

# The unintended consequences of censorship

By Sascha O. Becker, Francisco J. Pino and Jordi Vidal Robert

**In the 16th and 17th centuries, the Catholic Church tried to stop the spread of Protestantism by suppressing the printing of works written by Martin Luther (1483–1546) and his followers. On the surface, this succeeded in reducing access to forbidden books in Catholic areas. But it also encouraged creative people to move from areas that suppressed freedom of the press to those that resisted censorship.**

Censorship is common in many parts of the world today. Independent media are suppressed or highly regulated in countries such as Russia or Turkey. But censorship is not new. Even 500 years ago, after the invention of the printing press in Europe, censorship was high on the agenda, as the Catholic Church battled the insurgency of the Protestant reformer Martin Luther and his followers.

The Protestant Reformation in the early 16th century challenged the monopoly of the Catholic Church. The printing press helped the new movement to spread its ideas well beyond the cradle of the Reformation in Luther's city of Wittenberg, Germany.

During the Counter-Reformation of the 16th and early 17th centuries, the Catholic Church tried to halt the spread of Protestantism by issuing an Index of Forbidden Books which blacklisted not only Protestant authors but all authors whose ideas were considered to be in conflict with Catholic doctrine. ▶



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But how successful was this censorship? Did the printing of forbidden books continue or was there compliance with the Index of Forbidden Books? If there was compliance, did some cities comply more, while others largely ignored the rulings of the Catholic Church? We study printing in Europe to find out.

We use newly digitised data on authors censored by the Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation (Becker, Pino and Vidal-Robert, 2021). The Index of Forbidden Books (*Index Librorum Prohibitorum*) issued by the Pope was intended to apply universally. But the Catholic Church and Catholic rulers also issued local editions of the Index at different points in time over the course of the 16th century. We combine this information with data from the Universal Short Title Catalogue (USTC), containing information on book titles, authors, printers and printing locations between 1450 and 1650.

We look at the decades before and after a specific local index was issued (e.g., the Paris Index in 1544) and we compare the number of editions printed in cities with a printing press, of works written by forbidden authors and works by authors who were not censored.

We find that printing of forbidden authors dropped once authors were listed on the Index. But compliance was not uniform in space. Cities closer to a town where an index was issued show stronger compliance than those further away. This could be due either to printers further away being less aware of the Index, or due to weaker enforcement by authorities.

Religiosity could also be an important factor for compliance of Christian printers and readers, especially when being told that certain works should no longer be printed and read. Obviously, there are no survey data from the 16th century telling us about beliefs of individuals. But we can proxy the degree of religiosity of a location by looking at which municipalities honour a Christian saint in their name, such as St. Etienne in France, or St. Peter(-Ording) in northern Germany. We find that compliance was generally stronger in printing cities surrounded by more municipalities with names honouring saints.

Our results suggest that the Catholic Church succeeded in its primary aim of quelling dissenting ideas. But that is not the end of the story. We might expect that creative people, who often challenge traditional ideas, preferred to live in locations where their ideas could flow

unhindered. So, did ‘thinkers’ move away from cities that suppressed the freedom of the press and move to places where freedom of the press was allowed?

To analyse this, we focus on Germany, the heartland of the Protestant Reformation where the fight over orthodox and new ideas was fiercest, and various religious wars were fought over the course of the 16th and 17th centuries.

Using data from a collection of biographies known as the *Deutsche Biographie*, we look at the places of birth and death of famous Germans. Place of birth proxies for the location of their formative years. Place of death proxies for their place of work, under the assumption that most people in early modern Germany would die during or soon after the end of their work life.

We find that cities

which defied the Index of Forbidden Books were better at attracting famous people. Our results suggest that these thinkers in turn helped their adoptive cities to develop new ideas and grow faster over time.

In summary, while the Catholic Church seems to have successfully suppressed dissenting ideas in some areas, it came at the cost of losing creative people from those places. Censorship was thus a mixed blessing for the Catholic Church.

These unintended consequences of censorship are still relevant today. While censorship may help quell dissent, it comes at the cost of losing creative minds. ◀

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