Internship report

Motivation

After writing and doing my studies in English, I wanted to join a Dutch publication. Even though there are many international opportunities, I believe it is valuable to see how a national weekly operates and thought I would stand a better chance applying somewhere in a place I already live in and understand. Therefore I wanted to apply to Dutch publications. Additionally, this allowed me to add to my portfolio, which up until then only included English-language articles and projects, and some Dutch blogs.

My choice for a weekly had multiple reasons. First, because I knew, through my (short: 7 week) internship at the radio last year, what making a daily show is like, I was curious to experience a different side of journalism. Second, my interests are geared most strongly towards writing, so I wanted a chance to build up a portfolio of written articles. Thirdly, I wanted a chance to write longer, more in-depth articles.

Because I was really thrown into the deep in my last internship – which was not a bad thing, but it made for a very challenging summer - I wanted to be sure that I would have an internship place where I could learn more from other journalists, and where I was sure to get regular feedback, I chose for Elsevier: I had talked to others who had positive experiences with their internship there.
Even though I chose a place I expected to be guided, I was also expecting to develop my ability to work independently on articles which were suitable for magazines. This meant my main aim was to develop and prepare pitches and articles. I also wanted to see how a weekly got made, and how one coherent editorial line was kept throughout the making of a magazine.

The internship place

*Elsevier* is located in Amsterdam. It is a weekly news-oriented publication. There are about 28 people working on the weekly (and more freelancers) and five interns when I was there (but this differs per time period). All *Elsevier* journalists are divided over the subsections of the magazine: online (four people, one intern), ‘binnenland’ (eight people, one intern), foreign affairs, (two people, one intern, and twelve correspondents), economics (seven people, one intern), arts and knowledge (five people, one intern).

Additionally there are two research journalists. Next to this there are the editors (five people), and people responsible for images and layout (six people). With the editor-in-chief these people are all directly responsible for the contents of the magazine. “Behind” this there is 1 secretary, five people are responsible for ‘documentation’ and gathering information and then there are people working in distribution, marketing, and publishing.

Age-wise, the *Elsevier* staff is fairly diverse. The chefs of the departments are almost all men, only the documentation section has a woman as a chef. Overall the staff is quite diverse, but it I noticeable that in the writing department the division men-women is more geared towards men, and in the documentation and editing section there are relatively more women than men working there. In the online section the division between men and women working is equal, but the people working there are all young.

The publication has a right-wing political signature; the weekly is written for an audience
who wants to read a centre-right point of view about politics. This is noticeable in the direction of the articles and the discussion of the topics, but not so much in the daily rhythm of the workfloor.

It seemed that the profile of the magazine is geared towards the more contrarian point of view of politics. There needs to be a reason for people to buy weeklies, and for *Elsevier* the reason might be a for the reader to get a coverage of the news that goes off the (centre-left) script of most mainstream Dutch publications. Even so, within the magazine there is a multitude of views offered, but they all cater to the older, educated and wealthy (male) reader.

The weekly in its current form has been around since 1945. The name *Elsevier* has been used since 1891, when the publication started as a monthly geared towards culture called *Elsevier’s geïllustreerd maandschrift*. In its second phase, as a weekly (called *Elseviers weekbad*), the emphasis was on a politically independent and unaffiliated publication which would offer a sensible perspective to the readers. Over the years the magazine developed a more rightwing and conservative stance. Later on the magazine was split up in a financial publication and the weekly in its current form with the name *Elsevier*. Up until now, the weekly has continued to survive, even if news publications and especially weeklies in the Netherlands are struggling.

The magazine has been sold by RELX to New Skool Media almost a year ago. Since then there have been some changes and challenges faced by the staff, the most noticeable of which is the possible name change. The name *Elsevier* should not be used anymore, according to RELX, but the magazine staff councils against that. The conflict about the name means there is a lot of insecurity about the future of the magazine, which characterizes the working environment at the moment.
Weekly structure

Every Monday, there was a ‘commentaarvergadering’, a meeting in which all ‘chefs’ pitched their ideas for the comment section in the magazine. During this meeting they discuss the news of the week, determine what’s important enough to write about, and also discuss the “Elsevier” take on things. In my eyes this was one of the things that allowed the magazine to be coherent: people were constantly discussing and thinking about first what Elsevier should stand for and second what the Elsevier reader will and will not accept. Interns sat in in these meetings in a row of seats to the wall, they were –generally speaking- expected to keep quiet.

On Tuesdays the economic section had meetings, (usually these were once a week, but there were less meetings in the summer period). In these meetings I was expected to speak up and also pitch ideas, like the rest of the economic section. This was very nice since it was a way to check in, learn more about what the others were working on / had planned and maybe even make plans for collaboration. Generally everyone pitched a lot of ideas, and the ideas that were feasible would be worked out and discussed more with the chef, separate from this meeting. I pitched various ideas, for instance about a networking app, or about the safety of digital bookkeeping apps, or about the rules and regulation (and tax benefits) of monumental homes in the Netherlands, which were well received but died at various stages of the process. The bookkeeping app ended up being too similar to a story supplied by a freelancer, the networking app was in the end not interesting to me, and there wasn’t time to further develop the one about monumental houses. Generally there was a very positive atmosphere, where the focus wasn’t on criticism but on helping each other with for instance sources and angles. These were short meetings, designed to touch base with each other and go over the planning.

