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Inside a world of spin Four days at the World Trade Organization

■ Olav Velthuis

De Volkskrant, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT ■ This article provides an ethnographic account of newspaper coverage of a trade summit which took place in Geneva in the last days of July 2004. One problematic aspect of covering news events at international economic institutions such as the World Trade Organization is the phenomenon of mediated mediation: whereas the role of journalists is to mediate between news events and the public, access to these events is restricted. As a result, the media are dependent on mediation by key actors, press officers, spokespersons, NGOs and other parties with an interest in the way events are represented. Given the highly technical nature of these events, and the limited expertise of journalists, interested parties have many opportunities to ‘spin’ the coverage.

KEY WORDS ■ media anthropology, globalization, World Trade Organization, sociology of journalism

On the front page

Sunday afternoon, 1 August 2004. The voice of one of the editors in chief of *de Volkskrant*, a Dutch daily newspaper with an edition of around 300,000 copies, sounds through the intercom across the 5000-square-foot office floor. ‘5:30, it is time to talk about the front page.’ At first, there is no movement on the second floor of a seven-storey office building, located close to the center of Amsterdam. Most of the approximately 100 desks are

empty. One reporter, who is on duty for the business section this weekend, is standing in the center of the office space, where two graphic designers are positioned behind their wide monitors. 'Are you ready to draw the page?' one of them asks in newspaper slang. On his Apple computer the graphic designer opens page number six, the business page in the Monday newspaper. It is entirely empty, except for the page number on top and an advertisement on the bottom.

Minutes before, the reporter has taken stock of the stories that should be in the newspaper the next day. A substantial part of the page will be filled by a feature story that has been ready for almost a week now. The remaining space needs to be filled by a number of news articles that will either be filed in the course of the evening, or by copy from the press agencies. With an empty page – albeit now with a grid on it which marks the number, the size, and the position of the articles – the reporter walks back to his desk, ready to inform the colleagues who will be filing or who have already done so, what the exact length of their pieces should be.

In the meantime, reporters on weekend shift from the other sections of the newspaper (national news, foreign affairs, arts, sports, photography) have taken a seat in a small office, adjacent to the main editorial office. 'The Hague' (as the parliamentary desk of the newspaper is referred to because of its location close to the Dutch parliament in The Hague) participates in the meeting through a Charlie's Angels-like telephone speaker.

'What are we going to put on the front page?' the editor on duty asks. This weekend, he is responsible for the production of the Monday newspaper (*de Volkskrant* does not have a Sunday edition), which means primarily that he coordinates decision making about what will end up on the front page. The morning before, the editor convened with the same group of people, looking for stories in the national press that might be suitable for a follow-up.

'What's going on abroad?' the editor tries on Sunday afternoon. 'Not much', a reporter from the foreign desk answers. 'Another attack in Iraq – 11 people died, among whom some Christians. But I presume that's not what you would like to have upper left.' In the jargon of journalists, the importance of articles is expressed in plain graphic terms: 'a standing piece' (which is the format for 'hard' news), 'a lying piece' (a background article or analysis), or a mixture of the two: 'flat news' (a news story that lacks a sense of urgency, and is therefore printed horizontally). The most important spot of the page is the upper left corner.

During the week, reporters try hard to get their pieces on the front page by lobbying extensively with their superiors and 'selling' a story by selecting its most salient findings and sometimes presenting the story as being more spectacular than it really is. For the Monday newspaper, however, the problem is often exactly the opposite: where to find a 'two column piece'



Figure 1 The main negotiation room is located in a new building.

(a substantial news article) with which to ‘open’ the newspaper? What news can be ‘blown up’ is a question frequently posed at Sunday meetings. In the summer, when most political and governmental institutions are closed, only a limited number of press conferences are scheduled, and many citizens (including journalists) are on holiday, the problem is aggravated. Therefore, in July and August the prime concern of editors is not how to cover all news events in an appropriate way, but how to fill all the pages of the newspaper every day.

‘Anything happening in Israel?’ the editor tries again, knowing that the Palestine conflict has saved the Monday newspaper on numerous occasions before: businesses may be closed, politicians may be at home, but a violent conflict does not stop during weekends or holidays. ‘No, nothing from Israel’, the staff reporter of the foreign desk responds.

‘Business, what do you have?’ the editor continues. ‘A WTO deal has been struck in Geneva’, the reporter on duty responds. ‘Yes, I heard something on the radio this morning. A new trade deal, right? Can you tell us quickly what it is about?’ ‘We will have to cut our agricultural subsidies.

Because our subsidies keep farmers in developing countries poor. Billions of dollars are involved.' A sigh of relief from the editor: 'OK, the WTO is rather abstract, but unless there is a better offer we should probably open the newspaper with it. Do you all agree?' In the remainder of the 30-minute meeting, nobody comes up with a better suggestion.¹

The final press conference

Geneva, 15 hours earlier. It is 2:15am; the final press conference at the headquarters of the World Trade Organization has just ended. Outside, in the park where the WTO offices are located, it is pitch-dark. About 75 international journalists and a few representatives from non-governmental organizations with an interest in trade are present. The majority of the journalists come from European countries and the United States. Only a few journalists from developing countries are around, in spite of the fact that the current round of trade negotiations, the so-called Doha-round, is explicitly directed at improving the position of developing countries in world trade.

The press conference takes place in one of the meeting rooms whose design is typical for the WTO: long rows of yellow desks with chairs on either side. During negotiations, two representatives of each of the 147 member states sit at these desks facing each other.² In the middle of the desk, headphones and microphones, wired to the small box offices of some six interpreters, ensure that delegates can talk to each other. The timing of the press conference may be unusual, but apart from that it follows the script of other press conferences at international economic institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in Washington DC or the European Central Bank in Frankfurt. In front of the room, a long desk is positioned on a small platform. In the back, news agencies put their cameras on another platform to tape the entire event. Journalists take the seats reserved for the delegates during the rest of the year. Notebooks and pencils lie in front of them. Photographers freely walk around through the room, occasionally being shouted at when they appear within a camera's view. The implicit agreement is that they make their pictures at the beginning and the end of the session, in order not to interfere with the journalists or the cameramen.

