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New Beginnings come to an end: late *Gewina*, *Studium*, and the changing tides of history of science in the Low Countries, 1998–2019

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the development of history of science in the Low Countries over the last two decades, pointing at a number of shifts in its participation and organization, that had a profound effect on its journals over the same period. The focus is on the last decade of *Gewina* and the full lifespan of its successor *Studium*, from 2008 to 2019 the main Dutch-language publication in the field. We include a statistical analysis of *Studium* articles as a background to its establishment and demise and the current switch to a number of new history of science journals in the Low Countries.

Keywords: History of science, science publication, scientific organization, Studium

A good twenty years ago, when Bert Theunissen chronicled the history of history of science journals in the Netherlands, the situation seemed simple and stable.[1] *Janus* and *Tractrix* had recently ceased to exist and the only remaining major periodical was *Gewina*, the official journal of the eponymous Dutch history of science society. '*Gewina* is doing fine and is financially sound,' Theunissen concluded.[2] Sure, some challenges persisted, such as the tension between the journal's amateur and professional readership and their respective preferences, but these were as inevitable as they were manageable. Nothing urged new experiments or radical change.

Things would not remain that way. It was not so much historiographical developments that affected the Dutch publication landscape in two decades to follow, even though there were many (such as the rising interest in the circulation of knowledge, the move to a

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1 Bert Theunissen, 'Journals of the History of Science in the Netherlands', in: Marco Beretta, Claudio Pogliano and Pietro Redondi (eds.), *Journals and the History of Science* (Firenze 1998) 197–210. Reprinted in this issue.

2 Theunissen, 'Journals' (n. 1) 210.

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more globally inclusive history of science, an ever-intensifying focus on scientific practice and handiwork, and a historicization of fundamental epistemological categories like objectivity, to name but a few). But in themselves, these changes could have been absorbed by the existing channels of publication. What shook the journal situation much more were two institutional shifts that hit the Dutch history of science community, changing its composition as well as its orientation.

Bologna

The first of these shifts began with the Bologna declaration. As of September 2002, higher education was reorganized throughout Europe, restructuring curricula into three-year Bachelor's and one- or two-year Master's programs. In the Netherlands this made it possible to create degrees in History of Science (as well as in History and Philosophy of Science, Science and Technology Studies, etcetera) where the field had previously been hidden in minors and series of electives, subservient to other disciplines. Throughout the country universities started such programs, with the two-year 'research master' at Utrecht University as the flagship of the field. The increased autonomy was accompanied by increased participation. Many more students than before entered the history of science and explicitly and exclusively identified with it. The 'third phase' of the Bologna system subsequently also expanded, producing an equal boost in the number of PhD students.

These changes had an undeniable effect on the history of science community. Where Theunissen had still observed the division between amateurs and professionals – the former more numerous, the latter more active – as its main characteristic, now a new dynamic grew within the professional segment. It became larger, younger, and more rapidly changing. Not all of the neophytes would continue to a career in the field, of course, but the presence of a sizable contingent of youngsters was a more or less permanent fact.

Another consequence of the Bologna arrangement, and a very much intended one at that, was an increase in international exchange. The professional segment of the Dutch history of science community was already quite internationally oriented, but the new set-up made it easier to follow part of one's studies abroad. This produced an influx of foreign students as well as a greater mobility of homegrown practitioners to the rest of Europe and beyond. Most programs switched over to English, which, paradoxically, sometimes restricted the literature diet and, even more than before, turned the Anglophone corpus into the common standard. This was the kind of history of science in which the growing numbers of new professionals were trained.

Inevitably, these new demographic developments produced new preferences and needs. For one, Gewina's traditional Saturday afternoon meetings, with their calm mingling of arrivés and *pensionados*, became a bit too grey and leisurely to satisfy the newcomers. They started to organize their own PhD Conferences and to participate, *en masse*, in the Woudschoten meetings that were held biannually from 2005 onwards. The latter's overwhelming success, soon gathering around a hundred people for two full days and a night, aptly illustrates the new desires: Woudschoten conferences were for active researchers, they were held in English, they addressed international historiographical themes, and they always invited prominent foreign keynote speakers. They appealed to new and established professionals alike, particularly after organizers had made efforts to attract early career researchers.

The new needs were also felt at the journal level. *Gewina* and its successor *Studium* (about which more below) began to accept articles in English – with varying success. A group of

four PhD students set up the blog *Shells and Pebbles*, featuring archival finds and historiographical discussions, mostly in English.[3] This soon became the most read – and certainly the most talked-about – periodical on the history of science in the Netherlands. Yet for more substantial publications Dutch historians of science increasingly turned to international journals, for reasons that also reflected a new institutional reality. As it happened, the increase in the number of PhD positions, postdocs, etcetera had been accompanied by a shift towards more project-based, competitive financing. Gone were the days when a professor could hand-pick a favorite student for a job. Now such positions had to be acquired in funding applications, assessed by independent evaluators and (usually) foreign reviewers. The same became true for later career steps that hinged more and more on successful project acquisition.[4] In this new competitive environment, publishing in Dutch for a small national in-crowd no longer helped to put weight in the scale. Few assessors would be able to judge or even read such publications.

