Catastrophic Disruption

How the Printing Press Ignited Anti-Witch Hysteria in Early Modern Europe

Benjamin Jacobs
Witch Hunts: 1429-1750

- **Context:** Council of Paderborn vs Basel
- **~60,000 killed**
  - Many more maimed
  - Vast majority were poor women
  - Occurred in a context of political instability
- **Three Periods:**
  - Early Hunts 1429-1580
  - **Peak 1580-1630** <= Trier Witch Hunts: 1581-1593
  - Decline 1630-1750 <= “Salem” Witch Trials: 1692-3
- **Why?**
The Printing Press Cometh: ~1439

Time: 7:50-8:22
Existing “Publishing Market”

- Markets
  - The Church
  - Universities
  - Nobility/Burghers
  - Everybody?

- Business Model
  - Gazettes, News-Sheets, Avvisi, etc
  - Distribution Networks
Medieval and Early Modern Trade Routes
New Presses: ~1439-1500

Swetz, F (1987), *Capitalism and Arithmetic: The New Math of the 15th Century*, La Salle, IL; Open Court
The Printing Business: Early Products

- **Books**
  - Still Expensive
  - Existing Market
  - Capital Intensive

- **Pamphlets, Broadsheets, and News-Sheets:** “Safer” Investment
  - Less Capital
  - More Liquid
  - Existing Distribution Routes
The Printing Business: Market Forces

- No Policy or Market Framework
  - Low Barriers to Entry
  - Limited Censorship
  - No Copyright Protections

- Unintended Consequences
  - Need for Short Term Profits
  - Rise of “Clickbait”: No Restrictions on Content
  - Ideas “Go Viral”
  - Democratization of Misinformation
The Printing Press and the Protestant Reformation

https://blogs.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/taylor-reformation/2016/01/21/passional-christi-vnnd-antichristi/

Time: 16:15-17:51
Medieval and Early Modern Trade Routes

http://users.rowan.edu/~mcinneshin/101/wk12/images/Commercial-routes.jpg
Printed Witch Hunting Materials

- **Key Books**
  - Formicarius: 1435
  - Errores Gazariorum: 1450
  - Flagellum Haereticorum Fascinariorum: 1450s
  - Ulrich Molitor's De Lamiis: 1489
  - Malleus Malificarum: 1487
  - Daemonologie: 1597

- **Fictional accounts**
  - Faust

- **Fictional accounts presented as fact: Pamphlets**
Use of Pamphlets in Witch Hunts

- Accounts of previous witch trials
  - Grain of Truth
  - Highly Sensational
  - Embellished with Lies
  - Demonological Witches as an Opposing Force
  - Call to Action

- Pamphlets as Propaganda
  - Conspiracy or Business?

- Created paranoid conditions needed for mass panic
Decline in Hunts: 1630-1750

- Centralization
  - Religious
  - Education
  - Political
- Economic Factors
  - Market Saturation
  - Maturation of “The Media”
Learning from History: How Does it Rhyme?

- New, poorly understood technological environment
- Huge growth in available information
- Things go “Viral”
- “Clickbait Headlines”
- Large scale disruption of institutions due to technological and non-technological factors
- “Democratization of Misinformation”
- “Good Ideas” win out...eventually*  
  - *after 60k deaths
Good News: It is Not 1580

Use what we have learned over past 500 years to do better

- Work to present good ideas and not bad ones
- Use the market to fight our battles
- Public Policy has a role
- Avoid Self Fulfilling Prophecy
Thanks for Listening! Any Questions?

Main sources:

- *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* Elizabeth Lewisohn Eisenstein

- *The Serpent and the Lamb: Cranach, Luther, and the Making of the Reformation* Steven Ozment

- *Pamphlets, Propaganda and Witch-Hunting in Germany c.1560-c.1630* Robert Walinski-Kiehl

- *The Protestant Reformation, 1517-1559* Lewis Spitz