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How to manage an information state: Jean-Baptiste Colbert's archives and the education of his son

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Abstract This article examines the archival methods developed by Colbert to train his son in state administration. Based on Colbert's correspondence with his son, it reveals the practices Colbert thought necessary to collect and manage information in his state encyclopedic archive during the last half of the 17th century.

Keywords Information · State · Archives · Administration · Colbert

Introduction

In 1670, Jean-Baptiste Colbert sent his 18-year old son, the marquis de Seignelay, to the port of Rochefort. There, alone with his father's cousin, Colbert de Terron, the Intendant of the Port, Seignelay was to complete an apprenticeship in administering a naval port. He possessed a set of written orders from his father: work from dawn till dusk; spend 3 h early in the morning reading all naval code books, rules, and treatises. And after having acquired the "general knowledge" found in these books, he was to "descend into the particulars" of the construction and maintenance of ships (Colbert 1965, vol. 3, 2, p. 2).

He was to make a "survey plan" of the arsenal, visit, and make a list of all the ships, write the names of all the officers, and their responsibilities, and take down the measurements of each ship. He was to visit the munitions magazine, and look at all the inventories in the presence of the manager. Finally, he was to write his own inventory, and make a list of all merchandise. He had to do the same with each workshop: the rope factory, the drying rooms, the foundries, and the shops of sail-making, caulking, carpentry, barrel-making, and gun powder, etc (Ibid., p. 3). Colbert ordered his son to learn hydrography, navigation, piloting, the drawing up of maritime routes, and the reading of ocean maps. "Observe," "examine," "see," Colbert ordered his son. In a response dated August 8, Seignelay assures his father that he has indeed seen all, and that he has begun to transform his notes and his inventories into an "article" that he will be able to keep "in his

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pocket" as a guide to naval affairs and administration (Ibid., p. 8). Colbert's son thus collected information, took notes, and boiled them down into personal manuals, or "memoirs," as Colbert called them.

The trip to Rochefort was a hard mission. Seignelay fell ill. The climate of the salt marsh, the long hours, the difficult work conditions all contributed to the fever of the young apprentice. Though Seignelay recovered, Colbert expressed concern that the Rochefort apprenticeship was possibly too much for a young man accustomed to Parisian life (Ibid., pp. 18–19). It was certainly an unusual event in Seignelay's privileged existence. We are left with the striking image of the son and heir of Louis XIV's great minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert—one of the most powerful men in the world, at the summit of his influence—Seignelay, future husband to a cousin of the king, already in possession of a great fortune, far from the glories of the court, where, to the envy of many, he had a privileged place, now sick, covered in dust, struggling to take notes and write reports in a storehouse. This is a stark contrast to the common image of power and privilege in the grand court society presided over by Louis XIV, with its prudent, powdered, and politically impotent courtiers (Elias 1983). The complexity of this culture is evident in the paintings of Colbert's son. Colbert was always represented in black such as in the famous portrait Claude Lefebvre (1666), but his son wore the bright ribbons of a noble courtier. In the best-known portrait of Seignelay by Marc Nattier (1673) at Versailles, he is depicted dressed as a Louis-quatorzian courtier, at a writing desk, quill in hand, writing official dispatches. Thus Seignelay was both a noble courtier and an administrator.

So what was Seignelay doing in Rochefort? During the time of Mazarin and Louis XIV, roughly from 1655 until Louis' ascent to power in 1661, families such as the Colberts and the Le Telliers gained new influence, establishing powerful administrative dynasties (Bourgeon 1973). This neither meant that government culture became bourgeois, nor that these men of finance became wholly aristocratic (Dessert 1984, pp. 82–83). Instead, a new bureaucratic culture emerged in Colbert's state archives. Colbert was in the process of doing something innovative: he was building an administrative archive from scratch, and training his son not only how to collect information for the archive, but also how to manage it at all levels. Large administrative archives had become a hallmark of early modern government. The Church, Venice, Spain, Austria, Swiss Cantons—as well as merchant companies such as the Fuggers and various east India companies—mixed administrative and humanist knowledge in order to manage their states and companies (Burke 2000; Head 2003). They collected "relations" and "surveys," shipping and industrial reports, formal maps and works of history, law and geography, and the notes of Jesuits, naturalists, scientists and antiquarians (Shapiro 2000, pp. 63–85).

