

## CONSTRUCTING PUBLIC OPINION

DUTCH NEWSPAPERS ON THE EVE OF A REVOLUTION (1780-1795)

Marcel Broersma

When the Patriot revolutionaries left the Frisian town of Franeker to go into exile in 1787, the *Leeuwarder Courant* lashed out fiercely for the first and last time in the 1780s:

We have seen confirmed but too well these days in our hitherto blessed Friesland that a well-regulated state cannot be torn apart but by unreligious and loose people; however with great satisfaction we are able to please the peaceful countrymen of this province with certain assurance that the pretending State members, who have so bewilderingly and unjustly set themselves up in Franeker, have fled and dispersed of their own accord in the night between the 23rd and 24th of this month.<sup>1</sup>

The newspaper was not well disposed towards Patriots, as this outburst shows. Previous to this, however, readers had barely heard of the existence of this faction or its views. Like most newspapers in the Dutch Republic, the *Leeuwarder Courant* hardly devoted a single letter to domestic politics. It almost never reported on the decision-making process, let alone published editorial comment or other opinions on it. To the regent class's great satisfaction, politics took place behind closed doors. But this did not mean that everything remained secret. Through rumour circuits and a pamphlet culture, which thrived in times of crisis, citizens could still learn a great deal.

N.C.F. van Sas has stated that, in the Netherlands, modern politics were invented during the Patriot Revolution (1780-1787). In various articles, he has highlighted the importance of a political press in this context, as a result of which a 'national' public opinion could develop.<sup>2</sup> It was mainly voiced through periodicals and pamphlets, and seldom through newspapers. To the Patriots and their cause, the press was of great importance. They opposed the stadholderate and demanded more participation in the government of cities, provinces and the Dutch Republic. In the mid 1780s, the movement

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<sup>1</sup> *Leeuwarder Courant*, 26 September 1787.

<sup>2</sup> Van Sas, 'Opiniepers'; *idem*, 'Drukkers'; *idem*, 'Tweedragt overall'.

gained considerable support and managed to establish sympathisers as members of the government in various cities and provinces.<sup>3</sup>

Freedom of the press was one of the main points on the Patriots' political programme. They wanted citizens to be able to voice their opinions unrestrictedly and, subsequently, to spread them freely. They considered the politicised public opinion that would take shape in this way to be an important weapon against the ruling regents. If public favour turned against the regent class, changes in state government would become inevitable, so the Patriots thought. But they were not just concerned with spreading opinions. They also insisted on 'open government and freedom of information'. Not until citizens were able to take note of their government's actions would they be able to form a well-founded opinion. Based on this, it would become possible to monitor and possibly correct such actions.<sup>4</sup>

Many historians have argued that, while the reforms of the Patriot age were not unimportant, the rise of a political press among them, they were no more than an interlude. E.H. Kossmann concluded firstly that political openness was not new; during the revolt against Philip II, politics had already been a much debated and much written-about subject. Secondly, he concluded that the political openness of the Patriot age, which he described as 'the Patriot disaster' and 'a pathetic failure', was a short-lived eruption of little consequence. Stephan Klein, too, called the Patriots 'unique' and considered the Patriots' republicanism over by 1787.<sup>5</sup>

After 1787, a restoration took place in which the Orangist party held the reins. The Patriot opposition fled abroad and the revolutionary storm died down in the Netherlands. Not until the early years of the Batavian Revolution between 1795 and 1798 did a strongly politicised public opinion again arise, with numerous publishers starting newspapers and periodicals in which the state structure was hotly debated.<sup>6</sup> However, this also proved to be temporary. The new rulers soon curbed the freedom of the press. Politics disappeared from the public sphere and was only discussed in seclusion. Not until the 1830s would public debate gather strength again and be held openly. With the introduction of the liberal constitution in 1848, the freedom of the press was won definitively.

In this article, I will argue that the effects of the developments in the Patriot age lasted longer than has often been supposed. After 1787, the political press was indeed finished for the time being. Periodicals in which the

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Schama, *Patriots*.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. particularly Van Sas, 'Drukpers', pp. 176-177; Baker, 'Public Opinion'.

<sup>5</sup> Kossmann, '1787', p. 132; Klein, *Patriots republikenisme*, pp. 292-293; Aerts, 'Een staat in verbouwing', p. 34.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Broersma, *Beschaafde vooruitgang*, pp. 103-106.

state structure was discussed to all intents and purposes dropped out of the picture. Simultaneously with the disappearance of contentious politics, politicised public opinion, which accompanied it, vanished beneath the surface of society. Although after the restoration newspapers avoided opinions in this field, they did report on politics much more than before. Politics had definitely entered the public sphere. In the 1780s, a political discourse had taken place in the newspapers, even in those which concealed their positions on politics. As a result, newspapers provided their audiences – practically unnoticed – with a lot of information on the Dutch Republic's political process. This process of politicisation laid the foundation for the political outburst of the Batavian Revolution.

