Netherlands

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The media landscape in the Netherlands, also known as Holland, has been characterized by the presence of a strong public broadcaster and the movement toward an independent press. This entry examines the historical development of Dutch media organizations, their affiliation with political ideologies, ownership and popularity, the role of the state, and niche media as well as media products particular to the Netherlands.

Background and Historical Development

Originally, the Dutch media landscape was characterized as pillarized (or verzuild in Dutch), because most of the outlets were originally associated with the major religious, ideological, and/or political segments in society. Although such ideological affiliations are still at the root of many mass media organizations today, since the mid-1960s, media outlets have focused on meeting professional standards (i.e., independence) and have drastically lessened their ideological connections (i.e., de-pillarization).

Print

Although the first documented newspapers in the Netherlands emerged in the 17th century, the newspaper business really took off in the 19th century after freedom of speech was established in the Constitution in 1848, taxes (dagbladzegel) were elevated in 1869, and the rotary printing press was introduced. Among the first newspapers were Algemeen Handelsblad in 1828 (General Trade Magazine) and Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant in 1844 (New Rotterdam Newspaper), which later merged with the still popular NRC Handelsblad (NRC Trade Magazine). In the early 1900s, several major national newspapers emerged that either catered to a general audience (e.g., De Telegraaf [The Telegraph]) or to specific pillars in society: Catholics (de Volkskrant [People’s Newspaper]), socialists (Het Volk [The People]), protestants (De Standaard [Standard]), or communists (Tribune).

During World War II, several resistance newspapers were founded, including the still existing Trouw (Loyalty) and Het Parool (Motto), which has a strong focus on the Amsterdam region. In contrast to these newspapers, De Telegraaf took a pro-German stance during World War II, which led to a 30-year publishing ban that was, however, lifted in 1949.

Since the 1960s, the number of newspaper outlets has significantly reduced due to financial troubles and/or mergers. In the 2000s, most newspapers moved toward the physical tabloid newspaper format; De Telegraaf was the last paper to move to this smaller format in 2014. The sales of Dutch newspapers are largely based on subscriptions (more than 93%) with few newsstand sales. This may explain the absence of a really sensational newspaper: The Netherlands has no tabloid news outlets that are comparable to Bild in Germany or The Sun in the United Kingdom.

Radio

Even more than the newspaper industry, the history of radio has been influenced by the pillarization of Dutch society. The first public broadcasters emerged as the mouthpiece of the different ideological segments in the 1920s: protestant-Christian (Nederlandse Christelijke Radio Vereniging), catholic (Katholieke Radio Omroep), and socialist (Vereniging van Arbeiders Radio Amateurs). Only the Algemene Vereniging Radio Omroep aspired to be an independent broadcaster. Due to scarce terrestrial frequencies (first AM, later FM), broadcasters were forced to cooperate and independently distribute their own programs via the only two public radio stations that existed.
For a long time, commercials stations were forbidden. Commercial station Radio Veronica, however, in the 1960s made the innovative move to broadcast from a ship outside the territorial waters. As a result, the government could not interfere with the station’s operations. With technological developments, more terrestrial FM frequencies became available, and commercial stations were eventually allowed from 1994.

By 2017, the commercial outlet Radio 538 was the most listened station; Nederlandse Publieke Omroep (NPO) Radio 2 (public broadcaster) ranked second. There were two news radio stations: NPO Radio 1 and BNR Nieuwsradio. In an average week, 12.5 million citizens listened to radio (74% of population) for about 2.5 hours per day.

**Television**

Just as with radio, Dutch television has a strong public broadcasting tradition. Actually, the first (public) broadcasters in 1950s were simply the pillarized radio broadcasters that extended their activities to this new medium. Faced with similar restrictions regarding airwaves, the programming for all the ideologically different broadcasters aired on the same two channels. Airtime on the public broadcaster was distributed according to the number of citizens that were members of a particular broadcaster. To produce nonideological news, the broadcasters joined efforts to form the Nederlandse Televisie Stichting (Dutch Television Foundation) in 1956, which in 1969 became the Nederlandse Omroep Stichting (Dutch Broadcast Foundation). This system of separate broadcasters—all with their own identity—producing content for the same channels still exists: 11 different broadcasters deliver content for three public TV channels.

