

In what ways did the development of the print trade impact on early modern popular culture?

The large scale utilisation of the printing presses from their modest beginnings in the 1450's could be compared with the mass adoption of the internet in the twentieth century. Both have had an incredible impact on the culture of the ordinary person by bringing a wide variety of outside influences closer to home. Printed matter and electronic matter encompass many subjects that impact on the way that ordinary people viewed the world outside their own four walls, therefore the introduction of the mass medium of the printed word meant that influences from throughout the country and around the globe were freely available to the common man. This subject is wide ranging and complex, but by looking at a couple of important themes that were prevalent in the early modern period we can easily see the huge influence that the printing press had on the population.

The definition of popular culture is a widely debated issue and prior to embarking on any subject that may have an effect on popular culture it is important to explain the definition of popular culture that one is taking. The bi-polar view, which splits culture by class – the elite and the learned as opposed to the ordinary people with little or no overlap was a popular view (Burke, P 1978). Further study has shown that this is not quite true. There were certain cultural events, for example hiring fairs, which were enjoyed by all classes, producing much more of a crossover. The concept of popular culture can be broadened to include many other aspects – gender, religion or regional differences until it becomes, what I believe is a more accurate definition and takes in not just what the ordinary people enjoyed doing, but how they perceived their world, how they worked, worshipped and loved, their attitudes to law and order, politics and anything and everything else that may have had an influence on their daily lives. Popular culture is everyday – it is not the abnormal and unusual events that may have occurred, but the mundane and ordinary.

The advent of the printing press may have caused changes in mental habits and attitudes of a wide range of people and was not solely available in the domain of the learned. Easy access to presses meant that ideas for social, economic, scientific, political or religious reform were able to be set down on paper and disseminated to a public hungry for the printed word. Anyone and everyone could print their methodology or ideology and distribute it throughout the country or even globally. Through the book fairs in Europe, ideas from a wide variety of cultures were imported in to England, bringing a wealth of new concepts to the reading public. This audience had access either personally – by reading the literature themselves, or remotely – by finding a willing literate volunteer to read to them, allowing all classes to be exposed to the new ways of thinking stimulating “the formation [of] new intellectual combinations and permutations.”

(Eisenstein, E 1968) It is often debated whether the print trade created an audience for these new ideas, or whether the audience already existed during this time of reformation and the print trade simply satisfied this demand. Whichever way one looks at it, the scholarly texts were not longer only available to the learned and the elite, but were available to all who desired them and the ordinary man no longer needed the assistance of the upper classes to be aware of and understand 'revolutionary' learning and thinking.

The printing of the vernacular bible was a revolution in itself. The Word of God was now accessible to all – "to read the holy words of God in ones own tongue must have been an awesome experience" (Eisenstein, E 1968). The religious leaders must have been horrified. The printing presses meant that there was no longer a reliance on the existing rituals and imagery of religion to convey messages from God. Therefore the culture of print offered not only cultural choices to groups, but also a religious choice. No longer did the ordinary man need the clergy to read or interpret God's word, but they could read it (or have it read to) themselves. Preachers were disempowered as the common man could now make his own interpretation, conduct personal worship and have a more personal relationship with God, rather than having to have an affiliation with a particular church. This in turn may have been the catalyst, or at the very least an encouragement for religious dissent and the development and production of 'alternative' doctrines becoming available to the masses.

Cheap print was used, not only as a tool for interaction between the church and its congregation, but was used to undermine other religions. The chapbook and ballad were vital in portraying godly messages and moral tales to the ordinary man. Chapbooks were aimed at a wide audience – men and women, children, gentlefolk and labourers and contained prayers, songs, sermons and a number of 'instructional' woodcut prints. (Reay, B 1998). These offered ways of salvation, a guide to 'godly' human behaviour and moral and spiritual guidance without the need to physically take part in a religious event. In this way religious leaders were able to get the message of God across to a wider audience than their congregation. This did also allow the more 'abstract' religions to also display their beliefs to a large audience, diluting and undermining the official religions and possibly tempting readers away to an alternative. The availability of print to the church – regardless of denomination – was a huge impact on the culture of religion.

