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The Learned Journal as a Cultural Network in the Enlightenment

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Over the past couple of years, a group of scholars from the Radboud University of Nijmegen have collaborated on a joint project called 'Periodicals and their networks'. The result has been published only a month ago. As the book is in Dutch, though some of the contributions will undoubtedly appear in translation sooner or later, I felt that it would be a good idea to present some general conclusions from this project. These are, it must be stressed, my views, and they are based mainly on my own research. In the remaining minutes, I will expand on each of the.

1. Around an editorial board or editor, circles at varying distances can be described, each helping the making of the periodical in a different way. The outer circle usually consists of the readers.

In our work in progress on journals and their networks between the late seventeenth and the early twentieth century, our research group has had long discussions on the way to describe the people and groups surrounding a periodical. Some opted for 'circles'; I joined the network-group. The outcome was a compromise: the first term is used in the main title, the latter in the sub title. Both terms are un-coincidentally visual metaphors. What we were trying to do, is visualise a cultural landscape with words. In using the term circle, the main emphasis is on the distance to the centre. Networks, on the other hand, do not necessarily have a centre. Describing a group as a network implies a focus on relations.

Of course, both ways of describing reality have their strengths and weaknesses. Let's take up the circle metaphor. Looking at a cultural field from a centre that is defined by a periodical and its editor or editors, it is obvious that some people are closer to it than others. The crucial point in this thesis is, that the distance to the centre is determined by, or rather results from, the function that people fulfil in making the periodical. Furthermore, the number of circles that can be described is correlated to the way the periodical is made, and to its content. Simply put: if there is a 'Letters to the editor'-section, there also is a circle of readers writing these letters. This circle must be described as being closer to the centre than that of the anonymous passive audience. There have been periodicals with only two circles: the editor/publisher/printer and the readers, as well as magazines with innumerable rings, ranging from a supervising board, a society of friends to distant critics and plagiarisers.

It is this relationship between content and context, between the way a periodical is made, and the way people were involved in making it, that forms the reason for studying periodicals from the perspective of circles and networks. It is also, in my opinion, the most elegant way to close that horrible gap between writing and reading. In the case of periodicals, the influence of the audience, foreshadowing the consumer-movement of our own time, was great. Far greater than in the case of 'ordinary' books. Journals were never intended to be read only once. Their purpose was, and is, to establish a lasting relationship – a community.

2. In making a periodical, episode to episode, the editor(s) continuously stress the importance of the network towards their correspondents.

This is not so much a conclusion as an observation, to be frank. My main sources for understanding periodicals are prefaces and letters. Both are by nature part of a dialogue –

even if they only try or pretend to be. In fact, many of them were monologues, especially in the case of prefaces. These anonymous letters to anonymous audiences may seem commonplace, but I would like to invite you to see them as touching insights into the desperate minds of lonely journalists. Take for instance the preface to the first volume of the *Mémoires de littérature*. Editor Albert-Henri de Sallengre writes: ‘Si le public témoigne souhaiter la suite de ces *Mémoires*, je pourrai lui en donner un volume de tems en tems, & je profiterai avec plaisir des avis qu’il voudra bien me donner.’ Only four volumes later, the journal ceased to appear. The audience obviously was not interested in giving the requested advice. A more modest version of this remark had already been expressed by Pierre Bayle in his preface to the first edition of the ground breaking *Nouvelles de la République des lettres*, where he wrote:

On espère que les curieux ne se rebuteront point de voir, que les commencemens de cet Ouvrage n’auront pas toute la force qu’il seroit nécessaire qu’ils eussent. On les prie d’en excuser le foible, & on leur promet que quand la chose aura été mise en train, & que l’on aura établi ses correspondances, tout ira mieux. On espère aussi –Bayle continues– que les personnes qui ont à cœur l’instruction, & la satisfaction publique des gens de Lettres, ne nous refuseront pas les secours, & les Mémoires dont nous auront besoin, pour perfectionner cet Ouvrage. On en prie sur tout les personnes de ce Païs-ci, qui auront une connoissance exacte des nouvelles machines qu’on y pourra inventer, & des raretez qu’on y apportera des Indes.

A contrasting remark can be found in the preface to the *Maandelykse Nederlandsche Mercurius* (Monthly Dutch Mercury), a journal running from 1756 to 1807 and one of my personal favourites, in January 1762. The editor, Bernardus Mourik, writes: ‘We must expressively request the readers not to send us any but true and justified reports, because we will nor can make the least use of nameless writings or of those of which it is neither fit nor decent to make them public.’ The *Mercury* was a very successful periodical and Mourik obviously had trouble keeping people in their proper ‘circle’.