As Rienk Vermij notes in his contribution to this issue, *Gewina* responded by adopting peer review and other features of an international journal in a bid to become equally attractive to authors. But neither it, nor *Studium*, were entirely successful in this role. For some time, it was believed that Dutch-language articles might serve as stepping-stones for newcomers, on their way toward publishing in (fully) international journals. But this belief in fact never materialized, as early career researchers could not afford to lose time in building up their publication record. As a consequence, *Gewina* and *Studium* found it increasingly hard to remain the journal of choice for the professional history of science community. The journal's *raison d'être* had lost the self-evidence it had enjoyed at the time of Bert Theunissen's writing.

Institutional reorganization

The second institutional shift that hit the field was a bit more bottom-up, and a lot more specifically Dutch than the previous development. It first manifested itself in the transition from *Gewina* to *Studium* in 2008. This was no mere name change, but the result of a merger of *Gewina* with its Belgian counterpart *Scientiarum Historia* and the *Nieuwsbrief Universiteitsgeschiedenis* (dedicated to university history). The merger reflected, as then-editor-in-chief Huib Zuidervaart and then-Gewina president Bert Theunissen declared, 'a recent trend within history of science, namely the fading of boundaries between specialists in the various disciplines.'[5] *Gewina* had long covered the history of the natural sciences as well as mathematics, medicine and technology, but now it was to absorb the history of universities and the social sciences and humanities as well. A similar trend was institutionalized even more forcefully when the field was reorganized at Utrecht University,

3 See www.shellsandpebbles.com. In Belgium, various young scholars started the website BESTOR with a comparable blog function. See https://www.bestor.be/wiki_nl/index.php/Bestor_-_Belgian_Science_and_Technology_Online_Resources. Both accessed November 1, 2019.

4 It must be added that the new anonymity was produced differently in the two main funding organizations. In the Dutch research finance (NWO) schemes, it was assessment committees' wide disciplinary composition (theologians rubbing elbows with linguists to judge history of science proposals) that made evaluators unfamiliar with applicants, inexpert on their proposals, and therefore heavily reliant on external peer-review reports. In the several EU programs, it was the wide international composition of the pools of assessors that created a more anonymous process.

