



# INFORMATION AND POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING

Understanding the British decision to intervene in the Taiping Civil War through the 'grand perspective' of information history.

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# Introduction

“According to the latest accounts Ningpo was in danger. If it falls we shall see what is its fate. If our influence avails to save the town from plunder and destruction and the imperialists still continue helpless at Shanghai it may be a question whether we should not come to terms. Hitherto all experience shows that rebel occupation and destruction are synonymous.”<sup>1</sup>

A passage from a letter from the Shanghai consul Frederick Bruce to the Foreign Office in London from 2 December 1861.

It was 1861 and the world largest civil war had already lasted ten years.<sup>2</sup> This conflict between the reigning Manchu Qing dynasty and the Christian separatist movement called the Taiping had created a chaotic situation in China. In 1853, the Taiping movement had reached the point where it possessed its own kingdom within China: the Heavenly Kingdom. Through this kingdom, the Taiping began to threaten the stability and the legitimacy of the Qing dynasty. What began as a rebellion now became a civil war between the faction of Qing loyalists, who were defending the Qing dynasty, and the faction of Taiping rebels, who struggled to depose the Qing dynasty. However, even though the physical conflict was fought between these two factions only, other – previously neutral – factions, soon became involved as well.

Several years before, in 1842, the European powers had forcefully opened up Chinese trade.<sup>3</sup> In the years that followed, these powers, who were led by Great Britain, built a significant presence in several of the conceded treaty ports.<sup>4</sup> In turn, the treaty ports served as centres of trade where Western and Chinese merchants traded goods such as silk or tea. This trade, primarily focused on the city of Shanghai, became increasingly important as a source of revenue for the Western powers.<sup>5</sup> When the Taiping insurrection rose to prominence with the capture of Nanking in 1853, the West stayed on the side-line, choosing not to interfere in the Chinese affair. This would change in 1860, when the Taiping announced their claim on the Chinese part of Shanghai. When they moved to capture Shanghai, they were repelled by British and French guns dragging the European powers into the Taiping conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> National Archive Kew, London, PRO 30/22/49, f. 360, Bruce to Russel Dec. 2 1861.

<sup>2</sup> The Taiping Civil War eventually lasted from 1850 to 1864.

<sup>3</sup> The events also carries the name the First Opium War, as the conflict was fought over the matter of Opium. The treaty ending this war promised a form of free trade, as envisioned by the British.

<sup>4</sup> European powers like France were of course not directly led by Great-Britain as they often had an own agenda. The British however proved to be most successful in China, with several strong positions in treaty ports, (ports that had been opened to western trade) like Shanghai, Ningbo, Canton and of course Hong Kong. Because of their strong position in China, Great Britain often steered the other powers.

<sup>5</sup> The importance of the revenue generated by the Chinese trade in Shanghai is even mentioned in a report from the British consul in Hong Kong, dated 29 August 1854: “India did not supply, and never has supplied, like China”. Thus signalling that the trade in Shanghai was critical to the British finances.

Even though this encounter was resolved peacefully, it would not be the last meeting. A year later, in 1862, the treaty port of Ningbo was threatened.<sup>6</sup> The Western powers suddenly faced the possibility of a treaty port in the hands of the Taiping leading to widespread fear about a Taiping occupation. With this background the introducing passage was written by the Shanghai Consul, Frederick Bruce. He wrote this passage to the foreign office in London, which described the envisioned consequences of the Taiping capture, a destroyed Ningbo and a defenceless Shanghai. When the Taiping eventually marched upon Ningbo, a curious scenario unfolded: they captured the city without any loss of blood on either side and without any of the expected destruction.<sup>7</sup> The Qing official stationed in Ningbo chose to flee rather than fight.

The quoted passage paints a dark image of Ningbo's fate, but when the actual capture happened there was no destruction and plunder. This passage nonetheless made its way towards the British government in London, which had to decide on a multitude of affairs within the British Empire, including the Taiping Civil War. Because of Bruce's letter a wrong image of the Taiping was transmitted to the government which began discussing the British policy against the Taiping movement. After a series of debates, it came to a vote on the matter whether Great Britain should remain neutral in the Taiping Civil War or not. The vote rejected the motion to remain neutral and several months later, in 1862, Great Britain led a Western intervention against the Taiping. The decision had serious repercussions for the British interests in China, in for instance trade, which collapsed after the intervention.<sup>8</sup>

The Parliamentary decision and its motives became a controversial topic in literature about The Taiping Civil War. Some scholars within the Taiping historiography argued that the British intervened to strengthen British dominance on China by keeping the Qing dynasty weak.<sup>9</sup> Others argued that Great Britain actually intervened to create a strong Qing dynasty in order to stimulate the trade relationship between China and Great Britain.<sup>10</sup> Most of this literature examined the events and results surrounding the Western intervention, thereby ignoring how the British Parliament made the decision in the first place. However, in light of the introducing passage, the British parliamentary decision to allow an intervention becomes more complex as the reports from China available to the parliament did not always accurately described the situation. This thesis therefore wants to examine how the British parliament arrived at the decision to intervene based on the news and reports available to them. The central question is therefore formulated as follows: How has the British

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<sup>6</sup> Ningbo can also be written as Ningpo, depending on the translation. Both refer to the same city, located in the lower Yangtze delta.

<sup>7</sup> Jen Yu-wen, *The Taiping revolutionary movement* (London, 1973), 438.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen R. Platt, *Autumn in the Heavenly kingdom* (London, 2012), 359.

<sup>9</sup> S.Y. Teng, *The Taiping rebellion and the western powers* (Oxford, 1971), 291.

<sup>10</sup> Platt, *Autumn in the Heavenly kingdom*, 359.

decision to intervene in the Taiping Civil War been influenced by the information in newspapers and official reports available to the British Parliament between 1853 and 1864?

## The grand perspective of information history

The central question examines how the facts and images manifested in newspapers and official reports influenced the Parliamentary debates about the Taiping movement and eventually decided on an intervention through the discipline of information history. This discipline is still a rather young discipline focusing on the origin and use of information and information systems. Toni Weller, a prominent historian in the field of information history, argues that information history provides a new perspective through which we can examine different aspects of history.<sup>11</sup> In Addition, professor in information science Alistair Black supports Weller by stating that in an age dominated by the social, political and economic value of information studying the history of this information is highly relevant.<sup>12</sup> The newspapers and official reports and the information they harbour can best be examined through the 'grand perspective of information history' as it highly relevant to both previous research as well as to our present time.

As mentioned, newspapers and official reports contained information about the Taiping movement but within the discipline of information history the term information proves to be an intangible concept, as explained by a professor of information science, David Bawden. According to the latter, 'the word "information" is arguably the most over-used and poorly understood English language term of the present time'.<sup>13</sup> Historians like Michael Buckland argue that information is a 'thing', related to a certain object like a document.<sup>14</sup> Others disagree such as Nicholas Belkin and Jennifer Rowley who suggest that information is created collectively, or is socially constructed and shapes our society.<sup>15</sup> Weller's conclusion captures the essence of the discussion, as she remarks that, since information could in theory be anything, the term 'information' creates problems.<sup>16</sup> Even though the concept of information appears undetermined, this thesis does require a definition. Therefore, this thesis turns to the historian James Cortada, who regards the concept of information as an umbrella term for a collection of facts which describe a thing, place, person or events.

Besides the problem of defining information, it is also difficult to study information of the past, as mentioned by Weller when she asks how we can look for something as abstract as

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<sup>11</sup> Weller refers to this new perspective as a 'grand perspective'. Further Reading: Toni Weller, *Information history and the modern world* (News York, 2011), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Toni Weller, *Information history – An Introduction* (Oxford, 2008), 3.

<sup>13</sup> David Bawden, "The shifting terminologies of information", *Aslib Proceedings Vol. 53 Issue: 3* (2001), pp.93-98, here 93.

<sup>14</sup> Weller, *Information history – An Introduction*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, 13.

information in historical sources.<sup>17</sup> Weller, at the same time, proposes a way to solve this problem through what she calls 'a historical manifestation'.<sup>18</sup> Closely following Buckland's definition of information, Weller uses the term 'historical manifestation' to address certain historical sources through which information in the past can be found and studied. She finds a first manifestation in newspapers, whose network of correspondence collects and distributes news across the world. Different historians such as Joad Raymond and Robert Darnton agree with her and argue that newspapers provide a valuable resource in examining which information was available at a certain period.<sup>19</sup> A second historical manifestation proposed by Weller consists of specific documents, such as personal or official correspondence. Again, she is supported by several historians such as C.A. Bayly and P.J. Marshall, who both emphasize the British dependency in India on expertise of native writers, informants, runners and intelligencer in their official correspondence.<sup>20</sup>

Weller's two historical manifestations are, however, not resistant to contemporary difficulties. Darnton for instance argues that, contrary to their British, Dutch and German counterparts, newspapers in Old Regime France were subjected to heavy censorship.<sup>21</sup> Raymond in addition argues that British monarchs did not suppress but manipulated the press to their advantage.<sup>22</sup> Marshall follows by commenting on the second manifestation, official correspondence, and noticed that there was a difference between what politics in Great-Britain believed ought to happen and the reality of what happened.<sup>23</sup> Both manifestations also shared some difficulties as indicated by historian Yrjö Kaukiainen, who shows the means of communication available to the British government. Kaukiainen describes the developments regarding the time involved in conveying information to London, starting his analysis in 1830 and ending in 1870. Using several different sets of data, he showed that 141 days was the average delay for information to travel from Hong Kong to London in 1830. Even though developments such as the telegraph decreased this delay to 54 days in 1860, Kaukiainen clearly addresses the central problem of communication for the British government.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Weller, *Information history – An Introduction*, 88.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, 91.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Darnton, 'An early information society: News and the Media in Eighteenth-century Paris', *The American historical review*, Vol 105, No. 1 (Feb. 2000), 1-35.

