

Intelligence Offices in the Habsburg Monarchy*

Anton Tantner

Introduction

In the seventeenth century, the great European metropolises of Paris and London saw the establishment of so-called intelligence offices, which served as places of institutionalised information brokerage and were to promote the exchange of goods, real estate and work opportunities.¹ The first known institution of this kind, the *Bureau d'adresse*, was established near Notre-Dame in Paris in 1630; it was created on the initiative of the physician Théophraste Renaudot (1586–1653), a native of Montpellier, and undertook a number of different tasks: it acted not only as a sales agency and brokered real estate and work, but beyond that it served as a pawnbroker, a place of medical care for the poor, and as a venue for academic lectures, the *conférences du Bureau d'adresse*. All those who presented a request there could have it entered into a register for a fee of three sous; for the same sum, information was provided from the register. From time to time, excerpts from the register were published in the form of advertisements in its own advertising paper, the *Feuille du Bureau d'adresse*; from 1631, the information expert Renaudot published articles on political events in his newspaper, the *Gazette*.² In London, on the other hand, comparable

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- 1 On information offices in general, see Astrid Blome, 'Offices of Intelligence and Expanding Social Spaces', in *The Dissemination of News and the Emergence of Contemporaneity in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Brendan Dooley (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 207–22 and Anton Tantner, *Adressbüros im Europa der Frühen Neuzeit*, Habilitation thesis (University of Vienna, 2011) <<http://phaidra.univie.ac.at/o:128115>> [8/1/15]; the present text resulted from two projects funded by the Austrian Science Fund (P19826–Go8, Europäische Adressbüros in der Frühen Neuzeit) and the Jubiläumssfonds of the Austrian National Bank (no. 15275, Auskunftskomptoire und Adressbüros in der Habsburgermonarchie, 1750–1850).
- 2 Howard M. Solomon, *Public Welfare, Science and Propaganda in Seventeenth Century France: The Innovations of Théophraste Renaudot* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); Gilles Feyel, *L'Annonce et la nouvelle. La presse d'information en France sous l'ancien régime (1630–1788)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 11–308; Justin Stagl, *A History of Curiosity: The Theory of Travel, 1550–1800* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 134–47; Gérard Jubert, ed., *Père des Journalistes et Médecin des Pauvres. Théophraste Renaudot (1586–1653)* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2005).

institutions were founded from the mid-seventeenth century onward, which were known as 'intelligence' or 'registry' offices and mainly served to broker goods and domestic servants. They published advertisement papers and often established themselves near the Royal Exchange.³

These intelligence offices raise a number of questions, which, due to the scarcity of the sources identified so far, cannot yet be answered satisfactorily: what were the relations between information offices and traditional information brokers? Amongst the latter, especially concerning the placement of domestic servants, were the so-called servant agents, mostly elderly women who had specialist knowledge about domestic positions available in individual households, who were often accused of poaching domestics after having placed them in order to pocket a second brokering fee. How were the offices organised, were they state, city or—as was usually the case—privately administered, if licensed, institutions? Who frequented the information offices? Women, for example, were not accepted as customers in every case, as it seems on the whole that the institution of information offices in general was accompanied by a masculinisation of information brokerage, i.e. a squeezing out of women from this area of activity, which may already be identified during the seventeenth century. How did the interplay between information offices, and the brokering activities accomplished there, and other media in the urban area, work? Namely, what was the relationship between the advertisement papers sometimes published by the information offices and the institution of the penny post?

All these questions will stay relevant for future research; here, using archival and printed sources, I would like to attempt a description of the activities of largely unnoticed information offices in the example of the Habsburg Monarchy.

3 W.H. Beveridge, 'A Seventeenth-Century Labour Exchange', *Economic Journal*, 24 (1914), pp. 371–6; M. Dorothy George, 'The Early History of Registry Offices. The Beginnings of Advertisement', *Economic Journal Economic History Supplement*, 1 (1926–9), [January 1929], pp. 570–90; Michael Harris, 'Exchanging Information: Print and Business at the Royal Exchange in the Late Seventeenth Century', in *The Royal Exchange*, ed. Ann Saunders (London: London Topographical Society, 1997), pp. 188–97; Michael Harris, 'Timely Notices: The Use of Advertising and its Relationship to News during the Late Seventeenth Century', in *News, Newspapers, and Society in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Joad Raymond (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 141–56; Karl Tilman Winkler, 'Die Zeitung und die Anfänge der Informationsgesellschaft. Wirtschaft, Technologie und publizistischer Markt in London 1665–1740', in *400 Jahre Zeitung. Die Entwicklung der Tagespresse im internationalen Kontext*, ed. Martin Welke and Jürgen Wilke (Bremen: edition lumière, 2008), pp. 139–75.