News in a glasshouse: media, publics, and senses of belonging in the Dutch Caribbean

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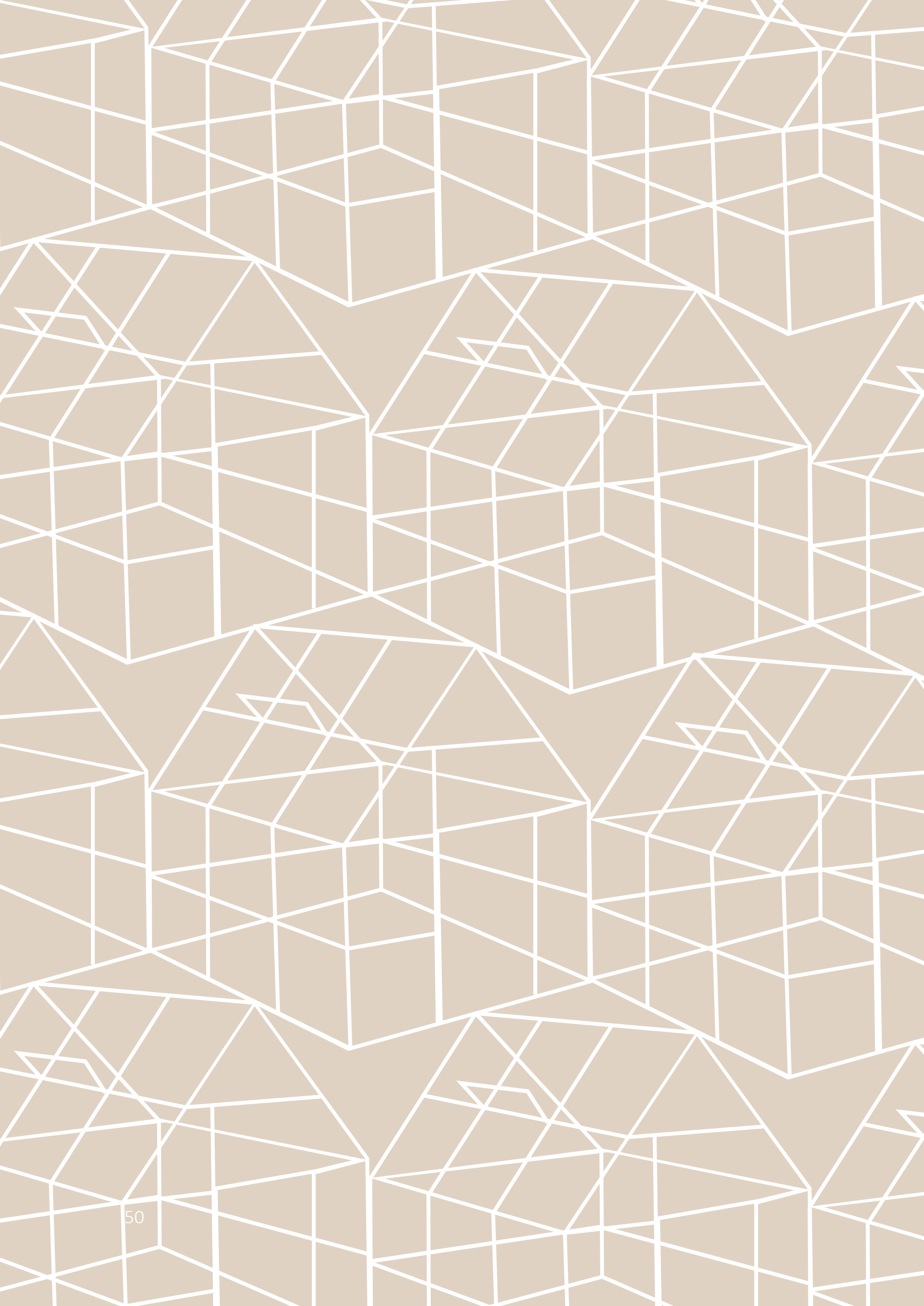

2 | An history of 'the news' contested by news

Emerging publics in the public sphere on Curaçao and Sint Maarten

In this chapter, I follow historical traces of 'the news' contested by news on Curaçao and Sint Maarten. Rather than a comprehensive historical overview, my aim in this chapter is to explore how public life on Curaçao and Sint Maarten was shaped by multiple emerging publics, and how this process unfolded differently on each island.

Building on the introductory chapter in which I described how the islands came under Dutch colonial rule, my starting point for this chapter is the introduction of 'the news' on the islands in the mid-19th century. This was a period of ongoing economic recession in the Dutch Caribbean. The islands, and particularly Curaçao as a logistical trade hub, had lost their central position in the Dutch Atlantic economy. With the formal abolition of slavery in the Kingdom of the Netherlands on July 1, 1863, the social order had to be reinvented on the islands. Together with the colonial government, religious institutions played an important role in this endeavor: they introduced 'the news' on the islands as a means to 'civilize' formerly enslaved Curaçaoans and Sint Maarteners.

By then, news and information had circulated widely through overlapping (legal and illicit) trade networks in the (Dutch) Caribbean. People of all ranks in the islands' societies had engaged with popular news practices for centuries. This was not the case for institutional news practices such as formal correspondence and official regulations sent from the Dutch mainland. These had been the exclusive domain of the islands' elites. Yet, in order to get news fast, the latter too had to lean on informal, and cross-imperial, news networks – a dynamic that had been perpetuated by the ongoing economic recession in Dutch Caribbean and the related neglect of the islands by Dutch rulers oversee.

The involvement of Dutch colonial governance in the Dutch Caribbean increased in relation to a general shift in European imperial and colonial policies in the course of the 18th century – a shift that was informed by an ideal 'bourgeois public sphere' in a Habermasian sense. This process began in the British territories, where printers and independent newspapers had already emerged in the course of the 18th century. 'Print capitalism' had flourished early on in the Dutch Republic. However, Dutch elites had long deemed it too costly, generally inappropriate and a potentially undermining influence to introduce 'the news' in the colonies. Enslaved people and free 'black' people were seen as being unable to engage in critical-rational deliberation and to form a public opinion. They were illiterate and 'uneducated', not least of all because Dutch colonial policy had aimed at keeping them ignorant in order to maintain the social order in the colonies. In keeping with this policy, Dutch rulers long ignored and silenced debates on the abolition of slavery. Only when the system of slavery became untenable in the colonies would the Dutch formally abolish slavery in 1863. This abolition was at least in part due to slave revolts on the islands and in the Caribbean region, as well as the fact that slavery had *de facto* been abolished on Sint Maarten because of the French abolition of slavery in 1848. It was also the result of international (particularly British) pressure. This did not mean that the notion of (now all) formerly enslaved people as being subordinate was gone, nor that their deplorable living conditions would change for the better. It was an incentive though for the introduction of 'the news' in the public domain, first on Curaçao and then on Sint Maarten in the late 19th century. Only later, norms of journalism came to inform 'the news' on both islands. This was in the course of the 20th century, spurred by a new round – and intensification – of global capitalism.

By following several historical traces of news and 'the news', I show that, similar to the export of 'the news' to other colonies of European empires, on the islands "metropolitan news practices were appropriated by local elites to modify the local news system for conscious political reasons" (Nerone, 2013, p. 451). This process, however, was neither linear nor one-dimensional. Not only were there multiple elites at different scales operating on the islands, institutional news practices never fully modified, let alone replaced, popular news practices. Rather, the latter – articulating the concerns of working classes in the popular public – continuously interacted with 'the news' in the institutional public. How 'the news' contested by news has shaped and been shaped by public life on each island is what this chapter is about. I start with Curaçao where newspapers appeared first.

2.1. BETWEEN MISSION AND TRANSMISSION: THE TRANSFORMATION OF CURAÇAO'S PUBLIC SPHERE

'THE NEWS' ON A MISSION

Under the second British occupation (1807–1815), an Englishman who fled from the revolutionary unrest in Venezuela established Curaçao's first newspaper, *The Curaçao Gazette & Commercial Advertiser*, or (later) *De Curaçaosche Courant*

(Coomans-Eustatia, 2001, p. 370). This was in 1812, a year that is often referred to as 'the beginning of journalism' in the Dutch Caribbean (Lent, 1971, p. 54, see also Hartog, 1944; Hendrikse, 1977; Oltheten, 1978). The paper did not yet operate according to liberal-democratic principles of journalism. These principles, as I argue later, came to inform a part of Curaçao's institutional news practices more than a century after the establishment of the first newspaper. *De Curaçaose Courant* served local elites with information on business, commerce, and colonial regulations. It was only after the formal Dutch abolition of slavery on July 1, 1863, that 'the news' was introduced to the island's public domain, based on the notion that "a whole new people had to be civilized" (Rutgers, 1994, p. 338). Formerly enslaved Curaçaoans – including the significant group of earlier freed 'black' Curaçaoans – had been deliberately excluded from education, the Protestant faith, and the institutional public more generally (Römer-Kenepa, 2013, p. 35). Here, Catholic missionaries had stepped in to fill the gaps.

In the early 19th century, Spanish missionaries who had long been going back and forth between the South American mainland and Curaçao, were replaced by representatives of the Dutch Catholic Church, who had their Mission formalized by the Dutch King in 1824. The colonial government and economic elites on the island soon realized the value of the Mission for preserving the social order (Oostindie & Klinkers, 2001, pp. 9–16). As a result, Curaçao's underclasses were Catholic (Groenewoud, 2017, p. 19).

Anticipating the formal abolition of slavery and the increasing number of manumissions that took place in the mid-19th century, the Dutch missionaries convinced the colonial government of the importance of educating the "uncivilized" Curaçaoans (Allen, 2007, p. 93). Throughout the 19th century, the 'civilizing' Mission took shape on the island. The Church set up several small schools to 'uplift' (formerly) enslaved Curaçaoans in line with the Christian doctrine. With the same purpose, the missionaries published booklets and catechisms at the modest printing press of the Roman Catholic Church on the island. Among missionaries there were discussions about the language of communication. Those arguing that the Mission could only succeed by 'lowering' oneself to the 'underdeveloped', including communicating in 'their' creole language, Papiamentu, won out. Establishing a Papiamentu newspaper was soon seen as an additional instrument of the Mission on the island. But the Catholic Church was not the only one with a mission.

The first Papiamentu newspaper was founded by the Freemasons, who were among the most fervent rivals of the Church. Aptly named *Civilisadó*[19] (1871–1875), this short-lived newspaper aimed at elevating the island's underprivileged in line with Enlightenment principles, such as critical and rational thinking (Rutgers, 1994, p. 98). With strong roots in the British, Spanish, and French Caribbean, the Freemasons played a central role in the revolutions against European imperial colonial rule. Freemasonry gained ground among Curaçao's upper strata during the second period of British rule (1807–16), particularly when, in 1811, the famous revolutionary Freemason, Simón Bolívar, fled to Curaçao during the South American wars of liberation against Spanish rule. Ever since then, Curaçao had seen the establishment of Masonic Lodges with members drawn from across the (upper) middle classes and elites on the islands, including Protestants, Jews, and (dissenting) Catholics. Together they formed a liberal counterforce from within Curaçao's institutional public.

With *Civilisadó*, the Freemasons criticized the colonial government and its policies by which, they argued, "the general interests of the Curaçaoan people were being sacrificed to serve the interests of a few merchants" (Abraham-Van der Mark, 2001, p. 630). They also turned against the Church and its Mission, particularly its Christian indoctrination and Papiamentu-language instruction. They ascertained that these were for keeping the island's underclasses in check instead of providing them with opportunities to climb the social ladder. Social mobility was an incentive for *Civilisadó*'s founders to open up a school for poor boys, where Dutch was the primary language of instruction.