<sup>20</sup> C.A. Bayly, 'informing Empire and nation: publicity, propaganda and the press, 1880-1920', in: Hiram Morgan (red.), *Information, media and power through the ages* (Dublin, 1999), 179-201, here 180; P.J. Marshall, *Problems of Empire: Britain and India* (London, 1968), 16.

<sup>21</sup> Darnton, 'An early information society: News and the Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris', 7.

<sup>22</sup> Joad Raymond, 'The Newspaper, Public Opinion and the Public Sphere in Seventeenth Century', in: Joad Raymond (red.) *News, Newspapers, and society in Early modern Britain* (London, 1999), 109-140, in here 109.

<sup>23</sup> Marshall, *Problems of Empire*, 16-17.

<sup>24</sup> Yrjö Kaukiainen, 'The improvement of communication in international freight markets c. 1830-70', in: Hiram Morgan (red.), *Information Media and Power through the Ages*, (Dublin, 1999), 137-151, in here 148.

The discipline of Information history might still be a developing field within historical research but it nonetheless offers an insightful perspective to view the British intervention in the Taiping Civil War. As shortly mentioned, previous research focussed on large and often external developments to explain the British intervention. This does not mean that previous Taiping studies did not mention the presence of coloured or false news and reports. It is therefore necessary to review the previous Taiping historiography through the perspective of information history in order to show the current position towards the influence of newspapers and official reports and the British intervention, through the three dominant reasons for a British intervention.

## The Taiping reviewed

The first reason to intervene that is mentioned in the scholarly debate on the Taiping Civil War regards the economic and political interests of the British Empire. Great Britain was focused on solving the paralysis of trade, to maintain the status quo of the weak Qing Empire, and to control areas vital for its trade such as the Yangtse river. This argument is defended by the Chinese historian S. Teng, who studied Taiping relations with the Western powers.<sup>25</sup> He reached his conclusions on the basis of the source material provided by Western missionaries, such as letters and reports, and from British political correspondence between the consul and the government. These sources are, however, far from properly examined and consist of limited primary sources which only support a strongly biased account against the British government. Teng does, for example, not distinguish between the image found in official reports and the British policy regarding the Taiping movement. This means that he does not differentiate between the sources available to parliament and the parliamentary decision. Teng thus argues that the British government always aimed at intervention in order to keep China weak.<sup>26</sup>

The second reason given within Taiping literature considers the increasing assertiveness of the Taiping movement in the 1860s. This argument is defended by two historians, J. Spence and J.S. Gregory. Although Spence's account is mainly historiographical and focuses more on the Taiping perspective, he does declare Taiping's assertiveness as a reason for the British intervention. Gregory, on the other hand, uses a large amount of British correspondence to construct his argument. He analyses two periods within his narrative: the early period without a Taiping threat to Western interests, and the later years with a Taiping threat to Western interests. Gregory argues that the second period determined the British policy, but was ignited by Qing forces who pushed the Taiping

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<sup>25</sup> Teng, *The Taiping rebellion and the western powers*, preface XII.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, 313-314.

towards the coastal provinces after the recapture of Anqing in 1861.<sup>27</sup> Gregory furthermore states that the increasing threat by Taiping forces created a large amount of coloured reports in both newspapers and correspondence.<sup>28</sup> He differentiates between newspapers, which had little influence on British policy, and correspondence, which strongly influenced the British policy towards the Taiping.<sup>29</sup> He eventually puts the reason for intervention in a larger development by pointing to the increasing assertive position of the Taiping in the areas surrounding the treaty ports, mentioning but ignoring the information carried in Newspapers and correspondence. The West was eventually forced to intervene because of the second Taiping assault of Shanghai in 1861, which both Spence and Gregory declare as the tipping point for Western interference.<sup>30</sup>

The third and last reason for an intervention examines the global perspective with a strong focus on international trade and the American Civil war. The British would not have had to intervene in the Taiping Civil War had there not been a similar civil war in America, which created a crisis in international trade. This argument is advocated by American historian Stephen R. Platt, who is specialised in Chinese Late Imperial history.<sup>31</sup> He argues that the loss of the American market caused the need for an alternative market, which British authorities tried to find in China. This forced the British to intervene in order to stabilise their trade.<sup>32</sup> Platt provides a new international narrative through extensive research using newspapers and correspondence from both British consuls as well as Taiping commanders. Just like Gregory, Platt mentions that the information arriving in London did not always reflect reality. He also concludes that the information from the reports provided by British consuls influenced British policy.<sup>33</sup> Platt does not, however, elaborate on the influence of this information and regards the global perspective as main reason for British intervention.

The reasons for British intervention mentioned above address the political and economic motives that pushed Great Britain towards an intervention. However, the literature on the British intervention barely discusses how the concept of information influenced the British decision, with authors like Gregory merely pointing towards the existence of false or coloured information in official reports. Instead, they address larger external influences in which the British decision to intervene has to be understood. This lack of scholarly attention is curious, especially in light of the introducing passage. Using the perspective of information history, this thesis aims to discover the connection between the news and reports – and the information they carried – and their influence upon parliamentary decision. By combining the discipline of information history and previous literature

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<sup>27</sup> John S. Gregory, *Great Britain and the Taipings* (London, 1969), 167.

<sup>28</sup> Gregory, *Great Britain and the Taipings*, 108.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, 68.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Spence, *God's Chinese Son* (London, 1997), 312.

<sup>31</sup> Platt, *Autumn in the Heavenly kingdom*, 232.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, 233.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, 236.



about the British intervention, our understanding of the concept information and its influence on politics increases. By considering the British decision to intervene within Taiping rebellion as a case study, this thesis explains how information can influence pre-modern politics. With this background the central question examines how the concept of information influenced the political decision to intervene in the Taiping Civil war making use of Weller's 'historical manifestation'.

## Method and sources

In order to answer the central question, two aspects are required to examine the influence of information from the newspapers and reports available to the British parliament. The first aspect regards the collecting of information which is possible using Weller's historical manifestation. The manifestations selected for this thesis consist of two specific newspapers and the official correspondence between China and Great Britain. The newspapers selected for this thesis are *The London Daily News* and *the London Times*, given their frequent and dominant coverage on Chinese affairs. The *London Times* first appeared in 1785 and had already been one of the largest newspapers in Great Britain when the Taiping Civil War broke out. As such, it had significant influence in British society. *The Times* also possessed a large network of correspondents, which included Chinese correspondents. Its main rival was the *London Daily News*, founded in 1846 by Charles Dickens. It often disputed *the Times'* conservative news by providing a liberal alternative.<sup>34</sup> In many matters, such as the policy in China, it took a position contrary to *The Times'* position.

The second manifestation regards the correspondence from the prominent British officials in China, such as George Bonham, John Bowring and Frederick Bruce, to the British government in London. Their reports were an influential official source of information that had been used in Parliament throughout the whole of the Taiping rebellion.<sup>35</sup> The consuls will be further introduced in the second chapter. Both chapters examine how the information in newspapers and correspondence changed between 1853 and 1863 by analysing the content of both the newspapers and official reports. As both 'historical manifestations' possessed information, or a collection of facts or images, about the Taiping movement, examining the content over the course of time displays how that information changed.

The third and last chapter addresses the second aspect of processing by using the changes in the content, discovered in both manifestation, to analyse how these are reflected or visible how they are visible in the parliamentary debates from 1853 to 1863. This chapter analyses the parliamentary

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<sup>34</sup> British newspaper archive, London Daily news (version 13-6-2017)

<<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/titles/london-daily-news>> [consulted on 24-5-2017].

<sup>35</sup> Gregory shows in this chapter the prominence of correspondence in providing information for the government in London. Further reading: J.S. Gregory, *Great Britain and the Taipings* (London, 1969), 4-5.

debate, through the parliamentary records, alongside the changes in information. The combination of examining the development of information arriving in London between 1853 and 1863 and analysing the visibility of this information in the parliamentary records will provide an answer to the question regarding the influence of information from newspapers and correspondence on parliamentary decision to intervene. On the basis of this analysis, a central conclusion on the influence on information will be presented.

