Book Review

The Layman Printer

Frank Barton and Gunter Lehrke

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Federal Republic of Germany**

Reviewer: Ikechukwu E Nwosu

In the year 1455, J Caxton produced the first printing press in Europe which operated by movable types. By the end of the century more than 20 million books had already been printed and circulated in the world. Today the number of printed documents in the world is innumerable.

In this age of information revolution, or what some have called "Information Takeover", the printing machine or printing process is still very important and useful.   The pervasive revolution of the printing press still persists in spite of changes in the modern information industry.

For the developing countries of Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America, the printing press still occupies a very important portion in the information industry, and will remain so for a very long time. For example, the rural press and vernacular newspapers are still a novel phenomenon in many developing countries and are yet to develop in some of

them. The electronic media are expensive, and are inaccessible to many rural and even some urban dwellers in these countries. But even in the developed countries where the electronic media are used widely, the fear that they would drive the printing press, newspapers, magazines and books off the scene has not been proved right. What we see instead is the co-existence of each of these media, and the strengthening of one by the other.

It is in the light of the above points that the book by Barton and Lehrke can be said to be an invaluable contribution to mass communication and the information industry. *The Layman Printer* is a compact manual of 98 pages on the art and science of printing, and the printing business. It is a detailed and focused book that takes the reader through the processes of relief block, rubber printing, letterpress, linotype, offset lithography, stencil duplication, silk screen duplicating, paper sizes and electronic stencil cutter.

The book goes beyond all these to give the reader detailed instructions on how he can set up his own print shop, and produce his own publications. It also contains useful tips on how to deal with printers if you are not printing by yourself, how to get quotations, preparing the manuscripts, proof-reading, paging and how to perform the entire process from the manuscript to a finished publication.

According to the authors, *The Laymen Printer* is written:

1. to give the ordinary person, who knows nothing about printing or printing process, enough information to be able to deal intelligently with the printer when he wants something printed.

2. to show how it is possible for a person, or group of persons with no previous experience to set up their own little printing works, and

3. to demonstrate how modest little publications, from leaflets to small booklets and even rural newspapers serving particular groups of people can be produced.

One thing that can be said about this book is that its declared objectives were well met, and that it even met other additional objectives it did not set at the onset. For instance, the book is a good manual for basic courses in newspapers, magazine and book publication, as well as in basic graphic art courses. Its focus on Africa, Asia and the Caribbean (developing areas), as well as its generous use of pictures and other illustrations, enhance its practical importance.

A point that is well made in the book is that the disparities in riches, information and all aspects of development in the developing and developed countries are closely related to the disparity in their level of literacy, and that printing will help to improve literacy in the developing areas by making available enough reading materials for the people of these areas. In their own words, "In the rich nations of the world - whether they are capitalist or communist - virtually everybody can read and write. The lowest degree of literacy in any developed country is 98 percent. Such examples are found in Ireland, Poland and Italy. In every other country of the "rich world" the figure is either 99 percent or 100 percent. Many countries in the developing world have literacy rate far below 50 percent and in some cases less than 10 percent. There are many reasons for this disparity between rich nations and the developing and they are very similar to the reasons why people in the rich half of the world have more of everything else than people in the poor half of the world".

One limitation in *The Layman Printer* which must be mentioned is the glaring absence of at least a chapter on modern trends and techniques on electronic or modern computerized printing. The authors' reason for this omission may be because the book is directed at printers and journalists in the developing countries. This might be a good defence or apologia on the ground that these electronic or computerized modern printing gadgets are not yet common in these developing areas or may not even be in existence in most of these areas. A chapter on modern electronic printing technology in the African and world context would have been helpful however especially when those "future" gadgets for Africa and other developing areas are already in wide use in the publishing industries of some developing countries such as Brazil and Singapore.

Moreover, developing countries are not static. They are in a state of continual growth or change in various fields, including printing technology. The growth may be slow but inevitable. We need to have this in mind always whenever we are writing books such as the present one for use by students, professionals and other individuals in the developing areas of the world.