Yet few of these state archives had been designed from the outset. Many had grown in a sedimentary process. In Rome, Florence, and Venice, secret state archives were often used for politics, legal matters, and propaganda. Yet they grew in a layered way, with little rationalized information management and only rudimentary cataloguing. Few actually knew the full content of the Italian archives, which were only roughly catalogued at the beginning of the 17th century (Baschet 1870, pp. 178–181; Marini 1861, pp. 433–453). Spain's Philip II was known as "El Rey Papelero," the paperwork king; yet he was overwhelmed by his own archives and unable to find a system with which to manage them effectively (Parker 1998, pp. 21–66; Kagan 2002). Colbert's innovation was to build his administrative archive from scratch, with the singular purpose to administer his state, which predated the permanent archives of the Marquis de Louvois and Louis de Pontchartrain (Sarmant and Stoll 1999; Chapman 2004, p. 62). To an extent, Colbert was able to do what Spain had failed to do: that was to render his vast archive manageable on a day-to-day basis and not become overwhelmed by the information that was the source of his administrative power (Depping 1851; King 1949; Balayé 1988; Saunders 1991). Thus this article seeks to reveal the mechanics of how Colbert built his state archive and certain elements of how he managed it; from the writing and collection of documents, to their filing and use (Bödeker 2001, p. 172).

Colbert closely oversaw Seignelay's education, in effect creating a decade-long training course to prepare his succession as the great Intendant of the state. In dozens of letters, Colbert outlined his vision of the skills needed to govern, and of the very essence of government itself. What emerges from this father–son correspondence is a blueprint of how to create, use and control a state information system. Colbert imagined his governmental creation as a virtual machine. He saw the state as sets of lists and documents collected by his agents, which would form a practical tool for the governing of the kingdom of France and its new colonial empire. When he thought of political action, he thought in terms of the mechanics of state paperwork and his information system. Thus Colbert's correspondence with his son is a window into how to manage a state archive and information system at a key moment in the emergence of modern administrative states and industries.

Training to manage Colbert's state archive

In June, 1679, Jacques Savary dedicated his book, *Le parfait négociant, ou Instruction générale pour ce qui regarde le commerce*, to Jean-Baptiste Colbert, who had commissioned it. The frontispiece shows a man sitting in front of a desk, in the middle of a maritime port, with an account book in front of him, a quill in one hand, taking a piece of paper from the hand of another man. Under the image is the title, "The Perfect Negociant." The merchant world offered many technical tools to the Colbert family, and the Savary frontispiece gives some impression of the world Seignelay inhabited in Rochefort.

Savary made his fortune serving the king under Fouquet, and then he definitively quit all financial management to write an official "Merchant's Code" in 1670 under Colbert's orders. The code was to be basis of this book. The *Parfait Négociant* is a compilation of documents, which shows how to function as a *négociant* and to essentially manage a merchant archive. It contains copies of formularies, registers, rules and regulations, banking notes, currency exchange, and lending papers.

Savary also outlined the proper education he saw fit to prepare for a business career. Above all, he recommends that the *négociant* know how to "write well (Savary 1749, I, p. 29)." From the age of 17 years, children would have to do the following professional exercises for this profession; "that is to say, to write well, have a good knowledge of Arithmetic, and to keep Books, in double and simple (…). (Ibid., I, pp. 297–299, II, p. 73)." Furthermore, the young merchant would have to learn how to travel and do business in foreign countries (Ibid., I, p. 30). Thus he would need to write, and in many cases write information about his travels.

As Savary described, medieval and early modern merchants traveled to make contacts, and establish relationships, if not of loyalty, of trust, as well as to discover foreign products, goods, technologies, and the working of states and economies. They kept notes in specially designed notebooks, which contained agenda-like sections for foreign weights and measures, currencies, daylight times, and the regularity of tides (Hoock and Jeannin 1991). In doing business, a merchant would have to carry his account books with him. In one case—a personal, manuscript journal, or agenda found in the Rare Books Collection of the University of Pennsylvania, Robert Williams, “Notes Concerning Trade 1632–1654.”—an English 17th-century merchant recommended traveling with a traveling archive: a trunk full of 21 different forms of note and account books:

