



“The Pen is so Noble and Excellent an Instrument”: How the Medieval Merchants and Renaissance Diplomats Invented the Newswriting Style

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that the modern newswriting tradition can be traced back to the networks of Italian medieval merchants and Renaissance diplomats. As of the late 1200s, merchant letters reveal an increasing tendency to report important political and military events for the sake of business interests. The emergence of permanent embassies in Italy in the mid-1400s gave a further impetus to the development of newswriting techniques, since one of the pivotal tasks of the Renaissance ambassadors was to keep their superiors informed about evolving situations in the foreign courts. As a result, both merchants and diplomats had to break with the rigid medieval letter-writing tradition in order to develop new rhetorical strategies capable of capturing the complex realities they observed. This study analyzes some of the key elements of this emerging reporting style such as the dateline, the lead, basic story structures, but also the early notions of objectivity that in their own way fostered the techniques capable of conveying direct speech. In conclusion, this essay points out several manuals for Renaissance diplomats and their secretaries that already clearly formulated the six journalistic Ws and also pondered the ability of news-writers to manipulate their audiences.

KEYWORDS

History of journalism; newswriting style; reporting techniques; editorial practices; medieval merchants; Renaissance diplomacy

“The Pen is so noble and excellent an instrument that is extremely necessary not only to merchants but to all of the arts, liberal and mechanical,” wrote Benedetto Cotrugli in the 1450s in his book of advice to an aspiring merchant. “And you can readily see how a merchant whose pen weighs heavily, one, that is, indisposed to put it on paper, can hardly be said to be a merchant.” Cotrugli pointed out that the invention of the pen was very appropriately attributed to Themis, the lover of Hermes – the messenger of the gods, arguing that it was essential to trade because it “can convey information and give advice from place to place about the things of great or minute importance” (Cotrugli Raguseo 1990, 171).

Cotrugli’s observation reflected a trend that started about a century-and-a-half earlier. Contrary to the generations of merchants such as the father and uncle of Marco Polo, who in the 1260s personally carried all their wares to China, in the following decades we can observe a dramatic shift in commercial practices labeled by economic historians as the

commercial revolution of the Late Middle Ages. By this time, trade became concentrated in urban centers interconnected by transportation networks that were increasing regular and reliable, and itinerant merchants gave way to resident or sedentary merchants who operated through factors – business partners in far-away trade centers, who represented their trade interests and carried out their orders (Lopez 1976).

In order to participate in long-distance trade, often simultaneously in multiple markets, the sedentary merchant needed to develop a good system of recordkeeping and at the same time to be well advised about the fluctuating exchange rates and commodity prices (Cf. Balducci Pegolotti 1936). The first challenge was addressed by the development of double-entry bookkeeping (Lane 1973, 140–143), while the second obstacle was tackled by the parallel rise of postal networks organized by various merchant companies and known under the Italian name of *scarsella* (Frangioni 1983), as well as by the pioneering of the new medium of paper. Early on, paper was imported from the Arab world, but by 1300 its manufacturing was established in Italy. It was not only much cheaper than parchment, but also available in quantities sufficient to sustain the need of the expanding communication networks (Kittler 2015).

A series of 16 surviving letters of the Italian Ricciardi company from Lucca, addressed to its London branch between 1295 and 1303, may very well illustrate this trend (Kaeuper 1973, 71). For the most part, they convey information related very narrowly to the company's commercial operations, yet in some of the letters we can already glimpse several early references to key political events that undoubtedly impacted its international business interests. Such information may have been still perceived as a mere curiosity by the writers who usually inserted it almost haphazardly – in separate paragraphs – amongst the accounts of their commercial operations (Castellani 2005).¹ However, the Venetian factor of the Tuscan Datini firm, forwarding news about Tamerlane's destruction of Aleppo in 1401, was already fully aware that "it is impossible to trade without news," simply because if the report he copied in his letter was true, "it would make great mutations to business."²

Aware of the close relationship between business, war and politics, by the early 1400s Italian merchant companies already had in place an information-gathering network that geographically mirrored the universe of their expanding trading interests. Westward, it spanned all the way to Bruges and London, it reached Avignon with its temporary papal seat, and encompassed also the most important Mediterranean trading posts – from Barcelona to Constantinople (Kittler 2018). Only a very few merchant letters written before the 1400s survived in their original form. But we can see an increasing number of those containing information about important political and military events, as well as natural disasters, copied in late medieval chronicles. The pivotal early sources are the Florentine chronicles of Giovanni Villani (c. 1276–1348) and Giovanni Morelli (1371–1444). But it is the Venetian chronicler Antonio Morosini (1360–1433) who not only transcribed verbatim such early news reports and included them into his diaries, but for the first time systematically disclosed also their origins as well as the channels through which he obtained the information (Morosini 2010).

Robert Lopez (1966, 34) argued that the medieval Italian city-states such as Florence, Venice, or his native Genoa were run as chambers of commerce by governments of businessmen, by businessmen, for businessmen. Especially in Venice, an ideal politician was a successful merchant who at some point retired from active trade in order to dedicate the

rest of his life to state service (Labalme and Sanguineti White 2008, 429–431). In response to the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the constantly warring Italian states were forced to cease hostilities and sign the Peace of Lodi. In order to enforce it, they created a network of the earliest permanent embassies in the west. This constituted a pivotal moment through which the experience of the former merchant was translated into the practice of the resident ambassador. It helped to transform the purely ceremonial role of a medieval message-bearer into the much more active role of a skillful negotiator whose main task was to provide his principals back home with a constant supply of foreign intelligence (Queller 1967, 88–89).

