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Social media in the 16th Century

How Luther went viral

Five centuries before Facebook and the Arab spring, social media helped bring about the Reformation

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Feedback

IT IS a familiar-sounding tale: after decades of simmering discontent a new form of media gives opponents of an authoritarian regime a way to express their views, register their solidarity and co-ordinate their actions. The protesters' message spreads virally through social networks, making it impossible to suppress and highlighting the extent of public support for revolution. The combination of improved publishing technology and social networks is a catalyst for social change where previous efforts had failed.

That's what happened in the Arab spring. It's also what happened during the Reformation, nearly 500 years ago, when Martin Luther and his allies took the new media of their day—pamphlets, ballads and woodcuts—and circulated them through social networks to promote their message of religious reform.

Scholars have long debated the relative importance of printed media, oral transmission and images in rallying popular support for the Reformation. Some have championed the central role of printing, a relatively new technology at the time. Opponents of this view emphasise

the importance of preaching and other forms of oral transmission. More recently historians have highlighted the role of media as a means of social signalling and co-ordinating public opinion in the Reformation.

Now the internet offers a new perspective on this long-running debate, namely that the important factor was not the printing press itself (which had been around since the 1450s), but the wider system of media sharing along social networks—what is called “social media” today. Luther, like the Arab revolutionaries, grasped the dynamics of this new media environment very quickly, and saw how it could spread his message.

New post from Martin Luther

The start of the Reformation is usually dated to Luther’s nailing of his “95 Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences” to the church door in Wittenberg on October 31st 1517. The “95 Theses” were propositions written in Latin that he wished to discuss, in the academic custom of the day, in an open debate at the university. Luther, then an obscure theologian and minister, was outraged by the behaviour of Johann Tetzel, a Dominican friar who was selling indulgences to raise money to fund the pet project of his boss, Pope Leo X: the reconstruction of St Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Hand over your money, went Tetzel’s sales pitch, and you can ensure that your dead relatives are not stuck in purgatory. This crude commercialisation of the doctrine of indulgences, encapsulated in Tetzel’s slogan—“As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, so the soul from purgatory springs”—was, to Luther, “the pious defrauding of the faithful” and a glaring symptom of the need for broad reform. Pinning a list of propositions to the church door, which doubled as the university notice board, was a standard way to announce a public debate.

Although they were written in Latin, the “95 Theses” caused an immediate stir, first within academic circles in Wittenberg and then farther afield. In December 1517 printed editions of the theses, in the form of pamphlets and broadsheets, appeared simultaneously in Leipzig, Nuremberg and Basel, paid for by Luther’s friends to whom he had sent copies. German translations, which could be read by a wider public than Latin-speaking academics and clergy, soon followed and quickly spread throughout the German-speaking lands. Luther’s friend Friedrich Myconius later wrote that “hardly 14 days had passed when these propositions were known throughout Germany and within four weeks almost all of Christendom was familiar with them.”

The unintentional but rapid spread of the “95 Theses” alerted Luther to the way in which media passed from one person to another could quickly reach a wide audience. “They are printed and circulated far beyond my expectation,” he wrote in March 1518 to a publisher in Nuremberg who had published a German translation of the theses. But writing in scholarly Latin and then translating it into German was not the best way to address the wider public. Luther wrote that he “should have spoken far differently and more distinctly had I known what was going to happen.” For the publication later that month of his “Sermon on Indulgences and Grace”, he switched to German, avoiding regional vocabulary to ensure that his words were intelligible from the Rhineland to Saxony. The pamphlet, an instant hit, is regarded by many as the true starting point of the Reformation.

The media environment that

Luther had shown himself so adept at managing had much in common with today's online ecosystem of blogs, social networks and discussion threads. It was a decentralised system whose participants took care of distribution, deciding collectively which messages to amplify through sharing and recommendation. Modern media theorists refer to participants in such systems as a "networked public", rather than an "audience", since they do more than just consume information.



Mubarak and Leo X, the anciens régimes

Luther would pass the text of a new pamphlet to a friendly printer (no money changed hands) and then wait for it to ripple through the network of printing centres across Germany.

