

Printed catalogues of booksellers as a source for the history of the book trade

Christian Coppens^(a), Angela Nuovo^(b)

a) University of Leuven, Emeritus; b) University of Udine, Italy, <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9441-8007>



Contacts: Angela Nuovo, angela.nuovo@uniud.it

Received: 31 January 2018; Accepted: 14 February 2018; First Published: 15 May 2018

ABSTRACT

Printed advertisements and lists of books for sales were used by publishers and booksellers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries respectively to promote and increase the sale of books in distant markets. This article proposes an overall interpretation of the uses of these catalogues in the trade in books, the purposes they were designed to fulfil, and the reading public(s) they aimed to reach. Specific attention is paid to the book prices which are found in about 30% of the surviving printed catalogues. These represent a reliable testimony to the pricing policies some of the most important publishing firms, and the segments of the market they intended to serve. The catalogues are therefore among the main sources for our understanding of the mechanisms of the early modern book trade and its economic structure.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant Agreement n° 694476). Although the two authors have discussed the whole paper, Christian Coppens wrote part 1, and Angela Nuovo part 2. The authors wish to thank Stephen Parkin for revising the text.

KEYWORDS

Book advertisements; Book trade; book market; history of the book; 16th-century books; printed booksellers' catalogues; early modern book prices.

CITATION

Coppens, C., A. Nuovo. "Printed catalogues of booksellers as a source for the history of the book trade". *JLIS.it* 9, 2 (May 2018): 166-178. DOI: [10.4403/jlis.it-12465](https://doi.org/10.4403/jlis.it-12465)

Introduction

The distribution of books by means of printed catalogues has aroused scholars' attention for a long time. After the foundational works of Konrad Burger and Ernst Voulliéme (Burger 1907; Voulliéme 1919) the first general treatise on the subject was published in Britain, where the pioneering study by G. Pollard and A. Ehrman put booksellers' printed catalogues in the larger context of catalogues of all types (Pollard-Ehrman 1965; Mandelbrote 1995). Today, we can say that this specific material is being examined by a variety of book historians focusing on different areas and periods.¹ As the overall picture grows increasingly detailed, the time has come to propose an all-encompassing interpretation of the uses of these catalogues in the book trade and the purposes they were created to fulfil, and to test their scope and representativeness in the general investigation on sixteenth-century book prices.

Part 1. From Advertisement to Catalogue: the development of the book trade 15th - 16th centuries

In order to understand well the role of advertising in the marketing of printed books in the sixteenth century, it is clear that we should look at what came before, what forms it took and the methods employed in the second half of the fifteenth century.

With the advent of the printed book producers commonly found themselves left with hundreds of copies. They had to get a return on new investments and to attract new investors to form a company. The investors wanted their share. A book was a commodity like jewels, gloves, handkerchiefs, rosaries, pepper, or any other luxury product; it was not a commodity like meat, beans, wheat, wine, and other products that everyone needs to buy just in order to live (Coppens 2014a).

Thus, the producer of a book had to find a way to reach the market. He had to identify a potential readership who would be interested in the product he wanted to sell – who were interested in acquiring books by purchase – and who had the means to buy it and then attract, even seduce them. For this reason, some booksellers distributed advertisements.

What is striking first of all in the texts of fifteenth-century advertisements is the way the producers took care to distance their products from manuscript or handwritten books. They had to conquer a market with a new product, which looked like – and was indeed designed to look like – what was already known, a manuscript, but was in fact new, for the producer in the first place, and then for the consumer, who needed to be convinced. The new art of printing made books more legible and ensured the text was more closely checked and was thus more reliable.² This reflects what readers were clearly looking for, or, at least, could be attracted by. It is this aspect which 'was new, and was better' (Coppens 2014b).

¹ Just to mention a few recent studies: Richter 1964, 1965, 1977; Serrai 1993; Wittman (ed.) 1985; Coppens 1992, 1995, 2001a, 2001b, 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2014b; Eisermann-Honemann 2000; Myers [*et al.*] (eds.) 2009; Walsby-Constantinidou (eds.) 2013.

