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Caught between business, war and politics: late medieval roots of the early modern European news networks

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This essay challenges the notion that the early modern news-gathering practices and networks in Europe crystallized only in the late fourteenth and throughout the fifteenth century, corresponding with the emergence of permanent embassies and state-run postal systems. Inspired by an article published in 2005 by Georg Christ that for the first time problematized this notion, the author offers additional evidence conveyed in the experience of late medieval Venice and Florence, while relying on contemporary chronicles, merchant letters and diplomatic dispatches. Mainly through the analysis of three historical case studies, the essay argues that the existing networks of lower-tier diplomatic representatives, sea captains and military liaisons were already functioning as nodal points of an intelligence-gathering mechanism whose news reports usually ended up circulating in the public sphere. But, as further shown in this study, it was the merchant circles that decisively shaped such a news-gathering network by lending it its own matter-of-fact writing style, as well as allowing it to rely on its own *scarsella* system of couriers.

Keywords: Late medieval period; Venice; Florence; *avvisi*; news networks; merchant letters; diplomatic correspondence

In the past two or three decades, communication historians articulated the emergence of the earliest handwritten newsletters – the still enigmatic *avvisi* – with the social and political developments taking place at the end of the fifteenth and the advent of the sixteenth century. It became generally accepted that their earliest iterations appeared in the Italian-speaking merchant environment,[1] but the driving force behind their gradual institutionalization has been associated mainly with the establishment of the first permanent embassies among the Italian city-states in the aftermath of the Peace of Lodi (1454). The ambassadors have been presented as the first important social class that not only produced, but also consumed, news, and was able to pay handsomely for reliable service.[2]

In 2016 a group of three dozen leading European communication history scholars published an authoritative volume entitled *News Networks in Early Modern Europe*, which articulates the above-mentioned thesis and further reinforces its paradigmatic power. The publication harnesses the results of various workshops held over a two-year period and proposes "a series of more or less consensual lessons" epitomized in a series of pivotal prepositions. At their core is the claim that the earliest modern news networks in Europe emerged between 1450 and 1650, and that they went hand-in-hand with the newly developed permanent embassies whose diplomatic channels "constitute the original news networks".[3] Such networks fully depended upon the emerging public postal systems,

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established gradually since the 1490s, which "formed the spine of news communication, shaping all printed and manuscript forms that follow, including periodicity".[4]

This essay attempts to challenge such orthodoxy by arguing that the roots of the earliest modern news networks in Europe are much deeper. As a matter of fact, Georg Christ already poked a hole in it in 2005 by pointing out a series of 1419 newsletters he discovered inadvertently while researching the late medieval Venetian merchant community in Alexandria.[5] They were all part of the literary heritage of Venetian consul Biagio Dolfin, who died just before he completed his two-year assignment in 1418–1420.[6] In an article for *Mediterranean Historical Review*, Christ focused on four sole letters in the collection insofar as they were shedding more light on the way one of the close associates of Dolfin's corresponding circle, Antonio Morosini, composed his famous chronicle.[7] Up until now, Christ's challenge remained practically unanswered, despite the fact that the evidence he presented questions everything known so far about the early history of the circulation of handwritten newsletters in Europe at the dawn of the modern era.[8]

Yet at least some pieces of correspondence addressed to Biagio Dolfin may be beyond any doubt classified as newsletters: they are already written in the same economical style as their later iterations, conveying the most recent political and military news circulating in Venice. Sometimes such information was the sole purpose of the letter, other times it was attached to other information peculiar to typical medieval merchant correspondence. All letters were signed, and most of them were dated in Venice, although one of the reports, authored by Giacomo Bragadin, was sent from Crete. Its author excuses himself for not writing earlier simply because there was nothing to report. "My fingers were still because there was no news up until now," wrote Bragadin, "but right now, our ships that left Venice on 13 December arrived here, and I have a copy of the news that I will denote to you as you can see below."[9] What follows is a long list of around two dozen news items of mostly a political and military nature, pertaining to developments in Italy, Europe and the Middle East. The report is very clearly structured – each paragraph is dedicated to one single news item that is usually summarized in the space of one to five lines.

In any case, Bragadin admits that he only copied a newsletter that was originally compiled by another (unnamed) author, and it was with great probability last updated before the ship's departure from Venice. By its overall compositional structure, syntax and range of covered topics, Bragadin's report is practically identical with handwritten newsletters that we see circulating through Europe in ever-growing numbers during the sixteenth century. But is it even plausible that the evidence contained in Biagio Dolfin's literary heritage is so unique that it would be left unmatched by any other archival collection or contemporary literary source?

The purpose of this study is therefore to take up the challenge posed by Christ more than a decade ago, and to explore the issue further through the analysis of additional primary sources and modes of communication emerging in Europe in the late medieval period and at the dawn of the Renaissance era, *ca*.1300–1450. In doing so, the study focuses on the Italian context – mainly on Venice and Florence – whose merchant circles operating within the republican political structures had the best chances at fostering reliable news-gathering networks that were accessible to wider strata of their populations. We have no indication whatsoever that news was already sold publicly as a commodity in this period. Its dissemination should therefore be seen for the most part as a side effect of various commercial, political or military operations.

The fundamental premises of this study

From what was said above it is clear that there is a need to re-evaluate the early roots of handwritten newsletters. For example, the letters exchanged by merchants in the course of the fourteenth century increasingly transcended the narrow scope of medieval merchant correspondence, with its almost exclusive focus on personal business affairs, shipping news, currency exchange rates and lists of prices of staple commodities.[10] The archives of the Datini firm in Prato, whose *ca*.125,000 commercial letters cover mainly the period 1382–1410, corroborate this claim very well. Examining their contents in the early 1900s, Giovanni Livi expressed his amazement at the amount of political news and reports of natural disasters they contained.[11] Half a century later, Federigo Melis echoed the same assertion, arguing that if all passages pertaining to political themes of Datini's archives were extracted and organized in a historical sequence, "we would obtain a very profound and detailed political and social history of various nations".[12]

Thus the evidence cited above suggests the existence of earlier newsgathering networks that reflected the increasing integration of Euro-Mediterranean markets and saw economic developments intertwined with the outcomes of political and military affairs, which increasingly dominated the content of the reports that the merchant networks transmitted.[13] At the same time, the Italian states may not yet have had in place a system of permanent embassies, but – as Lazzarini recently pointed out – by the end of the medieval period they already developed a set of practices that need to be conceptualized as a historical continuum culminating in the rise of resident ambassadors.[14] For example, the Venetian consul in Alexandria, Biagio Dolfin, already represented an earlier iteration of the lower-tier permanent diplomatic representative that included consuls, *bailos* (chief officers in charge of Venetian merchant communities operating in the Eastern Mediterranean), the notaries who were part of consular infrastructure, but also Venetian military commissioners (*provveditori*) or commanders of state galleys. This essay claims that they all grew up in the social milieu of a maritime merchant society accustomed to a constant supply of news, rendering them fully aware of the interconnectedness between the world of politics and economic affairs, and therefore cultivating the need to inform and to be informed even during their temporary sojourns abroad.

