

The Encyclopedia and the Gutenberg Parenthesis.

Lars Ole Sauerberg

The Gutenberg Parenthesis.

It is becoming increasingly likely that from the perspective of a not too distant future the period from the late Renaissance to the beginning of the 21st century will be seen as dominated and even defined by the cultural significance of print – not least in the form of the mass-produced book which is virtually synonymous with Western culture. It accordingly seems appropriate to designate this period, roughly corresponding to the half-millennium from 1500 to 2000, “the Gutenberg Parenthesis”.<sup>1</sup>

With the invention of moveable type and the printing press, the conditions for communication of and access to information and knowledge changed radically. The change affected not merely the material appearance of information and knowledge dissemination but also, in the process, the very nature of cognition. Today, in analogous but inverse manner, the mass-produced book is being absorbed into a digital environment, which enables reproduction and dissemination surpassing even the longest print runs, but which in terms of the disseminated substance also reduces the book to just another option in a wealth of different media modes and permutations.

As the opening of the Gutenberg Parenthesis meant the closing of privileged production and consumption of textually communicated knowledge, statement and information, the closing of the Gutenberg Parenthesis symmetrically implies the opening up to a completely new and so far only partially glimpsed - let alone understood - cognitive situation. What Walter Ong in his *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* suggests in his introduction about the dependence of thought upon writing, or what he calls chirographic activity, seems to apply also to the changes in thought brought about next by printing then by digitization:

Many of the features we have taken for granted in thought and expression in literature, philosophy and science, and even in oral discourse among literates, are not directly native to human existence as such but have come

into being because of the resources which the technology of the writing makes available to human consciousness (1982:1).

From the vantage point of the early 21st century it seems likely, then, that conventional notions of the text, which since Gutenberg have often been conflated with the printed book, will be radically transformed. On the one hand the emerging notion of the text is a both qualitative and quantitative expansion of the particular form of virtuality which is generated by the mass-produced book. On the other hand, despite the apparent variety, a new uniformity of the virtual seems to be in the process of formation, caused, not least, by a shift from a publishing-house culture to a diffuse internet culture determined by technological standards which are no more “natural” than those of the book. In this IT version of textuality, visual and auditive, elite culture and mass culture, old and new, text and commentary, sacral and secular, are placed on an equal footing. It is a development with significant consequences for our approach to the world. It is a development which, by changing the material conditions for cognition, changes the material conditions of cognition.

#### Parenthesis and Encyclopedia.

The emergence and consolidation of the encyclopedia as a multi-volume and privately-owned instrument of access to all existing knowledge is traditionally related to the Enlightenment in general and to Diderot’s work in particular, that is from about half-way into the Gutenberg Parenthesis. Now, at the end of the Parenthesis, the material existence of the encyclopedia as printed book is yielding to the hyper-text search facilities of the internet, and new, open-ended and open-contribution encyclopedias like Wikipedia.

In this limited space I shall focus on the development dynamics of knowledge and information handling in the form of the encyclopedia in the period from hand-copied works via multi-volume print enterprises to digitized screen-mediated projects. I shall attempt to hold this development up to changes in the constitution of authority ownership during the same period, sketching a situation of give-and-take between changes in media – copying by hand followed by print followed by digitization – and

ownership of authority as essential for cognitive-formation shifts, in terms of authority lent to the medium, as well as authority gained from the medium.

In the article on “encyclopaedia” the Britannica online encyclopedia by way of introduction states that “in the past two millennia several thousand encyclopaedias have been issued in various parts of the world, and some of these have had many editions.” In the perspective of the Gutenberg Parenthesis it is striking that the words “issue” and “editions” seem to take it more or less for granted that the phenomenon of the encyclopedia is pivoted on the mechanisms of printing and mass distribution.

From Hand-copied to Printed Encyclopedias.

