

## A DAILY TRUTH

### THE PERSUASIVE POWER OF EARLY MODERN NEWSPAPERS

Marcel Broersma

For when news is printed, it leaves, sir, to be news. While, 'tis but written –  
Though it be ne'er so false, it runs news still.<sup>1</sup>

In *The Staple of News*, written in 1625, the playwright Ben Jonson satirised the burgeoning news trade of his day. In the first act the main figures visit a newly opened office in which all kinds of news is brought in, examined and filed, before being published 'under the seal of the office as staple news, no other news be current'.<sup>2</sup> Information on current affairs is sold here like a commodity. In the office, the news reports are registered as 'authentic' or 'apocryphal' but whether they are true or false is not a criterion of their commercial value. Jonson clearly states that the last category of 'news of doubtful credit' outnumbers the true accounts.<sup>3</sup> In his play he gives multiple examples of false reports: the king of Spain chosen as pope and emperor, the Dutch navy possessing an invisible eel that has sunk the fleet in Dunkirk and the invention of perpetual motion, just to name a few.<sup>4</sup>

Is't true? As true as the rest.<sup>5</sup>

It does not matter as long as people will buy it.

The public must have recognised Jonson's sketch of the news industry that was emerging in Great Britain and the rest of Europe. In the early 1620s printed newspapers were a very new, 'hot' medium in England.<sup>6</sup> In his play Jonson repeatedly hinted at actual persons and events. The Gossips, four ladies Jonson introduced during the scene changes to comment on the play, for example, consider the above-mentioned reports as 'too exotic; ill cooked, and ill dished! They were as good yet as Butter could make them.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonson, *The Staple of News*, p. 79 (Act I, Sc. v, 48-50).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 79.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 93.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 157-158, 162.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 163.

<sup>6</sup> Black, *The English Press*, pp. 4-5.

In a word, they were beastly buttered!'.<sup>7</sup> In this comment they refer to Nathaniel Butter, one of the first and best-known publishers of London *corantos* in the 1620s.<sup>8</sup> Butter here functions as a *pars pro toto* for the newspaper business and its dubious practices.

Due to severe censorship, the first London newspapers, just like other European papers, mainly, or merely, published foreign news. At first sight it seems that the Gossips reject these reports because they are of less interest than the local London news they hear from their maid 'Joan Hearsay' or other fellow townspeople. However, on closer examination it appears that Jonson had these women oppose the dissemination of printed news for two other reasons. Firstly, as Catherine Rockwood has pointed out, Jonson takes a political stand. The playwright supported Jacobean royal policy, which enforced censorship to prevent the dissemination of international news that might stir up public sentiment in favour of England becoming involved in the Thirty Years War. The conflict between the king and Protestant opposition about whether or not to enter the war was a catalyst for the introduction of the newspaper in England.<sup>9</sup> Secondly, Jonson rejected the novelty of printing news because it thus seemed to acquire the same status as literature and scholarship. These genres were all now available in print, rather than in the more exclusive handwritten form, but according to Jonson the public should not make the mistake of valuing them equally.<sup>10</sup>

However, I would argue there is more to his position than a concern about propaganda for the Jacobean cause or cultural criticism. By criticising both the dissemination of news and the veracity of the reports in the papers, Jonson exposed the political-philosophical implications of the new *corantos* which brought the world to England and England to the world. He considered them, as Anthony Parr has observed, 'a threat to civilised communication' because they considered news, whether true or false, as a commodity.<sup>11</sup> Editors presented their representation of reality as truth, while their motives were to gain commercial and political profits from the exploration of current events, with no concern for the consequences. However, by disseminating news they challenged the God-given order which Jonson supported. Ordinary people could now obtain all sorts of information which was previously unavailable. They were confronted with various interpretations of what was happening in the social world and were encouraged to think for themselves. By doing so, newspapers stimulated the rise of scepti-

<sup>7</sup> Jonson, *The Staple of News*, p. 187.

<sup>8</sup> Grant, *The Newspaper Press*, pp. 32-33; Griffiths, *Fleet Street*, pp. 6-7; Sherman, 'Eyes and ears', pp. 32-33.

<sup>9</sup> Rockwood, "'Know Thy Side'", pp. 137-139.

<sup>10</sup> Parr, 'Introduction', p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

cism and public debate. Jonson opposed this, believing that such a debate was undesirable because it would only lead to trouble. Relying on corrupt information supplied by the papers was no way for people to begin to think for themselves.

Jonson not only criticises the ‘producers’ of the news who sold their buyers what they ask for, but also the people who paid money for these fabrications. A customer who asks for ‘any news o’ the saints at Amsterdam’ is answered: ‘Yes, how much would you?’, and is then given his ‘six penny-worth’ commodity. Anyone who pays is given anything they want and the more bizarre the news items, the better they sell.<sup>12</sup> The main character seems to voice Jonson’s argument in a nutshell when he states: ‘Why, methinks, sir, if the honest common people will be abused, why should not they ha’ their pleasure in the believing lies are made for them, as you i’th’office, making them yourselves?’. When you leave communication up to businessmen and public demand you will end up with lies, and that will lead to social agitation: nothing but trouble, according to Jonson.

