

Cover Page



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Summary

Since the nineteenth century there have been two national newspapers in the Netherlands with a liberal ideology, the *Algemeen Handelsblad* based in Amsterdam (1828) and the *Nieuwe Rotterdamse Courant* (*NRC*, 1844) with its headquarters in Rotterdam. In the first half of the twentieth century the publishers of these two newspapers made various bids to achieve a merger. Time and again open-minded individuals who regarded two newspapers with similar aims in such a small language area as being an unnecessary waste of resources made overtures. On every occasion however these attempts were blocked by local chauvinism.

During the 1920s and 1930s the company that published the *NRC* grew into a major concern through takeovers of a number of different papers. The managers of the *Handelsblad* on the other hand failed to broaden the basis for their newspaper. After a number of failed attempts at a partnership in the Amsterdam newspaper world, the managers of the *Handelsblad* turned in desperation to the company in Rotterdam. The editor of the *Handelsblad*, C.A. Steketee, wanted above all to found a single large liberal newspaper merging both journals. He realized that in the near future the economic need to combine forces would only intensify. As national evening papers, the *NRC* and the *Handelsblad* had an unfavourable position in the advertising market and this was likely to get even worse with the introduction of TV advertising. But the editor of the *NRC*, A. Stempels, saw the *Handelsblad* as less prestigious than his own paper, while the deputy editors of the *Handelsblad* in turn felt little enthusiasm for the plans for a merger. All that was achieved in 1964 therefore was a merger of the two companies that owned the newspapers. The founding of the *Nederlandse Dagblad Unie* (*NDU*) – the Netherlands newspaper union – meant that the two liberal journals were brought under one roof.

During the second half of the 1960s the editorial staff of the two papers worked with might and main for the survival of their own journals. In this they were unsuccessful and both the *Handelsblad* and the *NRC* booked losses. Disastrous results in 1969 led to the *NDU* board taking decisive action the following year, forcing the two papers to merge.

The aim of the merger was to produce the ultimate quality newspaper. This marketing-based concept meant a journal that would address the upper echelons of newspaper readership; early on however in the merger negotiations both editorial boards deployed the term to express their ambition to publish the best newspaper in the Netherlands. In order to highlight the fact that the new journal would be more than the sum of its parts, the editors argued that a new name was needed. The owners were underwhelmed by this proposal however. To keep advertizers and subscribers on board the title of the journal would be a simple merger of the old titles – *NRC Handelsblad*.

Despite the ambitious aims of the merger, concerns about the future continued to prevail. The journalists feared for the continuance of their newspaper. The managers too did not disguise their doubts about the paper's ability to survive. In the outside world the *NRC Handelsblad* was greeted with scepticism. There were no great expectations from a fusion of two papers, both needy, which had made unsuccessful attempts to reinvent themselves during the 1960s. In other media jokes were made about the 'quality' paper, the birth of which was confidently proclaimed by the joint board of editors. Some of the leading players themselves had serious doubts about the potential of the venture. During the merger discussions H.J.A. Hofland, the editor of the *Algemeen Handelsblad*, made a drawing of two ships heading for the rocks. According to him the merger was like welding two wrecks together on the high seas in a force ten gale. Many talented reporters abandoned the sinking ship, seeking a safe haven elsewhere in the world of journalism.

How was it then that the new merged newspaper proved such a success? Why did the *NRC Handelsblad* achieve in the 1970s what the two original papers had separately failed to realize in the previous decade? This question is the main theme of this dissertation.

To answer it a study has been made first of the two newspapers in the 1960s and then of the merged journal in the 1970s. *NRC* policy in the 1960s aimed at continuity. While society was undergoing rapid change due to increasing prosperity, individualization and secularization, the

NRC remained virtually unchanged. Editor-in-chief Stempels saw the heyday of the *NRC* in the 1930s as his model and was suspicious of innovations – in his eyes change could easily mean lower standards. As a result the journal lost touch with the times and became an anachronism. Virtues such as reliability and comprehensiveness that had traditionally been typical features of the *NRC* degenerated into dullness, formality and a lack of topical appeal. The paper began to pay the price for this in 1967 with a sharp decline in subscriptions.

The reversal came in 1968, after a palace revolution in which deputy editor J.L. Heldring seized power. Under his direction the editorial staff was drastically reorganized and the newspaper was modernized. With a more professional working approach, the *NRC* started to conform to modern journalistic practices – the front page for instance reflected the most important news items of the day and political commentary was now consigned to the newly introduced opinion page. The journalistic style of the *NRC* meanwhile did not change in essence, remaining distant, impersonal and elitist.

The *Algemeen Handelsblad* in Amsterdam found itself in an entirely different situation. During the 1960s Amsterdam was the scene of happenings and demonstrations. The *Handelsblad*, which throughout the twentieth century had been more conservative than its kindred paper in Rotterdam, was thus much more emphatically confronted with the movement of the 1960s. From 1960 onwards moreover editor-in-chief Steketee deliberately turned to new, youthful talent for the *Handelsblad* and created space for unorthodox initiatives. At the same time he left the old guard on the editorial staff in their posts, something that gave the paper a schizoid character. As the deputy editor, Henk Hofland said, quoting Goethe's Faust, two souls dwelt in the breast of the *Handelsblad*.

