

# The World of Aldus Manutius (1494-1515), a Renaissance Publishing Venture: Materiality, Cultural Entrepreneurship, and Institutional Dynamics in Markets

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## Extended Abstract

**Objectives.** This research project aims to contribute to the literature on processes of “market change and development” (Araujo *et al.* 2010; Martin, Schouten 2010) and “market system dynamics” (Giesler, Fischer 2016; Marketing Theory 2017). In this work, the “materiality of objects” and the relationships that the objects “perform” between production and consumption contribute to shaping markets (Callon 1998; Latour 2005; Law 1986): a) by restoring complex social dynamics “by simply being” (in terms of “social ordering”); b) by making actors, institutions and culture interact; c) by triggering change processes that are often unexpected because they are endogenous.

In this theoretical framework, the emergence of markets as “collective constructions” is linked to two analysis dimensions. First, a market can be defined as “an organizational field encompassing a set of institutions and actors, governed by institutional logics, supported by institutional work, and characterized by institutional boundaries” (Dolbec, Fischer 2015, p. 1449). So, to investigate the change processes of markets as institutions, we can introduce a “practice-based” research perspective (Nicolini 2012; Gherardi 2012): (i) “a family of orientations that take orderly materially mediated doing and saying (‘practices’) and their aggregations as central for the understanding of organizational and social phenomena” (Nicolini, Monteiro 2016, p. 110); (ii) and in which these phenomena “acquire an enduring character thanks to both intersubjective relationships among humans and of heterogeneous interactions between humans and non-humans (e.g., objects)” (Monteiro, Nicolini 2014, p. 64).

Considering the “modern book” as a “cultural artefact” (Knorr-Cetina 1997; Olsen 2013) and as a “change agent” (Eisenstein, 1982), the printing revolution, the emergence of publishing as a form of cultural entrepreneurship, and the evolution of the book trade during the Renaissance were explored in terms of “institutional dynamics in markets” (Scaraboto, Fischer 2013; Dolbec, Fischer, 2015; Figueiredo, Scaraboto 2016).

**Methodology.** Aldus Manutius, probably the most famous printer of publishing history, devoted his life to the “rebirth” and “restoration” of classical antiquity by reshaping the relationship between: (i) literary and publishing activity (Dionisotti 1995); (ii) the cultural life of his time and his own socio-economic context (Lowry 2000); (iii) the manufacturer/designer of books and profound intellectual impulses and ideals still foundation of present-day Italian and European culture (Nuovo 2003).

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*Empirical context.* An educator and grammarian, Aldus arrived in Venice around 1490, probably in his forties, from Carpi where he tutored the nephews of his friend Pico della Mirandola. Aldus' adventure, which lasted two decades, coincided with a rather rough period of history (the fall of the Roman Empire of the East dates back to 1453, Charles VIII came to Italy in 1494, the great plague dates back to 1498, the League of Cambrai against the Republic of Venice was in 1508). As fragile as it was, Venice was still at the height of its splendour, with an extraordinarily cosmopolitan and friendly environment, "full of commercial and administrative responsibilities", with all the factors that explained just how much the production and trade of manuscripts and printed books was thriving: "great universities, city communities with widespread literacy, social strata in economic growth, capable of great entrepreneurial initiatives, a thick presence of men of the church" (Nuovo 2003).

Aldus arrived in what was already the leading publishing centre in Europe: Lowry (1979/2000) points out that around the end of '500s, around 150 Venetian printers produced over four thousand editions, twice more than Paris and about one-seventh of the entire European production; however approximate, the average of private libraries could reach a staggering twenty books per inhabitant (Brown 1891; Castellani 1888); according to Pettegree (2011, 2014), eighty-eight thousand works were sent to the press between 1450 and 1660; and despite the press, printing companies and book trade being spread throughout Europe (especially between France and Germany), it does not seem an exaggeration to say that "the development of early printing coincided fully with the most influential moment in Italian cultural history" (Nuovo 2013, p. 2; Richardson 1994, 1999). In this framework, what distinguished Aldus' project was probably the philological and linguistic attention, his commitment to educational activities and dissatisfaction with the quality of texts and books on which he could rely in his role as a tutor (Dionisotti 1995).

