

Research Traineeships proposal - April 2020

1. Title of the Project

Columnists in Corona Times: Literary Strategies in Reportage and Commentary

2. Coordinators

Odile Heynders (DCU)

Roos Slegers (DFI)

3. Project Summary

Short summary in which you give a clear and concise outline of your project, including the research question, the intended methods of data gathering, the collaborative aspect of the project, as well as the objective you would like to achieve with the help of a research trainee. Max. 1000 words.

The pandemic of the coronavirus has a huge impact on people and society. Since March 2020, nation states all over the globe have organised a more or less 'intelligent' lockdown in order to stop the contamination. Various public media (newspaper, television, radio) report in general on the new governmental policies, on medical professionals having to work under harsh circumstances, and entrepreneurs dealing with the closing of shops, restaurants and cafes. The media also have an eye for the individual experiences of people, on how they cope with the measures taken: the social distancing, the quarantine and the drop of income. Personal narratives and perspectives help to build the resilience of citizens and social bonds.

This research project, *Columnists in Corona Times* (CCT), investigates the personal narrative and perspective told in newspapers by a specific spokesperson: the columnist. The observation starting this project is that columnists in the covid-19 era have a more prominent role than in ordinary times and more often make use of imaginary identification inviting empathy. Specific *literary* devices used for writing columns seem to be: depiction of details, focalizing mechanisms, irony, and the climax sentence ('kort-sluiting-regel') as closure. Some of the columnists identify as 'literary author', others have other professions but do use specific narrative strategies and stylistic devices.

The columnist has a specific role in the public sphere, by contributing regularly short pieces to a journal or newspaper and as such addressing a specific audience or micro-public. Most, but not all, columnists can be considered public intellectuals, as described in Heynders (2016; 15): "The public intellectual intervenes in the public debate and proclaims a controversial and committed and sometimes compromised stance from a sideline position. S/He has critical knowledge and ideas, stimulates discussion and offers alternative scenarios in regard to topics of political, social and ethical nature, thus addressing non-specialist audiences on matters of general concern."

Columnists write short articles, which are often immediately related to political and social events. As such, the column is connected to a short term perspective, and has a direct, but usually not long lasting effect. In the covid-19 times context, however, columnists seem to shape the debate and influence the public mood. This project considers the specific role of columnists as public intellectuals, investigating their rhetorical procedures, their ideas and their particular micro-publics.

This project focuses on the Netherlands, and on two quality newspapers (the columns are published both offline and online), investigating and analysing the work of 20 (19) columnists:

De Volkskrant	NRC
Peter Middendorp	Marjoleine de Vos
Nadia Ezzeroili	Ellen Deckwitz
Stephan Sanders	Maxim Februari
Arnon Grunberg	Arnon Grunberg
Sylvia Witteman	Frits Abrahams
Marjan Slob	Caroline de Gruyter
Aaf Brandt Corstius	Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer
Sheila Sitalsing	Tom-Jan Meeus
Asha ten Broeke	Tommy Wieringa
Elma Drayer	Christiaan Weijts

This - randomly constructed - corpus of columnists will be investigated by gathering data from the 3 months period of March 2020-May 2020. These data will be collected via LexisNexis and via internet searches on the websites of both newspapers and personal websites of the columnists.

Central research question of the project is: How are columnists effective and empathic in the public sphere in corona times, and how do they address a public?

Subquestions are:

1. What do the columnists write about (topics) - is there an individual or collective perspective provided?
2. Which rhetorical strategies and literary devices are used? How do these devices enhance empathy? (4 literary devices are taken here as decisive stylistic instruments)
3. How is the column critical on political and societal issues?
4. How is the column effective in the public sphere? (responses on social media, does the columnist use social media to spread the message?)

Methods used for the analysis of the collected data are: content analysis, critical discourse analysis, literary (formal) analysis of 4 main devices, and reading response analysis (of online micro-publics).

In regard to the literary devices, four narratological and formal procedures are focused on in the analyses of 'covid-19 columns':

1. depiction of details - cf. James Wood (2008), *How fiction works*: details are used to fix an impression,
2. focalizing mechanisms - cf. David Herman (2007), *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, focalization can be understood as mood, a reflective position
3. irony - cf. W.C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1974), irony as intimacy, a way in which ironist and reader get together in a delicate dance of construction of meaning
4. climax sentence ('kort-sluiting-regel') - cf. Paul Rodenko, *Tussen de regels* (1956), distinction between personality and *being* a person (identity and identification).

The project fits in a bigger research context in which the practices, performances and cultural authority of public intellectuals is investigated. This project focuses on various nations: Portugal, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Germany.

4. Project timeline

List of planned activities (possibly with milestones and intermediary results).

4. Project timeline

Component 1: collection of columns, classification of columnists

This component requires the collection of data - how many columns are written by whom in the period that is researched? Who are the columnists, what is their background, oeuvre and persona?

Component 2: clarification of the literary devices

To allow for the analysis of columns, 4 literary devices will be used. These devices have to be described on the basis of theoretical input by Wood, Herman, Booth and Rodenko and others.

Component 3: analysis of the columns

All columns in the corpus have to be described and analysed on the basis of the 4 literary devices. All columns will be compared and a synthetical analysis will be constructed.

Component 4: examination of the reader responses

After the content and formal analysis, the reader responses will be examined, on the basis of online posts on the newspaper platforms and on blogs. How can these responses be related to general debates in the public sphere?

Component 5: writing of an academic article

Students and supervisors will write an academic article on the topic, to be submitted in a journal on Media studies.

5. Research Trainee Profile

This topic may be interesting to students from:

- Algemene cultuurwetenschappen
- Filosofie
- UCT

6. How to apply

Send a resume as well as a brief motivation letter to Odile Heynders and Roos Slegers.

References

Odile Heynders (2016), *Writers as Public Intellectuals: Literature, Celebrity, Democracy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.