

The Case for Books: Past, Present, and Future

By Robert Darnton
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“The book is not dead,” Robert Darnton¹ declared while speaking to a large group packed in a small room on a cool winter night at the Harvard bookstore.² Surrounded by hard covers and paperbacks that ranged in topic from art to food to music to myth, he is more than aware of the current and incoming digital progression. With the Google age, the increase in online publication, and new “vending machine” book technology, Darnton understands the need and, perhaps, necessity—cost, ease, little discussed and published subjects—to comingle the printed word with its digitized counterpart. Starting in the future, Mr. Darnton chronicles what is to come, what is currently happening to research libraries and books, and finally to the rise and process of what it takes to access books in the past. He does this all while he laments the “special smells” books give off as well as informs of his love for “rare book rooms that make you put on gloves;” his joy for the physical medium of the book not only what is written inside.³ While his love of books is prominent and evident, Darnton hopes and believes the invasion of digital publishing will reinforce print publishing through this current transitional period to where they will both end up thriving together.

¹ Darnton, a Rhodes Scholar, is the current Carl H. Pforzheimer University Professor in the Modern European field and Director of the Harvard University Library. He founded the Gutenberg-e program and has written and edited over a dozen books mostly focusing on the history of the book itself.

² Robert Darnton, Harvard Book Store, Feb. 3, 2010, aired Book TV on C-Span 2, Feb. 20, 2010. Darnton speaking about his thoughts on digitization based on his views in *The Case for Books*.

³ ROBERT DARNTON, *THE CASE FOR BOOKS: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE*, 39-40 (2009).

The Case for Books is a collection of Darnton's previously published essays, edited and modified to create a narrative on how the progressing "Information Landscape" is both positively and adversely affecting our culture in relation to knowledge, access, and legal issues pertaining to the printed word in connection with digitization and research libraries.⁴ "Information Landscape"—the second essay in this collection—lays the framework as to how these libraries unite the past and have the ability to provide access to the future. As a historian, former professor, prolific writer, and current head of the Harvard University Library, Darnton views these institutions as essential research tools and keepers of our past. Without them, he believes, history is abandoned and future learning based endeavors become bleak. As a result of knowledge now arriving in the form of the Internet, there have been rising costs in scholarly periodicals and a lack of interest and use in subject specific monographs. The lack of appeal in this area, along with the ease of the internet, have forced these libraries to no longer buy books in quantities, causing, according to Darnton, a decrease in the dissemination of knowledge. New technology and the Google Book Search, Darnton argues, may offer grounds for hope in a new-age "Republic of Letters."⁵ It can aid in the distribution and spreading of intellectual exchange and ideas to make book learning readily available to many individuals and have the potential to further the importance of research libraries more than ever.

With this enthusiasm for the future, Darnton also realizes the potential pitfalls. Calling Google "so good, it's dangerous," he focuses on its potential to exploit and monopolize the

⁴ *Id.* at 21.

⁵ Robert Mayhew, "British Geography's Republic of Letters: Mapping an Imagined Community, 1600-1800," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Volume 65, Number 2, Apr. 2004, pp. 251-276, 251 (explaining the concept of the "Republic of Letters" as scholars, literary figures, and intellectuals creating a community where differing ideals and knowledge could be easily exchanged and respected).

market, possibly changing copyright laws.⁶ Although it is still unknown as to what may happen in the future to libraries and what's best for the public good, the digital world and the print world must continue to work together to create intellectual harmony. This electronic/print overlap addressed in "E-Books and Old Books" is the beginning of the present state of books.⁷

Darnton's criticism of the digital age begins with the fear that electronic publishing may wipe out the traditional book. His love for books leads him to quote the ultimate electronic and internet proponent Bill Gates, where even he concedes that "[r]eading off the screen is still vastly inferior to reading off of paper."⁸ However, even with his passion for the past and the "smell" and "feel" of books, Darnton must acquiesce to the existing climate of books.⁹ He demonizes commercial publishers for their rising costs and negative affect on scholars and research libraries. This increases the difficulty for these libraries to maintain their collections and thus university presses unwillingness to publish for lack of a market and distribution. He reconciles his view of the industry with the argument that "e-books," in the form of the electronic monograph, as a supplement to the printing press, is the best way to keep learning and knowledge at its peak.

