

"I like contradictions"
**The American historian, Robert Darnton, on E-Journals and Use of
the Internet**

Interviewer: Gudrun Gersmann

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Since the 1960s you have been working very intensely on the underground booktrade and underground authors in France under the Ancien Régime. In numerous monographs and articles you have shown how the clandestine bestsellers of the 18th century were produced, smuggled and distributed via efficient European cross-border networks. Or to put it another way, you are actually a classic book historian and, I presume, a book aficionado. Against this background, is it not actually a bit of a paradox to busy yourself with electronic media?

A contradiction? Possibly. I like contradictions. In my first attempts to write history, I tried to smoothe things out so that everything fit neatly into my argument. Now I favor arguments that bring out contradictions and that take account of the paradoxes and tensions built into human experience. So, yes, I love old books, and at the same time I thrill to the possibilities of the Internet. I do not believe, however, that the codex and the computer are incompatible. Looking back over the history of the media, I do not see one mode of communication displacing another but rather several modes interacting and overlapping in varying degrees. Recent studies of seventeenth-century England and of eighteenth-century France have demonstrated that manuscript books continued to flourish late into the era of printed publications. The radio has revived after the introduction of television. Communication by means of computers probably will promote the reading of books and journals.

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In these days of Internet, issues such as censorship, copyright, publicity and freedom of the press are as topical as ever. In the current discussions can you see parallels to the debates in the 18th century?

Certainly parallels exist, and one can study them without succumbing to anachronism. Nothing seems to be more muddled than the current debates about intellectual property and the freedom of the press. Yet when I study the 'freeing' of the press in Britain through the expiration of the Licensing Act in 1695, I find that a (relatively) free press was an unintended consequence of political maneuvering. Economic and political interests combined to defeat the lobbying of the Stationers' Company, and a similar combination of forces pushed through the first copyright act in 1710. Even then questions of intellectual property and press freedom continued to be contested through court cases right up to the famous decision against unlimited copyright by the House of Lords in 1774. The whole process involved battles of vested interests as complex as those we see today.

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I believe you could detect a similar mixture of ingredients behind the abolition of censorship in Denmark in 1770 and the restructuring of the French book trade in 1777. In fact, the freeing of the French press in 1789 was more ambiguous than most historians realize, and it had backfired by 1793. And as to the first amendment to the American constitution, which guarantees the freedom of the press in this country, it still gives rise to conflicts in the courts. Instead of clear distinctions between free and unfree regimes, I see constant struggle over competing versions of freedom.

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When I discussed censorship with censors from the GDR early in 1990, they did not think they were curbing liberty; they thought they were promoting socialism, and they claimed that censorship existed in the USA in the form of the market place. I disagree with that view, but I think it needs to be taken seriously. When I was president of the American Historical Association, I discovered that American historians could muster strong arguments on both sides of the debate over new copyright legislation. As authors, they wanted to defend their intellectual property against 'unfair' photocopying and downloading on the Internet. As teachers, they favored legal provisions for the 'fair use' of texts by students who reproduced them on xerox machines and computers. In short, the mess we live in today corresponds to the messiness of the past, and any historian who makes it simple is simply getting it wrong.

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A spectre is haunting Germany today - a spectre of the "journal crisis". Libraries are being confronted with ever increasing subscription prices for professional journals that they simply cannot pay. Are American university libraries also affected by such crisis phenomena? Are e-journals an alternative to the journal crisis?

American libraries are undergoing a severe crisis, driven for the most part by the sky-rocketing cost of periodicals, especially in the natural sciences. The economic downturn has also damaged acquisitions budgets, not only in the case of large research libraries but also among small town institutions and entire library systems like that of New York City. Now that libraries buy far fewer books, university presses cannot publish nearly as many monographs as they did twenty years ago. The statistics vary according to the press and the field of study, but many presses lose money on monographs about subjects such as early modern European history. Their universities, which frequently depend on state legislatures for revenue, no longer can subsidize them. So the university presses are cutting back or going out of business.

