Print, Propaganda, and the Protestant Reformation

Brad Forsyth

University of British Columbia

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The Protestant Reformation was a series of complex events typically attributed to beginning in Germany and emanating throughout Europe that would lead to the splintering of Western Christendom into various denominations in the 16th century. Reform efforts and rebellion were not a novel concept, as both the laity and some clergy recognized corruption within the Church. What made the Protestant Reformation unique was the fact that it was the "first major, self-conscious attempt to use the recently invented printing press to shape and channel a mass movement" by allowing "Evangelical publicists to do what had been previously impossible, quickly and effectively reach a large audience with a message intended to change Christianity" (Edwards, 1994, p. 1).

Some historians have argued that printing was the trigger for a movement that was inevitable, (see Eisenstein, 1983**)** but more recent scholarship warns against the notion of "Justification by Print Alone" (Flood, 1990, p.21). Print may not have been as revolutionary as previously believed, as it can be argued that "changes like the move to the codex or the more scientific approach to learning in medieval universities made a much greater impact on reading and the book" (Gilmont, 1990, p.13; see also Pettegree, 2015). This documentary will not attempt to go into detail regarding the numerous factors that contributed to the Reformation, but will instead explore the role that print and propaganda played in its success and the transformation of literacy and public consciousness. Focus will be on developments early in the Reformation, primarily in Germany, "the cradle both of printing and of the Reformation" (Flood, 1990, p.21) and on its most notable figure, Martin Luther.

Print was a relatively recent phenomenon when Luther grew to prominence, less than seventy years old. It has been estimated that by the dawn of the sixteenth century between 240 and 270 cities housed printing presses (Gilmont, 1990, p.12**).** An international market for printed materials was already in its infant stages, although not especially stable, as large printing firms were building trade partnerships. The early spread of printing was attributed to travelling printers "guided more by chance than by any assessment of profitable centers" and despite being largely an urban industry their establishment related more to strategic trade route locations than city size (p.12). It may seem like the time was ripe for widespread reform through the dissemination of new ideas through the use of the printing press, but it is important to situate developments within the reality of sixteenth century life. The church was so closely intertwined with the community and every day life that such a profound movement was not inevitable.

Born in 1483, Martin Luther would become a central and prominent figure in the Protestant Reformation. Early in his life he attended law school. As the story goes, while returning to university in Erfurt one evening in 1505 he was nearly struck by lightning and the fear of death and divine judgement inspired him to join the Augustinian order. Luther earned a doctoral degree in biblical studies in 1512 and became a professor at the University of Wittenburg in 1513, where his primary research interest was the language and grammar of the Bible.

Luther grew critical of several facets of the Catholic church, primarily asserting that salvation was a gift from the divine through faith and forgiveness alone, not through good works or the purchase of indulgences. In 1517 the Catholic Church began a campaign to sell indulgences to raise money for the restoration of St. Peter's church and appointed Johann Tetzel, a Dominican friar, to head the campaign in Germany. Luther was critical of the sale of indulgences and the Church's right to issue them, basing his argument on his interpretation of scripture, and in response distributed perhaps his most famous work, "The Ninety-Five Theses" (1517) to a number of colleagues, as well as Tetzel's superior, and allegedly nailed it to the door of All Saint's Church in Wittenburg. This act was not revolutionary and was quite a common method for academics to promote discussion with colleagues. To Luther, the matter was an academic dispute and his aim was not to rebel against or splinter Christianity, but to promote positive reform (with a small "r") against church corruption from within, as well as to advocate for curriculum reform at the university in which he taught. As an academic he was entitled to do so.

Luther's publication did not cause an immediate response from Rome. It is unclear how active Luther was in spreading his theses, or if his colleagues were initially responsible with his permission, but his work was shared throughout Germany within a fortnight and throughout Europe within a month (Eisenstein, 1983, p. 153). Within sixty days Luther was commanded to appear in Rome, but was granted permission to appear in Augsburg. An official response was then issued by the Pope's theologian that detailed four main points:

1. The Roman Church is represented by the College of Cardinals, however in its power it is the Pope who is the head of the Church, though in another manner than Christ"
2. The Roman Church and the Pope cannot err when he in his capacity as pope comes to a decision.
3. Whoever does not hold to the teaching of the Roman Church and the Pope…is a heretic
4. He is a heretic who wrongly interprets Scripture, so also is he a heretic who wrongly interprets the teaching and acts of the church (Prierias, p.34).

Luther was shocked at such a response. When addressing the Pope Luther expressed puzzlement at the swift spread of this theses, stating, "It is a mystery to me how my theses, more so than my other writing, indeed, those of other professors were spread to so many places" (Eisenstein, 1983 p. 151). Luther's ignorance may have been feigned. Regardless, Luther's conflict with the Church would escalate beyond repair, resulting in Luther's excommunication in 1521 and spawning a movement that forever altered western Christendom.