*Newspapers, periodicals and pamphlets*

In order to gain a clear insight into the communication structure in the Netherlands at that time, it is important to distinguish between pamphlets, periodicals and newspapers. Each medium had its own function. The pamphlet had a long-standing tradition. It was a flexible once-only publication, usually of polemical import. Especially in times of war and political crisis, political pamphleteering proliferated. Because pamphlets were often anonymous and printed in limited editions, publishers and authors ran little risk of personal or financial damage. The government could fine them (and in rare cases punish them more severely) and force them to destroy the remaining issues, but by then the publisher had usually already recovered his expenses because pamphlets with provocative stances sold well.

Journals appeared periodically. The publishers of these periodicals needed to ensure a steady flow of work so they could use their printing presses as efficiently as possible. This meant they had a great interest in a periodical's continued existence. During the eighteenth century, alongside the scholarly journals that aimed at small audiences, so-called 'spectators' appeared. Their aim was to educate citizens culturally – they were the medium of the Enlightenment *par excellence* – and they had a much wider distribution, which meant that they could be a much more lucrative enterprise for publishers. Current affairs were seldom found in periodicals, although they were sometimes discussed by proxy, because publishers did not want to risk an order to discontinue from the government.<sup>7</sup>

News was mainly spread via newspapers. Since the seventeenth century, these had been building a respectable reputation as 'the best source of information about contemporary events'.<sup>8</sup> They maintained international

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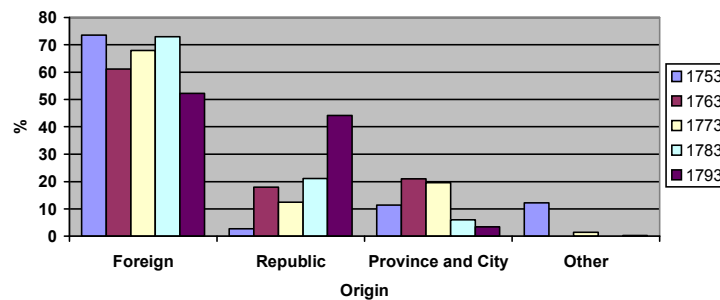
<sup>7</sup> Cf. Buijnsters, *Spectatoriale geschriften*; Johannes, *De barometer*.

<sup>8</sup> Popkin, *News and Politics*, p. 4.

networks and provided news that could hardly be spread by word of mouth. Around 1780, one or more newspapers were published in all the Dutch provinces (except Gelderland), though the centre, as far as both reputation and distribution were concerned, was Holland. In this wealthy and highly urbanised political and economic centre of the Republic, large cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam and The Hague had their own ‘*couranten*’, as did smaller towns such as Leiden and Delft.

Ownership of a newspaper was usually highly lucrative. Abraham Ferwerda made a fortune publishing the *Leeuwarder Courant*, as did Reinier Arrenberg, the publisher of the *Rotterdamsche Courant*. Advertisements in a paper were a rich source of income alongside the subscriptions. In 1742, the *Oprechte Haerlemsche Courant*, for example, had a circulation of around 4,300 copies, while the *Amsterdamsche Courant* issued around 6,500 copies between 1767 and 1780. In the same period, the *Groninger Courant* and the *Leeuwarder Courant* each published around 600 copies a day.<sup>9</sup>

Fig. 1.  
Origin of news in the *Leeuwarder Courant*  
(1753-1793)



The authorities controlled the newspapers through a subtle form of censorship, by granting a privilege. Publishers obtained the right to be the sole publisher of the newspaper in a province or city, usually in exchange for a donation to poor relief. If, however, they published things unpleasant to the government, it could withdraw the privilege and grant it to another publisher. It was demanded of the publisher of the *Leeuwarder Courant*, for example, that he would

<sup>9</sup> Broersma, *Beschaafde vooruitgang*, pp. 40-41; Sautijn Kluit, ‘De Rotterdamsche Courant’.

take good care that no passages will enter into the newspaper that might injure the high government of this province and Republic or any other countries, upon loss of the obtained privilege.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, publishers took care not to jeopardise their profitable businesses.

Newspapers generally published international news. The main subjects, contrary to what Kloek and Mijnhardt supposed, were the political and military developments in Europe.<sup>11</sup> The division of the continent into rival states made the existence of an international public sphere possible. A lot of space was devoted to political affairs – and disputes – in other countries. Diplomatic negotiations were covered extensively; often, various versions of the same stories were reported from several European capitals. In times of war, newspapers followed the armies' movements conscientiously. The balance of power within European governments was closely scrutinised. Even debates in the English parliament were elaborately reported on.<sup>12</sup>

Articles from the Netherlands were much rarer and '*courantiers*' or publishers seldom presented any reports from their own cities or provinces where news travelled faster by word of mouth than in a newspaper appearing twice or three times a week. Moreover, newspapers then ran the risk of offending the provincial or city council with the dreaded withdrawal of their privilege as a result. For this reason, publishers avoided reports on domestic politics. A guidebook to newspaper reading (1758) said:

