

## **The Internet of Letters: Comparing epistolary and digital audiences**

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### **Abstract:**

Based on a growing body of recent historical work, this article compares the audiences of two media: the letter and the Internet. Researchers of the digital world have claimed that the net is characterized by a blurring of borders between the one-to-one dialogue (long idealized by literary research), and the one-to-many dissemination (best exemplified by broadcasting). However, the ancient medium of the letter too had long blurred boundaries, from local leaks to full-fledged publications of collections of letters. The article first discusses various types of epistolary disseminations, mainly voluntary ones (for glory, for political aims, for managing communities and for family and community relationships), but also involuntarily disseminations for private or political surveillance. It concludes that in the *longue durée* of media history, the Internet exemplifies historical trends which started before the digital world: the demand for absolute privacy, and the risk of total political surveillance.

**Key words:** epistolary, Internet, dialogue, dissemination, context collapse

*Finally, the post office is the place of all affairs, all negotiations; through it, the absent become present; it is the consolation of life...*

(Voltaire, quoted in Derrida, 1987, p. 70)

*The historian must write history backwards if he wishes to break the cypher of the past.*

(Bloch, 2015/1931, p. XXXI)

This article proposes a historical exploration of ancient patterns of audience behavior, emphasizing their similarities with those of contemporary digital audiences. I suggest that Internet researchers who make sweeping claims about changes in the notion of audience,

triggered by the rise of the Internet, would be well advised to consider the history of communication more carefully. In particular, they ought to look back at a very old medium, the letter, that has been researched thoroughly over the past 30 years yet oddly neglected in media studies. The letter is a polymorphic, multi-generic, multi-use medium whose history extends back a thousand years. Its numerous affordances parallel those of the digital world in surprising ways, as demonstrated below.

The novelty of the Internet is striking, especially when considering the audiences who dominated media landscapes and research immediately before the digital age, i.e., the mass audiences of television. Internet audiences, unlike those of the broadcasting world, have been perceived and researched as active participants who produce their own messages, address various audiences in unpredictable ways and no longer submit to powerful and mostly nationwide broadcasting conglomerates. Academic<sup>1</sup> efforts seeking to demonstrate that mass audiences had more room to maneuver than was generally assumed (uses and gratifications, broad cultural studies, 'interpretive communities') did not really affect the global image of broadcasting as an instrument of massification, as distinguished from Internet technology, that is perceived as enabling communication between individuals and among communities of various sizes and types, as well as contribution of content (Web 2.0). A media history outlook that adopts mass (television) audiences as its point of reference covers too brief a period to provide a thorough understanding of the innovative qualities (positive or otherwise) of the Internet. By contrast with broadcasting, I focus on the letter, that embodies a broad spectrum of communicative options—not only peer-to-peer interpersonal exchanges, but also one to many and various forms of exchanges among small communities. In this respect, it could well be considered the most comprehensive medium of all until the emergence of the Internet.

### **Why and what do we compare**

Inspired by Tilly (1977) and Détienne (2000), I apply comparative history to maximize precision in discerning change and to demonstrate that the differences between past and present are not as intense as we assume. Nor do past and present diverge from one another as we imagine they do. This comparative approach is sorely needed in communication history (Bourdon, 2018) to counterbalance the striking claims concerning the deterministic power of given, hypostasized technologies *à la* McLuhan. Precise, exacting comparisons are not meant to lead to universal axioms about human nature or the power of technology, but rather 'to commonalities of structure across diverse societies' (Butsch, 2019).

Beyond the general interest historians may find in comparisons, we should establish the specificity of our distinctions. What are we comparing? I juxtapose the concept of the *letter, correspondence or epistolary* on the one hand against the *Internet or digital audiences* on the other. There are certain technological aspects to my comparison. The Internet is definitely perceived as a technology or set of technologies and its power was celebrated as such (before the advent of the age of negative criticism, following a pattern well known to historians of communications). But letter production and dispatch also

possess some critical technological features. Throughout history, letters have resorted not only to ink and paper (for writing) and to horses, pigeons and human beings (for transportation), but also to wedges, clay, papyrus, parchment, styli, terracotta, wood, wax, bronze, railways, airplanes, boats and so on. I use the term *medium* for lack of a better general description, but the focus of this article is not technology *per se*. I am considering various human practices of sending/receiving messages to/from distant others across histories and technologies.

Below, I attempt to define the two objects to be compared, with more precision. Literary theorists have long wrestled with the definition of letters, concentrating on the question of whether or not they possess literary character (Skwarczynska, 2000/1972)—an issue of no direct interest to us. Correspondence (the use of letters) is defined here as the exchange of material messages between human agents, mostly sent one-to-one and less often one-to-many.<sup>2</sup> Most letters are only written, and all (or almost all) include a written part, with the attendant stylistic consequences: Letters are written from an identifiable *me* to a similarly identifiable (and usually singular) *you* and from one place to another (with addresses identified by or at least known to the carrier). The research reviewed herein primarily concerns the Western world, although with some cautious effort, the proposed definitions and comparisons could probably be universalized.

The second term to be compared concerns a much briefer time interval but is harder to define. I consider only those parts of the digital world that ‘took over’ correspondence functions. Email (including distribution lists), for example, was perceived from the outset as a successor to correspondence, to which I add social networks and messaging applications (SMS, WhatsApp, and various forms of Messenger). I am aware that the boundaries of what constitutes successorship to correspondence cannot be delineated rigidly, especially when one considers that the World Wide Web, that began as a repository of hyperlinks to websites, has increasingly incorporated options for feedback, comments, etc.

Assuming that *Participations* readers are more familiar with research on Internet audiences, I begin with a brief review of the epistolary field and proceed to a typology of different epistolary audiences, each time suggesting comparisons with digital ones.

### **The growth of epistology**

In the last thirty years, in parallel with the rise of new media studies, epistology<sup>3</sup> (the study of letters and correspondence) has been developing steadily, if not exponentially. The idea of reviewing this field in only a few brief paragraphs may well sound preposterous. Even epistologists themselves cannot agree about the history of this discipline, whose interpretation remains divided between literary scholars (who consider history only as the history of literature—although there have been some recent exceptions, such as Hewitt, 2000) and social and cultural historians.