*The Staple of News* can be considered a very early example of press critique. I chose this example to illustrate how newspapers have been inextricably bound up with issues of truth since the day of their invention. Jonson satirised the deficiencies of the newspapers of his times. Following in his footsteps, many press critics would do the same (Pierre Bayle, for example, said the papers furnished a new comedy every day) and to this day the alleged untruthfulness of newspapers raises much debate.<sup>13</sup> However, while criticising the press for veiling the truth, Jonson and other critics also implicitly confirmed the standard for newspaper writing which has passed down through the ages: news must be true to be a civilised form of communication which serves society.

The claim to truth was a distinctive characteristic of the newly invented genre of the periodical newspaper which entered the European media landscape around 1610. The belief that newspapers had to preserve the truth became a broadly shared principle in both seventeenth and eighteenth-century newspaper writing and laid the ideological foundation for the development of modern journalism. Newspaper writers and their public agreed on this commonplace – which I will define as an idea or a phrase that is commonly accepted.<sup>14</sup> In its universality, a commonplace thus also becomes trivial, as it does with respect to the notion that news is or should be true. In this contribution I will explore the use and constant reconfirmation of this commonplace as a strategy to establish cultural authority.

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<sup>12</sup> Jonson, *The Staple of News*, p. 166; cf. p. 178.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Dooley, ‘News and doubt’, p. 280.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Jennifer Phillips, “‘Vox populi, vox dei’”, p. 23.

I will first analyse the discourse in which newspaper writing defined itself as a practice that had the ability to present a representation of reality that was ‘true’, that is, that reflected what had happened in the ‘real world’. In their statements of aim in the first issues of their papers, almost all printers and editors promised to give truthful accounts of real events. This explicit claim to truth seems as obvious from a popularist point of view as it is questionable from a scholarly perspective. Contemporaries were, as we have seen with Jonson, all too well aware of the fact that newspapers presented a disputable, if not false, image of social reality. However, rather than debunking the newspapers’ claim to truth we should study this claim as a discursive strategy which helped journalism to establish itself as a distinct and more or less autonomous field within society. In the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries editors developed specific discursive practices which had to secure a truthful representation of events. As I will show, we have to interpret the ‘invention’ of these conventions within a broader context of a ‘culture of fact’, in which the gaze was shifted from a divine Truth to an enlightened appeal to human rationality.

I will argue that the commonplace idea that news had to be true provided newspapers with authority and underpinned their appeal for both commercial success and press freedom. Truthfulness as the central argument in journalism discourse, at first functioned at a practical level as a unique selling point for a new intellectual product – the newspaper – while later on this moved onto a more philosophical level. It then legitimised the special position of the press and newspapers in society as the Fourth Estate, as described by the British historian and MP Thomas Macaulay in 1828.<sup>15</sup>

#### *A discourse of truthfulness*

From their inception in 1605 printed newspapers have claimed to tell the truth about the social world. They have assured their readers that the events reported really took place and had been represented correctly and without bias in the columns of their paper. However, this claim presented, as frequent criticisms indicated, an epistemological difficulty, if not an impossibility. News does not neutrally reflect social reality or empirical facts at all. It is a social construction. As newspaper writer Daniel Defoe wrote as early as 1702: ‘Nothing is more common than to have two Men tell the same Story quite differing from one another, yet both of them Eye-witnesses to the fact related’.<sup>16</sup> No story fully maps out an event. Furthermore, news is the result of a process of selection. Events and facts do not

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<sup>15</sup> Macaulay, *Essays*, p. 97.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Woolf, ‘News, history and the construction’, p. 107.

have ‘intrinsic importance’ but become important because they are selected by newspaper writers who adhere to a culturally, ideologically and commercially determined set of selection criteria. That is why journalism has to be studied not as a descriptive but as a performative discourse. In every issue, the public must be persuaded that what was written actually happened in ‘real’ life. Early modern newspaper writing (which is in my opinion a better term than journalism when discussing the period before the nineteenth century) developed textual strategies to achieve this reality effect. When it succeeded it transformed an interpretation into truth – into a reality upon which governments and citizens could act.<sup>17</sup>

