

Johan Snel, “Opening essay: Kuyper as journalist.”

According to Johan Snel, Kuyper was our first democrat who deserved this title. Before he became Premier of the Netherlands, he had already exerted himself for public debate for over thirty years as well as for a pluralistic press to make that debate possible. The association of journalists only became a movement to be reckoned with through the influence of Kuyper. Liberal journalist colleagues supported him enthusiastically.

Typical of Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) was the heaping up of the public roles he took on himself. In my portrait of the man—*The Seven Lives of Abraham Kuyper*—he is active in seven different roles or spheres, often next to or mixed up with each other.

The public Kuyper was a multi-tasker: Often on one and the same day he would conjure up a number of plates each with completely different propositions. In how far was he truly a journalist in addition to academician and politician, two of his most prominent roles? And what were his main concerns in journalism?

Five Roles

Kuyper posited the question himself, while others provided the answer in 1901. This is how it happened. On Boxing Day¹ 1898, the members of the Netherlands Journalist Association² (NJA) elected Kuyper as their new chairman. This took place *in absentia*: he had not yet returned from the USA, the journey during which he delivered his Stone Lectures delivered at Princeton and visited various Dutch settlements in the American Midwest. His election of course said something about his reputation but also about his vision of journalism.

Around 1900, Chairman Kuyper led the association through a series of constitutional amendments. The intention was to turn the organization from a mere basic social gathering into a genuine professional association in which the interests of journalists would be the central focus. These changes fully conformed to Kuyper’s own idea: journalists were to give shape to their profession within their

¹ The Dutch refer to December 26 as “Second Christmas Day,” which is translated in some English-speaking countries as “Boxing Day.”

² My unofficial translation of the organization’s name..

own autonomous sphere. He succeeded, though not as far as he desired. He wanted to exclude members of the board and chief editors from membership; from now on membership was to be restricted to journalists. The majority did not want to go that far.

The membership of a number of leading members was to be reviewed. So, those members wrote a kind of application letter that was to be judged by a special committee. One of those turned out to be Kuyper himself, the chairman, no less. In a letter of December 30, 1900, he served a formal request to be recognized only as a special member. He approached this with a new kind of argument. According to the revised constitution, membership was open only to those for whom journalism as their main occupation. His own major occupation was that of academician at the VU. Signed Dr. A. Kuyper.

The five-man committee that had to evaluate all the letters and produce a report had no trouble with it. It determined that the Kuyper letter came from the Chief Editor of both the daily *De Standaard* (*The Standard*) as well as of the weekly *Heraut* (*Herald*), that his reputation among Dutch journalists was such that a haulish laughter would rise among journalists if he were not considered a journalist. Furthermore, they observed that it is simply a fact that there are men of exceptional qualities that occupied multiple head tasks. The committee could only recommend Kuyper as an ordinary member; a special class of membership was not open to him.

Thus, in the eyes of his colleagues, Kuyper was undoubtedly a journalist, even if he had other leading roles as well. But while the committee was about to make its recommendation, Kuyper resigned his membership and, thus, his position as chairman, because he became Premier of the country in August 1901! The members then recommended him as their honorary chairman by acclamation.

Kuyper would not be Kuyper if he did not also combine a number of functions within the field of journalism. In this article, five are mentioned and it is their combination that characterize Kuyper for the journalist he was.

As Journalist

As journalist, Kuyper wrote regularly for the weekly *De Heraut* since 1869 and for the daily *De Standaard* from April 1, 1872, till December 1919, when he had to *surrender the pen due to sickness. In other words, taking it all together it amounted to more than half a century.* These many years were enough to render his journalistic activities the fundament of his public life--even in his own eyes. He fulfilled many roles, but fundamental to all of them was that of journalist.

