The composite world of early modern information

Filippo de Vivo

University of Oxford

Special issue of *European Review of History* edited by Alessandro Silvestri: "The composite polities of the Renaissance world: Government, distance, information."

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Abstract. Information provided a crucial means for the aggregation of composite polities, a notion first developed in the context of late medieval European multiple kingdoms, but one that can be extended chronologically and geographically to include a wider range of political arrangements that extended to large parts of the early modern world. To what extent did communications networks hold composite polities together, and what challenges did those networks face? These concluding remarks assess the viability of the notion of composite polities, the role of information, and the nature of their archives.

According to the Italian philosopher and historian Benedetto Croce, all history is contemporary history. First introduced by H. G. Koenigsberger, the notion of composite polities, became a historiographical classic thanks especially to John Elliott's 1992 article, published the same year when the Maastricht treaty both encouraged regional development and hailed ever-closer union.[1] As he argued, traditional political history centred on the rise of national states, but in fact most European monarchies in the long sixteenth century comprised largely independent territories that remained separate not just by geographical distance, but also by linguistic, legal and customary differences. The idea was useful to understanding how regional diversities and 'once suppressed nationalities' coexisted with integration processes. Elliott returned to the notion twenty years later, when he reaffirmed its importance for transnational history at a time when the European Union was facing a new economic and political crisis.[2] A little over a decade later, we have been moving away from transnational to global history, but the resurgence of nationalism, war, and mass

*I would to thank Jorge Flores and Alessandro Silvestri for their suggestions while writing this article.

[1] Koenigsberger, "Monarchies and Parliaments"; Elliott, "A Europe of Composite Monarchies."

[2] Elliott, *History in the Making*, 40-79 and see also ibid, pp. 168-218 for reflections on comparative global history.

displacement in Europe and beyond, urge us to distrust all simplistic narratives of increasing integration. Once again, however, the notion of composite polities helps view political connections in the light of differences, distances and dissenting voices, which all feature prominently in this special issue on *The composite polities of the Renaissance world: government, distance, information*. As the issue's subtitle indicates, moreover, the articles collected here also show an additional way in which the present asks new questions about the past, true to Croce's dictum. Together, they investigate the role of information: a topic to which neither Koenigsberger nor Elliott paid much attention, yet one that has become crucial in our own era of digital revolution. To what extent did communications networks hold composite polities together and enabled government across long distances, and what challenges did those networks face? On the basis of rich archival research and historiographical reflections, the authors gathered here tackle important common questions and – with the independence of constituent components of composite polities – offer a variety of answers from their different angles.

Composite polities of the world

Compared to Elliott, the authors in this special issue expand the category of composite polities chronologically, geographically, and qualitatively to include a variety of polities of dramatically different size as well as nature: principalities tying together both adjacent and separate towns with periodically renewed pacts, as in the case of Northern Italy's so-called regional states;[3] confederate aggregations of communal entities whose coordination was ensured through regular meetings of elected representatives, as with the Swiss cantons;[4] large multiple kingdoms under a common monarch in the Western Mediterranean, as with the Crown of Aragon – it's worth remembering that Sicily and Sardinia were each bigger than Wales, and the mainland Aragonese domains were as large as England;[5] a republican city-state such as Venice, ruling through governors and the cooptation of civic councils over a set of territories, islands and fortresses stretching over more

[3] Lazzarini, "Ruling by information, governing by records: the spoken and written grammar of power in post-communal Italy (c. 1350-1520)."

[4] Head, "Archiving the Swiss *Tagsatzung* in the Early Modern Era: From Distributed Protocols to Confederal Archive".

