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Transnational History and Social Network Theory

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Published in:
Networking Europe and New Communities of Interpretation (1400-1600)

DOI:
10.1484/M.NCI-EB.5.134308

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2023

Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database

Citation for published version (APA):
Folkerts, S., & Hoogvliet, M. (2023). Transnational History and Social Network Theory: A Brief Introduction to Theory and Terminology. In M. Hoogvliet, M. F. Fernández Chaves, & R. M. Pérez García (Eds.), *Networking Europe and New Communities of Interpretation (1400-1600)* (pp. 19-35). (New Communities of Interpretation; Vol. 4). Brepols Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1484/M.NCI-EB.5.134308

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SUZAN FOLKERTS AND
MARGRIET HOOGVLIET

Transnational History and Social Network Theory

A Brief Introduction to Theory and Terminology

To provide an outline of the theoretical foundations uniting the articles in this volume, as well as to streamline a shared vocabulary, this chapter will give a brief (and certainly not exhaustive) overview of recent ideas on Transnational History and Network Theory, together with their theoretical backgrounds. It is our intention to show how these models can be used to approach the flow of religious texts among individuals, groups, networks, and spaces, as well as through connecting links, during the late Middle Ages and the early modern period. This overview will also ask how we may arrive at a better understanding of connectivity and the functioning of networks, especially in the case of the Europe-wide and in some cases transatlantic dissemination of religious texts and the creation of widely shared values concerning lay communities of interpretation.

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Margriet Hoogvliet • is a specialist in the field of biblical and religious reading cultures of lay people living and working in the towns of late medieval France. Her research is concerned with the social, material, and spatial aspects of the reception of religious texts in French and their dissemination amongst the population.

Networking Europe and New Communities of Interpretation (1400–1600), ed. by Margriet Hoogvliet, Manuel F. Fernández Chaves, *and* Rafael M. Pérez García, New Communities of Interpretation, 4 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2023), pp. 19–36
10.1484/M.NCI-EB.5.134308

Transnational History

For a long time, history in Europe, as well as the history of those parts of the world Europe influenced, has been national history.[1] Even nowadays, to a non-negligible extent history still is national history, based on the political borders of the European nation states as they had become established by the nineteenth century, or in some cases only after the end of the Cold War in the 1990s. National histories tend to perceive nation states above all as discrete entities united by a commonly shared national language of identity and a collective ancestry (which is sometimes even thought to be genetically retraceable), while overemphasizing arguments for national exceptionality and (often perceived) differences with other countries. It is well known that these approaches grew out of Romanticism and from a Western anthropology dating from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which was mainly focused on searching for timeless 'national characters'. These perspectives are still with us, even though their focus clearly generates limited visions of the historical past.[2]

For researchers working on the medieval and early modern periods, the model of the nation inhabiting its own nation state quickly becomes uncomfortable, because the ever-shifting political borders and the mobility of people in the past differ in many cases from modern ideas of territorial and political delimitations. Moreover, the historical variants of national languages do not fit neatly into the imagined linguistic unity of modern nation states: linguistic variety and multilingualism seem to have been the common rule rather than the exception — and often they still are nowadays.[3]

As a consequence of recent migratory movements, resulting in the development of multicultural societies, and in combination with processes of decolonization and globalization, the idea of exceptional European nation states, supposedly characterized by cultural, genetic, and linguistic purity, has been rendered highly questionable. One of the critical approaches proposed by cultural analysis is Transnational History. While transnational approaches have their roots in the 1960s and 1970s, this notion has gained momentum in the early twenty-first century, due to the specific social context of globalization, as Patricia Seed observes: 'Transnational history [...] implies a comparison between the contemporary movement

1 This paragraph is in part based on Suzan Folkerts's keynote lecture '"A World of Communities": Transnational, Regional, and Entangled Approaches to the Circulation and Transformation of Religious Knowledge in Late Medieval Europe', plenary meeting of COST Action IS1301 'Going Transnational', University of Groningen, 3–5 November 2016.