To distinguish themselves from gossip, pamphlets, written newsletters and other early modern news products, newspaper editors promised their readers a supply of reliable information rather than opinion or fictional stories. When Haarlem city printer Abraham Casteleyn, for example, announced the opening of his own newspaper in 1656, he wrote that the ‘extremely fabulous’ character of current news had forced him to organise a network of informants from all parts of Europe whom he considered trustworthy. This regular correspondence cost him much ‘effort and money’. However, he believed citizens would prefer his paper to his competitors because of the truthfulness of his accounts.<sup>18</sup> Defoe was also unable to escape the assumption that news had to be true, and he promised the readers of his London *Daily Post* in 1719 that they would be given ‘just accounts of facts in plain words’. He stated that the ‘business’ of a newspaper writer was ‘to give an account of the news, foreign and domestic, in the best and clearest manner we can’.<sup>19</sup> The editor of the Dutch *Leeuwarder Courant* also emphasised the importance of reliable correspondents in the first issue of his paper (1752). He considered that the main reason for the public reproach of newspapers was that they did not always report truthfully. Therefore, he promised his readers that he would provide the most recent news, but also emphasised that he would always and above all print truthful reports (fig. 1).<sup>20</sup>

Newspaper writing’s claim to truth is the most important characteristic of its discourse, in which it establishes itself and claims authority. It is the alpha and omega of its existence and the basis of a social code shared by journalists and their public. The claim to truth by journalism today is an implicit one which underlies news coverage, but in early modern times this code had to be declared openly and repeatedly, as Daniel Woolf has noted:

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Broersma, ‘Journalism as performative discourse’.

<sup>18</sup> Van der Meulen, *De Courant*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>19</sup> *Daily Post*, 6 October 1719.

<sup>20</sup> *Leeuwarder Courant*, 29 January 1752; cf. Broersma, *Beschaafde vooruitgang*.

‘The early modern mind, with its deep distrust of anything new and unsanctioned by authority, needed reassurance that what was contained in the newsbook was not idle rumour, or fancy’.<sup>21</sup> Editors explicitly and implicitly emphasised how faithful they were. The British journalist Nathaniel Mist, for example, declared in 1721 that ‘a love of truth’ was a necessary ingredient for a newspaper, while Daniel Border of the *Faithful Scout* in 1651 promised to use ‘the sword of truth’ to counter falsehood.<sup>22</sup> Other printers also added ‘true’, ‘faithful’ or ‘sincere’ (*opregt* or *oprecht* in Dutch) to the title of their paper, or chose names such as ‘The Mirror’ to recall their claim to truth.

News consumers considered truthfulness to be more important than speed, the other selling point used by publishers to recommend their papers. In 1666, a citizen wrote to an acquaintance to tell him about the news from the Haarlem newspaper, the *Oprechte* [sincere] *Haerlemsche Courant*, ‘because we do hear many matters, but without knowing if they are certain, and I consider the *Haerlemsche Courant* the most reliable [newspaper]’.<sup>23</sup> In business terms, truthfulness was a unique selling point, which distinguished newspapers from literature and polemic. It provided them with a unique place on the seventeenth-century market for information. This discourse of truthfulness helped printers, as Stephen Ward has argued, to rationalise the role of the newspaper in society.<sup>24</sup>

However, this discourse of truthfulness obviously had to mask an awkward reality which was known to publishers and at least suspected by their public. Printers and editors were not always very conscientious. They often published reports that they knew, or may have known, were incorrect. ‘To make their news sell’, the London *Protestant Mercury* wrote in the late seventeenth century, the papers ‘take many things in trust from the first reporter’.<sup>25</sup> Sensational news about political affairs, murders and marvels attracted readers. The focus of these stories differed from country to country. In Britain, for example, there was a strong emphasis on blood and crime, especially that of a sexual nature, while in the Dutch Republic the stories seem to have been a bit more innocent. Deformed animals, such as a sheep with two heads, or family tragedies (for example, a pig eats the baby, the

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<sup>21</sup> Woolf, ‘News, history and the construction’, p. 103.

<sup>22</sup> Black, *The English Press*, p. 31; Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, p. 106.

<sup>23</sup> Van der Meulen, *De Courant*, p. 45.

<sup>24</sup> Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, p. 101.

<sup>25</sup> Dooley, *The Social History of Skepticism*, p. 75.

mother then kills herself and the father goes crazy) were remarkably popular.<sup>26</sup> After all, publishing was a business.

Furthermore, politics complicated the publishing of truthful accounts in at least two ways. Firstly, periodical publications such as newspapers were vulnerable to censorship and other government measures. They could be fined or even be banned from publication, which occasionally happened in both Great Britain and the Dutch Republic as well as other European countries.<sup>27</sup> Most newspapers therefore were careful not to publish news which could antagonise the authorities and they also avoided taking sides. As the editor of the *Leeuwarder Courant* asked his correspondents in the midst of the Dutch conflict between the so-called Patriots and Orangists in 1785: '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'.<sup>28</sup>

Secondly, the relationship between the press and politics could also be the other way around. In early modern Europe, press and politics were to a large extent intertwined. Editors needed new and reliable information about political affairs and were thus dependent on governments, which tried to prevent them from publishing certain stories and encouraged them to publish others. In times of turmoil printers and editors used their paper to voice political views and to protect political interests. In most cases authorities bribed them or their correspondents. As early as 1631 Richelieu supported the *Gazette de France* of Théophraste Renaudot to circulate news both nationally and internationally that was favourable to his government, while at the end of that century Louis XIV established a sophisticated propaganda system. Governments even launched their own newspapers and propaganda campaigns.<sup>29</sup>