Street literature has been in existence from cave paintings to the Acta Diurna of ancient Rome to the modern newspapers of today. The literature develops from the traditional culture of folk music, ritual, dance and story telling. Shepard states that every scrap of traditional and printed myth and legend would have found its way into the mind of the common person. Chapbooks and balladbooks became the libraries of ordinary folk rather than the more sophisticated literature,

emphasising their appreciation of tradition and possibly encouraging an aspiration to learn. Although any reaction to the literature may not have been instant and may have taken a while to filter through to the common psyche. For example, Hannah More wrote a ballad called "The Riot", which, after being read in public by the populous of the area, was alleged to have stopped a riot that was occurring in Bath.

The broadside ballads were a massive influence on the opinion of the public and the development of the printing presses converted this into a mass medium, but there was always the issue of censorship. The fear of rebellion that may appear from the printing of seditious material encourage the government to pass legislation to regulate the production of literature. Regardless of the Royal Charter petitioned for by the Guild of Stationers in 1557 – which only allowed members of the Company of Stationers to produce printed literature and gave them powers to search for illegal printers, destroy books and type and imprison offenders – illegal presses were printing for profit and publishing underground literature covering the dangerous topics of religion and politics, rather than the more morally offensive bawdy books.

With 250 recorded printers of ballad books in the 17th Century (Shepard, 1973), the development and acceptance of printed books and pamphlets has waxed and waned as governments have changed and new regulations have been implemented. With the abolishment of the champions of censorship – the Star Chamber – in 1641, some restrictions on printers were removed. Smaller printing presses become more popular and the printing of news pamphlets flourished. There was still a suppression of unofficial news pamphlets – which especially in 1649 prevented the public from learning about Cromwell's atrocities in Ireland. During this time the unofficial presses were more influential than the official printers as the official printers were regulated by official censorship. In the 16th Century foreign embassies consulted the street literature rather than the State Papers to accurately assess public opinion.

The prose news pamphlets offered a flexible form for scandal and propaganda that no longer relied on the talent of the ballad writers. These provided the people with a wide range of views on home and foreign news, but were not simple reading for simple folk. The common man would have found them still expensive – newspaper tax rose from 1d to 3½d at the end of the 16th Century (Shepard, 1973).

Before the advent of the printing press, minstrels sang the praises or satirised the politicians and the religions leaders. Printed sheets were a much more efficient way to distribute propaganda as they could reach a much larger audience in a much quicker time. The printing press co-ordinated the haphazard production of street literature. The increase in literacy of the poor could be

attributed to the prevalence of printed chapbooks and ballad sheets. Books of any kind would have had valuable effect on the poor, in a social, educational and creative way. This may have led to the development of a more individualistic culture (Barry, J 1995). The pre-existing oral culture was based on communal events, for example the festivals and rituals perpetuating the traditions of the agricultural society or the gathering of groups to listen to the scriptures or experience the newest play from the Capital, but with the development of the printed word, the also came the development of a type of culture that could be enjoyed by the individual person. Although this may have been true for the more literate groups, it is probable that for those that were less literate, they still gathered in groups to have the latest news books, for example, read to them.

The printing press revolutionised the way that the common man received his information from the outside world. No longer reliant on travelling ballad tellers or restricted to the news which was deemed appropriate by the pulpit, the ordinary person could be exposed to news from the capital and overseas, to ideas of a minority and revolutionary thinking than may otherwise have not permeated his daily life. The accessibility of the printed word enabled those with no previous access to education to be able to learn to read opening up a route of social elevation that may have not been possible. Influences also included the theatrical world, with printed manuscripts of plays available to all, enabling the plays to be performed throughout the country, bringing the spectacle of the theatre to more remote villages. Again to use the comparison of the printing press to the internet, the printing press enabled everyone to have access to a huge variety of information. The dissemination and distribution of the knowledge, news and entertainment to an audience hungry for print must have been revolutionary.

I don't believe there is any way that the printing press could be deemed **not** to have an effect on Popular Culture in the early modern period. Even from these few examples above, it is obvious that the printed word affected everyone's lives and profoundly affected the development and growth of Popular Culture at this time.

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