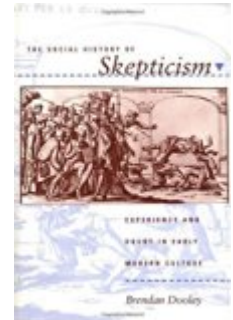


**Brendan Dooley.** *The Social Skepticism: Experience and Doubt in Early Modern Culture.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. 213 pp. \$46.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-6142-0.



**Reviewed by** Olga Borymchuk

**Published on** Jhistory (September, 2003)

Brendan Dooley, an associate professor in the Department of History at Harvard University, has produced an impressive account of the rise of skepticism about the political and historical information in the early modern Italy. His thoroughly researched and lucidly written book touches upon problems of belief, doubt and objectivity at the time of perpetual religious wars and social upheavals, flourishing polemics on the legitimacy of government and rulers, and break-through scientific discoveries. Although, all these issues had already been explored in modern historiography,[1] Dooley cuts out a niche for his work by exploring the origins of skepticism in the social dimension and tracing its development alongside the development of early modern media. Three main lines of Dooley's enquiry address origins and transformation of defiant newsletters and newspapers into virtually "state enterprise," evolution of state-commissioned (and thus purposefully biased) historical works into objective historical writing as a reaction to the skepticism, and proliferation of social skepticism as a reaction to the biased news media and historical discipline.

>From the first pages of this valuable study, we are immersed in the variety of guises in which political information was available to the early modern reader and listener (newsletters were still part of the oral culture). Manuscript sheets, newsletters and newspapers did not only spread news (hearsay, rumor, gossip) as information—they also made it as the most vivid imagination was freed and inspired by great distances and lack of information.[2] Although, as Dooley assures us, their audiences had no illusions as to the credibility of disseminated information, the news industry, offering alternative (not official) account of domestic and foreign news, was rapidly becoming a profitable business with vast networks of clientele and patronage.

As soon as the early modern media started to influence the public opinion, it was doomed to become subject to government control, since, as Hume argued, the government is based on people's opinion. Dooley shows us how the government's ideas on the newsprint changed from the prohibition and censorship in early 17th century to the "guarded toleration"[3] as the news indus-

try had already taken deep roots into the networks of power and patronage and proved to be immune to punitive legislation. The governments thus turned to exploring the possibilities of collaboration with newsletters by means of exclusive official report rights and state pensions thus endangering the defiant culture of news industry. The early modern wars of information began.

The historical scholarship had also been dragged into this warfare once the governments started to commission historical works glorifying their countries and spreading their fame abroad. The rhetorical persuasiveness and eloquence of these works overlapped with literary imagination and scholarship, thus producing a particular genre of political propaganda underpinned by the historical facts. However, as Dooley shows, the very success of this genre predetermined its decline as potentially dangerous publication with questionable credibility. In addition, corruption of the historical discipline was not unnoticed by its contemporaries.

>From this introduction to the world of media in the early-modern society, Dooley proceeds to question the connection between what circulated in the news and in the minds of the audiences. He argues that the defects of the early modern journalism were familiar to the audiences, and "if the product of error and fraud was skepticism, the product of skepticism was modern historiography."<sup>[4]</sup> The new generation of historians and readers demanded more rigorous methodology of research, arguments substantiated by evidence, and objectivity.

Dooley skillfully shows that contrary to a wide-spread assumption that residents of early modern Italy were repressed by the ubiquitous Church and nobility, the deep pool of information on the domestic and foreign affairs was available to all social levels of the peninsula. The reviewed book would probably only benefit from the additional discussion of the rise of blackmail alongside the rise of news media in early-modern Eu-

rope. But even without this suggested section, Dooley's work is a splendid read and a valuable addition to the early modern history of ideas and journalism. Although this book concentrates primarily on Italy, Dooley keeps the relevant developments in Europe within reader's sight, thus firmly placing the early modern news industry of the peninsula into the European context. In the conclusion, I would like to recommend this recent work of Brendan Dooley on the politics of information in early modern times.<sup>[5]</sup>

#### Notes

[1]. James Chandler et al., eds., *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines* (Chicago, 1994); José R. Maia Neto, "Academic Skepticism in Early Modern Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58.2 (1997) 199-220; Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago, 1998); Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley, 1979); Francisco Sanches, *That Nothing Is Known (Quod Nihil Scitur)*, ed. and trans. E. Limbrick and D.F.S. Thomson (Cambridge, 1988); Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago, 1994).

[2]. Brendan Dooley, *The Social Skepticism: Experience and Doubt in Early Modern Culture* (Baltimore, 1999) p. 17.

[3]. Ibid., p. 52.

[4]. Ibid., p. 116.

[5]. Brendan Dooley, *The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe* (London, 2001).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

**Citation:** Olga Borymchuk. Review of Dooley, Brendan. *The Social Skepticism: Experience and Doubt in Early Modern Culture*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. September, 2003.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8212>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.