

From the University Presses — A Post-Mortem for Gutenberg-e: Or, Why Ross Atkinson's Dream Is Still a Dream

Column Editor: **Sanford G. Thatcher** (Director, Penn State Press, USB 1, Suite C, 820 N. University Drive, University Park, PA 16802-1003; Phone: 814-865-1327; Fax: 814-863-1408) <sgt3@psu.edu> www.psupress.org

In her article titled “Mellon Foundation Assesses the State of Scholarly Publishing” (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 28), **Jennifer Howard** drew our attention to a section of the **Mellon Foundation's Annual Report** for 2007 that she called “a page turner.” It is an essay co-authored by **Donald J. Waters**, director of **Mellon's Scholarly Communications Program**, and **Joseph S. Meisel**, co-director of its **Research University and Humanistic Scholarship Program**, that bears the title “Scholarly Publishing Initiatives.” This is indeed an important document that anyone interested in the future of scholarly communication in the humanities should read, not least because of what it reveals about how the **Mellon Foundation** understands its role in supporting humanistic scholarship and publishing. Since there is no single foundation that has dedicated itself more to ensuring the vitality of this sector of higher education, we all need to listen carefully when **Mellon** speaks.

The essay was written, it appears, mainly to provide some context for two new initiatives that these two programs have jointly undertaken: one provides grants to groups of university presses to encourage their collaboration in publishing monographs for junior faculty in underserved and emerging areas of humanistic scholarship; the other follows the recommendations of the *Ithaca Report* in supporting more cooperation between presses and other entities on campus concerned about the production and dissemination of knowledge. **Waters** and **Meisel** go out of their way to emphasize that, unlike grants given by the foundation in the 1970s and early 1980s to foster publication of monographs by junior faculty, these new initiatives do not involve direct title subsidies or subventions to individual presses but rather are aimed at fostering the development of modes of collaboration among groups of presses and between presses and other entities within universities that have a stake in publishing, as well as the further development of technological tools to facilitate such cooperation — in other words, enhancing publishing infrastructure instead of easing publishers' deficits.

Those who like to read tea leaves to make prognostications about the future will find much to speculate about in this report. It is of course much too early to tell how these new initiatives will fare, and there will be post-mortem assessments in due course. But there is also much of value in the essay for those who want to understand how **Mellon** regards the payoff from its past investments. **Waters** and **Meisel** leave no doubt, for instance, that **Mellon** views **JSTOR** as the jewel in its crown of past successes. **Project Muse** also winds

up in the win column. In general, the authors make clear that **Mellon** has been much more successful in its initiatives with scholarly journals than with monographs. Among initiatives in the latter arena, **Gutenberg-e** aimed at junior scholars appears to have been a real disappointment for **Mellon**, while the **History** (recently renamed **Humanities**) **E-Book project** aimed at senior scholars produced at best mixed results, becoming self-sustaining largely because of the marketplace success of the digitization of over 500 backlist titles rather than the production of new ones (only 55 of the projected 85 ever having come to fruition). **BiblioVault**, originally developed at the **University of Chicago Press**, has struggled along for years in search of a viable business model, and the authors leave the impression that it seems finally to have found its *raison d'être* rather late in the game. And, they note ruefully, the **TORCH project** that **Oxford University Press** was supposed to have developed as a platform for disciplinary collections of monographs from cooperating presses never got beyond the conceptual stage.

What can we learn from the two experiments that were actually carried out and had the most to do directly with promoting the publishing of new electronic monographs, **Gutenberg-e** and the **Humanities E-Book Project**? **Waters** and **Meisel** provide their own post-mortem: “Both projects have been extremely valuable in demonstrating the capabilities and requirements for publishing monographs authored specifically for electronic media, but neither of them succeeded in establishing the core hypothesis that such books would be cheaper to produce and distribute than those designed for print media. Instead, the **Gutenberg-e project** proved far too expensive to sustain. Rather than being published separately, the eBooks are being made available by the **Columbia University Library** on an open access basis, and by subscription as part of the **History E-Book project**. Moreover, although at least two of the **Gutenberg-e** authors have been awarded tenure to date, only 12 of the 22 authors whose prize-winning works have been electronically published are now in tenure-track positions. A major issue is that the **Gutenberg-e** books have been all but overlooked in the review pages of the relevant general and specialized journals.”

