

2016

## The Singularity of the Book

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### Recommended Citation

Newman, Carey C. (2016) "The Singularity of the Book," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 28: Iss. 6, Article 16.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7562>

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## Ditching the Guillotine from page 24

a strong list in the field. But it was the 2015 protest of a blind professor of disability studies and literature that pushed **Michigan Press** to up its game.

**Stephen Kuusisto** expressed his frustrations at the difficulty of reading content published by the Press on his blog, *Planet of the Blind*. The post, entitled “My Everest: The University of Michigan Press,” vividly described the obstacles encountered by the author in trying to read content labeled as accessible. “They make the experience of attempting to read one of their books nearly impossible.”<sup>10</sup>

It would have been tempting to respond to this criticism with any one of the whiny retorts to which we publishers resort when on the defensive. “We’re understaffed!” “We’re underfunded!” “We’ve been told to cut costs!”

But press director **Charles Watkinson** chose to respond in a fashion from which we all might tear a page: humility. He wrote:

“We are very aware that we have more to do in making our works more widely accessible... Please know that we are actively working on the issue and hope to provide a better service to both our authors and readers soon.”

**Charles Watkinson** and his colleagues launched a process to produce born accessible eBooks. They reviewed and updated their production and image description guidelines and revised their instructions to authors to incorporate necessary requirements. They also developed a process by which they could audit EPUB3 files using the International Digital



Publishing Forum’s a11y<sup>11</sup> QA checklist. The details of this process — along with helpful tips — are described in **McGlone’s** slides.

In reviewing Michigan’s efforts, two pieces of advice stand out: “collaborate with campus experts” and “start small, iterate often.” This eminently sensible approach gives all publishers permission to blunder forward as best we can. We won’t get it right immediately. As with other new processes we’ve had to master — like ONIX compliance, metadata exports, digital catalogs, and eBook production — we’re going to meet with staff resistance and make some mistakes along the way.

But the potential benefits are significant. According to **BISG**, publishers that invest in accessible content can enjoy a variety of ancillary benefits, including new markets, better discoverability, and streamlined production workflow.<sup>12</sup>

And think of the money that could be saved by shedding the cumbersome, expensive, and inefficient processes of retrofitting that keep campus colleges shackled to scanners and disabled students lagging behind their able-bodied peers.

I still have a lot to learn, but I’m ready to ditch the guillotine and make the short leap from born digital to born accessible. Care to join me? 🐘

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*Press, the New Republic, Counterpoint Press, and Moon Travel Handbooks. She serves on the Board of the American Association of University Presses (AAUP), and has served as an adjunct faculty member in George Washington University’s Master of Professional Studies in Publishing program.*

### Endnotes

1. **BISG** Content Structure Committee’s Accessible Publishing Working Group, *Quick Start Guide to Accessible Publishing* (New York: Book Industry Study Group, Inc., 2016), 8.
2. **BISG**, 10.
3. **Accessible Books Consortium**, [http://www.accessiblebooksconsortium.org/export/abc/abc\\_brochure.pdf](http://www.accessiblebooksconsortium.org/export/abc/abc_brochure.pdf).
4. **World Blind Union**, <http://www.world-blindunion.org/English/resources/Pages/Global-Blindness-Facts.aspx>.
5. <http://www.slideshare.net/aaupny/aaup-2016-accessibility-presentation-j-axel-rod>
6. **Bill Kasdorf**, “Accessibility has Never Been More Accessible to Publishers,” *IBPA independent*, May 2016, 34, no. 5, <https://www.ibpa-online.org/article/accessibility-has-never-been-more-accessible-to-publishers/>.
7. **BISG**, 8-9.
8. <https://bisg.site-ym.com/store/ViewProduct.aspx?id=6972996>
9. <http://www.slideshare.net/aaupny/aaup-2016-getting-to-accessible-publishing-at-the-university-of-michigan-press-j-mcglone>
10. <https://stephenkuusisto.com/2015/07/21/my-everest-the-university-of-michigan-press/>
11. a11y is a community-based effort to facilitate web accessibility, by providing, among other things, automated content audit tools. <http://a11yproject.com/>
12. **BISG**, p. 13.

