The Role of "Agency" in Language Product Manufacturing, 1910-1930

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Just as language is one of the externalities that influence institutional environments, the organization is capable of shaping external language climates through education and the manufacture of publicly "influential" products. Among the characteristics that define commerce as "modern" is a dichotomous attitude toward the role of language products--dichotomous because such products function in the economy as articles-of-trade, without fixed value, at a price that fluctuates according to demand, vulnerable to public opinion, shifts in trends, taste, and politics. At the same time, such products are conceived of by their producers as creative, or as objects-of-art whose effectiveness as products is measured by the degree to which they penetrate the collective consciousness of the mainstream public. The use of "fine" printing techniques on "low" cultural goods is at the center of the dichotomous attitude toward language products which characterizes this period of business history. The educational determinant is key to productivity in the manufacture of language products. The progress of legitimization or the public's buying-into a set of values occurs when products of the low culture make their way into the high culture, acquiring value as they exert public influence. At the heart of this inquiry is an exploration of the process of diffusion: how products enter the mainstream of public opinion and become a part of the Great Story, the "definitive" culture.[1]

Between 1910-1930 the language product manufacturing sector was made up of printers and their allied tradesmen, type designers and typographers, illustrators, publicitors, and copywriters, journalists and news dealers, book publishers, and book dealers [1-4]. The chief product categories were: 1) publicity ephemera--advertisements, news releases, booklets, house organs, industrial biographies, employee magazines, catalogs, posters, brochures; 2) books; and 3) mass market magazines, newspapers, and popular fiction. The first two categories will be discussed in this paper. As one of the most distinguished printers of the day, Stanley Morison of Cambridge University Press and Monotype Corporation, London, observed,

[1] The historical resources for this paper are based on research in the Wing Collection on the History of Printing in the Newberry Library, the R.R. Donnelly & Sons corporate archives, and the special collections of the Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago. Additional information about the cases referred to here may be found in [1-4].

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the best printing of the modern age was to be found in the production of publicity ephemera rather than in books [13].

Historically, the term "agent" referred to the carnival barker, the theatrical ticket purveyor, then the advertising solicitor. In the early decades of the modern era agency ceased to be an occupational title and became an organizational style that sought public influence as a cultural byproduct. The first type occurred through the full-service publicity agency which emerged at the turn of the century as an amalgam of print product and message placement "managers" and typographic "experts" [29, 5]. The second type occurred through the large commercial printing house, which responded to the rise of the self-declared typographic "expert" in the full-service agencies by educating apprentice craftsmen to be "engineers" [1, 4]. The maverick, unhoused experts looked for professional identity in a turbulent marketplace, short-term profits, and rapid obsolescence of inventories [6]. The engineers raised the levels of production to such a degree that their products influenced standards throughout the industry. The role of agency in the manufacture of language products between 1910-1930 contributed not only to the transformation of modern values but also to the shape of organizational life, workplace education, and finally to the making of a public commercial culture.

Language products were an important cultural transformer of organizational and industrial values in the early modern period [13]. Education about new technology, product quality, and general culture was critical to both producers and consumers of language products. The predominant characteristic of the sector, as the following discussion will illustrate, is that products of the low culture exerted influence not only on industrial production standards, but based on their success, the manufacturers of these products attempted to lay claim to higher cultural ground and create a status niche for their goods in the definitive culture.

The competition between a new style of organization, a hybrid, and traditional firms in the printing industries during the heyday of commercial ephemera in the U.S. resulted in institutionalization of an educational infrastructure within industry that led to an overall rise in educational level and product quality within the sector. From the need to read the product in order to price it grew the need to command new technology and make critical and aesthetic judgments about the value of finished goods. "Reading" of language products was independent of the meaning or interpretation of the text; it was based on production criteria, on the quality of ink, paper, cover, binding, design, typography, illustration, and intangibles such as news value and styling which placed a high premium on innovation and originality in an era of mass production. Though the raw materials that made up the product had a fixed value, pricing was entirely based on the public's perception of the product as both an article-of-trade and an object-of-art, subject to public opinion, labor climates, politics, and the state of the economy [30, 23].

