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The Primacy of Parliamentary Proceedings: The Members of the First Dutch National Assembly and the Dagverhaal

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ABSTRACT

In the age of the Dutch Republic, both political authors and the public lacked detailed information on the behaviour of political figures, because decision-making took place on a level to which neither groups had direct access. This often led writers who aimed at a national audience to represent political figures in a stereotypical manner. During the first years of the Batavian Republic, the proceedings of the sessions of the National Assembly (the *Dagverhaal*) granted direct access to the political process. As long as the *Dagverhaal* was read by a large part of the population, the media and the electorate had the same knowledge of the public acts of their deputies. As a result, political commentators could take an important step towards a multidimensional and individualized representation.

KEYWORDS

Batavian Republic, National Assembly, *Dagverhaal*, character writing, political journalism

During the 1780s, Dutch citizens who called themselves 'patriots' unleashed a revolutionary media campaign in the Dutch Republic. Inspired by the works of French and British political theorists and the political language of the American Revolution, the patriots put forward the view that sovereignty did not reside with the ruling stadholder William V of Orange or with the regent assemblies of the seven united provinces, but with the people at large. The sovereign people, they claimed, possessed a series of inalienable natural rights, including the right to participate in government by choosing their own representatives and the right to dismiss a bad government at any given time.

The idea of the inalienable sovereignty of the people contrasted sharply with Dutch political practice. Since its emergence in the late sixteenth century, the Dutch Republic had seen the growth of an oligarchic class of urban regents who had monopolized local and provincial government through a complicated system of stadholderly nominations. From 1784 onwards, the history of the Dutch Republic was increasingly interpreted as a joint scheme between stadholder and regents of which the Dutch citizens had been victims for over two hundred years. The patriot press started calling the regents 'aristocrats'

and usually represented them in a stereotypical manner, reducing them to caricatures which always had the same three negative qualities: pride, greed and insincerity. The patriots asserted that even if the aristocrats professed popular sovereignty, they really wanted to keep public offices to themselves and to their families, to profit from their financial benefits and to enrich themselves. The language of the patriots must be understood in a tradition of classical republicanism, in which the exhibition of pride and the excessive love of wealth and luxury were thought to create a climate of moral decline, which would ultimately cause the downfall of every Republic.

When the patriots spoke about aristocrats, they rarely referred to any individual regents in particular. It was, the well-known pamphleteer Gerrit Paape wrote, not his intention to give the 'aristocrat' distinct features. He did not want to stigmatize actual people, because he meant no harm to anyone personally.[1] Even if he had wished to name and shame individual regents, there was little point for Paape to do so, since he was writing for a national audience. As a result of the locally controlled oligarchic structure of the Dutch confederacy, citizens were mostly concerned with local grievances against local regents and showed less interest in the situation elsewhere. For writers such as Paape, it therefore made sense to represent aristocrats as anonymous, caricatural figures, making it possible for their readers to each imagine their own local regents in their place.

The Patriot Revolution turned into a civil war when citizen militias started to purge local governments. Regents who refused to accept the idea of popular sovereignty were replaced with patriots. The stadholder William V considered this an infringement of his privilege to nominate candidates for public offices, and in 1787 he succeeded in suppressing the Patriot Movement with the support of a Prussian army. The patriots were forced to go underground or flee to France, where many of them took part in the French Revolution. After seven years of Restoration and censorship, Dutch exiles convinced the French revolutionaries to invade the Dutch Republic, leading to the collapse of the stadholderly regime and forcing William V to take refuge in England. The French yielded power to the patriots, who now called themselves 'Batavians' (*Bataven*) and renamed their country the Batavian Republic. The new regime did not hesitate to democratize local and provincial governments, declaring that these governments would maintain a provisional status until the new state had given itself a written constitution.

The reform of national government proved more problematic. All Batavians agreed that sovereignty resided with the people at large, but they did not agree whether the Batavian Republic should have a strong national assembly which was to hold supreme power, or whether it should remain a confederacy in which the provinces kept most of their autonomy. Further disagreement existed on the question whether the constitution was be to framed by a democratically elected National Assembly or by a small commission of wise men appointed by the provinces. The debate on the National Assembly was closely followed by the revived political press. Just like in the Patriot Era, however, most periodical writers and pamphleteers refrained from naming and shaming. The pamphleteer Willem Ockerse, for example, continued to condemn his political oppo-

[1] Gerrit Paape, *De Aristocraat en de Burger*. Rotterdam: Krap 1785 (3).

nents collectively rather than individually, speaking rather vaguely about 'hot supporters of the aristocratic system of 1787', who had obtained 'profitable offices' under the new regime and now feared for 'their wallet'.[2]

THE EMERGENCE OF THE *DAGVERHAAL*

After much debate, a compromise was reached on 30 December 1795. A democratically elected National Assembly was to be established in The Hague, but the provinces remained in power of their internal affairs, at least until the constitution had gone into effect. A special commission within the first National Assembly was to frame this constitution. To increase the political transparency which had been at the core of Batavian ideology ever since the Patriot years, the Batavians allowed for the foundation of the *Dagverhaal*, the published day-to-day proceedings of all that was said during the public sessions of the National Assembly.[3] From their first day in parliament, the members of the National Assembly would be at the centre of public attention, and they welcomed this without exception.

