

MEDIA HYPE IN THE 16TH CENTURY

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The boom in new media is by no means exclusive to our times. "This phenomenon existed as early as in the 16th century," reports Gabriele Haug-Moritz. Then as now, media change and the sweeping transformation of society were closely linked. "Just like globalisation and its consequences are entwined with the new electronic communication channels today, the new printing medium was closely connected with the new theology of Martin Luther or Huldrych Zwingli in the 16th century," explains the historian. Luther used the medium of print, developed a couple of decades before by Johannes Gutenberg, to spread the ideas that set the reformation in train. Soon after, in 1531, Protestant towns and princes founded the Schmalkaldic League, defensive alliance against the religious policies of the Catholic emperor Charles V. The tensions between the Protestants in the empire and the emperor himself came to a head in the Schmalkaldic War (1546/47), during which the ordinary people were kept informed by means of small booklets, called "pamphlets".

"Up to now, we have been most insufficiently informed about the role the pamphlets played in the world of media at the time," says the researcher. The connections which characterised European history of the 16th and 17th centuries are obvious: the close connection of religious dissent, unrest and media change. "Wars became media events and were both the expression and the cause of media change," says Gabriele Haug-Moritz

The historian, who is professor of General Modern History at the University of Graz, Austria, is investigating in her FRIAS project the role the new media came to play in the Schmalkaldic War and at the same time during the first French religious war of 1562-63, both of which only lasted one year, as well as their significance for the social communication processes in peace and war. Up until now, the extent of the effect of the print media in the Schmalkaldic War had not been understood. According to Mrs Haug-Moritz, the systematic investigation of these questions was only possible following the breathtaking rise of the internet as a (scientific) information medium over the last five years, and

the resulting possibilities of electronic research. "From a media-historical point of view, what took place in the German nation of the Holy Roman Empire during the short period of the Schmalkaldic War, could be described as a communications 'hype'," states the historian. Within barely twelve months, 500,000 pamphlets were printed and sold. "Printing production was based on the mechanisms of a market economy," the researcher explains, "which means that only those printers who properly understood the needs of social communication survived commercially." This makes the pamphlets extremely enlightening sources of information on how people saw their own times. A particularly popular one was "The Prayer of the Elector of Saxony", addressing one of the main protagonists of the war. This pamphlet was translated into Czech, and in 1546/47 reached a staggering 15 editions. Printing took place in towns where the authorities were Protestant, and often belonging to the Schmalkaldic League. Accordingly, it was clear that they publicly championed the pro-Schmalkaldic and anti-emperor cause.

Gabriele Haug-Moritz is particularly intrigued by the question of how this new technology became established in a society where political realities were traditionally conveyed by word of mouth. The interesting answer is that news was read out in pubs, in market places and outside churches. The widely established view that in those times pictures were more important than language is false. "Information about this war was communicated verbally," the scholar explains. "It was the great

era of rhetoric and the authors of the pamphlets – mainly theologians, lawyers and humanist intellectuals – communicated their faith using the persuasive powers of language and, in an interesting parallel to our own times, believed that words could shape reality."

This view was also held in France, even though the situation there in the first half of the 16th century was quite different. For a long time the Reformation did not have any great influence in the country. It was small groups meeting in secret that adopted the new ideas. The sudden death of the French king Henry II in 1559 marked the beginning of decades of weakening of the monarchy and a time during which the confessional conflict between the two nobility factions at the Paris court – Guise and the house of Bourbon, an off-shoot of the French royal family – grew more and more intense. In March 1562 this power struggle gave rise to the first of the religious wars in France, which would be followed by a further seven wars until 1598.

As in central Europe, the violent escalation of social-religious conflict and the printing of leaflets went hand in hand. "But it was not the Huguenots, as is often thought, that made use of the printing press. It was mainly the young French king and his mother, Catherine of Medici, who attempted to strengthen their rule by using print," says Gabriele Haug-Moritz. In 1562 they passed more than 300 laws which were made public in the form of pamphlets. Many of these were related to the conflict and were intended to demonstrate that the King was still

an institution that would guarantee the order and unity that had been so obviously lacking in France in the years since 1559. According to the historian, the function of printing in this conflict was quite different to that in the German empire; she concludes that "media and the processes of media change influence social perceptions, but at the same time they also reflect the balance of power in society – then as now." (kb)