In the 1490s, a Venetian resident ambassador was highly commended by the Doge and the Senate “on account of the diligent notice of all news which, according to your custom, you have given us.” The decree praising his skills further described information-gathering as an essential duty that “pertains to the office of faithful, prudent and diligent ambassador.”³ Indeed, a good government in Venice was often understood as a well-informed government, one whose principal role was defined in the early 1500s by a senior politician as “to search out the secrets of the universe, sending one’s mind in an instant to every single part of the world” (Chambers and Pullan 1992, 271).

From Diplomatic Letters to Anonymous *Avvisi*

We can only assume that the earliest news-bearing letters circulating throughout European circles of merchants and diplomats were perceived by their contemporaries as ephemeral scripts preserved only to the point when the information they carried lost its relevance. They first appeared during the 1300s in Italy under the name of *nuove* or *novelle/novelle* (news), only in the late 1400s were these handwritten newsletters increasingly labeled as *avixi/avisi/avvisi* (advices)—a name under which they became known for posterity. Merchants undoubtedly used them to benefit their trade, while diplomatic circles relied upon them in matters of war and peace. Before 1500 there is no surviving evidence that the newsletters themselves were sold as a commodity to third parties for financial profit, although they were often used as a bargaining chip, especially by diplomats (Kittler 2018, 200 and 204; Cf. Infelise 2007, 41–44).

In his advice to the newly-appointed Florentine ambassador to the imperial court, Niccolò Machiavelli in 1522 expressed the belief that “the best way to gain access to the *avvisi* is to share the ones one has with others,” simply because an ambassador who enjoys the reputation of being a well-informed person also has the best opportunity to learn new things (Machiavelli 1916, 423). The Duke of Milan Francesco Sforza lived by this strategy. In 1460, he instructed his ambassador in Naples to write two separate sets of dispatches—ones that dealt with confidential matters and were only for the duke to read, and others that “contain *novelle* (news) in general terms, and do it in a way that we can show a copy of them to our friends” (Senatore 1998, 235, n227).

By “friends” the duke meant diplomats and other public figures and the need to use newsletters as a bargaining chip in diplomatic circles without compromising one’s sources may have been one of the main reasons why the *novelle* or *avvisi* gradually separated from ambassadorial dispatches and started circulating on their own—first in diplomatic circles, only to be subsequently leaked to the broader public (Kittler 2016, 117). Two surviving notebooks from the ducal chancery of Venice give us a

rare glimpse behind the scenes and suggest how this mechanism worked.⁴ For example, they show how an original dispatch from the Venetian ambassador (*baylo*) in Constantinople, or a letter from the duke of Ferrara were, by the simple stroke of a chancery hand, transformed into two anonymous *avvisi*.⁵ The notebooks similarly illustrate how the chancery clerks compiled various news items received through different ambassadorial dispatches into a headline-style news digests (*sommari*). At the end of the drafts of such newsletters the clerks of the ducal chancery usually added lists of those Venetian embassies to which the particular *avviso* or news summary should be forwarded with the next diplomatic mail packet.⁶

New Writing Style Befitting the Profession of a Merchant and Ambassador

The art of letter writing taught in the medieval schools, known as *ars dictaminis*, required pupils to memorize archaic formulas repeated in the compositions of official letters, rejecting any forms of spontaneous informal expression (Grendler 1989, 115). In stark contrast to this practice, sedentary merchants faced situations that were far less predictable, and during the thirteenth century circumstances forced them to develop a new writing style driven by their own needs (De Blasi 1985, 44). We know very little about its initial development, yet by the early 1300s this new style was almost fully formed in the writings of Italian merchants. By this time, it was taught in the emerging abacus schools and became known under the name *mercantesca*—merchant script. It not only had its own distinctive way of forming letters, but also its own ductus—the way in which the writer sequenced and structured the text, largely mirroring spontaneous verbal expression (Grendler 1989, 325; Petrucci 2008, 54–55).

Letter writing soon became a bread-and-butter skill for an accomplished merchant. At the peak of its success during 1395–1405, the central office and eight branches of the Tuscan Datini firm annually produced up to 12,000 letters (Bruscoli 2011, 131). They mainly contained commercial information, although Federigo Melis (1972) argued that if all passages pertaining to political themes were organized in a historical sequence, “we would obtain a very profound and detailed political and social history of various nations” (17). This came at a significant cost to merchants and their factors, who almost relentlessly complained about the burden of letter writing. “Last evening ... I did not feel very well after having to do a lot of writing in the past two days, without sleeping neither during the day, nor at night,” confided Francesco Datini to his wife Margherita (Elena Cecchi 1990, 136). Yet, the same Datini reminded his affiliates that “one cannot write often enough, because there are new developments every hour” (184). And his factors not only wrote constantly, but also struggled to absorb the streams of information arriving incessantly from all known corners of the world. One of them complained that he and his clerk Isidor barely had time to eat and to go to church on a given day, “yet we still have so many [letters] to read that it will take us two more days” (cited in De Blasi 1985, 40).

