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Chapter 07 - Evolution of the Codex

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Evolution of the Codex

-Kristin Eck-

By the mid-18th century, the rise of literacy in the West had spurred the development of a large reading public that reflected an appreciation for the potential of the codex. In earlier centuries, the book found its form through clay tablets, scrolls, bamboo strips, papyrus, and even on the backs of turtle shells. At the dawn of the Christian era, the codex was introduced as a revolutionary invention that would continue to work as a disruptive technology up until the conception of the modern ebook¹. Proving to be a pivotal era in addressing its potential as a revolutionary innovation, the codex finds weight in the 17th-19th centuries. Its evolutionary progress can be tracked through the formation of the encyclopedia, the chapbook, the almanac, and the novel. Bearing their own unique and intriguing histories, these forms possess characteristics that prove disruptive in the political, social, and economic spheres of world history.

Diderot's Encyclopédie

Due to the creation of his *Encyclopédie*, Denis Diderot (1713-1784) was a prominent French Philosopher and writer during the Enlightenment¹. Although not the first encyclopedia ever published, Diderot's is notably the most disruptive and progressive. Because of censorship and regulation, the *Encyclopédie* gained notoriety during the French Enlightenment. Composed of 17 folio volumes, it was published in 1751, and because of its popularity, later achieved 11 more extravagant volumes¹. The compilation process engaged 150 of Europe's intellectual elites including Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, mathematician Jean d'Alembert, and medical scientist Louis de Jaucourt².

What makes this encyclopedia notable is its compilation of revolutionary ideas that spoke out against the fortitude of the church and crown. Because of contributions made by various historical figures, Diderot's

Encyclopédie became a vision of free thought, secular principle, and private enterprise². The *Encyclopédie* tucked revolutionary insights, opinions on political philosophy, religion, and various outcries against French society into its neatly organized articles. For example, in the first volume titled “Aiuslocutius,” Diderot begins by commenting on the high degree of freedom enjoyed by the English and Dutch, specifically in matters of religion⁴. He humbly suggests that the same freedom be granted to the French in matters of speech and thought. The conglomeration of authors that contributed to the book only added to the slights that can be found between its pages. It contained articles concerning unfair taxation, dissatisfaction with the government, hostility towards absolutism, and mentions the radical possibility of a constitutional monarchy⁴. As long as Diderot remained confined within reasonable ideological limits, the government wouldn’t intervene³. But he did not, and in the late 1750’s the *Encyclopédie*’s license for publication was revoked until political protection could be negotiated³.

In addition to its controversial content, the *Encyclopédie* was disruptive in form as well. Diderot sparked the beginnings of a legacy regarding the way knowledge and information was to be organized and disseminated. Present-day educators of technology can look at Diderot’s endeavor to better understand how the packaging of information has contributed to the ways in which our educational facilities are delivered³.



Left: In spite of its notoriety, many high-ranking political figures, such as The Marquise de Pompadour, supported the intellectual pursuits of the *Encyclopédie*. She is seen here posing with a few volumes of Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*.

The Marquise de Pompadour¹

For example, if a class uses an encyclopedia structured with overarching concepts rather than the alphabet, their research may be more thorough and comprehensive. For the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot focused mainly on the Mechanical Arts of the era: masonry, trade, and

blacksmithing. He attempted to organize articles based on divisions of knowledge such as memory, reason, and imagination, but typically deferred to basic alphabetization³. This system proved inadequate and lacked consistency, but paved the way for future attempts at representing knowledge and is a system that is reflected in contemporary texts today. Because of this, Diderot's *Encyclopédie* is historically disruptive as it was a new form of the codex, but its influence has permeated into the present day and guided the way we organize and compile knowledge.

The Convenience of Chapbooks

Chapbooks became popular in the beginning of the 17th century and continued to be used up until the end of the 19th century. Ranging from four to twenty-four pages long, chapbooks were made from cheap, rough paper with woodcut illustrations¹. Never intended to last very long, the cheap material quickly fell apart. The word "chap" literally comes from the old English word 'ceap' meaning trade, which is reflective of their nature⁵. A handful of upper-class members owned private leather-bound collections, but they were primarily created for lower-class people who could not afford books¹. This specialized book form was intended for children, the poor, and those people in rural communities. They covered a wide variety of topics such as folk tales, children's stories, nursery rhymes, poetry, religious works, fairy tales, romances, and histories¹. Due to the increasing literacy rate, chapbooks were printed for the masses in the 17th century and sold in the millions up until the late 19th century. Because they could be widely and easily

Many people became peddlers because they had a physical disability that kept them from regular work⁶.