Just as for radio, commercial channels were initially forbidden. However, under the guise of being a Luxembourg channel, Radio Télévision Luxembourg (RTL) Veronique started broadcasting programs aimed at the Dutch market in 1989. Not much later, the market was opened to commercial broadcasters who were also officially allowed to broadcast via cable or satellite from 1992 onward.

**Contemporary Media Landscape**

**Ownership**

The ownership of Dutch media organizations concentrated in the hands of only a few corporations has repeatedly been a cause for concern about pluralism (e.g., the diversity of views presented in the media). Regarding the (paid) newspaper market, after a number of mergers, two corporations own close to 90% of the market: De Persgroep is the largest with 52% of the market share, followed by Mediahuis with 36% (after its merger with TMG in 2017). Interestingly, both corporations originate in Belgium. Although there is still some choice and competition visible on the national level, hardly any competition exists between daily newspapers on the regional level: Only 10% of the population (mostly in the Friesland province) has a choice of two (or more) regional newspapers.

In the television market, a similar picture emerges with over 70% of the viewership shared by three owners. Next to the public broadcaster NPO (market share of 31%), there are several RTL channels (owned by the German corporation Bertelsmann) that collectively hold 25% of the market. Channels owned by the Finnish company Sanoma (including SBS6, Veronica) reflect an additional 15% of the market.
Until 2013, there were three news agencies in the Netherlands: GDP (an initiative of the regional outlets), Novum Nieuws (Novum News), and Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau (General Dutch Press Agency). GDP closed down in 2013 due to several mergers of regional outlets with national newspapers, and Novum Nieuws merged with Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau in 2015. As a result, as of 2017, Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau was the only news agency.

**Role of the State and Press Freedom**

Besides concentrated ownership of news media, there are relatively few threats to press freedom in the Netherlands. The state generally plays a supportive rather than a restrictive role by financing the public broadcasting system. In 2017, the government funded the public broadcasting system with €664 million. However, this budget has been shrinking over the years; with 0.13% of the GDP being granted to the PBS, this is a comparably low figure in Europe. On a small scale, the state provides subsidies for innovative projects in journalism (i.e., via the Stimuleringsfonds voor de Journalistiek [Support Foundation for Journalism]).

The Netherlands ranks highly in terms of press freedom according to both Freedom House and Reporters without Borders; the latter organization’s 2017 report ranked the Netherlands number 5 in the world. While the freedom of the press is protected, laws still exist that consider insulting the monarch a criminal offense. Furthermore, concerns have been expressed about a forthcoming Intelligence and Security Services Act (i.e., Sleepnetwet) that would make it more difficult for journalists to protect their sources. Although government censorship is absent in the Netherlands, the murder of film director and writer Theo van Gogh in 2004 as well as threats to journalists in the polarized migration debate evoke the risk of self-censorship among the media.

**Circulation**

The popularity of traditional (news) media is decreasing: Circulation of newspapers has declined for many years, and since 2015, overall television viewing time has declined. However, the average citizen watches more than 3 hours of TV per day. For television, the public broadcaster channel NPO 1 is the most popular. This channel is followed by the commercial channels RTL 4 and SBS 6. Remarkably, the 8 o’clock news produced by the public broadcaster (NOS Journaal) is very often the most watched television program of the day, with more than 2 million viewers. Also the commercial broadcaster’s newscast on RTL 4 remains popular, with more than 1 million viewers on average. Details about television viewership are freely available via Stichting KijkOnderzoek.