The position of an ambassador required a very similar set of writing skills and equal effort. In 1454, the Duke of Milan Francesco Sforza kept 93 persons on his payroll in support of an extensive courier service and required his ambassadors to report the most nuanced political developments at the courts they served (Senatore 1998, 269). The duke expected each of his ambassadors to write at least two, ideally three or four detailed reports every week (274). His definition of newsworthiness was simple, but

effective: “And so, you will let me know everything what is worth knowing and contains some kernel of truth,” commanded the duke in 1458 to his envoy in Naples, Antonio da Trezzo (431).

While Francesco Sforza wanted to be perceived by the world as the *signore di novelle*—the master of information—there were other rulers in Italy who matched his aspirations (Senatore 1998, 254). In 1448, the Bishop of Modena Giacomo Antonio della Torre, who served as an envoy on behalf of his duke, Leonello d’Este, complained that he was “tired of constant writing that requires an entire universe of paper,” not willing to serve in his position any longer because “he cannot bear that much fatigue anymore” (Senatore 1997, 37). In 1471, the newly-appointed Venetian ambassador in Naples, Zaccaria Barbaro, wrote 61 surviving dispatches in his first two months in the office, informing his government about every move at the court of King Ferrante (Corazzol 1994, 28). Between 1502 and 1505, during his three-year mission in Rome, another Venetian ambassador, Antonio Giustiniani, sent at least 1223 surviving dispatches—an astounding number that set the gold standard for all of his successors (Villari 1876).

The goal was to annihilate the space dividing the envoy from his principal by compressing the time of delivery and increasing the frequency of dispatches in order to create an illusion of simultaneity or contemporaneity (Cf. Dooley 2010; De Blasi 1985, 40). Chronicler Girolamo Priuli assessed that in the aftermath of the humiliating military debacle at Agnadello in 1509, the Signoria of Venice was receiving over 200 dispatches a day, not only from its diplomats, but also from the military liaisons and local administrators of its dominions (Priuli 1938, Vol. 4, 57). Marco Minio, one of the three Venetian ambassadors at the papal court in Rome who, ten years after the defeat, helped to restore his republic’s position among the European powers, begged the doge to send him a secretary in order to help with his dispatches, arguing that for an ambassador “there is no more arduous task than that of writing.”⁷

Key Elements of the Nascent Newswriting Style

Late Medieval merchants, and subsequently also resident ambassadors, faced one common challenge: their written reports had to capture situations that were often very different than those addressed by the rigid schemes of the *ars dictaminis* tradition. For example, they had to convey fluid developments that were riddled with internal contradictions, while constantly assessing the credibility of their sources. In order to do so, they had to develop and master a whole range of new expressive strategies that enabled them to capture such real-life situations, encode them through written language, and convey them to their respective audiences (Ricci 2011).

This was not an easy task, considering that the late medieval merchants—due to the lack of mastery of Latin—depended on the vernacular language and, as a result, introduced it into the letter-writing tradition in Italy. It was a language—or rather series of regional dialects with their own idiosyncrasies—that did not have an established orthography. The syntax of such vernacular dialects was not yet fixed, capitalization was still an unknown concept, and the writers worked with a narrow range of punctuation marks which further complicated an already ambiguous sentence structure.

Yet, this new emerging approach to reporting newsworthy events was subsequently embraced also by the resident ambassadors, oftentimes men with a strong humanistic

education. They helped to advance it further and by the mid-sixteenth century gave life to a reporting style whose beauty was in its simplicity (Senatore 1998, 161–163 and 206–214). By doing so, they *de facto* developed and established an expressive arsenal that is still used, with slight variations, by journalism practitioners. The following passages of this essay address some of the key elements of this evolving style, illustrating their gradual functional developments with examples selected from among the surviving archival evidence.

Morphological and Typological Structure

First of all, the letters produced by merchant companies rely upon the *mercantesca* script, which a trained eye can easily recognize among the Late Medieval corpus of writings. They had a very specific morphology and in contrast with other texts produced by the medieval chanceries and notaries, their authors started structuring the body copy into a series of shorter paragraphs—each addressing a separate issue.

By the early 1400s, two types of news-carrying letters crystalized within Italian merchant circles. The first type was a *monothematic* newsletter, which means that the entire body copy, or at least its substantial portion, addressed one single news item. The authors usually subdivided the topic into a series of short paragraphs, each gradually advancing the story (Ainaud 1965, 327–335; Villani *n.d.*, 1638–1639). There can hardly be any talk about the deliberate application of the inverted pyramid structure, although the most important information was usually captured in the opening paragraph, evoking the modern notion of a lead, with every subsequent section further elaborating and deepening the topic. “One must keep in mind the most important piece of information, which should be inserted in the opening paragraph,” advised the manual for diplomats and their secretaries compiled by the administration of Milan during the sixteenth century (Anonymous 1593, 387).