Interest in letters indeed originated in literature, focusing particularly on the fictive letters of the epistolary novels that flourished in the eighteenth century. Contemporary academic interest grew in the last fifty years. Rousset (1962) in French and Altman (1982) in

English can be considered as turning points. Fictive literary missives have a history almost as long as that of conventional, real-life letters: Some appear in Homer's works, while Ovid's *Heroides* is among the first collections of poetic letters. Although this article does not deal with literature, it does derive value from the analysis of fictive letters, as they demonstrate that the letter format has long been a resource available for imitation, quotation and the like in numerous cultures. The literary epistolary may have played a part in disseminating letter format as a means of communication, alongside the ancient epistolary manual genre, whose history is remarkably long and multicultural (Poster & Mitchell, 2007; see also Ceccarelli, 2011, Chartier, 1991 and Richter, 2013).

When literary epistologists first considered real-life letters, they discussed only those of (famous) writers. Classification of such letters as *literature* has been the topic of endless debate that began in the nineteenth century and persists to this day (e.g. Diaz, 1997). In a crucial process from our vantage point, mass letters slowly became a topic of interest—first those of the modern West and subsequently letters written in earlier times and more distant places. For example, historians dealt with modern France (Chartier, 1991), the United States (Decker, 1998; Henkin, 2006), medieval China (Richter, 2013) and Greek and Roman antiquity (Ceccarelli, 2013; Muir, 2009). Modern postal infrastructures also attracted attention (John, 1998; Milne, 2010), including not only fast and safe means of conveyance but also convenient access to post offices and inexpensive service fees (Henkin, 2006). These were analysed as complex achievements, quasi-revolutions in communications despite their 'low-tech' character (Behringer, 2006). Such changes, especially those that improved the postal system markedly, were noted by early historians, beginning with Herodotus who marvelled at the Persian Empire's postal service.

Philosophers addressed our modest medium as well (Foucault, 1997/1983; Derrida, 1980). Among these philosophers-cum-historians, Habermas (1989/1962)—and in a very different manner, Peters (1999)—discussed various aspects of letters, as examined below.

Finally, formal research in media occasionally called for analysing email in relation to letters. Focusing on the UK and on the question of presence, Milne (2010) still offers the only well-developed English-language treatment of the subject, while Mélançon (2013) proposes a broader perspective in French. The author (Bourdon, forthcoming) has recently attempted to connect the discussion of presence at a distance across different media, ranging from correspondence to computer-mediated communication.

### **The letter: Private, one-to-one communication?**

The first milestone on the comparative path which will guide us in the article (Table 1) is a discussion of a general feature attributed to Internet communication: An assumed radical change in relations between the private and the public. In particular, what was once private content is supposed to have become wholly or partially public as a result of processes that are very difficult to control.

**Table 1: Comparative Path**

	<b>Letters</b>	<b>Internet</b>
<b>Technology</b>	Low-tech; slow revolution(s)	Epitomizes hi-tech; form of <i>technological sublime</i>
<b>Modality</b>	Multimodal: Written words, still image, touch; body indexes (mostly handwriting); tridimensional potential	Multimodal: Typed words, still images, moving images, sound; disincarnated, two-dimensional
<b>Private/public</b>	Early sense of multiple risks of dissemination; 19 <sup>th</sup> and 20 <sup>th</sup> centuries—emergence of privacy as an individual right and new risk of total surveillance	Move from a (mostly) single, original copy to digital, dematerialized (and reproducible) copy. Increased blurring of borders and danger of leaks/surveillance (especially loss of control over data and over <i>institutional privacy</i> )
<b>Dialogue/ dissemination</b>	Continuum of situations: Interpersonal dyads, letters to community, shared letters, epistolary networks, open letters	Starts with clear contrast between email and passive access to information, with limited user-generated content, followed by growth of intermediary spaces, especially on social networks (context collapse)
<b>Dissemination for power</b>	Display of relationships by political and literary elites	Massive increase in dissemination and display of relationships (friends, followers)
<b>Dissemination for glory</b>	Started with Cicero; criticized in Christian culture	Better accepted on advent of secularization; faster space; new forms of fame; increased fantasies of more transitory fame
<b>Dissemination for managing communities... ... and maintaining family/small groups</b>	Christian tradition of the epistle, Paul's model Chain/circulating letter, especially for distant families and friends in the context of migrations	Multiple, fast moving communities (professional, affective, political, family, etc.) with various hierarchies and optional leader visibility
<b>Involuntary dissemination: Limited</b>	Primarily targeted political surveillance (spying)	Hacking, spying applications (not only political)
<b>Involuntary dissemination: Generalized</b>	Totalitarian regimes	Variety of surveillance and data collection (institutional/social?); New indifference/resignation

Two expressions have been coined to capture this change. Proposed in the 1990s by danah boyd and Michael Wesch (for a recent elaboration, see boyd, 2013), the phrase *context*

*collapse* suggests that digital communicators are never sure of the context in which their messages are received, that is, their addressees. An email can be cut/pasted and sent to others; a humble Facebook post meant for a few 'friends' turns viral. The easier the reproduction and amplification, the more likely the uncertainty of recipients. In general, Internet communicators (writers, webcammers, YouTubers) may find themselves received by audiences of one, many or anything in between. The radicality of the notion has been contested. Analysing a Facebook thread, Blommaert and Szabla (2017) show that despite the availability of messages to many readers, different subgroups use various indices to sort out what is relevant to them, both formally (the address, the register) and thematically. Regardless of the exact scope of the phenomenon, it cannot be denied that Internet users—especially social network participants but also email senders—often find themselves in liminal, uncertain situations concerning the context in which their messages are sent and read (distribution lists, mistaken addresses and so on).

A less dramatic formulation of this phenomenon is Castells' notion of 'mass-self communication.' The default situation of mediated communication, Castells claims, is no longer limited to either one-to-one or one to many, from point to point or point to mass (especially a 'point' representing a powerful, specialized institution): 'The communication foundation of the network society is the global web of horizontal communication networks that include the multimodal exchange of interactive messages from many to many, both synchronous and asynchronous' (Castells, 2007, p. 246). The messages are self-generated but may be consumed, if not in mass, at least in large groups, through a principle of self-selection in reception that (mostly) cannot be controlled at the transmission stage.

