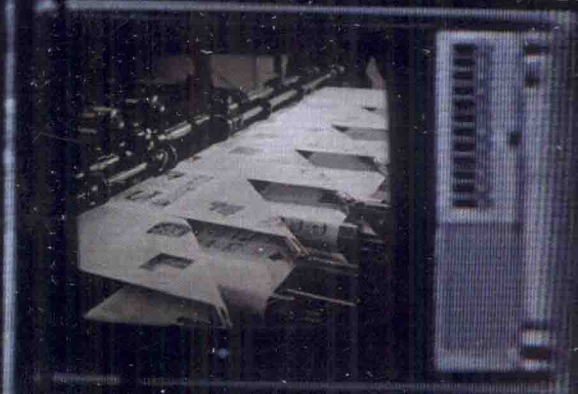
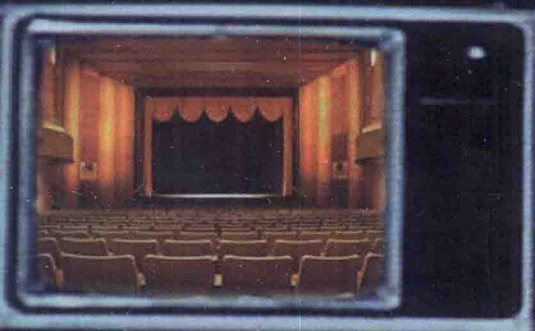


MESSAGES

Free Expression, Media and the West from Gutenberg to Google

Brian Winston



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For
The University of Lincoln

P R E A M B L E

What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly – Tis dearness only that gives everything its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated.

Thomas Paine, radical, writer and failed corset-maker, wrote those words on Christmas Eve 1776, amidst George Washington's defeated army camped at Fort Lee, New Jersey. This book, designed for the general reader, is dedicated to the proposition that Paine was right about this; and that the freedom for which he and many fought across the intervening centuries and bequeathed so cheaply to us, we do indeed esteem too lightly. In fact, we have allowed the very word to become tainted in the mouths of modern braggadacios, to stand more for the unbridled exercise of power and repression than as a right constraining such abuses.

This book is also predicated on the belief that, of those freedoms which progressives of Paine's time deemed 'celestial', none is greater than the individual's freedom of expression. This is especially so when it is used to address others in the mass and therefore 'the liberty of the press is the palladium of all civil, political and religious rights' (as the eighteenth-century radical who wrote under the pen-name 'Junius' put it). As we enter a third century since Paine's and Junius's day, when no freedom is treated so cavalierly, if not quite in practice then certainly as a principle, it is perhaps time to attempt to reanimate their language, cleansing it of its Enlightenment taints of paternalism, élitism and hypocrisy. This book seeks to do this, in a small way, by retelling the story of how we have come to this point via the media. Yet this is no chronicle of repression and censorship offered in the name of uncontrolled media libertarianism. Rather, by recounting

PREAMBLE

the origins of media forms, it offers a narrative about individual and collective human creativity as it has been expressed through the last six centuries in Europe and its outreaches by the means of mass communication – from press and stage through photography to screen and loudspeaker.

Space and understanding have necessarily limited this account. As a sketch of the origins of media forms and practices, it is perforce abrupt in determining those points when originality gives way to more routine mature activity outside the scope of the book. The book's limitations would have been even more severe, of course, without the help and advice I have received from many friends and colleagues, but especially from Anthony Smith, who has most generously shared his vast stock of knowledge with me. Robert Franklin made an equally crucial contribution by helping me to focus my argument and Richard Keeble not only did that but also expended much effort on closely fact-checking my text. (Wrong dates are assuredly not his fault.) Other parts of the manuscript were read and much improved by Roberta Pearson, Michelle Hilmes, Liz Wells, David Bate, Annabel Leventon and Michael Early. Needless to say, any errors and confusions have nothing to do with them. At an earlier stage, I benefited from initial conversations with Richard Barbrook, help from Jane Chapman, Mike Mason, Erin Bell, Julian Petley, Alan Schneider, Maud Tyler and Harry Zeigler; and the whole thrust of my argument reflects, I hope not too inaccurately, an agenda determined by Nicholas Garnham. My daughter and son have been a massive encouragement by hearing me out and cheering me on; and my wife, as ever, has provided essential corrections.

