of wireless telecommunication in the interwar years.

In addition to these technological advances, various Dutch actors created new organizations with the twin goals of lessening Dutch dependency on the big international press agencies and of amplifying the Dutch voice on the world stage. The first of these was the colonial press agency the General News and Telegraphy Agency (*Algemeen Nieuws-en Telegraaf-Agentschap* (ANTEA)), founded in Java in 1917 by the energetic, and unscrupulous, Eurasian businessman D. W. Berretty due to his frustration with the British telegraphy blockade. In the first years of ANTEA, Berretty managed to build up fruitful relations with both Reuters and the Dutch colonial authorities, which earned him a monopoly on wired news distribution within the Indonesian archipelago. In 1924 ANTEA received an official concession to use radio telegraphy to distribute news to the Netherlands. Via an office in The Hague it passed on its bulletins to Reuters for further distribution; as a result, the colonial press agency became the most important supplier of news from the Dutch East Indies.¹⁸ Following Communist uprisings in the East Indies (1926–7), Berretty made a deal with Dutch colonial officials, allowing them



Figure 6.1 Radio Kootwijk, by an unknown photographer, ca. 1930 (Spaarnestad Photo SFA002007682). © Spaarnestad Photo.

to check and edit messages before they went out in exchange for subsidies and tax cuts. ANTEA made it possible for Dutch colonial authorities to spread information on a global scale under the trusted brand name Reuters. Crucially, it enabled the Dutch officials to craft their own message in reports on important events such as the 1926–7 uprisings.¹⁹

Metropolitan developments lagged behind those in the Dutch Empire. A former MP, F.J.W. Drion, founded the Dutch National Information Service (*Nationaal Bureau voor Documentatie Nederland* (NBDN)) just after the First World War. His intent was to create a trusted source for international journalists about the situation in the Netherlands and its colonies that would serve national interests and enhance national prestige. Drion also took more active steps to influence global public opinion: he became editor of *La Gazette de Hollande*, a periodical founded in 1911 containing English, German and French translations of Dutch newspaper articles.²⁰ In addition he began to employ a network of ‘secret correspondents’, Dutch journalists and academics residing abroad who monitored the coverage of the Netherlands in the newspapers where they lived.²¹ Although on paper his bureau was private and had initially received its funding from wealthy businessmen, Drion was in close contact from the outset with officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Indeed, when the NBDN’s private funding dried up in the late 1920s, it received government money via secret channels.²² Joan Hemels argues that Drion’s initiative was an experiment in the operation of a government information service, which officials regarded as useful, but he also points out that its opaque setup dissatisfied politicians and policymakers.²³ Prompted by these worries, Dutch MP called for the organization to be professionalized in 1930, which spelled its end. In 1934 it was replaced by the first official Dutch public information service, the State Press Service (*Rijkspersdienst* (RPD)).²⁴

The RPD, however, was not a press agency. For most of their global news, Dutch newspapers remained dependent on the ‘Big Three’. However, the cartel’s high rates began to chafe once the economic crisis of the 1930s started hitting the budgets of Dutch newspapers, just as rising international tensions again raised the spectre of foreign influence on Dutch public opinion. These concerns were heightened when the ANTEA’s Berretty attempted to broker a deal between Reuters and a private Dutch press agency, Vaz Diaz, prompting leading Dutch newspapers to create their own press agency, the Foundation (*Stichting*) *Algemeen Nederlandsch Persbureau* (ANP) in July 1935.²⁵ Later that year, Vaz Diaz amalgamated with the ANP, which also assumed the position as main agent of Reuters in the Netherlands. In 1938 ANP took over the ANTEA offices in the Netherlands proper – ANTEA having lost much of its influence and autonomy after Berretty’s unexpected death in a plane crash in December 1934.²⁶ In the late 1930s the ANP, by then the premier press agency in the Netherlands, aspired to provide an ‘independent news service’ for all those interested in the Netherlands and to strive for ‘a balanced, transparent division of the costs’: news, henceforth, would be relatively cheap.²⁷

