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

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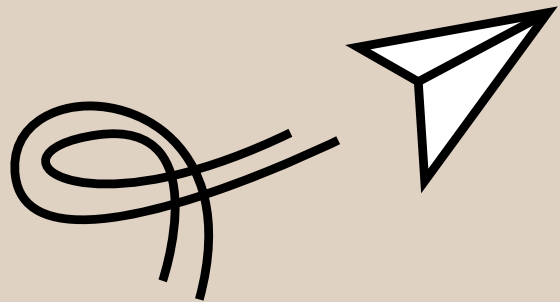Rotmeijer, S. H. (2023, May 23). *News in a glasshouse: media, publics, and senses of belonging in the Dutch Caribbean*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3618456

6 | Conclusion

In this book I have sought to answer the question of *how institutional and popular practices of newsmaking in the public sphere in Curaçao and Sint Maarten – understood as social processes of turning events into collective stories – generate common, contested and at times also cathartic senses of belonging?*

My main argument in this book has been that to appreciate the meaning and function of news on Curaçao and Sint Maarten, particularly as a marker and generator of senses of belonging, one has to study the dynamics of, and interactions between, the institutional public and the popular public.

News and 'the news': The analytical distinction I have worked with in this thesis recognizes how news practices shape and are shaped by these two publics. 'News' is about news practices employed in the popular public (so, popular news practices), while 'the news' represents the news practices in the institutional public (institutional news practices). Practices of news and 'the news' cannot be kept separate. They are constantly interacting with each other whilst remaining distinct. So too in the lives of people on the islands, as I explored throughout this book. Just like in so many other places in the world, people on Sint Maarten and Curaçao love 'the news' and are also quite taken by the 'new' and 'noteworthy' which is prevalent in popular realms of public life. Journalists, reporters, and other media actors working for or with established news media also engage with news while creating 'the news'. News emerges from the stories people tell and share about what happens around them, and gathers momentum once these stories become widely known with more people consuming, remaking, and disseminating them. Through news *common, contested, and at times also cathartic senses of belonging* emerge. In other words, practicing news unfolds *as a social process of turning events into collective stories*.

Building on the methodological approach of **multi-sited ethnography** I have followed practices of news and 'the news' in the popular and institutional public respectively across a spatially dispersed field. I conducted fieldwork on Curaçao and Sint Maarten and with Curaçaoans and Sint Maarteners throughout the Kingdom of the Netherlands starting in 2015. Between the end of August 2015 through June 2016, I spent six months on Curaçao and four months on Sint Maarten doing participant observation at three different newsrooms (of a Papiamentu-language and a Dutch-language newspaper on Curaçao, and an English-language newspaper on Sint Maarten) and at several news websites and social media platforms. I conducted 42 in-depth interviews with journalists,

editors, and news media owners. I followed practices of newsmaking through everyday island life. My fieldwork was not bounded to the territorial borders of Curaçao and Sint Maarten, nor did it stop once I continued my work in the European Netherlands. The locus of this study extends into the social-political realm of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Doing multi-sited fieldwork enabled me to understand the sites I engaged with in interaction with a multiscalar 'field' that unfolds through processual and situational relationships. The metaphor of the glasshouse, by which I came to refer to how social life on Curaçao and Sint Maarten became intrinsically entangled with colonialism and the imposition of capitalist modes of being, intimately links to this epistemological framework of the field. This is via a complex web of multiscalar interactions between people, (his)stories, news practices, and senses of belonging.

The metaphor of the **'glasshouse'** refers to how social life on Curaçao and Sint Maarten was designed under Dutch colonial rule and has evolved as part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands since colonial times. Like (real) glasshouses, constructed as regulated artificial atmospheres to optimize the growth of plants outside of their natural environment, I argue that as part of the Dutch colonial enterprise, Curaçao and Sint Maarten were designed and regulated as social environments to optimize processes of production and distribution. As a metaphor, the glasshouse resembles a microcosmos of an operation of reducing the social world to capitalist production relations. News media were vital to this operation, as were the many informal circuits of news circulation.

