

Introduction

In the early modern period, printing was the only means of disseminating a text or message reliably to a large number of people. Print could serve all kinds of purposes, ranging from religious education to scientific debate, from state propaganda to open political subversion, from proclamations and the reporting of news to the provision of entertaining fictional reading. But the printing industry was also one of the most complex, labour-intensive and investment-dependent sectors of the early modern economy, involving a huge range of very specialised and skilled manual labour as well as a range of associated trades (see Figure 1). It required considerable infrastructure, management and marketing skills, and was subject to severe market fluctuations with high risks. These conflicting pressures were not matched by any substantial technological change in the printing industry from the middle of the fifteenth century right through to the Napoleonic period. So despite gaining a solid footing in the economies of many large prosperous cities, the increase in the use of print for particular purposes was unsteady, and its geographic spread surprisingly uneven.

If we turn our attention from the production of print and its distribution, and focus more on physical presentation, content and intended readership, we encounter a number of different and additional variables. For example, in order to meet the expectations of readers with different levels of disposable income, a publisher could do little to change the unit costs, beyond making appropriate choices of page size and qualities of paper, and by experimenting with layout, font sizes and title pages. However, very short texts could be sold in a cheap paper cover – it was often the buyer who arranged for the actual binding of larger works – so authors and printers soon realised they could create and meet a different kind of demand by producing texts aimed specifically at readers with relatively modest resources and possibly different interests. Bearing in mind that a printed text was never really cheap, gaining a socially wider reader base was a matter of experimentation and innovation in format. To make the most of variable market demand, printers therefore rarely specialised in any one genre, and made sure they could easily switch between

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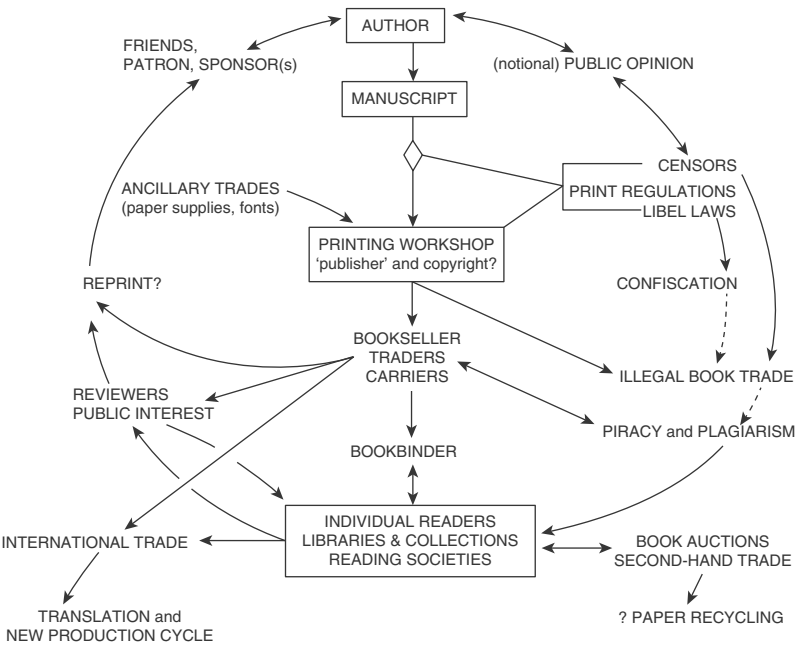


Figure 1: Production and dissemination of print

different types of work. In any case, books, newspapers, pamphlets, journals and printed flysheets were all produced in much the same way, and looked very similar. Publishing opportunities depended very much on cultural, political and social context; but the relationship between these factors is so complex that a serious study of print history now requires close scrutiny of the specific environment in which authors, printers and distributors operated. Each book or pamphlet had a history of its own, and each genre had distinct roles to play in political communication.

Since the publication in 1979 of Elizabeth Eisenstein’s seminal work¹ on the cultural impact of printing, historians have looked more closely at some of the many questions that arise from its early history. There is no doubt that Gutenberg’s ingenious combination (around 1452) of a mechanical wooden press with the use of movable type did mark a fundamental change in the way texts could be duplicated mechanically and reliably in large numbers. Yet this technological leap did not result in as sudden a change in

¹ E. Eisenstein, *The printing press as an agent of change: communications and cultural transformations in early-modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1979).