The would-be lead of such monothematic newsletters was usually an informative summary statement, although there are several newsletters in which the authors already experimented with what current journalism practitioners would call an alternative lead, opening the dispatch with a witty phrase or a proverb. “Here the things go from bad to worse,” reads the laconic opening of the newsletter reporting the 1415 French debacle at Agincourt, received by a Tuscan merchant trading in Venice. This opening statement, which clearly foreshadows the overall tenor of the dispatch, was followed by a sentence that succinctly summarized the event: “These French lords were defeated in the battle with the English on 25 October, in one place called Artexe [Agincourt], between France and Picardy,” after which follow further details about the battle.⁸ A much later newsletter from Paris, copied and forwarded by the Venetian embassy in Milan in 1574, offered a follow up on the previously reported failure of the plot of the Malcontents with the subsequent imprisonment of the duke of Montmorency, and opened with a similarly laconic statement: “After the lightning finally comes also some rain.”⁹

Even more diffused was the second type, a *polythematic* newsletter, whose earliest iterations blended substantial passages addressing private merchant affairs with short paragraphs dedicated to the reports of political developments, wars, or natural disasters. However, as of the early 1400s we see an increase in the amount of such letters that focused predominantly on reporting political news. In them, each new topic sentence

may start with the Latin term *item* (also), used when making lists, for example in the accounting. Throughout the 1500s, this approach was further developed into newsletters labeled as *sommari* (summaries),¹⁰ composed of a series of up to a dozen brief paragraphs, each usually starting with the Italian word *che* (that) or *come* (how), and each introducing a new news item reduced to a sole summary lead, almost in a headline-style manner. However, it must be clearly alleged that both *monothematic* and *polythematic* newsletters were only two Weberian ideal types that were sometimes combined, resulting in many hybrid forms. We can see countless examples of them being transcribed verbatim in the Venetian chronicle of Antonio Morosini (2010).

The Dateline

The habit of indicating time and place from which a given piece of information was reported may represent the closest link between the medieval *ars dictaminis* tradition and the emerging merchant letter. According to Pozza, during the medieval period the dateline was already in use, but it was traditionally placed at the very end of a chancery document. It was only in the late 1200s that Italian chanceries shifted its placement to the top of a letter—a practice that was from its inception adopted also by the sedentary merchants (Pozza 1997, 116).

In 1494, Fra Luca Pacioli summarized this practice, advising an aspiring merchant to start his letter with the symbol of the cross and the invocation of the name of Jesus Christ, followed by the date and location of the letter's origin. For example: "+ In the name of Jesus, 1494, on this 17th day of April in Venice" (Aldo Cecchi 1999, 16). This style was used by merchants and subsequently also by the ambassadors, while the authors of anonymous handwritten *novelle* or *avvisi* adopted it as well (Anonymous 1593, 385). Although they may have occasionally omitted the sacred invocation, they always explicitly indicated the date and place of origin, after which they disclosed also the way in which they obtained the information. For example, the factor of the Datini company in Venice, forwarding the content of an important newsletter about Tamerlane's plundering of Damascus to his colleague in Barcelona, placed a simple dateline reading "26th day of March 1401" above the body copy, while the opening line of the text further traced the provenience of the news item as a "Copy of a newsletter from Alexandria [Egypt] written on the 13th day of February, which was obtained via a letter sent from Candia [Crete]; received in Venice on the 21th day of March" (cited in Ainaud 1965, 332).

Eyewitness Accounts, Reliable Sources and Objective Detachment

Very early on in the developing newswriting tradition, authors of newsletters grappled with notions of authenticity and objectivity. A detached observer, ideally an eyewitness able to convey the observed phenomena in an impassionate manner with due attention to detail and nuance, soon became a preferred source of information.

In a 1299 preface to Marco Polo's travel accounts, Rustichello da Pisa assured his readers that the book clearly distinguished the reports of things that the Venetian traveler witnessed in person, and those which he had just heard from others. However, Rustichello emphasized, the sources of such second-hand accounts were always *persone degne di fede* - trustworthy persons (Marco Polo 1986, 103). The same expression was used

repeatedly by the Florentine merchant-chronicler Giovanni Villani, whose accounts span the years 1300-1348, mainly when the author needed to emphasize the veracity of his tallies. "In order to stay close to the truth and avoid mistakes, we include the copy of a letter sent from there by some of our Florentine merchants who are trustworthy persons," prefaced Villani the 1348 report about an earthquake in Friuli.¹¹

While the medieval merchant was already fully aware that it was impossible to do business without news, he was also conscious of the fact that news reports could be manipulated in order to benefit a particular interest. The Datini firm factor in Venice, picking up news about Tamerlane's plundering of Damascus in 1401 from local merchant circles and forwarding them further through the firm's hub in Genoa to Barcelona, Valencia, and Palma di Majorca, explicitly warned his colleagues to take such information with a grain of salt because "Venetians are quite inventive in creating such news in order to increase the price of their spices."¹²

It was even more challenging for a Renaissance ambassador to navigate the conundrum of systemic deception endemic to the fragmented political landscape of Italy. Indeed, several scholarly studies point out that the ability to master the art of dissimulation became one of the most prized qualities of early Italian diplomacy (Woodhouse 1994; Levin 2005, 177; Fletcher 2015, 77). In his treatise on the ambassador, *De officio legati* (1541), French legal scholar and diplomat Étienne Dolet warned an aspiring diplomat that if he

has some business to transact with the people of Venice or the Pope at Rome or other princes of Italy, inasmuch as they are past masters of pretense and dissimulation, he should likewise pretend and dissimulate, and should let his speech be greatly at variance with his thoughts. (Dolet 1541, 11)

This constituted a significant problem for Renaissance ambassadors. Some of their dispatches reveal their inner struggles in order to work out a range of reporting approaches that would enable them to capture volatile situations riddled with obscure mind games and further complicated by the fickle nature of the rulers at whose courts they served. In the 1460s and 1470s, several Mantuan envoys complained that they have never seen "such mutation and variability" as they witnessed at the court of Milanese duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza, whose actions smacked of "a thousand contradictions in each breath" and that it often seemed that not even the duke himself has "a good idea of what he wants" (cited in Dover 2004, 86).

