Introduction: Practices, Perceptions and Connections

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This collection of essays, taken from the ‘Print Networks’ series of conferences between 2008 and 2010, explores the ways in which early modern book-trade personnel interacted, understood themselves and networked within and beyond the trade. Each essay offers insights, specific to era and location, into the ways in which book-trade actors ultimately shaped the meaning of the texts that they produced. Together, the chapters reveal commonalities in a trade experiencing widespread transformation from one that was relatively small, limited by legislation and interdependent with its European counterparts, to one that grew in size numerically and geographically and was increasingly specialized and localized.

The volume is divided into two sections. Part One, ‘Practices and Perceptions’ offers chapters that examine the practices of authors, translators, producers and collectors, and the perceptions of book-trade personnel. The ‘cultural turn’ has promoted a growing historiographical focus on identity and cultural agency, and the early modern period was a turning-point in the recognition of the self. The Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment contributed to the recognition of the individual, whilst print offered new ways of shaping identities, challenging authorities and carrying these new ideas across Europe and beyond. If, as McKenzie has established, determining the socio-economic circumstances of production is crucial in understanding the text, so too is the significance of its cultural environment.1 As Johns

1 Donald F. McKenzie, Making Meaning: ‘Printers of the Mind’ and Other Essays, ed. Peter McDonald and Michael Suarez (Amherst, MA, 2002); idem, Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts (Cambridge, 1999).
argues, a book was trusted according to the character afforded to its printing house. Exploring how those in the trade perceived themselves, and how they were perceived by those connected to it, thus tells us a good deal about how printers collaborated with others in the trade and what influence they had on the texts they produced.

Part Two of this collection, ‘Connections’, explores the shifting geographical networks across the trade over the early modern period and their implications for readers. The ‘spatial turn’ has encouraged a review of the geography of the book, first explored by Febvre and Martin over fifty years ago. According to Ogborn and Withers, ‘a book is an object that must have a geography. Its making can be located and its movements can be mapped’. More than this, just as printing houses demanded multiple collaborators, books required networks of often geographically dispersed people to organize their production and distribution. In the early modern period, this meant European networks in the first instance, for the production of, and access to, books was dependent upon the circulation of personnel and texts from the Continent to London. By the mid-seventeenth century, there was an active market for books nationally, which paved the way for the establishment of printing presses in provincial towns after the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695. By viewing the early modern book trade as a multi-layered web of connections, this collection prioritizes human agency in the changing geographies of the early modern book trade.

The collection focuses on the English book trade, rather than the British, because for much of the early modern period production was centralized in London, and book-trade connections between England and the Continent were stronger and more extensive than those with Scotland, Ireland and Wales or indeed most other towns and

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regions outside of the metropolis. This is not to deny the wider importance of Britain’s markets and even British producers of texts, as several contributors recognize, nor does it mean that we have ignored the national contours of the trade. The confines of one volume, however, have demanded a focus on European and English dimensions.

It is worth exploring further how the essays in this collection speak to one another. As this introduction has already suggested, many of the essays within the volume deal with interconnected book-trade practices and relationships, shedding light on and complicating Darnton’s seminal ‘communications circuit’. Darnton envisages the various stages of a book’s lifecycle in a continuous loop; text travels from author to publisher, printer, shipper, bookseller, reader and back to author, with the information therein being transformed at each stage of its transmission as external influences further shape it.\(^5\) As Darnton himself has noted, however, book history cannot be encapsulated within a single formula; rather, his circuit was designed to demonstrate how book history’s ‘disparate segments can be brought together within a single conceptual scheme’.\(^6\) The authors in this collection offer an expansive view of the book trade in early modern England – one that was not simply linked in a perfect circle with texts moving between different actors, but in which actors had multiple and changing roles across a web of connections, some of which were ephemeral and others more permanent.

Most of the essays here describe in some way the fluidity of occupations within the book trade over the period here under review. As is widely recognized, combining printing with publishing, book and stationery-selling and other such activities was quite typical for an enterprising businessman or woman in the early modern book trade. Erickson, Newman and Wilson emphasize the blurred lines between printing, publishing and authorship; William Ponsonby, Thomas Freeman and Henry Chettle respectively worked as editors and textual


\(^6\) Darnton, ‘History of Books’, p. 73.
collaborators who mediated between texts and authors. Similarly, Satterley and Hughes remind us, through their close studies of the libraries and manuscript book lists of Robert Ashley of the Middle Temple and Elizabethan scholar and diplomat Sir Thomas Smith, that translation demanded a creativity developed through education often brought about by voracious book collecting and exchange.