Statistics about the circulation of print media are published by Stichting Nationaal Onderzoek Multimedia. These showed that popular dailies De Telegraaf, at 407,144 daily copies, and Algemeen Dagblad (General Daily), at 354,826, had the highest circulation in 2017. Three quality newspapers—de Volkskrant (254,132), NRC Handelsblad (142,844), and Trouw (102,631)—also have a considerable reach. The overall paid newspaper circulation is 2.5 million in 2017, which is a 40% drop from the 4.2 million in 2000; on average, the market shrinks 5% every year.

In 2007 and 2008, there were four free dailies in the Netherlands: Metro, Spits (Rush Hour), De Pers (The Press), and DAG (Day). By 2017, Metro was the only remaining free daily with a circulation of 345,958. Het Financieel Dagblad (Financial Daily) is the only specialized newspaper in the Netherlands with a circulation of 48,127 copies. The complete circulation of daily newspapers is evenly divided between national (55%) and
regional outlets (45%).

With an Internet penetration of 96%, the Netherlands is among those countries with the highest online reach. Verenigde Internet Exploitanten (United Internet Operators) publishes statistics about Dutch Internet usage on a monthly basis and shows that Google, Facebook, and YouTube dominate as the top three most used websites. Marktplaats.nl, a website for buying and selling secondhand goods, is the most popular Dutch website, followed by Nu.nl. The latter is an online-only news platform and an important source of information for those not consuming traditional media products. It is owned by the Finnish Sanoma Corporation. Also in the top of the list, one can find the online platforms of traditional news media, such as NOS.nl, AD.nl, and Telegraaf.nl.

**Niche Media**

There are several interesting Dutch niche media. For example, Omroep Max (Broadcaster Max) is a popular public broadcaster with programs especially tailored to the elderly. Another public broadcaster, BNN (Bart’s Neverending Network), which merged with Vereniging van Arbeiders Radio Amateurs in 2014, has a special focus on younger citizens and produces noteworthy programs about sexuality and drug use (e.g., Spuiten en Slikken [Shoot and Swallow]). In the print media, there are monthly magazines directed toward minority groups, including gays (GayKrant [Gay Newspaper]) and feminists (Opzij [Out of the Way]).

Especially on the right of the political spectrum, various online popular platforms can be found, such as ThePostOnline or De Dagelijkse Standaard (The Daily Standard), which has been coined “the Dutch Breitbart.” GeenStijl (No Style) is a popular weblog whose motto is “tendentious, unfounded and needlessly offensive”; it is known for its provocative, anti-migrant, anti-elitist articles written in a sarcastic style. Commenters on this website, reaguurders, are notorious for their harsh and cynical remarks.

**Media Products**

Several unique media products emerged in the Netherlands. Hyves was a very popular social media platform, which eventually lost its user base to Facebook and closed in 2013. Big Brother was the first reality game show of its time, in which the lives of the housemates were followed 24/7. The creator of Big Brother, John de Mol, later began the production company Talpa, which developed the successful reality competition TV show The Voice.

Dutch political satire has gained worldwide attention. During the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, LuckyTV produced the video Time of My Life in which political candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton sing a duet in apparent harmony. The satire show Zondag met Lubach (Sunday with Lubach) created the clip known as “America first, the Netherlands second,” which mocked the speeches and public appearances of President Trump and eventually inspired a global video contest that was labeled “Every Second Counts.”

Interesting journalistic initiatives unfolded in the Netherlands. De Correspondent, for example, is a current affairs website supported by individual memberships that aims to avoid the daily news cycle and media hype. Instead, it publishes in-depth articles as background to the news. Blendle is a website that aggregates the news of established journalistic outlets (e.g., newspapers, magazines) and sells these on a pay-per-article basis.

See also Bertelsmann; Free Newspapers; Journalism, History and Economics of; News Agencies; News-SAGE © 2020 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

The SAGE International Encyclopedia of Mass Media and Society
Websites


*Stichting Kijkonderzoek* (Viewing Research Foundation). https://kijkonderzoek.nl/


*Verenigde Internet Exploitanten*, or VINEX (United Internet Operators). http://www.vinex.nl/

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Further Readings