'one should not be too anxious or curious about state affairs, government business or other matters of secrecy (...); as a matter of fact, in the newspapers one would search in vain, because each newspaper editor knows that only those who control the ship of state are allowed to interfere in such secret state affairs'.<sup>13</sup>

The privilege system was effective in preserving the existing political culture. Only those decisions that the government itself published were printed, on the government's authority. Fig. 1. shows the balance between international news and reports from the Dutch Republic, the province of Friesland and the city of Leeuwarden in the *Leeuwarder Courant* (1753-

<sup>10</sup> Tresoar – Frysk Histoarysk en Letterkundich Sintrum (Leeuwarden), Archief Gewestelijke Bestuursinstelling van Friesland 1580-1795, inv.no. 164, 9 March 1757; inv.no. 2588, 9 March 1757; cf. Instruction for the editors of the *Amsterdamsche Courant*, in: Van Eeghen, 'De Amsterdamse Courant', p. 52.

<sup>11</sup> Kloek and Mijnhardt, 1800. *Blauwdrukken voor een samenleving*, p. 86.

<sup>12</sup> Broersma, *Beschaafde vooruitgang*, pp. 81, 86-88. See also Stephens, *A History of News*, pp. 164-168.

<sup>13</sup> Knoop, *Kort onderwys*, p. 14.

1793). As regards the relatively large percentage of Frisian news in the first three decades of this paper's existence, it should be noted that these were almost exclusively extensive enumerations of Frisian captains sailing the Sound.<sup>14</sup>

Politics was the domain of the pamphlet. The 1766 'Act of Consulship' for example, in which William V promised to consult the Duke of Brunswick regarding state affairs, caused a torrent of pamphlets. In the newspapers, however, nothing could be read about this act. The Stadholder's visit to Leeuwarden in 1773 also caused heated debates between supporters and opponents of the stadholderate. In pamphlets, and also on the streets, in coffee houses and on towing barges, the state structure was hotly debated; but not in the newspapers.<sup>15</sup> With regard to the concept of 'public opinion', this presents a major problem. The pamphlet was a one-off publication and it tended to be published particularly during times of unrest. In addition, it mainly voiced political views. The pamphlet was unsuited to providing the public with regular information about political affairs. Before the 1780s, a medium that could lay the foundation of a well-informed and permanent public opinion was lacking.

*The Patriot movement and the rise of a political press*

Around 1780, periodicals came to the fore as a medium in which political openness and public opinion took shape. 'Today, public opinion has a preponderant force in Europe that cannot be resisted', Louis-Sébastien Mercier wrote in the *Tableau de Paris* in 1782:

Thus in assessing the progress of enlightenment and the change it must bring about, we may hope it will bring the greatest good to the world and that tyrants of all stripes will tremble before this universal cry that continuously rings out to fill and awaken Europe.

As Keith Michael Baker has stated, political opinion became 'the articulating concept of a new political space with a legitimacy and authority apart from that of the crown' – or, in the Dutch political system, apart from that of the regent class and the Stadholder.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The figures which underlie the diagrams are supplied by content analysis (much more extensive in time and range), using constructed week sampling. See Broersma, *Beschaafde vooruitgang*.

<sup>15</sup> Klein, *Patriots republikenisme*, pp. 9-23; Broersma, *Beschaafde vooruitgang*, pp. 83-85.

<sup>16</sup> Baker, 'Public Opinion', pp. 187-188 and 199.

In the new political periodicals, the present and future of the existing order in the politics of the Dutch Republic were written about and discussed.<sup>17</sup> In Stephan Klein's words, the Patriot opposition

very purposefully tried to motivate inhabitants of the towns as well as the country and to mobilise them through requests. By using inflammatory rhetoric, spreading false rumours and making state papers public, they tried to make or break people's careers.<sup>18</sup>

In the 1780s, the States General and most provincial states adopted several resolutions to stop the publication of articles in which state affairs were revealed and discussed. But the absence of a central government made it almost impossible to prevent publishers from printing offensive and seditious libels, writings and pictures.<sup>19</sup>

The fact that political journals were published periodically enabled citizens to participate actively. They sent in letters to the editors – anonymously or under a pseudonym – in which they gave their opinions about current events and discussed these with fellow citizens. The periodical *De Post van den Neder-Rhijn*, founded in 1781, achieved the greatest renown. In it, Pieter 't Hoen, a Patriot of importance from Utrecht, commented on the political developments in Utrecht and other parts of the Dutch Republic in lengthy articles. The periodical gained wider influence because correspondents and letter-writers from all parts of the Netherlands voiced their opinions in it. Among them were unknown citizens as well as Patriot leaders.<sup>20</sup>

As a reaction to the Patriot political weeklies, which were a rich source of income for publishers, the Orangists started publishing their own periodicals. The names of the *Ouderwetse Nederlandsche Patriot* and *De Post naar den Neder-Rhijn* reflected the defensive position of these journals. They did not sell nearly as well as their Patriot counterparts and this is the reason why their importance has long been underestimated in historiography. However, it was the polemics between the periodicals of the two camps that created the conditions for a contentious political culture and the emergence of public opinion.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. the list of political periodicals published in the period 1781-1787 in Van Wissing, *Stokebrand Janus 1787*, pp. 333-351.