2 Caro Baroja, *El mito del carácter nacional*.

3 See for instance: Hsy, *Trading Tongues*; Morato and Schoenaers, eds, *Medieval Francophone Literary Culture*; Selig and Ehrich, eds, *Mittelalterliche Stadtsprachen*.

of groups, goods, technology, or people across national borders and the transit of similar or related objects or people in an earlier time'.[4]

One of the most important critics of nationalistic and ethnocentric approaches to history is Sanjay Subrahmanyam, who argues:

> Nationalism has blinded us to the possibility of connection, and historical ethnography, whether in one of its western variants of high Orientalism, or whether practised in the East, has aided and abetted this unfortunate process. The thrust of such ethnography has always been to emphasize difference.[5]

And, moreover:

> For the historian who is willing to scratch below the surface of his sources, nothing turns out to be quite what it seems to be in terms of fixity and local rootedness.[6]

If we turn to the borders that are thought to separate nations, cultures, ethnicities, and languages neatly from each other, these, too, turn out to be highly problematic, variable, and permeable. Borders and margins are, in fact, sites of contact, of exchange, of sharing, and of integration, as Noel Parker has made clear in a groundbreaking publication:

> To examine how margins are articulated, we need to see the identities of selves and their others engaged in a continuous interactive asserting, claiming, (r)ejecting, sharing, and sharing-out of features that become integrated in their own and/or the others' identities.[7]

If borders are increasingly perceived as permeable and national identities as subject to change, as a consequence comparative approaches become highly problematic, because the terms of comparison cannot be delimited clearly. Among others, Jürgen Kocka and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt have observed that comparative history often disregards interactions and connections:

> While the comparative approach separates the units of comparison, entanglement-oriented approaches stress the connections, the

4 Patricia Seed in Bayly and others, 'AHR Conversation', p. 1442. Other publications that address globalization and history include: Irie, *Global and Transnational History*; Gruzinski, 'Les Mondes mêlés de la monarchie catholique'; Douki and Minard, 'Global History, Connected Histories'.

5 Subrahmanyam, 'Connected Histories', p. 761.

6 Subrahmanyam, 'Connected Histories', p. 745.

7 Parker, 'From Borders to Margins'. For an excellent discussion of border studies and transregional approaches, see: Soen and others, 'How to do Transregional History'.

> continuity, the belonging-together, the hybridity of observable spaces or analytical units, and reject distinguishing them clearly.[8]

Sanjay Subrahmanyam, too, opposes the idea of separate and thus comparable cultures, and proposes to replace it with connected history:

> But ideas and mental constructs, too, flowed across political boundaries in that world, and — even if they found specific local expression — enable us to see that what we are dealing with are not separate and comparable, but connected histories.[9]

The actual study of connections could take the approach of *l'histoire croisée*, as developed by Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann in an often quoted, but less well understood article. They note the fact that the process of decolonization and globalization have, as a consequence, reorientated and reconfigured the social sciences and the humanities. *L'histoire croisée* is a relational, interactive, and process-oriented approach that examines intersections, because objects and practices will change as a consequence of cultural contacts. Consequently, 'the objects of research should not only be investigated in their relation to one another, but also through each other in terms of relations, interactions, and circulation'.[10] This is especially important for transnational studies because these should:

> make visible a network of dynamic interrelations, of which the constituent parts are partially defined through the links they maintain and the connections that structure their positions. Seen from this perspective, *l'histoire croisée* can open promising roads for writing a history of Europe that is not limited to the sum of the history of its member states or their mutual political relations, but instead takes into account the diversity of transactions, negotiations and new interpretations that take place in different places and around a great variety of objects. The combination of these different perspectives will contribute to the creation of a multi-level European history.[11]

Likewise, in recent thinking about approaches to connectivity and exchanges in the history of the late medieval and early modern period,

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8 Kocka and Haupt, 'Comparison and Beyond'.

9 Subrahmanyam, 'Connected Histories', p. 745.

10 Translation Margriet Hoogvliet of Werner and Zimmermann, 'Penser l'histoire croisée', p. 15. See also: Werner and Zimmermann, eds, *De la comparaison*; Werner and Zimmermann, 'Beyond Comparison'; Schilling and Tóth, eds, *Cultural Exchange*. A key publication concerning the origin and development of the theory of decolonization is Vega, *Imperios de papel*.

