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The Survival of Manuscripts: Resistance, Adoption, and Adaptation to Gutenberg’s Printing Press in Early Modern Europe

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to provide a brief survey of three types of responses to Gutenberg’s moveable type printing press and its effect on early modern Europe: resistance, reluctant adoption, and enthusiastic adaptation. Analyzing the respective examples of these three responses to print will help to explain why manuscript production survived in a world that was seemingly dominated by print. Although several different arguments for the survival of the manuscript may be derived from the exhaustive examples of print reactions, the theme of the newfound overabundance of information is the most prominent. This paper opens with an introduction, which is followed by a discussion of necessary historical context relating to manuscript production and the early fourteenth-century landscape. By invoking a wide range of figures and phenomena, this paper relies on primary sources to support its claims. Following a survey of each of the three sections, this paper concludes with an estimate of how the findings are relevant to today and how they may explain the survival of manuscripts.

Keywords: Manuscripts, Print, Scribes, Printing Press, Gutenberg, Writing, Language

Introduction: “Excitable Rhetoric…”

In 1499, Italian humanist and scholar Polydore Vergil wrote that “printing made its start to no less profit than the general amazement of humanity.”¹ He was one voice among many that praised Gutenberg’s press and viewed it as responsible for the success of future generations. Over five hundred years later, the press is still taught as one of the most important inventions in world history. While praise for print is certainly justified, the sheer volume of it has largely silenced those who did not immediately submit to print’s appeal. Further, the continuance of manuscript production after the establishment of the press can be explained by various reactions to it. After a brief discussion of the literary world that Gutenberg’s press was born into, the remainder of this essay is divided into three sections, each focusing on one type of response to print: resistance, reluctant adoption, and enthusiastic adaptation.

Prior to discussing three responses to Gutenberg’s printing press in early modern European society, it is necessary to first consider the world of publication that it disrupted. Manuscript production in the early Middle Ages was a strictly religious undertaking, where hosts of workers, such as

¹ Polydore Vergil, On Discovery, trans. Brian P. Copenhaver, I Tatti Renaissance Library 6,
scribes and illuminators, would gather in a monastery’s scriptoria and produce didactic religious texts. The religious sponsorship of the “flame of learning, tended for a thousand years in a thousand monasteries,” eventually began to burn out.² The rise of universities in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and the subsequent increase in the demand for books, which led to the pecia system, is evidence of the manuscript industry transforming from private to commercial.³

French historian Frédéric Barbier offers three explanations for what he calls this “scribal Renaissance” taking place before the advent of print in the early fifteenth-century: the introduction of specialized texts in a largely sacred and liturgical canon, the increasing size of the reading public and resulting standardization of texts, and the potential of books to demonstrate the social status of both the author and the reader.⁴ Vespasiano da Bisticci, a fifteen-century Florentine manuscript seller, is a fitting example of the last explanation. As his career took off and he was able to attract clients such as the Duke of Urbino and Lorenzo de’Medici, Bisticci paid particular care to the quality and luxury of manuscripts for his high profile clientele, which would in turn aid his reputation as a book purveyor.⁵ For all of these factors, as well as the widespread accessibility of paper, the increasingly commercial manuscript industry became one that was waiting to be revolutionized by the printing press.

An Agent of Change

Gutenberg’s printing press in no way eradicated manuscript production. Nor was the printing press a technology wholly independent from manuscripts. Print and manuscript were permanently intertwined, and it could be argued that neither would exist without the other. While the printing press did replace some scribal practices, it also introduced new communication and information forms that were meant to be physically written on.⁶

Keeping this relationship in mind, the ramifications of Gutenberg’s printing press cannot be denied. Whether immediate or gradual, its effects, in the words of British historian John Man, “became part of all of us.”⁷ Increasing the availability of literature, the advent of print sponsored widespread opportunities to become educated, and even created new methods of learning via visual models.⁸ Scholars had more opportunities to assess and criticize other literature in their field, and continue the conversation by

³ The pecia system emerged in the High Middle Ages within universities as a regulated process of copying texts that aimed to avoid corruption of text while producing copies faster. If a student requested a text to be copied, the exemplar copy would be distributed in quires rather than in its whole. This would allow a more efficient production rate of the copy since multiple copyists would be working on the same text. For further discussion of the pecia system, see the book by Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing 1450-1800 (London: Verso, 1976).

