CHAPTER 6

International News Flows in the Seventeenth Century: Problems and Prospects

Brendan Dooley

We know quite a lot about the modalities of news transmission—diplomats, postal services, scholars, diasporic ethnic and religious communities, merchants and so on—yet, in spite of the evident promise of this Braudelian theme, we know less about the overall patterns of news transmission. The availability of new corpora and new approaches suggests new routes to discovery. Here I would like to examine what has been done and point out what could be done to trace the European news networks of early modern times using a combination of methodologies. An important tool for tracing news flows is the measurement of textual borrowing across media, i.e. the study of intertextuality on a massive scale. Another approach would be to compare the stylistic aspects of journalistic prose across several cultures. I shall give examples of both. Centering on the basic unit of news and showing its transformations, I attempt a preliminary picture of news flows.

In a recent article in Annales Histoire Sciences Sociales, Will Slauter stated that

although specialists know that the gazettes and journals of the early modern period contained mainly foreign news, the movement of this news across linguistic and political boundaries remains very little studied.

As an example to the contrary he very kindly cited the recent volume published by the Bremen-based research group ‘Culture and Exchange’, The Dissemination of News and the Emergence of ‘Contemporaneity’ in Early Modern Europe (2010). But the work of that volume is very far from done. Indeed, the

problems we raised there might lead one to think that ‘very little studied’ really means ‘impossible’ or ‘too difficult’. Joad Raymond in the journal *Media History* in 2012 acknowledged, with resounding emphasis, that for writing the history of international news flows in the seventeenth century:

> there are profound obstacles not only in method, but also in the practical methods historians in different traditions use to collect and assess data, not to speak of significant and underexplored asymmetries between the contents and the cataloguing of the relative archives in the relevant countries.2

Nevertheless he stated that international news networks are ‘probably the most pressing and promising issue in the history of early media today’. The question is, what have we learnt over the last couple of years and what can we do with it? On the one hand the intervening time has more than confirmed Raymond’s suggestion that “there are profound obstacles”—on the other hand there are also signs that the obstacles may be temporary although the question remains “very little studied”, and here I would like to examine what has been done and what could be done to trace the European news networks of early modern times using a combination of methodologies involving text mining and network analysis.

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