In the last twenty years scholars have noted that the book trade did not entirely replace alternative channels for the circulation of knowledge in Europe. Without challenging the widely held model of print’s advent as a revolution, these authors have shown that both speech and manuscript continued to play a crucial role in circulating information in the early modern period. In particular, commercial centres, such as Amsterdam and Venice, have been identified as hubs from which knowledge of political change and of the new world travelled across Europe. More recently, there have been substantial advances in our understanding of the movement of knowledge across social space as well as physical space, in the analysis of communication between people from different spheres of life in Amsterdam.

This account of knowledge circulating outside printed channels has been both qualified and elaborated in work on the scientific revolution. Shapin, for example, has shown that advances in science were communicated through networks whose membership was defined by rank – specifically by the rank of ‘gentleman’. His work suggests that while the movement of scientific knowledge in England stopped at the borders of gentility, it was surprisingly free to move between ranks (for example between the aristocracy and the lower gentry) within those borders.

As a result, works like Burke’s and Shapin’s have perhaps encouraged a view of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as a time of the expansion of knowledge networks. However, there has

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been little or no work on the persistence of barriers to the circulation of knowledge in early modern Britain.

In this chapter I attempt to correct this imbalance through a small case study of the Scots in the Netherlands. I identify evidence that, contrary to the model outlined by Burke (and to a lesser extent by Shapin), every grade of rank in this group continued to obstruct the (non-print) circulation of knowledge in the period. I present evidence that certain categories of Scots knew surprisingly little in particular about the Dutch Indies – ‘surprisingly’ because Scots were involved in social networks in Holland which covered trade, seamanship, medicine and religious life, and which maintained powerful links with Scotland. The failure of this knowledge to circulate had calamitous consequences, as shall be seen.

I offer two explanations for this ‘obstruction’ of knowledge: decorum created constraints on exchanges between members of different classes; and late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Scots in the Netherlands had a strictly utilitarian approach to knowledge.

Scottish links to the Netherlands

The Netherlands was Scotland’s most important trading partner and migrants there worked in a range of ranks, from merchant to common seaman. They maintained close ties to their homeland. These economic migrants overlapped to some extent with Scotland’s political exiles. The exiles also maintained strong ties with Scotland while abroad which allowed them to return home in the years after 1688, when William of Orange and his consort Mary had ascended the British throne. Economic migrants and political exiles were joined by students at the universities of Leiden and Utrecht. They too retained strong ties to their home country.

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6 Catterall, *Community without borders*.

7 Gardner, *The Scottish Exile Community in the Netherlands*.

8 See for example the experiences of Andrew Fletcher (Dictionary of National Biography) and John Boswell (Royal College of Physicians, Edinburgh, transcript of diary of John Boswell).