<sup>18</sup> Klein, *Patriots republikanisme*, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Sautijn Kluit, 'Geschiedenis', p. 178, also pp. 170-180, 195-215.

<sup>20</sup> Theeuwen, *Pieter 't Hoen*.

<sup>21</sup> Van Sas, 'The Netherlands, 1750-1813', p. 61.

‘The printing press was sweating with the writings published by the warring parties’ a historian wrote in the 1790s.<sup>22</sup> This did not happen from political idealism alone. Publishers as well as authors cleverly took advantage of the demand for political texts; it could be profitable to publish such works. The Leeuwarder printer Johannes Boltjes, for example, started the periodical *De Friessche Patriot* in 1785, which quickly started selling well. It was compiled of readers’ contributions. The editors made a selection of their letters and sometimes commented on them. Some 150 Frisians saw their epistles in print during the two years of the magazine’s existence. Not only does this indicate the periodical’s popularity, it also proves that there was a need for a medium through which citizens could vent their opinions.<sup>23</sup>

Only a few newspapers made domestic politics a subject for discussion in the 1780s.<sup>24</sup> They gave their opinions on the political developments in the Dutch Republic and allowed letter-writers to reflect upon them. Newspapers such as the *Zutphensche Courant* or the *Noordhollandsche Courant*, later renamed the *Diemer- of Watergraafs-Meersche Courant*, were newly founded for this purpose. A few old and respectable papers such as the moderate Patriotic *Oprechte Haerlemsche Courant* and the Orangist *'s-Gravenhaagsche Courant* also joined in the chorus of political discussion. Often their position was a reflection of the balance in the states of their province or the city council that the publisher depended upon. The *Utrechtsche Courant*, for example, became the party paper of the radical Patriot municipality, and the *courantier* Pierre Gosse Jr. from The Hague was granted his privilege because of his Orangist sympathies.<sup>25</sup>

The *Groninger Courant* also reflected the political developments in its hometown. Until December 1782, this newspaper confined itself to sporadic advertisements for Patriot printed matter. From that time onwards, however, the Patriot party gained strength in the municipality and the *Groninger Courant* converted increasingly to the Patriotic cause. At first, it only covered political affairs in other provinces of the Republic. With the help of correspondents, in 1783 the paper paid ample attention to the Frisian cities’ battle against the Stadholder. Joan Derk van der Capellen tot den Pol’s fight against the *‘drostendiensten’* was also much reported.

During the course of 1785 and 1786, the columns of the *Groninger Courant* were filled with news on the Patriotic turbulence in the provinces

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<sup>22</sup> Schneider and Hemels, *De Nederlandse krant*, p. 85.

<sup>23</sup> Smit, ‘Mijnheer de Friessche Patriot!’.

<sup>24</sup> Contrary to what Van Sas argues in his ‘Opiniepers’.

<sup>25</sup> Van Wissing, *Henricus van Bulderen*; Sautijn Kluit, ‘De Noordhollandsche, Diemer- of Water-Graafs-Meersche, en beide Nederlandsche Couranten’; Schneider and Hemels, *De Nederlandse krant*, pp. 91-96; Theeuwen, *Pieter 't Hoen*, p. 584.



of Utrecht and Gelderland. The number of reports on domestic politics increased and the newspaper started to express its political views. It did not spare the Orangist garrisons' behaviour; this 'cursed party' had been, according to the radicalised paper, 'seen off with the choicest terms of abuse and curses'. A year later, the paper started to report on the political disputes in Groningen itself. In October 1787, the Orangist deputies of the surrounding countryside even founded a new newspaper, the *Ommelander Courant*, to refute the 'false reports' which were spread 'to please the favourite party' and to convert 'ignorant inhabitants' to the Patriotic cause.<sup>26</sup>

This new political function of the press, however, passed most newspapers by.<sup>27</sup> The publishers of the *Leidsche Courant*, for example, asked their contributors in April 1785 to avoid writing on politics: 'Since a newspaper is meant to publish news events, and print official documents, and is not designed to be a collection of contesting articles, we kindly request our contributors not to bother us with this kind of copy'. Reinier Arrenberg also took meticulous care that his *Rotterdamsche Courant* remained neutral. He did not publish articles in which political opinions were voiced and he refused to print letters to the editor that had been sent in anonymously.<sup>28</sup>

The *Leeuwarder Courant* cautiously avoided taking sides. This attitude led to the paper being scorned by *De Friessche Patriot*, which believed 'too great a one-sidedness' to be the cause: 'No person who reads the *Leeuwarder Courant*, and not a better newspaper, will ever be able to form true notions on the peculiar phenomena that appear in our State's Heavens'.<sup>29</sup> In 1782, the paper refused to print two polemical letters. Its publisher chose, contrary to his colleagues who issued political journals, not to assume responsibility for these. He also refused to print a (signed) advertisement in 1787, in which four Patriot professors gave their opinions on a conflict they had with the Orangist board of governors of Franeker University. The publisher had, so as 'to be safe for ourselves in this matter', asked the Provincial Executive for permission to publish, but he had not received it.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Van der Meer, *Patriotten in Groningen*, pp. 43-44; Tammeling, *De krant bekeken*, p. 27, pp. 32-38.