All of this was hidden, however, behind the openly voiced discourse of truthfulness. A German guidebook to the newspaper, written in 1695 by Kaspar Stieler, stated that newspaper publishers earned their reputation through the truthfulness of their reports. He refuted the common critique that newspapers were unreliable and untruthful: 'One buys and reads newspapers because one is told what is true and can be passed on. Lies have short legs and never live to be old'. He argued that most of the reports were

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<sup>26</sup> Cranfield, *The Development of the Provincial Newspaper*, pp. 78-80; Broersma, *Beschaafde vooruitgang*, pp. 78-80.

<sup>27</sup> Weekhout, *Boekencensuur*, pp. 79-83.

<sup>28</sup> Broersma, 'Constructing public opinion', p. 227. See also Koopmans' article in this volume.

<sup>29</sup> Burrows, 'The cosmopolitan press', pp. 32-34; Popkin, *News and Politics*, pp. 36-37.

true and asked whether a writer should be blamed for making a mistake now and then: 'There is no face so beautiful that it is without blemish'.<sup>30</sup>

A Dutch guide for newspaper readers, written by the botanist Johann Hermann Knoop and published in 1758, also emphasised that one should keep in mind that newspapers intended to tell the truth about events: 'Because it is unthinkable that a newspaper writer or a correspondent will knowingly spread lies'. The author chose an apt motto for his book: *Relata refero* (I am telling it as it was told to me). It was possible that an editor might be falsely informed, but he was obliged to correct this mistake in a new report in a subsequent issue. However, according to Knoop, this was not lying deliberately: 'the newspaper recounts what others have recounted or reported; if others lie about an event, so the newspaper inevitably does the same'.<sup>31</sup> Editors believed that this basic principle allowed them to provide an accurate representation of an event, even when their newspaper was partisan and they, or their correspondents, were biased themselves.

Editors emphasised their attachment to truth and their good intentions but they tended to apologise in advance for making mistakes. They underlined how difficult it was to obtain reliable correspondence and to judge the information it contained. 'I can assure you, there is not a line printed nor proposed to your view, but carries the credits of other Originals, and justifies itself from honest and understanding authority', the editor of the London newsbook *Weekely Newes from Italy, Germanie, Hungaria, Bohemia, The Palatinate, France and the Low Countries* wrote in 1622. 'So that if they should faile there in true and exact discoveries, be not you too malignant against the Printer here, that is so far from any invention of his owne, that when he meets with improbability or absurdity, he leaves it quite out rather than startle your patience'.<sup>32</sup> In early modern Europe a single 'true' account of events seemed impossible, and both of the guidebooks mentioned above warned newspaper readers not to believe everything that was written in the papers. They were encouraged to form their own opinion, and judge the facts clearly for themselves, as did the editors.

#### *A culture of fact*

Barbara J. Shapiro has shown how a culture of fact was established in England between 1550 and 1720. She argues that in the early sixteenth century, the term 'fact' was used to a limited extent and mainly in law courts. In a

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<sup>30</sup> Stieler, *Zeitungs Lust und Nutz*, pp. 32, 56, 58. Cf. Popkin, 'New Perspectives', pp. 7-12.

<sup>31</sup> Knoop, *Kort onderwys*, p. 12. Cf. Schneider, 'Hoe de krant lezen'.

<sup>32</sup> Griffiths, *Fleet Street*, p. 6.



law suit, satisfactory evidence had to be presented to the jurors to convince them that a fact, that is, 'a human deed or action which had occurred in the past', was 'true'. This kind of legal system, which was not based on rituals or religious convictions but on rational argument, required 'faith in the possibility of reaching adequate and reasonable belief about such events and a mode of thinking about what is knowable, who can know it, and under what conditions it is knowable, as well as institutional arrangements and processes for knowing'.<sup>33</sup> The events under consideration could not be observed or replicated in court; however, a firm belief was established that it was nevertheless possible to know the truth about them.

Law developed routines for finding facts. It relied on documents whose authenticity had to be examined, and the credibility of eyewitnesses was also central to the system. In an ideal case, a witness would have been present when an event happened, have no interest in the case themselves and would be educated and of irreproachable conduct. They had to be faithful and consistent in their testimony and, ideally, multiple witnesses would give the same account of an event. The judge and the jurors for their part had to be impartial.<sup>34</sup> These principles and routines were subsequently adapted by other disciplines such as history, science and news reporting.