In an attempt to minimize the damage the Freemasons could do to the Mission, the missionaries established their own newspaper, *Amigoe di Curaçao,* in 1883. The "apostolate of the press" (Rutgers 1994, pp. 101–102) was soon expanded. *Amigoe* eventually appeared in Dutch and Papiamentu. This was considered a 'mistake' as the Dutch articles did not (and were not supposed to) reach the underclass Curaçaoans (Hartog, 1944, pp. 167–68). In order to maintain its position in the institutional public while continuing its civilizing Mission, the Church decided to continue *Amigoe* as a 'higher level' newspaper in Dutch and to start the 'popular' Papiamentu newspaper, *La Cruz*, in 1900 (Hartog, 1944, p. 38). *Amigoe* contained more diverse and longer news items and was less patronizing than *La Cruz,* which featured articles that were highly didactic and moralistic-religious in tone, style, and message (Rutgers, 1994, p. 147).

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[19] Translates as "he who has been civilized" (Roe, 2016, p. 91).

The introduction of 'the news' went hand in hand with a class-based school system (Donk, 2013, 2019). Education was divided into three multiscalar compartments: public (governmental) schools, denominational institutional (Catholic) schools, and a variety of denominational private schools. Each segment had free, low-level *armenscholen* [schools for the poor] and fee-paying, mid-level *burgerscholen* [civic schools], which, in turn, were split into single-sex boys' and girls' schools. Language of instruction was an additional, yet crucial, differentiating factor: Dutch in public schools, Papiamentu in Catholic schools, and both plus Spanish (and other languages) in private schools.

The establishment of *La Cruz* went hand in hand with a process of convergence in the differentiated school system, resulting in a demarcation between Dutch-language public schools and Papiamentu-language Catholic schools by 1913.[20] The majority of the Curaçaoans went to one of the latter, if only, because there was no other option in the poor rural areas outside Willemstad.

While many pupils worked their way through this school system and some of them were able to climb the social ladder, the demarcation between Dutch-language and Papiamentu-language education limited social mobility among the lower classes. Whereas Papiamentu had been spoken by all layers within Curaçaoan society since the 18th century (Eckkrammer, 2003, pp. 99–100), Dutch-language instruction still was primarily preserved for the upper classes. In order to gain access to the institutional public one had to speak and read Dutch, the official language of the institutional order and its communication infrastructures (e.g., official documents, political reports, and administration). As Roe (2016) argued, "Papiamentu thus bridged the racial divide while also maintaining it" (p. 78). The language of Papiamentu did of course not lead in and of itself to racialization (as a politics of ascribing 'racial' essences to people based on skin tones), but rather perpetuated an unequal racialized class-based social order.

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[20] In 1913, there were three public, and 18 Catholic schools on the island. There were no private schools registered at the time (Donk, 2013, n.p.). See Donk (2019) for a detailed historical overview of this process, which resembled and strengthened social class divisions in Curaçao's society.

TRANSMISSIONS OF NEWS

In addition to using Papiamentu to reach the Curaçaoan poor, the missionaries who edited *La Cruz* built on popular news practices and oral storytelling traditions (Rutgers, 1994, p. 62). Among these practices of storytelling were the folktales of *Kompa Nanzi*, the spider-man trickster, in-between good and bad, human and animal, men and God, who was greedy and lazy, yet always smart and inventive in fooling its superiors. Enslaved people had carried Nanzi tales from West Africa to the Caribbean, including Curaçao where they had been transmitted from generation to generation to become part of daily social life (Allen, 2007, 2012; Clemencia, 2001).

La Cruz started to collect *konte kuenta* [folktales] such as of *Kompa Nanzi* and modified these in line with a Christian doctrine (Broek, 2001a, p. 380). These tales used to be read out aloud at home or else publicly by the editors of *La Cruz*. In a similar way, *La Cruz* published and transmitted these popular *kombersashon* [conversations] and Papiamentu proverbs, which were provided by the audience, as long as they 'nicely corroborated – or at least did not defy – particular Roman Catholic moral principles' (Broek, 2001b, p. 178). The popularity of the stories that were published and orated by *La Cruz* strengthened the role and impact of the Catholic Church in the lives of Curaçao's poor just as the provision of formal education and church services had done.

Yet, this did not mean that those among Curaçao's underclasses simply 'took in' the Catholic doctrine. As Allen (2007) argued, Afro-Curaçaoan social life (1863–1917) unfolded "through the creative re-appropriation of Catholic values, norms and practices and their reinterpretation according to local traditional practices and values" (p. 262). These had been developed by enslaved Curaçaoans as a means of physical and existential survival. The transmission of oral traditions had enabled them to preserve their being and senses of belonging amidst severe oppression and dehumanization. While open and direct resistance against the system of enslavement had certainly existed; for instance, by the Tula-led slave revolt in 1795, enslaved Curaçaoans had also found all kinds of creative ways to merely survive day by day.

Among the descendants of enslaved Curaçaoans, daily life continued to be deplorable even after the formal abolition of slavery. They faced severe poverty and were at the bottom of the island's society. Storytelling traditions kept on being transmitted and therefore persisted. Examples of these traditions were “the persistence of the Guene language, which allowed people to conceal their criticisms of those with power” and the (covert) “interplay of Catholic saints with good and bad spirits” (Allen, 2007, pp. 252–53). The popularity of Nanzi as the trickster archetype able “to weave new opportunities out of disruption, discontinuity and defeat” (De Souza, 2003, p. 345) resembled how (formerly) enslaved Curaçaoans had turned their daily lives into stories. These stories, in turn, had been transmitted and were re-articulated in terms of how poor dark-skinned Curaçaoans navigated daily life around 1900.

While the Church attempted to rewrite – and eradicate – long time popular practices of newsmaking, storytelling and transmission had never been a one-way street. Rather than a practice of orating to an audience, it was a joint performance wherein all were agents, yet not equally so. It was for this reason that the Christian doctrine and behavioral “codes imposed by the Church were at once formally accepted but in actual practice challenged” (Allen, 2007, p. 263) by the poor. This was how those at the bottom of the island society creatively employed popular news practices in conversation with, while also contesting, ‘the news’.

PUBLIC TRANSFORMATIONS

Among Curaçaoans it is popularly said that together with the handful of old elite families, the Church and Shell have long governed the island. After the Anglo-Dutch multinational Royal Dutch Shell (Shell) established the N.V. Curaçaosche Petroleum Maatschappij (CPM) on Curaçao in 1918, social and economic changes followed rapidly. By 1938 the *Isla* refinery was Shell’s biggest and the third largest refinery worldwide (Van Beurden & Jonker, 2021, p. 71). In 40 years, the population of the island grew from just over 33,000 in 1915 to almost 120,000 in 1955. In addition to the Isla oil refinery, built on the land where enslaved Africans had been traded[21], Shell established a “sales company, an oil storage/ transshipment company, and a shipping company on the island” (Ten Kate, 2011, p. 45). The oil company employed a significant part of the local (and regional) labor force, yet upper management positions were occupied by educated personnel from The Netherlands along with a few members of the historically established local ‘white’ elites. Professionals hailing from Suriname, Venezuela, and other Latin American countries, for the most part with a lighter brown skin color, formed a mid-level cadre of employees both at Shell and in the island’s society, as a whole. The same was true for incoming “Eastern European and Ashkenazi Jews, Lebanese, Chinese, and East Indians [who] entered the retail trades” (Anderson & Dynes, 1975, p. 35).

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[21] Called *Asiento* after the Spanish-Dutch (WIC) slave trade contract (1662–1713), which turned Curaçao into a central Caribbean ‘slave entrepôt’.

With the influx of migrant workers, the composition of Curaçao’s society changed significantly. At the same time, the Shell, “supported by the Dutch colonial state through laws, favorable tax regulations, and other facilities (…) maintained a policy of segregation (…) [that] manifested itself in terms of race, ethnicity, class, and gender” (Allen, 2013, p. 20). The Shell built upon the years of continuous Dutch colonial rule and further exacerbated the already segregation of the island’s racialized class-based order. Dutch white-collar employees were provided housing in newly built gated communities. Blue-collar migrant workers were accommodated in separate compounds on the basis of ethnicity, language and land of origin. The lower-class Afro-Curaçaoans, particularly those living in the countryside, continued to have a subordinate position. The mixed darker and lighter brown skinned working classes living in Willemstad benefitted relatively more from the growing employment opportunities and overall economic prosperity that came with the oil refinery than did those living in the countryside. Among these beneficiaries was a group with a lighter brown skin tone who were able to act on the new chances for upward social mobility. Together with the aforementioned mid-level cadres of newcomers, they formed a new middle class in the island society. Then there was a group of ‘lower’ Dutch Protestants (and other Europeans with a light skin tone). Of course, not all ‘white’ people on the island were as privileged and wealthy as those representing the colonial authorities and the sectors affiliated with the government and Shell. Since the colonial heyday, soldiers, sailors, and tradespeople had come to the island. Their position was significantly less privileged than that of the ‘higher’ Dutch Protestants, although certainly not comparable to the continual oppression the ‘black’ lower-class Curaçaoans faced. In the newly emerging social order, these lower Dutch Protestants also came to form a mid-level cadre in the (lower) middle classes.

In response to the rapid industrialization, the Church launched a second weekly, *La Union*, in 1922, “for the developed Curaçaoan” (Groenewoud, 2017, p. 72), who, according to the Church, belonged to the urban Afro-Curaçaoan working classes. As an organ of the R.K. Volksbond [Roman Catholic People's Union] established in 1919 (Broek, 1992, p. 120), *La Union* aimed to inform its members of union activities and encourage them to read 'appropriate news' in their own vernacular of Papiamentu (Hartog, 1944, p. 52). Together with the weekly *La Cruz*, which came to primarily focus on the rural 'black' lower-class Curaçaoans, *La Union* tried to keep the working classes in check by propagating Catholic values and behavioral norms of respectability (Broek, 1992, pp. 121–22; Roe, 2016, p. 92), which continued to play an important role in the institutional public on the island. Consequently, they were contested by news practices in the popular public as described above. As Römer (1979) argued, "this 'R.K. Volksbond' was in fact not a union, but rather a middle-class social organization which tried to promote the cultural, including the religious, interests of the people" (p. 141). Yet, 'the people' were not unaware of this. Rather they utilized the opportunities this social organization provided to attain a level of security and stability amidst rapid social transformation. And so, rather than an interest in the Catholic doctrine, it was because of the services (such as life and health insurance) provided by the Church that a membership of the R.K. Volksbond appealed to Curaçaoan laborers (Broek, 1992, p. 126).

Meanwhile, the Freemasons on the island continued to rival the Church for using Papiamentu to reach the masses. Their concern was not about Papiamentu, as a language, but rather, that the Church was using it to indoctrinate Curaçaoans (Broek, 2001a, p. 378). In 1928, members of the Freemasons established *La Prensa*, a Spanish-language (later Papiamentu) daily that regularly published critical pieces, for example, by former *La Union* writer and orator, W. Kroon, who increasingly turned against the Church and the Mission (Broek, 1992, pp. 128–30). With *La Prensa*, these Freemasons opposed the missionaries who, in turn, used the *Amigoe* to challenge them. This ongoing polemical back and forth between the Freemasons and the missionaries (see Hartog, 1944, pp. 198–99) had long agitated the institutional public. But the rapid process of modern industrialization would stir the institutional public still some more.

With the arrival of Royal Dutch Shell on the island came modern media technologies and liberal-democratic standards of what 'the news' should be and do in the (bourgeois) public sphere. Shell employees started experimenting with radio on the island, which led to the establishment of the *Curaçaose Radio Vereniging* [Curaçao Broadcasting Association] in 1933, followed by the first radio station on the island, *Radio Curom*, in 1937. *Curom* was government subsidized

(Lent, 1971, p. 58). *Emmabode* (1929) was a newspaper exclusively for Dutch expatriates. It was followed by the Dutch-language newspaper *Beurs- en Nieuwsberichten*[22] (*De Beurs*) established in 1935 by a Shell employee from London. The paper was soon embraced by the business sector on the island. There were now two Dutch-language newspapers in the institutional public: the *Amigoe*, owned by the Church and *De Beurs*, owned by Shell. Whereas these represented Catholic and liberal-Protestant principles, respectively, their differences were increasingly pushed to the background by shared commercial and political interests and a common focus on professionalizing 'the news' through the implementation of journalism norms (i.e., accuracy, objectivity, neutrality, and public accountability). As Hartog (1944), a former Dutch-Curaçaoan journalist, recalled: "the first 'professional' journalist was flown over from The Netherlands to become the editor of *De Beurs*" (p. 276). This was an example soon followed by *Amigoe*. The appointment of Hartog as its chief editor in 1940 was accompanied by a process of modernization. With the establishment of the *Paulus Drukkerij N.V.* [printing office], the weekly turned into a daily.