[5] Silvestri, "'We want to know and be clearly informed': Official Records, Unofficial Correspondence, and Oral Communication in the Fourteenth-century Crown of Aragon (Majorca, Sardinia, Sicily)."

than 2,000 miles from the Adriatic to the Levantine sea.[6] Finally, two articles reach out beyond Europe, with the seaborne Iberian empires which ruled over huge territories in the Americas, Africa and the Indian Ocean – empires which themselves functioned as composite monarchies within their peninsular domains and, in the period 1580-1640, constituted multiple kingdoms under three successive hereditary monarchs.[7] Despite the title, the special issue also questions classic features of European Renaissance historiography; for example, as Alessandro Silvestri suggests in his introduction, it would be wrong to identify composite polities as primordial phases on the way toward the modern state.[8]

Can we push this further to view composite polities as central to global early modernity as an era marked less by unification than by increasing connections, in which the aggregation of a diverse range of territories grew across the board as a result of increasing global entanglements? On the one hand, there is an argument for comparison. The Holy Roman Empire, once regarded as a unique arrangement, can itself be understood comparatively with reference to other European and non-European cases.[9] On the other hand, we need to understand the very nature of connections away from Eurocentric views. The very expansion of composite polities depended largely on the collaboration of some local elements often in competition with each other; they too had to negotiate governance with local elites and to some extent recognised local customs.[10] Of course empires behaved in very different ways toward local communities and institutions depending on power asymmetries. But even where conquest led to coercion and the forced implantation of imported elites, they had to come to terms with both those elites and local societies. Portuguese outposts such as Macau or Goa owed their continued existence to the concession by dominant local powers as, to some extent, junior members in Asian composite polities. In fact a great deal of early modern

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[6] O'Connell, "Jem Sultan, Bartolomeo Minio and Venice's Intelligence System: Complex Archives, Information, and the Composite State)."

[7] Flores and Cardim, "An Imperial Formation Joins a Composite Polity: The Portuguese Empire and the Information System of the Hispanic Monarchy (1580–1640)", and Calvo and Gaudin, "Manila and their agents in the Court: long-distance political communication and imperial configuration in the seventeenth-century Spanish monarchy."

[8] Silvestri, "Information and the Government of the Composite Polities of the Renaissance (c. 1350-1650)", p. 0000.

[9] Different recent comparative approaches in Scholz, *Borders and Freedom of Movement*, and Close, *State Formation and Shared Sovereignty*.

[10] Restall, "The New Conquest History" and Yun Casalilla, *Iberian World Empires*. For a similar point about the Venetian Mediterranean empire, see Arbel, "Venice's maritime empire".

global connections developed in the framework of entangled composite polities. It is worth asking whether the category of composite polities can usefully be applied to non-Western political entities. Victor Lieberman's 'strange parallels' pointed to similar processes of national aggregation in Western Europe and Southeast Asia.[11] But this is to define aggregation as political and territorial unification. What if we look elsewhere, namely if we define aggregation as the coordination of composite elements? Can the Ottoman empire's constellation of satellite tributary states or its recognition of separate judicial systems be seen as elements of a composite polity?[12] Or the Mughal empire's patchwork of crownlands and semi-independent rajas?[13] For all their claims to universal rule, early modern empires across the globe were quintessentially composite conglomerates which aggregated ethnically and religiously mixed peoples and territories by negotiating rights and obligations.[14]

Information matters – and information people

How did the composite polities' several components come, and stay, together? Again we see a shift in recent research. The classic formulation focused on the one-to-one, personal and dynastic *ad hoc* pacts that had to be continually recognised, maintained and renewed through representative assemblies or in the negotiation between centrally nominated governors and local elites. The articles in this special issue move from institutions to information to remind us that another crucial connective comprised news and letters which, as Monique O'Connell aptly puts it here, constituted the 'lifeblood of governance' for composite polities. This resonates with recent research in the history of information, which has been asking how information boomed and networks increased in intensity and rapidity at a time of thickening global connections.[15] Composite polities are – to use Paul Dover's expression – 'letterocracies'. Information connected composite polities in two ways according to the studies collected in this special issue. In one, the governments of composite polities in princely or republican capitals and imperial metropoles gathered knowledge about their

