

Early 20th century marketing of literature - Reclam, a trendsetter?

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Abstract

The literary marketplace changed significantly from the 19th to the 20th century: industrialisation, new readership and wars were as well reflected in the publishing industry. The attempts made by publishers to approach this new market with cheap books and high quality literature varied. The case study of Reclam, a German publisher, analyses the aims and means used for marketing between the late 19th century and 1930 in order to demonstrate, that with revolutionary ideas like the book-automat or an export library, there was money to make. Finding the gaps and how to use movements for their own profit could lead to success and set trends.

Key Words

Reclam, Marketing, Early 20th century, Paperback, Great War, Working-class

Introduction

Early 20th century Europe was marked by numerous historical and economic changes. Industrialisation and territorial fights of nations shaped the different marketplaces and, hence as well, the publishing industry. Connected to this, the following study aims to trace the marketing strategies for literature in the beginning of this challenging century and their success. What effect

had the conditions faced by the publishing industry on producing cheap but high quality literature? Can we say they had more difficulties due to the social, economic, or political situation they worked in?

After contextualising the publishing industry within that time period and analysing the marketplace and some publishers from Germany and the United Kingdom (producing cheap priced books), the main focus will be laid on the case of Reclam. In order to discover the success of Germany's oldest paperback publishing house, the revolutionary program and innovative aims of this publisher will be compared to possible competitors. Finally, this study will answer what kind of publisher Reclam was and if some of the marketing ideas could still work in or be adapted to the 21st century.

The literary marketplace of the early 20th century

After a belligerent and revolutionary 19th century, the consequences of the historical, economic and political changes were reflected by the society in the beginning of the following century. In Europe rose the Social Question, describing the social evils caused by the industrialisation. Furthermore, the publishing industry was shaped by the Industrial Revolution: new technological inventions produced scientific progress and a fast growing population; increasing prosperity and obligatory education resulted in a clash of classes, working-class movements, and a fight for identity, democracy and liberalisation. How to react to these movements and changes and how to stay in business? The reactions of publishers varied from rejection of the new reading mass to attempts to solve these problems.

In the United Kingdom the general tendency seemed to have been rejection. John Carey argued:

Dreaming of the extermination or sterilization of the mass, or denying that the masses were real people, was, then, an imaginative refuge for early twentieth-century intellectuals. [...] The early

twentieth century saw a determined effort, on the part of the European Intelligentsia, to exclude the masses from culture. (Carey, 1992: 15-17)

Some people from the publishing industry seemed to despise the (new) mass: according to Geoffrey Faber "Literature now is in the hands of the mob; and the mob is stampeded. It moves in a mass, this way or that, and all its thinking is done for it." (Faber, 1943: 29) A common opinion is that the direct reaction was gatekeeping and exclusion (Delany, 2002: 104).

In Germany the reaction was contrary in a way. As a very young nation, they still tried to develop their own identity and nationhood. Hence, the educational movement was seen as necessary and positive. Max Bernstein said: "Wer die Geister beherrscht, ist der wahre Regent." (Widmungsblätter, 1908: 67) [The one who owns the spirits is the true regent.], and demonstrated that they tended to see education as a mean of influence for progress.

Consequently, supporters of education were described as benefactors. The philosopher Wilhelm Börner said that "Der größte Wohltäter scheint mir der zu sein, der die sittliche und geistige Kraft seines Volkes, und somit der Menschheit, stärkt und erhöht." (Widmungsblätter, 1908: 107) [The greatest benefactor seems to be to me, the one who forces and elevates the moral and intellectual power of his nation, and, hence, of mankind.] Ernst Bassermann, councillor and member of the government, declared that:

Dem Schöpfer einer Universal-Bibliothek welche reichen Bildungssegen unserem Volke gebracht hat und ein Teil echter Freude und reinen Genusses für Millionen geworden ist, zolle ich meine volle Anerkennung für sein Lebenswerk. (Widmungsblätter, 1908: 41)

[I pay tribute to the lifework of the creator of a universal library which brought rich educational blessing to our nation and which became a part of true happiness and pure pleasure for millions.]

It can be argued that in comparison to the UK, Germany welcomed the change and tried to use it as an advantage.

The new readership and the technological changes were very important for the publishing industry. For the book production and its communication circuit (Darnton, 1982: 12) this included more than the closer connection between publishers and readers: consumer society and good distribution gained importance and developed the need for marketing. Travellers, a new reader group, were approached by Routledge with the Yellowbacks (1840-1899). The so called Railway Novels were popular fiction and some non-fiction books sold at train stations for 2 shilling per piece. The cheap price was due to a poor quality and advertisement on the back of the books. Still, this mass-market paperback with high availability disappeared before the 20th century.

