

Information and Communication in Venice: Rethinking Early Modern Politics

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Jacob Burckhardt famously described Venice as the mysterious city of 'political secrecy'. In his wake, generations of scholars have continued to point to the remarkable degree of secrecy maintained by Venetian officials where political matters were concerned. Such secrecy, they have claimed, was central to the survival of the early modern state. Keeping political information under wraps - revealing only final decisions and not the information, debates, or conflicts that led to them - allowed Venetians to present a unified front to the rest of the world and prevent the growth of factionalism and family violence that plagued many other states. Secrecy kept Venice peaceful, and in turn, its republican government endured for a thousand years while despotism and absolutism flourished elsewhere.

Secrecy, however, does not come naturally; people like to talk. Filippo de Vivo's study examines the competitions, slippages, and ironic connections between the Venetian ideology of state that maintained this strict policy of secrecy and the capacity to communicate and express oneself inherent in human nature. As de Vivo shows us, the Venetian state in the 16th and 17th centuries employed highly articulated and well-honed mechanisms to maintain control over the flow of political information between the halls of government and the world outside. Such control could never be completely effective, however, since information flowed like mercury and could never be fully contained or controlled by any particular group. What happens, de Vivo asks, when the drive for secrecy for the benefit of the group is confronted with the individual capacity to chatter, express one's opinion, and manipulate information for personal ends?

De Vivo begins with a detailed description of how Venetian state officials managed political information.

Namely, no records were kept of arguments and discussions that took place behind closed doors in government councils; the official legislative process left no trace, thereby preventing any debates that occurred in the halls of state from blossoming into greater political confrontations in the public realm. In addition, two magistracies had the responsibility for containing and administering the flow of information: the Council of Ten, which oversaw cases of conspiracy, and the Inquisitors of State, who dealt with disclosures of any political information more generally. Between the two magistracies, Venetian officials safeguarded a vast body of information related to the smooth functioning of the state, ranging from ambassadorial reports with highly classified diplomatic information to discussions about warfare and taxation.

In addition, another official council called the *Collegio* directed the daily functioning of the Venetian government. The *Collegio* was comprised of the Doge - the 'prince' of Venice - and 22 high-ranking councilors who together as a group represented 'the central mechanism in the transmission of information inside the political system' (p. 37). If the Inquisitors of State or the Council of Ten, for instance, wanted to pass on any information to the larger governing body of the Senate for wider discussion, they had to pass it first through the *Collegio*, which met every day and decided which information should reach the Senate, how it should be expressed, and when it should be presented. In addition, ambassadors delivered all their reports directly to the *Collegio* alone, giving this magistracy a monopoly on some of the most crucial political information. Furthermore, the *Collegio* decided upon the precise discussion and voting agenda for larger governing bodies. Venetian senators, for instance, could not make their own proposals about legislation on the floor of the Venetian senate; they could only respond to the agenda and terms of debate supplied to them by the *Collegio*: an agenda that was often restrictive and narrowly defined. Senators frequently had very little 'extra' information on hand when voting on state policies and were forced to come to decisions based only on the select or edited information that the *Collegio* decided it could safely pass on to them. While debate and voting in the Venetian government took place among a large group of patricians, in the end, the possession of the most complete information about any given topic or event - a treaty, a business transaction, or a military escalation, for instance - was restricted to this very small group of individuals in the *Collegio* who carefully decided how to parse information out. Like a spider at the centre of the web of Venetian political life, the *Collegio* never passed on a word more than was necessary. Such were the baroquely elaborate mechanisms upheld to keep information literally under lock and key.

De Vivo then goes on to show that despite such great efforts to maintain political secrecy, disclosures of information happened regularly. There was a vast 'political arena' that operated alongside the official workings of the state that systematically allowed for the leakage of information. *Relazioni*, for instance, or reports that various officials gave at the end of their missions or assignments, often ended up circulating in the public sphere in a textual form. These 'secret' reports became objects of exchange that conveyed personal prestige on their owner, and as a result professional scribes and secretaries often copied and sold them to supplement their income. In this hot market for the sale of secrets, *relazioni* moved quickly from manuscripts to print and became status items in the personal libraries of collectors. To prove his point, de Vivo traces the leakage of one specific *relazione*: an ambassadorial report from Ottoviano Bon, an ambassador to France in 1619. Information from this report flowed, step-by-step, from the ambassador himself through a variety of patricians and finally to the offices of state when officials learned of this breach of political information.