Before the press conference begins, some journalists – almost exclusively those working for press agencies, for whom accuracy is a core value – put their tape recorders on the desk. When some of the protagonists of the negotiations – Pascal Lamy (the trade commissioner of the European Union),³ Robert Zoellick (the American trade representative), and Supachai Panitchpakdi (the director-general of the WTO) – enter, the chatter in the

meeting room abruptly ends. Among the journalists, one can notice a sense of awe: these are the people that seem to have the power to make or break a trade deal. Many times, their names have been mentioned in newspaper stories, but many journalists have had only limited opportunities to see them in person, let alone speak to them.

The protagonists take their seats behind the desk. Presided over by the chief press officer of the WTO, Keith Rockwell, they all make a brief statement about the outcome of the negotiations. Even before he has done so, Zoellick's aides distribute a leaflet among the journalists with the text that he is going to deliver – the reminder 'spoken word counts' (which means that in case of a difference between a speech that is distributed on paper and the way it is presented in person, the spoken word should be quoted), which is often printed on statements distributed on paper, is absent. Within hours, the statement will also appear on the website of the trade department, so that journalists around the world who have not been willing or able to attend the trade summit can nevertheless quote Zoellick in their stories, as if they had talked to the American trade representative in person.

Subsequently, the script allows for journalists to ask questions. By now, some of them have become known to Rockwell, allowing him to address these journalists cordially by their first name when they raise their hand. Establishing a close relationship to press officers has payoffs when time is limited, and many journalists are eager to ask a question. Compared to other press conferences, this one, which according to director-general Supachai marks a historic breakthrough in trade negotiations, is brief. Everybody seems to be tired and longing for their hotel beds. Moreover, many journalists have already filed their pieces, since the deadline for most Sunday newspapers passed hours before. After deliberation by telephone with their editors, they decided that it was safe to put the outcome of the summit in print before the final press conference had even started. As soon as the public part of the press conference has ended, the journalists who still have to file their stories flock to the speakers to ask more detailed questions about the outcome, hoping to get a quote in private that may set their own story apart from those of their colleagues.

Fifteen minutes after the end of the press conference I am back in my hotel room. I turn on the television. BBC World already has the outcome of the trade summit as its main item. I watch the news, turn off the TV, sleep for three hours, and take the plane back to Amsterdam. By then, quite a few journalists have already left. In the weeks before the summit, Supachai had announced that negotiations would end on Friday, 30 July. Some journalists had made their travel plans – hotel bookings, air plane ticket – accordingly. On that very Friday, when it became clear that negotiations had not yet resulted in some sort of agreement, discussions ensued about what would happen after the deadline expired. 'The end of this month could



Flowing the street of two car bombs that exploded in quick succession near two Baghdad churches on Sunday.

or threat in N.Y. and Washington

5 buildings believed targeted for attacks

Cloning when they detailed and credible threats against the five buildings in New York, Washington, D.C., and Chicago. The buildings are being targeted, they say, because they are "symbolically important" to the Islamic world. The buildings are the World Bank, the United Nations Secretariat Building, the World Bank headquarters, the World Bank headquarters, and the World Bank headquarters.

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In Baghdad, at least 10 people were

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were wounded, according to reports

from local hospitals. The death toll

from Mosul was unclear but Sunday

reports from the capital, were at least

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the Holy Father of Jerusalem, a friar

in a Catholic church. "It is Sunday, and

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Figure 3

The social construction of the WTO's importance

Since the spring of 2004, when I left academia in order to become a journalist, I have been responsible at *de Volkskrant* for the portfolio of international economic affairs, which includes, apart from the WTO, the World Bank, the IMF, development issues, and globalization. With hindsight, it is difficult to tell why I decided to attend the trade summit at the end of July 2004. Daily routines at the newspaper may provide part of the answer.

A regular day at the business section of *de Volkskrant* starts at 10 o'clock in the morning with a brief (15- to 30-minute long) informal meeting of all reporters that are not 'out' reporting, conducting an interview or attending

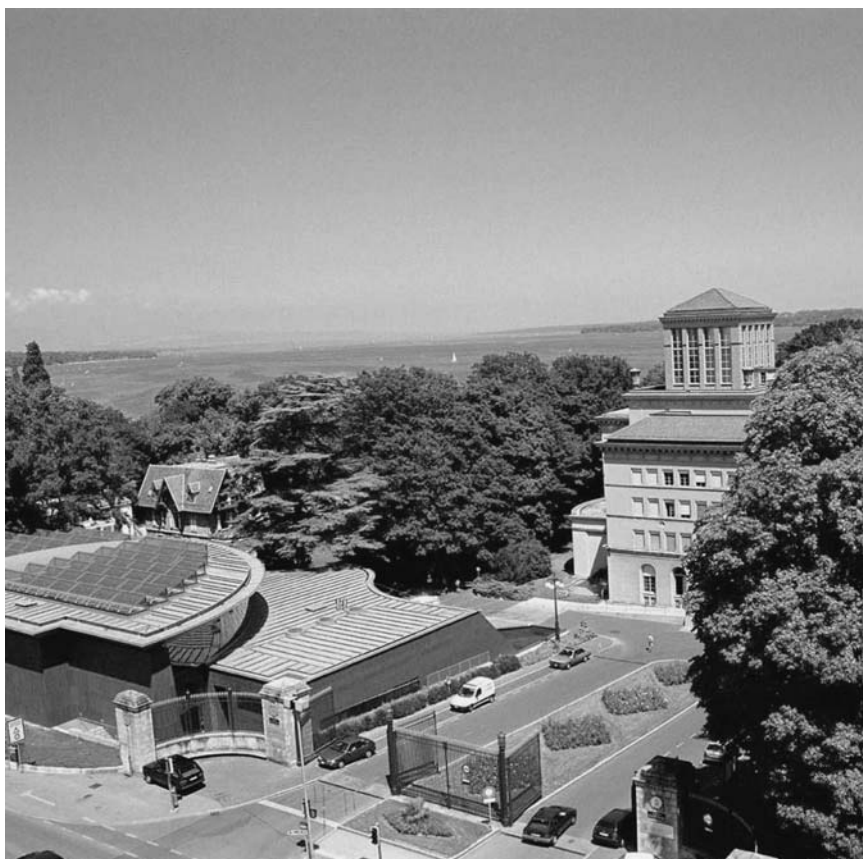


Figure 4 The WTO headquarters are located in a park on the shore of Lake Geneva.
Courtesy WTO.

a press conference (in total, about 15 reporters work in the business section; the entire newspaper employs around 200 reporters). Standing around the desk of the chief of the business section, all of us comment on the newspaper of the current day, focusing on articles that appeared on the front page and in the business section. Subsequently everyone announces what articles he or she will file for the day afterwards or in the near future.