Much more successful was the Everyman's Library, founded in 1906 by J. M. Dent, a working-class bookbinder. He used the end of the copyright as a start and as "He was familiar with the early series [...] as well as the French 'Bibliothèque nationale' and the 'Réclam' series of Leipzig. But they represented fairly random selections of titles, unattractively produced and poorly edited." (Rose, 2002: 133), his aim was to improve these models and to build a canon, including as well avant-garde authors, proletarian writers and women writers. Furthermore, his program addressed the market of workers and students; he supported the Workers' Educational Association and used the increasing demand for cheap books in schools. The Everyman's Library was successful; by 1975 more than 60 million copies were sold worldwide (Rose, 2002: 135).

In Germany, small publishers tried to sell classics in form of *Volksbüchereien* (series called public library), e. g. Hesse or Meyer, but they did not succeed and disappeared after 1920. More successful was Tauchnitz Editions (1837-1943), described as the first modern paperback for students and travellers. Their marketing program focused an international market with series in English like the 'Collection of British and American Authors' or 'Series for the Young'. With just 20% German readers (*Sachsen Archiv*) and a global presence they gained their prestige in foreign countries, not in Germany. After World War I, the English market decreased constantly and Tauchnitz closed in 1943 after the bombing of the press. Until then, Tauchnitz was the competition for the UK in continental Europe.

Summarising, there were different publishers who tried to make money with cheap paperbacks but most of them did not survive the two World Wars of the 20th century. Did they not adapt well enough to the changing market? In the following, the case study will demonstrate how important marketing became in this time period and in which way a publisher could be successful.

Reclam's marketing strategies until 1930 and its reception

After its establishment in 1837, the Philipp Reclam jun. publishing house started to print and sell popular books for a cheap price. In 1867, Hans Heinrich Reclam founded the *Universal-Bibliothek*, by using the changed copyright regulation. His aim was to publish in single editions different popular and literary high quality works for the price of 20 Pfennig; a revolutionary cheap price, stable until 1917. A positive feedback from the beginning helped to build up a reputation among different social classes within the German nation: the mix of entertaining literature and challenging texts reached a wide public and allowed cheap mass production. Reclam's plan worked thanks to marketing strategies and the demand on the market. Until 1900 they had included different series into the *Universal-Bibliothek*: popular works/ classics, libretti/ opera texts, translations of Greek and Latin classics as well as translations of medieval, Russian and Scandinavian texts, philosophical works, law texts and, 1896 the Commentary on masterpieces series. The world literature tendency from the beginning was suitable for all classes and the single editions evoked a desire to collect the published numbers.

Identification with the publishing house was one of Reclam's first strategic points and a constant price and design, unchanged for 50 years, made the brand distinctive. *Universal-Bibliothek* volumes were books with extreme small lettering on densely filled pages. The booklets with simple binding (feather edge) out of inferior wood-pulp paper were wrapped into a pale yellow-red paper without cover, just an unostentatious framing.

Reclam tried advertisement in books for marketing during 1905-33; soon they exclusively advertised their own publications in form of inserts like e.g. bookmarks. The main period of advertisement was before the Great War. In the first years, Reclam promoted the *Universal-Bibliothek* as literature for home and travel. With regular inserts in form of fold-out brochures (including number, price, and length of the book) several thematic series were presented to the reader, e.g. the 50 famous novels or women literature. From 1914-18 the shortage of material caused a significant decrease in the number and quality of inserts. Furthermore, after 49 years, the price of 20 Pf had to increase to 25 Pf per book. The influence of wartime was also reflected in the content of inserts, focusing on distraction and encouragement. It is evident that in 1919-24 the weak economic situation caused deficient advertisement due to a crisis in the publishing house. Nevertheless, after 1924 Reclam started to advertise hardbacks and expanded the program with sample libraries and works by living authors like Stefan Zweig, Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, etc. With the takeover of the National Socialists and the decision not to promote their vision, Reclam stopped the production of inserts.

Apart from advertising and branding, Reclam set standards by adapting to the market with strategy variation and an inner core structure of the *Universal-Bibliothek*. The main target market were the working class, students and, during wartime, soldiers. For each public, they used a different marketing strategy.

Although a connection to the school as an institution was never directly expressed, since 1900 the new printed numbers of the *Universal-Bibliothek* and their publishing date were parallel to the reading lists of, in particular, the Prussian syllabus. Later even school catalogues with relevant class books appeared. From 1911 on the series of interpretation keys for schools, a reform of the orthography and more margin space turned Reclam books into the cheapest possibility for students to gain knowledge. Themed "Wer die Jugend für sich hat, hat die Zukunft für sich." (Lerner, 1992: 304) [The one who owns the young, owns the future.], this marketing strategy succeeded as the

dedication letters from 1908 show: many writers remembered spending their pocket money on the little Reclam booklets to expand their knowledge and to satisfy their hunger for good literature.

