

Before Copyright: Printing privileges and the politics of knowledge in early modern Europe

BE4COPY examines the long-term history of printing privileges from a cross-disciplinary and European perspective. These privileges provided exclusive rights for the production of books and images: they can be considered one of the precursors of what we now call 'copyrights'. Introduced around 1470, shortly after the invention of the printing press, privileges were abolished around 1789, when new notions of ownership emerged alongside new ideas about political representation. The BE4COPY project studies the changing nature of the printing privilege over the course of these turbulent 300 years. The intimate relationship between legal frameworks and the politics of knowledge is the primary focus of the project.

Although numerous studies have examined printing privileges in their local context, there are to date no historical studies that have examined how different European systems of printing privileges were interrelated. BE4COPY will change that and thus contribute to a better understanding of the origins of copyrights as a specific form of shared European heritage. It does so by (1) examining the distribution of printing privileges on a European scale, exposing existing trade routes and political alliances, and (2) rethinking the relationship between legal protection and political interests. How did shifting discourses of expertise and stewardship influence the proprietorship of intellectual creations? How did the interplay between law, economy, and politics shape the production of knowledge? And how did 'authorship' and 'ownership' eventually emerge in that context as twin categories?

BE4COPY employs an innovative archive-based approach centred around the cross-cutting themes of 'Censorship and Promotion', 'Travelling Ideas and People', and 'Authorship and Readership'. The project adds a new layer to our evolving understanding of copyright and opens up new perspectives regarding the question of how knowledge was produced and shared in early modern Europe.