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Excellence in Printing or About bears and monkeys

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Intro

Certainly you all know Henning Mankell's books and the movies based on them. They are not suitable for sensitive minds. Some scenes made me shake my head. I thought that's only fantasy, made up by some crime story writers. That is just not true. In reality the morbid imagination of murderers is much crueller.

The retired superintendend Josef Wilfinger wrote about some of his most interesting criminal cases in Munich in his non-fiction book "Abgründe – Wenn aus Menschen Mörder werden" , which can be translated as "spiritual abyss - when humans become murderers". Compared to that Mankell's books are bedtime stories. It's self-evident, that the book was in the best-seller lists for long times.

Why do I talk about that? In my speech I would like to give you an impression of a drastic reality, which scientific books about printing history can't tell. But more of this later.

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I would like to begin with a short introduction of the history of printed newspapers, which starts 1605, as you know. But the first copies of newspapers remaining are from the year 1609. That's the "Relation", published in Straßbourg and the so called "Aviso" from Wolfenbüttel.

If we take a closer look, we notice that the history of printed newspapers began with a mistake. It was the typesetters fault: He setted Avisa and not Aviso. This lapse should never happen to him again.

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How should you imagine newspaper publishers in the early period?

This New Year's sheet from 1632 shows the historic press in an allegoric way. The man on the left stands in front of a treasure chest, which contains the privilege from the authorities: the permission to print a newspaper.

The men, who sit behind the desk, are some kind of editorial conference, which means they discuss the topics of the newspaper. You can identify them as scholars by their clothes and the globe on the desk.

In the middle of the picture the editor-in-chief is sitting at a writing desk and redacts the newspaper. The post and thereby the latest news are handed to him by a messenger.

In the background, on the right there is a typesetter setting the text, before the printer prints the news on the wooden press.

The foreground of the picture shows the newspaper publisher with a jester's cap among other things. The cap symbolises the circumstance that the publisher is similar to a jester, who speaks out loud the (inconvenient) truth.

On his side there is a news agent with a hawker's tray, selling the newspaper to a buyer.

If we look at old printed newspapers, flyers, broadsheets etc. in our museum, especially regarding the "excellence in printing" it is underwhelming. Why?

Let us not deceive ourselves! Even back then it was all about the rapid dissemination of news and sensations, and in the race for the latest news people necessarily wouldn't always care about print quality.

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This is the first daily newspaper, the so called "Einkommende Zeitungen", which has been published since 1650 in Leipzig.

The Master of printing, Johannes Gutenberg, who printed the 42-line Gutenberg Bible, would have turn in his grave.

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It was all about content. The reader was especially interested in spectacular stories and pictures, in accordance to the motto "bad news are good news", as you can see on this flyer from 1620. This sensation seeking hasn't changed much, even after almost 400 years.

The print quality wasn't top priority. The types could be squeezed, the ink smudgy or poor in contrast or it adheres to the paper, it all depended on the physically or mental state of the typesetter or printer on that day or night (since they also printed at night-time). The alcohol consumption is a major part, too!

And this brings us to the subject.

It would be like carrying coals to Newcastle, if I tell you something about print quality itself.

In this case the most important factors are easy to list:

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Printing presses and printing machines

Printing method

Paper

Ink

Fonts

Images

Style

Proofreading

Processing

and the human factor.

My explanations are based on the analysis of different sources. Which are:

17 Educational books

18 Autobiographies

19 Contemporary novels

20 Leaflets

21 Letters and instructions, work regulations

22 Specialised books and other scientific publications

Needless to say, that I will have to simplify and overstate at some points, but as Agent Fox Mulder in "The X-files" once said: "The truth is out there!"

In our case it is the truth, lost in the mist of time and we, who are involved in the field of the history of technology, try as hard as we can to reconstruct the real working conditions.

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So let's get back to the human factor.

The „Jünger der Schwarzen Kunst“ as we say in Germany (and which can be loosely translated in the "followers of black art"), could rely on excellent specialised literature to learn and exercise their trade. The oldest "Manual of Printing" worldwide was published in 1683/84. The so called "Mechanick Exercises on the whole art of printing" by Joseph Moxon. Imitators quickly followed and published similar books in every language. In the subsequent decades and centuries many reprints, reflecting on the respective technologies, were released.

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Especially illustrations of printing workshops, working situations, printing presses, machines and materials are relevant for our topic.

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What do we notice?

They are either allegoric or show the ideal case, but they aren't realistic. They are too clean.

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In Benjamin Franklin's autobiography we can find the first realistic impression of the working situation in the printing companies in the middle of the 18th century, in England and in the USA. Here some quotations.

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„I drank only water, the other workmen, near fifty in number, were great quzzlers of beer.“

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"I found in his house these hands: Hugh Meredith, a Welsh Pensilvanian, thirty years of age, bred to country work; honest, sensible, had a great deal of solid observation, was something of a reader, but given to drink."

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"My companion at the press drank every day a pint before breakfast, a pint at breakfast with his bread and cheese, a pint between breakfast and dinner, a pint at dinner, a pint in the afternoon about six o'clock, and another when he had done his day's work."

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"That's around 3,5 liters of beer, every day!"