Unlike larger books, which took weeks or months to produce, a pamphlet could be printed in a day or two. Copies of the initial edition, which cost about the same as a chicken, would first spread throughout the town where it was printed. Luther's sympathisers recommended it to their friends. Booksellers promoted it and itinerant colporteurs hawked it. Travelling merchants, traders and preachers would then carry copies to other towns, and if they sparked sufficient interest, local printers would quickly produce their own editions, in batches of 1,000 or so, in the hope of cashing in on the buzz. A popular pamphlet would thus spread quickly without its author's involvement.

As with "Likes" and retweets today, the number of reprints serves as an indicator of a given item's popularity. Luther's pamphlets were the most sought after; a contemporary remarked that they "were not so much sold as seized". His first pamphlet written in German, the "Sermon on Indulgences and Grace", was reprinted 14 times in 1518 alone, in print runs of at least 1,000 copies each time. Of the 6,000 different pamphlets that were published in German-speaking lands between 1520 and 1526, some 1,700 were editions of a few dozen works by Luther. In all, some 6m-7m pamphlets were printed in the first decade of the Reformation, more than a quarter of them Luther's.

Although Luther was the most prolific and popular author, there were many others on both sides of the debate. Tetzl, the indulgence-seller, was one of the first to respond to him in print, firing back with his own collection of theses. Others embraced the new pamphlet format to weigh in on the merits of Luther's arguments, both for and against, like argumentative bloggers. Sylvester Mazzolini defended the pope against Luther in his "Dialogue Against the Presumptuous Theses of Martin Luther". He called Luther "a leper with a brain of brass and a nose of iron" and dismissed his arguments on the basis of papal infallibility. Luther, who refused to let any challenge go unanswered, took a mere two days to produce his own pamphlet in response, giving as good as he got. "I am sorry now that I despised Tetzl," he wrote. "Ridiculous as he was, he was more acute than you. You cite no scripture. You give no reasons."

Being able to follow and discuss such back-and-forth exchanges of views, in which each author quoted his opponent's words in order to dispute them, gave people a thrilling and unprecedented sense of participation in a vast, distributed debate. Arguments in their own social circles about the merits of Luther's views could be seen as part of a far wider discourse, both spoken and printed. Many pamphlets called upon the reader to discuss their contents with others and read them aloud to the illiterate. People read and discussed pamphlets at home with their families, in groups with their friends, and in inns and taverns. Luther's pamphlets were read out at spinning bees in Saxony and in bakeries in Tyrol. In some cases entire guilds of weavers or leather-workers in particular towns declared themselves supporters of the Reformation, indicating that Luther's ideas were being propagated in the workplace. One observer remarked in 1523 that better sermons could be heard in the inns of Ulm than in its churches, and in Basel in 1524 there were complaints about people preaching from books and pamphlets in the town's taverns. Contributors to the debate ranged from the English king Henry VIII, whose treatise attacking Luther (co-written with Thomas More) earned him the title "Defender of the Faith" from the pope, to Hans Sachs, a shoemaker from Nuremberg who wrote a series of hugely popular songs in support of Luther.

A multimedia campaign

It was not just words that travelled along the social networks of the Reformation era, but music and images too. The news ballad, like the pamphlet, was a relatively new form of media. It set a poetic and often exaggerated description of contemporary events to a familiar tune so that it could be easily learned, sung and taught to others. News ballads were often "contrafacta" that deliberately mashed up a pious melody with secular or even profane lyrics. They were distributed in the form of printed lyric sheets, with a note to indicate which tune they should be sung to. Once learned they could spread even among the illiterate through the practice of communal singing.

Both reformers and Catholics used this new form to spread information and attack their enemies. "We are Starting to Sing a New Song", Luther's first venture into the news-ballad genre, told the story of two monks who had been executed in Brussels in 1523 after refusing to recant their Lutheran beliefs. Luther's enemies denounced him as the Antichrist in song, while his supporters did the same for the pope and insulted Catholic theologians ("Goat, desist with your bleating", one of them was admonished). Luther himself is thought to have been the author of "Now We Drive Out the Pope", a parody of a folk song called "Now We Drive Out Winter", whose tune it borrowed:

Now we drive out the pope
from Christ's church and God's house.
Therein he has reigned in a deadly fashion
and has seduced uncountably many souls.
Now move along, you damned son,
you Whore of Babylon. You are the abomination and the Antichrist,
full of lies, death and cunning.