[11] Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*.
[12] Barkey. *Empire of Difference*, and Kármán and Kunçević, *The European Tributary States*.
[13] Dale, "India under Mughal Rule," 281.
[14] Burbank, and Cooper, *Empires in World History*.
[15] The following two recent volumes both give ample space to political aspects, but neither has much to say about the question of composite polities: Blair et al., eds. *Information*, and Dover, *The Information Revolution*.

distant provinces; they used it for decision-making, prior to redistributing news and above all instructions outward. The Venetian republic compiled 'summaries' of the information received from across its domains and from its ambassadors and other representatives abroad, and transcribed them in multiple copies to send to each of its governors and representatives (sometimes with important variations.)[16] Information was vital to survive in the frantic world of rapidly changing alliances and sudden threats on even the relatively small geographical scale that Isabella Lazzarini illustrates for Northern Italy in the fifteenth century.[17] Of course, channels of communication grew increasingly slower with distance and this only increased when the Mediterranean Sea or massive oceanic distances separated territories and made rulers depend on fragile webs of transmission. Just like the king of Spain, the Sforza dukes of Milan, the kings of Aragon, and the Republic of Venice also asserted their will to know everything, with an emphasis that was inversely proportional to their ability to retrieve rapid and reliable information.[18] The point for us as historians is not just that we need to take with a pinch of salt such confident statements about the efficiency of governmental communication. It is, rather, that, if composite government is government by information, information is composite too, an object of conflict and competition as much as communication.

This brings us to the other way in which information helped composite polities coalesce. Once we shift our point of view away from the centre, we realise that information always and inevitably depended on provincial informers. Every governor needed local informants they could trust, as the Aragonese realised in Sicily in the 1390s.[19] But each component of composite polities had an interest in furnishing the centre with particular kinds of information, offered more or less selectively in exchange for favour, or wielded as part of processes of negotiation and as useful tools in the competition for resources. As most articles here insist, the study of information reminds us that composite polities were not just polymorphic, they were also truly polyphonic and expressed themselves always with multiple and sometimes competing voices. In the confidential local knowledge offered by local feudatories, in the texts of *arbitristas* offering advice, in petitions imploring favours or in more forceful demands, manuscript newsletters or printed *relaciones de*

[16] As well as O'Connell's article in this special issue, see Petitjean, *L'intelligence des Choses*, 354.
[17] As well as Isabella Lazzarini's article in this special issue, see the now classic Senatore, '*Uno mundo de carta'*.
[18] Brendecke, *The Empirical Empire*.
[19] Silvestri, "'We want to know'," p. 0000

sucesos, provincial elites or other members of local communities also put forward their views of political arrangements. This led to the coexistence of competing worldviews, as in northern Italian principalities where officers' appointments issued by the ruler identified territories in hierarchically arranged sequences, while fiscal records produced on the basis of local testimonies recorded more capillary and organic views including hamlets, houses and plots of land.[20] At times rather than simply engaging in informational transactions, component parts could send powerful messages of resistance, ranging from dissent to outright rebellion.[21] The case of Venice shows that, the state had no Weberian monopoly of either legitimate violence or, even less so, the means of reliable or effective communication.[22] The information of composite polities is composed by a multiplicity of different actors competing or complementing each other.

Once again, a global approach can help set European views in context. On the one hand, we need to ditch European exceptionality as all early modern empires saw an increase in the gathering of information about distant territories as well as neighbours at a time of increasing global competition when no single power dominated. In the same years as Philip II was described as 'el rey papelero', ceaselessly labouring on the written reports from his distant domains, the Mughal emperor Akbar with equal tirelessness demanded new forms of information gathering and record-keeping including 'daily journals of events obtained from all cities and towns'.[23] On the other hand, a global approach can help us revise some of our assumptions about the ways in which information circulated in Europe itself. The example just mentioned of Akbar reminds us that, alongside writing, orality and aurality continued to play a crucial role. It was not only this reputedly illiterate and more likely dyslexic emperor who instructed secretaries to read out letters; so too did his emperor-and-author son Jahangir and, in the same years, Elizabeth I and Philip II himself, who for all his papers affirmed that 'it is easier to understand these matters in a conversation than in a letter'.[24] Written and oral information were inextricable when, even at the centre of highly

[20] Lazzarini, "Ruling by information"

[21] For different accounts, in late medieval and early modern Italy, see de Benedictis, *Neither Disobedients nor Rebels* and Cohn, *Popular Protest*; for an interesting comparison, Lantschner, 'City States'.