## A growing divide

Weller's first 'historical manifestation' is found in *The London Times* and the *London Daily News*. This is not surprising, as newspapers played a key role in the collection and distribution of news across

nineteenth-century Europe. British newspapers especially were highly developed contrary to their mainland counterparts such as the French newspapers.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, they faced certain difficulties such as the two-month delay in communication, explained by Kaukiainen. Several companies, for example the Reuter Company, tried to reduce this delay through the use of technological innovations such as the telegraph.<sup>37</sup> British newspapers were aware of their social and political position in British society, resulting in a wide range of newspapers catering for different audiences. This awareness made them not just sources of information but also subject to research, as they filtered and framed the information collected from their network of correspondence.<sup>38</sup> Newspapers were thus a critical collector and distributor for all kinds of social and political news, including case of the Taiping Civil War. This chapter examines how the facts and images, or in other words the information regarding the Taiping movement, changed between 1853 and 1863 in *The London Daily News* and the *London Times*.

Newspapers filter and frame certain events abroad, and as a result of this only the relevant issues or events were reported.<sup>39</sup> The gradually changing content of both newspapers can best be displayed through a series of important events within the Taiping Civil War. These events include the capture of Nanking in 1853, the first Shanghai assault in 1860 and the capture of Ningbo in 1863. Both *The Times* and the *Daily News* reported on these events applying their own filter and thus creating different categories of thought on the Taiping issue.<sup>40</sup> By chronologically examining the information from both newspapers on each event its general development will be analysed.

## Christianity, trade and patriots

When newspapers took hold of the Taiping story, they first published news on the capture of Nanking in 1853. A few aspects stand out: firstly, the newspapers focused on the Christian character of the Taiping movement. Previous attempts to Christianise China had not been successful, but now a Christian movement suddenly became prominent.<sup>41</sup> On 1 August 1853, *The Daily News* wrote about the imagined opportunities: “The insurgents [...] turn out to be all Christians, genuine iconoclasts who unsurprisingly destroy all images, whether pagan deities of roman saints. Protestant Christians

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<sup>36</sup> Darnton, ‘An early information society’, 7; Raymond, ‘The Newspaper, Public Opinion and the Public Sphere in Seventeenth Century’, 109.

<sup>37</sup> Weller, *Information History – An Introduction*, 89.

<sup>38</sup> Stephen Vella explains this in more detail in his text. As Newspapers possessed a large and complicated structure to collect the information and subsequently distribute it, they did not merely present information but also filtered, frames and analyzed news. Further reading: Stephen Vella, ‘Newspapers’, in: Miriam Dobson, Benjamin Ziemann (eds.), *The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century History* (Routledge, 2008), 193.

<sup>39</sup> Stephen Vella, ‘Newspapers’, 192.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, 192.

<sup>41</sup> Gregory, *Great Britain and the Taipings*, 48.

morally and spiritually.”<sup>42</sup> The *Daily News* linked the nature of the Taiping movement to that of the reader, i.e. the protestant Englishman. In fact, the newspaper implied the existence of shared values between Great Britain and these ‘genuine Chinese’, as the *Daily News* called them.<sup>43</sup> The message of the *Daily News* was supported by *The Times*, which wrote the following on 9 August 1853: “they [Taiping] professed Christianity – protestant Christianity – and I believe sincerely and many of them intelligently so; nor can there be any doubt of the Protestantism for their expression is characteristic - [...] they are iconoclast and destroy every vestige of idol worship”.<sup>44</sup> However, for the *Daily News*, the possibilities did not end here. According to one report, “the Christianization of China, in short, will be the greatest step towards the civilization of the world which has been made since the first promulgation of Christianity by the apostles.”<sup>45</sup>

The early news reports on the Taiping did not limit themselves to religion. Even though few facts were presented, the rhetoric used speaks for itself. *The Times*, for example, noted on 30 July 1853 that “they [Taiping] profess great friendship to foreigners and desire to trade in all articles except opium”.<sup>46</sup> *The Times’* positive opinion of the Taiping was reinforced by the *Daily News*, which described the Taiping as “the insurgents, or patriots - terms which follow our sympathies for the one party or the other – turn out to be Christians”.<sup>47</sup> The term ‘patriot’ also occurs in *The Times*: “The patriot army as it is now called by our eastern informers, continues as wonderful as ever”.<sup>48</sup> By describing the Taiping as patriots, the European idea of patriots was being projected onto the movement and so depicted a movement that welcomed Westerners and desired Christian relations.<sup>49</sup>

Both newspapers shared the same attitude regarding the Taiping after the conquest of Nanking. Their enthusiasm for the Christian element and their rhetoric showed a favourable attitude towards the Taiping movement. This changed around 1855, when the first signs of different opinions became visible. Whereas the *Daily News* continued to favour the Taiping, saying “the Imperialists have been defeated by the patriots in engagements near Chiung-keang Foo”.<sup>50</sup> *The Times* began to change its stance, as is shown in a published letter from T.T. Meadows, a British translator in China: “I might beg for space in your columns to oppose [...] ‘false facts’. By his false facts, I mean chiefly unveracious reports respecting the original position [...] now disseminated as true; by his erroneous

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<sup>42</sup> ‘China’, *The London Daily News* (1 August 1853), 5.

<sup>43</sup> ‘China’, *The London Daily News* (1 August 1853), 5.

<sup>44</sup> ‘The insurrection in China’, *The London Times* (9 August 1853), 7.

<sup>45</sup> ‘China’, *The London Daily News* (1 August 1853), 5.

<sup>46</sup> ‘India and China’, *The London Times* (30 July 1853), 5.

<sup>47</sup> ‘China’, *The London Daily News* (1 August 1853), 5.

<sup>48</sup> ‘The progress of the Chinese rebels’, *The London Times* (15 August 1853), 6.

<sup>49</sup> The European idea of a patriot differs from country to country. Here the idea refers to a certain group loyal to its nationalist cause, or in other words ordinary Chinese people resisting the foreign Manchu government.

<sup>50</sup> ‘India and China’, *The London Daily News* (3 December 1855), 5.

opinions, [...] they are not pirates and brigands".<sup>51</sup> Meadows disputed previous statements made by a Canton Merchant who denounced the Taiping movement by labelling them as 'false facts'. Through this letter the difference in coverage between the two newspapers became slowly visible.

## The Taiping march on the coast

Between 1855 and 1860, only minor attention was given to the Taiping Civil War. Other affairs became more pressing and news about the Civil War lost the interest of the British readers in London.<sup>52</sup> Several developments, such as the Qing conquest of Anqing and the American Civil War, however, brought the Taiping Civil War closer to the British interest in the vicinity of Shanghai.<sup>53</sup> This put the relations between the Taiping and Great Britain under stress and led to an increasing interest in the newspapers' coverage.

The second incident which once again drew attention to the Taiping conflict is the first Taiping assault on Shanghai. Even though the Taiping had sent a decree announcing their arrival and intentions to only capture the Chinese part of Shanghai, it was portrayed as an 'assault' in the newspapers.<sup>54</sup> The *Daily News* on 22 September 1860 described the sentiment on the eve of the Taiping approach as follows: "I hear from a reliable source that great apprehension of an attack is felt by the Chinese traders of Shanghai".<sup>55</sup> The important British trading port of Shanghai feared the expected Taiping assault. *The Times* confirmed this by stating that "business in general remained almost at a dead stand, the only outlet being Ningpo, and if, as was currently reported, the rebels should invest and ultimately occupy this port, the business at Shanghai must come to a stand".<sup>56</sup> Both newspapers reported that the arrival of Taiping forces in the vicinity of the treaty ports had a negative influence on commerce.

Although both newspapers appeared to agree on the Taiping impact on commerce, they differed on their condition. *The Times* on 17 October 1860 noted that "The Taiping gained

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<sup>51</sup> Thomas Taylor Meadows, 'Chinese insurgents and British policy', *The London Times* (1 October 1855), 5.

<sup>52</sup> Platt describes the story of a British official heading to China being trapped in the Sepoy Mutiny in India from 1857. According to Platt, all the attention in Asia was aimed at this rebellion, which delayed the official's journey. This event was followed with the Second Opium War, also called the Arrow War, which claimed most of the attention of British officials in China from 1857 to 1860. Further reading: Stephen R. Platt, 'Neutrality', in: Stephen R. Platt, *Autumn in the Heavenly kingdom* (New York, 2012), pp. 25-50.

<sup>53</sup> Gregory, *Great Britain and the Taipings*, 167.

<sup>54</sup> In newspapers and correspondence, the Taiping approach on Shanghai is described as an assault. However, the Taiping commanders had sent a decree announcing their arrival and intentions in Shanghai. The decree included the following passage: 'My army is now about to proceed directly to Shanghae. [...] I have already given orders to them that they must not, in that case, molest or injure any one [foreigners].' Even though, the Taiping did not consider their march upon Shanghai an assault, it was reported as such. Further reading on the Taiping view on the Shanghai Assault: Franz Michael, Chung-li Chang, *The Taiping rebellion*, 3 volumes (Seattle, 1971), III: 1117-1121.

