

The important newspaper *Corriere della Sera* has created a new app and called it “Le Bussole di oggi” [Today’s compasses]. Its presentation reads as follows: “Events to keep an eye on during the day, explained and contextualised from early morning onwards by the *Corriere della Sera*.” This sentence inspired our question to Professor Andrew Pettegree: “who needs news, anyway?” And yet, it’s the genuinely unexpected that keeps us reading and listening, afraid we might miss something. In his book entitled “The invention of news. How the world came to know about itself,” Pettegree demonstrates how few of us, in fact very few, can resist the urge to know. It’s an ancient hunger about what was happening elsewhere which existed long before printing had even been invented. For example, Pettegree writes that in the eleventh century two Welsh remote monasteries would exchange messengers every three years. They stayed for a week, bringing monks up to date about the latest – and not so latest – news and

gossip. It’s also astonishing to learn that the roots of the industry began with a monopoly. In 1605, the Alsatian Johann Carolus founded his *Relation of all distinguished and commendable news* in Strasbourg. The *Relation* has often been credited as being the first proper newspaper. When Carolus asked the City Council to stop anyone from competing with his publication, the Council promptly granted his request. But what is news? One very popular (and amusing) definition attributed to many individuals, from George Orwell to William Randolph Hearst, or simply anonymous, is: “news is something that someone somewhere doesn’t want us to know.” Today this statement is obsolete: in most cases, powerful people want us to know exactly what’s in the news. Astonishing events that burst into our consciousness are very rare indeed, most of the rest are announcements, speeches, adverts or press releases that have scarcely been rewritten. Maybe that’s why so many people don’t seem to be paying much attention anymore. Pettegree writes

that it was once a game in which life and death were determined by speed and trustworthiness. Technology has eliminated time-delay; today we can be present everywhere, albeit virtually. The more news there is, the less anyone really needs it. All too often this leads to paralysis and information overload. What are we to do with it all? Perhaps this is why “an important newspaper like *Corriere della Sera* created a new app and called it “Le Bussole di oggi” [Today’s Compasses], presenting it with the following statement: “Events to keep an eye on during the day, explained and contextualised from early morning onwards by the *Corriere della Sera*” ...” Let’s read what Professor Pettegree has to say and we’ll know more, but above all, we’ll learn more.

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PETTEGREE

## WHO NEEDS NEWS, ANYWAY?

“My investigations demonstrated that the desire to have news, to be in the know, is essentially timeless, and certainly preceded the age of print.”

**Telos:** The title of your most recent book is “The invention of news” and it tells it all. However what is even more intriguing is how it goes on “how the world came to know about itself.” What does it mean?

**Andrew Pettegree:** Before I wrote my book the history of news was usually written as a history of newspapers. So now, as the newspaper takes an ever smaller role in a multi-media environment, it seemed a good time to cast our eye back to a world before the newspaper: and discover, as I did, a vibrant multi-media environment of correspondence, pamphlets, manuscript news sheets, conversation and public announcements. It led me in all sorts of unexpected directions and proved richly rewarding – as I hope Italian readers will now find. My investigations demonstrated that the desire to have news, to be in the know, is essentially timeless, and certainly preceded the age of print. What print brought was wider dissemination and the ability to bring news from further afield: hence, ‘how the world came to know itself’. The concerns about accuracy, and a need to separate news from gossip and rumour, were inherited from an earlier age when news was essentially the preserve of Europe’s rulers. Print made news less expensive, and a commodity that could for the first time be freely traded. Those who had previously enjoyed a monopoly of sensitive information were by no means sure that this was a good thing, and continued to use their own privileged channels. But the birth of a market for news was undoubtedly an absolutely critical element in the development of an articulate participating public. The shrewdest rulers quickly adapted. If you read the first printed ordinances or proclamations, for instance, it is remarkable how much of the text is given over to explaining why a particular regulation has been introduced: obedience is not taken for granted, a real effort is made to secure community understanding and tacit consent.

In the last years, the focus of your scientific research has shifted towards an interest in the history of communication, and especially the history of the book. You run a research group that in 2011 completed a survey of all books published before 1601: the *Universal Short Title Catalogue*. Is it worth spending so much effort to have a survey of all books published before 1601?

The *Universal Short Title Catalogue* has proved enormously useful. Before we created the USTC early print was more usually studied in national silos. But the early modern book world was essentially a trans-national market: books and texts flowed naturally across national boundaries. The USTC has recreated this reality. We have also been able to build into the database (which is available free on line to all users) all sorts of useful search features available in no other bibliographical tool.