The latter formed the entry point of **Chapter Two**, where I followed historical traces of 'the news' contested by news on Curaçao and Sint Maarten. In doing so, I showed how public life on Curaçao and Sint Maarten took shape via multiple emerging publics, and how this process unfolded differently on each island. I 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. The effect of this was that the public sphere on Sint Maarten was private (based on capitalist social relations). This was clear to all Sint Maarteners, whether among the lower or higher levels of society. Speaking the same language (literally and figuratively) also meant that the popular and institutional public – and news and 'the news' – met on more equal, and thus political, terms. I argued that on Curaçao such equal 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). The representation of this culture in this sphere basically takes shape against the Dutch presence and is located in the institutional public and popular news media. The popular public does not meet on equal terms with the split institutional public in the public sphere on this island.

While those in power on both islands and sides of the ocean (and increasingly across the world) acted on emerging media infrastructures, so did those among the lower rungs of society. 'The news' has always interacted with and been contested by news. This interactional process between practices of newsmaking in the institutional and the popular public continues to shape current public life on the island. Through the proliferation of electronic and digital media technologies during the past decades, practices of news and 'the news' came to generate a plethora of different outlooks in and on the world – outlooks that open up to and, at the same time, reduce the world (people, production, produce) to the demands of global capitalism.

The analysis I presented in this chapter ties in with the first part of my main research question, namely *how institutional and popular practices of newsmaking in the public sphere in Curaçao and Sint Maarten* were shaped by the imposition of a capitalist mode of being and, in turn, acted on (and were contested by) by news practices on the island. Following these traces back is important because they continue to be manifested in everyday public articulations of *common, contested and at times also cathartic senses of belonging.* These I explored in the rest of the chapters of this book.

In **Chapter Three** ("Who is the 'black bourgeoisie'?") I explored how institutional and popular news practices in the public sphere of Sint Maarten generated **contested senses of belonging** among the middle classes on the island.

Using my experiences with the lecture of Dr. Umar Johnson (a clinical psychologist and pan-Africanist from the US) during the Black History Month (February 2016) on Sint Maarten as my point of departure, I showed how this event was both news and 'the news' (as the event was turned into stories in both the popular and the institutional public). Dr. Johnson was invited by a group of activists who have pushed black nationalist politics into the public sphere. They did so first in the 1970s by owning and editing newspapers. Today they do so

through YouTube tutorials, Facebook posts, an annual book fair, the organization of literary salons, and ownership of an international publishing house. They used to practice news from 'below', aligned with the popular public. Today they are an alternative within the institutional public where they advocate a racialized politics of belonging. A new generation, however, does not feel that this politics of belonging represents Sint Maarten's contemporary reality. During Black History Month on Sint Maarten they challenged black politics by advocating – via practices of news and 'the news' – the acceptance of the island as it is – a highly plural society that has rapidly changed from a fishermen's village into a dynamic regional and global junction of relations between people, politics, technologies, and business. Both publics (black nationalists and an emerging younger public) belong to the middle class. While engaging in contestations based on contrasting politics of belonging, I show that they share a confident common sense of belonging. They share a sense of being a Sint Maartener and having equal social standing.

My aim with this chapter was to show how a common understanding of the capitalist infrastructures buttressing Sint Maarten's (bourgeois) public sphere – a public sphere that is private – allowed different publics to articulate popular concerns into the public sphere. On this island, it was this common understanding together with a shared language (St. Martiners') English by which the popular public and the institutional public could meet on equal terms through a *political* register.

This was different on Curaçao as I showed in **Chapter Four** ("The lottery of life") where I focused on *how institutional and popular news practices in the public sphere on Curaçao generated **a common sense of belonging** among the working classes on the island.*

On this island, popular concerns (news) entered 'the news' through an affective register that was central to the 'cultural public sphere' as part of the (split) institutional public on this island. In the cultural public sphere, mass popular culture interpellates its public emotionally, focusing on the quotidian and extraordinary, straying away from political analyses. On Curaçao, the institutionalization of the popular public 'news' via the cultural public sphere took place via 'popular news media' that operated parallel to 'formal-institutional news media' in the bourgeois public sphere.

