

Foreword

What are nautical media? This question is likely to be asked not only by those unfamiliar with media studies, but even by media scholars themselves. Firstly, this book uses ‘media’ where others use ‘technology’. This is done in order to focus on why technology is developed and how it is used, because technology is always situated between a user and the world (other users, other technologies, networks, environment), both by design and in practice. For those still uncomfortable with this use of ‘media’, it may be helpful to use the distinction between public media and infrastructural media (cf. Schüttpelz 2016), where public media are those traditionally identified as media, and infrastructural media are those that make the world work, mostly outside the public eye. Second, the study of media, even in its broadest sense, has a terrestrial focus, with a few exceptions to the rule (cf. Jue 2020; Borbach 2024). The relationship between mobility and media has been studied extensively and with great success (cf. Ramella 2018, 2021; Hind and Gekker 2022; Willkomm 2022; Bender and Kanderske 2024), whereas the media used on water and between water and land have not received enough attention. This study shows how these media are arranged and configured to enable navigation on rivers, estuaries, and in ports, also through the numerous connections between land and ship. Although the focus is on inland navigation in northern Europe, its relevance extends beyond inland navigation, both through its interaction with maritime navigation and through the shared media, practices, and work biographies. Furthermore, the contrast between the two in terms of manoeuvrability, navigation techniques, economic dynamics and hydrological conditions is made productive for both inland and maritime shipping. Thus, nautical media are those technologies nested in constellations between the bridge or wheelhouse on the one hand and crew members elsewhere, river or seabed, other ships, and shore on the other hand. Such constellations primarily enable navigation, but also (and often simultaneously) economic activity, compliance with regulations, and nurturing (distant) social relations. Ships require physical separation, and nautical media both ensure this, but also bridge it. In fact, it is the constant electronic, often digital, bridging of distances that makes safe, profitable, authorized, and intimate separation possible in the first place.

One might then ask: what is historical ethnography? Again, neither historians nor anthropologists are likely to have a clear idea of what it is, let alone anyone else. If ethnography is “an account—in writing, film, or other graphic media—of life as it is actually lived and experienced by a people, somewhere, sometime” (Ingold 2017: 21) it relies on certain methods for collection in the field, like participant observation and interviews. Archival research and oral history can also be such methods, with the difference that I remained an ethnographer while doing historical research, looking for traces of lived experience. An ethnography can become a historical ethnography when the researcher realises that key events took place before entering the field (cf. Vaughan 1996, 2021). It allows the researcher to understand how the past resonates in the present, how and why people are invested in the past, and it gives the researcher and participants a common purpose in delving into the past together. It places a lived experience between past, present and future: it shows what has been “handed down” (Wietschorke 2012) and what is being handed down, not only to shape the present but also in an attempt to shape future knowledge and practices. Nautical media are thus understood within the practices in which they emerged and are now embedded.

Different Belgian, German and especially Dutch communities—skippers, engineers, control room operators, civil servants—welcomed me into their homes and workplaces, which are sometimes one and the same. For days on end, they let me witness how they work and live, and how they have done so in the past. Archives, then, are much more than the official ones financed and managed by states. What is worth remembering is therefore first preserved by those involved in the field and then generously shared for this particular reconstruction. I am immensely grateful for the openness and trust of all those involved. I cherish our conversations, the empathy displayed and wisdom shared. This would be the place to name these people. However, after several participants asked to remain anonymous, and after it became clear that others who spoke openly were in need of protection, I have decided to change all the names of people and ships still active. This leaves those who were part of the oral history project and most of whom are retired, my collaborators of chapter two: Dirk Zwijnenburg and Ruud Filarski who carefully read earlier versions of parts of this book, Jan Timmer, Rolph Herks, Frans and Mieke Heijlaerts, Fokko Boersma, and Ad van Zanten.

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