**Andrew Pettegree**, is a Professor of Modern History at the University of St Andrews, and Director of the Universal Short Title Catalogue. Educated at Oxford, Pettegree held Research Fellowships at the Universities of Hamburg and Cambridge before moving to St Andrews in 1986. In 1991 he was named the founding director of the St Andrews Reformation Studies Institute, which has since then become recognised as a leading centre for research in the field. His first book was a study of religious refugee communities in the sixteenth century, and since then he has published on the Dutch Revolt, as well as a general survey of the history of the sixteenth century. He is the author of a number of books on the Reformation and, more recently, on the history of communication, including *Reformation and the Culture of Communication* (Cambridge, 2005), *The Book in the Renaissance* (2010) and *The Invention of News* (2014). In 2015 *The Invention of News* won the Goldsmith Prize of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. This prize, awarded annually by the Shorenstein Center for Media, Politics and Public Policy at the Kennedy School of Government, honours the book that best fulfils the objective of improving democratic governance through an examination of the intersection between the media, politics and public policy. His latest book, *Brand Luther. 1517. Printing and the Making of the Reformation*, will be published in October by Penguin USA. He is now engaged on a study of advertising in seventeenth-century Dutch newspapers. Since 2012 Prof. Pettegree is the Vice-President of the Royal Historical Society. He lives in St Andrews, Scotland, with his wife and two daughters.

Where else could you assemble a list of all sixteenth-century cookbooks in under five seconds? I still spend some part of every working day working on improving the data (which will be extended to 1650 next year, doubling the size of the resource).

**The invention of the printing press and the advent of internet. Could these two things be compared?**

It was great to be studying the first age of print during the next great media shift, because in some respects the parallels were absolutely obvious. What struck me about the two great periods of change is how both new inventions, print and digital, were accompanied by a torrent of false prophecy. Boosters of print predicted that it would immediately make manuscripts redundant: it didn't of course, and manuscript continued to play a leading role in the transmission of texts, much as print and digital co-exist today. And just as with digital technologies, people invested huge sums in the first print era without having a very clear idea of how to make their money back. Most of the first printers went bankrupt, and print experienced something close to the existential crisis of the dot.com bust of the 1990s. What it demonstrated me is that invention was often the easy part: the question of how to monetarise a media revolution is far more challenging. Consumers are canny; they know they can have the best of both worlds, adopting new technology without having to abandon the old. Legacy providers of news today, such as newspapers, are still wrestling with this problem. One of the very interesting aspects of the media interest that accompanied the publication of *The Invention of News* was that so many of the questions I was asked focused on the future – journalists in particular, wanted to know how the story would end. For a historian like myself, used to exploring the past, this is fairly uncharted water. Of course, it is still impossible to predict how it will end for print – if it ends at all. The book was an invention of genius, and now digital exists as an alternative we are only beginning to articulate why in so many ways print is a superior medium – for browsing, for encouraging focused learning, and the way the physical object acts as an aid to memory. My guess – and it can only be that – is that the book as a material object will be with us for a long time to come.

**Beyond being an historian and a distinguished Professor, you are recognised to be one of the leading experts on Europe during the Reformation. In *The Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion* (2005) you explored the process by which Reformation ideas were communicated, through the media of publications, pictures, theatre and songs. Is that a turning point in your interest for communication strategies?**

*The Culture of Persuasion* was an important book for me. I wrote it very quickly, and it demonstrated that the communication process, how people received information and what they made of it, was the heart of my work as a historian. The Reformation was a transformative challenge to existing wisdom in an age where change was not always embraced as a social good, but it was also a news event: as news of Luther's extraordinary challenge to the church hierarchy spread through Germany, he became a celebrity as much for his defiance as for his theological insights. When he travelled to meet his judges in Augsburg and Worms, people clamored to see him – those who could not bought engravings or woodcuts of his image. It was a very modern sort of media explosion. I am returning to the subject again this autumn, with a book focusing on precisely how Martin Luther, a rather conservative monk already in middle age, embraced the new communication medium of print, and discovered a quite extraordinary gift for writing for a wide audience that had previously largely been excluded from theological debate. My book, *Brand Luther*, describes how he invented what was in effect a new communication medium, and how it was packaged for him in an entirely original way. *Brand Luther* is published by Penguin on 27 October 2015.