The publication of the *Dagverhaal* was a monumental enterprise undertaken by Van Schelle and Comp., a publishing house from The Hague. The proceedings appeared on a daily basis, but with a few days delay, adding up to more than five thousand pages for the First National Assembly – March 1796 until August 1797 – alone. The editors of the *Dagverhaal* could learn the *métier* by looking at several English newspapers – which had gradually been allowed to report on parliamentary debates since the early seventies[4] – and French revolutionary newspapers like the *Journal logographique* and the *Moniteur universel*.[5] None of these examples, however, fully met their objective to reproduce every single word that had been said in the Assembly. In the Netherlands, the publication of the *Dagverhaal* was an operation of entirely unprecedented nature. Under the Old Regime, the sessions of the provincial assemblies had been secret. Since the founding of the Batavian Republic, the different provinces had allowed for the publication of the proceedings of their meetings, but these proceedings had only listed the resolutions which had been taken, without giving an account of the deliberations leading to these resolutions.[6]

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[2] [Willem Anthonie Ockerse], *Bataven! eischt eene nationale conventie! Of beroep aan het Bataafsche volk*. s.l. [1795] (4-5).

[3] *Dagverhaal der Handelingen van de Nationaale Vergadering representeerende het Volk van Nederland*, The Hague: Van Schelle en Comp. 1796-1798.

[4] Peter D.G Thomas, 'The Beginnings of Parliamentary Reporting in Newspapers, 1768-1774'. *English Historical Review* 74, 1959, 623-636; J.R. Pole, *The Gift of Government. Political Responsibility from the English Restoration to American Independence*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press 1983 (111-113).

[5] Etienne Lehodey de Saultchevreuil, *Journal de l'Assemblée Nationale ou journal logographique: Première législature*. Paris: Le Hodey 1791; *Gazette nationale ou moniteur universel*. Paris 1789-1810. See also: Jeremy D. Popkin, *Revolutionary News. The Press in France, 1789-1799*. Durham, NC [etc.]: Duke University Press 1990 (108-111).

[6] See for example: *Dagbladen van het verhandelde ter vergadering van de provisioneele repræsentanten van het volk van Holland [...].* Den Haag: B. van Cleef et al. 1795-1796; *Dagverhaal der handelingen van de provisioneele representanten des vrijen volks Vriesland*. Leeuwarden: M.A. van der Wal and M. Kroon 1795.

Judging by the thousands of addresses and requests the First National Assembly received, the *Dagverhaal* was bought and read daily by a nowadays unimaginably large part of the Dutch population. Unlike its government-issued successors such as the *Handelingen van de Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal*, it remained a private periodical without an official status. Although the editors of the *Dagverhaal* were widely judged to do their job as impartially and accurately as they could, their work nevertheless involved making choices and was only an interpretation of what had actually happened in the parliament. Most of the *Dagverhaal* consisted of the deputies' speeches, the accuracy of which could not always be guaranteed. The former lawyer Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck, for example, improvised his speeches, forcing the editors to note on one occasion that it had been impossible to reproduce his words literally because they had not received his speech in writing.[7] Most other deputies wrote their speeches down and facilitated the work of the editors by giving them copies, but even then, the written speeches did not necessarily correspond with what they had decided to say in the end. More serious difficulties arose when the Assembly became a stage for real debate, especially when in the heat of the debate things got out of hand. In the *Dagverhaal*, passages like the following were not unusual:

> the citizen Verster had hardly finished speaking, when several members interrupted, and a great confusion took hold of the Assembly. Especially Van Hooff made himself heard, but the voices of other members, and the clapping, both by some members of the Assembly and from the tribunes, caused that he could not be heard. Meanwhile, according to the information he has given us afterwards, he was essentially saying the following [...][8]

In this example, it was the editors' decision to reproduce Van Hooff's words and not those of one of the other deputies who had been speaking at the same time. Moreover, they went by Van Hooff's account of what he had said. This was not a self-evident choice, since Van Hooff was hardly impartial and it was in his interest to reshape his contribution into what he had wanted it to be.