We should judge the newspapers' discourse of truthfulness within this framework. Editors emphasised their impartiality and faithfulness. While this was a rhetorical necessity designed to persuade their readers to believe that newspapers mirrored social reality, it was also a normative methodological position. To persuade readers to believe their coverage – and to gain authority thereby – they developed textual conventions which had to demonstrate that their reports were reliable. They attempted to give news a sound basis in facts and aimed to attribute news to written sources or to eyewitnesses if they had not witnessed the event themselves. News writers used a set of standard phrases to indicate the dependability of the news in their articles. By doing so they enabled their readers to make a judgement of their own.

The dateline of an article stated where and when it was written. 'Harwich, Jan. 30', 'Dublin, Jan. 20', 'Kingsale, Jan. 23', 'Marseilles, Jan. 17', and so on. This convention was used by almost all European newspapers from the early seventeenth century onwards. To underline the reliability of their article, news writers would specify the time and place in the first sentence. 'On Saturday last here arrived (...)', 'Wednesday last was burried here (...)', 'On Sunday last, three small vessels came into this harbor

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<sup>33</sup> Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact*, pp. 11, 208.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 12-26.

(...).<sup>35</sup> However, it did not always mean that the article was actually about these towns or the events that occurred on these days. Letters from central places on European postal routes could also mention events that happened earlier in other countries. An account from Vienna could give news about events in Constantinople some weeks before. The dateline and first sentence would then read like this: ‘*Leghorn, March 30*. On the 21<sup>st</sup>, the King of Sardinia and the Prince Hereditary of Piedmont, arrived at Placentia, where he has fixed his Head Quarter’.<sup>36</sup>

The most reliable information was probably that which was based on official documents and government publications. To avoid political measures newspapers tended to print documents related to domestic politics in their entirety. In most cases these were released for publication by the government. It was safer not to make alterations. It was less of a problem to print foreign secret documents in summary. In January 1759 the *Leeuwarder Courant*, for example, wrote that it had postponed a story about a conspiracy against the Portuguese king because it lacked official documents: ‘Now we have received the concessions and sentences which were published by the Court itself we are able to compile a concise history of this outrageous incident based upon the most important matters which are in them’.<sup>37</sup> The public enjoyed both the sense of truthfulness and the disclosure of State secrets. The number of official documents that were published rose extensively in periods of contestation and political troubles. It was much safer to print these than to interpret events. Moreover, it offered the opportunity to provide balanced reporting by publishing documents from opposing political factions. In this way, readers could make up their own minds.<sup>38</sup>

News from correspondents, people in different parts of the country or in foreign countries who were paid to regularly send updates of the news they obtained was almost always presented in the form of a letter. This made these accounts very personal, which was important in a society in which there was no formal system for the organisation and distribution of knowledge. Trust was therefore dependent upon the authority of the person who made the statement. It could happen that accounts from different towns and countries, for example in the diplomatic build-up to a war, contained con-

<sup>35</sup> Examples from *London Gazette*, 1 February 1666.

<sup>36</sup> Example from *London Gazette*, 6 April 1742.

<sup>37</sup> *Leeuwarder Courant*, 10 March 1759. The Dutch text: ‘Nu wy de Consessien en Sententien, door het Hof zelf gepubliceerd, magtig geworden zyn, zullen wy uit den voornamen inhoud der zelve, eene beknopte Historie van dit voorval formeeren (...)’

<sup>38</sup> Broersma, ‘Constructing public opinion’, pp. 230-231.

tradictory statements. In such cases editors tended not to weigh pros and cons, and readers were again expected to judge for themselves.

Almost as reliable as official documents were those accounts in which the writer had been an eyewitness to an event. A letter from Paris in the *Leeuwarder Courant* of 18 August 1792, for example, stated: 'I have just a minute to write you that at this moment the Tuilleries are besieged; that the people are rolled back by the Swiss; that blood flows from all sides'.<sup>39</sup> The suggestion of action and involvement, and the use of expressive details caused a reality effect. In a story about a devastating fire in the prison of Leeuwarden the reporter emphasised that he had heard the shouting and seen a pall of smoke at night. He went to the building, saw the flames and heard the prisoners shouting and crying: '(...) one saw these poor people put their hands through the bars, when they were almost choked by the smoke they could not make a sound anymore, and shortly afterwards were burnt under the burning ruins'.<sup>40</sup>

When official documents were not available and the correspondent was not an eyewitness to an event, newspapers had to rely on second-hand information. In the text, editors attempted to convince their readers of the reliability of the information they presented by giving as much detail about the source of the account as possible. This resulted in phrases such as: 'A letter from Stockholm of the 3d instant mentioned (...)', 'By our accounts from Bavaria we learn (...)', or 'According to a private letter from a bombardier in the British train of artillery in Flanders, it consists at present of (...)'.<sup>41</sup> In many cases they explicitly stated that an account was true and why it could be believed: 'From a letter from Weymouth, written by a reliable person and dated December 15th, we learn that (...)'.<sup>42</sup> Or, 'We read the following account in the foreign newspapers which has been confirmed by private correspondence (...)'.<sup>43</sup>

Some editors mentioned the newspapers from which they extracted information. The editor of the London *Daily Courant*, which was first published 11 March 1702, assured his readers in the first issue that he would

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<sup>39</sup> In Dutch: 'Ik heb slegts even tyd om u te melden, dat men op het oogenblik de *Tuilleries* belegert; dat het volk door de Zwitzers terug gejaagd word; dat het bloed reeds van alle kanten stroomd.'