For example, during the decisive military conflict with its arch-rival Genoa, known as the War of Chioggia (1377–1381), Venice sent Pietro Cornaro as its temporary ambassador to the lords of Milan, the Visconti family. The surviving reports that Cornaro wrote during his year-long sojourn in Milan (1379–1380) represent the earliest surviving Venetian diplomatic correspondence generated during a sustained mission. They reveal that Cornaro's main role was to strengthen the alliance with the Visconti, and negotiate the supplies of armaments and food, as well as to keep the Venetian government informed about the enemy's situation through "the newsletters received from a friend in Genoa" – a mysterious correspondent whose identity Cornaro jealously protects in his dispatches.[15] In addition, Cornaro also includes the newsletters – originals or copies – received through the lords of Milan and their own networks of spies in Genoa.[16] They are further copied and circulated in Venetian diplomatic circles where they are often used as bargaining chips, or shared with allied governments as a sign of goodwill. This may explain how some of such *copiam novorum* related to the developments in Chioggia, diffused through Venetian governing circles and networks of diplomatic envoys, ultimately ended up, for example, in the archives of the Gonzaga family in Mantua.[17]

In constructing its argument, this study adopts some key premises made by other scholarly sources and assumes that such an exchange of news among the above-mentioned

players – merchants and diplomats – relied on three elements that were essential for their operations: (1) the networks of couriers connecting the main political and commercial centres;[18] (2) the increasing literacy among new generations of sedentary merchants who adopted long-distance trade and worked within progressively integrated Euro-Mediterranean markets on the one hand,[19] and at the same time the growing importance of the government chanceries that nourished recordkeeping and literacy among the wider strata of those involved in political and military decision-making on the other;[20] and (3) the manufacturing of paper, mastered in Italy during the 1300s – a medium that was substantially cheaper and in much better supply than parchment, allowing government agencies and merchant companies to produce expanding volumes of written records.[21]

The earliest surviving news reports

There is a paucity of surviving comprehensive collections of merchant or diplomatic correspondence that would allow the analysis of the news networks before 1300. The most important known material corpus may be the letters of the Ricciardi company from Lucca, a trading firm that went bankrupt in London in 1303. The collection survived only thanks to the fact that all of the company's documents were subsequently confiscated by the English crown, since the king was among Ricciardi's clients.[22] It contains 16 letters received by the Ricciardi London branch from the headquarters in Lucca over the period 1295–1303, which, for the most part, follow the standard typology of a medieval merchant letter as described earlier. Yet the authors here-and-there already sneak in some very brief international news reports received through their own trading networks – for example an update on the Mongol invasion of Syria that was reported in April 1300 by another affiliate office.[23] About half of the last letter in the collection, dated 12 April 1303, is dedicated to news from Tuscany, but also contains one international news item. The terse summary begins:

> We have learned from the letters from France about the peace accord between the kings of France and England, that the [English ambassadors] the Duke of Savoy and [the Duke of Lincoln] Henry returned to England for a consultation with the king.[24]

The next best primary sources are late medieval chronicles. In the year 1300, the Florentine merchant Giovanni Villani (1276–1348) undertook a pilgrimage to Rome. Upon his return – being inspired by great Roman historians and literates such as Virgil, Sallust and Livy – he decided to write his own chronicle dedicated to the city of Florence.[25] Villani's accounts are often problematic, mainly when he writes about his native Florence. His historical accounts often rely upon mythology, and his reports of the present-day events clearly demonstrate his personal political and social biases. But Villani also often takes detours and includes some information related to other important international events that came to his attention. It may not always be reliable, but it still reveals a great deal about the range of awareness that Villani's contemporaries in Florence had about the surrounding world.[26]

For example, one of his earliest entries is dedicated to the Battle of Courtrai fought in 1302 between the French king and a rebelling Flemish region. It is actually a series of entries that go back and forth between the events in Flanders and other local developments in Florence and Italy. "I learned the other day that …," Villani begins one of the updates on the aftermath of the battle.[27] The chronicler never reveals the sources of his information, but he follows the immediate fallout of the battle for the ensuing year with

numerous updates, and one can only assume that he is adding the information to his chronicle as he receives it.[28] At some point he writes:

> I have dedicated so much space to the developments in Flanders because they were newsworthy and surprising, and we had the opportunity to learn the truth about them with an unshaken certainty. But let's leave these events now and let's return our attention to the news events from Italy and from our city of Florence,

redirecting the reader's attention in the manner of a modern newscast anchor.[29]

Only toward the end of his life does Villani here and there inadvertently disclose his sources: the accounts of itinerant persons who eye-witnessed a particular event;[30] a verbatim transcript of an official report about the death of a pope sent by his brother-merchant from Rome;[31] or the letters of Florentine merchants stationed abroad – often multiple testimonies that refer to the same event.[32] In 1347 the chronicler reported on the plague that affected all of Europe as far as the Black Sea merchant colonies in Tana or Trebizond, and its devastating impact, information learnt through "the letters of our citizens worthy of trust who were in these lands".[33] Villani himself succumbed to the plague the following year. Yet before he died he offered us a rare glimpse into the method through which he gathered news from abroad. His last entry, dated January 1348, is a verbatim copy of a letter from the Florentine merchants in Udine, narrating a devastating earthquake that hit the north-eastern regions of the Italian peninsula. "In order to stay close to the truth and avoid mistakes, we include the copy of a letter sent from there by some of our Florentine merchants who are worthy of our trust," starts the entry.[34] What follows may be a verbatim copy of one of the oldest surviving newsletters dedicated to one single event, described in depth, without mixing it with any other additional information peculiar to typical merchant correspondence.

Another event captured by Villani was the 1346 Battle of Crécy between the French and English allied forces. Military historians Livingston and DeVries recently published a collection of 80 primary sources related to what became one of the big opening salvos of the Hundred Years' War, and Villani's account of the encounter is ranked on their list as one of the earliest and most detailed, albeit slightly biased, reports from outside of France.[35] The collection contains a wide variety of documents that range from the primary eye-witness accounts to subsequent retellings of the battle, with the geographic reach of the sources covering the modern territories of France, England, Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, the Czech lands, Austria and Italy. Livingston and DeVries naturally focus on the military aspects of the battle. The rare passages that may shed light on the origins of the various accounts are intentionally omitted from their collection. Yet, one must inevitably question how it was possible that one single event was captured – within a relatively short time frame – by so many chroniclers in so many diverse parts of Europe. Was there an early news exchange network that, by the late medieval period, was already well developed enough to carry such a vast range of detailed accounts of pivotal historical moments such as the Battle of Crécy all across the continent?

Unfortunately, the fourteenth-century Italian chroniclers do not offer enough evidence to answer these questions. Such information may only be extrapolated from the more systemic accounts of the ways in which news was distributed and consumed that emerged in the early 1400s. A good example is the report of the contested election of the Roman Emperor Rupert in 1401, penned by the Florentine chronicler Giovanni Morelli. The emperor's coronation by the pope himself was scheduled to take place in Milan, where Rupert would have needed to assert his power over the warmongering Duke Gian Galeazzo

Visconti – lord of Milan and archenemy of Florence – who had bold plans to invade Tuscany and annexe it to Lombardy. Morelli mentioned several written eye-witness reports circulating in Florence that described the entry into Italy of Rupert's entourage with 40,000 horsemen through the Brenner Pass and into the town of Trent. One of them was written by Andrea di Neri to his son Neri, and – Morelli tells us in his chronicle – letters such as this were read and discussed everywhere across the land. Alas, the chronicler captured one such public reading in Florence during "a Sunday morning in the New Market [Mercato nuovo] when we were dining thoughtlessly, considering the destiny of Lombardy for sealed".[36]

The means of transmission

While the Italian chroniclers writing before the 1400s reveal their sources only occasionally, it is the Venetian diarist Antonio Morosini – one of the informers in the circle of Biagio Dolfin mentioned in the opening passages of this essay – who for the first time shared with the reader in a quite systematic manner not only the sources of his information, but occasionally also evaluated their trustworthiness and juxtaposed several accounts that told the same story from different vantage points.

To a large extent, Morosini's codex is very similar to the much more famous diary of Marin Sanudo spanning the years 1496–1533, which served as one of the pivotal sources to justify the claim that the first handwritten newsletters circulating systematically through Europe emerged only in late fifteenth-century Italy.[37] The main difference between the two chronicles is that while Sanudo offers a balanced account of domestic developments and foreign reports, Morosini relies almost exclusively on the information from abroad – especially during the reigns of the doges Michele Steno (r.1400–1413) and Tommaso Mocenigo (r.1414–1423). In 1418 the chronicler actually ran into trouble for his efforts to gather information about certain domestic affairs, and was ordered to destroy a portion of his chronicle.[38] The proverbial secrecy under which the Venetian government operated may thus have been the main reason why his accounts focused mainly on the reports from abroad.