These domestic tasks were complemented, as stipulated in the ANP’s 1935 founding statute, an internationally oriented goal for the agency, namely ‘the advancement of quality news coverage about the Netherlands and Dutch interests’ abroad. This intention was closely aligned with the aims of the newly founded RPD, something

noted in a report prepared for the ANP's founders by the Dutch diplomat A. Pelt, then the director of the Information Section of the League of Nations. Quite critical of the RPD, Pelt noted that it lacked the means to reach out to international press agencies because it had no access to telegraph networks. He therefore saw the ANP to be an important addition to the Dutch international media network.²⁸ As for the ANP's relations with the government, Pelt emphasized that the agency's editorial independence was crucially important; there should be 'no political or financial ties' between the organization and officials in the Netherlands or the Dutch East Indies.²⁹ At first glance these remarks appear to echo the idea that Dutch press organizations were 'neutral' and therefore trustworthy, in the sense that they were free from political influences.

But Pelt did see an important political role for the ANP in safeguarding the country's neutral position in a geopolitical sense. In his final recommendations, the diplomat suggested that the ANP and RPD could cooperate, which shows that he thought a strict separation between press and government was not possible in practice. The ANP's founders, however, repudiated this latter passage and only asked for 'moral' and 'legal' support from the government so that they could organize their press agency along the lines of existing bureaus.³⁰ In this sense, the relation between the ANP and the PTT, which managed the Dutch radio telecommunications infrastructure, was crucial. The PTT provided the press agency full access to all its facilities, including the longwave transmitter at Kootwijk. The ANP was thus granted instant access to state-of-the-art radio technology that had been, up until then, the exclusive province of the largest international press agencies, including the *Hellschreiber*, an early form of telex machine that automatically translated radio signals into printed text.³¹

In the discussion about the nature of the ANP we see how two notions of Dutch neutrality were intertwined in a complex way. Formally, the ANP was an independent, 'neutral' organization, but it is clear that from its foundation onwards, the organization was closely aligned with foreign policy goals that originated in the auto-image of the Netherlands as a 'neutral country', a conception widely shared by Dutch elites. After the First World War, the intense concern about the Netherlands' subordinate position in global telecommunication networks prompted various initiatives for improving the country's standing in this realm, which were undertaken by official and non-official actors alike. Both the development of radio technology and institutional reforms created the opportunity to sound a Dutch voice in transnational media flows. All these initiatives aimed to safeguard Dutch 'neutrality', which meant official government interference in the ANP's operation was taboo. However, the explicit adherence to 'Dutch interests' in the organization's statutes makes it clear that it aligned itself with foreign policy goals. This phrase underlines that the self-proclaimed 'neutrality' of ANP was hardly neutral: news inherently had geopolitical meanings. In this respect it is important to realize that one of the most important functions of the emergent Dutch transnational media network in the early 1930s was the bolstering of the country's colonial dominance in Southeast Asia. Later that decade the rise of Nazi Germany would pose a different challenge, threatening the very existence of the European part of the Dutch realm. The unfolding geopolitical crisis underlined the importance of the ANP as the 'voice of the Netherlands' abroad.

The Hell community

On 1 January 1936, a few months after its founding, the ANP joined the international body of press agencies, the *Agences Alliées*. This organization had been established in 1924 in reaction to the founding of numerous press agencies in the newly independent countries of Central and Eastern Europe after the Habsburg Empire had collapsed in the wake of the First World War. On the one hand, the *Agences Alliées* subscribed to the idealist internationalism of the era and, in that sense, marked a change in the way the cartel operated. Mimicking the League of Nations system, the press agencies from large states engaged in regular multilateral negotiations with their counterparts from smaller states who managed to secure, albeit informally, better conditions for information exchange. In addition, the attendees of the conferences emphasized the importance of placing 'objective truth above propaganda' in an effort to contribute to global peace.³² On the other hand, however, the *Agences Alliées* served as a vehicle to sustain the prewar dominance of the 'Big Three'. Reuters, Havas and Wolff, known in the interwar years as the 'doyen agencies', had commanding influence within this institution and used it to control competitors that could potentially challenge their cartel.³³ Nevertheless, membership was required if the ANP was to spread 'Dutch news' globally, argued Pelt in his recommendations to the founding members of the Dutch press agency.³⁴ From 1936 onwards, the ANP provided a weekly bulletin of Dutch news in English and French, which it distributed to all members of the *Agences Alliées*.³⁵