*Data sources and analytical process.* The case study connects historical institutionalism (Suddaby *et al.* 2014) and sociology of translation (Callon 1986, Latour 2005) in an investigation in which "the publishing company encroaches on the history of culture and humanistic literature [...]" (Dionisotti 1995, p. 37). The research project is based on a rich literature produced by different disciplines and academic skills: book historians, scholars of bibliography and library studies, experts of the Italian and European Renaissance, art historians, antiquarians, philologists, scholars of textual criticism (Armstrong 1990; Barbier 2001; Febvre, Martin 1958; Nuovo 2003; Pearson 2013; Richardson 1999; Suarez, Wouldhuysen 2013; Turner 2014). Over time, a huge amount of archival material and documentary sources have allowed us to approach the history of Aldus far beyond the production of books (Lowry 1979/2000). From an empirical standpoint (Belk 2006), the work is based on a special "list of objects" that retrace the entrepreneurial history of Aldus between 1494 and 1515, that proposed in the exhibition *Aldus Manutius and the Renaissance in Venice* (Gallerie dell'Accademia, 2016; Beltrami, Gasparotto 2016). Table 1 refers to the theoretical framework of the paper (the case restores the entire set of institutional work types: Lawrence, Suddaby 2006), the research themes (materiality and institutional work-IW): Nicolini *et al.* 2012; Monteiro, Nicolini 2014; Lawrence *et al.* 2009) and a selection of materials used for the analysis (illustrative quotes).

Table 1 – Analytical dimensions, research themes, categories of IW and research materials

Type of institutional work (*):	Material objects of institutional work (**):	Illustrative quotes (**):
A. «political work in which actors reconstruct rules, property rights, and boundaries that define access to material resources»		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• vesting</li> <li>• defining</li> <li>• advocacy</li> </ul>	<p><b>Object no 1,</b>  <b>Vittore Carpaccio, <i>St. Ursula and the Pilgrims Meet Pope Cyriacus outside Rome</i>, c. 1490-1491)</b></p>	<p>A1. «[...] It is the portrait of the greatest Venetian humanist, the most important philologist of the time (on par with Poliziano), epitome of a new culture that based full possession of civilisation and ancient knowledge on the systematic recovery and restoration of classical texts, being aware of the absolute value of words and form. A culture of profound spiritual congruity with Aldus Manutius, who grew up in the Roman humanist environment, but only in Venice (with the philology of Barbaro and his circle) found the foundations and nourishment for his publishing activities» (p. 169)</p>
	<p><b>Object no. 2,</b>  <b>Hellenistic sculptor and the workshop of Tullio Lombardo, <i>Muse</i>, called <i>Cleopatra Grimani</i>, second century B.C., and c. 1500)</b></p>	<p>A2. «[...] it is fascinating to think that while a new textual philology and Aldus Manutius as publisher were committed to reconstructing the original lesson of texts by classical authors, a Venetian sculptor belonging to the circle of the Lombardo family offered a sample of integration (and reinterpretation) of an ancient statue in a fragmentary state» (p. 170)</p>
B. «actions in which actors' belief systems are reconfigured»		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• connecting identities</li> <li>• changing norms</li> <li>• constructing networks</li> </ul>	<p><b>Object no. 3,</b>  <b>Aldus Manutius, <i>Musarum Pangyris</i>, Venice, Baptista de Tortis, c. 1489)</b></p>	<p>B1. «The little book or pamphlet, probably composed in 1484, contains short poems in simple Latin – a kind of pedagogical exercise – addressed to his young pupil Alberto Pio of Carpi, who would go on to become one of Aldus' most important patrons and supporters, together with a letter to the boy's mother Caterina Pio on the value and advantages of the classical education Aldus was, as their tutor, imparting to her sons»</p>
	<p><b>Object no. 7,</b>  <b>Anonymous sixteenth-century Venetian medal maker, <i>Medal Portrait of Aldus Manutius</i>, bronze casting, c. 1515</b></p>	<p>B2. «[...] the letter is notable for its references to contemporary scholars – Pico della Mirandola (Caterina's brother, who had recommended Aldus to her as her sons' tutor), Zaccaria and Ermolao Barbaro, and Federigo, Duke of Urbino – as well as Aldus' sense of a collaborative scholarly community: both these elements found in the letter – the pedagogical purpose and the awareness of the value of scholarly collaboration – were to play a fundamental role in Aldus' publishing enterprise» (p. 171).</p> <p>B3. «[...] Whereas the back of the medal illustrates his famous trademark (an anchor and a dolphin), bearing the motto [...], that is the translation into Greek of the Latin "FESTINA LENTE" [...]. Aldus mentioned his "hieroglyphic" of the dolphin and anchor for the first time in the dedicatory letter to Alberto Pio dated 14 October 1499. [...] The reason for choosing this emblem, that was destined to become renowned and nearly a symbol of publishing itself, was narrated by Erasmus of Rotterdam in one of his <i>Adagia</i>, it was dedicated to the <i>Festina lente</i>, so dear to Emperors Augustus and Vespasian, where the contrast between the stability of the anchor and speed of the dolphin acquired the meaning of a quest for the right balance between opposites in the art of government, between swiftness in deeds and firmness in decisions» (p. 180-181).</p>
C. «actions designed to alter abstract categorizations in which the boundaries of meaning systems are altered»		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• mimicry</li> <li>• theorizing</li> <li>• educating</li> </ul>	<p><b>Object no. 28,</b>  <b>Francesco Colonna, <i>Hypnerotomachia Poliphili</i>, Venezia, Aldo Manuzio per Leonardo Crasso, 1499</b></p>	<p>C1. «[...] Written in a sophisticated Italian prose leavened with Greek expressions and not always easy to understand, the story of <i>Hypnerotomachia Poliphili</i> consists of elaborate descriptions of Poliphilo's love for Polia and the decidedly initiatory ordeals he undergoes in a dreamland while searching for his loved one. In spite of the author's name, Francesco Colonna, being readily deducible from the acrostic formed by the first letters of the work's thirty-eight chapters [...], doubts still remain as to the actual identity of the person who bore it, although he is very likely to have been a Dominican monk living in the monastery of Santi Giovanni e Paolo in Venice» (p. 220, ).</p>
	<p><b>Object no. 70,</b>  <b>Dante Alighieri, <i>Terze rime [Commedia]</i>, Venezia, Aldo Manuzio, 1502</b></p>	<p>C2. «[...] Aldus Manutius took the initiative of printing his famous books in a small format so as to provide texts by classical and modern poets in a pleasant reading form for his more sophisticated and erudite readers during their leisure time [...]. Petrarch [...] and Dante, the most important Italian poets, were included in this publishing programme thanks to the financial support of Pietro Bembo and that of his brother Carlo» (p. 300).</p>

