Arranging reality: The editing mechanisms of the world’s first Yiddish newspaper, the Kurant (Amsterdam, 1686-1687)
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1. Introduction

In the summer of 1902 David Montezinos (1828-1916), book collector and librarian of Ets Haim, the library of the Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam, bought a book from a street peddler while watching Amsterdam’s Flora Theater burn.\(^1\) It was a volume containing one hundred issues of a Yiddish newspaper printed in Amsterdam, the *Kurant*, the Newspaper, dating from August 9, 1686 to December 5, 1687.\(^2\) It turned out to be the oldest known Yiddish newspaper in the world and to date it is the only Yiddish newspaper of which more than a few issues have survived before the East-European Yiddish press came into being in the nineteenth century.\(^3\)

The *Kurant* carried news from all over the world, apparently translated from Dutch newspapers. From August 9, 1686 until June 3, 1687 it was printed and published by the Ashkenazi printer Uri Faybesh Halevi, and from June 6 until December 5, 1687 the printer and publisher was the Sephardi David de Castro Tartas. The compositor, and probably also the translator and editor, was the *ger* – convert to Judaism – Moshe bar Avraham Avinu, or, as it probably was pronounced, Moushe bar Avrom Ovinu.\(^4\) The *Kurant* usually appeared


\(^2\) In the period the newspapers were printed by Uri Faybesh Halevi one issue is called *Kuranten* (plural), not *Kurant*. From the moment that David de Castro Tartas took over all further issues were called *Kurant*. Here I will use the word *Kurant*; only when referring to a specific issue printed by Halevi I will use the name *Kuranten*. The newspaper is often referred to as the *Dinstagishe un Fraytagishe Kuranten*, because it appeared on Tuesdays and Fridays. However, this was not the official name. A Tuesday issue bears the heading *Dinstagishe Kurant(en)*, a Friday issue *Fraytagishe Kurant(en)*, just as Dutch newspaper issues are called *Haerlemse Dingsdaegse Courant* or *Amsterdamse Donderdaegse Courant*. Yet in general those newspapers are referred to as *Haerlemse Courant* or *Amsterdamse Courant*, without the name of the day.

\(^3\) The other ones are the *Dirnfurter Prifilegirte Tsaytung* (Dyhernfurt (near Breslau), December 13, 1771 and January 10, 1772), the *Vokhentlikhe berikhtn* (Amsterdam, January 10, 1781) and the French *Tsaytung*, (Metz, 1789 and 1790): see Ch. 11. Some call the *Kurant* the oldest Jewish newspaper (e.g. Fuks, *Joodse pers*), others (notably Schnitzer, ‘Gazeta’) argue that this title belongs to the Spanish-language *Gazeta de Amsterdam*, also printed by David de Castro Tartas, of which the first known issue was published in 1672. Although the *Gazeta* was not Jewish in character, its readership was probably mainly Jewish: see Ch. 3.

\(^4\) In the issues printed by Halevi, he is referred to as *homesader* (‘the compositor’); in the issues printed by Tartas only his name is mentioned.
twice a week, on Tuesdays and Fridays;\textsuperscript{5} between December 6, 1686 and February 14, 1687 and from August 8, 1687 until the last known issue of December 5, 1687 it appeared once a week (on Fridays). It is not known whether more issues have existed than those in this volume.

1.1. Earlier research on the Kurant

As far as we know, before Montezinos’s purchase neither he nor his fellow scholars in the Netherlands and abroad had any idea that this newspaper had existed. Several of them wrote about the discovery of the Kurant. The first to write about the Kurant was Sigmund Seeligmann. In his article Seeligmann gives a brief description of the Kurant and indicates that Montezinos acquired the volume shortly before the time of writing (1902). Seeligmann writes he will not elaborate because Montezinos himself intends to write about the newspaper.\textsuperscript{6} However, it seems Montezinos never did so. After his death in 1916 the book with the Kurant stayed in Ets Haim.\textsuperscript{7}

The Kurant drew the attention of the great Yiddishist Max Weinreich who came all the way from Vilna to Amsterdam in the 1920s to study it.\textsuperscript{8} He gives an extensive, albeit not flawless\textsuperscript{9} description of the contents and appearance of the newspaper, which he calls ‘\textit{di bobe fun der yidisher prese’}, the grandmother of the Yiddish press. He stresses the reports on Jews. They are comparatively few, Weinreich writes, but they are very interesting. He also gives some information about the printers and about the compositor, who was probably the editor as well, so he assumes. In his opinion, however, Amsterdam was not the right place for the Kurant. On the last page he sighs: ‘My God, it is unfair that such an important book, a treasure for our “Yiddish” Jews, lies with several other old Yiddish works in a city

\textsuperscript{5} And once on Thursday, April 3, 1687: see 5.7).