By the time the ANP joined the international conference of press agencies, the very foundation of the organization had been undermined. Several countries that wanted to revise the geopolitical status quo employed their press agencies to achieve such ends. The Nazi rise to power in Germany in 1933 had been the greatest catalyst of this process. Right after the takeover, the *Reichministerium* for propaganda, led by Joseph Goebbels, centralized the main press agencies in Germany, including Wolff, into the *Deutsches Nachrichtenbüro* (German News Office (DNB)). Although the organization's ideological underpinnings had changed compared to those of its Weimar predecessors, the Nazis took over much of its pre-existing structures and, indeed, its staff. In contrast with the in-your-face propaganda of the domestic National Socialist German Worker's Party (NSDAP), with its characteristic mass rallies, the Nazis' manipulation of international news media was more subtle. They used existing German press agencies, which had strong connections abroad, to spread information, often formulated in moderate language, that supported Hitler's geopolitical goals.³⁶ In this context Nazi officials recognized the usefulness of membership in the news cartel and thus the DNB remained a member of the *Agences Alliées* and sent representatives to attend all its conferences.³⁷ The *Agences Alliées* continued meeting until the beginning of the Second World War on 4 September 1939 – when Great Britain and France declared war on Germany after its invasion of Poland.

For the Dutch, the sudden collapse of the *Agences Alliées* conjured up ghosts from the not-too-distant past. A return to a media landscape dominated by big press agencies meant that the Netherlands could again become isolated and lose control over the narrative about the country put forth via transnational media networks. Wireless technology alone could not suffice for the dissemination of news about

the Netherlands: if the 'doyen agencies' did not pick it up, the information would be useless. The ANP took the initiative to prevent that from happening, contacting press agencies in countries that, like the Netherlands, had declared themselves neutral: Belgium, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland – coincidentally, fellow members with the Dutch in the Oslo Group.³⁸

Governments from these small states had started to cooperate in 1930 on trade and tariff policies to boost their trade in a time of protectionism. Later in the 1930s, with an eye to the rising geopolitical tensions due to Nazi Germany's rise, the 'Oslo states' also began contemplating political and 'spiritual' cooperation. All the states involved adhered to a strict policy of neutrality in foreign affairs, and protecting this principle was the main priority. In addition, the idea emerged in the late 1930s that the Oslo states could, precisely because of their smallness and neutrality, act as mediators and promote international harmony. Inspired by auto-images that had developed in northern European states in the late nineteenth century, positing their special interest in and proclivity for promoting peaceful cooperation, actors from the Oslo countries launched a broad variety of initiatives to prevent all-out war, especially between the signing of the Munich Agreement in September 1938 and the outbreak of war in Western Europe in September 1940.³⁹ Ger van Roon's monograph on the Oslo countries argues that the bloc suffered structural weaknesses from within – due to its members' isolationist tendencies – and without – it seriously miscalculated Nazi Germany's political intentions. He briefly notes how the Oslo Group provided a framework for state and non-state actors to communicate and cooperate, but he does not expand on this facet of the alliance.⁴⁰ In that sense his one-sided analysis overlooks the more lasting effects of the Oslo Group's initiatives undertaken not long before the outbreak of the Second World War, such as the promotion of cooperation amongst press agencies.

In October 1939 the ANP's director, H.H.J. van de Pol, wrote to his colleagues in the Oslo countries asking whether they were interested in joining forces in transnational news flows. These officials met in November in Amsterdam and a final agreement was reached in December. Highlighting the prominent Dutch position in radio technology, Van de Pol proposed setting up a distribution system in which all participating agencies would send their bulletins to the ANP headquarters in Amsterdam, to be followed by dissemination via Hellschreiber through the long-distance radio transmitters at Kootwijk. This was an attractive proposition, strengthening each small state news agency's ability to provide 'neutral news' and allowing them, collectively, to become voices for moderation and the nonviolent resolution of international conflict. Referring to the technology they employed for the dissemination of their news items, Van der Pol baptized the collaboration amongst small state agencies as the Hell Community (*Hell commune*). After several tests, a regular service was inaugurated in the first week of February 1940. A memorandum from the ANP's management explained the main goals of the alliance. First and foremost: 'neutral countries will be able to receive news from each other directly without interference of the great agencies from belligerent countries.' In addition the 'participating countries are also able to make communications of national interest known to the world'. This news network was available to all that subscribed to it, but only agencies from neutral countries could send in news dispatches.⁴¹