The inextricable connection between the public's reading of the product and the price it could command made it necessary to educate both print consumers and print producers. As printers became more highly educated, they wanted their products to do more, to be influential, to set

trends, to serve as cultural ambassadors abroad as a testimonial that American industrial know-how was competitive with the long-dominant British and German forces in the industry [15, 13]. As consumers became more educated and their demands increased for greater refinements of stylistics, typography, and design, the language product market became hierarchically segmented. While the same producers labored on high as well as low cultural products, they became increasingly articulate about the value of these to the overall culture. Aesthetic judgment as a basis for product differentiation became part of the overall manufacturing mix in the language product sector, giving rise to new allied tradesmen, including the social critic and market analyst, whose major business was evaluation of and information about others' products.

Printers' Organizations

The modern full service agency developed when newspaper jobbers who had often set advertising copy "stick in hand" for less literate solicitors left their employers and joined forces with other tradesmen in allied language product industries [19]. Three primary occupational groups--newspaper editors, printers, and marketers--developed professional organizations during this period [27]. Printers were the chief labor force behind the formation of the amalgamated agencies [5]. By 1910 newspapers were outmoded as the major means of commercial message delivery because of the unprecedented variety of commercial ephemera developed by printers in amalgamated full-service agencies that provided cheaper alternatives [8].

The modern full-service agency differed from the agencies of the 1890s whose sole business was placing advertisements in newspapers [21]. The amalgamated agency was made up of a core of publicity administrators who functioned as managers and counselors with an unestablished "body of knowledge" about how to communicate commercial messages cost-effectively. Technology drove the market, and new products, particularly specimens of printers' capabilities in the form of booklets as well as hardbound books, frequently were issued in order to stimulate demand. Organized loosely, the full-service agency was structured as a network of free lance solicitors, illustrators, and copywriters with one or two principals managing accounts [1, 2, 5]. This structure varied from one firm to another according to client base. Their organizational purpose was to control the effectiveness of message delivery though innovative print products [27]. They also could sell "hired square inches" as readily as had their predecessors in the 90s [18, 29].

The body of knowledge that provided a basis for publicity advice included differentiation of ten major generic product lines, with clear rules for how each should be designed and when they should be used, and services including typography, layout, copywriting, illustration, printing, and free distribution [1]. Souvenir booklets, posters, brochures, along with the other products in wide use since the 18th century such as dodgers, broadsides, and catalogs were produced in record numbers [24]. The capacity of a single plant to pump out these products in the millions was a point of civic pride, especially in Chicago and New York, which both boasted being the world's leader in production of such pieces [27]. The

amalgamated agency sold not only its ability to write, illustrate, design, print, and distribute these products but its ability to counsel about which to use according to that unpredictable tyrant, public taste. When first introduced, these innovative alternatives to the high cost of buying space in newspapers (and later magazines) so seriously threatened newspaper revenues that the right to advertise in public spaces was fought in the courts [11].

The development of new product lines was a market force within the industry that resulted in increased attention to production detail, type design, innovative fonts, layout, and materials. The traditional printing plant operation had to either hire the new class of experts or recruit their own from the craftsmen already employed [5]. While some free lance illustrators and typographers were employed by printing houses, the dramatic increase in commercial printing orders made it imperative that the design function be staffed internally and integrated with the manufacturing process.

Education

Often used by the advertising agencies of the 1890s as a vehicle to garner rural newspapers as clients, the house organ was reinvented by the full-service agency as a means of professional education. For a period of several years these publications were developed to the point where they contained trade columns, informational and critical pieces, and grew to resemble legitimate trade journalism. The most successful of these became mass market magazines once significant circulation mass was achieved (e.g. *Chap Book* became *House Beautiful*) [30, 2].

By 1910 the boom-and-bust cycle that saw 200 such publications begin and fail within a decade (1903-1913) already had begun its downturn. There were close to 2,000 agencies nationwide at this time, located primarily in the six major U.S. cities. Initially they took market share from the established printing journals which quickly countered by incorporating the publicitors' interests in their publications, recovering their dominant market share within 18 months. Full-service publicitors continued to raid one another's narrow client base without accounting for the interests of large commercial printers, which contributed to the demise of the publicity organs.

