

Internship report

Protests, festivals, interviews,
enumerations. Journalist internship
at The Northern Times

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Internship Report

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Preface

From February to late June 2023, I worked as a journalism intern for The Northern Times, an English-language news outlet for the three northern provinces of the Netherlands: Drenthe, Friesland and Groningen. Under the guidance of my external supervisor, Traci White, I have written several newspaper articles covering topics relevant for the local audience as well as prepared social media content, and done photo-coverages for my stories.

I have performed the necessary research and data collection to deliver well-informed, quality journalism. My topics ranged from social safety protests, through a film- and a light- festival, to analysis of local business sectors such as water technology or circularity and sustainable firms. Publishing the articles online made them accessible to broader audiences, giving non-Dutch speakers the possibility to stay informed on a broader range of topics from original reporting in English. Especially in the case of social safety protests, my articles have often been the earliest news coverages of the events, gaining much interest in the local circles.

The internship has been a unique opportunity for me to get closer to the local social, cultural and political life. I am grateful for being able to talk to many interesting and inspiring people and the opportunity to delve deeper into the goings-on about town. Many thanks to Traci White, the editor-in-chief of The Northern Times and my internship supervisor, for her kindness, patience and precious advice.

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Introduction

As I have delved deeper into courses from my major, Responsible Governance (politics, economics) and completed research projects from the Language and Culture track, it has become clearer to me that I would like to put my knowledge and skills into practice outside of academia. In the last semester of my studies, I have applied via the internal RUG job search engine and become accepted as a journalism intern for The Northern Times.

I started on the 20th of February and finished with the end of June, working 260 hours in total, which constitutes 9 ECTS points. I have written thirteen articles in total. I supplemented all of them with social media (Instagram and Facebook) content, also creating some additional, Instagram-exclusive posts and stories on the most urgent news stories. I have also complemented eight of the pieces with original photographs. About a half to two-thirds of the topics have been selected and suggested by me (e.g. “Discrimination and harassment are still happening” - March 8th protest in Leeuwarden”), the rest was a result of a recommendation from my supervisor (e.g. “Why the north is making waves with water technology”). Besides the writing process itself, I have performed online research, analysed articles and documents, done multiple interviews with stakeholders, observed events, talked to the participants and attended (online) meetings.

In order to describe my internship and report on its course, I will first present the internship organisation, The Northern Times, followed by a brief listing of the daily tasks of the internship, stages in producing an article, and my progress in the complexity of written works. Next, I will evaluate the four learning outcomes: critical thinking, communication skills, experience in local journalism and knowledge on local governance and civic society. Last but not least, I will mention the usefulness of bachelor knowledge and skills for my work and provide a short summary of the report.

Description of the internship organisation

The Northern Times (TNT) is a small-scale, local news outlet unique in the fact that it provides local stories in English. It “covers local politics and business news, as well as cultural events and more in-depth articles on long-running topics” (Groningen.nl, 2023). It is meant as a portal useful for expats: students, professionals and others who have freshly arrived to the north of the Netherlands or who prefer English to Dutch when it comes to journalist articles. TNT is financed by the Gemeente Groningen but maintains independence in the content of their reporting. Their office space is shared with International Welcome Centre North (IWCN), with which they maintain friendly ties. The IWCN is an organisation helping internationals with settling into living in Drenthe, Friesland or Groningen: assisting with administrative tasks, organising workshops and language courses (IWCN, 2023). Working with similar audiences, the Welcome Centre and TNT are natural partners, for instance when it comes to promoting each other: for instance IWCN has the most recent TNT articles on their main website.

Due to the close collaboration of TNT with the Gemeente Groningen, I was formally an employee of the latter despite performing tasks only as a junior reporter for the news outlet.

TNT is an online news outlet, producing news articles, but also guides for internationals or lifestyle pieces on local Dutch culture. It operates on its website (thenortherntimes.nl) as well as on Instagram (@TheNorthernTimes) and Facebook (The Northern Times). It currently has three part-time staff members, including one intern. The semester-long intern position is intended for young, aspiring journalists as a temporary opportunity to gain experience and skills under the supervision of senior reporters. It typically publishes a few articles per week, with the most popular and noteworthy being included in the newsletter sent to the subscribers. TNT has a regular readership of about two to three thousand viewers, according to the average number of shares on their website posts.

About the internship

In this section, I will elaborate on my daily tasks as an intern, the stages of writing an article as well as the progress I have made in the course of my work, exemplifying it with a brief description of the articles I wrote.

