Media revolutions: The transformations of the digital age in light of the invention of the printing press

As revoluções das mídias: As transformações da era digital à luz do surgimento da imprensa

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ABSTRACT
This text is a review of the book Gutenberg’s Europe: The Book and the Invention of Western Modernity, written by the French historian Frédéric Barbier, published in France in 2006 and in 2018 in Brazil — a translated version published by Edusp. The author traces a historical panorama of the invention of the movable-type printing press, focusing on the social, economic and cultural processes that precede and succeed it, covering, therefore, more than three centuries. His aim is to draw a parallel between the revolution caused by the printing press and the current digital revolution, its causes and consequences.

Keywords: Book history, printing press, communication and media

RESUMO
Esse texto é uma resenha do livro A Europa de Gutenberg: O Livro e a Invenção da Modernidade Ocidental (Séculos XIII-XVI), do historiador francês Frédéric Barbier, lançado na França em 2006 e no Brasil em 2018, em tradução publicada pela Edusp. O autor traça um panorama histórico do surgimento da prensa de tipos móveis, atentando para os processos sociais, econômicos e culturais que o antecedem e o sucedem, cobrindo, portanto, mais de três séculos. Com essa análise, sua proposta é elaborar um paralelo entre a revolução causada pela imprensa e a atual revolução digital, suas causas e consequências.

Palavras-chave: História do livro, invenção da imprensa, comunicação e mídias
THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION that has happened since the last quarter of the twentieth century is surprising due to its speed and results. Until recently, theorists dedicated to analyzing writing and reading practices and reconstructing their history predicted a promising future. The advent of information technology and the subsequent Internet popularization allowed us to dream of a world in which knowledge would be largely democratized, in which the web would be a repository of all knowledge and access to this immense global library would be easy and broad. Texts from various areas and eras would be subject to intervention by readers, in a never seen before movement of universal collaboration, which would open a new era of almost infinite sharing.

Despite this utopia, the present shows that the growing access to information does not necessarily mean that people are well informed: a 2019 United Nations (UN) survey indicates that more than half of the world’s population uses the internet (“UN Study,” 2019)—however, much of the digital environment is now dominated by fake news, revisionism, denialism and companies that unscrupulously capture user data for ad targeting, as shown in the documentary The Network Dilemma (Orlowski, 2020), distributed by Netflix. The scenario is confusing and disappointing, especially if we consider all the potential of the digital age. Is a period of doubt and obscurantism part of the process of a communicational and intellectual revolution? Is the crisis transitory or perennial?

Many doubts arise and looking at the past in search of a similar phenomenon could serve as an outline for a prognosis. This is the proposal of the French historian Frédéric Barbier, in his book Gutenberg’s Europe: The Book and the Invention of Western Modernity (13th-16th centuries), a work from 2006, published in Brazil by Edusp in 2018. In the first pages, the author explains his goal of understanding the media revolution of the 2000s, departing from what he considers the first media revolution: the invention of the movable-type printing press, in the mid-fifteenth century.

With this in mind, reading Barbier’s work allows us to identify similarities between two distant moments. To tell the story of the printing press, Barbier uses familiar terms to the contemporary reader, such as hardware, when talking about objects and machinery; software, when talking about their content; start-ups, for the first printing and publishing workshops; and paper valley to name the Reno Valley, in the region of Mainz, birthplace of Gutenberg’s invention. He even evokes the idea of the machine book, that is, the printed book as the main tool of rationality for five centuries, a function that will be later occupied by computers and digital memories.
This insistence on drawing parallels and employing the vocabulary of current digital age seems a little forced for readers of the book's historiography, but it may be attractive to the lay public. In this sense, the essay-like tone of the text is also appealing, fluidly narrating the different stages of the emergence process of the new media. To transport their readers into the past, Barbier demonstrates his deep mastery of the theme and reconstitutes, with detailed descriptions, the urban landscape that helped forge the ideal setting for the production and consumption of prints around 1450. The work, as a whole, proves to be a tour de force of the author’s erudition. A disciple of the prestigious book historian Henri-Jean Martin (who is often quoted), Frédéric Barbier is a researcher at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in France, author of numerous works on the history of writing and press, the development of the publishing market, the formation of libraries, among other related subjects, which he has researched since the 1970s. In Gutenberg’s Europe, Barbier shows how the consolidation of a printed text culture was only possible because it was accompanied by a transformation in the way of thinking about access to information. “It was a phenomenon that seems, a posteriori, so remarkable that it was put on the same plane as the collapse of the Byzantine Empire and the discovery of the New World, with which it brought the canonical chronology of the Middle Ages to an end” (p. 241), says the author.

