

## **THE NEW BALANCING ACT**

**by Caroline Nevejan at the international conference 'Press and Press Support in a Digital Age',  
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Wouter Kurpershoek, a Dutch TV journalist who – at 42 – is far from old, has resigned his post as correspondent in the United States. The reason he gave was that he could not longer live up to his own journalistic ideals. His employer required him to act as cameraman, sound technician, lighting technician and journalist. The journalistic profession is changing, as is so much more.

Not very long ago, just a few years in fact, it was quite common for a household to have a newspaper subscription. Generations have grown up with a daily newspaper, which was read by various members of the family – the father at any rate.

Although radio and television helped to break the dependency on the newspaper as a source of news, the newspaper still provided added value, whether in the form of additional depth, clarity, the sheer number of articles and the ability to choose what you wanted to read at any time you wished. The other forms of media couldn't offer this.

Today, however, one can keep up with the latest news anytime, anywhere and free of charge. This begins in the morning at the railway station or the store with the free dailies, of which there are now four I believe. Then there are, of course, the online sources available all day long via computer, laptop, mobile, iPod, etc. World news is sometimes literally at our fingertips at any time of the day. Everyone can keep up with the latest news at any time.

This is wonderful of course. However, these developments also create problems for the daily newspapers, given the production time involved and their fixed delivery times. I'm not only referring to the falling circulation figures and the dwindling number of independent newspaper editorial staffs, which comes at the expense of diversity of opinion. Instead I'm talking about a situation in which the behaviour of the media, particularly as regards young people, has changed so dramatically that we, with our traditional perspective, have to do our best to not only keep pace with – but also stay ahead or even anticipate – these developments. Why pay for a newspaper when I can get one for free? Why should I read long articles when I can quickly browse the highlights online? Why should I read articles at all if a photograph is a more powerful form of expression and draws more attention? Why should I wait for the evening news to begin when I can get my fix of news at any time online?

For newspapers, this new consumer attitude means that they also have to think differently to stay ahead of these developments.

It is clear that the media increasingly create the context in which our culture is given meaning. The term 'medialisation' is used to describe the growing influence of media in our daily lives. As I just

pointed out, it's not only the media that are changing; we are changing as a result. Our world view is increasingly determined by the information, knowledge and perceptions disseminated by the media.

The connection between our daily lives and the media is reinforced by the increased accessibility of the media and the opportunities the public itself has to shape and determine the media and its content. The public is able to participate more actively in the production of information. This gives rise to new editorial forms and different relationships between the public and the creators.

The fact that the media increasingly create the context in which society operates, also gives rise to a divide when part of the public lacks the skills to deal with these media. Coined by the Council for Culture to describe this very phenomenon, the term 'media wisdom' is increasingly being used since its introduction in 2005. The Council promotes the development of technical skills to facilitate the use of new media. But it doesn't stop there. It is as important to learn how to deal with new forms of information provision and to learn how to interpret information. We need to be able to ask ourselves where certain information originates. After all, the newspaper has always been seen as a trusted source of information, while the Internet can be described as a fickle adolescent who tells a story in a different way every time.

The Council also believes that regulations are necessary to ensure a high-quality, freely accessible and diverse public digital domain. Promoting the skills for finding the media domain, making choices within it and dealing with these are part of both media policy and cultural policy. Public and independent media, as well as the education system will play a key role in this.

Our personal involvement in the various media continues to increase. This is a necessary condition for full participation in society. After all, social and political life are becoming increasingly linked to the world of the media, internet and television in particular. Spectacle, drama, conflict and emotion not only typify contemporary television, these qualities also leave their mark in the political and cultural arena. And so does the Internet. With its endless gathering of witness reports, information clusters, games, new businesses and transactions it has become a narrative landscape of significance.

The media's influence on society has not only expanded, it has also become more complex. The mass media work as a binding agent and promote social cohesion. In contrast, the media are also capable of dividing society by means of target-group policy and niche marketing.

Today's media are thus both a tool that builds community – however brief this may be – and a tool that enables and reinforces individualisation. After all, media users determine where they get their news, entertainment and culture by flipping channels or surfing online.

The interactive structure many digital media offer gives rise to new forms of social interaction and cohesion, which for the most part take place outside the traditional mass media's sphere of influence. These digital media include online communities where people who share common interests are brought together, as well as chat and dating sites. The mass media are also discovering this approach and providing opportunities to delve deeper into issues and interests with like-minded individuals, such as newspapers that offer readers the chance to discuss issues on the website or personal weblogs.