Discussions of contemporary media often include radical yet vague differentiation between the revolutionary present and the stable past. In the case at hand, we suggest that there is some intermediary space between one-to-one and one-to-many communications. As noted above, the topic is generally addressed as though the pre-Internet era was based on the contrast between broadcasting (one-to-many) and intimate, private (one-to-one) communication, the latter perhaps ideally exemplified by letters. For most of us, the dominant image of correspondence consists of letters kept in family archives, sent from one parent to another and read with a sense of exposing what was once meant to be (mostly) private. This image is linked to a very old Western topos: The letter has long been compared to conversation between absent persons, especially absent friends. The analogy is further enhanced by the idea that the letter is a mirror of the soul, a deeply sincere message. This conception first appears in early discussions of epistolary style (e.g., Demetrius' *On Style*, c. second century BCE) and the first Hellenistic epistolary manuals to reach us, such as *The Types of Letters* and *On the Form of Letters* (Ceccarelli, 2013; Malherbe, 1988; Muir, 2009). In typologies of letters, the friendly letter has always come first, affecting our perception of letters as a whole. Its style should be clear and unadorned, closely resembling that of a conversation and shifting easily from one topic to the next. This comparison was already considered trivial in the era of Cicero, who was a key figure in ensuring its popularity just as he was central to Western curricula until the mid-twentieth century.

Since then, the comparison has been reiterated endlessly. In the seventeenth century, for example, a letter written by Madame de Scudéry describes the letter as ‘a conversation between absent persons.’ In that same century, another layer was added to this representation of the intimate conversation, especially in France, where letter writing was considered particularly suited to women, even though female writers were a small minority and only one, Madame de Sévigné, rose to full epistolary and literary glory (Planté, 1998).

Letters have been associated with the concept of *dialogue* since ancient times, most likely reinforcing their representation as face-to-face, one-on-one exchanges. Dialogue has remained a complex notion since the inception of its use in ancient Greek (Jazdzewska, 2015). For Plato’s Socrates, dialogue comprises the questions and answers of people conversing face to face, as contrasted with public speaking. The term was introduced in English around 1200 as ‘a literary work consisting of a conversation between two or more persons’ (O.E.D), its meaning extended soon thereafter to include actual conversation, especially between two persons, face to face. In its Greek etymology, *dia* means ‘between’ or ‘among’: dialogue is about language circulating between/among people. Yet, in the numerous languages that still use forms of the Greek word, a *dialogue* is often understood as a conversation between *two* persons: This understanding may have been fostered by confusion between the Greek root *dia* and the Latin root meaning ‘two,’ present in English and French, for example, in words such as *duel*, *duo*, *duet* and the like. This confusion is not anecdotal. If there are more than two speakers, the problem of symmetry and reciprocity (by no means simple in a dyad) becomes far more complicated. Some will choose or be able to participate more or less, ‘unratified’ (Goffman, 1981) bystanders may try to be privy to an interesting conversation. The possibility of an audience arises and indeed, many participants in Plato’s dialogues quickly turn them into highly asymmetrical ‘duologues’ between Socrates and another participant. This long-term confusion between dialogue and duologue is directly relevant to the history of the letter: The image of dyadic correspondence has endured for centuries, in various cultural contexts, despite practices contradicting or qualifying this vision from the outset.

What could be the topic of such a ‘duologue’? The changing notion of privacy and the very definition of subjectivity and intimacy have been debated extensively by historians. The verbal content of letters between friends certainly included reference to numerous feelings, such as happiness, pain or grief. Furthermore, they had obvious phatic dimensions: Regardless of content, being in touch mattered. In exile, Cicero wrote that even if he cannot find ‘any excuse for a letter’ (that is, some information to convey), ‘I cannot refrain from entrusting letters to folk who are bound to Rome, especially when they are members of my household. Believe me, too, when I seem to talk with you, I have some little relief from sorrow, and, when I read a letter from you, far greater relief’ (in Malherbe, 1988, p. 23).

Personal feelings were conveyed. Calling them private may create confusion with contemporary notions of privacy, especially in two respects: For us, privacy has become intimacy, the sense of deep self that can be revealed progressively (Taylor, 1989). Moreover,

we have developed the sense of privacy as a right that still frames our practice of digital correspondence, even if its fragility has become increasingly palpable.

The right to privacy is a recent legal and social achievement that may well be vanishing before our eyes. In the United Kingdom, for example, the Post Office Act of 1711 ‘allowed for the opening, detaining or delaying of certain categories of letters (...). Fears of a Jacobite insurgence, of treason and sedition, gave the government of the early-eighteenth century an excuse or cause to request these warrants’ (Milne, 2010, p. 34); in 1844, public disapproval led to a change of practice (Vincent, 1998). Slowly, the idea of the secrecy of private correspondence became part of Western or perhaps even global public culture. But practice has never fully respected principle and the opening of certain letters has always been a possibility. Even in democracies, dead letters that do not reach their addressees are routinely opened by state postal administrations (France—see Derrida, 1987; United States—see Peters, 1999).

### **The letter as early context collapse**

Perception of letters as manifestations of arch-intimate duologue tells only a small part of the story, as twentieth-century epistolary historians and their successors continue to reiterate. Chartier (1991, p. 9) was one of the first to make this point: ‘Free and codified, intimate and public, *torn between secret and sociability* [emphasis mine, Author], the letter, more than any other form of expression, associates the social link with subjectivity.’ That same year, in a now classic study of Sévigné’s correspondence, Farrell (1991), disagreeing with more traditional Sevignan scholars, argues that Sévigné’s letters were located ‘between the private and the public’ and that some letters (and specific parts thereof) circulated beyond their official, single addressees (especially Sévigné’s daughter). Discussing the ‘scribal circulation of early modern letters’ in England, Daybell (2016, p. 365) wants to contribute to ‘recent scholarship that has complicated models of epistolarity as a closed two-sided exchange’, arguing instead for letter writing as a ‘more fluid, multi-agent collaborative process of writing, delivery, and reading.’ Interestingly, our only non-Western reference concurs: ‘Many of the transmitted letters thus seem to have been part of a discourse that was more public than personal, and the exchange of ideas among a greater number of people was most likely one of the main functions of letter writing in early medieval China’ (Richter, 2013, p. 42). Chinese epistolographs also compared letters with friendly conversations.