<sup>40</sup> *Leeuwarder Courant*, 16 November 1754. The Dutch text: '(...) men zag die Rampzaligen hunne Handen door de Tralien steken, wanneer ze half verstikt in damp geen geluid meer konden geven, en kort daar op onder de glandige Puinhopen verbraden wierden.'

<sup>41</sup> Examples from *London Gazette*, 6 April 1742, 10 April 1742 and *Newcastle Courant*, 20 November 1742.

<sup>42</sup> *Leeuwarder Courant*, 6 January 1753.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, 3 February 1753.

‘give his extracts fairly and impartially’. He promised to name the newspaper from which he had taken a news item at the beginning of each article. In this way, ‘the public could, seeing from what country a piece of news comes with the allowance of that government, may be better able to judge of the credibility and fairness of the relationship’. He promised, furthermore, not to comment on the news but provide ‘only matter of fact, supposing other people to have sense enough to make reflections for themselves’. Two months later he elucidated his statement by saying that ‘the proper and only business of a news-writer’ was, in addition to providing the latest news, ‘delivering facts as they come’.<sup>44</sup>

To emphasise their faithfulness, correspondents also used conventional phrases when they doubted the quality of the information they provided. When news could not be attributed to a source, the account would start with the words, ‘It is said that’. Readers were familiar with this phrase, which was also commonly used in personal letters and diaries. They would know then that it was a rumour that might be true but which was likely to be false. Furthermore, there was much space devoted to corrections. If an editor had faithfully copied news from a source and also attributed the information so readers could judge it, and then learned after some days that it was false, the honest editorial response was to correct the earlier account and apologise to the readers. For example, the *Northampton Mercury* wrote in 1721: ‘We hope our candid readers will not condemn our Mercury for the many falsities that have of late been inserted therein, as we took them all out of the London Printed Papers, and those too the most creditable’.<sup>45</sup>

#### *Newspapers as sites of knowledge construction*

The introduction of the printed periodical newspaper in the early seventeenth century marked an important change in the construction of knowledge and its dissemination, as it was now much more regularly distributed and among a much broader audience. Information that came by word of mouth, the private letters of merchants and even written newsletters, only reached a small and in many cases select group. The same can be said of the scholarly journals, which began with the publication of the French *Journal des Sçavans* in 1665, which were aimed at a select academic public. Newspapers profited from the growth of the reading market. In the eighteenth century especially, their number rose rapidly in various European countries. Many of them were purely commercial enterprises, but newspapers also

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<sup>44</sup> *Daily Courant*, 11 March 1702, 19 May 1702. Cf. Black, *The English Press*, p. 88.

<sup>45</sup> Smith, ‘The long road to objectivity’, p. 157.

cherished their aura as heralds of progress and of benefit to the people through their working for the common good.

Many newspapers extensively covered discoveries in science and technology. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the *Leeuwarder Courant*, for example, dedicated almost six percent on average of its editorial space to science. 'Public writing (...), like our daily paper is the most suitable instrument to enlighten enthusiasts, to tell them how much progress other countries are making and inspire them to do useful experiments themselves as well', the paper wrote in 1776.<sup>46</sup> Less specifically, newspaper writing 'systematized the collection and organization of data' about the social world.<sup>47</sup> Publishers selected the most important or remarkable news from the flow of messages they found on their desk, and sometimes added comments. Subsequently, they presented their more or less connected representation of reality to their readers as the truth about social reality, even when they knew that the accounts were false, or were likely to be, or at the very least sensational or overstated. Be that as it may, by disseminating 'true' information, newspapers constructed a social reality that had potentially subversive powers of its own.

The commonplace idea that, on the one hand, news had to be true, but on the other hand, in demonstrable cases it was not – with critics even wondering if it even could ever be – stimulated the rise of pragmatic scepticism. Newspaper readers were confronted with discrepancies between reports. In the case of a peace treaty or a battle, for example, a reader would find, often in the same issue, letters from different European cities which said different things. A discouraged British reader in 1659 observed: 'We have every day several news, and sometimes contraries, and yet all put out as true'. This stimulated critical comparison of news items. Peter Burke points out that the habit of newspapers correcting false information in a subsequent issue would have stimulated news consumers to 'look at the news with a critical eye', while Brendan Dooley speaks of a 'common thread of doubt'.<sup>48</sup>

Newspaper reading stimulated the critical powers of an intellectual elite who understood how the process of news and meaning-making functioned. It enabled them to question the 'natural' social order. However, newspapers aimed to reach a broad public. Many people still believed that what was written in the papers was actually true, even in the case of advertisements.