> A Catalogue of ye Bookes necessary for ye punctuall Marchant to Keepe Acco[un]ts (sic). 1. A Cash-booke 2. A Write or Acquittance Booke 3. a booke for charges Merchandize 4. a Coppie booke of Letters 5. a Remembrance or Note Booke 6. a ffreight booke 7. a booke of Inv[en]toires sent 8. a booke of Inv[en]toires received 9. a Coppie-booke of Acco[un]ts sent 10. a Coppie booke of acco[un]ts rec[eive]d 11. a bill of lading booke 12. a booke of orders given & rece[ieve]d 13. a Cates-booke for household exp[enc]es 14. a Wast or day booke 15. a Journall 16. a Lidger 17. a Quadaranecra (*quadernàccio*, a rough work book) of Goods rec[eive]d & cons[igne]d 18. a Custome-house booke 19. a booke of Cargoes of ships arrived & dep[ar]ted 20. a Month booke 21. a booke et Coppie in partitos.

If one followed the recommendations of Savary, then much of a merchant voyage would be taken up by various forms of paperwork-handling, describing foreign merchandise, keeping account books, filling out bills of exchange, and noting weights and currency exchanges, and filing these documents.

Colbert was clearly intent on bringing merchant information handling techniques to the service of the state archive. Colbert had expanded Richelieu’s system of state Intendancies: *missi domini* who traveled to the provinces to make sure royal laws were carried out and taxes properly collected. At the same time, the Intendants were clear offspring of the merchant tradition: they too traveled, took notes, kept account books, and sent reports back to the central office. Indeed, many Intendants had climbed the administrative ladder from the ranks of the merchant class, first training as tax lawyers, or “maîtres de requêtes,” becoming administrative masters of legal paperwork. Some historians consider Colbert’s most significant administrative reform the transformation of the function of the state Intendants from provincial tax-collectors, into professional observers, statistic-takers, and, as Anette Smedley-Weill calls them, “informers” (Esmonin 1964, p. 71; Smedley-Weill 1995, pp. 133–154). While the French state had long measured itself and commissioned general descriptions, it had never formed a corps of professional observers, aside from the traditional, Italian-style ambassadorial corps. This reform differentiated Colbert’s information project from that of Philip II of Spain. In 1663, Colbert issued an *Enquête* asking more or less the same questions as found in earlier French surveys and in Philip II’s *Relaciones Topográficas*: population size; architectural, industrial, and natural resources; political and religious institutions; and the number and status of their officers (Trénard 1975, p. 12). While Philip’s *Relaciones* often went unanswered, or were unclear, Colbert had trained the bearer of his *enquête* as a professional observer, note-taker and reporter. The Intendants were meant to guarantee the quality and regularity of the information flowing toward the state archive. In the case that Colbert could not trust the work of an Intendant, he could send his brother, his son, or any number of well-trained aides to verify their work.

Thus as the heir to Colbert, Seignelay’s educational needs would be complex. Growing up in Reims, Colbert had been educated by Jesuits. He chose the same basis for his son’s education. Seignelay attended the Jesuit Collège de Clermont where many famous contemporaries had studied before him: from Princes of the Blood to commoners like Molière. Seignelay wrote a thesis in natural and military mathematics: *Positiones mathematicae de mundi systemate/Positiones mathematicae ex architectura militari* (Paris: Anon., 1668), now found at the Bibliothèque Mazarine. In addition, Colbert hired as his son’s personal preceptor, the Jesuit rhetorician, the père Bouhours. After having been a tutor to the children of the duc de Longueville, Bouhours had become chaplain to the Dunkirk garrison. Colbert chose Bouhours neither for his poetic prowess, nor for his erudition, but rather due to his expertise in geographical description (Dingli 1997, p. 24). The Jesuit had written a description of the port of Dunkirk, precisely the sort of text Colbert would send his son to write in Rochefort. Thus at the Collège de Clermont (later Louis-le-Grand), Seignelay would come in contact not only with the traditional humanist curriculum of the *ratio studiorum*, but also with the new Jesuit focus on the description of nature, navigation, and geography (Dainville 1878, pp. 25–150, 427–463). Jesuits were known for writing descriptions of their trips—of people, plants, places, buildings, and government. These ethno-natural travel texts were most often called "relations," though they could also be entitled "memoir," "history," "letter," "report," or "description. (Shapiro 2000; Greer 2000)" In essence, the Jesuits were themselves masters of writing bureaucratic reports.

