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## **Introduction: distance, credibility, and European geographies of information, 1450-1750**

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# Introduction

## Distance, Credibility, and European Geographies of Information, 1450–1750

*Michiel van Groesen and Johannes Müller*

In the early modern period, distance played a significant role in how people perceived credibility. Horizons expanded, but the speed of communication remained slow: information took long to travel across oceans, plains, and mountain ranges. Physical distance hence created a new sense of disconnect. In a period when people were used to rely on local sources of knowledge, many viewed information from faraway places with scepticism as they were unable to verify its accuracy. In historical scholarship, the period between 1450 and 1750 has become emblematic of the rapid emergence of exchanges, connections, and transfer patterns that shape our present globalized world. Long understood and framed as the “Age of Discovery” or “Age of Encounters”, or instead critically examined as the era of asymmetrical proto-imperialism, the period witnessed a dramatic increase in distant exchanges and the mobility of people, goods, and ideas. For good reasons, then, scholars of early modern Europe have been quick to adopt “global” approaches. They have pointed out in multiple ways that new geographical connections and entanglements established a paradigmatic shift in European thought, and for centuries remained an important catalyst of cultural assimilation and historical change. The unbalanced concentration on early modern connections and mobilities, however, can easily be prone to overlooking the physical and technological restrictions of the early modern world. Several recent articles have demonstrated that distance remained a cause of delay and uncertainty throughout early modern Europe, providing ample opportunities for error, manipulation, and distortion in ways that are difficult to imagine from a twenty-first century perspective.<sup>1</sup>

1 For good recent essays that provide the historiographical groundwork for this volume, see Daniel Carey, “The Problem of Credibility in Early Modern Travel”, *Renaissance Studies* 33, no. 4 (2019): 524–47; Filippo De Vivo, “Microhistories of Long-Distance Information: Space, Movement, and Agency in the Early Modern News”, *Past & Present* 242 (2019): 179–214; and Stefania Tutino, “Historical Authenticity and the Expanding Horizons of the Seventeenth-Century Catholic Church”, *Journal of Modern History* 92, no. 1 (2020): 1–39. By adding the notion of geographical and cultural distance to the problem of credibility, the volume addresses issues that have first been put on the scholarly agenda in important

Distance also provided a considerable challenge to communication. The inability to verify what was reported from beyond the horizon severely deferred the European acceptance and exegesis of information, particularly when conventional truths were bluntly dismissed by individual eyewitnesses who lacked the authority of classical learning. The erosion of traditional frameworks of knowledge, moreover, coincided with the brittleness of belief as Christianity's consensus disintegrated and confessions drifted apart. The world of learning, gradually yet unevenly, began to develop new, and increasingly independent, strategies to evaluate information. Early modern Europe's mounting susceptibility to new ideas meant that marvellous testimonies of cultures and civilizations far away resulted in a cacophony of competing realities. But what was "fake" and what was "true"? After the first wave of incredulity had receded and a global perspective progressively took hold among recipients of information, European geopolitical agendas added another layer to the noise: propaganda typically accompanied colonial triumphs, and measured silences followed transoceanic defeats, thus providing new and conflicting filters of uncertainty. The onset of globalization, it is fair to say, truly transformed the Old World's intellectual outlook.

The key question that this volume attempts to address is how exactly this process unfolded. European armchair travellers, of course, did not stand by helplessly, waiting to be washed away by a flood of long-distance (mis)information.<sup>2</sup> When the initial shock had disappeared, they quickly began to reconstruct and reconfigure their comforting cultural hierarchies by employing what Joan-Pau Rubiés has termed the "languages of Christianity and civility".<sup>3</sup> A subsequent era of unrivalled curiosity heralded the quest for a more concerted intellectual response, and ultimately a more orderly form of

monographs such as Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Brendan Dooley, *The Social History of Skepticism: Experience and Doubt in Early Modern Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); and Peter Burke, *A Social History of Knowledge. From Gutenberg to Diderot* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

- 2 Ann Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information Before the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010). The term "long-distance information" is used by De Vivo, "Microhistories". It is worth emphasizing that we are interested mainly in European configurations of distance and credibility. There are very good recent examples of scholarship on non-European people grappling with the same issue; see for example Gregory E. Dowd, *Groundless: Rumors, Legends, and Hoaxes on the Early American Frontier* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015); Katherine Grandjean, *American Passage: The Communications Frontier in Early New England* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); and Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (New York: Versa, 2018).
- 3 Joan-Pau Rubiés, "New Worlds and Renaissance Ethnology", *History and Anthropology* 6, no. 2/3 (1993): 158. For an extensive comparative exercise between East and West, see Serge Gruzinski, *What Time is it There? America and Islam at the Dawn of Modern Times* (New York: Polity Press, 2010).