What the above should have made clear is that on Curaçao, the Dutch colonial presence remained tangible, first indirectly, via the Church and the colonial government, and then more directly starting in the early-20th century with the arrival of Royal Dutch Shell. This colonial presence was articulated through and implemented by institutional news practices, which, in close relation to education and language policies promoting differentiation, contributed to maintaining the social order. The Dutch institutional presence and the intensification thereof with the influx of professional journalists and journalism norms into 'the news', reinforced the status quo. It did so by breaking up the institutional public via 'the news'. On Curaçao, the institutional public split into a bourgeois public sphere (representing 'Dutch' liberal-democratic ideals articulated through the Dutch language) and, what I will refer to as the cultural public sphere (representing 'Curaçaoan' culture articulated through the Papiamentu language). Newspapers such as *La Cruz* and *La Union* laid the basis for this Papiamentu language sphere, which would take full shape in the decades to come. I further elaborate on the characteristics and implications of Curaçao's split institutional public in Section 2.4. Let me now first turn to how news interacted with – and often shaped – 'the news' on Sint Maarten.

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[22] Translated from Dutch: "news from the stock exchange".

2.2. RUNNING YOUR OWN AFFAIRS ON SINT MAARTEN: NEWS IN A PUBLIC SPHERE THAT IS PRIVATE

ROAMING NEWS ACROSS THE REGION

With the seat of colonial power located on Curaçao, Sint Maarten was what Badejo (1990, p. 121) termed, a 'privately leased colony' under Dutch colonial rule. After the Dutch had conquered the southern part of the island, political jurisdiction had been outsourced to private settlers. The same was true for the neighboring Dutch islands, Saba and Sint Eustatius, as well as the English, Danish, Swedish, and French controlled islands known – together with the Dutch Windwards[23] – as the Leeward island group that were part of the larger Lesser Antilles chain. Sharing the northeastern waters of the Caribbean Sea, the Leewards were intimately connected through a shared language, the circulation of people, informal trade, and information networks. They shared the spoken language of creole English (known as St. Martiners' English on Sint Maarten) which enabled the establishment of information networks and streams of news to flow across the Leeward archipelago. In the island societies, "news spread quickly, and the frequent and intensive connections between people on the Leeward islands facilitated this transmission of information", as Roitman (2016) noted:

> Slaves served as sailors on the vessels that plied the routes between the islands and would have passed on information in each port they entered. Moreover, the population of the islands who were already free formed, in the words of one inhabitant of the colonies, a 'zwervende bevolking' – a roaming group. (p. 380)

Similar trade and information networks had long existed in Curaçao and its surrounding waters. Here too, news travelled quickly from port to port, such as between Curaçao and Coro on the Venezuelan coast – a route well-known to (enslaved or free) sailors, missionaries, and merchants alike (see Rupert, 2009, 2011, 2012). What differed though on Sint Maarten was a less tangible Dutch colonial presence. This was true for other islands that are part of the Leeward archipelago too as “most had relatively weak administrative and military infrastructures” (Roitman, 2016, p. 378). Across the Leewards, informal news circulation was paramount, not only as a primary intelligence source for private colonial authorities, but also as streams of news “that crisscrossed and often subverted official authority” (ibid).

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[23] Sint Maarten, Saba, and Sint Eustatius are referred to as the Windward islands in Dutch. Yet internationally they are referred to as being part of the Leeward islands.

This lack of a strong official (colonial) presence played a central role in the (relatively) early emancipation of enslaved Sint Maarteners. When the Dutch formally abolished slavery on July 1, 1863, slavery on Sint Maarten de facto already belonged to the past (Paula, 1993). Here, the tides had started to shift with the English abolition of slavery in 1833, which not only led to a significant ‘roaming group’ of free people across the Leewards, but also to an increase in the number of enslaved people who managed to escape to British-ruled islands where they were declared free as soon as they set ashore. When rumor had it that the French abolition of slavery was imminent, Dutch slave owners and authorities on Sint Maarten became increasingly concerned that emancipation on the French-ruled side of the island would lead to a slave uprising on the Dutch side. After all, “if information was easily transmitted across the sea, albeit over short distances, it was that much more easily passed between people on the same island on which there were no real borders” (Roitman, 2016, p. 381).

With the French abolition of slavery on 27 April 1848, the slavery system could no longer be maintained on Sint Maarten. This did not mean that the Dutch government formally acknowledged this situation. Rather, it was in the absence of Dutch colonial governance – in terms of both military presence and direct lines of communication – that the early abolition of slavery became a reality in this ‘privately leased colony’. This was illustrated by a letter from the Governor of Sint Maarten to the Captain of the ship “Arend” (likely en route to Curaçao or Suriname) earlier that month, on 10 April 1848. He wrote that, “he [the Captain] will doubtless have heard of the events in France [abolition; declaration of a Republic] from the European newspapers” (Archives of Sint Maarten, 1848).[24] In the letter, the Governor urgently asked for more information. He had no idea what the Dutch stand on the matter was and complained that he had to ask the French notary about the ongoing events to get any information. Direct lines of formal communication with the Dutch mainland and the colonial government in Curaçao were chronically slow and, as a result, rather weak.

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[24] I thank my colleague, Jessica Roitman, for providing me with this information, based upon her archival research on Sint Maarten. For more information about the communication between Sint Maarten and the Dutch colonial government in the lead up to the French abolition of slavery, see Roitman (2016).

To get ‘the news’ fast, Sint Maarten’s administrators had to consult their ‘colleagues’ on the northern side of the island and on neighboring islands. Also, they read European and regionally published newspapers that circulated from island to island and across imperial borders. The oldest newspaper under Dutch colonial rule was established on Statia with the name *The St. Eustatius Gazette* (1790-1794). In one of the remaining editions of the bi-lingual (English, Dutch) weekly, there were clear references to Sint Maarten (e.g., advertisements, reports of enslaved ‘run-a-ways’), which shows that this newspaper was distributed on Sint Maarten (see Hartog, 1948). In addition, and more substantially, was ‘the news’ coming from St. Kitts, a nearby island that long served as the ‘Mother Colony’ for not only the British West Indies, but also the neighboring Dutch Windward islands (Johnson, 2021a). On St. Kitts, a free ‘black’ family with roots in Antigua established *The St. Christopher Advertiser and Weekly Intelligencer* in 1782 (ibid).[25] This paper, which would be published until 1909, circulated among, and reported on, neighboring islands. Saba had its own small column in the St. Kitts newspaper. The St. Kitts newspaper was sent to the colonial government in Curaçao. This was how news and ‘the news’ travelled through the region and across the Dutch Caribbean.

PRIVATE GATEKEEPERS AND REGULATING ‘THE NEWS’

The *de facto* end of slavery on Sint Maarten came during a period of economic hardship on the island that affected slave owners and enslaved people alike. Enslaved people who had managed to flee to the northern side of the island after the French abolition of slavery could hardly provide for themselves. Faced with severe poverty, scarcity, and hunger, many decided to return to the Dutch side of the island and to take up their work in the salt pans and cultivation of sugar, tobacco and cotton (i.e., Haviser, 2015; Milton, 2016). Even before the French abolition in 1848, starting in the early 19th century when economic recession set in, many among Sint Maarten's elites had decided to leave the island. The attempt to sell their enslaved chattel, land, and estates was often in vain. Many settlers simply abandoned their properties, which, in turn, created an opportunity for others to step in.

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[25] Johnson (2021a) notes that the paper was established by members of the Cable family, who “like so many of their class owned domestic slaves in their printing office but were themselves subject to the injustices of the racial hierarchy of the British West Indies”. The ownership of enslaved people by free dark-skinned families was not unique in (Dutch) Caribbean island societies, including Curaçao (see Klooster, 1994).

It was a young merchant from a wealthy Amsterdam family, Van Romondt, who would seize this opportunity. He was able "to acquire both property and political power rapidly" (Roitman & Veenendaal, 2016, p. 76), by buying up deserted plantations and estates, while marrying into the governing planter elite. In the decades after Van Romondt's arrival the island's population was cut in half, from 5,500 in 1790 to 2,100 in 1858, and decreased still further to a paltry 1,484 in 1950, a century later (ibid, pp. 76–78). The remaining elite came to form a close network of kin that consolidated its power over generations. While the family name, Van Romondt, would not last on Sint Maarten, the infrastructures through which power and property could be attained were there to stay either by blood, by marriage or – and this is why wealthy newcomers were always again welcome to 'the friendly island' – by buying oneself into the private-public enterprise that Sint Maarten was.

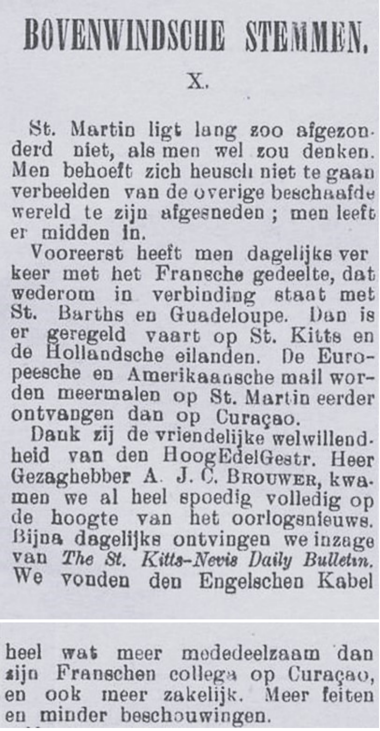
It is important to highlight here that while there was less overt 'Dutch presence' on Sint Maarten than there was on Curaçao, Dutch infrastructural power played an important role in how the social order took shape on this island. In contrast to Curaçao "where they had a regime of civil servants" that served the Dutch colonial government seated on this island, the institutional order of Sint Maarten (and Sint Eustatius and Saba) became "completely modeled after the situation in Holland, whereby an oligarchy of the elite developed that helped each other in the saddle and kept them there" (Johnson, 2021a, n.p.). Similar to how Dutch elites maintained control over the Dutch private-public enterprise, power and property were passed on for generations among a handful of families on Sint Maarten. These were Sint Maarten's "gatekeeping families", who "controlled access to positions of power and regulated the flow of information and political influence" (Roitman & Veenendaal, 2016, p. 83).

In the late 19th century, the colonial government on Curaçao started to stretch its administrative arm to the Windward islands. Better communication and transport infrastructures were key to this attempt. Together with the establishment of a post office on Sint Maarten in 1882 (and by 1884 also on Saba and Sint Eustatius), the colonial government in Curaçao started to contract privately owned schooners in the Windwards to ensure regular inter-island mail services (Johnson, 2021b). Whether contracted or not, private shippers continued to play a vital role at the turn of the century, not least for shipping mail to and from St. Kitts and St. Thomas, the routes via which the mail services with the Dutch colonial headquarters ran.

That Sint Maarten was a juncture of regional and international news flows was acknowledged by Father R. J. C. Wahlen, the chief-editor of the *Amigoe* (1901–1918), who had boarded a contracted mail boat from Curaçao to the Dutch Windwards and visited the island in early 1916. As part of a series "Bovenwindsche Stemmen" [Windward Voices], Father Wahlen wrote about his experiences with the worldly connectedness of 'the news' on Sint Maarten in comparison to 'the news' on Curaçao at the time [see Figure 5].

