

Joop W. Koopmans, *Early Modern Media and the News in Europe. Perspectives from the Dutch Angle*. Library of the Written Word 70 (Brill: Leiden, 2018, 361 pp., ISBN 978 90 04 37930 5).

The recent changes in the worldwide news consumption and media infrastructure have led to a growing fascination with the history of communication. Since 2000, the history of early modern communication has become a burgeoning field with numerous edited volumes and special issues devoted to the subject. The American book historian Robert Darnton stated that the history of communication investigates ‘the problem of how societies made sense of events and transmitted information about them’.¹ In the past two decades, Joop Koopmans has taken Darnton’s suggestion to heart for the Dutch Republic, one of Europe’s most vibrant centres of printing. In his research he seeks to understand how Dutch society received and processed information about both local and distant events during the long eighteenth century. He has disseminated his results on news and media in the Dutch Republic by publishing numerous articles in edited volumes and special issues on the topic. The current volume contains a selection of his previously published articles; two appear for the first time in English. The fifteen essays are arranged thematically into four sections rather than in the chronological order of appearance. The first five chapters represent the most coherent part of the volume, covering news digests, a distinct and often-neglected genre of current-affairs publishing. The other chapters are far more wide-ranging and deal with topics such as the layout of newspapers, the postal infrastructure and censorship in the Dutch Republic. Nevertheless, the volume presents for the first time Koopmans’ significant body of work and his original contributions to the field of history of communication.

In the past twenty years, the approaches and methodologies in the field have changed considerably. Early modern historians have shifted their attention from the study of individual media towards a wider range of media. To give just one example, in past scholarship newspapers were studied in isolation, while other available news media such as pamphlets, news digests and prints were not taken into account. There is a growing consensus among historians of communication that a more inclusive media approach is necessary to grasp the full complexities of early modern communication systems.² Already in the early 2000s, Koopmans opted for such a multimedia approach by incorporating printed news digests, better known as mercuries, into his field of enquiry. These current-affairs publications had appeared since 1583 on a bi-annually basis and were printed just in time to be sold at the Frankfurt Book Fair. During the seventeenth century, these news

periodicals started to appear across Europe. Despite their popularity in the seventeenth and even eighteenth century, scholars had not studied these news digests systematically as a genre. According to most historians, the newspaper fulfilled the most crucial role in Dutch society as the main provider of the latest news to a large audience.³ Koopmans convincingly argues that mercuries need to be part of the picture as they updated a wide readership on contemporary events. He presents the genre as ‘storehouses of news’, with a different as well as a complementary role to newspapers in the consumption and collection of news. In a case study of the reporting on the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748, he returns to the theme questioning the boundaries between news and history by analysing these two distinct and complementary media.

Throughout his career, Koopmans has worked extensively on one specific title: the *Europische Mercurius*, a Dutch news digest published in Amsterdam from 1690 until 1756. Such a long-running publication is remarkable and it offers unique material to work with. It is, for instance, possible to trace the influence of different printers as well as editors on the selection and presentation of news. In various chapters, Koopmans examines how news is selected and presented in this publication by these different actors. One particularly interesting feature of these news periodicals is the visual material as no other genre devoted to current-affairs reporting had illustrations. Koopmans again applies a multimedia approach by paying attention to both text and image. The frontispieces and other illustrations in the *Europische Mercurius* made the publications attractive and appealed to potential customers. Koopmans stresses that these prints equally had an important informative value as they often reinforced anti-Catholic sentiments in the Dutch Republic.

Koopmans’ approach is meticulous. He analyses the content and style of reporting of different media in considerable detail to answer how different groups within Dutch society made sense of incoming news reports. He traces where the reports originate and how fast news travels to test how accurate newspapers described contemporary events. His work is characterised by a longer-term media perspective: he studies the initial reporting of an event and devotes equal attention to the ongoing media

1 Robert Darnton, ‘An Early Information Society: News and the Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris’, *The American Historical Review* 105:1 (2000) 1-35, 1. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/105.1.1>.

2 For a recent overview see Daniel Bellingradt and Massimo Rospocher, ‘A History of Early Modern Communication’, *Annali dell’Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento/ Jahrbuch des italienisch-*

deutschen historischen Instituts in Trient 45:2 (2019) 7-22.

3 See Arthur der Weduwen, *Dutch and Flemish Newspapers of the Seventeenth Century, 1618-1700* (Leiden 2017) and Michiel van Groesen, ‘Reading Newspapers in the Dutch Golden Age’, *Media History* 22-3/4 (2016) 334-352. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/136688804.2016.1229121>.

coverage. Exemplary in this respect are two case studies: the reporting on the shipworm disaster in the 1730s and the Dutch reactions to the devastating earthquake in Lisbon in 1755.

At the end of the volume, I had hoped for some broader reflections on what his insights and these Dutch perspectives add to the existing scholarship on the topic. While these are absent, the volume certainly provides the reader with a clear and profound understanding of the Dutch news world. Together these articles demonstrate Koopmans' diligent research and careful scholarship to understand the process of how media at the same time reflect and shape society.

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