During the witchcraft prosecutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, news of witches, their crimes, confessions, and punishments made the early modern headlines. Pamphlets and broadsheets were printed throughout Europe detailing specific cases. In this way, the early modern news media played a significant role in communicating and constructing the crime of witchcraft to contemporaries. In recent years the historiography of witchcraft has become more focused on representations of witchcraft, both visual and textual. This has led to growing interest in how witchcraft was treated in early modern news media. This chapter will give an overview of some of the main historiographical developments in this emerging field of study. To date, most research has focused primarily on early modern Germany and early modern England. For this reason, these will be the geographical parameters for this overview. A number of issues will be considered: the origins of witchcraft news reports, authorship/readership, form, content and function, the use of images, and news in translation. As there is already a very useful survey of witchcraft in literature and drama, by Diane Purkiss,¹ this piece will focus purely on news media, the historiography of which has hitherto received no attention.

Historiographical context

While historians have long been aware that news reports of witches were in circulation at the time of the witch hunts, such reports have only become the subject of serious scholarship in the last three decades. Like images, pamphlets and broadsides were previously used as extraneous sources in studies that focused primarily on trial manuscripts and legal sources.² Despite the linguistic turn of the 1990s, which saw attention shift to ‘languages of witchcraft’ and witnessed a closer inspection of demonological works,³ in comparison to the erudite treatises and tracts, cheaper print media still failed to grasp the attention of scholars.

In 1984 Wolfgang Behringer began to draw attention to the role of print media by examining in detail a topical news pamphlet printed in 1590, ‘The Expanded Witchcraft Report’ (Erweiterte Unholden Zeitung).⁴ His interest in early modern news continued to develop over the following two decades, and in 2009 he published ‘Witchcraft and the Media’ – one of the most useful overviews or introductions to the topic to date.
This looked at the use of a variety of media across various temporal and geographical boundaries, with a special focus on how news travelled. Behringer recognised that reports could be used as ‘building blocks’ for demonologists, an idea that was further substantiated by my own research. He also argued that different media played different roles. For example, non-periodical pamphlets and broadsides tended to always promote the reality of witchcraft and rarely offered a sceptical outlook or commentary. On the other hand, monthly magazines provided authors and readers with a means to deconstruct the witch stereotype and combat superstition. The nature of the medium is therefore significant, as it influenced, if not embodied, its function and message.

A number of other historians, such as Robert Walinski-Kiehl, in 2002, and Harald Sipek, in 1994, pointed to pamphlets as worthy sources, meriting more serious attention. The new millennium saw people begin to carry out case studies, or focus on certain aspects of printed news reports. For example, Hans Harter wrote a monograph looking at the first known witchcraft pamphlets and a broadside concerning a witch from Schiltach. Ulla Krah explored the relationship between fact and fiction (a point which will be discussed further later on) in news reports, analysing a number of German broadsides. Charles Zika, in 2007, highlighted the importance of images in the news and how they helped to construct an already evolving stereotype of the witch.

Prior to Behringer’s article in 2009, one of the most detailed discussions of witchcraft pamphlet literature was to be found in Joy Wiltenburg’s work, which included a section comparing German and English witchcraft narratives. This is still the only comparative analysis available, despite the growing interest in news media in Germany and England. With regards to English pamphlet literature, Marion Gibson was the first to publish in this field. Her book Reading Witchcraft suggests ways to dissect, or in her words ‘deconstruct’, the narratives found in reports, in order to discern which part is legal record, and which part is fiction. She questions the verisimilitude of the reports, asking whether there is any truth to be found. While her post-modern approach is refreshing, a broader contextualisation of the reports is lacking, as is any discussion of the images. In 2007, Anna Bayman, sharing Gibson’s interest in the role of fact and fiction, proposed that ‘Witchcraft, located on the borders of fact and fiction, or “record and story”, offers historians the opportunity to study the construction of narrative and the nature of evidence and record’. She underscored the tension between commercial impulses and moralising ones and argued that the two strands of pamphlets may co-exist. Bayman hones in on reception, suggesting that perhaps reports were more entertaining than morally constructive to some audiences. Her article highlights a significant issue for historians of early modern news: not knowing how people read and understood reports.