⁴ For a provocative discussion of the interplay between scribal culture and print culture, denoted as “a new age of manuscript,” see Paul Dover, The Information Revolution in Early Modern Europe, New Approaches to European History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

⁷ Man, Gutenberg, 252.

The effects described above only scratch the surface of the impacts of the printing press in Europe. Although much of the press's impact was gradual, as argued by British librarian David McKitterick, initial reactions to the press ranged from disgusted rejection to the prediction that it would revolutionize the world.

A bold example of this is early twentieth-century historian Will Durant's far-reaching statement that all scribes, newly unemployed with the onset of the press, "vainly denounced the new gadget." As will be demonstrated in the last section of this essay, this sentiment was not widely shared save among a few insecure scribes. However, modern scholars are correct in concluding that resistance to print was relatively uncommon compared to praise. Notably, resistance may be found among monks, scribes, politicians, and booklovers alike, each offering different explanations for their opposition. Within these groups, four overarching reasons may be identified for their opposition to print: the heightened prospects of incorrect or corrupt information being distributed widely, the refusal of copyists to give up their profession, the notion that manuscripts were "superior" to the printed word, and nostalgia, which sought to keep existing practices in use.

Prior to the rekindling of the study of the European printing press in the last quarter of the twentieth century, spearheaded by Elizabeth Eisenstein and Adrian Johns, historians tended to generalize any resistance to print as merely petty scribes upset about losing their jobs. This sentiment was not widely shared, save among a few insecure scribes. However, modern scholars are correct in concluding that resistance to print was relatively uncommon compared to praise. Notably, resistance may be found among monks, scribes, politicians, and booklovers alike, each offering different explanations for their opposition. Within these groups, four overarching reasons may be identified for their opposition to print: the heightened prospects of incorrect or corrupt information being distributed widely, the refusal of copyists to give up their profession, the notion that manuscripts were "superior" to the printed word, and nostalgia, which sought to keep existing practices in use.

Respect
In 1474, a scribe named Filippo de Strata, in his plea to the Doge of Venice, Nicolò Marcello, to remove the numerous presses in the city, referred to print as “the plague which is doing away with the laws of all decency.” A possible motive for this polemic was Strata’s concern for his job security, noted in a fear that the printing press would soon obviate his skills. He blamed the literature produced by printing presses for widespread moral degradation, and conveyed particular concern for children, who were being corrupted by overly sexual and impure texts. The concern that printed texts might contain errors, whether intentional or not, manifested itself in both resistant and reluctant responses to print. Here, Strata has no hope that print can advance a community’s ethical fabric and calls for a complete eradication of all printing presses. His plea is comprehensive, taking care to outline why writing is “nobler than all goods,” and must be protected from the deception of print.

Angelo Poliziano, a poet from fifteenth-century Florence, mirrored this fear of the broad dissemination of amoral texts, regretful that “now the most stupid ideas can in a moment be transferred into a thousand volumes and spread abroad.” In this way, the vast spread of knowledge and information made possible by the press was viewed by the opposition as its most damaging outcome.

Johannes Trithemius, a fifteenth-century German abbot, is commonly cited by historians as an example of stark opposition to print. His 1494 treatise De laude scriptorum (In Praise of Scribes) was a reaction to print and conveyed a deep concern for the future of devotional and monastic copying. According to Trithemius, the time that a monk spent copying religious texts would bring them closer to God and make them more pious. Further, he credited scribes with providing the materials of both scholars and Church leaders, claiming that their work “would never reach posterity without the skill of the scribe.” A substantial, yet blatantly incorrect, pillar of this argument held that scribal parchment would physically last longer than the paper of printed books. Attempting to appeal to those who immediately supported the printing press, he even admitted some of the faults of manuscript production. Ironically, one of the faults he noted is that the individual motives of authors can sometimes be ulterior, which is one of the common arguments against the printing press. Beyond the religious and longevity reasons for supporting manuscript copying over print, Trithemius also wrote extensively of the spiritual relationship between a copier and their text that simply could not be replaced by print. By spending hours with a text and paying attention to its smallest details, a scribe would come to know the text intimately. The comprehension of texts that came with the incredibly attentive study by scribes would remain unmatched by printers. Overall, in addressing