After this meeting, or just before, many reporters turn to the filing cabinets that separate the business section from the national desk. On these cabinets lie a small number of international newspapers (*Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Handelsblatt*) as well as all the Dutch national

newspapers. The international newspapers are to a large extent agenda-setting for our own work, if only because they frequently publish scoops about multinational companies, or, in the case of the *Financial Times*, international economic institutions such as the WTO. After having read or at least scanned these newspapers, the reporter turns to his desk, reads his email, and reviews the copy of the Dutch and international press agencies that appear on his screen through integrated computer software. In addition to that, some reporters subscribe to the news services of international newspapers such as *The New York Times*.

In the weeks preceding the trade summit, the *Financial Times* in particular regularly reports about a dramatic deadlock that needs to be broken at the WTO; the heroic efforts of individual WTO-member states that try to do so; and about the future of the WTO, which may be at stake if the trade summit fails. I read similar stories on the international press agencies Reuters and Associated Press on an almost daily basis during the month of July. To underscore the importance of the trade negotiations, many articles refer to a World Bank report which claims that a new trade agreement would give a boost of \$500 billion to the world economy, adding that 140 million poor people may be lifted above the poverty line. From January until July 2004, this finding occurs 204 times in the international newspapers that are archived in the electronic media archive Lexis Nexis. In a background article, I refer to these numbers of the World Bank as well, but I have to admit that until this day, I have not read the report myself, and my guess is that neither have many journalists who reported the figure. With this in mind, look at this statement from the trade economist Jagdish Bhagwati of Columbia University, paradoxically one of the most vocal proponents of trade liberalization:

I consider many of the estimates of trade expansion and of gains from trade – produced at great expense by number-crunching at institutions such as the World Bank with the aid of huge computable models, and then fed into the public policy domain with the aid of earnest journalists – as little more than flights of fancy in contrived flying machines. (Bhagwati, 2004: 230)

Those earnest journalists, however, who lack the expertise to judge the validity of those numbers, happily report them anyway because of the drama and self-legitimizing importance they bestow on their stories.

In the weeks preceding the trade summit, I am also approached a number of times by a Dutch development organization, Novib, a branch of the international organization Oxfam. They ask me if I plan to go to Geneva, and want to hook me up to their local trade specialist there, Celine Charveriat.⁴ By email, I receive a research report of Oxfam (with its dramatic title: *One Minute to Midnight*) two weeks before the summit, as well as several press releases.

With less than two weeks left, we are still miles away from anything looking like the basis for a development round. Almost one year after the failure at Cancun, it seems that lessons still have not been learnt and that it is still business as usual. (Celine Charveriat, Head of Oxfam International's Geneva Office, from the text of a press release on 16 July 2004)

By sending these press releases and research reports, Oxfam and other NGOs provide the narrative frame that almost all media will use later that month in their news stories about the trade summit. This frame easily satisfies the media's desire for drama, conflict and pathos, and compensates for the technicality of the negotiations themselves (McNair, 1998: 154): the struggle of harmless poor countries against the evil rich countries and their billion dollars' worth of agricultural subsidies.⁵

Through frequent reporting in the international media, the provision of striking numbers by the World Bank, and the dramatic narrative frame which the NGOs provide, the importance of the trade summit is socially constructed in the weeks preceding it. Thus, when I go to the chief editor of the business section with the proposal to attend the summit, she readily agrees.

No demonstrators showed up

The headquarters of the WTO are rather unassuming – not at all what one would expect of one of the three foremost, and surely most heavily criticized, institutions of globalization; the building is small compared to the enormous offices of the other two incarnations of globalization, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, both in the center of Washington DC. The WTO-building is a four-storey gray/brown edifice, built in the 1920s as the home of the International Labour Office. It is located in a park on the side of Lake Geneva, just outside of the city center. During the last weekend of July 2004, when the skies were clear and the weather was hot, standing in the park one had a splendid view of Mont Blanc, the highest peak of Europe. The troubles and toils of globalization seemed further away than ever.

During the negotiations, apart from the delegates of the 147 member-countries and the staff of the WTO, only journalists are allowed to enter the building. To that purpose, we had to register for the summit in advance, filing a copy of a passport, press credentials, and a photograph. In front of the building, a considerable police force and a large number of police vans are present, while a double row of high fences has been put around the entire terrain. The authorities seem to be prepared for the worst. However, only a few demonstrators show up. Later in the week, security measures

are relaxed to a considerable degree. The police force and the security guards do not even care anymore if people bypass the metal detector and the identity inspection by entering the premises through the entrance that is meant for the cars of top-trade negotiators.

'Swiss farmers planned to demonstrate; but now that the weather is so good, they cancelled their plans and choose to harvest instead.' This is how a press officer of the WTO explains the absence of demonstrations. 'Activists have been focused on the war in Iraq, you know', says Amy Barry, a young press officer from Oxfam who has been flown in for the event from London, 'and we are preparing for the G8 meetings in Scotland next summer.' One of my Dutch colleagues, among others, will later in the week nostalgically recall the trade summit in Cancun (2003), where large-scale demonstrations and a quick, unexpected breakdown of the negotiations intensified the atmosphere. An American journalist working for a specialized trade magazine tells me that the ministerial meeting of Seattle (1999), when large-scale, violent demonstrations transformed the WTO into a metaphor for globalization and everything that critics say is wrong with it, was even better.