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<sup>46</sup> Broersma, *Beschaafde vooruitgang*, p. 75. The Dutch text: 'Publyke geschriften (...) gelyk ons dagpapier, zyn de geschikste werktuigen, om den liefhebberen te onderrichten, hoe ver men daar omtrent in andere landen vordert, en hen dus aan te moedigen insgelyks nuttige proeven te neemen.' *Leeuwarder Courant*, 31 August 1776.

<sup>47</sup> Popkin, 'Periodical publication', p. 205.

<sup>48</sup> Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge*, p. 202; Dooley, 'News and doubt', p. 276.

When, for example, in 1774 the *Leeuwarder Courant* published an announcement for a book which stated that the end of time was near, public fear in the Dutch Republic was so great that people stopped working and hid themselves under their beds, shaking and trembling.<sup>49</sup> Its power to move people, to construct opinions and form interest groups made newspapers into a subversive medium which would be of decisive importance during the social changes that took place in the late eighteenth century. They stimulated the idea that society did not have a closed God-given hierarchy in which everyone's life was predetermined. They stressed the conviction that the right to truth was not the prerogative of the elite.

*Truth and freedom of the press*

The concept of press freedom which developed during the eighteenth century was first and foremost a political invention.<sup>50</sup> The bourgeois who opposed the autocratic regimes needed the media to express their political views and to raise support for their position. Furthermore, contrary to a monarch who had God-given authority, they had to legitimise their actions by founding their authority on public opinion, another newly invented concept which was closely related to press freedom. To facilitate the necessary rational and critical debate in the public sphere, which eventually would lead to a political 'truth' (the best answer to a political question or problem), people needed facts, reliable information and true accounts of events. In 1702, the *Daily Courant*, for example, promised to report 'only Matter of Fact, supposing other people to have Sense enough to make reflections for themselves'.<sup>51</sup> Reading a newspaper became more than a personal affair that provided enjoyment or education, or satisfied a need for information. It became a means for citizens to participate in the public sphere.

Although it might have been difficult to give 'true' accounts of reality – and editors willingly admitted that this was problematic – newspapers developed a discourse of truthfulness in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which aimed at building trust and authority. This discourse had both a rhetorical and a methodological character. They wanted to persuade readers to believe that events had actually happened as they were represented in the newspaper. Once the idea – or the promise – that news had to be true became commonplace, newspaper writers developed, or adapted from other professions, textual conventions which established a reality effect. The at-

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<sup>49</sup> Broersma, *Beschaafde vooruitgang*, pp. 76-78.

<sup>50</sup> Baker, 'Public opinion as political invention', pp. 167-199; Broersma, 'Constructing public opinion'.

<sup>51</sup> Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, p. 148.

tribution of information using well-known phrases gave news a semblance of truth.

The discourse of truthfulness that newspapers had developed initially as a commercial feature was remarkably successful. It was contested when actual cases of falsity were exposed, but from a more general perspective, as a commonplace, it was by then firmly rooted in public conscience: newspapers had to write the truth and they were able to do so, but they simply did not always do so because of practical problems and political considerations. In the late eighteenth century, however, this discourse of truth moved onto a philosophical level. Newspapers were no longer just a business but also had an important task within the political system. They had to deliver the ingredients necessary for the public to form its opinion. As Jeremy Bentham would later argue: they were ‘the only regularly and constantly acting’ distributors of public knowledge and truth.<sup>52</sup>

In one of the first treaties on press freedom, *Essai sur la liberté de produire ses sentiments* (1749), the Dutch scholar Elie Luzac stated that men are obliged to contribute to the general good. To do so the search for truth was essential. While this was only possible if all viewpoints could be known and examined, Luzac concluded that curbing the freedom of expression obstructed the prosperity of society.<sup>53</sup> As Velema has argued, Luzac’s plea concerned the exchange of information and views of the elite: ‘He was writing about the collective search for truth within an idealized Republic of Letters’. Furthermore, Luzac’s essay was apolitical. He did not want, nor foresee, the creation of a vehicle of public opinion that could influence government policy as a result of press freedom.<sup>54</sup> However, ultimately, essays such as that by Luzac or David Hume’s *On the Liberty of the Press*, as well as John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, contributed to the idea that newspapers were important instruments in the dissemination of the truth about the social world and in facilitating the development of public opinion.

This commonplace ideal of truthfulness shaped the development of the concept of press freedom. If the press was to be allowed absolute freedom it had to show that it was a responsible guardian of the common good. Newspapers had ‘not only to give public intelligence’, as the *Whitehall Evening Post* stated in 1718, but ‘all intelligence’ had also to be ‘calculated for the public good’.<sup>55</sup> To obtain commercial and political autonomy they had to present themselves as impartial and independent registers. Readers, for their part, had to acknowledge that the news was a true account of what had hap-

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<sup>52</sup> Boyce, ‘The Fourth Estate’, p. 21.