communication and dissemination as one might have expected. At first, printing was meant to produce pages that looked like quality manuscripts, primarily for large Bibles and other devotional texts aimed at a limited institutional market. The economic advantages either to the printer or the user were not immediately obvious – and indeed Gutenberg himself struggled financially. But over the next century others exploited the market more effectively. In the second quarter of the sixteenth century, Luther and other advocates of religious reform grasped the huge potential of printing as a way of transmitting their ideas to a much wider audience by means of short catechisms, collections of psalms, as well as polemical and belligerent tracts. Yet the scope for other kinds of reading material was not recognised as quickly, and some printers struggled with uneven demand and at best only modest growth. A small print run (perhaps less than 100 copies) was not cost-effective, so handwritten copying remained commonplace well into the eighteenth century – and indeed much later, in some smaller language communities. In any case printing technology initially remained confined to prosperous cities, notably those that were situated on the great trading axis of early modern Europe running from northern Italy, along the Rhine to the Netherlands, and in cultural centres such as Paris and subsequently London.² Even there, the output and content of print fluctuated considerably, boosted during the major religious conflicts of the second half of the sixteenth century, but still dependent on an unpredictable market. As we will argue in Chapters 1–2, it was only from the 1630s that a new wave of innovative printing came about, this time spectacularly fuelling, and fuelled by, the political upheavals which continued through the 1640s and 50s.

If the early history of the production and dissemination of print has proven less linear than it once seemed, its effective cultural impact has also been the subject of intensive research. Half a century ago, Robert Darnton questioned the traditional assumptions about the ‘great’ works of the Enlightenment. He focused on ways of determining what kinds of books were the real bestsellers of the later eighteenth century, and in particular noted the ‘grub-street’ polemics that most clearly met reader demand – more so than the ‘canon’ of famous texts which with hindsight have assumed the status of landmarks of the Enlightenment.³ His work

² For the impressive but uneven growth of print before 1600, see notably A. Pettegree, ‘Centre and periphery in the European book world’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 18 (2008), 101–28.

³ This historiographical development was heralded by R. Darnton, ‘The high Enlightenment and the low-life of literature in pre-revolutionary France’, *Past & Present*, 51 (1971), 81–115. Further work will be cited in later chapters, but see also H. T. Mason, *The Darnton debate: books and revolution in the eighteenth century* (SVEC 359, Oxford, 1998).

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has had enormous impact on how historians try to assess the real dissemination of different kinds of printed material, and on the kinds of evidence which may throw new light on the complex business practices of printing and bookselling.⁴ In effect in recent years the intellectual and cultural history of the early modern period has shifted substantially, partly in recognition of the fact that many of the texts that were widely read at the time of publication (but have since fallen into obscurity) can now be recognised as important historical evidence. Research on this more diverse reading material has given us a much clearer understanding of the role of those texts which were profitable, sold well in particular contexts, generated public discussion, or possibly contributed to the growth of what we would now call ‘public opinion’. As we will see here, some works still stand out as major landmark texts with both an immediate and a longer-term impact, but they did not achieve such impact in isolation. Research in intellectual history which focuses solely on ‘great’ writers and thinkers and how they influenced each other misses at least half the story. We now have to recognise the need for a much more comprehensive re-evaluation of the precise cultural and historical context and dissemination of all kinds of print, using detailed research into the bibliographical evidence, as well as assessments of the ‘life’ of each particular text, its physical appearance in extant copies, its immediate and/or enduring impact on readers, as well as the many factors that may have affected its dissemination, reprinting and physical survival.

This enormous research agenda is what makes the history of early modern print such a dynamic and increasingly interdisciplinary field. From the small handful of texts that have so far been studied in sufficient depth, we have gained insights into the processes of dissemination and communication that printing made possible and how it affected public discussion. We have also learnt a great deal about the increasing tangle of censorship and other restraints on freedom of expression which authors and publishers had to navigate. Printing did not displace the use of manuscript, but by the seventeenth century printing affected all aspects of cultural interaction and communication in urban communities, including controversies within and between religious groups, many aspects of central and local government, and the nature of power-relationships in civic society more generally. Not surprisingly, the incentives to learn to read were enhanced accordingly, affecting everyone who wanted to participate in urban life.

⁴ See notably R. Darnton, *The business of the Enlightenment: a publishing history of the Encyclopédie 1775–1800* (Cambridge, MA, 1979).

