

## DENIS MCQUAIL IN AMSTERDAM AND THE ATLANTIC TURN IN COMMUNICATION SCIENCE

Jo Bardoel

As almost the last one in this line-up of fine speakers to commemorate our Denis McQuail I will highlight the importance of Denis for Amsterdam and the Netherlands, but also, as the title of my contribution suggests, his great importance for the constitution and course of communication studies in our country and probably the rest of continental Europe.

[SLIDE 1 ]

A few telling facts to begin with: when Denis was appointed as a young professor in Amsterdam in 1977, communication science did not have an official academic status in my country. When he retired twenty years later, Amsterdam was by far the largest center for the study of our field in the Netherlands, and one of the major ones in Europe. When Denis passed away as our emeritus professor another twenty years later, the University of Amsterdam was about to take over the first position from the University of Southern California, according to the QS World University Ranking in our subject. Although I don't want to overrate the importance of rankings, these few facts show how much we owe to our 'friendly giant', as Mark Deuze and I called Denis in our obituary for the *European Journal of Communication*.

When Denis came to Amsterdam in the 1970's the university was in great turmoil. Therefore it proved not so easy to find a successor for Maarten Rooij, the previous professor of press studies who was - just like his colleagues from the Catholic and Calvinist universities in the Netherlands at the time - a former newspaper editor in chief. But then, in the 1970's, many students and also staff preferred an academic candidate of a more progressive or even Marxist profile. Several foreign guest professors came by - I remember, for example, Herbert Schiller and Lee Thayer - but nobody wanted to or was allowed to stay. In the battle between left and right, and also between the old normative and the new empiricist approaches, Denis seemed an ideal compromise candidate without a strong ideological profile. After several visits to England Denis was eventually persuaded to come over to Amsterdam. So he and his family changed their home from Southampton to Schoorl, a village on the Dutch coast from where, with a bit of clear view and a lot of imagination, one could still see the British shore.

[ SLIDE 2 ]

When Denis started in Amsterdam he was the only full professor in a small team that did teaching and research in the old academic tradition, as they wished, when they wished and even if they wished. Denis' inaugural speech, called 'The historicity of a science of

mass media: time, place, circumstances and the effect of mass communication' was a strong plea for a new discipline that was, according to my colleague and media historian Hemels, still in the waiting room of the social sciences. Only a few years later, in 1984, our discipline would indeed achieve an official academic status. The then protestant minister of education wanted to grant the first official license exclusively to the Catholic university of Nijmegen, but after wide protest and debate in parliament both the Catholic university of Nijmegen and the pagan University of Amsterdam were allowed to start full study programmes in mass communication.

With Denis as the chair of the new department a comprehensive study programme, with both BA and MA, was developed and a merger with the adjacent Baschwitz Institute for 'Mass Psychology, Public and Propaganda' was realised. The new department adopted the label of 'communication science', although Denis preferred, both for his books and his chair, the prefix 'mass communication'. Kurt Baschwitz had been the first professor in our field in Amsterdam and the Netherlands. He also was the first professor of foreign origin, Denis was the second and in many ways Kurt and Denis were antipodes. Baschwitz had started to teach in Amsterdam before the war, after being forced to flee for the Naziregime in 1933. He also set up a newspaper department at the newly founded International Institute of Social History, the archive of socialism and social movements, including original works of Marx and Engels, Leon Trotsky and Emma Goldman.

[ SLIDE 3 ]

On the slide you can see Denis with his PhD's, including myself with my eyes shut, and some staff members on the stairs of this institute, in a former warehouse in the Amsterdam harbor area.

Back to Baschwitz. After the war, which he miraculously succeeded to survive as a Jew, he had become the cofounder of the famous 7<sup>th</sup> faculty of social sciences, he started journalism courses and, yes indeed, he was one of the early originators of this organisation, IAMCR, which got its first secretariat in Amsterdam.

[ SLIDE 4 ]

On the slide we see Baschwitz, gathering with European colleagues as well as a representative of Indonesia that just had gained his independence from the Netherlands.

My Amsterdam colleague Jaap van Ginneken just published two books (one in Dutch and one in English) about Baschwitz. He calls him the 'godfather' of journalism and communication studies in the Netherlands, who is unknown internationally, because he published in German and Dutch and never in English. On the slide you can see the cover of Baschwitz' Dutch book 'The Newspaper through the Ages' (from 1938) and Van

Ginneken's new biography, both in Dutch and also sharing the same cover design by the famous illustrator for the Dutch socialist movement, Albert Hahn.

[ SLIDE 5 ]

As a child of his time, and his background, Baschwitz studied the masses, both invisible, as in newspaper readers and radio listeners and as constitutors of public opinion, as well as visible masses, from witch-hunting to the Nazist movement. Would he had lived today he would certainly have studied the populism of Donald Trump and Geert Wilders.

The opposition of these two successive giants in our field in Amsterdam of foreign origin, Baschwitz and McQuail, also illustrates the transition from a mainly continental approach in our discipline, inspired by German and French intellectuals, towards a more Anglo-American approach, that began with a strong orientation on Britain from the 1970's on, and that has become a more American orientation recently. That is also the reason why, and I hate to admit it, most of my colleagues visit ICA conferences instead of IAMCR nowadays. Denis was not the cause, but yet a strong symbol of this Atlantic turn, not because of his managerial power, but due to his intellectual impact.