To illustrate the common sense belonging of Curaçao's working classes and connect these to the relationship between the (split) institutional and popular

public on this island, I employed an existential anthropological approach connected to a phenomenology of hope and fear. The working classes on Curaçao do not organize and seek social change like black nationalists on Sint Maarten do. Their ambition is to live as the elites do, not to topple the structure. It is this mode of being generating a common sense of belonging among Curaçao's working classes that I explored by focusing on everyday news routines around *the lottery* and *the obituaries*. In doing so, my aim was to show that along with being instruments of domination by keeping the lower class in check, they are also employed by the working classes to express a common sense of belonging. This was important as they found themselves thrown to the bottom of the social order of the glasshouse that was Curaçao. To escape their daily reality in this glasshouse, the working classes oriented themselves towards the future in the hope of a better life one day (lottery) and fearing a future that was inevitable (obituaries).

Curaçao's popular news media acted on this future orientation among the working classes by providing them the issues of the day, an ethic of (tomorrow) 'God Willing', a future through the 'university of the street', and a dream of getting out of this glasshouse someday – that is, by winning the lottery. From the daily routine of handing in one's lucky number and buying one's *brièchi* (lottery ticket) to watching the live broadcast of the daily draw – news practices around the lottery reflected a shared need among the working classes to get some grip over a life that was deeply uncertain. To them, buying a lot was not about rationally deliberating whether this was worth the risk – after all, they had nothing to lose really. They sensed that all belonged *equally* to the Kingdom of God. And His salvation was their only escape out of the glasshouse they found themselves in. Their faith enabled them to take a hand in their 'lot' and to celebrate chance in the hope for a better life one day.

What happens when the glasshouse, due to an external catastrophic event, breaks down, was the central focus in **Chapter Five** ("A shattered glasshouse"), where I explored *how institutional and popular news practices in Hurricane's Irma's aftermath on Sint Maarten generated* **cathartic senses of belonging** *throughout the Kingdom of the Netherlands.*

I argued that the aftermath of Hurricane Irma led to the exposure and intensification of more popular news practices that, at that moment, served a widespread need for information not only in the popular but also in the institutional public. The sudden and violent disruption of social life as it used to

be broke down the glasshouse – and with it the infrastructures upon which the division between these publics existed. Now, every Sint Maartener stood in the face of the unknown, while many related to and affected by the disastrous event were confronted with feelings of hope and fear. They scrolled the internet for a sign of life from a loved one. They listened day and night to the only locally operating radio station. They joined the rapidly emerging Facebook groups because they were in need of emotional release and some comfort. Amidst severe existential insecurity, these and other news practices generated cathartic senses of belonging. In the face of the unknown, all belonged to 'we' Sint Maarteners.

In this chapter I showed that these cathartic feelings of belonging were not constrained by the territorial or national borders of the island but stretched into the Dutch Kingdom (and beyond). In The Netherlands, the news media no longer portrayed Sint Maarteners as Others, far-away and backward on a distant Caribbean island. Rather, they were Dutch citizens in need of help. On Curaçao, the call to stand with "our Antillean brothers and sisters" was spread via popular and institutional news practices alike. For a moment, we were all in this together.

What happened with the world we came to share in Irma's immediate aftermath? And what about the popular news practices, the intensification of which had generated cathartic senses of belonging throughout the (Dutch) world? These practices were by no means gone. In the popular public news continued to spread fast by word of mouth as neighbors, friends, and family (whether on or beyond the island) were helping each other to get through the day. In the popular public we still could feel that we belonged to 'we'. This would not change. What did change though was that with the reconstruction of the formal-institutional order and its underlying liberal-democratic norms, popular news practices and the (common and cathartic) senses of belonging generated by these, were pushed back into the popular public. 'News' was thereby removed from 'the news' again. In the institutional public of the Kingdom of The Netherlands, 'the news' was key to critical-rational deliberation, which, in turn, was vital for maintaining the social order. When the infrastructures of media, politics, and business were restored, so was a capitalist mode of being in society. Hence, 'we' all found each other back in the glasshouse again.

