

From papyrus to pixels; The future of the book

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ABSTRACT

In 44BC Cicero, the Roman Republic's great orator, wrote a book for his son Marcus called *de Officiis* ("On Duties"). It told him how to live a moral life, how to balance virtue with self-interest, how to have an impact. Not all his words were new. *De Officiis* draws on the views of various Greek philosophers whose works Cicero could consult in his library, most of which have since been lost. Cicero's, though, remain. *De Officiis* was read and studied throughout the rise of the Roman Empire and survived the subsequent fall. Then, in the 15th century, *de Officiis* was copied by a machine. The lush edition in your correspondent's hands--delightfully, and surprisingly, no gloves are needed to handle it--is one of the very first such copies. It was printed in Mainz, Germany, on a printing press owned by Johann Fust, an early partner of Johannes Gutenberg, the pioneer of European printing. It is dated 1466. Some 500 years after it was printed, this beautiful volume sits in the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, its home since 1916. Few physical volumes survive five centuries. This one should last several more. The vault that holds it and tens of thousands of other volumes, built in 1951, was originally meant to double as a nuclear-bomb shelter. The private joys of the book will remain; new public pleasures are there to be added.

FULL TEXT

The digital transformation of the way books are written, published and sold has only just begun. Essay rubric FINGERS stroke vellum; the calfskin pages are smooth, like paper, but richer, almost oily. The black print is crisp, and every Latin sentence starts with a lush red letter. One of the book's early owners has drawn a hand and index finger which points, like an arrow, to passages worth remembering.

In 44BC Cicero, the Roman Republic's great orator, wrote a book for his son Marcus called *de Officiis* ("On Duties"). It told him how to live a moral life, how to balance virtue with self-interest, how to have an impact. Not all his words were new. *De Officiis* draws on the views of various Greek philosophers whose works Cicero could consult in his library, most of which have since been lost. Cicero's, though, remain. *De Officiis* was read and studied throughout the rise of the Roman Empire and survived the subsequent fall. It shaped the thought of Renaissance thinkers like Erasmus; centuries later still it inspired Voltaire. "No one will ever write anything more wise," he said.

The book's words have not changed; their vessel, though, has gone through relentless reincarnation and metamorphosis. Cicero probably dictated *de Officiis* to his freed slave, Tiro, who copied it down on a papyrus scroll from which other copies were made in turn. Within a few centuries some versions were transferred from scrolls into bound books, or codices. A thousand years later monks meticulously made copies by hand, averaging only a few pages a day. Then, in the 15th century, *de Officiis* was copied by a machine. The lush edition in your correspondent's hands--delightfully, and surprisingly, no gloves are needed to handle it--is one of the very first such copies. It was printed in Mainz, Germany, on a printing press owned by Johann Fust, an early partner of Johannes Gutenberg, the pioneer of European printing. It is dated 1466.

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Although this copy of *de Officiis* may be sequestered, the book itself is freer than ever. In its printed forms it has been a hardback and, more recently, a paperback, published in all sorts of editions--as a one off, a component of

uniform library editions, a classic pitched at an affordable price, a scholarly, annotated text that only universities buy. And now it is available in all sorts of non-printed forms, too. You can read it free online or download it as an e-book in English, Latin and any number of other tongues.

Many are worried about what such technology means for books, with big bookshops closing, new devices spreading, novice authors flooding the market and an online behemoth known as Amazon growing ever more powerful. Their anxieties cannot simply be written off as predictable technophobia. The digital transition may well change the way books are written, sold and read more than any development in their history, and that will not be to everyone's advantage. Veterans and revolutionaries alike may go bust; Gutenberg died almost penniless, having lost control of his press to Fust and other creditors.

But to see technology purely as a threat to books risks missing a key point. Books are not just "tree flakes encased in dead cow", as a scholar once wryly put it. They are a technology in their own right, one developed and used for the refinement and advancement of thought. And this technology is a powerful, long-lived and adaptable one. Books like *de Officiis* have not merely weathered history; they have helped shape it. The ability they offer to preserve, transmit and develop ideas was taken to another level by Gutenberg and his colleagues. Being able to study printed material at the same time as others studied it and to exchange ideas about it sparked the Reformation; it was central to the Enlightenment and the rise of science. No army has accomplished more than printed textbooks have; no prince or priest has mattered as much as "On the Origin of Species"; no coercion has changed the hearts and minds of men and women as much as the first folio of Shakespeare's plays.

Books read in electronic form will boast the same power and some new ones to boot. The printed book is an excellent means of channelling information from writer to reader; the e-book can send information back as well. Teachers will be able to learn of a pupil's progress and questions; publishers will be able to see which books are gulped down, which sipped slowly. Already readers can see what other readers have thought worthy of note, and seek out like-minded people for further discussion of what they have read. The private joys of the book will remain; new public pleasures are there to be added.

What is the future of the book? It is much brighter than people think.

Illustration

Caption: Chapter I

DETAILS

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