The final report on **Gutenberg-e** submitted to **Mellon** in August by the **American Historical Association (AHA)**, while presenting a somewhat more favorable assessment, also admits to the project's failure to confirm the “core hypothesis.” (The final report, as well as other information about the project's develop-

ment, can be found here: <http://www.historians.org/prizes/gutenberg/Index.cfm>). While calling the experiment “a qualified success,” the report agrees that “It has not met the Foundation's goal of a sustainable business model for the project, though the partners in the project differ about why that might be.” Further on the report elaborates on the reasons for market failure: “The ‘first-copy’ costs proved to be higher for books making any substantial use of the digital medium than regular print books, and their availability in an online form did not reduce the costs of working in and through traditional channels for marketing and legitimation of these books. Quite apart from the fellowships given to the authors (which were never considered a ‘sustainable’ part of the project), the costs of administering a selective peer review process for a wide-ranging publication program like this, and the basic costs of preparing books for publication does not seem sustainable without a significant revenue stream or outside support. As the chart of expenses (Attachment 4) indicates, the cost of production ran significantly higher than we had budgeted. Sustaining staff for a longer period than anticipated and developing books that make a substantive use of the medium raised the costs much higher than the initial projections. And these variances would appear dramatically greater if they included the true unfunded costs sustained by both the Library and the Press during the life of the project. Despite our initial assumptions that electronic publications would be less expensive to produce, the ‘first copy’ costs of the books proved to be significantly higher for electronic books. The staff time involved in basic copyediting was comparable to that of a print book, but the staff had to take on a number of additional responsibilities to make them truly digital monographs. Assisting the authors with the thornier problems of obtaining rights to images for online publication, creating consistent file types, and standardizing and uploading files, all created significant costs over and above that of print publication. For authors who wanted to really develop their projects and take full advantage of the medium, the costs proved to be even higher. And only a few of those added costs proved to be a benefit to other authors in the project, since each of them brought a different vision and a different set of software requirements for their publication. Lastly, the material in these publications, and the publications themselves, present a significant problem of long-term maintenance and preservation.



continued on page 68

In the brief life of this project, for instance, the standards for coding Webpages changed dramatically.” And so, the report states, “Although it was not explicitly stated as one of the goals of the project, the notion of creating a sustainable model of electronic publishing was certainly an implicit goal of the Foundation. And on that score, the project was clearly not a success.”

The **Mellon Foundation** has always pushed the idea of sustainability as a goal of its philanthropy in the arena of scholarly communication, and that is a primary reason that **JSTOR** and **Project Muse** go down in **Mellon's** books as true success stories. It is therefore not surprising to see, in **Mellon's** own post-mortem, that the “core hypothesis” of **Gutenberg-e** was taken to be that it could reach sustainability because “such books would be cheaper to produce and distribute than those designed for print media.” But one wonders why **Mellon** believed this to be the “core hypothesis” worth testing because not a single member of the advisory committee that was convened by **Robert Darnton**, then President-Elect of the **American Historical Association**, to consult about the project’s development believed this hypothesis to be true! And the advisory committee also anticipated just about every problem of cost that the project ended up encountering.

I was a member of the **AHA's Electronic-Book Prize Committee** that **Darnton** formed in the late spring of 1998 to help him develop the proposal for **Gutenberg-e** to be approved first by the **AHA Council** and then submitted to **Mellon** for funding. The other members of the committee were: **John Ackerman** (Director, **Cornell University Press**), **Colin Day** (then Director, **University of Michigan Press**, now Director of the **University of Hong Kong Press**), **Carla Hesse** (Professor of History, **University of California, Berkeley**), **Michael Grossberg** (then Editor, *The American Historical Review*), **Stanley Katz** (then Vice President, **AHA Research Division**), **James Michalko** (then President, **Research Libraries Group**), **Ann Okerson** (Associate University Librarian, **Yale University**), and **Kate Wittenberg** (then Editor-in-Chief, **Columbia University Press**). I had urged **Darnton** to invite **Ackerman** to join the committee (partly because he had a Ph.D. in Russian history) and **Day** (because, as a **Cambridge** Ph.D. in economics, he knew more about the economics of publishing than anyone else from the university press community). **Lynne Withey**, then Associate Director, now Director, at the **University of California Press**, and **Edward Barry**, then Director of **Oxford University Press**, also contributed to the committee’s discussion while not being formally members.

By this time **Darnton** and I had already long been discussing, and worrying about, the fate of the monograph. I had known him from my days as an editor at **Princeton University Press**, where he served on the **Editorial Board** for a number of years. As a pioneer

in the then fledgling interdisciplinary field of book history, **Darnton** had even more reason than most faculty to take a special interest in what would become of the book in the digital age. Beginning back in the early 1970s, when the press’s director, **Herbert Bailey, Jr.**, and its associate director and controller, **William Becker**, identified and limned the dimensions of a “crisis” in scholarly publishing in a series of influential articles in the journal *Scholarly Publishing* (later renamed the *Journal of Scholarly Publishing*), we had already started to talk about monographs in certain fields of the humanities and social sciences as “endangered species” (a term that I believe **Bailey**, a former science editor at the press, had coined). This term of art became widely employed in more widespread discussions that followed, both with faculty like **Darnton** and with key personnel at the **Mellon Foundation**, including its president, **John Sawyer**, with whom **Bailey** had a close relationship. (The connections became even stronger after **William Bowen** left the presidency of **Princeton**, where he had served ex officio on the **Press's Board of Trustees**, to become president of the **Mellon Foundation** in 1988.) It served as a focal point not only for the formulation of the plans for **Gutenberg-e** but also for a report written by **Herbert Bailey** in 1990 for the **Association of American University Presses** titled *The Rate of Publication of Scholarly Monographs in the Humanities and Social Sciences 1978-1988* and for a joint project of the **AHA** and **ARL** known as the **Historical Studies Distribution Network**, which ultimately was abandoned after **AHA's** then Executive Director, **Sandy Freitag**, left the organization.

