

Gutenberg-e

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Gutenberg-e's Digital Gumption

With all the hype about the new Kindles, those new to the professoriate might well think that eBooks, e-texts, or texts delivered in an electronic format a relatively new phenomenon. Such is not the case, of course, but e-texts have been around far longer than most might think. Texts delivered in an electronic format, even scholarly ones, have been with us from more than *three* decades, and closing in on four.⁽¹⁾ It's easy to understand the confusion. We have been inundated recently with all things Kindle: Kindle 1, Kindle 2, and now the Kindle DX. The Sony eBook Reader PRS 700 is also very new to the scene, as are knockabouts like the iRex Iliad, Ectaco, and Astak e-readers. Because large sums of money fund these enterprises (Amazon behind the Kindle content, Google behind the Sony), the press is surely to take note, even scholarly presses. Combine that with the number of eBook pilot endeavors across the country using Kindles, Sonys or a combination of both, and the University of Michigan Press's announcement that it will print only on-demand, and even a well-informed reader might well think eBooks are just hitting their stride.⁽²⁾

Enduring E-Texts

It's simply not the case, of course, but it's necessary to point out, however, if for no other reason than to underscore not only how long we've all been trying to get this e-text business right, but also to emphasize how long these enterprises have failed to deliver reliable e-reading. This is not a criticism but an observation that obtains vis-à-vis the future of such endeavors. Gutenberg himself, the original one, failed a number of times before he got printed texts right, and any new technology will take time, money and a great deal of patience to succeed. E-texts, at least as a scholarly endeavor, are still struggling and will likely continue to do so for many years to come. E-enterprises have become proverbial for their fugacity. The reasons are many and the issues complex. But more about that in due course.

The Gutenberg-e Enterprise

[Gutenberg-e](#) [2] (not to be confused with the Gutenberg Project) began as a program of the American

Historical Society (AHA) and Columbia University about a decade ago.⁽³⁾ Its successes and failures are a thumbnail (no pun intended) sketch of the larger electronic publishing enterprise. Gutenberg-e is the brain trust of Princeton's magisterial and irrepressible Robert Darnton, former president of the AHA, who proposed to address the problem of high production costs of publishing monographs by sponsoring the production of electronic books on the Internet. His 'A Program for Reviving the Monograph' is required reading. Darnton conceived of a program in which electronic texts would get the same scrutiny as traditional scholarly publishing, but fashioned in such a manner to match or exceed in scope and enterprise their printed cousins, owing to the flexibility allowed by the Web.⁽⁴⁾ After fits and starts, Gutenberg-e is the *partial* (more about that later) fulfillment of that proposal, one that drew upon the resources of Columbia University Press and the Mellon Foundation to succeed. Some might argue that Gutenberg-e traded the high print monograph production costs for an even higher electronic production cost on the Web. Each of the 36 texts cost about \$60,000 to produce.⁽⁵⁾

Since 1999, the Gutenberg-e project has published the edited and more readable versions of six prize-winning dissertations each year in electronic format. *Junior* scholars in each field submitted their dissertations to specified areas and a panel of distinguished scholars determined each year's half dozen winners. The authors then collaborated with a staff of Gutenberg-e employees who guided them on everything from layout, to design, to access, to hotlinks and so on. The Mellon grant allowed winning authors to use their \$20,000 award to bring the texts from ponderous pontifications to tantalizing treatises. According to the American Historical Association, '[b]etween 1999 and 2004, the AHA awarded Gutenberg-e prizes to high quality dissertations from many different fields and topics in history. A distinguished panel of scholars judged the dissertations, selecting the award recipients primarily on the scholarly merits of the dissertations.'⁽⁶⁾ AHA, not to put too fine a point on it, had the highest of hopes for the venture, and the award was 'designed to use the prestige of the AHA – by conferring the bluest of ribbons awarded by the grandest of juries with the full authority of the AHA behind it – to set a high standard for electronic publishing.' To date there are 36 e-texts on the Gutenberg-e site. The awards, according to the American History Association's website have ceased, but publications will continue through 2008.⁽⁷⁾

