

history of publishing

Summary

Gutenberg Bible

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history of publishing, an account of the selection, preparation, and marketing of printed matter from its origins in ancient times to the present. The activity has grown from small beginnings into a vast and complex industry responsible for the dissemination of all manner of cultural material; its impact upon civilization is impossible to calculate.

This article treats the history and development of book, newspaper, and magazine publishing in its technical and commercial aspects. The preparation and dissemination of written communication is followed from its beginnings in the ancient world to the modern period. For additional information on the preparation of early manuscripts, see writing. A more detailed examination of printing [technology](#) can be found in [printing](#). The dissemination of published material via electronic media is treated in [information processing](#). For a discussion of reference-book publishing, see the articles encyclopaedia; dictionary.

General considerations

The history of publishing is characterized by a close interplay of technical [innovation](#) and [social change](#), each promoting the other. Publishing as it is known today depends on a series of three major inventions—writing, paper, and printing—and one crucial social development—the spread of literacy. Before the invention of writing, perhaps by the Sumerians in the 4th millennium bce, information could be spread only by word of mouth, with all the accompanying limitations of place and time. Writing was originally regarded not as a means of [disseminating](#) information but as a way to fix religious formulations or to secure codes of law, genealogies, and other socially important matters, which had previously been committed to memory. Publishing could begin only after the monopoly of letters, often held by a priestly caste, had been broken, probably in connection with the development of the value of writing in commerce. Scripts of various kinds came to be used throughout most of the ancient world for proclamations, correspondence, transactions, and records; but book production was confined largely to religious centres of learning, as it would be again later in [medieval](#) Europe. Only in Hellenistic Greece, in Rome, and in China, where there were essentially nontheocratic societies, does there seem to have been any publishing in the modern sense—i.e., a copying industry supplying a lay readership.

The invention of [printing](#) transformed the possibilities of the written word. Printing seems to have been first invented in [China](#) in the 6th century ce in the form of block printing. An earlier version may have been developed at the beginning of the 1st millennium bce, but, if so, it soon fell into disuse. The Chinese invented movable type in the 11th century ce but did not fully [exploit](#) it. Other Chinese inventions, including paper (105 ce), were passed on to Europe by the [Arabs](#) but not, it seems, printing. The reason may well lie in Arab insistence on hand copying of the Qur'ān (Arabic printing of the Qur'ān does not appear to have been officially sanctioned until 1825). The invention of printing in Europe is usually attributed to [Johannes Gutenberg](#) in Germany about 1440–50, although block printing had been carried out from about 1400. Gutenberg's achievement was not a single invention but a whole new craft involving movable metal type, ink, paper, and press. In less than 50 years it had been carried through most of Europe, largely by German printers.

Printing in Europe is inseparable from the [Renaissance](#) and [Reformation](#). It grew from the climate and needs of the first, and it fought in the battles of the second. It has been at the heart of the expanding [intellectual](#) movement of the past 500 years. Although printing was thought of at first merely as a means of avoiding copying errors, its possibilities for mass-producing written matter soon became evident. In 1498, for instance, 18,000 letters of

[indulgence](#) were printed at Barcelona. The market for books was still small, but literacy had spread beyond the clergy and had reached the emerging middle classes. The church, the state, universities, reformers, and radicals were all quick to use the press. Not surprisingly, every kind of attempt was made to control and regulate such a “dangerous” new mode of communication. [Freedom of the press](#) was pursued and attacked for the next three centuries; but by the end of the 18th century a large measure of freedom had been won in western Europe and [North America](#), and a wide range of printed matter was in [circulation](#). The mechanization of printing in the 19th century and its further development in the 20th, which went hand in hand with increasing literacy and rising standards of education, finally brought the printed word to its powerful position as a means of influencing minds and, hence, societies.

The functions peculiar to the publisher—i.e., selecting, editing, and designing the material; arranging its production and distribution; and bearing the financial risk or the responsibility for the whole operation—often merged in the past with those of the author, the printer, or the bookseller. With increasing specialization, however, publishing became, certainly by the 19th century, an increasingly distinct occupation. Most modern Western publishers purchase printing services in the open market, [solicit](#) manuscripts from authors, and distribute their wares to purchasers through shops, [mail](#) order, or direct

sales.

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Published matter falls into two main categories, periodical and nonperiodical—i.e., publications that appear at more or less regular intervals and are members of a series and those that appear on single occasions (except for reissues of essentially the same material).

Of the nonperiodical publications, [books constitute](#) by far the largest class; they are also, in one form or another, the oldest of all types of publication and go back to the earliest civilizations. In giving permanence to man's thoughts and records of his achievements, they answer a deep human need. Not every published book is of lasting value; but a nation's books, taken as a whole and winnowed out by the passing years, can be said to be its main cultural storehouse. Conquerors or usurpers wishing to destroy a people's heritage have often burned its books, as did Shih Huang-ti in China in 213 bce, the Spaniards in Mexico in 1520, and the Nazis in the 1930s.

There is no wholly satisfactory definition of a book, as the word covers a variety of publications (for example, some publications that appear periodically, such as *The World Almanac and Book of Facts*, may be considered books). For statistical purposes, however, the [United Nations](#) Educational, Social and Cultural Organization defines a

book as “a non-periodical printed publication of at least 49 pages [excluding](#) covers.”

Periodical publications may be further divided into two main classes, [newspapers](#) and [magazines](#). Though the boundary between them is not sharp—there are magazines devoted to news, and many newspapers have magazine features—their differences of format, tempo, and function are sufficiently marked: the newspaper (daily or weekly) usually has large, loose pages, a high degree of immediacy, and miscellaneous contents; whereas the magazine (weekly, monthly, or quarterly) has smaller pages, is usually fastened together and sometimes bound, and is less urgent in tone and more specialized in content. Both sprang up after the invention of printing, but both have shown a phenomenal rate of growth to meet the demand for quick information and regular entertainment. Newspapers have long been by far the most widely read published matter; the democratizing process of the 19th and 20th centuries would be unthinkable without them. Magazines, close behind newspapers both historically and in terms of readership, rapidly branched out from their learned origins into “periodicals of amusement.” Today there is probably not a single interest, [frivolous](#) or serious, of man, woman, or child, that is not catered to by a magazine.

There are, of course, many other types of publications besides books, newspapers, and magazines. In many cases the same principles of publishing apply, and it is

only the nature of the product and the technicalities of its manufacture that are different. There is, for instance, the important business of map and atlas publishing. Another important field is music publishing, which produces a great variety of material, from complete symphonic scores to sheet music of the latest popular hit. A further range of activities might be grouped under the term "utility publishing"; *i.e.*, the issuing of calendars, diaries, [timetables](#), ready reckoners, guide books, and all manner of informational or directional material, not to mention postcards and greeting cards. A great deal of occasional publishing, of pamphlets and booklets, is done by organizations to further particular aims or to spread particular views; *e.g.*, by churches, religious groups, societies, and political parties. This kind of publishing is sometimes subsidized.