In the 1470s, Zaccaria Barbaro, the Venetian ambassador in Naples at the court of another notoriously fickle ruler, King Ferrante, faced a very similar situation. During the first two months in office, Barbaro wrote one dispatch a day on average. He dated and sealed each letter and—because the regular courier service connecting Naples with Venice through Rome operated on a weekly basis—he bundled and expedited them all at once. This presented a significant challenge for those who were reading his reports back home, since the messages often contradicted each other as the conditions on the ground kept changing (Corazzol 1994, 22). However, writing to his superiors, Barbaro insisted that this difficulty was amply compensated for by the fact that it gave his principals an opportunity to observe how the situation was evolving in real time. Barbaro saw himself as a mere conduit of information and by doing so he inadvertently evoked the notion of detached, objective reporting. "I am not behaving like those [ambassadors]

who first look in their notes in order to avoid contradicting what they have previously written,” argued the diplomat in a letter to the doge in 1472.

I think that the main purpose of my service is to record day-by-day what I hear from His Royal Highness, so that Your Sublimity can draw your own conclusions; and even if I contradict myself at times, I always write the truth.¹³

The editor of Barbaro’s diplomatic correspondence, Gigi Corazzol (1994, 19 and 26), pointed out that at some point the ambassador adopted the attitude of a doubting Thomas—reporting only what he saw or heard directly. Alas, the incentive for the diplomat to serve only as a mere conduit of information, suppressing his own judgements and interpretations, fostered another pivotal reporting strategy—one that enabled the writer to convey direct speech.

Reporting Direct Speech

While practically all available contemporary transcripts of early diplomatic correspondence include quotation marks, they are nowhere to be seen in the original manuscripts.¹⁴ However, the authors were already identifying portions of direct speech through taglines and signal phrases. At the same time, they repeatedly assured their principals that they only reported verbatim what they heard. For example, in 1461 three Milanese envoys negotiating with newly crowned King Louis XI of France pledged to their duke, Francesco Sforza, that their dispatches listed in due order

everything what was said to us, including the mode in which it was done, as well as our own responses; all was with great attention written down in an accurate and punctual manner, exactly as it was articulated and told to us. (Bernard de Mandrot 1916, 121)

Similarly in Venice, the expectation of reporting key portions of the discourse meticulously was clearly asserted by the legislation related to diplomatic missions. The 1478 Senate resolution reminded the ambassadors that “whatever they will have heard and is said to them, they should write and communicate faithfully, under penalty of privation of all legations and offices and benefices of our Signoria for five years”.¹⁵

However, Renaissance ambassadors were not the first ones who faced the challenge of conveying in their dispatches what was told to them by their interlocutors, to summarize and report an important public discourse or an official document. This task was already quite successfully tackled by the medieval merchants (Senatore 1998, 391–393). A series of letters sent to merchant Giusfredo Cenami in Lucca from several of his business partners in Venice in 1375 already contained tag lines such as “he tells me ... I told him ... he said ...,” structuring the discourse and signaling their author’s verbal exchanges with other traders (cited in Bini 1856, 400).

This soon became a common practice clearly exemplified by three anonymous dispatches produced between 1401 and 1402 in Crete and addressed to the Signoria of Venice, which survived among the documents of attorney Francesco Avonol. They are all written in the same hand and all are in Latin—a quite unique feature for a newsletter. All three dispatches contain transcripts of short colloquies the unknown author had with different sailors and merchants who arrived in Crete from the eastern Mediterranean and who brought news about the impending conflict between the Ottoman armies and the

Turco-Mongol leader Tamerlane. All three dispatches first introduced their individual interlocutors—a Genovese seafarer and two separate Greek ship owners—and the following paragraphs summarize what each of them reported, every new topic-sentence starting with a formulaic premise and its slight variations: “He reports that ... He also reports that ... Then he heard that ...”.¹⁶

Interviewing as a Working Tool and a Literary Form

Citing short fragments of direct speech was the first step in an attempt to capture a more complex portion of the discourse, eventually evolving into a full-fledged Q&A interview. In its most rudimentary form, the dialogue was already present in a 1375 letter addressed to Giusfredo Cenami from Lucca, cited above. In 1484, Venetian envoy Giovanni Dario reported from Adrianopoli to Doge Giovanni Mocenigo about his meeting with Mehmed Pasha, relying upon the same strategy. Dario structured the transcript of his meeting with the third highest-ranked man in the Ottoman hierarchy by similarly interjecting formulaic taglines such as “I told him ... he told me ... I told him ... he replied to me ...” into his account (Dario 1992, 96).