information management – often a local rather than a global occupation.<sup>4</sup> But doubts remained nonetheless. The natural suspicion of recipients, seeking verification of stories that appeared fabricated, forced their itinerant compatriots to work harder, as it were, to emphasize the veracity of their tales, sometimes by character references in the paratexts of their printed accounts or by simply insisting that what they reported was true, but often by devising new, more elaborate rhetorical strategies to vouch for the authenticity of their testimonies and encourage their acceptance.<sup>5</sup>

The early modern relationship between distance and credibility, although not necessarily inversely proportional, is sufficiently tense to merit scrutiny. Historians in recent years have emphasized that oceans and other geographical barriers developed into new channels of information and transfer, and have explored the ways in which new media and technological innovations brought about a gradual “demise of distance”. A wholesale transformation of global communication networks did not occur, however, until the invention of the telegraph and the steamship in the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> It is for this reason that the early modern movement of information should not be taken for granted, and that the question how distance affected the transfer of values and ideas in the early modern world is crucial to understanding Europe’s response to the emergence of global opportunity. What happened to information once it had travelled halfway around the world? Under which circumstances were testimonies from afar relied upon or distrusted? Which mechanisms were employed to establish credibility, and which strategies did communicators and audiences use to authenticate information? Studying the relationship between distance, information, and credibility in the early modern era, the scope of this volume stretches over three centuries and allows for a grasp of the diachronic dimension of the changing dynamics between these forces – leading to one more additional question: Along which lines did the relationship between distance and credibility change, and how linear were these developments in an early modern setting?

### **Re-establishing Familiarity in a Globalizing World**

Notions of geographical and cultural distance appear to have changed several times between the late Middle Ages and the eighteenth century, when the world arguably became both bigger and smaller. On the one hand, as European ships

4 See for example Arndt Brendecke, *The Empirical Empire: Spanish Colonial Rule and the Politics of Knowledge* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016); Filippo De Vivo, *Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Daniela Bleichmar, *Visible Empire: Botanical Expeditions and Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

5 Carey, “The Problem of Credibility”, esp. 525–31.

6 John J. McCusker, “The Demise of Distance: The Business Press and the Origins of the Information Revolution in the Early Modern Atlantic World”, *American Historical Review* 110, no. 2 (2005): 295–321.

rounded the Cape of Good Hope, sailed towards the Caribbean and South America, or circumnavigated the globe, traditional cosmology and cosmography – both built on the foundations of classical antiquity – ceased to provide satisfying answers.<sup>7</sup> Travellers, both faithful and imaginative ones, marvelled at the new worlds they encountered, and the multitude of islands and landmasses that suddenly appeared on formerly empty maps.<sup>8</sup> The increasing flow of information, facilitated in Europe by the rise of print, constituted a professional sphere of exchange and transfer in which news was disseminated quickly, stereotypes emerged and endured, and foreign regions gradually appeared closer and more familiar.<sup>9</sup> However, despite the increasing frequency and quantity of information exchange, questions of verification and authentication remained persistent throughout the period discussed in this book.

The dialectical relationship between distance and familiarity becomes manifest in the world of early modern media. Even in our contemporary mediatized world, media not only connect disparate regions, they also exclude a wide range of geographies from their maps. The distances and proximities created by news media, for example, are inherently selective and contextualized.<sup>10</sup> As a result, large parts of the globe remain *terra incognita* in the mainstream of news. We can hardly overestimate the role of media in

7 On the “defeat” of cosmography in sixteenth-century Europe, see Frank Leslingant, *Mapping the Renaissance World: The Geographical Imagination in the Age of Discovery* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994). For a more positive view, see Maria M. Portuondo, *Secret Science: Spanish Cosmography and the New World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). On the impact of America on Europe in the sixteenth century, see the excellent essays in Karen Ordahl Kupperman, ed. *America in European Consciousness, 1493–1750* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995). On the failure of eyewitness testimonies at the expense of learned knowledge, at least initially, see Anthony Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts: The Shock of Discovery and the Power of Tradition* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

8 Good recent studies include Ricardo Padrón, *The Indies of the Setting Sun: How Early Modern Spain Mapped the Far East as the Transpacific West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); Elizabeth Horodowich, *The Venetian Discovery of America: Geographic Imagination and Print Culture in the Age of Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Lia Markey, *Imagining the Americas in Medici Florence* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016); Surekha Davies, *Renaissance Ethnography and the Invention of the Human: New Worlds, Maps and Monsters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

9 See for example Michiel van Groesen, *The Representations of the Overseas World in the De Bry Collection of Voyages (1590–1634)* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Sabine MacCormack, *On the Wings of Time: Rome, the Incas, Spain, and Peru* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes, 1250–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and the classic multi-volume Donald F. Lach and Edwin J. van Kley, *Asia in the Making of Europe*. 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965–1993).