18 Strata, Polemic.
19 Quoted in Alan Moorehead, “The Angel in May,” The New Yorker, February 24, 1951, 34.
21 Trithemius, In Praise of Scribes, 35.
22 Trithemius, In Praise of Scribes, 55.
23 This argument of Trithemius reads as a distant rebuttal to Socrates in Plato’s Phaedrus, who concluded that the practice of writing would lead to less knowledge and comprehension. Here, in In Praise of Scribes, Trithemius conveyed that because of the time required to produce a text, scribes will have the most layered understanding of the text, even more so than the reader, demonstrating the effectiveness of writing. To read Socrates’ perspective, see Plato, Phaedrus, trans. by Robin Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
congregations of scribes with his tract, Trithemius advocated resistance to the printing press on the account of the inherent value that came with copying, such as historical preservation and the scribe’s advanced comprehension that came with copying. Unfortunately for the monk, his fellow monks at Sponheim did not agree with his devotion to copying and he was forced to leave the monastery in 1505. Before leaving Trithemius, it must be noted that he contradicted himself in his polemic. Along with several of his other works, he had In Praise of Scribes printed in order to reach as many scribes as possible, taking full advantage of the invention he called on his people to ignore.

Reluctant Adoption

A good portion of the European population was initially ambivalent to Gutenberg’s printing press. Effects of the press were generally gradual and fitful, making it difficult to immediately assess the invention’s impact. In addition, the distinction between the earliest printed books and manuscripts was not as obvious as one might think for reasons which will be explored in the last section of this paper. Various reasons for this reluctant adoption towards the press echo similar reasons for print resistance, such as the fear of corrupted texts, saturation of the market, and a bias towards existing techniques. The reluctant response to print expressed these concerns while simultaneously taking advantage of what the invention had to offer, which may be explained by personal motives. The examples to follow illustrate a response to

print that, like the other two types discussed in this paper, is nuanced and can hardly be characterized as uniform.

Ironically, one of those most reluctant to embrace the printing press was one of its loudest supporters: Desiderius Erasmus, a Dutch humanist, scholar, and intellectual celebrity of the Northern Renaissance. Erasmus immediately took advantage of the possibilities offered by the printing press, working with renowned early printers such as Aldus Manutius in Venice and Johann Froben in Basel. Recognizing the new formats of writing made possible by the printing press, he published a variety of works, including Greek and Latin translations of scripture, satirical treaties, educational manuals, and his own letters to other European humanists. It was only later in his life, and for three overarching reasons, that he grew ambivalent towards the press. First, he found that the quick commercialization of the industry had a tendency to produce texts of poor quality. The industry quickly became filled with non-experts who solely sought to make a profit from the press and whose inattention to and disregard for detail resulted in lower quality texts. According to Erasmus, these “stupid, ignorant, raving, irreligious and seditious” texts directly contaminated the existing book market. Further, as printers grew increasingly greedy in this competitive market, structural errors in the texts, such as incorrectly spelled words and the omission of original passages, became more common. In a letter to Martinius Dorpius in 1528, Erasmus expressed his discontent with a printed version of Galen that was plagued by

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errors; he even suggested that a scribe could have fixed said mistakes for cheap, thus demonstrating a nostalgia for the prior means of producing texts.\textsuperscript{27} Second, he was concerned that deliberately corrupt texts would contaminate the market. As with his first concern, Erasmus believed the impact of both faulty and misleading texts to be devastating to the legacy of prior authors but also to the education of the readers. In his \textit{Adagia}, he admits that this same issue is present in scribal production of texts, but the printing press poses greater dangers for such activity.\textsuperscript{28} Third, Erasmus was horrified by the prospect of classical literature falling to contemporary publications. The printing press allowed for more publications that were cheaper and easier to produce than manuscript copying, which in turn diversified the subject matter and quality among these texts.\textsuperscript{29} The opportunity to publish was extended to nearly everyone, which Erasmus found repulsive. He feared that the works of ancient authors, such as Aristotle and Cicero, would be overshadowed by his contemporaries’ publications, all of which he regarded as unworthy. Also, in his \textit{Adagia}, he outlined what he expected to become of a world that lacks the authority of classical texts, prophesying a barbaric authoritarian regime with no civic polity.\textsuperscript{30} Instead of seeing the printing press as fostering independent thought and dissenting opinions, as did Martin Luther, during the later part of his life, Erasmus perceived print as a threat to the survival of classical literature. The three primary reasons behind Erasmus’s eventual reluctance towards print resemble some of the explanations framing outright resistance, particularly the concern about the corruption of texts, which Filippo de Strata and Angelo Poliziano shared. However, his perception of print is deeply nuanced because he had already engaged with multiple presses and established his fame. A closer look at Erasmus reveals that he was purposefully exploitative of the new medium, desiring to enhance his reputation through his entertaining array of publications.\textsuperscript{31} With the help of Manutius and Froben, he realized the potential for fame that print provided, and deliberately crafted the spread of his image in print to shape and extend his reputation. Framed by the humanist climate of the Renaissance and supported internationally by prominent figures, he sought full control of his celebrity campaign, and his publications reflect the intellectual rigor that he has since been known for.\textsuperscript{32} It is this fixation on fame that could be an underlying reason for Erasmus’s sheer ambivalence. He spent his entire life dedicated to classical authors and was driven to construct that same degree of a legacy for himself. Supported by his undying desire for fame, Erasmus’s embrace of the possibilities offered by the press, combined with his critiques, is one example of a complicated attitude toward print.

