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Description

Review of:

Man, John. *Gutenberg. How One Man Remade the World with Words*. John Wiley and Sons, New York: 2002.

O'Donnell, James J. *Avatars of the Word*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass: 1998.

Wertheim, Margaret. *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace. A History of Space from Dante to the Internet*. W.W.Norton & Company, New York: 1999.

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Gutenberg, Avatars of the Word, and The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace

Posted on **June 1, 2002** by **Editor**



Review by Jeffrey Barlow <barlowj@pacificu.edu>
Editor, Interface

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Wertheim, Margaret. *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*. A History of Space from Dante to the Internet. W.W.Norton & Company, New York: 1999.

For those of us interested in the Internet it usually seems that nothing is more important in a book than that it be recent. If while browsing we are caught by a catchy title but see that the book was published sometime ago, as were two of the books reviewed here (1998 and 1999) our tendency is to put them aside. How could they be anything but terribly outdated as quickly as events move in cyberspace? Yesterday's really big thing (push technology, for example) is tomorrow's dot com crash.

But there is some advantage in looking backward to see where we are going in the development of the Internet. Whereas the Internet itself is definitely new, it is not the first revolutionary development in media or communications. Each of these three books has something useful to tell us about previous such revolutions, and much can be learned about our own future from them.

The oldest of the three, as well as the one set farthest back in the past of communications is James O'Donnell's *Avatars of the Word*. O'Donnell's subject is the transition from papyrus rolls to the codex, or hand-copied book produced by scribes. This occurred in Latin Late Antiquity (300-600 A.D.). This may seem to many to be a relatively unimportant transition as both forms were

essentially hand copies, only the “stuff” being written upon changed in form.

However, the implications of this change were vast. One measure of the change is that few of the scrolls themselves survive and none of the libraries in which they were collected. This is because scrolls were long and cumbersome, difficult to store, almost impossible to index, and very difficult to access other than linearly—by “scrolling” through them. But books could be shelved, indexed, have page numbers and concordances. And books, of course, could be printed.

O’Donnell’s academic field is Classical Studies, but he was Vice-Provost for Information Systems and Computing at the University of Pennsylvania at the writing of this book. He draws upon his deep understanding of previous transitions in communications to illuminate our current one. He moves easily from discussions of the remote past to apt comparisons with current conditions.

For those alarmed about the revolutionary transformations created by the Internet, the general lesson of this text is something like: “Be calm, we have been through all of this before and reading and scholarship will survive.”

The second work reviewed here, John Man’s *Gutenberg*, takes up quite naturally where O’Donnell’s work largely leaves off, with the development of printing. Man, too, has frequent recourse to comparisons with the impact of the Internet, and points out that, except for very few specialists, the only authoritative copy of the original Gutenberg Bible that can be accessed freely is available on the Internet <<http://www.humi.keio.ac.jp/treasures/incunabula/B42/>> But his book is really a social history of Gutenberg’s time and a history of the development of printing. While Man points out the many points at which printing may well have developed, both in Europe and in Asia, he identifies Gutenberg as:

... that rarity: a man seized by an idea, obsessed by it, imprinted by it, who also has the technical skill, business acumen and sheer dogged year-after-year grit to make it real. (Man 52)

We learn further from Man’s book that much is yet to be understood about the development of printing: there is not even agreement as to how the basic process initially was accomplished.

While it was Gutenberg’s printing of the bible that has come to symbolize the impact of printing, in fact there were earlier works printed by him. The first was probably the *Ars Grammatica*, a Latin textbook published about 1450. (Man 147).

Printing, we learn from Man, developed over a period of hundreds of years. But once Gutenberg had made the process profitable, it spread rapidly. From Gutenberg’s one press in c. 1450, Europe had, by 1480, 122.

John Man’s *Gutenberg* is a very worthwhile work. From it we learn about the technological

history of printing, of the development of paper and typefaces, of the socio-political environment that both facilitated printing and the world that was subsequently created by printing. We come to understand Gutenberg, as well as many who were in a sense created by the printing press, such as Martin Luther. But above all we see that when the time for ideas has come, they are unstoppable and will develop with a rapidity that surprises all observers.

The last of these three books, Margaret Wertheim's *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, follows nicely in time after *Gutenberg*. Its subject is the Renaissance, one of the results of the development of the printing press. Wertheim, too, has much to say about the development of the Internet, based upon earlier historical precedent. Her subject initially seems extremely abstract: the relationship between human ability to conceive of space and our view of mankind itself. (Wertheim 37). Taking as her intellectual canvas the development of pictorial art during the Renaissance, Wertheim argues that our changing conception of space, whether the medieval Christian heaven, or the utopian dreams of a fully democratic cyberspace, all reflect our understanding of space itself.

The revolution affecting the Renaissance subjects of Wertheim's inquiry was not technological, like the development of the book or of printing, but conceptual: the realization that the earth was not the center of the solar system as Ptolemaic astronomy had it, but the sun itself, as Copernicus demonstrated. This, with related conceptual changes, had the effect of locating mankind in real space; angels no longer had a celestial home and man, not God, became the center of human thought. A result of this change was that Renaissance painters introduced a viewer-centered perspective into their art that, in turn, had the effect of assisting later scientists in visualizing space (Wertheim 105). This, Wertheim argues, was key to later scientific development.