10 Niklas Luhmann, *The Reality of Mass Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

creating and defining centres and peripheries, but it is not only the selection of certain geographical areas over others that creates such irregularities. The ways in which media can produce distance are also qualitative: medial depictions of foreign countries or continents are often designed in terms of otherness that revolve around the contrast between “here” and “there”. The history of early modern European print media offers relevant precursors, as the role of early print in covering and depicting the non-European world is full of contradictions and complexities: Books, pamphlets, newspapers, images, and maps, as well as handwritten letters and documents did not only bridge and overcome distances and integrate vast geographical spaces into one continuum, but they also did the opposite. Media that offered access to information about new worlds and promote understanding by using recognizable monikers such as *New Spain*, *New France* or *New England* often opted to do so by artificially distancing the “exotic” elements of these worlds from the cultures and societies Europeans were familiar with at the same time. Paradoxically – and this holds true for the entire period between 1450 and 1750 – the psychological demise of distance went hand in hand with medial constructions of otherness that relied on the emphasis of cultural and geographical distance between Europe and the world beyond.<sup>11</sup>

To understand the flexibility and the often questionable status of information, as well as the formative and transformative role that early modern media played in the process of verification and authentication, it is important to pay close attention to matters of genre, materiality, and distribution in recontextualizing, distorting or suppressing information. Conventions determined what could be shared with others, and how that could be done to reach out, appeal, and exert influence. Cultures of perception from the era between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, notoriously difficult to grasp, mattered too. Early modern Europeans, judging from their own comments in letters to friends and colleagues as well as from the limited traces of reading practices that have survived, were well aware of the different meanings that different genres affixed to global information, and harboured a healthy dose of scepticism.<sup>12</sup> On top of that, reading, information management, and even collecting were mostly individual practices, and could lead to a variety of interpretations on distant cultures and societies regardless of typographical fixity and nascent notions of contemporaneity in the Old World.<sup>13</sup>

11 Davies, *Renaissance Ethnography*, 297–301. See also Ralph Bauer, *The Cultural Geography of Colonial American Literatures: Empire, Travel, Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4–5, who emphasizes lateral connections of trust and credibility between colonies.

12 See for example the contributions by Joan-Pau Rubiés and Ricardo Padrón in this volume. On information and information management, see Blair, *Too Much to Know*; Ann Blair, Paul Duguid, Anja-Silvia Goeing, and Anthony Grafton, ed. *Information: A Historical Companion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

13 The notion of typographical fixity was famously coined by Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural*

All of this raises questions about the specific ways in which distance and familiarity were construed and disseminated within different media genres, the materiality of circulation, and the degree to which observations were either carefully edited or instead presented as “raw” and authentic sources. In which form were testimonies most effective in claiming authenticity – printed or in manuscript – and what happened to sensitive information once it became public? Another crucial revolving point in the quest for credibility was the changing notions of time and authority and the question of how, when, and under which circumstances older sets of knowledge needed to be updated or abandoned altogether. And finally, it is crucial to emphasize the role of publishers, translators, and illustrators in the production and dissemination of printed materials: how did the publication process impact credibility, and which part did early modern Europe’s media infrastructure play – and the reputations of their various actors – as information was collected, ordered, and managed? How did the expectation of the book and print market inform authorial and editorial decisions, and to which extent were travel accounts, to mention just one example, sold and bought as reliable documents on the world abroad or merely for their literary or entertainment value?

The ambivalent relationship between distance and familiarity complicated the notion of credibility. Spatial distance confounded the possibility to evaluate information and verify dubious claims, a problem that was widely recognized in early modern Europe. As the sixteenth-century Marburg professor Johann Dryander put it in his preface to Hans Staden’s seminal *Warhaftige Historia* (1557), distance was the natural ally of liars, stating that “Those who lie, lie from far abroad. For no one ever goes there to verify their claims, and instead of taking the effort to do so, he would rather believe it.”<sup>14</sup> More than eighty years later, in 1638, the Amsterdam newspaper editor Broer Jansz was sarcastically advised by competitors “to lie some more about Brazil, since it is far enough away from here”, while in Spain, around the same time, the poet Francisco de Quevedo mused that news reports from abroad “fall like rain, and so do lies.”<sup>15</sup> And another sixty years later, for reasons of vanity and