² Compare with «Attamen non artis calamo, sed excellentis artis ingenio litterarum trusionis impressionis» (*Advertisement for the 41-lines Bible* [Strassburg: Heinrich Eggestein, 1468/70], GW 4208; ISTC ib00533000).

The Roman poet Martial (d. c. 104) gives a lively description of a bookshop in Rome: next to the Forum is a bookshop, where both doors are plastered with advertisements. These display the titles of the books in stock.³

Printed advertising started between the end of the 1460s and early 1470s in the German Empire, in Mainz, Strasbourg and Augsburg. It also becomes clear that most of the surviving advertisements date from the 1470s. Their use declines in the 1480s, to die out almost completely in the 1490s.

The advertisements could just be lists or could advertise a newly published book with a lengthy description of the content. They mainly displayed the same structure, often using identical formulas, which strongly suggests the existence at an earlier period of similar, handwritten advertisements for manuscripts or other commodities.

The line of argument taken in the earliest marketing blurbs pointed to the quality of the characters, as well as the clear readability and quality of the text. They usually stressed that the printed edition was based on the best exemplars, that mistakes in the manuscripts were corrected, ‘since scribes had made mistakes’, and that the edition in question was in any case ‘better than a competitor’s edition’. There is a colophon that even stressed that in the case of a typo, this was not the compositor’s fault, but rather that of the scribe who had copied the manuscript used as the exemplar. Illustrations and painted initial letters which served to mark the structure of the text, were also features which could attract attention and were worth promoting.

The content had to be useful, because a book had to be useful, and its usefulness was demonstrated in printed advertisements with a kind of table of contents, not a mere list, but a structured continuous text. Another important aspect of the usefulness of a book was the presence of an index. The use of the index in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century books can be seen by the additions or corrections made to them by readers in their own hands.

A convenient price and the personal competence of the bookseller could also attract a potential customer. At the end of advertisements, there was commonly the formula informing the purchaser of the place where the books could be bought, left blank to be filled in by hand, as they could be found on sale in different places.

These were the things which were important for potential customers in the fifteenth century; these features had to be advertised in order to persuade someone to buy a book; this was the essence of the marketing strategy. These advertisements were pinned up on doors, of churches for instance, or distributed in other ways, depending on where the bookseller (or rather, his agent) was selling his merchandise. This makes it clear that the fifteenth-century book trade was directed at individual purchasers, in other words it is a *retail* trade.

Aldus is the outstanding figure who marks the transition from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century, starting his business at the end of the 1490s and continuing until his death in 1515, when it was carried on by his heirs. His first catalogue, of 1498, is already new, in comparison with those of his

³ Martial, 1.117 («Contra Caesaris est forum taberna scriptis postibus hinc et inde totis, omnis ut cito perlegas poetas»). See Clarysse & Vandorpe 2008.

predecessors.⁴ It is an advertisement, printed on one side, like the advertisements before him, but is a real catalogue, without a real soliciting text, but rather a simple announcement of what a potential reader could find. In contrast with the descriptions of his predecessors Aldus's are well done, and there are prices, the very first in the history of the trade in printed books.

It is possible that he came to regret this inclusion, as he omitted prices in his second catalogue, published in 1503 – though the only surviving copy has prices added by Aldus in his own hand –, and again, quite certainly this time, in his third catalogue the last to be issued during his lifetime, in 1513.⁵ In one of the two surviving copies of the latter there are also prices added in manuscript (Graheli 2017, Harris 2017). The heirs reprinted the catalogue in 1527 and issued their next catalogue in 1563.⁶ Omitting prices probably had to do with the book trade outside Venice, when the expenses for transport and tolls had to be taken into consideration, or it could be due to the fact that booksellers could receive a discount. In any case Aldus's catalogues, addressed to booksellers rather than to private customers, signal the start of a new system.

Investors in the production of a book in the fifteenth century were remunerated with copies of the book, which means that they had to sell the books to get a return on their investment. This means too that there was a parallel circuit for the book trade, one in which the sale price is unknown.