Darnton had imbibed the lessons from us publishers (and also the librarians with whom he consulted) well, and in his first draft of the proposal that he sent to me for comment on February 20, 1998, he summarized the plight of the monograph thus: “Three interlocking problems bedevil our profession: the skyrocketing price of journals has decimated library budgets and produced a disastrous drop in purchases of monographs; the drop in demand from the libraries has made university presses cut back drastically on the publication of monographs; and recent Ph.D.s are finding it fiercely difficult to advance in their careers by converting their dissertations into books.” With allowance for certain rhetorical flourishes (“decimated,” “disastrous,” “drastically,” “fiercely difficult”) that were his own invention, this was a nicely succinct description of the pattern that the **ARL** had documented statistically for many years to show the baneful effect of spiraling journal (especially STM) prices on the purchases of monographs. Those who have followed **Darnton's** career into his present position as head of **Harvard's library** will also see here the root of his passion for “open access” of articles, which is now being implemented at **Harvard**. In this original proposal for **Gutenberg-e**, **Darnton** in fact envisioned that “the books should be made available to any reader without charge. Perhaps the **AHA** could publish directly from its office or via the **H-NET**. It might be possible to include documentary material as a supplement to the main body

of the text. And although publication would be free, there should be copyright protection concerning the re-publication of the text.” Is it any surprise that **Harvard** has followed the path it has with open access? One sees here even an adumbration of the Creative Commons noncommercial license.

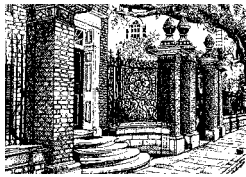
If cost recovery was of no immediate concern to **Darnton**, then what was motivating him in proposing **Gutenberg-e**? One hint comes from this section of the original proposal: “The principle behind the prize would be to sanction electronic publishing by showering the winners with so much honor that tenure committees and academic administrations would sit up and take notice. If successful, the example could spread and help change the rules of the game in academic life. It could also promote scholarly communication of a new kind at a time when publishers and librarians are perplexed about how to take the first steps in the difficult and dangerous field of electronic publishing.” Alas, **Darnton's** strategy underestimated the entrenched power of traditional academic practices, and as **Mellon's** post-mortem observes, this aim of the project was never realized beyond a very limited extent: the eBooks were all but ignored by professional review media, and few of the authors gained tenure or even got on the tenure track. (The **AHA's** own post-mortem, however, details somewhat greater success on both counts).

It is the second goal **Darnton** identified here that I believe to have been at least as important as helping junior faculty achieve career success in **Gutenberg-e's** conceptualization and justification. Promoting scholarly communication “of a new kind” is indeed a noble goal and should have been recognized by **Mellon** as the principal objective of the whole project in the first place. The origin of this inspiration, I believe, came from conversations I had with **Darnton** about how technology could help create a new kind of book, unlike anything that could be accomplished in codex form. I drew heavily in these conversations from an article that **Cornell** librarian **Ross Atkinson** had published in *College & Research Libraries* in May 1993 titled “Networks, Hypertext, and Academic Information Services: Some Longer-Range Implications.” His term for this “new kind” of document structure is “concentric stratification,” which “might consist of a top level that would contain some kind of extended abstract; this level or stratum would then be connected to the next level, and so on. Each succeeding level would contain the information in the previous level, but would provide in addition greater degrees of substance and detail. Scholarly communications that would require an extended context, and would therefore deserve a monograph in the paper environment, would in the online environment merely include more levels than would a communication that would in a print environment have been published as a journal article.” As hinted here, **Atkinson** sees electronic publishing as breaking down the dichotomy between monographs and journal articles, and he also sees reading shifting from a linear form to something “that is done, so to

continued on page 69

Subscribe to *The Charleston ADVISOR* Today!

6180 East Warren Avenue • Denver, CO 80222
Phone: 303-282-9706 • Fax: 303-282-9743



The Charleston ADVISOR

Critical Reviews of Web Products for Information Professionals

"The Charleston Advisor serves up timely editorials and columns, standalone and comparative reviews, and press releases, among other features. Produced by folks with impeccable library and publishing credentials ...[t]his is a title you should consider..."