11 Werner and Zimmermann, 'Penser l'histoire croisée', p. 17. Translation Margriet Hoogvliet.

'places and processes of exchange'[12] and 'contact zones'[13] take an increasingly central place.

Although most chapters in this book engage most notably with European history, it is important to bear in mind that another consequence of globalization and postcolonial emancipation is the 'decentring of the West' by studying its connectivity to the wider world. Subrahmanyam argues that the writing of history should move from the incommensurability of different empires to the lens of commensurability and hybridity: 'what usually happened was approximation, improvisation, and eventually a shift in the relative positions of all concerned'.[14] As Timothy Brook has shown in his study of Vermeer's paintings, during the early modern period locally made objects, with primarily local functions, were often connected in some way to broader and even global forces.[15] In part as a result of these developments in recent thinking about history, historians of the medieval period are also shifting their outlook towards the 'Global Middle Ages'.[16]

These broader horizons and textual connections, stretching out over long geographical and cultural distances (in some cases intercontinental and transatlantic connections), will be addressed in all the chapters of this book.[17] The approach uniting these chapters is the focus on connections, exchanges of texts, interactions, and intersections, as well as infrastructures and their practices, in order to uncover shared European patterns of religious reading cultures in the European vernaculars and the emergence of new religious identities of the laity. Together they produce an approach to European history that is thought-provoking and potentially leading to new insights — with a necessarily flexible delimitation of Europe and European Christian cultures.

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12 Hackett, 'Introduction', p. 12.

13 Greenblatt, 'A Mobility Studies Manifesto', p. 251.

14 Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters*, pp. 24–30. For similar approaches, see: Hillerbrand, 'Was there a Reformation'; Arnzen and Thielmann, eds, *Words, Texts and Concepts*.

15 Brook, *Vermeer's Hat*; Gerritsen and Riello, eds, *The Global Lives of Things*; Fennetaux and others, eds, *Objets nomades*; Christian and Clark, eds, *European Art and the Wider World*; Boucheron, eds, *Histoire mondiale de la France*; Heerma van Voss, ed., *Wereldgeschiedenis van Nederland*. See also Italian 'microstoria', that perceives small-scale historical events and objects primarily in their relation with the wider historical contexts at large: Ginzburg, 'Microhistory'; and 'glocalisation', the interplay between the local and the global: Roudometof, *Glocalization*.

16 Holmes and Standen, 'Introduction: Towards a Global Middle Ages'.

17 For the study of the contact zones and cultural exchange in colonial and transatlantic spaces during the early modern period, see Hespanha, *Filhos da Terra*. Talking about the cultural exchanges in the Ibero-American world, Paiva, *Dar nome ao novo*. About the Atlantic exchange of books and culture in the Iberian Atlantic, Maillard Álvarez and Fernández Chaves, eds, *Bibliotecas de la Monarquía Hispánica en la primera globalización*.

Networks

As discussed in the previous paragraph, transnational history and connectivity are concerned with contact zones and connecting links. These links, connecting two or more entities, can also be studied through the lens of the network model.

Even though the later Middle Ages have sometimes been heralded as having produced the birth of individualism as a result of the growth of private devotions,[18] the same period also witnessed the flowering of many formal and informal social networks connecting individuals to each other and to larger social groups.[19] The formal networks included, for instance, the urban communal movements, knightly orders, parishes, confraternities, guilds, beguinages, and Third Order communities. Towns all over late medieval Europe included very similar social network structures, and some networks even stretched out supra-locally. Among the latter were not only the religious orders, but also lay organizations, such as international banker's firms, entrepreneurial *compagnie*, and Hansa trading networks.[20] Moreover, during the early modern period, the mercantile colonies and the members of the religious diasporas (Huguenots, Quakers, Mennonites, Jews, *Moriscos*), alongside Catholics,[21] acted as connectors involved in wider networks that made possible cultural exchanges and the creation of new communities of interpretation in Europe as well as in the colonial Atlantic world.[22]

Social Network Theory (SNT) has emerged as one of the major theories guiding social studies and social history. It is in part inspired by the development of modern communication networks and the interhuman

18 See, for instance: Smith, *Art, Identity, and Devotion*, p. 4; Fuchs and others, eds, *Religious Individualisation*; Arlinghaus, 'Conceptualising Pre-Modern and Modern Individuality'.