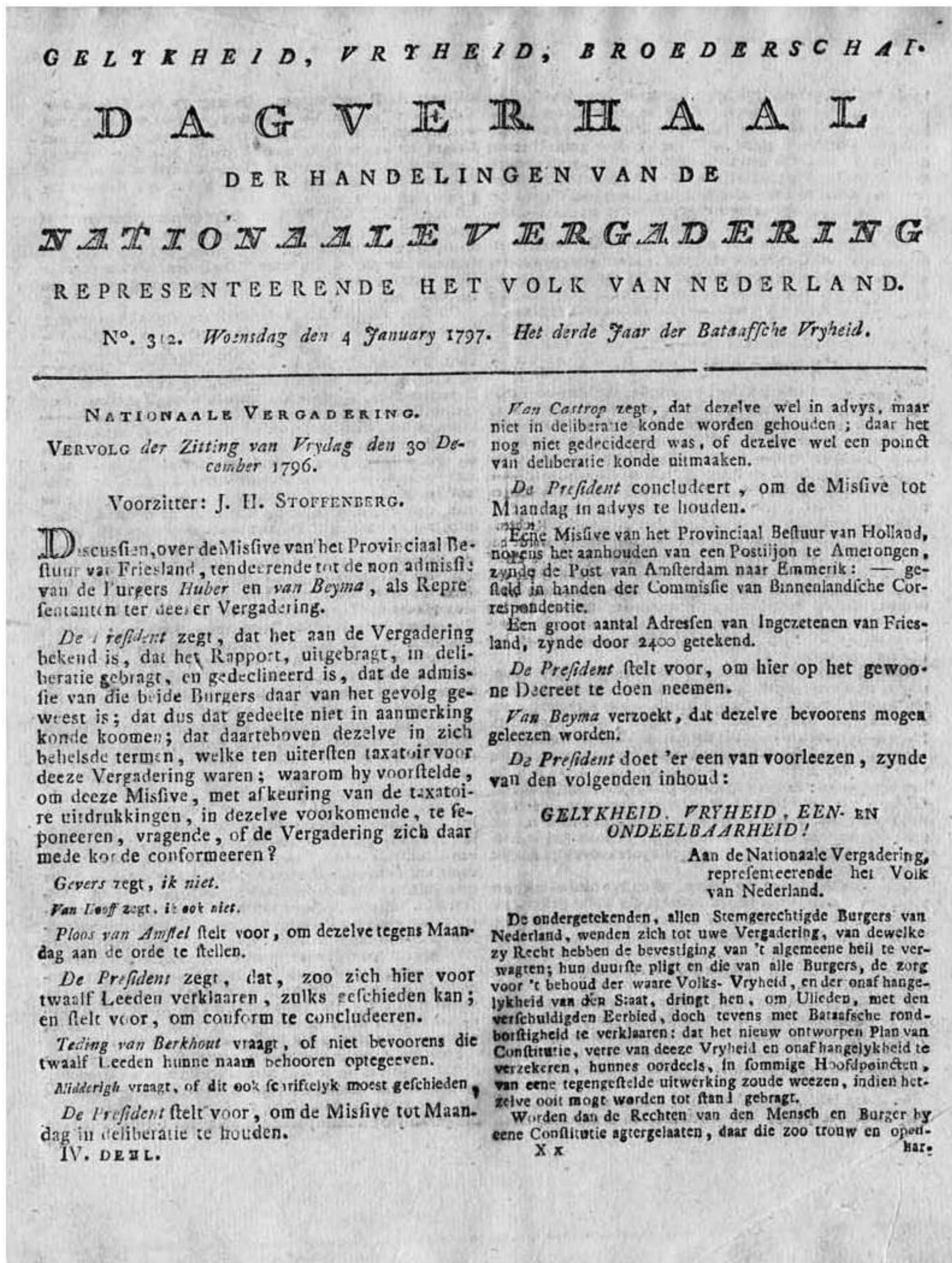
On a few occasions deputies explicitly objected against the way they had been represented in the proceedings. The former professor IJsbrand van Hamelsveld, for example, was accused of partiality by several of his colleagues after he had been elected to the rotating office of chairman. According to the *Dagverhaal*, Van Hamelsveld stood up, beat his chest furiously, and cried out:

> I am IJsbrand van Hamelsveld, who has never for joys and sorrows tended to the left or to the right, nor has he ever feared or been frightened by intimidations of any kind, but who has always stood fast, and is known for this by everyone![9]

Van Hamelsveld referred to this painful incident in another session two months later. People were not to worry, he said, that he would lose his temper. If they thought that he was a hothead because the *Dagverhaal* had represented him as such, he could reassure

[7] *Dagverhaal* I, no. 34, 270 (session of 5 April 1796).
[8] *Ibid.*, III, no. 204, 278 (29 September 1796).
[9] *Ibid.*, IV, no. 287, 151 (29 November 1796).

them: he had never lost his temper, he had never raised his voice, and he had never spoken the words that had been attributed to him by the *Dagverhaal*.[10]



GELYKHEID, VRYHEID, BROEDERSCHAP.

DAGVERHAAL

DER HANDELINGEN VAN DE

NATIONAALE VERGADERING

REPRESENTEERENDE HET VOLK VAN NEDERLAND.

N°. 312. *Woensdag den 4 January 1797. Het derde Jaar der Bataafsche Vryheid.*

NATIONAALE VERGADERING.

VERVOLG *der Zitting van Vrydag den 30 December 1796.*

Voorzitter: J. H. STOFFENBERG.

Discussiën, over de Misfive van het Provinciaal Bestuur van Friesland, tendeerende tot de non admissie van de Burgers *Huber* en *van Beyma*, als Representanten ter deezer Vergadering.