— *Magazines for Libraries, eleventh edition, edited by Cheryl LaGuardia with consulting editors Bill Katz and Linda Sternberg Katz (Bowker, 2002).*

- Over 250 reviews now available
- Web edition and database provided with all subscriptions
- Unlimited IP filtered or name/password access
- Full backfile included
- Comparative reviews of aggregators featured
- Leading opinions in every issue

\$295.00 for libraries
\$495.00 for all others

Yes! Enter My Subscription For One Year. **Yes, I am Interested in being a Reviewer.**

Name _____ Title _____
Organization _____
Address _____
City/State/Zip _____
Phone _____ Fax _____
Email _____ Signature _____

From the University Presses from page 68

speaking, in three dimensions: first, one can read horizontally or linearly within any level of a given publication; second, one can read vertically or hierarchically through the levels of any particular publication; and, third, one can read referentially back through the constituent citations (be these explicit or implicit) into other texts on the network." It struck me that this approach could open up wonderful opportunities to make available often esoteric research to a variety of audiences, ranging from lay people and journalists wanting basic information about new research results in down-to-earth language to highly trained specialists who want every last detail including references to data on which the results reported are based — and everyone in between. If this were to become the future path of scholarly publishing, I could readily envisage roles for university editors, reference librarians, and public information staff — not to mention computer experts — to play in creating such multifaceted, multilayered documents.

Darnton clearly was inspired by this vision as well. It was, in a way, the centerpiece of his now classic article for the *New York Review of Books* (March 18, 1999), "The New Age of the Book," where he explained the background and rationale for both the **Gutenberg-e** and **ACLS History E-Book projects**:

"If everything comes together successfully,

will electronic monographs be recognized as books? Will they acquire enough intellectual legitimacy to pass muster among suspicious tenure committees and to relieve the pressure on academic careers? This is the point at which veteran scholars can make a difference. Those who have proven their ability to produce first-rate conventional books could help create books of a new kind, far more original and ambitious than a converted dissertation.

"In the case of history, a discipline where the crisis in scholarly publishing is particularly acute, the attraction of an eBook should be especially appealing. Any historian who has done long stints of research knows the frustration over his or her inability to communicate the fathomlessness of the archives and the bottomlessness of the past. If only my reader could have a look inside this box, you say to yourself, at all the letters in it, not just the lines from the letter I am quoting. If only I could follow that trail in my text just as I pursued it through the dossiers, when I felt free to take detours leading away from my main subject. If only I could show how themes crisscross outside my narrative and extend far beyond the boundaries of my book. Not that books should be exempt from the imperative of trimming a narrative down to a graceful shape. But instead of using an argument to close a case, they could open up new ways of making sense of the evidence, new possibilities of making available the raw material embedded in the story, a new consciousness of the complexities involved in construing the past.

"I am not advocating the sheer accumulation of data, or arguing for links to databanks — so-called hyperlinks. These can amount to little more than an elaborate form of footnoting. Instead of bloating the electronic book, I think it possible to structure it in layers arranged like a pyramid. The top layer could be a concise account of the subject, available perhaps in paperback. The next layer could contain expanded versions of different aspects of the argument, not arranged sequentially as in a narrative, but rather as self-contained units that feed into the topmost story. The third layer could be composed of documentation, possibly of different kinds, each set off by interpretative essays. A fourth layer might be theoretical or historiographical, with selections from previous scholarship and discussions of them. A fifth layer could be pedagogic, consisting of suggestions for classroom discussion and a model syllabus. And a sixth layer could contain readers' reports, exchanges between the author and the editor, and letters from readers, who could provide a growing corpus of commentary as the book made its way through different groups of readers.

"A new book of this kind would elicit a new kind of reading. Some readers might be satisfied with a study of the upper narrative. Others might also want to read vertically, pursuing certain themes deeper and deeper into the supporting essays and documentation. Still others might navigate in unanticipated directions, seeking connections that suit their own inter-

continued on page 70

ests or reworking the material into constructions of their own. In each case, the appropriate texts could be printed and bound according to the specifications of the reader. The computer screen would be used for sampling and searching, whereas concentrated, long-term reading would take place by means of the conventional printed book or downloaded text.

“Far from being utopian, the electronic monograph could meet the needs of the scholarly community at the points where its problems converge. It could provide a tool for prying problems apart and opening up a new space for the extension of learning. The **Andrew W. Mellon Foundation** has provided support for several initiatives in this direction. One, a program for converting dissertations into electronic monographs, has just been launched by the **American Historical Association**. Another, for producing more ambitious eBooks, is now being developed by the **American Council of Learned Societies**. Others are in the works. The world of learning is changing so rapidly that no one can predict what it will look like ten years from now. But I believe it will remain within the **Gutenberg** galaxy — though the galaxy will expand, thanks to a new source of energy, the electronic book, which will act as a supplement to, not a substitute for, **Gutenberg’s** great machine.”