*Transformations in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), and subsequently challenged by Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). On collecting, see Daniela Bleichmar and Peter C. Mancall, *Collecting Across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011). The concept of contemporaneity, the awareness that everyone had access to more or less the same information at the same time, is developed in Brendan Dooley, ed. *The Dissemination of News and the Emergence of Contemporaneity in Early Modern Europe* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

14 Hans Staden, *Warhaftige Historia* (Marburg: Kolben, 1557), [A4r].

15 Henk Borst, “Broer Jansz in Antwerpse ogen: De Amsterdamse courantiër na de slag bij Kallo in 1638 neergezet als propagandist”, *De zeventiende eeuw* 25, no. 1 (2009): 86; Arthur Weststeijn, “Empire in Fragments: Transatlantic News and Print Media in the Iberian World, c. 1600–40”, *Renaissance Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2021): 528–70.

commercial gain, the Franciscan friar Louis Hennepin boasted in his *Nouvelle Découverte d'un tres grand pays* (1697) to have been the first to descend the Mississippi river – a claim that led Robert La Salle to object that “he will not fail to exaggerate everything [...] he speaks more in keeping with what he wishes than with what he knows”.<sup>16</sup> Hennepin’s lies, however, did not stand in the way of the appearance of numerous reprints and translations well into the eighteenth century – which partly explains why the problem persisted for so long. The tension between distance and credibility in eyewitness accounts remained so ubiquitous that conscious yet only thinly veiled attempts at verisimilitude, like Daniel Defoe’s *The Life, Adventures and Piracies of the Famous Captain Singleton* (1720), occasionally succeeded in fooling credulous readers.<sup>17</sup>

### Observation and the Question of Testimonial Authority

Authority claims through eyewitnessing had belonged to the repertoire of European travel writing since the Middle Ages. Unlike medieval encyclopaedias, cosmographies, and bestiaries which were largely based on textual authority and often had a general moral and theological meaning, early modern travel accounts told specific stories, laid out in a specific time and place. Consequently, their authors felt the urge to present their narratives as both literally and morally true.<sup>18</sup> Editions of the accounts of Marco Polo and Sir John Mandeville, then, routinely introduced the authors as direct eyewitnesses of the places and events they described – to such an extent in fact that it exerted an influence on early modern etymologies, because travellers time and again lamented what Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park call “the inadequacy of language” to communicate their experiences in foreign lands.<sup>19</sup> Three German testimonies from across the period discussed in this volume elucidate the problem, and its persistence. As these examples from between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries illustrate, questions of credibility continued to inform both reading and writing practices.

While the subjective nature of human experience and the specific conditions of communicating individual perceptions were only later conceptualized in more theoretical terms, its basic mechanisms belonged to the vocabularies of early modern readers and writers. Travel was at the heart of reflections on the subjective nature of experience. The modern Dutch and German terms for experience (“ervaren” or “erfahren”), are directly derived from notions connected to “travelling” (“varen” or “fahren”). The semantic change that took

16 Percy G. Adams, *Travelers & Travel Liars, 1660–1800* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), 45–49.

17 *Ibid.*, 3.

18 Andrea Frisch, *The Invention of the Eyewitness: Witnessing and Testimony in Early Modern France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

19 Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone, 1998), 62–63.

place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reflects the status of travellers (“fahrer”) as speaking from personal experience, and underlines their status as the most reliable interlocutors of knowledge and information. Yet personal experience, perception, and direct testimony were not automatically accepted as truth, and pre-modern authors and readers were clearly able to take the subjectivity of observing eyewitnesses into account. As Hans Schiltberger (1380 – after 1427), a Bavarian traveller to Turkey, India, and Persia, notes in his *Reisebuch*, the temporal distance between his actual travels and his narrative did not allow him to recall everything correctly. In his preface he explicitly did not rule out errors and lacunae in his memory. He also acknowledged that the specific circumstances of his travels shaped his perspective as well. As a Mongol captive, he had participated in Timur’s campaign to India and he notified the reader that his position did not allow him to see everything he wanted in the countries he travelled, and that the specific circumstances of his travels shaped his perspective as well:

And what I have experienced (“erfahren”) in my time among the heathens was only written down later, and I cannot report everything I witnessed (“erfahren”), as I do not remember everything clearly. And in my time among the heathens, I was not able to intensively travel (“erfahren”) to all the places in the lands and cities where I have been, because I was a captive and I did not belong to myself.<sup>20</sup>

Not belonging to himself and not being able to see everything he wanted was the reason for long inclusions of other travel narratives, especially passages from Mandeville. These intertextual interventions, he assured his readership, did not undermine his status as a witness but served to complete his own perspective.<sup>21</sup>