Some wizened professors may balk at the term 'junior' scholar. Recently reported in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* is a new journal for adjuncts only: tenured or tenure-track scholars need not apply.⁽⁸⁾ One tenured professor, nose ostensibly upturned, essentially said, 'Perish the thought.' But we were all junior scholars once upon a time, and many readers of this journal were – or are – adjuncts. (Given the current economic meltdown, we *all* may well be adjuncts soon.) Furthermore, Gutenberg-e claims to present the best from up-and-coming junior scholars, and a review of the 36 titles proves this to be inarguably true. The specified topics have included, for 1999, Africa, Colonial Latin America, and South Asia; for 2000, Europe before 1800; for 2001, military history and history of foreign relations; for 2002, history of North America before 1900; 2003, Women's History or History of Gender; 2004, Open to all Fields of History; 2005. The Gutenberg-e site does not list winners beyond 2003 and the AHA site beyond 2004. The AHA site has not been updated in over a year.

Gutenberg-e's E-texts

Selected titles include Bin Yang's *Between Winds and Clouds: the Making of Yunnan (Second Century BCE-Twentieth Century CE)*; Laura J. Mitchell's *Belongings: Property, Family, and Identity in Colonial South Africa*; J. L. McIntosh's *From the Heads of Households to Heads of State: The Preaccession Households of Mary and Elizabeth Tudor, 1516-1558*; Jennifer E. Langdon's *Caught in the Crossfire: Adrian Scott and the Politics of Americanism in the 1940s Hollywood*; Sarah A. Gordon's *'Make it Yourself': Home Sewing, Gender, and Culture, 1890-1930*; Helena Pohlandt-McCormick's *'I Saw a Nightmare...': Doing Violence to Memory: The Soweto Uprising, June 16, 1976*; Gregory S. Brown's *A Field of Honor: Writers, Court Culture, and Public Theatre in French Literary Life*; and, Michael Katten's *Colonial Lists/Indian Power: Identity Politics in Nineteenth Century Telugu-Speaking India*, to name but a few.

I am not a professionally trained historian and so cannot speak to the merits or defects of the individual titles. It's safe to say, however, that few would spend \$60,000 on deadbeat or limpid offerings from the

'bluest of ribbons awarded by the grandest of the juries' selection committee. Patrick Manning's review (cited in the notes) offers a good overview of the early titles, and other reviews are available online.⁽⁹⁾ All the titles chosen appear to fill the very niche for which they were chosen, and all have been refashioned for the Web with a meticulous care one would expect from an enterprise that has, *ab initio*, been carefully executed.

The Gutenberg-e Experiment

Winners from each year were gathered together at Columbia's Butler Library for a brainstorming workshop. Assembled, ironically enough, in a *book-lined room*, were editors, tech-wonks, designers, web-gurus and e-publishers.⁽¹⁰⁾ The workshops allowed the winners of the dissertation award to report on their progress and afforded them the chance to talk with those in the electronic publishing field about what is required to bring a text-based manuscript to e-press light of day. Even though these junior scholars are all young and probably spent their formative years on the Web, transforming a text to a readable, usable e-text isn't a matter to be taken lightly. More than one e-publisher has made that mistake. It is to the credit of the team assembled at Gutenberg-e who recognized and, for the most part, successfully avoided that mistake.

The experiment – for that is what Gutenberg-e really is – gives scholars and publishers a chance to see how much Web razzle-dazzle can be transformed into Web readability and scholarly design, while not reducing the text to a blog-like facsimile. Dynamic links, photographs, graphs, multimedia presentations and the like must be determined for each book. Recall that it was Darnton's view that such an entity would rise to the level of the printed monograph and be as tenure-worthy as those texts. The jury is still out on the tenure-worthiness of the enterprise, for those adjudging such matters are often the same individuals who have made their fame and small fortunes on the tedious tome, the ponderous pontificatory. Not too many years ago, at the *teaching* university where I work, faculty met to determine if faculty roles and rewards could edge outside the holy trinity of teaching, service and scholarship. The end result of the now six-year discussion has so far been 'not so much,' but we continue to work on it. As younger and younger faculty replace older tenured ones, a change to what is now the inevitable conclusion to such discussions will eventuate. But even getting some tenured professors to accept a junior professor's article that was *posted* online after it appeared in a peer-reviewed journal, is proving to be no small beer at some institutions. Some faculty remained unconvinced of the Web's worthiness as a publisher of the ersatz electronic monograph. Given the ephemeral nature of the Web's offerings (see below), that may be less Luddite of them and more prophetic-like.