<sup>27</sup> Schneider and Hemels, *De Nederlandse krant*, pp. 91-96, pp. 102-104; Van der Meer, *Patriotten in Groningen*, p. 25.

<sup>28</sup> Sautijn Kluit, 'De Hollandsche Leidsche Courant', pp. 3-86, p. 63; *idem*, 'De Rotterdamsche Courant', pp. 47-48.

<sup>29</sup> *De Friessche Patriot*, 6 December 1786.

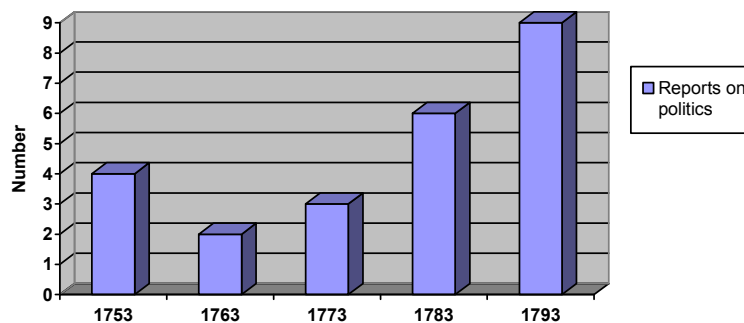
<sup>30</sup> *Leeuwarder Courant*, 1 June and 15 June 1782; University Library Leiden, BPL 1030, A. Ferwerda's heirs to Joh. Valckenaer, 6 March 1787; Joh. Valckenaer to A. Ferwerda's heirs, 7 March 1787; C.L. van Beyma to G. Coopmans, 7 March 1787; cf. also: Van der Meulen, *Coert Lambertus van Beijma*, pp. 118-119.

### *A Political Discourse*

Most newspapers avoided creating a political profile for themselves. However, during the Patriot Revolution their attitude towards political news from the Dutch Republic changed fundamentally. They paid far greater attention to it than they had in previous years. They did this both by means of correspondents' articles and by publishing official documents. The *Leeuwarder Courant*, which I studied in detail, showed a rise in the number of articles on politics and the number of columns devoted to politics, as well as a rise in the percentage of reporting devoted to politics (see figs. 2, 3, and 4).

Most newspapers did not burn their fingers on the political developments in their own province. 'We read more of our own affairs in the Dutch papers than in any of our own', the English journalist and writer Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) remarked, and the same applied to the situation within the Netherlands.<sup>31</sup> However, newspapers did begin to pay attention to political developments in other provinces. In the early 1780s, the *Groninger Courant*, for example, reported elaborately on the machinations in the Frisian provincial government where a Patriot faction led by Coert Lambertus van Beyma tried to gain power. However, they ignored the rumbling within the Groninger states and the city council of Groningen.<sup>32</sup>

Fig. 2.  
Number of reports on domestic politics in  
the *Leeuwarder Courant* (1753-1793)



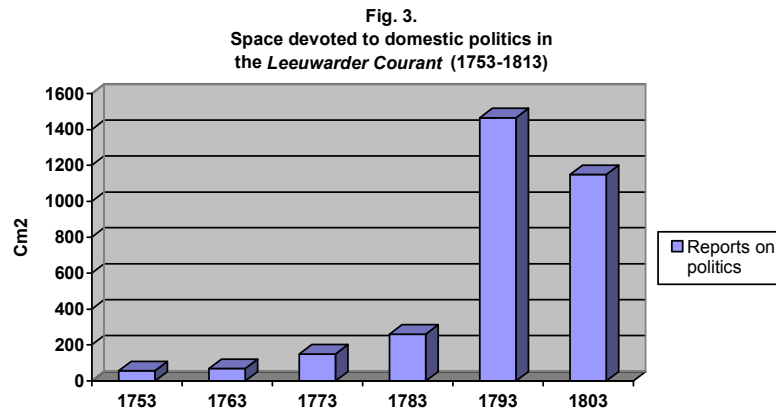
Readers of the *Leeuwarder Courant*, in their turn, found very little reported on the political contestation in Friesland. Although the paper did print a publication from the provincial states in 1784 in which they summoned citizens to behave as 'quiet and peaceful inhabitants', nothing could

<sup>31</sup> Quoted by Cranfield, *The Development*, p. 71.