A different strategy was used to reach soldiers and volunteers at military hospitals. Parallel to other publishers all around Europe, Reclam produced three different boxes with 100 books for 25 Mark called the *Tragbare Feldbücherei* [portable field library] for distraction from the misery:

Reclam erkannte die großen Absatzmöglichkeiten für die kleinen, handlichen Bändchen und warb 1915 für 'Gute Bücher für unsere Feldgrauen, ausgewählt aus Reclams Novellen-Bibliothek' sowie für 'Kompagnie-Büchereien, zusammengestellt aus Reclams Universal-Bibliothek'. (Ewald, 1992: 249)
[Reclam identified the major key market for the small, handy books and advertised 1915 the 'Good books for our field-greys, selected from Reclam's novel-library' and the 'Company-library, selected from Reclam's universal library'.]

The interest in the working-class was of profitable nature and educational aims. Reclam found support in the German elite and politics (socialists and liberals) who thought that better educated workers would understand their role in society and fulfill it better. In other words, the education of the lower classes was supposed to ease and solve the Social Question in order to secure the international economic competitiveness (Knappenberger, 1992: 85). Reclam achieved to reach this class by collaborating with educational associations, producing catalogues for workers and, most important, by colportage.

Nevertheless, the most outstanding inventions of the early 20th century for marketing reasons were the Reclam Bookshelf (1911), a foldable model in three variants for optimal storage of the *Universal-Bibliothek* in bookshops; Reclam's Export Library (1926), a metal box, protecting 50 novels from rain, dust and insects for Germans living in tropical regions, and, finally, the Book-Automat (1912-1940): this "snack automat" for the mind was a reaction to the increase of street sellers: the machines were independent, without personal cost and open all day and all year. Round 80 different books, with a short summary or blurb on it to raise the reader's curiosity could fit into one automat.

The feedback of the German public proves that Reclam's marketing plans were successful. Several workers wrote letters, e.g. a metal worker saying that he owed most of his knowledge to Reclam, and that he became a different man (Knappenberger). More visible is the reception in the dedication letters to celebrate the 5000 number of the *Universal-Bibliothek*: 1225 people (booksellers, professors, directors, members of the government, authors and earls) felicitated Reclam in six different languages and called Reclam a blessing, miracle and a monument of national education and common property.

After this closer look at this publisher, we could say that Reclam was more than just an agent in the circuit of textual production (Darnton); Reclam was an agent in the construction of a cultural field (Bourdieu) and participated actively in nation building. Partly, Reclam channelled the flow of ideas and controlled them (Coser), by publishing many socialist texts, but a general preference was not obvious neither intended.

Reclam, a trendsetter?

Back then, Reclam was revolutionary: the aim to reach a broad mass with high quality but cheap literature and the versatile mix of texts were a risk, taken by the publisher, who adapted to the market and, therefore, set standards and gained status. The marketing means used to succeed were suitable and creative. Apart from outstanding inventions (Book-automat, Export-library, etc.), Reclam used one of the most powerful strategies: be distinctive and identifiable with program, design and price. Besides, collaboration with influential associations and people was used for profit and translations of authors like Ibsen and Gorki (rejected in their home countries) showed the world literature tendency and autonomy of this publisher.

Could we say that Reclam was a trendsetter? Partially. Some ideas were copied: e.g. the literary program of the *Universal-Bibliothek* was an inspiration for worker associations and *Volksbüchereien*,

and the book-automat was copied by Penguin 1937 in the form of the *Penguincubator*. But ideas like war-book-boxes were a general European phenomenon and, hence, are more a participation in a trend. However, many publishing houses did not survive two world wars, inflation, Industrial Revolution and other changes; but Reclam did (without merging with another publisher) and is now after nearly 200 years the oldest German paperback publisher and still successful. On the whole, parts of the program and strategy inspired other publishers but, I would say that this is not enough to declare Reclam as a trendsetter.

Conclusion

The problems and conditions they faced by producing cheap but high quality books were on the one hand wartime and inflation, on the other hand a change of population and society. The process of making history implies changes, and some of them last longer than others. War and inflation are not that relevant in 21st century Europe as they were before, but the change of society is a never ending process and will always challenge the industry. I would argue that it was not more difficult back then for the publishing industry, but different.

The publishing industry has to adapt constantly to either war, new readers, or globalisation and new media (social, electronic, etc.). Therefore, not all of the marketing strategies used by Reclam in the early 20th century could work in a modified way again in the 21st century: a war-time library is not relevant and the export-library box, although transforming this into an ebook-holiday package might be a success. Still, I am of the opinion that the series 'Comments on masterpieces' and the interpretation keys for students could be an inspiration for foreign publishers, as within Germany also followers like Klett make profit out of these separate books for schools.

Finally, I believe that even in the electronic media era a book-automat would succeed on streets, train stations or the beach. In fact, it is surprising that they are not in use anymore.

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