\textsuperscript{6} Seeligmann, ‘Jüdische Ansiedelung’, 7-8. Sigmund Seeligmann (Karlsruhe 1873-Amsterdam 1940) was a historian, bibliographer and the founder of the \textit{Genootschap voor de Joodsche Wetenschap in Nederland}.

\textsuperscript{7} Already in 1889, Montezinos had donated his book collection to Ets Haim. From that moment the library was called Ets Haim – Livraria Montezinos. Apparently this did not prevent him from buying new books, like the volume containing the Kurant.

\textsuperscript{8} Weinreich, ‘Di bobe’, 679-683.

\textsuperscript{9} E.g., on p. 681 he quotes from the issue of February 24, whereas it should be September 24 (1686). He also writes, on p. 679, about one of the successors of the Kurant, the \textit{Dirnfurter Prifilegirte Tsaytung}. According to him it dates from 1742, whereas the two issues we know date from 1771 and 1772.
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where one will barely hear a living Yiddish word. I begrudge them, the Western Jews, their heritage, because one has to prove oneself worthy of a heritage, one has to be able to protect a heritage, one has to treat a heritage respectfully. And just dusting off is not enough to protect intellectual property.’

In 1935 Montezinos’s assistant and successor, Jacob da Silva Rosa (1886-1943), shed light on the treasure in his library in the Dutch Jewish weekly *Nieuw Israelietisch Weekblad*. Two years later the American Yiddishist Jacob Shatzky translated the Dutch article into Yiddish and added some critical remarks. In Da Silva Rosa’s eyes, the *Kurant* was a newspaper carrying world news in Yiddish, for a Jewish readership that was yet unable to read the Dutch newspapers, as the *Gazeta de Amsterdam* (1672-1702) was for Spanish-speaking Sephardic Jews. First he gives a brief overview of the historical events in the period that the *Kurant* was published. Then he gives some technical details of the *Kurant* and information about the printers and the compositor, followed by a description of its content. Like Weinreich, he pays a lot of attention to the Jewish news. In an epilogue, Jacob Shatzky contradicts Da Silva Rosa’s remark that the *Kurant* was not mentioned in the scholarly literature and gives 21 titles. He also remarks that Da Silva Rosa is wrong in assuming that the *Gazeta* was a model for the *Kurant*. In the first place, writes Shatzky, because the editor undoubtedly did not speak Spanish, and in the second place because Shatzky found out that the *Haerlemse Courant* existed at the time, which was a much more likely example for the *Kurant*.

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10 Weinreich ‘Di bobe’, 683.
13 Da Silva Rosa, ‘Di kurantin’, 17-19. The majority of them are short mentions in Yiddish articles, but his list includes Seeligmann, ‘Jüdische Ansiedlung’ and Weinreich, Di bobes as well.
14 Da Silva Rosa, ‘Di kurantin’, 19. Although Shatzky does not tell what he means by ‘model’ and ‘example’, he seems to suggest that according to Da Silva Rosa the *Gazeta* might have been a source for the *Kurant*. However, what Da Silva Rosa says on p. 8 is: ‘Therefore we should not be surprised that just like the Sephardic Jews with their *Gazeta de Amsterdam*, the Ashkenazi community had, half a century after their consolidation, a newspaper of its own.’ This seems to be a sensible remark, which is not inconsistent with Shatzky’s arguments. Whether or not the *Gazeta* served as a model, an example or even a source for the *Kurant*, I will discuss in Ch. 3.
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In the Second World War the books of Ets Haim, including the volume containing the *Kurant*, were transported to Germany. In 1946 they returned to Amsterdam. In 1969 the *Kurant* was part of an exhibition in the Anne Frank House, ‘Jewish Press in the Netherlands and in Germany 1674-1940’. In the introduction to the catalogue, L. Fuks mentions the *Kurant* and calls it ‘a Jewish newspaper in the full meaning of the word, which, besides general political news, pays a lot of attention to domestic and foreign Jewish news.’ He also mentions the fact that the *Kurant* sometimes appeared on Tuesdays, but always on Fridays. He sees this as the beginning of a still extant tradition.

