‘Secret and Uncertain’: A History of *Avvisi* at the Court of the Medici Grand Dukes

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Avvisi and the Tuscan State

The central role that *avvisi* played in the intelligence gathering of the Medici court was acknowledged in a letter of 4 August 1602 written by Grand Duke Ferdinando I de' Medici to his Spanish agent in Valladolid. Ferdinando was sending the agent a French newsletter that was to be shared only with the duke of Lerma. In Ferdinando's words, the newsletter was “of some importance, being so rare both the news from your parts, and the insights into such affairs”.¹

Much of the explanation for why newsletters—or *avvisi* as they were called in Italian—occupied such a fundamental place in the Medici state lies in the fact that the rise of early modern news networks and establishment of the Medici grand duchy in Tuscany were coeval developments.² More than a

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1 Letter of 4 July 1602, Ferdinando I to Rodrigo Alidosi de Mendoza in Valladolid, MdP 4963, fo. 3, MAP doc. ID#17261.

2 For a general orientation to the history and uses of *avvisi* in Italy, see Mario Infelise, ‘News networks between Italy and Europe’, in *The Dissemination of News and the Emergence of Contemporaneity in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Brendan Dooley (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 51–67; Mario Infelise, ‘Roman *Avvisi*: Information and Politics in the Seventeenth Century’, in *Court and Politics in Papal Rome, 1492–1700*, ed. Gianvittorio Signorotto and Maria Antonietta Visceglia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 212–28; Mario Infelise, *Prima dei giornali: Alle origini della pubblica informazione* (Rome and Bari: Laterza, 2002); and

merely casual connection, this temporal coincidence signals the deep interdependency of these two systems. On the one hand, Medici court functionaries required regular access to trans-continental news currents to successfully carry out their duties. At the same time, the format and trajectory of that news was evolving partly in response to the Medici court's consumption patterns and its active dissemination of information.

Thanks to this close relationship between the Medici court's operations and its news networks spanning the European panorama, both the circulation and reading of newsletters are referred to often in the court documents kept in the Medici court's epistolary archive.³ This archive, the so-called *Mediceo del Principato*, covers the period from 1532 to 1737 and contains over 100 volumes of *avvisi* from places as distant as London and Constantinople. In addition to the *avvisi* themselves, the Medici grand ducal archive also contains numerous personal missives referring to *avvisi* (or the term's rough cognates, such as 'lettere', 'inserti', 'gazzette', and 'nuove') as well as the postal system that relayed them.⁴ Located by means of the Medici Archive Project's digital database (BIA), these epistolary references in the Medici grand ducal archive constitute the basis of the present study of *avvisi* at the Medici court, particularly in the period 1540–1620.

The interest in *avvisi* at the Medici court began with the founder of the grand ducal dynasty, Cosimo I de' Medici (1519–74), the 17-year-old scion of a secondary branch of the Medici family chosen by Charles V to assume the ducal throne left empty after the assassination of Alessandro de' Medici in January of 1537. At least three more generations of the Medici sustained Cosimo's enthusiasm for *avvisi*. They included Cosimo's sons, namely Grand Duke Francesco, Grand Duke Ferdinando I, don Pietro, and don Giovanni, along with Ferdinando I's consort, Christine de Lorraine.⁵ The next generation

Filipo de Vivo, 'Paolo Sarpi and the Uses of Information in Seventeenth-Century Venice', *Media History*, 11.1 (2005), pp. 37–51.

- 3 Printed gazettes were published in Florence by the company of Amador Massi e Lorenzo Landi in the year 1641, who used their printing press to publish the handwritten *avvisi* that reached them from other cities, especially Venice and Genoa. These gazettes can be found in MdP 2695.
- 4 Since 'avvisi' and all the cognates mentioned here were also used in a more generic sense to mean 'updates', even verbal ones, these terms must be interpreted with caution, and in some cases, the precise meaning cannot be determined.
- 5 While in Madrid in the 1590s, don Pietro received Roman *avvisi*, which on some occasions were read aloud for the benefit of the staff; see the letter of 6 January 1590, Francesco Guidi in Madrid to Ferdinando I, MdP 4920, fo. 398, MAP doc. ID#957. In the first decade of the seventeenth century, don Giovanni de' Medici read *avvisi* sent from the Medici court when he was

of *avviso* readers included Grand Duke Cosimo II's consort Maria Magdalena von Habsburg, and Cosimo II's siblings the duchess of Mantua Caterina de' Medici and cardinal Carlo de' Medici.⁶ This interest was inherited by Cosimo II's son, Mattia de' Medici.⁷

In addition to being an object of ardent interest to the Medici family, *avvisi* were also of central concern to the Medici government's administrators. By integrating *avvisi* with traditional sources of intelligence, the Florentine secretariat and its bebies of ambassadors and agents abroad were kept apprised of current international events. Once the *avvisi* had fulfilled their purpose, the administrators of the court carefully filed them in the same central archive that housed the court's incoming correspondence and the first drafts of outgoing missives.

The Medici Mail

To ensure the safe and efficient circulation of *avvisi* and other time-sensitive documents within his duchy, duke Cosimo's ministers engineered a domestic postal service.⁸ This postal service had figured among his first priorities when he came to power in 1537, and by the early 1540s more than fifteen couriers were in Cosimo's employ, ferrying mail and other objects in and out of Florence, day and night. A letter written on 24 August 1590 by Medici secretary Belisario Vinta to Iacopo Lusardo regarding plans for providing the Florentine court

in Ardennes, France (Letter of 6 April 1606, don Giovanni in Sedan (Fr) to Belisario Vinta, MdP 5157, fo. 447, MAP doc. ID#8818); and when he was in Ostend, Flanders (Letter of 1 October 1603, don Giovanni in Ostend to Belisario Vinta, MdP 5155, fo. 578, MAP doc. ID#17682); and in 1590, Ferdinando I sent Flemish *avvisi* to his wife, Christine; see the letter of 19 March 1590, don Giovanni in Livorno to Chrstine de Lorraine, MdP 5151, ins.2, fo. 3, MAP doc. ID#12128.

6 Maria Magdalena read Spanish *avvisi* in 1619; see the letter of 31 March 1619, Maria Magdalena von Habsburg to Ginevra di Porcia in an unknown location, MdP 6101, fo. 258, MAP doc. ID#15603. Caterina and Carlo exchanged *avvisi* in 1619; see the letter of 6 August 1619, Carlo di Ferdinando de' Medici to Caterina di Ferdinando de' Medici in Matua, MdP 6108, fo.210, MAP doc. ID#6249.

7 Mattia was the recipient of *avvisi* in the late 1650s, as shown by the address information on the *avviso* from Rome dated 9 February 1658, MdP 4027a, fo. 619, MAP doc. ID#21051; and the *avviso* from Rome dated 16 February 1658, MdP 4027a, fo. 621, MAP doc. ID#19961.