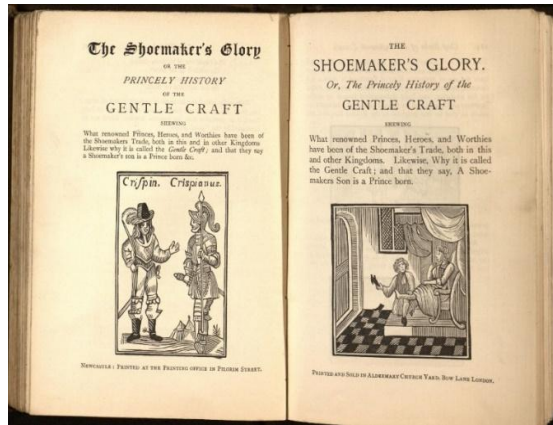


Left: An anonymous French painting of a Colporteur from 1623.

The Colporteur²

dispersed, their influence on culture and modern life is apparent all over the world. In France, chapbooks were called “*bibliothèque bleue*,” and in Spain, they were called “*pliegos sueltos*” which literally translates to loose sheets¹. With their wide and successful distribution, governments began requiring chapbook peddlers to be licensed. In 1696 all English chapbook peddlers were required to have proper paperwork; 500 were authorized in London alone¹.

Not only did chapbooks provide entertainment from the tedium of long work days and a somewhat dull existence, they often offered suggestions for daily life. Some included calendars, horoscopes, recipes, magical remedies and medical advice, etiquette books, and alphabet books for children¹.



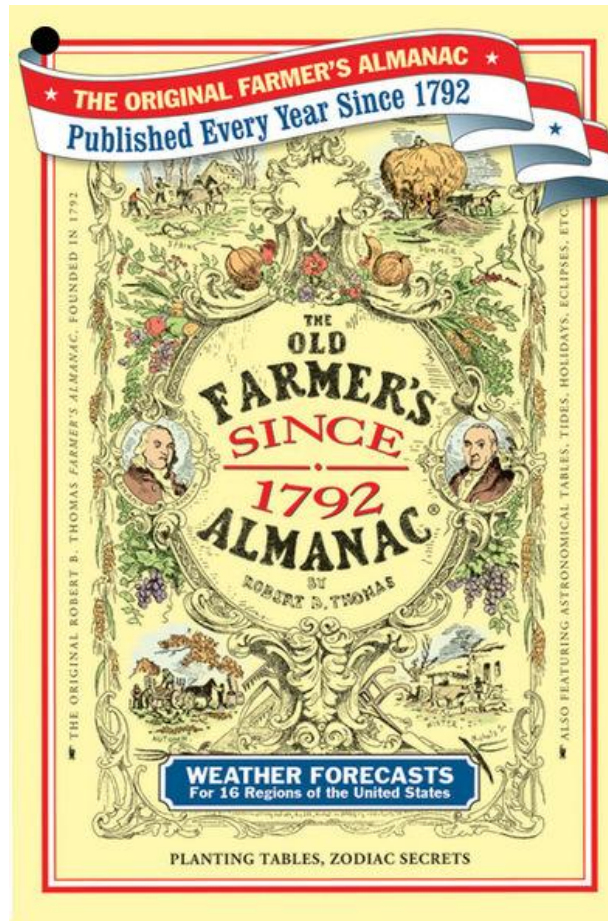
Left: Example of a chapbook from 1882, written in gothic and roman print.

Chap-Books of the Nineteenth Century³

Chapbooks were typically written in very simple language; today they would be considered rudimentary. To add to this, they were almost always written in gothic print. During this time, the art of the book was changing, which brought new typefaces to the surface of book publishing. Roman print began competing with traditional gothic print and—depending on the intended audience—books were published in one or the other. Besides being used for contemporary literature, roman print became popular in the science and political sphere of society¹. Gothic remained for religious works such as the Bible and Book of Hours, and was popular with newspapers¹. Because the Bible was typically the only text affordable to the lower-class, they could only read in gothic print. Because of this, chapbooks were almost always printed in gothic. Due to their high print rate, wide dissemination, and appeal to the lower class, chapbooks proved an influential tool for the spreading of popular culture across Europe.