Through these meetings the chefs could set the line for the sections and the editor-in-chief
could set the line for the magazine. This has been stated above as well, but to be clear: this “line” or these journalistic practices and visions could be described as provocative but generally fair (the Dutch: hoor en wederhoor) and thorough reporting. Elsevier sets itself apart: if all the other magazines say one thing, they will try to give a different take on the issue. This gives an identity to the magazine and is also a selling strategy: if people want to read something “new”, they can buy Elsevier.

On Tuesdays there was an informal type of ‘drinks’ which was a discussion hour from 17:00 to 18:00 in which new people could be introduced, and there was room for more informal discussions. For this hour all interns prepared a discussion statement each week (during a lunch meeting) about a journalistic topic relating to Elsevier. Then they defended the statement. We (the interns) all came up with statements. I came up with some, the most notable one was about an article published in one of the Elseviers which was about Chinese tourists in the Netherlands. I posited that it was at the very least too one-sided to adhere to Elsevier’s editorial line (by which I referred back to the ‘hoor en wederhoor’ notion mentioned earlier). There was room for criticism and they were open to it, but the meeting was uncomfortable. These weekly discussions a very nice way of interacting with people who worked there in a different way, and also a nice way to learn more about the philosophy behind Elsevier and about the way they worked. Interns were encouraged to be critical here, and that was nice.

Friday there was also a meeting where I, and the other interns, could sit in (but only in the first week). Here the editors of the various sections met with the chief editor and explained what would be in their section for the next week and how the articles were going. Here there was a lot of questioning each other and discussing whether the articles were suitable for the tone of the magazine (rightwing-ish, geared towards highly educated older people, mostly men) and why “now” was a good time to be writing these articles. This was interesting since it gave some
insight into the way the magazine has contributors with somewhat different backgrounds and (political) alliances and thoughts about what was important while the editor in chief (Arendo Joustra) kept the style and tone of the magazine fairly uniform. So there was an “easy” answer to one of the things I wondered about in my internship plan, which was how to get a magazine cohesive if it’s “news” themed: lots of meetings, questioning each other, having a magazine with a set identity, and being open to other viewpoints.

Aside from Monday and the meetings, the rest of the week is just continuing with stuff I am working on, in this I am left pretty much to myself, the timeline is very relaxed (partly because there simply is not that much space in the economics section). Overall I do take long to finish stories, I think because I can. So I have a lot of time to go back and forth as well and really think about what I am writing. I try to be finished with my stuff by Thursday so I have Friday to think and come up with new ideas (and put the finishing touches on stories). I really appreciate that I can take this time and divide my time however I please as long as I produce stuff some time before the deadline.

Responsibilities of the internship

During my internship at the economics section there was one section I (and every intern) was responsible for; the “nieuws samengevat” section. This is a short summary of important economic news from that week (Wednesday to Monday, with a focus on Thursday and Friday. It consisted of five news articles) on subjects that weren’t important enough to actually write a longer article about but that were interesting for readers nonetheless. The hard deadline for this is Tuesday morning, but generally this is finished by Monday afternoon.

The other responsibility was the ‘te koop’, a weekly staple in which a house that’s for sale is reviewed. I was not expected to do this every week. I wrote 4 in three months. Other than that I
was expected to come up with my own pitches, and also to work out ideas for articles from Jean (the editor-in-chief of the economics desk). This last thing happened twice (once an article about advertising for the elderly and once about misuse of tourist tax by Dutch hotels). I had an assigned spot, and was mainly left alone to work on whatever I chose, while I felt free to come by and ask questions if it was necessary. This way of working really suits me, so that was nice.

My role as an intern was to work on larger pieces myself, and be available to (occasionally) do research or make tables/additional information to go with articles. This happened only twice: once I was asked to find out how many people use Airbnb in Dutch cities and another time I made a table about car prices. Though this was also my role there, mainly I was expected to work on my own pieces, keep up with the economic news so I could make ‘nieuws samengevat’ and also develop my pitches. Another ‘duty’ (which was not obligatory) was to make the discussion statement with the other interns on Tuesdays.

Because the economic topics were new for me, I didn’t have to get used to writing about topics new to me for an audience new to me. I didn’t have to change my approach to economic stories since here I was first developing them, within the context of Elsevier and with the benefit of having the archive available to me for examples and having journalists around me who were discussing their own stories and approaches as well.

What was really fun was writing the shorter pieces (270 words) for the ‘te koop’ section. This was essentially a review of a house, the actual setting up of the appointments and traveling to small towns took a lot of time. The writing was difficult because it is a very short piece, which has a set of obligatory segments and little room for writing about the house (which made it a challenge to write a little article that still flowed). Then the piece had to be approved by the realtor and the home owner and this generally went fine, but there was difficulty in getting it approved: the pieces should be reviews not commercials. I could resolve this on my own, and the
main issue was that it took a lot of time.

