

Research Project

‘JEV-Fellowship for European Administrative History’

## **Government Use of Print in the Holy Roman Empire in the Sixteenth Century**

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From the 1450s onwards, the printing press proved an increasingly important weapon in the drive to spread the tentacles of authority. With the help of Gutenberg’s invention official announcements could be produced quickly and inexpensively in unprecedented numbers. Thus printers and their presses progressively became an integral part of early modern administration.

This study investigates these issues through two case studies: official publications such as ordinances printed in the Duchy of Württemberg and in the Free Imperial City of Cologne. These two contrasting jurisdictions, one a major princely state, the other one of the greatest of the commercial cities, both made increasingly sophisticated use of print to address and school their local populations. By analysing the formats of these publications, their design, their print runs, as well as instructions for circulation, we can gain invaluable insights into the mechanisms of early modern administration.

All of this owed a considerable debt to the local printing industry. So the second part of this work is to paint a portrait of the printing houses that conducted this vital and often very lucrative work. In the larger cities printers competed fiercely to be named the official printer. In smaller places, where the local printing industry had a more tenuous existence, work for official bodies (the church as well as the state) made the difference between solvency and bankruptcy. The ideal arrangements were often negotiated over a considerable time. The sixteenth century was a period of experimentation, as governments attempted to find the most suitable printer for their work; in many parts of the Empire this period of trial and error lasted until the very end of the century.

In this study we can trace these tentative beginnings of collaboration between rulers and printers. A sophisticated understanding of the structures of the early modern print industry allows us to establish the business and market conditions that underpinned the production of official work and also establish how disruptions like war, the plague or bankruptcy hindered the spread of authority. All of this will be placed in a transnational context: our case studies allow us to draw comparisons and contrasts to the role of print in the workings of other European governments in the Netherlands, the Swiss Confederation, England and France.