Schiltberger’s experience of not belonging to himself was not limited to his actual captivity, and his work appears to contain several subjective perspectives. His account switches between the first and the third person, and the episode of his captivity seems to refer to a different self than the one that leaves Germany and returns home after thirty-three years. Early modern ideas about the impact of individual subjectivities as a factor in travel writing and personal testimony were diverse and often presupposed a wider critical epistemological apparatus. European audiences were clearly capable of differentiating between various subjective perspectives and they were willing to find traces of empirical observation in accounts they deemed distorted by the specific circumstances of their production – but it required considerable

20 Hans Schiltberger, *Reisebuch*, edited by Valentin Langmantel (Tübingen: Litterarischer Verein, 1885), 1.

21 Albrecht Claassen, “Global Travel in the Late Middle Ages: The Eyewitness Account of Johann Schiltberger”, *The Medieval History Journal* 23, no. 1 (2020): 74–101; Mary Baine Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World. Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

effort.<sup>22</sup> For authors, citing eyewitnesses did not necessarily mean that their testimonies were absolutely reliable but that they could be ascribed to an individual perspective and critically examined as subjective accounts.

Attributing observations to specific observers and subjecting them to critical examinations was not an invention of the Enlightenment, but it did become more prominent during the eighteenth century. As the German naturalist and ethnologist Georg Forster notes in the preface to *A Voyage Round the World* (1777), “the same objects may have been seen in different points of view, and [...] the same fact may often have given rise to different ideas.”<sup>23</sup> Each perspective on the world beyond the horizon could manifest itself in different ways to different observers. It was therefore important to be familiar with the background of the person who authored an account from far abroad and the context in which it was written:

Two travellers seldom saw the same object in the same manner, and each reported the fact differently, according to his sensations, and his peculiar mode of thinking. It was therefore necessary to be acquainted with the observer, before any use could be made of his observations.<sup>24</sup>

Critically reflecting on the subjective nature of empirical observation, Forster justified his decision to include parts from James Cook’s notebook into his travel narrative: even though the two men had been on the same ship, Cook’s role was very different to Forster’s and mixing the two perspectives would offer a more complete account of the journey. The Italo-French painter Jean-François Rigaud’s 1780 portrait of Georg and his father, the zoologist Johann Reinhold Forster, at work in New Zealand suggested that distance could be overcome if only one scientifically described one’s observations (Figure 0.1).

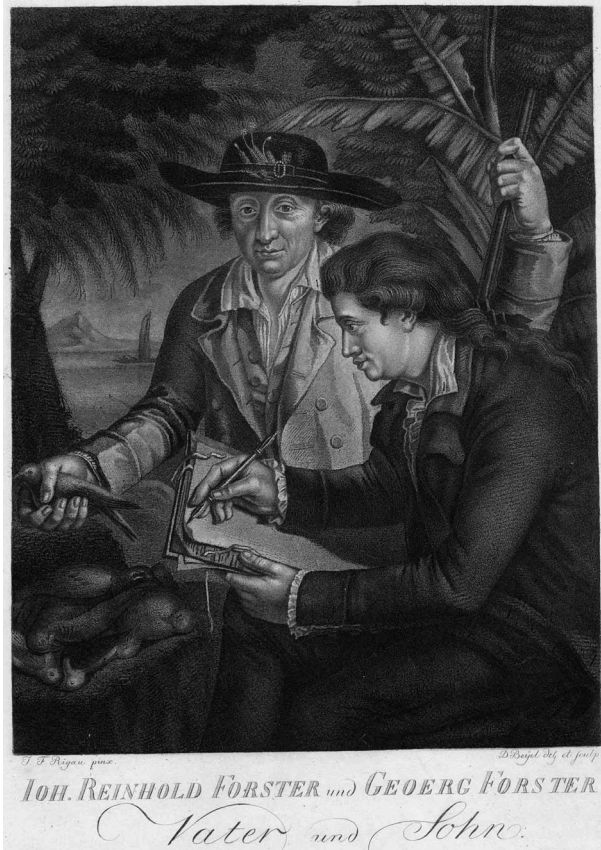
The physical presence of eyewitnesses and the possibility to question them about their information was certainly an indication of credibility. In the preface to Hans Staden’s sixteenth-century *Historia*, Johann Dryander introduced the protagonist of the Brazilian travel account as a local who was known to everyone as a son of honourable parents.<sup>25</sup> Another reason to trust his account was his reference to Heliodorus Hessus, another Marburger, whom he had met in Brazil. Staden, Dryander asserted, did not know that Hessus had also travelled to South America, which was proof of the account’s truthfulness. On the other hand, sceptics could just await Hessus’s return and if Staden’s *Historia* was indeed a collection of lies, its author would become

22 A good example is Gabriel Rollenhagen’s *Vier Bücher Wunderbarlicher biß daher unerhörter, und ungleublicher Indianischer reysen* (Magdeburg: Bötcher, 1603), discussed more extensively in Chapter 5 below.