More recently, in 2011, Carla Suhr completed a PhD on the genre of English witchcraft pamphlets, tackling them through a linguistic lens. This approach focuses more on language (not surprisingly) and less on the historical context, however, it does include an interesting analysis of the images and a useful appendix of the content of pamphlets. Charlotte Rose Millar has also been working on English witchcraft pamphlets, taking a very different approach through exploring the relationship between emotion and witchcraft. Her work is reflective of a broader turn to emotions in witchcraft scholarship.

While Millar’s work focuses on the feelings of the witches, as presented by the media, new research has begun to explore how the media shaped emotional responses to witches. The role news media played in constructing fear of witchcraft in early
modern Germany is the subject of my own research. Unlike, Gibson and Millar, my analysis of German witchcraft news reports incorporates images and compares news reports to other contemporaneous texts, including demonological works, works of art and trial manuscripts. This comparative approach uncover points of intersection between various discourses hitherto unnoticed. In order to further disentangle the web created by the ‘extended mediation’ of witchcraft more comparative work is needed.

**Origins of witchcraft news pamphlets and broadsides**

The second half of the sixteenth century saw a sharp rise in the publication of news pamphlets and reports. In early modern Germany a new genre rose to fame: *Neue Zeitungen* (new reports). These were essentially non-periodical reports that were printed following notable events or happenings. They were either printed as a Flugschrift (a pamphlet) which were at least four pages long, or as a Flugblatt (a broadside), which was a single page print. While some pamphlets included a woodcut on their title page, most news broadsides included a large image depicting the contents of the report in vivid detail. Alongside witchcraft, other topics covered included reports of gruesome murders and executions, battles, monstrous births, and celestial apparitions. Publishers and printers were quick to include news of witches into reports, and in Germany, as the number of witch trials increased, so too did the number of reports. The titles of these reports were often similar, beginning with literary hooks such as ‘a terrifying new report’ (*ein erschreckliche Neue Zeitung*). Most of them also claimed to be ‘truthful’ (*warhafftig*) accounts of events that really happened.

In England, witchcraft pamphlets were part of a wider and growing pamphleteering market. However, it has been argued that witchcraft pamphlets make up a distinct genre of their own, as the nature of reportage, particularly in earlier pamphlets, differed from other news pamphlets, chiefly in the way that authors utilised large parts of legal documents for the report. It is interesting to note that many of the famous or well-known pamphleteers of this period did not author witchcraft pamphlets. Bayman suggests that they did not write such reports for two main reasons: firstly, they did not think the London audience would be interested, and, secondly, following the accession of James I to the throne, they were wary of entering a discourse that King James I was clearly concerned with. That said, pamphlets on witchcraft were still penned, albeit by lesser-known or anonymous authors. English witchcraft pamphlets also tended to be longer. Like the German pamphlets, there was an emphasis on the truth and trustworthiness of accounts, however, the titles’ emphasis was usually focused on the ‘discovery’ of the witch or witches. This focus on discovery, and the corresponding discovery narrative is not a feature in the German reports. In terms of numbers of editions and prints, Suhr’s research shows that there was a clear rise in publications in the latter half of the sixteenth century; such a rise is also evident for early modern German reports in this same period.

**Readership and authorship**

It is important to ask who the potential audience for these publications were, and also who was responsible for writing them. With regards to audience, Wiltenburg has argued that the audience for this type of literature was quite broad and could extend
to people of humble status. A contemporary account from Augsburg names both journeymen and students as groups who bought such reports. There has been no comprehensive study of literacy in early modern Germany, but it has been estimated that the literacy rates may have been around 30 per cent for Augsburg, and similar figures have been proposed for Nuremberg and the Franconian hinterland. In general it is agreed that literacy rose in this period but that in both Germany and England, levels of literacy varied sharply between the countryside and towns. David Cressy has estimated, on the basis of signatures on loyalty oaths, an overall figure of 30 per cent literacy for rural England in the 1640s. However, it is important to remember that reading and writing were separate skills in this period; thus someone might have been able to read but not have been able to write. Also, it was common for people to read aloud to their families or friends. In addition, almost half of the German witchcraft news reports were written in rhyme to be sung to well-known tunes. Therefore, these news reports were far more accessible to a broader audience, both literate and illiterate: one did not have to be literate to participate in a written culture.