Inside the headquarters, the freedom to move around is restricted. Apart from the meeting room on the highest floor of the building, where the press conferences take place, access for journalists is limited. We are granted use of a large lounge with comfortable couches to rest on, and an adjacent press room, where some computers, a printer and network cables for the internet are available – albeit not in abundance, causing some bickering among journalists, and leading international press agencies to claim their own spaces during the entire summit. An announcement board in the pressroom notifies journalists of press conferences that have been scheduled by the WTO itself, one of its member countries, or representatives of groups of countries that negotiate as unified blocs (in trade jargon referred to with codes such as the G10, G20, G90). Some journalists hang around in the corridors or in front of the offices of the press department, asking for information or fishing for news. Although the stairs that lead to other parts of the building have not been blocked by guards or fences, they are forbidden terrain for the journalists. Their casual dress (almost invariably jacket without tie) makes them easy to distinguish from the much more formally dressed delegates who occasionally visit the lounge.

Upon arrival in this lounge, I hear somebody talking Dutch on his cell phone. After his phone conversation is finished I introduce myself. He turns out to be a journalist for *NRC Handelsblad*, the main competitor of *de Volkskrant* in the Netherlands. We tell each other that we have read one another's articles, but until then we have never met. Together we review which other colleagues from the Dutch media may be present. International events like trade summits or annual meetings of the World Bank and the



Figure 5 Delegates of the WTO member countries are often involved in highly technical negotiations.

IMF are among the few places where members of the Dutch media that cover international economic affairs spend time together. At the summit, five Dutch journalists (including myself) turn out to be present. During the rest of the week, we kill time exchanging gossip about colleagues who are not present, talking about previous assignments, or debating personal opinions about world trade that are not supposed to enter news coverage. 'Do you know why nobody from ANP (the main Dutch press agency) is here?' I ask. One of them responds: 'I heard that they were not able to send anybody because of the summer holidays.' Also, we exchange basic information such as the location and timing of a meeting with the Dutch Minister of Economic Affairs, or rumors about the latest developments in the negotiations. In the evening, we eat dinner together. When the reporter from the popular daily *de Telegraaf* hears from his editor that his news piece will not end up on the front page of the Sunday edition (*de Telegraaf* is the only Dutch newspaper with a Sunday edition, which means that it is the first Dutch newspaper to report the outcome of the negotiations – *de Volkskrant* and the *NRC Handelsblad* have to wait until Monday) because the topic is not considered important enough, we comradely express our regrets.

In spite of this atmosphere of cooperation, however, the everyday competition between national newspapers continues during the summit. Thus we hardly talk about the content of the articles we are about to write, the sources we use to write these, or the way we interpret the most recent events. When an editor calls to hear what stories to expect for the next days, a journalist discreetly walks away from the rest of the group in order not to disclose relevant information to his colleagues. Also, we eagerly check electronic media sources to see what our competitors wrote, how much space they were granted by their editors, and how prominently their articles were published.

Interaction with reporters from foreign media is limited. Furthermore, the journalists of press agencies tend to socialize separately. Some of them are permanently based in Geneva, unlike most of the other journalists present, and therefore already know each other; during the summit they are joined by colleagues from their own companies that are temporarily assigned on the job. Also, their work rhythm prevents them from socializing with reporters from the daily newspapers, since they have to work and file articles on an almost permanent basis.

Endless waiting

In the mornings, I call the editor of the business section to discuss if, and, if so, what type of article to file. 'I have read that no progress has so far been made', the editor tells me on the phone on one of these days. Through the international press agencies, my editor is up to date about new events at the WTO almost as soon as I am. On Friday morning he tells me that the 'front page' (a short-cut for the meeting where the content of the front page is decided upon) is interested in a news piece about the negotiations for the Saturday newspaper. I reply that it is not likely the negotiations will be concluded by Friday night.

Daily life during the summit contrasts sharply with the discourse of triumph that prevails in the media. In its main news piece, published on the Monday after the trade negotiations have ended, the *International Herald Tribune* quotes several stakeholders at the WTO who describe the outcome as a 'truly historic achievement', 'landmark accord', 'a moment of victory', and an 'international cause celebre'. However, during the week that negotiations take place, journalists perceive no action whatsoever. In fact, covering trade negotiations by and large boils down to waiting – for the next press conference to begin/for the next draft of a document to appear/for the next negotiator to be briefly interviewed. Some of us permanently watch the cars parked in front of the building, from which we can infer which top negotiators are in the building.

At the end of each day, a dense cloud of cigarette smoke hangs in the lounge. During the trade negotiations, the WTO has the characteristics of a total institution, to use Erving Goffman's term (Goffman, 1961). For four days, we all have the same thing on our mind. For four days, we are cut off from society; we lead an enclosed life, leaving the building only for a meal or to sleep. But then again, most journalists stay in the same hotel, nearby the headquarters; also, running into each other during dinner is inevitable given the limited number of restaurants at a reasonable distance. Since my own hotel is in the city center, my days start with a walk along the quiet Lake Geneva in the morning, and a walk back through the crowds of locals who visit the fair on the Lake's shore in the evening.

Contrary to the total institutions such as prisons, mental hospitals or convents discussed by Goffman, we are free to walk in and out of the WTO building. Nevertheless, many choose to spend the entire day inside the building, if only because it offers computer services, it houses spokespersons and press officers, and it is, after all, the place where new information comes out first. Also, the previous trade summit in Cancun ended in failure well before any journalist had expected it, creating an anxiety for being too late this time to cover events in case a trade deal is unexpectedly struck or, alternatively, if negotiations break down.

Furthermore, although our lives are not formally administered by anyone during the summit, the role of the WTO's press officers is to some extent comparable to the role of guards at Goffman's total institutions. Journalists are to a large extent dependent on them during these four days: for information about the developments of the negotiations, for background information, and for getting access to key actors. Also, the rhythm of the day is dictated by the press officers and their timing of events. Long stretches of time spent waiting are interrupted by brief outbursts of activity, when all journalists collectively get onto their feet because a press conference is called or a new document is distributed.