Many of those in the book trades identified themselves as having multiple roles. As Wilson notes, Henry Chettle – pamphlet writer, dramatist, printer, stationer, compositor and a reader for the press, amongst other roles – has been described as a ‘transprofessional’, a term that offers much in the way of understanding book-trade occupations in early modern England. Practitioners like Chettle recognized the fluidity of their roles and used ‘printer’, ‘publisher’, ‘compositor’ and other labels interchangeably from text to text. The midwifery trope, as Newman demonstrates, was similarly employed to describe a range of printers, publishers and editors. Certainly there were benefits for authors in highlighting potential textual interference by a profit-driven printer-publisher, not least in concealing the writer’s own lust for lucre and providing a scapegoat for poor content or production. As Johns has explored elsewhere, authors worried about their texts and were concerned with the process of producing their books because form affected credibility. Even so, the blurred boundaries between roles across the book trade, especially between authorship and publishing (and readership and translation) mean that it is not simply artificial to distinguish between individual trades, but impossible.

It is tempting to understand the ambiguity of early modern book-trade roles teleologically, as embryonic precursors of more clearly defined occupations that emerged as the trade became larger and more specialized by the eighteenth century. Essays in this collection, however, suggest that it is more fruitful instead to reconsider those involved in early modern book production as they themselves frequently did – as transprofessionals, practitioners of multiple

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complementary and interchangeable activities performed either simultaneously or consecutively over their lifetimes, a role unique to the early modern period.

Women have also been cast in multiple guises: as muses, patrons and dedicatees, producers, writers and readers and collectors of early modern texts. In her historiographical essay, Bell explores an alternative type of perception: historians’ changing perceptions of women as actors who inspired, produced and consumed texts. Some roles of women have been much studied but their involvement has been reassessed. Women have long been recognized, for example, as muses and dedicatees but the meaning of their involvement has moved from inspiration to reciprocation; a female patron could confer cultural capital on her client, but she could also gain a literary reputation on which she could capitalize in the process.

Often the roles of women in the book trade are less historically apparent. They frequently held ambiguous positions, shielded from view – as editors, scribes, collaborators and co-authors. They tended to be wives or widows, appearing in the historical record only when their husbands were absent from the business. This partial visibility and seeming inexperience could be a benefit too. By presenting women as the hapless and innocent faces who ‘accidentally’ printed forbidden texts, printers might escape prosecution. Women, as Bell points out, continue to be underexplored in early modern studies, especially as provincial book-trade personnel and as book collectors. The existence of a specifically female market for books from the seventeenth century, moreover, needs to be weighed up against evidence of female readers. After all, as Bell points out, in a trade that constantly sought out new markets, the female author and subject were attractive commodities.

Book-trade personnel were rational economic actors, and this informed practical decisions, from the choice of texts produced to linkages across the trade that crossed regional and national borders. Networks between individuals were an indispensable element of early modern business. Some printers, like Anthony Munday, cultivated small networks of book-trade associates with whom he worked recurrently, his example thus conforming neatly to the Darnton model. Regular
trusted contacts increased the likelihood of production quality and, as in all trades, facilitated the mobilisation of finance. In a credit-based society in which personal reputation constituted social capital, securing a network of trusted contacts provided avenues through which to gain credit and offered at least some safeguard against the risk of bad debt. Nevertheless, there was a balance to be made between ensuring credit-lines and stifling creative activity. Some of the most successful early modern printers, such as William Ponsonby, collaborated with a wide range of personnel. Similarly, major translation projects such as the Iberian and French translations of *Amadis de Gaule* and *Palmerin* employed at least several translators spanning cities and even nations. The most entrepreneurial book-trade agents thus operated within a complex and ever-changing web of interconnectivity. They were willing to increase risk by working with new and potentially untested collaborators in order to ensure a constant stream of innovations and new ideas, and of course potentially meeting new and more powerful customers in the process.

A particular characteristic of the early modern book trade was its integration with continental networks. Indeed, in its early years, much of England’s book trade was continental; between 1476 and 1536 two-thirds of England’s resident printers, booksellers and bookbinders were from other countries. From 1523, Reformation legislation limited the number of foreign apprentices and journeymen in English printing houses, but the production of continental texts for the English market continued unabated throughout the Tudor period. Panofré’s chapter demonstrates that decisions about the location of printing houses and the transmission of print across Europe could be moulded by legislation but were grounded in business. Providing an important corrective to current historiography on exile printing, Panofré determines that during Mary I’s reign, the political and religious nature of cities was not so much a determinant of exiles’ publishing activities (as has typically been argued) as the practical and financial

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9 Ogborn and Withers, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.
considerations affecting printing trades. In the case of Antwerp, identified by Panofré as a major exile print centre rather than Wesel, significant competition would have left some printers no choice but to turn to riskier printing, whilst the city’s geographical situation and trade links with England facilitated regular transport at a relatively low cost. Until Panofre’s detailed analysis of exile type, the location of Marian exile printers was obscured because they laid a false trail in their imprints to ensure the texts’ continuation and prevent their own apprehension.