Luther described printing as "God's highest and extremest act of grace, whereby the business of the Gospel is driven forward" (p. 150). Luther and his colleagues were actively involved in the printing and distribution of their works. Together with Lucas Cranach the Elder, an artist and publisher, it has recently been argued that Luther quickly recognized that "the medium is the message." By combining their expertise and focusing on proofreading, editing, typography,

layout, and book design created a "brand" that was "distinctive and instantly recognizable" (Pettegree, 2015, p. 145).

Luther's works were increasingly distributed in the vernacular rather than Latin, and shifted from long formats to short, cheap pamphlets of one or two sheets as part of a distinct propaganda campaign. Although the first instance of overt propaganda distributed during the Reformation, Cranach and Karlstadt's *Wagen (* 1519*,)* has been described as a "spectacular failure" for its "inability to understand what can and cannot be conveyed in a picture" (Roper & Spinks, 2017, p. 257), reformers would refine the use of pamphlets into an extremely effective method of visual propaganda. As soon as 1521 and the publication by Cranach of the *Passional Christi and Antichristi* the pamphlet had been further refined by drawing familiar medieval motifs to boldly display images of a papal antichrist (Strickland, 2011).

Most pamphlets, however, remained largely unattractive and cheap, "forming a mosaic of information quite unappealing to the modern mind…indicative of a shift in new technology" (Flood, 1990, pp. 77-78). Authors were evidently educated despite stylistic shortcomings, and included those both supportive and critical of Luther's ideology. Subject matter varied, including discussions concerning "the interconnections between religious reform and traditional social and economic issues, as well as the repercussions of changes in religious practice on society at large" (p.79). The sermon, the prose dialogue, and the letter were some of the most important genres used (p.78). The study of Reformation pamphlets is problematic as they rarely included a record of where they were printed, and were not durable, making it difficult to analyze how they were circulated. With the aid of Cranach, Luther eventually developed distinctive title pages for many of his works that greatly increased their marketability both aesthetically and by highlighting Luther's name and place of publication (p. 984).

Jared Rubin (2014) sought to empirically test if the spread of the Reformation was linked to the spread of the printing press and concluded that "within the European nations where some variation in religious choice existed, cities that were early print adopters were 52.1 percentage points more likely to adopt Protestantism by 1530, 41.9 percentage points more likely to adopt Protestantism by 1560, and 29.0 percentage points more likely to adopt Protestantism by 1600" (p. 282). These findings do not confirm a cause-and-effect relationship, but do imply a strong correlation. This link was also evident in the fact that in many towns the first work produced by printers were often Lutheran, or at times anti-Lutheran works (Flood, 1990, p.29).

Elizabeth Eisenstein (1983) argues that profit-seeking printers can be viewed as independent agents amid ongoing religious and social change, but were the "natural enemy of narrow minds" (p. 177). For the first time in history the business economy and the Church were operating on the same "playing field" (Scialabba, 2013, p. 79). The distribution of books was dominated by the printer-publisher until approximately 1560, around which time the wholesale dealer came to predominate (Flood, 1990, p. 54). Publishers who only supported one faction risked their

livelihoods, as there were cases of publishers being executed for printing particular pamphlets that were deemed heretical (p. 32).

Many publishers including those in Erfurt, Leipzig, and Munich printed both Protestant and Catholic works, but only Lutheran works sold steadily (p.42). Publishers often selected works with profit in mind rather than religious affiliation. Despite praising print as a way to spread the word of God, Luther was also critical of the printing industry, declaring, "They only look to their greed" (Eisenstein, 1983, p.170). Despite the printing industry's motives, they needed to be enlisted in order to "bypass priests and place the Gospel directly into lay hands" (p.170).

Another central concept of Luther's proposed reforms was that of the "priesthood of all believers," which emphasized the importance of the scripture as the ultimate authority rather than the church, and empowering the laity to read scripture for themselves. In a publication from 1520 Luther wrote, "There is no true, basic difference between laymen and priests…. except for the sake of office" (p. 37). Reformers understood that the German language was key to winning over the masses, particularly in the spread of the Bible. Luther made a concerted effort to publish translated versions of the Bible that included annotations to assist with reading and comprehension.

In the early 1450's it was the *Vulgate,* St. Jerome's translation of the Bible, that Guttenberg chose to be the first printed book (Fussel, 1999, p. 159). The earliest complete Bible in German was produced in 1466, but is said to have "followed the Latin model so doggedly that its German text can only be grasped by someone who knows Latin grammar (p.159). There was a total of 18 Bibles in the German language prior to Luther; however, their impact was likely restricted by cost and outmoded language (p. 163). It has been estimated that between 1522 and Luther's death in 1546, more than three hundred High-German Bible editions constituting approximately half a million copies were published (p.163). Luther made the conscious effort to avoid regional dialects in his publications, both the Bible and pamphlets, contributing to a gradual "leveling out" of language and the development of a common printed language within the German empire that was already occurring and would continue throughout the sixteenth century, (p. 193).