[22] De Vivo, *Information and Communication* 8 and 231.

[23] Parker, *The Grand Strategy*, 58–59 and 67–68; Wink, *Akbar*, 68.

[24] See, respectively: Flores, *The Mughal Padhsah*, p. 94 (I am grateful to Jorge Flores for this reference) and Balabanlilar, *Jahangir*, p. 75; *Calendar of the Cecil Papers*, vol. 5, p. 1; and Parker, *Imprudent King*, p. 56.

bureaucratised systems, reports were constantly presented in voice and in turn discussions were sometimes recorded in careful minutes for the sake of future decision-making.[25]

A global approach to the circulation of information in composite polities is not just about expanding our vision to take empires into account, important as that is. It is also about revising the centripetal views inherent in the classic understanding of composite polities. As illustrated in this special issue's articles on the Iberian empires, information did not just tie central government and provinces, it also moved horizontally and laterally among the different components of empires, thus contributing to their essentially polycentric nature.[26] In the same vein we could speak of the exchange of news, advice, and knowledge among the different parts of composite polities more generally. How much did elites and at least some ordinary people in each component territory know about those in other provinces? Research in central archives occasionally shows that ambassadors and governors overseas corresponded with each other: but central archives are a lot better at recording vertical communications with the centre. As Calvo and Gaudin admit, we know that a great deal of communication circumvented the centre and tied Goa, Manila and Mexico, but 'existing archival sources do not tell us the exact contents of the information shared between these agents and procurators.'[27] Research might be more fruitful in different kinds of archives. For example, historians have been showing that merchants sought partners and opportunities primarily in other components of their composite polity.[28] This is a crucial further way in which the history of information can further contribute to the study of composite polities. Recent historians have suggested that the dissemination of news resulted in 'contemporaneity', namely 'the perception … of experiencing a particular event at more or less the same time ... of participating in a shared present.'[29] Can we, in the same way, talk about the perception of compositeness in early modern composite polities as deriving from increasing levels of information exchange? Further research in this sense can show that such informational coalescence had powerful, but also unpredictable, political implications. If presumably it gave some elites across empires a sense of participating in a shared imperial purpose, it inevitably gave others ideas of revolt and of coming together against

[25] De Vivo, "Archives of speech".
[26] Cardim et al., eds., *Polycentric Monarchies*.
[27] Calvo and Gaudin, "Manila and their agents," p. 0000.
[28] For telling examples, see Sabatini, "The Vaaz", and Yessef Garfia, and Rocío. "A Genoese Merchant."
[29] Dooley, *The dissemination of news*, xiii.

the authorities, especially when the news travelled horizontally and bypassed the centre, as in 1647 when news of the rebellion of Palermo in Sicily encouraged rebellion in Naples and dozens of other towns in Southern Italy.[30] Could information underpin and communication channels facilitate not just composite governance but also composite resistance?

