The Gutenberg Parenthesis
Interview with author Jeff Jarvis

For podcast release
Monday, August 14, 2023

KENNEALLY: Johannes Gutenberg printed the Bible using movable type in Mainz, Germany, in 1454. A publishing industry of booksellers and printers eventually emerged. And until a few decades ago, the books, magazines, and newspapers produced and sold by authors and publishers dominated communication.

Welcome to CCC's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

Printed books engendered a culture of communication that endured for centuries. Journalism professor and book author Jeff Jarvis recalls that early in his own writing and publishing career, he wrote on typewriters and saw his story set in hot metal linotype. With titles like *What Would Google Do?* and *Geeks Bearing Gifts*, the books Jarvis writes today make obvious how much has changed since those days. Indeed, his latest book, *The Gutenberg Parenthesis*, places us outside the era of print and beyond the world that print created. As transmission of knowledge and creativity shifts off the page and onto the screen, should we celebrate or mourn? Jeff Jarvis joins me now. Welcome to the program, Jeff.

JARVIS: Thank you for having me, Chris.

KENNEALLY: In your new book, you ask that we imagine the timeline of human civilization. *The Gutenberg Parenthesis* is the five and a half centuries when printed works, especially books, silently conveyed developments in science, arts, and politics to equally silent readers. Indeed, you quote Mark Twain, "what the world is today, good and bad, it owes to Gutenberg."

JARVIS: I think the lesson from that timeline is that we probably have time now – if we think that the internet and the networked world is as potentially – we won't know for a long time – as major an innovation as print was, as a disruption, then how long will this take? We tend to think today that this change we're undergoing is rapid and complete. Well, I ask us to consider instead, what if the change is actually very slow, and it's just begun?

If you do the quick timeline from Gutenberg – and let's be clear that movable type was first used in China and Korea before Gutenberg. But if we start the clock for Western print

culture at about 1454, when Gutenberg's Bible was coming off the press, it was another half-century until the book as we know it took on the form we know today, with page numbers and paragraph indentation and titles and title pages. It was not until about 1605, another century, before we saw the invention of the newspaper. And around that time also, importantly, the invention of the modern novel, with Cervantes, the invention of the essay with Montaigne, the creation of a market for printed plays with Shakespeare. Fast-forward again to 1710, a date that matters very much in your life, which was the Statute of Anne and the creation of a business model for print in the person of copyright. Another century gets us to 1800. That's the first time we really see major changes in the technology of print – the steel press, then steam-powered presses, rotary presses, paper made from wood pulp much cheaper, finally the linotype at the end of the century. A little bit forward, 1920s, we get the first competitor to print, radio. And here we are today.

What I left out of that timeline, of course, is the internet. I mark the beginning of the popular internet with the commercial browser in 1994 – which is to say, Chris, that we're about a quarter-century away from the beginning of the internet, and that would put us about 1480 in Gutenberg years. Now, history doesn't repeat itself. Nothing's deterministic here. But I do think that we are still seeing the future in the analogue of the past. We still see magazines and newspapers that are recognizable in their form online. I don't think we've seen the kind of innovation and invention that came along with Cervantes and Montaigne. So I think we have time, and that means we have responsibility to make wise decisions going forward.

KENNEALLY: You've just given the capsule of what lies inside that Gutenberg parenthesis. In your book, you describe how human communication before Gutenberg, and again, now in our own day, is of a different kind. We no longer are connected simply by words on a page, you say. We live in a digital network brimming with images and sounds.

JARVIS: The idea of the Gutenberg parenthesis comes from three academics at the University of Southern Denmark named Tom Pettitt, Lars Ole Sauerberg, and Marianne Børch, and it's their theory that I jump off here. They point out that before Gutenberg, our culture was very conversational. Information was passed around mouth to mouth. It was changed along the way. Come Gutenberg, things get set in stone, or at least in lead, and they are contained within a book. McLuhan said that the line – and this sentence is an example – became our organizing principle. So we enter into, in McLuhan's view and others' view, an age of text.

Well, today, I think a few things have happened. One is I believe that we're becoming more conversational again. In fact, print was very conversational in the early days. Martin Luther was in conversation with the Pope through their books and the burnings of them. Sir Thomas More and Erasmus were friends – were in conversation literally in their books

with letters sent to each other that ended up printed. What changed that, I think, was the mechanization and industrialization of print come the 1800s – again, with the steam-powered press and with the linotype and with scale and the mass media business model and the idea that you're going to sell an audience and its attention to advertisers. That took away, to my mind, the conversational nature of media. I think that we're just beginning to regain that now, although we're clearly out of practice as a society in holding a conversation.

