

Storehouses of News: the Meaning of Early Modern News Periodicals in Western Europe*

Over the course of the early-modern era, several new categories of printed news media appeared, such as news reports, pamphlets, newspapers and also engravings incorporating references to recent happenings. A specific category in the expanded early-modern dissemination of news was the periodical with news summaries that appeared on a regular basis; it was a printed work with a publication frequency ranging from about once a month to once every one or two years, far less frequent than newspapers, which had at least one or a few editions per week. By the end of the 16th century literate people could already buy and read printed news periodicals in several parts of Europe, of which the so-called German *Messrelationen* and the Latin *Mercurius Gallobelgicus* are a few early examples. In the subsequent centuries these surveys would have many successors in mainly Western Europe.

Their initial purpose of news dissemination having been achieved, the early-modern news periodicals became a welcome source for historians. Scholars consulted them frequently as reference works, looking for certain facts and figures or old documents, the originals of which were kept in faraway or inaccessible archives. However, they did not start systematically studying the serial news periodicals as a specific medium with its own characteristics as they did with the early-modern newspapers in the 19th century—at least not in a comparative way with international dimensions. This lack of interest in early-modern news periodicals has continued more or less to the present day. News digests seem to have fallen between the cracks. On the one hand they were not considered a very exciting phenomenon by the media historians who advanced a discourse of increasing communication speed with regard to the new media.¹ In such a narrative early-modern newspapers and pamphlets were far easier to locate than infrequently published news periodicals. On the other hand news

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1 See, e.g., Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, *A Social History of the Media: From Gutenberg to the Internet* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2005).

periodicals were not very interesting for historiographers either, because the genre could not compete with well-wrought contemporary chronicles, which usually had far more professional content. To put it colloquially, in that narrative news periodicals would have been neither fish, nor flesh, nor good red herring.

The resulting lack of knowledge about early-modern news periodicals becomes clear in current historiography, in which news periodicals are not mentioned at all or are incorrectly described. For example, in the recent synthetic study of Dutch culture in European perspective, *1650: Hard-Won Unity* [*1650: Bevochten eendracht*] the authors quote the 17th-century Dutch news annual *Hollandsche Mercurius* several times to explain and illustrate a variety of developments and changes. Although this title was a yearbook with far more pages than a newspaper, they incorrectly label it a monthly newssheet while also counting it among the newspapers.²

In this paper, I will attempt to rescue early-modern news periodicals from oblivion, presenting them as a separate medium with distinct characteristics, and to start a discussion about their contemporary significance. It is my intention to deal with several questions about this category's characteristics, in order to get a better impression of its role. How did news periodicals function within the range of early-modern media? What intentions did their makers have in mind when they started publishing them? How did they produce and distribute them, and what, additionally, may be said about their audience? Furthermore, what connections, similarities and differences can be discovered between early-modern news periodicals from several European countries?

The paper begins with a concise section about the genre's name: should we speak about newsbooks, mercuries, periodicals, magazines or (bi)annuals? The next section includes a few striking examples of early-modern news periodicals, in order to get a better idea of the genre's evolution and spread across Western Europe since the 16th century. The final section deals with the purpose and role of the news periodicals, in combination with their content, production and audience. Can we consider them as products of the popular press? Some of the news periodicals also presented sensational or satirical stories, while other titles included scientific news, or, as in the case of the *Mercurie de France* that was launched in 1672, literary and fashion topics.³ This paper will not discuss

2 Willem Frijhoff and Marijke Spies, *1650: Hard-won Unity* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2004), pp. 17, 69, 261, 429.

3 The female-orientated *Mercurie de France* started under the titles *Mercurie Galant* and *Nouveau Mercurie Galant* and was founded by the French author Jean Donneau de Visé. See, e.g., the second and third chapters of Joan DeJean, *The Essence of Style: How the French Invented*