8 There is a discreet bibliography on mail delivery systems in early modern Italy. See the general work, John B. Allen, *Post and Courier Service in the Diplomacy of Early Modern Europe* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1972); on Italy specifically, B. Caizzi, *Dalla posta dei re alla posta di tutti* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1993); and on the Medici, Sergio Chieppi, *I servizi postali dei Medici, 1500–1737* (Fiesole: Servizio editorial fiesolano, 1997).

with news from Genoa reveals that such a domestic postal service was critical to the delivery of foreign *avvisi* to the Medici court:

The *avvisi* you wish to provide day by day, giving them to that friend in Sestri [a port near Genoa], can indeed be sent to us by that route because at every hour the [Tuscan] couriers pass along that road, unless in the case of an urgent and very time sensitive *avviso*, in which case—using all possible diligence—you can even send it with a special courier.⁹

By the mid-seventeenth century, the Medici court had several postmasters outside of Tuscany. For instance, Agostino and Monanno Monanni managed the Roman operations of the Medici court's private postal routes, which in 1642 ran to Naples, Lyon, Genoa, and Milan.¹⁰ All of the latter postal routes overlapped along the segment that linked Rome to Florence, ensuring a nearly seamless connectivity between these two cities. If the Medici courier going from Naples to Milan was not available to deliver a Roman letter to Florence, the letter was simply sent with the couriers headed to Genoa or Lyon.

The Tuscan roads used by the postal riders were both patrolled and maintained, and any problem that resulted in slow, lost, damaged or stolen mail garnered immediate attention. For mail deliveries beyond the Medici postal routes, foreign postal services were employed, but always with an eye to obtaining the best service in light of various options. In the following letter from a disgruntled Medici court functionary in London, it appears that they chose among foreign postal services according to such pragmatic criteria as cost, reliability, and security, with variation in distance being of only secondary concern:

Ricevei tre giorni sono l'ultimo dispaccio di V.S. Illustrissima de 15 febbraio, accompagnato dai soliti fogli di Roma et Genova, restando nondimeno sempre adietro di quello che ordinariamente si dovrebbe havuto questa settimana che sin a questa hora non è comparso et tutto per difetto et mala diligenza di questo maestro delle poste che è olandese et ci tratta malissimo senza poterne rimediare. Questo Ambasciatore Veneto vedendo la disorbitanza del pagamento de posti de suoi pieghi che manda et riceve da Venezia, il quale senza altra tariffa li fa ad libitum, ha lasciato la strada d'Anversa et mano di questo maestro di poste et

9 Letter of 24 August 1590, Vinta to Lusardo in an unknown location, MdP 208, fo. 2, MAP doc. ID#16582.

10 See MdP 1490, a volume covering the activities of the Medici Roman Post from 1641–4.

manda hora i suoi pieghi per via di Parigi ... et sebene la strada è un poco lunghetta è però per lui sicurissima et di meno spesa.¹¹

(I received three days ago the dispatch of 15 February from Your Most Illustrious Lordship, accompanied by the usual [news] sheets from Rome and Genoa, because [the ordinary post] is always late with respect to the appointed delivery time and this week's still has not arrived at this late hour, and all because of the fault and incompetence of this postmaster who is Dutch and who treats us very badly, leaving us no recourse. The Venetian Ambassador, upon seeing the exorbitance of the expenditures for the delivery of the letters that he sends and receives from Venice, which were not priced according to standard rates but rather by improvised estimates, has relinquished the Antwerp route and the service of that postmaster and now sends his letters by way of Paris ... and even if that route is a bit long, it is nonetheless very secure according to him and less expensive.)

Yet even with this vigilance, the regular circulation of mail was occasionally interrupted. Obstacles to the smooth running of this system were usually banal and weather related. For example, after a mail courier arrived late from Lucca in 1648 and tried to put the blame on the health authorities who fumigated his mail, it emerged that the true cause of delay was the courier's drinking binges.¹² The excuse used by this errant courier brings to mind a far more serious problem for the efficient circulation of *avvisi*: the frequent recurrence of contagious epidemics. As soon as the suspicion of plague had been aroused by *avvisi* and other information sources, Italian cities enacted draconian measures to detect potential carriers of the contagion and block them from entering the urban perimeter. If either *avvisi* or their couriers had passed through plague-infested locales, they were withdrawn from circulation, either to undergo fumigation and quarantine, or to endure graver repercussions.

Due to the prevalence of such precautionary measures, in 1575 the fear of the plague had choked off the supply of news from northern Italy. Whereas the Venice courier had been detained by a quarantine ordinance in Ferrara, his less fortunate colleague, the courier from Milan, was shot to death in Florence at the order of Grand Duke Francesco de' Medici because he was suspected of having the plague (although after his death it was discovered that he was

11 Letter of 21 March 1625, Amerigo Salvetti in London to Curzio Picchena, MdP 4095, unnumbered folio, MAP doc. ID#23170).

12 *Avviso* from Rome dated 15 August 1648, MdP 4027a, ins. 1, fo. 16, MAP doc. ID#19374.

actually free of the disease).¹³ Since shooting the messenger was not considered an irrational action during times of plague, the couriers who carried *avvisi* from plague-ridden cities ran substantial risks at both ends of their delivery routes.

As a curious corollary to this widespread use of sanitary cordons and quarantines to block intercity traffic during plagues, the sudden cessation of the flow of *avvisi* from a particular place was a sort of news item in and of itself. As Grand Duke Francesco pointed out in a letter to a contact in Prague, the lack of French *avvisi* in Florence was due to the unusual lateness of the courier from Lyon, and his absence in turn was caused “perhaps by reason of the plague, which seems to have again touched upon that city”.¹⁴ Such exchanges are suffused with the bitter irony that while plague-stricken couriers were considered public enemies, *avvisi* from places suspected of having the epidemic were highly valued as a means of determining the course of an outbreak and evaluating the need for prophylactic tactics.¹⁵

War similarly intensified the demand for *avvisi* at the same time as it created obstacles to their delivery. Pietro Piccolomini, stationed in Cambrai, wrote to a Medici court official abroad, Girolamo de Rossi in Brussels, on 11 September 1595, during the buildup to the siege of Cambrai that would take place the following month. He exhorted de Rossi to provide newsletters, conveying the urgency of the matter: “Le raccomando di novo le incluse et aspetto le gazzette non accettando scusa alcuna” (“I remind you again about the attachments [of *avvisi*] and I await the gazettes and will accept no excuse”).¹⁶ During another period of aggression in the Netherlands, the supply of Flemish *avvisi* in Paris dried up after the Spanish General Ambrogio Spinola imposed capital punishment on anyone caught sending letters from the region of the battlefield; as a

13 *Avviso* from Rome dated 16 November 1575, MdP 4026, fo. 491, MAP doc. ID#26283.

14 “... bene è vero che questa settimana per ancora non teniamo *avvisi* di Francia, tardando più del solito il corriere di Lione, et forse per conto della peste, che pareva che di nuovo avesse ritocco in quella città” (Letter of 20 July 1581, Francesco de’ Medici to Giovanni Alberti in Prague, MdP 257, fo. 6, MAP doc. ID#13798).

15 For example, in the letter of 31 July 1586 from Francesco de’ Medici to Ambrogio Vignati in Bologna (MdP 269, fo. 108, MAP doc. ID#16350), Francesco notes that news from Lyon about the signs of the epidemic convinced him to keep his own city’s sanitary defenses intact: “Et per conto della Peste è molto ben fatto che costì, et per tutto il contorno si ritorni alle diligentie, et guardie di prima, le quali io non ho voluto mai nelli stati miei rimuovere, poichè da Lione vengono confermate molto cattive nuove”.

16 Letter of 11 September 1595, Piccolomini in Cambrai to Rossi in Brussels, MdP 4255 fo. 274, MAP doc. ID#25760.

result it was hard for the outside world to perceive who had the upper hand during this phase of the Dutch Revolt.¹⁷

Precisely because rapid updates on world events had become so central to rulership, interference with mail routes began to be adopted as a political tactic to weaken one's enemy. This is the underlying purpose of Medici interference with mail delivery in 1575. The Roman *avvisi* of that year reported that the delivery of mail from Milan to Rome had ceased because Grand Duke Francesco de' Medici had detained the courier in order to exact revenge on the Duke of Mantua, who had earlier held up a courier carrying Francesco de' Medici's urgent letter to emperor Maximilian II.¹⁸ These incidents reveal how diplomacy was necessary for efficient mail circulation, and how mail circulation in turn was crucial to early modern statecraft.