This book cannot explore the full range of cultural change attributable to the use of print, nor will it provide a survey of the origins and impact of intellectual change in general. Rather, it takes as its starting point a question which is central to our understanding of cultural, political and social communication in early modern Europe: what functions print could perform in engaging a widening circle of readers who had not previously had much opportunity to access texts of their own choice; and in particular, how communication in print might change some of the key parameters of political life broadly defined. Of course all participants in any form of social organisation invariably come into contact with some forms of power, and political awareness would no doubt have been enhanced by the very long European tradition of contestation through petitions, riots and demonstrations, as well as by simple refusal, disobedience or even legal challenge. But print provided a very powerful additional tool of communication and, when used skilfully, a means of fundamentally transforming public discussion. Historians of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have been aware of these questions for some time, and as a result have substantially reshaped their definition of major cultural shifts such as the Enlightenment.⁵ This book, however, encompasses a broader period going back to the 1630s, and focuses on ways in which print could provide crucial information and conflicting interpretations, in formats that could be accessed consistently by a much larger number of readers, and could be cited and challenged – thereby facilitating critical analysis of the use of power, the nature of legitimate authority, and the ordering of civic society itself. In a way, print became an essential component in the emergence of demands for political accountability, representation and ultimately some experimental forms of democracy in the 1790s.

Historians now recognise that in the early modern period what we call ‘political culture’ – awareness of the structures of power and authority in civic society – was much more widely diffused and more complex than the normative language of a hierarchical and deferential society might lead us to assume. Before 1789, the specific words ‘politics’ and ‘political’ were used in a mostly theoretical and narrow context derived directly from the writings of Aristotle and Plato, and referring to classical ideals such as the Greek ‘polis’ (city-state), the Latin ‘politia’ and its adjective ‘politicus’. Derivative forms (and spellings) of the root word were absorbed into many European languages by the fourteenth century. Variants such as

⁵ For an admirably concise survey, see J. Robertson, *The Enlightenment: a very short introduction* (Oxford, 2015). Wider dissemination and reader access is discussed in T. Munck, *The Enlightenment: a comparative social history 1721–1794* (London, 2000).

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‘polity’, ‘politie’ or ‘policie’ were used to denote civil society in general, the processes of civil and ecclesiastical government, and ultimately the range of policies and public regulations creating the framework for social and economic relations (‘good police’ or public policy), most frequently in respect of early modern towns and markets. As a more abstract adjective or noun, ‘politic[s]’ could denote public affairs and the nature of government – the study of which was originally regarded as part of moral philosophy, but by the eighteenth century was often treated as a subject in its own right focusing on theories of government, state-craft (*Staatswissenschaft*) and administration. John Locke wrote in 1690 of ‘Divinity, Ethicks, Law, and Politicks, and several other Sciences’, while David Hume noted that ‘Politics consider men as united in society, and dependent on each other’.⁶

As we explore other usages of this cluster of related words, we meet some surprises: the word ‘politic’, for example, could be used in the sense of ‘judicious’ and ‘sensible’, but also (already by the sixteenth century) in a more derogatory sense of ‘expedient’, ‘crafty’, ‘scheming’, or ‘cunning’, to describe someone lacking principles, even a hypocrite. In French, ‘politique’ might denote a pragmatic middle way, but also acquired strong undercurrents of cynicism when used in the contexts of court politics and civil war, so, by extension, was applied to men who were engaged in politics (politicians). Not surprisingly, the root word came to acquire further connotations, often in certain combinations – notably as ‘body politic’ in the sense of ‘commonwealth’ (a word which also had a very long history, widely used as a synonym for ‘res publica’ or the whole nation/community gathered together). By extension, ‘politic’ came to be used for decision-making at lower levels, not just town councils (or even church meetings), but also, more rarely, in the household – as when Henry Fielding refers to the reading of ‘a lecture on prudence, and matrimonial politics’ to a young woman.⁷ Clearly, concepts of private and public, ‘natural’ or normative authority, and the ‘people’ in relation to the community or the ‘nation’ – all components of what might nowadays be regarded as ‘political culture’ – meant different things in different

⁶ J. Locke, *An essay concerning humane understanding* (London, 1690), book 2, ch. 22, p. 135; see also his use of terms such as ‘community’, ‘commonwealth’ and ‘civitas’ in his *Second treatise of government: an essay concerning the true original, extent, and end of civil government* (London, 1690), chs. 8, 10, 15 and *passim*; and [D. Hume], *A treatise of human nature* (London, 1739), Introduction, p. 5. For an overview of the history of political concepts, see M. Pappenheim, ‘Politique’, and R. Monnier, ‘République, républicanisme, républicain’, which constitute vol. 21 of R. Reichardt (ed.), *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680–1720* (Berlin, 2017).