The longer articles I wrote, for instance about the role of smaller businesses as debt collectors, were challenging to write because of my lack of economic knowledge. However, through interviews and triple checking everything I managed to do it, I just had to work harder on it because of my lack of knowledge. Also challenging was finding someone to interview, since business owners might not want their name in a publication connected to debt; it implies they lack money. I solved this by reaching out to many small businesses and asking them about their experiences, and finally I found one. Finding sources was sometimes more easily solved by asking the people working around me about their connections, which worked out for the elderly commercial articles. People were always willing to help, and share their experience and sometimes even take a look at my articles if I asked for this.

Generally I interviewed quite a lot of people and collected more information for articles than might be usual, this was to overcome my gap of economic knowledge. Therefore this part of the process of producing articles was fine. I found it difficult sometimes to structure, and got help here from the editor-in-chief of the economic section through feedback on my articles. Another difficulty was lingo: in the economic section there is some specifically economic lingo which is used quite a lot and I was not familiar with that so I had to learn a lot.

**Supervision**

Especially in the beginning the supervision was very good, with regular meetings. This lessened a bit during the course of the internship, but at the same time I felt there was room to discuss my articles and get feedback on them and that was very nice. In terms of guidance and help with stories, this depended on how much I asked. Generally I sent pitches and stories by email and waited till the editor-in-chief of my desk/section had time to check it. Usually there is then a
longer face-to-face meeting discussing the pieces. If I had any questions in the meantime I felt comfortable enough to ask people around me for guidance. Because of the summer holidays the last month there was a change in supervisor for me.

The supervision from my home university was also good. I sent in a report every two weeks and we met twice, together with the editor-in-chief of the economics desk.

**Evaluation**

Writing for a published weekly magazine is totally incomparable to making assignments for a journalism master (as it should be). For print writing I could think back to the very first course we had, taught by Robert Chesal. Other than that I could recognize that my being an editor and ‘leading’ a group during courses in the master helped me with my ability to understand how to pitch—i.e. give examples, be clear, etc. and speak up myself in meetings.

What I missed during my master, leaving me feel a little underprepared in this internship, was learning to pitch, but also learning to stand up for your own piece during the editorial process: since in the masters we were all mainly working on our own pieces rather than working together on something truly coherent.

During the internship I felt that I was learning something new almost every day, about the way the magazine was run, or about conducting yourself as a professional journalist. I also learned to keep track of my piece, learned to plan better, learned how to write more quickly, and learned more about how to write for a specific section of a magazine (‘rubriek’) and a specific audience. By working independently and also by looking at the way people working at *Elsevier* dealt with any problems that might arise I felt I was on a track to develop myself fast.
Reaching goals

In order to evaluate whether I reached the goals set in my internship plan, here they are:

*I want to be able to write quickly, grasp what is important, improve my writing for a specific audience. Mostly I will focus on improving my pitches and streamlining the process of turning a thought into a full article. Throughout the internship I wish to focus on becoming more assertive, by being pro-active in meetings, making sure not to go beyond what I am comfortable with doing, and being prepared at all times.*

Based on the final evaluation and my own impressions I really developed myself and reached these goals. Writing for *Elsevier* means being very conscious of the intended audience, and because this question (who do we write for) was constantly asked by everyone it was relatively easy to incorporate that into my own writing as well. I also practiced my pitching a lot and was able to stand up for myself.

Conclusion(s) & Recommendations

It is more difficult than I thought to bring some innovative ideas to the table here. The online section of the magazine is apart from the rest of the magazine, they are completely separate. About four (young) people, without an official editor who is constantly present, manage the online section. For video productions there is a camera, but it is not really used often. Videos that come in are too long (since people don’t know how to make videos for internet, rather than TV). Overall there seems to be resistance and misunderstanding of how different platforms can be incorporated. The focus is on print, but not on pretty and special print, just on print the way it was made always.

There is some uncertainty about the future and the way in which the magazine will continue, maybe that contributes to the lack of moving forward in a unified fashion. It seems that the people who
have been here longest (the “chiefs”) know that they should do something, and aren’t opposed to change, but they constrain themselves to words rather than action. A videoproducer has been hired, parttime, though, so maybe this will change in the future. Overall there seems to be a total disconnect between platforms (i.e. video is separate, print is separate, online is separate). This means my plan to contribute something, through a multimedia production, hit a roadblock of sorts. Ideas are “always welcome” but following up on them without resources is a bit tricky.

To gain more understanding about the way this works I arranged to intern a week at the online section (which is, to be honest, also customary for people whose editor is on holiday--only reinforcing the idea that the online section is sort of a dumping ground for young people). Many people who work for Elsevier don’t read the online section of the magazine. They are focused on their own pieces, which makes sense, but leaves the office floor feeling disconnected from each other. The floor platform means people are divided over “islands” (4 desks pushed together) and these islands really are exactly that. This was the main area where I thought there was a lot of room for improvement: incorporating the online section of the magazine into the actual magazine (or the other way around).