



Paradigms Lost: The Life and Deaths of the Printed Word

William Sonn

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Four times in western history: in the 1400s, the early 1800s, the 1880s, and again in the mid-20th century, we learned to duplicate and disseminate the printed word more cheaply. And each time strange events followed.

For with each of these changes in the gritty production of glamorous content, expensive and secret bodies of knowledge abruptly became cheap and easy to spread. Once-rare and sometimes disorienting impressions rained down on once-sheltered folks. New and otherwise inexpert hands mixed them into whole new breeds of information, myth, logic, and viewpoints. There were fantastic scientific advances, mass migrations, bold social experiments, financial upheavals, and much bloodshed. In the harrowing decades that followed, powerful new kinds of governments, businesses, and groups came to elbow aside old ones. In all of these periods, there were great, creaking shifts in politics, wealth, religions, and even the way we learn, think, and see. And in the last decade, the costs of producing and distributing printed knowledge have fallen a fifth time, far and fast and almost to free.

Paradigms Lost traces the history of the accidents, inventions, forces, eccentrics, and geniuses who accelerated information in the past, examines what happened each time they succeeded, and provides some background for what, if the past is any guide, may be coming.

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