⁷ H. Fielding, *The history of Tom Jones* (London, 1749), vol. III, book 16, ch. 7, p. 214.

contexts. In this as in other respects, the ‘linguistic turn’ in early modern historical research has been hugely valuable and productive.⁸

Authority, power relationships and effective control in civil society could be expressed verbally in many different and sometimes oblique ways – notably so in past societies where there were immense and often implicit or hidden restraints on what could be openly said or written. Some forms of authority were obvious and unmistakeable, projected visually, spatially and culturally by rulers and state institutions. But real agency might well be delegated to others (local authorities, landowners) or exercised jointly with, for example, the church. The reality therefore rarely corresponded to the theoretical ideals and ideological constructs of a strictly hierarchical social order – a mismatch both in words and practical implementation which we will notice frequently in the course of this book. Out of practical necessity, some words such as ‘culture’ will be used here in the modern sense, since ambiguity is unlikely to arise. But more unstable terms such as ‘public’ or ‘private’, the meanings of which were themselves contested in the early modern period, will where appropriate be used with cautionary quotation marks to highlight alternative meanings. Other keywords, such as ‘representation’ and ‘sovereign’, became such central concepts during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that explanations will be provided as necessary. One of the central arguments of this book, however, is that many commonly used terms became so widely contested, and could be used to denote such different (and sometimes incompatible) ideals, that language itself became a key tool of authors and publishers who wanted to reach a new audience. Already from the time of Erasmus and Luther, print had helped to demonstrate the fundamental fluidity of many keywords. But during the seventeenth century, as Latin was gradually displaced by French as the common language of the educated elite, new possibilities opened up. Even more important, the translation into other vernacular languages enriched the vocabulary of everyone. Print could serve both to enhance and to standardise common usage of words and concepts in all linguistic communities. This textual legacy in turn allows historians to understand early modern political cultures in a much more precise context, and on a much

⁸ Key work includes J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian moment: Florentine political thought and the Atlantic republican tradition* (Princeton, 1975); Q. Skinner, *The foundations of modern political thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1978); M. van Gelderen and Q. Skinner (eds.), *Republicanism: a shared European heritage*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 2002); G. Mahlberg and D. Wiemann (eds.), *European contexts for English republicanism* (Farnham, 2013); A. Brett, ‘Political thought’, in H. Scott (ed.), *The Oxford handbook of early modern European History 1350–1750* (Oxford, 2015), vol. II, 29–55.

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wider scale, than what is reflected in the formal rhetoric and projection of traditional authority.

In theory, at least, early modern political ideals were based on traditional Old Testament patriarchy, buttressed by notions of a severe and judgmental God. In practice, however, authority was exercised by a whole array of variable power relationships, visible at all levels of society and far more dependent on tacit agreement and apparent consensus than normative descriptions of the hierarchical social order might suggest. Yet direct physical expressions of power were also very obvious. Amongst the most extreme manifestations were the military and naval codes of conduct, using violence and displays of force to suppress internal disorder, to exploit overseas maritime commerce and to legitimise occupation of foreign territory. During the early modern period military manpower was acquired primarily by two means: the use of mercenary soldiers, and a more systematic implementation of coercive military impressment. Both required elaborate financial mechanisms to extract resources, and a clear projection of the non-negotiable power of the state. The forcible extortion of supplies and revenue from occupied territories (your own, or foreign, wherever your army was operating), the development of military entrepreneurial networks for equipment and organisation, and the difficult consolidation of more permanent fiscal and administrative mechanisms to sustain the inevitable increase in military demands were the most obvious indicators of what we now call the process of 'state formation' in this period. The impact on every member of society was inescapable, whether it came in the form of huge increases in the tax burden (leading to the 'fiscal state'), demands for personal military service from able-bodied males (conscription and other labour service), or unpredictable pillage by marauding troops (the booty of war). Armies and navies were themselves run on norms of ferocious internal discipline which replicated the hierarchy of civil society but added extreme levels of physical violence, well beyond what would have been acceptable in terms even of the harsh standards of early modern civil law. No state during this period secured anything like a monopoly of violence, but the projection of political power was an essential means towards that end.

