

# History Matters: Martin Luther and the Age of Information

Martin Luther was a Catholic monk who believed sincerely in his faith and the Catholic hierarchy that he served. He rose to a position of prominence and oversight, presiding over eleven parishes. But upon seeing the workings of the Church from this more prestigious position, he was disturbed by practices he believed corrupted his parishioners.

At first, he wrote letters of complaint that were ignored. Over time, however, he got the attention of people in higher positions who were alarmed by Luther's outspoken criticism, especially since it included complaints about the Pope. They hatched a plan to corrupt Luther and hush his dangerous talk. They decided to dazzle Luther with attention, praise, and a trip to Rome. These men did not understand the sincere man they were dealing with. A trip to the glitz and grandeur of Rome only caused Luther further consternation about the work of the Church, as the visible accumulation of material wealth heightened his concern.

As Luther returned to a life of study, he began to find deeper divisions in his own beliefs and the Church. He was a Catholic in his heart, so he did not contemplate rebellion. Instead, he searched for a way to enlighten his fellow priests.

Then, in 1516 the Pope sent out requests for the sale of indulgences to rebuild St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. An indulgence is a way to pay money for the forgiveness of a sin. Luther did not believe that paying for a sin brought God's forgiveness; he believed forgiveness required a genuine display of remorse. Now Luther found his misgivings about the Church smacking him in the face in a way he couldn't ignore. The request to fundraise for the Basilica sent Luther into a final moment of reckless rage at the Catholic Church.

On October 31, 1517, he wrote a list of 95 Theses, or complaints, detailing the problems he believed needed to be corrected in the Church and, according to some accounts of the time, nailed them on the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany.

Within two weeks, Luther's Theses were being printed in batches of a thousand and spread throughout all of Europe. Within a few months, everyone in Europe, including the Pope, knew what he had written. Martin Luther became the first man to “go viral” through the use of “new” media. No one was expecting it, especially not the Pope, who in other times would have trumped up some charge of heresy and had this troublemaker burned at the stake.

Martin Luther had the good fortune to handwrite his 95 Theses at a time when someone could take them down to the printer and reproduce them quickly, giving rise to the phrase we now know as “the power of the press.” The press spread Luther's words as fast as printers—all of whom were eager to sell the pamphlets and make money—could generate them. It was not simply about the words Luther had written; it was also about the business opportunities they offered too.

Some printers tried to print rebuttals to Luther's remarks, but this turned out to be a waste of time as well as a poor business investment, because no one wanted to read them. Erasmus, a theologian who disagreed with Luther, had to pay out of his own pocket to have his rebuttals produced, but this effort resulted in a dismal failure. Luther never paid for any of his work to be printed. The printers were eager to get their hands on the next things Luther wrote. And so the publishing industry was born.

As one of the pivotal changes of the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation set the stage for a multitude of changes. In combination with the printing press and the scientific revolution, the upheaval of Martin Luther's accusations of corruption and calls for reform of the Catholic Church turned the world upside down. Rarely does one man have such an impact.

Luther did more than accuse the Pope of being the “anti-Christ.” He put the Bible into the hands of the common man by printing it in the common German language of the day. Before Luther, the Bible had only been printed in Latin, a language that could only be understood by those who had access to a higher education. As a result, it functioned as a kind of secret code—off limits to the average person.

The Church was keen to keep parishioners from reading the Bible and interpreting it without a priest as an intermediary. Yet, Luther encouraged people to read the Bible and even went so far as to recommend that they

interpret the meaning for themselves. Then he really cut out the men in power, by insinuating that it was possible for everyday people to communicate directly with God themselves, without the help of a priest. Luther called the Church's integrity into question and, by extension, its legitimacy and relevance.

Martin Luther may have been talking about reforming Catholicism, and he may have founded Lutheranism, but he also revolutionized the idea of thinking for oneself. Through his actions, he put the power of knowledge into the hands of the average man.

Luther was committed to the idea that he was revealing a great truth. The power of the printed word, whether it is in a newspaper, book, or webpage, is still at the heart of human knowledge. But can we say that those who communicate with us are as passionate about printing, reading, and knowing the truth as Luther? Sadly, we know many are not.

While the age of information expands at a rate Luther could never have imagined, so does the age of misinformation. Luther set us on a path of self-discovery, but it will end in disaster if we don't understand the need to distinguish truth from lies. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century political theorist Hannah Arendt explains:

*"The moment we no longer have a free press, anything can happen. What makes it possible for a totalitarian or any other dictatorship to rule is that people are not informed; how can you have an opinion if you are not informed? If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer. This is because lies, by their very nature, have to be changed, and a lying government has constantly to rewrite its own history. On the receiving end you get not only one lie—a lie which you could go on for the rest of your days—but you get a great number of lies, depending on how the political wind blows. And a people that no longer can believe anything cannot make up its mind. It is deprived not only of its capacity to act but also of its capacity to think and to judge. And with such a people you can then do what you please."*

[“Hannah Arendt.”](#) *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. July 2006, Revised 2024.

Berkowitz, Roger. [“On Fake Hannah Arendt Quotations.”](#) *The Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities*, August 2024.