Not only in the periodicals themselves do editors stress their reliance on networks, in their correspondences they also repeatedly express the function of their pen-pals for the continuing existence of their periodicals. Borrowing from my colleagues’ research in our project on *Periodicals and the Circles*, I dare to conclude that journalists of all times have been stubborn complainers in their letters to anyone they knew. We have combined information from periodicals appearing between 1684 and 1930 and each contribution gives ample illustration of this fact.

3. *In the journal itself, the readers are frequently reminded of being part of the network established by the journal.*

This is a strategy that already becomes apparent in the title carried by many of the eighteenth-century periodicals: *Bibliothèque*: library: the French and Dutch journals not only posing as a virtual centre of knowledge, but also (and mainly so) as multiplied successors to the cabinet of the frères Dupuy and the French royal library. The readers were supposed to imagine themselves part of the illustrious societies gathering in these legendary temples of Athena. This is no different from the suggestive word play used by Addison and Steele in their *Spectator* and its innumerable British and continental successors. Here, the audience was ficticiously transferred from its home, or even their local coffee house, to the zenith of intellectual exchange, the ideal coffee house from which the narrating ‘Spectator’ was both the centre and the spy. What had been a commonplace in learned

correspondences, to refer to letter writing as a substitute for actual engagement, was dissolved by the journal that transformed itself into a virtual meeting place, where its readers could feel part of a real learned society.

A less spatial metaphor used in Enlightenment journals was that of the correspondence network. One needs only take a look at the first or last lines of many of the contributions to see that periodicals were not supposed to be read as a neutral display of information, but made the reader part of a correspondence network. The ‘vous’ to which most contributions are addressed is expressively kept unspecified. It might be the editor, it might just as well be the reader. In sum, in presentation and form periodicals suggested to be much more than an intermediary of knowledge: they presented themselves as a locus of knowledge. That is what Bayle meant, when he stressed in in the same preface from which I quoted just now, that: ‘on ne pretend point établir un *Bureau d’adresse de médisance*’.

4. The content of any periodical publication is determined by the network from which it originates.

If one takes this to mean that the people contributing to a periodical influence its content, no one will oppose it. Yet that is not all. If we look at eighteenth-century periodicals, the majority is edited by one man, calling himself the ‘author’ or ‘journalist’. The journalist, to paint the picture in black and white, was either working completely alone, or was merely passing on information and opinions from a wider network. This bipolar picture can clearly be seen in periodicals of the time, now as then. One-man journals show a personal view on matters. This led these periodicals to be criticized especially for their showing a personal taste. An extreme point of view in this matter was taken by the editors of the *Journal littéraire*, a learned journal printed in The Hague from 1713 onwards. In the aftermath of Pierre Bayle’s *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* many francophone journals appeared in the Dutch republic, gaining renown as the so-called ‘journaux de Hollande’. All of these were edited by one man, though hardly any of them managed to achieve a status near that of Bayle –except maybe for Jean Le Clerc and Jacques Bernard. The editors of the *Journal littéraire*, in their first issue, complained of the partisan and individual views that were expressed in the journals of their day. They proposed a radically different approach to journalism in establishing an editorial board. The preface to the first volume leaves no doubt: one-man journalism was equivalent to partisanship, ignorance, and incompleteness. Only an anonymous collective board could guarantee its audience a balanced state of affairs.

The plea by the editors of the *Journal littéraire* was heard throughout the entire Republic of Letters. And, though the ‘société’ started to fall apart after little more than a year, the preface ensured the journal of a good reputation for a decade. Even though the battle cry of the journalists from The Hague implies that the standard in journalism was *not* collectivity, their idea did not come out of nowhere. There was no one contesting the truth in their claim that collectivity equalled spread of knowledge and balance of opinion. In fact, other journalists were always keen to emphasize the width of their network of correspondents. The fact that most of the articles in early eighteenth-century scholarly and literary journals were written *as though* they came from the source of the news itself (which was evidently untrue in many cases), implies that the preface to the first *Journal littéraire* was merely an explication of a sentiment that was widespread. This argument acquires further strength when we look at a second collectively edited journal from the same period: the *Europe savante*, also appearing in The Hague, from 1718 to 1720. The initiative was

taken by one of the former members of the editorial board of the *Journal littéraire*, Thémiseul de Saint-Hyacinthe. In their preface, the editors write:

Dans une société, chaque particulier a ses sentimens, & le même droit de les faire valoir. De-là résulte un examen critique, dont les contradictions amènent à l'impartialité, & où l'opposition de divers sentimens fait, pour ainsi dire, réfléchir des lumières, qui servent à mettre la vérité dans un plus beau jour. L'inconvénient des sociétés, c'est qu'il est difficile d'y maintenir l'union ; & qu'ainsi les ouvrages qu'elles entreprennent ne sont pas de durée. Mais nous avons pris des mesures certaines pour la continuation de ce journal.