The Influence of the Almanac

The beginnings of the almanac can be traced back to the 13th century with the Catholic Book of Hours, but the almanac did not become prolific until the 17th century during the Western Enlightenment⁶. Similar to the encyclopedia, almanacs became popular for their gathering of useful information, such as astrological tables, predictions and prophecies, religious holidays, and important fairs¹. Some almanacs were so instructive they were



Evergreen Cover⁴

Left: The cover of an original *Old Farmer's Almanac* containing weather forecasts for regions in the United States.

It is said that Robert B. Thomas had a secret weather forecasting formula, which is traditionally said to be accurate 80% of the time. Today, his formula is tucked away in the almanac offices of New Hampshire⁷.

considered, by some members of society, a sort of manual for everyday life. In a sense, they were an annual calendar (in the traditional codex form) with an abundance of other information helpful for life. Farmers and their families found almanacs especially useful due to weather forecasts, advice for harvesting, recipes, and herbal remedies¹. One of the most notable almanacs is Robert B. Thomas' *The Old Farmer's Almanac*, dating back to 1792 during Washington's first term as president⁷. It included information about the rising and setting of the sun, tides, weather, and time. It still exists to this day and is notably the most successful and longest running periodical to be published. It is

believed that this almanac became popular because it was more entertaining, its weather predictions were more accurate, and its advice was more useful.

The market for the almanac found a foothold in Germany, England, France, Spain, and Italy, and was being produced and sold in the millions by the end of the 18th century. Nathaniel Ames' *Astronomical Diary and Almanac* was

so popular in 1726, it was considered to be a household necessity alongside the Bible⁶. Because these almanacs were treasured by their owners, their influence on the daily lives and culture of their readers is evident. Around the same time, the scientific community began to scrutinize the content of almanacs. Up until publication of Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* in 1733, astrology had been accepted as a standard explanation for ideas concerning the Earth, sun, moon, stars, and planets⁶. But with the



Left: The cover of a 1760 version of Nathaniel Ames', *Astronomical Diary and Almanac*.

Many modern newspapers still contain daily horoscopes. This tradition is actually a reflection of early almanacs and shows how their influence is present in today's society¹.

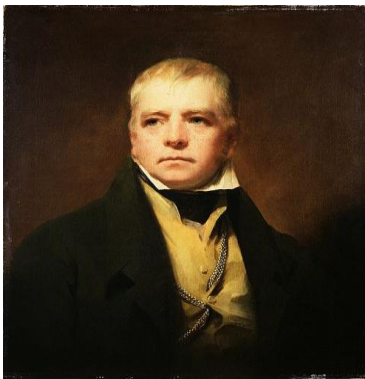
An *Astronomical Diary*⁵

Enlightenment came new scientific discoveries that questioned the validity of astrology⁶. The progressive and analytical tone of the Enlightenment did not prevent people from finding entertainment in the almanac, but it did generate the opportunity for publishers to experiment with the content. With a turning away from astrological prophecies, almanacs printed records of important historical events and useful statistics. But because of their blandness, they did not sell well. Italy, on the other hand, was successful in producing almanacs for subjects in fashion, the courts, and for teaching manners to young children. The

prevalence of the almanac in the lives of the people played a large role in molding the social, political, and scientific culture of its era.

The Rise of the Novel

The novel became a revolutionary form due to its assembly of preexisting characteristics of the book. It derived its form from early romances and novellas, which is the Italian name for “little new thing”⁹. These two forms were short tales in prose fiction and typically had shallow morals and simple plotlines. Nothing in the novel was necessarily new; character development, plot-making, situation, and incident had all previously been studied and executed in dramas, novellas, and long narratives⁸. Although somewhat difficult to pinpoint, the novel is said to have arose in the early 18th century with the publication of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, and Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*⁹. These two works pioneered a path for the future of literature by establishing a realistic account of an individual’s experience. The novel became a disruptive technology because it established this new perspective and reexamined the type of content readers would enjoy. Books became imbued with ennobling sentiments that spoke to the emotional side of their readers. By giving them something to relate with, the novel quickly revolutionized the way text was interpreted. This innovative form of the book has continued to influence the world of literature up to modern day, and has left a lasting resonance among readers.



