In recent years scholars have devoted increasing attention to the nature – or even the viability – of public opinion in sixteenth-century Europe. The received opinion that the operation of public opinion would necessarily await the emergence of a Habermasian ‘public sphere’ in the eighteenth century looks increasingly threadbare.\(^1\) The thirst for information long pre-dated the invention of the coffee shop in Georgian England, and nowhere more so than in the thriving, bustling cities of Italy, Germany, France and the Netherlands.

In Europe’s centres of commerce and trade, information was at a premium for quite obvious reasons. Merchants had to know whether roads were safe, and whether changes in the ruling personnel of lands near or distant threatened carefully nurtured business relationships. But the appetite for news clearly went beyond this. Not only was marketplace opinion informed, it clearly occurred to those in power that they had to devote care and attention to shaping this opinion. In this way a news community shaded into what can truly be regarded as nascent public opinion.

Two aspects of this phenomenon have particularly interested scholars in several disciplines. The first is the way in which the articulation of information on current affairs helped shape a changing sense of identity. Early modern societies inherited a sense of identity that was profoundly local. Citizens might feel a generalized sense of themselves as part of larger national communities, particularly in time of war, but their primary points of identification were more specific: to kin, to their lord, to their parish or guild, to their city. One of

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\(^1\) J. Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Darmstadt, 1986); translated into English as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, 1989).
Alastair Duke’s most influential essays has been his discussion of the extent to which the Dutch Revolt involved a complex process of negotiation with pre-existing senses of identity before a notion of nationhood could coalesce around an independent northern state. In the Netherlands, as elsewhere, a sense of national identity had also to compete with new, super-national identities in a religiously divided Europe. In a Europe of Catholics and Protestants, with whom did one enjoy true kinship?

For the rulers of these complex societies it was especially important to be seen as a personification or incarnation of an emerging national identity. Yet regality had also to respect the complexity of allegiance. This was true of a ruler’s relationship with his cities as with his leading nobles. In the urban context the greatest contemporary expression of this complex relationship was the joyeuse entrée, a ceremonial event at which a ruler took symbolic possession of the city, while simultaneously promising to respect its liberties. The essence of kingship was encapsulated in these dignified events: the assertion and acknowledgement of might and theoretically untrammeled power, balanced by recognition that effective rule was always necessarily co-operative. Citizens had simultaneously to be awed and persuaded. A community of interest was an active, participatory community, even if expressed in a rhetoric of deference and power.

In sixteenth-century societies the exercise of power was always persuasive; agreement must be cultivated, even where duty was formally commanded. In this context, a number of scholars, including Alastair Duke, have recently begun to pay particular attention to the role of print in shaping an active, politically aware and co-operative public: and the consequences for the body public when this co-operation began to break down. The development of such a literature of persuasion and dissent is all the more striking because in the sixteenth century print was not necessarily the primary mechanism for the circulation of official information. Laws, regulations and ordinances would traditionally be relayed by word of mouth, and this process continued into the sixteenth century. In France the oral publication of official edicts took on an increasingly ritualized character. In Paris

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2 Duke, ‘From King and Country to King or Country?’.