In his chronicle, Morosini uses formulas such as "*avesemo novele da Roma*" or "*per la nuova vegnuda dal campo nostro in Lombardia*"[39] – "we had news from Rome" or "for the news that came from our military camp in Lombardy". His reports never mention the term *avisi* or *avixi*, the early iterations of the Italian term *avvisi* that became practically synonymous with the handwritten newsletters contained in Sanudo's diary. Indeed, the Italian chroniclers up until Sanudo, as well as the late medieval merchants in their surviving correspondence, had almost exclusively used the terms *novele*/*novelle* or *nuove* when referring to letters or dispatches that reported certain newsworthy events, whereas the term *avviso* was associated more with very narrowly focused technical information, such as the shipping news, prices of various commodities or the currency exchange rates.

The news from abroad that Morosini reported in his chronicle reached Venice mostly by couriers (*chorieri*/*choriedi*), messengers (*mesi*/*messi*), horse-riders (*chavalari*/*cavallari*), merchant and military ships (*novelle abude da mar*), as well as the footmen in the employ of merchant networks (the barefoot *mesi di prechazo* or *fanti di prechazo*, who carried a *scarsella*, which literally means a leather bag used for the storage and transport of letters). As of the late medieval period, such a *scarsella* system – a consortium of underwriting merchants that operated a regular postal exchange between two or more important commercial centres – represented the most reliable system outside the networks of the official government heralds and couriers.[40]

The earliest known *scarsella* contract, establishing the connection between Florence and the papal seat in Avignon, was signed by a group of 20 Tuscan trading firms in 1357.[41] But the existence of the system is already implicitly acknowledged in the 1295–1303 correspondence of the Ricciardi firm from Lucca to its branch office in London.[42] Throughout the 1300s we can observe an increasing frequency and regularity of the *scarsella* networks, as well as an expanding number of urban centres that they connected. The sealed bag containing packets of letters for individual members tied together by a cord, sealed and marked with their distinguishing commercial imprint, was usually delivered to one of the senior members of the consortium who de facto served as the postmaster. He made sure that the bag was opened in the presence of the majority members of the underwriting group, and the *scarsella* contracts often explicitly stipulated that all packages were promptly distributed.[43]

The service was accessible to the public in the sense that even non-members were able to dispatch their correspondence, but they were expected to incur a time penalty: upon the arrival of a courier, their letters were usually distributed one day later.[44] This practice clearly reflected the deep understanding that information was a very perishable good, which – if acted upon quickly – was able to provide a great economic advantage. "If you are a merchant who receives a package of letters that contains also other letters, always keep in mind to read first your own letters, and only then distribute the rest," advised Paolo da Certaldo (1320–1370) to the aspiring merchant.[45]

Federigo Melis claims that at the end of the fourteenth century the merchant *scarsella* networks experienced incredible growth in terms of both regularity and speed. They relied on two principal communication axes with Milan at its centre, although each segment may have been operated by different groups which for the most part mutually collaborated, but sometimes even competed among themselves.[46] One branch of the network connected Valencia and Barcelona through Montpellier, the papal seat in Avignon, leading to Milan, and from there proceeded all the way to Venice. The other axis connected Naples, Rome, Florence, Lucca and Pisa; after reaching Milan it crossed the Alps and continued through Lyon and Paris all the way to Bruges, from where it also reached London and Amsterdam.[47]

In Morosini's accounts, the information arriving in Venice via merchant *scarsella* connections with Valencia was limited almost exclusively to the progress of the Venetian galleys on their way to and from Flanders. Similarly, the amount of news from Avignon, picked up by the courier on his way from Spain, progressively diminished because of the transfer of the papal seat back to Rome after 1418. A much more prominent node in the newsgathering network was Florence, with its powerful banking houses and merchant firms with vast multinational interests spanning the entire continent. Many of them, such as the Datini trading firm or the Medici bank, had their branch offices in Venice, whose managers, known as factors, were key players in the news-exchange.[48]

But the most important *scarsella* connection during Morosini's lifetime seems to be the one between Flanders and Venice – *lo camin de Fiandra a Venexia*.[49] The commanders of the annual Venetian convoys of galleys to Flanders (*la galee* or *mude di Fiandra*) used it regularly to send reports about their safe arrivals, business dealings, the make-up of their returning cargoes and their impending departures for Venice.[50] Yet, as will be shown later in this essay, the connection also gained prominence politically in the mid-1410s, with the escalation of the Hundred Years' War and the ensuing resistance movement that galvanized around Joan of Arc. At the same time, the news from the Eastern Mediterranean, as the above-mentioned dispatches of Biagio Dolfin already suggest,

were mediated through the dense network of Venetian naval bases and overseas merchant colonies, and carried by commercial and military ships. The following three case studies will offer additional evidence to illustrate the inner workings of the system and therefore further support the claims made earlier.

Case study I: the Ottoman Empire under Tamerlane's attack

In the final Battle of Chioggia (1380), Venice defeated Genoa, its chief naval rival, and practically secured its trade supremacy in the Mediterranean. But there was another enemy on the rise – the Ottoman Empire – whose territorial expansion was closely monitored in Venice. Yet in the early fifteenth century the seemingly unstoppable Ottoman advancement in the Balkans went through an important setback when the Turco-Mongol forces led by the legendary warrior Tamerlane attacked the Ottomans from the east and temporarily shifted the focus of their war machine away from Europe.[51]

The Venetians' first encounter with Tamerlane dates back to 1395 when he sacked Tana – an important Black Sea outpost under the control of their merchant community.[52] Five years later, Tamerlane invaded the Ottoman territories in Anatolia – as well as the Mamluk strongholds in Syria. The first reports about this new twist of events reached the Venetian Senate in October 1400.[53] The government monitored the situation with anxiety and in doing so, the Signoria relied mostly on a network of governors, notaries, ship captains and merchant representatives who performed their tasks very well. "All current news and rumours were relayed to the mother city, and a glance through the records of the Venetian Senate shows that good use was consistently made of these reports in its deliberations," Dennis asserts.[54]

Indeed, the surviving records reveal the efficacy of such an information-gathering mechanism. They include a series of reports sent to Venice between October 1400 and January 1401 by Aloisio da Canal, probably a military commissioner stationed at the naval base in Modon, as well as three dispatches written between September 1401 and April 1402 by Francesco Avonal, a Venetian notary in Candia – the administrative capital of the Venetian colony of Crete. Da Canal's reports are based on information arriving from Constantinople, and report the bewildering withdrawal of the Ottoman armies from the Balkans.[55] Avonal's letters narrate the early stages of the military encounter, and are based on the accounts of merchant-sailors who on their journey from the Eastern Mediterranean landed in Candia and told the Venetian notary everything they saw or heard about the impending conflict.[56] Some were hastily written with many corrections, as if the Venetian notary were hurryingly debriefing his source in the port in order to expedite the dispatch with another ship that was ready to leave for Venice.[57]

All of the above-mentioned surviving dispatches about Tamerlane's advance were addressed to the government, yet there are many indications that some subsequently circulated in Venice. Several of such reports are summarized by the Datini firm's representatives in Venice, from where they were forwarded not only to the firm's Tuscan headquarters, but also to its affiliate offices in Genoa, Montpellier, Barcelona, Valencia, Ibiza and Majorca.[58] One of them, containing the account of Tamerlane's conquest of Damascus on 19 January 1401, was compiled by the Venetian consul in Alexandria on 13 February, sent by ship to Venice via Crete, and after reaching the city on 21 March was copied and forwarded via *scarsella* to the Datini office in Valencia.[59]

The plundering and fall of Damascus was subsequently confirmed by an eye-witness account of Florentine merchant Gherardo di Doni, who landed on the Syrian coast, talked

to the refugees and told their story when he later landed in Rhodes – apparently relating it to one of the consuls representing the maritime trading city-states. "They say here that all Damascus is levelled with the ground, the castle is destroyed, and the Jewish synagogue is torn down with all Jews, adult and children, men and women, dead inside," reported Di Doni. This account somehow found its way to the Datini firm's representative in Montpellier, one of the merchant communes with a consular office at Rhodes, who copied and forwarded it through the firm's branch network.[60]

Many such newsletters reporting Tamerlane's conquest ultimately ended up copied in Morosini's chronicle. Indeed, they may represent some of the most comprehensive surviving accounts of the conflict in the West. At the same time, the invasion constitutes a pivotal point in Morosini's chronicle's overall style and structure, because it coincided with the moment when it gradually ceased to be a mere account of the past, and was transformed into an actual day-by-day record of all newsworthy information gathered mainly through the newsletters that circulated publicly in Venice. And *sier* Antonio Morosini dutifully documented those that he judged to be the most important "for the memory of all Christendom".[61]

One of the earliest war correspondents

The single most important source cited by Morosini is Salamon Salvazo – apparently a Venetian merchant active in the Black Sea region – who may have been based in Tana and who identified himself as the "prisoner of Tamerlane".[62] It may be a somehow figurative way of describing his position, since he was able to communicate with the Signoria through the *bailo* of the Venetian merchant community in Trebizond, Giovanni Moro. To the verbatim transcripts of Salvazo's letters, Moro added his own observations capturing the impact of the war on one of the last Byzantine outposts – Trebizond.

