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Michiel van Groesen and **Helmer Helmers**

Early modern Europe witnessed an eruption of news. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the burgeoning business of print, the professionalization of postal networks, confessional conflict, and the process of state-building all worked together to radically improve the availability of political information in a wide range of genres, ranging from handwritten newsletters to elaborate prints depicting recent sieges and battles. As the universe of news rapidly expanded and evolved, ever more people gained access to ever more information from an ever wider geographical range. It was a development that deeply affected various spheres of life. Elites engaged in high politics, book traders, merchants, as well as ordinary citizens were confronted with a phenomenon that affected their business, their daily lives, and their view of the world.

This special issue of *Media History* aspires to advance a new perspective on the early modern communication revolution by treating news as a specific kind of information—by its nature continuous, unreliable, and diffuse—which needed to be managed. The news boom of the early modern period challenged European authorities, producers, and readers to devise their own strategies to create cohesion in the fragmented supply of (mis)information. How did authorities respond to the diversity of news? Which strategies of information management did individual and institutional readers employ to make sense of the rapid succession of events in distant places? How and why was news collected? And how was news incorporated into history writing and political narratives, and ultimately into collective memories?[1]

The overload of information, as Ann Blair has demonstrated to great acclaim a few years ago, presented early modern Europeans with a problem that, if not entirely new, had certainly been more limited before the invention of the printing press. Multiple factors contributed to the rise of an early modern information age: the costs of production were reduced by the displacement of parchment by paper, literacy rates gradually improved (particularly in towns that simultaneously developed into information hubs), and cultural attitudes of readers changed. The impact of print, and the public distress the mass production of information could cause, was particularly acute for genres that were produced in large numbers for low prices.[2] Blair mentions indulgences as the most poignant example, but for our purposes the same characteristics could easily be applied to news sheets.

Since the appearance of *Too Much to Know*, the profusion of news in its many oral and written forms during the early modern period has received a lot of scholarly attention. Andrew Pettegree in particular, in two recent books, has advocated an interpretation of early modern news culture as a segment of the book market. In *The Invention of News*, he systematically traces the emergence of printed newspapers and handwritten periodical

bulletins into the world of rumours that expanded both within and beyond the continental borders of Europe.[3] Other recent studies and conferences have focused on the production and distribution of the news (e.g. the rise of periodicals and the spread of news through transnational networks of printers, merchants, diplomats, and religious migrants), and on the relationship between news and public opinion.[4] We here propose to merge the burgeoning historiographies of early modern news and information management by introducing the notion of 'news management'. By examining this concept from various angles, we hope to elaborate on some of the observations in Robert Darnton's paradigmatic 'communication circuit' that ties together the processes of production, distribution, and reception.[5] As this special issue will demonstrate, how to manage the overload of news was an everyday concern for authors and readers alike, regardless of their function in the news cycle.

For the authorities, the rise of printed news, and the democratization of political information which this implied, was a double-edged sword. While news of the victories and successes of the ruling parties could evidently serve as propaganda that could buttress their authority, adverse reports might be used to challenge it. There were two obvious, only seemingly opposed, responses to this duality. On the one hand, authorities might attempt to gain control over the flow of news by selecting and patronizing local coranteers. Many European (city) governments themselves encouraged and subsidized a periodical press exactly for this reason. Thus in Antwerp, as Paul Arblaster has recently shown, the government, by granting a monopoly to the compliant local news publisher Abraham Verhoeven, successfully rendered the periodical press into a mouthpiece of the Archducal regime.

On the other hand, governments might try to ban printed news altogether. Committed to the ideals of divine kingship and *arcana imperii*, James I of England objected to the circulation of news on principle, and his impulse was therefore to resort to censorship. When news of the Thirty Years' War implied opposition to his pro-Spanish foreign policy, James addressed his 'loving subjects' to:

> straitly […] command them and evry of them, from the highest to the lowest, to take heede, how they intemeddle by Penne, or Speech, with causes of State, and secrets of Empire, either at home, or abroad, but containe themselves within that modest and reverent regard, of matters, above their reach and calling, that to good and dutifull Subjects appertaineth.[6]

Seeking the assistance of the States General in the Dutch Republic to stop the flow of translated corantos into England, James even extended this strict censorship policy into the sphere of diplomacy.[7] News did not only reflect developments in international relations, it also affected them, as several of the contributions to this issue also emphasize.

For publishers, journalists, and other newsmakers, the key challenge was to strike a balance between placating political patrons, and maintaining their credibility and financial sustainability. Since the optimal balance depended on historical contingencies, and was different in every political constellation, authors and editors were required to manage the content and form of their publications carefully.[8] In addition to managing their networks of informers, which tended to grow and diversify in time, they needed to critically examine the flow of news and distribute only those bulletins that they considered relevant and reliable. Their coverage of geopolitical developments and their preference for bringing

'good' news, with an eye for commercial gain, consistently jeopardized their credibility. Every printed bulletin, then, was meticulously scrutinized by the reading public who had all too often seen time turn rumours into lies.

But readers themselves also faced the problem of information management. Both institutional and private readers developed strategies not only to collect and archive the news, as genre paintings of newsracks thematized, but also to assess its reliability. Governments were confronted with a steady stream of news provided by newsletters, corantos and the reports of their expanding *corps diplomatique* neither of which tended to prioritize or summarize. In order to distinguish substance from gossip, urgent information from ongoing concerns, bureaucratic information management systems were a necessity, although they were not always successful. The Spanish King Philip II famously weaved an intricate news network throughout his global empire, but at home in El Escorial he suffered from an overabundance of news that at times threatened to overwhelm him.[9] For ordinary news addicts who depended on the early modern media for their information, the problem of selection was compounded by the question of what to believe. Opinion makers often interpreted news right away, giving the narrative a partisan flavour that further obscured what had really happened. And when a particular storyline had reached its conclusion, and evolved into history, it was frequently reframed by chroniclers or politicians for their own purposes. History writing, from this point of view, was yet another way of news management, which occupied itself with influencing the way in which news events were stored in the collective memory.

