

'Pressing' her case: A Dutch journalist calls on Mussolini, Eleanor Roosevelt and Queen Fabiola (Babs Boter)

Abstract

The Dutch journalist Mary Pos (1904-1987) has now been mostly forgotten. The few studies on Dutch female journalists that have been published so far do not mention her name (Diekerhof 1986; Lakmaker 1988), and the few sources that do refer to her characterize her reportages as mere chit chat (Lammers 1986). But when we analyze her publications as well as her diaries and letters, we learn that *she* took her work very seriously. She was proud of her contact and confrontations with political and other leaders, and presented herself as a true and outspoken champion for the good cause. As an unconventional and determined journalist who operated independently when most women were discouraged to do so, she showed an extraordinary kind of agency.

In three case-studies I will show that the Dutch journalist created a rather particular way of pushing her causes. In 1935 she visited and interviewed Mussolini, interrogating him about political issues such as women's rights and roles, child labor, and animal welfare. In 1950, during a press conference in Amsterdam, Pos pressed Eleanor Roosevelt, then chair of the UN Commission on Human Rights, to act on the issue of Ambon, where the central state of Indonesia repressed a Moluccan rebellion. In 1970 she wrote a letter to Queen Fabiola of Belgium, to urge her to take action on the Belgian production of pastry stuffed with thrush.

My presentation will first position Mary Pos in the (Dutch) field of journalism, particularly within the pillar of the Protestant Christian press. I will then analyze the cases referred to above: How did she conceive of her 'journalistic role' (Hanitzsch 2018)? Did she live up to the female journalist's role as 'moral order keeper' (Belinfante 1918)? How much leeway did she have? Did she make use of her status as a 'spectacle' (Lucht 2023), being the first female travel journalist in the Netherlands? What was her 'political attitude' (Reinemann and Baugut 2014) and what was her style of interviewing?

Bio

Babs Boter is Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Humanities, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Her research and teaching focus on life writing, travel writing and Diaspora Studies. She is initiator and convenor of the international expert group Unhinging the National Framework: Platform for the Study of Life Writing and Transnationalism.