<sup>32</sup> Van der Meer, *Patriotten in Groningen*, p. 43.

be found in the *Leeuwarder Courant* on the ‘extravagance ... by holding tumultuous conversations and holding meetings, as well as bearing signs of party membership or party slogans’, or on the ‘revolt’ that spread through Friesland according to this publication.<sup>33</sup>

The Frisian newspaper also refused to print a letter of excuse that the Patriot minority in the Frisian states had sent to the States of Holland in 1786. They had been criticised in a missive from the Frisian provincial government for stirring up discord by, among other things, not putting a check on the publication of defamatory pamphlets. In order to enforce their dissatisfaction with this majority decision, the Patriot members of the states made their letter of excuse public. It was published in nearly all newspapers in the Dutch Republic, but not in the *Leeuwarder Courant*. This paper did not want to risk losing its privilege, which was granted by the provincial government.<sup>34</sup>



Frisian readers were informed reasonably well on the situation in other parts of the Netherlands. The riots that occurred in 1786 after Cornelis de Gijzelaar, the pensionary of Dordrecht, rode onto the Binnenhof in The Hague through the Stadholder’s gate, were described in full detail. The complications involved in capturing the Patriot towns of Hattem and Elburg were also disclosed in detail.<sup>35</sup> And there was a report on the founding of a Free Corps in Utrecht, after the ‘serious example of the freedom-loving Oostergoo’. The newspaper did not tell its readers that this ‘quarter’ in the Frisian states had proposed (together with others) to allow the founding of

<sup>33</sup> *Leeuwarder Courant*, 26 June 1784.

<sup>34</sup> Van der Meulen, *Coert Lambertus van Beijma*, pp. 115-117.

<sup>35</sup> *Leeuwarder Courant*, 25 March 1786, 29 March 1786, 23 September 1786, 27 September 1786; cf. Broersma and Brugman, *De nieuwste tydingen*.

these civil militia. Again, in 1785 it did not report on the great assembly of these Free Corps in Utrecht or the publication of the so-called *Grondwettige Herstelling* (Constitutional Restoration).<sup>36</sup>

Newspapers also published official missives, government decrees and reports much more often than before. This enabled citizens to form opinions on the regents' performances. Before the 1780s, newspapers had also published government documents but these were generally publications of minor importance that had already been announced and billed. They had contained decrees issued by the city council or the provincial government, such as a ban on fruit baskets from the town of Sneek, which caused conflicts in the marketplaces because they were smaller than those used in the rest of Friesland.<sup>37</sup> Publishers were often obliged by their privileges to print these. The *Amsterdamsche Courant* was even formally owned by the city council, which used it as a means of communication.<sup>38</sup>

However, in the 1780s it was no longer just part or all of the results of the political process that were published but also documents that provided insight into the decision-making process. This was achieved by the Patriots' performances in the city councils and provincial governments. They broke with existing political convention by seeking publicity and so forcing their political opponents to do the same. This made public the business discussed in states assemblies, as well as the documents employed during these assemblies, which constituted a fundamental breach with the existing political culture. Both parties appealed to public opinion by means of these publications and sought to influence and change the course of the decision-making through them.

Patriot leader Joan Derk van der Cappellen tot de Pol was one of the first to apply these tactics. He released a speech for publication in which he pleaded for the abolition of the '*drostediensten*' during the states assembly. His fellow members of the states of Overijssel were not amused; they reproached him for 'improper and tumultuous conduct'.<sup>39</sup> But such publications could not be left unanswered. The *Leeuwarder Courant*, for example, did not just publish letters and speeches by Van der Cappellen, but also excerpts from states' decrees and Stadholder's missives. It did mind its p's and q's in this area as well, however. A missive from the States of Holland to the Frisian states was published after a delay, for example, because the

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<sup>36</sup> *Leeuwarder Courant*, 18 June 1783; Frieswijk *et al.*, *Geschiedenis van Friesland*, pp. 35-39.

<sup>37</sup> Broersma, *Beschaafde vooruitgang*, p. 89.

<sup>38</sup> Van Eeghen, 'De Amsterdamse Courant'.

<sup>39</sup> Klein, *Patriots republikenisme*, pp. 84-85.

paper considered it 'inappropriate' to do so 'before the same has been brought up for deliberation at the State assembly here'.<sup>40</sup>

This pattern of contestation, in which the two parties reacted to each other by making their opinions and their official papers public, gained a dynamics of its own in the Patriot era. In the *Leeuwarder Courant*, the number of articles devoted to domestic politics increased each year. This took up a growing proportion of editorial space. But this method of gathering news – in which news was told through official documents – meant that the balance in the news coverage tipped towards the Orangists' by the end of the Patriot Revolution. As the Patriots' fight became more radical and they were driven into a corner, they could plead their case only scantily through the official channels. The Orangists were now practically the only source of the flood of publications and missives that appeared.

#### *After the Restoration*

During the incident at Goejanverwellesluis (July 1787), where Patriots held up William V's consort on her way to The Hague, the Orangists showed that they too had become proficient at manipulating public opinion. In sharp terms, both the Stadholder and his 'beloved consort' reported 'the scorn that has been brought upon us by this hold-up and the way it was carried out' in letters to the States of Holland.<sup>41</sup> By publishing these letters in the newspapers, the Orangist party hoped to win over public opinion.

