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# Market system dynamics, “sociology of texts”, and materiality of the book: Venice and the Renaissance printing industry

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## Abstract

The case study, between historical institutionalism and sociology of translation, faces the evolution of the press and the emergence of publishing in Venice between 1490 and 1515. Adopting a market system dynamics perspective, the book as a “cultural artefact” is the unit of analysis in this study. The investigated phenomenon revolves around the entrepreneurial experience of Aldus Manutius and the cultural dynamics of that era, while observing the interweaving of different institutional logics and the emergence of market creation processes supported by forms of institutional work.

**Keywords:** *market and institutional dynamics, ANT, materiality of book, Aldus Manutius, Renaissance printing*

## Introduction and theoretical context

In 1465, the introduction of printing with movable type in Italy was conventionally associated with the two German typographers staying at a Benedictine monastery in Subiaco (Richardson 1999, Pettegree 2011, Suarez, Wouldhuysen 2013). It was introduced in Venice in 1469 (Brown 1891; Fulin 1882), while it was spreading across the rest of Germany and other parts of Italy (between 1467 and 1471) and in France (between 1470 and 1473). Around 1480, that technology did not seem to have any special secrets. Yet, between 1490 and 1515, in Venice more than anywhere else, it was possible to understand the revolutionary potential that gave birth to modern publishing.

The research strategy adopted integrates the traditions of Science and Technology Studies (Law 1986, 1991, Latour 2005), Social Construction of Technologies (Bijker et al 1987) and the sociology of markets (Callon 1998). In this work, the phenomenon is related to “(1) the heterogeneity of the elements involved in technological problem solving, (2) the complexity and contingency of the ways in which these elements interrelate, and (3) the way in which solutions are forged in situations of conflicts” (Law, in Bijker *et al.* 1987, p. 111).

The materiality of the book (McKenzie 1986; Tanselle 1998) and the stabilisation processes around the cultural artefact (Knorr-Cetina 1997; Barad 2003; Suchman 2005) represent a unit of analysis of the work. The research hypothesis is to consider the change processes triggered by associations between artefacts and social practices (Bijker et al 1987, Latour 2005, Law 1991, Callon 1998): a) restoring complex social dynamics in terms of “social ordering”; b) making actors, institutions and culture

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interact; c) triggering institutional change processes that are often unexpected because of their endogenous nature.

In management and organisation studies, the practice-based perspective is instrumental in introducing the materiality of objects as a unit of analysis (Carlile et al., 2013). Schatzki (2002) considers “a practice” as “a temporally evolving, open-ended set of doings and saying linked by practical understandings, rules, teleo-affective structures, and general understandings” (p. 87). Different theories have dealt with the role of artefacts in the interpretation of social phenomena (Nicolini 2012): the perspectives of boundary objects (Star, Griesemer 1989) and epistemic objects (Knorr-Cetina 1997); cultural historical activity theory and the perspective of the objects as infrastructure (Nicolini 2012). Nicolini et al. (2012) identify common aspects: “collaboration and sociality are practical accomplishments; social action is mediated by material and symbolic artefacts; social phenomena such as groups, communities, and institutions are the results of organizing work; social structures are both mediums for, and outcomes of, human activities; action and environment are mutually and recursively constituted; and human actors are driven both by rational consideration and emotions, desires, and passion” (p. 614).

Organisational institutionalism frames the thread of market system dynamics (Scaraboto, Fischer 2013; Marketing Theory 2017). A market can be defined as “an organizational field encompassing a set of institutions and actors, governed by institutional logics, supported by institutional work, and characterized by institutional boundaries” (Dolbec, Fischer 2015, p. 1449). The evolution of printing and the emergence of publishing in Renaissance Venice are phenomena that come together to demonstrate: “how [markets] are constituted as complex social systems and how actors and institutions actively shape (and are shaped by) them” (Gielser, Fischer 2017). In terms of institutional logics (Lawrence, Suddaby 2006), the extension of commercial logic to the production and distribution of the book intertwined with the diffusion of the cultural movement of Italian secular humanism. In addition, market creation processes (Araujo et al. 2010) associated with the birth of modern publishing were supported by forms of institutional work triggered by the book as a cultural artefact, “actions aimed at creating, maintaining, or disrupting practices, understandings, and rules shared by actors in an organizational field” (Dolbec, Fischer 2015, p. 1450).