Erasmus was not alone in his idea that print would inevitably flood the market with errors and lead to corruption among readers. Eisenstein has identified an ambiguous dichotomy present among a portion of initial responses to print. While the desire of a writer to achieve fame, as illustrated by Erasmus, leads them to use the printing press, it clashes with the fear of losing control once the text is no longer in their possession.\textsuperscript{33} The text would be subject to the mistakes of the

\textsuperscript{27} Quoted in Barbier, \textit{Gutenberg’s Europe}, 243.
\textsuperscript{28} Desiderius Erasmus, “Adagia II, Festina Lente,” 11.
\textsuperscript{29} Erasmus, “Adagia II,” 13.
\textsuperscript{30} Erasmus, “Adagia II,” 12.
\textsuperscript{31} Dover, \textit{The Information Revolution}, 151.
printer. Although these fears of textual corruption and a loss of control were not specific to the fifteenth-century, they were intensified by the press and the appealing chance of fame that it provided. This ambivalence to the press may be illustrated by three Italian late fifteenth-century writers. Humanist scholar Giovanni Calfurnio, in his 1481 edition of Catullus, praised the vast number of books that the printing press allowed for, which distinguished the past from the present. However, he proceeded to condemn the lack of “diligent and accurate” corrections to printed errors, claiming that “the rose is often closest to the thorn,” signifying a discrepancy in his attitude toward the press.34 Although the printing press advanced Calfurnio’s career by allowing him to widely publish commentaries and translations of ancient authors, he was outraged at the resulting widespread corruption of texts. A similar sentiment may be seen in the letters of Niccolò Perotti, a Latin grammarian from Florence. In 1470, before Florentine had a successful printing press, Perotti wrote to a cardinal that he was initially attracted to the “new art of writing lately brought to us from Germany,” and envisioned its success.35 To Perotti’s avail, he quickly concluded that printers produced a surplus of texts with such little value that would lead to corruption of the Latin language and demanded the intense scrutinization of texts prior to publication.36 Interestingly, he disregarded his own critiques of the press and had a number of texts published, in which swaths of errors were found.37 Third, in 1481, Venetian scholar Hieronimo Squarciafico wrote of his gratitude for print, noting that all future authors owe their success to the press. In the same tract, he described a dream where humanists and orators debated “whether the newly invented art of printing was more to be praised or condemned.”38 The dream concludes with one of the scholars begging another to ensure that his name survives but that his published writings contained no errors.39 Unsurprisingly, Squarciafico did not apply this critique to his career, as he published his own texts and worked for the Aldine Press, the Venetian print shop that would come to be celebrated for its production of ancient classics and vernacular texts. These three examples are representative of initial ambivalence to the press that are explained by simultaneous aspiration toward fame and fear of losing editorial control.

