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In the beginning, some 116 years ago, you could subscribe to A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles, with the first issue or fascicle covering A-ANT, although it took 40 years to collect the whole of what we now know as the OED. And now, once again, you can subscribe to the language's great work in progress. On March 14, Oxford University Press launched OED Online which offers access to not only the Internet version of the second edition but also to the unfolding of a complete revision of the most complete of English-language dictionaries that will close to double its size and take to at least to the end of this decade.

The down-side of this news is that it may be the end of the OED as we know it: "OED Online will be the Dictionary in future," declares Chief Editor John Simpson. Shed what tears you will over this net loss for book publishing, others will be searching the new e-OED on their wireless Palm Pilot as they read the paper on the train (or do the crossword, using its special missing-letter features). They will email definitions to the friend with whom they've wagered on a meaning. And, if perchance the word is not in the OED or is inadequately defined for their purposes, they will enter the citation in which they've found the word for the editors to consider for a future entry in the ongoing revision of the OED.

All this for a subscription fee of £350 per annum for individuals, with site licenses for universities and libraries in the £600-2000 range. The annual fee may exceed the price of the one-volume compact edition of the OED (£225), while costing less than a year's worth of Collins' online Cobuild Dictionary and Bank of English service (£500), but the OED Online is more dictionary than you can buy in any other form. This is not only because it combines past and current supplements and not only because it brings a thousand new and revised entries every quarter – many of which have been left untouched since James Murray set them more than a century ago – drawn from OUP's £34 million revision programme extending to the English of Asia, Africa, Australasia, and the Americas, as well as to South Park, Seinfeld, and Blackadder television scripts (O brave new words!). The technological advantages of the OED Online include an ability to search for words you have hardly a clue how to spell, or by language of origin and date of first usage, and the means to ply the 2.5 million citations by author, title, year and citation. Centuries of language and literature are now a click away in whole new ways.

Now, it would be easy to also go on about the artful transfer of page to screen, combining the traditional layout of the OED – itself a typographic breakthrough in the orderly, informative use of typefaces and spacing – with colored fonts and minty white lozenge-buttons for navigation. But there's a more important issue at stake with the OED Online, now that this great dictionary has now taken its place within the new online information economy. The web has proven itself a powerful broadcasting and publishing medium, but what kind of public and private space is going to be defined by that economy that is proving to be is only beginning to take shape. Information on the web – whether it concern the news, finance, sports, health, education, government, or research – is increasingly a matter of sponsorship or subscription.

Last fall, for example, Encyclopedia Britannica dropped its online subscription service, let its door-to-door sales force go, and offered free access to Britannica.com, that is, access paid for by the ads flashing at the top, bottom, and room permitting, side of the page. This made Britannica.com (and the accompanying Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary) instantly available to the growing number of homes and classrooms with internet connections around the English-speaking world. By this move, Britannica instantly recast itself from a major investment in knowledge for libraries and families to a popular, ubiquitous medium, much like the online newspaper and magazine.

Now, it may be that only 22% of Britons are currently accessing the Internet, according to a recent Booz, Allen, and Hamilton study, but Tony Blair has made universal access to the web a target for 2005. With everyone able to tap in, it suggests a second "digital divide," which Blair fears between haves and have-nots, will develop between private (subscription) and public (sponsored) sources of knowledge.

If Guinness ads would seem a little much for sponsoring greater public access to the OED, then perhaps the advertising and marketing department of Oxford University Press might have seized the opportunity to capture the attention of dictionary users. My concern for fostering greater public access turns on how this dictionary began as a work of common and uncommon readers. The nineteenth-century tradition established by its first editor, school teacher, and amateur linguist James Murray, of inviting reader participation in the OED, continues to this day with Simpson's 1999 Appeal that would "invite readers to contribute to the development of the Dictionary by adding to our record of English throughout the world. Everyone can play a part in recording the history of the language and helping to enhance the Oxford English Dictionary." Only now you needn't mail your word-finds in on half-slips of paper, as Murray asked while offering to pay postage. You can simply enter them through the OED's web page.

The OED's authority has always rested, in part, on this democratic invitation to participate, sans académie, in shaping the language's best record. Its acknowledged weakness has always been about limits to that participation. When the publisher declares that "Rapper Ice Cube and mad minister join Jane Austen in new OED Online," it only points to how women form still something of their own novelty item among the citations in the original parts of the OED. Extending these recognized forms of participation in English to those otherwise excluded, to other parts of the English-speaking world and other sources of this varied language, can only add to the OED's claims to represent English, even as the OED's 300 expert staff and advisers define, more than any other body, an official sense of how this language is constituted.

We all have reason to watch, then, what this interactive, online dictionary makes of the untamable and energetic qualities of the language that Samuel Johnson celebrated in the preface of his dictionary. Oxford University Press may yet want to reconsider how sponsoring greater public access to this resource would better match the global reach of this language and the OED's lexicographical project.

Having said that on behalf of the public sector of this information economy, I'm encouraged by the reported interest shown by British universities, libraries, and schools in the OED Online's reasonable educational rates. I also think it admirable that "different price bands" will apply to institutions in developing countries. It'll mean more of this wonderful dictionary about and greater use of it, given how the OED Online encourages linguistic and literary wandering, with much scrolling through the thickets of citations

and clicking among cross-references, touching down here and there in the language's history, usage, and meanings.

One can get over the missing heft and delicacy of volume and page, ink and column. A dictionary, in a necessarily permanent state of revision, lends itself, if any book does, to web publishing. One can also wonder about what we are getting with this new publishing medium, and specifically what will come of greater public engagement with this dictionary's formidable learnedness, its particular and changing take on the language. It could well prove a net gain for the state of public knowledge.

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