In addition to the copying and sharing of official reports like this, de Vivo describes how ambassadors regularly socialised with Venetian patricians in *ridotti* or gambling salons, and 'spies' or professional informers like servants, secretaries, patricians' children, and lawyers regularly sold political information for revenue. Informers also doubled as writers of *avvisi* or manuscript newssheets that circulated regularly in 16th-century Italy, all pointing to the cracks and fault lines that fissured the official Venetian policy of secrecy. Perhaps most centrally to his study, de Vivo shows how even those whose lives had theoretically nothing to do with official state politics showed a knowledge of and interest in political events and played a role in the circulation of information about politics. A wide spectrum of people from all social classes, for instance, regularly met in barber shops, pharmacies, book shops and warehouses, and at the Rialto and San

Marco, to exchange news and information. 'For all the Inquisitors' fears,' de Vivo tells us, we see 'the pervasiveness of political communication beyond the political arena: the politicization of urban space' (p. 97).

Managing information, we see, was an extremely complex and contradictory business. While the state on the one hand was at pains to protect certain 'secret' information, on the other hand, the communication of other information such as laws, edicts, and decrees was a crucial condition of political action and control. The Venetian government therefore found itself trying to keep some information secret while simultaneously attempting to force other information into the minds of the city's inhabitants. The publication of new laws and messages from state officials, both read, posted and circulated in pamphlets, often competed with alternative forms of public communication and expression: poems, drawings, and political messages that contested the state's authority, including pasquinades posted at the statue of the Gobbo or hunchback at the Rialto. In *paternosters* ('sacred parody' poems that were read, copied, and circulated in countless versions around the city, usually with the point of emphasising the hypocrisy of rulers and their politics), for instance, de Vivo demonstrates the dynamic mixture of oral and literate forms of communication that travelled in a vast cross-section of Venetian society. Most people at large in the city were clearly capable of understanding and criticising the political events that whirled around them. Like Menocchio, they were not simply passive receptors of information, but processed, re-formed and re-circulated ideas with their own opinions and spin in a mixture of spoken words, manuscripts and print.

Against this background, de Vivo builds to the narrative culmination of his study: the case of the Interdict against Venice. As a result of persistent squabbles having to do with land and legal jurisdiction, the papacy effectively excommunicated the city of Venice in 1606-7. While historians have traditionally analysed this conflict through the lens of church versus state, with Paolo Sarpi representing the great freedom fighter against the tyranny of the papacy, de Vivo by contrast uses this incident to consider how early modern people communicated their political ideas. De Vivo argues that this period witnessed an unprecedented attention to the ways that information flowed and to the forces of public thought. Both the Venetian state and the papacy called on public opinion to decide in favour of one side or another, resulting in an all-out battle over the dissemination of information about the conflict.

The Venetian government took the hard line approach of refusing to acknowledge the Interdict at all, and in tandem with such thought refused to allow any publications to discuss the event, thereby hoping to completely invalidate the pope's censure. The government's strategy of attempting to place its hands over the ears of the entire city rested, however, on the flimsy assumption that the state maintained a monopoly on the dissemination of information. Indeed, informal means of communication, in particular manuscript copies of letters from the papal camp, were transcribed and read in collective settings and quickly got the message of the Interdict to Venetians, making an easy mockery of the official state policy of denial. Here, it is interesting to note as an aside that de Vivo never once mentions the famous debate between Elizabeth Eisenstein and Adrian Johns about the nature of print: a curious omission, since his research addresses this discussion directly. These many examples of leaked *relazioni* or copied papal letters neatly support Johns' side of the argument that even after the advent and regularisation of print, manuscripts were often much more effective as means of communicating information since they were easily produced (no machine required) and quickly disseminated.