<sup>55</sup> 'India and China', *The London Daily News* (22 September 1860), 6.

<sup>56</sup> 'India and China', *The London Times* (27 November 1860), 7.

advantages which made their name known throughout the world and caused to believe [...] great work was being done in the Eastern hemisphere. Then the tide turned in favour of the Imperial forces. The rebels were defeated and defeated again.”<sup>57</sup> The passage described the apparent downfall of a movement which had once been great. The same article finished by stating that “we shall remain neutral in the civil conflict so long as the rebels refrain from attacking the places which contain the persons and properties of British subjects.”<sup>58</sup> *The Times* concluded that the Taiping, who appeared to be weakened, needed to leave the treaty ports alone to prevent British meddling.

The *London Daily News* took an opposing view. In a report on the subject, the newspaper remarked that “the conjunction of circumstances [...] is at once making us a powerful instrument in the hands of the Tae-pings rebels and also brings us, at another point, in collision with the rebels”. The *Daily News* rejected the position of *The Times* by arguing that the Western protection of the treaty ports only pushed Great Britain closer into a conflict with the rebels. In the end, the first assault on Shanghai created little tension and merely started the conversation in the public sphere on Taiping policy.<sup>59</sup> Both newspapers influenced this conversation by providing reports through their own category of thought, reflecting the different attitudes regarding the Taiping. The third event, in the next paragraph, would only increase these differences.

## An information rift

Two years later, between 1861 and 1863, the tensions between the Taiping movement and the British authorities reached an all-time high and the content in the two newspapers began to differ enormously. Contrary to *The Times*, which supported pre-emptive action, the *Daily News* actively supported neutrality. On 29 October 1861, the latter noted the following:

“The Tartar city of Shanghai was defended in August 1860 against Taepings by British and French troops at that time we were at war with the Tartar [...]. British officers were being tortured to death in Peking [...]. We aid the Tartar to crush the rebellion; making thereby our professed neutrality a mockery.”<sup>60</sup>

The *Daily News* fought the existing policy by stating the contradictions within the events that, in their view violated the professed neutrality. *The Times* provided a different view: “Nankin is totally destroyed, as is also Chinkiang, the first of the open ports [...] all trade is stopped and the people

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<sup>57</sup> ‘London, Wednesday, October 17, 1860’, *The London Times* (17 October 1860), 6.

<sup>58</sup> ‘London, Wednesday, October 17, 1860’, *The London Times* (17 October 1860), 6.

<sup>59</sup> Gregory, *Great Britain and the Taiping*, 167.

<sup>60</sup> ‘British Neutrality in China’, *The London Daily News* (29 October 1861), 2.

quite enslaved.”<sup>61</sup> However on the same page, *The Times* stated contrary information, declaring that the Taiping controlled silk district around Shanghai exported more silk to Europe than ever before.<sup>62</sup>

Tensions continued to rise with the capture of Ningbo in 1862. The *Daily News* reported that “Since the capture of Ningbo, the Taepings have conducted themselves there in a very explanatory manners [...] the trade in the port is reviving.”<sup>63</sup> Where the *Daily News* showed optimism with regard to the Taiping, *The Times* did the exact opposite: “The sack of Ningbo is an accomplished fact [...] Shanghai in the hand of the rebels would mean Shanghai destroyed for all our purposes [...] the time has surely come when we must take some cogent measures with this evil.”<sup>64</sup> *The Times* further constructed these images by publishing a letter from the Ningbo consul Harvey regarding the affairs in Ningbo: “To conclude the Taipingdom is a scourge and if it has travelled unchecked through provinces and districts, both plague and pestilence have often done as much.”<sup>65</sup> The *Daily News* reacted by stating that “they [the Taipings] have always shown a desire to cultivate friendly relations with us [...] our trade with that port [Ningbo] has largely increased.”<sup>66</sup> It is clear that at the height of the political tension, just before the intervention, both newspapers strongly disagreed with each other.

Taking a step back from these specific reports in both newspapers allows for a broader view of the developments in their news coverage, in the period leading up to the British parliamentary decision to intervene. The facts and images, or in other words the information, were used by both newspapers to support rapidly polarising views, leading both newspapers to directly oppose each other by 1863. Around 1853, *The London Times* and the *London Daily News* both published positive views on the Taiping movement. When the mentioned events deteriorated the political and economic situation around 1860, the information about the Taiping in the reports from *The London Times* became increasingly negative.<sup>67</sup> In contrast, the *London Daily News* published reports contained increasingly positive information. At the same time, the published sources in both newspapers differed. *The London Times* published several reports from British officials abroad. The *London Daily News*, on the other hand, published reports from their own correspondents as well as letters from a Member of Parliament, Colonel Sykes, who opposed British intervention.<sup>68</sup> After the

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<sup>61</sup> ‘China’, *The London Times* (13 may 1861), 9.

<sup>62</sup> “the total export of silk from China to Europe is 74.834 bales, against last year’s 56.140 bales, in: ‘China’, *The London Times* (13 may 1861), 9.

<sup>63</sup> ‘The British government and the Rebellion in China’, *The London Daily News* (19 April 1862), 7.

<sup>64</sup> A few days ago we told the story of the capture’, *The London Times* (11 March 1862), 8.

<sup>65</sup> ‘The Rebellion in China’, *The London Times* (17 June 1862), 8.

<sup>66</sup> ‘London Thursday, July 24’, *The London Daily News* (24 July 1862), 4.

<sup>67</sup> While at the same time coverage in *The Times* became increasingly negative, other reports, such as *the* trade report of 17 October 1861, appeared to contradict this by painting a more positive image.

<sup>68</sup> Several of news articles published in the *London Daily News* were written by Colonel Sykes, who supported the view of the *Daily News* about the Taiping.

British forces had intervened in the Taiping Civil War the *London Daily News* made a final statement expressing its thoughts on the entire matter: “And so ends our farce of neutrality, under the pretence of which British good faith, straightforwardness and disinterestedness have been compromised.”<sup>69</sup>

## The watchful consuls

The first historical manifestation, as found in *The London Times* and the *London Daily News*, showed that the content from reports changed and the newspapers’ position towards governmental policy

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<sup>69</sup> ‘China – Events at Ningpo’, *The London Daily News* (1 September 1862), 2.



quickly polarised around 1860. Because of the polarisation, the information contained in the coverage of both newspapers provided a contradictory and unclear picture of the Taiping rebellion. However the British political world did not rely solely on newspapers but also on their own sources. Weller's second 'historical manifestation' consists of this official correspondence in the form of reports from the British officials, or in other words consuls, who were stationed in China after the British opened China for trade in 1842.<sup>70</sup> Previous researchers emphasise the importance of official correspondence in their studies on information. Bayly for instance explained that British policy was often directed by these official reports, as they proved a reliable source of intelligence.<sup>71</sup> A serious danger, mentioned by Marshall, was the gap between the image in the reports and reality because what was written was not always accurate.<sup>72</sup> As correspondence proved a valuable source in political affairs, including the Taiping conflict, this chapter examines how the information contained in the correspondence between the prominent consuls in China and the Foreign Office in London changed between 1853 and 1863.

Contrary to chapter one, this chapter does not focus on specific events. Instead, it considers two periods, namely the period before and after the instalment of Consul Frederick Bruce. In the first period, from 1853 to 1860, the most important consuls were George Bonham, the Shanghai consul, and John Bowring, the superintendent of trade. The Taiping began their movement in the vicinity of Hong Kong and moved towards Shanghai. Both officials produced extensive and influential reports on the Taiping for the Foreign Office in this first period. In the second period, from 1860 to 1863, Bonham, was replaced by Frederick Bruce in 1860. At the same time the title of superintendent of trade was transferred to Bruce.<sup>73</sup> These changes combined with Shanghai's close proximity to the Taiping kingdom, made the correspondence from the Shanghai consul the most relevant. This chapter uses the appointment of the new consul of Shanghai to examine how the information in official correspondence changed between the two periods.

## The first watch

The first reports, during Bonham's and Bowring's time in office, were sceptical about the Taiping movement.<sup>74</sup> The facts and images provided in these early reports expressed doubt about the

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<sup>70</sup> The consul in Shanghai was one of the most important consuls in China, especially around 1860. As the position of Shanghai grew in importance, so did the position of the Shanghai consul. When the Taiping movement became prominent in 1853, its capital, Nanking, was located relatively close to Shanghai. As the Civil War progressed, Shanghai's close proximity to Nanking allowed the Shanghai consul to effectively gather intelligence on the Taiping. See also: John S. Gregory, *Great Britain and the Taipings* (London, 1969), introduction XIV.

<sup>71</sup> Bayly, 'Informing Empire and nation', 181.

<sup>72</sup> Marshall, *Problems of Empire*, 16

<sup>73</sup> Gregory, *Great Britain and the Taipings*, 72.