The Medici News Networks

Like Cosimo I's Medici state, the Medici news networks had a tenuous start but expanded through the building of alliances and friendships. One of the earliest notices attesting to the circulation of *avvisi* in Cosimo's court dates to 1538, the first year or so of his reign. At this time, Cosimo was receiving *avvisi* from the Spanish Viceroy in Naples, Pedro Álvarez de Toledo, who entrusted them to Cosimo for forwarding to Emperor Charles V.¹⁹ As a link in this chain of news circulation, Cosimo was able to read the Neapolitan *avvisi* and even to make copies, which he distributed to his own contacts. Without a doubt, it was a great privilege and sign of trust for the Imperial Court to share these *avvisi* with the young Tuscan prince. Before another year had passed, Pedro de Toledo consolidated that trust when he gave his daughter to Cosimo in matrimony.

Soon after coming to power, Cosimo reached out to his far-flung confidants to obtain additional news, which came sporadically at first. Cosimo's diplomatic agent in Rome, Agnolo Niccolini, summarised for him the contents of *avvisi* from France that he heard or read in 1539.²⁰ The next year, some *avvisi* from Burgos were sent to Cosimo by Lorenzo Antinori, and in 1542, Milanese

17 Letter of 18 August 1608, Cosimo Baroncelli in Paris to Belisario Vinta, MdP 5157, fo. 505; MdP doc. ID#8835.

18 *Avviso* from Rome dated 11 November 1575, MdP 4026, fo. 472, MAP doc. ID#26277.

19 First draft of a letter dated 1538, probably by Cosimo I and intended for an unknown recipient, MdP 2, fo. 89, MAP doc. ID#7415.

20 Letter of 9 July 1539, Niccolini in Rome to Cosimo I, MdP 3262, ins. 2, fo. 75, MAP doc. ID#18855.

avvisi were sent to him from Carrara (Tuscany), courtesy of Cardinal Cybo.²¹ By 1543, Cosimo was able to follow the movements of the Imperial Court thanks to *avvisi* from Speyer and Mainz that had been copied into Italian and forwarded to him.²² Venetian *avvisi* were obtained in the mid 1540s through the assistance of Donato Bardi in Venice, whom Cosimo compensated by sending him news of a Turkish fleet that he had obtained via special dispatch from Genoa.²³ In the late 1540s, copies of German and even English *avvisi* fell into Cosimo's hands thanks to his agent Pier Filippo Pandolfini in Venice and his secretary Averardo Serristori in Rome, but the news they carried must have been rather dated since the regular mail in 1548 took as many as twelve days just to reach Florence from Rome.²⁴

In the last years of Cosimo's reign, foreign *avvisi* became more abundant. Medici diplomat Fabrizio Ferrari scouted out Flemish, French, Polish, Viennese, English, Scottish and French *avvisi* from his outpost in Milan and sent either complete copies or summaries to Florence.²⁵ Yet more French *avvisi* were sent to Cosimo in 1563 by Sallustio Piccolomini, the Florentine Ambassador in Ferrara, and the simultaneous availability of multiple newsletters dealing with events in France finally permitted Cosimo to compare newsletters in order to evaluate their accuracy.²⁶

Cosimo's eldest son Francesco, who had begun reading *avvisi* even before he ascended to his father's throne, vigorously expanded the Medici news network. The earliest notice of his access to newsletters, dating from 1562, refers to *avvisi*

- 21 Letter of 24 July 1540, Cosimo I to Antinori, MdP 2, fo. 410, MAP doc. ID#16899. *Avviso* from Milan, undated but probably 28 March 1542, MdP 3717, unnumbered folio, MAP doc. ID#23603.
- 22 *Avvisi* from Speyer dated 2 August 1543, MdP 362, fo. 5, MAP doc. ID#2155.
- 23 Letter of 24 May 1544, Cosimo I to Donato Bardi in Venice, MdP 185, fo. 82, MAP doc. ID#14510.
- 24 Letter of 12 November 1546, Cosimo I to Pier Filippo Pandolfini in Venice, MdP 8, fo. 174, MAP doc. ID#14581. Letter of 19 April 1548, Cosimo to Averardo Serristori in Rome, MdP 11, fo. 53, MAP doc. ID#6949.
- 25 See the letter of 17 October 1560, Fabrizio Ferrari in Milan to Cosimo I, MdP 3108, fo. 124, MAP doc. ID#12312; letter of 1 January 1561, Ferrari in Milan to Bartolomeo Concini, MdP 3108, fo. 147, MAP doc. ID#16767; letter of 25 June 1561, Ferrari to Cosimo I, MdP 3108, fo. 217, MAP doc. ID#16537; and letter of 21 May 1561, Ferrari in Milan to Cosimo, MdP 3108, fo. 20, MAP doc. ID#17338. The delivery of these *avvisi* was relatively efficient, considering that amid winter weather and Christmas holidays the *avvisi* traveled from Milan to Florence in 10 days; see the letter of 2 January 1561, Cosimo I to Ferrari in Milan, MdP 214, fo. 56, MAP doc. ID#22381.
- 26 "Gli *avvisi* che ci mandate di Francia si confrontano con alcuni altri che haviamo". Letter of 4 February 1563, Cosimo I to Piccolomini in Ferrara, MdP 219, fo. 34, MAP doc. ID#16201.

from France and Trent, which Francesco passed to Medici secretary Lorenzo Pagni when he finished with them.²⁷ As Grand Duke, Francesco early on made the steady supply of *avvisi* a priority, setting to this task the secretary of the Medici Legation in Venice, Cosimo Bartoli (1503–72), who compiled weekly news reports for over four years, from 1567 to 1571, at a monthly salary of 30 scudi.²⁸ Meanwhile, the scribes of the Florentine legation in Rome—working from within Palazzo Firenze, Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici's first Roman residence—copied *avvisi* for forwarding to Francesco in Florence.²⁹ With the outbreak of the devastating epidemic of bubonic plague in northern Italy in 1577, Francesco resorted to corruption in order to obtain *avvisi*, relying on the Bologna postmaster Ambrogio Vignati to send him surreptitiously made copies of the *avvisi* that passed through his mail channels. These included *avvisi* that had been prepared by the French ambassador to Rome for the benefit of King Henri III, as well as *avvisi* from Ferrara, Venice, and Spain.³⁰

As Francesco gained experience at Tuscany's helm, his avidity for newsletters grew, so that by the 1580s he had a full hand of news sources at his disposal. Letters from the later years of Francesco's reign reveal him to be acutely concerned about the quality of the news content. In 1581, Francesco praised the work of an *avviso* compiler in Milan, Gabriello Verri:

Teniamo l'inserto et il rapporto di avvisi molto copiosi, che ci sono stati sommamente cari, si che seguitate nella medesima diligentia dandoci ragguaglio di quanto pervenga a notitia vostra, che non potete farci piacere più accetto, et massime cercando voi di ritrarre le cose con più di fondamento, et di certezza, che vi sia possibile.³¹

(With your last letter from the 2nd [of August], we received your insert and the report of the very copious *avvisi*, which were very much

27 Letter of 29 April 1562, Francesco de' Medici to Bartolomeo Concini, MdP 215, fo. 46, MAP doc. ID#16975.

28 Bartoli's *avvisi* can be found in MdP 3080 and MdP 238.

29 Letter of 3 July 1570, Pietro Usimbardi in Rome to Antonio Serguidi, MdP 1177, ins.16, fo. 475, MAP doc. ID#5172.

30 Letter of 10 March 1577, Vignati in Bologna to Francesco de' Medici, MdP 695, fo. 280, MAP doc. ID#16074. Letter of 15 March 1577, Vignati in Bologna to Francesco de' Medici, MdP 695, fo. 236, MAP doc. ID#16063; the Ferrara and Venice *avvisi* themselves can be found in MdP 695, fos. 237–8, MAP doc. ID#s16065–6. Letter of 31 January 1578, Vignati in Bologna to Francesco de' Medici, MdP 693, fo. 99, MAP doc. ID# 17326.