23 Georg Forster, *A Voyage Round the World* (London: White, Robson, Elmsly, and Robinson, 1777), viii.

24 *Ibid.*, xi.

25 Staden, *Warhaftige Historia*, [A3r]. Trust was evidently a social category, as emphasized by Shapin, *A Social History of Truth*, 6.



*Figure 0.1 Daniel Beyel, after Jean-François Rigaud, Portrait of Dr Johann Reinhold Forster and his son Georg Forster (c.1799).*

Source: Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg Carl von Ossietzky.

known as an “unreliable man”. Hessus probably died ten years after the book’s publication, but the possibility of his return could promote the assumption that Staden would not have dared to merely invent the stories of his stay on the other side of the ocean as it potentially affected his reputation. Dryander’s preface also reflects the distrust that travellers faced in general: in the eyes of the “common man”, living a vagrant life was the most obvious sign that someone should not be trusted and it was due to the unreliability of travellers that truthful observers faced scepticism. The credibility of witnesses to global travel, thus, often depended on their embeddedness in local networks and knowledge about their whereabouts. As Dryander made clear, Staden was not a vagrant or a permanent traveller – which might indicate that he might tell different stories everywhere he came – but his two Brazilian adventures were the only longer voyages he had ever made. The rest of his life

was well-known to his fellow citizens and his embeddedness in a network of familiar names and persons who might show up to confirm or disprove his claims was reason enough for him to believe him.

Even though Dryander made clear that there were good reasons to doubt the accounts of travellers – there had been so many examples of invented and manipulated travel narratives – he also warned of a categorical distrust towards all accounts from far abroad. Writing off any testimony of hitherto unknown places, people or natural phenomena contained a bias that was also fundamentally anti-intellectual. The same prejudice had been already made by the “common people” who could not accept the calculations of cosmography as they could not imagine the vast distances between the earth, the sun, and the moon.<sup>26</sup> To dispute everything that could not be confirmed by daily experience was thus nothing but methodical ignorance, and readers should not exclude the possibility that seemingly incredible accounts contained some truth. The problem of how to distinguish between truthfulness and manipulation, he admitted, could never be fully solved with the help of scholarly methods. Intuition, sensation, and emotion became equally important instruments of examination and evaluation, and helped to facilitate the consolidation of information into knowledge well into the eighteenth century.

Europe’s expanding geographical horizons between 1450 and 1750, of course, had a substantial effect on the political balance of power, meaning that sensory means of verification were also applied to information that was produced by those who, almost by default, could not be trusted. From Columbus’s voyages onwards, the Catholic Church appropriated and tried to monopolize the Americas, but found it increasingly difficult to find the right balance between authenticity, credibility, and faith in the divine truth as it attempted to capitalize on the challenges of worldwide conversions in a context of increasing confessional strife. According to Stefania Tutino, “the increased rate of mobility and the enlarged scope of the Catholic missionary efforts made the task of verifying the truth of the facts more difficult, while simultaneously raising the theological, devotional, ideological, and polemical stakes in the battle to prove that the Roman Catholic Church was the same as the one true Church of Christ”.<sup>27</sup> By the seventeenth century, the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds had definitively become geographical extensions of the European theatre of war, and as a result, truth became even more conditional. The Reformation had witnessed the rise of largely parallel cultures of belonging, in which different media catered mainly, or at times only, for those within their own bubble.<sup>28</sup> Information by coreligionists was privileged over information from opposing confessions. Tenacious myths, such as the Black Legend of Spanish atrocities in the Americas, represented truth and untruth

26 Staden, *Warhaftige Historia*, [B1r].

27 Tutino, “Historical Authenticity”, 4.

28 Andrew Pettegree, *Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

at the same time, depending again on one's perspective.<sup>29</sup> Hence the process by which credibility, authenticity, doctrinal dogmas, global propaganda, and ideological drive intertwined and differentiated became "tortuous and painful" at least until the onset of a more scientific approach to verification in the later eighteenth century.<sup>30</sup> In the meantime global conflict ensured that long-distance information invited competition as much as exchange, adding a political layer to Fernand Braudel's timeless creed that distance was the "first enemy" of communication in early modern society.<sup>31</sup>