Providing transparency

Given the non-public character of WTO negotiations and the limited access provided even to experts, a classical, democratic role of the media seems to be at stake in covering the trade summit: providing independent coverage to the rest of the world, and, by doing so, overseeing that negotiations are conducted in an orderly, transparent manner. Indeed, an aura of responsibility and exclusivity surrounds the journalists that have decided to come to Geneva.

In reality, however, as some journalists would only realize upon arriving at the headquarters of the WTO, the entire negotiation process takes place

behind doors that remain closed for everyone but the delegates. The only times journalists are allowed to enter the rooms is before negotiations begin or after they have ended. Not even the last plenary session, which has a by and large ceremonial character, can be attended by the press. In spite of their insistence with press officers to get access, they have to wait in the corridors of the new edifice of the WTO building where the last session takes place, or, because of the high temperature, outside, in the dark. Only photographers are allowed in at the very beginning to take pictures. As a result, negotiations are hardly transparent for journalists.

'This is a summit on steroids', chief press officer Rockwell of the WTO comments at one point on his way out of the lounge, leaving journalists wondering if this is a quote for attribution or a remark that has been made off the record. Just before, Rockwell has admitted that he does not know anymore where meetings are taking place, which parties get together, and which subjects are exactly on the table. Off the record, his colleagues from the press office seem to agree with NGOs who accuse WTO negotiations for their notorious lack of transparency. But in conversations I conducted with other journalists, this never came up as a problematic aspect of covering trade negotiations.

We do know, again from a press officer, that the most crucial negotiations, between a group of countries alluded to in WTO slang as the FIPs (Five Interested Parties: the European Union, the United States, Brazil, India, and Australia) are not even taking place in the WTO headquarters but, allegedly for security reasons, in the American mission. No single journalist is present there. News about what is going on in these negotiations is based on the international press agencies who regularly call spokespersons of the parties involved.

If the task of journalists is to mediate between news events and the general public, at the WTO summit this mediation is itself mediated. In spite of having covered them, I find it hard to imagine until this day what negotiations at the WTO exactly look like, and how the 'historic' framework agreement has been reached. Since not even minutes of the negotiation sessions are made public, the coverage of journalists is entirely dependent on representations by press officers, spokespersons, or, during press conferences, by the negotiators themselves. To be sure, this problem of mediated mediation is not incidental to covering the WTO, but is a structural feature of international economic journalism. At meetings of the G8, the World Bank or the IMF, which usually make newspaper headlines all over the world, no direct coverage of events is possible either.

The media have to base their coverage of these events to a large extent on press conferences that are scheduled at the end. It is obvious, however, that speakers at these press conferences have no reason to present a neutral, impartial view, but can instead be expected to present an account that is in

WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION

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Doha Work Programme

Decision Adopted by the General Council on 1 August 2004

1. The General Council reaffirms the Ministerial Declarations and Decisions adopted at Doha and the full commitment of all Members to give effect to them. The Council emphasizes Members' resolve to complete the Doha Work Programme fully and to conclude successfully the negotiations launched at Doha. Taking into account the Ministerial Statement adopted at Cancún on 14 September 2003, and the statements by the Council Chairman and the Director-General at the Council meeting of 15-16 December 2003, the Council takes note of the report by the Chairman of the Trade Negotiations Committee (TNC) and agrees to take action as follows:

a. Agriculture: the General Council adopts the framework set out in Annex A to this document.

b. Cotton: the General Council reaffirms the importance of the Sectoral Initiative on Cotton and takes note of the parameters set out in Annex A within which the trade-related aspects of this issue will be pursued in the agriculture negotiations. The General Council also attaches importance to the development aspects of the Cotton Initiative and wishes to stress the complementarity between the trade and development aspects. The Council takes note of the recent Workshop on Cotton in Cotonou on 23-24 March 2004 organized by the WTO Secretariat, and other bilateral and multilateral efforts to make progress on the development assistance aspects and instructs the Secretariat to continue to work with the development community and to provide the Council with periodic reports on relevant developments.

Members should work on related issues of development multilaterally with the international financial institutions, continue their bilateral programmes, and all developed countries are urged to participate. In this regard, the General Council instructs the Director General to consult with the relevant international organizations, including the Bretton Woods Institutions, the Food and Agriculture Organization and the International Trade Centre to direct effectively existing programmes and any additional resources towards development of the economies where cotton has vital importance.

c. Non-agricultural Market Access: the General Council adopts the framework set out in Annex B to this document.

d. Development:

Principles: development concerns form an integral part of the Doha Ministerial Declaration. The General Council rededicates and recommits Members to fulfilling the development dimension of the Doha Development Agenda, which places the needs and interests of developing and least-developed countries at the heart of the Doha Work Programme. The Council reiterates the important role that enhanced market access, balanced rules, and well targeted, sustainably

Figure 6 The document that was finally adopted by the WTO member states.

line with their own specific political agendas. For instance, at an IMF-meeting that I attended, the British Minister of Finance Gordon Brown told journalists that he had done his utter best to convince his colleagues from other rich countries to sell some of the gold of the IMF in order to cancel the high, unsustainable debt of developing countries. In doing so, he contributed to constructing and reproducing his own identity as a key advocate of debt relief for developing countries, or, to put it in more blunt terms, as savior of the poor. Later, however, during a private meeting with Dutch journalists, the Dutch Minister of Finance Gerrit Zalm vowed that no proposals had been made by Brown during the meeting to sell the IMF gold. Instead, Zalm remarked wryly: 'It is so easy on these meetings to put yourself in the spotlight by making pretty statements.'

Not for attribution

Limited access to events is not the only problematic aspect of covering trade negotiations. On top of that, their 'story suitability', as Herbert Gans called it in a classical work in the sociology of media, is limited (Gans, 1979): trade negotiations are highly technical, whereas their outcome only affects the readers' lives indirectly. In other words, the WTO may be important, but it is hardly interesting for a lay audience.⁶ Journalists can counteract this, for instance, by using dramatic narrative frames such as the one presented by NGOs, by personalizing events, or by introducing anecdotes into their stories.