In the coverage of the Provo movement it was clear that a new sort of journalism was cautiously making its entry in the columns of the *Handelsblad*. Provo was a small group of young anarchists, who succeeded with inventive, non-violent actions in provoking the authorities in 1965/66 to such an extent that the Netherlands was faced with a serious political crisis. Young journalists of the *Handelsblad* like Hans van Mierlo were affected by the street protests and by the disproportionate violence of the police response. They tried to define this new social phenomenon, even giving space to the protestors in their columns. The *NRC* on the other hand relied purely on official sources in its coverage of the Provo movement. All they did was reproduce the statements of the estab-

lished institutions – the local authorities, the police and the courts. The *NRC* showed no concern for the motives of Provo, leaving its readership inadequately informed about what was going on in society.

Meanwhile a large section of the subscribers of the *Handelsblad* did not appreciate that the views of the 1960s movement were being aired in their paper. The commissioners of the company also rose up in arms against this perversion of their preferred organ. The *Handelsblad* in the 1960s saw two groups set on a collision course – on the one hand were the innovative, mostly young journalists while on the other was the old guard on the editorial staff, the commissioners and the majority of the readership. Steketee tried to mediate between the two parties. His approach confirms the theory that Schuyt and Taverne propagated in their study of the landmark year 1950 that the rapid reversal in standards and values that occurred at the end of the 1960s was not caused by the accommodating attitude of the authorities towards the demonstrators, but by the intervention of a third group which in varying guises tipped the balance of advantage in favour of the innovators.

Steketee was dismissed in 1968 by the *NDU* board in favour of deputy editor Hofland, who took control of the *Handelsblad* with A.S. Spoor. Under these two editors the innovative spirit definitively became dominant. In 1969 everything possible was done to save the *Handelsblad*, but the radical metamorphosis that the paper underwent turned in Hofland's words into a 'salto mortale'. The old subscribers no longer saw their views reflected in the paper and cancelled their subscriptions in large numbers, while it was still too soon for the paper to win over new target groups.

The reorganization of the *NRC* under Heldring was accompanied by a slight rise in the number of subscriptions – but nowhere near enough to get the paper out of the red. At the end of March 1970 both editorial boards were informed by the management of the need for a merger between the two journals. A few days later they met at a neutral location in Noordwijk to plan the concept of the new paper. It was Spoor who took the initiative. He was the only editor actively to welcome the fusion, eager as he was to seize the opportunity to produce a newspaper that was a cut above the normal level of Dutch journalism.

The concept for the new paper drawn up in Noordwijk clearly bore the stamp of the *Handelsblad*. The dated, more distant, institutional and elitist journalistic style of the *NRC* was defeated. It was the new, more interpretative and proactive journalism of the *Handelsblad* that was at stake in the merger. The key posts in the new paper were also occupied by leading

figures from the *Handelsblad*. Economically however, it was Rotterdam that dominated and this was where the paper was also based. Protests from journalists of the *Handelsblad* that the newspaper belonged in the capital were to no avail.

In the first years a great gulf existed between the ideals as stated in the merger and the newspaper as it appeared in practice. The editorial staff of *NRC Handelsblad* was weak. A fair proportion of the talented Amsterdam journalists had refused to go to Rotterdam and sought employment with other organs. Many of the remaining editors were insufficiently trained to meet with modern journalistic standards or else they quite simply lacked the talent. The paper was plagued with a dramatic decline in subscriptions and advertisements. But the editors could hold on to the unshaken faith chief editor Spoor had in the right to exist of the paper he envisioned. He was able to attract talented journalists. The editor of the *Leidsch Dagblad*, Rob Soetenhorst, for instance, was brought in as head of the news desk. He doubted whether the paper would survive but was eager to work with the inspiring Spoor.

By the mid-1970s the greatest problems had been overcome and the paper began to comply with the ideal of a quality paper as envisioned during the merger negotiations. Key concepts were independence, proactive journalism and a thematic expansion of the news coverage.

In 1973 for the first time the paper made a profit for the company, mainly as a result of increased revenues from advertising. From 1974 onwards the number of subscriptions also grew. An important explanation for the turning point in the number of subscriptions was the closure of the Catholic daily *De Tijd*. This left the *NRC Handelsblad* as the only national evening newspaper and the only journal that addressed the upper sectors of the market. In terms of its journalism *NRC Handelsblad* set a standard for the press from the end of the 1970s onwards. The goal of making the *NRC Handelsblad* a quality paper in a new sense of the word had been achieved.

We will conclude with a short reflection on the causes of the eventual success of *NRC Handelsblad*. Firstly it should be stated that the social developments that revolutionized society in the 1960s created a market for the quality paper that Spoor in particular had in mind. Increasing prosperity in combination with the mass influx of students in higher education gave rise to an intellectual middle class. With large groups of people abandoning the faith and ideology they had been raised in, a market was

created for a secular and independent newspaper with a well-to-do educated readership. The cast-iron formula of the paper related well to the interests of the new intellectual middle classes. *NRC Handelsblad* offered this highly educated group more political and foreign news and more art and culture than any other newspaper. The Cultural Supplement which the paper issued every Friday was a novelty in Dutch journalism.

Finally editor-in-chief, André Spoor played a crucial role in the success story. It was largely he who was the inspiration behind the newspaper. His firm belief in the journal's *raison d'être* gave editors something to hold on to in the difficult early years. Of course he could not have pulled it off without a number of key figures, but it was Spoor who inspired these people and won their loyalty.