Around the time Father Wahlen visited Sint Maarten, a few newspapers started to emerge on the island. As was the case on Curaçao, the publishing of newspapers on the island was closely related to the work of missionaries and the development of the educational system. Several Christian denominations were present on Sint Maarten by that time, including the Roman Catholic and Dutch Protestant Church. Yet, "large parts of the inhabitants became members of the Methodist church, which was active in the adjoining British Islands" (Milton, 2016, p. 30). The Methodists had been a presence on Sint Maarten since the 1800s. In contrast to Curaçao, where Church membership was regulated along class-based, racialized, and linguistic social lines, on Sint Maarten the majority of people – whether among the higher or lower rankings of society – were Methodists (Johnson, 2014a).

In the early 20th century, members of Sint Maarten's elite started issuing several irregular and short-lived newspapers (Lent, 1971, p. 60). The first local weekly, *St. Martin Day by Day* (1911–1920), was followed by the bi-monthly paper *Bovenwindsche Stemmen* (1933–1942). The establishment of the latter was the result of committee initiated by a Dutch teacher on Sint Maarten in order to establish a newspaper that would "give St. Maarten and by extension St. Eustatius and Saba a voice which could resonate in the colony" (Johnson, 2016a, n.p.). While the paper was written entirely in English, its Dutch title referred to Wahlen's series of columns in the *Amigoe*, which in turn built on a longer tradition of news bulletins under the header "Bovenwindsche Stemmen" in the *Amigoe*. Since 1912, these news bulletins had been sent in by Catholic missionaries located on Saba, Statia, and Sint Maarten.



BOVENWINDSCHE STEMMEN.

X.

St. Martin ligt lang zoo afgezonderd niet, als men wel zou denken. Men behoeft zich heusch niet te gaan verbeelden van de overige beschaafde wereld te zijn afgesneden ; men leeft er midden in.

Vooreerst heeft men dagelijks verkeer met het Fransche gedeelte, dat wederom in verbinding staat met St. Barths en Guadeloupe. Dan is er geregeld vaart op St. Kitts en de Hollandsche eilanden. De Europeesche en Amerikaansche mail worden meermalen op St. Martin eerder ontvangen dan op Curaçao.

Dank zij de vriendelijke welwillendheid van den HoogEdelGestr. Heer Gezaghebber A. J. C. BROUWER, kwamen we al heel spoedig volledig op de hoogte van het oorlogsnieuws. Bijna dagelijks ontvingen we inzage van *The St. Kitts-Nevis Daily Bulletin.* We vonden den Engelschen Kabel heel wat meer mededeelzaam dan zijn Franschen collega op Curaçao, en ook meer zakelijk. Meer feiten en minder beschouwingen.

BOVENWINDSCHE STEMMEN

X.

St. Martin is nowhere near as isolated as one might think. One should really not get the illusion of being cut off from the rest of the civilized world: one lives right in the middle of it.

First of all, there is daily traffic with the French part, which in turn holds close connections to St. Barths and Guadeloupe. Then, there is regular sailing to St. Kitts and the Dutch islands. The European and American mail is often received faster on St. Martin than on Curaçao.

Thanks to the friendly benevolence of His Honour Lt. Governor [of Sint Maarten] A.J.C. Brouwer we quickly were fully updated on the news of the war [WW I]. Almost daily we had insight into 'The St. Kitts-Nevis Daily Bulletin'. We found the English Cable to be much more informative than its French colleague on Curaçao[26]*, and more businesslike too. More facts and less speculation.*

Figure 5: Excerpt of the 10th edition of a series "Bovenwindsche Stemmen" [Windward Voices] that was written and published by chief-editor Father Wahlen on the front page of the *Amigoe* in the course of 1916 (Wahlen, 1916, p. 1).

Following up on this practice, news bulletins from the Sint Maarten newspaper *Bovenwindsche Stemmen*, regularly appeared under the same name in *Amigoe*, of which small numbers were distributed on the Windward Islands. The exchange of 'the news' between the *Amigoe* and *Bovenwindsche Stemmen* was another example of strengthened communication infrastructures between elites on both islands. *Bovenwindsche Stemmen* avoided any tendentious issues around inter-island and colonial politics. Its rival, *De Slag om Slag* [Blow for Blow] (1934–1939), however, did not shun controversy. Also, this paper was written entirely in English, despite its Dutch title. The Dutch title may have been chosen to speak to a similar audience as *Bovenwindsche Stemmen* did: the colonial government on Curaçao and elites throughout the Dutch colony. Despite the paper's editor being the son of the Governor of Sint Maarten (A. C. J. Brouwer) and married to a Van Romondt – just like the editor of *Bovenwindsche Stemmen* –, the editor of *De Slag om Slag* was jailed for publicly criticizing those in power on the island and beyond.[27] On Curaçao, different political, economic, and religious elites ideologically contested each other via newspapers despite the fact that they often (also) shared political-economic interests. On Sint Maarten, in contrast, these political and economic interests were clear to all. In order to successfully run the public-private enterprise that was Sint Maarten, elites avoided any sort of lack of harmony going public – not only to protect business, but also family, property, assets, and capital. It would take another two decades after *De Slag om Slag* was shut down in 1939 before a newspaper would be established again on the island. This re-establishment of a newspaper coincided with the dawn of the island's rapid social-economic transformation.

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[26] In 1887, Curaçao was connected to the international telecommunication network via the French cable. Wahlen's reference to the English cable versus the French cable was an analogy for the different infrastructures – and interrelated cultures – of 'the news' on both islands: Anglo-Caribbean and North-American-related practices of 'the news' on Sint Maarten versus European (mainland) and Latin-American-connected news practices on Curaçao.

Life on Sint Maarten would be completely transformed in only two decades starting in the 1960s when its tourism market took off. Until then, "during the old storytime", as Daniela Jeffry (2003) recalled, "the dissemination of news and information, whether it was personal, familiar, professional, trade or official was not only passed on to successive generations of the small population" (p. 10), but also played a vital role in daily island life. In 1932, 75% of the population of Sint Maarten was illiterate (Albus, 2001, p. 447). And while this changed in the decades following World War II, news continued to be a private endeavor and primarily a matter of oral transmission. Looking back on his arrival on Sint Maarten from Saba in 1955, journalist and politician Will Johnson (1989) remembered the "numerous hawkers, vendors and peddlers who (…) passed along the houses in the early morning hours selling their wares, passing on the news of the day and, in some cases, carrying *your* news further down the street" (p. 19, *emphasis in original)*. News traveled fast from person to person along with commercial exchange on the island and informal trade networks that had long existed across the region (Roitman, 2016, pp. 3–7).

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[27] When the editor was about to be sent to jail (on Curaçao) a second time for defaming a friendly Head of State, he took his life in 1939 (Johnson, 2016a). The Head of State he had criticized in his newspaper was Adolph Hitler.

*

Sint Maarten and Curaçao experienced a different run-up to the changes both islands came to face in the second half of the 20th century. This difference stemmed from different forms of governance and communication infrastructures that had developed on each island under Dutch colonial rule. While both islands were neglected by Dutch authorities during the 19th century, on Curaçao the Dutch colonial presence remained tangible and was strengthened with the arrival of Shell on the island. This presence was articulated through and implemented by institutional news practices (Church-, Shell-owned newspapers) that contributed to maintaining the social order, based on a split institutional public.

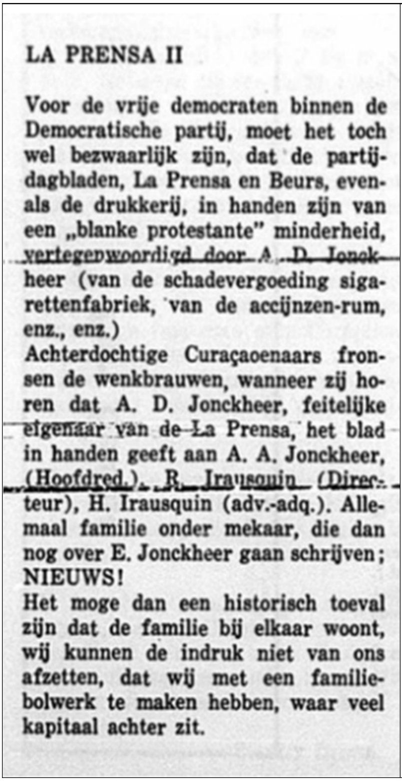
Sint Maarten continued to exemplify a 'privately leased colony'. Here an oligarchic system unfolded with closely connected private gatekeepers controlling the island's administration and economy. News spread fast by word of mouth on the island and across the region via private (family) ties across the region. The same was true for institutional news practices. Sint Maarten's gatekeepers leaned on 'the news' which came and went alongside commerce and trade networks. While the first newspapers on this island emerged in close relation – whether cooperative or antagonistic – with 'the news' on Curaçao, there was no development of a Dutch(-backed) press apparatus on Sint Maarten. It would take until the late 1950s before 'the news' started to play a more significant role in public island life on Sint Maarten, particularly as a tool of pushing popular concerns into the institutional public. This was also the case on Curaçao during the same period, albeit in a different way as I will explore in the following section.

2.3. ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN THE POPULAR AND THE INSTITUTIONAL PUBLIC ON CURAÇAO AND SINT MAARTEN

SOCIAL INEQUALITY ARTICULATED THROUGH NEWS AND 'THE NEWS': A LABOR REVOLT ON CURAÇAO

In 1957, *La Prensa* ended up in the hands of the Democratische Partij [Democratic Party], at the time the leading political party on Curaçao. *De Beurs* was acquired by the party in 1958 (Hendrikse, 1977, p. 158). Despite attempts to purchase *Amigoe* (Lent, 1971, p. 62), the Church held a firm grip over this newspaper, as it did with *La Cruz* and *La Union*. In 1971, media researcher Lent concluded that "the ownership of influential newspapers is bothersome" and that "editors admit, with a defeated shrug of the shoulder, that they run everything that the government or church stipulates" (p. 62).

An opportunity to mobilize Curaçaoan working classes emerged when unemployment rates climbed rapidly due to automation and the subsequent cutbacks by Shell in the late 1950s and 1960s. After migrant workers had been laid off, many Curaçaoan laborers lost their jobs. Unlike the elites, these workers did not have access to the growing financial offshore sector, which "remained an island on the island with no discernible effect on the stubbornly high unemployment rate of 15–20 percent" (Van Beurden & Jonker, 2021, p. 80). Those who sought social change joined efforts made by the weekly *Vitó* (1966–1971), and the movement that came to carry the same name. Under chief editor and teacher, Stanley Brown, the newspaper was critical of the situation and addressed poverty, racial, and social inequalities. Brown and the paper held the island's elites, and the influential newspapers owned by them, responsible for maintaining the inequalities inherent in the status quo. In addition to criticizing the press organs of the Catholic Church, the Brown and his paper also took aim at the government-owned newspapers. As Van Meyeren (2017) noted in her study of the weekly, "*Vitó* attributes cases of censorship and misinformation to three different networks of influence: (1) political interests (2) capital and (3) family ties" (p. 27). This was the case when *Vitó* wrote about *La Prensa*'s ownership and management in 1967 [see Figure 6].



LA PRENSA II

Voor de vrije democraten binnen de Democratische partij, moet het toch wel bezwaarlijk zijn, dat de partijdagbladen, La Prensa en Beurs, evenals de drukkerij, in handen zijn van een „blanke protestante" minderheid, vertegenwoordigd door A. D. Jonckheer (van de schadevergoeding sigarettenfabriek, van de accijnzen-rum, enz., enz.)
Achterdochtige Curaçaoenaars fronsen de wenkbrauwen, wanneer zij horen dat A. D. Jonckheer, feitelijke eigenaar van de La Prensa, het blad in handen geeft aan A. A. Jonckheer, (Hoofdred.), R. Irausquin (Directeur), H. Irausquin (adv.-adq.). Allemaal familie onder mekaar, die dan nog over E. Jonckheer gaan schrijven; NIEUWS!
Het moge dan een historisch toeval zijn dat de familie bij elkaar woont, wij kunnen de indruk niet van ons afzetten, dat wij met een familiebolwerk te maken hebben, waar veel kapitaal achter zit.