When, at the end of the 1980's, the number of students and the organisational problems grew, his colleague Jan van Cuilenburg, with whom he had worked together in a project on media pluralism for the Dutch government, came over from the well-organized, Calvinist Free University to our always slightly chaotic University of Amsterdam to become the new managing chairman. Shortly before his early decease two years ago, Jan told me that he never would have considered making the transfer to the UvA if Denis would not have been prominent in the department. Jan also became the first director of the newly founded research school ASCoR, the Amsterdam School of Communications Research. Denis' farewell speech at the University of Amsterdam in 1997 not coincidentally overlapped with the opening conference of ASCoR, the Amsterdam School of Communications Research.

[ SLIDE 6 ]

On the slide the farewell picture of Denis' own small team in Amsterdam, with colleagues Kees Brants, Irene Costera Meijer, Jan Wieten and Liesbeth van Zoonen.

Denis knew that he left the department in a much better shape than when he had arrived twenty years earlier. The circumstance that in the twenty years of ASCoR's existence, my colleague Peter Neijens found out, altogether 20 alumni have become full professors in Amsterdam as well as elsewhere in Holland and Europe, is testament to Denis' legacy.

[ SLIDE 7 ]

This slide shows Denis with his successor Klaus Schoenbach, on the right, and ASCoR director Peter Neijens.

Personally, my first reading of Denis' work was at the Catholic University of Nijmegen in the early 1970's, and not surprisingly in the German language, through his book *Soziologie der Massenkommunikation* (Verlag Volker Spies, Berlin, 1973). Therefore for me Denis, although our age difference was only about 15 years, always remained more a mentor than a colleague. In the same year 1977 that I defended my PhD thesis at a late age, Denis retired as professor in Amsterdam. It has been Denis though who had stimulated me, as a policy advisor for Dutch public broadcaster NOS, to start a PhD project. And it was Denis who handed over my doctoral certificate to me in 1977. Unfortunately there is no good picture of this moment, since Denis always managed to miss the cameras. Instead I have chosen a picture of a later dinner with Denis and Rosemary at the Amsterdam Grand Hotel.

[ SLIDE 8 ]

As an academic who always has tried to combine theory and practice Denis has been very important as a source of orientation and inspiration. He did not, unlike some of us, hold strong opinions or views, but in his work he showed to have both a fine nose for and an open view on relevant trends, such as the commercialization of the media sector, the convergence of communication modalities, the growing relevance of media governance and accountability, the transformation of the journalistic profession and more in general the importance of upholding old values, also in the context of new technologies and new platforms.

When Denis came to Amsterdam in the 1970's there were even suggestions by opponents that Denis, as a good Catholic of Irish descent, might be a member of Opus Dei, the legendary secret Catholic brotherhood. But indeed, over time Denis became our godfather, maybe even our god. In our department Denis developed a kind of divine omnipresence and immanency: if he was there he was not there, and if he was not there, he was there yet. At a meeting he often seemed to sleep, and sometimes even snored a bit, but at the end he was awake to produce a perfect summary or comment, as my colleague Kees Brants reminded us at the funeral. Denis thus has introduced the sleep mode in our department long before computers took over.

[ SLIDE 9 ]

And Denis always managed to surprise us. When we travelled to Moscow for meetings to discuss and promote the open society in the 1990's, we saw Denis reading a Russian newspaper and chatting with a waitress. He explained us that he had learned to read Russian as part of his military service for MI5 during the Cold War.

Only a few years ago Sage called me to ask if I was willing to read Denis' new manuscript on *Journalism and Society* for a short comment on the flipside of the book. Since my last communication with Denis had been on his critical health situation, I responded with my well-known Dutch diplomatic talent: Denis, a book, I thought he was about to die! And the man from Sage responded with that typical British bluntness: yes, we were a little surprised too... From the last mail we received from his daughter Rachel I understand that Denis was "still scribbling notes and thoughts on the back of envelopes and scraps of paper, relating to academic theory right up to the end". Here a picture of my last chat with Denis: thank you for a great picture, Kaarle (Nordenstreng).

[ SLIDE 10 ]

Mark Deuze, who is working on a new edition of McQuails *Mass Communication Theory*, told me last week that he was inspired by an essay Denis wrote for Helena Vartanova's book, *Media and Change*, published in Moscow and called 'Rethinking the concept of mass communication for the digital age'. In a mail message last week, Mark wrote me that in order to bring the field back into one cohesive structure and in one handbook it is, in Denis' vein, important to tackle the pressing issues of our time and the role mass media and communication play here in relation to issues as social cohesion, social inequality, globalization and the rise of populism." We wish Mar good luck.

And indeed, Denis came of age in an era in which the newspaper was still dominant, while at the same time television gained prominence. And although social media were not yet present in the index of the last edition of his book, I am sure that his reflections and insights as a founding father of our discipline will remain relevant, also in this digital age. Finally two pictures of the building and the neighborhood in Amsterdam where Denis has worked in Amsterdam: the Oostindisch Huis, the former headquarter of the Dutch East Indies Trade Company, often called the world's first multinational.

[ SLIDE 11 ]

And next I will show you the neighborhood where we worked; the same neighborhood where people such as the philosopher Spinoza and the painter Rembrandt had lived before. On the slide you can see Spinoza's statue and the motto of this pioneer of the Enlightenment that also does apply to Denis (and not to Donald): 'The Objective of the State is Freedom'.

[ SLIDE 12 ]

And the odd thing remains that the colleagues in Amsterdam in the 1970's, who expected to get a new professor that was an empiricist and a positivist, in fact got a professor that will be remembered first and foremost for his reflexivity and normativity,

within the holy trinity of theory, practice and policy. Denis, thank you very much for all you did, and, dear audience, thank you for your kind attention.

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