The exhibition in the Anne Frank House was the first and the last public appearance of the volume containing the *Kurant*. In the seventies it disappeared without trace. Possibly it was among the books that were transferred from the Ets Haim library to the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem in 1978, yet it seems it never arrived in Jerusalem. It may have simply been stolen from Ets Haim. Did someone take Max Weinreich’s remark too seriously? Fortunately, photos and photocopies of the papers can still be found in the Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana of the Universiteit van Amsterdam, while microfilms are kept in the City Archives in Amsterdam and in several libraries in the Netherlands and abroad.

After its disappearance the *Kurant* continued to stir the curiosity of scholars. The most extensive piece was written by Shlomo Berger. Berger summarizes the literature on the *Kurant*, information on the printers and the compositor/translator/editor, and a description of the appearance and the content. According to Berger, the main sources are Dutch newspapers, especially those from Amsterdam and Haarlem. He is also, like Toury, Lifshitz, Fuks and Fuks-Mansfeld, of the opinion that the compositor used letters sent to Amsterdam by Jews from abroad for reports on Jewish communities. It is hard to tell with

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16 I would like to thank Abraham Rosenberg, former curator of Ets Haim – Livraria Montezinos, Dr. Adri Offenberg, former curator of Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, and Prof. Emile Schrijver, curator of Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, for sharing their information and conjectures.


19 In Ch. 7 I will show that this is probably incorrect.
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certainty who were the readers of the Kurant, according to Berger. Dutch newspapers were mainly read by middle-class merchants, he writes, whereas the majority of the Dutch Ashkenazim were poor and therefore probably unable to subscribe.

1.2. Research question

The articles mentioned above give ample information about the Kurant. To a great extent this information is descriptive. When did it appear, how did it look, what did it write about, by whom was it published? Some authors also mention probable sources or try to identify its readers. However, they do not answer the question that to me seems the most important: what did the printers and/or the compositor/translator/editor want with the Kurant; with what representation of reality did they want to confront their readers?

Although newspapers in the seventeenth and eighteenth century often used the same sources and sometimes copied each other’s texts, each retained its own character. They were hardly voicing opinions, yet by selecting certain reports and leaving out others, by stressing certain subjects more than others, they ‘arranged reality’ in a specific way and thus presented their readers with a certain view on what was happening in the world. Studies on this aspect of press history are scant, both in the Netherlands and abroad.20 One important case study is Marcel Broersma’s insightful history of the Leeuwarder Courant between 1752 and 2002. Broersma presents his study as a search for the identity of the newspaper.21 In order to be convincing and successful, says Broersma, a newspaper had, and still has, to connect with its readers; newspaper and reader need a common frame of reference. Of course journalists do not know all their readers personally and they do not always have a specific type of reader in mind when they publish their newspaper. However they often belong to the same socio-economic and cultural group as their readers and so more or less know what their readers feel and think.22 Thus they are able to create, in the words of Benedict Anderson, an ‘imagined community’ of readers. Anderson, in his study on nationalism, uses this concept to explain how people can be convinced to belong to a nation.

20 See Ch. 3 for a survey of Dutch press historiography.
21 Broersma, Beschaafde vooruitgang. I would like to thank Prof. Frank van Vree for bringing Broersma’s book to my attention.
22 Broersma, Beschaafde vooruitgang, 18-19; Darnton, Lamourette, 62.
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and mentions newspapers as a tool for that.\(^{23}\) Broersma argues that ‘imagined community’ can also be used to denote other kinds of territorial, religious, linguistic or political communities. Thus, when people read a newspaper that appeals to them, they can get the feeling that they belong or should belong to a community that shares certain characteristics or values, like language, nationality, religion or political views, even though they do not know all members of the community personally.\(^{24}\)

Both Anderson and Broersma concentrate on the period between the eighteenth and the twentieth century, so the question is: can we use the concept of the imagined community to draw conclusions about the identity of the readers of the seventeenth-century Kurant and of the Kurant itself? Eisenstein states – as does Anderson himself\(^{25}\) – that in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe the use of the vernacular in printed texts was an important agent in the formation of group identities: ‘Printed materials encouraged silent adherence to causes whose advocates could not be found in any one parish and who addressed an invisible public from afar. New forms of group identity began to compete with an older, more localized nexus of loyalties.’\(^{26}\) Eisenstein’s definition of these forms of group identity bears a great resemblance to Anderson’s concept of the imagined community.

