Going Comma-bose
The effect of punctuation and the space between words on Medieval Europe

Presentation by Melissa Hirsch
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Before there were spaces

- *scriptura continua*


- Greeks adapt Phoenician alphabet by adding vowels
- spaces no longer as necessary
- MYNAMEISINIGINOMONTYOYAYOUKILLEDMYFATHERPREPARETODIE
Why weren’t there spaces?

- They weren’t necessary
  - No need for speed
    - Lower quantity of difficult reading material
    - More interested in rhythm
    - Oral tradition
  - No need to re-read
    - Committed common texts to memory
  - No need to concede
    - Widespread literacy was not a goal of the ancient world
- …no need, indeed!
Carolingian Miniscule

• Lowercase letters

http://campus.belmont.edu/honors/122OnlineText/carolminus.jpg

• MYNAMEISINIGOMONTOYAYOUKILLEDMYFATHERPREPARETODIE
• MynameisInigoMontoyayoukilledmyfatherpreparetodie
“Word” Spreads

- Benedictine Rule
  - Emphasizes
    - Oral prayer readings
    - Silent study
  - Spaces between words spreads through monasteries
“Let them analyse the correct meaning according to *cola* and *commata*, and let them insert those relevant marks of punctuation in their proper hierarchy, so that the lector may neither misread, nor by chance fall silent suddenly before the devout brothers in church.”
The Effect

- Smaller print
  - books become more compact
  - less expensive
- Change in the function of reading
  - Silent reading is implied
The Effect

- Individual authorship
- Critical thinking
- Skepticism
The Effect

- HERESY!
  - Orléans, 1022
    - “Fabrications which men have written on the skins of animals”
  - *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*-1559
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Selected References