31 Letter of 7 August 1581, Francesco to Gabriello Verri in Milan, MdP 257, fo. 15, MAP doc. ID#15399.

appreciated, and if you continue with the same diligence giving us summaries of all that comes to your attention, you would not be able to please us more, particularly if you seek to characterise the news items with greater factual basis and certainty according to your abilities.)

At nearly the same time, he thanked an agent in Genoa for sending him *avvisi* that included information from Paris about the Turkish fleet near Sicily, demonstrating that Francesco's contacts in nearby places were actually furnishing him with *avvisi* compiled from a wide geographical range of sources.³²

Five years later, in 1586, Francesco not only had a southern contact in the Naples Postmaster's Office (Francesco Navarrete) who furnished *avvisi* from the Levant, but he also had three contacts to the north.³³ These northern informants were an agent in Milan named Prospero Visconti who ferreted out German *avvisi*;³⁴ an agent in Prague (Orazio Urbani) who sent *avvisi* with news from places as distant as Constantinople;³⁵ and Antonio Bartolini in Venice, who was paid one scudo monthly for supplying *avvisi* from Venice and other places—a service so secretive that Bartolini was paid through a Venetian middleman.³⁶ Shortly thereafter, in 1587, these important currents of information were supplemented by two agents in Rome. One of them, Giovanni Alberti, provided summaries of *avvisi* from Poland and Germany.³⁷ The other, Francesco

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- 32 Letter of 23 September 1581, Francesco de' Medici to Pedro de Mendoza, MdP 257, fo. 50, MAP doc. ID#16098.
- 33 Letter of 10 December 1586, Francesco de' Medici to Navarrete in Naples, MdP 270, fo. 3, MAP doc. ID#16407; Letter of 8 January 1587, Francesco to Navarrete in Naples, MdP 270, fo. 18, MAP doc. ID#16417.
- 34 Letter of 20 February 1586, Francesco de' Medici to Visconti, MdP 270, fo. 48, MAP doc. ID#16463. Letter of 10 July 1586, Francesco to Urbani, MdP 269, fo. 91, MAP doc. ID# 16331; and letter of 19 September 1586, Francesco to Urbani, MdP 269, fo. 139, MAP doc. ID#16386.
- 35 Letter of 20 February 1586, Francesco de' Medici to Visconti, MdP 270, fo. 48, MAP doc. ID#16463. Letter of 10 July 1586, Francesco to Urbani, MdP 269, fo. 91, MAP doc. ID#16331; and letter of 19 September 1586, Francesco to Urbani, MdP 269, fo. 139, MAP doc. ID#16386. Letter of 10 December 1586, Francesco to Navarrete in Naples, MdP 270, fo. 3, MAP doc. ID#16407; Letter of 8 January 1587, Francesco to Navarrete in Naples, MdP 270, fo. 18, MAP doc. ID#16417.
- 36 Letter of 28 March 1586, Francesco de' Medici to Napoleone Cambi, MdP 269, fo. 12, MAP doc. ID#14198: "mettete a uscita a spese nostre generale scudi otto di moneta, che questo dì n'havete contanti pagati a Michelangelo Stanghetti, a nome di Curtio Granucci di Venetia, et a lui per Antonio Bartolini Venetiano per la sua provisione d'otto mesi decorsi per tutto dicembre prossimo passato, per havere mandato a noi la gazzetta et datoci in quelli tempi diversi avvisi".
- 37 Letter from 21 August 1587, Francesco de' Medici to Alberti, MdP 270, fo. 158, MAP doc. ID#16562.

Gerini, sent Roman *avvisi* to Francesco with the Lyon courier, who arrived with a delay of only five days.³⁸ In addition to them, the aforementioned Bologna postmaster, Ambrogio Vignati, regularly funneled Flemish *avvisi* to Francesco in these last years of his reign.³⁹

In the seventeenth century, *avvisi* became more available and subscriptions became more prevalent. It was now feasible for *avviso* subscriptions to be arranged without any other recompense except a standardised fee, paid either to couriers or to the middlemen used to shield the identity of information pirates. The responsibility for obtaining *avvisi* was largely delegated to the Medici court's staff abroad, who would routinely collect, read, and forward *avvisi* home to the Florentine court.⁴⁰ At the same time, since they were now handled so openly and by so many functionaries, *avvisi* appear to have lost some of their aura of secrecy.

Particularly during the reign of Cosimo I's grandson, Grand Duke Cosimo II, there are signs of the conversion to long-term subscriptions established in advance from Florence according to standard rates, supplanting the former arrangement in which the sporadic and spontaneous deliveries of *avvisi* either to Florence or to its outposts had been rewarded *ad libidum* and with the Medici grand duke's express gratitude. Just such a long-term subscription was in prospect in 1618, according to this letter between Medici court officials regarding the *avvisi* desired by Cosimo II's consort Maria Magdalena von Habsburg:

Hoggi doppo desinare la Serenissima Arciduchessa nostra Patrona vuole sentire a' leggere quelle nuove venute da Venezia. Et Sua Altezza Serenissima si contenta che Vostra Signoria li faccia venire ogni settimana, s[c]rivendo in questo mentre a quel amico che si dichiari quanto si potrà darli l'anno.⁴¹

38 Letter 18 July 1587, Francesco de' Medici to Gerini, MdP 270, fo. 138, MAP doc. ID#16549.

39 Letter of 20 February 1587, Francesco de' Medici to Vignati, MdP 270, fo. 48, MAP doc. ID#16462.

40 During the reign of Ferdinando I, Medici secretary Curzio Picchena resided in Prague from where he forwarded *avvisi* containing news of Constantinople; see the letter of 25 August 1590, Ferdinando I to Picchena, MdP 280, fo. 3, MAP doc. ID#16584. Later in Ferdinando's reign, Antwerp *avvisi* came from an agent (possibly of French origins) in Antwerp who sent the newsletters to Cosimo Baroncelli in Paris, and who in turn passed the newsletters to Belisario Vinta in Florence; see the letter of 18 August 1606, Baroncelli in Paris to Vinta, MdP 5157, fo. 505, MAP doc. ID#8835.

41 Letter of 29 December 1618, MdP 4634, fo. 242, MAP doc. ID#16177.

(Today after dining, the Most Serene Arch Duchess our Ladyship wants to hear the reading of the newsletter from Venice. And Her Most Serene Highness would be pleased if Your Lordship would secure their delivery every week, writing to this effect to that friend so that he might say how much he is to be given annually.)

As the century wore on, the provision of *avvisi* transpired under ever more impersonal, overt and standardised accords.