With the success of weblogs and other user-generated content, there is a growing acceptance of non-authorised or non-institutionalised sources of information, despite the fact that it is not always clear whether and to what extent the information providers are independent and reliable. This also relates to the evolving role of the journalist. The layman and the expert, the witness and the journalist, these players are more frequently coming face to face. In other words, what a blogger from Iraq writes can have a greater impact than an article in the Wall Street Journal has.

New technology has created a global infrastructure that determines the access to knowledge and culture. Individuals are given more and more opportunities to actively participate in this, both as consumers *and* as producers. The range of options is enormous, with a reach that extends across the globe.

The position of individuals in a complex, evolving and fundamentally medialised world is one of the key themes of the Council for Culture's multi-year action plan and advisory programme "Innovate, Participate". In this text the idea of 'cultural citizenship' is introduced. We are not only members of a national community, we are also consumers of a global cultural heritage. In local, regional, national and global contexts we can participate and produce in a variety of ways. Globalisation and digitalisation have radically changed the patterns of consumption, distribution and production of goods, both cultural and otherwise.

At the same time, digitalisation can lead to concentrations of power among providers and infrastructural administrators. Culture and information are becoming more marketable and that leads to increases in exclusive rights claims. This gives rise to questions about how and by whom the ever-growing infrastructure of culture and information is managed, how the content of this is provided, and who governs access. In other words, who determines what we do or don't see, hear or don't hear, read or don't read, and which images, sound or text we may use ourselves and which ones we are not allowed to touch? And what are the implications of such openness or restrictions?

This touches on a fundamental human right, specifically the right for people to freely communicate with each another. The free access to sources of information and culture is a basic right, which is included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as it is adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948. The Scientific Council for Government Policy's report *Focus on Functions* cites access to reliable, diverse and independent media as an essential condition for a successful democratic society.

In particular, new forms of cultural participation, cultural production and cultural transfer greatly benefit from free access to sources of knowledge, information and culture.

In its advisory report *Innovate, participate!*, the Council for Culture has expressed its support for the free dissemination and use of information, knowledge, media and culture without a direct profit motive.

Both Dutch and European government policy continue to be insufficiently geared to the developments I've just outlined. For this reason, the Council for Culture is currently exploring the issue of accessibility

of culture and information in the public domain. For those interested, the Council will publish its findings during the first quarter of 2008.

The independent press is one of the players in the public domain. It faces intense competition from other media, in the form of both professional and amateur journalism.

For the existing press sector, the new developments not only pose opportunities as well as threats, they may also bring about a change in attitude.

News – regardless of whether it is geared to fit the attributes of a specific medium – will be more frequently disseminated via various platforms.

These transmedia developments have serious implications for the editorial staffs of national and regional daily newspapers. More and more news products are being generated by relatively smaller editorial staffs and fewer journalists. The Dutch Media Authority recently conducted a study into the news market's source use. On average, more than one in three reports is based on news reports from press agencies. Consequently, press agencies, especially the Netherlands national news agency ANP, can be considered the editorial staff behind the news that other editorial staffs produce.

In addition, most editors generally follow the reporting example of the competition, with the most significant sources being the national daily newspapers and the public service broadcasters.

The concentration of editorial staffs, as part of which an increasing amount of news and reports are being produced by fewer journalists, leads one to suspect that mainly pre-existing content is being provided in new packaging. Rather than leading to greater diversity, this 'recycling' increases the blandness of information.

As journalism has become more market-oriented, the goal of the media contributing to the democratic shaping of opinion and offering a forum for social cohesion appears to be further away than ever. The rapid rate at which issues gain prominence in the media and then disappear is part of the problem.

Depth and knowledge are forced to compete with sensation.

The emergence of free dailies and the nearly inexhaustible supply of free information have made people less inclined to pay for daily news. As a result, the publishers of daily newspapers face falling circulation figures and less advertisement revenue for their general papers. Only newspapers with a specific readership, such as *Het Financieele Dagblad*, *Trouw* and *NRC.Next*, have seen their numbers rise. An additional problem for the sector is that the younger generation does not see a newspaper subscription as a matter of course. The compromised position of publishers could make them more attractive for takeover by foreign investors. These investors, for whom profit is the primary goal, could replace the shareholders' equity with debt.