Despite their homogeneity and short life cycle these publications were extremely influential in the sector's development between 1910-1930. Their numbers littered the shops on Printer's Row in Chicago and the backrooms of newspapers and agencies in New York and Boston. Correspondence and biographies by publicitors and printers of the period indicate that the organs were recognized as having social authority and that jobbers-turned-publicitors such as Earnest Elmo Calkins used them as educational tools to advance themselves professionally [8]. Their contents chronicle the codification of a definable "Body of Knowledge" that included specifications of generic product lines and specialized advice about how to use lawsuits to gain press coverage, advertise by suggestion, advertise a town, city, or state, one's personality, a bank or monetary system [22].

To meet an increasing volume of printing orders in what ranked as the sixth largest national industry by 1910 more printers were needed [27]. The American Arts & Crafts Movement had reawakened interest in handset

printing, individual craftsmanship in type design, and the book arts in the first decade of the new century [10, 13]. Precipitated by William Morris's activity at the Kelmscott Press in the early 1890s, the Arts & Crafts philosophy was disseminated to America primarily through printers' journals and agency organs. Morris's socialistic ideas were reinterpreted in the U.S. as a philosophy of "spiritualized industry," the integration of "genius and workmanship," the balance of industrial function and design [13]. In brief, that philosophy urged the tradesman toward ownership of his product and advocated humanizing industrial settings. At its best, the philosophy rationalized a tight link between education and industry, university and factory, making the workplace a site for human growth and professional learning that resulted in the highest technical excellence and production efficiency [9].

In the wake of national printers' strikes (1904-1908), R. R. Donnelley & Sons in Chicago tried an anomalous educational experiment that endured for two decades and established a public perception of the company as the epitome of "spiritualized industry," as one University of Chicago English professor wrote in a 1915 *Chicago Tribune* editorial [14]. To avoid unionization, complete with the advances in education among the printers' unions, and reinforce company loyalty, the Donnelley company established its own apprenticeship program, the Lakeside School. The printing house "trained craftsmen to become printing engineers" enlisting them in an eight-year program of "subjects of cultural value to a future printer" [14, 4]. In organizing its first class in 1908, management discovered that "boys of promise" did not want to learn a trade. After a decade, Donnelley management reported that as the reputation of the School spread and the "success of its graduates" became known "the prejudice against a trade in favor of a white-collar job" was "rapidly disappearing" [14, 4].

The Lakeside School began in 1908 by selecting thirty boys fourteen years old for a seven-year course of "economics and cultural studies" in which they were rotated through all departments. Growth in the business enlarged the class size to fifty, and by 1920 there was a long waiting list and competitive entry. Cooperative arrangements were made with the Universities of Chicago and Cincinnati to offer a five-year undergraduate degree. By 1927 the Press had graduated 165 apprentices. All but 35 stayed with the Press for life, nineteen going on to become foremen, three salesmen, and fourteen executives [14, 4].

To help establish the School, the company built the distinguished Memorial Library and installed exhibition gallery space ("ventilated and washed with refrigerated air") that rivaled the then-major American art museums including the Metropolitan in New York [14]. The library and gallery were designed "to influence the taste" of the company printers. In the Memorial Library, a hexagonal room in a tower of the plant with cathedral ceilings, leaded windows, a large fireplace, and leather chairs, an employee could find examples of the finest printing from around the world over several centuries as well as a full complement of the most important books the company had printed.

Education was critical in meeting the need to expand the workforce and sustain quality. Because of intense competition in an expanding market

driven by technology, printers came to be perceived as having a higher social status than their allied tradesmen. At the same time, language product goods--everything from posters to books--came to be perceived increasingly as objects-of-art as well as articles-of-trade. The attention to product quality in publicity ephemera during the second decade of the modern era influenced the production of books in the 20s and 30s, leading eventually to a stratification of language products as "trade," "ordinary," "fine," "rare," "deluxe", and "luxury" [30]. The chief victory that resulted from the widespread improvements in printers' education, both by the unions and in-house, was the rise of the trade and ordinary book as an important product nationally recognized by the industry [7, 27, 28]. As the aesthetic value of the language product increased, playing an important role in pricing, its value fluctuated according to public opinion climates and the need to marshal, persuade, monitor, or manage the public opinion process in order to maintain the value of those goods became necessary. This enlarged the potential importance of the modern agency at the same time it provided the impetus to institutionalize the design function integrated with production in traditional printing organizations.