Darnton’s vision, it should be clear, was a further elaboration of the scheme that **Ross Atkinson** envisioned six years earlier. To his credit, **Darnton** has not only talked about this idea abstractly but actually put it into practice in his own multifaceted, multilayered book about publishing in 18th-century France that he is completing for **Oxford University Press**. He gave a superb account of it in his **Gutenberg Prize Lecture** in 2006. *Lingua Franca*, in an article titled “The French Revolution Will Be Webcast” (July/August 2000), gave this description of **Darnton’s** planned eBook: “Tentatively titled ‘A Literary Tour de France: An Electronic Book about Books in the Age of Enlightenment,’ the essay will be accompanied by its source — a traveling salesman’s 1778 diary, full of such details as how much he paid to have his horse shod and bled. **Darnton** has in mind not so much an online scholarly edition as an online ‘archaeological dig’. Along the steps of the book peddler’s journey, **Darnton** hopes to place a series of essays on bookstores, smugglers, paper suppliers, and press workers, all hyperlinked to each other and to original source material. Eventually he hopes to post online some eighteen hundred letters and other documents from the period, drawn from the archive of an eighteenth-century Swiss-French publisher, the **Société Typographique de Neuchâtel**. **Darnton** hopes to develop an online site for the archive where other scholars can contribute their own interpretations of the documents and criticize his work and each other’s. He himself would edit the site, and he imagines a committee of scholars would carry on after he retires.”

Alas, this vision is still well ahead of its

time. The actual development of the **Gutenberg-e** proposal shows how **Atkinson’s** and **Darnton’s** dream ran up against the cold, hard reality of the economics of scholarly publishing. **Darnton’s** original idea for making the eBooks available “to any reader without charge” quickly disappeared as later versions of the proposal were generated in response both to the advisory committee’s comments and to **Mellon’s** demand for a business model that could provide some reasonable basis for expecting the project to be sustainable after the grant ran out. All of the publishers on the committee, joined also by librarian **Ann Okerson**, voiced their strong doubts that the project could be carried out at a cost less than what print publishing of a monograph would typically entail. **Colin Day** was most eloquent and forceful in expressing this point of view. In a lengthy email message dated September 29, 1998, to **Darnton** in response to questions **Darnton** had asked the committee to consider, **Day** began by emphasizing the importance of keeping market and economic considerations in mind in designing the project even while admitting that “university presses have evolved to provide a unique and valuable mix of the altruistic and the economic” and that a university press, in contrast with a commercial publisher, “decides to publish on scholarly grounds and then attempts to make the best economically of the work, whereas the commercial house merely decides on economic grounds.” He then went on to discuss the important “value added” by presses in the editorial work they perform. Continuing, he said: “So far I have treated the work as though it could be thought of as a manuscript: as a linear text. However, there are many more potential dimensions to the electronic publication. And these complexities blur the distinction between the editing I have been discussing so far and the more detailed and technical issues that demand attention for the electronic publication. What is new to the electronic environment and difficult to generalize about is the work that is required not to ensure the digital elements ‘work’ but to design the publication: to develop the ‘look and feel’, to exploit the technology effectively, to ensure that, not just as a simple text, but in this new medium, the work is an effective vehicle conveying its message to its intended readership. This is an expensive exercise costing much more than the analogous activity in the traditional medium. It may well be that for the kind of scholarly works under consideration for the prize, the work should be envisioned only as text delivered electronically, i.e., without these costly efforts. However, it is by showing the capabilities of this medium, and showing them well, that the prestige which is the end objective of the whole exercise will be achieved. Simple or complex, there remain the questions of who manages the work and who pays for it. We are, I assume, focusing on works that would not be economic to publish in traditional codex form. So the full costs of traditional publication would be higher than the likely revenue. Now electronic publication of a straightforward text may be a little cheaper than traditional..., so there is a category of work that may be viable in electronic form

that is not viable in traditional form. But the category, I believe, is a small one. Carefully restricting the competition to such works, even if we could successfully identify them *ex ante*, would seem rather artificial and not in the spirit of the project. It would eliminate many worthy candidates that would not be fully viable even with the (modest) cost savings of electronic publication. Thus we have to plan on the basis that winners will not generate sufficient revenue to cover costs. This is certainly true if the works exploit the technology and have rich hyper-textual linking and multi-media elements embedded. Again, the costs of designing and implementing such devices and checking them for reliability are significant. So I see an inescapable need for funding to support these tasks of publication. I have not mentioned the questions about controlling access, copyright, collecting payments, etc..., which all raise questions about the income flow in such electronic publishing. Although I am moderately sanguine about the establishment of long-term solutions to all these problems, any scheme designed today should presume that revenue from an electronic book (using the term ‘book’ elastically but excluding the repetitive subscription-based publication of the journal-type) will be small. So I find it inescapable that the project will need ongoing funding not only for the prizes and the competition administration but also for the publication of the winning works.”