19 This paragraph is indebted to Margriet Hoogvliet's collaboration with Christina Williamson and Megan Williams for the module 'Mediterranean III: The Blue Web', University of Groningen (2013); as well as to the presentations by Megan Williams and Arie van Steensel during the plenary meeting of COST Action IS1301 in Groningen, 2–5 November 2016. Medieval networks were also addressed during the international virtual conference 'Communities and Networks in Late Medieval Europe (c. 1300–1500)', University of Cambridge, 9–10 September 2021: https://communitiesandnetworks21.wordpress.com; and the International Medieval Congress in Leeds will have as central theme 'Networks and Entanglements' in 2023.

20 For recent publications on medieval trading networks, see: Parker, 'Entrepreneurs, Families, and Companies'; Lugli, 'Linking the Mediterranean'; Blockmans and others, 'Maritime Trade Around Europe'; Caracausi and Jeggle, 'Introduction'; Ewert and Selzer, 'Social Networks'; Nagy and others, eds, *The Medieval Networks in East Central Europe*.

21 Freist and Lachenicht, eds, *Connecting Worlds and People*; Herrero Sánchez and Kaps, eds, *Merchants and Trade Networks in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean*.

22 Maillard Álvarez, *Books in the Catholic World*; Hampe Martínez, *Bibliotecas privadas*; González Sánchez, *New World Literacy*.

connectivity created by online social media. It has led historians working on the late Middle Ages and the early modern period to realize that these twenty-first-century theoretical models may also be used to describe very well social connections as found in 500- to 600-year-old historical sources, in some cases even dating from still earlier ages, and that networks can be used as a productive analytical tool for historical processes.

Until the 1960s and 1970s organizations and societies, both modern and historical, have often been understood as being constructed following the centre-periphery model: a command centre in the middle that gives directions to subordinated entities surrounding it. Another often used metaphor for describing social relations is the tree: a hierarchical and genealogical structure where dependent entities branch out from a common ancestral stem. In the 1980s the inequalities inherent in these conceptualizations were criticized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who proposed instead the idea of a web-like, horizontally growing root structure of rhizome plants (such as bamboo, certain grasses, and orchids) to represent the non-hierarchical connectivity and heterogeneity of phenomena such as knowledge, power structures, and cultures.[23] More recently, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk has proposed the model of foams for describing the non-centrally directed masses and ever-changing connectivity of modern societies.[24]

The development of computer networks, Internet, and mobile communication has provided one of the most widely used models, that of the Network Society as proposed by Manuel Castells in his seminal study with the same title.[25] Yet, already as early as the 1930s Jacob Moreno proposed to represent social structures as networks and to use network graphs for quantitative analysis.[26] Next to Castells's work, the basic network model generally used for Social Network Theory is based on Paul Baran's ideas concerning the Distributed Network as a resilient system for technology-based communication, first published in 1964.[27] Baran distinguished three types of networks: centralized, decentralized, and distributed. The distributed network is a non-centralized network, with multiple connections between each of its points, not unlike the rhizome model of societies. When a part of the distributed communication network is destroyed, the remaining parts will take over its activities, allowing the network to remain functional.

23 Deleuze and Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie*.

24 Sloterdijk, *Sphären*.

25 Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*.