A closer look at Florence will reveal a regional hesitancy to the printing press. While it cannot be said that every individual Florentine was ambivalent, the city was notably slow to adapt the invention. Florence was a major hub for manuscript production, and its vibrant bookmaking trade attracted foreigners. Despite its reputation as the forefront of artistic and technological change during the Renaissance, Florence did not have a successful printing shop until a new press was set up in the Covenant of San Jacopo di Ripoli in 1476, at which point printing shops in other Italian cities, such as Venice and Rome, had become particularly successful.40 Canadian author Ross King identified two potential reasons behind Florence’s reluctance to print. First, Lorenzo

de’ Medici, de facto ruler of Florence, was seemingly uninterested in print, and preferred for his books to be manuscripts. He commissioned scribes to copy texts until his death in 1492, some fifty years after the printing press was invented. A second reason for the delayed success of print in Florence is due to the prominence of Vespasiano da Bisticci, the city’s most popular bookseller. Bisticci had been in the manuscript production industry for forty years and served clients such as Cosimo de’ Medici and the Duke of Urbino. He took care to provide his clients with exactly what was requested and varied his products, offering both luxurious manuscripts and secondhand books. Since Bisticci sufficiently served Florence’s book-purchasing public, the demand for a press was not as obvious. In 1480, Bisticci closed down his business, for the increasing prominence of print had finally overshadowed his skills. Despite his claim that, in comparison to his manuscripts, any printed volume “would have been ashamed in such company,” Bisticci surrendered his craft to give way to the developing print culture in Florence.

Enthusiastic Adaption

As noted by historians Eisenstein and McKitterick, the revolutionary impacts of print that are easily identifiable today were not as obvious at the time. Early printers entered a manuscript market, which was more intimate, specialized, and private than that of the coming trade. However, printers were familiar with this, and initially adopted their craft to the existing climate. Simultaneously, while some manuscript booksellers and scribes such as Bisticci did not submit at once to print, a good portion of veterans from the manuscript trade sought new positions in the wake of the press, with a number of them becoming printers themselves. It is through this shifting dichotomy that the relationship between handwriting and print may be seen. The onset of print did not suppose the end of manuscript writing; rather, it inspired a modern upgrade to the practice.

On several counts, the early modern printed book may be described as a hybrid between manuscript and print. As mentioned previously, the printing press spurred a variety of items that were meant to be written on. These items took the forms of record-keeping, scholastic work, bureaucratic and administrative files, and personal letter writing. The diversity of these texts demonstrates the continued relevance of manuscript in a print world and the undeniable relationship between the two practices. Further, in order to attract and appear familiar to the existing market, early printed books in particular were intended to resemble manuscripts. Although the list of identical design and structural elements that may be identified between early print and manuscript is extensive, three are the most prominent. First, early printed books employed marginalia so the reader could contribute to the text, which was a prominent feature of early manuscript books and tracts. Reader annotations can be deeply personal in nature and were encouraged by the deliberately blank spaces in early print as an ode to manuscripts. Second, the

44 Dover, Information Revolution, 187.
45 Pettettee, The Book in the Renaissance, 33.
typographical fonts of printing presses were recognizably derived from manuscript fonts. A third visual element of early printed works that resembled manuscript production was the heavy focus on illustration. Although printing presses would come to employ woodcut illustrations, early presses sought to replicate the lavish features of an illuminated manuscript but with a mechanized process. This process was laborious, expensive, and often unsuccessful. Early printers quickly realized the cost of these slow processes, and began to employ illuminators that would, by hand, add the final touches to the manuscript. Beyond the physical makeup of the printed works, early printers conducted their business in a way that resembled the intimate nature of the existing manuscript trade. In a competitive and expanding industry, early printed booksellers aspired to distinguish their products. As the printed book became a commodity, booksellers sought out the needs of their consumers, and adapted their products to fit those needs. Further, early printers responded to the idea of a printed work’s lack of originality compared to a manuscript by hand-finishing multiple copies of a text according to the wants of each client. Although the pool of consumers for print grew significantly larger than that for manuscripts, early booksellers made the effort to work with their clientele, which may be seen as an adaptation of the intimate nature of the manuscript trade.

As mentioned earlier, manuscript production in the Middle Ages was a religious undertaking. Although the copying of texts by monastic scribes had been an enduring tradition in the church, they were quick to adapt to print. Strikingly, the first printing press established in Italy, the Subiaco Press, was located in a monastery, indicating the church’s dedication to print. A crucial element in explaining why the church immediately approved the press is due to the opportunity it provided to raise money. In 1452, a student manual declared that “printing was dedicated by the special grace of God,” after the printing of papal indulgences had raised money for the fight against the Turks. As the printing press grew in prominence, monastic libraries commissioned printed copies of their manuscripts, demonstrating the church’s enthusiasm for print but also the inherent value that they perceived in manuscripts. Further, in the mid fifteenth-century, the Library at Avignon was described as “growing rapidly and destined to be much utilized,” demonstrating the church’s willingness to adapt their manuscript tradition to the new print culture and their excitement for what print could offer.