De President zegt, dat het aan de Vergadering bekend is, dat het Rapport, uitgebragt, in deliberatie gebragt, en gedeclineerd is, dat de admissie van die beide Burgers daar van het gevolg geweest is; dat dus dat gedeelte niet in aanmerking konde koomen; dat daarteboven dezelve in zich behelsde termen, welke ten uiterften taxatoir voor deeze Vergadering waren; waarom hy voorftelde, om deeze Misfive, met afkeuring van de taxatoire uitdrukkingen, in dezelve voorkomende, te feponeeren, vragende, of de Vergadering zich daar mede konde conformeeren?

Gevers zegt, *ik niet.*

Van Hooff zegt, *ik ook niet.*

Ploos van Amftel ftelt voor, om dezelve tegens Maandag aan de orde te ftellen.

De Prefident zegt, dat, zoo zich hier voor twaalf Leeden verklaaren, zulks gefchieden kan; en ftelt voor, om conform te concludeeren.

Teding van Berkhout vraagt, of niet bevoorens die twaalf Leeden hunne naam behooren optegeeven.

Midderigh vraagt, of dit ook fchriftelyk moest gefchieden?

De Prefident ftelt voor, om de Misfive tot Maandag in deliberatie te houden.

IV. DEEL.

Van Castrop zegt, dat dezelve wel in advys, maar niet in deliberatie konde worden gehouden; daar het nog niet gedecideerd was, of dezelve wel een poinct van deliberatie konde uitmaaken.

De Prefident concludeert, om de Misfive tot Maandag in advys te houden.

Eene Misfive van het Provinciaal Beftuur van Holland, nopens het aanhouden van een Postiljon te Amerongen, zynde de Post van Amfterdam naar Emmerik: — gefteld in handen der Commisfie van Binnenlandfche Correspondentie.

Een groot aantal Adresfen van Ingezetenen van Friesland, zynde door 2400 getekend.

De Prefident ftelt voor, om hier op het gewoone Decreet te doen neemen.

Van Beyma verzoekt, dat dezelve bevoorens mogen geleezen worden.

De Prefident doet 'er een van voorleezen, zynde van den volgenden inhoud:

GELYKHEID, VRYHEID, EEN- EN ONDEELBAARHEID!

Aan de Nationaale Vergadering, reprefenteerende het Volk van Nederland.

De ondergetekenden, allen Stemgerechtigde Burgers van Nederland, wenden zich tot uwe Vergadering, van dewelke zy Recht hebben de bevestiging van 't algemeene heil te verwagten; hun duurfte pligt en die van alle Burgers, de zorg voor 't behoud der waare Volks- Vryheid, en der onafhangelykheid van den Staat, dringt hen, om Uliede, met den verfchuldigden Eerbied, doch tevens met Bataafsche rondborftigheid te verklaaren: dat het nieuw ontworpen Plan van Conftitutie, verre van deeze Vryheid en onafhangelykheid te verzekeren, hunnes oordeels, in fommige Hoofdpoincten, van eene tegengeftelde uitwerking zoude weezen, indien hetzelve ooit mogt worden tot ftand gebragt.

Worden dan de Rechten van den Mensch en Burger by eene Conftitutie agtergelaaten, daar die zoo trouw en openbar.

X x

Fig. 1: First page of the *Dagverhaal* of January 4, 1797.

[10] *Ibid.*, IV, no. 352, 661 (27 January 1797).

One of the editors, fearful that Van Hamelsveld's objections would endanger the *Dagverhaal*'s reputation as an accurate and objective medium, added in a note to the deputy's statement that he would respond to it elsewhere, because he did not consider the *Dagverhaal* itself the right place for this.[11] Whether this response was actually made remains unclear, but the editor had every right to make it. In the debate in question, two deputies had referred to Van Hamelsveld's unpresidential behaviour on the day of the incident. Michaël Witbols had mockingly commented that 'since the chairman had beat his chest, he would also beat his chest, a chest that glowed with love for his country'. Another deputy, Christiaan Reyns, had maliciously added that the chairman's fearlessness suited him well, but that he did not quite understand why he had to bring up his fearlessness at this very moment. Both remarks could, of course, be read in the *Dagverhaal*, which could not so easily be led astray.[12]

Whereas Van Hamelsveld had set out to identify an incidental mistake – or rather what he wanted to pass for one – his colleague Jacob Hahn went as far as to question the very legitimacy of the *Dagverhaal* as a trustworthy source of information and denied that the Assembly should allow the proceedings as evidence of the course of earlier debates. On 13 October 1796, three local politicians made an official complaint regarding offences that had been made against them by members of the Assembly. They had learned this from the *Dagverhaal*, which, they wrote, 'they had taken to be accurate'. Hahn took this occasion to remind his fellow deputies of something that 'had been on his lips many times before': the Assembly did not have an official daily newspaper. He did read – and often to his satisfaction – the newspaper published by Van Schelle and Comp., but this publication, Hahn asserted, had no 'authenticity'. As much as he appreciated the editors' hard work, they often made mistakes in reproducing the different speeches – he claimed to have been misrepresented on several occasions – and he believed that the Assembly should not waste its time dealing with newspaper content.[13]

Hahn knew very well that his was a voice crying in the wilderness, only serving to reveal that in a few months time the *Dagverhaal* had come to fulfil an indispensable role in the political system of the Batavian Republic. Even if they realized that the *Dagverhaal* did not give an altogether unproblematic representation of the events that took place in the Assembly, most deputies happily turned a blind eye to its imperfections and welcomed it as an authorative source of information. To the supporters of political transparency, the *Dagverhaal* was simply the best option available, far better than the much more concise (and unpublished) minutes made by the Assembly's own secretaries. Not only did it give citizens access to the Assembly's debates, rather than only to the decisions, but it also gave them a permanent overview of the public acts and utterances of their representatives.