As the Venetian senate slowly surmised that denial simply did not work, it temporarily reversed its strategy. It passed measures in favour of print publication about the Interdict in the summer of 1606 in the hopes of effectively attacking and reducing papal arguments with pro-Venetian ones. This resulted in what de Vivo sees as a historically unprecedented publicity event. In a brief period of about eight months, channels of communication dramatically opened. Venetian printers produced a truly enormous quantity of polemical pamphlets about the Interdict that invited readers to discuss and challenge the relationship between secular and spiritual authority. While some argued for falling into line with the papacy's camp, others ridiculed the ineffectiveness of papal authority, claiming as did one priest from Padua, that it was 'better to be excommunicated twelve years than hanged half an hour' (p. 241). In the end, however, when Venice and the papacy resolved their differences, this outburst of debate and discussion ended. When the Interdict was

finally concluded, the government quickly returned to its policies of secrecy and silence. Pamphlet publication was once again monitored and restricted, and the government became even more taciturn where any discussion of state politics was concerned. In the wake of this extraordinary moment of public discussion and communication about political events, the Venetian government once again, sadly it seems for de Vivo, retreated into silence and busied itself anew with the task of preventing the leakage of political information from its halls out onto the streets.

De Vivo wants his readers to glean two main points. First, we need to dismantle our typical way of thinking about politics and political action as being polarised or divided between official political actors and 'the rest of the people'. Most people, he argues, including washerwomen and barbers, had political knowledge and ingenuity. Along these lines, if everyone knew about politics, this meant that information almost never flowed in a simple or singular top-down direction from 'the government' to 'the people'. Manuscript copies of government documents that circulated around the city or drawings about state officials etched around town are cases in point. Communication and the flow of information always entails a creative interaction between various people and groups so that in the end, there is no real distinction or opposition between power and the public, propaganda and public opinion, or high and low politics. The manipulation of information was always a contest or a negotiation. Interdict pamphleteering, for instance, has traditionally been labelled as propaganda: a term de Vivo disparages since it entirely ignores the reception and creative reformulation of ideas when they are digested by an intelligent and informed urban population.

Second, along similar lines, de Vivo repeatedly shows us how, paradoxically, the more regulation existed, the more leakage and abuse of secrecy appeared to occur. When Venetian officials established a law or regulation, instead of effectively blocking or preventing certain actions, such legislation instead actually opened up the issue as a contest or debate, encouraging individuals to contest and break that rule. In the end, rules and legislation ironically achieved the opposite of their desired end. This is something that scholarship about censorship has long shown; censorship did not squash Aretino's career as a ribald writer but instead rocketed him to fame, and this concept applies to infinite other examples. The more rules the state published about blasphemy, for instance, the more creative people became in their ways of insulting God. The more detailed sumptuary legislation became, the more women found ways to wear pearls and damask to church. In de Vivo's examples, the tighter control that state officials tried to maintain on 'secret' government reports, the more individuals desired to get their hands on them, and the more profiteering secretaries were willing to copy them for a tidy fee. While de Vivo never invokes him, Foucault appears to be the ghost in his machine, as de Vivo regularly reminds us that all acts of power necessarily invoke 'fissure[s] through which the powerless can empower themselves' (p. 17).

De Vivo's narrative raises many questions. To name just a few: scholars have long noted that rhetoric really mattered in Venice since it was not just about eloquence or politeness but existed at the centre of political life. Senators regularly employed their rhetorical training in the halls of state, and as de Vivo points out, 'success depended on the ability to speak well' (p. 20). However, a truly striking number of rules and limitations regulated debate in the Senate: so much so that we are left with the impression that senators made almost no use of their rhetorical skills because what they could talk about and what they could say was so dramatically limited by the *Collegio*. Perhaps it is therefore wrong for us to imagine that rhetorical capacity had more of a political bent in Venice than in other early modern states, since in the end, very little 'true' discussion was ever allowed to happen. Were the debates that did occur so limited, circumscribed, and stilted that we cannot even call them real debates, thereby fundamentally altering how we conceive of Venice as a 'republican' state?