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That means there is no outlet for many young historians who need to publish their dissertations. You know the cynical American slogan: "Publish or perish." Without a healthy university-press industry, many scholars will not be able to pursue their careers. In the American Historical Association, we are trying to reverse this trend through the 'Gutenberg-e' Program, an annual prize competition that selects outstanding dissertations and helps the prize winners to rework them as electronic books. We want to legitimize electronic publishing in the eyes of the profession and also to set new standards of excellence for scholarship published on the Internet. This experiment, now in its seventh year, seems to be succeeding.

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The older, more conservative members of the history profession are gradually abandoning the notion that e-books can't be real books. Can a similar tendency prevail among scholarly journals? Electronic publishing proved its worth long ago in subjects like physics and medicine, although we should remember that, despite the importance of electronic pre-publication, physicists still insist that their work appear in print. In history, we are promoting e-journals through an organization known as the History Cooperative. But we have no illusions about the difficulties that we face: problems of preservation, of financing, of editing, and even of reviewing. Moreover, electronic publications - journals and monographs alike - tend to be marketed as 'packages', and electronic data bases, magnificent as they are, are wildly expensive. Acquisition librarians now have to find room in their budgets for electronic as well as for printed products. This problem exists everywhere, not only in the United States. In fact, the over-pricing of periodicals began in Germany, The Netherlands, and Britain. Electronic journals promise to be part of the solution, but they are also part of the problem.

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E-journals and pre-print-archives are already long established in the field of natural sciences. However, in the humanities it's quite different. What's the situation like in the USA? How are e-journals in the humanities received and appreciated? Are they considered just as something temporary on the fringe or are they seen as real competition to the classic print journals?

If I may answer this question by drawing on my own experience, I should explain that the main historical journal in the United States, the American Historical Review, decided in 1999 to produce an expanded, online version of its print edition. As president of the American Historical Association, I was invited to write the first article to be published in both media. It was to be the presidential address that traditionally appears as the lead article in the February issue of the AHR, and it also was to be the first article of the new electronic version of the AHR, where all sorts of innovations would be possible.

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I chose as my subject the media and the flow of information in eighteenth-century Paris, and I concentrated on oral networks of communication, especially gossip and songs. In the printed version, I developed a straightforward argument, citing evidence in the usual way. In the e-version, I produced a map of Paris, which readers could use to promenade in their imaginations through the city, stopping by 29 cafes, where they could click on links that would make it possible for them to eavesdrop on conversations reported by police spies. In the case of the songs, I found 641 texts in 'chansonniers' (manuscript collections of songs and poems) from the period 1745-1751. The lyrics provided a running commentary on current events, and they were improvised to fit popular tunes identified by their titles or first lines. 'Keys' to the titles and first lines provided the musical annotation. Helene Delavault, an opera singer and cabaret performer in Paris, kindly agreed to study the music and record the songs. By listening to her renditions of the most popular songs, the readers of the e-article could get a sense of how Parisians took in the daily news as it was sung in the streets.

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I think the electronic version of the article (available at <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/105.1/ah000001.html>) opened up a new way of making contact with the past, but it had two drawbacks. First, it required a vast amount of labor, not just by me (it was more like writing a book than an essay) but by a whole team of editors, programmers, and Web designers mobilized by the AHR. Secondly, it did not go far enough in exploiting the material to make an argument instead of merely illustrating one. In the case of the songs, for example, I argued that music provided a mnemonic device that both diffused messages and enriched them through associations with other texts that had been sung to the same tunes. But I did not show how those associations actually operated. Since then I have discovered that the same text was sometimes sung to different tunes and that the same tune could be used for so many different texts that no clear path of 'elective affinities' could be detected. But these reservations indicate the inadequacy of my own work, not of the electronic medium itself. Others have used e-journals more effectively than I have. A good example is Philip J. Ethington, 'Los Angeles and the Problem of Urban Historical Knowledge' (<http://cwis.usc.edu/dept/LAS/history/historylab/LAPUHK/index.html>) in the AHR (December 2000).

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So, yes, I think that e-journals are proving their value in the humanities and that they have proven themselves capable of communicating arguments beyond the range of conventional print journals.

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