

CfP: The Production of Information: Technologies, Media Markets, and Labour in the Twentieth Century (Hamburg, Germany, 12-14 April 2018)

Discussion published by Karsten Uhl on Thursday, August 3, 2017

The Production of Information: Technologies, Media Markets, and Labour in the Twentieth Century

Deadline for proposals: 30 September 2017

"I have never seen an industry that is going to be more completely changed in the next decade as a result of automation - nor one which today realizes it less." With these categorical words, American automation expert John C. Diebold described the printing industry in 1963. In Diebold's eyes the industry was a perfect example of both managers and workers turning a blind eye to inevitable technological change. Yet, rather than adopting the automation guru's as normative as self-serving narrative of progress and efficiency we would like to widen the perspective and take a comprehensive view which takes stock of the various, often conflicting ways in which the technological, social, and cultural transformation of print media and its changing production conditions unfolded in the twentieth century.

We are inviting historians of technology, business historians, social and cultural historians, and media studies scholars to investigate the many facets combined in the production of information. The most popular examples of technological innovation, such as the triumph of hot metal typesetting machines around 1900, the success of web-offset printing in the post-World War II era, and the introduction of cold type and computers since the 1960s and 70s tend to conceal that these processes were often gradual in nature and sometimes inconsistently implemented. They were also intricately entangled with transformations in other fields: changing consumption patterns of readers (and viewers) both reflected and boosted the application of new technologies which, in their turn, also contributed to the advent of multinational media corporations. What new forms of distribution, like mail-order book clubs, meant for sales and consumption, new means of data storage, simplifying and reducing the costs of transfer, implied for the production of mass media. Changing technological paradigms also affected the development of typography, layout, and design of newspapers, for book and magazine illustration, etc. Traditional machine suppliers such as the producers of the famous Heidelberg printing press or Linotype typesetting machines lost parts of their customers or had to adapt by entering new fields, losing industrial leadership to new competitors like Xerox, Apple, and Adobe along the way.

Technological change and the transformation of old and the introduction of new media were often accompanied by competition and conflict in various fields: the scramble for markets; industrial relations; freedom of the press; and intellectual property rights. Both national and international markets for media products became increasingly contested, experienced rapid concentration, and saw new technologies applied to boost efficiency, reduce costs, and ease outsourcing process. Predictably, these developments triggered industrial conflict. In most countries, industrial relations were characterized by specialised trade unions for individual professions, like printers, compositors,

bookbinders, and journalists. Only in the course of the second half of the twentieth century did these unions consolidate to form media unions or amalgamate with larger non-media unions. Technological change often had very different connotations for different professions; therefore industrial relations had more frontlines than those between workers and managers, including competition for labour between different professions, skilled and unskilled, male and female, or domestic and foreign workers. Whether or not a particular technological innovation was perceived as a threat or an opportunity depended on the concrete changes in the work progress and on the previous position of the individual employee therein. Simultaneously, debates about the freedom of the press were concerned with the spectre of monopoly, the controversial issue of state subsidies, and with labour strikes, which halted newspaper production. At the same time, intellectual property rights came under pressure with the introduction of increasingly efficient (and, towards the end of the century, immaterial) copying techniques.

Contributions may focus on different aspects of print media, e.g. books, newspapers, magazines, or academic publishing. Topics may include but are not limited to:

- Typography - reconceptualising type: ever since Gutenberg introduced movable type to European printing typography had been a very material art, using literally tangible wood and lead letters. This changed only with the advent of photo and computer typesetting, substituting first film, then mere data. For typographers working within printing cultures, which relied on Latin or related alphabets this implied new means of expression and new possibilities while also forecasting the ambiguous proliferation of typefaces in the age of the personal computer. In the context of other languages and alphabets, however, abandoning the lead standard meant that typesetting and printing promised to become both easier and cheaper and thus to enhance the availability of print products greatly. Case studies, if possible comparative, will be very welcome.

- Texts and images - the (im)materiality of information: how did images become commodities? Which role did stock photo agencies play, how were markets created? In which ways did these developments transform journalism when it came to researching, writing, and editing? Additionally, how did technological change in other departments of print houses affect journalists? The computerization of typesetting made the composing rooms lose their autonomy (though not necessarily overnight), with compositors' responsibilities becoming mostly technical and ancillary in the process of dematerialization. Journalists on the other hand gained more influence on the final product than they had enjoyed before while also being expected to move beyond purely intellectual work.

- Media production as business - companies and markets: new products (from paperback books to audio and digital formats) as well as innovative forms of distribution, such as mail-order book clubs and the rise of Amazon and its epigones, drastically transformed the industry. The rise of multinational corporations and oligopolistic structures restructured whole markets, introduced cross-media marketing, and challenged notions of plurality and independence of the press, but also those of authorship and property rights. Conversely, the decreasing reliance on capital-intensive machinery meant that access to previously difficult-to-enter markets was becoming easier, allowing new publishers to carve out niches for themselves. Both small and large enterprises seized the opportunities offered by technological innovation: cold type and computerization did not only promise to render typesetting and printing less costly by reducing personnel, with the help first of small, light data storage formats and then of digital communication technology out-sourcing became a viable

option. Both composition and printing could be transferred over long distances, even to different countries. Especially interesting is the case of printing behind the iron curtain despite the apparent hurdles of Cold War bloc confrontation (as well as international trade integration). Again, both case studies and industrial overviews would be welcome.

- The media industry and industrial relations: new technology transformed professions, qualifications, and practices. We are interested in how technological and cultural changes affected different professions (journalists, typographers, paper makers, composers, stereotypers, printers, bookbinders, publishers, et al.). Deskilling seems to have been the most common experience, but there are different stories. Under which circumstances did certain groups benefit from technological innovation while others lost in terms of status, income, or employment? How did gender relations and especially gendered power-relations alter? Which roles should we accord to age and education?

- Technology and machinery: we are looking for researchers exploring the history of technology-i-use, i.e. the ways in which technology users adapted new technologies. Interconnected with these practices is the field of system design and prototyping: how did designers, programmers, and engineers imagine users'/workers' demands? Mostly, the history of printing industry is told as a sequence of technological innovations. However, did the industry experience a "shock of the old" (D. Edgerton)? Or was incremental change the rule rather than the exception, e.g. with hand-composition continuing for a long period in niches like special type, rarely used languages, and sheet music? Other processes (e.g. bookbinding) temporarily proved less affected by automation. After the apparent triumph of computerised typesetting most corporations introduced hybrid systems (part electronic, part traditional) during a long period of transition. For the interest of business historians and of historians of technology, it is crucial to compare companies' divergent approaches in implementing new technologies on the shop floor. Case studies of both gradualist strategies and "big bang" approaches would be highly welcome.

Timeline for proposals:

Please send your proposal for consideration for inclusion in the conference programme. We ask for a short abstract (ca. 400 words) and a brief CV by the 30th of September 2017 to Kim Christian Priemel (University of Oslo, k.c.priemel@iakh.uio.no) and Karsten Uhl (Helmut Schmidt University Hamburg, uhl@hsu-hh.de).

The conference, kindly funded by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation and the German Research Foundation (DFG), will take place at the Museum der Arbeit (Museum of Labour) - renowned for its printing trade section - in Hamburg (Germany), 12-14 April 2018. Speakers' travel and accommodation costs will be defrayed.

Related date:
September 30, 2017