That is also the impression a good look at his journalistic work gives. Kuyper was often quoted whenever he wrote an opinionated piece, but his daily work was also definitely journalistic in nature. He delivered at least two kinds of articles: headline articles for the front page and the three-star type that would immediately follow the headliner. Headliners could deal with whatever happened to be in the news of the day; the three-star ones were usually sharp reactions to the news. Even though in his headliners Kuyper could bring up themes that were less time bound, they always served the broader reality and were considered news worthy by journalists of other papers.

For example, he would annually devote much of his January articles to reviews of developments during the previous year. In these kinds of reviews it became very apparent how closely he would follow global news. Literally everything was subject to his treatment. He would read not only Dutch papers, but during his many journeys abroad—he would, e.g., regularly spend a few days in Brussels—he would also read as many foreign papers as possible, often in hotel lobbies. Especially popular were his views on international events few of which escaped his interest.

In the Netherlands he was not only the driving power behind his daily *De Standaard*, but also behind his weekly Sunday paper, *De Heraut*. Especially among mothers and other family members, the latter was much more popular than Kuyper's more "manly" daily. But even in *De Heraut* the hand of the journalist was visible. Even there the news was never far removed, for Kuyper lived consciously along with all global developments and shared them with his readers.

As Editor-in-Chief

Kuyper owed his fame partially to his role as chief editor of both his papers; for *De Standaard* since its founding in 1872 and for *De Heraut* since its re-establishment

in 1878. Less known is that his reputation as chief editor did not only depend on his written articles by means of which he determined the course of both papers. That definitely was his most important role as chief editor: with his lead articles he set the tone, took positions and made sure the rest of the paper followed the same track.

However, he also worked behind the scene. From the fragments left of his correspondence with other editors, especially journalists, it is clear that he also involved himself actively in their work. In his role as employer, he not only hired journalists, but he supervised their work and, where necessary, corrected them. When a staff wrote something Kuyper did not appreciate, he would often be invited for a discussion, though less important issues were solved with a sleight of hand.

As Animator

When Kuyper started his daily, there literally were no more than a handful of weeklies and monthlies that followed the same anti-revolutionary course and with whom he exchanged ideas as much as possible. Gradually during the course of his journalistic life more than twenty papers with similar aims were established, some dailies even. In 1910 he was even able to establish an association of the “Christian press” with journalists of all these new media, though the association accomplished so little that it soon dissolved.

This network of openly spiritually-related media became known as the “Little Press;” it was this “Little Press” that honoured Kuyper as its great predecessor and animator or inspirer. In many provincial places these new dailies and weeklies attempted to serve as an antirevolutionary alternative to the more dominant liberal press. Two examples were the dailies *De Graafschapper* and the most important and still existing the *Frisian Daily*, the alternative to the long-established *Leeuwarder News*.³

The point here is that this entire network of the “Little Press” openly appealed to Kuyper and allowed itself to follow his orientation. Both *De Standaard* and *The Heraut* served a spill function for the gradually developing antirevolutionary and

³ Leeuwarden is the capital of the province of Friesland.

*Gereformeerde*⁴ world. Kuyper was the unquestionably its inspirer of both its content and style.

It was thus no accident that the greatest anniversary ever celebrated by Kuyper was the twenty-fifth anniversary of *De Standaard*. On Thursday, April 1, 1897,⁵ 5,000 subscribers, both men and women, came to Amsterdam to enjoy listening to speeches by Kuyper and others in the *Paleis voor Volksvlijt*.⁶ The constituency of antirevolutionary readers had in the meantime grown so large, they could easily have sold 10,000 tickets.

It was at this occasion where Kuyper's journalist colleagues, who were nearly all liberals, through their chairman Charles Boissevain whom Kuyper addressed at his reception, honoured him as "*monsieur le premier*" among Dutch journalists. Kuyper was also active as leader in their world.

As Director

In 1895 Kuyper was persuaded to join the new board of the Netherlands Journalist Association. In this capacity, he quickly distinguished himself as a warm advocate for the interest of "ordinary journalists," who soon elected him in 1898 as their new chairman. This was however preceded by a certain amount of drama.