LA PRENSA II

For the free democrats within the Democratic party, it must be somewhat problematic that the party sheets, La Prensa and Beurs, just as the printer, are in the hands of a "white protestant" minority, represented by A.D. Jonckheer (from the compensations tobacco industry, from the taxed-rum, etc., etc.).
Suspicious Curaçaoans frown when they hear that A.D. Jonckheer, factual owner of La Prensa, hands the paper to A.A. Jonckheer (Chief-editor), R. Irausquin (Director) and H. Irausquin (Advertisement dep.). All family amongst themselves, who then even will write about E. Jonckheer: NEWS!
It may be a historical coincidence that the family is living together, yet we cannot shake the impression that we are dealing with a family-stronghold with a lot of capital behind it.

Figure 6: Opinion piece about family ownership *La Prensa* in *Vitó*, 1967 (Zielinski & Antersijn, 1967).[28]

In this opinion piece, *Vitó* not only pointed to the families in charge of *La Prensa*, but also to the extent of their power. By pointing to the family ties as possibly having been an "historical coincidence", *Vitó* addressed how a "white Protestant minority" had come to power beginning with Dutch colonialism and were able to maintain this social position, and its associated wealth, in a capitalist system. This was reflected by their ownership over the means of news (media) production. In addition to these two influential newspapers, the (extended) family also owned Drukkerij De Stad N.V., which became the biggest printer on the island and has been responsible for printing all newspapers (plus supplements, folders, magazines), except for *Amigoe*, ever since.

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[28] As part of her study, Van Meyeren uploaded a digital collection of *Vitó* editions. (Available at: https://emmavanmeyeren.cargo.site/Trinta-di-Mei).

Vitó challenged the establishment so it had to be printed via the "alternative circuit" (Rutgers, 1994, p. 211). Stanley Brown, who came from a mixed middle-class family but had a light skin tone himself, received financial help from obvious and less obvious sources, sometimes to support the cause, but often from those hoping for some sort of personal gain (e.g., sponsors representing opposition parties). Yet Brown's aim with *Vitó* was not to support oppositional voices in the institutional public, but to mobilize Curaçao's lower classes. Here, I recall that Curaçao's institutional public was split. Critical pieces in written Dutch, such as Figure 6, spoke to the Dutch-speaking and reading establishment which were part of the bourgeois public sphere and, by extension, the institutional public. To reach the masses on the island, *Vitó* had to shift to Papiamentu, the language of the popular public, by which *La Cruz* and *La Union* had long catered the lower classes. As soon as the paper started publishing in Papiamentu in 1967, it rapidly infiltrated the working class barios [neighborhoods] of Willemstad (Verton, 1977, pp. 80–82). In addition to its distribution (in the streets) and language choice (Papiamentu), which reflected how news was produced and circulated in the popular public, *Vitó* spoke to Curaçao's working classes by politically articulating their daily concerns into the institutional public. As an alternative outlet that was part of 'the news', the paper's founders were able to find support from labor union leaders. In cooperation with these leaders, the paper became an important instrument in mobilizing the labor force on the island.

What started as a labor strike against one of Shell's contractors on the morning of 30 May 1969 evolved into the revolt known as Trinta di Mei [30 May]. With the slogan, "Pan i rekonosomentu!" [Bread and recognition!] around 4,000 laborers poured out on the streets of Willemstad. The strike escalated quickly and two people were shot and killed by the police. Many shops in the neighborhoods of Punda and Otrobanda were plundered and looted. Parts of the city center of Willemstad burned down. When government authorities could no longer control the protestors, they turned to The Hague. Dutch military troops intervened and forcefully suppressed the uprising (i.e., Anderson & Dynes, 1975; Oostindie, 1999, 2014; Römer, 1999).

Trinta di Mei caused a compositional shift in Curaçao's institutional public. The institutional public changed in terms of outlook, yet remained the same in terms of its structural dynamics and power relations. In the immediate aftermath of the labor revolt, politicians with a dark(er)-toned skin color attained prominent positions in Parliament and in the administrative apparatus on the island. Among these where "black leaders from two parties, the Worker's Liberation Front (Frente Obrero de Liberación, FOL), formed by labor leaders, and the New Antillean Movement (Movimento de Antiyas Nobo, MAN), formed by socialist-oriented intellectuals" (García Muñiz, 2011, p. 548).[29] In 1970, the first 'black' Governor of the Netherlands Antilles was appointed, following the first 'black' Prime Minister of the Netherlands Antilles in December 1969. The latter was a member of the Democratic Party, representing the 'white' Dutch Protestants, while the first represented the Catholic National People's Party. Both parties had been in power since the political constellation of the Netherlands Antilles had been formalized with the 1954 Kingdom Charter. Culturally speaking, nationalist discourses and a policy of what came to be known as 'Antilleanization' became dominant in the institutional public (e.g., Roe, 2016; Verton, 1977). The concept of the *Yu di Kòrsou* [child of Curaçao], which had been used by the Church to promote national belonging among the mass since the 1920s (Allen, 2014, p. 16), became an important national identity marker. The scholarly interest in Afro-Caribbean culture, oral traditions, and creole languages increased, building upon the earlier work of Catholic priests and (religious) intellectuals in the 1950s–60s.

'The news' reflected this process of a wider investment in maintaining the social order. In the aftermath of Trinta di Mei local entrepreneurs and labor union leaders joined forces with wealthy investors on the island to found Papiamentu-language news outlets (Römer, 1979, p. 150). Among the first and still extant newspapers were the daily *Nobo* and the morning paper *Èxtra*, established in 1974 and 1976, respectively. Produced and overseen by elites firmly anchored in the institutional public, the Papiamentu newspaper industry was specifically designed to cater to the working classes. Like the missionaries, they combined popular news practices and oral traditions to provide (religious) education and entertainment. And they did so with a modern twist. Instead of opposing a modern-industrialist lifestyle, as the Church had done, these emerging newspapers embraced it. They capitalized on oral news practices by integrating them into a successful business model. Unlike door-to-door delivery based on subscriptions as practiced by the Dutch-language *Amigoe* and *De Beurs*, as well as Papiamentu-language *La Prensa*, most of the rest of the Papiamentu dailies that emerged after Trinta di Mei were sold by street vendors at busy traffic junctions, on the road, at street corners, and other public sites. With street-selling came an added mode of storytelling: namely through images. To draw attention from passers-by, the front page of a paper sold on the street had to tell a story in a blink of an eye. The emerging Papiamentu newspaper industry soon realized that 'sensation sells'.

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[29] The FOL was established by three key persons involved in the Trinta di mei revolt: two union leaders, Wilson 'Papa' Godett and Amador Nita, and *Vitó*'s editor, Stanley Brown.

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With a business model that incorporated popular news practices and oral storytelling, the Papiamentu news industry catered to the island's working classes in a modern capitalist world. These newspapers were intended to speak to their dreams and concerns in a *non-political* way. Their articulation of the popular public was thus significantly different than that of *Vitó*. This articulation was in a cultural rather than an explicitly political register. As such, the emerging Papiamentu-language news market reproduced how *La Cruz* and *La Union* had long catered to working class Curaçaoans, yet they transformed these institutional news practices to modern capitalist times. The result was that on Curaçao, the popular public 'news' came to be articulated into 'the news' through an affective register – a register downplayed in the bourgeois public sphere, but central to, what McGuigan (2002, 2005) called, the "cultural public sphere". A characteristic of this public sphere is that it is mass popular culture that appeals to its public emotionally, focusing on the quotidian and extraordinary, straying away from explicit deep analyses of oppressive political and economic structures. As such, Curaçao's institutional public came to consist of both the bourgeois public sphere and the cultural public sphere. In Chapter Four, I will explore the institutionalization of the popular public 'news' in the cultural public sphere through what I will refer to as 'popular news media'. Let me now turn to how news and 'the news' came to meet on a more equitable, and thereby political, footing on Sint Maarten.

PUSHING POPULAR CONCERNS INTO THE INSTITUTIONAL PUBLIC ON SINT MAARTEN

Between the 1920s and 1950s, many young Sint Maarteners left the island for work in the US and in the emerging oil industry on Curaçao and, particularly, Aruba, where the Lago refinery of American Standard Oil (now Exxon) attracted English-speaking workers throughout the Caribbean (Roitman & Veenendaal, 2016, p. 83). The cutbacks following the automation at the Lago refinery during the 1950s and 1960s forced Sint Maarteners to return home. Meanwhile, those who had stayed on the island – often because there had been no pressing economic need for them to leave – had strengthened their position on the island. Among these were the Wathey family who gradually took over from the Van Romondt family in the first half of the 20th century. Together with other prominent families, they had started to promote Sint Maarten as a Caribbean tourist hub and destination. With the returning labor force the tourism market could take off.

Those who returned were not only manual laborers, but also (higher-)educated middle classes. They brought back their experiences with the labor movements in Aruba (and Curaçao) in the 1950s–60s, together with inspiration drawn from black nationalist movements across the Anglophone Caribbean and the US. Of particular importance to these movements was the work and black nationalist ideology of Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey (1887–1940), a US civil rights activist and political leader of the Pan-African Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA). In 1933, a branch of the UNIA was established on Sint Maarten. Like other 'Garveyists', those returning to Sint Maarten viewed the labor struggle "through a prism of racial solidarity and Pan-African mobilization" (Ewing, 2017, p. 188). Moreover, as they "were not invested in the personalistic structures of politics on the island", they became fierce opponents of the establishment and particularly critical of "what they perceived to be the Wathey administration's corruption" (Roitman & Veenendaal, 2016, p. 83).

Among the most prominent intellectuals at the time was journalist and politician Joseph Husurell Lake, Sr. In 1959, he established the *Windward Islands'*

Opinion (*Opinion*).[30] Born in the Dominican Republic to a mother from Sint Maarten, Lake Sr. grew up in Middle Region, Sint Maarten. During his years on Aruba, Lake Sr. had been active in the Lago employee council as an editor of its periodical (Sekou, 1996, pp. 75–76). In his late teens, he had already been a member of the international UNIA and its Sint Maarten branch, which explained "he strongly advocated for civil rights for African descendants and espoused Afro-centric views" (Haviser, 2015, p. 252). Lake Sr. established the People's Printery and the *Opinion*. He needed the revenues of this printing office to finance the *Opinion*, which was boycotted by local businesses and thus lacked advertising revenues. The publication of critical pieces had placed Lake, Sr., "in immediate conflict with the establishment on both sides of the island" (Sekou, 1996, p. 70). Based on the memories of his contemporaries, Lasana M. Sekou, one of Lake's sons, wrote in 1996:

> St. Martiners hid in the alleys or *steegjes* [backstreets] of Great Bay to buy the Opinion. Some hid it in a brown paper bag, in their shirt or blouse, and hurried away. It was an unwritten political offense to be caught reading what was then the island's only newspaper. (pp. 71–72)[31]

Like *Vitó*, the *Opinion* aimed at challenging the status quo and those families with capital and political power who had a keen interest in maintaining it. It did so too by building on popular news practices (i.e., street selling, word-of-mouth circulation) to articulate popular concerns to the institutional public. Unlike its Curaçaoan counterpart, the *Opinion* did not face an established press apparatus that was firmly embedded in an institutional public separated from a popular public. As a result, the popular and the institutional public, and respective practices of news and 'the news', met on a more equitable footing on this island. Lake's newspaper blended practices of both news and 'the news' to articulate the concerns of ‘black’ Sint Maarten laborers into the public sphere through an explicitly political register – turning it in an immediate political force in both the popular and the institutional public [see **Figure 7**].[32]

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[30] Up until 1983, the Windward Islands (Sint Maarten, Sint Eustatius, and Saba) formed one island territory. As such, many names of media outlets, but also political parties, of that time carried the name of 'Windward Islands' instead of Sint Maarten (or St. Martin).