5 B. Theunissen & H. Zuidervaart, "Woord vooraf/Avant-propos", *Studium* 1 (2008) 1, 2.

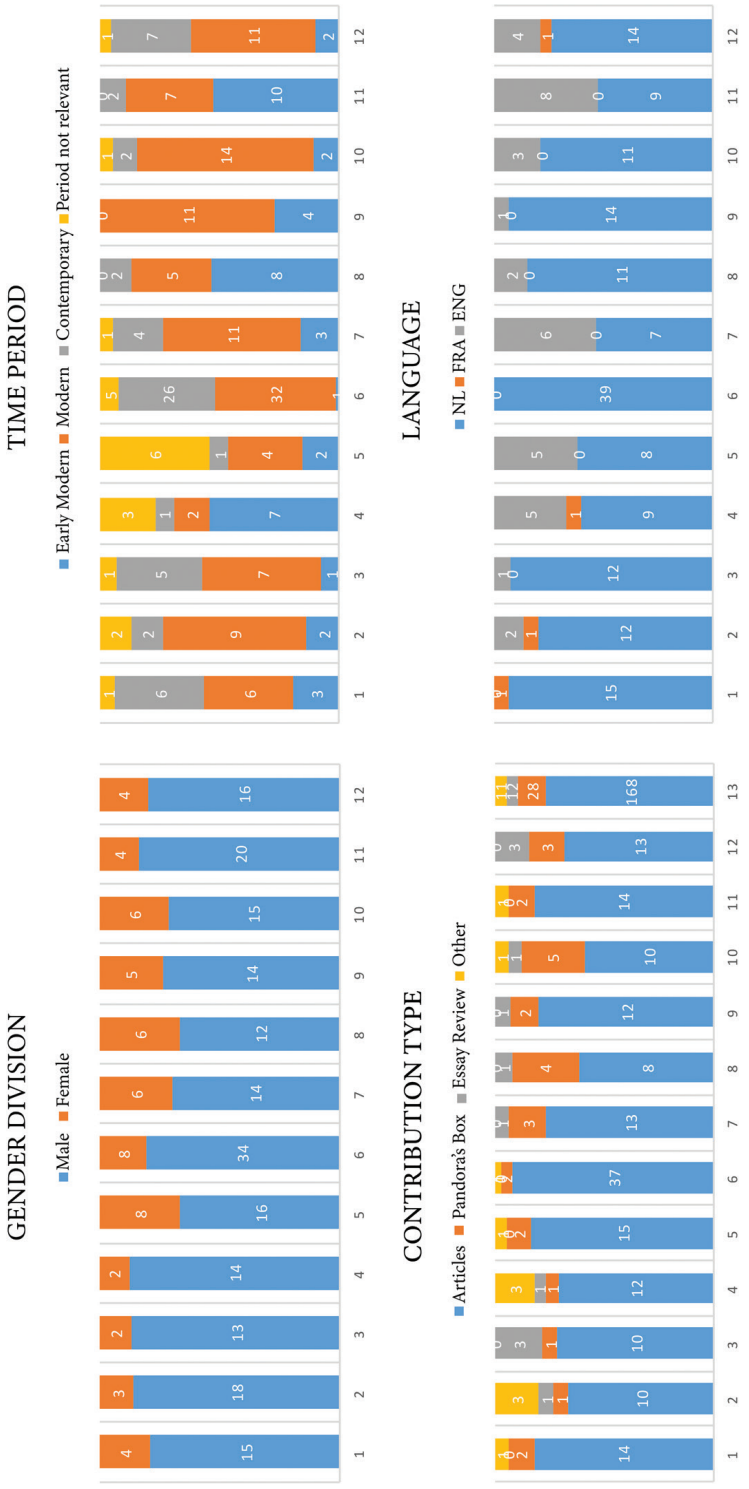

Fig. 1: Statistics for *Studium's* twelve volumes, 2008–2019. Source: www.gewina-studium.nl.

traditionally its center in the Netherlands. In 2007 the existing Institute for the History of Science at the physics department was incorporated in a much larger, university-wide structure that accommodated the history of all academic disciplines, from astronomy to veterinary science and from art history to psychology. This 'Descartes Centre' was preceded by the equally interdisciplinary Sarton Centre at Ghent University and followed by comparable initiatives at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (the Stevin Centre) and the University of Amsterdam (the Vossius Center). The latter was also the product of the meteoric rise of the history of humanities, launched by Rens Bod, not just locally, but internationally, with a new journal, conference series, and a string of research projects and publications.

Studium followed these developments, but it was questionable if the journal could keep doing that by ever adding specialties to its perimeter, especially when this was not backed by an equal expansion of its editors' expertise as well as a broadening of its output. The question arose what its domain actually was, in terms of disciplines but also in terms of geography. Was the Belgian-Dutch history of science journal devoted to the history of Belgian-Dutch science? Or was it a journal carried by the Belgian-Dutch history of science community? If so, what was the particular part played by the Gewina members now that Open Access made it available to anyone?

Studium anatomized

These were questions that plagued the *Studium* editors and they were reflected in who and what was actually published. Taking stock of this can be instructive, and one of us has undertaken a statistical analysis of twelve years of *Studium* (Fig. 1).

Of the 219 contributions that appeared over the period of *Studium*'s existence, the large majority (168) consisted of scholarly articles, all of which were peer-reviewed. The *Doos van Pandora* ('Pandora's Box') section, consisting of shorter non-peer-reviewed pieces devoted to material and archival discoveries, comes in second with 28 publications, followed by essay reviews and various editorial pieces (twelve and eleven, respectively). Most issues also contained several book reviews.

The overwhelming majority of *Studium* authors was attached to a university with minor representations from museums and research institutes.[6] Amateurs formed a negligible minority.[7] Despite fluctuations, women authors remained at a little over one quarter from the first through the twelfth volume, which is striking considering the growing female participation in the field over the same period. This trend (or rather lack of a trend) testifies to the first institutional shift mentioned above. Most new female historians of science were young, and young authors never contributed much to *Studium*, in spite of hopes and expectations to the contrary. The typical *Studium* author continued to be a male, late-career academic.

The overwhelming majority of articles was devoted to Dutch subjects (160) versus Belgian topics at 16 – and after 2013 we find only a single article on a Belgian subject. Accordingly, a large majority of authors was Dutch (197) versus 35 Belgians and 17 of other nationalities. It does not look like *Studium* inherited equal numbers of genes from its two parents, *Gewina*

6 Statistics for this paragraph have been derived from the *Studium* website, www.gewina-studium.nl (accessed 10 October 2019).

7 Also see G. Somsen, 'Academisch profiel (ranking, kwaliteit, auteurs, publiek, recensies, peer-reviewproces)'. Internal discussion paper, Gewina, 2016.