In addition, how can we explain the state's apparent lack of interest in the many individuals who willingly and publicly broke the state's rules about sharing secret political information? Why, for instance, were Sanudo and Bon not reprimanded for their publications of *relazioni*: publications that were unabashedly produced with no sense of stealth or secrecy (compared to the pharmacist Cerruti, who was arrested and eventually expelled from the city for his suspicious liaisons)? Is this simply a classic case of the laws being applied unevenly based on social class, or does this actually reveal an ambivalence or laziness about secrecy on the level of the state? Obviously, the main point here is that the state had only limited control over the

way that information circulated, but it often appears that even when there was the possibility to identify clearly and prosecute a leak, state officials did not do so. With these and other examples, it is sometimes unclear whether Venetian magistrates were in fact obsessively concerned with secrecy, or only wanted to construct the appearance of being so concerned.

Similarly, de Vivo at times seems undecided about Venetian patrician attitudes towards the lower classes and political 'outsiders'. On the one hand, he claims that patricians 'agreed in dismissing the populace as incapable of comprehending politics' (p. 156, also 87-8), but on the other hand, 'oligarchs ensconced in the secrecy of the Ducal Palace's most restricted councils, were constantly preoccupied by the voices of their subjects in the squares below' (p. 4). He states that 'the communication between different spheres was constant, but not intentional', meaning that patricians may have inadvertently ended up hearing about what the underclasses thought, but that they did not actively pursue this knowledge, compared to political outsiders, who persistently 'sought and discussed political information' (p. 156). I would argue that indeed, state officials were always very interested in what everyone else thought and said no matter what rhetoric to the contrary. Rumour and gossip were significant indicators of political thought widely cast, and any wise politician sought to keep his finger on the pulse of society for precisely this reason. Sanudo loved to report the daily word on the street; his chronicle is largely derived from urban babble. Inquisitors and their assistants, as another example, were always interested in 'what people said', not only to pursue effectively the heretic at hand, but also as a means of monitoring the spiritual state of the city.

Lastly, where does political communication begin and end? What is it, exactly, that separates political communication from communication at large? If history broadly conceived involves endless forms of communication and expression (indeed, this is how we know about history at all, from the remnants of all these communicative acts), when exactly can we say such communication is specifically political? De Vivo defines this term in a straightforward manner, stating that it represents 'the circulation of information and ideas concerning political institutions and events' (p. 2), but at times this definition seems too narrow or awkwardly forced. To cite just a few examples, he states that when informal manuscript transmissions fused with official publications, 'different levels of political communication blurred'. Here, 'communication' might simply be more accurate. Or, once the Interdict was finally resolved, de Vivo says that it was as if 'the Republic wished to silence all public communication' (p. 248). In this context, it seems more correct just to say that the state wanted to silence any sense of celebration of the resolution; such a celebration could be understood as political, or not.

In a general sense, of course, we get his meaning; he is discussing the spread of ideas about politics, political events, and news as traditionally defined. Perhaps this is no more than semiotic hair-splitting, or a classic Saussurian example of the ways in which language is arbitrary and often fails to capture completely our meaning: 'political communication' is the closest we can come. Or perhaps this could be clarified with more discussion of the language and terms early modern people themselves used to delineate political communication; did they have such a term? Nevertheless, at times he tries to force a wide spectrum of ideas or concepts under the umbrella of 'political communication', when in fact most information, communication and expression involves a mixture of personal, political, creative, familial, financial, and spiritual components. It is hard to know when political communication ends and every and any other type of communication begins.

These queries and reflections aside, de Vivo's monograph about Venetian political life in the 16th and 17th centuries remains a tour de force. No study better lays bare how the Venetian government really worked, and even those well versed in the complexities of Venetian politics will emerge with a clearer understanding of how the government functioned in its daily practice. He deftly demonstrates that despite intentions, secrets cannot be kept; that perhaps there is no such thing as 'propaganda' but only constantly shifting and circulating ideas; and that the era that remarkably asserted 'the priesthood of all believers' simultaneously demonstrated the parallel and related concept of the senatorial nature of all urban citizens and inhabitants.

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