### **Evidences from printing and publishing Renaissance Venice**

The two passages introduce the dimensions of the phenomenon: The Renaissance book is essentially the first “mass product” in human history and the “Venetian success” of publishing is a form of cultural proto-entrepreneurship (Suarez, Wouldhuysen 2013).

[1] “The book privilege was not entirely innovative. Its novelty lay in the object to which the privilege was applied, and especially in their earliest form, book privileges were similar to patents for new inventions. [...] The first known printing privilege granted by a European government was that conceded by Venice to Johannes de Spira in 1469, making it legal for him and him alone to pursue the art of printing in the city

for five years. Moreover, the privilege prohibited the importation into the state of books that had been printed elsewhere. This privilege *pro arte introducenda* was similar to many privileges conceded earlier in the Venetian Republic, and if that model had continued to be followed for this new market sector, the development of printing would have been severely impeded. Because the privilege was personal, however, it was annulled by the sudden death of Johannes de Spira” (Nuovo 2013, p. 200).

[2] “The creation and dissemination of sales catalogues, the creation of book series and the development of the publishing insignia led to the emergence of a truly recognisable brand, and above all, a high socio-cultural profile. Relations with the humanist community, in the validation and approval of the philological work of the workshop, as well as in the publication of its work with illustrious and potential patrons, represented the cornerstone in the construction of the Aldo Romano publishing house. We can say that, thanks to the intuition that he gathered in this invisible network of people and ideas, Aldus Manutius began the concept of modern publishing” (Graheli, in Plebani 2016, p. 172).

Aldus Manutius (Bassiano, papal states, c.1450 - Venice 1515) arrived in Venice around 1490 (Davies 1995, Lowry 1979). He completed his studies between Rome and Ferrara, a student or listener in the most important academic circles of that time. In 1480, Aldus became tutor to princes in the small courts of Pico and Pius, Mirandola and Carpi (Dionisotti 1995). It is not entirely clear why Aldus, at a late age, chose Venice to change from a modest scholar and pedagogue to a famous printer and publisher (Lowry 1979; Infelise 2016; Plebani 2016). The fact remains that he faced various difficulties in finding capital and technical specialists for his original cultural project: “to produce editions of hitherto unpublished Greek texts, edited with great accuracy and freed from the medieval commentaries which had filled the margins of the Latin translations published in the fifteenth centuries” (Beltrami, Gasparotto 2016, p. 81). Around 1494, he was able to involve (Lowry 1979): an old student (Alberto Pio, future lord of Carpi), a doge nephew (Pierfrancesco Barbarigo), a successful publisher (Andrea Torresano, whose daughter he would marry), probably the best character designer (Francesco Griffio). Furthermore, in the Venetian years, he did not cease to surround himself by intellectuals and scholars who were fundamental to his project (e.g. Barbaro, Bembo, Musuro, Erasmo).

## Methods

The case study, between historical institutionalism (Suddaby et al. 2014) and sociology of translation (Callon 1986, Latour 2005), deals with an investigation space in which “the publishing business crosses the boundary in the history of humanistic culture and literature [...]” (Dionisotti 1995, p. 37). Research is based on primary and secondary empirical materials on the history of printing and history of the book (Febvre, Martin 1958, Eisenstein 1982), and on the entrepreneurial affair of Aldus Manutius (Lowry 1979).

*Bibliography as method.* Howsam (2006), places the evolution of book history studies at the confluence of “three major academic disciplines – history, literacy

studies, and bibliography – that focus respectively upon *the book as a cultural transaction, a literary text, and a material artefact*. This research tradition refers to the new Anglo-American bibliography (McKenzie 1986; Tanselle 1998). Transposed in this work, the layout of the bibliography as sociology of text, as proposed by McKenzie, conceives the materiality of the book “in its entirety as an expressive form, [...] a text investigated within the written culture that produced it”, namely “[...] the product not only of the author's intent but of all the agents involved in its production and enjoyment as well” (1986).