The Gutenberg-e Web-Based Adventure

The 36 texts vary in the degree and complexity with which they have incorporated into the online presence all the nimbleness of the Web. Some have .pdf formats along with their .html formats. All the reference notes are linked to the text and back. While I have not looked at every one of the 36 texts, I did examine more than a dozen of them. Surprisingly few of the ones I examined used the electronic medium's full flexibility. While more historical texts do not, unsurprisingly, have many online citations, some of the dissertations on more recent topics did not have many, either. Some texts used dynamic or 'hotlinks' to online citations. Of the ones I viewed, Laura J. Miller's text incorporated not only more of the Web's dynamism but also more of its features to take readers to similar materials. None of the texts viewed failed to use illustrations of some kind (photographs, maps, or other archive-like materials), but only a few used them to a degree that one would expect in such an enterprise. Kenneth Steuer's text on the YMCA used numerous photographs to the text advantage though some of them appeared slightly off-centered. Gregory Brown's dissertation on French court culture listed Web links as a separate icon-clickable entry. He also used icons for archive sources, images and a glossary in a frame context that moves with each page. Timothy Hodgdon's dissertation on manhood also used numerous online citations, many of them to online archives. None of the texts I viewed used the so-called Web 2.0's flexibility (e.g. wikis, blogs, etc.) though some seem to have added this dimension as an afterthought to web-publication. Some of the viewed texts appear to have mastered the Web, others merely to have used it as an added dimension to basically a print-based text. What surprised me most of all was the absence of a Gutenberg-e link on every page of every dissertation. Newer

titles had this link, but many of the older ones I viewed did not, making navigating back to the Gutenberg-e home site more cumbersome.

Readers and E-Readers

The reader's experience with the text on the Web, Darnton notwithstanding, is a matter of multiple interpretations of a given e-text.⁽¹¹⁾ With so many links and accompanying matter that could not possibly be provided in a printed text, there is the possibility of very widely divergent views by readers for the same texts. Of course, the problem can be present in a printed text when one reader brings to it a deeper understanding than another, or one reader carefully reads and ponders each note, compared to the reader who passes them over them all as ancillary. But in a Web-based text, the chances of this are far higher, and far more inevitable. One reader may follow each link carefully, and follow each of those farther still. Other readers may skip them altogether, while another may get an entirely wrong impression from them. Then there is the issue – albeit a somewhat minor one – of reader fatigue. After reading a given page filled with multiple links of varying complexity, the reader may not only completely forget what's being read, but become so exhausted by the experience of going from link to link, simply to stop completely. This is hardly a concern for scholars, but it does contract the attraction of a general readership. Even for scholars, however, the tedium of tracking links that may be broken through no fault of the author poses something of a concern, especially if link rot, the tendency of links to fail over time, is present to any degree (and we know it is present on the Web to a very high degree now).

Online Reading versus Text-Based Reading

Of more immediate concern is the idea behind online reading. For all the challenges in eBook technology – and there have been many and for the most part progressively better ones – one continues to remain a concern. The best of computer screens have resolutions at 50 per cent or so of the printed page. Regardless of the sophistication of the reader, this creates both eyestrain and general fatigue that must be taken into account. Further, the saccade, or the jumpy eye movements across a printed page, is not replicated on the computer screen, at least not in the same manner. The almost imperceptible refreshing or blinking of computer screens is noted by the eye and the brain, creating yet another, and for the most part, new signal that must somehow be ignored. Most of us are able to do this without difficulty, but some cannot and so the reading process is further compromised. We now know that we do not generally read either as fast or with the same high levels of comprehension online as we do on the printed page. For reasons that are not yet clear, the brain does not 'anticipate' words as well on the screen as it does on the printed page. All of these are important factors for reading online. This is one of the many reasons that most of us, when faced with more than three online pages, hit the print button. While electronic books may well cut production costs, no one has accounted for the hundreds, or thousands or even tens of thousands of 'print' commands that individual users execute when reading online. The world may be going green, but clearly the online environment is not as green as we thought or hoped.