<sup>74</sup> Sir George Bonham served as a consul, which meant gathering information and reporting to the government in London. Bonham initially doubted the intention of the rebellion, which is not really surprising, as the British

movement's nature and attitude. A first example of this was a letter dated 7 June 1853, in which Bonham stated:

“They will, from motives of policy, refrain from and prohibit plunder, but if not, and Canton should happen meanwhile to be deserted by the authorities, the foreign settlement may incur some danger from a rabble who have already successfully attacked”.<sup>75</sup>

This passage regarding the early Taiping threat to Canton shows Bonham's doubts regarding the nature and the policies of this 'rabble'. In a second letter, dated 5 June 1854, Bonham also wrote sceptically about the presumed Christianity of the Taiping: “It regards the religious element found among the Tai-king-wang [...]. What has really occurred and is still occurring will throw a veil over the bright prospects of Christianizing China”.<sup>76</sup> The developments in Taiping Christianity were, according to Bonham, not what they appeared; their Christian sentiment would only hinder the efforts to Christianise. Contrary to the enthusiasm about the Taiping Christianity expressed in the newspapers, Bonham was not convinced about the Taiping conviction. In the same year, on 14 July 1854, a report was sent to the Foreign Office containing the results of an expedition to Nanking to gain intelligence on the Taiping movement. It was summarised as follows: “Your lordship [Earl of Clarendon, secretary of the Foreign Office] will no doubt come to the conclusion that neither the religious element, nor the political organization of the Insurgent power, can we look with hope or confidence.”<sup>77</sup>

As the Taiping proved themselves more than just an ordinary rebellion, the reports written by Bonham and Bowring became more nuanced. In 1854, for example, Bonham wrote about the possibilities of the Nanking rebellion. According to him, “the Nanking rebels are by any means likely to establish a government which will be generally recognised or obeyed in China”.<sup>78</sup> A letter from John Bowring dated 14 January 1856, underlined Bonham's observations: “The rebels in Kwangsi remain in strong positions in the prefecture of Sinchow, and the troops collected by the government are in insufficient numbers to venture to attack them.”<sup>79</sup> In reports dated 12 April 1856 Bowring continued that “the reports that reach me are favourable to the rebel's cause [...] the rebels are getting stronger [...] the blessing of having a neutral ground bring forth immense advantages to our

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had only been in China for around fifteen years. As such, most of the rebels they had encountered were bands of robbers. It is understandable no wonder that Bonham viewed the Taiping with scepticism around 1853. As the Taiping persisted over the years, Bonham began to view the possibilities of the movement from the perspective of the British Empire. Further reading of Bonham attitude towards the Taiping: John S. Gregory, *Great Britain and the Taipings* (London, 1969), Chapter two 'Neutrality' 25-50.

<sup>75</sup> National Archive Kew, London, FO 17/169, Sir Bonham to Earl of Clarendon, 7 June 1853.

<sup>76</sup> National Archive Kew, London, FO 17/214, 19, Sir Bonham to Earl of Clarendon, 5 June 1854.

<sup>77</sup> Gregory, *Great Britain and the Taipings*, appendix no.2. 194.

<sup>78</sup> National Archive Kew, London, FO 17/214, 19, Sir Bonham to Earl of Clarendon, 5 June 1854.

<sup>79</sup> National Archive Kew, London, FO 17/244, Sir J. Bowring to Earl of Clarendon, 14 January 1856.

position in trade".<sup>80</sup> The Taiping rebels appeared to have a strong military position in the conflict and the neutral position of Great Britain proved to be an advantage for its trade as the Taiping controlled the tea and silk producing regions. Instead of being sceptical, both Bonham and Bowring switched to a more nuanced view on the Taiping movement.

In this first period Bonham and Bowring both viewed the Taiping from a nuanced perspective, presenting both the danger as well as the opportunities. In the early letters, scepticism had the upper hand, but as time progressed and the Taiping gained more successes the reports provided more nuanced statements. This gradual development can be found in Bowring's letter dated 12 January 1857, just after the outbreak of the Arrow War: "The apparent stagnation in the rebel's movement may give rise to the supposition that the cause is not flourishing as it was, but in China, progression is marked by result [...] they hold everything they have gained, they are in possession of [...] the Yangtse kiang river."<sup>81</sup> This letter seems to indicate that the Taiping cause had not reached its end and was still flourishing. With Bonham as consul in Shanghai, British attention in both the reports and newspapers moved away from the Taiping movement to a more relevant matter, a new British-Sino conflict about opium called the Arrow War.

## A change of command

Throughout the Arrow War, the Taiping movement was a minor topic in the official correspondence, as it was only mentioned in the background of the British-Sino conflict. This changed when the Taiping marched on Shanghai and they again became a subject of attention in the correspondence. When Bruce began to write about the Taiping, it stood in sharp contrast with the previous reports. Bonham and Bowring had produced many nuanced reports with reliable intelligence on the Taiping. Bruce used the reputation of reliability from the previous consuls to provide increasingly negative views on the Taiping.<sup>82</sup> His correspondence to the Foreign Office became dominated by negative facts and images regarding the Taiping movement.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> National Archive Kew, London, FO 17/246, 145, Sir J. Bowring to Earl of Clarendon, 12 April 1856.

<sup>81</sup> National Archive Kew, London, FO 17/263, 125, Sir J. Bowring to Earl of Clarendon, 12 January 1857.

<sup>82</sup> Gregory, *Great Britain and the Taipings*, 45-46.

<sup>83</sup> The previous literature does not agree on the figure on Frederick Bruce. Whereas older, Chinese accounts see him as a firmly anti-Taiping agent for the British Empire, recent authors, such as Stephen R. Platt, are more moderate. Platt describes him as a rather simple man, new in China and easily influenced by outside figures. He tries to explain Bruce's hostile attitude by combining his character and his surrounding, leaving him to conclude that Bruce saw the Qing as legitimate rulers and the Taiping as mere rebels. Unresponsive to other views on the matter, Bruce continued to favour the Qing dynasty. Even though Platt mentioned that Bruce was not unopposed in his views, he was the dominant voice. Platt's description tries to explain why Bruce developed a hostile view and seems plausible but it does consist of speculation, as it is difficult to construct someone's personality through letters. Why Bruce became so hostile towards the Taiping could remain a mystery. Further reading on Bruce's hostility: Stephen R. Platt, *Autumn in the Heavenly kingdom* (London, 2012), 43-44, 72-74, 89-94, 140-142.

The first letter in which Bruce showed his distinctive view on the Taiping was written on 4 September 1860. He reported on the Taiping assault of Shanghai by stating that the three thousand soldiers, “consisted of desperados [...] and men [...] forced to serve.”<sup>84</sup> Bruce emphasised the extortionate nature of the movement by concluding that “My impression is that their strength is much over-rated [...] once checked, it would dissolve. [...] the Europeans who sympathized with them being either misled by the tone of the rebels or by their own fear.”<sup>85</sup> On this strong condemnatory note with regard to the Taiping and their sympathisers Bruce closed his report. A second letter dated 7 August 1861, Bruce again made his negative view clear: “The capture of the city of Shanghai would be fatal to the commercial prosperity of the port. [...] It is rather a matter of surprise that trade should continue at all.”<sup>86</sup>

Whereas correspondence under Bonham and Bowring noted little on the Taiping impact on trade, Bruce emphasised it heavily: “Looking at the manner in which the Taiping wage war [...] we are perfectly justified in not allowing them to occupy [...] a foreign settlement.”<sup>87</sup> Bruce argued for the first time that foreign intervention could be justified, this was further emphasised by his description of the nature of the Taiping: “When the capital is destroyed, the insurrection will die out, for the fanatical and political element is insignificant”, he wrote in August 1861.<sup>88</sup> Three months later, he continued denouncing the Taiping nature by disputing their political authority: “Let them cease to be brigands and land pirates and become recognizable as a political body.”<sup>89</sup>

During 1861, Bruce began to frame the information in his reports about the Taiping movement in a negative way, and by letting go of the nuanced perspective, he started to embrace a political agenda. A letter dated 23 February 1862, regarding negotiations with the Qing dynasty, mentioned that “they [the Qing-dynasty] doubtless believed [...] that England or some other foreign power would intervene to prevent the city [Shanghai] from falling into rebel hands”. Bruce wrote that the Qing dynasty hoped the British to intervene in order to protect its own interest from massacre and pillage.<sup>90</sup> Interestingly, he did not object to this apparent use of foreign powers by the Qing dynasty as he continued to point out that the Taiping constituted no alternative:

“The Taiping show, which they have not hitherto done, a capacity to govern [...]. Anarchy and brigandage can be repressed and that our great trading interest imperatively calls upon us to

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<sup>84</sup> Mr. Bruce to Earl Russell, Shanghai, September 4, 1860, *Correspondence respecting affairs in China 1859-60* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1861), 132.

<sup>85</sup> Mr. Bruce to Earl Russell, Shanghai, *Correspondence respecting affairs in China 1859-60*, 133.

<sup>86</sup> National Archive Kew, London, FO 17/355, 102, Frederick Bruce to John Russel, 7 august 1861.

<sup>87</sup> FO 17/355, 102.