Roughly speaking, booksellers gave up using advertisements for about fifty years. There must have been a reason for this. The economy was growing, from before the fifteenth century onwards. It is an error to think that the fifteenth century represented a low point in stagnant economic and cultural circumstances, but there was no break between the fifteenth and the sixteenth century, it was an almost seamless continuation (Hunt and Murray 1999, 249).⁷ The printed book emerged within this economic and cultural situation, as a novel product, and had to find its own way, profiting from the progress of the time. It is not surprising that the new method of advertising, an actual catalogue in the form of a booklet, started in Basel. With Johann Amerbach and Johann Froben, the city had become what was probably the most progressive centre of the contemporary book trade (Sebastiani 2014). It was the heirs of Froben who issued this first catalogue in 1537, together with Johannes Hervagius, the son-in-law of Johann Froben (Richter 1974, 192; today no copy known).

It is in any case noticeable that from the very beginning a printer/publisher was always 'also' a bookseller, or, rather, was primarily a bookseller. It is the books from the printer/publisher's own

⁴ ISTC im00226700; GW M20725. See Omont 1892. The Paris copy has been digitized at <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8595102h/f173.item>.

⁵ See Omont 1892. Only one copy of the 1503 catalogue has survived at the BN in Paris, digitized at <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8595102h/f183.item> and <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8595102h/f184.item>. One copy of the 1513 catalogue (Edit 16 CNCE 61629, with a digital reproduction) is preserved in the Biblioteca Civica Joppi, Udine. See also the Paris copy, digitized and available at <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8595102h/f157.item> (and ff, till f161).

⁶ On the 1527 catalogue, see Fletcher 2011, 145–156 (with reproductions; Fletcher dates it to March 1527). At least three copies of the 1563 catalogue are preserved in Italy (Edit 16, CNCE 51311).

⁷ Johan Huizinga (1872-1942) played and still plays a very misleading role with his *The Decline of the Middle Ages*, published in 1919, immediately after the First World War. Huizinga gives a highly misleading picture of the so-called 'waning of the Middle Ages', seeing it as a break with the past and denying all continuity with what followed. This theory is still supported today.

production which are listed in the catalogue and offered for sale. There were no printers' catalogues, nor pure publishers' catalogues as such; they were always, in the first place, booksellers' catalogues. There were booksellers who were only booksellers, but it is very clear that there were no printer-publishers who were not also booksellers.

The advertisements of the fifteenth century were for retail trade. What becomes clear from the catalogues issued in Basel in the sixteenth century is that the book trade had completely changed, from being a retail enterprise to becoming a wholesale business. This change took place over time, between the end of the fifteenth century and some decades into the sixteenth. The change was certainly connected with the growth of the market. There were far more books, combined with the number of booksellers with shops in towns; the market became, and indeed had to become, a real network.

One should not take booksellers like Aldus and Froben as representative examples of publisher-booksellers. On the contrary, they were exceptions. They were scholars in their own right, working with other scholars. Many booksellers, if not most, did not have the means to hire a scholar to supervise their production. A bookseller was and had to be in the first place a merchant, thinking only of the investment he had to make, for otherwise he faced failure.

It is striking that, from the very beginning of the use of catalogues instead of advertisements in the sixteenth century, none of the selling points, stressed in the marketing blurbs of the previous century were mentioned any more. It seems clear that potential customers no longer needed to be persuaded of the quality of the printed book; now, there were booksellers with real shops where a customer could go to see what he wanted to buy, or just to be informed what was on the market. In a certain sense, the title page sometimes took over the role of the advertising blurb.

At present some 280-290 sixteenth-century catalogues are known, including some 50 advertisements from the fifteenth century, with most of the advertisements coming from the German Empire. For the sixteenth century, the catalogues coming from the German region are again in the majority with around 50. For France, Italy and Switzerland the number is about the same, between 35 and 40. For the Low Countries 15 catalogues are recorded, mainly issued by the *Officina Plantiniana*. In Spain, as far as is known, only one catalogue appeared, issued moreover by an Italian bookseller in Madrid.⁸

The question why some booksellers used advertisements and catalogues to market their books remains unanswered. Those who did were in any case in a minority. With the de Colines dynasty, father and son Chaudière, and Robert Estienne for instance – who were, by the way, a proper family dynasty, the business passing from one in-law to another – it is interesting to see that this way of marketing is used by succeeding booksellers. In contrast, Guillaume Morel junior did not issue any catalogue, while his father Guillaume senior, who died in 1581, had eight catalogues printed from 1550 till 1562.