Daily tasks

As my internship span was 13 hours, I spent about one to two days in the week working on the tasks I had as a junior reporter. I was invited to stay at TNT's office in Groningen and I used the opportunity regularly. Getting to know my colleagues - both working as journalists and others, staff of IWCN - has allowed me to get to know the office culture and acquaint myself with a broader, international community in the city. Small talk during lunch break or before work has given me valuable insight into the professional life of my colleagues as well as provided me with interesting information for the background of my articles. I also worked from home, organising my own schedule to fit both professional and study duties in my agenda.

Each week, I would have a short meeting with my supervisor to discuss what I have done in the last week, ask questions and receive feedback on my writing, talk about plans for next projects and gain much appreciated guidance in the direction of my reporting.

Stages of article writing

In the course of my internship, I have written fourteen articles for TNT, illustrating some with photo-reporting. I have also made some informative posts on Instagram for the most urgent news. Even though the writing process varied depending on the topic, type and scope of the article, there are some stages of the process all of them shared.

First, I did a little of preliminary research in order to ensure that the topic is indeed newsworthy, adequate to the scope of the article I was planning and that I am able to research it adequately. In the case of subjects I took on from my own initiative, I focused most on the first component. If the article was my supervisor's suggestion, I put most effort in deciding the last of the conditions. An example of this phase would be browsing the website of International Film Festival Assen, checking its scope, getting to know about the films screened there. Another example could be searching for existing circularity-oriented policies in Friesland, organisations that focus on this aspect of sustainability as well as firms committed to make their business circular.

Second, I would discuss possible further research directions and the angle my article would take with my supervisor, often gaining essential advice on sources, contacts or approach. At this time, I would start planning the text structure and gathering information needed for each part. I would also have already reached out to key stakeholders. For instance, for the article on social safety policies at the RUG, it would have been an informant from Organise the RUG, the university Ombudsperson, the official spokesperson and an author of the social safety report written a few years back. During this stage, I would prepare for short interviews with them, thinking of questions to ask, preparing information on their background and the angle they might give to the story.

Thirdly, I would organise the input gained from my interlocutors and any additional information sources I would gather during the second stage. At this point, I would often rethink the structure and content of the article, adding, changing or deleting parts. I would also start writing, ask my supervisor for some feedback and finally, reread and edit the ready text.

In the last stage, I would put my article on TNT's website, ask for final approval from my supervisor, publish it and create social media materials promoting the article.

Progress

During the span of the internship, I learnt a lot about a reporter's job, which allowed me to write better, more thorough and complex articles. In the beginning, my texts would mostly be news articles or short pieces with information about local events. I would, for instance, report on the coming train strike listing the basic things passengers need to know about the delays.

In March and April, I mostly reported on protests due to the growing tensions in the RUG community around Susanne Täuber's firing. Those texts required of me a quick reaction, good photo-journalist skills and most of all, a balance of takes on the situation to include in my texts. My articles have begun to not only inform, but also to summarise the broader context needed in order to understand the social movement behind the demonstrations. I learnt to write quickly, prepare as much as possible beforehand and to weight the words of many parties involved. What is more, I also gained confidence in talking to people manifesting as well as professional press officers.

Throughout my internship, I also had the opportunity to write about cultural events and phenomena. I covered Luna, the Leeuwarden light festival, which gave me the opportunity to improve night photography skills, I wrote two articles on International Film Festival in Assen, an impressive and engaged event with ambitious films, which made me research into the world of cinematography and talk to artists and film critics, going out of my comfort zone. I also reported on MENA Is Here, a new festival in Groningen, and get acquainted with the community of the city's expats a little more. This type of articles more required of me in terms of writing style and own opinion on the events in question.

Towards the end of my internship, I wrote some longer, more analytical texts. Those took considerably more time: about two months of preparation per text. I worked simultaneously on a few texts, which allowed me more time for contacting sources, consulting progress with my supervisor as well as performing more thorough research on the topic. I consider the three last texts of my internship the most demanding. One on circularity in Friesland in terms of material selection and critical approach to my sources - firms branding themselves as circular, one on water technology in terms of including and grasping technical knowledge outside of my expertise, one on social safety policies analysis in terms of balancing various angles to the story and largely contrasting approaches to the issue from my interviewees. Those articles made me grow the most in terms of research, analysis. interview and writing skills.