The final example of a certain type of response to Gutenberg’s printing press that will be outlined in this paper is that of Federico da Montefeltro, the Duke of Urbino from 1444 to 1482. Montefeltro was a successful condottiere, Renaissance

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48 It is estimated that illustrated books cost up to 100% more to produce than non-illustrated books, unless the illustration is done with reused wood-blocks. For more, see Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety*.
49 Barbier, *Gutenberg’s Europe*, 205.
54 Quoted in Barbier, *Gutenberg’s Europe*, 27
humanist, and patron of the arts and scholarship. His deep love for books inspired him to commission a grand library that would be split between the city of Urbino and his Castel Durante. Vespasiano da Bisticci happened to be his book purveyor and noted that the Duke had “always employed, in Urbino, in Florence and in other places, thirty or forty scribes in his service.”

However, it is not hard to imagine that Bisticci was biased in favor of the Duke’s manuscript collection. Although the Duke strongly preferred manuscripts, he had a small collection of printed texts which he sectioned off from his main manuscript collection. The printed texts lived at the library at the Castel Durant, which he affectionately called “the other library,” while his manuscripts stayed in Urbino.

The implication in this scenario is that the Duke regarded his printed books as inferior to his luxurious manuscripts. While his response reads as resistant and is characterized here as adaptive, the Duke’s perception of print cannot be confined to one category. What is important here is that the Duke made a distinction between print and manuscript, which was not common during his time; the first few decades of print sought to accommodate itself to a manuscript world. It was not until the late seventeenth-century that the public began to conceive of manuscript and print as inherently different. If the Duke were wholly opposed to printed texts, it would be difficult to explain his collection, even if it is insignificant. He clearly recognized some degree of value or intrigue in both manuscript and print, which inspired him to keep both collections around, albeit separate. Although the Duke’s stark distinction between the two might be suggestive of his personal biases or tastes, it offers a nuanced perception of the relationship between manuscript and print in the late fifteenth-century.

Conclusion: “...And Totally False Prophecy”

When studying those who diverged from mainstream support of Gutenberg’s printing press, it is difficult to fully grasp the conditions that influenced their attitude. However, all the sentiments outlined in this paper, as well as those well beyond its scope, compose a fabric that repeatedly weaves itself throughout history. One only needs to look at our digital age and our own ambiguity to hear these echoes. Every age has experienced a degree of revolution that affected the way information was communicated, received, or processed. Despite the common understanding that such technological innovations, such as writing and the printing press, were revolutionary and paramount to the evolution of civilization, this conviction ignores the criticisms and concerns of those living during the time of such inventions. Plato’s Phaedrus was one of the first texts to reveal such discontent for the advent of writing, and the concerns outlined in the tract, such as the extinction of real knowledge, resurfaced in concerns about Gutenberg’s printing press. Further, we see resemblances of Socrates’ concerns in criticism of our present digital age. It is precisely this conversation between Socrates and our own times that inspired this project.

Within all of the reactions to print that

55 Bisticci, Vespasiano Memoirs, 102.
56 Bisticci, Vespasiano Memoirs, 104.
58 David McKitterick, Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order, 1450-1830 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 49-52.
were explored in this paper, a number of explanations for why manuscripts survived the onset of the printing press can be derived. However, one theme in particular looms over the rest: the overwhelming amount of information. A material effect of the printing press was the steady injection of more texts, products, and ideas into society, which was a stark change from the conservative output of manuscripts. An overabundance of anything can be intoxicating, especially when more remains unknown than known. Responses to print that cite the corruption of texts, greedy booksellers, and the overshadowing of classical texts are all responding to a newfound abundance of information, with which they do not know what to do. Once again, today we are experiencing a similar, deeply overwhelming output of digital information. Perhaps it may bring us solace to know that our age is not the first, or the last, to experience such information overload.

The various responses to the printing press illustrate Andrew Pettegree’s claim that innovations are often plagued by “excitable rhetoric and totally false prophecy.” It was impossible to predict what all the printing press would spur. The idea that the printing press would terminate manuscript production is a prophecy proved wrong, demonstrated by the voices outlined in this paper.

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