Take the following scene. On Saturday morning, Arancha Gonzalez, the young Spanish spokeswoman of EU-trade commissioner Pascal Lamy, walks through the lounge where journalists are sitting together. By that time, most journalists seem to be tired of waiting. Gonzalez runs into a French journalist. Exchanging kisses on the cheeks, they greet each other cordially (in fact, many spokespeople and press officers have worked as journalists earlier in their career, and still have a network of friends within the profession as a result). Subsequently, she joins the conversation. Why are the negotiations taking so long?, the journalists want to know. Gonzalez smiles, 'But don't you know what happens if you put these types of men together?' she says. Then, imitating an alpha-male gorilla striving for dominance, the spokeswoman pounds with her fists on her chest. After she leaves, journalists discuss her gesture at length. It sheds a different light on the way negotiations are conducted. Nobody, however, decides to use her gesture as material for a news piece or background article.

On the one hand, then, journalists seek to personalize and enliven their stories as much as possible with anecdotal information, unexpected events, or striking personal traits. On the other hand, professional rules of conduct

and shared ethics lead to voluntary censoring of the very material which serves that purpose. In the case of Gonzalez, journalists may have abstained from using her gesture because of the role reversal that took place before making it: she joined the conversation in her role of friend of a journalist rather than her role of spokeswoman. However, similar self-censorship takes place in the absence of role reversal. Take another scene. During a press conference, the Dutch Minister of Economic Affairs Brinkhorst allows a female journalist to ask a question, saying: 'yes, please, that cute young journalist over there, you can try to ask a smart question.' Afterwards, several journalists are upset about the sexist remark. But nobody considers writing it down. At another press conference, organized by Oxfam outside of the headquarters, in the open air in the park, Love Mtesa, the WTO ambassador of Zambia, is one of the speakers. Mtesa's short speech is almost identical to the press releases put out by the NGO. Also, when journalists ask questions after the speech has ended, the campaigners of Oxfam seem much more able to respond than Mtesa himself. But again, no journalist dares to write up that Oxfam reveals a Zambian ambassador to be a talking head. The standard argument of editors is that this information is irrelevant because it has no news content. But that argument counts equally for many other anecdotes or quirks that reporters frequently do incorporate into their articles.

Given these external (lack of access) and internal (shared ethics) restrictions, documents are one of the only reliable sources of information that remain. On Friday morning, a reporter of the Associated Press has managed to get hold of the draft version of the framework agreement that was agreed upon by the WTO member states in the middle of the night. The draft, which was scheduled to appear at least a day earlier, is what many journalists have been waiting for. The reporter does not want to reveal who leaked the document to her, but some of her colleagues speculate it may have been sources within the staff of the WTO itself. Indeed, for press officers, leaking documents is in general a way to manage press coverage: a journalist who is known to write in a truthful or favorable manner can thus be allowed to set the tone.

Documents, then, such as court papers, government memoranda, or much awaited research reports, are fetishized by journalists (Riles, forthcoming). Since they often contain 'hard' news, getting hold of them before other journalists may result in a scoop. But apart from being a source of information, documents are a source of status: managing to get hold of them symbolizes the skills of a journalist and the strength of his network (after all, without the appropriate network, documents are hard to come by in an early stage, before their official publication). At the same time, however, time constraints and – in the case of the WTO – difficulties in understanding them, prevent reporters from studying documents in detail.

In fact, they often do not get further than reading the press release and the executive summary (for the framework agreement at the WTO, however, no summary was available).

Since the reporter of Associated Press has already filed a piece about it, she does not object to sharing the document by having it photocopied. Later in the day, the WTO makes the document officially public and puts it on her website. After it has been photocopied, groups of reporters try to make sense of the document collectively in the lounge of the WTO headquarters. But after a while, most of them give up and put the text aside. The document provides a lot of legal text, but little concrete material to refer to.

Again later, Arancha Gonzalez, the spokeswoman of Lamy, and Richard Mills, the American spokesman of Zoellick, mingle with the journalists; they are keen to point out why the agreement will be a major step forward in the Doha round, what their employer has contributed to that achievement, and that other countries are to blame for the fact that not more progress has been made. At the same time, Celine Charveriat, Oxfam's head of advocacy in Geneva, holds meetings with some journalists in the lounge, in which she expresses her disappointment with the framework, arguing that the position of developing countries has hardly improved. The lounge of the WTO, where journalists spend endless hours waiting for the negotiations to come to a conclusion, has turned into a rhetorical battlefield.

Adding to this battlefield character, a man in a suit appears with the draft in his hand, and starts talking excitedly to a group of journalists. 'You are going too fast for me, Pedro', says a reporter of *The New York Times*. At that moment I realize I know the person. Pedro Camargo Neto, a Brazilian trade consultant and former negotiator for the Brazilian government. I read about him in *The New York Times*, in an article highlighting the crucial role he played in the Brazilian victory – 'a landmark victory' – at the WTO regarding American cotton subsidies, which a panel of experts deemed illegal.

Then, by pure coincidence, I got Camargo Neto's email address through an American contact of the chief editor of the business section of my newspaper. For a feature article about the cotton case, I did a telephone interview with Camargo Neto, and exchanged several emails. But, as with many sources that I contacted by phone or email, I had no idea what he looked like. Camargo Neto tells the journalists standing around him there is no historic framework at all. 'Look here', he says, pointing at the numbers he has scribbled on the back of a copy of the draft agreement. 'This is a status quo index; you see, Europe and the US hardly have to give up anything according to this framework. It is a bad deal for developing countries.' Two days before, I interviewed Scott Andersen, the Geneva trade lawyer hired by Brazil in the cotton case. Andersen, who has his office opposite the WTO

headquarters, described Camargo Neto as one of the most knowledgeable trade consultants world wide.