Evaluation

In this section, I will evaluate the completion of the four assumed learning outcomes and reflect on the progress I have made as a professional and as a person during the internship. Overall, I am convinced I learnt a lot at TNT, which also aligns with my supervisor's opinion on my performance and improvement. In her references, Traci White mentions that I "learned very quickly on the job by asking the right kinds of questions, and [...] was extremely thorough in approaching interview subjects to get all sides of the story".

Learning outcome 1. critical thinking

Writing opinion-forming, quality journalist text requires not only taking all sides of a story into consideration but also assessing them critically. During my internship, I had many opportunities to improve my critical thinking skills, for instance when assessing the motives and context of my interviewee's quotes (e.g. "First of May demonstration - first time in Groningen" article - links to all my articles are available in Appendix 1.) or estimating the importance of a company from what its website and its PR representatives can say about its impact (e.g. "How can companies go circular? Ask Friesland." article). What is more, I also learnt to approach my own biases more carefully. While covering the social safety protests, it was easy to sympathise with the demonstrating students and staff. Even though I do not mean to say that a reporter should always stand the middle ground, regardless of which side has more reasonable arguments, I recognise a need to approach all parties with a grain of mistrust. During my internship, I learnt to not give in on the emotions of the demonstration and instead, think critically and weight all the information about the given situation.

Learning outcome 2. writing and communication skills

Next to the more hands-on part of reporting, I also gained some practice in writing newspaper articles. Coming from an academic background and having never written for newspapers in English, adjusting to the expected style took me some time. Thanks to a few months of work and continued practice on fourteen shorter and longer pieces, I have improved in terms of structuring articles and in getting my point across in a clearer way. Thanks to the detailed and patient feedback from my supervisor, I internalised the “inverse pyramid” rule for writing news articles and learnt to never forget including answers to the six key questions: what, who, where, when, why and how. Especially as I begun writing longer, analytical pieces, I have improved the precision of what my texts are suggesting. Instead of insinuating that a website page of the RUG might not be working on purpose, as I was close to doing in one of my earlier articles, I have learnt to check my facts and make sure I am responsible for what I am communicating with my writing, as I did in my last article (“Questioning “Just ask”, UG’s social safety campaign. Just how relevant is it?”), letting available reports and quotes from my sources paint the situation instead of suggesting something I cannot be certain about.

Learning outcome 3. experience in local (photo-) journalism

As I am considering a career in the field, gaining experience as a journalist intern was a precious opportunity. Even though I had already completed a summer internship in a regional newspaper during high school, writing systematically and for a longer period of time enabled me to see immense progress in the confidence, efficiency and nuance of my reporting. I have also been able to learn about photo-journalism: the types of shots, rules of consent, editing functions that still maintain the “true picture” of the story being covered. For the first time, I have been systematically attending events as a journalist with

my camera. I learnt making small-talk around my photographing, so useful to gain an insight into the experiences of others participating in the reported events.

Learning outcome 4. knowledge on local governance and civic society as well as various organisations

In the course of doing research for my articles, I gained much insight on various local organisations and key personas. For instance, I have gotten to know of the innovative research carried out at Wetsus as well as the practical implementations done by companies who are part of the Water Alliance (“Why the north is making waves with water technology” article). I have also researched municipal policies connected with circularity and talked to two representatives from Vereniging Circulair Friesland, aiming to make the province the most circular region of Europe by 2025 (“How can companies go circular? Ask Friesland.” article). Even though after completing the internship I wish I could still learn more about the local civic society, I know I have made a few first steps to getting to know it during my internship.

Contribution Reflection

As TNT intern, I hoped to add more of the Frisian expat perspective to the Groningen-dominated community existing around the editorial team. Even though it might be difficult for them to maintain such stronger focus when my internship is finished and again, none of the team members would be based in Friesland, I have contributed with some articles on the goings-on-about Leeuwarden and beyond. I have written on the Luna light festival in Leeuwarden (Luna: Leeuwarden light festival and young artists’ exhibition winding down this weekend” article), the Women’s Day march organised there (“Discrimination and harassment are still happening”: March 8th protest in Leeuwarden“ article) and finally, on the circular ambitions of the province (“How can companies go circular? Ask Friesland.” article).

Usefulness of Bachelor Knowledge and Skills

My tasks as an intern demanded of me some basic knowledge of the local governing system as well as the broader, political culture of the Netherlands. Perhaps surprisingly, some information I acquired during the Comparative Political Systems came in handy when I was to describe a negotiation process between protesters and the University Board representatives or when I was researching information on Friesland's sustainability policies. What is more, some skills developed in the Language and Culture track were useful during my work. Doing interviews both in person and through a phone call was something I could practice writing my capstone or completing the Ethnographic Theory and Practice course.