Many manuscript copies of pre-print encyclopedias were in circulation. Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia* was known in the Middle Ages. As Robert Collison remarks in his invaluable study *Encyclopedias: Their History Throughout the Ages* from 1966 : “No self-respecting medieval library was without a copy” (26).<sup>2</sup> Collison (1966, 49) estimates that more than one hundred copies of Hugh St. Victor’s *Didascalicon: de studio legendi* (late 1120s) copied through the ensuing four hundred have been preserved. St. Victor’s work was designed to counter secular tendencies threatening the monopoly of the church in matters of learning and instruction.

After Gutenberg’s invention the tendency on the part of publishers and printers – often the same persons – was to make use of what had already proved of some popularity. Hand-copied works were turned into printed works, printed works provided quarries for new works, and gradually new works were commissioned for printing. It is quite striking, however, that in Collison 1966 the shift from pre-Gutenberg to Gutenberg, from pre-print to print, is noted as a purely mechanical shift, as it were, not something entailing a major mindset change caused by something for once deserving the designation of a culture-paradigm shift.

Hand-copied encyclopedias were turned into print from the mid-fifteenth century. The first two encyclopedias to go directly into print were Wenceslaus Brack’s *Vocabularius rerum*, printed in several editions in late fifteenth century, in Basle by Peter Kollicker, 1483, and by Anton Sorg in Augsburg, 1487, and Gregor Reisch’s *Margarita philosophica*, first published in Heidelberg in 1496. The first encyclopedias

designed for printing coincided with the secularist tendencies of humanism, and, we may add, of Protestant Christianity. The printing technique did not occasion the secularist tendencies, but facilitated their impact. (No Luther success without Gutenberg success!).

Regarding encyclopedias the transition from hand-copying to printing press coincided with a cultural dynamic of secularization. But the beginning of a new encyclopedia-for-all era was not signaled until the French encyclopedia project of the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The *Encyclopédie* set the pattern for the huge wave of encyclopedias to emerge over the following 250 years.

By the end of the nineteenth century there were universally recognized multi-volume encyclopedias in print in most countries, running along roughly the same lines of systematization and presentation, and more or less nationalistically inclined. Encyclopedias soon developed into more or less self-propelling ventures. Many of them assured their own reliability by the very fact of being in print in ever-updated versions. The genre of the encyclopedia consolidated itself as a virtually closed-circuit system of authority, whose trustworthiness almost paradoxically owed itself to the constant deconstruction of past truth by updating and revising. It vouched for its reliability by an overt system of authority, extending from signed articles up through a layer of editors and advisers via the editor in chief to the university institution. It is striking that the editor's preface to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* published in 1967, while mapping the difficult territory braved by the editor of such a huge work such as the passage of time, changes in structure of knowledge, exclusions, the nature of the huge printed work against the rapid development of science, etc., the validation of knowledge receives no comment. There is, though, on the verso of the title page the rather cavalier declaration that

The Encyclopaedia Britannica is published with the editorial advice of the faculties of the University of Chicago and of a committee of members of the faculties of Oxford, Cambridge and London Universities and a committee at The University of Toronto.

Then there follows a list of departmental editors and advisers and their awe-inspiring alma maters before the articles appear in alphabetical order, signed by initials filled in in

the very last index volume. Its fifth edition published also in 1967 *Everyman's Encyclopedia* addresses itself to the less affluent book-buyer. The twelve volumes have a brief preface by the editor, E. F. Bozman, M.A. (Cantab.), stating with regard to the authority of the volumes that

These standard articles, which between them have created the unique quality and usefulness of *Everyman's Encyclopedia*, remain anonymous as a matter of policy. The team of contributors has been reinforced by numerous specialists, particular care being taken to ensure that new and authoritative factual statements are available on contemporary problems (v).

No doubt for many users of this encyclopedia its very physical features endow it with any authority wanted.

The ideal encyclopedia at the end of the Gutenberg Parenthesis must be judged, as claimed by S. Padraig Walsh in his *General Encyclopedias in Print 1969: A Comparative Analysis*, in his reflections on authority, by the

measure of the authority behind its compilation. A good encyclopedia will emphasize this by publishing a full list of the editors, special advisory boards, consultants, and contributors, together with a detailed listing of their academic and special qualifications and a clear definition of their areas of contribution (1969, 8).