<sup>53</sup> Velema, *Enlightenment and conservatism*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20.

<sup>55</sup> Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, p. 146.

pened in the social world or at least that newspapers strove for a truthful representation of reality. They had to acknowledge the value of the press as a social institution. This mutual discursive embrace of newspapers as investigators of what was true and what was false, of the respectable motives or the selfish reasons of agents in the public sphere, helped to establish the notion of the press as the Fourth Estate. As a representative of the citizens it had to pursue the truth, confronting both the public and the government with the consequences of their actions, motivated by the need – to paraphrase Hume – to preserve society from tyranny.



## LEEUWARDER



## Saturdagse Courant.

**D**eze Courant die men voornemens is alle weken uit te geven, zal volgens een byzonder en nieu plan geformeert worden, uit de volgende No. zal den Leser het rechte denkbeeld van deselve kunnen formeeren, men zal deselve meer trachten te verbeteren, en tot de uitsluiting volmaaktheit brengen, geen moeite noch kosten ontien om die voor het algemeen van nut te doen zyn, het welke de ondervinding beter dan een cietlyk opgepronkte Voorreden zal aantonen: Deselve zal een veel groter meniche van voorwerpen in zig bevatten dan de ordinaire Nieuspapieren in 't gemeen behelfen, door dien het geentints myn oogmerk zoude zyn om de myne op de ondergang der andere te vestigen, de liefhebbers van den ouden trant kunnen zig met de ordinaire Nieuspapieren vergenoegen, en men zal dese met veel nut en vermaak kunnen lesen, zonder de jalousie van de Autheurs of Drukkers van de andere op den hals te halen.

De Couranten in 't algemeen aangemerkt, zyn niet zo zeer te verachten als sommige menschen zig wel verbeelden, zy kunnen de Histori-Schryvers voor Memorien of Gedenkstukken verstrekken in alles wat de wesentlykheit en de rydt der gebeurtenissen betreft. Het verwyrt dat men haar doet van niet in alles oprecht en na waarheit te zyn, spruit dikwils voort uit een valsche Correspondentie: Maar het is de nootzakelyke plicht der Schryveren omme het gemeen van de begane misdagen te adverteren, dit is een point waar op in dese Courant een bysondere reflectie gemaakt zal worden: En hoewel wy aan den Leser de eerste en nieuwste rydingen zo veel ons mogelyk zullen mededelen, waar toe wy menen genoegsame middelen aan de hand te hebben; zo zullen wy nochtans als het eerste en voornaamste point de waarheit deselve in 't oog houden.

Men heeft veel reden om te vermoeden dat geen Schryver van enige Nieuspapieren verwaantheit genoeg besit, om zig te verbeelden dat zyne Lesers eenvoudig genoeg zullen zyn, om te

geloven, dat zyne Correspondentie hem het geheim van het staatkundig Cabinet kan doen doorgonden, en al hadde hy het geheim van dese of gene intrigue ontdekt, zoude hy wel zekerheit hebben om deselve op een veilige wyse te divulgeren? Men belooft in desen oplichte niets, als het gene dat men mag en kan zeggen, zonder zig te exponeren. Men zal met zo veel vrymoedigheid als ymand het Land der *conjectures* doordwandelen: Nochtans altoos een billyke onsydighheit en een gepaste welvoegelykheit in agt nemende: De grondregel is ons zeer bekend dat het onvoorligtig is zig tegens de sterfste partyaan te kanten.

Het zal zeer dienstig zyn met een woord uit te nodigen alle die gene die ons met hare Correspondentie gelieven te vereeren, al het gene dien kan, om het ware interessen wezenlyk nut van de inwoonders deser Provincien te bevorderen, zal een nuttig en geschikt onderwerp voor dese Courant verschaffen. Indien ymand dierhalven enige nieuwe ontdekking doet in enige kunst of wetenschap, zo 'er iets zeltzaam en bysonders gebeurt waardig om tot de kennis van de nakomelingschap overgebragt te worden, indien 'er iets voorsvalt dat van enig nut kan zyn voor de Commerciende Inwoonders van dese Provincien; indien ymand in zyn functie of bediening deze of gene zaak uitgevonden heeft die voor het algemeen van nut kan zyn, in een woord alles wat het Politique, zo wel als den Koophandel of het Kerkelyke betreft, ja van alle bysondere takken waar uit het nut en vermakelyk kan hervoorfpruiten. Alle die gene die de Burgerlyke plichten der Maatschappie weten en betrachten, worden uitgenodigt ons de by haar bekend zynde bysonderheden mede te delen, en die gene die het nodig oordeelt zal zyn Naam met de vereifte omzichtigheit gemeld zien.

Alle advertentien van wat Natuur deselve mogen zyn, zal men voor een zeer redelyke en geschikte prys in dese Courant kunnen invoegen,mits deselve aan niemands goede naam, of affairs enige prejudicie teebrengen.