In rare occasions, the author of a newsletter reported not only the content of a verbal exchange, but inadvertently also disclosed the fact that interview was the principal working tool used to gather information. This is definitely the case of the already-mentioned three reports from Crete. Another example is the report through which Venetians learned about the outcome of the catastrophic Battle of Ankara (1402), during which Tamerlane’s armies captured Ottoman Sultan Bayezid I. In order to find out what happened, the Venetians dispatched a small fleet of military galleys to the coasts of Anatolia. After landing at Ephesus, its crew interviewed many members of the disbanded Ottoman army who gave them detailed first-hand accounts of the battle, and this information was conveyed in a diplomatic dispatch that commander Pietro Bon hastily sent to Venice.¹⁷

Nevertheless, the process of fact-finding through questioning was not an entirely new strategy, one invented neither by the merchants nor by the diplomats. The oldest testimony of an interrogation was captured in the opening passages of the Bible, when God questions Adam after he ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.¹⁸ However, it was Socrates who elevated questioning to an art form and passed it on his disciples (Paul and Elder 2002). The classical philosophical heritage served as a foundation for the dialogical traditions within medieval scholasticism and was subsequently adopted also by the inquisition (Novotný 1977; Novikoff 2011; Kieckhefer 1979, 30). During the 1430 trial of Joan of Arc, the formula “When asked ... she said ...” appeared repeatedly in the transcripts from various court hearings (Barrett 1932). The minutes from another famous interrogation, that of Paolo Veronese by the Inquisition in Venice in 1573, reveal that it was similarly constructed around the “Said to him ... he answered ...” formula (Chambers and Pullan 1992, 232–236).

The process of questioning, which served the office of the Roman Inquisition so well, was equally suited to gather newsworthy information. At the dawn of the famous Battle of Lepanto in 1571, the news networks of Europe transmitted several interviews with fugitive Christian slaves, who previously served as rowers of the Ottoman military fleet. Transcripts of at least three of them survive in the Medici archives in Florence and illustrate the

frenzy with which the fragmented Christian coalition was assembled in the final stages before the battle.¹⁹ We do not know who the authors were, but since the interviews took place aboard Christian battleships stationed off the coast of southern Anatolia, Montenegro and Algiers, where the freed slaves were rescued, it may be assumed that they were conducted by navy liaisons and were “leaked” to the wider public as part of a targeted strategy aimed at boosting morale in the Christian world.

The protagonist of one such interview was Paolo Ferro, a Christian man enslaved for nine years in various Ottoman galleys, who was rescued by an Italian ship just before Lepanto.²⁰ The interview opened with a two-page hand-written summary that introduced Ferro, outlined the circumstances of his rescue and the main points of his testimony. This was followed by a 5-page Q&A interview that very strictly stuck to the “When asked/ inquired about ... he answered that ...” formula. The interviewer questioned Ferro about a particular military operation of which the freed Christian slave had some first-hand knowledge, but the key portion of the interview aimed at the equipment of the Ottoman navy, its armaments and food provisions, as well as at the overall morale of its crews and that of the Greek population of the Aegean islands. In the end, the interviewer reiterated that “the information conveyed above was corroborated by six other fugitive Christian slaves who were rescued during the skirmish.”²¹

Editorial Practices of a Medieval Merchant

Some of the most sophisticated surviving early newsletters were written by Pancrazio Giustiniani, a Venetian merchant residing in Bruges. Between 1429 and 1430, Giustiniani wrote a series of almost a dozen dispatches that progressively reported the rise and tragic fall of Joan of Arc. Personal comments interjected in his reports almost inadvertently give the reader a chance to follow their author’s editorial strategies reflected in his reasoning. Giustiniani first mentioned Joan of Arc in a letter dated 10 May 1429, just two days after the end of siege of Orléans.²² The report itself was a compilation of passages from various newsletters arriving from both sides of the two competing French factions of the conflict—Burgundian, tacitly supporting the English invaders, and the royalist Armagnac bloc supporting the dauphin and his claim to throne. In the first four paragraphs, Giustiniani’s report summarized the events from the royalist Parisian perspective and his account mentioned for the first time *una poncela*—a battle name by which Joan of Arc was soon immortalized in Italy. The author assured the reader that he relied on “the most truthful news from Paris [received] by the way of letters, couriers, merchants, and by other means.”²³

At the end the fourth paragraph, Giustiniani switched to reports from the Burgundian side of the conflict, in a presumed attempt to capture both sides of the story. “I have in my possession also the reports of merchants who are in Burgundy, dated April 16, that tell some facts about this young lady, as well as an update written on the 28th that refreshes their accounts,” Giustiniani opened the second part of his report, claiming that so far he has “point-by-point reproduced all letters exactly as they were written in chronological order.”²⁴

Reporting the positions of both sides of a conflict was a common trait of Pangrazio Giustiniani’s newsletters. Yet his effort to remain an objective reporter of the events is sometimes contradicted by the interjected personal comments and observations that reveal his firm belief in the miracles performed by Joan of Arc. However, Giustiniani

understood that those who read his letters had their own agency and therefore interpreted the facts that he conveyed in accordance with their own beliefs. Indeed, he was convinced that “everyone has liberty” to believe what he pleases.²⁵ In the case of Joan of Arc, Giustiniani noted that “some believe in her, the others not, because I deem that people have their own will, they justify and embellish [the facts], diminishing or exaggerating them as they like.”²⁶

Ambassadors and the Critical Humanistic Tradition

Merchant manuals, such as the one by Benedetto Cotrugli Raguseo cited in the opening passages of this essay, for the most part addressed the practical needs of the sedentary merchants. Yet despite the key role that commercial letters played in their lives, none of the known surviving manuals ever mentioned how to compose them. Writing and counting was a basic skill that the aspiring merchant learned first in the school of abacus, and the composition of actual letters and lading bills was acquired and perfected during his subsequent apprenticeship years (De Blasi 1985, 44).