Despite the fact that the catalogues in the form of a booklet, and certainly the broadsides of the fifteenth century, are often seen as ephemera, they were used after their basic function as a publicity for recent editions. Even the broadsides survived their function as ephemeral announcements of the publication of a list of books or just one edition. Particularly the latter were sometimes pasted on the

⁸ See in this same issue the article by Pedro Rueda.

upper paste down, even in some cases decorated and rubricated. Some could be used as a kind of contents, or ‘just’ a summary.

In the sixteenth century, catalogues were used by a bookseller to inform other booksellers about his list, and they were kept as such by retailers, and by customers, for whom they were bibliographical sources. One testimony to the way they were used are the additions in manuscript of newly issued books that one can sometimes find in surviving copies.

A good example of the use of these so-called ephemeral publications is the catalogue issued in 1592 by the heirs of Gabriele Giolito. Of the three copies known there are two in which the date has been changed in manuscript to 1596, and in the third in 1598 (Coppens 2005). Another very interesting example is the catalogue issued in Paris by Mathieu David in 1554. In the only known copy his name is deleted, and another name was added, namely that of Louis Grandin, a little-known bookseller, with the new address added and dated 1557 (Lutz 1937, 116–117).

Not only for the book trade itself were catalogues an important source, but also for scholars and other people building up a private library. The very first to use this material and to point to the importance of it, was of course Conrad Gessner, who transcribed some of them in various ways, or made lists of his own in his *Pandectae* of 1548 (Lutz 1937; Sabba 2012; Blair 2017; Nelles 2017). One noted example, among others, of someone building up a library, was Jacques Bongars (1554-1612), a French scholar and diplomat. In his collection there is a *Sammelband* with three catalogues and another with six (Eschler (ed.) 1994). They were bibliographical tools intended for the use of the private owner.

The phenomenon of the marketing of books, from the fifteenth-century advertisements to the first catalogues of the sixteenth century, shows that it took a considerable amount of time, while the commerce in manuscripts was still going on, for a new field to develop in the book trade, from being a ‘casual’ trade into the professional business which the sector has remained, almost unchanged, until the present day.

Part 2. Printed booksellers’ catalogues and book prices

We have examined the problem of the commercial book trade seen from the producers’ and traders’ point of view. Now, the reading publics deserves our attention. How much money did early modern readers have to spend in the possession of books? and which readers could really afford to purchase them? To answer these questions properly, we need to reconstruct a real history of the book from an economic point of view, based on available sources, first of all contemporary evidence of book prices (Ammannati and Nuovo 2017, Nuovo 2017). This can be done correctly only taking into account the general history of prices and its methodological issues (Braudel and Spooner 1967, Malanima 2017, Tucci 2014).

Commercial sources such as inventories of bookshops and lists of books for sale are not too rare and they often include prices. They can allow us to make comparisons between prices, so revealing which were the most expensive or the cheapest in a given quantity of books but they don’t provide enough evidence for a general evaluation. Moreover, comparing book prices with prices of other goods

(another key-interpretation which is all too common) though fascinating, can be misleading for a variety of reasons. Other occasional evidence are the annotations of the prices paid by individual purchasers in surviving copies of the books they bought (Wagner and Carrera 1991; Danesi 2008; Danesi 2014). Although extremely precise, these single episodes of purchasing with their individual prices remain at an anecdotal level. Every real transaction was a one-off negotiation and every paid price was the result of an individual deal influenced by non-economic – mainly social – factors. It cannot be taken for granted that the same object, even relatively mass-produced and purchased in the same period, would have had the same value, and therefore the same price, for different individuals. Purchase prices are not only unsystematic in the way they were calculated and applied, but they are also the results of dynamics which cannot easily be generalized.