In general, Salvazo's dispatches outlined in detail the movements of Tamerlane's armies through eastern Anatolia, Syria and modern Iraq, giving a first-hand account of their plundering of the cities such as Aleppo and Damascus. "I never in my life saw such cruelty, and it seemed to me to be the hell which appeared to the Holy Apostle," the author insinuated the Apocalypse of St John while comparing Tamerlane to "a wicked Nero".[63]

In a way, Salvazo may be considered one of the earliest-known war correspondents, whose accounts convey not only the images of the battlefield, but also allow the reader to peek behind enemy lines. His dispatches describe the strength of Tamerlane's army and its armaments, as well as the diplomatic foreplay of the impending encounter with Sultan Bayazid. "Every day embassies go and come from Bayazid to Tamerlane and from Tamerlane to Bayazid, and no one knows what he [Tamerlane] will do," reported the first of three of Salvazo's letters that Morosini transcribed verbatim in his chronicle.[64] The next dispatch warned that diplomacy was only a game of time that Tamerlane played with Bayazid:

> I think that what [Tamerlane] is doing is intended to keep [Bayazid] happy until the snow melts, because there is some reason that prevents him from moving at the moment, and then he will attack him as soon as he is able to do so.[65]

Morosini interrupted the series of Salvazo's dispatches with a letter by one Andrea Foscolo from Trebizond – probably a Venetian merchant residing in the city – that sheds additional light on the diplomatic interplay between the Emperor of Trebizond and Tamerlane. In his letter, Foscolo also conveyed the accounts of an Italian merchant named Marco di Domenico, who on 28 March 1402 departed from Tamerlane's main military camp

in Karabakh. "Sier Marco tells me that based on the accounts of plundering he heard from [Tamerlane's] soldiers … he advises me to take everything I have here and leave."[66]

The same warning, only in a much more dramatic tone, is echoed by the subsequent dispatch by Salvazo from Tamerlane's military camp, addressed to the Venetian and Genovese merchant communities in Trebizond, and through them to the whole of Western Christendom. Salvazo asserts that if the Western merchants residing in Anatolia and Syria are not able to load all their merchandise on a ship, they should rather set fire to it and run away. "I beg all you, merchants, to send this letter to the West to my brothers wherever they are," wrote Salvazo, "inform all Christians, and let no one say that 'If I had known this I would have made my escape.'"[67]

Assessing the final damage

The subsequent entries in Morosini's chronicle are based purely on dispatches of Venetian sources positioned outside of the conflict zone – on various Mediterranean islands as well as in the Balkans. Their chronology in respect to the previous accounts is unclear, since the events they describe may be overlapping with the previously quoted letters. It is as if Morosini first decided to narrate the prologue of the conflict, then capture it from the perspective of the Venetian Black Sea community, and only now was trying to tell the story from the perspective of its observers positioned in the Mediterranean.

His first entry was a copy of a dispatch by the Venetian consul at Rhodes, forwarded by government offices in Crete, which summarized the account of a captain of a Venetian military galley on its way from Syria. It narrates an attack by Tamerlane's forces in Aleppo and the ensuing mass exodus of Western merchants to Famagusta in Cyprus, leaving behind "goods there to the value of 35 thousand ducats of gold, and many [local] debtors". The captain interviewed one of the refugees, Francesco Storlado, who "said and affirmed: 'These are Tamerlan's men. He will conquer the entire [lands of] Syria'".[68]

The next two entries in Morosini's chronicle are based on the letters that reached Venice via the Balkans, through the Dalmatian coast and Montenegro, and contain somewhat confused accounts of battles and their outcomes. The authors of the dispatches were most likely Venetian government officials in the republic's naval bases. The first author admitted that the news about Tamerlane's troops' advances against Bursa that he was reporting were uncertain. "In order to have more accurate information, we have sent a courier to Slavonia and other parts and if we learn something new, we will let you know." Yet, the author subsequently suggested that "this may be difficult because the Turks are blocking all mountain passes that lead from the coast [through the Balkan hinterlands] and no one is allowed to pass".[69] The next dispatch, recorded by Morosini only a day later, was even more confusing because it claimed that Tamerlane had been taken prisoner in an attack in revenge for the killing of two of Sultan Bayazid's sons in a previous battle.[70] The newsletter was written in the Montenegrin port of Ulcinj, and it was based on the account of a messenger of the patriarch of Pec, an important religious centre in Kosovo, who just arrived "with many letters, and talks big news".[71]

One of Morosini's last entries related to Tamerlane's campaign in Anatolia, in which the chronicler finally set the facts straight, was labelled as "The Capture of Bayazid". In great detail it offers the full account of the Battle of Ankara (1402), including the military strategy by which Tamerlane deceived the Ottoman troops, leading them into a trap. The account is based on a dispatch sent by the commander of a small fleet of Venetian military galleys, Pietro Bon, who landed at the island of Chios, where he learnt that the coastal areas of

western Anatolia were full of refugees escaping Tamerlane's invasion. Many of them were veterans of the Battle of Ankara. Bon decided to land near Ephesus, where he interviewed disbanded members of the Ottoman cavalry, and also met the official Ottoman envoys. "And these mounted men and messengers and other Turks who were in the army reported the defeat of the Turk in this way," starts the detailed account of the battle that was recorded by one of Bon's captains on 3 September 1402 – about 45 days after the battle – and immediately dispatched to Venice where Morosini again secured a copy for his chronicle.[72]

Case study II: the council of Constance

Armed conflicts that resulted in major disruptions of economies and trade, or pitted against each other the military forces of various nations, naturally drew the attention of wide international audiences. But they were not the only political events worthy of Morosini's attention. Just as modern media events – political summits, royal weddings or sporting competitions[73] – can attract the attention of audiences that follow such events as they unfold, Italian chronicles offer enough evidence that even the important late medieval gatherings of worldly or spiritual powers were closely monitored by increasingly widening publics that logistically relied on temporary networks of couriers put in place by various government or private entities.

Among the most important of such events undoubtedly ranked church councils and papal elections. For example, the Venetian chronicler Martino da Canale had already closely followed the development of the Second Council of Lyon, which gathered for over two years (1272–1274). Da Canale's account of the council relied on accounts of the returning Venetian envoys, but the key source of information for Venetians was apparently their countryman Nicolò Natale – an educated cleric of noble background whose dispatches containing council news updates seemed to circulate freely in Venice.[74] "And who wants to know all that was done at this Council," concluded Da Canale in his account of the council, "should consult the reports brought by the Venetian envoys that were written by Messer Nicolò Natale, a priest born in the parish of St Raphael, that contain a lot of information about the Council."[75]

Da Canale admitted that his account was based on Natale's letters, which de facto become the earliest mentioning of any form of an informative newsletter analysed in this study. By this time, the city of Lyon undeniably had the advantage of being one of the main commercial nodes of Europe – at the intersection of well-travelled road networks. From the logistical perspective, a much more challenging situation arose during the Council of Constance (1414–1418), whose primary purpose was to end the Great Western Schism, and which was held on the other side of the Alps in southern Germany. Yet, despite its relatively remote location, Venetians received regular updates about this gathering, from the preparatory negotiations through to the arrival of different delegations, the approval of important documents, critical setbacks and their diplomatic solutions, up until the election of a new pope and his coronation. Overall, between December 1413 and April 1418, Morosini's chronicle offers at least 80 different entries pertaining to the developments at the various stages of the council proceedings under way.