Woodcuts were another form of propaganda. The combination of bold graphics with a smattering of text, printed as a broadsheet, could convey messages to the illiterate or semi-

literate and serve as a visual aid for preachers. Luther remarked that “without images we can neither think nor understand anything.” Some religious woodcuts were elaborate, with complex allusions and layers of meaning that would only have been apparent to the well-educated. “Passional Christi und Antichristi”, for example, was a series of images contrasting the piety of Christ with the decadence and corruption of the pope. Some were astonishingly crude and graphic, such as “The Origin of the Monks” (see picture), showing three devils excreting a pile of monks. The best of them were produced by Luther’s friend Lucas Cranach. Luther’s opponents responded with woodcuts of their own: “Luther’s Game of Heresy” (see beginning of this article) depicts him boiling up a stew with the help of three devils, producing fumes from the pot labelled falsehood, pride, envy, heresy and so forth.

Amid the barrage of pamphlets, ballads and woodcuts, public opinion was clearly moving in Luther’s favour. “Idle chatter and inappropriate books” were corrupting the people, fretted one bishop. “Daily there is a veritable downpour of Lutheran tracts in German and Latin... nothing is sold here except the tracts of Luther,” lamented Aleander, Leo X’s envoy to Germany, in 1521. Most of the 60 or so clerics who rallied to the pope’s defence did so in academic and impenetrable Latin, the traditional language of theology, rather than in German. Where Luther’s works spread like wildfire, their pamphlets fizzled. Attempts at censorship failed, too. Printers in Leipzig were banned from publishing or selling anything by Luther or his allies, but material printed elsewhere still flowed into the city. The city council complained to the Duke of Saxony that printers faced losing “house, home, and all their livelihood” because “that which one would gladly sell, and for which there is demand, they are not allowed to have or sell.” What they had was lots of Catholic pamphlets, “but what they have in over-abundance is desired by no one and cannot even be given away.”

Luther’s enemies likened the spread of his ideas to a sickness. The papal bull threatening Luther with excommunication in 1520 said its aim was “to cut off the advance of this plague and cancerous disease so it will not spread any further”. The Edict of Worms in 1521 warned that the spread of Luther’s message had to be prevented, otherwise “the whole German nation, and later all other nations, will be infected by this same disorder.” But it was too late—the infection had taken hold in Germany and beyond. To use the modern idiom, Luther’s message had gone viral.

From Wittenberg to Facebook

In the early years of the Reformation expressing support for Luther’s views, through preaching, recommending a pamphlet or singing a news ballad directed at the pope, was dangerous. By stamping out isolated outbreaks of opposition swiftly, autocratic regimes discourage their opponents from speaking out and linking up. A collective-action problem thus arises when people are dissatisfied, but are unsure how widely their dissatisfaction is shared, as Zeynep Tufekci, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina, has observed in connection with the Arab spring. The dictatorships in Egypt and Tunisia, she argues, survived for as long as they did because although many people deeply disliked those regimes, they could not be sure others felt the same way. Amid the outbreaks of unrest in early 2011, however, social-media websites enabled lots of people to signal their preferences en masse to their peers very quickly, in an “informational cascade” that created momentum for further action.

The same thing happened in the Reformation. The surge in the popularity of pamphlets in 1523-24, the vast majority of them in favour of reform, served as a collective signalling mechanism. As Andrew Pettegree, an expert on the Reformation at St Andrew's University, puts it in "Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion", "It was the superabundance, the cascade of titles, that created the impression of an overwhelming tide, an unstoppable movement of opinion...Pamphlets and their purchasers had together created the impression of irresistible force." Although Luther had been declared a heretic in 1521, and owning or reading his works was banned by the church, the extent of local political and popular support for Luther meant he escaped execution and the Reformation became established in much of Germany.



Where monks came from, in the Lutherans' view

Modern society tends to regard itself as somehow better than previous ones, and technological advance reinforces that sense of superiority. But history teaches us that there is nothing new under the sun. Robert Darnton, an historian at Harvard University, who has studied information-sharing networks in pre-revolutionary France, argues that "the marvels of communication technology in the present have produced a false consciousness about the past—even a sense that communication has no history, or had nothing of importance to consider before the days of television and the internet." Social media are not unprecedented: rather, they are the continuation of a long tradition. Modern digital networks may be able to do it more quickly, but even 500 years ago the sharing of media could play a supporting role in precipitating a revolution. Today's social-media systems do not just connect us to each other: they also link us to the past.

from the print edition | Christmas Specials