Some time between 1452 and 1454 came that crucial day when the first sheet of paper printed with movable type rolled off the press in the Mainz workshop of Johannes Gutenberg. The new technique created unprecedented scope for reproducing texts, scope that was exploited to the fullest extent over subsequent decades. Printing presses rapidly proliferated throughout Europe, and the number of printed treatises grew almost visibly from day to day. The era of the book had dawned.

No one would dispute the influence of the printing press on the course of early modern history, but opinions differ as to the precise consequences. Generations of historians saw the printing press as the driving force behind many, if not all, historical developments. Without the press no humanism, no Reformation, no scientific or democratic revolutions: in short, modern society itself would have been impossible.1 Nowadays, historians adopt a more nuanced view, pointing out that the effects of printing arose from its human applications rather than being a logical consequence of the process itself.2 At the same time, attention has widened to include other media in the early modern era, since historians now increasingly believe that the advent of books can be better understood as a change in the media system of pre-industrial society.3 Viewed from this perspective, the history of books is one aspect of the long-term development towards a literate society. The production of texts was already increasing in the late Middle Ages, and the

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printing press continued this trend. Texts became a major vehicle for communication and information for growing numbers of people in more and more areas of society, and handwritten texts were at least as important here, if not more so, than printed ones. But for all their growing prominence, texts did not supersede images or the spoken word. These other media remained important, on the one hand altered by printed texts and manuscripts and on the other hand influencing them, producing new mixed media.

Historians have always taken an interest in media. Besides numerous studies on printed books, manuscripts and paintings, research has been published on communication through spectacle and the conveying of messages through ostentatious display. But historians have largely concerned themselves with the media themselves and the institutions involved in their origins, particularly where the history of books is concerned. Under the influence of anthropological and literary theories, cultural historians have developed a new concept of culture over the past thirty years, in which the emphasis is on human action. This means that the value of a cultural product is no longer inferred solely from the product itself, but also takes into account the diverse meanings that people ascribe to it. So cultural history (including the history

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