26 Freeman, *The Development of Social Network Analysis*; Prell, *Social Network Analysis*, pp. 19–58.

27 Baran, 'On Distributed Communication Networks'.

As a consequence of their origins, the central terms commonly used in Social Network Analysis are often borrowed from the terminology developed for computer-based communication networks:

> Network: a collection of interlinked nodes that exchange information.
> Node: the most basic part of the network; for example, a user or computer.
> Tie (or Link): the connection between two nodes.
> Hub (or Server): a node that has connections to a relatively large number of other nodes.[28]

An important point of departure for the articles in this book is the idea that social networks are not inactive entities, but are understood as having functions and agency, most notably their instrumentality in the transportation of objects, ideas, information, and texts.[29] Moreover, the nodes in the network are not only thought of as human beings, but objects, environments, texts, books, and ideas can also be represented as nodes with agency in the network.[30]

Network-based data models were first conceived for quantitative analyses of social phenomena,[31] and scholars such as Manuel Vásquez have argued against the 'positivist and reductive tendencies in network analysis'.[32] However, the network model can also be used in a more general way for understanding the fundamental interconnectedness of past individual and collective social entities, as famously argued by Barry Wellman and S. D. Berkowitz:

> We suggest that network analysis is neither a method nor a metaphor, but a fundamental intellectual tool for the study of social structures. In our view, an important key to understanding structural analysis is recognising that social structures can be represented as *networks* — as sets of *nodes* (or social system members) and sets of *ties* depicting their interconnections.

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28 'Beyond Distributed and Decentralized': What is a Federated Network?', <https://networkcultures.org/unlikeus/resources/articles/what-is-a-federated-network/>, accessed 7 January 2022.

29 For studies of connected places that receive and transmit goods, information, and ideas, see: Burghartz and others, eds, *Sites of Mediation*.

30 Vásquez, 'Studying Religion in Motion', p. 169, quoting White: 'As temporal and spatialized forms of relationality, networks are also negotiated "phenomenological realities" consisting of narratives, practices, cognitive maps, and microhistories. In other words, meaning, orientation, and intentionality are not just commodities that circulate but are constitutive of the networks themselves'. See also the 'Actor–Network' model, in Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

31 For historical studies, see: Jullien, 'Netzwerkanalyse in der Mediävistik'; Lemercier, 'Formal Network Methods in History'.

32 Vásquez, 'Studying Religion in Motion', p. 171.

> This is a marvellously liberating idea. It immediately directs analysts to look at linked social relations and frees them from thinking of social systems as collections of individuals, two-person dyads, bounded groups, or simple categories. Usually, structural analysts have associated 'nodes' with individual people, but they can just as easily represent groups, corporations, households, nation-states, or other collectives in this way. 'Ties' are used to represent flows of resources, symmetrical friendships, transfers, or structured relationships between nodes.[33]

Network Theory, in a great variety of formats and methods, is increasingly used for the study of historical societies. For instance, the notion of connectivity, proposed in Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell's study of Mediterranean history, is often used as a model for the analysis of historical social networks, including those of the Middle Ages and the early modern period.[34] For Horden and Purcell, however, connectivity functions primarily within and between the microecologies that are typical for the Mediterranean marine milieu. In their view, long-distance shipping lanes crossing the sea that were used for commerce were not as important as often thought, but rather the 'shifting webs of casual, local, small-scale contacts' were the connections primarily used throughout the area.[35]

In a more recent article, Peregrine Horden stresses that the notion of connectivity as used in *The Corrupting Sea* was primarily developed for the particularities of the Mediterranean landscapes and their microecologies.[36] Horden strongly disapproves singling out connectivity while disregarding its original context and using it as a 'fig leaf' for the study of other cultures in different geographical areas. On the other hand, small-scale exchanges in any form between different areas, together with 'global links with other big areas', as Horden puts it, point towards a potentially fruitful approach for this collection of essays as well.[37] More recently, pre-modern networks and networking behaviour operating at a larger scale, such as 'long-range networks criss-crossing Eurasia and parts of Africa', are emerging as a lens for research into the 'global' Middle Ages and the 'global' early modern period.[38]

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33 Wellmann and Berkowitz, 'Introduction: Studying Social Structures', p. 4. See also the excellent contribution to this book by Wellmann, 'Structural Analysis from Method and Metaphor'.

34 Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, esp. pp. 123–43.

35 Horden and Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea*, p. 144.

36 Horden, 'The Maritime, the Ecological, the Cultural'.

37 Horden, 'The Maritime, the Ecological, the Cultural', p. 71. For the use of the concept of 'connectivity' in cultural history, see also: Folkerts, 'Introduction', pp. 14–15.