Witchcraft broadsheets and pamphlets were produced with the intent of being sold. There is little information regarding the size of individual print runs. Travelling pedlars could pay printers to run off copies of prints. For example a travelling pedlar in the eastern Netherlands ran off 1,000 copies of a sheet with three popular songs for one guilder. These shorter works provided lucrative business for printers while they were compiling more complex works in the press. In the words of Andrew Pettegree: ‘No publisher could make a reputation with works of this sort. But they could make money’. Unfortunately, while there is often a reference to the printer and place of publication, the author is almost never named. So who were the anonymous authors of these reports? Print-shop owners and workers were possible authors, as were ‘hack journalists, roving students and underemployed teachers’. Churchmen, lawyers, and magistrates are also known to have penned reports about miracles, crimes and punishments. In Germany some were possibly penned by Zeitungsänger (news-ballad singers) who would then print copies and distribute them themselves as they sang the contents from market squares or on their travels. In Germany and England reports would have been sold in book stores and markets, and in England chap-men became responsible for the distribution of pamphlets throughout the countryside.

With regards to cost, the price of news pamphlets and small tracts in Germany ranged from 3 to 6 Pfennigs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while shorter pamphlets may have been cheaper. To provide some context, the daily wage of a master mason or carpenter in the early sixteenth century was about 24 Pfennigs, while a day labourer would earn about 60 Pfennigs per week. In comparison, short pamphlets printed on cheap paper in England cost 3 or 4 pence, with prices rising for longer tracts. While the price of pamphlets declined as the cost of paper dropped, pamphlets continued to be affordable, but not cheap. Wiltenburg and Suhr caution that this ephemeral literature was not just targeted at and read by people of humble origin, but that intellectual or aristocratic readers were not excluded from reading these texts. Indeed, many German broadsides only survived the ravages of time after being meticulously selected and collected by a reformed Swiss pastor Johann Jakob Wick (1522–1588) in Zurich.
Function: between fact and fiction

What was the function of these reports? Some historians, such as Robert Walinski-Kiehl, have labelled them as propagandistic, believing that pamphlets played an important role in inciting audiences to action against witches.\(^{39}\) Despite this claim he cautiously recognises the impossibility of ever knowing how people read them or reacted to reports. There is evidence to suggest that authorities were wary of news reports concerning witches. For example, Nuremberg, an Imperial Free City that saw very few witch prosecutions, censored a broadsheet in 1627 detailing the execution and crimes of witches in Bamberg and Würzburg.\(^{40}\) Their swift act of censorship demonstrates the city council’s concern about the pamphlet’s potential to incite a witch panic.

However, in other cases, pamphlets were actually used by other authorities to try and authenticate and validate the prosecution of witches. For example a preacher in Sélestat in Alsace, Reinhard Lutz, printed a pamphlet following the execution of four witches in 1570 in order to set forth the reasons why their treatment had been just and in accordance with the law.\(^{41}\) Lutz claimed that he wrote the tract in question so that the people of Sélestat may understand that ‘a lawful sentence was pronounced’.\(^{42}\) He proposed that many people, not understanding the nature of witchcraft, may have concluded or thought that one had ‘dealt improperly and not lawfully with these people [the witches]’.\(^{43}\) However, Lutz pointed out that the women, having entered a ‘damnable, demonic and accursed covenant’\(^{44}\) with the ‘Evil Spirit’, received their ‘due punishment’.\(^{45}\) Similarly, in 1666, the council printer in Augsburg, Andreas Aperger, printed a report where he quoted sections verbatim from the Council Punishment Book, taking care to point out that all of the actions taken against the witches by the authorities were according to the law.\(^{46}\)