It was only when permanent embassies were gradually established in Italy in the second half of the 1400s that ambassadors and ducal chancery clerks pioneered a more systemic and philosophically sophisticated approach to letter-writing, reflecting their humanistic education and growing interest in philology (Turner 2014). However, the earliest letter-writing manuals for diplomats and their secretaries were still following the Ciceronian tradition, so popular at this point in time in Italy. For example, Giorgio Valagussa’s *Elegantiae ciceronianae* (1456–1564) or Cristoforo Landino’s *Formulario di epistole ed orazioni* (1488) were compilations of eloquent exhortations that were often taken directly from Cicero’s epistles and were translated into vernacular language. Their authors were not yet ready to break with the medieval *ars dictaminis* tradition (Senatore 1998, 210–211). Similarly, in the most famous early treatise on the office of an ambassador, *De officio legati* (c. 1489), Venetian diplomat Ermolao Barbaro—the son of the earlier-mentioned envoy Zaccaria Barbaro—presented an idealized image of a Renaissance envoy without delving into the practical aspects of his embassy such as letter writing (cf. Barbaro 1969).

It was only in the second part of the 1500s when the first critical-analytical works emerged, addressing also mundane aspects of a diplomat’s mission as well as that of his secretary. For example, Francesco Sansovino dedicated a significant passage to letter writing in his manual *Del Secretario* (1563), explicitly addressing letters whose purpose was to convey a newsworthy event—*dare aviso*. Sansovino pointed out that such letters must take into consideration the intellectual ability of the reader to comprehend the reported matter and therefore should be based on “a brief and clear account” (Sansovino 1584, f. 53r). In order to meet this objective, “such narratives must include the person *who* does, *what* was done, *when* was it done, *where* it was done, the mode *how* it was done, and the reason [*why*] it was done” (Sansovino 1584, f. 36r - emphases added).

We do not know to what extent Sansovino’s thesis was influenced by the classical seven elements of circumstances—*septem circumstantiae*, which Sloan traces to an obscure passage in Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* (who, what, when, where, why, in what way, by what means), and which were later echoed in Cicero’s *De inventione* or in Quintilian’s

Institutio oratoria (Sloan 2010). However, Sansovino reduced the lofty and convoluted philosophical discourse related to seven elements into one simple maxim containing six practical probes that found its way into newswriting practices and eventually became one of the key tenets of journalistic education.

It was Sansovino's contemporary, the renowned Italian poet Torquato Tasso, who pondered over the manipulative potential of language employed by diplomats in writing their news reports. Inspired by Plato, Tasso first wrote a dialogue *Il Messaggero* (1580), reflecting upon the mission of an ambassador, and subsequently a manual for the secretaries, *Il Segretario* (1587). Both treatises convey the author's personal experience during a series of brief engagements at various princely courts of Italy. In his dialogue contemplating the mission of an ambassador, Tasso played on the ambiguity between the Italian term *oratore*, which literary means a rhetor or orator, but which was in the Renaissance period also a preferred way of addressing an ambassador. Evoking the analogy of a cook, used by Plato in *Gorgias*, Tasso claimed that while "a cook with the variety of flavors and seasonings can render great even foods that are not tasty in themselves, so the orator can season through the flavors of his eloquence many matters that would otherwise remain tasteless" (Tasso 1582, f. 28r; Plato, *Gorgias*, 462d-e and 521e). The author concluded that there were some important lessons that an ambassador, while composing his reports, must learn from the classically trained rhetor, from whom he had already borrowed the name *oratore* (Tasso 1582, f. 34v).

The theme of manipulation through mediation was further developed by Tasso when he discussed the ways in which an ambassador could influence his superiors back home. This, according to Tasso, can be done in three ways: by telling outright lies, by withdrawing some fact, or by using spin. The author obviously did not use the term spin, but he used an elegant metaphor to capture this concept when he compared human action to the feathers of a dove or a peacock that remain the same in their substance, yet depending upon the light shed on them they sometimes evoke the colors of an emerald, other times of a ruby or a zephyr. The same could be applied when one reports news about a human endeavor which "may take various shapes depending on how it is presented to others for their consideration," concluded Tasso (Tasso 1592, f. 34r).

Conclusion

This essay builds upon the premise that newswriting developed as one of the side effects of the commercial revolution of the Late Middle Ages. During the 1200s, emerging sedentary merchants began departing from rigid medieval letter-writing formulas perpetuated by the *ars dictaminis* tradition and gradually pioneered their own set of expressive strategies. This trend was originally driven by the need to communicate private business matters among trading partners, but it subsequently induced merchants to also include in their letters information related to political and military developments as well as natural disasters that could impact their trade.