The Making of a Definitive Culture

Surrounded by a glut of finely-printed publicity ephemera and cheaply printed mass market books [28] an educated printer who had studied economics and culture in order to cultivate his tastes in the plant School aspired to achieve something permanent by producing "definitive" work, particularly in an age saturated with ephemeral imitators, and by doing so influence American culture [17]. Yet in the early decades of modernism, the prevailing characteristic, as Daniel Boorstin identified, was the blurring of cultural boundaries resulting from the rising importance of public opinion as a science [6]. This awakening of a sense of national culture as a public expression of a collective awareness left many fascinated by the nature of the American commercial character [26].

Kittredge and the Lakeside graduates hoped to achieve a definitive public statement that spanned class boundaries and instructed American industry about excellent workmanship, and which could speak abroad about that part of high culture which Americans held sacred. Definitive work, in the view of those printers who aspired to achieve it, would first of all "never be imitated or redesigned again," second, it would be well-known, embraced as important in a highly public way; and third, it would have a lasting influence on universal industrial production standards. Cultural definition could be said to occur when the design of a product transcends its purpose, message, textual interpretation, or historical periodicity, and becomes valued as a work of art in addition to its intrinsic value as an article of trade [14].

That production and design came to be regarded in printing houses as an integrated process rather than discrete stages of operation is characteristic of modern printing. "Design" means "intention," as Beatrice Warde of Monotype Corporation pointed out, and the closer the designer was to the producer, the interpreter of intentions, the greater the clarity of purpose, which led to definitive work. "Vagueness of intention" was

counterproductive she commented, whether in the manufacture of fine books or ordinary trade literature [5].

R. R. Donnelley & Sons established its Department of Design and Typography in 1920 in response to a $300,000 order from Pittsburgh Plate Glass for a publicity booklet about the history of glass [4, 14]. Donnelley's main business was traditionally "printing by the ton, or even trainload," catalogs for Sears, Roebuck & Co., Montgomery Ward, and others, encyclopedias, telephone directories, magazines, reference and textbooks, monthlies such as *Fashions of the Hour* for Marshall Field's direct mail advertisements, and industrial biographies of Henry Ford, William Wrigley, Albert Blake Dick, and Harvey S. Firestone, among others. When Donnelley received the PPG order even the well-established illustrator Rudolph Ruzicka was reluctant to accept it on a free lance basis, forcing senior management to establish design as an integrated line function [30, 14].

To handle the order William Kittredge was brought in to head a five-man Department of Design and Typography. Formerly of the Riverside Press in Cambridge and Art Director for a leading printing house in Philadelphia, he had made his commercial reputation on the Victor Talking Machine and Packard Motor Car accounts. According to senior vice-president Herbert Zimmerman, to whom he reported, it was Kittredge's "instinctive feel for promotion" and "interest in the relation of the graphic arts to the general culture of the community" that established the immediate impact of the department on company operations. Kittredge and the Design Department made up of Lakeside graduates were responsible for the long range influence of the Donnelley Co. as a market leader, not only in fine printing for commercial ephemera, but in advancing integrated design as a line production function [30, 14].

One of Kittredge's first glimmers of genius was the Four Books campaign (1926-1930) intended to produce "definitive illustrated editions of American literature" as a protest against limited editions by private presses that reprinted foreign work which no "ordinary businessman" would read, on hand-made paper, by hand-presses, using "antique methods" and selling at a price "only the rich could afford." In Kittredge's view such editions were a "crime against progress" [14]. Kittredge's Four Books began as specimen product advertisements, to be given away to book publishers to demonstrate the ability of Donnelley to produce as fine an edition with large machinery as could be accomplished with a handset press.