**Findings.** Historically, it is unclear why Aldus “decided to change careers and pursue that of a publisher and printer” (Beltramini, Gasparotto 2016, p. 81). However, he described his publishing and cultural project in several documents:

“the publication of Greek texts that had never been printed in the original language before, published carefully but without the medieval commentaries that littered the margins of Latin translations in fifteenth-century editions. However, keeping the readability and clarity of the texts a priority was an essential precondition for securing the favour of students and scholars, as well as the need to present it in an elegant and refined version so that it also appealed to the richer and more sophisticated cultural elite at the time” (p. 82).

Aldus was a peer of, among others, Luca Pacioli, Pietro Bembo, Erasmus of Rotterdam, and Ermolao Barbaro - all personalities he interacted with in Venice. The first object presented in the exhibition was a 1490 Carpaccio painting which seems to represent the Ermolao Barbaro’s circle (quotations A1, table 1): humanists, scholars, writers played a key role in building those “rule systems that confer status [and] identity, define boundaries of membership or create status hierarchies within a field” (“defining”: Lawrence, Suddaby 2006, p. 221). For Aldus, it was necessary to make his business model recognisable and legitimate, in a context where there was widespread printing technology without there being a real “political project” around the object-book: as suggested by Latour, “objects – taken as so many issues – bind all us in ways that map out a public space profoundly different from what is usually recognized under the label of ‘the political’” (in Latour, Weibel 2005, p. 15). The Greek statue (object no. 2, quotation A2, table 1) provides a symbolic representation of the plot from “the Antique, its worship, its interpretations” (p. 14) and the concept of “archaeology of ancient texts” (Olsen 2013).

Reconfiguring the belief systems of Venetian culture protagonists involved redefining “the relationship between an actor and the field in which that actor operates” and “re-making the connections between sets of practices and the moral and cultural foundations for those practices” (Lawrence, Suddaby 2006, p. 221). In this case (quotations B1 and B2), the publication of Aldus’ grammar, namely the publishing project that had considerable success, was linked to the pedagogical and educational practices in which he firmly believed. Furthermore, Aldus considered “cross-disciplinary collaboration” to be essential (Nicolini *et al.* 2012) among scholars of classical culture, given that the two phenomena are closely linked through the materiality of the book. What emerged was “a social world in which practitioners interrogate “their own activity and explore new ways of doing, saying, and being” (Nicolini, Monteiro 2016; p. 124).

The double-headed anchor with an entwined dolphin is the famous “trademark” of Aldus, reproduced in this case on the back of a bronze medal minted the year of his death (object no. 7, quotation B3, table 1). Biographical accounts on adopting that brand, which had become the publishing house’s symbol along with the legendary motto “*Festina lente*” (“hasten slowly”), all emphasise the profound admiration and friendship on which the professional collaboration between Aldus and a young Erasmo rested (Dionisotti 1995; Davies 1995; Lowry 1979/2000; Bonora 2015). The

fame of “Aldine” had already crossed Italian borders in the early 1500s, so much so that “in 1507 Erasmus wrote to Aldus, as fellow scholar, praising him not only for his learning but also for his technical achievements in printing the Greek and Latin classics” (Beltramini, Gasparotto 2016, p. 181). In December 1507, Erasmus moved to Venice and lived for nearly a year as a guest at Aldus’ house to closely follow the implementation of the new edition of the *Adagia*.