This fundamental assertion puts emphasis on the primacy of the commercially-driven need for information over political needs in an effort to trace back the early modern newswriting tradition. Surviving archival evidence presented in this essay further indicates that as of the early 1400s, newswriting fostered its own set of fundamental rules and internal logic that increasingly set it apart as a distinctive literary style. This is clearly exemplified by

the countless transcripts of original newsletters preserved for posterity by Venetian chronicler Antonio Morosini.

If we look at journalism as a profession, the surviving empirical evidence at the focus of this study reveals very little about its roots. The earliest known news writers were for the most part merchants who out of necessity became also reporters, but saw their role still as an intrinsic aspect of routine business operations. They wrote and exchanged newsworthy information fully understanding its value for commerce, but they did not yet see it as a commodity per se. Alas, journalism as a profession and news as a commodity are phenomena that started arising only during the 1500s—a development captured masterfully by Infelise in his seminal book *Prima dei giornali* (2002), or more recently by Raymond and Moxham in their edited volume *News Networks in Early Modern Europe* (2016).

Yet if we conceptualize journalism as a set of a peculiar newsgathering and reporting techniques, or if we look at it from the point of view of editorial practices, we can clearly discern its roots in the world of the late medieval merchants, and subsequently among the networks of diplomats arising during the Renaissance. Both groups were fully aware not only of the pivotal role that information played in the pursuit of commercial or political goals, but also of the manipulative potential of misinformation, which makes the current post-truth era look much less exceptional in the long history of newswriting. The institution of regular courier services, the *scarsella* system, should be seen in this light as a very deliberate attempt to annihilate space by the compression of time. Similarly, newsgathering strategies deployed by the Sforza house of Milan or the doges of Venice reveal some of the earliest pragmatic attempts to harness the nexus between knowledge and power.

Notes

1. The original letters are in The National Archives (TNA) in Kew, UK, in two separate folders: E 101/601/5 and SC 1/58.
2. Archivio di Stato di Prato (ASPT) – Fondo Datini, busta 550, inserto 16, codice 307781 and busta 881, inserto 13, codice 517104; cf. Federico Melis, *Documenti per la storia economica dei secoli XIII–XIV* (Firenze: Leo Olschki, 1972), 30–31.
3. Donald E. Queller, *The Office of Ambassador in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 89; cf. Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASVe), Senato, filza XXX, f. 52v (62v).
4. ASVe, Avvisi, bb. 6 and 7.
5. ASVe, Avvisi, b. 7, ff. 58r, 59r, 130r, and 266r.
6. ASVe, Avvisi, b. 7, f. 80r.
7. TNA, PRO 31/14/82, Marco Minio, letter no. 449 – dated Rome, 26 January 1520, ff. 612–613.
8. Morosini, *Il Codice*, 64.340–340bis, p. 646.
9. ASVe, Senato, Secreta, Dispacci dei Ambasciatori, Milano, filza 3, f. 269r.
10. For an early iteration of this type see ASVe, Avvisi, b. 7, f. 12r; for a later iteration see ASVe, Senato, Secreta, Dispacci dei Ambasciatori, Milano, Filza 3, ff. 6v and 153r.
11. Villani, *Cronaca*, 9.LXIV, p. 611; 12.XCVII, p. 1360; 13.LXXXIV, p. 1578.
12. ASPT, Fondo Datini, busta 550, inserto 16, codice 307781 – Venezia-Pisa, 1 August 1401; cf. b. 881, inserto 13, codice 517104 – Genoa-Barcelona, 20 February 1401. Cf. Melis, *Documenti per la storia*, 30–31.
13. Gigi Corazzol, *Dispacci di Zaccaria Barbaro* (Napoli: Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, 1994), 196, letter no. 93 – Naples-Venice, 10 March 1472.

14. For example, compare Girolamo Donà, *Dispacci da Roma, 1510*, ed. Viola Venturini (Venezia: La Malcontenta, 2009) with the originals in ASVe, Senato, Secreta, Archivi Proprii degli Ambasciatori, Roma – Filza 3.
15. A Senate decree adopted on 13 July 1478 – Senato, Secreta, filza XXVIII, f. 104v (115v); cf. Queller, *Early Venetian Legislation*, 116.
16. ASVe, Notai di Candia, busta 2, avvisi; cf. George T. Dennis, “Three Reports from Crete on the Situation in Romania, 1401–1402,” *Studi veneziani*, no. 12 (1970): 243–65.
17. Morosini, *Il Codice*, 63.85–86, pp. 239–242.
18. *Bible*, Genesis 2.17;
19. Archivio di Stato di Firenze (ASF), Archivio Mediceo del Principato, Roma, Avvisi, filza 4025, ff. 466v–469r; ASF, Archivio Mediceo del Principato, Venezia, Avvisi, filza 3080, ff. 125r–128r and 129r–140r.
20. ASF, Archivio Mediceo del Principato, Roma, Avvisi, filza 4025, ff. 466v–469r.
21. *Ibid.*, f. 469r.
22. Morosini, *Il Codice*, 65.1011–16, pp. 1341–1345.
23. Morosini, *Il Codice*, 65.1013, p. 1343.
24. Morosini, *Il Codice*, 65.1015–16, p. 1344.
25. *Ibid.*, 65.1057, p. 1359.
26. *Ibid.*, 65.1161, p. 1391.

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