



Jeff Jarvis. *The Gutenberg Parenthesis: The Age of Print and Its Lessons for the Age of the Internet.*

Jeff Jarvis. *The Gutenberg Parenthesis: The Age of Print and Its Lessons for the Age of the Internet.* New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. 328 pages. ISBN 9781501394829. US \$24.30 (cloth).

In 2011, journalist and digital media expert Jeff Jarvis published *Public Parts: How Sharing in the Digital Age Improves the Way We Work and Live* (New York: Simon & Schuster), a book that explores how the internet has created public spaces in which people can share their knowledge and experience. In *The Gutenberg Parenthesis* (2023), Jarvis turns his critical attention to the claim that formats of information sharing that have emerged in the digital age will wipe out preexisting literary traditions and institutions established during the age of print.

To do so, Jarvis delves deep into the theory of the “Gutenberg Parenthesis.” The term was coined by literary scholars Lars Ole Sauerberg, Marianne Bärch, and Thomas Pettitt to describe the age of print that began with Gutenberg’s printing press in mid-fifteenth-century Europe and ended with the rise of the internet. While the introduction of print technology rendered knowledge and information flow fixed, linear, and unidirectional, the internet gave rise to participatory modes of information sharing that enabled the return of “collaborative” and “performative” modes that first emerged in the pre-print world (p. 3). Print cultures, in other words, effected a pause, or parenthesis, in the format and flow of information.

Jarvis generally agrees with the argument that new collaborative approaches to information sharing in the digital age echo older pre-print traditions. But he also suggests that the history of print offers important lessons for the future of information sharing and communication.

In the first two sections of his book, Jarvis draws from extensive scholarship in multiple disciplines—including bibliography, histories of the book and print cultures, and intellectual copyright—to trace how the development of print technology impacted the circulation of and access to information. He begins with the publication of Gutenberg’s Bible, the first book printed in Europe using movable type, and discusses how the limited formats printed during print’s first century, including broadsides, pamphlets, and indulgences, catered exclusively to either the State or the Church (p. 58). As print technology evolved and print formats including newspapers, journals, and magazines began to proliferate, they also gained more credibility, eventually replacing their oral counterparts.

In section two, Jarvis contends that increased access to print caused authorities and institutions to crack down on people’s participation in print cultures to control public discourse and conversation. He argues that the scope for conversation and dialogue in literary works such as Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) and Martin Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses* (1517) gave way to the soliloquising tone of Montaigne’s *Essais* (1580), which contributed to cultural narratives that authors must be qualified in order to write. Similarly, public conversations in coffee houses, which publishers once drew on for content, were replaced by mass media that restricted creative control and used exclusionary tactics to define normative sociocultural discourses. However, participatory collaboration did continue in some other literary spheres and projects beyond what Jarvis pays attention to in this book—as is evidenced, for example, by a growing body of research on the collaborative innovations of small presses and literary institutions such as the Poets Essayists and Novelists (PEN International) in the modernist period.

The third section of the book focuses on the closing of the parenthesis and the explosion of sociocultural and media narratives in the digital age. Jarvis borrows bodily metaphors from Marshall McLuhan to describe the transition of cultures in terms of a shift from “the age of the ear (orality) to the eye (text) to the mouth (networked discourse)” (p. 150). He acknowledges that the forms of information dissemination in the three ages vary and is attuned to the ways that the internet has given rise to forms of communication that dismantle past hierarchies of information creation and dissemination. Yet Jarvis also points out that many oral traditions coexisted with print cultures, and is similarly optimistic that the digital age can still provide ample space for print culture traditions to coexist and flourish.

That Jarvis himself enjoys the new participatory forms and the democratization of access that characterize the digital age is clear. He celebrates how the internet has led to the rise of what Alvin Toffler in *The Third Wave* (New York: William Morrow, 1980) describes as “prosumerism,” or customer participation in creating products for consumption, though he neglects to explore how it contributes to unpaid labour. Jarvis also celebrates the connections one can forge on social media, praises instant access to information, and expresses excitement about the new creative opportunities and open-access practices birthed by the internet. He acknowledges that the multiplicity unleashed by the internet has triggered a “crisis of cognition,” or an inability to comprehend if information is authentic (p. 231). Yet Jarvis still favours embracing the internet’s multiplicity and argues that the creative potential produced by this multiplicity can be used to better human society.

Does this mean that Jarvis is unaware of the dangers of the internet? Far from it. He is well-informed about the increasingly common instances of fraud, plagiarism, fake news, hate speech, and blackmail

that the internet enables. But his solution to these problems is unorthodox. The internet enables freedom of expression that Jarvis considers to be the defining characteristic of democratic societies. In the age of print, he argues, processes like censorship and institutions like copyright threatened freedom of expression. Jarvis suggests that banning or governing content on the internet would similarly interrupt creativity and do little to minimise harmful content. Instead of regulating the internet, he proposes empowering people to derive the best from it by creating and sustaining institutions (like the age of print's publishing houses and libraries) designed to support and nurture creativity.

As a humanities researcher, I wholeheartedly endorse Jarvis's proposition to retain and increase funding for institutions that foster "informed, rational, open, mutual understanding" (p. 236). Knowledge, indeed, is power. But it seems somewhat impractical to propose that governments and Big Tech work together to ensure that the internet lives up to its creative potential. If the last thirty-plus years are anything to go by, creating "productive public discourse" is not always what motivates Big Tech (p. 236). Jarvis would perhaps be more pragmatic to be mindful of this reality.

The Gutenberg Parenthesis is a hopeful treatise that addresses the anxieties of social change and transformation. It is also a testament to Jarvis's bibliophilia: he offers up the book, an enduring gift from the transformative history of the Parenthesis, as an antidote to fears generated by the internet. He proposes the book as the standard to innovate towards in the digital age and advises using lessons on pre-digital restrictive practices wisely to prevent the repetition of old mistakes. Jarvis's book is a brilliant compilation of multidisciplinary research and scholarly debates (including frequent appearances by Elizabeth Eisenstein, Marshall McLuhan, and Adrian Johns) that would make a great addition to reference lists in foundational Book History courses. Packed with entertaining print culture trivia, it also promises to interest general readers as well as print culture and digital humanities scholars.

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