Nonetheless Walsh recommends the *Everyman Encyclopedia*.

During the Gutenberg Parenthesis it might be said that the very genre of the encyclopedia was itself a guarantee of its authority. Up there in the bookcase in an impressive number of gold-embossed volumes sits all available knowledge in the world. Physical exertion – walking towards the bookcase, fetching volume, turning pages – is required to get at it. Thus the retrieval of knowledge is rendered an aura of substance, of something solid existing in and by itself and quite distinct and different from any other purely intellectual chore preoccupying the one seeking knowledge.

Encyclopedias After the Gutenberg Parenthesis.

The situation today for the encyclopedia is indeed one of convergence, as users deploy a variety of options at their disposal. But it is hardly imaginable that a new, printed-encyclopedia will ever see light again anywhere. In itself, the internet is one vast encyclopedia, ready to be browsed by the search engines at hand. But the encyclopedia principle, that is the availability of knowledge in an ordered and authoritative manner, still seems to play a considerable role. Users want reliability in the barrage of information that a simple Google search will result in. This is a craving welcomed by those with an interest in the Gutenberg-parenthesis kind of encyclopedia. *Encyclopedia Britannica* is available in a *Britannica online* version which contains articles currently updated and offers a variety of relevant links, but no possibility for the user to contribute. The solution chosen by Gyldendal, the publisher of *Den Store Danske*, as the web version of the printed edition of *Den Store Danske Encyklopædi*, was recently to make it into a moderated wiki, half way between the almost total user generation of knowledge by Wikipedia and the *Britannica online*. It is an open question for how long this state of convergence in the encyclopedia field will be viable. Surely the combination of the guarantee of expertise offered by the boards of specialists behind the partly open wiki of the Gyldendal's encyclopedia and the often extremely comprehensive compilations of the Wikipedia enthusiast contributors offers a possibility never offered previously, of instant comparison of knowledge and ensuing sorting out efficiently of whatever is needed.

Today's encyclopedia user does not differentiate knowledge retrieval from the task performed, as the source for knowledge is only a key punch away. Knowledge becomes integrative but at the same time every instance of its use must be probed for its reliability. Whereas the Gutenberg-Paranthesis encyclopedia user could consult the relevant volume with an untroubled mind, knowing that state-of-the art truth could indeed be had, today's user will have not only to sort from a wealth of information, but also to be alert to those features which contribute to the reliability of the source. This is a mindset that requires simultaneous work on object and meta levels, always judging reliability along with knowledge provided.

Whereas authority during the Gutenberg Parenthesis rested on the mastery of the accumulated canon of wisdom lodged in books, authority beyond the closing of the

parenthesis will lie with those mastering the permutations of iconography under the aegis of the permanence of change. The post-Gutenberg memory is the digital storage unit, which offers accessibility and combination more in line with the dynamics of memory than the memory virtually printed, and kept outside personal experience – in books, among them encyclopedias. It is worth noting that by this re-orientation we are, arguably, effectively reverting to medieval and Renaissance thought from before Gutenberg, a pre-parenthetical phase which saw creativity as a re-forming, by memory and imagination, of what was available.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> The observations on the arguable nature of the Gutenberg Parenthesis are based on the deliberations and theses of position paper of the Gutenberg Parenthesis Research Forum at [http://www.sdu.dk/Om\\_SDU/Institutter\\_centre/Ilkm/Forskning/Forskningsprojekter/Gutenberg\\_projekt.aspx](http://www.sdu.dk/Om_SDU/Institutter_centre/Ilkm/Forskning/Forskningsprojekter/Gutenberg_projekt.aspx), of which I am a co-author.

<sup>2</sup> In my survey of the history of the encyclopedia I follow Collison 1966. Another, and more recent, survey is Yeo 2001, a capsule version of which is the entry under his byline in Suarez and Woudhuysen 2010:697-9.

<sup>3</sup> The *Encyclopédie* is a much-researched object. A valuable study of its printing history after the first edition is found in Darnton 1979, while this study in the bibliographical note offers an overview of references to studies on the first edition.

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Gutenberg Parenthesis Research Forum at

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