<sup>88</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>89</sup> National Archive Kew, London, PRO 30/22-49, f. 367, Frederick Bruce to John Russel, 12 November 1861.

<sup>90</sup> National Archive Kew, London, FO 17/370, 148, Frederick Bruce to John Russel, 23 February 1862.

facilitate the attempt, while they [the Taiping] render to overthrow the government, by bands of destroyers [...]. The greatest calamity that can befall China.”<sup>91</sup>

Bruce continued to push for political action by arguing that foreign assistance could be beneficial in saving cities like the treaty port of Ningbo. He wrote that just a little naval assistance would suffice to dissuade the Taiping from attacking, leaving the insurrectionary cause without much of its attraction.<sup>92</sup> Around 1862, Bruce expanded his agenda by actively starting to promote political action against the Taiping in his correspondence, which he did not unopposed.

In a letter dated 12 December 1862, Bruce responded to a series of questions from the Foreign Office, who had received contradictory information from a Member of Parliament, Colonel Sykes. In his letter, Bruce rejected all of the claims made by Colonel Sykes with regard to the Taiping: “they are [...] banditti such as have been the scourge of China.”<sup>93</sup> Bruce continued by rebutting claims made by Colonel Sykes about the full extent of the Taiping provinces: “It should be stated that these three provinces have never been at the same moment in Taiping possession [...] it is much doubted whether there be any Taipings in the said provinces.”<sup>94</sup> He ended his letter by once again rejecting any political authority possessed by the Taiping and emphasised that political action could be justified. He wrote that every Chinese he had spoken considered it impossible that the Taiping could ever found a dynasty.<sup>95</sup> By rejecting the possibility of a Taiping dynasty, Bruce described them as mere rebels not worthy of consideration by the British government.

Contrary to the findings in chapter one, there was no gradual change in the information present in the correspondence between 1853 and 1863. When Bruce replaced Bonham as consul of Shanghai, the facts and images contained in the reports rapidly changed from a neutral position, mentioning both the possibilities and dangers of the Taiping movement, to a hostile position that increasingly advocated political and military action. For example, when Bruce’s reports were disputed in Parliament, Bruce’s reaction indicates that he twisted the image of the Taiping in a way that was favourable to the Qing dynasty. Marshall addressed this problem in his research to British India, where he stated that the image in correspondence could differ extensively from the actual situation.<sup>96</sup> This gave Bruce the ability to shape the facts and image about the Taiping to his own liking. Apparently he succeeded as newspapers, such as *The Times*, validated his image by publishing his reports.

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<sup>91</sup> FO 17/370, 148.

<sup>92</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>93</sup> National Archive Kew, London, FO 17/375, 242, Frederick Bruce to John Russel, 12 December 1862.

<sup>94</sup> FO 17/375, 242.

<sup>95</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>96</sup> Marshall, *Problems of Empire*, 16.

As indicated above, both manifestations were connected and cannot be approached separately. When Bruce received the office of consul, he quickly attracted the attention of *The London Times*, who supported his position regarding the Taiping. Opposing him, stood Member of Parliament Colonel Sykes and his newspapers, *The London Daily News*. As mentioned, Sykes had already expressed doubt on Bruce's reports in the British parliament. At the same time, Sykes published frequently in the *Daily News* often contesting the position of both Bruce and *the Times*. The connection between both manifestation is clearly indicated in an important passages from Bruce's correspondence: "the Tae-pingdom is a huge mass of nothingness' and 'a scourge [...] to be swept of the face of the earth by every means necessary within the power of Christian civilized nations". It became an important argument in favour of an intervention, as it was published in the *Times* as well as given to parliament. After 1860, the manifestation supplying Great-Britain with information about the Taiping, had formed themselves into two sides, either supporting or opposing intervention.

## The British judgement

Weller's 'historical manifestations' analysed in the previous two chapters reveal that the content from both manifestations changed rapidly after 1860, eventually causing the creation of two opposing sides. One side consisted of Bruce and *The London Daily News*, who advocated political action; the other included Colonel Sykes and *the London Daily News*, who defended British neutrality. These contending sides each supplied their own facts and image, or information, to the British

Parliament, affecting the political spectrum. It is important to remember that newspapers were seen as tools used by political elites.<sup>97</sup> In this instance both Bruce and Sykes used *the Times* and *Daily News* to support their own political agenda. At the same time, British politics depended on their network of overseas officials to provide the government London with the latest intelligence, which was necessary to decide political issues.<sup>98</sup> Both manifestations could influence the political world and in order to discover how their information steered the political debate, this chapter is analysing how the changes in information contained in both 'historical manifestations' were reflected in parliamentary debates regarding the Taiping movement from 1853 to 1863.

The British Parliament discussed the Taiping movement when it was deemed important, after events such as the capture of Nanking in 1853, the first Shanghai assault in 1860 and the Ningbo experiment in 1863. Parliament found it necessary to react on each of these events in the form of a proposed question or a debate.<sup>99</sup> The parliamentary reactions to each significant event will be examined through the changes in information from both manifestations. Each debate will be analysed by first highlighting the important statements. These are subsequently analysed in order to discover how the changes from both manifestation were visible in each debate.

## The Taiping issue surfaced

The first reaction from Parliament to the Taiping issue came shortly after the Taiping conquest of Nanking in 1853, which, as we have seen, was heavily covered in both newspapers. On 20 May 1853, shortly after news of the capture had reached London, questions regarding the Chinese rebellion were asked in the House of Commons: "In the course of the last few weeks, statements had appeared in public prints to the effect that a rebel force [...] had met and defeated the armies of the Emperor [...]. The Emperor had applied to the representative of her Majesty's Government in China for aid in suppressing the insurrectionary movement [...] what was the course [...] to pursue in this matter."<sup>100</sup> It is important to note that the question was triggered by reports in the 'public print', which referred to the newspapers. Based on the information received through the newspapers, the

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<sup>97</sup> Mark Hampton, 'Newspapers in Victorian Britain', *History Compass* 2, BI 101 (2004), 1-8, here 1.

<sup>98</sup> Bayly, 'Informing Empire and nation', 197-198.

<sup>99</sup> Several historians, such as Bayly or Kaukiainen, have already noted that information about the Taiping, as well as the British actions in China, required time to reach the government in London. This meant that even though events in China were developing, Parliament could only react on the older reports. Platt addresses this issue in Chapter eight, 'the Perils of Civilization', when he discusses the parliamentary reaction alongside the events unfolding on China. Even though parliament only reacted to the received intelligence, Gregory argued that they still had a final say in the policy pursued. Further reading: Stephen R. Platt, *Autumn in the Heavenly kingdom* (London, 2012), 182-183. Or: John S. Gregory, "British Intervention against the Taiping Rebellion." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 19:1 (1959): 11-24, in here 12.

<sup>100</sup> *Hansard's Parliamentary debates* (London: T.C. Hansard), May 20 1853, vol. 127 cc436-7.

question regarding the government's policy towards the rebels was asked. The response from the secretary of the Foreign Office was as follows:

"According to the last report, the city of Nankin had fallen into their hands. It was not certain this was the case but at all event that city was menaced [...] the existing means would be sufficient to protect British persons and property at Shanghai [...] the forces of this country should not interfere in the civil war".<sup>101</sup>

The Foreign Office confirmed the capture of Nanking on the basis of the latest reports by the consul and stated that the capture posed little threat to British subjects and subsequently swept concerns aside.

When comparing this report to the information provided by both manifestations, an interesting picture is forming. The first notable element is that the question was posed after the newspapers reported on the Taiping movement, suggesting that the Members of Parliament were initially informed on this foreign matter through newspapers. The response from the Foreign Office was based on the 'latest reports' from consul Bonham and Bowring, who wrote extensive reports about the Taiping movement. At the same time, the Foreign Office appeared to share the nuanced view in these reports. The secretary of the Foreign Office stated that the capture of Nanking posed little risk to British subjects and required no further attention for the British forces. This first reaction from the British government about the Taiping movement appears to be influenced by both sources: the newspapers addressed the issue and the correspondence determined the attitude towards the matter. This first parliamentary reaction was, however, a mere question.

## The Taiping controversy

The initial reaction was followed by a period in which the Taiping issue was deemed not important enough to be discussed in Parliament. In addition, news with reference to the Taiping was absent from the newspapers after the capture of Nanking in 1853. Seven years later, however, the Taiping resurfaced in parliamentary debates after their march on Shanghai, on which newspapers thoroughly reported on.<sup>102</sup> On 12 March 1861, Parliament reacted to Frederick Bruce's report about the Taiping assault on Shanghai.<sup>103</sup> Colonel Sykes, Member of the House of Commons, , asked what line of policy

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<sup>101</sup> *Hansard*, vol. 127 cc436-7.

<sup>102</sup> Platt mentioned that the issue resurfaced in the parliamentary debates after several newspapers, such as the *Daily News*, begged to look beyond the negative images found in the correspondence: Stephen R. Platt, *Autumn in the Heavenly kingdom* (New York, 2012), 232.