The coverage of this incident was not the *coup de grâce* for the revolutionary process. Even after the 1787 restoration – when Prussian troops avenged the 'assault' on the princess and drove the Patriots out of the country – the Stadholder and his cabal continued to use these tactics. The House of Orange's power had always been based on the people, as William V knew, and although, like his father, he did not want to be a 'Prince of the Mob', he was not averse to a veiled appeal to the masses.<sup>42</sup> Until his flight in 1795, the Stadholder's missives to the States General or to other state councils were regularly published in newspapers. It is true that William V did not want to change the country's political system, but he did see the stadholdership as an 'integrating (and central) part of the constitution'.<sup>43</sup>

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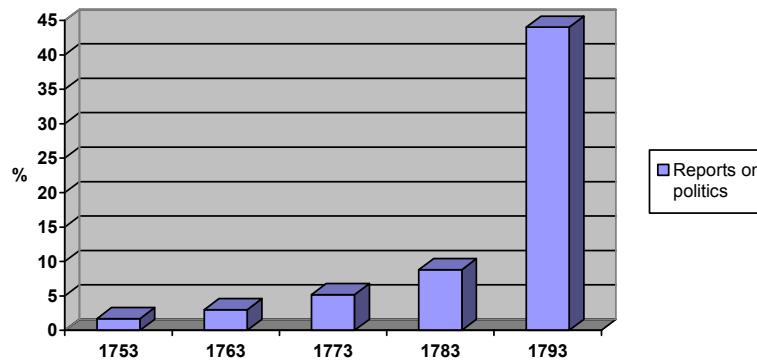
<sup>40</sup> *Leeuwarder Courant*, 2, 6, 9 and 20 November 1782, 23 December 1786.

<sup>41</sup> *Leeuwarder Courant*, 7 July 1787 and 14 July 1787.

<sup>42</sup> Schutte, 'Willem IV en Willem V', p. 211.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 220.

Fig. 4.  
Percentage of reporting devoted to domestic politics  
in the *Leeuwarder Courant* (1753-1793)



Bringing William V's participation in the government of the Dutch Republic to the public's attention stressed the importance of the stadholder-ship. His efforts to strengthen the army, for example, were covered extensively. The *Groninger Courant* published the Stadholder's addresses to the States General in which he emphasised the importance of these reforms to the military defence of the Republic. The publication underlined the fact that the amount of money he was asking for was an absolute minimum to protect the borders. By making these addresses public, the States General were pressured to lend support to the propositions they contained. Most newspapers also stressed William V's involvement in granting a general pardon to many former Patriots who had taken refuge in foreign countries.<sup>44</sup>

The noble character of the Prince of Orange was highlighted in various articles. In 1788, for example, the prince, as commander of the army, had a letter published in which he asked the officers not to come to The Hague to honour him but instead to stay with their garrisons and maintain the peace. Enthusiasm for the House of Orange had sometimes led to riots and plundering. 'The following order ... shows the good intentions of His Distinguished Highness the Lord Prince inh. Stadholder &c &c &c, of keeping the peace', the *Leeuwarder Courant* wrote in a postscript.<sup>45</sup> The next winter, the *Ommelander Courant* reported that William V had ordered that some of his coach houses be heated and opened to the poor. He even served free hot meals.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> *Groninger Courant*, 29 January 1788, 19 February 1788, 21 March 1788, 10 April 1789.

<sup>45</sup> *Leeuwarder Courant*, 5 March 1788.

<sup>46</sup> *Ommelander Courant*, 13 January 1789.

After 1787, when his position was criticised, William V again sought publicity in order to manipulate public opinion. For example, in 1792, when it was suggested in a pamphlet that Princess Wilhelmina's lady's maid and steward had received large sums of money on her behalf in exchange for favours, the Oranges issued a public reaction. In the newspapers, an extract appeared from the resolutions of the States General in which the Stadholder denied the event and insisted on an investigation and punitive measures against the printer of the pamphlet. The order was given at once during the meeting, as the document showed, in order to avenge 'the disrespect that has been brought upon his Highness'.<sup>47</sup>

Both the number of columns and the proportion of the newspapers that were taken up by Dutch politics grew considerably in the period 1790-1795. Contrary to what may have been expected, there was a large increase in political news compared to the 1780s. This was partly due to the lengthy excerpts from the resolutions of the States General and the provincial state assemblies, as well as to the official documents that were included. After the Patriot era, the government, led by the Stadholder, continued to publish official documents, even though their political opponents and their writings had disappeared in the meantime. The domestic politics of the Dutch Republic and its defence against the French armies thus remained an important subject in the newspapers.