The deputies were well aware that they were speaking both to each other *and* to their constituents. It depended, however, on their understanding of the concepts of sovereignty and representation whether they allowed this awareness to affect their behaviour. Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck, for example, recognized that the inalienable sovereignty

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[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.*, IV, no. 287, 152 (29 November 1796).

[13] *Ibid.*, III, no. 212, 338 (10 October 1796).

ultimately resided in the people, but strongly believed that deputies had been called to office because they knew what was best for the people who had elected them. A deputy did not act in the people's best interest when he changed his views in order to please the public opinion, but only when he followed his conscience. 'Nothing in the world,' he declared, 'has ever withheld me from speaking according to my heart and my head; [...] no appeals to the people of the Netherlands [...] have ever withheld my tongue from speaking.'[14] If the people disliked him, they were free to send him away in the next elections. Until then, it was irrelevant to Schimmelpenninck what they thought of him.

Fig. 2: The National Assembly in 1797. The speaker and the clercs.

More radical deputies maintained that there was a more permanent link between representatives and how they were represented. To Pieter Vreede, a leading radical, the principle of inalienable popular sovereignty meant that the people could make their grievances known at any time when they felt that the deputies did not act in corres-

[14] *Ibid.*, II, no. 158, 644 (18 August 1796).

pondence with the general will, and that the deputies had no choice but to respond to this.[15] In this system of permanent popular control, Vreede thought it important that the deputies presented themselves actively as 'true friends of the people' who acted only with popular support. He did this by supporting every proposal that was submitted to increase the power of the people and by constantly making demands 'in the name of the people', exactly the kind of political behaviour that Schimmelpenninck was so appalled by.

Whatever their thoughts on self-representation, all of the deputies believed that their being represented in the *Dagverhaal* rendered the representative democracy in the Batavian Republic a great service, because it provided benevolent citizens with information that they could use to exert control over their representatives. For the deputies themselves, there was, of course, a downside to this. The not-always-so-benevolent opposition also made eager use of the *Dagverhaal*, and it was not always subtle what came their way.

THE CASE OF THE CHARACTER SKETCHES

On 17 January 1797, a request from a group of Amsterdam citizens was read publicly in the National Assembly. The requestors expressed their indignation about a 'certain libel titled *Character sketch* &*c*, in which some members of this Assembly [were] defamed in a utterly disgraceful manner'. The citizens requested that the Assembly protect the honour of their members and deal with the 'slanderers' properly.[16]

Two months earlier, the Assembly's constitutional commission had presented a first draft constitution, in which the confederative structure of the Republic was largely kept intact. In response, the unitarist members of the Assembly had called this draft an infringement on the revolutionary principle of unity and indivisibility and an offence to the people, not even fit to serve as a preliminary document. When it came to a vote, these members had been outvoted by a coalition of deputies who thought it was essentially a good draft and deputies who feared too much time would be fruitlessly wasted when a new preliminary document was to be written by another commission.[17]

The sixty-six members of the Assembly who had wanted to accept the draft as a preliminary document all appeared in the above-mentioned pamphlet, which was fully titled *Brief character sketch of the men, who have accepted the handed over draft constitution for the Batavian Republic as basis for discussion of the National Assembly, representing the people of the Netherlands*.[18] The concept of the *Brief character sketch* was as simple as it was effective. Its anonymous author – whom, I have argued elsewhere, might very well be the above-mentioned radical deputy Pieter Vreede – offered a brief characterization of forty two deputies in alphabetical order, using between two and twenty-nine lines for each

[15] *Ibid.*, II, no. 85, 60-61 (3 June 1796).

[16] *Ibid.*, IV, no. 333, 512 (17 January 1797).

[17] This happened on 29 November 1796: *Dagverhaal* IV, no. 289, 166.

[18] [Pieter Vreede], *Korte characterschets der mannen, welken het ingeleverd Plan van Constitutie voor de Bataefsche Republicq, tot een grondslag der deliberatie van de Nationale Vergadering, representerende het Volk van Nederland, hebben aengenomen*. s.l. [1797].

deputy.[19] The remaining twenty-four deputies in favour of the draft were discussed in one longer section of the pamphlet and characterized with only a few words.