[31] In a conversation with one of Lake Sr.'s sons, I learned that those drawing on Lake's legacy use the notion of St. Martiner (versus Sint Maartener) to counter the colonial and national (French/Dutch) division of the island. Instead of a French versus a Dutch side, they spoke about a northern and southern part, respectively. Many of the old families have members living on both sides of the island. Newcomers too have affiliations on both sides of what continues to be one island with open borders (see also Rotmeijer, 2018, where I spoke about the Sint Maarten border).

Being caught reading the *Opinion* was an ‘unwritten political offence’ not only because it was the only newspaper, but also because Lake Sr. became “a high-profile politician of his time” (Haviser, 2015, p. 252). In 1963, he was listed as a candidate of the National People’s Party (NVP, Sint Maarten) to oppose Wathey and the Democratic Party (DP, Sint Maarten).[33] By then, the DP-controlled government had consolidated their position of power for the transformations to come. In 1951, for example, Wathey had launched a tourism commission tasked with permitting lease and sale contracts of government-owned estate, including “some of the best land on the island, such as the Lowlands, Point Blanche, and Little Bay Point” (Roitman & Veenendaal, 2016, p. 79). Wathey and his cohorts held seats on the commission, thereby ensuring their control over public space and the implementation of the infrastructure necessary for tourism. In 1959, the revolution in Cuba – until than a popular US holiday destination – had provided Wathey’s administration a chance to market Sint Maarten as an alternative to US investors, hoteliers, and tour operators. The number of tourists visiting the island increased from around 30,000 in 1964 to 200,000 in 1974. After the return of laborers from Sint Maarten, the island would see thousands of Caribbean migrant workers arriving on the island. In 10 years’ time the official population went up from 3,868 in 1964 to 10,310 in 1974 (Lake, 2004, p. 66). In 1984 this number would double to more than 20,000 people. Incoming migrant workers often had no other choice than to accept deplorable working conditions and very low wages. Those who considered themselves as ‘native Sint Maarteners’ soon were a minority, causing deep feelings of anxiety about the cheap incoming labor force. Unlike poor Sint Maarteners who, along

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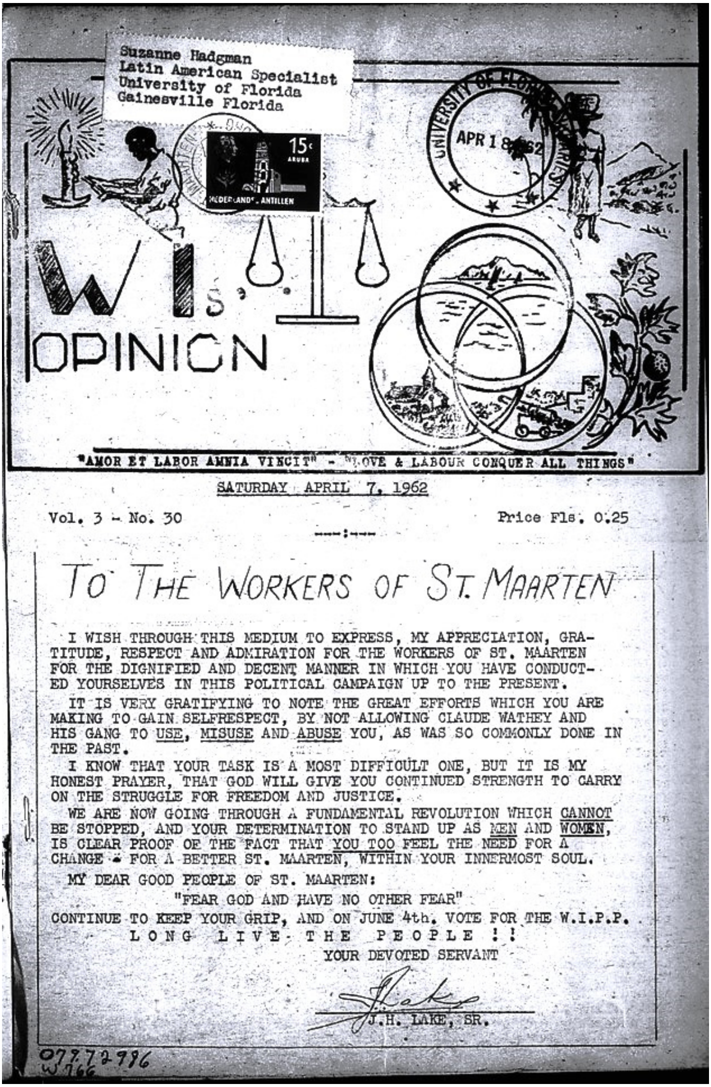
[32] A few remarks about the symbols displayed. Apart from obvious references: Christianity (three circles – holy trinity); Enlightenment (reading, candle); justice (scale); labor and black nationalism (Sint Maarten landmarks and national symbols, ‘black’ people) – the symbolic geometry (even more pronounced in early editions, including the display of working tools) and the motto of the paper (which changed from ‘labor omnia vincit’ to ‘Love & labour conquer all things’) seem to refer to Freemasonry. Although I could not find any public information of him being member of a Masonic lodge, Lake Sr. was among the charter members of the Rotary Club of Sint Maarten, which has historical links and shares principles with Freemasonry.

[33] Since the Netherlands Antilles had come into being with the Dutch Kingdom Charter in 1954, political parties on both Curaçao and Sint Maarten alligned.



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W.I.'s OPINION

"AMOR ET LABOR AMNIA VINCIT" - "LOVE & LABOUR CONQUER ALL THINGS"

SATURDAY APRIL 7, 1962

Vol. 3 - No. 30 Price Fls. 0.25

TO THE WORKERS OF ST. MAARTEN

I WISH THROUGH THIS MEDIUM TO EXPRESS, MY APPRECIATION, GRATITUDE, RESPECT AND ADMIRATION FOR THE WORKERS OF ST. MAARTEN FOR THE DIGNIFIED AND DECENT MANNER IN WHICH YOU HAVE CONDUCTED YOURSELVES IN THIS POLITICAL CAMPAIGN UP TO THE PRESENT.

IT IS VERY GRATIFYING TO NOTE THE GREAT EFFORTS WHICH YOU ARE MAKING TO GAIN SELFRESPECT, BY NOT ALLOWING CLAUDE WATHEY AND HIS GANG TO USE, MISUSE AND ABUSE YOU, AS WAS SO COMMONLY DONE IN THE PAST.

I KNOW THAT YOUR TASK IS A MOST DIFFICULT ONE, BUT IT IS MY HONEST PRAYER, THAT GOD WILL GIVE YOU CONTINUED STRENGTH TO CARRY ON THE STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM AND JUSTICE.

WE ARE NOW GOING THROUGH A FUNDAMENTAL REVOLUTION WHICH CANNOT BE STOPPED, AND YOUR DETERMINATION TO STAND UP AS MEN AND WOMEN, IS CLEAR PROOF OF THE FACT THAT YOU TOO FEEL THE NEED FOR A CHANGE - FOR A BETTER ST. MAARTEN, WITHIN YOUR INNERMOST SOUL.

MY DEAR GOOD PEOPLE OF ST. MAARTEN:

"FEAR GOD AND HAVE NO OTHER FEAR"

CONTINUE TO KEEP YOUR GRIP, AND ON JUNE 4th. VOTE FOR THE W.I.P.P.

LONG LIVE THE PEOPLE !!

YOUR DEVOTED SERVANT

J.H. Lake

J.H. LAKE, SR.

077.72986
W766

Figure 7: The front page of 30th edition of the *Windward Island's Opinion* in 1962. The editorial, titled "To The Workers of St. Maarten" and signed by José Lake Sr., advocates for laborers to vote against "Claude Wathey and his gang". The WIPP refers to the Windward Islands People's Party. Ideological differences were minimal between political parties (see Roitman & Veenendaal, 2016, pp. 81–82).

with anxiety felt relief at the relative economic prosperity after decades of economic hardship, the returning intellectuals saw the influx of newcomers as a threat to 'the real Sint Maarteners' and considered Wathey's stranglehold on power to be responsible for this economic and existential threat.

Resentment against the 'old' establishment united Sint Maarten's petit bourgeoisie, among whom were returning educated black nationalists as well as 'petit blancs'. They joined forces and decided that 'if one can't beat them, join them'. Lake Sr. was a case in point as he strategically joined the DP after three years in an opposition party. As a candidate on Wathey's list, he obtained a seat on the island council in 1967 and on the Legislative Council in 1969 (Haviser, 2015, p. 252; Roitman & Veenendaal, 2016, p. 83). According to Will Johnson (2016a, n.p.), who was another case in point, it took only a week after Lake Sr. shifted parties before the *Opinion* got an advertisement from Royal Dutch Shell, "whose agent at the time was Claude [Wathey]" (n.p.). Johnson was a light-skinned Saba-born teacher, politician, and writer, who had started his career working at Sint Maarten's post office in 1960. A year later, Lake Sr. had asked him to write for the *Opinion*, which he continued to do even though he soon joined the DP. When Sint Maarten saw the establishment of its first trade union in 1966, Johnson became the editor of its news organ, The Labor Spokesman. Between 1965–68, he also reported 'the news' on *PJD-2*, Sint Maarten's oldest radio station, established by a Dutchman in 1959. While "these were activities highly suspect to Claude and Clem [Labega, DP co-founder]", as Johnson (2016a, n.p.) recalled, it was Wathey's brother and leading businessman, Chester Wathey, who took over *PJD-2* in the early 1960s (Jeffry, 2003, p. 64). The Wathey family was not the only one with members gatekeeping 'the news'. Sint Maarten's Lieutenant Governor Van Delden (1968–1975) happened to have a brother, Henk van Delden, who was the then chief editor of the DP-owned Curaçaoan newspaper, *De Beurs* (Lake, 2004, p. 12).

*

Language and inter-island constitutional dynamics make a difference in understanding the Sint Maarten situation in contrast to that of Curaçao. On Sint Maarten, English – in its creole variety – is the language of both the popular and institutional public. Banter and serious news practices take place in one idiom. This was quite different on Curaçao where, for the most part, up until the labor revolt of 1969 and even up to this day for many, 'the news' is Dutch. While *Vitó* politically addressed the concerns of Curaçao's laborers in the institutional public, it had to shift to Papiamentu in order to reach the working classes. In doing so, *Vitó* entered the 'cultural public sphere' as part of the institutional public. In the aftermath of Trinta di Mei, 'popular news media' came to act in the cultural public sphere next to 'formal-institutional news media' in the bourgeois public sphere. Now turning to inter-island dynamics: it is vital to recognize that while there were class differences on Sint Maarten that corresponded, more or less, to skin tone, there was also 'big brother' Curaçao as the citadel of power in the Netherlands Antilles – the constitutional entity that came to institutionally bind the Dutch Caribbean islands after 1954. In the decades prior to the Dutch Kingdom Charter (1954), the development of transport and communication infrastructures between Sint Maarten and Curaçao had already led to more interaction between the island's elites. With the flux of migrant laborers from the Dutch Windwards to the oil refineries on Aruba and Curaçao, inter-island connections had become more intimate through all levels of the island societies. The 1954 Charter formally recognized these inter-island ties with the formation of the entity known as the Netherlands Antilles. Now, Sint Maarten – once a privately leased colony – became subjected to a central government seated on Curaçao. Of course, Sint Maarten's institutional order was represented in this government too. Yet whether or not Curaçao actually had the last say over the other islands, this was certainly how Curaçao was represented by Sint Maarten's elites. The focus on an outside suppressing power brought people on Sint Maarten together.

What these two factors – language and inter-island constitutional dynamics – entailed is that through the shared language of (St. Martiners') English, concerns in the popular public could be mediatized in the institutional public through an explicitly political register. Thus, the response of the petit bourgeoisie on Sint Maarten in the 1960s and 1970s was to translate the anxiety so deeply felt among the working classes into an advocacy for genuine inclusion into the formal structures of membership, on the basis of black nationalism. In Chapter Three, I explore the legacies of this advocacy in practices of news and 'the news' today. Let me now turn to how both islands underwent far-reaching social-economic transformations that shaped and were shaped by processes of change in the production, circulation, and consumption of news and 'the news'.

