A History of Early Modern Communication. German and Italian Historiographical Perspectives

Veranstalter: Massimo Rospocher, Istituto storico italo-germanico, Trent; Daniel Bellingradt, Institut für Buchwissenschaft, Erlangen
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Do we know, at all, what is the history of communication? In an attempt to answer this question, researchers from all over Europe met for two days in Italy, hosted by Trent's Italian-German Historical Institute (FBK ISIG). In their introduction to the conference, the organizers DANIEL BELLINGRADT (Erlangen) and MASSIMO ROSPOCHER (Trent) emphasized a contradiction that is inherent to the history of communication: its great success versus its lack of a proper academic and theoretical framework. Bellingradt and Rospocher proposed a number of possible keywords and concepts, including the necessity of studying the ensemble of early modern media (Medienverbund), with its multiplicity (multimediality) and interactions (intermediality). Regarding these concepts, scholarship has made important progress in the last twenty years, pushing itself well beyond the realm of the written word to encompass orality, soundscapes, smells, gestures, rituals, public performances, and –significantly– their complementarity. Furthermore, the idea that an act of communication made in a particular medium prompted a reaction – further acts of communication made through different media – has been usefully conceptualized as „media echo".

The conference consisted of into three sessions. The first featured two keynote speeches, delivered by RUDOLF SCHLÖGL (Konstanz) and MARIO INFELISE (Venice). These talks radically differed and, because of this, raised interesting questions and discussion. Schlögl's keynote concerned itself with a broad notion of the history of communication and discussed its theoretical approaches. He criticized the overcharging of the concept of „public sphere" with strongly normative assumptions. In its place, he proposed a re-interpretation of the term based on communication and media theory. He began by tracing the differentiation of the media system in the early modern period, and then explored its social consequences. According to Schlögl, differentiation had few far-reaching consequences, at first, since most developments were limited to elites and were based on the stratified logic of society. It was not until the eighteenth century that a profound change took place. The assumption that information, in order to be reliable, needed to be communicated by a neutral and objective observer. This change did not originate in the Enlightenment, but rather between the increasing contrast of rival opinions in politics, and the claim of truth likewise formulated by the new scientific thought.

Mario Infelise's keynote, by contrast, addressed a more specific area of the history of information, and dealt more empirically with the evolution of European historiographical traditions. Infelise stressed how, in the beginning, scholarship approached the „prehistory of news" with the analytical tools of contemporary media history, adopting a strictly national framework relating to questions of nation-building. This trend changed towards the end of the 1990s, when the perspective became more holistic and the subject shifted from specific textual categories and/or objects to information in itself. Research encompassed a European perspective and to different media; „network" became an important keyword. In spite of these welcome paradigm shifts, Infelise noted that there still can be done more to avoid teleological perspectives in the history of news and information. For instance, the circulation of printed news did not supplant that of manuscript news; rather, the two coexisted until the first half of the eighteenth century. Manuscript and privy news sources were, for a long time, considered much more reliable than printed and public news, even though they largely shared the same information base. Infelise concluded by arguing that this information base, its origins and circulation, should become the primary object of research.

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In the second session of the Conference, each paper adopted a research perspective advocated by Bellingradt and Rospocher in their introduction: namely taking one communicative setting, „frozen" in time, and considering the complexity of its mediality.

ALEXANDRA SCHÄFER-GRIEBEL (Mainz) analyzed how, during the French Wars of Religion, the royalist party took advantage of the whole media ensemble, countering the communicative strategies of the Catholic League. Taking the decisive year 1589 as case study, she gave various examples of the ways in which different media sought to address different audiences in different manners, all conveyed through the reassuring image of King Henri III. The same media ensemble served as a means of self-reassurance for royalists, and as a call to action for fellow royalists.

CHIARA DE CAPRIO (Naples) focused on Neapolitan chronicles (mainly from the second half of the fifteenth century) and accounts of natural disasters (seventeenth century) to show how these texts both report and contain the intermediality that characterized the early modern communicative landscape. The texts report intermediality insofar as they make continuous mentions of different acts of communication – written, oral, or performative – taking place at critical junctures in Neapolitan history. They also contain intermediality. Firstly, because from a linguistic point of view, some passages clearly originate from oral accounts. Secondly, because multiple texts share similar passages, a sign of the circulation of other texts or accounts. Thirdly, because texts often contain images, which in turn suggests (alongside other elements) that they were made to be read aloud to – and to be seen by – a textual community.

CARLA ROTH (Basel) presented a single source: a pair of notebooks in which, between 1529 and 1539, St Gallen linen merchant Johannes Rütiner (1501–1556/7) duly reported the pieces of news, rumors, gossip, anecdotes he received, together with his informants and sources. This is the key for understanding, how a sixteenth century town-dweller came to know about near and distant informations. Roth singled out two things in particular, namely that the great majority of news, even when originally based on texts, reached Rütiner through oral exchange; and that Rütiner considered reliable those stories that were told to him by familiar and trusted people whereas he was generally skeptical about written information. Roth has also reconstructed the network of 349 informants that populate Rütiner, showing the importance of the networks relating to family and guild.

