

Forum Kommunikationsgeschichte

Das Jahrbuch für Kommunikationsgeschichte widmet sich seit nunmehr 20 Jahren der Vielfalt an möglichen Zugängen und interdisziplinären Perspektiven zu historischer Kommunikation. Die anhaltenden Fragen zu Konturen, Werkzeugen und Denkmustern kommunikationshistorischer Erkenntnisinteressen geben uns Anlass, ein Beitrags-Forum zu begründen, dessen Grundfrage »Was ist Kommunikationsgeschichte« in den nächsten Jahren aus unterschiedlichen Forschungsrichtungen und aus dem Blick auf verschiedene Epochen erörtert werden soll. Die bewusst kurz gehaltenen und mit wenigen Anmerkungen versehenen Beiträge dieses Forums sollen fragende, einordnende und anregende Impulse geben, um »Kommunikationsgeschichte« innerhalb historisch arbeitender Disziplinen konzeptionell zu schärfen. In diesem Sinne werden die einzelnen Beitragenden das eigene (fachliche) Verständnis von Kommunikationsgeschichte vorstellen, begründen sowie Potentiale und Grenzen der eigenen Ansätze erörtern

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WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF COMMUNICATION? AN EARLY MODERNIST PERSPECTIVE

1. WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF (EARLY MODERN) COMMUNICATION?

Communication today is one of the principal fields of historiographical enquiry. Nowadays, it seems evident that in order to understand the past of a given society it is necessary to know how its communicative system functioned. So too scholars of the early modern period have demonstrated the necessity of a historical approach to communication, assessing it within the social, political, material and cultural context of pre-industrial Europe.

But what do we mean when we talk about the history of early modern communication? What distinguishes it from the history of the media? What are the objectivities and modalities used to reconstruct this history? At present, an agreed definition of the history of communication does not exist. Instead, we confront a broad domain of research in which media studies, the history of information, media history, communication research, literary studies, social and cultural history, and the history of publishing converge. In trying to delimit the analytical scope of a field that crosses disciplinary boundaries and is still in a phase of formation, it is appropriate to adopt an inclusive and pragmatic notion of the history of communication; inclusive both from the point of view of communicative processes and from that of the media involved. Rather than as a fully conceptualized field, communication history can be conceived in broad terms,

»understanding it as written, spoken, or other mediated representations of signifying events and practices in the past«.¹

In general, as Robert Darnton has written, the history of communication has as its object »the problem of how societies made sense of events and transmitted information about them«.² More specifically, the aim to historicize a phenomenon like communication – a term that emerges and enters into the political vocabulary of early modernity – means considering not only messages, but also the manner in which they were transmitted and the social actors involved in the production and reception of communicative acts. Thus, the history of communication analyses methods of collecting information and modes of interpreting it; interactions between the instruments involved in disseminating it, sharing it, censoring it or falsifying it; the spaces and agents engaged in communicative processes; the effects of the media on the daily lives of individuals and more generally on historical processes.

In the last two decades this inclusive history of early modern communication has seen important innovations in its approaches, concepts, and methodologies. From a theoretical point of view, historians of the early modern period have questioned and redefined some of the interpretative models and fundamental concepts of the historical study of communication, such as those of the public and private sphere, or of propaganda. The focus has shifted from the message to the medium, and then from the study of (individual) media towards the analysis of the mediality of history. Currently, much attention is being paid to the intermediality integral to the communicative systems of the *ancien régime*, based on the assumption that, then as now, communication was conveyed in and to countless combinations of intended and actual publics, meanings, and effects, and in myriad forms, including images, performances, rituals, objects, and spoken, sung, manuscript, and printed words interacting with each other.

In the following pages, I seek to survey the state of this discipline in Italy, shed light on the original contribution of Italian historiography to this field of research, and finally to point towards some new methodological perspectives and possible risks in the near future of the history of communication.

2. EARLY MODERN ITALIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY AND COMMUNICATION

For decades, communication has had only a marginal role in Italian historiography.³ Still now, the history of communication struggles to find its academic niche and is almost absent from the curricula of history faculties. There is no scientific journal in

¹ Peter Simonson / Janice Peck / Robert T. Craig / John P. Jackson, Jr.: The history of communication history. In: Peter Simonson et al. (ed.): The handbook of communication history. New York: Routledge 2013, p. 13–57, here p. 13.

² Robert Darnton: An early information society: News and the media in eighteenth-century Paris. In: The American historical review, 105, 2000, p. 1–35, here p. 1.