Thémiseul and his new circle were well aware of the difficulties of working together, but they did not lose heart and tried to bring, so to speak, the network into the journal.

Keeping this in the backs of our minds, it is interesting to take a closer look at eighteenth-century literary journalism. The standards that had to be upheld were periodicity, impartiality, completeness and informativity. On which factor do these demands depend? You can guess my answer: the network employed by the journalist. An example. In 1715, the young French refugee Henri Du Sauzet made his debut as an editor and publisher with his weekly *Nouvelles littéraires*, a periodical he himself described as 'un espèce de gazette pour les gens de lettres'. What Du Sauzet hoped to achieve, was to use the popularity of the most popular section, also called 'Nouvelles littéraires', of most francophone learned journals. At the same time, by printing his periodical as a one-sheet weekly, he enabled his readers to order subscriptions by mail. His undertaking was an immense success. Elsewhere, I have calculated that the *Nouvelles littéraires* must have been the most widely read periodical in France in its five-year existence. At the outset, however, Du Sauzet had nothing more than a plan –it was his debut after all. In the first weeks and months of the *Nouvelles littéraires*, Du Sauzet worked like a mad man to enlarge his network. He employed every contact he had to get to know more people. Via a book seller's society that met in a coffee house right across the street where he lived, he got in touch with a Rotterdam publisher who was his link to the editor of the *Acta eruditorum* of Leipzig, whose editor promised him news from Germany. Another friend of a friend lived in London, but also had good contacts in Paris. Within a month, he doubled the size of the *Nouvelles littéraires* from a half-sheet to a whole. After half a year, he was able to stop copying the tables content of other periodicals and rely on his own correspondents. After a year and a half, he started to receive too much copy for the size of his periodical. He started printing separate side-editions after two years. After four years, he made the big step and turned his weekly 'gazette' into a full-size quarterly, of which only a part consisted of 'nouvelles littéraires' proper. And then, his network failed him: he knew an awful lot of people who were willing to send him short news items, but there were no real journalists to be found in his network. Less than a year later, he had to quit his project.

5. *The content of a periodical must likewise be understood as an attempt to establish or maintain a network among its intended audience.*

In his much-debated lecture *Rules for the human park* the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk discussed the role of classical, enlightened humanism as a community of letter-writing friends. He interprets each book as a letter from a distant past, establishing a face-to-face relationship between reader and writer, and creating a society of letters. Any written word, Sloterdijk implies, is a connection, a link and each link serves the same purpose: creating a community –including some, excluding others. To interpret all forms of written text as letters is more than a rhetorical pose, it describes the core of the concept of writing

as it was expressed in the early-modern Republic of Letters. An eminent example of the unclear distinction between letters and books is found in the physicist Christiaan Huygens, founding member of the Académie des sciences, in whose correspondence the larger part of his scientific work can be found. Essays and calculations were circulated in manuscript as appendices to letters. After the texts found their way into print, the discussion continued the same way as before. Elsewhere, I have described Huygens' correspondence network as a virtual academy. Only in his later years did a gradual change occur in Huygens' scientific communication, when he started to publish his theories and observations in the *Journal des sçavans*, the *Nouvelles de la République des lettres*, the *Acta eruditorum*, and the *Philosophical transactions*. The periodical was taking over as the locus of the virtual academy.

Throughout the early-modern time, editors of periodicals expressed their views on their journal and on journalism in general in prefaces, which often appeared at the beginning of a new year, though sometimes rather less or more frequently. I have already discussed these in order to describe the networks from which periodicals originate. From another point of view, the prefaces, as well as the rest of the content of a periodical, can be understood to create and maintain a network of the editor and his audience. In this respect, periodicals are the immediate successors to the traditional humanist correspondences, which are known to be full of references to the ideals of the Erasmian Republic of Letters. The same references can be found in the literary and scholarly journals of the time. If periodicals are to be understood as virtual academies, prefaces are words of welcome. Here, the reader was given a first impression of the atmosphere, the subjects open for discussion and the other members of the network. In that respect, the repeated statement that anything might be printed clearly echoes the *sub rosa* of the salon.