This special issue originated at a conference at the University of Amsterdam in June 2014, organized in cooperation with the Huizinga Institute. As the above suggests, this conference sought to approach news management as a diverse practice, in which many actors in many different countries were involved, both on an individual and an institutional scale. The nine papers collected in this issue examine the meaning of early modern 'news management' by exploring different media, situated in different times and places, under different political conditions. With the current selection of the papers we hope to convey both the variety and the sense of connectedness that emerged during our exchanges.

In the opening two contributions, Paola Molino and Carmen Espejo focus on attempts to regulate and standardize the unpredictable flow of information. Molino discusses the use of different languages—Italian and German—in the vast collection of newsletters of the Fugger family in Augsburg, the so-called *Fuggerzeitungen*. She uses several bilingual volumes of the collection around 1580 that combined the traditions of *avvisi*-writing and German *Zeitungen*, and addresses the question how the management of language facilitated the management of news. Ultimately, the Fuggers decided to switch to German altogether, dismantling the discrepancy between the different 'spheres of information' north and south of the Alps. As Italian practices faded in Germany, however, their impact lived on elsewhere in the Mediterranean world. Carmen Espejo examines how the same *avvisi* tradition influenced the idiosyncratic format of printed gazettes in Spain. By the 1620s, the design and structure of Spanish newspapers was sufficiently uniform for the genre to be instantly recognizable in the Iberian book market.

The next two articles, by Una McIlvenna and Michiel van Groesen, study the interplay between producers of news—ballad singers and coranteers—and their respective

consumers. McIlvenna demonstrates that throughout the early modern period, people from all walks of life not only listened to news ballads, but also joined in, thus participating in the further dissemination of topical information. Reliability and emotion determined the practice of singing the news. The ballad singers' capacity to evoke sympathy or ridicule can be understood only if the melodies are taken into account, and are a crucial factor in grasping how news was being managed by a broad early modern audience. In the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, printed corantos were the principal genre in the news market. Michiel van Groesen argues that these newspapers were read by a broad cross-section of (a highly literate) society. How and why readers managed the weekly bulletins can be gauged from the iconography of newspaper reading, written accounts of reading, and surviving collections of corantos which reveal various reading habits. Like McIlvenna, Van Groesen calls on scholars to broaden the range of primary sources in order to comprehend early modern news management.

The next step in the news cycle is discussed by Joop Koopmans. Newspapers were not only read, Koopmans pertains, they were also carefully remediated. In the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, editors of annual news digests like *Hollandse Mercurius* and *Europische Mercurius*, by correcting errors, contextualizing and reflecting on major political developments, and providing opinionated commentary, played a key role in the transformation of foreign news events into contemporary historiography. In eighteenth-century London, too, news was being compiled by professional hacks to manage the increasing flow of unverified reports. As Will Slauter demonstrates, however, satirical writers 'aggregated' news by not only comparing, but also exposing different accounts of the same events. Unlike the editors of Dutch news digests, Richard Russel thrived on errors and contradictions. For his *Grub-Street Journal*, he literally cut and pasted bulletins from other newspapers, and then exploited the genre's recognizable format to criticize and make fun of the press and the political class.

Stéphane Haffemayer, Helmer Helmers, and Jason Peacey examine the various ways in which politicians managed the news. Haffemayer focuses on the attempts of Cardinal Mazarin to stem the tide of hostile public opinion during the Fronde, the French civil war which he considers to be a 'media crisis'. Confronting the tensions between Mazarin's adherence to an absolutist ideology and the necessity to enter into public debate with his enemies, Haffemayer shows how Mazarin invested heavily in a press office that struggled to find the right tone, but eventually succeeded in moulding public opinion by way of a poly-centred system of communication. Whereas Haffemayer is mainly concerned with national news management, Helmers and Peacey deal with the ways in which international news flows were managed. Diplomats, widely recognized as the most avid news addicts of their time, evidently figure large in these essays. Early modern diplomacy is traditionally portrayed as a secret sphere, but Helmers argues that managing publicity was in fact an important aspect of the diplomat's business. Examining the various ways in which European diplomats sought to control political publicity abroad, Helmers seeks to apply the modern notion of public diplomacy to an early modern context. Jason Peacey's article, finally, offers a case study of the Dutch newsmaker Abraham Casteleyn. Focusing on Casteleyn's many English connections, Peacey's article shows that Casteleyn's newsletters and gazettes were read, valued exploited in England in ways traditional histories of news have completely disregarded. The Dutch news produced by Casteleyn became, Peacey argues,

'more or less integral to the English government's strategies and practices for grappling with news culture'.

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Notes

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2. Blair, *Too Much To Know*, 13.
3. Pettegree, *Invention of News*. See also Pettegree, *The Book in the Renaissance*, 130–150.
4. Raymond, *News, Newspapers, and Society*; Dooley and Baron, *Politics of Information*; Raymond, *News Networks*; Koopmans, *News and Politics*; Dooley, *Dissemination of News*; Arblaster, *From Ghent to Aix*; and Davies and Fletcher, *News in Early Modern Europe*.
5. Darnton, "What Is the History of Books?" 65–83, esp. 68.
6. Hughes and Larkin, *Stuart Royal Proclamations I*, 495–496, 519–520.
7. Raymond, *Invention of the Newspaper*, 7–8.
8. Boys, *London's News Press* and Arblaster, *From Ghent to Aix*.
9. Borreguero Beltran, "Philip of Spain," 49.

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