The economic, social, geographical and political aspects explored in the book are different layers that have intervened and allowed massive changes in the form of data transmission, communication and knowledge exchange in only a few decades. The author, however, elaborates his analysis covering more than three hundred years. This cutout is divided into three parts: the period prior to Gutenberg’s invention, which provided fertile ground for the revolution (from the 12th century on); the moment when it actually happens, with all its implications (15th century); and its subsequent developments, evidencing the impact of the new media (the following decades). The emphasis, therefore, is on the revolutionary process and not on the event itself.

The first part, “Gutenberg before Gutenberg,” recalls the conditions that allowed the development of a written culture in the Early Middle Ages and the creation of a new market for text production. The medieval city emerges as the key space of this process, multiplying its demands for written documents, both administrative and commercial registers. It is there that the physical and visible presence of manuscripts grows and the written text, both in Latin and in vernacular languages, undergoes important reformulations improving its readability, and it becomes a part of different spheres of common life. The act
Media revolutions of reading and writing are no longer exclusive to clerics and the book-object changes its status and becomes collectible.

The second part shows how this favorable scenario enables the experimental creation of different techniques of text making. It is “The Time of Start-Ups,” as Barbier entitles to Chapter 2, making an analogy with the entrepreneurial activity characteristic of the 2000s. The diffusion of the use of paper, the emergence of a European industry that replaces parchment, the massive production of images with the woodcut technique and the beginning of mass consumption—observed in large pilgrimages—are some of the factors that motivated innovations. It is in this context that Johann Gutenberg and his sponsors act. A significant part of this chapter is dedicated to explaining the articulation between incipient capitalism and the developments that enabled the media revolution of the printing press. Barbier clarifies the crucial role of investors who launched themselves in this high-risk venture, betting on completely new technologies and on products that did not have a constituted market:

With printing, we have a system of manufacturing production in which the role of the capitalist became much more important than in the manuscript age. . . . With the increase in production, editing a book became an increasingly complex accounting, industrial and commercial operation. (pp. 215, 228)

“The First Media Revolution,” third and final chapter, assesses the impact of the new media in the following decades. From Mainz, typography quickly spread to large urban centers and, in a few years, to the whole Western Europe. All crafts linked to printed production followed this movement, such as editors, typographers, engravers, translators, proofreaders, distributors and booksellers. Gradually, the aesthetics and configuration of the printed media became different from the manuscript models, creating its own language, which included movable-type formats and the precedents of graphic design, changing not only the nature of the object, but its relationship with the consumer. Barbier thoroughly describes the multiple consequences of the dissemination of printed media culture, as well as the gradual substitution of Latin by vernacular languages, which indicates the increase of the reading public.

Two theses addressed by the author seem particularly interesting for their application as foreshadowing for the future of communication. One is communication imperialism, based on the concentration of typographic activity in some urban centers, which, therefore, would become poles of circulation of ideas and media exploitation—in detriment of the places on the margins of this production, which only consume it. The second proposes that the logic
of knowledge transmission through printed media allowed the emergence of journalism, by imposing a new time of events: *real time*, in which events and comments about them were reported almost simultaneously.

The instances of power immediately perceived the potential of the printing press and managed the activities related to it since the beginning: granting editorial privileges, censoring contents, regulating the offices, supervising editions and their commercialization, as well as intellectual property and copyright issues. However, the immense production in only a few years and the impossibility of controlling the dissemination of information promoted what Barbier called the “krach of the media”: “as today with the screen and the Internet, the system of knowledge seemed to be losing its cohesion in favor of a sort of potentially subversive chaos” (p. 365). It is when society faces a huge amount of information that is produced very fast and circulates frantically, but cannot yet be absorbed.

The expression used by Barbier, “krach of the media,” is adapted from Paul Virilio, who writes an article, in 1998, on the imagery overproduction of telecommunications and the internet, to which we are currently exposed. According to Virillo (1998), the rampant and constant contact with this imagery would not cause a more detailed and sophisticated perception of the world, on the contrary: “[it is a threat of] a collective blindness of humanity, the unprecedented possibility of a defeat of the facts and a disorientation of our relationship with reality”1 (para. 32). According to Barbier, in the case of Gutenberg’s invention in the fifteenth century, the result of the “media krach” was nothing less than Western modernity. This assessment may be a ray of light in the darkness of our days.

**REFERENCES**


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1 In the original: “C’est la menace d’un aveuglement, d’une cécité collective de l’humanité, la possibilité inouïe d’une défaite des faits et, donc, d’une désorientation de notre rapport au réel.” Our translation.