Besides **Colin Day’s** admonitions about its economic viability, the project’s rationale was questioned by **Ann Okerson** on grounds of the inconsistency of its presumed goals, which she identified from **Darnton’s** original formulations as: “legitimizing electronic publishing with all its attendant advantages; relieving the pressure on library budgets and on the production of monographs; advancing the careers of young scholars; saving the ‘endangered’ monographs; covering many diverse fields of historical study.” As **Okerson** observed in her email response of October 8, 1998, “legitimacy is far more likely to be achieved by publishing manuscript contributions from notable, established scholars such as **Professors Darnton, Katz, or Hesse** than by publishing dissertations from even the brightest Ph.D. students”; “no publisher who has written to this committee has suggested that quality electronic publication will be cheap, at least at this time, and thus there is no hope that electronic publications will positively affect library budgets...”; “young scholars’ careers are not likely to be advanced by using them as guinea pigs for electronic publishing experiments — for them, a prize for a brilliant dissertation in book form is likely to have more effect”; “... putting [endangered monographs] into electronic form, a form which is not widely accepted and which we are told is as expensive to craft as print, and using unknown authors on top of that, is not likely to make the endangered work any more affordable in e- than it was in p-form — possibly even less so”; “covering diverse fields with a limited number of prizes per year doesn’t result in enough critical mass for the included books to benefit from the advantages of linkage to supporting documentation....”

continued on page 71

Colin Day and Ann Okerson were both responding to a letter from Darnton dated August 18, 1998, in which he posed five questions for the committee to consider prior to a planned meeting on October 10: "In which fields or sub-fields among the historical disciplines is the monograph most endangered?... How would the competition be organized?... Who would be the publisher?... Assuming the books will be offered for sale, how should the marketing and sales be done?... What linkage can be developed with other projects?" I was asked to address the first question in particular, as many of my discussions with Darnton had focused on the "endangered species" that we all presumed to exist on the basis of anecdotal and some limited statistical evidence from Princeton University Press's sales histories by discipline. My reply to Darnton, based on a mini-survey of fourteen press directors, was that the issue was rather more complicated than we had supposed. With sales of scholarly books already at a very low level across the board, one director dryly observed that "the differences between these endangered subfields are miniscule. Do you sell 395 copies of a book on 19th-c. Italy and 403 of a book on 18th-c. France? Is that statistically meaningful?" This same director ruefully concluded that "over half of everything that is worth doing is endangered." This sentiment was echoed by John Ackerman in his very detailed and thoughtful answer to the survey: "I find myself hard-pressed to say which fields are 'endangered' when the whole enterprise seems to be in trouble." I tried to communicate the complexity of defining what can be considered "endangered" to Darnton thus: "John's thoughtful memo has led me further to believe that any quick generalizations are hazardous because there always seem to be exceptions. E.g., while German history in general may not sell well, books on the Nazi period often do. We see in U.S. history great differences in sales between books on, say, the Gilded Era and books on the Civil War; even a narrowly focused book on the latter period could easily outsell a broad-gauged book on the former. In Cold War history I would expect books that have to do with espionage to do much better, generally, than books about diplomacy. And so it goes through most 'fields' defined either by country or by period. It may be true that highly quantitative studies do worse than books in 'cultural studies' these days because the latter is still the fashion of the day.... Books with a focus on gender used to do better on average than books without that focus, although the bloom is a bit off the rose in that respect as the market gets more crowded with such studies. I think it's fair to say that books on almost any 'small' country — say, Albania in eastern Europe, or even Bulgaria, and countries like Paraguay or Ecuador in Latin America — covering any period will not have much of a market, and that's simply because there are far fewer scholars working on these countries than there are on the 'major' countries, like Poland

or Mexico. But even here there are exceptions: when a 'small' country gets in the news a lot (as Vietnam did in the 1970s and Nicaragua did in the 1980s), almost all books on it will benefit from the extra exposure in the general media and have more of a market during their period in the limelight. Just because of this considerable complexity, which John highlights so well in his memo, I'm not sure it makes sense to develop very broad categories for the process of selection. As a number of people have said, it seems that practically every area of publishing in history is affected these days, with perhaps only a subset of U.S. history being the major exception.... I think it may take a pretty refined statistical study over some period of time to come up with really reliable 'patterns' that can serve to identify 'endangered' fields/subjects/approaches with the degree of precision that could justify discrimination at the level that might really respond to the problem this set of prizes is supposed to help solve. I guess I am more convinced than before, then, that the prizes might best be designed, not so much to 'rescue' certain subfields from extinction (since practically every area of history is suffering to some degree now) as to promote experiments in electronic publishing of documents that will take full advantage of the special attributes of the new medium and thus go well beyond the traditional codex form of monograph."