This is, almost exclusively, a meditation on media histories written by others. It has been specifically designed for the non-specialist. It is, therefore, enormously and extensively (and repetitively) indebted to those I acknowledge too inadequately in the list of sources. I have tried to do nothing but make what I hope is an accessible, uncluttered (albeit picaresque) narrative pattern of their work in the name of an argument about media freedom and individual expression – an argument which I believe now needs urgently to be put.

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PRINT

Prologue I

‘THE LIBERTY TO KNOW’: PRINT FROM 1455

‘The work of the books’

Mainz, the Rhineland: some time in 1455.

The men slid the inked forme under the platen and screwed it down, as they had done, modern scholars calculate, 237,169 times before. The printer, Peter Drach of Speyer, Clas Wolff, Jans von Koblenz – we just do not know who was at work that day – heaved the press-bar. Another heave and the forme was released. The 1282nd and final sheet of that copy of the Bible, the last of the edition, slid from the press, its black letters glistening.

‘The work of the books’ involved using four (or maybe six) presses upon which the men could produce between eight and 16 impressions an hour. Six compositors and 12 printers had taken almost a year to finish the run of 180 copies and, in the course of their labours, they had worn down four cases of type (both upper and lower). The type – Gothic Textura – aped the style of writing used by monks. Six centuries later, ten copies survive, the ink – soot, varnish, urine and egg white – still gleams.

The men were employed by a 55-year-old goldsmith and entrepreneur, Johnny Gooseflesh – Henne (Johann) Gensfleisch zu Gutenberg. Johann was eventually awarded the title ‘Chevalier’, but the ‘zu’ in his name did not denote aristocracy, merely that his family had lived in a house in Mainz called ‘Gutenberg’. For more than a century, the Gensfleisch had been ‘house retainers’ of the master of the Bishop of Mainz’s mint. Johann Gutenberg was just the latest of a long line of

metal artificers, a member of the Goldsmiths' Guild, who also had skills as a diamond cutter and polisher. The Gutenberg family, because of their episcopal connections, tended to the more patrician party among the burghers who ruled the city.

The ordered hierarchy of the feudal world – from serf to yeoman to noble to king or bishop, and from kings and bishops in their turn to the Emperor and Pope – had been much battered in the calamitous previous century. Plague was a repeated disaster. The worst outbreak lasted from 1333 for 19 years, taking a third of Europe's people and eventually writing itself upon European consciousness as the 'Black Death'. The labour shortage it created severely undercut the traditional bonds tying each man to the man above him, leading to such outbreaks of unrest as the English Peasants Revolt of 1381 as authority attempted to impose the old restrictions on a much-depleted work force.¹

In the small urban concentrations such as Mainz, although deference remained powerful, the unbroken chain of fealty was severely weakened. A less feudal and hidebound urban world was establishing itself. In that environment, developments such as double-entry book keeping introduced in Genoa at the beginning of the thirteenth century laid the foundations of mercantilist capitalism. Being able to strike a balance of debt against credit on an ongoing basis was to be as important to European civilisation as any technological advance.

Politically, too, the town was a place of innovation and experiment. Urban government stood between the citizen and the overlord. A collective, the burghers, was bound communally to a lord but their relationships, one to another, loomed as large as did their joint responsibility. Nowhere was this more the case than in southern Germany, where the hand of the Holy Roman Emperor was barely felt and the local lord had often seen his powers progressively curtailed by the growing independence of the burghers. For serfs still tied to their lord in the countryside, it was a truth of the day that '*stadluft macht frei*' – town air made you free.