2.4. GOING ON AIR AND UNDERGROUND: NEWS AND 'THE NEWS' IN A NEOLIBERAL CAPITALIST WORLD

In the 1980s, Curaçao and Sint Maarten entered a new phase of accelerated global capitalism. The enforcement of global neoliberal programs, and the development of (first electronic then digital) media technologies, deeply affected news practices on both islands. Sint Maarten's tourism market exploded, and the island saw an influx not only of migrant workers and tourists, but also of wealthy investors and suppliers from the US, Europe, India, and later, China. Curaçao, in contrast, faced economic crises beginning in the mid-1980s. In 1985, Royal Dutch Shell sold its refinery for a symbolic price to the Antillean government that, subsequently, leased it to the Venezuelan state-owned company, Petróleos de Venezuela S.A. (PdVSA). The severe currency and debt crises in Venezuela affected Curaçao's tourism industry, while the worldwide economic recession of the early 1980s disturbed the island's international (trans)shipment industry. In the constitutional realm, the Dutch government came to accept "that the decolonisation process would not be completed in the classical sense of a transfer of sovereignty" (Oostindie & Klinkers, 2003, p. 120). Anticipating the ongoing ties with its (former) colonies, the Dutch government decided to increasingly – and more intensively – interfere in political and economic island affairs. In the 1990s, the Dutch involved the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as an intermediary, thereby ensuring that "future aid became contingent upon structural adjustment of Antillean economic policies" (Oostindie & Klinkers, 2003, p. 149).

Caribbean "new media and ICT infrastructure has developed (…) through foreign investment of global capital" (Pertierra & Horst, 2009, p. 103). New policies and tax laws were developed to stimulate e-commerce. Curaçao's offshore-industry 'Free zones' were transformed into ICT-attractive 'E-zones'. Meanwhile, consortiums of international telecommunication companies facilitated the necessary digital infrastructures for e-commerce and online gaming throughout the Caribbean. They constructed a network of submarine optic-fiber cables that turned Curaçao and Sint Maarten into crossroads of major intercontinental cable networks.

MAKE SOME NOISE: RADIO AND TV BROADCASTING ON CURAÇAO AND SINT MAARTEN

Against the background of these processes, by which Curaçao and Sint Maarten became (once again) logistical nodes of global capitalism, the media landscapes of Curaçao and Sint Maarten changed significantly. Reflecting the regional rise of electronic media and (cable) television since the 1980s (Rabess, 1998) and mobile phones, internet, and social media starting in the 2000s, the islands saw a proliferation and diversification of radio and television broadcasting. In Curaçao, the cultural aftermath of Trinta di Mei and governmental policies towards 'Antilleanization', created new opportunities not only for a variety of actors, but also for different content and formats of news production. In addition to "dissatisfaction with the content of mainstream media" (Rabess, 1998, p. 433), which had so far mainly represented and been owned by the 'white' elites, "the reduction of costs of the technology of production and transmission" and "policy shifts by (…) governments, such as liberalization, deregulation, privatization" (ibid, p. 434), created opportunities for local entrepreneurs and (semi-)skilled workers to enter the broadcasting business. Deregulation led to increased competition as the number of registered radio stations grew from four in 1976 to 13 in 1996 (Reinders, 1996) and to 28 in 2016 (Pin et al., 2016).

Most of these radio stations broadcasted in Papiamentu, following the practice of popular newspapers established a decade before. Together these news outlets operated as 'popular news media' in the 'cultural public sphere' as part of Curaçao's institutional public. More so than their print media counterparts, however, radio broadcasting mediated popular news practices directly into the public sphere. This was particularly so for daily call-in talk shows that went on air after a legislative reform in the 1980s (Lent, 1990). As radio broadcasters were no longer "required to pre-record and submit broadcasts for government approval" (Römer, 2017, p. 119), they could experiment with new broadcasting formats blending 'the news' with entertainment and commentary. Live call-in talk radio became a highly successful format for providing Curaçaoans a space to turn events into stories. Römer (2017) explained:

> [M]embers of the working classes— or middle classes who upon being downsized out of their jobs experienced downward mobility and a decline in their livelihoods—turned to radio not only as the last available niche for social

> advancement but also to register their grievances at the politicians and policies that failed them. (p. 121)

The same was true on Sint Maarten where radio became “the most influential local media on the island” (Guadeloupe, 2005, p. 171), with around 10 different stations in 2021 (BTP St. Maarten, 2021). The rapid socio-economic development on the island from the 1980s, in combination with the growing accessibility of electronic media, had provided an opportunity for those seeking upward social mobility – and also for those who sought to maintain the social order. Even up until today, gatekeeping families regulated the flow of information on the island. This was illustrated by two siblings, one owning four highly popular radio channels, one directing the bureau for telecommunications that is in charge of issuing licenses for using radio frequencies. As owner-managers of the main broadcaster on the island, their news practices played a significant role in reflecting and shaping the island’s public realm. And they, like their employees and listeners, knew all too well that this realm was, in essence, a private one.

This understanding could be seen in the manager’s daily show, “Good Morning, Mr. Governor”, which was broadcasted on all four radio channels. Starting (and ending) with an address to the governor, the manager usually read out a short statement on the importance of the island’s economy, while pointing out the (lack of) responsibility shown by political authorities in effectively supporting it. In episodes, such as “We must spend money in order to make money” (2016) or “Can government ever operate like business?” (2016), the private sector was spoken of as ‘we, community’. A press release that was sent out for a 2014 election debate broadcasted by the company’s main channel, *Laser 101*, was another example of this understanding:

> [W]e at [X] broadcasting network, as a corporate citizen of St. Maarten, feel that [it] is our responsibility to our listeners to assist them in providing as much information as possible regarding the position of the different political parties on the issues regarding business and the St. Maarten economy. At the end of the day it is the private sector that is the motor that drives our country (…). (SMN news, 2014, n.p.)

Beyond stressing the importance of the private sector for Sint Maarten, it was the position from which was spoken here – namely that the broadcasting network was seen *as a corporate citizen* – that spoke to this notion of Sint Maarten's public sphere being private. As the popular and the institutional public on Sint Maarten shared this understanding, it was through radio that these publics met. I further elaborate on the central role of radio, and *Laser 101* specifically, in Chapter Five.

The lasting impact of the Dutch colonial presence on Curaçao was shown by an ongoing influx of Dutch 'media professionals' and 'experts'. During my fieldwork in 2015, for example, I met a Dutch consultant with a significant already established career in Dutch news media who was hired by *TeleCuraçao* to guide its transformation into an interactive 'local TV platform' and to help with the development of an editorial charter. The charter was necessary, as the Dutch media consultant told me, to prevent politicians from enforcing airtime – a common practice on the island, particularly around elections. For politicians (and other prominent figures) it was a relatively cheap yet effective campaigning tool. For broadcasters it provided welcome revenue in the highly competitive news business.

While electronic technologies opened up the island's media landscapes to a variety of new actors, the elites maintained a firm grip on the ownership and regulation of broadcasting. This was most clearly illustrated by the infrastructural power of the Bureau Telecommunicatie en Post (BTP) as the telecommunications regulator was called on each island. To go on air one needed a license provided by the BTP that, in turn, needed the approval of a Minister in charge of licensing. On Curaçao, this was the Minister of Traffic, Transport and Urban Planning, who, until recently, also represented the government as the main stakeholder of the telecom company UTS, the parent company of the public broadcaster, and one of the biggest television and radio license holders, *TeleCuraçao* (see Pin et al., 2016, p. 98).[34] On Sint Maarten, the BTP director was subject to a criminal investigation of the Dutch-initiated Anti-Corruption Taskforce (TBO) on the suspicion of real estate fraud at the BTP in 2019. Sint Maarten's BTP's director was a main stakeholder in various ventures on the island. His business partner, a politician and former Member of Parliament, was sentenced for tax fraud and taking bribes in 2020. Cases of nepotism and corruption in relation to ownership and regulation of 'the news' were closely related to capitalist interests on both islands – interests that, in turn, exceeded way beyond the borders of the island territories. In his memoirs of Sint Maarten's long-time political leader, Claude Wathey, Will Johnson (2016b) wrote: "Capital which has its own life when coming in to St. Maarten became a factor which could no longer be controlled" (n.p.). The Dutch government became increasingly aware of this. After The Netherlands Attorney General's office had started an investigation, Wathey was charged with corruption, fraud, and participating in a criminal organization. In 1994, he was convicted of perjury and got 18 months in prison. More recently, the Anti-Corruption Taskforce started an investigation into Wathey's grandson, Theo Heyliger, former leader of the DP (later the United People's Party). In 2020, Heyliger was found guilty of taking bribes and wide-scale money laundering and was sentenced to five years in prison.

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[34] The sale of UTS in March 2019 did not change this situation as *TeleCuraçao* became a state-owned enterprise.

Since the 1990s, the Dutch government increasingly intervened in the institutional affairs of these islands with the aim of reclaiming control over capital's proliferation on both Curaçao and Sint Maarten. Meanwhile, the development of digital media technologies led to the emergence of unforeseen practices of news and 'the news'.

BREAKING (THE) NEWS: CURAÇAOAN AND SINT MAARTEN NEWS PRACTICES IN THE ONLINE WORLD

While the press was among the first to launch news websites as additions to their core print business, the rise of digital media technologies opened up 'the news' to actors, voices, and flows of information beyond the established news media on the islands. Online infrastructures were implemented and acted upon by a wide variety of infrastructural powers – from global political and economic elites to media and telecommunication multinationals. As Curaçao and Sint Maarten became important regional data and information hubs, the island societies gained access to accumulated news flows via news websites, Facebook pages, mobile phones, and WhatsApp groups. Digital technologies also gave way to new (next to older) news practices and producers, among whom were also many without – or having less direct – access to the (bourgeois) public sphere. Social media, in particular, provided venues for popular news practices to be articulated directly next to, while diffusing, institutional news practices.

During my first week of fieldwork on Curaçao, I was introduced to this diffuse news media landscape. On the annual *Dia di Prensa* [Press Day] on September 1, 2015, I was invited to an informal get-together of freelance journalists, bloggers, and broadcasters among whom was one of the three most prominent, what an interlocutor termed, “lone wolves” on the island. These were hugely popular freelance reporters who were always on top of ‘the news’. They not only brought the news to the public first, but also brought it out in a critical – and, at times – controversial fashion. Facebook was their main platform and many on and from Curaçao told me that checking their pages was the first thing they did when they woke up in the morning. One of these lone wolves was a Dutch freelance journalist working for a variety print and broadcasting news media on Curaçao and in The Netherlands; one was a Curaçaoan radio broadcaster and newspaper reporter, who posted on Facebook with his own name; and one, arguably the most popular, who was a Curaçaoan radio and TV news reporter, who had made Facebook reporting his core business. Together, these lone wolves performed news and ‘the news’ on the edges of Curaçao’s two-fold institutional public: in-between the cultural and the bourgeois public sphere.

In addition to the lone wolves, since the 2000s a variety of news websites and cross-media platforms had emerged on both Curaçao and Sint Maarten. These were often initiatives of (former) radio DJs, TV broadcasters, newspaper managers, and editors as well as PR and communication experts. The latter were not new to ‘the news’ on the islands. Considering the overall small staff and high workload, which had increased to keep up with around-the-clock online news circulation, the press relied at least in part on incoming press releases to make ‘the news’. Many journalists and editors considered it a necessary evil to fill the newspaper with (translated and, at times, adjusted) press releases. Radio and TV stations, in turn, based their news broadcasting on what was published in the newspapers. Communication and politicians’ PR spokespersons, political parties, and businesses in charge of writing and spreading press releases thus played a significant role in determining ‘the news’. Moreover, they used this position of power in and over ‘the news’ in the digital era to their advantage. It was therefore not surprising that a government PR and communication official ran a news website on the side (as was the case on Sint Maarten) or that one of Curaçao’s main news websites was launched by a former government communication specialist. At the same time, (former) journalists also decided to shift careers and move into PR. This was frowned upon by colleagues – certainly those working for or with formal-institutional news media underpinned by bourgeois norms of journalism. Yet, in reality, and certainly in the daily island reality, wearing multiple hats was not only common, it was also necessary to make a living. Journalists too were bounded by the capitalist glasshouse order.

