

A Book Online? No, An Online Book!

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Once upon a time, in the fairytale beginnings of the technologies and infrastructure that allowed anyone with some knowledge of [HTML](#) and space on a [server](#) to create content online, there was great excitement about the possibilities of creating new modes of communication through hypertext and interactivity. There were some particularly innovative projects—such as the [360°](#) site on the criminal justice system or the experimental (and somewhat [NSFW](#)) [Electronic Literature Organization](#)'s 2001 award winner, [These Waves of Girls](#). But, for the most part, people put online what they already had written offline: text meant to be read linearly, with perhaps some links to provide further information or simple navigation. Scholarly or literary publications online have likewise tended to reflect their print-based origins, appearing as [PDFs](#) and HTML that read just as they would in print. Again, there have been some exceptions that have looked to take advantage of the flexibility of the online medium, including Cell Press's [Article of the Future](#) and Penguin's [We Tell Stories](#) series, but academic publications online have been, more often, very conservative in their design and implementation, whether intentionally or unintentionally. This is the case even for such well-known projects as [Gutenberg-e](#). These are books online, not online books.

What's the difference?

A book online follows the basic principles of a book in print. All the elements of the print book are there, although there may be the addition of some components to improve or enhance [navigation](#). When you come to a book online, you immediately recognize it as that: a book. It has a table of contents. It has a bibliography. There are notes. The image on the landing page is often of a recognizable book cover. There may be materials that are part of an “appendix” or a list of illustrations. Navigation is insistently linear, beginning with the acknowledgements ending with the references and appendices. While the book may be in HTML, it is no different in many respects from what you encounter as part of the scanned corpus that appears in [Google Books](#).

An online book is something else entirely.

There is nothing wrong with having books online, whether they were “[born digital](#)” (as the current terminology has it) or whether they were first birthed on a printing press and have been retrofitted for online delivery. But an online book, such as the Web version of *Dangerous Citizens*, takes full advantage of the medium. The print book, which appeared earlier this month, as we [reported](#) last week, is beautiful in its own right. What we look to do online is to create a very different experience.

First, we understand that users interact with online material differently than they do with print. When you hold a book in your hand, you might look at the table of contents, skim through the index, flip through the pages, and stop at an illustration here, a passage there. All of this happens within the context of the physical object in your hands. Online, you are first likely to encounter the text via keywords that you've typed into a search engine. You land on a page that could be

anywhere within the corpus. Where are you? What should you do now? Rather than insist you “begin at the beginning”—that you read the introduction and then progress linearly through the text—we encourage you to start by exploring where you are, with a richness you could only get online. Sure, read the text surrounding the keyword(s) you typed in, but also examine the [parerga](#), which give you a chance to read the author’s thoughts; hear interviews, songs, and poems; and watch videos. Check out the glossary [wiki](#) for terms you may not know and suggest words to add to it. Look on the timeline to see where an event referred to on this page may be located. Find a place’s location on the map or follow the journey of the prisoners. Use the words in the [tag cloud](#) to follow an idea through the text. Jump to linked resources. Submit photos, text, videos, and comments of your own.

Second, an online book has a continuing life. Books online are static, frozen in time at the point of their publication. An online book allows for additions and modifications to be made at any time, and we are building an interface for Neni (the author) to allow her to do just that, while respecting the need for clear versioning. Parerga-style contributions from others around the world—anthropologists, historians, philosophers, political scientists and theorists, lawyers, human rights scholars and activists, students and scholars, interested members of the public—can also become part of the project, once they have been vetted and approved by Neni, who then becomes not only the author of this work but also an editor. Because some of these contributors may not be technologically savvy, we need to create an intuitive and easy-to-use interface for submissions of materials, for review, and for publication. We also want to encourage reviews and comments that at any time can become part of the project’s ongoing life.

Third, most books online have been created without any plan to adapt to evolving technologies and thus ensure ongoing access. They are snapshots in time of their current technologies and rely on future technologies to accommodate their formats. In contrast, an online book should be created to adhere not only to the best practices of the technology of its day, but with the long view in mind. One of the attractions of a physical book is that it remains accessible year after year, as long as the paper holds up and the ink does not fade. That same kind of permanence of access needs to be built into the design of an online book, to allow for ease of migration as technologies and devices change. Because we are building *Dangerous Citizens* in an [accessibility-compliant way](#) as possible while still allowing for a pleasing user interface, we already accommodate various devices for reading and displaying the content, from PCs to screen readers to mobile phones. In fact, the explosive use of mobile devices as much more than mere telephones provides a window into the future. We don’t know what the next Big Thing might be, but we should be ready for it. To that end, *Dangerous Citizens* has been tagged in [XML](#) in accordance with the National Library of Medicine’s [Archiving and Interchange Tag Set](#), which has become the established XML [DTD](#) standard for scholarly publications. The *Dangerous Citizens* site is generated from that XML. Likewise, additions to the site will be submitted via [XForms](#), allowing us to continue to work within an all-XML workflow and thus to refresh the site as needed as new technologies emerge. And when eventually Neni decides this project has developed as much as she would like, we will archive the site and all its components in [Academic Commons](#), Columbia University’s research repository, to allow for ongoing access to these materials in the decades to come.

We are looking to launch our experimental online book during the week of the [American Anthropological Association](#)'s annual meeting, December 2-6, and look forward to hearing your feedback. Is it merely a book online or have we succeeded in creating a true online book? Let us know!

—*Rebecca Kennison, Director @ CDRS*

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