Surprisingly, Darnton himself desires to write an e-book. In fact, he has been working on one for ten years. He has a vast array of research and knowledge to share with the world and he believes the Internet is the best way to disperse the archival style notes he has gathered over the years. The ability to provide for the reader everything possible to completely understand his

⁶ Robert Darnton, Harvard Book Store, Feb. 3, 2010, aired Book TV on C-Span 2, Feb. 20, 2010; *see also* 17 U.S.C. 42 (1998) (citing the goal to lengthen copyright protection to give owners and creators of works more rights and to further the goal of copyright, that is the dissemination and encouragement of the science and the arts). While Google would ultimately be doing this, they would essentially monopolize the field of all copyrighted books, which is not good for the public good or creators of works in general.

⁷ DARNTON, *supra* note 3, at 67.

⁸ DARNTON, *supra* note 3, at 69 (quoting Bill Gates).

⁹ DARNTON, *supra* note 3, at 39.

topic, through the use of music and documents and links, while also giving them the capacity to print and bind sections they find interesting or important, are reasons why this information should be based on-line and not the more limited codex.

He tries to express that the ease and ability to create a new medium where more than just reading can occur, coupled with libraries increasing costs and minimal possession of infrequently written-on scholarly subjects, are what guided his construction and plan of the Gutenberg-e project. Despite the fact that Darnton continues to promote and pine for digitization and online access during and after this period, I feel his narrow success in this project directs him to condemn the growing electronic field more than he praises it. The Gutenberg-e project was described as a mode of change to developing and continuing problems in the book world as well as a means to launch careers and attempt to reestablish the sagging monograph. The mission was to provide a way for PhD dissertations to become published in fields that were often difficult to publish in conventionally. Another aim was to alleviate costs and simultaneously appeal to new and boundless—both physically and materially—methods for libraries to exchange in research. As the project grew to fruition and its eventual demise, many problems arose in its pacing, high expectations, and financing. Although, later than expected, the digital monographs were eventually disseminated.¹⁰ Notwithstanding these issues, Darnton was not dissuaded from to further promote open access in what he believes is most important to books and their history, the ideal of a republic of letters; that is, this continuing intellectual exchange of knowledge through history, scholars, and readers.

The adoration for history and the past in connection with the printed word and what it brings to learning and knowledge is not lost in any of these essays. The potential warning

¹⁰ See *American Historical Association: The Professional Association for all Historians*, The Gutenberg-e Program, archived at <http://www.webcitation.org/5nl2zweTl> (describing the project's elements and giving further background information on the process and awards given).

against digitization is most prominently expressed in Darnton's critical book review of Nicholson Baker's *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* and his criticism of the great many libraries that attempted to convert old newspapers to microfilm in "A Paean To Paper."¹¹ Through faulty methods of investigation, libraries began to falsely believe that paper, most specifically newsprint, would begin to disintegrate and history would be gone forever. The description of the way these institutions transferred many historical newspapers into microfilm through violently destroying the original creates a "massacre," as it is so stated in one instance, giving the reader a sense of sorrow.¹² This is likely Darnton's goal, as he includes this essay to further his case for books and establish a metaphorical view on how the potential evils of the Google Book Search could comparably relate to the demise of many irretrievably lost newspapers.

Darnton advances and supplements his interest in the printed word as codex with tales of how scholars and readers viewed books in the past. He explains the progression of books from where scholars tried to learn, understand, and revive classic plays of Shakespeare to the creation of new works in which a reader wrote notes in the margins of their favorite tomes resulting in their own original ideas they wished to express. Reading for knowledge and pleasure, while being such a changing concept, is what Darnton ultimately wishes to express to his own readers. "Texts," he writes in the last of these essays "What is the History of Books?," "shape the response of readers" and that theme couldn't be more dominant to the book as a whole.¹³

This book is a call for anyone who has been comforted by the prospect of a good book, has read to increase their knowledge in a subject area, or who looks to the future and the

¹¹ DARNTON, *supra* note 3, at 109.

¹² DARNTON, *supra* note 3, at 114.

¹³ DARNTON, *supra* note 3, at 175, 202.

potential of new technology to shape our understanding of the world. Darnton is a lover of books and it rubs off in his writing, although he is open to the idea of a changing future to preserve the past. Those who are interested in what may come and also wonder how society and our world has changed through reading and development of the written word will be greatly influenced by Darnton's theories and thoughts. What books mean to people, and now, how digitization is shifting their views, for better or worse, will hopefully, in his eyes, continue to develop hand in hand to better influence and increase the knowledge and learning of our society.