Rare or Commonplace, Fresh or Stale

In studying the economics of *avvisi*, it should be kept in mind that news supplies were not undifferentiated commodities in Florence. For instance, some news was considered rare, and this made it valuable. The desire for something other than pedestrian knowledge about current events was summed up succinctly by Grand Duchess Maria Magdalena von Habsburg when asking her contact, Ginevra di Porcia, the Marquesa de Mortara, for Spanish updates: “Gli *avvisi* che Vostra Signoria mi ha scritto delle cose di Spagna, mi hanno apportato contento, e ne gusterei sempre grandemente che Vostra Signoria avesse qualcosa da parteciparmi che non si sappi per ognuno” (“The *avvisi* that Your Ladyship has written me about Spanish events have brought me contentment, and I would always be pleased greatly if your Ladyship should have something to share with me that not everybody knows”).⁴²

Some news was rare because it issued from a place both distant and important about which little was known; rare news of this kind was had at a premium. While *avvisi* from Constantinople and from Rome were both in demand, they were not equally obtainable. This point is illustrated by a letter from 1556 in which Cosimo I de’ Medici advised the Medici envoy in Constantinople, Pietro Gelido, on negotiations with the two unnamed gentlemen who had agreed to leak *avvisi* from Constantinople to the Florentine duke. Cosimo wished to show his gratitude to these two men, and wondered what news he could offer them in exchange. He immediately thought of news from Rome, which in Cosimo’s own words was the place “where all attention is focused, more than anywhere else”. Yet in an afterthought Cosimo realised that this would be an insufficient inducement, given that these savvy Venetians

42 Letter of 31 March 1619, Maria Magdalena to Ginevra di Porcia, MdP 6101, fo. 258, MAP doc. ID#15603.

presumably had better access than he did to “frequent, privileged *avvisi*” from Rome.⁴³

Whenever *avvisi* about Ottoman affairs were available, they generated a stir at the Medici court. In 1551, Medici functionary Francesco Vinta noted the arrival in Milan of Venetian *avvisi* reporting on the Ottoman Sultan Süleyman I Othmanli: “From Venice there are fresh *avvisi* about the Turk ...”⁴⁴ Still with Venice in the backdrop, *avvisi* with news of the Ottoman state reached Florence again in 1608; this time, however, they had taken a more direct route because the Spanish ambassador stationed in Venice had shared them with the Florentine ambassador, Asdrubale Montauto, through a kind of political pact. As Montauto explained to Grand Duke Ferdinando I:

... offertole non solo quel che posso far io a suo servitio ma anche quello che può venir dall'Altezza Vostra per sua sodisfattione, et servitio del suo Re, et egli mostrando aggradirlo infinitamente mi ha dato gli avisi che ha questa settimana di Costantinopoli che sono assai lunghi et mando inclusi.⁴⁵

(Having offered him not only my own efforts for his needs, but also all possible help from Your Highness in the satisfaction and service of his king, he signaled that this pleased him infinitely by giving me the *avvisi* that he received this week from Constantinople, which are rather long, and I send them as attachments.)

For his troubles, the Spanish ambassador was compensated with verdea wine and cookies from Florence.⁴⁶

Another geographical area of deep interest to the Medici from which *avvisi* were comparatively rare was ‘the Indies’, a term which could refer either to the East Indies or the West Indies. Grand Duke Ferdinando I’s secretary Curzio Picchena at Villa Cafaggiolo wrote to Belisario Vinta in Florence in 1604 to

43 “Ringratierete cotesti Signori Illustrissimi per parte nostra della partecipazione delli avvisi, che vi hanno data circa le cose di Levante, de quali male possiamo rendere loro cambio alcuno non si offerendo da queste bande nuova da conto, perché delle cose di Roma (dove hoggi si mira più che in altro) sappiamo non ne mancano a loro Signorie avvisi frequenti, et particolari”. Letter of 27 June 1556, Cosimo I to Gelido in Venice, MdP 639, fo. 302, MAP doc. ID#16873.

44 “Da Venetia ci sono freschi advisi delle cose del Turco che sollecita l’armata e tuttavia la va inpressando, come lei vederà per la copia”. Letter of 8 May 1551, Vinta in Milan to Cosimo I, MdP 3102, fo. 397, MAP doc. ID#17863.

45 Letter of 31 May 1608, Montauto in Venice to Ferdinando I, MdP 3000, fo. 380, MAP doc. ID#14969.

46 Letter of 10 January 1608, Montauto in Venice to Vinta, MdP 3000, fo. 261, MAP doc. ID#14683.

clarify the importance of such news, and the passage is cited here at length because of the useful information it also provides about the relative rates of *avviso* circulation by sea and by land:

Mentre si leggevano gl'Inseriti de segretarii di Spagna, in un luogo dove si parla dell'Indie, il Gran Duca disse, che si ricordasse all'Ambasciadore et a' segretarii, che in queste cose facessero particolare studio, per poter sapere, e scriver qua, più minutamente che potranno. Et perché mostravano non haver l'avviso delle flotte arrivate, et S.A. disse esser qua venuto per altra strada, vuole che si scriva loro che ci stiamo più avvertiti. Ma a me non par maraviglia, et lo dissi, che tale avviso possa esser in Italia, nel medesimo tempo che alla Corte di Spagna, poichè da Siviglia a Genova può venir molto presto.⁴⁷

(While the *avvisi* sent by the [Tuscan legation's] secretaries in Spain were being read, during the part that talks about the Indies, the grand duke said that the ambassadors and secretaries were to be reminded that these topics ought to be given particular attention, discovering information and writing about it in the greatest detail possible. And because [these ambassadors and secretaries] obviously had not received the report of the arrival of the fleet, and because His Highness said that this information arrived here through other channels, he wants you to write to them that we are better informed [than they are]. But I am not surprised at this, and I told him that such news could reach Italy and the Spanish court at the same time, since [the news] can move very rapidly between Seville and Genoa.)

Presumably the fleet described in the previous passage hailed from the West Indies, for which Seville was the port of entry for both merchandise and information. For news about the East Indies, *avvisi* from Spain as well as Portugal and the northern European shipping capitals were also very useful to the Medici. For instance, they received a London *avviso* in 1615 that reprinted Spanish news regarding the escalation of confrontations between the Dutch and Portuguese in the East Indies.⁴⁸

As relevant to the value of *avvisi* as their rarity was their expeditious transmission. Recent news was called 'fresh', and old news—usually meaning news received more than three weeks after its byline date—was often characterised as 'stale': in a changeable world, the passage of two weeks could dramatically

47 Letter of 1 October 1604, Picchena at Villa Cafaggiolo to Vinta, MdP 4936, fo. 317, MAP doc. ID#17286.

48 *Avviso* from London, 5 February 1615, MdP 4191, unnumbered folio, MAP doc. ID#22597.

alter the apparent truth of things. The arrival of a fresh *avviso* often revealed the falsehoods contained in its predecessor, further intensifying the Medici court's distinction between 'old' and 'new' as seen in such appraisals as this one from 1605: "Negl'avvisi ch'io mandi di Roma che sono un po' vecchietti vi si contiene che Strigonia si ritrovasse in pericolo, ma con avvisi più freschi come lo ho scritto si afferma che il Turco non habbia seguitata quell'impresa" ("In the *avvisi* that I am sending from Rome which are a little old, it is written that Esztergom is in danger [of attack], but in the fresher *avvisi* as I have written it is affirmed that the Turks did not pursue this road").⁴⁹