Finally, SABRINA CORBELLINI (Groningen) spoke about religious literacies in the long fifteenth century (c. 1400–1550). She defined literacies as sets of practices that are taught, learned, and which inherently feature intermediality – as the relationship with texts was always embedded within multiple acts of non-written communication. For this reason, Corbellini called for a stridently spatial approach to mediality, making the claim that it is fundamental to examine the entire communicative landscape within a given physical space, defined as a *lieux de savoire* – a place of (religious) knowledge, such as a church or a confraternity.

In his commentary, JAN-FRIEDRICH MIßFELDER (Zurich) suggested asking more questions about the social consequences of intermediality. How did the perception of (and attitudes toward) intermediality change in the early modern period?

The third session of the conference addressed a more specific problem than „intermediality," encouraging the presenters to interpret the theme according to their own specializations.

In the first paper, PAOLA MOLINO (Munich/Padua) dealt with transalpine information transfer. Her analysis focused on the Fugger Collection in Wien, which contains both German „Zeitungen" and Italian „avvisi". On the basis of a quantitative and content analysis of the collection combined with local case studies of European news centers, Molino succeeded in reconstructing a differentiated picture of the evolution of the information landscape around 1600. The Fugger-Zeitungen showed that „avvisi" and „Zeitung" differentiated themselves into two linguistic and cultural variants of the same medium. Thus, the news writers reacted to changed needs of the different target groups

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and their very specific interests and were able to serve different channels of the news market.

The transalpine perspective was retained in ANDREAS FLURSCHÜTZ DA CRUZ'S (Bamberg) paper, which sought to answer two interconnected questions: how did the Venetians, who constantly needed new mercenaries, know that they would receive them at the courts of the Old Reich; and how, conversely, did the German princes know when and to what extent Venice would demand them? This information was crucial because the recruitment and transfer of troops was time-consuming, cost-intensive and thus associated with a high entrepreneurial risk. Flurschütz da Cruz worked out how various settings developed during the period under study in which relevant information on the availability and effectiveness of troops were communicated, agreements on prices and modalities were negotiated, and contracts were concluded.

DAVIDE BOERIO (Cork-Teramo) took one specific event in time, the Neapolitan Revolution of 1647–48, to show that emergency overturned the standard „information asymmetry" which characterized the early modern period. Because of this information asymmetry, elites were able to get more information and to shape narratives that were more effective. In contrast, a period of emergency resulted in a phase of „information equivalence" in which multiple actors had the chance to unleash competing flows of information and narratives regarding the unfolding events. This stance can be summarized in the clash between the revolutionaries and the noble faction over a stone engraving of one of their agreements. The revolutionaries contested the first version and obtained its rewriting, this time on a canvas, so that it would be easier to amend it in the event of further controversies.

Finally, ISABELLA LAZZARINI (Molise) gave a presentation on Italian diplomacy in the long Quattrocento. She addressed the transformation of diplomacy from a series of single negotiations and/or ceremonial events to a permanent web of information-circulation and communication involving multiple centers, thus creating a veritable political system. This web prompted rulers and their chanceries to produce new instruments in order to manage intelligence; it also created a shared Italian vocabulary of negotiation and analysis of current events. Lazzarini also stressed that orality played an important role in this information and communication infrastructure. On the one hand, because a good share of diplomatic dispatches was based on oral information received by the writing ambassador/informer; on the other hand, because, in case of conflicting written news items, the viva voce of a trusted person and/or a witness of the controversial event was considered paramount.

In his commentary, MATTHIAS POHLIG (Berlin) invited reflection on the fact that in most of the contributions the focus lay on communication rather than on how information gathering can be understood in a systematic connection to communication.

In his final commentary, HEIKO DROSTE (Stockholm) remarked that intermediality was too often used as an umbrella term. It is at least as important to consider the specific logic of single media and their genre conventions, as it is to examine the intermedial level. Droste also highlighted the question of communication's social consequences as a key to understanding the early modern media landscape.

Droste also praised the organizers' proposal to develop an inclusive approach for a history of communication. The conference in Trent can be regarded as a solid base for this. A continuation of the format would therefore be highly desirable.

Conference Overview:

Daniel Bellingradt/Massimo Rospocher: Introduction: What is the history of communication?

Keynotes:

Rudolf Schlögl: Public Sphere in the Making in Early Modern Europe

Mario Infelise: Information and communication in Early Modern Europe: from national historiographies to a European model

Section 1: Intermediality of Communication

Jan-Friedrich Mißfelder: Chair and Commen-

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tary

Alexandra Schäfer-Griebel: News on the French Wars of Religion. An intermedia perspective

Chiara De Caprio: A linguistic perspective on intermediality in Early Modern Italy. The Regno, 1450-1700

Carla Roth: Speaking of Print: Oral Informants on the Marketplace of News

Sabrina Corbellini: Shaping Religious Literacies in the Long Fifteenth Century: Intermediality of Communication

Section 2: Communication as Information Acquisition

Matthias Pohlig: Chair and Commentary

Paola Molino: From street to paper? Language, translation and communication in late Renaissance German and Italian newsletters

Andreas Flurschütz da Cruz: The Republic of Venice and the German Princes as Military Allies: A German-Italian History of Communication in Times of War (17th and 18th century)

Davide Boerio: Communication and Emergency: Information gathering in times of crisis in the early modern period

Isabella Lazzarini: Tutto serve a sapere: gathering, ordering and using information in diplomatic communication (Italy, 1350-1520 ca.)

Roundtable

Heiko Droste: Commentary

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