

Censorship and the regulation of printing

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The printing industry was, from the outset, a regulated industry. The authorities of the sixteenth century recognised the power of the printed word to spread ideas, both orthodox and heretical, and sought to control it. In Basel, the council issued ordinances that required printers to submit books to censors before publication, prohibited the printing of defamatory or heretical writings and required that books bear the name of the printer and the place of printing.¹ The censors were usually professors of the university, who examined manuscripts and granted or refused permission to print.

Censorship in Basel was relatively mild compared with that of other cities. The council was concerned above all to avoid conflicts with neighbouring powers, with the Confederates and with the Emperor, and to maintain the reputation of the city. It tolerated the printing of works by authors of different confessions, provided they did not cause a scandal. This relative tolerance made Basel an attractive place for printers and authors who could not publish in their home countries, among them Italian and French Protestants and dissenters of various kinds. Chapter V returns to the refugees who used the Basel presses to publish their works.

The regulation of printing in the sixteenth century has a modern parallel in the regulation of information in financial markets. A financial centre depends on the reliability of the information that circulates in it: prospectuses, financial statements, research reports, market data. The Financial Services Act requires the publication of a prospectus for public offerings of securities, subject to review by a review body. It also imposes liability for incorrect or misleading information.² The author of this book wrote his doctoral thesis on the prospectus liability of life insurers. He has observed that the question of who is responsible for the truth of printed information addressed to the public goes back to the first printing presses. The Basel council that examined manuscripts before publication and the

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review bodies that examine prospectuses today serve, in different contexts, the same purpose: the protection of readers against false or harmful information.

1 Notes

1. On the censorship ordinances of the Basel council for printers in the sixteenth century (from 1524 onwards), see HLS, article "Zensur"; the literature on Basel printing. Date to be verified. ↩
2. Art. 35 ff. FinSA on the prospectus obligation, Art. 51 ff. FinSA on the review of the prospectus by a review body, and Art. 69 FinSA on prospectus liability. See SR 950.1. ↩

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