One of the biggest issues in the historiography of witchcraft news media is whether reports were meant to be taken seriously or if they were simply a form of entertainment. Baymen, writing on the Elizabethan and Jacobean witchcraft pamphlets, believes that they were both titillating and entertaining, while simultaneously moralising, with some pamphlets giving a higher priority to entertainment.\(^{47}\) Gibson, similarly divided English pamphlets into ‘triviall’ and ‘necessary’ ones; however, she maintains that serious pamphlets can, in fact, be just as unreliable as trivial pamphlets, because they sometimes have propaganda purposes which may distort their view of witchcraft. Trivial pamphlets can be unreliable because they appear to privilege genre or style above factual reporting and produce a version of witchcraft which may be heavily influenced by the form of its narration.\(^{48}\)

Wiltenburg, on the other hand, stresses that reports, especially those claiming to be ‘true’, were meant to be taken seriously.\(^{49}\) With regards to the German news reports, it is not as easy to label the pamphlets in this manner, dividing them into two distinct categories. Certainly there are some that we know to be pure fiction, imagined up by an author, possibly for financial gain,\(^{50}\) but in general, most pamphlets contain this underlying interplay between entertainment and earnestness. The pamphlets also have a religious undertone throughout. Many point to the danger of the devil. In fact, one of the
most popular Biblical passages quoted in pamphlets concerning witches, alongside the well-known Exodus 22:18, ‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live’, is the less well-known, 1 Peter 5:8: ‘Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour’.

Authors forcefully remind readers to be on their guard and to be god-fearing through the stories told in the news. With so many authors claiming that their reports were ‘true’, it is not surprising that this has become a point of contention in historical research. From whence did they get their facts? For English pamphlets, Gibson has shown how earlier pamphlets (pre 1590), in particular, were heavily based on, and indeed constructed from, legal sources. This is not the case in Germany. While narrative only became more popular in England after 1590, in the German pamphlets and broadsides, the stories of the witches were mostly written in narrative format. This narrative was sometimes broken to number the crimes of the witch in list format. The narrative usually began with the name and age of the witch, a description of how they met the devil before outlining the crimes that they had confessed to, ending with a description of their punishment. It is possible that authors heard this information when it was read out publicly at the witch’s execution. However, by the late seventeenth century, some authors of reports stuck very close to the authoritative record as related in the Council Punishment Book. The chronology here may be significant, as reports in the late seventeenth century would have been competing with periodical news reports, and hence may have strive to stick as close as possible to the official facts of the case.

Aside from using trial manuscripts, German authors appear to have used a number of other sources for penning their news, such as other news reports or even demonologies. There were no copyright laws like we have today, and as a result copying and recycling of narratives was rife not only amongst authors of witch reports, but more generally in publishing. In fact, most demonologies were compiled by recycling and reusing examples and narratives from earlier demonological works. One news pamphlet, written in verse, detailing the crimes and execution of 133 witches in the County of Westphalia was reprinted multiple times. The first edition that I have found, printed in 1588, claimed that 133 witches were executed on one day in 1588. However, the same report was printed again in Jena in 1589 and then in Erfurt in 1591, followed by another print in 1596 (which claimed to be ‘erstlich gedruckt zu Regenspurz’). Each one claimed that the witches were burnt that year; however, they were clearly a copy of the earlier pamphlet, the only thing changed was the year of the report. What is more striking, however, is that some authors copied stories from demonologies and attempted to pass them off as current news. In one such case an author, writing in 1581, translated an entire section concerning weather magic from Heinrich Kramer’s Malleus Maleficarum into vernacular verse and claimed that the story related to a witch who was recently executed in the Margraviate of Baden. These cases confound our understanding of reports. Was it more important for the stories to be truthful? Or was the moral of the story more important? These questions are difficult to answer, but there is a general consensus amongst historians that whether or not the stories were copied, fictionalised, imagined, or carefully noted down from legal sources, they are all valuable sources, in that they allow us to understand how the crime of witchcraft was popularly imagined.
English pamphlets: charity refused/denied; revenge; and motiveless malignity.\textsuperscript{58} While some of these narratives are recognisable in the German pamphlets, especially in the 1570s and 1580s, authors very quickly began to outline the witches’ crimes without going in any detail as to why the witch caused the harm. However, Gibson claims that in England the rise of narratives with motiveless malignity developed when the victims were noble or gentle and so did not want to appear to be deserving of a witch’s wrath. In Germany, as the scale of the witch hunts increased detailed stories about individual witches and their specific motives became less popular. From the 1580s onwards single pamphlets were often detailing not just the crimes of one witch from one town but also the crimes and executions of multiple witches across various towns. The emphasis shifted from why witches caused harm to outlining what specific harm they caused. One must remember that England and the Holy Roman Empire experienced very different levels of witch persecution, and that the nature and scope of witch hunting ultimately had an impact on how the crime of witchcraft was reported. The sheer scale of witchcraft executions in German speaking lands in the second half of the sixteenth century led to the character of German witch news reports changing, as they began to offer sweeping panoramas of witch hunting rather than reporting individual cases.\textsuperscript{59} It is interesting to note, however, that when the witch prosecutions began to decline in German speaking lands, reports once again began to focus in more detail on individual witches, what harm they caused, and why they did so.