The final proposal as submitted to Mellon on October 30, 1998, reflected much of this internal criticism noting, for instance, that the project, in trying to achieve multiple objectives ("to promote electronic publishing, rescue the endangered monograph, and ease the difficulties of young scholars") "raises the danger of trying to do too many things at once or of working at cross purposes." The proposal admitted that "several members of the committee warned about the need to define priorities, and the committee as a whole thought the development of first-rate electronic monographs should stand out as our top priority." On the definition of what is "endangered," the proposal referred to my survey and observed that "the very notion of fixed and stable fields now looks dubious," but nevertheless recommended the project "to concentrate on a few areas where the difficulties are greatest and to avoid subjects that are flourishing on the marketplace, such as modern America, the Civil War, and gender studies." The proposal also acknowledged the emphasis that Kate Wittenberg and other members of the committee had placed on achieving "critical mass" as a precondition for successfully selling the eBooks through site licenses: "We have no illusions about proposing a set of texts with enough affinities in subject matter to create hypertext links within the group of prize winners. (According to one rule of thumb, it takes 500 books in a database before readers benefit from online cross-searching [the number that became the objective for digitization of backlist titles for the History E-Book project]). But if this works as a pilot project, it could open the way for other, larger endeavors such as the program to be developed by the ACLS [i.e., the History E-Book project]. In the long run, we should be able to develop some important linkage." And, indeed, the final decision made

about Gutenberg-e was to incorporate it as a subcomponent of the History E-Book database, while also retreating to the original vision Darnton had had for making the eBooks available online "to any reader without charge."

The proposal frankly admitted the "difficulties" the project faced: "(1) Despite some useful experiments, this sort of enterprise has not been adequately tested and involves a great deal of guesswork. (2) The best-informed guesses are mutually inconsistent, at least in some important details. (3) Despite their discrepancies, all estimates indicate that electronic monographs could be expensive to produce, especially if they are heavily loaded with bells and whistles." Further, in concluding, "We dare not make promises about blue [sic] ink and bottom lines. But we can put together a feasible program, one that will provide a start toward solving a set of problems at the heart of scholarly life in this country. At the very least, this program will generate the knowledge necessary to get a better understanding of those problems. But we expect it to do more. It should open the way to a new kind of scholarly communication, the well-wrought electronic monograph. Some variety of electronic book seems certain to proliferate in the near future, but it will be done well only if an organization like the AHA takes the lead in developing it, setting standards, and legitimizing the whole endeavor in the eyes of a skeptical profession."

Early reactions to both Mellon eBook projects reflected the reservations and skepticism expressed by the publishing members of the advisory committee. In the same article where it had described Darnton's own eBook project, *Lingua Franca* quoted Walter Lippincott, then Director of Princeton University Press, as saying "It seems unlikely that electronic books are going to be any cheaper to publish. The big cost for a university press is the gatekeeper function. It is not so much the copyediting and the printing and the binding in nice cloth. It is deciding which are the very best monographs to publish. And I don't see the demand increasing just because they are in electronic form. The fact is there is a limited demand for monographs." And Lindsay Waters, executive editor at Harvard University Press, intoned: "I'm afraid it will be a big waste of money. The notion of just letting more stuff flow out, when we are already inundated with stuff, is just making the world worse."

Mellon's own post-mortem, in light of this history of Gutenberg-e's development, seems a bit unfair and wide of the mark. No one on the advisory committee ever thought it should be judged a success only if it proved the "core hypothesis" of proving electronic publishing to be cheaper than print, or turned out to be economically sustainable after the initial grant had run its course. Whether or not the Mellon Foundation ever saw the comments of the advisory committee members I do not know, but the proposal as submitted certainly hedged its bets on this score, noting various "difficulties" and making no "promises about... bottom lines." Knowledgeable external observers, too, felt it could never succeed in these narrowly

continued on page 72

financial terms. **Mellon** did not have much excuse for entering upon this project if it were to be judged by those criteria alone because it had fair warning of the odds against its succeeding in that manner. Even **Kate Wittenberg**, who ultimately became the project's manager, testifies in her own post-mortem (appearing in the December/January issue of *Learned Publishing*) that "the long-term business model for this enterprise was never the main focus of **Gutenberg-e**."

Should it therefore be considered a failure? I think not. What really lay at the heart of this initiative, I would argue based on what I know about how the project was developed and about what I understand **Robert Darnton's** passion as a bibliophile to be, is the desire to advance scholarly communication by experimenting with a "new kind" of book — the multifaceted, multilayered document that **Ross Atkinson** had dreamed about in 1993 and **Darnton** had elaborated into a fuller vision in his 1999 article that was itself written in part as a justification for **Gutenberg-e**. No one on the advisory committee expected this project to be sustainable without, as **Colin Day** argued, ongoing subvention. Yet everyone on the committee still believed it to be a worthwhile undertaking, if only to "generate the knowledge necessary to...open the way to a new kind of scholarly communication, the well-wrought electronic monograph." And I feel confident that, if polled today, the committee members would agree that in these terms it was quite a success, giving us all more hands-on experience than we have ever had before in developing this cutting-edge form of monograph — if, indeed, it is even correctly or adequately described by that tradition-freighted word. The **AHA's** own post-mortem also credits these achievements. Its brief "Conclusion" reads: "At this late stage, we feel the project succeeded in its central goal — demonstrating the value and merits of digital publication of monographs. These books stand as models of exceptional scholarship in the discipline and rich examples of how new media can transform the traditional monograph form. The ancillary studies conducted in the course of the project, as well as the effort spent working with journal editors and crafting a better system for assessing these sorts of publications, have helped to secure the future for publications of this kind." And, from a publisher's viewpoint, I would add that Appendix 4 laying out the actual expenses of the project is alone bound to prove a valuable, as well as sobering, document for any other press brave enough to help carry this vision forward to the next stage. **Kate Wittenberg**, too, in her recent post-mortem, views the experiment in just these terms: "This project was, rather, designed to lay the groundwork for future programs in born-digital scholarship, to create models for others to follow, and to communicate the lessons learned in this early experiment. The goal of this project was to break new ground, learn from successes and mistakes, provide a group of scholars with