I rephrase the historians’ argument somewhat differently in the context of classic communication scholarship: Like digital communication, the letter offered complex controlled or uncontrolled spaces between ‘dialogue and dissemination,’ a seminal opposition in the long history of the idea of communication (Peters, 1999). In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, the intellectual reciprocity of the dialogue is modelled on loving reciprocity: ‘Philosophy, explains Socrates, is love of wisdom; it can only be pursued with another human, one’s beloved. It takes two to philosophize’ (Peters, 1999, p. 43). By contrast, in Jesus’ Parable of the Sower in the three Synoptic Gospels, the speaker can control neither



the identity nor the interpretation of recipients. Jesus ‘performs a radically public, exoteric mode of dispersing meanings—even though the hearers often fail to catch the hint—in which the audience sorts out the significance for itself’ (Peters, 1999, p. 53). Plato’s ideal favours ‘symmetry, circles and reciprocity’ while evangelical dissemination prioritizes ‘differences, ellipses, and suspension’ (Peters, 1999, p. 61). Contesting the privilege of the dyadic dialogue, Peters insists on the specific generosity of dissemination, wherein the addresser relinquishes control and relies on unknown recipients to interpret the meaning of the widespread message.

In this study, we extend beyond overt contrast between two models. Even the purest form of one-to-one dialogue bears the risk of dissemination—a fundamental uncertainty about the actual circulation (and interpretation) of the message that is crucial to our understanding of the long history of correspondence. Letters were perceived primarily as dialogue but disseminated nevertheless, willingly or unwillingly, at the moment of their reception. As they could be dispatched again, they were subsequently copied, anthologized and—in China and later in the West—printed. Addressing non-experts, epistologists sometimes yield to the temptation of sweeping statements, e.g.: ‘for centuries (...), many letters were meant to be read aloud before families, communities, businesses and congregations’ (Carter, 2010, p. 94), but this is too simplistic a statement. We are interested in the grey, uncertain areas between the two extremes. Which letters, which parts of the letters, were meant to be explicitly or implicitly addressed to collectivities and how?

I proceed with a preliminary discussion of the content and pace of letter dispatch, then attempt to organize a typology of epistolary dissemination, each time suggesting comparisons with those of the digital world. Throughout, I distinguish between two categories of writers: Elite writers who can afford dissemination for political and reputational gain (and were often prolific in addressing one another within a ‘prosumer’ community) and conventional writers who practice small-scale dissemination without cost/benefit analysis—a practice that developed late, with the rise of literacy and the growth of public postal systems, then expanded exponentially in the digital age. As I shift from one dissemination category to the other, I gradually leave exclusively elite readerships behind and address questions of dissemination for both elite and ordinary audiences—and in some cases for the latter only.

My typology begins with voluntary (desired) dissemination, homing in on fame as an early objective for elite correspondents that was since transformed and generalized for their digital counterparts. I then move on to the letter as a tool for power building, recalling its status as the most ancient medium for political networking (see discussion of ancient Greek political and diplomatic letters in Ceccarelli, 2013). Letters explicitly addressed to communities were used to control and monitor their targets, as illustrated by the Christian tradition, beginning with the Epistles of Paul. Turning my attention to later and more widespread types of dissemination, I consider how ordinary correspondents maintained family and community ties through complex ‘ballets of letters’ (Poublan, 1991). Letters also carried news of various kinds, beyond personal information, especially political and family

news. Letters served as a very early form of newsletter, before this genre was distinguished by its specialized function and form (Neurone & Barnhurst, 2001).

I conclude with a discussion of involuntary dissemination, long feared by political opponents to authoritarian regimes. In modern societies with broader media cultures (mostly following the rise of printing), elites would also fear public embarrassment. In the modern world, fear of dissemination has increased for elites as numerous leaks are revealed. Such fear has even reached ordinary correspondents, in two principal forms: Surveillance by authoritarian and totalitarian powers and the more common digital variety used for commercial or political aims (even in democracies). The risk of embarrassment has also become greater and more 'democratic.'

### **The content and pace of diffusion: The letter as a rich medium**

Castells maintains that mass-self communication includes 'the *multimodal* exchange of interactive messages from many to many, *both synchronous and asynchronous*' [emphasis mine, Author] (2007, p. 248). By multimodal, Castells means that the content of digital messages can include not only words, but also still and moving images and sound (some of the finer points of his arguments have been omitted in this study). By contrast, however, I would not consider letters *monomodal* because they include writing only. Letter writers were acutely aware of the need to make themselves present, applying a variety of means to do so. Visual content could appear in letters: Images were sent in antiquity, long before dispatch of photographs became commonplace. Indeed, many modern epistolographs—and not only famous ones like Kafka and Proust—shared 'an epistolary and a photographic passion,' as if one complemented the other (Kaufmann, 1990, p. 119). The letter also includes semantic resources that are absent from the digital world. Handwriting is an indexical sign (in Peirce's sense) of the past proximity of the body with the text. Paper can be touched, carried, kissed and epistolographs suggested, or at least one may report having done so (again, in China as well as in the West). Sending a lock of hair was a well-known practice in romantic correspondence. These practices are linked to a question of intimacy and pace: indexical signs mean a lot when you know or knew the correspondent. As the letters are copied and printed and the objects accompanying them disappear, indexicality recedes and proximity matters less and less, except perhaps among literary audiences seeking fetishist contact with their favourite writers. This process, too, has a long history. As an example, manuscript miscellanies prevailed in the seventeenth century (some time after the invention of print). This rather broad term denoted 'volumes containing different genres of writing by several authors compiled from various sources' (Daybell, 2016, p. 366).