We also now know through various bits of research that young readers who learn to read online do not carry that skill over to the electronic page as quickly or as well as that skill transfers from the printed page to the screen. This may seem a pointless comment to make in connection to scholarly tomes; but if younger readers are struggling with reading, and the electronic environment contributes more to that declining state, the future of electronic readers in specific – and reading in general – does not bode well.⁽¹²⁾ Some readers may scoff at this as so much *laudatory temporis acti*, a praising of old things – reading – for being old, while criticizing rising generations who are more technologically astute. But are they? Our rising technologically astute generations may not be as astute as we once thought, making their claims to higher savviness baseless.⁽¹³⁾

E-Text Financial Sustainability

The real claim to eBook technology, however, is its sustainability over time, and under this rubric there are two issues: financial and online longevity. E-texts, as I said at the outset, have been with us for nearly four

decades. While they have been around a long time, it's surprising that they have gained little of the market share of readers. Some readers might wish to argue the contrary by citing the booming business of Kindle I, Kindle II, the new Sony and now the Kindle DX. But even granting Kindle's success and generously allowing for sales of just over a million Kindle e-book readers, what percent of the total number of readers does that account for? Not much more than 5 per cent.⁽¹⁴⁾ With so small a market share, the issue of sustainability becomes far more than a moot point. In general, then, financial e-book sustainability is far from sure.

But what of Gutenberg-e and its financial salubrity? When first rolled out, Gutenberg-e offered individual books to individual readers if desired (basically in a print-on-demand arrangement), but the real salability of these texts lay in subscriptions. Subscriptions to Gutenberg-e cost \$195 each. Individual subscriptions could certainly be bought, but the target markets were originally academic libraries.⁽¹⁵⁾ In the grand scheme of electronic access where online databases cost more than a mid-size car or a two-carat diamond (literally), \$195 annual subscriptions surely seemed an easy sell. Granted, the subject matter of these subscriptions is indeed esoteric, but academic libraries, almost by definition, seek out the esoteric. If they did not, all academic publishing might well cease. The Gutenberg-e business model seemed a sound one.

But an alarm sounds. Since 1950, academic libraries have not been awash in cash, and that is especially so now. All sorts of political pressure abounds on them, from local turf-protecting skirmishes between one discipline or another, all the way to the statehouses where a given governor may think that academic libraries are unnecessary, mischievous, obsolete, or a luxury.⁽¹⁶⁾ Moreover, the current track record of e-book ventures is less than compelling. netLibrary began with more than \$80 million in venture capital. It was rescued out of Chapter 11 when OCLC, the worldwide bibliographic database, bought it out. Questia began with more than \$100 million in venture capital. Its owners now claim that cutting staff by 75 per cent and retooling entirely has nothing to do with Chapter 11. Even the seasoned and excellent Gutenberg Project struggles financially, leaving us with a question of where, if grand ventures awash in venture capital did not succeed, does that leave smaller worthy projects like Gutenberg-e?

Open Access the Answer?

The answer, since November 2008, is open access. To be fair, it was 'insisted' that Gutenberg-e, according to Jim Jordan, investigate a working relation with the American Council of Learning Societies (ACLS) Humanities E-Book venture.⁽¹⁷⁾ It has, and while that site requires subscription (either as an institution or individual to access all its holdings, not just Gutenberg-e), the Gutenberg-e site offers its 36 titles freely. The failure of Gutenberg-e even at a paltry \$195 to find a secure solvency beyond the Mellon Foundation and Columbia University makes all such ventures suspect. The open access nature of Gutenberg-e is certainly every reader's gain, especially scholars. But that says nothing about the sustainability of such projects in the long run, or perhaps only too much. Open access gets a great deal of attention from dreamy-eyed cheerleaders, and I for one welcome it. But I do not see it as financially viable over the long run. Open access cannot exist on its own unless, of course, one means by that that the site is left unattended. That is not the definition of open access by any standard of which I am familiar, and it clearly isn't the way the originators of Gutenberg-e wish to leave it. But where does the site go from here? And who is to pay for future titles? Given the severe economic downturn and the current quadrupling of the federal deficit in an effort to save that downturn from falling even farther, any such open access enterprise cannot be long for this world without some means of making it work. What those means are in the case of Gutenberg-e remains unspoken or undefined.