## The Singularity of the Book

by **Carey C. Newman** (Director, Baylor University Press) <Carey\_Newman@baylor.edu>

**F**acebook is the world’s most wildly successful media company that neither produces nor owns any content. Airbnb is the world’s most wildly successful hotel company that neither buys nor owns property. **Uber** is the world’s most wildly successful transportation company that owns no cars. **Alibaba** is the world’s most wildly successful retail company that owns no inventory. Academic publishers must follow suit — or so say the industry gurus, the barons of third-party funding, the rajahs of professional societies, and the high priests of power within academic publishing itself. Publishers must become software companies without any books.

This vision of the future capitalizes on the technological confluence of the cloud, broadband, and mobility to transform academic pub-

lishing into an all-information, all-e, all-OA, and all-cloned enterprise, all the time. Books — and any part of any book — can and should be free to all. Books can and should be digital and perpetually available, anywhere, anytime, on any device. And books can and should be bot-built, opening up infinite AI iterations of content based on carefully mined aggregations of readerly whims. Datum sans corpus.

But to pass into full technological bliss, and to leave behind an undue and outdated fixation on print, academic publishers must master the mysteries of Big Data. The challenge is to capture and tag all the data and content that can be captured and tagged, and, as it turns out, there’s quite a bit to be captured, acquired, tagged, stacked, indexed, remixed, clustered, cited, extracted, packaged, and

fracked. The quiet, quaint, and erudite, formerly located in some comfortable anteroom of global publishing, has been transformed at a dizzying pace into a bastardized mashup of frenzy: academic publishing is now an all-out arms race for technology and a Texas-sized, Powerball-lottery bet on content. Publishers now must secure and digitize all the content possible — not knowing whether any of it is really valuable, but hoping that some of it just might be — and become experts in optimizing that content’s maximum discoverability and lure before, finally, creatively (and cravenly) monetizing the whole process for revenue. *This is the future, so say the wise.*

Well, whatever *this* is, I am pretty sure it isn’t publishing.

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What crime did the physical book commit to be so summarily treated with such disdain? What is it about the traditional book that is so offensive and so irritating to so many? Why such a dogged and determined effort to dinosaur the book? Poor books. They really did mean well. They had no idea that their paper and ink, their spines and folds, would cause such a fuss. Wooden. Fixed. Isolated. Dead. Unsearchable. They could probably be forgiven if they weren't so stubborn. But there they are, such as they are, and they, and their publishers, have become the villains in the new meta-narrative for this post-disruption, tech-driven economy. The true heroes are those who liberate content from its traditional, generically hegemonic bindings. For far too long these arbitrary containers have held information constrained and shackled. At long last information can be free, instantly, and free to — and for — an immense, invisible, and vast readership. Links and tags. Links and tags. Content, links, and tags.

Against this backdrop the solitary figure of **Aldus Manutius** (1449–1515) appears unique and even comical. **Manutius**, one of the very first post-Gutenberg publishers, established the glories of the Aldine Press. His anonymous *Hyperotomachia Poliphili* (1499) is often said to be the most beautiful, and possibly the most unreadable book, ever published. Graced with 168 woodcuts, unsurpassed typography, and riddled with bizarre and often indecipherable loan words from Greek, Hebrew, and Latin (and some invented languages), the book is eccentric — both Jung and Eco loved the book — lavish, and excessive. At first glance **Manutius** is the poster child for all that's claimed wrong with decadent and irrational academic publishing today. But, upon closer inspection it might be that old **Manutius** may have something important to say to us today about the singularity and enduring worth of our common craft.

**Manutius** invented a true publishing *imprint*. He produced books of such quality, in both content and form, that his books, collectively, constituted a recognizable brand, symbolized beautifully in a colophon — the anchor and dolphin — a colophon still employed by **Doubleday** today. The Press' imprint was so distinctive and effective that it was pirated. **Manutius** was compelled to distribute fly sheets warning of the forgeries. In language that sounds all too eerily familiar, he protested that the knockoffs used inferior paper, substandard typography, and were, um, marked by a certain “smell” — they emitted a distinctively “French” odor (having been printed in Lyon).

The books a publisher chooses to publish are a dramatic expression of singularity. It is not just a particular book's individuality, though it is that for sure; it is the collocation of a publisher's particular books — their enchainment into a unique whole — that forms a house and defines an imprint. A publisher's

unique practice of the craft, slowly but surely, tells a larger story and gains a purchase on the academic disciplines it serves. The decision not to publish is equally artistic. To publish the wrong book is to insert the wrong character into a novel; it is to paint a Dutch realist face into the corner of *Starry Night*.