If the study of information can help historians of composite polities, in turn the conceptual framework of the history of composite polities can enrich our understanding of the history of information. Just as the notion of composite polities helped overcome older narratives of national state formation, so the history of information has been demolishing its own teleologies. Rather than focusing on older notions of the press as an isolated agent of change, for example, we now emphasise the overall growth and the increasing regularity of information deriving from a multiplicity of media such as manuscript newsletters and reports, maps, catalogues and lists. In Europe, the composite polities of Renaissance Italy pioneered the infrastructural revolution that saw the introduction of regular couriers and postal stations.[31] And information was never only textual either, written or printed. On the one hand, it was visual and material, an aspect that has attracted increasing attention recently.[32] The articles here illustrate the point, from the small painted stones to be shown to guards in fifteenth-century Italy to the depictions of Portuguese fortifications across the Indian Ocean in the sixteenth.[33] On the other hand, we must never forget that mediated information – namely information that is passed on impersonally by means of media – was itself only a small portion of much more widespread and pervasive oral communication.[34] The constant, inevitable reliance on face-to-face contacts and networks points to the importance of, beyond media, people: an actor-based history of information that studies not impersonal media but the people who fashioned the media.[35] Couriers and other envoys carried letters, goods and objects, and at the same time transmitted a wealth of oral information: experience that was not easily put to paper or intelligence that could not be. They constantly crisscrossed composite polities shuttling back and forth between metropoles and their distant territories, including the procurators

[30] Villari, *Un sogno di libertà*, 309; Parker, *Global crisis*, 430-32 and 439-40.
[31] Behringer, *Im Zeichen Des Merkur*.
[32] See for example Bellingradt and Rospocher, eds. *The Intermediality of Early Modern Communication*.
[33] See the articles by Lazzarini, and Cardim and Flores in this special issue.
[34] On mediated information, see Thompson, *The Media and Modernity*.
[35] Molino, "Connected news."

who travelled between the Philippines to the Spanish court, at huge peril but regularly if 'roughly' (with *rugosidades*).[36] If letters are the lifeblood of composite polities, the articles in this special issue remind us that men – and no doubt women too – were the veins and arteries through which it circulated.[37]

Archives as intelligence and as fantasy

If we step back for just a moment from people to papers, we see the crucial role of archives. Archives today contain both some of the remaining texts used in the information transactions of the past and the traces of oral exchanges. As importantly, archives are themselves the products of long-term historical processes of information gathering, as they were established and maintained, as instruments not just for storing but also for processing and utilising that information. Archives were created not as repositories of documentary sources for modern scholars, but rather as functioning elements of institutions or collectivities at the time. The articles in this special issue bring together the history of information with the expanding field of the history of archives and, by insisting on compositeness, move beyond the central state chancelleries that have long preeminently occupied historians of archives, to capture diverse varieties archives.[38]

The authors gathered here all emphasise the changing role of archives of increasing complexity where records were assembled and organised to be reused in new and more sophisticated ways. Polities stored and preserved information in archives just like they did other precious properties in treasure rooms. But archives were more than store-rooms: they had to be equipped with tools that would unlock the potential of their holdings. Unlike quantifiable and fungible goods, information is only activated once it is analysed and turned into knowledge. For this reason, the period 1350-1650 saw the multiplication of retrieval tools and other 'little tools of knowledge' developed by clerks and archivists and not just in political institutions: notes, indexes, inventories, calendars and lists that in this same period were increasingly used by scholars, merchants and natural philosophers.[39] Thus archives became more than sites of preservation, they

[36] See Calvo and Gaudin's essay in this special issue.
[37] Akkerman, *Invisible Agents*.
[38] On the archival turn, see the recent Head, *Making Archives* with the bibliography cited there.
[39] Becker and Clark, eds. *Little Tools of Knowledge*; Blair, *Too Much to Know*; Fossier et al., eds. *Écritures grises.*

functioned as centres for the elaboration of information. And here we return to people, for the history of archives is also the history of the people who created, maintained, used and helped use archival records. Secretaries, chancellors and their clerks, custodians, guardians collaborated to process incoming letters, summarise contents, compile retrieval tools, all of which were essential to their and their superiors' decision-making processes and thus, in a loop, to produce further letters and records.[40] All composite polities developed a certain degree of archival intelligence in the sense that these were tools that, like human intelligence, enabled them to transform more or less raw information into useful knowledge. Understanding this function of archives, in turn, may provide us too as historians today with a certain degree of archival intelligence about the past societies which we study.[41]