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This glasshouse, as I have explored throughout this book, was not constructed and upheld by total control and discipline. Just as uncontrolled metamorphoses of plants and wildlife (ants, bugs, fungus) take place in actual glasshouses, so too unexpected flowerings and mushrooming happen on Curaçao and Sint Maarten. News in the glasshouses that are Curaçao and Sint Maarten does not necessarily follow the script of a bourgeois liberal imagining of a common sense of belonging. 'The news' attempts to do so but is constantly thwarted by news. The latter articulates how the island communities are continuously constructed in-between regulation. It is reproduced by the bourgeois public sphere and its institutes, as well as by the popular practices that emerge in relation to this regulation. It is not so much despite oppressive infrastructures since colonial rule but due to oppression that invention, creativity, and resourcefulness emerge in daily island life. News practices – again, understood as the social processes of turning events into collective stories – articulate the creative transformation that emerges from contestation into new ways of imagining and constructing the island communities.

Based on the acknowledgement that apart from 'the news' in the institutional public there is always also news in the popular public, I have aimed to problematize two prevalent dominant representations about 'the islands'. One is based on 'spatio-temporal othering' and continues to buttress public debates, political campaigns, and media representations across the Kingdom of the Netherlands as well as to inform the many 'development projects' employed on the islands. The other one is employed by those who wish to counter the first representation by highlighting Afro-Caribbean cultural practices and 'black' forms of expression. Throughout this book, I have shown that both these representations tend to ignore how Caribbean communities have always come into being by multiple publics and in between oppression and invention.

This leads me to the answer to the main research question of this thesis; *how do institutional and popular practices of newsmaking in the public sphere on Curaçao and Sint Maarten – understood as social processes of turning events into collective stories – generate common, contested and at times also cathartic senses of belonging?*

I argue that popular and institutional practices of newsmaking – news and 'the news' respectively – unfold through contestation that enables emergent counter publics to form on Curaçao and Sint Maarten. In daily island life, news in the popular public and 'the news' in the institutional public interact continuously,

whilst remaining different. These interacting social processes of turning events into collective stories may generate common senses of belonging. This was the case, as I argued, among Curaçao's working classes, who articulate a sense of all belonging to the Kingdom of God through news practices around the lottery and the obituaries. It is shown through contested senses of belonging as illustrated by Sint Maarten's middle classes between those who practice news and 'the news, to either generate a black nationalist politics of belonging or a 'creole', cosmopolitan sense of belonging. We also see the cathartic senses belonging in the intensification of popular news practices across the Kingdom of The Netherlands in Hurricane Irma's aftermath. Just as multiple publics and counter-publics interact, while remaining distinct, so do the news practices in these publics and the senses of belonging these generate. The contested politics of belonging among Sint Maarten's middle classes is underpinned by a common sense of belonging to Sint Maarten and having access to and meeting on equal footing in the island's institutional public. The common sense of belonging as expressed by Curaçao's working classes in relation to news practices around the lottery unfold in a parallel realm and through a phenomenology of hope and fear. Contrast this with the senses of belonging among those practices of 'the news' around lotteries from a position in the institutional public. To understand the function and meaning of news, as a marker and generator of senses of belonging, it is necessary to take multiple emerging publics and their interactions in the public sphere on Curaçao and Sint Maarten into account. Also, I argue that processes of news and 'the news' in public life on these islands are multiscalar. They connect intimately, yet differently, to the realm of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and a shared past of colonialism and the imposition of a capitalist mode of being.

Public life on Curaçao and Sint Maarten and across the Kingdom of the Netherlands has always come into being because of contestation that enables emergent counter-publics to form. And by highlighting these processes of contestation in daily life, I have shown that those excluded from the (bourgeois) public sphere become central to its construction and, in fact, have always done so.