Just as the character of the report reflected the nature of prosecution, the content and the crimes included in the reports tell us something about the contemporary, cultural and local understandings of witchcraft. The crimes reported in the German and English pamphlets are quite different. While the German pamphlets frequently allude to the witches’ dance (\textit{Hexentanz}), such references are absent from English reports (with the exception of the Lancashire 1612 pamphlet).\textsuperscript{60} In addition, while English pamphlets often refer to witches’ familiars, or spirits in the form of animals who feed on the witch through a special teat, references to familiars are most unusual in German accounts. A comparative analysis of the news reports will undoubtedly shed light on how witchcraft was imagined and constructed differently in different geographical regions and cultures.

**News travels and news in translation**

Just as news travels today, there were a number of witch executions that became media sensations in the early modern period. Some stories or narratives transcended geographical boundaries, and were translated into foreign languages and printed in foreign news reports, whilst others made their way into local chronicles or demonologies.

The most famous case, recognised by historians as creating a media shockwave, was the trial and story of Peter Stumpf, a werewolf witch, who was reportedly executed in a small town of Bedburg near Cologne in 1589. In the year 1589 numerous broadsides were printed in Augsburg, Nuremberg, and Cologne, detailing the case with a large woodcut depicting his crimes and unusual execution.\textsuperscript{61} There was very little difference in the image and text in each of these single-leaf prints. There were
also a number of pamphlets that included accounts of the case in Germany and abroad. Willem de Blécourt has recently tried to decipher the chronological order of these reports. The story was recorded in a pamphlet printed in Antwerp in 1589 and London in 1590. Interestingly, the London pamphlet contains the most elaborate and detailed report concerning Stumpf. The English author purported that it was a translation of a German (‘high Duch’) text that was printed in Cologne. There has been no matching German pamphlet found to support this claim. This, along with the extraordinarily sensational details interwoven in the English text, has led de Blécourt to surmise that the narrative was ‘an imaginative elaboration of the earlier documents’. Stumpf’s story became so well known it was incorporated into Martín Del Rio’s *Disquisitionum magicarum* (1599/1600). It was included as an example in Book Two, question 18, which asked whether magicians could transform the bodies of one species into those of another. The same passage was then repeated in Maria Francesco Guazzo’s work in 1608. Guazzo cited Stumpf’s confession as proof that incubus and succubus devils existed in his *Compendium Maleficarum* (1626). It is worthy of note, that no corresponding trial manuscript for the Stumpf case has ever been located. The trial of Stumpf, although the most well-known, was not the only report that made it into the foreign press. For example, the trial of the Pappenheimer family in Munich in 1600 was reported in an English pamphlet, printed in London in 1601.

These few examples highlight the potential for news to travel, and to be transmitted from one genre, or discourse, into another, relatively fluidly. For this reason, early modern news media can offer valuable insights into the communication and transmission of ideas and narratives of witchcraft in the early modern world.