In September, 1898, the enthronement of the young Queen Wilhelmina was to take place, an occasion that would draw more foreign journalists than had ever been invited. Director Kuyper formed a small committee that was to organize their visit into a positive presence. Even though at that "*moment supreme*" he himself was in the USA to deliver his famous Stone Lectures, his dynamic approach to their reception drew attention.

The two hundred foreign journalists received free passes for public transit like steamboat and train as well as for all celebrative events; they were entertained on a grand scale. Expressed in highfalutin terms, their reports of the warm reception by the modest Kingdom of the Netherlands were collected the following year in five

⁴ There are many Reformed denominations in the Netherlands. "Gereformeerd" and "Gereformeerden" refers to the denomination established by Kuyper himself. We use this term to avoid confusion with other denominations.

⁵ This was 125 years since the date of this translation (2022) and 150 years since its establishment.

⁶ Palace for Popular Diligence, a large exhibition hall in Amsterdam.
[/en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paleis_voor_Volksvlijt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paleis_voor_Volksvlijt).

bundles and offered to the young queen at her palace *Het Loo*. As result, Kuyper was recognized as the man behind this success, the “*organisateur de victoire*”—again in the words of Boissevain—and as leader of Dutch journalism.

Before he even returned from the USA, Kuyper was elected as the Association’s chairman, successor of the sickly Charles Boissevain, the Editor-in-Chief of the prominent liberal *Algemeen Handelsblad*. As director, Kuyper saw to it to turn the Association into a more goal oriented, a second kind of life. *For Dutch journalists around 1900 there was no question as to who was the leading journalist of their generation: Kuyper, of course.*

He earned this epithet also because of his international involvement. For example, in April 1900 he arranged the arrival of a Dutch delegation of journalists at the world exhibition in Paris to participate in an international journalism congress. As director of the international journalist association UIAP, Kuyper was literally *the* figure head of Dutch journalism and as such received at the *Elysee*. If he had not become premier unexpectedly in 1901, he would also have been recognized as the international face of Dutch journalism.

First Democrat

There was still another area to which Kuyper turned his attention during the years he was active as director. It was kind of an extra role that he automatically adopted since he was already in the waters of journalism. He developed a number of perspectives on journalism as head articles in his daily. Herewith he showed himself to be the most prominent theoretician also in journalism, for sure before World War I and perhaps till after World War II.

Kuyper was also professor of literary studies and lectured in that broad discipline in addition to theology. In this context he also gave lectures in what would later be called “mass communication.” His daily journalistic functions and his role as director now automatically combined with this theoretical reflection on a number of disciplines—and voila: A series of head articles saw the light in November 1895 with the title “*Het Vrije Woord*” or “The Free Word.” In his theoretical reflections he described journalism as an independent or autonomous social sphere, to which his famous principle of “sphere sovereignty” could be applied. In

Kuyper's eyes, journalists themselves should be accorded the last word over journalism, not the owners or directors.

What strikes one the most in these articles is that Kuyper had surprisingly modern views on journalism and media. He was, for example, very conscious of the significance of the public with whom journalism shared values. According to him, journalists constituted a community of values and functioned above all in that value community. Hence journalism and public debate were pre-eminently pluralist. In his theoretical perspectives he showed himself an avid pluralist; in the essays he continued to write about journalism and the media.

Only when a thousand flowers would bloom could there be a public debate that deserved the name and the platform of that debate would be a pluralistic press. This was not merely necessary but also to be seen positively: without such a platform, genuine public debate could never develop and citizens would never sufficiently be represented by journalism.

It was not only because of his enthusiastic embrace of modern human rights and his advocacy for a wider suffrage that Kuyper was regarded as our first democrat. It was also because of his avid embrace of pluralistic journalism that made public debate possible. According to Kuyper, public debate was the oxygen of democracy. In his days, few expressed that so clearly and that was supported by such firm theory and full conviction. If there is one thing for which we wish to honour Kuyper, it would be for his role as our first democrat.