6. The success of a periodical depends on the editor's success at activating a network.

All of the above remains rather theoretical from the point of view of an editor or journalist. In the everyday reality of eighteenth-century journalism it wasn't always possible to acquire a network in order to support the editors with copy, money and good publicity. Sometimes people must have wondered what it was they were doing wrong when no-one answered their call for help. Henry Desbordes knew the value of a good network when he wrote in his publisher's preface to the first edition of Pierre Bayle's *Nouvelles de la République des lettres* of 1684: 'On travaille à établir de bonnes correspondences par tout, & le lecteur ne doit pas juger de la suite par ces commencemens.'

For some journalists, as for many readers, the periodical was a window on the world. In his review of the *Etat présent des Nations et Eglises Grecque, Arménienne et Maronite en Turquie* by De la Croix, the Berlin journalist Etienne Chauvin wrote in his *Nouveau Journal des Sçavans*: 'Cette relation aura sans doute bien des censeurs. Pour moi, renfermé dans ma sphère, je ne songe qu'à en donner le précis fidèlement.' When I stumbled on this line, in one of the other contributions to our little volume, I could not believe my luck. He literally says it: 'renfermé dans ma sphère'. That is what they felt like. That is what they tried to overcome, by writing letters, by publishing their periodical. And if they failed, that was where they remained: in their little sphere. I am tempted to make another link to Peter Sloterdijk, but I won't.

7. For the readers as well as for the journalists and editors, the 'membership' of the network is at least as important as the exchange of ideas that takes place in the periodical.

Why did eighteenth-century editors take the trouble of stressing over and over again the personal relationship they had with their readers? Why did everyone involved do their very best to keep up the community-experience, when all that was in fact going on, was the transmission of knowledge from a small elite to an anonymous mass? Because people liked it that way, bluntly speaking, that is why. Being part of such a community was thought of as something good, pleasant or profitable. If we go back to the spatial metaphors used to turn the periodical into a virtual meeting place, we should keep in mind that the average reader would in fact never attend a real gathering of scholars or *philosophes*. That was the entire point: journals were largely meant for an audience just *outside* the inner circle of the Republic of Letters. These people did not belong to any similar network: their subscription was all they had. This means, that for the readers, reading their journal was like visiting their scholarly society and must have meant just as much to them as the membership of the Royal Society to its members.

Finally: an anecdote

To the volume on journals and networks that forms the inspiration for this lecture, I wrote a contribution on Albert-Henri de Sallengre, a classical scholar and diplomat who wrote for two very different periodicals in the early eighteenth century. The journals were as different as any journal can be. The first, the *Journal littéraire*, was edited by an anonymous collective, was styled after the traditional learned journals, and was known for its modern point of view and the attention for the new sciences. The second periodical, the *Mémoires de littérature*, was edited by Sallengre alone and only dealt of rare books and manuscripts. When Sallengre joined the editorial ‘société’ in 1713, he was only eighteen years old. Considering his age, it is very unlikely that he was asked to join the editorial board for his knowledge of journalism, or even for any kind of knowledge. It is more likely that it was the people he knew that gave him his entry ticket into the world of letters. Sallengre was, after all, by birth ‘un homme de qualité’. Moreover, his family fortune provided him with the rare capital called leisure. Unlike many professional journalists, Sallengre was able to spend time creating a network for the *Journal littéraire*, which was what he was entrusted to do on two long journeys to Paris in 1714 and 1716. The mere fact that he was appointed this task could, to a certain degree, be given as proof for all my previous conclusions.

Young Albert-Henri did not fit in the structured *équipe* that edited the *Journal littéraire*. As the youngest, he was treated at times as the errand boy of the other editors, in spite of his talents as a journalist and writer. Early in 1715 he already made his plans to ‘go solo’, as we would call it nowadays. He started his *Mémoires de littérature*, a journal of unannounced periodicity, devoted to old and rare books, manuscripts and philology. By his choice of subject, Sallengre imposed severe restrictions on his potential circle of readers. In the end (though this end was near enough to begin with) this circle proved to be too small and the *Mémoires de littérature* ceased to exist after four issues, even though copy for a fifth edition had already been assembled. The reason for this failure, as I see it, lies in the mistake Sallengre made, to aim for a circle of readers that coincided with his circle of authors. He did not manage to stretch his network wide enough. His choice for the *Mémoires de littérature* had also been a choice against the *Journal littéraire*, and Sallengre was unable to return to his former periodical. He died of small pox in the same year that the *Journal littéraire* ceased to appear, 1723, aged 28.