Dan Cohen's Digital Humanities Blog » Blog Archive » The Perfect And The Good Enough: Books And Wikis

As you may have noticed, I haven't posted to my blog for an entire month. I have a good excuse: I just finished the final edits on my forthcoming book, *Equations from God: Pure Mathematics and Victorian Faith*[1], due out early next year. (I realized too late that I could have capitalized on *Da Vinci Code* fever and called the book *The God Code*, thus putting an intellectual and cultural history of Victorian mathematics in the hands of numerous unsuspecting Barnes & Noble shoppers.) The process of writing a book has occasionally been compared to pregnancy and childbirth; as the awe-struck husband of a wife who bore twins, I suspect this comparison is deeply flawed. But on a more superficial level, I guess one can say that it's a long process that produces something of which one can be very proud, but which can involve some painful moments. These labor pains are especially pronounced (at least for me) in the final phase of book production, in which all of the final adjustments are made and tiny little errors (formatting, spelling, grammar) are corrected. From the "final" draft of a manuscript until its appearance in print, this process can take an entire year. Reading Roy Rosenzweig's thought-provoking article on the production of the Wikipedia[2], just published in the *Journal of American History*, was apropos: it got me thinking about the value of this extra year of production work on printed materials and its relationship to what's going on online now.

Is the time spent getting books as close to perfection as possible worth it? Of course it is. The value of books comes from an implicit contract between the reader and those who produce the book, the author and publisher. The producers ensure, through many cycles of revision, editing, and double checking, that the book contains as few errors as possible and is as cogent and forceful as possible. And the reader comes

to a book with an understanding that the pages they are reading entail a tremendous amount of effort to reach near-perfection—thus making the book worthy of careful attention and consideration.

On the other hand, I've become increasingly fond of Voltaire's dictum that "the perfect is the enemy of the good"; that is, in human affairs the (often nearly endless) search for perfection often means you fail to produce a good-enough solution. Roy Rosenzweig and I use the aphorism in *Digital History*[3], because there's so much to learn and tinker with in trying to put history online that if you obsess about it all you will never even get started with a basic website. As it turns out, the history of computing includes many examples of this dynamic. For instance, Ethernet was not as "perfect" a technology as IBM's Token-Ring, which, as its name implies, passed a "token" around so that every item on a network wouldn't talk at once and get in each other's way. But Ethernet was good enough, had decent (but not perfect) solutions to the problems that IBM's top-notch engineers had elegantly solved, and was cheaper to implement. I suspect you know which technology triumphed.

Roy's article, "Can History Be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past,"[4] suggests that we professional historians (and academics who produce books in general) may be underestimating good-enough online publishing like Wikipedia. Yes, Wikipedia has errors—though not as many as the ivory tower believes. Moreover, it is slowly figuring out how to deal with its imperfections, such as the ability of anyone to come along and edit a topic about which they know nothing, by using fairly sophisticated social and technological methods. Will it ever be as good as a professionally produced book? Probably not. But maybe that's not the point. (And of course many books are far from perfect too.) Professors need to think carefully about the nature of what they produce given new forms of online production like wikis, rather than simply disparaging them as the province of cranks and amateurs. Finishing a book is as good a time to do that as any.

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filed under Academia[5], Books[6], Wikis[7]. You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0[8] feed. You can leave a response[9], or trackback[10] from your own site.

References

1. ^ Equations from God: Pure Mathematics and Victorian Faith (www.dancohen.org)
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http://lab.arc90.com/experiments/readability