Not all the national news agencies of the Oslo member states could be persuaded to join, however. The Swiss were the surprising holdout. Van de Pol's attempts to change their minds highlight the lofty ideals of the Hell Community and the immense political and cultural importance he ascribed to the network. He argued that if 'we do not succeed now, we will be cast for *ever* in the dependent position in which we have had to work, and will continue to work. It is given to us today to gain our independence in one blow and to secure a position that does not depend on anybody.'⁴² The Swiss, unpersuaded, simply stopped responding to these arguments.⁴³ Van de Pol continued to hold out hope right up until the German invasion of the Netherlands, but to no avail.⁴⁴ The reasons behind the Swiss refusal are not evident in the source material, but considering the nation's longstanding and dogmatic tradition of neutrality in international affairs, the management of the Swiss press agency may well have been afraid that to join the Hell Community would be deemed an infringement of the hallowed principles of their country's foreign policy.

The correspondence about the financing of the Hell Community contains more explicit references to the project's political implications. Although both Havas and the DNB subscribed to the Hellschreiber service of the neutral countries, their contributions were hardly enough to cover expenses.⁴⁵ Although all parties involved in the Hell community were commercial companies, it appears that the governments of the Oslo countries were prepared to provide funds as well. In a letter to the PTT, Van de Pol wrote that the press agencies of the Hell Community received money from their governments to cover the extra costs of transmissions to Amsterdam. Although the ANP's director did not ask for a direct subsidy from the Dutch government, as this would 'go against the principles' of the agency, he did ask for financial leniency from the PTT, which initially charged not only for the hours when their radio stations transmitted the Hell messages but also the time it took to set up the facilities for such broadcasting. Van de Pol asked to cut the latter costs.⁴⁶ Although the PTT director pointed out that he was operating according to the agreed-upon conditions, he did meet these demands so as to help the ANP solve the operational problems.⁴⁷ Thanking the director for the PTT's support, Van de Pol assured him that all the allied press agencies 'expressed their feelings [and] admiration' for Dutch radio technology.⁴⁸ This correspondence shows that, despite the strong emphasis on the ANP's independence, government approval and involvement were important to the setup of the transnational news network. Neutral news, in other words, had political meaning, which was illustrated in a 'service order' (*dienstorder*) issued to ANP employees which characterized the Hell Community as 'our European home line' (*onze Europeesche huislijn*), citing an example of how a speech of the Dutch foreign minister should be distributed.⁴⁹

By the time these words were written down, early in February 1940, the Hell Community had started its news service – without the Swiss – and Van de Pol had managed to make it work, both technologically and financially. But problems soon emerged, especially in light of the escalating geopolitical crisis. Within that context, it appeared that not all of the organization's participants shared Van de Pol's high hopes for an independent network to disseminate neutral news. There was attrition. On 30 November 1939 the Soviet Union attacked Finland, one of the Hell Community countries. During a meeting Van de Pol and the director of the Belgian press agency

decided that the Finns could nonetheless contribute to the Hell Community of neutral news agencies, arguing that 'if a great power invades a country of one of the participating agencies [*Agences Participantes*], this country is not marked as belligerent'.⁵⁰ However, Van de Pol's Belgian counterpart complained in February that 'the press agency in Helsinki did not provide the most abundant collaboration'. The agency was surely working amidst difficult circumstances, but nonetheless 'everybody will understand that, exactly because of the sympathy for Finland, we want to receive more news items from Finnish sources'. In addition, he noted that certain news dispatches from Helsinki that had reached the editorial office of the Hell Community could not be used because the French agency Havas had already distributed them. He argued that such information should be communicated to 'us' first.⁵¹ These remarks suggest that the Finns had chosen to distribute news from the frontlines via the big press agencies, thus undermining the main idea behind the Hell Community.

