

The republic of letters as a network

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The humanists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries called their community the *respublica litteraria*, the republic of letters. It was a community without a territory, without a government and without formal membership, united by a common language, Latin, a common ideal, the revival of classical learning and its application to Christian life, and a common practice, correspondence. Humanists wrote letters to each other constantly, exchanging news, discussing texts, recommending friends, requesting favours and defending their reputations.¹

Erasmus was the centre of this network. More than three thousand letters by and to him survive, although he wrote many more that are lost. His correspondents included popes, emperors, kings, cardinals, bishops, princes, nobles, merchants, printers and scholars in every country of Latin Europe. He published selections of his letters during his lifetime, which made his correspondence a public performance of his relationships and a demonstration of his standing.²

The republic of letters functioned as an information network. Letters carried news of political events, of new books and discoveries, of the deaths and appointments of scholars and patrons, of plagues and wars. Carried by couriers, merchants, students and travellers, they took days or weeks to reach their destination. The humanists shared the information they received, copied letters and passed them on, so that news spread through the network faster than through official channels.

It also functioned as a reputation network. A scholar's standing depended on his relationships: whom he corresponded with, who praised him, who dedicated books to him, who defended him against critics. Since Erasmus could make or break reputations with a letter, young scholars sought his recognition as the key to a career. Conversely, Erasmus's own reputation depended on the network, which is why he defended it fiercely against his

critics, among them theologians of Louvain and Paris, Spanish monks and, later, Luther and his followers.

The parallel with financial networks is instructive. Merchants and bankers of the sixteenth century also relied on correspondence to obtain information about prices, markets and the solvency of their partners. Their business, in turn, depended on their reputation for reliability. The letters of merchants and the letters of humanists travelled by the same routes and often through the same couriers. Some humanists were themselves merchants' sons, while some merchants were patrons of humanists. The information and reputation networks of scholarship and commerce overlapped.

In the modern financial world, reputation remains the foundation of the business. Banks, asset managers and financial advisers depend on the trust of their clients and counterparties. This trust is shaped by what is said about them in the networks of the profession, in the press and, increasingly, in rating agencies, supervisory reports and public registers. The Swiss financial centre, which has built its reputation over centuries, has seen how quickly this reputation can be damaged by scandals. The humanist network of Erasmus is an early example of a reputation economy, in which the currency was praise and the risk was ridicule.

1 Notes

1. On the *respublica litteraria* as a network of correspondence, see the literature on humanism and the history of scholarly communication. To be verified. ↩
2. The critical edition of Erasmus's correspondence, *Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P. S. Allen et al., 12 vols, Oxford 1906–1958, contains more than 3,000 letters. To be verified. ↩

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