In 1644, the Ming dynasty, which had ruled for three hundred years, came to an end as its last ruler, the Chongzhen 崇禎 emperor (r. 1628–1644), fled his palace through the back-gate to commit suicide on Coal Hill, as legend has it, by hanging himself from a plum tree. Before long, word traveled throughout the empire. Shocked by the loss of the emperor and the empire, loyal Ming literati responded by retiring from public life, becoming Buddhist monks, or sometimes even by taking their own lives. Reports of the fall of the Ming did not stop at China's frontier. In time the Japanese learned of the horrific event and even countries in the far-off Europe soon became aware of the tragic fall of the Ming and the emperor's suicide. By July 22nd 1650, information about the Chongzhen emperor’s death and dynasty’s fall had traveled across the globe as a fleet of the Dutch East India Company returned to Holland and sailors confirmed ‘the calamities of the ingenious China’.1 As one scholar, Edwin van Kley, has put it, the fall of the Ming should be considered the first global news event of the early modern world.²

The term ‘global news event’ is provocative in its contemporaneity. It neatly captures the way a host of local information networks were increasingly interacting on a global scale to create a densely woven web of shared knowledge about recent events. As such the notion nicely suggests the year 1644 as the early-modern beginning of our familiar, information driven contemporary world. Of course the phrase also tends to suggest a host of contemporary qualities nowadays associated with news-objectivity, freedom of speech, public and open information—qualities not necessarily found in seventeenth-century discourse.³ Indeed, the seemingly innocuous use of the term ‘news’ tends to

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1 Hollandtsche Mercurius 1650, 26.
2 van Kley 1973, 561–582.
3 For a good history of the way in which the notion of ‘objectivity’ became crucial to the concept of news in the nineteenth century, see Schudson 1978, in particular 3–11.
obscure the unpredictable ways information about recent events actually did travel just as it tends to gloss over the way such information flows were conceptualized during this early-modern moment, a moment when the concept of ‘news’ was still in its early, formative stages. As Michiel Groesen has shown, in the case of early-seventeenth-century ‘news’ circulation in Holland, ‘newspapers’ (‘couranten’) may have played an important role in disseminating information about recent events, yet an equally if not more important role was played by gossip, ‘private’ letters, ‘public’ sermons, celebratory songs, and illustrated poems, to which we might add a variety of theatrical spectacles ranging from the comic to the religious and revelatory. Simply put, applying the term ‘news’ to the way early-modern information networks operated tends to produce teleological accounts in which contemporary ideals are a-historically applied to an era with less clear-cut or still emerging distinctions between fact and fiction, oral and printed modes of dissemination, news and history, scandalous rumor and public opinion.

A closer look at the mid-seventeenth-century Dutch ‘reportage’ on the fall of the Ming indeed complicates van Kley’s early assessment of this moment as ‘news’ event. For instance, when Edwin van Kley documents the first European news reports on the fall of the Ming, the phrase Dutch sailors ‘confirm the calamities of the ingenious China (Confirmeren de onheylen van’t vernuigh China)’ suggests that rumors about the fall of the Ming had already been circulating for some time, that these rumors were presently reaffirmed by sailors orally, and only now making their way into print. Meanwhile the printed source van Kley is citing, De Hollandtsche Mercurius, turns out to be not a newspaper, but rather a ‘news digest’ chronicling events annually, something more akin to what we would think of as history as opposed to news. In short, we may locate ‘news’ in van Kley’s first global news event, but it is wedged rather uncomfortably between the suspect epistemological ambiguity of rumor and salty sailor’s tales on the one hand and the definitive certainty yet also antiquated irrelevance of history on the other.

4 Sometimes the date 1594 is offered as the birth of the newspaper. Raymond 2005, 6. Other times, the date 1605 is used. See Pettegree 2014, 8–11. The first Dutch newspaper was printed in Amsterdam in 1618; by 1640 there were nine competing newspapers in Amsterdam alone. Ibid, 188–190.
5 van Groesen, 2010. For the way in which news events quickly became part of public life through theatrical performance, see Mareel 2011.
6 See, amongst others, Dooley 2010 and Pettegree 2014.
7 The publication itself employs the term ‘annales batavicae,’ i.e., ‘annals.’ The phrase reporting the fall of the Ming dynasty is later literally incorporated in a local history of the city Enkhuijen. See, Brandt 1666. For more on the Hollandtsche Mercurius, see Harms et al., 2013, 259.