It seems that Van de Pol particularly worried about the continued Finnish preference for the doyen agencies, all the more because other agencies also appeared to do so and even shunned the Hell service. The same day that he received the letter from Belgium about the Finnish agency, Van de Pol sent a missive to the Swedish press agency to complain that they had provided news about the Swedish stance towards the war in Finland directly to Reuters. Even worse, the Swedes did not even mention this news in their transmissions to the editorial office of the Hell Community.⁵² Ten days later he wrote a telegram to Stockholm in which he accused the Swedes of using Havas as an intermediary agency, a 'violation [of the] strictly neutral character [of the Hell] service'.⁵³ In reaction, the director of the Swedish press agency indicated that he did not understand Van de Pol's objections and claimed that he had the right to decide with whom to share its news.⁵⁴ Van de Pol countered by stressing that, in his view, participating agencies should use the Hell Community to disseminate 'national news of their countries, before such news is emitted by the doyen agencies'. He proposed to discuss this matter at a Copenhagen meeting of the Hell Community scheduled for 3–5 April.⁵⁵ During the conference the issue was tabled and the minutes stated that, although the representatives of participating agencies remained committed to the idea behind the Hell Community, they regarded the network as not yet a 'rival of the big agencies'.⁵⁶

That the small state press agencies lacked power to effectively challenge the big agencies based in the belligerent countries was a reflection of the current geopolitical crisis. The situation became painfully clear when Germany invaded Denmark and Norway a few days after the Copenhagen conference had ended. The conference reiterated the principle, as applied to the Finnish case in January, that a country under attack from a large power should be allowed to contribute to the Hell service, but it was also stipulated that were the country conquered and occupied, the remaining members should decide if it would still be allowed to participate. A few days after the invasion of Denmark it appeared that the editorial staff of the Copenhagen-based press agency Ritzau had been taken over by the Nazis; Van de Pol, opting to bite the bullet, proposed suspending it from the Hell Community. At the same time, the Germans had also begun sending news from Oslo under the name of the Norwegian press agency, although the agency's manager, having sought refuge in Stockholm,

continued to transmit from there.⁵⁷ Despite these setbacks, Van de Pol decided to keep the Hell service on the air, as it were, but the disruptions resulting from the German conquest of the Nordic countries foreshadowed the network's future: on 10 May 1940 Germany invaded the Netherlands, and on the morning of that day the ANP made its last international transmission. One day later, the radio facilities at Kootwijk were sabotaged, which made further action impossible. A memorandum dated one month later concluded: 'And so the Hell Community passed away quietly and peacefully.'⁵⁸

During the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, the ANP was taken over by the new regime, which used it as a propaganda tool for the Third Reich. Van de Pol, who did not agree with this editorial line, was fired in 1941.⁵⁹ Engaging in clandestine activities, he was connected to a group of former ANP employees who were gathering news from the Allied press agencies via a secret radio installation.⁶⁰ These anti-Nazi credentials enabled Van de Pol to reassert his position as the ANP's director after the liberation of the Netherlands in May 1945. He quickly managed to restore its original status as an independent organization owned by the Dutch newspaper publishers.⁶¹ Once he had secured his base at the ANP, Van de Pol got in touch with his colleagues in the former Hell Community and, finding that most of them had survived the war, he proposed that they meet again. In the following years the group met annually, and in 1949 decided to formalize their cooperation in an organization baptized (as noted above) 'Group 39', a reference to the turbulent period of their initial cooperation. In a speech at the 1949 meeting Van de Pol underscored the fundamental spirit behind the project, in the past and into the future:

We feel it as a moral right that the national agency, and no foreign news organization, distributes the news from its own people to its own people. Because if a foreign news organization would gather and distribute home news of another country an element may welcome in the news supply which is foreign in character. It would be trespassing upon our own life and culture.⁶²

Van der Pol's message in 1949 was essentially the same as it had been ten years earlier: only by working together could press agencies in small countries defend their independent position.

