

Between Poetry and Politics: Humanist Pundits and the Renaissance Press

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Two things stand out about the Renaissance humanists: their commitment to classical learning and their interest in politics. We know a great deal about the impact printing had on the humanist revival of classical scholarship — how humanist editors, proofreaders, and publishers combined forces to print classical texts in astonishing numbers. But we know far less about the connection between humanist political writing and the press in its earliest decades.

The Italian humanists used the press for more than just editing the classics. Many also sought to use the new medium to disseminate commentary on current events, whether out of sincere concern for the state of the world or in hopes of gaining political advantage for either themselves or their employers.

Humanist political texts could take many forms: orations, dialogues, encomia, commemorative verse, biographies, partisan histories and commentaries on events both past and present. Much of this material — lengthy, verbose, often pretentious, almost always written in pedantically classical Latin — has been dismissed by scholars of Renaissance politics as so much insincere and ineffective “noise,” produced and consumed on the periphery of real events and real public discourse.

But this material got into print with surprising regularity in the first decades of the Italian press. Humanist authors, editors, and correctors forged relationships with printers early on and were often able to exploit these connections to see their political texts through the press. Sometimes they had the backing of powerful state sponsors — but just as often they seem to have acted alone. How did their publications contribute to the increasingly sophisticated public discourse of the Italian city-states? What were their motives for publishing, and how did they collaborate with early printers to pursue their goals? What can their experiences tell us about the development of the printing industry, state propaganda, and the market for news in early modern Italy?

Current scholarship on the origins of printed news or political printing has tended to focus on the production of vernacular pamphlet literature, most of it cheap, anonymous and ephemeral. This paper will examine a different aspect of early news publication: the production of highly polished and sophisticated commentary by highly-placed humanist scholars determined to see both their names and opinions in print. The strenuous activities of these aspiring ‘media pundits’ offer an important reminder of the role played by individual actors in the contest to control and shape the spread of information in the early modern public sphere.