The first dispatch sent directly from Constance arrived in Venice on 19 May 1415 as a newsletter copied and forwarded to the Signoria by the Venetian authorities in Verona. "In what follows, I will note all facts of the council that is congregating in Constance as they unfold, with the aim to unite the Holy Roman Church," Morosini promised his imaginary reader after citing the letter in full.[76] And indeed, in the following three years he

undoubtedly delivered on his promise. His news updates were occasionally attributed to the letters sent by the Venetian entourage attending the council,[77] official communications and envoys of the council that arrived in Venice,[78] verbal accounts of foreign delegations who visited Venice on their way to or from Constance,[79] but in most instances his reports were simply introduced as "per letters received from Constance",[80] or with a laconic formula "we have [news] from the current council".[81]

In his chronicle, Morosini recorded many official letters sent by various parties to the council, as well as transcripts of entire documents approved in Constance. "This is an exact copy, without a word or a little detail changed," begins the verbatim transcript of the agreement between Benedict XIII (Pedro Martinez de Luna), one of the (anti)popes, and the Roman Emperor Sigismund of Luxemburg.[82] The presumably Latin original text of the treaty was already translated to vernacular Italian in Morosini's chronicle, which in itself may be an indicator of the treaty's wider circulation beyond the narrow circle of educated elites.[83] It seems that every official dispatch or document would sooner or later circulate publicly in Venice. Only at the very end of the council did the chronicler mention that he was not able to gain access to a letter sent by a group of Venetian ambassadors to the Signoria by a special courier, owing to the increased focus on secrecy within the governing circles in Venice.[84] But the very fact that he knew about its existence is already telling.

Since the council had not only immediate political repercussions, but also far-reaching economic consequences, it was closely followed by the foreign merchant companies that had their representatives in Venice – for example, through the Tuscan Bon Romeo (Borromeo perhaps?) or the Medici branch offices.[85] As a matter of fact, the most dramatic situation came at the moment when all major players finally reached an agreement on the name of a new pope – Martin V. In his chronicle, Morosini noted that early in the morning on 19 November 1417 a "galloping courier" arrived from Constance with the news for the Venetian branch of the Medici bank – one of the contenders for the privilege of becoming the new pope's banker. Morosini emphasized in his diary the speed with which the information was delivered: "He reached Venice after a seven-day journey, resting neither by day nor by night, and [it] is understood that two horses died under him."[86]

Case study III: the Hundred Years' War and Joan of Arc

The last case study addressed in this essay is dedicated to the events that marked a new escalation of the conflict known as the Hundred Years' War.[87] The earliest record of the impending English invasion of France noted in Morosini's diary refers to the merchant letters that reached Venice on 10 May 1415 by a *scarsella* courier from Flanders. Venetian correspondents admitted that their own countrymen were bankrolling the English side and thus enabling the invasion, but simultaneously expressed worries about the annual convoy of the Venetian state galleys to Flanders that may have been caught in the middle.[88] The subsequent report, written only five days after the English landing in Normandy, confirmed the invasion. The newsletter copied by Morosini was delivered by "a courier arriving from Flanders, who left on 18 August" and his bag contained "many letters of our [merchants] there, but especially the letter of the noble mister Nicholò Michiel sent to Chastelani Michiel of [the parish of] San Casian".[89]

On 1 December 1415 Morosini reported a newsletter from Paris addressed to a certain Nicholò d'i Gorganeti, a Lucchese merchant living in Venice, with shocking news about the French debacle at Agincourt.[90] "Here the things go from bad to worse," opens the report laconically, and then concisely summarizes the event: "These French

lords were defeated in the battle with the English on 25 October, in one place called Artexe [Agincourt], between France and Picardy."[91] The chronicler added that the Signoria was able to corroborate this information through other newsletters obtained via Genoa, Lucca and Verona that he subsequently cited. He concluded that "this news seems more reliable because of a courier who arrived and gives us certainty" of the French military defeat that "was described here above as it unfolded".[92]

Between 1416 and 1417 Morosini recorded many news updates on the conflict. Among others, he cited three letters by Alban Sagredo, apparently one of the Venetian merchants residing in Bruges. Sometimes the chronicler reproduced entire letters; other times he selected only the most important passages that he cited verbatim, while making a very clear distinction between the passages that he only summarized or paraphrased. Quotation marks were not used by the late medieval writers, but Morosini marked distinctions by interjecting taglines and attributing phrases such as: "he says the following", "he writes that the peace agreement was perfect news", "he adds" or "he says there is no doubt whatsoever about these facts".[93]

One of the reports, dated in Morosini's chronicle on 22 July 1417, started with a long and convoluted premise that sheds more light on the way in which the chronicler often worked selectively with multiple sources of information. He first cross-examined them in order to assess their reliability, and then without any apparent explanation selected one single letter that he cited in full.[94] Other times Morosini described a very complex network of correspondents through whom he kept receiving intelligence about the intricate political and military developments in France. His undated entry from late April 1421 cited verbatim a copy of a newsletter from Paris that was originally sent via Bruges to the Duke of Milan. It was copied by one of his secretaries and forwarded to the marquise of Ferrara, only to be copied again by the philosopher Guglielmo Capello, who was serving at the time as a tutor of the marquise's son,[95] and forwarded by Capello to one of Morosini's relatives in Venice.[96]

The rise of Joan of Arc

A series of reports related to the French counteroffensive led by Joan of Arc occupies a particular place in Morosini's chronicle. Some of them are anonymous, received for example *per la via de Fontego* – through the German merchant community in Venice; others were signed and made their way to Venice via diplomatic channels.[97] Two letters covering the early days of Joan of Arc's ascent were written from Avignon by Zian da Molin, commander of the 1429 Venetian fleet to Aigues-Mortes.[98] They were with great probability sent to Venice through regular merchant *scarsella* upon the fleet's return from Barcelona and Valencia. In another case, it was the courier carrying the *scarsella* who learned important news while on the way and reported it verbally after reaching Venice.[99]

But the bulk of the 20 news dispatches recorded in Morosini's chronicle between May 1429 and March 1430, during the stunning French insurgence led by Joan of Arc, were written by Pancrazio Giustiniani – a Venetian merchant residing in Bruges – and were addressed to his father Marco in Venice (Table 1). The fact that we know the name of the author of an entire series of dispatches is quite unique; just as unusual is the fact that Giustiniani often disclosed his sources as well as some editorial strategies that he adopted while compiling his newsletters. All of his entries have at least a three-week lag that corresponds with the duration of the *scarsella* journey between Bruges to Venice.[100] They indicate that the breaking of the siege of Orleans on 8 May 1429 bestowed upon Joan of Arc

Table 1. Newsletters related to the events in France that are reported by Antonio Morosini in his chronicle between May 1429 and May 1430.