Having said that, Group 39 now operated under different circumstances from those of the time of the Hell Community's founding. In 1939 the threat of war had prompted the press agencies in the small states to actively distribute news from their countries in order to guard their geopolitical neutrality, which meant that they did not mingle in the doyen agencies' business. In the late 1940s, the need to safeguard the political neutrality of the northwestern European small states was less urgent and consequently the small agencies felt less restricted with regard to their larger counterparts, which they approached in a much more assertive way to defend their national interests. This attitude was illustrated in 1951 when M. Godeschalk, Van de Pol's right-hand man at the ANP, wrote a long letter to Reuters in which he listed ten of the ANP's 'objections' to how the British agency worked. Tucked in the middle, as point 5, lay the most fundamental point of criticism: 'British and American angles often prevail in reports on international events in which smaller nations take part, as well as in other news.'⁶³ In



Figure 6.2 The ANP telex office in 1949 (ANP collection, private). The Dutch news agency continued to employ both Hell machines and telexes up until the late 1940s. © ANP.

addition to these critical reflections on the content of the services provided by the big agencies, the small state agencies in these years cooperated on a more practical level. They formed a bloc in negotiations about tariffs and pooled resources together so that they could afford the newest technological innovations and thus be less dependent on the large press agencies. Echoing the ideals of 1939, the Belgian director Ryelandt argued in 1955 that ‘our combined powers made us a new power in the international press system.’⁶⁴

In those years it became clear that the international media landscape as had existed in the 1920s and 1930s would not return after the Second World War. Although the three main press agencies from that era continued onwards in one form or another, their grip on global news flows was less firm. In France and West Germany the press agencies were fundamentally reformed; the international body through which the doyen agencies had yielded power, the *Agences Alliées*, was not resurrected. In this climate, Van de Pol and his allies began working towards a new internationalist organization to manage the European news flows. In the 1950s they pointed to the process of European unification that was taking off and argued that press agencies could contribute to this project, too. Indeed, Van de Pol, in a letter to the ANP’s board of directors, even touted his idea for the Hell Community in 1939 as having been ‘already in embryonic form, small [*in het klein*], a European continental press agency.’⁶⁵ In the years that followed, Group 39’s members were instrumental in the foundation of the *Alliance Européennes*

des Agences de Presse, a body that also included agencies from West Germany, France, Italy and Yugoslavia.⁶⁶ This new body, which did not include Reuters, can be seen as the definitive sign of the end of the big press agencies' news cartel, ending their dominance that had begun in the late nineteenth century.

Conclusion

The story of the forging of a small state transnational news network helps us think about the politics of smallness. A crucial concept in the contemporary debate about this topic was neutrality, a term which in this context had a double meaning, referring to both geopolitical aloofness and the reliability of news. Historians need to approach this word critically. As this article shows, the Dutch initiative, begun in autumn 1939, for cooperation amongst a group of small states' press agencies was far from neutral: its main actors saw 'neutral news' to be a means to bolster their country's independence – and, indeed, to reinforce the grip on their colonial possessions. These motives go back to the experiences of the Netherlands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the Big Three press agencies formed a news cartel that would long dominate transnational media flows. As a small state with a large empire, the Netherlands was particularly dependent on the British transcontinental telegraphy lines that connected the country with its main colony in Southeast Asia, the Dutch East Indies. This dependency was painfully exposed during the First World War. In reaction to these predicaments, Dutch actors developed wireless radio technology and founded the press agency ANP in the interwar years. Although on the face of it the ANP was a strictly private initiative, there were political implications in play: the organization's statutes explicitly stated that it served national interests, and it received indirect support from the government. However, Dutch technological prowess notwithstanding, Dutch actors in the late 1930s were still aware that they were operating in a media landscape dominated by the doyen agencies. They realized that greater cooperation with press agencies from other small states was necessary to defend the national interest.

The geopolitical crisis in September 1939 prompted ANP director H.J.J. van de Pol to launch an initiative for cooperation amongst the press agencies of the Oslo countries. Agreeing that the belligerents' propaganda posed a threat to the neutrality of the small states of Europe, they joined the plan for the Hell Community. The main idea was to secure the news supply from participating countries; reports were gathered by the ANP and then transmitted from the Dutch wireless station in Kootwijk, using state-of-the-art technology. Van de Pol managed to overcome several organizational problems and the Hell service was initiated in February 1940. Despite the successful execution of his plan, Van de Pol did encounter scepticism from several of his partners when he asserted that the Hell Community could secure complete editorial independence for the small countries. At the conference held in Copenhagen, the consensus was that the network, for the time being, could not yet be a rival to the doyen agencies. Indeed, less than a month later, the Hell Community came to an abrupt end with the German invasion of the Netherlands. Despite the tragic end of the Hell Community in the

flames of the *Blitzkrieg*, the spirit of the network, the idea that small states should work together to guard their national interests against the dominance of the doyen agencies, re-emerged after the end of the Second World War. The persistence of the main ideas behind the cooperation amongst the press agencies that had emerged in 1939 shows that if small countries work together they can exercise a sizeable impact.