If the trip to Rochefort was purely mercantile in nature, Seignelay's following trips mixed merchant, ambassadorial, and learned, antiquarian traditions of traveling (Mattingly 1955, pp. 111–118; Stagl 1995; Bely 1990, pp. 235–288). In 1671, Colbert sent his son to visit Italy. He wanted Seignelay to examine governmental structure, shipbuilding, art and architecture and to write a "relation" of his trip. The young Colbert was to meet the pope, visit the palaces and shipyards of Venice, observe neoclassical architecture and art, learn the constitutions of the old city–states and visit Venice's *Arsenale*. In a set of instructions to his son, Colbert outlined his expectations for the trip: Seignelay was to observe and write a relation much in the style of an *enquête*. In each place, Seignelay was to,

> (…) look at principally, the city, its situation, its military forces, the number of its peoples, the greatness of the state, the number and size of cities, towns and villages, the quantity of the peoples that compose the whole; the form of State government, and if it is aristocratic, he will inform himself of the names and the status of noble families which have taken or will take part in governing the Republic; their different functions; their general and particular councils; who represents the State, in whom the sovereign power lies and who resolves peace and war, who makes laws; etc: the number and names of all who have the right to enter [into government deliberations?]; and in what manner propositions are made; the suffrages collected and the results taken and pronounced; the particular councils for the militia, the admiralty, justice, for the city and for the rest of the State; the laws and the customs under which they live; in what consist the militias meant to guard the main square; *idem* for the maritime forces.
>
> Visit the public works, maritime and on ground, all the palaces, public houses and generally all that is remarkable in the said city and in all the State (Clément 1867, pp. 96–99).

At one level, Seignelay traveled as a young prince, meeting heads of state and witnessing the workings of government and power; at a second level, he traveled as learned gentleman, or antiquarian, capable of reading ancient inscriptions and describing rare plants, beautiful paintings, and Renaissance doorways; and a third level, Seignelay's trip was the training mission of an industrial merchant, who carried his books with him, writing down names and inventories, and inspecting factories. Whereas authors such as the antiquarian, Ezechiel Spanheim, author of a famous 1690 relation on court-life at Versailles, sought a certain level of professional notoriety from their published relations, Seignelay's goal was to keep his knowledge and expertise secret. His reports became major files in Colbert's archives.

The handling of state paperwork

Colbert kept an almost daily correspondence with his son, the driving theme of which was the writing of reports and the management of state paperwork. Indeed, the exchange of letters between father and son resembles more that of a teacher and student, for Colbert covered his son's letters with corrections and criticisms (Grafton 1981; Blair 2003). At the end of the year 1671, Colbert dictated a new set of instructions, which Seignelay dutifully wrote down. It was the nineteen-year-old's first royal assignment, as designed especially by his father. Looking over his son's shoulder, Colbert corrected the dictation, making marks on the page, and even writing criticisms in the margins of his son's manuscript. It was a supremely Jesuit moment: the administrator father, dictating orders to his son, which were dutifully written in a portfolio, only to be corrected again by the father. For Colbert, governing was about writing and organizing writing into easy-to-use notebooks. This was the old humanist culture of the commonplace notebook and the Jesuit schools, now the basis of governmental pedagogy.

Colbert's "Instructions to my son for fulfilling well his first commission under my orders" (1671), is the closest thing we have to a blueprint of Colbert's vision of how to govern (Colbert 1865, 3, 2, pp. 46–71). In his memoirs, Louis XIV remarked that he learned to govern by sitting in on Mazarin's councils (Louis XIV 1970, pp. 95–96). Seignelay too would be exposed to royal council meetings at a young age. But as we have seen, his apprenticeship was technically more hands-on. Along with his princely education at the Collège de Clermont, there was much about his education that resembled that of a *négociant*. If Colbert had insisted that his son travel across France and Europe, he also required that he also spend many hours behind his desk, learning the textual and archival practices that controlled the machinery of the state. Thus to be Colbert, Seignelay would have to master a state archive, and to do this, he would have to learn how to handle the paperwork machine invented by his father.