What is more, at a time of information overload, the tools of information management had to be expanded and sharpened. Faced with the double expansion of horizons and data at a time of increasing global connections, authorities in composite polities attempted different strategies.[42] They created central machineries – Venice's Secret Chancery, Simancas, the Torre do Tombo are just some of those mentioned in these articles – but they also coordinated archival practices with the capitals of their multiple territories and kingdoms. In other words, alongside a process of archival centralisation – a process which tended to be favoured in older histories typically written on the basis of central national repositories – composite polities also saw a process of archival devolution, where local communities retained, organised and preserved their part of the information exchange, in original drafts or copies. Sometimes, the polities driving these processes were one and the same: Alessandro Silvestri studies the case of the kings of Aragon, who were responsible for one of the most sophisticated central archives of the fourteenth century yet also encouraged archival construction in their other kingdoms, especially (albeit in different ways) in Sicily and Sardinia.[43] The same can be said of their successors, the Austrias: they followed Aragonese precedents and both established a central archive in Simancas and also enlarged the archives in Naples and established in Cagliari a central repository for all patrimonial and feudal documents of the kingdom of Sardinia. Similarly, the Portuguese established a replica of Lisbon's

[40] Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual*; Alam, and Subrahmanyam, *Writing the Mughal World*, 311-338; de Vivo et al., eds., *Archivi e archivisti*; Ketelaar, *Archiving People*.
[41] De Vivo, "Archival Intelligence."
[42] Donato, and Saada, eds, *Pratiques d'archives*.
[43] De Vivo et al., eds., *Fonti*, p. 25

Torre do Tombo in Goa.[44] Thus archives functioned as instruments of patrimonial negotiation, and in other cases this led to archival competition, as Silvestri showed concerning the fight over feudal titles in late medieval Sicily.[45]

Competition increased due to another process: archival diffusion or dissemination, which gained pace as literacy and record-keeping increased outside state institutions. A particularly interesting case studied here is the Swiss confederation, where the deliberations of the central diet were kept – or were supposed to be kept – in multiple copies in central as well as cantonal archives. Rather than an exception, the Swiss case reminds us that the history of archives is not solely, as in its most traditional formulation, a history of centralisation by nascent nation states; it is also one where local archives functioned side by side, complementing or competing with each other.[46] Once again, historians of European archives can learn from studies further afield, for example about the debates in the Ottoman Empire concerning the value of central documents vs. local authorities.[47] The point is not just to observe similarities between processes of administrative reform in Europe and under Abbas in Iran or Akbar in India, important as they are. The aim should rather be to raise unexpected questions. For example, how far did European composite polities also employ policies like the Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal empires which all in different ways selected bureaucratic cadres of mixed ethnic origins as a way of both reconciling and drawing expertise from different groups in the empire?[48]

In their article on the Portuguese empire, Jorge Flores and Pedro Cardim rightly warn us against embracing a 'functionalist perspective which would ultimately reduce these papers and their authors to mere instruments of a well-regulated state.'[49] We have seen how information in the composite state was the product of a variety of different actors often competing with each other. Did archives give central institutions the means of elaborating information or rather the illusion of being able to do so? Everywhere, the explosion in information to some extent frustrated

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[44] On deliberate following of Aragonese precedentes in Naples, see de Vivo et al., eds., *Fonti*, p. 227, and more generally on continuity see Castillo Gomez, "The New Culture of Archives". On Cagliari, see Olla Repetto, "Archivio di Stato di Cagliari," 737.
[45] Silvestri, "La real cancelleria siciliana nel tardo medioevo."
[46] Head, "Archiving the Swiss *Tagsatzung*."
[47] Burak, "Evidentiary Truth Claims".
[48] Newman, *Safavid Iran*; Richards, *The Mughal Empire*, 58– 78; Kinra, "Master and Munshī".
[49] Cardim and Flores, "An Imperial Formation Joins a Composite Polity," p. xwx.