Some of the other formal principles underpinning power in early modern society were equally explicit, not least in terms of institutions, deferential use of space and appropriate forms of speech, all of which could serve to mark out the many intricacies of status, rank and power. Important as these were, however, they should not blind us to the many more tacit assumptions and symbolic reinforcements of inequality that sometimes emerge from closer scrutiny of a wider range of source material. We need to be acutely aware of the connected but not identical

concepts of legitimate authority (including sovereignty), legitimate traditional power and coercive power – and the attendant (reinforcing but not always explicit) political assumptions that held civil society together most of the time. In trying to conceptualise early modern political culture, therefore, we may want to keep in mind the many ways in which power might be represented in different contexts: in the language of legal processes and arbitration, and the ceremony or spectacle of social discipline (including criminal punishment); in the many ambiguities inherent in the power relationships of landowners with their workforce (peasant tenants, cottagers, labourers); in the very different civil relationships existing within those urban societies that could preserve some degree of autonomy and self-government; and (in so far as visions of civil society reached that far) in the norms of (ostensibly pious) discipline which were supposed to prevail within household and family structures. Much of the evidence relating to these complex cultural systems never made it into print, and for some of these areas of interaction body language and speech were at least as important as handwritten texts.

If there are many forms of evidence reflecting the higher levels of power and authority of rulers, church leaders, judges, landowners, town councils, guilds and corporations, it is sometimes more difficult to evaluate at the lowest level of everyday experience, especially where patriarchy was most firmly entrenched, within the individual household.⁹ There, actual relationships were not on continuous open display, and most of those on the receiving end of regulatory discipline or even physical abuse never had a chance to describe their side of the story, let alone challenge any coercion. Normative sources, ranging from church and civil law to moralising advice manuals recommending appropriately decorous behaviour, always assumed that authority belonged unequivocally to the head of household (typically an older male), who was culturally and explicitly the key link in a hierarchy of power reaching all the way down from the head of state to the individual. Male household authority was not only unquestioned, but also in practice nearly unrestrained even in law (except in cases of extreme violence). Accordingly, within the family, there was effectively no scope for legitimate contestation by other members of the household – least of all by women, whose ability to engage in decision-making either in the household or in the local community was habitually regulated by senior males in the family. Such a hierarchy of power applied in principle at all social levels, from the aristocracy down to the great

⁹ See C. W. Brooks, *Law, politics and society in early modern England* (Cambridge, 2008), 352–84, regarding the law in relation to the household. For a wide-ranging discussion of patriarchy in cultural context, see C. Cuttica and G. Mahlberg (eds.), *Patriarchal moments: reading patriarchal texts* (London, 2016).

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majority of households where occupational and economic constraints made women an essential (if often unacknowledged) part of the labour force, and where gender inequality was taken for granted.

In a formal sense, the household was not in the public eye, and its relationships were deemed private and unaccountable. By convention, the textual portrayals of household relationships fictionalised the domestic sphere: a profusion of satirical ballads circulating in oral culture and sometimes in print; privately published sermons and devotional literature amongst non-conformist groups; actual fiction (including by the eighteenth century the all-important category of novels); new types of family-oriented reading material such as the moral weeklies and *Spectator*-type journals; and not least (for those who could afford it) imaginary representation in opera and theatre. Much of this material tended to rely on stereotypes, or even caricatured aberrations – leaving many questions unanswered. Far more detail is found in the manuscript material and administrative archives of law courts, municipal government and parish churches, where we find ample evidence of quarrelsome partners, disputed property rights both within marriage and involving outsiders, unruly servants, rebellious children, tiresome or complaining elderly relatives, physical and verbal abuse which offended against moral and religious precepts and, not least, illicit sexual relationships with or without the consent of both participants.¹⁰

Some types of first-person account from this period survive. They range from simple annotations in printed almanacs, autobiographies, memoirs, family histories and diaries, to more elaborate travel accounts or fictionalised storytelling based on real-life experience – categories of writing which were only developing at the time, and not all stabilised into recognisable forms. First-person accounts are by definition always exceptional, their authors taking an extraordinary decision in writing anything at all.¹¹ Apart from letters, the relatively few personal writings that survive conventionally focus on devotional and spiritual life, or, amongst the aristocracy, typically about family and lineage. But during the eighteenth century, memoirs with political content became more

¹⁰ A few legal records made it into print. The *Proceedings* of the Old Bailey in London, published from 1674 and almost serialised, were never detailed accounts, but rather summaries intended for those with an interest in the law, and for the general public. This venture was exceptional: in London and elsewhere, the publication of legal briefs became more common only in the later eighteenth century. In Paris such publications became fashionable in the 1780s, also serving as publicity for the lawyers themselves: S. Maza, *Private lives and public affairs: the causes célèbres of pre-revolutionary France* (Berkeley, 1993).

¹¹ An excellent analysis with particular focus on lower social levels is found in J. S. Amelang, *The flight of Icarus: artisan autobiography in early modern Europe* (Stanford, CA, 1998).