To aid in this effort, reformers recognized the need to publish manuals to assist with spelling and grammar to encourage literacy, which was still relatively low. (Flood, pg. 68). Additionally, Luther published works encouraging educational institutions to assist in educating the general population. Protestant objections to the use of Latin was also directed toward academic and professional elites, arguing that "the liberal arts and sciences should not be hidden in Greek or Latin tongue" (Eisenstein, 1983, p. 164). Despite the growth in published works in the vernacular, approximately seventy percent of all published works in 1570 were in Latin (Flood, 1990, p. 43).

This movement to supply an accessible bible to encourage education and accessibility to scripture for the laity had a profound effect by allowing the literate laity to internalize the study

of scripture and become masters of their own home. They became responsible for teaching and conducting services for their families, a distinct difference from Catholic teachings that strictly warned against reading and interpreting scripture for oneself (Eisenstein, 1983, p. 167). “Latin no longer served as a sacred language veiling sacred mysteries” (p.161).

It is important not to overemphasize this shift, however, as low literacy rates and societal traditions made it likely that informal gatherings to read scripture were likely more common than individual reading. The church and preacher remained an integral part of community and everyday life (p. 168). Walter Ong (1982) asserted that the rise of print directly influenced the development of internalized, silent reading. Some recent scholarship challenges this assertion, instead arguing that the shift towards a literate European society began in the Middle Ages as silent reading may have occurred rarely, and increased importance was given to individual contact with texts, which in turn encouraged education (Gilmont, 1990, pp.14-15).

Estimating literacy rates at the onset of the Reformation is extremely difficult, as the main source of evidence of literacy – the ability to sign one’s name- is not an accurate indicator of writing or reading levels (p.16). While print allowed reform leaders to broadcast their messages rapidly and to new audiences like never before, it paradoxically also “undermined central authority because it encouraged the recipients of the printed message to think for themselves about the issues in dispute, and it provided the means by which each person could become his or her own theologian” (Edwards, 1994, p.7)

The Catholic church came to see itself under attack on two fronts- from a scholarly elite and a laity with increased access to scripture. It is perhaps ironic then that it was the Catholic Church that in the early years of the printing press provided the most reliable market for early publishers through the production of liturgical books, sermons, books of hours, devotional texts, and the various texts used in indulgence campaigns (Pettegree, 2017, p. 982). The Catholic Church had already utilized print in its crusade against the Turks (Eisenstein, 1983, p.148) and used it throughout the Reformation as well to promote uniformity, reinforce Catholic doctrine, reform corruption, and strengthen Catholic education (Scialabba, 2013, p. 80).

Catholic efforts were not nearly as successful, however, as it was difficult to find printers who would publish their works, and because of their own restrictions they placed on themselves. Policies formed at the Council of Trent emphasized controlling production of the Bible while maintaining its Latin version, and enforcing lay obedience and restricting lay reading. Those in Catholic kingdoms were just as eager to read the Bible in their native language (Eisenstein, 1983, p. 171). Censorship was attempted since Luther’s earliest works. *The Index of Forbidden Books* was later published in 1564, but only served as a marketing tool for printers outside of Catholic authority.

To argue that the rise of printing was directly responsible for the success of the Protestant Reformation does not account for the myriad of political, economic, social, and religious factors

that contributed to and allowed for its success. The period leading up to the Reformation was one of unsettling change, anxiety, and fear in many aspects of society. During the German Peasant's War of 1524, for example, peasants incorporated religious ideologies of the Reformation to validate and justify designs of social and political reform.

Was the Reformation then a movement in which an educated elite utilized propaganda campaigns to sway a discontent or indifferent laity or was it a movement driven in a "bottom-up" fashion by a laity increasingly unhappy with Church corruption and the barrier in place between them and literacy? The answer likely falls somewhere in the middle. What is clear is that the printing press allowed for the rapid dissemination of information to be used as overt propaganda to promote a religious movement for the first time in history, leading to a burgeoning new industry, increased emphasis on literacy and education, and a levelling out of language that would continue beyond the sixteenth century. People yearned to be a part of the new culture that was rising and recognized that literacy provided them with the "intellectual tools, the skill and wherewithal to receive and process the information that flowed from the press" (Scialabba, 2013, p. 78).

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Woodcut ("Sauritt des Papsts") after Lucas Cranach the Elder, used by Christian Rödinger the Elder of Magdeburg, of the pope riding a sow, holding steaming excrement. Retrieved from: https://www.flickr.com/photos/58558794@N07/5615492671.