*Table 1 – The role of objects in the processes of markets creation*

	Theoretical approach	Main function of the objects	Examples from Renaissance publishing
<b>Tertiary objects of market creation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Infrastructure theory</b> (provide the basic "mundane" infrastructural change)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "the work oriented infrastructure"</li> <li>• "the service infrastructure"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the book privilege systems</li> <li>• education/scholarship and academic systems (Italian humanism)</li> <li>• paper manufacture</li> </ul>
<b>Secondary objects of market creation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Boundary Objects</b> (facilitate work across different types of institutional boundaries)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "containing and fostering learning across boundaries"</li> <li>• "sense making around and interpretatively flexible artifact"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• inventories/catalogues/bookshops</li> <li>• commercial networks</li> <li>• marks and branches</li> </ul>
<b>Primary objects of market creation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Epistemic Objects</b></li> <li>• <b>Activity Objects</b> (trigger/sustain/motivate the institutional dynamics)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "how working in something that may never exist acts as a source of motivation"</li> <li>• "how the nature of the objects induces different ways of working"</li> <li>• "the emergent nature of the object of work"</li> <li>• "community without unity"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "public/private" libraries</li> <li>• Greek and Latin grammaries/school texts</li> <li>• "editio princeps"/enchoridion</li> <li>• manuscripts</li> <li>• collections/collecting</li> </ul>

*elaboration from Nicolini et al. 2012*

*Analytical process.* Table 1 summarises the theoretical framework of the work and the research themes (the three levels of analysis) to investigate the role of objects upon introducing institutional work forms. The Venetian entrepreneurial experiences, from Johannes de Spira to Nicolas Jenson and Aldus Manutius (Davies 1995, Dionisotti 1995, Lowry 1979, Infelise 2016) tell of: print run issues of books, magazines, shop inventories and trade catalogues (Dondi, Harris 2013); Distribution dynamics, organisation of trade networks, retail techniques, branch system management (Nuovo 2013); Practices and standards for the protection of book trade using trademarks and privileges (Castellani 1888; Brown 1891). Furthermore, the Venetian context (Fulin 1882; Brown 1891) provides a peculiar evolution of printing technology that appears to be based on the “transformation of cultural practices” by actors involved in the “new” production system (e.g. artisan printers, financial backers, commercial dealers, scholars, readers).

### **Findings: Humanists & merchant-entrepreneurs between books & (new) readers**

The prospects identified by Nicolini et al. (2012) create a three-tiered framework (table 1) to describe the role of objects in change processes.

*Infrastructure theory: between humanists and merchant-entrepreneurs.* Firstly, “material infrastructure represents the basic socio-material infrastructure without which [market creation] and other types of work would be possible” (Nicolini et al. 2012, p. 625). The Venetian system (abstract [1]) introduced literary privileges, but it was the industrial and commercial privileges that would extend such logic to the production and distribution of books: “the system of privileges drew no distinctions between the various categories of petitioners (printers, publishers, authors, curators, owners of manuscripts, etc.), because its purpose was not to recognize individual rights but to regulate commerce, to construct an ideal environment for the development of printing, with consequent advantages for the state” (Nuovo 2013).

Legitimizing different forms of competition than the production of manuscripts meant recognising new professional skills and expertise around the emerging figure of the merchant-entrepreneur-publisher: “bookmen were among the most creative and innovative of merchants. The very idea of novelty, which involved, for example, an emphasis on bringing new works onto the market, soon became part of their productive strategy. Their working tools included the gathering of information on production and cultural consumption in various locations, evaluation of the stability of a text (a process that might lead to the commissioning of a new work), and various accounting practices” (*ibidem*, p. 5). In addition, the commercial logic of Venice at the time was intertwined with a cultural dimension of the phenomenon. As a humanist and grammarian, Aldus regarded himself as “a transmission element of a great tradition, [and] his business as one of the components of a wider process” (Lowry 1979). Translating the attention to grammar and the original texts into Greek and Latin as a business model seems to fit into the maturation of that cultural movement, the preconditions of which are at the origins of Italian secular humanism of the twelfth century (a different relationship between the traditional documentary and “book culture” and the “new legal culture”: Witt 2012). Piecing together the traces up to the late Middle Ages is a good basis for understanding how this movement was redesigned: the relationship between public and private spheres; the organisation of education and intellectual life; the way in which western Europe was preparing to accept the invention of printing around the relationship between grammar and rhetoric.

