The Gutenberg Parenthesis: The Age of Print and Its Lessons for the Age of the Internet by Jeff Jarvis, Bloomsbury, 319pp, ? price

Reviewed by John Naughton

Here's a thought-experiment. Imagine that it's 1485 and you are an employee of a medieval opinion-pollster standing with your clip-slate on the bridge over the river Mainz in Germany, where you're politely stopping passers-by and asking them a few questions. Here's Question 4: "On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is definitely 'yes' and 5 definitely 'no', do you think that the technology invented down the street by Herr Gutenberg will: (a) Undermine the authority of the Catholic Church; (b) Fuel a Protestant Reformation and trigger a series of religious wars; (c) Create entirely new social classes, occupations and industries; (d) Foster 'scientific' inquiry; and (e) Change our conceptions of childhood?"

You only have to ask the questions to know that nobody in 1485 could have guessed that printing by moveable type would have such epochal impacts. And yet it did, and far, far more: in fact Gutenberg's invention shaped the world for the next half-millennium.

Why 1485? Answer: the *Gedankenexperiment* is set 30 years after the first printed bible emerged from Gutenberg's press; and today is 30 years since the launch of the first graphical browser for the World Wide Web that had been invented by Gutenberg's spiritual heir, Tim Berners-Lee. Which means that we're the same distance into another epochal revolution in our media ecosystem -- and that we are as naively ignorant about its longer-term implications as inhabitants of Mainz were in 1485.

So a modicum of humility is in order. Also a sense of history, a sensibility entirely absent from Silicon Valley, where hubristic ideology holds that its inhabitants -- who see themselves as makers of the future -- have nothing to learn from it. Given such invincible ignorance, we are obliged to look elsewhere for wisdom.

In 2009, a Danish medievalist, Lars Ole Sauerberg, came up with an intriguing metaphor which he called 'The Gutenberg Parenthesis'. This is the idea that the Gutenberg era — the period from the 15th century to the 20th, an age defined by textuality — was essentially an *interruption* in the broader arc of human communication. Before print, culture was essentially oral; then it was dominated by print; and now network technology is undermining that dominance, closing the parenthesis and bringing us back to orality -- conversation, gossip, the ephemeral — again.

Jeff Jarvis is a distinguished journalist who now teaches in NYU. He's long been fascinated by Gutenberg (and indeed wrote a pamphlet about him as the "the world's first technology entrepreneur"). Like many of us, he has also been intrigued by Sauerberg's metaphor both as a gateway to a long view of the evolution of humankind's communications environment, and as an antidote to the patronising hubris of hindsight.

The trouble with metaphors, though, is that they are simultaneously useful and flawed. They are useful in that they provide a dramatic way of helping people appreciate novelty by viewing it through a familiar lens; but they are also deficient, because the similarity that provides that flash of enlightenment may also be superficial in significant ways. Jarvis's book addresses that problem by making an assiduous attempt to put flesh on the bones of the meta-

phor, so that readers can appreciate the extent to which the 'parenthesis' idea helps us to view the present in a wider context; but he is also alert to the ways in which the metaphor can mislead. The problem with a parenthesis, for example, is that enclosing something inside a pair of square brackets implies that there is a neat and clear distinction between what went before and what came afterwards. But life -- and cultural evolution -- isn't like that.

The book is divided into three sections. The first two trace the evolution of print technology from its origins to what Jarvis sees as its "eventual eclipse",and examines the debate about its meaning. The third section asks what we can (should?) do with digital technology based on what we've learned from the age of print. The opening sections provide a display case for Jarvis's expository skills. He has produced the best general account of the evolution of print technology that I've seen -- impeccably researched and referenced, but also compulsively readable. At times he reminds one of Neil Postman, the great cultural and media critic of the 1960s and 1970s.

It's only when he gets to the putative closing of the parenthesis -- the end of the period of print dominance -- that he seems to lose his way. In part that's because in practice transitioning between one era and another is not like crossing a frontier and more like witnessing a slow metamorphosis, as new cultural and institutional forms emerge from the fog of contradictory signals. As we head into "the unknown and unsure" digital future, Jarvis writes, "we have the blessing, the gift, of the history of books and of our transition into the Parenthesis to learn from". His book provides an admirable summary of what we should have learned from history. Silicon Valley please copy.

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