³ The influential »Empire and communications« by Harold Innis, for instance, was translated into Italian only in 2001; Harold A. Innis: Impero e comunicazioni. Roma: Nautilus ed. 2001. For an excellent historiographical overview: Gabriele Balbi: Una storia della storia dei media. Mappa di una disciplina in formazione. In: Problemi dell'informazione, 2, 2011, p. 163–192.

Italian which concentrates on communication from a historical perspective. More specifically, there is an almost complete lack of works of synthesis examining the question of communication in the early modern period.⁴

Only since the 1990s have Italian early modernists shown explicit interest in communication as a historical theme. Prior to that, Italian historiography confronted the question of communicative processes and practices only in an implicit manner, within established research fields and without being made explicit or theorized. What has changed, above all, is the emphasis on the communicative element in historical processes, or rather the accent on this element in the ambit of »traditional« subjects of study. For example, we can point to the history of diplomacy, whose lexicon has been studied as a language of political communication and as an operative praxis from the perspective of the control and manipulation of information.⁵ In the field of religious history, the impact of various media, including vehicles of communication such as preaching and cheap print, have been the subject of increasing attention.⁶ The history of political thought has historically analysed and debated some important categories of early modern communication, above all that of public opinion.⁷ In the new political history, the emphasis on communication has meant greater interest not just in the message, but also in the audience and the messengers involved in its transmission as producers or intermediaries.⁸ And there has been some examination, in a comparative perspective, of the public character of the law, its communicative dimension and modes of divulgation in the urban spaces of early modern Europe.⁹

Among the reasons one might cite for what was in the past an essentially implicit history of communication, is a certain reluctance demonstrated by Italian historiography with regards to conceptualization. German historiography, in comparison, boasts a more developed theoretical tradition; thanks also to the influence of thinkers such as Habermas or Luhmann who have put early modern media and communication at the centre of their philosophical and sociological reflections. However, the current organization of research and the mobility of younger generations of historians are rendering

⁴ Among the exceptions: Sandro Landi: *Stampa, censura e opinione pubblica in età moderna*. Bologna: Il Mulino 2011.

⁵ Isabella Lazzarini: *Communication and conflict. Italian diplomacy in the early Renaissance, 1350– 1520*. Oxford: Oxford University Pr. 2015, p. 104–119.

⁶ S. Dall'Aglio: *Reading the preacher's voice. Sermons, orality and writing in Early Modern Italy*. Oxford [forthcoming]; Massimo Rospocher: *Il papa guerriero. Giulio II nello spazio pubblico europeo*. Bologna: Il Mulino 2015.

⁷ Sandro Landi: *Naissance de l'opinion publique dans l'Italie moderne. Sagesse du peuple et savoir de gouvernement de Machiavel aux Lumières*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes 2006.

⁸ Filippo de Vivo: *Patrizi, informatori, barbieri. Politica e comunicazione a Venezia nella prima età moderna*. Milano: Feltrinelli 2012.

⁹ Émilie Delivré / Massimo Rospocher: *La legge e la piazza. Comunicare la legge negli spazi pubblici dell'Europa moderna*. In: Christoph Cornelissen / Paolo Pombeni (ed.): *Spazi politici, società e individuo: Le tensioni del moderno*. Bologna: Il Mulino 2016, p. 135–162.

such distinctions between different national historiographies ever more nebulous, as well as multiplying occasions for dialogue.¹⁰

Nonetheless, if not a national character or a defined theoretical input, it is possible to identify an original methodological contribution that can be attributed to Italian historiography on the history of early modern communication. Drawing both on Italy's strong philological and microhistorical traditions, recent research in the field of communication history has proposed a microhistorical analysis of political and social events and processes, bringing to light the dynamics and mechanisms that characterized the early modern communication system. Analysis of circumscribed contexts has allowed the ways in which international events were reflected in and influenced local experiences to be described, in addition to the investigation of how the instruments of communication contributed to the creation of a collective and shared memory of events. The reduction of scale has permitted historians to verify the practical use of various media on the part of individuals, not to mention to assess the level of agency of the social actors involved. Placing people at the forefront of their study, this approach has meant that one of the aims of the history of communication could be achieved: that of illuminating the gap between production and consumption-reception.