The *Brief character sketch* was soon followed by a second pamphlet called *Monument for the next generation in the Batavian Republic, or character sketch of the deputies of the National Assembly*.[20] This pamphlet was written by a different author who had applied the same concept, but gave a characterization of all 126 members of the Assembly. The *Monument* was printed in a second edition, which was exceptional during the revolutionary years. Both the imitation of the first and the re-edition of the second character sketch indicate the great success of the pamphlets, which caused a considerable stir during the first half of 1797. In daily speech, the two pamphlets were not clearly distinguished from each other, and both were commonly referred to as the *Character sketch* – forcing me to do the same.

Fig. 3: The National Assembly in 1797. One of the deputies reading a speech to his colleagues.

The authors of both character sketches had not created a genre out of the blue, but appealed to a long tradition of character writing that originated in the work of Aristotle's student Theophrastus. In his *Characters* (ca. 319 BC), this Greek philosopher made a study of thirty 'characters', by which he intended clearly recognizable moral types that each represented a larger group. Throughout antiquity and most of the early modern age the art of character writing was exercised in a Theophrastian way, but during the second half

[19] Joris Oddens, *Pioniers in schaduwbeeld. Het eerste parlement van Nederland 1796-1798*. Nijmegen: Vantilt 2012 (491).

[20] *Monument voor het aankomend geslacht; opgericht in de Bataafsche Republiek; of karakter schets der volks vertegenwoordigers, zitting hebbende in de Nationale Vergadering*. s.l. [1797].

of the eighteenth century the meaning of 'character' was gradually extended to include the characterization of individuals.[21] In the Dutch Republic, this shift had first become manifest in 1757, which was the year of the so-called *Wittenoorlog* (the war of the De Witts), a pamphlet polemic about 'the real and true character' of the Dutch seventeenth-century statesman Johan de Witt.[22]

If the *Wittenoorlog* had shown that the genre of character writing could be used for political purposes, the historical figure De Witt had been represented less as an individual than as a stereotypical regent – virtuous or evil, depending on the perspective. The author of the *Brief character sketch* was among the first in the Dutch context to use the genre for the characterization of political figures of his own time; more than anything else, it was the *Dagverhaal* that enabled him to do this.[23] His own experience, he wrote in an introduction, had given him reason to believe that his sketch would affirm the audience's opinions. This statement shows a presupposition that the readers of the pamphlet already had a fairly detailed knowledge of the deputies. The actual sketches further indicate that the author of the pamphlet expected his readers to be careful readers of the *Dagverhaal* or to at least have access to a full copy of the proceedings:

> De Mist: See his speech on the draft constitution, his attempt to have this poisonous piece swallowed everywhere. [...] Read everything that he said in the Assembly with care [...] and decide for yourself, whether this so-called citizen is no DETERMINED SUPPORTER OF ORANGE.[24]

The authors of both character sketches did not attempt to represent the deputies in a neutral way, but purposely worked to damage the reputation of the supporters of provincial autonomy. What is significant, however, is that while not altogether abandoning the three negative qualities which had become stereotypical for the aristocratic regent – pride, greed and insincerity – they offered a more individualized representation. Instead of turning the deputies into flat characters which had little basis in reality, they drew from a great variety of other negative properties – incompetence, ignorance, stupidity, opportunism, pompousness, fickleness, long-windedness, slavishness, etc. – ridiculing the behaviour that the deputies had actually exhibited in the Assembly:

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[21] Johanna Stouten, *Willem Anthonie Ockerse (1760-1826). Leven en Werk*. Amsterdam [etc.]: APA-Hollands Universiteitspers 1982 (64-65).

[22] The polemic was also – but to a lesser extent – about Johan de Witt's brother Cornelis, another influential political figure at the time. See P. Geyl, *De Witten-Oorlog: een pennestrijd in 1757*. Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche Uitgeversmaatschappij 1953.

[23] There is at least one earlier example in which an attempt to describe of the characters of contemporary politicians was made. It concerns two pamphlets published in 1783 (one of orangist and one of patriot making), 'analyzing' portraits of politicans who did have national fame, like William V, his advisor the duke of Brunswick and the patriot leader Joan Derk van der Capellen van den Pol: [Rijklof Michaël van Goens], *Catalogue raisonné d'une collection de tableaux peints par les plus fameux artistes de ce pais*. s.l., [1783]; [Frans Adriaan van der Kemp], *Catalogue raisonné d'une collection de tableaux peints par les plus fameux artistes de ce pais no. 2*. s.l., [1783].

[24] [Vreede] [1797] (5).