Aside from this mainly Orangist discourse, however, a revolutionary discourse continued to exist in the same newspapers' columns. There were no more public discussions on the Dutch Republic's political system, though. The Patriots' flight had finished the political press, although pamphlets that had been printed just across the border appeared once in a while. The developments in revolutionary France, however, were covered extensively and accurately in the newspapers. Reports were published on the latest events, such as the tennis court oath, the fall of the Bastille and the decrees of the new revolutionary government, as well as reports on the changes in everyday life. The Dutch newspapers also covered debates in the National Assembly at length.<sup>48</sup>

Essentially, the coverage of the French revolution was an implicit continuation of the contentious public opinion that had started during the Patriot era. The views of the Dutch newspapers on the revolutionary events in France reflected their political positions in the domestic politics of the 1780s. The *Oprechte Haerlemsche Courant*, for example, sympathised with the revolutionary demands, whereas both the *Rotterdamsche Courant* and

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<sup>47</sup> *Leeuwarder Courant*, 1 February 1792.

<sup>48</sup> Berkelbach van der Sprenkel, 'De Franse revolutie'; Frijhoff, Jongedijk and Rottier, *Vryheid of de Dood*.

the *'s-Gravenhaagsche Courant* were cautious and sceptical about the political developments in France. The *Leeuwarder Courant* even called it a 'life-threatening anarchy':

And behold! ... these are the definitive benefits of the much-praised French liberty, which will be the grave of the nation, and will ruin the most beautiful country in the world!<sup>49</sup>

Despite these emotional outbursts, newspapers covered the political affairs in France correctly. They informed their readers elaborately and made Dutch citizens familiar with the revolutionary discourse. The government recognised the subversive potential of this process of information dissemination, although the editor of the *Rotterdamsche Courant* argued that 'the French set rather a warning instead of an example worthy of imitation'.<sup>50</sup> The municipality of Haarlem even summoned the publisher of the *Oprechte Haerlemsche Courant* to the city hall. It pressured him to withhold articles about the political developments in France which could fuel Patriot sentiments in the Republic.<sup>51</sup>

It has been argued that the French revolution was good training for the exiled Patriots and, after their 'homecoming' in 1795, they were said to have put into practice what they had learned. But they found receptive ground. Readers of the newspapers were already well informed about the revolutionary ideas and rhetoric. The news coverage between 1787 and 1795, it can be supposed, made changes to the Dutch Republic's political system thinkable and readied its inhabitants for their own revolution.

### Conclusion

The Patriot Revolution of the 1780s was essentially a local and regional revolution. This had major implications for news coverage in the Dutch Republic because the political position of a newspaper was closely connected to the stand taken by the local or provincial government which granted the publisher's privilege. The papers of Utrecht, Groningen and Haarlem, for example, supported the Patriotic cause, just as their city councils did. The *'s-Gravenhaagsche Courant* voiced the views of the Orangists who had the upper hand in The Hague. However, most newspapers avoided taking a stand. The established papers, with good reputations and strong market po-

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<sup>49</sup> *Leeuwarder Courant*, 4 July 1792.

<sup>50</sup> Berkelbach van der Sprenkel, 'De Franse revolutie', p. 342.

<sup>51</sup> Sautijn Kluit, 'Geschiedenis', pp. 220-221.



sitions, tended not to publish leading articles, letters to the editor or other opinions on the struggle between the Patriot and Orangist factions.

Nevertheless, in the 1780s, all newspapers, whether neutral or contentious, started to devote more space to the political affairs of the Republic than they had ever done before. Firstly, they published all kinds of official documents. This was an important change allowing readers to take note of at least some of their government's actions and resolutions. This made it possible for citizens to form well-founded opinions. Secondly, newspapers started to print reports on political developments in other provinces. They took advantage of the fragmentation of authority and the rivalry between local and regional governments. When, for example, the Orangist city council of Rotterdam complained in 1785 about the news coverage in the *Leidsche Courant*, the Patriot municipality of Leiden riposted that it could not discover a single defamatory article. No action was taken against the paper.<sup>52</sup>

When the Patriots fled in 1787 and with the ancien regime pulling the reins, coverage of political affairs in the newspapers did not decline. On the contrary, it grew considerably. The Stadholder and his cabal showed that they had also become proficient at manipulating public opinion. In addition to this Orangist discourse, there was also a continuing revolutionary discourse. The Dutch papers reported extensively on developments in revolutionary France. They voiced opinions on the ideas and practices of the revolution, but in particular they accurately informed their readers about French political affairs. This made the Dutch revolution of 1795 thinkable.

During the 1780s and 1790s, politics entered the public sphere. Newspapers played a major role in the construction of national public opinion. They supplied the information on which such opinion was founded. In their columns, papers displayed a political map of the Dutch Republic and showed the interrelationship between events in different towns and provinces. The period 1780-1795 was a cataclysmic era, which served as a prelude to and a learning experience for actual 'open government'. During the following centuries, the coverage of domestic politics expanded to become the core business for newspapers.

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<sup>52</sup> *Nieuwe Nederlandsche Jaarboeken* (1785) p. 948.