CHAPTER 6

Managing Reputation and Controlling the Press, 1649–1700

As has already been mentioned above, it was only after the conclusion of the peace treaties of Münster and Osnabruck that the Habsburg Netherlands acquired something comparable to Renaudot's *Gazette or Nouvelles ordinaires*. This was a privileged newspaper, printed in Brussels, mostly under the title *Relations véritables*. It became the official gazette of the Brussels court, with institutional continuity until 1791, although under the title *Gazette de Bruxelles* from 1741, and as the *Gazette des Pays-Bas* from 1759. While comparable to the Parisian *Gazette* in function, it was not by any means identical: control of the press remained far more devolved and disparate in Flanders and Brabant than it ever was in France.

Opposing Renaudot

The first issue of what was to become the *Relations véritables* was published in Brussels probably in late August 1649, under the title *Courier véritable des Pays-Bas*. The first two issues were undated, but contained news datelined Brussels 27 August and 3 September respectively; issue no. 3 was dated 12 September. While earlier newspapers had stressed their informative and entertaining content, the *Courier*’s founder, the franc-comtois lawyer Pierre Hugonet, specifically founded his paper to oppose the ‘lies’ of the French *Nouvelles ordinaires* with ‘true reports’. He applied for a licence, but the application took a long time to process. In the meantime, as he had presumably spent some months laying the groundwork for his newspaper’s first issue (which contained reports from as far away as Ireland, Spain and Italy, as well as from London, Paris, Brussels itself, and various locations within the Habsburg Netherlands), he commenced publication regardless, sending off a note to the Council asking that the process of licensing be expedited, but without mentioning his intention to proceed unlicensed. It was to be almost two months later, on 12 October, that the Privy Council, in the King’s name, adjudged the *Courier* ‘not to be

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1 Cordemans, ‘Het oudst-bewaarde nieuwsblad te Brussel’, p. 263.
2 Editorial in first issue.
without use to our service and to the reputation of our armed forces’ and granted a licence, and a monopoly on French-language news publishing in the Netherlands. Usual practice with the issuing of licenses was that the justificatory arguments in a successful application would simply be reworded by the clerk of the Privy Council (for instance so that ‘Your Majesty’ became ‘we’). The wording of the licence therefore probably follows that of Hugonet’s application fairly closely.

The language in which Hugonet had couched his licence application would thus seem to have been that of the reputation of the Spanish monarchy, and more particularly of its armies. Like Verhoeven thirty years before, he saw (or wished those in power to see) his primary role as providing news of victories. No direct comparison between Verhoeven’s *Tijdinghen* and Hugonet’s *Relations véritables* is possible. The one was published in Dutch by an artisan, in a city of businessmen and craftsmen, during the war with the Dutch. The other was published over fifteen years later in French by a lawyer, in a city of courtiers and councillors, during the war with France. But there are certain striking similarities and differences. Where Verhoeven relied on news about the war in the Empire from Prague and Vienna as his staple correspondence, Hugonet’s focus was Flanders and Italy, and the war against the French. In his reporting on the war against France he was conducting a personal propaganda war against the Parisian gazetteer Renaudot. Just as Verhoeven consciously opposed the reliability of his reports to the mendacity of those emanating from Amsterdam, so Hugonet publicly declared his purpose to be the independent presentation of more accurate reports on the war than those provided by Mazarin’s pensioner. Hugonet adopted a newsbook format, but without headlines or woodcuts.

Hugonet was the first editor-proprietor in the Habsburg Netherlands not to print his newspaper himself, the printing being contracted out first to Jan Mommaert the younger, and later to Goddefroy Schoovaerdts and Willem Scheybels. The change of printer coincides with the issuing of the royal licence: when the *Courier véritable* was still technically illegal it was being printed by Mommaert, printer to the States of Brabant; from the sixth issue (9 Oct.), the printing was carried out by Schoovaerdts, and from the eleventh (6 Nov.) by Willem Scheybels. But whoever did the actual printing, the point of sale was a...