the will to control knowledge at the centre. In the introduction to this special issue, Alessandro Silvestri rightly points to the informational 'voracity' of late medieval and early modern rulers – what Ann Blair has described as 'info-lust'.[50] But, perhaps, we should equally speak of rulers' 'informational indigestions'. Despite all their statements about the will to know, state institutions were less imperious masters of the news than stunned participants in a huge, incontrollable world of information: they desperately tried not just to obtain some of the countless news that circulated independently, but also to fully understand it. It is important to underline the double, contradictory functions of archives as not just instruments of power but sites of tension – a tension that saw the will to know clash with the growing mass of ever-more slippery information, and the desire to control frustrated by a multiplicity of social and political actors who had their own interest in obtaining that information. It is not a coincidence that so many archives were labelled as secret (in Italy alone this was true in Rome, Venice, Ferrara, and Bologna) at a time when illicit leaks and the dispersal of documents was the rule. In Venice, for example, the very establishment of the Secret Chancery was just one of many desperate attempts to limit the illicit diffusion of government intelligence.[51] The emphasis on secrecy gave the illusion of control, a fantasy that mattered as much as actual knowledge. What could a global history of secrecy tell us?

The notion of composite polities does not have to be solely European. This does not mean that it can be an attempt to impose a European model onto the study of cultures and societies in the rest of the world.[52] On the contrary, its value lies both in encouraging global comparisons as an antidote to European exceptionalism and also, and above all, in stimulating methodological and interpretive crosspollination that benefits all, including historians of Europe, who can only gain by understanding political, informational and archival practices that varied both within and across the boundaries of composite polities and cannot be viewed as uniform or even hierarchically arranged.[53]

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[50] Blair, *Too Much to Know*, p. 6

[51] De Vivo, "Coeur de l'Etat, lieu de tension."

[52] Burak, Rothman, and Ferguson. "Toward Early Modern Archivality".

[53] Hirschler, "From Archive to Archival Practices"; and for a recent study of documentary and textual practices across much of the globe, see Bahl, and Hanß, eds. *Scribal Practice*.

Taking distance seriously

If all history is contemporary history, let us conclude with some thoughts that evoke our own world of information overload and fake news multiplied and magnified by innumerable actors and media powers. There is some similarity here with the fragmented informational landscape of global early modernity. But what today is enabled by constantly evolving digital technologies and artificial intelligence, was in the early modern world the result of the opposite: the inability of communications media to overcome what Fernand Braudel already called the 'tyranny of distance'.[54] Distance posed a formidable and inescapable challenge to all composite polities. Most articles in this special issue note that power rested in the rulers' ability to reach across staggering geographical expanses and so bring remote territories together. But the composite nature of early modern information, fashioned by multiple figures and groups, suggests another view of distance as not only an obstacle to government, but as a transformational element which informed both power and knowledge for a wide variety of people. Distance presented not just impediments but also opportunities for each constituent part of the polity. In the history of information, before the invention of the telegraph, news were not pre-packaged goods that moved unchanged across space. The transmission of information changed the nature of that information because, as we have seen, it involved not just impersonal media but personal transactions and human agency. Like a massive game of 'broken telephone', early modern news travelled through relays and so changed due to both unwitting and wilful misunderstanding, mistranslation, selection as well as tampering. As global historians have argued about scientific knowledge, so too with information we can say that it was constructed in the process of circulation.[55] Placed in different parts of composite polities, participants in the information exchange had different agendas and objectives, and they invariably moulded global news on the basis of local concerns. In the early modern world, the growth of information may have shortened long distances, but every step turned into a transformative leap. This made for partisanship and deception, but also for resistance and participation. Today it is worth reflecting about all this when we consider the challenges and opportunities we too have to face.

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[54] I draw here from de Vivo, "Microhistories of Long-Distance Information'.

[55] Raj, *Circulation and the Construction of Knowledge*; see de Vivo, "Microhistories of Long-Distance Information', 181, 211.

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