The circulation of cheap print around Europe was similarly grounded in the exigencies of business. Barker’s chapter examines the circulation of sensational news stories across England and the Continent almost from the inception of print to the eighteenth century. These translations offered a ready-made package of stories for printers who would supplement their income by producing them in-between more substantial jobs.

These European networks connected disparate reading markets in more oblique ways too. Links with the European trade offered early modern readers perceived proximity to far-flung and exotic places, and the resultant ability to conceive real and fictitious places within the same imagined space. Producers of texts thus played with reality. The stories that Barker explores invariably purported to be from specific continental towns or regions and provided some seemingly verifiable detail, in an attempt to present themselves as authentic. Henry Neville’s *Isle of Pines* (1668), examined by Mills, is entirely fictitious. The story tells of a shipwrecked Englishman, George Pine, and four women who establish a small utopian society on an uninhabited island that ultimately fails amidst civil war. It is significant that Neville presents this as an authentic story by claiming that it has been passed on by a Dutch sailor; being in Europe the story’s purported author was *almost* near enough to be located, but not quite. In both cases, by creating imagined realities, the authors of spurious stories provided contemporaries with the wherewithal to reassess the modern world. For Barker, stories of the wondrous were motivated by the desire to understand the turmoil of the post-Reformation world; Neville’s *Isle of Pines* was an allegory for
the failure of the Civil War and of print’s role in that failure. In many ways, therefore, the geography of print was inherently unstable over the early modern period, both in terms of practical and legislative decisions that informed where texts were produced, but also in terms of distortions (both intended and accidental) by authors, printers and others in identifying the origins of texts.

By the mid-seventeenth century, there was a web of connections across the English book trade too, explored by Capp. Despite its dominance, London’s power was far from total over the early modern period. Even before the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695, texts and ideas spread not simply in a core-periphery model from London to the country, but within localities and from towns and regions around the country into London. As Capp demonstrates, local and regional markets were already important arenas for book sales in the seventeenth century, and local sermons and speeches were printed in London for a specific locale. Booksellers traded in every major town, but beyond them, an individual’s collection of print was acquired in multiple ways, purchased from booksellers, fairs, chapmen and others, and acquired through gifts, loans, bequests and other non-commercial means. Nor did the commercial book trade monopolize the national market for print as national distribution systems were employed by, amongst others, Quakers, Fifth Monarchists and mid-century dissident republicans. Thus, whilst the lapse of the Licensing Act transformed the production of print in the local arena, the availability of print nationally long pre-dated it, and no doubt acted as a spur to the reorientation of the trade and the availability and activities of provincial printers after 1695.

Yet the post-1695 world of print was different for those practising the book trade outside of London. As Gardner considers in her chapter on the North East book trade, the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 precipitated the swift establishment of printing presses across the country and encouraged collaborations between printers and booksellers within and across towns and regions. The North-East’s print centre, Newcastle, was the largest in England outside of London and the personnel who trained there or who set up shop, had business
dealings or were simply passing through as itinerant workers, each developed new connections through whom printed materials could be created and circulated. Newspapers, a permanent feature of the book trade after 1695, created new localised webs of connection and distribution for printed materials of all sorts, and joined together constellations of tradesmen and women across regions as they became newspaper and advertising agents.

The book trade was also reliant on other networks, and thanks to the coal trade, the isolated North-East was peculiarly well-connected to London. Colliers sailed to the metropolis laden with their black gold and returned with other materials – raw materials used in papermaking, as well as books, stationery and medicines. Locally, the book trade relied on the transportation of goods over the roads that led from Newcastle’s port, themselves undergoing modernisation in the eighteenth century. These arteries of trade underpinned the book trade and added meaning to the texts that travelled along them, reinforcing regional identity alongside a sense of proximity to London and other areas of Britain.

The essays in this collection seek to shed light on the ways in which the early modern book trade intervened in and shaped the production and circulation of texts, which ultimately informed their meaning. In one way, each of the essays contributes just one case study to a world of print that stretched across national boundaries and several centuries. But in other ways, the chapters contained herein repeat the same stories – of businessmen and women connecting and collaborating, developing their own sense of their place in the world, and using print to transport their readers too.