Whenever Medici envoys believed that the *avvisi* they were forwarding home would arrive with substantial delay, perhaps even after the arrival of much newer *avvisi* sent along more efficient routes, they did so apologetically, as if the money spent on the postage were being wasted.⁵⁰ From the point of view of Medici functionaries abroad who had few alternative sources of information, the lack of fresh *avvisi* was perceived as a paralyzing situation, termed a 'famine' by Giulio Battaglini while stationed in Naples in 1599.⁵¹ Amid such famines, the old *avvisi* might yet still be read and appreciated, but for other reasons altogether different from intelligence gathering, as indicated by Grand Duke Francesco's reaction to the late *avvisi* sent from his agent in Antwerp in 1581. In his letter to his agent, Francesco graciously conceded that although old, at least the *avvisi* were signs of "the will to serve" and were written in the detailed manner he especially appreciated.⁵²

Appraising *avvisi* at the Medici Court

As avid consumers of *avvisi*, the Medici court regarded their contents with a healthy dose of skepticism. Cosimo Baroncelli complained from Antwerp in 1604 that the news of the war contained in the gazettes and merchant *avvisi*

49 Letter of 26 September 1605, Belisario Vinta to Sallustio Tarugi in Valladolid, MdP 5052, fo. 235, MAP doc. ID#16991.

50 See for example the letter of 20 August 1605, Cosimo Baroncelli in Paris to Belisario Vinta, MdP 5157, fo. 381, MAP doc. ID#8798; also, the letter of 8 August 1606, Baroncelli in Paris to Vinta, MdP 5157, fo. 489, MAP doc. ID#8825.

51 "Qui alle volte si ha carestia di avvisi freschi di Spagna". Letter of 27 September 1599, Battaglini in Naples to Lorenzo Usimbardi, MdP 4087, fo. 237, MAP doc. ID#17485.

52 "Non obstante che li avvisi inviatimi da V.S. sieno assai vecchi mi sono stati non dimeno gratissimi, et per l'ossequente volontà con che ella meli ha mandati et per esser descritti molto distintamente". Letter of 14 December 1581, Francesco to Giovanni Battista Del Monte in Antwerp, MdP 257, fo. 88, MAP doc. ID#14046.

amounted only to “lots of chatter and in my opinion [it is] without foundation”.⁵³ Any time contrasting accounts appeared in contemporary *avvisi*—as Grand Duke Francesco noted in 1581—that was proof enough that at least one of the accounts had to be false.⁵⁴

Because the reliability of news reports was quite often held in doubt, the Medici court developed a method for ascertaining their truth through comparative analysis with other news sources, perhaps analogous to the timeworn philological methods of determining the most authoritative version of an ancient literary text, or perhaps to the forensic practices of comparing the testimonies of various eyewitnesses. In 1556, regarding the Constantinople *avvisi* that were mentioned before, Cosimo told his agent in Venice:

L'ultima vostra de ii contiene gl'avisi di Levante conforme apunto a quelli che ci sono stati inviati dal Signor Duca d'Alva et da diverse bande. Tenghiamoli per veri, accompagnandoli con molte vive ragioni che di presente ommettiamo.⁵⁵

(Your recent letter of the second contains reports from Levant that coincide precisely with those sent by lord duke of Álvarez [Cosimo's brother-in-law] and those from various other parts. We feel them to be true, considering them alongside of many strong arguments that we needn't mention here.)

Avvisi were thus cross-checked for consistency, and if they proved credible, then these reports were included in a broader examination of a range of intelligence sources and reasoned arguments in order to reach a conclusion.

For this method to be carried out effectively, multiple *avvisi* reporting on the same events or individuals were needed, which explains why the Medici news network described above demonstrates instances of overlapping coverage and why the resulting archival collection contains duplicate *avvisi* such as the Roman *avviso* of 21 March 1587.⁵⁶ Consistency in this usage of similar or

53 “Di Roma si aspettono le nuove di guerre, d'onde, et avvisi di mercanti e gazzette dicono molte chiacchiere al creder mio con poco fondamento”. Letter of 29 October 1604, Baroncelli in Antwerp to Belisario Vinta, MdP 5157, fo. 275, MAP doc. ID#17525.

54 “Li *avvisi* de paesi bassi dativi dal Marescial della Corte sono del tutto contrarii a quelli che habbiamo noi, non essendo altrimenti Alansone condottosi in Inghilterra”. Letter of 20 July 1581, Franceco to Giovanni Alberti in Prague, MdP 257, fo. 6, MAP doc. ID#13798.

55 Cosimo I to Piero Gelido in Venice, MdP 639, fo. 294, MAP doc. ID#16870.

56 See *avviso* from Rome dated 21 March 1587, MdP 3085, fo. 292, MAP doc. ID#11187; and *avviso* from Rome dated 21 March 1587, MdP 3085, fo. 294, MAP doc. ID#11189.

duplicate *avvisi* can be seen by comparing a statement by Cosimo I with one by his son, Ferdinando I. In 1563, Cosimo wrote to his agent in Ferrara: “Gli *avvisi* che ci mandate di Francia si confrontano con alcuni altri che haviamo” (“The *avvisi* from France that you send us are being compared with some others in our possession”).⁵⁷ In a very similar vein, Ferdinando wrote to his secretary in Prague in 1590: “Ci sono stati cari gl’*avvisi* di Constantinopoli che si conformono con quelli che habbiamo ancora noi di là” (“We deeply appreciated the *avvisi* from Constantinople which conform with those we ourselves obtained from there”).⁵⁸ To a casual observer, overlapping *avviso* coverage might appear at first to be wasteful expenditure caused by disorganisation, but in fact the Medici court willfully encouraged redundancy to serve in their strategic practice of reading similar *avvisi* side-by-side to penetrate below the superficial implications of the data, and to appraise its trustworthiness.

The widespread adoption of this practice can be detected in a Medici secretary’s instructions to the court functionary in Madrid in 1607 to read a certain Roman *avviso* and then to “be careful to listen to what they are saying in your parts, and what might be the truth of these matters”.⁵⁹ Similarly, this practice came into play when Asdrubale di Montauto, Ferdinand I’s Ambassador in Venice, reported in 1608 that because the *avvisi* from Constantinople were unclear as to whether Amuraoh Rais had been appointed general, merchants and Jews had been consulted on the point and their conclusions were being sent to the grand duke.⁶⁰ A whole panoply of parallel intelligence sources was collated in 1605 by the Medici agent in Antwerp in an effort to sort out conflicting reports on the possible death of Pope Leo XI: Spanish contacts, Milanese *avvisi*, Venetian *avvisi*, letters, and couriers.⁶¹

It has been shown above that even in the sixteenth century, the Medici court was skeptical in its assessment of the truth-value of newsletters. However,

57 Letter of 4 February 1563, Cosimo I in Pisa to Sallustio Piccolomini in Ferrara, MdP 219, fo. 34, MAP doc. ID#16201.

58 Letter of 25 Aug 1590, Ferdinando I to Curzio Picchena in Prague MdP.280, fo. 3, MAP doc. ID#16584.

59 “V.S. Illustrissima vedrà l’incluso avviso venuto di Roma, per sua intelligenza; et starà a sentire quel che se ne dica costà, et qual sia il vero senso intorno a tal materia de’ Ministri che governano, et di Sua Maestà”. Letter of 21 December 1607, Belisario Vinta to Sallustio Tarugi in Madrid, MdP 5052, fo. 529, MAP doc. ID#17144.