An economy of quotes

Apart from studying documents, attending press conferences, or speaking to spokespersons and press officers, reporters try to get information by trying to get hold of the trade negotiators themselves. To that purpose, so-called Green Room meetings are the best opportunities. Among critics of the WTO, these meetings, named after the color that the director-general's conference room used to have, have been condemned because only few parties (around 20 out of the 147 member states of the WTO) are invited by the director-general to participate. But since these meetings take place inside the WTO building, all the participants need to pass through the corridors on their way in and out. This provides ample opportunities for journalists to 'catch' them.

During one of these Green Room meetings, a group of reporters post themselves at the bottom of the stairs of the WTO headquarters. After a seemingly endless stretch of time, the American trade ambassador Zoellick descends the stairs; several reporters try to block his way, put a running tape recorder or digital device in front of his face, and immediately start asking questions. But Zoellick keeps his mouth shut, walks around the journalists, and speeds through the corridors to the monumental entrance of the building, where his driver is waiting to whiz him away from the media. After a short while, Celso Amorim, the Brazilian minister of Foreign Affairs, also comes out of the meeting. In his role of the underdog, albeit an underdog who quickly seems to be gaining power, Amorim is clearly the journalists' darling; within seconds, a large group of journalists surrounds him, giving the minister, who is a good friend of the Brazilian president Lula, a rock star appearance. Even journalists who do not recognize Amorim instantly, but infer from the large group of their colleagues that it must be somebody important, join. Within the narrative frame that many journalists decide to use, Amorim is the good guy, since he represents one of the main countries that try to force the US and EU superpowers on to their knees.

After he has made his way out, the group does not fall apart right away, but instead stays together. 'What did he exactly say?' somebody asks from the outer rings, who has hardly been able to hear Amorim's voice. In the inner rings, the reporters of the press agencies have already started to rewind their tape recorders, or pressed the 'stop'-button of their digital recording devices. For them, it is important to make sure that the wording of the quotes they are about to file is identical to that filed by their

colleagues. In order to accomplish this, they listen to one of the tapes, and subsequently come to an agreement about the quotes that they will all write up.⁷ Because Amorim is the first delegate to tell the journalists that a final agreement about the framework has been reached, the press agencies don't want to lose time, and immediately afterwards call one of their bureau chiefs by mobile phone. "This is the beginning of the end of all subsidies", says Amorim', one reporter says through the phone. Others return to their computers and incorporate the quotes into the articles they were working on. Most of the journalists that work for dailies, however, don't even look at the quotes they have scribbled down anymore, and instead wait for the next takes of press agencies to appear on the screens of their laptops.

For a quote to end up in the newspaper, it does not need to have been spoken by the person that is quoted, I learned at the WTO. 'Does anybody need to file any time soon?' chief press officer Rockwell asked at the conclusion of one of the press briefings during the WTO meetings. 'Please come to me afterwards, and I will give you a quote of Supachai.' Also, after the trade negotiations had been concluded, press releases of all kinds of organizations automatically started arriving in the inbox of my email account.⁸ In fact, I noticed that after important news events, institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO or Oxfam send out a press release by email in order to provide journalists with a quotable reaction, in general by the highest-ranking official within the institution. Thus, the press departments of institutions have found an efficient way to contact the media, evading many phone calls by journalists asking for comment.

The implicit agreement underlying this economy of quotes is that the commentator and the journalist do not have to speak to each other for a quote to end up in a newspaper story. In fact, quotes are often invented by press officers; they might be reviewed and edited by the official that the quote is attributed to, but they are hardly ever literally spoken by the latter. In fact, it often happens that an identical quote is deliberately attributed to several persons. For instance, Novib, the main Dutch development organization that is affiliated with Oxfam, tends to translate quotes by international campaigners that originate from – English – press releases of Oxfam, and subsequently attributes the Dutch translation of these quotes to its own, local, Dutch directors.⁹

Press officers are highly aware of the media's demand for quotes and almost always have a supply ready, if only because they are afraid that the standard phrase in a news story '... was not willing to comment' will negatively affect the reputation of their organization. In supplying quotes, press officers are more aware than the authorities whose press appearance they manage that somewhat bold, rhetorical statements are in highest demand.

Journalists themselves participate in this economy of quotes by exchanging them. 'If you use this quote of mine, can I use that one of yours?' I

heard a reporter of a press agency asking her colleague from a competing agency; the preconditions for such a swap are that the reporters involved consider the quotes to be of comparable value, and they are not able themselves to reach the officials who supplied the quotes to their competitor. Also, in gathering quotes at meetings of international institutions where many member countries send their delegates, such as the WTO, the World Bank, or the IMF, journalists face the problem that delegates of different countries are available for comment at the same time. In that case, a division of labor may emerge, in which reporters of two different press agencies go to one meeting each, and afterwards exchange quotes among each other.

Conclusion

In the end, in the approximately 800 news stories that appear in the electronic archive Lexis Nexis about the outcome of the trade summit, the optimism of the WTO, the EU and the US resonates stronger than the pessimism of experts such as Camargo Neto or NGOs such as Oxfam, Greenpeace and ActionAid. 'WTO pact to reduce farm aid in rich nations', the headline in the *International Herald Tribune* reads. The *Financial Times*: 'Top WTO nations hail deal on Doha'. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: 'Agriculture has to make do without export subsidies; agreement at the WTO in Geneva'.

From the perspective of cultural studies and critical theory, this outcome may not come as a surprise. It more or less automatically follows from societal configurations in which the media are structurally linked to power elites within government and business. As Noam Chomsky (1989) argues: 'The media serve the interests of state and corporate power, which are closely linked, framing their reporting and analysis in a manner supportive of established privilege.' Also, the media 'allow the agendas of news to be bent in accordance with state demands and criteria of utility' (Chomsky, 1989: 5).

But for an ethnographer, the processes that may account for such an outcome are hard to pin down. On the most basic level, I noted that the people that were instructed to provide 'positive' spin to the outcome of the negotiations (at least five press officers of the WTO, as well as the spokespersons from chief negotiators such as Lamy and Zoellick) simply outnumbered those that were critical (Charveriat of Oxfam was the only representative of the NGO that got access to the WTO headquarters). Furthermore, there were no impartial sources around such as scientists who could have helped in assessing the outcome. These sources are banned from the WTO headquarters during the negotiations, unless they are officially registered as members of the delegates of member states.