In terms of “normative networks” (Lawrence *et al.* 2009), evoking the splendour of the manuscripts and Greek and Latin culture, the “Aldine” became “new models of material culture” (Nicolini *et al.* 2012). The high production standards imposed by Aldus, the phenomenon of international collectors and the admiration of competitors lead to the creation of sophisticated counterfeits, and this was “in spite of the patents granted by the Aldine press the Venetian Senate and the Pope” (p. 185).

At the time, incidents of piracy involved one of Aldus’ main rivals, the dynasty of the Giunta family of Florence (Nuovo 2003/2013). In Europe, Lyons had become the leading French publishing centre and was one of the few markets where artisans and printers could boast circulating high quality counterfeit Aldine. In a 1503 document, Aldus directly addressed his readers, as was his custom: “for the sake of buyers (but unexpectedly informing the Lyon booksellers), Aldus himself pointed out these subtle differences [...]” (p. 185; see also: Kostylo 2008; Manutius 1502, 1503). The adoption of the trademark was just one of many expedients Aldus adopted to remedy the problem of counterfeits.

Aldus did not stop at the philological “restoration” of ancient books and scholarly readership (object no. 70, quotation C2, table 1): (i) he made available “texts for [that] new culture, in editions characterised by impeccable philological care and an innovative design that improves readability and ease of use of the reader”; (ii) he spread the great “vernacular literature” (Dante, Petrarch, Bembo, Erasmus); (iii) and his operation “was crowned with great success” so much so that the *pocket-edition classics* [...] became a very sought after and fashionable object first in the sophisticated world of the Italian courts and then throughout a cultured and cosmopolitan Europe” (p. 15).

The pocket format (known as “the octavo format”), the italic typeface and the catalogue of his own production (Lowry 1979/2000; Fletcher, 1988) are the most famous innovations with which Aldus was able to enter a very competitive context and with the technology from Germany that was already widespread (other large printers had been in operation for a long time in Venice such as, for example, Nicholas Jenson: Lowry 2000; Marcon, Zorzi 2004; Maclean 2009; Kirwan, Mullins 2015). In addition, printing in Greek with movable type “required a significant investment of capital and specific calligraphic and metallurgical skills” (p. 174). Aldus found the financial support in his young student Alberto Pio, who became lord of Carpi, and the help of Pier Francesco Barbarigo, nephew of the Doge of Venice in office. Finally, he became a partner of a skilled and wealthy local publisher, Andrea Torresano, whose daughter he would later marry. From a technical point of view: the design and realisation of Greek characters was performed by famous Bolognese engraver, Francesco Griffio; Aldus introduced cursive writing by using the handwriting of a skilled scribe, Emanuele Rusota, as a model; and in March 1495, the

first book was ready, a prestigious Greek grammar of a famous Byzantine philologist (Turner 2014).

In this perspective, object 28 (quotation C1, table 1) seems alien to Aldus' original project: the legendary book, regarded by many as the most beautiful illustrated book of the Renaissance, the *Polifilo* seems to be a "fable and not philological" product, visionary rather than educational and cultural (Beltramini, Gasparotto 2016). In terms of institutional work, the book played a key role in showing the "skills and knowledge necessary to support the new institution" in action (Lawrence, Suddaby 2006, p. 221). On closer inspection, the technique and content in the "Strife of Love in a Dream" (literal translation of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Colonna 1499/2004) reflected the underlying metaphor of the work: "Polia (from the Greek 'many things') can be classical antiquity, art or knowledge itself. That of Polifilo is an initiatory journey, a gradual conquest of knowledge" (Beltramini, Gasparotto 2016, p. 217).

**Research limits.** Research limits are from a critical management perspective (Alvesson, Sköldbberg 2009; MacLaran *et al.*, 2009; Araujo *et al.* 2010) which aims to also extend a practice-based approach (Schatzki 2010; Nicolini 2012) to marketing studies and analyses of market dynamics/market change processes.

**Practical implications.** In terms of theoretical and empirical implications, Giesler and Fischer (in Marketing Theory 2017) have successfully identified the main lines of inquiry shared by the evolution of this research perspective: a) "markets as complex social systems"; b) "co-construction of marketplace reality"; c) "focus on change and development".

**Originality of the study.** The combination of institutional theories and the sociology of markets (Callon 1998) allows us to investigate the diffusion phenomena of innovation, the cultural dimension of business processes and the change of markets within a single coherent theoretical and epistemological framework based on overcoming the "agency vs. structure" relationship.

**Key words:** *materiality of things; history of books; Aldus Manutius; institutional work; market as social system*

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