No.	Dated	Originated in	Author	Addressed to	Reported by Morosini on	Time lag	Note
	Siege of Orleans lifted on 7 May 1429						
1	10 May 1429	Bruges, Belgium	Pancrazio Giustiniani	Marco Giustiniani (father)	18 June 1429	39 days	
2	4 June 1429	Bruges, Belgium	Pancrazio Giustiniani	Marco Giustiniani (father)	25 June 1429	21 days	
3	After 23 June 1429	Avignon, France	Giovanni da Molin	The Signoria	14 July 1429	21 days or less	Received with many other letters containing similar information
4	28 June 1429	Marseille, France	n.d.	n.d.	Late July 1429	22 days or more	
5	30 June 1429	Avignon, France	Giovanni da Molin	The Signoria	After 20 July 1429	20 days or more	
6	9 July 1429	Bruges, Belgium	Pancrazio Giustiniani [arguably]	Marco Giustiniani (father) [arguably]	2 August 1429	24 days	
7	*ca.* 10 July 1429	n.d., France	Unknown [forwarded by the Marquis of Montferrat]	The Signoria	After 2 August 1429	23 days or more	
8	*ca.* 10 July 1429	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	After 2 August 1429	23 days or more	A summary of a newsletter related to the previous document no. 7
9	1 August 1429	Genoa, Italy	n.d.	n.d.	Before 11 August 1429	10 days or less	
10	16 July 1429	Bruges, Belgium	Pancrazio Giustiniani	Marco Giustiniani (father)	Between 18 August and 1 September 1429	33–46 days	
	The conquest of Reims and the next-day coronation of the dauphin on 17 July 1429						
11	27 July 1429	Bruges, Belgium	Pancrazio Giustiniani	Marco Giustiniani (father)	Between 18 August and 1 September 1429	23–36 days	

(*continued*)

Table 1. (*Continued*).

No.	Dated	Originated in	Author	Addressed to	Reported by Morosini on	Time lag	Note
12	9 August 1429	Bruges, Belgium	Letters of resident Venetian merchants	n.d.	Between 12–17 September 1429	33–38 days	
13	n.d.	Bruges, Belgium	Letters of resident Venetian merchants	n.d.	17 September 1429	n.d.	
14	13 September 1429	Bruges, Belgium	Pancrazio Giustiniani	Marco Giustiniani (father)	Between 4–28 October 1429	21–45 days	
15	20 November 1429	Bruges, Belgium	Pancrazio Giustiniani	Marco Giustiniani (father)	23 December 1429	33 days	
16	n.d.	Florence, Italy	n.d.	n.d.	6 January 1430	n.d.	
17	4 January 1430	Bruges, Belgium	Pancrazio Giustiniani	Marco Giustiniani (father)	1 February 1430	28 days	
18	17 February 1430	Bruges, Belgium	Pancrazio Giustiniani	Marco Giustiniani (father)	30 March 1430	40 days	Both letters are summarized by Morosini in the same entry
19	4 March 1430	Bruges, Belgium	Pancrazio Giustiniani	Marco Giustiniani (father)	30 March 1430	25 days	
20	22 March 1430	Bruges, Belgium	Pancrazio Giustiniani	Marco Giustiniani (father)	17 April 1430	26 days	Via merchant *scarsella* received by Bonromeo da Fiorenza's office in Venice
	Joan of Arc captured by the Burgundian troops at Margny on 23 May 1430						

the status of a pre-modern celebrity. Morosini mentioned her for the first time on 18 June 1429 in a verbatim copy of a very long newsletter from Giustiniani. The newsletter itself was a compilation of various sources from both sides of the two competing French factions of the conflict – the Burgundian, tacitly supporting the English invaders, and the royalist Armagnac bloc backing the dauphin and his claim to the French throne.[101]

In the first four paragraphs of the letter, Giustiniani summarized the events from the royalist Parisian headquarters. The author relied on "the most truthful news from Paris [received] by the way of letters, couriers, merchants, and by other means".[102] The account mentioned for the first time *una poncela/la Pulzella* – the battle name under which Joan of Arc became immortalized in Italy.[103] At the end of the fourth paragraph, Giustiniani switched to the reports from the Burgundian side of the conflict, emphasizing that he had "point-by-point reproduced all letters exactly as they were written".[104] Their author was a certain Lorenzo [Lawrence?], an Englishman and "a good and discrete person" whom the correspondent's brother Marino Giustiniani reportedly knew very well in person.[105]

Again, there are several indications that such news reports, addressed originally to individuals, freely circulated in Venice and had therefore a very public, epistolary nature. In one of his dispatches Giustiniani attached an almost verbatim copy of a now famous treatise by the emeritus chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean Gerson, conceived as an unfaltering defence of Joan of Arc against those who accused her of witchcraft.[106] Here, the son directly encouraged his father to circulate the dispatch publicly in Venice. "I believe that *miser* doge and many others will have the ultimate pleasure to read this work, which I copy here. Make it available to anyone who would like to read it," he wrote.[107] The public nature of such newsletters addressed originally to private persons is further supported by the fact that at least two of the updates on the situation in France recorded in Morosini's chronicle are also preserved among the archival documents of the Benedictine monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice.[108]

It is therefore rather surprising that while Morosini's chronicle dedicates so much space to Joan of Arc's rise to power, her capture on 23 May 1430 is practically ignored. Only later, in early August 1430, did the chronicler summarize a newsletter from Bruges claiming that she was taken prisoner by the Duke of Burgundy. "We have no details of what happened to her, maybe later," commented Morosini in his entry.[109] The account of the martyrdom of Joan of Arc was finally received in Venice through merchant *scarsella* that departed Bruges on 22 June 1431, and Morosini's reconstruction of her execution is based on two newsletters that it contained, addressed to Zian Zorzi and Andrea Corner.[110]

Final analysis

Most of the current communication history scholarship argues that the great information revolution that gave birth to the handwritten *avvisi*, the immediate predecessors of modern newspapers, took place between the second half of the fifteenth century and the early sixteenth. While it recognizes that the late medieval merchant letters may have sporadically carried news from distant places, it argues that such reports were just labels taken out of cultural, political and geographic contexts that otherwise did not matter in merchant correspondence. Infelise points out that the world at large was seemingly irrelevant to the communities of expatriate traders, as if before the Renaissance revival of cartography and subsequent popularization of maps the merchant class still lived in a reality that was completely extraneous to our concept of space today. "What mattered was the economy

with its own dynamics, and nothing else. The political or religious encounters were only accidental obstacles that added friction to the economic exchange."[111]

This view may indeed find support in the surviving merchant manuals. For example, Giovanni da Uzzano or Benedetto Cotrugli Raguseo in the 1440s/1450s advised their "perfect merchants" to rely on correspondence in order to be well informed about the seasonal dynamics of the various markets and their currencies, the dates of fairs, and other times when the money was abundant in specific places; the importance of broader social and political developments is not mentioned at all by either of the authors in question.[112] Yet Datini's factor in Venice, forwarding information about Tamerlane's destruction of Syrian lands all the way to Aleppo in 1401, already began his commercial letter with a premise that "it is impossible to trade without news". He was furthermore aware that "if all this news is true, it would make great mutations to business", but he also cautioned that the information conveyed in his dispatch still needed to be confirmed because there are "many lies and deceptions out there" by those who already skilfully used fake news reports to manipulate the markets.[113]

Indeed, the evidence presented in this essay indicates that at least by the early 1400s – mainly in the larger commercial centres like Venice and Florence – there was already a relatively sophisticated audience hungry for information that transcended the sheer market data, such as the currency exchange rates and commodity prices. This was reflected in a vast number of newsletters circulating through various social, commercial and political networks, which were closely monitoring important political, religious and military developments – not only in Italy, but also on a relatively extensive international scale.

Such newsletters were produced by various entities – for the most part merchants and lower-tier permanent diplomatic representatives, galley captains and military liaisons, whose networks often operated with symbiotic synergy. Their news dispatches were copied – either partially or in their entirety – then forwarded and often combined with other letters, generating an echo chamber of information, often of uncertain origin and authorship reminiscent of the current environment created by the internet. While their authorships may not have always been properly attributed, the opening passages of such newsletters invariably provided a minute record of times and places through which the information travelled.

Increasingly, these emerging newsletters had one feature in common: the economic information typical for a traditional medieval merchant correspondence, if it were mentioned at all, was clearly presented as subordinate to the complex political or military developments and natural events that the merchant needed to know for the sake of business. In other words, they were not just classic merchant letters where the authors here and there sneak in a paragraph or two covering some newsworthy event that caught their eye. Many of them, such as the report from Udine recorded in 1348 in Villani's chronicle, were emerging newsletters in their own right. They were dedicated to one single event and typologically they may be seen crystallizing in a series of newsletters dedicated to Joan of Arc, sent by Pancrazio Giustiniani from Bruges.