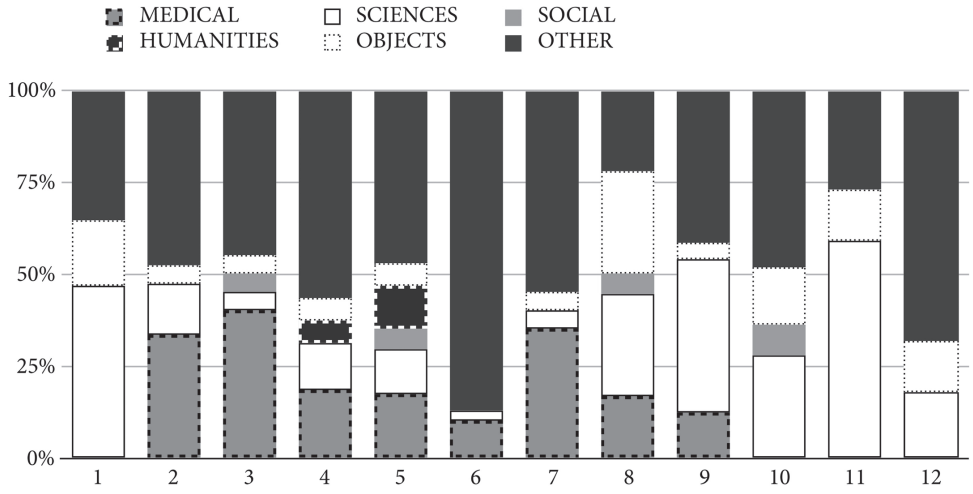

Fig. 2: Relative thematic distribution across twelve volumes of Studium, 2008–2019. Source: gewina-studium.nl.

and *Scientiarum Historia*. The use of the French language also remained minimal, despite occasional efforts to stimulate it. But perhaps more surprising is the lack of increase of the use of English. Even though *Studium* welcomed anglophone contributions from the start, their proportion flucuated, never exceeding 50% and totalling at 18%. The journal's hope of serving international publishing needs was not fulfilled.

Almost half of all contributions were dedicated to modern topics (19th-20th century), and about a quarter to early modern ones. If this seems surprising considering the prominence of Dutch Golden Age science, it is an adequate reflection of the periodic foci of the professional academic history of science community in the Netherlands. The thematic emphasis of the journal is not easily definable. While subjects (Fig. 2) from the history of the exact sciences were definitely prominent, *Studium* also showed a pervasive interest in the organization and politics of science, as well as in philosophy and historiography. The modest role of medical history must be attributed to the fact that it is an organizationally somewhat fragmented field in the Netherlands, and *Studium* was not always its most obvious publication channel. The history of the social sciences and humanities remained similarly underrepresented, perhaps because these had not traditionally been part of the scope of *Studium*'s predecessor *Gewina*. Perhaps most striking in the statistics, however, is the dominance of the category 'other' and the lack of any easily distinghuishable trend. If Dutch history of science included more and more disciplines, this is not clearly visible in *Studium*'s contents over time.

Switching gears, once more

After a number of years, these and other developments (and lack of developments) led to repeated reflections on the journal's role and status, especially by *Studium*'s chief editor, Huib Zuidervaart. In 2015, retirement in sight, he compiled a systematic analysis of the journal's challenges, after which the Gewina board decided to have a special committee investigate the matter and come up with recommendations. This committee was led by *Studium*'s

new editor-in-chief Esther van Gelder and consisted of fellow editors, board members, a *Shells and Pebbles* editor, and some external publication experts. It took into account the broad trends sketched above as well as more technical concerns such as affordability and Open Access policy. After several partial investigations and discussions with the heads of Dutch history of science centers and editors-in-chief (at the time no less than six of the field's international journals happened to be based in the Netherlands) this committee made a number of recommendations that were by and large adopted by the Gewina board and approved by the Gewina members. Hence it was decided that the best way out of the identity crisis was to terminate *Studium* and replace it by three clear-cut publications: an attractive magazine on the history of science for the amateur segment of the society (in Dutch), a dynamic website with blogs for all of its members, and an academically focused journal geared toward an international readership and authorship for professionals old and new. The latter journal's profile, in line with the second institutional shift sketched above, was to be aimed at the history of knowledge, a new category that seemed to meet an international demand and also culminated the *Gewina-Studium* trend, while thematizing it with greater relevance and consistency. The *Journal for the History of Knowledge* is now about to publish its opening issue.

Here ends the line of 'het groene tijdschrift' ('the green journal'), *TGGWNT*, *Gewina*, and *Studium*. You are currently looking at the pages of the latter's last issue. But the death of this journal by no means marks the lifelessness of the community that carries it – on the contrary. History of science in the Low Countries flourishes as never before, and its practitioners keep managing to adapt to changing and admittedly challenging circumstances. The journal is dead, long live the journal!