> Verhees: [...] He requests to speak rather often [...] only to declare that he *agrees* with this or that speaker [...] Forthwith he gives written notice to the logographers, in order that his decisive language can be placed in the *Dagverhaal*.[25]

The authors of the character sketches typically commented on the general behaviour of the deputies, but sometimes also referred to specific incidents which had taken place during the debates. This was the case with IJsbrand van Hamelsveld, whose characterization sounds familiar to us: 'Hamelsveld: a dreadful chairman, who roared in a ludicrous demonstration of pride: HERE STANDS IJSBRAND VAN HAMELSVELD [...] meaning: here stands a learned fool.'[26] Through its individual focus and sharp observations, the *Character sketch* brought to surface that the deliberations in the National Assembly and their reproduction in the *Dagverhaal* had done serious damage to reputations which had often taken years to build up. This was particularly hard on Van Hamelsveld, who had been highly esteemed by his co-revolutionaries ever since the Patriot Revolution of the 1780s, when he had lost his professorship in Utrecht as a result of his Patriot sympathies:

> His writings made him a renowned scholar and patriot, but because of his foolish fanaticism, his ridiculous speeches and his ludicrous presidency, he is now commonly known as a man who's lost it.[27]

To make things worse, the pamphlets did not only poke fun at Van Hamelsveld in his own sketch, but even in the one dedicated to Christiaan Reyns, the deputy who had commented on his behaviour after the notorious incident:

> Reyns: a true friend of the people, who showed his zeal especially in the debates about the acceptation of the draft constitution, when he stalemated the pedantic chairman VAN HAMELSVELD.[28]

When Van Hamelsveld tried to make the readers of the *Dagverhaal* believe that his words and actions had been misrepresented, he also declared that he was not disturbed by 'this slanderer, the author of the infamous *Character sketch*.'[29] The attempt to adjust his image and the fact that he mentioned the pamphlet at all both point to the contrary: Van Hamelsveld was in fact highly disturbed by the image for which he was largely responsible himself. The display of pride which was brought in against him was of course a rather traditional accusation, but at the same time he was one of the first victims of a new media strategy. Being part of a group of regents who were criticized collectively by political commentators may not have been the most pleasant of experiences, but becoming a national bogeyman or laughing stock because of a specific incident the nation had read about witnessed was doubtlessly more hurtful.

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[25] *Ibid.* (7).
[26] *Ibid.* (4).
[27] *Monument* [1797] (7).
[28] *Ibid.* (12).
[29] *Dagverhaal* IV, no. 287, 151 (29 November 1796).

Van Hamelsveld was not the only deputy to give his opinion on the *Character sketch*. After the public reading of the request by the Amsterdam citizens, the deputy Bernard Nieuhoff told his colleagues that he had 'had the honour' to be mentioned in the *Character sketch*, but that he was not bothered by this. Nieuhoff stated that slanderous libels of this kind could smudge neither the Assembly nor the individual deputies.[30] He was seconded by another deputy, Rutger Jan Schimmelpenninck, whom the sketchers had – not entirely inappropriately – represented as a skillful speaker who shamelessly tried to impose his personal views on his colleagues.[31] The accusations, Schimmelpenninck said, were of such an unspecific nature, that it would only be a waste of the Assembly's time to respond to them. After these remarks, the Assembly decided that no further discussion on the request about the *Character sketch* was necessary.[32]

It is ironic that 'unspecific' was the word that Schimmelpenninck used to do away with the *Character sketch*, because according to the standards of the time, this was exactly what they were not. The revolutionary ideal of a free press prevented the deputies from taking measures against the pamphlet, but when the first National Assembly came to its end some seven months later, it became clear that several of them nevertheless expressed their worries about precisely the more individual-based approach of political commentators in general and the authors of the *Character sketch*(es) in particular. The slander directed against them, the members of the Assembly believed, could endanger their re-election to the second National Assembly. The deputy Gerard Bacot complained that newspapers had plotted against certain members of the first Assembly so that now all over the Republic the people were prejudiced against these members. Bacot's colleague Jan van Hooff even went as far as to explicitly blame the *Character sketch* for this.[33]

One deputy tried to downplay the power of the media somewhat by declaring that he did not have time to read newspapers and that he had never even laid his eyes upon the *Character sketch*. Bacot responded curtly that this did not mean that the citizens would not have done this either.[34] Bacot was right to believe that newspapers and pamphlets had a great many readers during the first years of the Batavian Republic, but if he thought that these media could successfully 'plot' against members of the Assembly in order to prevent them from being re-elected, he overestimated their power. The authors of pamphlets like the *Character sketch* certainly made an attempt to influence the public opinion, but they made such specific references to the deliberations in the Assembly that their pamphlets could not be read independently, but only in combination with the *Dagverhaal*.

As long as the *Dagverhaal* was the principal source of information for both media and public, the media were both facilitated and restricted in their representation of political figures. Facilitated on the one hand, because the people's familiarity with their deputies meant that the media could count on a considerable degree of shared knowledge and

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[30] *Ibid.*, IV, no. 333, 512 (17 January 1797).
[31] *Monument*, 12.
[32] *Dagverhaal* IV, no. 333, 512 (17 January 1797).
[33] *Ibid.*, VI, no. 642, 768 (16 August 1797).
[34] *Ibid.*

introduce a more detailed approach. Restricted on the other hand, because citizens would partly base their opinion about their politicians on their own reading of the parliamentary deliberations, and the media could not deviate to much from their content. And thus, though they may not always have seen it this way themselves, IJsbrand van Hamelsveld and his colleagues were largely responsible for their own image.