60 Letter of 5 April 1608, Asdrubale Montauto in Venice to Ferdinando I, MdP 3000, fo. 343 MAP doc. ID#14814.

61 Letter of 13 May 1605, Cosimo Baroncelli in Antwerp to Curzio Picchena, MdP 5157, fo. 372, MAP doc. ID#17545. Leo XI had in fact died; his death occurred in Rome on 27 April 1605.

there is also evidence that they were evaluating *avvisi* in an additional and more sophisticated way: not just as a means of obtaining facts about the events described therein, but also as indications of public opinion in the locations where they originated, and as material evidence of the use of *avvisi* to propagate tendentious or even false perceptions of current events. This consciousness that *avvisi* could be catalysts in unfolding political dramas by virtue of their role in influencing public opinion emerges in the commentary of a Medici agent posted in Spain in late August 1588, as Florence waited with bated breath for news of the Spanish Armada's attack on England. Writing to the Medici court from Spain where he was secretary for the Florentine embassy, Camillo Guidi gave an account of the many *avvisi* arriving there concerning the fortunes of the Spanish armada in the English Channel:

Vanno tanto segrete et incerte, come ogni altra cosa, le notizie di questa armata, che pare che nessuno si possa promettere di dirne la verità, se non chi dica di non ne saper verità.... Prima si disse della vittoria per la parte nostra così favorevole et fortunata, come io scrissi con l'ordinario per lettera de' xx. Et fu questa voce fondata su una relazione di Don Bernardo de Mendoza, il quale non solo ne scrisse, ma ne mandò alcune stampe, che sopra ciò haveva fatto imprimere. Poi si pubblicò che l'armata nostra haveva pacificamente passato il Canale et preso porto a Cales con havere veduto Drach et l'almirante inglese senz'alcun motivo loro, non che contrasto. Et questo presupposto con la verità degli altri scritti da me a Vostra Altezza per lettera de' xxvii et in particolare di quello [in cipher with interlinear transcriptions:] [^]oro in Francia[^] diede luogo a quelle considerazioni che in essa scrivevo.

Ultimamente per due corrieri ci sono due avvisi, uno del medesimo Don Bernardino, dove si va moderando et limitando. L'altro del Principe d'Ascoli, del quale, sendovi assai male nuove, se ne sono vedute copie difficilmente, et quelle poche con poco gusto di questo Cons.re di Guerra, il quale si dice che per sopirle habbiano immediatamente fatto pubblicare più prosperi avvisi della sconfitta di Drach et dell'armata inglese, che sono più desiderati che creduti per molte ragioni, ch'io reputo superfluo numerare a Vostra Altezza ben informata d'ogni successo. Ben ho voluto mandarle le copie de' detti avvisi, acciò vegga come qua si dicono et variano le cose.⁶²

62 Letter of 31 August 1588, Guidi in Madrid to Ferdinando I, MdP 4919, fo. 465, MAP doc. ID#8356.

(So secret and uncertain, like everything else, is the information about this Armada, such that it seems no one can swear to be telling the truth, and yet no one will admit to knowing nothing. At first it was said that the victory for our side was indeed advantageous and favorable, as I wrote in my letter of the 20th [of July]. This rumor was founded on the account by Don Bernardino de Mendoza, who not only wrote this account, but who also sent with it some engravings he had commissioned of the events. Next, it was announced publicly that our Armada had peacefully passed through the Strait and docked at Calais, having sailed past Drake and the English admiral without incident. And with this assumption I wrote Your Highness the letter of the 27th [of July].

Just now, two couriers have arrived, both with *avvisi*. One *avviso* is from the same Don Bernardino, who is now more moderate and laconic in his reports. The other *avviso*, from the Prince of Ascoli, contains quite bad news, and for this reason it has been very difficult to obtain copies of it, and those few copies that were made have greatly disturbed the Spanish Minister of War, who, they say, has attempted to dilute the impact of the negative news by instigating the immediate publication of more upbeat *avvisi* describing the routing of Drake and the English fleet, news that is more wishful than credible for a number of reasons that I consider unnecessary to list for you as you are well informed of all events. In any case I wished to send you copies of the *avvisi* I have spoken of, so that you might see how here [in Madrid] they speak of and distort these things.)

From the letter of this Florentine ambassador in Madrid, we see that despite the amount of news that reached Spain, there was still no certain knowledge of the outcome of the Armada because the *avvisi* furnished by trusted agents abroad gave contradictory information. It is important to note that Mendoza's erroneous *avvisi*, which he probably composed while in France, were sent along with engravings that he had commissioned to reaffirm the reliability of his verbal report, as if it had the truth-value of an eyewitness account. Back in Spain, once the contradictory reports arrived, it was soon obvious that a public opinion campaign was being mounted: the beliefs of the general populace, whether grounded in reality or not, were the target of these government-sponsored *avvisi*. It seems there may also have been some degree of censorship of the "bad" news.

Guidi's analysis of the intelligence at his disposal serves a very interesting purpose: he does not purport to be able to enlighten the Florentine grand duke about the fate of the Spanish Armada, and moreover he presumes the grand duke to have better knowledge of this than he does. Instead he thinks it will be

valuable to the Florentine court to know that various newsletters are available to Spain, that the Spanish government is trying to manipulate public opinion with contrived *avvisi*, and that as a result he and others are skeptical about any news reports claiming a Spanish triumph.

If the Medici court was also exploiting *avvisi* as evidence of public opinion and of the propaganda campaigns in other states, this circumstance would explain why they read *avvisi* even in those cases when they knew the information they contained to be incorrect. Thus, in 1561, Fabrizio Ferrari in Milan presumed Cosimo I would want to have *avvisi* about Pope Pius v's meddling in Sienese affairs even though the account they gave 'could be a fable'.⁶³ Almost the same language was used by the Florentine Jew Benedetto Blanis when he sent *avvisi* to Don Giovanni de' Medici in Venice: "Poichè Vostra Eccellenza Illustrissima mi scrisse che se bene le passati avisi erano fiabe che era bene non di meno di sentire gli mando le incluse acciò le facci leggere a veglia doppio cena hora che le notte sono cresciute" ("Because Your Illustrious Excellency wrote to me that even though the last *avvisi* were fables it was worthwhile nonetheless to hear them, I send you these *avvisi* so that you can have them read while you're awake after dinner during these longer nights").⁶⁴

Mirrors and Diversions

Somewhat related to the potential utility of late *avvisi*, redundant *avvisi*, and erroneous *avvisi* is the case of autochthonous *avvisi*, i.e. newsletters found in the Medici grand ducal archive that carry reports about the Medici grand dukes. In 1570, the Medici envoy in Venice sent home to the Medici court an *avviso* describing Cosimo I's recent coronation in Rome:

Per altre lettere di Roma de xv di Febraro: Che questa sera alle XXIII hore il Gran Duca è arrivato alla Vigna di Papa Iulio [III], et questo suo arrivo, per essere piovuto et nevicato duoi dì continui, è stato molto confuso et disordinato.... Che il Gran Duca haveva oltre alla famiglia ordinaria de

63 "Qui sono *avvisi* che dicono che Sua Santità manda il Cardinale Mulla a Sua Maestà a trattar molte cose d'importanza principalmente sopra le cose di Siena, il che anchora che creda che possi essere una favola non ho però voluto lasciar di dire a Vostra Eccellenza possi essere una favola". Letter of 18 June 1561, Ferrari in Milan to Cosimo I, MdP 3108, fo. 211, MAP doc. ID#16526.