Publishers are eyeing various possibilities of combating their weakened position. One possibility involves gearing their approach to how people now get their news and to opt for more contemporary platforms, such as new titles for target groups, newspapers in a tabloid format and flexible subscription options.

In addition to collaborating with radio and television programmes, some newspapers offers more extensive content on their own website. This offers readers the opportunity to respond to and to view

dossiers regarding a specific topic. Readers also appear to be willing to pay for specific articles, while this is less and less the case for general news since it can be obtained everywhere free of charge. Online activities and specialised content, such as editorial articles, reviews, health and leisure tips, can become a key source of revenue for printed newspapers. Mobile communication is playing an increasingly significant role in these activities and the content offered. Readers are not only able to read news via their mobiles, they can also receive text messages notifying them of articles on the website relating to their interests. In this changing media landscape the newspaper still is a strong brand that people trust and know, enabling it to retain groups, create communities and develop other transmedia activities.

In conclusion, in looking at all of what I consider to be exciting trends, we can ask ourselves: what are the implications on policy?

To best respond to the challenges and opportunities offered by digitalisation, it is necessary to be flexible and have the courage to experiment and take risks. This applies to both the sector and the government. With digitalisation and the associated convergence, exhaustive media policy is unavoidable. Only then will it be possible to base policy more on content and functions.

The press and broadcasting are two sectors with national coverage and a high degree of accessibility. Nevertheless, the government takes a different approach to each. With regard to broadcasting, the government exercises a high degree of intervention and offers financial support via, for example, the Media Act. However, aside from a few concentration regulations, the government does not regulate the press. When these two sectors with a totally contrasting approach converge, it is necessary to review current policy and perhaps work out a new role for the government.

This requires, as I already mentioned, a change in attitude. The press sector has a tradition of self-regulation and, as such, government policy in this area has always been limited. The aim of Dutch press policy has always been to promote diversity and combat concentration.

If we look at this tradition, the government's media policy should focus primarily on offering the sector the flexibility to take advantage of new developments and to explore new territory. In this time of convergence, a policy that is oriented towards journalistic content – irrespective of how it is disseminated – makes the most sense. Moreover, the government can stimulate innovation with respect to implementing transmedia activities, reaching new target groups and promoting the provision of regional news. The widening of the legislative options regarding cross ownership and transmedia activities represents a step in this direction.

When it comes to the quality control of information provision – with regard to which I refer to independence and reliability, for example – self-regulation and a laissez-faire approach on the part of the government is likewise more advisable than imposing regulations. In other words, any intervention should occur in a selective and flexible way. The various media stakeholders in society should first assume responsibility themselves.

Media self-regulation is thus becoming increasingly important. A key reason for this is the convergence of media and growth in the supply of media. Against this backdrop, it is becoming more difficult to regulate supply and to evaluate whether it complies with legal requirements. The sector itself is also aware of the importance of self-regulation, as demonstrated by the establishment of the Netherlands News Monitor. The *Persinstituut* consulted this forum in order to study how key social issues are reported by newspapers and certain television news programmes, based on journalistic criteria.

Despite the importance placed on self-regulation, the government faces a dilemma. On the one hand, there is the cultural individual who wants to be informed and whose basic rights need to be protected. On the other hand, the government is responsible for facilitating the operations of the media and the market. For the government, this means reducing the burden of regulation, enabling the media and the market to have the freedom to expand their transmedia activities, for instance. At the same time, the government needs to safeguard the diversity and independence of the public domain by preventing the formation of monopolies and by protecting an appropriate use of copyright that will generate cultural production instead of making this impossible. This is the balancing act the government must confront in policy-making.

With the expanded responsibilities of the Press Fund, which supports such activities as innovating publishing concepts and transmedia activities, reaching new target groups and promoting regional news provision, and the widening of the legislative options regarding cross ownership, the government has taken a good step forward in supporting the press sector in response to the current changes. A modern press policy, based on a clear long-term vision on the function and position of the press regardless of how rapidly developments occur in the field of digitalisation and new media, is indispensable for any democracy to function.

I thank you for your attention,

Caroline Nevejan

(Note: this speech is written in collaboration with Jaap Visser en Monique Brok)

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