Second, the other point you raised is that in an age of text, in an age of the alphabet, I think it's fascinating that we now have emoji and memes and video and other things that extend our notion of language and literacy and communication. It's a fun toy to play with again. It's not just restricted to what a machine could set letter upon letter. So I think we're going to expand our ideas of communication and even literacy.

KENNEALLY: To understand better the shift away from print and the dominance of text, you think it's important to understand the history of print and publishing. In that story, you highlight, Jeff Jarvis, the drive to win control of minds.

JARVIS: I think that the story of print is indeed the story of power and who held the power to speak and who didn't. One of my favorite anecdotes from the book is that it is said that the first call for censorship in print came in 1470, not very long after the Bible in 1454. A man named Nicolò Perotti, who was a translator in Italy, was much offended by a shoddy translation of Pliny. He wrote to the Pope and beseeched him, saying you must appoint a censor to monitor every form before it's printed. You need someone who is erudite and intelligent to do this difficult job.

As I thought about it, I realized he wasn't asking for censorship at all. What he was asking for was quality and the assurance of that. What he was foreseeing was the creation of the institutions of editing and publishing, which worked very well for a long time – for half a millennium. But now, they kind of aren't up to the task of dealing with the scale of speech today. And I celebrate that scale. There are so many people who were not included and not represented and not served in old mainstream mass media, which is run by people who look like me, old white men. The fact that Twitter and Black Twitter and Facebook and communities and TikTok and collaboration enable voices that were always there, but for too long were not heard, to come out is something I celebrate. But we're trying to get used to it. We're trying to understand this cacophony that is democracy. And it's not easy at first.

KENNEALLY: It's important to understand that contrast, isn't it, Jeff – that mass media abhors diversity, and in this new communication environment, everyone has a voice.

JARVIS: I think whenever you see a medium – and I don't think, by the way, the internet is a medium. I think it's something beyond that. But whenever you see a means for more people to speak and be heard, obviously those who held control of those means before resented it. The Church controlled all communication. Along comes Luther – not so much making his impact with a nail on the door of the church, but more with the creak of the press that put his pamphlets and his views out to the world, and we had the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation. Come the 1920s when radio came along are fascinating stories about how newspapers tried to keep radio out of news and out of their turf, and they eventually failed, of course. And then today, what we see is again voices who were not heard before who now can be heard, and I wonder in some ways whether Black Lives Matter is our racial reformation and whether January 6th is the counter-reformation of the people who resent these voices now having the ability to be heard and to assemble and to act and to have power through these new mechanisms.

KENNEALLY: Jeff Jarvis, in *The Gutenberg Parenthesis*, you celebrate this noisy, maybe even messy, information environment. But some may feel nostalgia for the days of information curation. How can we learn to appreciate information superabundance?

JARVIS: It's a good question, Chris. I think that you and I grew up in a time of what I think is the myth of mass media – the Walter Cronkite myth, that Walter Cronkite would end his show saying, "and that's the way it is," and to many Americans, it wasn't the way it was. But certain people have a nostalgia for that Cronkite era, for that belief that we had a shared national viewpoint which we never did, for the mass media that was really – I despise the idea of the mass, because it is a way to not listen to people and not understand them as communities and individuals. I celebrate the death of the mass. So I think we have to move past those presumptions and nostalgias and appreciate the fact that we have all these voices now.

Now, the problem is the internet is often accused of creating filter bubbles and echo chambers, though there's a lot of research, ever more research, that says that's simply not true. There is a researcher in Denmark named Michael Bang Petersen who contends that the filter bubbles we live in – and we do live in them – are the ones we create in our real lives when we choose to move into a community or take a job or join a club or go bowling with people who are like us. What the internet does is puncture that bubble, and we come to a place where we are exposed to people we're unfamiliar with, who are strangers, who may be scary or being made scary by certain forces, and we don't know how to deal with that. My fondest hope for both the internet and its companies and its entities, but also for good old media, is that we find the means to make strangers less strange. I think that's the most pressing job we have in our society today.

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KENNEALLY: Jeff Jarvis, author of *The Gutenberg Parenthesis*, thank you for speaking with me.

JARVIS: Thank you so much, Chris.

KENNEALLY: That's all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts, and please do follow us on Twitter and on Facebook. You can also find Velocity of Content on YouTube as part of the CCC channel. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening.

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