From a purely business standpoint, the Four Books campaign successfully achieved its goal, repositioning Donnelley with mass market book publishers. The campaign design as well as the materials themselves formed the leading prototype for marketing books in the early modern period, and were widely imitated throughout the U.S. and U.K., by George Macy's Limited Editions Club, Burton Emmett's Colophon, and Bennett Cerf's Book-of-the-Month-Club, among others. The production details of the Four Books (Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*; Richard Henry Dana, *Two Years*; Edgar Allen Poe, *Tales*; and Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*) took six years, far longer than anticipated. Initially intended to be entirely American-made, Kittredge was unable to obtain the materials he needed

in the U.S., and nearly everything but the labor had to be imported from Britain [30, 4].

Over a period of years Kittredge planned for an exhibition to launch the release of the Four Books. He hoped that the show in the Donnelly gallery for employees, also open to the general public, would consist of all the "definitively" illustrated books in the English language [30]. Kittredge aspired to penetrate what Lawrence Levine calls the sacralized culture with what were irrefutably low commercial products [17].

The exhibit was opened in October of 1931, the year after the Four Books were released. Kittredge's selection of titles demonstrates what he meant by cultural definition, that his work would never be reprinted or reinterpreted again. The exhibition included 242 works including wood engraving books completed prior to 1500, copper plate engraved books from France, and color plate sporting books from England. Some of the works exhibited came from the company's Memorial Library, others from collectors. The Art Institute loaned William Blake's hand-colored plates for Dante's *Inferno*, and examples by Redon, Goya, Turner, and others were included in the show. Kittredge wanted to achieve cultural definition in the manner of printed drawings by Hans Holbein, Albrecht Durer, and Sandro Botticelli's vision of Dante's *Divine Comedy* printed in Berlin in 1925, all included in the show.

Modern and contemporary examples of equally sacred "popular" culture also were abundant: Eric Gills' *Canterbury Tales*, Kate Greenway's *Pied Piper*, Frederic Remington's *Old Sante Fe*, George Cruickshank's *Seven League Boots*, and *Jack and the Bean Stalk*, Aubrey Beardsley's *le Morte d'Arthur* and *Salome*, John Tenniel's *Aesop's Fables* of 1848 and *Alice in Wonderland*. Clearly Kittredge was a man who wanted his work to be known by the company it kept: the Donnelley Four Books were included in the exhibit and were well-received in impressively definitive company [30].

While the house printer valued well-designed, definitive editions that would raise American industrial standards and make a cultural and industrial statement to Europeans about the state of U.S. industry, the maverick, full-service agency experts valued "Style." To compete with the professional stylists who "understood not only type but white space," the houses straddled an uncertain market and developed brand-name faces suitable for either purpose, books or publicity [23]. A full-blown split between publicity and book printing in the 1920s fueled a price-for-value debate that dominated the 1930s [28]. As prices became more volatile, language products became increasingly politicized.

The word "styling" in modern printing developed between 1917 and 1927 and became an important alternative to creating new markets. By selling goods that could become obsolete by virtue of "that mysterious current of human affairs known as a change of style," resulting from shifts in public opinion, politics, economic climates, and mass media inventions, inventoried type-faces could be labeled old-fashioned, and the modern business man could be urged to scrap and replace what had become outdated [27]. Styling was an artificial stimulus to the maturing market in low culture language products. Design, on the other hand, was valued as

the authentic representation of the higher culture. Timeliness was discounted in the search for permanence.

The blurring of cultural distinctions between high and low culture that led to a universal regard for all language products, despite their design or segmentation, as both articles-of-trade and objects-of-art fueled the drive to influence definitive public culture among printers of commercial ephemera. In the early modern period, language products acted as a cultural transformer of printers' organizations, educational systems, and industrial values [13]. Their agency occurred by virtue of their attempt to bridge cultures, values, geography, and class distinctions. Education about new technology, product quality, and what was called in the industry "cultural studies" was critical to both producers and consumers of language products, and experiments in industrial and professional education that could serve as models, even today, of workable systems were tried, tested, and proven successful. Based on their successes in education, applied technology, and visual literacy, the producers of low cultural products attempted to lay claim to higher cultural ground and successfully created a niche for their goods in the definitive culture.

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