The Gutenberg-e site has not been updated since the 2003 winners. For additional winners and more recent information, one must go to the AHA's website and its link on the Gutenberg-e project. Even so, the Gutenberg-e part of the AHA site has not been updated since February 2008. Now that the site is open access, one would not of course expect updates every month, but some notice should be provided on both sites as well as an updated page of award winners, especially now since no more awards will be made. It's just this sort of desuetude on the Web (to use an ironic adjective in this case) that makes scholars, especially older ones, wary of the Web's viability.

Online Longevity

The financial failure of Gutenberg-e leads to questions about its online longevity. The duration of most texts on the web is about 36 months. One expects lengthier texts to last much longer, but how can they when the financial means have dissolved? Then there is the issue of link rot, mentioned earlier, a disease of web texts not unlike black spot for roses. Link rot occurs when no permanent URLs are created and maintained. Given Gutenberg-e's lineage, it's perhaps not likely, but on the Web, *anything* can happen, and usually does, and often it is the unanticipated and undesirable that occurs most frequently.

Did Darnton's vision succeed? I said earlier that it was in partial fulfillment to his vision and, having studied the site and its texts, I must conclude that it remains only a partial fulfillment. Gutenberg-e has for all intents and purposes completed its mission in less than a decade, a mere period in the publishing history of printed matter but perhaps a semicolon for the ever-changing and often all too ephemeral Web. Its move to open access will make its contents more available to scholars, and certainly these 36 dissertations will be far more available (so long as the site remains) than their University Microfilm counterparts. But are they more accepted than, say, an enterprising PhD who publishes her dissertation on the open web, complete with an ongoing wiki and multimedia presentations? Probably not, especially if our enterprising young PhD also blogs about her work and watches to make sure she keeps it current with RSS feeds and the like.

E-Texts Tenure-worthy?

Are Gutenberg-e texts all tenure-worthy contributions to scholarship? Of course, that will be a determination made by the institutions where these young scholars begin their careers, but all of them appear to me to be equal, if not surpassing, texts that already have been considered tenure-worthy. Some of the topics, such as Hodgson's, will raise some eyebrows. Having grown up in Tennessee, and having lived there when Stephen Gaskins created his farm, I was most surprised to see Mr. Gaskins treated with any sort of solemnity. His drug-fogged shenanigans remained a risible comedy sideshow for Tennesseans, but perhaps we lack the intellectual *feux d'artifice* to understand his significance in the history of organic farming. Still, it's a certainty that *some* of these texts will be held to a degree of suspicion merely because they are on the Web. That will be a tragedy but will likely change as more and more young scholars replace older ones.

Conclusions

Finally, has Gutenberg-e saved historical monographs in specific and humanities publishing overall? Hardly. This now ended experiment proved that it can be done but also proved that it is not financially sustainable. Given the current economic conditions, finding foundations to undertake new enterprises like Gutenberg-e is highly unlikely. Gutenberg-e now takes its place along side Xanadau, netLibrary, the Gutenberg Project and Questia. That is to say, not necessarily entirely failed ventures, but failed in the sense that they did not live up either to their own expectations or to the expectations of others. But financially Gutenberg-e must be said to have failed, an all-too-familiar tendency that bedevils many enterprises of mass digitization. Even Amazon's Kindle continues to subsidize its most newsworthy feature – wireless access – to make it appealing to the masses to order online materials at will. How long Amazon can continue to subsidize this feature remains to be seen. The terms of open access for Gutenberg-e appear tenuous at best:

Columbia University Press shall have the right at any time to change or modify the terms and

conditions applicable to your use of Gutenberg-e or to impose new conditions with respect to such use. CUP shall have the right at any time to change or discontinue any aspect or feature of Gutenberg-e, including but not limited to content, functionality, hours of availability, and equipment needed for access or use. Such changes, modifications, or additions shall be effective immediately upon notice thereof, which may be given by means including but not limited to posting on Gutenberg-e, electronic or conventional mail, or any means by which you obtain actual knowledge. Any use of Gutenberg-e by you after such notice shall be deemed to constitute acceptance by you of such changes, modifications, or additions.[\(18\)](#)

In other words, today you see it, tomorrow you may not. Of course, *habent sua fata libelli*, but no printed text I am aware of can mimic this rather remarkable degree of caducity.

Gutenberg-e provides scholars and other readers with easy access to 36 of the finest dissertations written in the last half decade or so. One can and should mourn the inability to keep it afloat. But financial stability has always dogged e-texts and will continue to do so. If historical monographs are in real trouble, and humanities monographs in general slipping the way of all flesh, I don't think anything online will save them. What will save them will be what always has: excellent writing and flawless research.

Notes

1. If you count Ted Nelson's visionary venture with Xanadu, the longevity of e-texts is longer still.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. 'U-M redefining scholarly publications in the digital age', 23 March 2009 <[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. The Gutenberg Project began in 1971 and has digitized thousands of electronic texts, mainly those in public domain and so unfettered by current and draconian US copyright law. See www.gutenberg.net [3].[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Kenneth Margerison, 'Gutenberg-e: a field report', *Perspectives*, October 2003 <[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Patrick Manning, 'Gutenberg-e: electronic entry to the historical professoriate', *The American Historical Review*, 109, 5 (December 2004), note 31.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. <[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. <[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Marc Beja, 'For adjuncts only: a new literary magazine denies tenure', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 4 2009 <[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. For reviews about the texts and the project see Douglas E. Haynes, 'Gutenberg-e reviews: community and public culture: the Marwaris in Calcutta 1987-1997', *American Historical Review*, (December 2003) <[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Pillarisetti Sudhir, 'Second Gutenberg-e workshop marks progress', *Perspectives* <[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Ibid. Darnton argued at the workshop that authors should worry only about their work and not about the reader. I think there is room for debate here. If he means not to worry about it in order to get the text online, he's right. If he means it doesn't matter at all, I think that is debatable.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. A number of texts come to mind that have treated this topic: Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (London, 1994) may well have been the first and certainly one of the most lyrical. See also my own, *Fool's Gold: Why the Internet Is No Substitute for a Library* (Jefferson, NC, 2007), and Mark Bauerlein, *Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young American and Jeopardizes our Future (Or, Don't Trust Anyone Under 30)* (New York, 2008). Sadly, Bauerlein, one the finest writers on this topic, has been dismissed all too quickly owing to his title alone. Bauerlein's comment, however, is one that any professor who teaches these days has noticed: the precipitous decline both in literacy skills and the desire to read among today's so-called tech-savvy generation.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. See for example, Sid Vaidhyanathan, 'Generational Myth', *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 19 September 2008 <[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. This is devilishly difficult to ascertain precisely, but there are about 86 million regular *adult* readers in

the US, according to the *Statistical Abstracts of the United States, 2009*. Even if Amazon sold more than 2 million Kindles (a million more than has so far been reported), that is still not even 5 per cent.

[Back to \(14\)](#)

15. Of course public libraries could buy them, too, but apart from the 5 or 10 largest public libraries in the country, it's unlikely there would be many more takers among them.[Back to \(15\)](#)
16. I know of a case in which an important state official contended some years ago that with electronic access, libraries would be a thing of the past and so unneeded. Even some professors are calling for us to 'blow the library up!' See my *Fool's Gold* for more pronouncements on the end, or needless duplication of academic libraries.[Back to \(16\)](#)
17. Jim Jordan, 'Letter from Jim Jordan about Gutenberg-e', *Columbia University Press Blog* <[Back to \(17\)](#)
18. See [Back to \(18\)](#)

Other reviews:

[4]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/792#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/3771>

[2] <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/>

[3] <http://www.gutenberg.net>

[4] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>