From the account provided here, it appears that the main result of Van de Pol's initiative was an institutional reshuffling of transnational media networks in the mid-twentieth century. In this sense, the concept of 'neutral news' can be seen as a catalyst for the attempts of small state press agencies to challenge the Big Three's cartel, which had been in place since the late nineteenth century. One question that remains, however, concerns the extent to which these developments affected the actual content of the news coverage. The ANP archive does not contain the texts that it received and disseminated via its international network. Future research could be geared towards getting an overview of this information by gathering data on small states from digitalized media collections from various countries and by analysing this mass of material in bulk via software programmes designed to uncover semantic patterns. In this way, we might find the fingerprints of the press agencies which tried to influence the coverage of their country's affairs in international media. Such a project would sharpen our understanding of 'neutral news' and, consequently, our comprehension of the agency exercised by small state actors as it appears manifested in transnational media flows.

Notes

- 1 Nationaal Archief Den Haag (hereafter NL-HaNA), Stichting Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau (ANP), 2.19.212/527: Speech D. Ryelandt at the 20th anniversary of the ANP, s.d. [1955].
- 2 <https://www.perssupport.nl/persbericht/060919055/80-years-of-group-39-independent-news-agency-alliance-expands-its-circle-of-members> (accessed 4 June 2020).
- 3 Hellema underlines that neutrality made strategic sense for the Netherlands during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: Hellema, *Nederland in de Wereld: Buitenlandse Politiek van Nederland*. For a comparative reflection on the concept of geopolitical neutrality in Dutch history see Erlandsson, *Window of Opportunity*.
- 4 Tworek, *News from Germany*, 19.
- 5 Kuitenbrouwer, *War of words*, 108.
- 6 Tworek, *News from Germany*, chapter 1.
- 7 Dijk, *The Netherlands Indies and the Great War, 1914–1918*.
- 8 Klinkert, Kruizinga, and Moeyes, *Nederland neutraal*, 158.
- 9 Kuitenbrouwer, 'The Dutch East Indies during the First World War and the Birth of Colonial Radio', 29.
- 10 Hemels, *Een journalistiek geheim ontsluit*, 7–180.
- 11 Hemels, 20–1.
- 12 Kruizinga, 'A Small State? The Size of the Netherlands as a Focal Point in Foreign Policy Debates, 1900–1940', 428.