<sup>103</sup> The Taiping marched on Shanghai on 19 August 1860 and the reaction in parliament is dated 12 March 1861. To prevent any confusion regarding the time between the assault and the parliamentary reaction to it, this



the government intended to pursue in their relations with the Taiping in light of Bruce's report regarding the Shanghai assault and requested further papers.<sup>104</sup> By mentioning further papers, he indicated that the facts and image contained in the correspondence had a direct influence. Sykes emphasis this influence by first mentioning earlier reports on the Taiping from Sir Bonham: "Sir George Bonham and Mr. Meadows went up the river to Nankin and discovered [...] that there was a religious as well as a political element in the movement. [...] The Taepings maintained themselves in Nankin from 1853 to 1858."<sup>105</sup> Sykes used these older reports to mention positive aspects attributed to the Taiping. He then began to criticize Bruce's account of the Shanghai assault:

"Mr. Bruce states the rebels create a desert wethever they go; but for ten years past they have overrun six of those provinces which produce tea and silk, and the official returns of exports from Shanghai indicate that this production has not been interrupted. [...] Everywhere they are busy rebuilding the place [Nankin]."<sup>106</sup>

Sykes also expressed doubt about Bruce's observations: "Mr. Bruce considers that [...] the rebels are greatly over estimated [...] having sustained a signal defeated [...] the rebellion would disappear. But the Rev. Mr. Roberts [...] gives proof [...] to the contrary."<sup>107</sup> He continued by saying that "the above communications are in absolute contravention of the opinions expressed by Mr. Bruce, but then it would seem we are to risk a contest with the rebels."<sup>108</sup> Using different sources, Sykes contested Bruce's account and closed on the question: "how long this policy [i.e. neutrality favourable to the Qing] was to be continued".<sup>109</sup>

The response from the Foreign Office secretary, John Russel failed to provide a direct answer. Indeed, Russel first mentioned that "in a dispatch dated 17 August, 1860, he [Bruce] says – Shanghai is menaced with a serious attack from the insurgents"<sup>110</sup> and continued that "these are the plain and practical considerations [i.e. Shanghai might be plundered, hindering trade] which influenced Mr.

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thesis would like to emphasize the study done by Yrjö Kaukiainen. This research displayed the time between sending a message and receiving one, which around 1860 was roughly two months. Add to this the collecting and distributing done by the Foreign Office and it would only be logical that a reaction came later. Further reading: Yrjö Kaukiainen, 'The improvement of communication in international freight markets c. 1830-70', in: Hiram Morgan (red.), *Information Media and Power through the Ages*, (Dublin, 1999), 137-151.

<sup>104</sup> *Hansard's Parliamentary debates* (London: T.C. Hansard), March 12 1861, vol. 161 cc1841-591841.

<sup>105</sup> *Hansard*, vol. 161 cc1841-591841.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>110</sup> *Hansard*, vol. 161 cc1841-591841.

Bruce [...] and determined them to resist the attack of the rebels.”<sup>111</sup> Later on in the debate, he further defended Bruce’s decision:

“We meant to be entirely neutral; but that we could not remain neutral when the town where the English and foreign merchants were established was attacked by rebels. [...] I say that Mr. Bruce and Mr. Meadows have do no more than their duty in the course they have pursued.”<sup>112</sup>

The response covered a large amount of the criticism expressed by Colonel Sykes. However, Russell’s response merely consisted of quoting passages from Bruce’s report and defending the action he had taken. When considering this response to the questions posed by Colonel Sykes, it would appear that the Foreign Office themselves lacked more extensive intelligence on the matter, as they referred exclusively to Bruce’s report.

The second reaction to the Taiping, sparked by their first assault on Shanghai, is interesting especially in the light of the division in both manifestations. To begin, the newspapers appear to be absent in the entire debate. This could indicate that the newspapers did not influence parliamentary debates, which has been argued by Gregory.<sup>113</sup> Other authors like Platt and Brown, however, argue that newspapers played a role in the background by providing different kinds of information on the Taiping, as was the case with the first debate - in light of the polarisation of the newspapers around 1860, they might have steered the debate in a certain direction.<sup>114</sup> The correspondence, however, is a completely different matter, as it was the primary source of information in the debate.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, Sykes criticized Bruce’s report about the Taiping assault on Shanghai. He did this on the basis of earlier correspondence.<sup>116</sup> He addressed Bonham’s report from 1854 mentioning his expedition to Nanking in order to construct a background on which Sykes could express doubt on Bruce’s report. Sykes highlighted all contradictory elements in Bruce’s letter and criticized the content. Whereas Sykes provided a wide range of arguments doubting the validity of Bruce’s report, Russell defended

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<sup>111</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>112</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>113</sup> Gregory states that it was not apparent that official policy was in any significant way influenced by these outside views: John S. Gregory, *Great Britain and the Taipings* (London, 1969), 47.

<sup>114</sup> Platt, *Autumn in the Heavenly kingdom*, 178; Brown.

<sup>115</sup> Gregory argues that correspondence directly steered the policy of the British government attitude towards the Taiping movement. Platt however explores the correspondence further and concludes that it indeed had an important influence in British Policy. This policy was, according to Platt, criticized in parliament causing correspondence on which the government based its policy to be a central issue in the debates. Further reading: John S. Gregory, *Great Britain and the Taipings* (London, 1969), 108. or: Stephen R. Platt, *Autumn in the Heavenly kingdom* (New York, 2012), 180.

<sup>116</sup> Private correspondence has not been used in this thesis as it was not a continuous source of information. The private correspondence included letters from missionaries and traders living in China.

Bruce was based on the arguments the latter himself had presented in his letter. Following this debate, in which Sykes had the upper hand, Russell sent a letter to Bruce requesting an explanation. This letter, discussed in Chapter two, would be used a year later in the final debate.

## The final struggle on the Taiping issue

The final decision on the Taiping issue was debated on 8 July 1862 in the House of Commons and on 28 July 1862 in the House of Lords. Contrary to the House of Commons, the House of Lords did not contest the decision to intervene. Since the debate in the House of Commons did, it proves far more relevant for this thesis.<sup>117</sup> The House of Commons opened the debate on the motion: “To avoid any intervention beyond that absolutely necessary for the defence of those British Subjects who abstain from all interference in the Civil War now raging in China.”<sup>118</sup>

The opening address was made by Member of the House Mr. White: “Although the subject was considered by [...] the House to be a very uninteresting and disagreeable one, events passing in the East had been and would be so intimately connected with the finances of this country that the attention [...] must be given to this question.”<sup>119</sup> He continued by saying that the British policy in China was not credible. Through the newspapers he perceived that Great Britain was in a state of actual war, instead of the claimed neutrality. White accused the government that the policy of their officials in China had been, not a policy of neutrality, but one of systematic co-operation with the Imperial power.<sup>120</sup> He mentioned the flaws of the policy pursued in China, by both the government and the consuls, before proceeding to the Taiping impact on trade: “He contended that the change in policy was most inopportune. [...] When the rebels took possession of Shanghai [in 1853], trade went on, and the loss they suffered [...] from the Imperialist.” White then addressed the situation in Ningbo: “But the fact was, that there was a larger trade at Ningbo when it was held by the rebels than when it was occupied by the Imperialist”. He concluded that a new policy of intervention would only hinder British interest, instead White was in favour of adopting friendly mediation to promote peace and prosperity.<sup>121</sup>

The position of White was quickly attacked by the Members of the House Mr. Gregson and Mr. Kinnaird, who both favoured intervention. They contradicted White by arguing that the

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<sup>117</sup> The House of Lords had less interests to defend in China than the House of Commons, which represented among others the merchants. Although the House of Lords pointed out some inconsistency, they did not question the Foreign Office, contrary to the House of Commons. For this reason, this debate is left out, to focus on the more relevant debate in the House of Commons. Recommended further reading: *Hansard's Parliamentary debates* (London: T.C. Hansard), July 28 1862, vol. 168 cc882-901882. Or: Stephen R. Platt, *Autumn in the Heavenly kingdom* (New York, 2012), 232.

<sup>118</sup> *Hansard's Parliamentary debates* (London: T.C. Hansard), July 08 1862, vol. 168 cc29-8129.

