Knowledge and ideas cannot spread on their own — for that to happen intermediaries are needed. These intermediaries can take different forms, but during the early modern era the main mediating agents were people and some form of representation, primarily writing. The Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, or VOC) was active for almost two centuries (1602–1799), during which period it established a trading empire stretching from the Cape of Good Hope and Mauritius in the west to Japan and the Chinese Sea in the East. Its primary locus of activity was, however, centred on the eastern rim of the Indian Ocean: India, Ceylon, Southeast Asia and Indonesia. The trading activities of the VOC were made possible by a fleet of hundreds of large ships which plied the oceans in journeys lasting almost a year: from the Netherlands to the headquarters of the VOC in Batavia (modern Jakarta) on the island of Java, normally punctuated by a visit of a couple of weeks at the Cape of Good Hope. The Cape owed its existence as a VOC station (only gradually did it grow into a ‘colony’) from 1652 onwards, not to trade — as with most other Dutch ‘factories’ (trading stations) in the East — but to its convenient location halfway on the route between Europe and the East Indies. The VOC’s activities were performed by thousands of European men — from all over northwestern Europe, but primarily from the Netherlands, the German states and Scandinavia — who worked on the ships as sailors, protected the VOC’s interests as soldiers (the majority of them) or administered the Company, its trade and personnel as merchants and clerks. During the two centuries of the VOC’s existence, around one million men sailed to the East Indies. Of these, only about one third returned to Europe, the others either dying en route or in the East or choosing to remain in the VOC territory as so-called ‘free burghers’ (former employees of the VOC who were released
from service and could make a living on their own as 'citizens' but who remained subjects of the VOC). It is to this last category of people to which the Cape colony owed its growth as a settler colony.  

The primary aim of the VOC was to make a profit: as Nicolaes Witsen — a VOC director and a leading light in the scholarly world of the late 17th century — complained to one of his learned friends: 'What does Your Lordship ask for curiosities of learning from the [East] Indies? No, Sir, it is only money and not learning that our people are looking for, a lamentable fact.' Yet the very nature of the VOC’s activities unwittingly helped to create an infrastructure for the mediation of knowledge. By maintaining regular routes and traffic between different parts of the world, allowing thousands of people to have new experiences, and providing them with the opportunity to maintain contact with their home ports, a new network for the flow of knowledge was created. The VOC itself — as a large trading company which had to jealously guard its interests against competitors — required specific information: of trading possibilities, routes, local customs and political information. Part of the success of the Company is attributable to its highly efficient and well-developed communication network, much the superior of its rivals. Certain types of information had immense commercial value, particularly (given the very nature of the activities of these maritime merchant companies) that relating to navigation and sailing routes. Hence the immense importance the VOC attached to information regarding its naval technology and the mapping of the territories which it visited. The value of such information was reflected by the money the VOC invested in sending out professionals to perform the tasks of mapping, surveying and navigating, as well as by the secrecy with which they guarded this information. In addition to this, the VOC put great store by written reports and statistical data — for which they had a large army of clerks and secretaries who wrote down (and copied several times!) everything the Company officials in East India House in Amsterdam might possibly require. In short, the VOC knew

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