But the excessive drinking of beer affected the social life in the printing companies, too. Let's read again about these circumstances in Franklin's book:

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"Those who continued sotting with beer all day, were often, by not paying, out of credit at the ale-house, and us'd to make interest with me to get beer; their light, as they phrased it, being out."

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Quite a few workmen, described as ragged, were drunk all along. The only picture I could find proofing this, is the painting by Jacques-Albert Senave. It shows a "wayzgoose in a printing press". A wayzgoose is a printing term, dating from the seventeenth century, for an entertainment organized by a printer for his staff.

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The most important source for the history of printing is preserved in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. The entire archive of the „Société Typographique de Neuchâtel S.T.N.", a publishing and printing company, is presenting unique insights into the actual everyday work in a midsize book printing workshop around 1770.

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"The actual printing companies were dirty, noisy and riotous - and that's how the real printers were, too..."

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Dirty, smelly: The smell in a printing workshop was literally breathtaking.

A mixture of ink, wet paper, beer, leftovers, perspiration and of urine, which was used to wash and store the printing pad.

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At this point I would like to quote extracts from the memoirs of the journeyman printer Charles Manby Smith.

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According to him it was quite common to work several shifts in a row, 40 to 50 hours. How the printing workshop looked and smelled afterwards is written down in this book.

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Loud: The two journeymen printers produced their average 12.000 to 15.000 prints a week, so there were four presses constantly operating in Neuchâtel. Some pairs of printers even reached the

enormes amount of 18.000 prints. These incentive workers were called "abatteurs", which can be translated as "lumberjacks". 10 single pulls of the bar per minute on the wooden press strained the material and the workers. If you count with four presses, there would be 40 loud impacts on the wood per minute. Furthermore there were songs, laughter and curses in different languages to complement the soundscape.

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Experiments on old printing presses proved these loud impacts (between 85-94 decibels) in the field. The results were published in our journal of printing history.

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Riotous: The supervisors of the printing workshops had to keep settling differences, besides their regular role of controlling and monitoring the workmen.

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Working for peace between the German and French workmen

Working for peace between the typesetters and printers

Working for peace between the single groups, who were up to bad jokes, destroying the typesetting of their rivals by purpose and insulted them in very rude ways.

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The most common complaints are discussed in the letters of the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel S.T.N:

Donner la huée	lärmen	to bluster
Faire une copie	derbe Späße	rude jokes
Faire la dérouté	Kneipentouren	pub crawls
Prendre la barbe	Trunkenheit	drunkenness
Prendre la chèvre	Streit	fight, conflict...
Faire des loups	Schulden	debts
Promener sa chape	schwänzen	to skip sth.

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In these documents you can find the terms "ours" (=bear) and "singe" (=monkey) for the first time.

Presumptive the terms emerged from the printers, bustling from the ink container to the press and from the press to the ink container. There is definitely a similarity to a bear bustling in his cage. But the "bears" took revenge and named the typesetters "monkeys", after the small movements the typesetters had to execute by taking the types out of the typecase.

As a matter of fact, the comparison of the workmen with different animals has a certain tradition.

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For example: The Grub-Street-Journal Extraordinary, a satiric newspaper published in London, lifted the lid on "The Art and Mystery of Printing" in the here shown edition from 1732. The copper-

plate print and the following text thematise the benefits of the communication and information technology for society.

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Let's take a closer look at the triptych, which correspond with the layout of a newspaper from that time.

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The typesetter is shown as a stupid donkey; because there was a mistake in his typesetting and so he had to redo it for free.

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The beater, who colours the plate has a dirty job and therefore is shown as a boar.

His colleague on the press, the puller, is a poor horse, because he has to work physically hard for hours by pulling the bar.

The greyhound, equipped with a sword and a wig, is probably a censor, kicking in the printing plate to avoid unpleasant contents spreading out.

The owner of the printing company is shown with a janus face to illustrate, that he decides over the value of the prints by the use of the printing technique. He is able to criticise the authority or just spread pornographic literature.

The grotesque face in the background is the printing devil.

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He stands for an odd-job boy, who helps to print the newspaper, like a poor devil.

54 Summarized:

All the factors mentioned influenced the actual working situation in the printing workshops and of course affected the **Excellence in printing** enormously.

The never ending battle between the pride of the craftsmen on the one side and the desire to make work easy anyhow on the other side can be seen at the newspapers in our German newspaper museum:

Wrong paginated pages, missing registers, too much space between the words or lines, printing errors, marks, daubed copies etc.

For us historians this is evidence of the activities of the anonymous workmen, whose history and stories are getting lost in the fog of the past and who just left us their imprints, literally as fingerprints of bygone times.

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I hope you all gained a small insight in the real work world of our ancestors. In those days the **Excellence in printing** depended first of all on the human factor. Even if I try not to glorify the good old times, I sometimes can't avoid, that my employees dignify the tradition of the art of printing. That's the reason why our graphic designer was guided by the clean and idealistic images and ac-

ording to them created our direction sign on the motorway in a positive way. She chose the image of a trained sonny boy with a friendly smile and did not show a ragged and drunk printer!!

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Thank you very much for your attention.

*Roger Münch, Director German Newspaper Museum, Wadgassen, Germany,
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