**Suggestions for future research**

This is still an innovative and developing area of research. While there has been much progress made, especially with regards to the treatment of witchcraft in news media in Germany and England, there has yet to be a systematic survey or investigation of news reports in other European countries. In addition, there has been little comparative work carried out, with studies tending to focus on one geographical or linguistic region. While my own work on German pamphlets and broadsides incorporated the images into the analysis, this has yet to be done for the English reports. To date, the best analysis of images of witchcraft in the early modern news is to be found in Charles Zika’s *Appearance of Witchcraft*. To fully understand the nature of the media, it is crucial that we explore both textual and visual elements. Finally, as Behringer pointed out in his article in 2009, there is still a broad range of other media that have yet to be mined by historians, such as periodical news reports and monthly magazines.

As we expand and enrich our approach to early modern media sources, we will simultaneously broaden our understanding of the role that media played in communicating and constructing the crime of witchcraft. Ultimately such research will help us to uncover further the cultural imaginings and meanings of witchcraft in the early modern world.
Notes


3. Some chief examples of this shift in interest can be found in Stuart Clark’s Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), which was a momentous work seeking to more fully understand how the ideology of witchcraft was constructed and understood through language and texts. See also the edited collection of essays Stuart Clark, ed., Languages of Witchcraft: Narrative, Ideology and Meaning in Early Modern Culture (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2001). Gerhild Scholz Williams also wrote on the nature of witchcraft discourse, investigating how popular and intellectual texts helped shaped people’s understanding of the world in her Defining Dominion: The Discourses of Magic and Witchcraft in Early Modern France and Germany (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1999).


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21 Behringer coined this term in his essay “Witchcraft and the Media,” 235.

22 Non-periodical reports, unlike periodical reports, were not published at regular recurring intervals.


26 Ibid.


28 Wiltenberg, Disorderly Women, 33.


31 Ibid., 135.

32 Ibid., 334.


34 Ibid.

35 Wiltenberg, Disorderly Women, 35.

36 Ibid.

37 Wiltenberg, Crime and Culture, 11; Suhr, Publishing for the Masses, 21.

38 For more detail on Johann Jacob Wick and his collection see Wiltenberg, Crime and Culture, 106–110. Also see Franz Mauelshagen, Wunderkammer auf Papier: die “Wickiana” zwischen Reformation und Volksgläube (Epfendorf: Bibliotheca academica Verlag, 2011).


40 Ibid.


42 Ibid.: ‘. . . deß ein billichs urtheil felle.’

43 Ibid.: ‘. . . vielleicht viel gedencken / auch schliessen möchten / das man vngebührlich und nicht rechtmessig mit diesen Personen gehandelt . . .’

44 Ibid.: ‘. . . schantlicher / teufflicher / vn verflutchter verpflichtung . . .’


47 Bayman, “Large Hands,” 5.

48 Gibson, Reading Witchcraft, 119.


50 For example, there was a report printed in 1591 by Georg Kress about 300 women who had made a pact with the devil in Julich-Berg, who could turn into wolves. There is no evidence of any such case, and it is thought that the author was trying to cash in on the popular interest in werewolves and witches following the sensational Stumpf case: Erschröcklichen und zuvor nie erhörte newe Zeitung / welcher massen im Landt zu Gülch über dreihundert Weibs personen / mit dem Teuffel sich verbunden [. . .] (Augsburg, 1591). For more see Erika Münster-Schröer, “Hexenverfolgung in Jülich-Berg und der Einfluß Johann Weyers,” Spee-Jahrbuch 7 (2000): 59–103.


54 Dreyerley Warhaffte newe zeitung. . . . Die dritte. Auß dem Landt Westuahllen/ von der Statt Ossenbruckh/ wie man auff einen Tag 133. Unholden verbreñt hat . . . geschehen den 9. Aprilis diß 96. jars. (s.l., 1596). It is unclear whether the printer is referring to Regensburg in Bavaria or in Switzerland.


56 Ibid., 263–267.

57 Ibid.

58 Gibson, Reading Witchcraft, 87–109.


63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Martín Del Rio’s, Disquisitionum magicarum libri sex (Lygdvn: J. Pillehote, 1608).

67 Ibid.

68 For more see Warfield, “Media Representation,” 74.


70 Zika, The Appearance of Witchcraft, 179–209.

### Bibliography (selection)