64 Letter of 1 October 1616, Blanis to Don Giovanni in Venice, MdP 5150, fo. 93, MAP doc. ID#16340.

gentil'huomini et cavalieri, 50 cavaleggieri, 50 Todeschi, et xxx paggi a cavallo ... Intanto si intende che Sua Santità ha mandato a chiamare il Gran Duca, che sarà ricevuto nelle stanze di Alessandro [Borgia] questi duoi giorni senza essere visitato da nessuno. Che sabato mattina poi se ne ritornerà alla vigna per fare la entrata sua, la quale se non sarà impedita dalla pioggia si prepara così superba quanto altra che sia mai stata dalla venuta di Carlo Quinto in quà, con tutto che il Gran Duca sia arrivato in questa sera con abito et cavallo ordinarissimo, et che si dice per la Corte che Sua Serenità non desidera queste dimostrazioni, ma la Nazione Fiorentina che si trova in Roma ha fatte spese smisurate in abiti. Et di Castello [Sant'Angelo] si è cavata tutta la artiglieria grossa non più mossa dalla guerra di Paolo Quarto in quà, et si è dato ordine per quello che si dice, che li colpi sieno raddoppiati, et che non si perdoni a spesa nessuna per honorare un tanto Principe.⁶⁵

(From letters of 15th February: this evening at the 23rd hour the grand duke arrived at the villa of Pope Julius [III], but since it had been raining and snowing for two days continuously, his arrival was very chaotic and disorganised ... the grand duke had in addition to his normal escort of gentlemen and knights, 50 light cavalry, 50 Germans and 30 pages on horseback ... In the meantime it is known that His Holiness has ordered that the grand duke stay at the apartments of Alexander [Borgia] for two days without visits from anyone. Saturday morning he will then return to the villa in order to make his formal entry which, if it is not obstructed by rain, is being prepared so as to surpass any other since the arrival of Charles V in Rome, even taking into consideration that the grand duke arrived in Rome with ordinary clothes and an ordinary horse. It is said in the Roman Court that the duke does not desire these ostentations, but rather that it is the Florentine Nation that resides in Rome who has made these enormous expenditures for the formal entry. And from the castle [Castel Sant'Angelo] they have taken out all the heavy artillery, which has not been touched since the war of Paul IV, and orders have been given supposedly that the cannon fire should be redoubled and that no expense will be spared to honor such a Prince.)

This *avviso* could not possibly have helped the Medici court to know what had truly happened in Rome, for on that matter the grand duke was certainly the

65 *Avviso* from Venice, dated 15 February 1570, Cosimo Bartoli to Cosimo I in Florence, MdP 3080, fo. 513, MAP doc. ID#21955.

indisputable authority. Instead, the presence of this *avviso* in the Medici grand ducal archive demonstrates that Cosimo was interested to know how his own actions on an international stage had been perceived within a framework of public opinion and reaction. In the coronation ceremony described in the *avviso* cited above, Cosimo had not wanted to appear either arrogant or presumptuous, and so he dressed with a modesty that was duly noted by the writer; at the same time, his power and the support he enjoyed from the Florentines was conveyed by a contingent so excessively large that it impressed the Roman court. Having undertaken such carefully contrived public gestures, Cosimo would surely have wanted to read the reports of the *avvisi* writers, to discover whether his orchestrated appearances had achieved the intended effect. In this sense, the autochthonous *avviso* served as a mirror for curating his appearance before the world.

Once again the grand duke could read about public reactions to his behavior, this time quite a scandalous situation, when, a month later the same Medici secretary in Venice conveyed this news to him:

Che è venuto nuova che l'Altezza del Gran Duca habbi sposata Madonna Cammilla Martelli senza saputa delli Serenissimi Figliuoli, il che qui [Venezia] ha dato da ragionare un pezzo ancorché da molti venga scusata che ciò habbi fatto per voto, et che havendolo conferito con Sua Santità l'habbi esortata a vivere cristianamente conforme a San Paolo, che dice "melius est nubere quam uri".⁶⁶

(There arrived the report that his Highness the grand duke has apparently married Madonna Camilla Martelli without the knowledge of his children, which has provoked a lot of interest here [in Venice] even though many people excuse it saying that he was obliged to do this by his vow, and that when he discussed it with His Holiness the latter urged him to live as a Christian in accord with Saint Paul who said, "Better to marry than to burn.")

The Medici court's acquisition of *avvisi* reporting on their own affairs, even when these reports cast them in a negative light, suggests strongly that at least

66 *Avviso* from Venice dated 15 April 1570, Cosimo Bartoli to Cosimo I in Florence, MdP 3080, fo. 723, MAP doc. ID#21966. There is also the example of Florence's celebration of the election of the new German emperor being reported in Roman news that was sent back to Florence; see the letter of 27 July 1658, Torquato Montauto in Rome to Giovanni Battista Gondi, MdP 3384, fo. 79, MAP doc. ID#21007.

some of their *avviso* consumption was directed towards gauging the world's perception of them and their state. Moreover, the monitoring of circulated news about their own affairs could potentially help pinpoint double agents, spies, and leaks in the Medicis' own household.

The final facet of news culture that concerns this history of *avvisi* at the Medici court is that of entertainment, which, after all, was a very high-priority pursuit, particularly in the period beginning with the reign of Ferdinando I and lasting throughout the seventeenth century. An initial indication of this very different approach to early modern news reports is found in Grand Duke Francesco's comment to Camillo degli Albizzi in 1586 that "the news item that came to you from the Gazette of Rome is truly ridiculous".⁶⁷ A confirmation that *avvisi* could offer respite from the serious work at court was penned just a year later, when the grand duke's Florentine secretary sent two *avvisi* to a Medici diplomat in Spain with the note that these were "two gazettes to pass the time".⁶⁸ Again this point was made by a Medici court secretary in 1605, as he sent newsletters to his colleague in Spain: "Mando a Vostra Signoria Illustrissima alcuni fogli d'*avvisi*; che mi trovo in segreteria che le serviranno per un poco di passatempo" ("I am sending Your Most Illustrious Lordship some pages of *avvisi* that I found in the office of the secretariat that you will find useful for a bit of recreation").⁶⁹

In this initial assessment of the Medici and their early modern news networks, it is clear that within a relatively short period of time, the members of this court had become cautious, even cynical, readers of *avvisi*. Yet despite their leeriness, they turned to *avvisi* for information on a vast spectrum of topics ranging from the distant Americas to themselves, and for differing purposes that included the monitoring of epidemics in a program of public disease control, keeping tabs on the spread of propaganda in foreign lands, and the detection of moles and spies in their own. Finally, they even found a purpose for the old and obsolete *avvisi*, which provided ridiculous distraction from the troubling concerns of the day. The same texts that had once been read to gain insight into the true state of the world now could be read as contemporary fables in precise and vivid detail to pass the long hours of the night.

67 "L'ultima vostra è de XIII, et la havuto seco l'inserto ... L'avviso portato costì dalla Gazzetta di Roma è veramente redicolo." Letter of 29 July 1586, Francesco de' Medici to Camillo degli Albizzi, MdP 269, fo. 98, MAP doc. ID#16338.

68 "col mandarle due gazzette da passar tempo". Letter of 26 February 1587, Antonio Serguidi to Vincenzo Alamanni in Spain, MdP 5042, unnumbered folio, MAP doc. ID#15402.

69 Letter of 3 April 1605, Curzio Picchena to Tarugi in Valladolid, MdP 5157, fo. 372, MAP doc. ID#16972.