The "memoirs," "registers," "lists," "files," and "agendas" that Colbert ordered his son to write were not just memorization exercises. These lists of officers, cities, nobles, laws, rights, ports, and ships were to be kept on hand, and carried in the pocket for practical use. The French government was complicated, and its arcane rules sometimes the verbal whims of the monarch. There were neither guides nor maps to the functioning of the royal household. Thus, the notes taken by Seignelay and put in Colbert's register books were to be the first functional guide maps of the internal workings of Louis' kingdom and government. Seignelay would need to learn the workings of the state's existing information system and the mechanics of its various archives. In 1670, Colbert commissioned a series of manuscript books from trusted jurists for the education of his son. These bound folios, found in the manuscript collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale, are entitled, "Mémoire sur les Ordonnances en general de Mr. Colbert," and appear to date from 1670.A later librarian wrote on the binding: "Manuscrit Originel du Cour des Hautes Études du Fils de Colbert." The first of the three volumes contains legal texts concerning Gallican rights. The third volume contains a section entitled, "Traité des états," that contains the lists of royal custom taken in great part from compilations by Jean Du Tillet and Théodore Godefroy. Most fascinating is an anonymous chapter called, "Du Conseil du roy," which is a pure sociology of how this institution worked, outlining the function of each member.

In inheriting his father's positions, Seignelay would have to defend the rights of the monarchy and guarantee the smooth functioning of governmental offices. For this, he would need to learn the minutiae of arcane state institutions, and learn the specific paperwork needed for each governmental function. Volume 4 contains a chapter by

Nicolas-Joseph Foucault, called, “Il y a différence entre Loix, Ordonnances, et Edits.” One of Colbert’s henchmen in the pillaging of the archives of Languedoc, Foucault was a model information agent. A family friend of the Colberts, a former student of the Jesuits at the Collège de Clermont, he began his professional career as a maître des requêtes, and became Intendant de Montauban in 1674, where he put down a violent rebellion (Foucault 1862, p. xlviii). He both repressed ultramontane resistance against the Régale in 1680 by seizing the renegade clerics’ papers, and helped Louis suppress the Protestants as Intendant of Béarn (Ibid., pp. 57–73). Foucault later founded the Académie des Belles Lettres in Caen in 1705, owned a famous “cabinet d’antiquités,” and was himself a member of the Académie Royale des Inscriptions. Even in the 1670s, no one was better acquainted with the link between administration and erudite culture, so who better to write Seignelay’s manual on state paperwork? Foucault’s text is a glossary of every type of government paperwork. It resembles Savary’s compilation for businessmen; however, this manuscript was for Seignelay’s eyes only. Foucault’s treatise explains how to write and properly sign documents. It lists types of documents, official seals, and the documentary practices and responsibilities of each officer. Next to the section on seals, in the margin, Foucault writes an exercise for the young marquis:

> Assignment for Monseigneur. Write a succinct memoir of all the different forms of chancellery letters, their forms and the essential clauses of their distinctions from which all the different names and letters which are sent under each form. For example. Patent letters…. Declarations, commissions, (…) arrests (Ordonnances,” vol. 2, fol. 471).

Volume IV of the *Ordonnances* also contains a study of the Chambre des Comptes, the financial archival administration of the kingdom, which was essentially a documentation center for accounting orders and receipts. Once again, it is essentially a workbook, which explains each sort of official document. For example,

> What is a “Comptant”: It is a receipt in Parchment, signed by the King’s hand, of the End of the Month accounts which have recently been paid to him by the Savings Treasury and of which no mention is made of the Cause of expenditure (Ibid., vol. 3, fol. 175).

With this training manual, Seignelay became an expert in state archival documentation. He memorized the names and styles of documents, and copied them as practice. He wrote lists, inventories, and reports. His father corrected this work, often making him re-write them.

Seignelay could not afford an error in his own paperwork for the finished product—the boiled-down extracts and reports—would, in many cases, go before the king (Colbert 1865, *Lettres*, 3.2, p. 80). Colbert reminded his son that every Friday morning, each official report would have to be finished and polished for that was when Louis took the time to read his ministers’ reports and dossiers. If the information that Colbert collected was a virtual representation of the kingdom, it also represented the competency of his family and usefulness of the services they offered. Therefore, the final preparation of documents for the king was a complicated process. Colbert writes,

> As soon as I have seen all the dispatches, if they have arrived on time, I will send them to my son for him to see them, and promptly and exactly take extracts, which will be written on the back of each letter and returned at the same time to my table; I will write a word with my hand on each article of the extract, containing the response which should be made immediately; my son should write responses with his own hand, and

> then show them to me so that I can correct them, and when everything is ready, on Friday we shall bring to the King all the letters, we will read him the extracts, and at the same time the responses; if His Majesty orders any changes, it will be done; otherwise, the responses will be cleaned up, signed and sent out. And so, in observing these orders with exactitude, without ever departing from them, it is certain that my son will put himself in a state to acquire esteem in the King's opinion (Ibid., p. 62).