well-edited, innovatively designed, and professionally produced publications, and offer a new model of scholarly communication in the digital environment."

Robert Darnton thus has good reason to feel proud of this experiment, which was undoubtedly the crowning achievement of his year as **AHA** president, and so too does the **Mellon Foundation**. One would hope, if there is a lesson to be learned here, that the folks at **Mellon** would treat their projects as successes even when they do not perform according to strictly economic criteria. We are still a long way from finding a solution to creating a viable transition for monographs from print to electronic environments even when the electronic does not do much more than mimic the print version (as, indeed, most electronic journals merely mimic their print counterparts), let alone realizing **Ross Atkinson's** dream of a document embodying "concentric stratifica-

tion." But the **Gutenberg-e** project, together with **Darnton's** own forthcoming eBook, should remain as a source of inspiration and experiential knowledge for many years to come and will undoubtedly prove to have been well worth the investment in the long run.

*I wish to thank **Robert Townsend** at the **American Historical Association** and **Donald Waters** at the **Mellon Foundation** for giving me permission to quote extensively from their organizations' reports, **Kate Wittenberg** for sharing a draft of her own post-mortem prior to its publication, and **Robert Darnton**, **Colin Day**, and **Ann Okerson** for allowing me to quote from their emails and other private communications during the deliberations of the **AHA's Electronic-Book Prize Committee**. 🌿*

Booklover — Joy and Against the Grain

Column Editor: **Donna Jacobs** (Research Specialist,
Transgenic Mouse Care Facility, MUSC, Charleston, SC)
<jacobsdf@musc.edu>

*Editor's Note: **Donna Jacobs** is a medical type whose job title is "Research Specialist, Transgenic Mouse Care Facility." I first met her over 15 years ago at a friend's cocktail party. Recently we reconnected and I learned that she is an avid reader and has as her current project to read all the books that have won the Nobel Prize. We began talking and now we have **Donna** as a regular columnist. Can't wait to see her perspective on all the books she's reading! — **KS***

When a library is in one's top five destinations while on holiday it makes for interesting discovery. The *Book of Kells* located in the **Trinity College Library** in Dublin Ireland, **Copernicus's** autography "De Revolutionibus" in the **Jagellonian University Library** located in Krakow Poland, the beautiful walnut-walled 10,000-volume library of **George Vanderbilt** located in the **Biltmore Estates** in Asheville North Carolina are good examples. The fun part is that one never knows what one will find, like being introduced to the **Haynes Library** on Eleuthera Bahama or being invited into the personal library of **Joy**.

Joy — a three-letter word to express delight, elation or to call a unique friend by her name. We often speak of the joy of reading and I have actually met **Joy**. She inherited her love for reading from her mother, who read to her and her brother from the time they spoke their first words.

My husband and I spend several days in 2003 visiting friends on Eleuthera Bahamas and it was during this visit we were introduced to **Joy** and her husband by these friends. **Joy**

had arrived on Eleuthera Bahamas in 1946 with her brother aboard a converted Lancaster bomber. The flight was a test flight for **British South American Airways** and was piloted by **Air Vice Marshall Bennett** with a crew of 5 and a passenger list of 13.

Joy invited us to their home for cocktails and the promise of a magnificent sunset. Besides the spectacular view of Governor's Harbour, I was immediately entranced by the walls of books in the main room of the house. Unable to help myself, I began walking along one wall scanning the titles in this private library until I was encouraged to come to the patio for cocktails, and "nibbles" made even more delightful by numerous hummingbirds enjoying the hibiscus. The sun began to set and true to promise it was as picturesque as a tropical postcard.

We retired to the main room decorated with books and began to discuss literature; this book and that book read until one book's title failed to come to mind. **Joy** disappeared to a more private room and produced a journal. Opening the journal she began running her fingers down the lines of entry — title, author, month, year. This journal was just one in a series that **Joy** had kept since 1946 when she began recording the books that she read. Books of non-fiction, travel to interesting places, biographies about fascinating people. What impressed me was her ability to find the particular journal that placed the book in question in rough chronological order of her reading as this is how the journals



continued on page 73