- 13 Dijk, ‘“You Act Too Much as a Journalist and Too Little as a Diplomat”. Pieter Geyl, the National Bureau for Documentation on the Netherlands and Dutch Public Diplomacy’, 90–1.
- 14 Schuurmsma, *Vergeefs onzijdig*, 10.
- 15 Kuitenbrouwer, ‘Ir.dr. C.J. de Groot: radiopionier in de tropen’.
- 16 The organization was called *Posterijen en Telegrafie* in 1915 and the last T (telephony) was added in 1928, but for the sake of clarity I will refer to it as the PTT throughout this text.
- 17 Blanken, *Geschiedenis van Philips Electronics N.V. Volume III: 1922–1934*, 263–5.
- 18 Baggermans and Hemels, *Verzorgd Door Het ANP*, 48–9; Termorshuizen and Veer, *Een groots en meeslepend leven*, 101–5.
- 19 Graaff, *Kalm temidden van woedende golven*, 584.
- 20 Dijk, ‘Uithangbord van de BV Nederland. La Gazette Hollande en de Nederlandse Publieksdiplomatie, 1918–1935’.
- 21 Kuitenbrouwer, ‘Propaganda That Dare Not Speak Its Name. International Information Services about the Dutch East Indies, 1919–1934’, 246–9.
- 22 For the financing of the *Gazette* see: Dijk, ‘Uithangbord van de BV Nederland. La Gazette Hollande en de Nederlandse Publieksdiplomatie, 1918–1935’, 41–56, 96. For the financing of ‘secret correspondents’ see: Hemels, *Van perschef tot overheidsvoorlichter*, 32; Graaff, *Kalm temidden van woedende golven*, 577, 588.
- 23 Hemels, *Van perschef tot overheidsvoorlichter*, 10.
- 24 Hemels, 14–16.
- 25 Baggermans and Hemels, *Verzorgd Door Het ANP*, 64–6.
- 26 Baggermans and Hemels, 88–90.
- 27 Baggermans and Hemels, 90.
- 28 Baggermans and Hemels, 111–12.
- 29 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/ 151: Rapport Commissie voor de Persdiensten, s.d., 12.
- 30 Baggermans and Hemels, *Verzorgd Door Het ANP*, 91.
- 31 Baggermans and Hemels, 112.
- 32 Tworek, ‘The Creation of European News’, 730–1.
- 33 Tworek, *News from Germany*, 111.
- 34 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/ 151: Rapport Commissie voor de Persdiensten, s.d., 9–10
- 35 Baggermans and Hemels, *Verzorgd Door Het ANP*, 113.
- 36 Tworek, *News from Germany*, chapters 7 and 8.
- 37 Tworek, 183.
- 38 Luxembourg was also a member of the Oslo group, but did not have a press agency. Switzerland did not join the *Hell-commune*.
- 39 For a detailed account see: Roon, *Kleine landen in crisistijd*, chapters 11–13.
- 40 Roon, 326.
- 41 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/560: Memorandum ANP ‘Hellcommune’, 2 February 1940.
- 42 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/562: Circular by H.J.J. van de Pol, 27 December 1939.
- 43 This is mentioned in several documents, see for example: NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/562: Notes of meeting H.J.J. van de Pol and D. Reyelandt (Belga), 16 January 1940.
- 44 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/562: Circular by H.J.J. van de Pol, 13 December 1939 and H.H.J. van de Pol to A. Pelt, 17 February 1940.
- 45 Baggermans and Hemels, *Verzorgd Door Het ANP*, 114.
- 46 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/562: H.H.J. van de Pol to H.H. Damme, 7 February 1940.
- 47 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/562: H.H. Damme to H.H.J. van de Pol, 14 February 1940.

- 48 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/562: H.H.J. van de Pol to H.H. Damme, 15 February 1940.
- 49 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/560: 'Dienstorder 147', 3 February 1940.
- 50 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/562: Notes of meeting H.J.J. van de Pol and D. Reyelandt (Belga), 16 January 1940.
- 51 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/562: D. Reyelandt to H.J.J. van de Pol, 16 February 1940.
- 52 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/562: Proof of letter [by H.J.J. van de Pol] to G. Reuterswaerd, 16 February 1940.
- 53 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/562: Proof of letter [by H.J.J. van de Pol] to G. Reuterswaerd, 27 February 1940.
- 54 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/ 562: G. Reuterswaerd to H.J.J. van de Pol, 4 March 1940.
- 55 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/562: Proof of letter [by H.J.J. van de Pol] to G. Reuterswaerd, 7 March 1940.
- 56 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/563: 'Procès-verbal de la second séance de la Réunion des Agences Participantes de Service Hellcommune à Copenhague le jeudi 4 Jeune [Avril] 1940'.
- 57 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/562: Memorandum with copy of telegram H.J.J. van de Pol to D. Ryelandt, 16 April 1940.
- 58 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/562. Memorandum, 20 June 1940.
- 59 Baggermans and Hemels, *Verzorgd Door Het ANP*, 133.
- 60 Baggermans and Hemels, 143.
- 61 Baggermans and Hemels, 152.
- 62 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/539: Draft speech H.J.J. van de Pol, s.d. [February 1949].
- 63 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/539: M.C. Godeschalk, 'Report on Reuter's News Service', s.d. [August 1951].
- 64 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/527: Speech D. Ryelandt at the 20th anniversary of the ANP, s.d. [1955].
- 65 NL-HaNA, ANP, 2.19.212/528: H.J.J. van de Pol to chairmen Board of Directors ANP and Association of Dutch Newspapers (De Nederlandse Dagbladpers, NDP), 15 September 1955.
- 66 Baggermans and Hemels, *Verzorgd Door Het ANP*, 117.