<sup>119</sup> *Hansard*, vol. 168 cc29-8129.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>121</sup> *Hansard*, vol. 168 cc29-8129.

government was pursuing perfect neutrality and only endeavoured to protect the treaty ports.<sup>122</sup> Gregson argued that Britain still had a 'perfect neutrality', but was forced to act: "Gentlemen talk of non-intervention; but to protect the lives and property of our subjects was not intervention, but a positive duty."<sup>123</sup> He, in turn, was glad that Ningbo had been retaken by the Imperial government because he thought it was a mistake to allow one of the treaty ports to be taken by the Taiping in the first place.<sup>124</sup> To this Kinnaird added: "to protect them [i.e. British subjects] from the atrocities and devastating barbarities of the Taiping. [...] they were, in fact, endangered by an incursion of murderers and robbers. [...] The policy [of neutrality] had been tried at Ningbo, and the consequence was well known." Kinnaird referred to the negative claims about the Taiping in the reports from Bruce and ended by stating that the Taiping had devastated provinces which before had possessed an enormous population, turning these into deserts.<sup>125</sup>

Colonel Sykes responded to these claims and again contradicted the reports of Bruce: "Mr. Bruce had evinced a hostile disposition to the Taepings, and even alluded [...] the prospects of its being desirable to reduce Nankin. [...] The Foreign Office would have to [...] accept this additional violation of Neutrality. Harvey [the consul of Ningbo] had filled the blue-book with accusations against the Taiping."<sup>126</sup> In these few statements, Sykes criticized the sources on which the policy was built. He continued by stating that the mentioned desolation of trade was unfounded as the export in tea from Taiping provinces had increased.<sup>127</sup> Sykes even emphasised *The Times*, known for its anti-Taiping attitude, and noted that "seven hundred prisoners [Taiping] were taken and send to Shanghai, where executions were daily taking place."<sup>128</sup> He closed by stating that for nine years the Taiping had received Europeans among them and there had never been an injury to an European persons or property during that time.<sup>129</sup> Following Mr. White, Sykes argued in favour of friendly mediation by formally expressing his protest against the policy of intervention.

The final speaker, Mr. Layard, the undersecretary for Foreign Affairs, argued again in favour of intervention, and said that "he would invite the attention [...] to the report of Mr. Harvey. [...] they were what he had before described them to be – a band of ruthless marauders intent on murder, rapine and pillage." He continued to support these claims by referring to Bruce who wrote that the British government must take either one side or the other.<sup>130</sup> Layard followed with a denunciation of

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<sup>122</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>123</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>124</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>125</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>126</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>127</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>128</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>129</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>130</sup> *Hansard*, vol. 168 cc29-8129.

the Taiping, stating that they never stopped after they had plundered and ravaged a province. If they were not stopped, rivers would soon be swarming with pirates and commerce would be destroyed.<sup>131</sup> He ended on the final note that Great-Britain had treaties with the Qing dynasty and not with the Taiping. If the Taiping got possession of a treaty port, “experience proved they did not appreciate the nature of bonds and obligations.”<sup>132</sup> After these arguments, Parliament voted on the motion, and after it was rejected the intervention became a reality.

When comparing these three debates with the changes in information from both historical manifestations, an interesting correlation becomes visible: together, they seem to steer the political debates regarding the Taiping. The first debate was a rather simple matter, with newspapers posing a question which was answered through the correspondence. Just like the newspapers and correspondence, it proved to be a neutral matter in 1853. When the Taiping surfaced again in the news in 1860 after the Taiping assault on Shanghai, the developing divide within both manifestations found its way into parliament. Colonel Sykes criticised the information from Bruce’s reports on its inaccuracies, attempting to prove that the British ‘perfect neutrality’ ought to be maintained in the interest of the British Empire.<sup>133</sup> Sykes clearly triggered a response from the side that favoured an intervention as the third, most important debate showed a clear divide. During this debate, two sides were present, each with their own sources of information that completely contradicted the other. When both historical manifestation began to polarise, so followed the political debate. The dominant side from both historical manifestations, supporting an intervention, eventually won.

The increasing polarisation from the second debate onwards shows how information directed the parliamentary decision on the Taiping issue. However, the two sides were represented by just a few Members of the House, as the majority did not speak. Those who did speak, carried an important message, beginning with Mr. Cobden: “I confess he [Mr. Layard] has left me in somewhat of a haze as to that policy [intervention].” Cobden expressed his confusion about the Taiping issue, because both sides presented contradictory images and facts. In this confusion, he was not alone as Mr. Walpole said: “Sir I cannot vote for a motion which gives directions to the Government how they are to act in the future with regards to the circumstances with which we are so imperfectly acquainted. I shall therefore vote against the motion: but before giving that vote I cannot help making some remarks [criticism] upon the policy.”<sup>134</sup> Mr. Walpole also indicated confusion on the Taiping issue, obstructing his judgement. Lord John Manners joined Mr. Walpole’s statement: “I so

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<sup>131</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>132</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>133</sup> ‘Perfect Neutrality’ refers here to the initial policy towards the Taiping conflict, in which Britain remain perfectly neutral by not supporting any side through trade, territorial access or other matters favouring one side above the other.

<sup>134</sup> *Hansard*, vol. 168 cc29-8129.

entirely agree with the opinions expressed by [...] Mr. Walpole.”<sup>135</sup> It is thus that the contradicting information from both sides not only increased the polarisation in the house, but also obstructed other members in making a thoughtful decision.

## Conclusion

In the end, it turned out that Bruce was right about the fate of Ningbo but he was mistaken about the perpetrators, which would be the British themselves. On the morning of 10 May 1862, a combined army consisting of British, French and Qing soldiers opened fire and shelled the city of Ningbo.<sup>136</sup> The Taiping were poorly prepared and quickly overrun when an assault party stormed the walls and opened the city gates. In a matter of hours, the city, which had been captured peacefully

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<sup>135</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>136</sup> The British and French forces consisted of regular soldiers while the troops deployed by the Qing dynasty were well known pirates. Suffice to say, looting went alongside the capture. Further reading: Stephen R. Platt, *Autumn in the Heavenly kingdom* (London, 2012), 280-283.

by the Taiping, was reduced to rubble. When the British authorities handed the city back to the Qing magistrate, several days of “chopping off the heads of the unlucky rebels” followed.<sup>137</sup> This violent recapture of Ningbo was the beginning of the Western intervention which eventually lasted from May 1862 until January 1863. In this short period, the Western powers turned the conflict in favour of the Qing loyalists. As information still needed roughly two months to arrive in London, the actual debate about the intervention was not held until July 1862.

This thesis has examined the British decision to intervene through the use of information history by first focussing on the collecting of fact and images, or in other words information, about the Taiping contained in Weller’s ‘Historical manifestations’. The content from both manifestations began on a neutral, slightly positive tone. Before 1860, newspapers reported on the opportunities related to the Taiping while the correspondence also noted the dangers. After 1860, the situation changed dramatically as the new consul in Shanghai, Frederick Bruce, began to denounce the Taiping in his reports. While doing so, he managed to gain the support of *the London Times*, in which his reports were published. Opposite to Bruce, stood the Member of Parliament Colonel Sykes, who used the *London Daily News* to support the notion of perfect neutrality. After 1860, when the tension between Britain and the Taiping reached its peak, two opposing sides had formed within the manifestations that supplied the British Parliament with information, on which it had to base its decision.

The second part of this thesis has analysed how the information was processed in the form of a parliamentary decision. The two strongly opposing historical manifestations created an increasing polarisation within the Parliament, reflected in the debates. The first debate, before 1860, appeared nuanced, just like the information available to parliament. The second debate, after 1860, clearly showed a divide in parliament, which was fully revealed when Parliament debated the actual motion on British neutrality. Within this third debate, two completely opposing sides had formed, each fuelled by their own sources of information. It appears that the development of two opposing sides within the information available steered the parliamentary debates on the Taiping issue. The fact that the dominant side in both manifestations favoured an intervention could indicate that it is the reason the intervention was allowed by the Parliament. Yet, there existed another influence, which might have been far more important.

This refers to the confusion that existed among the majority of the British Parliament. Even though polarisation stimulated by the opposing information from the manifestations had created two sides on the Taiping issue, they were represented in parliament by just a few members on each side. In the third debate several members came forward to declare their confusion about the entire

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<sup>137</sup> Platt, *Autumn in the Heavenly kingdom*, 280.

matter. This confusion is understandable, knowing that the contradictory information only distorted the matter for the other Members of the House. The majority thus appeared to vote in favour of an intervention, not because they were convinced by the facts and images that were put forward by both opposing sides on the Taiping issue, but because the government itself favoured an intervention. To answer the central question of this thesis, the influence of information from both 'historical manifestations' on the British decision was polarisation which generated confusion about the entire Taiping issue.

This thesis has attempted to understand a political decision based on the information available to it. It turns out that the way facts and images evolve over time were already critical to a political decision in the nineteenth century. Since the nineteenth century information has exploded and occupied almost all facets of our daily lives. In light of Toni Weller's term 'the information age', the discipline of information history has to be seen through the larger concept of information. This concept is everywhere and every piece of information has many radically different views. This research explored two different views and their influence on a political decision. In our own lives we are exposed too much more views, some more valid than other. When faced with so many different and contradicting views based on all kinds of fact, or in some case alternative facts, how are people supported to make an informed decision? As Bawden mentioned, information is a poorly understood term and yet it is such a large part of our time.<sup>138</sup> The entire concept of information must be better understood. Several studies like Christopher Clark's 'Sleepwalkers', James Cortada's 'All the facts' and Cass Sunstein's Republic.com 2., continue to explore the concept of information and its present and past influences. In order to better understand our own time, we need to further examine the concept of information in both the past and the present. This thesis has aimed to contribute to this goal.

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<sup>138</sup> Bawden, "the shifting terminologies of information", 93.



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