As do O'Donnell and Man, Wertheim draws upon her understanding of one field, in this case Renaissance art, to better explain to us the many ways in which we are reacting to our own contemporary revolution, the development of the Internet, as did our intellectual forbearers react to their own eras of great change.

Any one of these three books is well worth reading for itself. But taken together, they permit us to draw upon the lessons of three important historical periods and the human intellectual reaction to their revolutionary developments. Taken together, they help us to better understand our own era and the challenges presented by the Internet.

Review article by
Jeffrey Barlow,
Editor, Interface

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20 THOUGHTS ON "GUTENBERG, AVATARS OF THE WORD, AND THE PEARLY GATES OF CYBERSPACE"

naijaon **January 30, 2014 at 11:36 AM** said:

Awesome talk! Thank you so significantly for hosting Great.

breaking newson **January 30, 2014 at 1:54 PM** said:

I do Like visiting your blog, you usually make me suprise with good post.

plotkaon **February 1, 2014 at 1:48 AM** said:

"Great, thanks for sharing this article post.Appreciate it Once more and again. Terrific."

Wroclawon **February 1, 2014 at 3:52 AM** said:

One more issue I need to talk about is that as an option to trying to accommodate all your on the internet degree lessons on times that you end jobs (since the majority individuals are tired when they get home), try for getting most of one's instructional classes over a week-ends and only a couple courses in weekdays, even if it methods a little time away in the saturday and sunday. This is beneficial due to the fact on a saturdays and sundays, you will be more rested along with concentrated in school work. Thanks a lot to your several things I have figured out in the site.

9jaon **February 3, 2014 at 1:32 AM** said:

Hey quite cool world wide web site!! Guy .. Beautiful .. Superb .. I'll bookmark your blog and take the feeds also...I am satisfied to find so quite a few useful information the following inside post, we'd like develop far more techniques in this regard, thanks for sharing.

temat

on **February 3, 2014 at 1:55 AM** said:

Hello, you employed to write good articles, but the last many content had been kinda boring... I miss your great articles. Past several articles are just a little out of track!

nigeria social network

on **February 4, 2014 at 10:18 AM** said:

This is my very first time pay a visit at right here and i am truly impressed to read everthing at alone place.

nigeria entertainment news

on **February 4, 2014 at 10:29 AM** said:

Whats up. Really nice web site!! Guy .. Beautiful .. Amazing .. I am going to bookmark your web site and take in the feeds additionally...I am satisfied to come across lots of helpful info the following inside the article. Thanks for sharing...

nigeria entertainment news

on **February 4, 2014 at 10:38 AM** said:

I have mastered some essential elements through your internet site post. A single other subject I need to talk about is that there are numerous games out there on the marketplace developed specially for toddler age children. They include pattern acceptance, colors, family pets, and shapes. These normally focus on familiarization as

an option to memorization. This keeps small young children engaged without the need of sensing like they are studying. Thanks

christian ministry ordination online

on **February 4, 2014 at 2:32 PM** said:

Simply want to say your article is as astonishing.

The clearness for your put up is just

nice and i could think you're a professional in this subject.

Well along with your permission allow me to snatch your feed to stay up to date with imminent post.

Thanks a millikn and please keep upp the enjoyable work.

<http://www.awardwinningwebdesign.com/>

on **February 4, 2014 at 3:23 PM** said:

hello!,I really like your writing so so much!

percentage we be in cntact extra about your post on AOL?

I need a specialist on this house to unravel my problem.

Maay be that's you! Taking a look forward too see you.

consolidate credit cards debt

on **February 4, 2014 at 7:26 PM** said:

Amazing blog! Is your theme custom made orr did you download it from somewhere?

A design like yours with a few simple tweekes would really make my blog stand out.

Please leet me know where you got yiur theme. Blexs you

teatroengalicia.es

on **February 4, 2014 at 9:22 PM** said:

It's enormous that you are getting thoughts from this paragraph as well as from our dialogue made at this place.

christian youth ministry jobs

on **February 5, 2014 at 7:23 PM** said:

Simply want to say your article is as astounding. The clearness in your submit is simply nice and i can think you're a professional in this subject. Well with your permission let me to snatch your feed to stay up to date with coming near near post. Thank you 1,000,000 and please carry on the enjoyable work.

<http://www.toplista.pun.PI/index.php?a=stats&u=lenora43nigcu>

on **February 5, 2014 at 8:01 PM** said:

An interesting discussion is worth comment. I do believe that you should publish more on this topic, it may not be a taboo matter but generally people do not speak about these issues. To the next! All the best!!

catholic church near 85024

on **February 5, 2014 at 8:04 PM** said:

At this moment I am ready to do my breakfast, after having my breakfast coming over again to read the news.

health fair

on **February 6, 2014 at 1:03 AM** said:

Hi to every body, it's my first go to see of this blog; this

webpage carries awesome and really excellent data for readers.

Celsa

on **February 6, 2014 at 3:36 AM** said:

It's remarkable in support of me to have a site, which is valuable for my experience.
thanks admin

soohelp.com

on **February 6, 2014 at 5:12 AM** said:

Pretty nice post. I simply stumbled upon your blog and wished to mention that I've really loved browsing your blog posts. After all I'll be subscribing to your feed and I am hoping you write once more very soon!

wiki.exbis.pl

on **February 6, 2014 at 8:10 AM** said:

I think this is among the most important information for me.

And I'm glad reading your article. But I want to remark on a few general things, The web site style is wonderful, the articles are really nice : D.

Good job, cheers