This leads to the second characteristic emphasized by Castells, [a]synchronicity. Again, it would be easy (and trivial) to contrast the (potentially) synchronous digital world with the slow pace of letter sending. Speed, however, is a relative notion. Here one could single out the history of organized mail within the annals of the letter. Various cultures have portrayed the postal system as the epitome of speed (Behringer, 2007), from Darius' imperial postal

system (mentioned above) to the 1849 celebration of the English Mail Coach by De Quincey (1905).

More importantly, the pace was always perceived as a strategic issue that correspondents mentioned and also tried manipulating, either to slow it down or accelerate it. Although no letter writer could dream of instant ratings (and fame was not measured in the same way as it is today), many famous writers and personalities encouraged rapid publication of their correspondence and were concerned about the results of such dissemination (see examples below). On the whole, however, dissemination of correspondence took place mostly after the death of their writers, when privacy appeared to be much less of an issue or none at all. This situation contrasts sharply with the practices prevailing in our contemporary *presentist* culture, in which private affairs are exposed rapidly and often strategically. The process also depended on the slower pace of the rise to fame, including posthumous fame, that rendered publication of letters (or any other writing) more valuable. As of the late nineteenth century, the pace of literary correspondence picked up steadily, while rules for publication (and transmedial conversion from handwriting to print) slowly took shape, as the famous example of Flaubert illustrates (Gothot-Mersch, 1991). Today's publishers, who hunt for profitable material constantly (Thompson, 2015), may also initiate correspondence between literary celebrities that is intended for publication from the outset (e.g., Houellebecq & Lévy, 2008).

### **Voluntary dissemination: for fame and power**

In all societies in which writers had a special status, they were 'haunted by the specter of publication' of their letters (Corbin, 1994, p. 772). As writers turned into public figures, distribution of their letters as a means of gaining a (literary) reputation clearly constituted a major issue in modern Europe. The character of the famous writer (Bénichou, 1999) changed from humanist to novelist through enlightenment philosopher, but all were writers of letters to their peers and increasingly to their readers. Kuin (2006, p. 148) described letter writing among Renaissance humanists as taking place somewhere 'between the murmured conversation of close friends and the public oration conferring glory.'

Of course, this is reminiscent of contemporary celebrity culture (originally based on mass media, then enhanced by social networks). Here, our comparison co-opts the long history of debates concerning the merits of various forms of posterities and their publics. The Romans contrasted political fame with (longer-term) artistic fame. With the rise of atheism, the attraction of immediate fame became stronger (this issue lies at the heart of the well-known Diderot-Falconnet debate of the eighteenth century—see Braudy, 1997). In contemporary societies, distinctions among the different forms of fame have become more complex, with the rise of new categories such as the so-called 'micro-celebrity' or the 'influencer' (Hearn & Schoenhoof, 2015).

To elucidate the complexity and ambivalence of dreams of epistolary fame, I focus on two classic examples: Cicero and Madame de Sévigné.

Cicero was a prolific letter writer whose works had already been published in his own time. He also commented on the role of correspondence and the various types of letters. As his reputation increased, he became aware of the possibility of delayed dissemination that could include his personal letters, namely their distribution as a collection. He wrote to a friend: 'There is no collection of my letters, but Tiro has about seventy, and I must gather some up from you. I have to inspect and correct them; then, finally, they will be published.' (Wilcox, 2012, p. 6). He jokes about the lofty style employed by another friend, as contrasted with the customary conversational tone expected in a letter: 'I see what you are up to—you too want your letters copied onto rolls' (ibid.). This quote suggests a stylistic distinction: Authors who thought of dissemination wrote differently. This, explains the historian, clearly affected 'the register of each' type of letter (Wilcox, 2012, p. 75). It also shows us that publication was linked to a technological transformation. Most Roman letters were written on *tabula*: Small wooden tablets covered with wax. Being copied onto 'rolls' of papyrus (volumen) was the Roman equivalent of shifting from handwriting to print, or, for some successful bloggers, from electronic diffusion to print. Transmediality has long been with us, stretched over long periods of time. Today, in a more synchronous space, the relations between different media (new and old) are of course more complex, with cooperation and rivalry constantly renegotiated, as the example of fashion blogs may illustrate (Rocamora, 2011).

Our second example illustrates the lack of consensus concerning willingness to be disseminated, even among experts discussing the same writer. Madame de Sévigné (1626-1696) did not have any collection of her letters printed before she died, but her reputation as a writer was established in her lifetime and her letters became part of the French literary canon soon after her demise. Her story is an example of the way letters could accord educated women access to a literary reputation even though they were confined to domestic space and could not easily publish.

In Sévigné's correspondence, there are numerous references to the copying, public reading and circulation of letters (both hers and those of her correspondents). For example, in this letter to her daughter: 'Do not fear that I show your letters inappropriately. I know quite well those who are worthy of them and what should be said or concealed' (in Farrell, 1991, p. 142). Like Cicero, Sévigné could inform her correspondent which segments were permitted to be publicized, enabling us to reconstruct flexible etiquettes of such practices.

Sévigné's quest for publicity was always expressed with an even greater measure of irony and ambivalence than was Cicero's (because of gender and cultural differences), as if it could not be claimed openly. At least twice, she alludes to the publication of letters as a (desired?) *betrayal*: 'My goodness, *ma bonne*, how kind your letters are. There are parts worthy of being printed; one of these days you will find that one of your friends has betrayed you' (ibid., p. 146); 'You so praise my letters beyond their merit that if I weren't quite sure that you will never peruse them or read them again, I would suddenly fear finding myself in print by the betrayal of one of my friends' (ibid., p. 150). The reference to the printing of letters as an indication of their literary quality would become widespread.<sup>4</sup>

Both Cicero and Sévigné's cases suggest direct comparison with contemporary debates about context collapse (Blommaert & Szabla, 2017). At the most general level, the risk of copy is much higher in the digital world, as it is not even possible to write about an 'original' being 'copied': a digital text is rarely ever (and less and less) stored in a single hard disk. Regarding the reception of messages, like Facebook readers, ancient correspondents had to sort out what was addressed to them only and what was (or could be) meant for a broader audience. Facebook users, however, face many more gray areas. Their control over the material also shifts constantly, although they can supposedly choose their public (answering the question: 'Who can see my post') and issue a request to write privately through Facebook Messenger or other applications.<sup>5</sup>

### **Power building: From networking with letters to the increased risk of collapse into solipsism**

Alongside the desire for fame, there were other, more specific reasons for allowing or encouraging letter dissemination. In Ancient Rome, 'participation in letter exchange (...) was an essential means by which aristocratic Romans advertised and negotiated social status *domi et foris*' (Ebbeler, 2007, p. 30). Ebbeler gives the examples of Cæsar using his correspondence with Cicero to gain leverage vis-à-vis the Roman Senate during his rise to power. More generally, the circulation of letters was about the management and reinforcement of the norms of aristocratic life: For example, letters of consolation also encouraged the bereaved to resume their obligations (Wilcox, 2012). Such recommendations were part of a public code of conduct.

