

VU Amsterdam objects and their stories

1950-1955 the first edition of Ad Valvas

It's something we're all familiar with: the boxes with piles of the latest *Ad Valvas*, full of news, opinions and critical articles. But did you know that this lively magazine, and corresponding website, has roots going all the way back to 1953? And it was originally a print-heavy official journal? University historian Ab Flipse tells the story and Editor in Chief Marieke Schilp adds her thoughts.

How it all began

By Ab Flipse

The history of *Ad Valvas*, the independent, journalistic platform of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, begins in 1953. The first issue appeared on 1 September of that year, with the subtitle 'weekly official journal of the Civitas Academica of the Vrije Universiteit'. It was a folded A4 sheet, put together by the VU administrator and featuring mostly official announcements. *Ad Valvas* arose from the need for all bodies of the university community to have their announcements printed. The term 'ad valvas' (i.e. 'on the doors') was already familiar: it was used for the announcements board on the door of the university building. As it announced in the first issue, *Ad Valvas* aimed to play a 'modest but useful role' for the university which began growing rapidly in this period. It was sent to members of staff and to students.



Ad Valvas, no. 7 from 1953, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam University Library Collection

In the first decade the journal was mostly filled with official announcements: by the rector, the faculties, the student and study associations, and so on. In 1965, *Ad Valvas* was published for the first time on glossy white A4 paper and the journal received a slightly more generous format with room for articles with more content. But things did not become any more exciting than an item about a professor's anniversary, a new student pastor or the buildings under construction at the Buitenveldert campus.

Things changed in the 1970s. Firstly in terms of appearance: *Ad Valvas* became a newspaper in tabloid format. But in terms of content, too: *Ad Valvas* became more independent and started presenting news 'in a journalistically responsible way', with space for opinions and aiming 'if possible to elicit opinions on major issues'. In the 1970s, the journal reported on the many clashes and conflicts that occurred in the democratically organised university of the day. Moreover, the journal itself regularly became embroiled in the conflicts.

In 1973, following a difference of opinion with the university administration, the first editor in chief was out of job again. A new editorial statute, drawn up on the initiative of the University Council, aimed to demarcate the responsibilities more clearly. From now on the role of *Ad Valvas* should be 'to provide information and to record opinion', doing so 'generally without giving the editorial staff's own opinions', while nonetheless independent. And the new editor in chief did actually stay on much longer than the previous one (16 years as opposed to less than a year). Although the following decades were quieter for the organisation, new challenges kept appearing.

Everything has changed.

by Marieke Schilp

Just consider the technical developments since the first issue of the journal illustrated here. From hopping on your bike to take the closely typed black-and-white sheets to the printer to get them typeset (hurrah, full-colour became possible!) in those days, to sending a completed magazine straight from your PC to the printing house, in just a few minutes. And after a few more minutes the printed issue is ready.

We have begun building websites, using social media, chatting with the readers. The editors – these days all professional journalists – can be contacted quickly and personally, and the newspaper shed its formal nature many years ago. It's no longer a newspaper either, by the way.

What might actually be more significant is the steadily growing competition. Not only online, where you can read and zap between so much – actually *all* media have to compete for the attention of readers. What's just as challenging, if not more so, is today's competition within our own university, given that in addition to a digital revolution, we have also had one at the business level. Educational institutions have increasingly organised themselves like businesses. Marketing and image building have become part of the core business. Universities have set up major communication departments. In the past there were sometimes open disputes – at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and elsewhere in the higher-education community – about the need and justification for an independent journalistic platform. Universities today, however, take a smarter approach to this. They create large budgets and editorial teams to publish media themselves: digital newsletters and magazines about science and academic activities, about the institution, about the teaching. These are delivered personally to the various target groups. With this flood of publications, just try, with a handful of journalists, and together with the readers, discovering what's really going on.

Because ultimately that's still our task, and it hasn't changed over all these decades: to supply students and staff at the university with independent journalism. To inform, investigate and provide opinions. And to keep asking questions beyond the point where corporate reporting stops. That's what motivates us. In essence, nothing has changed.

Marieke Schilp has been Editor in Chief of *Ad Valvas* since 2003.