While some among the established news media managed to adapt to the digital reality of 'the news' – e.g., by embracing a cross-media business model or by online transitions – others strove to retain control over the flow of information. They did this, for example, by erecting (full or partial) payment walls on their news sites or by suing online news actors for copy right violations (justified or not). For these media businesses, the internet not only posed a threat, but also offered new infrastructures to enforce control. The management of the *Amigoe*, for example, found a way to use (the services of) Facebook against those sharing 'the news' on Facebook itself. Whenever a screenshot or a picture of an *Amigoe* news item was shared on Facebook, the newspaper filed complaints of copy right violations with Facebook, which, in turn, immediately blocked the account(s) of the news actors who had shared the screenshots until further notice. Among those affected by these measures were not only (freelance) reporters, but also others involved in 'the news', amongst others, a Curaçaoan media researcher (in 2017).

For activists and social action groups, emerging online infrastructures also provided a channel for spreading information about their cause and for exposing abuses in the institutional public. Their critical weblogs formed a threat not only to media owners, but also to wider elite networks on the islands and beyond. There were several cases of activist bloggers who, like critical reporters online, faced regular lawsuits (based on claims of, among other things, slander, discrimination, and copyright violation), as well as cyber-attacks, intimidation, and threats. On Sint Maarten, a blogger with numerous weblogs aimed at exposing corrupt politicians and business people on the island was arrested for alleged slander in 2017. I also spoke to a Dutch-Curaçaoan blogger who sought to expose the connections between illegal gambling and online gaming in the Dutch Caribbean in relation to the Kingdom-wide financial offshore. She had been forced to operate underground after receiving death threats.

These and other attempts to control the flow of information were devastating to those directly affected, yet only temporarily hindered news practices online. The islands' elites had long held a firm grip on flows of information in the institutional public, particularly via the press. While newspapers were still important on the islands, they no longer held a monopoly on ‘the news’. A Curaçaoan journalist with years of experience in both print and broadcasting media on the island told me:

> Now, everyone who is concerned with the media is part of those bringing the news and many people take this news as equally truthful [as the news of established news media]. The role of media has completely changed: it’s only about the game of the news. (Interview Steve, October 13, 2015)

The game of news, as my interlocutor called it, was now played by the rules of digital media, among which were instantaneity, velocity, multiplicity, and proliferation. This was a game that required being first and fast, breaking the news, getting likes, and going viral. For established news media in the institutional public (with its formal procedures, professionalism, and bourgeois conventions), it was hard to adjust to this emerging news reality on the islands. Yet, in the popular public (with its informal communication networks and tradition of word-of-mouth and oral transmission) digital media technologies spoke to how news had long been practiced in Caribbean island societies. This was particularly the case for social media platforms, among which Facebook was the most popular among Curaçaoans and Sint Maarteners and certainly among young(er) generations (CBS Curaçao, 2018). Referring to these, the above-mentioned journalist told me: “They [youngsters] will tell you that they have the news from Facebook or that they’ve heard it from their aunt. To them it doesn’t matter at all who has said it or why, for news is news!” (Interview Steve, October 13, 2015). Indeed, this was how news circulated and became meaningful in the popular public, and certainly not only among the youth. I still vividly remember the answer of a close friend and co-researcher from Curaçao in response to my question about how she got the news from the island: “my mom”.

Facebook had attained a central role in daily island life. It provided not only the latest news (also for those working in and providing ‘the news’), but also smoothed access to one’s social and professional network. In addition to face-to-face contact, Facebook Messenger was the primary communication tool to get in touch with family members, to check in with friends, to plan office meetings, and to do business. The reason for the popularity of social media among islanders was aptly described by a Sint Maarten telecommunication expert when he said in an interview:

> Well, to tell you the truth, St. Martin is Internet savvy from a social networking point of view (…). Because of our oral culture, word-of-mouth has remained the main part of what caused the [online] social network to explode. (Cited in Sekou, 2011, n.p.)

Popular news practices flourished in interactive (open and enclosed) Facebook groups (e.g., “WiVoice” on Sint Maarten) and lively comment sections on Facebook pages from both established popular news media (e.g., *Vigilante* on Curaçao) and public figures – from politicians to rappers, bloggers, and popular news reporters. To (Dutch) Caribbean people, who had always been moving and now lived across the world, social media provided a popular realm to turn events on and beyond the islands into shared stories. Like oral storytelling, online news practices held “the propensity (…) to make the story dramatic to keep the audience’s attention” (Storr, 2016, p. 115). On Curaçao, this skill in oral information transfer, the stories it produced, and the social affects it triggered and steered, was commonly referred to as *bomboshi* [literally: drama]. The logic of social media was one of ‘bomboshi’ too. Whether posting controversial, shocking, cute, or personal content, as long one steered affect, action, and reaction, there was a chance of going viral. Rather than replacing word-of-mouth circulation and informal communication networks, digital media technologies were thus a vehicle for popular news practices to thrive, intensify and expand – or, as in the above quote, “to explode” – on and beyond the islands across the world. I elaborate further on this dynamic in Chapter Five.

The widespread use of social media among Curaçaoans and Sint Maarteners did not mean that access to online news was freely or equally distributed in the island societies. In 2021, the internet penetration (internet users as a percentage of the total population) was said to be 68,1% on Curaçao and 68,6% on Sint Maarten (DataReportal, 2021a, 2021b). There were many explanations for why arguably one-third of the island societies did not use the internet, among which were ageing populations (mostly, on Curaçao) and that many who lived on the islands were not officially registered. With respect to internet access, many lower-class Curaçaoan and Sint Maarten households could not afford a computer, let alone a monthly internet subscription (see, for Curaçao, CBS Curaçao, 2018). And while some of them could go online elsewhere (e.g., at work or via family), Internet access was generally not free. Thus, the World Wide Web by no means led to the transcendence of longstanding inequities in the access to information on the islands.

Yet amidst these continuing inequalities, people on the islands found creative ways to engage with emerging digital media technologies. From the lower to the higher social levels, most islanders did have a mobile (smart) phone or, whenever they could, bought a pre-paid sim card to go online.[35] I experienced this as I regularly spent an afternoon at an office of Chippie, TelCell, Digicel or one of the other mobile network providers along with many others in line to purchase a sim card. In search of free Wi-Fi across the islands, I could tell when I had found a likely spot because of all the youngsters on their cell phones hanging around certain bars and coffee shops. Moreover, having multiple ways of accessing the internet was a way to deal with unforeseen network failures, whether caused by regular electric power outages (generally due to malfunctioning public utilities on the islands) or a lack of telecom investments in keeping the online infrastructures up to date. Such failures were not new to islanders though. They had found creative ways to pragmatically deal with these as they knew (too) that in the glasshouse they lived, having access to information was necessary to make a living.

With the rise of digital media technologies, capitalism – with its primary need for news (media) – accelerated on a global scale. News from throughout the world now flew in 24/7 to the island societies, which, in turn, contributed to the global network that news had become. Online news infrastructures made information from and about global powers, such as The Netherlands, the UK, and the US, available in an instant. The accessibility to online news and information affected islanders' image of the world, their place in it, and their senses of belonging to it.

2.5. COMPARISON AND CONTRAST

What this chapter attempted to make clear is how public life on Curaçao and St. Maarten took shape by multiple emerging publics, and how this process unfolded differently on each island through interacting practices of news and 'the news'.

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[35] There was a wide-spread use of pre-paid sim cards versus post-paid subscriptions, which came with monthly payment obligations and a risk of debt.

I have argued that Curaçao has always known a Dutch presence as an extra layer of ruling power on the island. This power was outsourced on Sint Maarten to private individuals. Now, why is this important to practices of (the) news on both islands in relation to senses of belonging? On Sint Maarten the public sphere is (and always has been since Dutch colonialism) private. Differently said, what connects Sint Maarteners is what anthropologist Francio Guadeloupe (2008) called, quoting his interlocutors, the “money tie system”:

> Perhaps these small islanders had come to know one of the barest truths in our capitalist world: to assert our existence, we are all socialized to seek economic and status gains. This is what binds all the peoples of the globe. This is the truth they termed the money tie system, and no interaction is free of this truth. No society is outside the sphere of capitalism. (p. 211)

This truth of the ‘money tie system’ is clear to all Sint Maarteners, whether one belongs to the lower or higher levels of society. Speaking the same language (literally and figuratively) also means that the popular and institutional public – and related, news and ‘the news’ – meet on more equal terms. This encounter is political as defined by Collins, “Political means relating to the way power is achieved and used in a country or society” (Collins Dictionary, 2021).

On Curaçao, such shared understandings of what is basically a system of inequality (a class-based social order based on capitalist production relations) is ‘disturbed’. Here, the Dutch presence and active institutional involvement has led to a situation in which the institutional public split into a bourgeois public sphere (representing ‘Dutch’ liberal-democratic ideals) and a cultural public sphere (representing ‘Curaçaoan’ culture which takes shapes in opposition to the Dutch presence in the institutional public and popular news media). The popular public does not meet on equal terms with the split institutional public on this island.

My point here is that on Curaçao too capitalist production relations prevail. Those who do have access to the island’s institutional realm know this. Here, the split institutional public hides the fact that it is actually a “money tie system”. On Curaçao, the popular public has been ‘trapped’ in a cultural public sphere where popular news media effectively articulate the hopes and concerns of those who do not have access to that other part of the institutional public, the bourgeois public sphere. In this bourgeois public sphere, liberal-democratic norms –

including those of journalism – inform interactions between institutional actors. They do this idealistically to monitor and control the proliferation of capital and those in power profiting from this. At the same time, the bourgeois public sphere has also contributed to the maintenance of a class-based order. It regulates access to the institutional public by prioritizing rational-liberal deliberation, education, and professional expertise. This is somewhat 'known' on Sint Maarten, and is less well-known on Curaçao.

The introduction of 'the news' on both islands was part of a Dutch infrastructural investment in maintaining the social order. Institutional news practices, in turn, were used by other powers (from local to global such as the US) on their own terms and differently through time. Infrastructural power and logistics management was thus never a one-way endeavor. Like the export of 'the news' to other colonies, on the islands "metropolitan news practices were appropriated by local elites to modify the local news system for conscious political reasons" (Nerone, 2013, p. 451). Yet, while those in power on both sides of the ocean (and increasingly across the world) engaged with emerging media infrastructures, so did those among the lower levels of society. In this chapter, I have argued that 'the news' has always been contested by news. This process of continuous interaction between practices of newsmaking in the institutional and the popular public shapes public island life.

In the chapters that follow, I build on recent social-economic transformations that came with processes of change in the production, circulation, and consumption of news and 'the news'; the proliferation of radio stations and TV broadcasters in the 1980s; and the rise of online news and social media since the 2000s. With the rise of digital media technologies, global capitalism – with its primary need for news (media) – accelerated once more. Today, news from throughout the world flows 24/7 through the island societies, where news practices in turn affect the global network news and 'the news' have become.

As a result, practices of news and 'the news' came to unfold through the demands of global capitalism. They did this by and while generating a plethora of different outlooks in and on the world – outlooks that open up to and also reduce the world (people, production, produce). The way this, in turn, has affected *how institutional and popular practices of newsmaking in the public sphere in Curaçao and Sint Maarten – understood as a social process of turning events into collective stories – generate common, contested and at times also cathartic senses of* *belonging,* is what I aim to answer in the chapters that follow. I start by exploring the legacies of black nationalist politics of belonging through practices of news and ‘the news’ in today’s Sint Maarten.