In other historical contexts, elites have used letters in a similar manner. Relationship management and negotiation of norms were at the heart of correspondence among Renaissance Humanists. For example, as a way to establish his status, Erasmus published the first letter he received from one of his senior humanists, Guillaume Budé (Haroche-Bouzinac, 1998). In such configurations, one may sketch the portrait of a (quasi) trans-historical character: The hyperactive letter writer who accumulates knowledge, solicits his peers and makes the requisite connections to advance his or (as of the eighteenth century, although rarely) her career and/or ideas. Cicero and Voltaire belong to that category, and so does Jean Paulhan, editor of the most prestigious literary review of its time (1908-present), *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. Paulhan developed 'a frenetic epistolary activity' and built 'a far-reaching and sprawling network' (Lacroix, 1998, p. 112) to manage relations among the numerous collaborators to his journal, encouraging the creation of an epistolary community as he handled conflicts and disagreements, much like the moderator of a distribution list. Today, the various modes of digital correspondence offer far more varied network building options that are no longer limited to literary elites with a great deal of time on their hands (see, e.g., Miller *et al.*, 2016).

Besides examining the cases of these sometimes famous networkers, I address a related but more general issue: For reasons concerning power, reputation, or simply sociability,

letter writers have long been eager to receive responses and have attempted to encourage others to write.

This anxiety has a long history in the West. In his published letters to Lucilius, Seneca seems to address himself at times, while waiting for readers to assume the place of the official addressee. His letters sometimes seem to give up on the addressee, 'collapsing into solipsism' and becoming just a 'self-gift,' allowing for a deeper understanding of one lone self (Wilcox, 2012, p. 72).

In a different cultural context, a similar uncertainty was central to Romantic correspondence. Bertrand Russell (1945) considered the 'fear of solipsism' as one of the defining traits of the Romantic age, while claiming the twentieth century inherited it. Emily Dickinson is the most famous example of the constant interrogation about the capacity of the letter to overcome solitude (a solitude that can also be sought therein). Her letters 'consistently focus on the formal problems of correspondence: Will I be understood? Will my letter be received? Will I receive a letter in reply?' (Hewitt, 2000, p. 145).

Narcissism on social networks, including the fear of collapse into solipsism, has already been the subject of countless psychological studies, with an acute sense of contemporary specificity and intense focus on the effects on a specific medium, if not a specific platform. Broader sociological and historical perspectives are lacking and only a few studies make an effort, mostly in passing, to contextualize individual focus (one example among many: Bergman, 2011).

Nevertheless, contemporary digital writers of the self sometimes echo anxious Roman writers, when they wonder about their absent or rare public. Social network writers may dream of exposure and fall into depression when it fails to occur. They may also rediscover (Cardon, 2010) an ancient rule for being read: Start by reading, comment on others and write to them, or, in other words: Write if you want to be written to.

Here the letter connects with another genre of personal writing with a long history: The diary. Like the letter, the diary has been wrongly conceptualized, treated as purely personal while, 'since its very conception, the genre has been dialogic rather than monologic, hence obliterating the line between private and public' (Van Dijk, 2004). Like the letter, the paper diary (published, unpublished, or published posthumously) can be studied as a precursor of writings of the self on the Internet.

### **Power building in communities: the Christian tradition**

I proceed to address another form of power building that is no less ancient than systematic networking among elites. In this form, there is no ambiguity between dialogue and dissemination: From the start, letters were disseminated to a specific public, characterized by common geographical location and, more significantly, by a common creed. In the Christian world, the founding figure is the Apostle Paul and his Epistles (*epistole* means letter in ancient and modern Greek; *apostle*, from the same root, originally meant messenger). Paul has remained a model for spiritual directors across the ages. His case has been studied from a mass communication perspective: Simonson (2010) suggests Paul used the letter to

reconfigure the body of Christ, as the letter offered instructions for common religious practice in the community (moving from small communities in the first Epistles to a wider vision of the *Ecclesia* in later ones), as well as ‘a vision of themselves as the collective Body of Christ’ (p. 52).

I will choose less or slightly less known examples of Christian epistolography. Despite the classic iconography of the pious hermit, St. Jerome was a very active letter writer, addressing religious communities to transmit his message and establish his authority as a ‘spiritual mentor to a remarkable group of disciples who, to hear him tell it in (his) epistolary anthology, were the frontrunners of the women’s ascetic movement in the fourth-century West’ (Cain, 2010, p. 9). Furthermore, he collected his letters and made sure they circulated in a *liber* that constituted a form of hologram, a ‘personal textual presence-in-absence from faraway Palestine’ (ibid., p. 10).

Jesuit and exorcist Joseph Surin’s *Lettres spirituelles*, published in Nantes in 1695, thirty years after his death, launched a new literary genre in seventeenth-century France. Before their publication, the letters were originally addressed to specific individuals, mostly nuns. Some were read to the whole convent, sometimes at the explicit request of the writer. The letter thus loses ‘its specific character and fulfils a social function. It reinforces the community and is a reminder of the reasons for this common life’ (Goujon, 2010, p. 289). This collective dimension is not only about religious life. Surin also wrote to pious, secular ladies, offering advice and suggestions for ‘spiritual practices for the whole family, or for the young girls of an orphanage’ (ibid.). Such letters could also be circulated by their recipients.