Sir Walter Scott⁸

Walter Scott (1771-1832) is credited with making the novel a respectable form of literature¹. Famously known for *Ivanhoe*, *The Lady of the Lake*, and *Waverley*, Scott sold more novels than any other English author of his time, and grew to be internationally recognized. His fame was due to the fact that he

wrote novels with the intent to make his readers cry. By focusing on the lives of the middle and working class, he created realistic stories that sympathized with the people. Walter Scott was essential in making the novel a form that directly addressed domestic and social concerns of lower ranking individuals, caught up in the system of societal hierarchy. Because of this, the novel is sometimes referred to today as a sort of “criticism on life”. Other notable authors who achieved the same affluence were Henry Fielding, Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, and Jane Austen¹.

The 18th century also proved to be a pivotal era in the development of the narrator. As the novel evolved, authors began experimenting with this specific role. They started asking questions like: *Who is the narrator? How much do they know? Do they talk to the reader? From whose perspective is the story told?* Authors like Dickens and Thackeray played with the idea of an omniscient narrator: a figure who is aware of all the characters and events that will unfold⁹. Since this time, authors have developed other methods of writing that portray a more individualistic kind of narrator or voice. They focus on creating a single stream of consciousness, concentrating less on dialogue and syntax, and more on the characters’ emotions, thoughts, and experiences⁹. These early developments through the 17th-19th centuries were essential to the creation of the novel and heavily contributed to mass diversity that is seen in the book industry today. Because of its thorough portrayal of modern life, its ability to resonate with readers, and its analysis of the societies in which characters live, the novel exists as an essential feature of the book as a disruptive technology.

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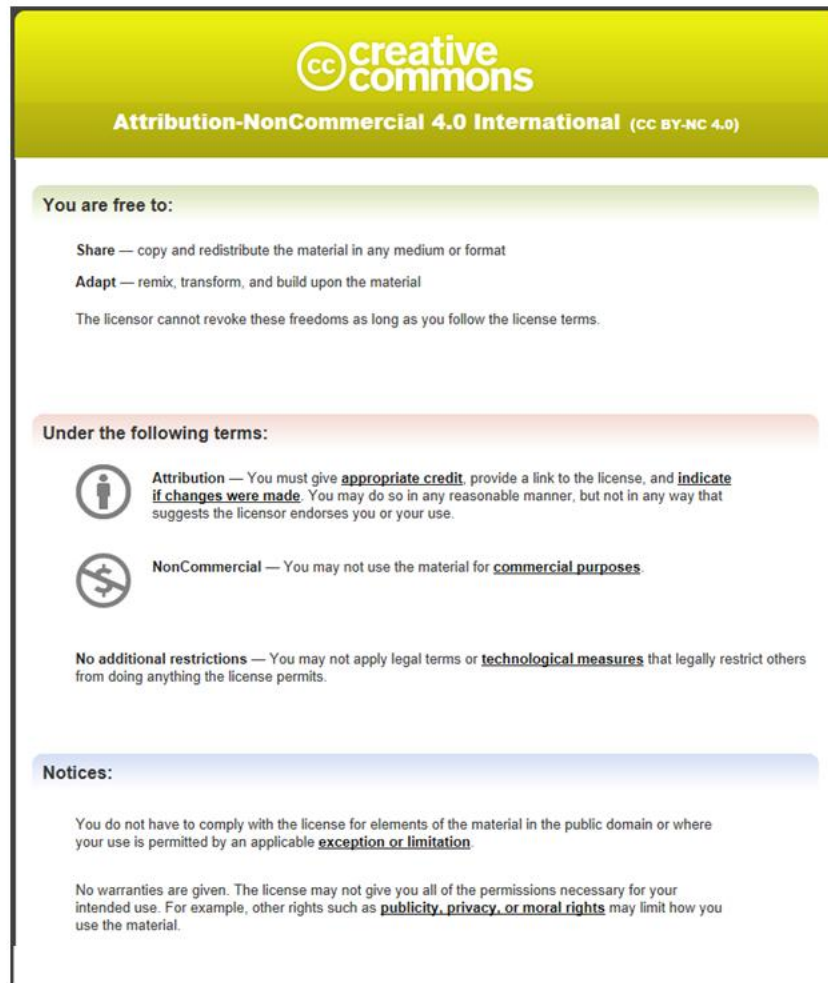
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