We need to overcome as far as possible an impressionistic approach and try to reconstruct a general view of European book prices over a prolonged period, as systematically as possible. This will enable us to tackle some of the still unanswered questions on access to and ownership of printed books.⁹

Certainly, the diffusion of books in public and private spaces (domestic spaces, first of all) and the growing size of libraries must be connected to the decrease in book prices (Nuovo 2010). Two different elements seem to be the basis of price reductions in this period: competition between publishers (only in part mitigated by the system of privileges as a system of guarantees by means of temporary monopolies), and market expansion, driven not only by individual purchasers but also by religious and educational institutions on both sides of the divide during what has been called the age of confessions (MacLean 2012).

The evolution of book prices is an issue that has only recently started to be investigated systematically thanks to the ERC-funded project EMOBookTrade. In order to focus on this subject, the research group is taking into account primarily commercial sources containing sets of prices, as extensive as possible, established by producers, booksellers and trade professionals in general, such as printed catalogues.

Printed catalogues seem to be the most objective and rewarding source for beginning an investigation on book prices. Only about 30% of the surviving sixteenth-century printed catalogues include prices. They were produced mainly in Italy and France therefore the sample is fairly small. Nevertheless, in an overall investigation of book prices, no other source ensures that the prices included refer only to new and unbound editions. Prices in printed booksellers' catalogues, when not otherwise specified, are not copy specific, i.e. they never include the cost of bindings. This is also the case for the stock still available in warehouses, which can include books printed several years previously. Volumes from bookshops on the contrary, which are in a few cases included in these sale catalogues, were indeed possibly sold bound and the related prices are therefore less reliable for our analysis.¹⁰

⁹ Unfortunately, Plantin/Moretus' firm excluded, information about costs of printing, i.e. costs of paper and other raw materials, wages and technical improvements that could affect book prices is not available in a way that can allow a systematic investigation.

¹⁰ See for instance the atypical addition to the 1592 Giolito sale catalogue included in the copy held at the Winterthur Stadtbibliothek, as described in Coppens 2005, 464–466.

If the most obvious obstacle for studying prices is related to the fact that, unlike much more recent times, books were not distributed with a price printed on them, the closest example of set price are those prices which were unquestionably decided by the producer (or the wholesale trader, in any case at the beginning of the trade chain). Starting from this 'fixed' price, of course, a variety of negotiations, reductions, and discounts could and would take place in the real process of purchasing and selling.

Therefore, we can consider prices in printed catalogues in the 16th century as a sort of 'ideal' figure, which fixes a quoted value for a book as a public point of reference'. The problem of the market operators and reading public these catalogues were intended for is rather complex. As has just been stated, these prices were principally fixed and made public for the purposes of wholesale commerce. Large-scale operators in the trade, regular book fairs attendees, owners of large bookshops and established publishers: these catalogues were produced for all of these categories. It is in a certain sense misleading that the very few surviving copies of this kind of literature have come down to us almost invariably through the private libraries of scholars and book collectors of the same period. They were not the main public the catalogues were meant for, but their interest in the book trade (and in ways of acquiring books in the best possible conditions) was so deep as to make them users and collectors of this kind of material as well.

Working with printed book sale catalogues presents more challenges than is generally acknowledged. First of all, although printed (and therefore easily legible), the series of titles pose a variety of problems. Quite apart from editions which do not survive in any known copies, there can be several discrepancies between what was originally considered an edition, as a unit for the market, and what is regarded as an edition now, as a physical volume in a library or as an entry in bibliographical databases.

Secondly, the lists of prices in these catalogues show as a rule various inconsistencies, irregularities or simple mistakes. Understanding the reasons for these phenomena and making sense of them is an aspect of the work which the EMoBookTrade research team has started to tackle with insight and flair. Every catalogue expresses its prices in one currency, and we therefore might conclude that it circulated only in the area where that currency was used. Nevertheless, in respect to Italy, the *lira veneziana* was by far the dominant currency in the wholesale book trade, so it seems to have been used in a larger area than the Venetian State, across the whole of northern Italy (as shown for instance by the Genoese book sale analyzed in this same issue by Graziano Ruffini). On the other hand, we know from various sources that booksellers and bookshop owners (like all other merchants at the time) were used to working in different monies of account, not to mention the very wide variety of coins they were ready to accept. These are the issues, among many others, which have been identified in the first year of research, and which will offer abundant material for the investigations over the next few years.