Our two examples exemplify certain similarities and differences between these writers. They were meant to establish and confirm the authority of the sender, but Jerome made the most strategic use of letters. In addition to individuals, he wrote directly to communities and also made sure a collection circulated while he was still alive. Surin wrote to individuals, sometimes encouraging copying and circulation, but had no collection of letters published in his lifetime.

The comparison with the thriving contemporary world of spiritual direction online easily comes to mind: Individuals can acquire their own private directors, who may also address varying communities. The circulation of much of this material between the private and public spheres is no less remarkable than it was for ancient letters (Campbell, 2005). In an age in which the secular literary canon is crumbling in favour of more open, cosmopolitan syllabi, religious canons (not only the Christian one) remain remarkably stable: contemporary Christian leaders may therefore perpetuate a tradition of spiritual direction based on ancient yet well-transmitted and repeated models.

### **Voluntary disseminations: the letter and the newsletter**

As a genre, the newsletter does not fit the image of the confidential dyad. The word ‘newsletter’ dates back to 1665. In 1893, a popular historian, Augustus Jessop (cited in the OED) noted: ‘The newsletters of the seventeenth century did the work of the newspapers

now.’ Newsletters started as an early form of semi-personal newspapers (they could be written by a single person) whose use was variegated until it was transferred to the digital world. A letter to a family, or an extended family (examples below) could be called a newsletter. The evolution of the lexicon alone reveals a short history of the to-and-fro between dissemination and dialogue for letters bearing news. *Newsletters* began as disseminated use of a supposedly dialogic instrument. Then the increasingly disseminated *newspaper* (mass communication) replaced it. Much transformed, the *newsletter* has made a (digital) comeback. Here, the term may confuse us, as it has become a pavilion for all sorts of cargo: Very different organizations of all sizes may send digital newsletters (once called ‘e-bulletins’) to their employees, volunteers, clients and so on (Heinonen & Michelsson, 2010). Newsletters have been variously analysed as participatory tools (Hopkins, Hare, & Donaghey, 2015) or control instruments. Beyond the emails, social networks regularly provide some form of news to various audiences. Here, the comparison suggests that the world of correspondence preceding the Internet, for all its long history, may be easier to grasp and classify than the still expanding contemporary one.

In societies with no regular means to disseminate public news, i.e., before the advent of the modern press, correspondence was the major vehicle for the diffusion of news. Numerous Roman letters were routinely divided into four parts (Achard, 1991), starting with political news and proceeding to matters of money, friendship and family. In faraway provinces, political representatives of the Roman Empire eagerly awaited letters, of which the news sections, at least, were often read aloud.

Letters were crucial for audiences such as distant merchants who required business updates. The letter played a key role in early forms of commercial globalization, as in the Venetian Empire, for example (Doumerc, 1994). Merchants were key agents in the use of the letter to consolidate commercial networks, such as those of the Arab world (Ragheb, 1988). Close comparison with the Internet as an agent of change in the organization of commerce and production would reveal many similarities (Castells, 2001).

Even after printing became commonplace in modern Europe, people still used letters to propagate news. Some of their writers were renowned as sources of current affairs, their output comparable to that of the first journalists. Sévigné was famous for the news she reported, especially from the King’s Court. When covering the trial of Superintendent Fouquet, a dramatic political-judicial event of her time, she commented on the length of her letters: ‘After those declarations, I do not think you can hope to stop the flow of my gazettes’ (November 20, 1664, quoted in Farrell, 1991). Blaming her daughter for having circulated certain letters, she wrote: ‘You thought of treating me like the Gazette de Hollande’ (March 11, 1671, in Farrell, 1991). Less famous than Sévigné, Mademoiselle de Scudéry wrote to a friend: ‘I am surprised that you, who do not like the news very much and never look at the stories of Renaudot, have expressed the wish that I relate my trip to you. It is by no means as beautiful as the siege of Gravelines and the exploits of Mr. d’Enghien. Nevertheless, since you demand it, I’ll satisfy your curiosity with a faithful narrative of the



events' (September 5, 1644). She refers to Théophraste Renaudot, who was already famous as the creator of the first French regular (weekly) newspaper, *la Gazette*, in 1631.

From elite communities and their news, I move on to ordinary audiences. As correspondence become massified and migration (from countryside to cities and across national borders) increased, letters were used to preserve a sense of community among extended families.<sup>6</sup> The first exploration of private archives reveals the complex role of letters in this respect. Letters that were addressed to a single parent and then read to the whole household also reached beyond their original destination, as they were quoted (and excerpted) for other family members and friends. The following citation from an 1831 letter written in France illustrates the complexity of such trajectories: 'I got your letter this morning and thank you for also transmitting what my father wrote to you. Today I wrote to my younger uncle and included what my brother wrote. He is sure to send you my letter, so I will not repeat myself' (Poublan, 1991, p. 391).

Discussions about the complex circulation of texts on social networks are highly relevant here. I begin the comparison by noting that to a certain extent, contemporary analysis insists on the blurring of genres and categories—not only between private and public, but also between personal and collective and between institutional and personal. Reliable institutional newspapers appear threatened by the recent rise of social networks as a major source of news (that is not always corroborated or identified, except according to the name of the poster, who often simply forwards news but does not create it). One might say that the original American publishers of newspapers, the *printers*, as Nerone & Barnhurst (2001) call them, had much in common with famous bloggers. They wrote most of the articles, but also included reprinted or edited material. Readers probably assessed a source's reliability largely according to the printer's identity. Moreover, instead of opposing today's uncontrollable (fake?) news with yesterday's carefully sourced and published reports, one should research the manner in which ancient correspondents confronted the question of control and their surprise on discovering that their text could escape them and become appropriated in unexpected and sometimes malicious ways. Here, we are moving to involuntary dissemination.