Gutenberg was an urbanite, in his own day a comparatively rare figure, almost an outsider to the feudal structures which governed his

world. He was still, of course, of that medieval world but his career also reveals a certain modernity, most importantly in what seems to have been a somewhat entrepreneurial spirit. Having been forced to flee from Mainz to Strasbourg in some municipal political upheaval, by 1437 he was immersed in a scheme to produce some 20,000 small mirrors mounted as brooches. These were to be sold to the swarms attending the Shrine Pilgrimage to see Aachen Cathedral's four most sacred 'Great Relics', which were exposed only once every seven years.² It was believed that if a mirror caught the image of the relics, it would itself be touched by the relics' beneficent strengths – a curious spiritualised echo of the photograph's power and attractiveness.³ Gutenberg persuaded some other merchants to back him and set about making the mirrors – probably using a press to stamp out the brooches. Presses were a by no means uncommon machine of the day, important not only for making wine and oil but also for use in paper manufacture and in metal work. The only problem with the mirror money-making scheme was that the pilgrimage took place in 1439, not 1438 as Gutenberg and his partners had erroneously calculated. This created a serious cash-flow problem and, inevitably, they finished up in court suing each other. Out of the legal records of this fiasco come the earliest hints indicating that Gutenberg thought the press might be put to other uses.

Gutenberg returned to Mainz in 1444 and by 1448 he was pursuing in earnest what subsequent court records refer to as 'Werk der Bücher' – the work of the books. He needed to 'invent' nothing for this new enterprise. Not only was the press to hand but so was the book. Handwritten on parchment, it had been around for 1,000 years, an alternative to the scroll. Paper was being produced by specialised manufacturers and by Gutenberg's time it was generally available, although production remained centred in Italy. The town of Fabriano was noted as making the best, but rivals were to be found further north. There were enough papermakers in Paris by 1398 for them to form a guild. Nevertheless, parchment continued to be used and was available in bulk, ready cut. Gutenberg printed 30 copies of the Bible on vellum, using the skins of about 170 sheep for each copy.

Different facets of the trade in texts had become specialised. To reduce the possibility of scribal error, for example, there was a business in hiring authoritative manuscripts, *exemplaria*, to copyists, normally quire by quire so that many hands could work simultaneously on the same book. Text copiers were distinct from illustrators. Illustrators were organised into workshops and used a form of tracing paper to make copies from master designs, 'cartoons'. Getting an image from a wood block in a press, xylography, was well established. They had been doing this in the East for 600 years at least. Pictures of the Virgin and the saints were particularly popular in Gutenberg's part of the world and in Burgundy. They were bought as talismans for the home. At first such prints bore handwritten legends but these became part of the engraving. Complete books of whole blocks – blockbooks – had begun to appear in the 1440s and *The Poor Man's Bible* (*Biblia Pauperum*) and *The Art of Dying* (*Ars Moriendi*) were particularly popular in this form. On the other hand, xylography also produced tools for the Devil's work in the form of playing cards.

Gathering all these elements together – paper or parchment, ink and wood block, putting copyists or xylographers to work, selling or hiring manuscripts for reading as well as copying – became the job of stationers, an ancient term which had been revived by the Italian universities. From the last quarter of the thirteenth century on, stationers were to be found in towns housing courts or universities, increasingly replacing monastic scriptoria as the source of manuscripts. The idea of the book, handwritten but as a set of identical multiple copies, was firmly established. Over 2,000 manuscript copies of Aristotle survive from the two centuries before Gutenberg. Some 250 copies of Sir John Mandeville's fantastical *Travels* (1356) survive in ten languages, including Irish. It was possible to be an avid collector. In 1346, the poet Petrarch had written: 'I cannot get enough books. It may be that I have already more than I need, but it is with books as it is with other things: success in acquisition spurs the desire to get still more.' Petrarch's was a passion which would not go away and feeding it remained profitable for many. Ninety years later Cosimo di Medici, *de facto* ruler of the Florentine

Republic, acquired what was probably the largest private collection in the West, the 800 books gathered by the early humanist scholar Niccolo Niccoli, and in 1444 he had them housed in Europe’s first public library. It is no wonder that one successful stationer in the city, Vespiano di Bisticci, had enough work to employ 50 copyists on a permanent basis.