Even before the institution of formal postal connections, such letters travelled through Europe via relatively regular merchant *scarsella* networks that ensured certain periodicity. The more established the postal networks become, the more regular the news exchange becomes. They were written privately, yet there are many indications that such dispatches circulated among wider audiences. They must have been considered ephemera by their recipients, and therefore only a few of such newsletters survived in their original form – yet many ended up being copied in late medieval chronicles, where they are sometimes corroborated by or confronted with similar letters originating in various other places.

Most of the newsletters analysed in this essay convey the accounts of a single event, which they narrate in depth. But it seems that the circle of correspondents around Biagio Dolfin developed an alternative typological scheme when they already selectively edited various similar monothematic newsletters and by-word-of-mouth tales, and compiled them into headline-style reports – concise news digests addressing up to two dozen events, each covered in less than five lines of text. They were copied, combined with other similar newsletters and circulated further, as the report of Giacomo Bragadin from Crete clearly illustrates. In his chronicle, Antonio Morosini captured both typological schemes of such newsletters, which survived practically unmodified by news writers for several subsequent centuries. They are all composed in a concise, clearly structured and formulaic style labelled by Infelise as the "essential minimum" that is very different from the eloquent Latinized letter-writing style practised by the educated elites. Indeed, it may be justly claimed that modern news-writing owes a lot to the experience of medieval merchant circles that pioneered many of its core strategies – but that would be a subject for another study.[114]

Aside from the merchant circles, diplomatic envoys were the next important group that pioneered the news-writing, although in the case of Venice or Florence, these two classes of persons very often intersected. Alas, the birth of the *avvisi* had been previously tied to the nascent system of permanent embassies instituted by the Italian states like Milan or Venice in the second half of the 1400s. Beyond any doubt, the permanent ambassadors were the key producers and consumers of news in Renaissance Europe.[115] Yet the above-mentioned evidence indicates that by the end of the fourteenth century the city-states like Venice already had in place a system of lower-tier government representatives stationed in practically all commercial centres spanning the territory between Constantinople and Bruges. Their primary role was to assist the expatriate merchant community, but they simultaneously served as the intelligence-gathering conduits put in place by the Signoria.

Morosini's entries attest that between his consulships in Sibenik and Alexandria, Biagio Dolfin assumed, at two different points in his life, the role of the author as well as the consumer of the newsletters.[116] Venetian notary Francesco Avonal in Candia, Bailo Giovanni Moro in Trebizond, Aloisio da Canal in Modon, Zian da Molin – the captain of the state commercial fleet to Aigues-Mortes, or the captain of a military galley Marco Grimani from the coasts of Turkey – they all strived to provide important information that allowed the government back in Venice to make its decision-making process more efficient, reacting in what could have been considered by contemporary standards "real time" to the major domestic and international developments.

The stories reported in the early newsletters did not always originate in important commercial or political centres. Most of the military battles took place in remote places – yet there was always an eye-witness whose account was recorded in a matter of days in one of the central nodes of the information-gathering network. Most peculiar was the situation of Salamon Salvazo, who literally followed the movement of Tamerlane's armies in the manner of an early frontline reporter, quasi-embedded with the troops he covered. Meanwhile, during the church councils or papal elections that took place in out-of-the-way locations, an entire network of potential correspondents and speedy couriers was temporarily set in place to keep the rest of Western Christendom regularly updated about the key developments. Thanks to the incessant interest in everything related to armed conflicts (and supernatural powers), even commoners such as Joan of Arc could become household names throughout Europe in a matter of weeks.

We might reasonably wonder whether Venice or Florence as major centres of commerce were different from the news-network perspective than other similar urban

centres with a developed civic spirit. Similar studies focusing on the situation in, for example, Bruges, Antwerp, Lyon or in the Hanseatic cities would shed more light on this issue. But a mere glance at other contemporary northern Italian cities with more centralized political power suggests that at least on a regional scale, the merchant-driven republican environment of Venice or Florence was indeed ahead of its time, both in the amount of publicly circulating information and in the nature of networks through which this was gathered. The *Chronicon Patavinum*, composed practically simultaneously with Morosini's chronicle in neighbouring Padua, or the *Diario Ferrarese* that corresponds with the early years of Sanudo's diary, indicate that the news about political and military developments was mostly under the control of the central political power that served as the main gatekeeper of information, and communicated it to the rest of population based on its own judgement and interest.[117]

Overall, the findings presented in this study amply justify the claim that the core practices pertaining to the early modern gathering, diffusion and consumption of news that historians previously associated with the advent of the sixteenth century may be already clearly discerned at least 100 years earlier, in the early 1400s urban environments of Venice or Florence. There is no indication that there was already a widespread market for such newsletters; that is truly a phenomenon that Infelise located only in the mid-1500s.[118] The available evidence suggests that in their infancy, such newsletters were mostly a by-product of various diplomatic, commercial or military operations, and circulated publicly through formal and informal networks, propelled by the increasing awareness of the nexus between information and the world of business and politics.

While the widespread records of the events such as the Battle of Crécy indicate that already in the 1300s there must have been an exchange mechanism connecting the most advanced European commercial and political centres, there is no material evidence in the form of surviving letters or news-sheets to support this claim. The contemporary chroniclers themselves only rarely disclose their sources, and there are no substantial surviving collections of merchant correspondence enabling further analysis. The examples of newsletters scattered randomly among the vast merchant literary heritage preserved by the Datini Archives in Prato, or the few early 1400s examples contained in various collections of the State Archives in Venice,[119] may be both relatively narrow, but they give us the earliest glimpse into the operation and scope of the nascent news-gathering networks. Consequently, Morosini's chronicle complements such scarce direct evidence and is truly unique in the sense that for the first time a chronicler, in a systematic way, attributed each piece of information to the source, stating also the exact time when and where the newsletter originated, sometimes even its author's name and how he obtained it. Therefore, this is what we can say at the moment about the origins of the enigmatic *avvisi* – the handwritten predecessors of modern newspapers: they were already well established in the early 1400s and known under the name *nove* or *novele/novelle*, yet their roots might have to be searched for at least a century earlier.