*Far from the Truth* addresses these issues by bringing together a diverse range of scholarly approaches and academic disciplines – examining textual, visual, material, and psychological strategies of persuasion and reception. The volume opens with shipboard perspectives from Portugal, which shaped the early stages of globalization and conditioned the European gaze by exploring West Africa, rounding the Cape of Good Hope, and reporting on the riches of the Indian Ocean world. From his viewpoint on the front deck, Josiah Blackmore argues in Chapter 1 that the Portuguese in the fifteenth century developed a seafaring epistemology, with ships as vessels of truth, that culminated in Luís de Camões's *Lusiads* and retained its significance throughout the early modern era – even serving to facilitate the credibility of legendary tales of monsters which were never completely eradicated. In Chapter 2, Joan-Pau Rubiés revisits the canonical travel accounts of Amerigo Vespucci, Ludovico de Vartema, and Antonio Pigafetta to demonstrate that the longing to establish credibility from a distance was widely shared, and that the rudimentary tools to do so were already in place as early as the first half of the sixteenth century. The observer's perceived honesty, the quality of his observations, the reliability of his sources, and the means of disseminating his experiences would remain key components in early modern attempts to distinguish truth from lies, facts from fiction. Stephanie Leitch, in Chapter 3, reminds us that these modes of information management were not exclusively textual. Influential publishers like Theodore de Bry and Levinus Hulsius, active around 1600 in Frankfurt, the epicentre of the European book market, did not travel themselves, but were instrumental in making the Americas more recognizable to home audiences by copying and recontextualizing

29 Margaret R. Greer, Walter D. Mignolo, and Maureen Quilligan, ed. *Rereading the Black Legend: The Discourses of Religious and Racial Difference in the Renaissance Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Harold J. Cook, *Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 175–225.

30 Tutino, "Historical Authenticity", 39. A key role in the Church's missionary efforts was of course reserved for the Jesuits, see Markus Friedrich, *Der lange Arm Roms? Globale Verwaltung und Kommunikation im Jesuitenorden, 1540–1773* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2011) See Renate Dürr's chapter in this volume on John Lockman's self-conscious attempts to understand beyond the confessional divide.

31 De Vivo, "Microhistories", 180; Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. 2 vols. (New York: Harper Collins, 1972), II, 358–69.

printed images which were deeply familiar. European iconography provided sufficient comfort to create a stock catalogue of “novel” interpretations that persisted until the Age of Enlightenment.

Yet the means of authentication did not develop in linear ways. In Chapter 4, Ricardo Padrón unpicks the discussion in early modern Europe about the number of islands in the archipelagos of Southeast Asia. He shows that although eyewitness accounts gradually led to more exactitude, the myths about an exaggerated “multitude of islands” that had originated in the later Middle Ages continued to be propelled in various genres – relying on the same rhetoric of (in this case imagined) precision. Johannes Müller, in Chapter 5, proceeds to examine the rigorous methods of source criticism that emerged in attempts to overcome geographical distance. Gabriel Rollenhagen, an aspiring German emblemist and poet, systematically challenged forty false propositions about nature, science, and geography, undermining what was left of the cosmographical tradition while at the same time developing a new method to expose persistent misconceptions. The rise of individual scepticism that the likes of Rollenhagen promoted put the onus on those responsible for disseminating information to be even more conscious of the connection between credibility and reputation. The French newspaper editor Théophraste Renaudot, Michiel van Groesen writes (Chapter 6), was by many considered unreliable because of his position as the mouthpiece of Cardinal Richelieu. Geographical and metaphorical distance, in Renaudot’s *Gazette de France*, offered a respite: since news from the Americas was not overly politicized in Paris until the ascent of Colbert, Renaudot could use it to shore up his credibility – offering nuance in his coverage when other media did not, and providing multiple eyewitness perspectives on important geopolitical turning points. Renaudot’s transoceanic reporting was an exception, however: linear progress was still not achieved.

As the seventeenth century progressed, and geopolitical rivalry replaced curiosity as the main impetus for European engagement with the non-European world, the tension between distance and credibility affected other forms of information management too. Christina Brauner, in Chapter 7, examines the life of political treaties between European merchant companies and African polities on the Gold Coast, and studies the different interpretations of trust that facilitated both the conception and the validity of these diplomatic documents. The materiality of the treaties in particular, traceable in the archives, reflects their multiple meanings. The archive itself is the main focus of Chapter 8, as Nicholas Popper explores the single-minded attempts of the English Secretary of State Joseph Williamson to keep control over the rapidly expanding British Empire by gathering, ordering, and filing letters he received from correspondents in the Caribbean. Popper shows that Williamson used his personal archive to support political decision-making, and to carve out a key role in controlling the flow of transoceanic information. Renate Dürr, in the volume’s final chapter, follows the dynamics of establishing credibility into the eighteenth century. Despite the English scholar John Lockman’s heartfelt aversion to the Jesuit order, he recognized that Jesuit