But is the concept of the imagined community applicable to the Jewish case? Historian of the Jewish book Zeev Gries thinks not. He remarks that Jews in the Diaspora had several languages; the linguistic factor uniting the Jewish people was not the vernacular language, but the sacred language, Hebrew. That is, according to Gries, why until the eighteenth century the publication of Yiddish books lagged behind compared to Hebrew ones. He thinks Jews shared the sense of a living community long before other peoples in Europe and so did not need an imagined one.\(^{27}\)

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26 Eisenstein *Printing Press*, 132-133.
27 Gries *The Book*, vii-ix. Gries here – intentionally? – misunderstands the concept of ‘imagined’. Anderson does not use the word as opposed to ‘real’. The community is imagined because its members ‘will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion.’ (Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.) In this sense Gries’s ‘living community’ is also an imagined community.
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Shlomo Berger recognizes that Hebrew was the marker of identity for Jews all over the world, yet he sees Yiddish as a powerful Jewish language that had the potential to foster cohesion among various Ashkenazi communities and thus also supported the formation of an Ashkenazi diaspora. The growing distribution of books became a crucial factor in the standardizing of Yiddish and made it a central communication instrument within Ashkenazi society and culture. Even though the Yiddish book production amounted to around ten percent of the books produced in Hebrew type, the impact was probably far greater than that of Hebrew books. In a German- and Dutch-speaking environment, Yiddish was also able to function as mediator between the Jewish world and surrounding society.  

Thus, it seems possible, after all, to apply the concept of the imagined community to the Ashkenazi Jews in Amsterdam and perhaps in other parts of the Dutch Republic as well. At the time the Kurant was published most Ashkenazi Jews had been living in Amsterdam for only a few decades, having arrived mainly from Germany and Poland, and they were still in the process of becoming a community. Of course they had long been part of the community of all Diaspora Jews, Hebrew being its uniting linguistic factor, as Gries remarks. Before they settled in Amsterdam, they already were part of the community of the Ashkenazi diaspora, in which Yiddish was the uniting linguistic factor, as Berger states. After their settlement in the Netherlands a new aspect was added to their identity: they became inhabitants of Amsterdam and the Dutch Republic. Although they lived in their own quarters, ghettos were absent and many of them were surrounded by and frequently got in touch with non-Jews. A newspaper in Yiddish might have helped its readers create the feeling of belonging to a specific community of Amsterdam or Dutch Ashkenazi Jews by giving them the opportunity to form opinions both about the non-Jewish world around them and about their own place in this world, in their own vernacular.

The question whether the Kurant indeed created this feeling is not easy to answer. Broersma’s study covers 250 years and has at its disposal a statement of principles by the founder. In the eighteenth century the Leeuwarder Courant probably took its foreign news from other newspapers, but also employed their own reporters and contributors. The archives offer information about the readers, about the circulation of the newspaper and

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28 Berger, ‘Reshit ha’itonut beyidish’, 68-86.
29 Broersma, Beschaafde vooruitgang, 63-65.
30 Broersma, Beschaafde vooruitgang, 71-72.
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several other aspects. This, together with a systematic analysis of the newspaper’s content, enables Broersma to conclude that the *Leeuwarder Courant* welcomed ‘civilized progress’ and propagated the idea that every human being was obliged to develop into a valuable citizen.\(^{31}\)

Of the *Kurant*, on the other hand, only sixteen months have survived. We know who the printers, the compositor and probably the translator and editor were, but neither they, nor anyone else left a statement about their intentions. It seems the *Kurant* did not have its own correspondents or reporters. It obtained its news from other sources, primarily Dutch newspapers. As to the (intended) readers, the Dutch Ashkenazi Jews, we know even less than about the makers. We have some information about their socio-economic position and some conjectures about their reading habits and interests. Thus, whatever the conclusions of this study, they will be speculative to a rather large extent. Nevertheless, my research question is:

The *Kurant*, and, more specifically, its editor, ‘arranged reality’ by selecting and editing the material from the sources. What can the selecting and editing mechanisms of the *Kurant* tell us about the intentions of its makers and about the kind of imagined community of readers the *Kurant* may have helped create?