Here was the solution to Philip II's information overload. Seignelay learned each link in the chain of information: the choice of subject, the collection, the writing, the organization, and the presentation to the king. Even more, he would have to oversee archival management, and the general functioning of the state paperwork machine.

Though Seignelay was one of the richest men in the kingdom, with a privileged place in Versailles, and respected even by Saint-Simon, his life often resembled that of a Dickensian clerk. His father's letters are filled with scathing critical tirades, sometimes lasting for pages, such as this virulent passage: "One sees rather clearly that you never write minutes of your dispatches, which is, between us, something absolutely shameful, and which denotes a negligence and a default of application that cannot be excused, or even expressed (…). (Ibid., p. 80)" Here is the raw grit with which Colbert mercilessly trained his son, and also destroyed enemies such as Fouquet, concentrated power for himself and his family, and tried to help Louis XIV build an absolute monarchy.

In 1671, Seignelay wrote an exercise aptly titled, "Memoir on that which I propose to do every week to execute the orders of my father and to make me more capable of relieving his worries," in which he concedes his shortcomings and assures his father he will apply himself to the management of his paperwork:

> I will make myself copy down the records Tuesday, after dinner, I will file them after having read them, and I will write on the side the minutes written by my father.
>
> Above all, I will not fail, when I have to send official correspondence, of whatever nature it might be, to search in the register books of my father that which has been done in a similar occasion, and I will give myself the time to read and examine the said registers, in order to form my style by that of my father.
>
> I will visit every night my table and my papers, and I will expedite, before going to bed, that which I can, or I will put aside and send later, before marking, in my agenda that I will keep exactly on my table, the affairs that I will have sent out [to my correspondents], so as to be able to hold them accountable if they take too long in responding.
>
> I will write all my current affairs in the aforementioned agenda, and I will cross them out when each official letter has been sent.
>
> (…)
>
> In making my principal points, I will write them all with my own hand, and I will make notes on the side of the points which I must address in my letter, and I will attempt to follow the style of my father, in order to save him the trouble, where possible, of having to correct and redo these letters, even entirely, which happens quite often.
>
> Saturday morning will be spent examining and signing ordinary letters, to be sent to the Friday council, and working on current affairs.

> Saturday after dinner, I will not fail to examine the agenda, and look in the register of finances to see if there are any new funds which have been omitted from the register of orders given to the treasurer; if I have omitted none, during the week, I should record those which have been given; and I will apply myself to be so exact in the keeping of the said agenda, that I will not need to have recourse to the treasurer to know what funds he has in his hands (Ibid., pp. 71–74).

While contemporaries admired Seignelay as a hard worker, Colbert was never satisfied. Indeed, it appears that Seignelay lacked his father's obsession with organization and filing. In 1676, after many years of training, Colbert was furious to find his son's desk in disorder. Had all his lessons been in vain?

> You must still take care to look after your papers, particularly the important ones, which you should keep under lock and key, such as all the treaties and memoirs I asked you to do, and which I still do every day, for you, and which I now find rolled in a desk, in the worst state of filth, in spite of the fact that they contain the quintessence of the spirit of the most accomplished people in the kingdom;
>
> Your portfolios;
>
> The Decrees, by call numbers and dates;
>
> All the treatises, the books, the instructions and all that concerns the fundaments and the maxims taken, that you should know perfectly.
>
> Take care that all your memoirs and letters are well-organized by reference numbers.
>
> That none escape your attention that there are none that you miss, that you examine, and that you give orders on that which they contain. (…) That no paper or letter pass through your hands, without your seeing and examining it and giving your resolution, and without your asking about what you do not perfectly understand (Ibid., pp. 172–173).

Was Seignelay's messy desk a sublimated filial rebellion? In 1674, in the margins of his "Instructions," Colbert had expressly reminded his son, "You must put call numbers on all your sheets, divide these maxims by date and by chapter, and only make a precise extract (…) (Ibid., p. 64). Observation and note-taking were not enough. Seignelay would need the skills of an accountant and archivist to handle the register books made from notes and reports, and only by these means, assured his father, would he never have to worry about information overload.