In this issue of JLIS, the first results of this project are presented. In our new database, prices of books published in printed catalogues issued by some of the most prolific publishers of the period, like

Giolito and Wechel, have been entered and analysed, a work in progress which in just over one year of research has already reached a total of more than five thousand book prices.¹¹

A crucial element in our approach is that we are routinely breaking down book prices into prices per sheet. There is ample evidence that not only publishers but also scholars of the time were in the habit of referring to books not as volumes but as sets of printed sheets: cost of production, size, shipping costs and of course the work time put in printing shops, everything was evaluated and calculated as quantities of printing sheets (Danesi 2012). Working on prices per sheet allows us to carry out a much quicker comparison and evaluation of prices, though we are well aware that prices cannot be deduced from sheet counts only: they cannot simply be taken as (and are not) a summation of prices per sheet. Many other elements influenced the setting of a price, and every single available source is a historical witness to a specific commercial transaction, which has always to be put in context. Nevertheless, the final result of such an approach will allow us to define not only the average price of a book (be it in folio, quarto, octavo, duodecimo and so forth), but much more precisely the average price of a printed sheet.

In fact, when analyzed at the price-per-sheet level these two prices can sometimes turn out to exist in a counter-intuitive relationship. In the second half of the sixteenth century, while the total price of a copy of an edition in folio was more expensive than a copy in any smaller format, and normally in exact ratio from the largest to the smallest, prices per sheet can tell another story. At the Plantin-Moretus firm, at the price-per-sheet level the most expensive editions are in fact the largest and the smallest ones (24mo and 32mo), while the cheapest price-per-sheet editions are in octavo.¹² The same phenomenon has been ascertained through the analysis of the Estienne catalogues, especially with his editions in 16mo format.¹³ One of the reasons for this phenomenon must be linked to production: in the first case, the cost of large quantities of good quality paper determined the price, in the second, the work time needed to compose the text and the complicated imposition of very small formats influenced the increase in the price. While a customer was prepared to spend a remarkable sum of money to buy a large folio volume, he was probably not aware of spending a comparable amount of money in proportion for purchasing what was in fact a text concentrated in less paper. What buyers had the impression they were doing was choosing a cheap, convenient book, with the special functionality of being easily portable.

But this is not a rule in the pricing strategies of early modern publishers. At Giolito's, not only is price-per-sheet set in a fairly uniform way, notwithstanding formats, but quarto volumes are slightly more expensive than the other two formats used most often at the firm, octavos and duodecimo. The policy of the Giolito firm especially towards the end of their activity seems to have been that of producing a (comparatively) mass product, which was basic and within the reach of all budgets, conceived for a market which included a wide range of social strata, for which they published an abundant and successful devotional literature.

¹¹ The database of book prices will be launched online in a couple of years.

¹² I am referring here to analysis carried out by Goran Proot on the mss M 39, 164, 296 e 321 in the Archives of the Plantin-Moretus Museum in Antwerp: see the podcast <http://emobooktrade.uniud.it/content/kick-conference-udine-30-november-2016-podcast-6>.

¹³ See in this same issue the article by Goran Proot.

Nevertheless, one has always to take into consideration the multiple factors which influenced price setting: time and circumstance, as well as prospective sales, all play a role. While Plantin and Moretus in the documentation analyzed were setting prices of newly published books, the Giolito heirs in their printed catalogues at the end of the 1580s and in 1592 clearly wanted to get rid of the still unsold editions which had been printed sometimes decades before. To achieve this goal, standardising prices was the best strategy.

Therefore, the pricing policy of a publisher is a reliable indicator for the segment of the market he plans to cater for and the strategy he can adopt in order to reach this goal.

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