*Boundary objects/Epistemic & Activity objects.* In the two subsequent levels of analysis, the boundary objects “could be artefacts or, more often, representations of artefacts or portrayals of how artefacts are used (e.g., recipes, norms, and routine)”. If the function of secondary objects “is that of bridging different types of boundaries” (Nicolini et al. 2012), primary objects (table 1) “have the capacity to explain what motivates and fuels [market creation] in the first place” (*ibidem*, p. 625) (e.g., both the why and how of the market creation process).

Although the presence of courts and universities was essential for book trade (Suarez, Wouldhuysen 2013), the cities that dominated Renaissance publishing (Venice, Paris, Lyon, Basel, and Antwerp) were above all the cornerstones of a vast distribution network of goods (along with paper and binding, distribution was the main cost factor of the book: Harris, in Plebani 2016). Furthermore, the complexity of the publishing business pushed merchant-entrepreneurs to adopt the most advanced

management tools of the time: “The book trade needed refined accounting systems, such as double-entry bookkeeping. Although no comprehensive record of the accounting techniques used by the Italian bookmen survives, their contribution to the spread of double-entry bookkeeping seems of particular importance, also because they printed the first manuals of practical mathematics, called *libri di abbaco*” (Nuovo 2013, p. 6).

In this framework, between 1495 and 1515, one hundred editions were enough and his business activities were “out of the box” enough to make Aldus’ work memorable in the history of publishing (abstract [2]) (Febvre, Martin 1958; Eisenstein 1982). His books were distinctive: (i) in terms of design due to the aesthetic beauty of the object, the readability of the text, the enormous versatility of use; (ii) and were accompanied by his catalogues at sales venues, a significant innovation of his studio. Aldus laid the foundation for a new fruition of the book and for a new consumer. These catalogues of 1503 and 1513 gave rise to the “great novelty of *enchiridia*”, [the famous] in-8 pocketbooks (Harris, in Plebani 2016, p. 106, Fulin 1882, Brown 1891). The “myth of the low cost democratic pocketbook” is, however, a false one: in the cultural and intellectual context of the time, Aldus contributed to the ideal of cultural growth by introducing “innovative tools and methods” of management (Infelise 2016; Plebani 2016). In addition, inventories and bookshops (e.g. *cartolai*’s shops and binding shops) were essential business practices and spaces for the circulation of expensive academic, liturgical, classical, and scientific books (a rare document is the *Zornale* of Francesco de Madiis, a day-book for the years 1484-88: Brown 1891; Dondi, Harris 2013).

Three additional elements allow us to understand the contribution of “the idea of the book object” to the birth of publishing: brand meaning, collecting, and the obsession with manuscripts (aspects that connect to the earliest modern forms of public libraries). The raw material to ensure the textual reliability of the editions was made up of manuscripts of original texts: Aldus was tireless in his search for sources from all over the continent; and his “*editiones principes*” were often the only editions available on the market, while manuscripts were only available to private collections or libraries that were inaccessible to the public. The very high production standards imposed by Aldus, early international collecting and the admiration of competitors fuelled counterfeiting (Lowry 1979): Lyon, for example, was one of the few markets in which craftsmen and printers could boast of circulating false high-quality Aldine editions. Aldus adopted his famous brand (1501) to contain this phenomenon (Nuovo 2013; Infelise 2016). The publishing house symbol of the two-pointed anchor with the dolphin wrapped around it and the legendary “*festina lente*” (slowly hastened) (abstract [2]) brought together “the stability and steadfastness of the anchor with the speed and agility of the dolphin” (Beltrami, Gasparotto 2016).

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The phenomenon of modern publishing in Renaissance Venice has been questioned in terms of: (a) philological evolution of the concept of the “book as an artefact” (as sociology of texts); (b) attention to the “social conditions” of book

production (markets as social systems); (c) as specialist knowledge, it can be “translated into practice” by producing social and institutional change processes around movable type technology (institutional change and development). The analysis conducted suggests that different types of objects and relationships that gather around the production of the Renaissance book allow us to interpret the concepts of “restoration” and “cult” of times past as a “transformation of cultural practices”. Through Aldus’ entrepreneurial affairs, the book as an artefact describes various forms of institutional work that support market creation processes to interpret the emergence of modern publishing in Renaissance Venice

*Research implications.* The juxtaposition between institutional theories and market sociology allows to investigate the spread of innovations, the cultural dimension of business processes and the change of markets within a single, coherent, epistemological, and theoretical framework (a market system dynamics perspective) based on overcoming the relationship of “agency vs. structure”.

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