38 Shepard, 'Networks', p. 149.

The usefulness of relational concepts and relational thinking for historical studies and archaeology is presented in an excellent way by Tom Brughmans, Anna Collar, and Fiona Susan Coward in their introductory chapter to the collection of essays entitled *The Connected Past*:[39]

> First, taking a network perspective means that the individual entities of research interest, such as technological innovations, objects, individual humans or communities, archaeological sites, and islands, are never studied in isolation. Instead, it is assumed that these entities are engaged in relationships that are fundamental to understanding their behaviour in the past. The physical size or materiality of the entities under study is largely irrelevant: almost anything can be usefully considered a node depending on the research question, potentially allowing network perspectives to bridge different spatial, social, and conceptual scales of analysis.
>
> Second, the relationships between entities can be equally diverse: a recorded action of information transmission, spatial proximity; a physical connection such as a road, friendship; political alliance; membership of an institution; presence of similar structures on different sites; the morphological similarity of objects.[40]

Next to the social interconnectedness of people and objects, in their view networks from the past can take many forms:

> Archaeologists and historians aim to understand past phenomena, whether they are past networks of some sort that are hypothesized to have existed (e.g. a road network) or aspects of human behaviour that translate less straightforwardly into network concepts (e.g. trade).[41]

In the essays of this book, various international travel networks and commercial networks from the late Middle Ages and early modern period are not only hypothesized, but also well documented as existing and retraceable entities.

Roads, waterways, and other travel infrastructure are yet another interesting category of subjects for social network analysis, because they are physical and often surviving 'hardware' that makes visible the networks connecting people. The frequency of contacts is sometimes measurable, for instance in business administration and toll registers. The importance of commercial networks, diasporas, and medieval travel infrastructure is

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39 Brughmans and others, 'Network Perspectives on the Past'. See also: Collar, ed., *Networks and the Spread of Ideas in the Past*. Useful examples from archaeological research can be found in: Knappett, ed., *Network Analysis in Archaeology*; Knappett, *An Archaeology of Interaction*.

40 Brughmans and others, eds, *The Connected Past*, p. 7.

41 Brughmans and others, eds, *The Connected Past*, p. 8.

a key feature connecting the contributions to this volume, most notably historical networks in the book trade, a subject taken up earlier by John Hinks. In the introductory chapter on Social Network Theory, Hinks suggest that people, places, events, ideas and books are interconnected:

> Networks help to demonstrate how things fit together: people, places, events and ideas. [...] Written or printed texts are key connectors within networks, virtual networks perhaps, but still networks. So a solitary scholar is connected to a network of ideas by the books he or she reads — and perhaps by the books he or she publishes. [...] The book trade historically depended on networks of various kinds, for both the production and distribution of books and other related goods.[42]

The contributions to this book take up the idea of social networks as facilitators of the dissemination of religious ideas and religious books, but Hinks refers here to another network brought about by the act of reading: a 'textual community',[43] or, in the terminology of COST Action IS1301, the creation of 'new communities of interpretation'.[44]

The essays that follow use the lens of connectivity and networks on a trans-European and in some cases a transatlantic scale, in order to analyse processes of the transfer of religious knowledge and religious texts shared by different communities. All the contributions focus on networks of religious texts and networks of readers, meanwhile uncovering shared European patterns of religious reading. This has resulted in a richer documentation and a more calibrated understanding of late medieval and sixteenth-century textual communities.

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42 Hinks, 'Beyond Metaphor', p. 1.

43 Scase, 'Reading Communities'; Hoogvliet, '"Pour faire laies personnes entendre"'; Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture*, pp. 272–98, 405–60; Campbell, *The Call to Read*; Rehberg Sedo, *Reading Communities*; Hexter, 'Location, Location, Location'; Van Dussen and Soukup, eds, *Religious Controversy in Europe*. For an overview and a critical discussion of theoretical aspects of "textual communities" (most useful when presented as a question rather than a solution), see: Heath, 'Textual Communities'; Korhonen, 'Textual Communities'.

44 See the general introduction to this book.

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