letters contained valuable information on regions that few Europeans had visited. The problem, obviously, was one of trust. For this reason Lockman set up his own system to distinguish fact from fabrication in the catalogue of “dangerous knowledge” that the Society provided. His extensive footnotes provided an antidote to clearly biased truths that threatened to develop into mainstream viewpoints, and allowed readers to become eyewitnesses themselves. The volume concludes with a short coda by Miles Ogborn, who reflects on the nature of truth and the attempts at different ways to reach different truths – or even possible truths – in early modern Europe.

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Contemporaries would have recognized the problems discussed in this volume, because they, too, abundantly realized that distance and credibility mattered. In 1739, the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher David Hume devoted two sections of his foundational work *A Treatise of Human Nature* to “contiguity and distance in space and time”.<sup>32</sup> Hume was more preoccupied with the temporal version of distance than with the geographical kind, but was quick to acknowledge that in reflecting on any object distant from ourselves, “we are oblig’d not only to reach it at first by passing thro’ all the intermediate space betwixt ourselves and the object, but also to renew our progress every moment; being every moment recall’d to the consideration of ourselves and our present situation”. Distance, in other words, required (self-)reflection at every step of the way towards a full understanding. Of course, Hume continued, “the fewer steps we make to arrive at the object, and the smoother the road is, this diminution of vivacity is less sensibly felt, but still may be observ’d more or less in proportion to the degrees of distance and difficulty”. Proximity was a virtue, in other words, to such an extent even that, according to Hume,

men are principally concern’d about those objects, which are not much remov’d either in space or time, enjoying the present, and leaving what is afar off to the care of chance and fortune. Talk to a man of his condition thirty years hence, and he will not regard you. Speak of what is to happen to-morrow, and he will lend you attention. The breaking of a mirror gives us more concern when at home, than the burning of a house, when abroad, and some hundred leagues distant.

“Distance”, Hume concluded, “weakens the conception and passion”. As the various tales in this volume demonstrate, however, this was not a universal

32 In quoting Hume, we have used the digitized edition at [www.davidhume.org](http://www.davidhume.org). The section entitled “Of contiguity and distance in space and time” comprises Sections VII and VIII of Part 3 (“Of the Will and the Passions”) of Book 2 (“Of The Passions”) of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, first published in London by John Noon in 1739–40.

truth. For some early modern Europeans, that which was remote was simply too important to leave to “the care of chance and fortune”. Hume, then, proceeded by challenging his own reasoning, raising the problem “why a very great distance increases our esteem and admiration for an object”. His answer to this question merits being quoted in full here:

’tis evident that the mere view and contemplation of any greatness, whether successive or extended, enlarges the soul, and gives it a sensible delight and pleasure. A wide plain, the ocean, eternity, a succession of several ages; all these are entertaining objects, and excel every thing, however beautiful, which accompanies not its beauty with a suitable greatness. Now when any very distant object is presented to the imagination, we naturally reflect on the interpos’d distance, and by that means, conceiving something great and magnificent, receive the usual satisfaction.

It is unlikely that Hume’s contemporaries, most importantly those who had themselves travelled the world, regarded wide plains and oceans primarily as “entertaining objects” which helped to conceive satisfaction. What they might have more readily subscribed to is the philosopher’s idea that the human imagination played a key role in overcoming distance.

More than two-and-a-half centuries later, Carlo Ginzburg criticized Hume’s attempts to overcome the contradictions inherent in his reasoning as “disappointing insofar as they are drawn from individual psychology only”.<sup>33</sup> Ginzburg has a point. Although early modern Europeans would have used different terminology, it is precisely this individual nature of the human imagination in relating or translating distance that presented others with the arguably even more challenging problem of credibility. Who and what to believe, and why? These questions in turn produced an equally compelling and, one hopes, universal human passion: the desire to uncover and transcend alternative facts, and to create a practicable toolkit to do so. The chapters below will follow on the trail of David Hume by finding out how Europeans between 1450 and 1750 used their imagination in attempting to smoothen the road from there to here, and collectively provide a better understanding of the itineraries towards distant truths, no matter how strange, incredible or elusive.

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33 Carlo Ginzburg, “Killing a Chinese Mandarin: The Moral Implications of Distance”, *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (1994): 57–59, with the quotation on p. 59.

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