By means of approaches typical of historical anthropology, for example, an investigation into a revolt that occurred in sixteenth-century Murano has been used to shed light on how the circulation of information through the media of the time (print, rumour, gossip, songs, proclamations read out or stuck up on walls) influenced the political actions of the people.¹¹ The study of the image of a Renaissance pope became a paradigmatic case for reconstructing the mechanisms of political communication in the European public sphere, based on the constant interaction between various media in local and transnational contexts.¹² Or the focus on an «exceptionally normal»¹³ event such as the Interdict against Venice in 1606 revealed the functioning of the structures of communication in an early modern urban context.¹⁴ Such an approach to communication has produced two principal results. Above all, it has thrown light on the action of new protagonists, and not just passive audiences, in communicative processes: artisans, shopkeepers, merchants, doctors, notaries who contributed to the pluralistic early modern public sphere. At the same time, the spatial turn in historiography has encouraged an interest in the physical urban spaces in which communicative acts such as conversations, performances, cries, songs and recitations took place. This has delineated a new topography of communication in which the streets, piazzas, taverns, markets and pharmacies have come to rank alongside more recognized spaces such as theatres,

¹⁰ For instance, the international doctorate programme financed by DFG («Politische Kommunikation von der Antike bis ins 20. Jahrhundert») in cooperation among the universities of Frankfurt, Innsbruck, Bologna, Pavia, Trento and active between 2004 and 2015, which focused on political communication.

¹¹ Claire Judde de Lavrière: *La révolte des boules de neige: Murano face à Venise, 1511*. Paris: Fayard 2014.

¹² Rospocher (2015) (wie Anm. 7).

¹³ The oxymor «exceptional normal» was introduced by Edoardo Grendi: *Micro-analisi e storia sociale*. In: *Quaderni storici*, 35, 1977, p. 506–520.

¹⁴ Vivo (2012) (wie Anm. 8).

churches and courts. More generally, the city has affirmed itself as the principal unit of measure for the history of early modern communication.¹⁵

3. NEW APPROACHES

The microhistorical approach and the urban dimension are interwoven with other perspectives in the field of communication history. For example, the city was the theatre of that »culture or community of presence« (Anwesenheitsgesellschaft) in which communication was determined by physical presence, according to the theory elaborated by Rudolf Schlögl to understand media flows within the urban society of early modern Europe.¹⁶ A similar orientation has been proposed, if not theoretically developed, in the analysis of completely different contexts. In a region like Florida, for instance, deprived of a regular postal system and of print culture at least until 1730, personal and face to face exchange was the constitutive element of the network of communication which allowed the flow of information between the population of native Americans, but also between European colonists, throughout the early modern period.¹⁷ Jean Paul Ghobrial has analysed everyday practices of communication which took place between individuals in cities like Paris, London, and Istanbul during the XVII century. As part of the growing attention to the dynamics of circulation across geographic and linguistic barriers in early modern history, he shows how »wider information flows that connected Europe and the Ottoman world were themselves the product of interpersonal exchanges that took place at the small-scale level of everyday communication«.¹⁸ Quotidian practices of communication, based on face to face interactions, from the oral exchange of news to the circulation of gossip to the informal sociability of individuals, interacted with and were echoed by other media: the city was a »resonating box« within which the echoes of different media reverberated incessantly.¹⁹

The early modern city is also a hub for currents of information, a contact zone which enables translocal connections and lends itself to an analysis of communication that relates the micro and macro levels. In the history of communication too, one sees that intertwining of the local and the global suggested by the adoption of the term microspatial history; a translocal microhistory able to examine information flows across geographical and cultural borders in a society as politically fragmented as that of the

¹⁵ Juraj Kittler: The city. In: Peter Simonson et al. (ed.): The handbook of communication history. New York: Routledge 2013, p. 273–288.

¹⁶ Rudolf Schlögl: Politik beobachten. Öffentlichkeit und Medien in der Frühen Neuzeit. In: Zeitschrift für historische Forschung, 35, 2008, p. 581–616; Rudolf Schlögl: Kommunikation und Vergesellschaftung unter Anwesenden. Formen des Sozialen und ihre Transformation in der Frühen Neuzeit. In: Geschichte und Gesellschaft, 34, 2008, p. 155–224.

¹⁷ Alejandra Dubcovsky: Informed power. Communication in the early American South. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2016.

¹⁸ John-Paul Ghobrial: The whispers of cities: Information flows in Istanbul, London, and Paris in the age of William Trumbull. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013, p. 7.

¹⁹ Daniel Bellingradt: The early modern city as a resonating box: Media, public opinion, and the urban space of the Holy Roman Empire, Cologne, and Hamburg ca. 1700. In: Journal of early modern history, 16, 2012, p. 201–240.