What is more, the internship gave me some insight into the process of writing and reporting, further strengthening my qualitative research and writing skills. Talking to interviewees on a daily basis has made writing a term paper for the final Language and Culture course much smoother and enabled me to see and include more nuance in my academic essay.

Even though the intern position has only been a temporary job post, I can see myself working in a similar position for a different employer - perhaps in another country. My experience as TNT intern has ensured me that I can work as a journalist, perform my job well and enjoy it.

References

Groningen.nl (2023). Official website. Retrieved on August 18th, 2023, from <https://groningen.nl/en/practical-matters/media-in-groningen>

IWCN (2023). Official website. Retrieved on August 18th, 2023, from <https://iwcn.nl/about-us/our-story/>

Appendix 1. - list of articles

February 17th, 2023 [article, photos]

“Luna: Leeuwarden light festival and young artists’ exhibition winding down this weekend”

<https://northerntimes.nl/luna-leeuwarden-light-festival-and-young-artists-exhibition-winding-down-this-weekend/>

February 27th, 2023 [article]

“Regional public transport set to strike weekly through early April”

<https://northerntimes.nl/regional-public-transport-set-to-strike-weekly-through-early-april/>

March 1st, 2023 [Instagram post, photos]

“Am I next’ protest - solidarity with RUG scholar about to be sacked”

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CpP4xLItdkX/?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==>

March 2nd, 2023 [article]

““Unique collection of really timely films”: 43rd edition of feminist film festival in Assen begins next week”

<https://northerntimes.nl/unique-collection-of-really-timely-films-43rd-edition-of-feminist-film-festival-in-assen-begins-next-week/>

March, 7th, 2023 [article]

“International Women’s Day 2023 in the North”

<https://northerntimes.nl/international-womens-day-2023-in-the-north/>

March 8th, 2023 [Instagram post, photos]

“RUG strike on discrimination and harassment cases - ‘Am I Next?’”

<https://www.instagram.com/p/CpiBk1LNoqM/?igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==>

March 9th, 2023 [article, photos]

“Discrimination and harassment are still happening”: March 8th protest in Leeuwarden“

<https://northerntimes.nl/discrimination-and-harassment-are-still-happening-march-8th-protest-in-leeuwarden/>

March 15th, 2023 [article, photos]

“Groningen filmmaker wins Noordsterren prize at IFA 2023 with “Jäger””

<https://northerntimes.nl/groningen-filmmaker-wins-noordsterren-prize-at-ifa-2023-with-jager/>

March 23rd, 2023 [article, photos, Instagram updates]

“University of Groningen students stage sit in for social safety (UPDATED)”

<https://northerntimes.nl/university-of-groningen-students-stage-sit-in-for-social-safety/>

April 4th, 2023 [article, cover photo]

“Dutch tradition: "Matthäus Passion" concerts this week”

<https://northerntimes.nl/dutch-tradition-matthaus-passion-concerts-this-week/>

April 25th, 2023 [article, photos, Instagram updates]

“Academy Building occupied again by protestors calling for reinstatement of professor Susanne Täuber (UPDATE)”

<https://northerntimes.nl/academy-building-occupied-again-by-protestors-calling-for-reinstatement-of-professor-susanne-tauber/>

May 2nd, 2023 [article, photos]

“First of May demonstration - first time in Groningen”

<https://norderntimes.nl/first-of-may-demonstration-first-time-in-groningen/>

May 9th, 2023 [article]

““MENA is here”: Groningen festival celebrates culture of Middle East and North Africa region”

<https://norderntimes.nl/mena-is-here-groningen-festival-celebrates-culture-of-middle-east-and-north-africa-region/>

May 22nd, 2023 [article, photo]

“Why the north is making waves with water technology”

<https://norderntimes.nl/why-the-north-is-making-waves-with-water-technology/>

June 28th, 2023 [article]

“How can companies go circular? Ask Friesland.”

<https://norderntimes.nl/how-can-companies-go-circular-ask-friesland/>

July 5th, 2023 [article, cover photo]

“Questioning “Just ask”, UG’s social safety campaign. Just how relevant is it?”

<https://norderntimes.nl/questioning-just-ask-ugs-social-safety-campaign-just-how-relevant-is-it/>