### **Fear of dissemination: Gossip, politics and power**

In the digital age, fear of dissemination (at least the kind that merits broad exposure) appears to be concerned primarily with scandal and the disclosure of reprehensible behavior, of which the MeToo movements (the plural is intentional as there are strong cultural differences among modalities of exposure across countries) now offer the best illustration. Letters and newsletters, especially manuscript newsletters, did play a role in circulating gossip, especially in political contexts in which the powers that be were vulnerable. The Modern Era provides striking examples of such processes, especially those originating in pre-revolutionary societies. The case of Queen Marie Antoinette has been made famous by Richard Darnton, although he may have overestimated the reach of the

pamphlets, 'correspondence' (newsletters) and manuscript newsletters exposing her private (especially conjugal) woes (Gruder, 2002).

A fear of dissemination that has increased in the contemporary age but has very long historical roots concerns the state as a powerful audience, represented by anonymous, covert civil servants. In the modern world, this kind of fear grows and assumes new forms: Electronic correspondence can be hacked by unknown sources; it can be leaked massively and published online and offline, creating a new (and extremely large) audience of digital watchers or voyeurs.

Early letter writers had to worry about political powers who had enough resources to keep watch on their real or imaginary enemies. Both Roman and Chinese emperors had surveillance systems (Richter, 2013). In Rome, the privileged literate minority practiced self-censorship cautiously: They used nicknames for the public figures they criticized, sealed their letters against unauthorized opening and burned them after reading if they could compromise the sender. Cicero gives us an early example: 'My letters are not those that can be read by others without risk for me: They include so many revelations that I even avoid dictating them to secretaries, as I am worried about leaks' (Achard, 1991, p. 143).

My review of the present rise of powerful, well-staffed surveillance organizations begins with the well-known political tradition of censorship, irrespective of regime, in Russia/the Soviet Union. The so-called Black Office, that intercepted correspondence on a massive scale despite laws enacted to protect privacy, 'represented a tradition going back to Catherine the Great, one which the Bolsheviks not only continued but even expanded upon' (Izmovic, 1996, pp. 287-88). In the 1920s, the authorities 'secretly opened the letters of tens of thousands, and subsequently even millions of people.' In Communist China, correspondence bore no guarantee of confidentiality (Qinglian, 2008); letters could also be read by the authorities if reported as suspicious by their addressees. This is probably one of the most extreme cases of surveillance in the history of correspondence. Not only social elites or suspected political militants were at risk, but the entire population.

Doubts concerning secrecy and confidentiality became more serious in the digital correspondence age, especially because of the increasing likelihood of leaks. In parallel with the rise of social networks, a certain loss of privacy has come to be expected. Practices aimed at achieving confidentiality (deleting emails, encryption, multiple password use) have given way to 'cultivated resignation' (Draper & Turow, 2019), wherein users may still worry about 'social privacy' (the content of their messages and identity of their correspondents) but much less so about 'institutional privacy' (the circulation and sale of their personal data for the benefit of various platforms) (Sujon, 2018). They act like letter writers who would ignore or accept a postal administration's routinely opening their letters for the purpose of sending them targeted advertising. In this respect, ancient letter writers have more in common with early emailers, who had a stronger sense of privacy (Nelms, 1999) than do social network users.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

This study constitutes a rudimentary outline of an academic project that invites considerable expansion. Additional comparisons could be added easily. The first moment of the epistolary's cultural triumph (the Enlightenment and the eighteenth century) (Chamayou, 1994) could be perceived as presaging idealization of the intellectual, digital conversation among 'virtual communities'. One could compare the long history of epistolary manuals from antiquity to the nineteenth century with the brief history of Netiquette (Vincent, 2008; Walker, 2007) or analyze 'online' consultation with well-known physicians (perhaps beginning with Galen of Pergamon in the second century CE) (Boudon-Millot, 2010). Furthermore, we might seek the digital equivalent of open letters in public space as a means of mass interpellation. Discussions of style are also relevant: many scholars have noted the semi-oral character of digital written communication (e.g., Sofer, 2012), that harks back to ancient discussions of letter style as written conversation. Media historians may propose numerous focused, 'one-dimensional' (Tilly, 1977) comparisons, shedding light on the exact mix of change and continuity, from the long history of letters (and communication technologies as a whole) to the so far brief digital age.

Beyond inviting detailed comparisons, this article also strives to refute claims about digital technologies as agents of a radical historical change in the long history of mediatization (see, e.g., Couldry & Hepp, 2017). I use the Internet as an occasion to revisit media history and to return to old questions in new ways. The discussion of digital, hyperactive, multimodal audiences allows us to resume historical work, extending back past the mass audiences of television (that never constituted the whole story even when television dominated the media landscape) to discover other kinds of active audiences.

We need history not as a preamble to synchronic research but as a path towards a better understanding of our communicative present. 'It seems that mediated communication is no longer simply or even mainly mass communication ('from one to many') but rather that the media now facilitate communication among peers (both 'one to one' and 'many to many'),' wrote Livingstone in 2004 (p. 74). In the *longue durée* of epistolary practices, there has long been no clear distinction between one-to-one and one-to-many. The enduring focus on mass communication has obstructed our historical and conceptual horizon. The Internet researcher should not reinvent the wheel by rediscovering the vast space between dialogue and dissemination: It has long been with us.

## Biographical note:

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup>. Put into historical perspective by Butsch, 2000.

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- <sup>2.</sup> I will not deal with letters written by a few to many, i.e., open letters published in the press, as they represent a marginal case in the global history of correspondence (although comparison with digital open letters/petitions is highly relevant).
  - <sup>3.</sup> There is no accepted word for the study of letters. *Epistolography*, first used in French (épistolographie) and English in the eighteenth century, means the writing of epistles and letters. The substantified adjective, the *epistolary* (l'épistolaire) is used mostly by literary researchers. I adopt the far less frequently used *epistology*.
  - <sup>4.</sup> Goethe, for example, uses the phrase “worth printing” for a particularly good letter (Habermas, 1989, p. 49).
  - <sup>5.</sup> See discussion of involuntary dissemination below.
  - <sup>6.</sup> See, for example, the classic sociological study by Znaniecki and Thomas (1996/1920), based on such correspondence.
  - <sup>7.</sup> Beyond correspondence, the history of “hidden listening” in supposedly private communication is still a new field with much contemporary relevance (regarding the telephone, see Carmi, 2019).