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Notes

1. Infelise, "News Networks Between Italy and Europe", 51–2; Infelise, "From Merchants' Letters", 34–5, 43.
2. Infelise, *Prima dei giornali*, 3–4, 38–9. Cf. Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy*, 104–5.
3. Raymond and Moxham, *News Networks*, 7–8.
4. Raymond and Moxham, *News Networks*, 10. Schobesberger et al., "European Postal Networks", 19–20.
5. Christ, "A Newsletter in 1419?"
6. Archivio di Stato di Venezia (ASVe), Procuratori di S. Marco, Commissarie Miste, b. 181, fasc. 15. For the list of consuls, see Ashtor, *Levant Trade*, 552.
7. Morosini, *Il Codice*. All subsequent references and citations from the chronicle will be marked by the system devised by the editor Nanetti (ordinal number of a ruling doge/paragraph number), accompanied also by the volume and page number of the printed edition.
8. Infelise ("News Networks Between Italy and Europe", 51–2) acknowledges Christ's findings, but does not accept his challenge to re-evaluate the dominant idea that the information networks emerged only in the second half of the fifteenth century.
9. Letter of Giacomo Bragadin to Biagio Dolfin dated 12 January 1419. ASVe, Procuratori di S. Marco, Commissarie Miste, b. 181, fasc. 15.
10. De Blasi, "La lettera mercantile".
11. Livi, *Dall'archivio di Francesco Datini*, 3.
12. Melis, *Documenti per la storia economica*, 17.
13. Cf. Infelise, "La circolazione dell'informazione", 521. The close relationship between the increasingly integrated European markets and news exchange has already been eloquently articulated in the work of scholars such as Federigo Melis or Fernand Braudel.
14. Isabella Lazzarini, *Communication & Conflict*, 3–4.
15. Vittorio Lazzarini, *Dispacci di Pietro Cornaro*, 21 and 28.
16. Ibid., 23.
17. Luzzio, *L'Archivio Gonzaga*, 199–200.
18. Melis, "Intensità e regolarità"; Frangioni, "Organizzazione e costi"; Milanesi, "Ordini della 'Scarsella'".
19. Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic*, 136–52.
20. Pozza, "La cancelleria".
21. Kittler, "From Rags to Riches"; Melograni, "Manuscript Materials".
22. Castellani, *Lettere dei Ricciardi*, xix. The original letters are in the collections of The National Archives (TNA) in Kew, UK, contained in two separate folders: E 101/601/5 and SC 1/58.
23. Ibid., 89. For the text original see TNA, E 101/601/5 f. 12v.
24. Ibid., 145. For the original text see TNA, SC 1/58 f. 20c.
25. Villani, *Cronaca di Giovanni Villani*. All subsequent references and citations from the chronicle will be marked by the book number/entry number, accompanied also by the page number as listed in this online edition.
26. For critical analysis of Villani's work see Clarke, "The Villani Chronicles".
27. Villani 8.LXXIX, 640.
28. Ibid., 8.LV-LXXIX, 587–642.
29. Ibid., 8.LVIII, 602.
30. Ibid., 8.LXIV, 613.
31. Ibid., 12.XIX, 1244.
32. Ibid., 13.LXXXIV, 1578.
33. Ibid., 13.LXXXIV, 1578.
34. Ibid., 13.CXXII, 1638–9.
35. Livingstone and DeVries, *The Battle of Crécy*, 356.
36. Morelli, "La cronica", 310.
37. Infelise, "From Merchants' Letters", 36–7.
38. Melville-Jones, "Venetian History", 207–8.
39. Morosini, *Il Codice*, 65.1587, and 65.1590, vol. 3, 1558–9.
40. Melis, "Intensità e regolarità", 20–1.
41. Milanesi, "Ordini della scarsella".

42. Castellani, *Lettere dei Ricciardi*.
43. Cecchi, "Posta e Paleografia (3)", 147–51.
44. Frangioni, "Organizzazione e costi", 60–3.
45. Da Certaldo, *Libro di Buoni Costumi*, 149–50.
46. Cecchi, "Posta e Paleografia (4)", 55–60.
47. Melis, "Intensità e regolarità", 17–8; cf. Friangioni, "Organizzazione e costi", see the attached map entitled "Irradiazione del servizio postale".
48. For the Medici branch office, see Morosini, *Il Codice*, 63.690, vol. 1, 465; the Datini firm is discussed by Melis, *Aspetti della vita economica*.
49. Morosini, *Il Codice*, 64.585, vol. 2, 757.
50. See for example ibid., 64.306, vol. 2, 635. Cf. Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic*, 126–7.
51. Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic*, 196–201.
52. Cf. Morosini, *Il Codice*, 62.29, vol. 1, 192.
53. Dennis, "Three Reports from Crete", 262–3; cf. Thiriet, *Régestes des délibérations*, 13.
54. Dennis, "Three Reports from Crete", 243.
55. The Da Canal dispatches are summarized in ibid., 262–3 (the originals are in ASVe, Miscellanea Gregolin, busta 6).
56. All Avonal's dispatches are transcribed, translated and annotated in ibid., 244–61.
57. Ibid., 255–6.
58. Melis, *Aspetti della vita economica*, 30–2.
59. Ainaud, "Quatre documents", 332–3.
60. Archivio di Stato di Prato – Fondo Datini, busta 899, inserto 3, codice 114314.
61. Morosini, *Il codice*, 63.065, vol. 1, 230–1.
62. Ibid., 63.078, vol. 1, 236.
63. Ibid., 63.067, vol. 1, 231–3.
64. Ibid., 63.067, vol. 1, 231–3.
65. Ibid., 63.070, vol. 1, 233.
66. Ibid., 63.072, vol. 1, 234.
67. Ibid., 63.075, vol. 1, 234–5.
68. Ibid., 63.081, vol. 1, 236.
69. Ibid., 63.082, vol. 1, 236–7.
70. Ibid., 63.083–084, vol. 1, 237–9.
71. Ibid., 63.082, vol. 1, 236–7 .
72. Ibid., 63.085 – vol. 1, 239–41.
73. For more on modern media events, see the seminal book by Katz and Dayan, *Media Events*.
74. Da Canale, "La cronaca dei Veneziani", 677 and 679.
75. Ibid., 678–9.
76. Morosini, *Il Codice*, 64.203, vol. 2, 600–1.
77. Ibid., 64.448, vol. 2, 691.
78. Ibid., 64.278 and 64.280–4, vol. 2, 625 and 626–8.
79. Ibid., 64.262, vol. 2, 622.
80. Ibid., 64.213, vol. 2, 604.
81. Ibid., 64.214, vol. 2, 605.
82. Ibid., 64.329–339, vol. 2, 643–6.
83. The author of this study was not able to locate the original text of the treaty in the archives, although it may be reasonably assumed that it was issued in Latin, since it was among the official documents of a church council.
84. Ibid., 64.645, vol. 2, 783.
85. Ibid., 64.321 and 64.494, vol. 2, 640–1 and 709–10.
86. Ibid., 64.588, vol. 2, 759–60.
87. For the sake of consistency, I will continue relying on Nanetti's edition of Morosini's chronicle in my footnotes, although the excerpts relative to the history of France have been presented also by Lefèvre-Pontalis and Dorez in *Chronique d'Antonio Morosini*.
88. Ibid., 64.227, vol. 2, 609.
89. Ibid., 64.277, vol. 2, 624.
90. Ibid., 64.340, vol. 2, 646.
91. Ibid., 64.341, col. 2, 646.
92. Ibid., 64.342, vol. 2, 647.

93. Ibid., 64.475, vol. 2, 701.
94. Ibid., 64.558, vol. 2, 744.
95. Hausmann, "Capello".
96. Morosini, *Il Codice*, 64.925, vol. 2, 887.
97. Ibid., 65.1265, vol. 3, 1431.
98. Ibid., 65.1030, vol. 3, 13349–50.
99. Ibid., 65.1268, vol. 3, 1432.
100. Melis, "Intensità e regolarità", 42.
101. Morosini, *Il Codice*, 65.1011, vol. 3, 1341.
102. Ibid., 65.1013, vol. 3, 1343.
103. Ibid., 65.1015, vol. 3, 1344.
104. Ibid., 65.1016, vol. 3, 1344.
105. Lefèvre-Pontalis and Dorez, *Chronique d'Antonio Morosini*, 48–9, note 6.
106. Morosini, *Il Codice*, 65.1162, vol. 3, 1391; cf. Hobbins, "Jean Gerson's Authentic Tract".
107. Morosini, *Il Codice*, 65.1162, vol. 3, 1391–2.
108. Lefèvre-Pontalis and Dorez, *Chronique d'Antonio Morosini*, 163, note 3.
109. Morosini, *Il Codice*, 65.1263, vol. 3, 1430.
110. Ibid., 65.1481, vol. 3, 1515–6.
111. Infelise, "La circolazione dell'informazione", 500 and 521.
112. Da Uzzano, "La pratica della mercatura", 148; Cotrugli Raguseo, *Della mercatura*, p. 166.
113. Archivio di Stato di Prato – Fondo Datini, busta 550, inserto 16, codice 307781. Cited by Infelise, "La circolazione dell'informazione", 513–14.
114. Ibid., 512.
115. Ibid., 501.
116. Morosini, *Il Codice*, 64.263, vol. 2, 622.
117. See De Gataris, "Chronicon patavinum"; Zambotti, "Diario ferrarese".
118. Infelise, "From Merchants' Letters", 41–4.
119. For example, the Commisaria of Biagio Dolfin; Miscellanea Gregolin or the Notarial archive of Francesco Avonal (Notai di Candia) – both analysed in Dennis, "Three Reports from Crete" – all sources were cited earlier in this study.

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