Paperwork and reform: insights into an 18th-century information crisis

If Colbert had ordered his son to collect documents, make lists, observations, reports, and organize it all, with headings and call numbers, he was not speaking in abstract terms, but describing his own notebooks with which Seignelay was not only familiar, but which he also inherited in due course and clearly used. Aside from Colbert's massive book and manuscript collection, he kept around one hundred compilation portfolios, with on average 700 folio pages, each one on a different theme: relations with Italy, the Régale and Church affairs in 1682, shipbuilding, architecture, secret codes, letters and formularies from the reign of Louis XIII, lists of Spanish nobility, etc. (Bourel de la Roncière and Bondois 1920–1922, pp. 1–93). Each folio contains numerous texts, some copies, some originals, of documents Colbert deemed useful. On the back of each document, Colbert wrote its title, in some cases adding, “Extremely Important,” so he could easily manage these files. He added to each book regularly, to keep them up to date, or to add a useful text if he found one. This was Colbert’s archive for governing. When a particular problem arose, Colbert could reach for his personally made manual on the topic for easy reference. When Colbert died, Seignelay continued to use the collection, for example, the dossier on religious affairs continued to grow as Seignelay managed the legal aspects of Louis XIV’s Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, adding new documents to his father’s old, but still useful compilations. After Seignelay’s death in 1691 however, the library stopped being a center of administration and became a museum of past power.

The institutional tradition Colbert began lived on and prospered with the Colbert de Croissy branch of the family (Baillou 1984, I, pp. 53–118). Colbert’s brother, Charles Colbert de Croissy (1629–1696), not only worked as an Intendant, but replaced Colbert as minister of foreign affairs from 1680 to 1696. It was he who most effectively continued the administrative traditions of his brother. Under the orders of his brother, he wrote numerous *enquêtes*, and a year before becoming Foreign Minister, he organized the first systematic foreign affairs archive, the first official, non-personal depot for diplomatic correspondence and historical archives (Baschet 1870, pp. 53–118; Klaits 1976, pp. 26–31; Rothkrug 1965, pp. 212–213). He personally showed his assistants how to write diplomatic minutes and instructions, and in many cases rewrote their communiqués before they were presented in the royal council. Above all, he oversaw and organized all diplomatic correspondence (Kerhave et al. 1978, p. 73). It was said that he insisted that all papers pass through his hands. Power for the Colbert family was not only in the office, but in the mastery of a management system through techniques of information collection, recording, and organization, and this power was delegated outwards among a web of family members and loyal agents.

In creating the first systematic archive of diplomatic documents, Croissy was essentially creating a ministerial archive on a smaller scale than what his older brother had done in the family/state archives and royal library. While much of the new archive consisted of traditional historical diplomatic documents, there was a move to keep all minutes and correspondence, as well as to obtain the personal archives of ministers and ambassadors. Even more, Croissy’s son, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, marquis de Torcy, foreign minister from 1696 to 1715, continued the Colbertist tradition, strengthening the diplomatic archives by creating an independent “Dépot des Archives” at the Louvre in 1709, and moving to create a “corps of professional historians,” trained in the triage and analysis of historical documents (Baschet 1870, p. 83; Baillou 1984, p. 109; Bely 1990, chap. 2). These miniature Colberts were to be educated in a school funded within the ministry of foreign affairs, called the “Académie Politique,” a fitting name for a secret historical academy in the archives of the diplomatic corps (Thuillier 1996, pp. 212–213). The Académie Politique worked for several years, but essentially stopped after the death of de Torcy. What remained however, was this new central archive (now the archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

In the end, what characterized Colbert’s secret information system was not only its effectiveness, but also its purely personal nature. Colbert’s information system was understood only by him, his son, and possibly by the Croissy branch. His information web was so complex, and made up of so many different parts that after his death, many of the institutions he created did not remain part of the centralized royal information system. While the crown retained control of the police and intelligence networks through the long and loyal service of the Lieutenant La Reynie, as well as the ministry of foreign affairs, other academies and networks slowly slipped out of the direct control of the crown (Rothkrug 1965; Soll 2005, pp. 123–125). As Colbert so firmly believed, knowledge was power, and that was why it had to remain secret. Colbert had not succeeded in creating a centralized and permanent state policy archive, but de Torcy did in the Foreign Ministry. Although the Colbert archive did not become the central state archive, it was a model for modern governments French and foreign, despotic, democratic, and totalitarian alike, and was developed with varying levels of success throughout the eighteenth century.

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