Also, reporters attended press conferences scheduled by trading blocs such as the European Union and the United States significantly more often than the press conferences of NGOs or developing countries. When I asked colleagues what they made of this phenomenon, their answer was a sobering one: however sympathetic the plea of the African countries for fair trade might be, they argued, their bargaining position in the negotiations is simply too weak to warrant elaborate attention. 'That is not where the news will be', one of my colleagues claimed. 'I am sympathetic to their plight, but it does not matter what they say.'

Finally, the high uncertainty regarding the meaning of the outcome, and the lack of expertise that is necessary for autonomous judgment, was an ideal breeding ground for mimetic processes (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Sitting in the computer room, I would often read articles through the wire services installed on my laptop or on the internet that had only moments ago been filed by reporters of press agencies sitting next to me. Fortifying these mimetic processes, press officers everyday compiled a collection of the latest newspaper stories about the WTO which appeared in the major international newspapers, copied and stapled them, and put them in the press room.¹⁰ Thus, a rather homogeneous interpretive community came into being among the journalists.

More than a year after the summit in Geneva, hardly any further progress has been made in the negotiations. When I ran into the journalist who covers the WTO for the *International Herald Tribune* two months later, at the annual meetings of the IMF and the World Bank in Washington DC, she confided that she never believed the US government would seriously make an effort to cut subsidies to farmers. President Bush presented his new budget in January 2005; it did entail cuts in agricultural subsidies, but due to strong resistance in Congress, Bush revoked the major part of his plans. In May, the French population said 'no' in a referendum about the European constitution; politicians responded by promising the electorate to defend national interests more strongly, including those of – heavily subsidized – French farmers. Soon afterwards, talks among member states about a new budget for the European Union collapsed because of the French unwillingness to cut agricultural subsidy schemes.

At the moment of writing this article, government officials, NGOs and experts seem to agree that the outlook for the ministerial meeting of the WTO in Hong Kong, in December 2005, is bleak. If the ministerial meeting ends up in a failure, the war of spin will most likely be about who is to blame. In the process of writing this article, I have cancelled my travel plans to Hong Kong, since I am no longer convinced that physical proximity to the negotiations positively affects the quality of reporting about them.

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Notes

- 1 The 5:30 meetings, when decisions are made about which stories to put on the front page, involve multifaceted hermeneutic processes: most news events are in principle incommensurable, since no single criterion can be used to assess their importance. Therefore, apart from content, a wide range of non-intrinsic factors co-determine what ends up on the front page: Have other media published about the event (which editors, on the one hand, interpret as a sign which confirms the importance of the news event; if other media broke the story, however, this may at the same time be a reason to downplay its importance)? How powerful and authoritative is the person that has written the story? Is the news exclusive? Has a correspondent of the newspaper been present at the news event, or will the story be based on the coverage of press agencies? At what moment of the day does the news event take place (news events that take place in the morning are less likely to end up on the front page since almost 24 hours go by before the newspaper appears, making the news not 'fresh' enough for the front page)?
- 2 In the meantime, the WTO has added one new member state, bringing the total number to 148.
- 3 Since 1 September 2005, Lamy has been the new director-general of the WTO.
- 4 In media studies, journalists have been frequently criticized for being exclusively interested in events at institutions that represent the powers that be (McNair, 1998: 152–3). But in the case of the WTO, critics of trade liberalization – NGOs such as ActionAid, Greenpeace, or Oxfam – played a crucial role in the construction of the WTO negotiations as a major news event.
- 5 As Oxfam put it in another press release, sent out to hundreds of journalists and other interested parties around the world on 22 July: 'rich countries have pursued a strategy based on self-interest and consistently blamed everyone else for potential deadlock'; they will 'undermine world trade talks and perpetuate inequality and poverty'. Several newspapers, including *de Volkskrant* in the Netherlands and *The New York Times* in the US, condemned agricultural subsidies in their editorials.
- 6 Even the importance of WTO negotiations can be questioned: some trade economists argue that the effect of a new trade deal on economic growth

of the world economy is limited if compared to other factors which influence growth. Others argue that the emergence of China is more effective in liberalizing trade than the WTO, because China prompts countries such as India to unilaterally decrease their tariffs in order to be able to compete better with the new economic giant. Moreover, development economists claim that many developing countries will hardly gain from a new trade deal as long as preconditions for economic growth such as basic infrastructure and reliable public governance are absent.

- 7 When I was covering a banking affair in Italy, I 'doorstepped' (journalism slang for waiting outside of the building or office for a source to appear, so that he can be interrogated) with a group of Italian journalists in front of the office of a judge. After he had made some comments, the group withdrew in an office space in order to harmonize their texts. 'There is hardly a quote in there', one journalist complained after having listened to the tape recorder collectively. 'Can we not make his rhetoric a bit stronger?' he proposed. The rest of the group were embarrassed by his proposal and did not hesitate to reject it.
- 8 To that purpose, my predecessor gave me a thick pack of business cards that she had collected throughout the years when I started out at the newspaper; also, she sent me a long list of institutions (both governmental and non-governmental) that would put my name on their email distribution list for the press.
- 9 In other cases, newspaper quotes are the outcome of a bargaining and bartering process between journalists and press officers: most spokespersons in continental Europe request a preview of the final interview text before giving authorization to publish it. This often entails a process of give and take between the two parties involved, in which journalists grant a spokesperson the right to adjust a quote that is, with hindsight, problematic in the spokesperson's view. In exchange, journalists ask the favor that other quotes, for instance ones that they deem to be particularly newsworthy, are left unchanged. Also, when a spokesperson rather than an official is questioned by a journalist, the two may subsequently negotiate about how to attribute the quote in the newspaper article: to the official for whom the spokesperson works, to the spokesperson himself (with or without his name), to 'sources around the organization' (which, in the Netherlands at least, is a journalistic code that stands for the spokesperson himself), or to anonymous sources.
- 10 I have seen this practice at other international news events as well.

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