**Manutius'** singular genius can also be measured in his attention to detail. Under the colophon were the Latin words *festina lente*, “hasten slowly.” And that he did. He hastened very slowly, laboring over every aspect of form. Famously, **Manutius** invented italic type and insisted on a Roman type that was clean, readable, and elegant. But his attentions were also drawn to the smallest creative aspects of publishing. He invented the modern use of the semicolon and the comma. He preserved the extravagant art and beauty of the illuminated manuscripts of previous ages and transferred the calligraphy of his day into his publications. But he also tinkered with the trim size of his books, being careful to marry books to use. He thus developed small, smartly designed editions, with plenty of room for marginal notes, of classics in a series he called *libelli portatiles*, “portable little books.” In doing so, **Manutius** helped invent the modern idea of a personal library. **Manutius** thus created something so unrepeatable and, yet, something that other publishers have sought to replicate through the centuries.

**Kecia Ali's** *The Lives of Muhammad* (Harvard UP) rests on my desk. Having lost this book to **Harvard** in the hand-to-hand combat that is acquisitions, I remained keenly aware of the book's progress toward publication. I was aware and jealous, jealous because I desperately wanted the book on my list, not only because **Kecia** is a great person (which she is), and this was a great book (which it is), but because this individual book would fit and define **Baylor's** own imprint. But my ever-present jealousy turned to admiration when a copy of the finished book arrived in the mail — awe of the perfect way **Harvard** married the design of the book, right to the smallest detail, to the soul and vocation of the book. It is perfectly sized and weighted. The volume nests comfortably in the hand. The matte finish invites exploration. The interior font's ability, ever so slightly, to echo the art of the cover and the arabesque that graces a mosque forms a hermeneutically robust koan for the whole. The leading is adjusted upward ever so slightly so that eyes are encouraged to skip along with **Ali's** crackling prose. The decadent endpapers, surely a wanton and irrational choice by today's standards, mime the book's signal of importance. The table of contents brimming with concision, symmetry, and progression is poetic in sight and sound and arcs the narrative of the volume. **Ali's** very brief introduction sets the table for all

the courses ahead. The book is a symphony of detail masterly conducted by **Harvard**, its publisher.

Since **Manutius** publishers have lavished attention on covers, font, leading, gutters, margins, headers, trim sizes. Publishers have long labored over prefaces, introductions, prose, notes, and conclusions. None of this art is plug and play.

Publishing is not technology, though it employs technology. Publishing is not a business, though it depends on money. Publishing is art. It is a dangerous art at that. It is dangerous because it is so consistently irrational and decadent. To spend so much time, imagination, and treasure on one book makes no sense. Madness. The danger of a book resides in its wisdom. Any old machine can spew information; but the profusion and superabundance of information should never be confused with a specific and unique incarnation of wisdom. Publishing, like the work of the author, is thus built upon an element of impossibility. It takes a publisher, as an artist, to conjure a book.

Using the latest technology to screen *Starry Night* — or even a mashup of several **van Goghs** — on a T-shirt to make it available to the masses does not make the T-shirt art. It just makes it a cool T-shirt. The very particular glory of a **van Gogh** is accentuated and enhanced by the work of curators in providing a frame. The singularity of *Wheatfield with Crows*, possibly **van Gogh's** last, is perceived only at the end of a long, carefully orchestrated series of **van Goghs**. By the time that particular painting is reached in the museum in Amsterdam you are both prepared — and utterly unprepared — for it. The power of that unique painting communicates because of frame and framing.

There is no technological substitute for the singular work of a publisher, just as there is no technological substitute for the book itself. As

**Umberto Eco** reminds,

“The book is like the spoon, scissors, the hammer, the wheel. Once invented, it cannot be improved. You cannot make a spoon that is better than a spoon.” All that can be done is make wonderful, glorious particular spoons. As it turns out there's a craving for such artisanship. The obsession with \$6 coffee is because each bean is hand selected. Chicken coops dot urban backyards because of the desire for intimate connection to what is produced. The infatuation with everything handmade and locally sourced could be judged irrational and decadent. And it may just be, when publishers practice the artistry of their singular craft well, their particular books will be talked about on Facebook, bought and sold on **Alibaba**, read in an Airbnb apartment, and accidentally (and serendipitously) left on the seat of an **Uber** ride. 🐾

