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Opinion

Print technology, the original disruptor, can live with digital publishing

By Alix Christie

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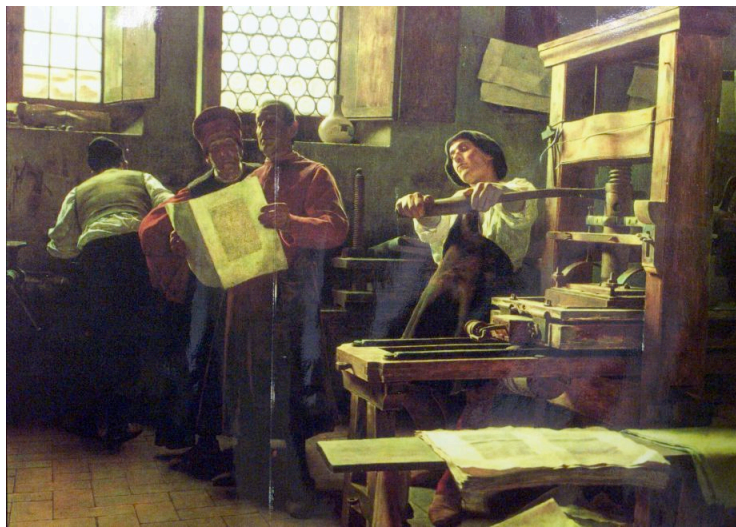


Photo: KAT WADE, Staff / SFC

A photograph of the first printers in Florence, Italy, in 1471, was part of a display shown to students at Stanley Middle School, who were able to print their own broadsheets using antique letter presses during a program put on by the Lafayette Arts & Science Foundation.

The world's first insanely great tech startup wasn't born in a garage in Cupertino. It saw the light some 560 years ago in a German city on the Rhine. A small and driven team — one inventor, one scribe, one venture capitalist — presented a radical new technology called printing, in a monumental Bible unveiled at the [Frankfurt Fair](#).

Tech people like to cite this event as an example of disruptive new technology. It is an article of faith in Silicon Valley that today's digital revolution, like that unleashed by [Johann Gutenberg](#) in the 1450s, must necessarily disrupt and render obsolete all that came before. But like many stories from the past, this is not exactly true. Print didn't eat the world in one bite, any more than digital publishing is doing now. The history of printed books is far more nuanced.

A closer look at that gradual evolution may in turn help us to rethink the fruitless standoff between digital and print, new and old, which is disrupting San Francisco.

The real lesson of Gutenberg's invention is the surprisingly long co-existence of scribal and print technology, and the time it took the book as we know it to evolve. Like the Kindle, the first printed books simply aped what came before. It was not until 50 years later that a dramatically new form — the pocket book for individual reading — emerged in Venice. All told, it took nearly a century for handwritten manuscripts to entirely die out. And manuscripts were not anchored nearly as deeply in the broader society as print books would become over the next 500 years. Print culture, therefore, is unlikely to fade away as fast, or as completely.

What this suggests is that the notion of total disruption is more ideology than fact. The swift annihilation and replacement of one technology by another may hold true in computer science or engineering, though this is open to debate. (IBM still makes mainframes, and the cloud hasn't caused "the end of software.") Yet as a belief system applied to cultures, the idea can be destructive. False dichotomies and antagonisms are the result, such as those between print "Luddites" and digital evangelists, or on the socioeconomic plane, tech invaders versus bohemian San Francisco.

Superficially, the gospel of disruption is easy to believe. After all, the hot-metal foundry and typesetting shops that once filled South of Market have been replaced by the likes of Dropbox, Zynga and Pinterest; the [Northern California Print Center](#) is now home to Cambrian Genomics, a startup that is developing a DNA printer. "Tramp printers," itinerant union workers who could count on a shift at a newspaper or printing house or a spare quarter on their union card, have been succeeded by software hipsters riding Google buses and driving up local rents. But a city is a palimpsest of many epochs, and San Francisco's deep connection to print culture lives on. How much better it would be if we could all step back, and reconceptualize the evolution of technologies — and of cities — as coexistence and gradual adaptation, rather than revolutionary overthrow.

Newer tech immigrants may be unaware, for example, that the Bay Area remains a powerhouse of letterpress printing and the nation's center for the making of fine books. It is nearly 100 years since the establishment of the Mackenzie & Harris type foundry at the Panama Pacific International Exposition of 1915. But M&H, as it is now known, still makes hot type and is training a new generation of typographers under the aegis of the [Arion Press](#) in the Presidio. In scores of local lofts, meanwhile, artisans are avidly practicing these obsolete techniques; the future for the book arts could not be brighter.

And for all the tech startups that have flocked to San Francisco, the city is still a pre-eminent literary center. It ranks third among metropolitan areas in books sold by volume, and boasts twice as many independent bookstores per capita as New York. There are three dozen in the city alone, with several dozen more around the bay.

Print isn't dead, any more than digital is the devil. Most of us have room and time for both. Two rich subcultures can exist side by side, with sufficient mutual respect. San Francisco was founded, yes, on the Gold Rush, a financial frenzy every bit as disruptive as this silicon rush is now. But it was also founded on workers' rights and the unions and the Summer of Love.

Rapprochement is the way forward. It starts with small but significant steps, like one that took place last month on Potrero Hill. A group of engineers from Google Books put their scanners to the side and spent an afternoon at the [San Francisco Center for the Book](#), learning how to sew a binding on that fusty old object, a physical book.

[Alix Christie](#) is the author of “Gutenberg’s Apprentice,” (Harper Books, 2014). To comment, submit your letter at www.sfgate.com/submissions/#1.