Gutenberg seems to have made two original technical contributions to the ‘work of the books’. He concocted a new ink base, a variant on the recent Flemish development of oil-based paints. As his ink was better for vellum than paper, this improvement was not so critical, given paper was anyway replacing vellum. On the other hand, his refinement of the type-casting process was an essential advance. Gutenberg seems to have developed a little hand-held mould, a type-founder’s tool, into which the liquid metal could be poured. It enabled individual letters – sorts (or even, perhaps, subdivided elements of individual letters) – to be made which could be assembled into texts, printed and taken down to be reused. The mould was also reusable, producing up to four sorts a minute, and could be easily disassembled. As many sorts were needed for every page of text and wore out quickly with repeated use, the mould was a critical development.

The recipe for ink and the creation of the little mould aside, Gutenberg was otherwise what we would today think of as a systems engineer, putting together machines and techniques readily available from parallel practical purposes, rather than the ‘Eureka’ inventor of popular imagination. Perhaps the surest claim he has to such a title rests on the idea of reusability rather than the creation of any particular device; it is the type-case, overflowing with letters, spaces and symbols, rather than the sorts or types themselves, which is the most radical new thing. *Reusability* of individual letters is the breakthrough, a concept which perhaps would come more readily into the mind of a metal worker than to a stationer surrounded by the paraphernalia of mass manuscript production. Otherwise, the skills Gutenberg needed to engrave the reversed letter in the mould would have been part of his stock-in-trade as a goldsmith. The concept of the metal punch had been known in

antiquity and was the basis of the minting of money, also something with which Gutenberg would have been most familiar. Over the two centuries before the introduction of movable type, die stamps were being used in Europe for an increasing number of purposes, from inscribing crests to marking pewter. And presses were everywhere. That he was not alone in the 1440s in realising the potential of a system of printing using individual types is a proof that the ‘invention of printing’ is not the unexpected and inexplicable product of a single person’s genius.

Metal workers, who were to be found in every European town and city, were all familiar with the tools and techniques necessary for printing. In 1444, the year Gutenberg quit Strasbourg, Procopius Waldvogel, a silversmith of Prague, was in Avignon, at work using a steel fount and press. In contracts dated from that year and 1446, there are clear references to the art of artificial writing (*ars artificialiter scribendi*) and to Latin and Hebrew letters, but no examples exist of his work. It must also be said that nothing that Gutenberg might have printed before 1448, despite veiled references, exists either. Given how little Gutenberg and Waldvogel had that was new, there might well have been other ‘inventors’. Let Laurens Janszoon Coster of Haarlem, a rhetorician, stand for these putative lost others. At the same time as Johann and Procopius, this Laurens, according to a story published a century after his death, reputedly brought together punches to make metal letters, presses, formes and paper. None of his printing work, if there was any, survives either, although his writing does.

And then there is the problem of the East’s influence. The earliest surviving blockbook is in Chinese and dates from 868 AD and type had been well known in China since the eleventh century AD at the latest. A major Korean treatise on etiquette had been produced with individual metal types in 1234. Yet Marco Polo, who said he was in China in the 1270s, made no mention of printing techniques – but he might never have actually travelled to the East. On the other hand, visitors who indubitably reached the Orient – emissaries of the Pope on recurrent visits to the Great Khan, or Catholic bishops sojourning in Beijing continuously between 1307 and 1368 – produced no records to show that