I am not suggesting that the makers of the *Kurant* published the newspaper with the idea of creating an imagined community of readers. Imagined communities, both in the strict and in the broader sense, are generally observed by historians in hindsight. The printers of the *Kurant* probably decided to publish a newspaper because they hoped it might become a commercial success. For it to be a commercial success, the editor had to select and edit the material from the sources in a way that appealed to the intended readers, a way that made, to some extent, that they could identify with its view on what happened in the world, and gave them the feeling that the *Kurant* was their newspaper.

1.3. Content

The main structure of this study is as follows.

1. Introduction

Part 1. The Landscape of the Kurant
In order to answer the research question, I will first take into account what I call ‘the landscape of the Kurant’, the real world in which the Kurant existed, the landscape of the Dutch press, and the (intended) readers of the Kurant.

Chapter 2. The main events in the Dutch Republic and abroad
What was going on in the Dutch Republic and abroad in 1686 and 1687; what were the important events and what were the issues people in the Dutch Republic were concerned about?

Chapter 3. The Dutch press
Which newspapers existed in the Netherlands in the 1680s, including foreign-language newspapers, and to what extent did they serve as a model for the Kurant?

Chapter 4. The readers
It is clear that the (intended) readers were to be found in the Ashkenazi community of Amsterdam and possibly the newspaper was also read elsewhere in the Dutch Republic or even abroad. What was the socio-economic position of the readers and how did they view the world around them? Did they lock themselves up in their own Jewish environment or did they get in touch with non-Jews? Did they consider themselves a group, a community? What books did they read, to what extent were they interested in news events?

Part 2. The Kurant and its Makers
What does the Kurant look like and who were its makers?

Chapter 5. Bibliographical description
A detailed bibliographical description of the volume containing the hundred issues.

Chapter 6. The makers
The makers of the Kurant, the two printers and the compositor/translator/editor, did not publish a statement of principles, nor is the Kurant mentioned in any contemporary source. We do have biographical information about the printers and the compositor/translator/editor, though, which may give us some clue about their intentions.

Part 3. The Editor at Work
The central part of the study.
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Chapter 7. The sources of the Kurant
Before I can compare the Kurant with its sources, I have to find out what the sources are. To this end I carried out a representative sample survey of issues of the Kurant and compared them to the Dutch newspapers available from that period, the Oprechte Haerlemse Courant, the Amsterdamse Courant, the Ordinaire Leydse Courant and the Opregte Leydse Courant. I determined which percentage of each issue could be traced back to which source. Thus I could see whether the editor preferred a certain source, whether there were changes in the use of the sources, and if so, whether it was possible to find a reason for them. I will also show which reports in the Kurant cannot be traced back to any of the sources available.

Chapter 8. Selection and editing: examination in detail
After having determined the sources of the Kurant, I will show the work method of the editor in detail by taking four issues of the Kurant and comparing them to the Dutch newspapers that might be the sources. I will show which report was taken from which source, whether the editor translated the sources faithfully or edited them in some way, whether there is a difference in editing and borrowing between the issues that appeared once a week and those that appeared twice a week, and between the issues printed by Uri Faybesh Halevi and by David de Castro Tartas, whether the editor changed the geographical or chronological order of the reports and whether he understood everything. I will also show which reports from the Dutch newspapers the Kurant did not borrow.

Chapter 9. Subjects in the Kurant and its sources
Subsequently I will take a look at the subjects covered by the Kurant, based on a classification of the subjects in the entire corpus of the Kurant, and compare them to the subjects covered in a representative sample of the sources. Does the Kurant focus on the same subjects as its sources or does it have other preferences? I will also take a closer look at the way the Kurant describes Jews and Jewish subjects.

Chapter 10. Conclusions
In this chapter I will answer the main research question: the Kurant, and, more specifically, its editor, ‘arranged reality’ by selecting and editing the material from the sources. What can the selecting and editing mechanisms of the Kurant tell us about the intentions of its makers and about the kind of imagined community of readers the Kurant may have helped create?

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32 And by doing so, I also show my own method of working in determining what are the sources.
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Aftermath

The Kurant was the first known Yiddish newspaper, and almost the last – until the nineteenth century. In this chapter I will give a short description of the only other Yiddish newspapers still extant.