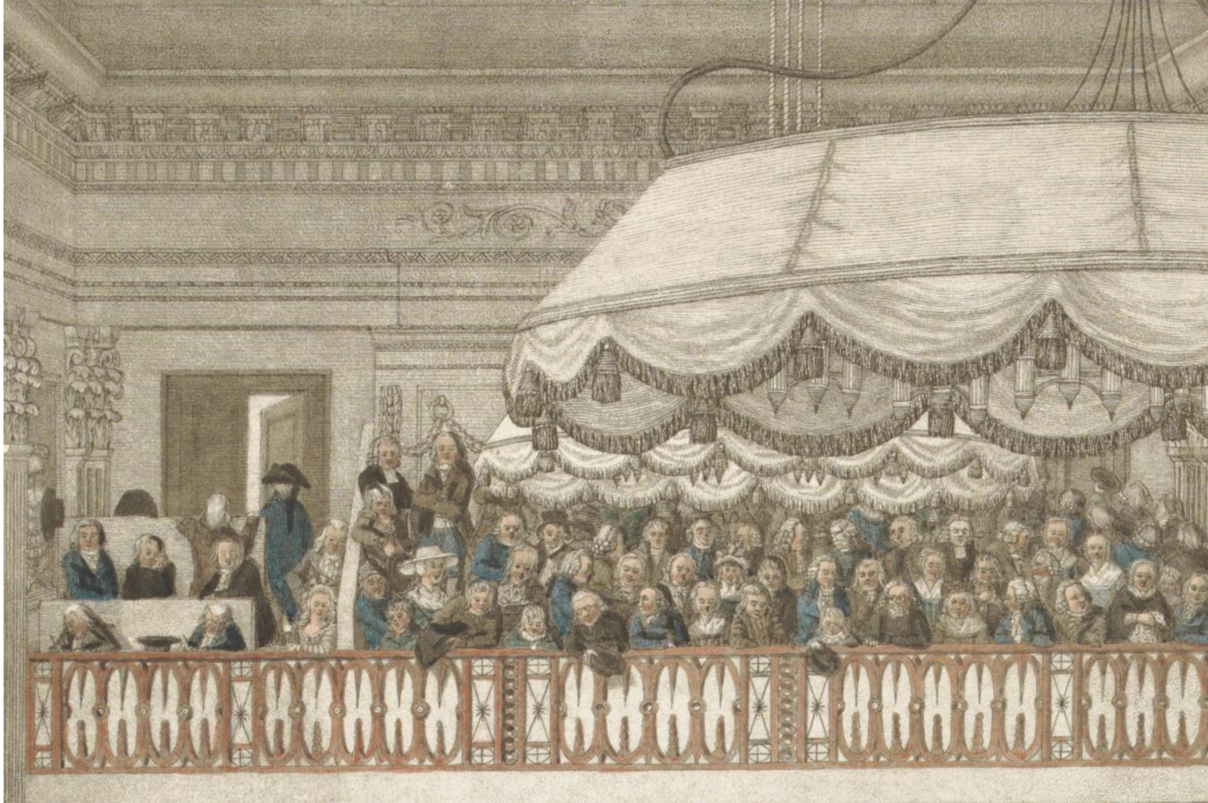

Fig. 4: The National Assembly in 1797. The public gallery.

This situation was not to last. Disagreement among the members of the Assembly kept impeding them from designing a successful constitution. Early in the year 1798, the fragile Dutch democracy suffered a *coup d'état* by a radical group. These radicals gave the country its first constitution, but failed to live up to their own democratic standards and were swept away by a counter-coup only a few months later. The new regime lacked the democratic enthusiasm of the past few years and did little to prevent a rapid decrease in popular interest in politics. The *Dagverhaal* continued to be published for some years, but the parliamentary debates lost much of their initial fervour, and they no longer had the central position they had occupied in the first Batavian years. Finally, Napoleon first put an end to the parliament, and then to all Dutch politics whatsoever. Parliament was only re-established in 1813, but the verbatim proceedings did not return until 1848, when they assumed the ungrateful role of a reference book only used by journalists and scholars, a role familiar to us today.

CONCLUSION

Before the Batavian era, both political commentators and the public lacked detailed information on the behaviour of political figures, because decision-making took place on a level to which neither groups had direct access. This often led writers who aimed at a national audience to represent political figures in a stereotypical manner, working in a republican tradition which condemned excessive luxury and amoral behaviour. They produced images of anonymous aristocratic regents, which were caricatural representtations and could interchangeably be used for almost every local regent in the country.

During the first years of the Batavian Republic, the *Dagverhaal* granted direct access to the deliberations in the National Assembly. As long as the *Dagverhaal* was read by a large part of the population, the media and the public shared the same knowledge of the public acts of their deputies. As a result, the media did not abandon the republican tradetion altogether, but they did make a step towards a multidimensional and individualized representation, in which for the time being, they had no choice but to stay relatively close to the images the deputies themselves produced in the Assembly. These limitations disappeared when the public lost interest in the published daily deliberations of parliament. The members of parliament nearly lost all the control over their image, which was more and more left for the media to dispose of as they pleased.

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