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“The Future of Books, the Future of Libraries”

Reading, Old and New

Storytelling is part of what makes us human, and it predates reading by a long time. Reading is an ancient process undergoing profound changes in our time. What those changes are, and what they mean, is difficult to prophecy about. Are people substituting viewing for reading? If so, which people and how much? And is digital reading fundamentally different from analog, and if so, is it different in ways that matter for learning? A 2007 National Endowment for the Arts study found that Americans between the ages of 15 and 34 spent, on average, just one hour a week reading. They found corresponding drops in literature readership rates among college-aged young people. Then a newer study, discussed in Wednesday's *Chronicle of Higher Education*, examined the reading habits of over 1500 college students and found that students actually read a lot, but not for class. Predictably, students thought reading textbooks “tedious” and “time consuming,” yet had a hard time unplugging from phones in class. According to the lead researcher, few of the students she observed “followed instructions, took notes, or brought their textbooks to class.”¹ Like many others in higher education, I have noticed similar trends anecdotally: students typically do not arrive on our campus as avid readers on their own, or ready to read in the ways that academic settings have traditionally demanded. One commenter to that article reported:

The theme of one of my class sessions is whether books can change the world, and I ask students to come to class prepared to discuss one book that made them see the world differently. I was shocked when not one of my students could recall having read one book in recent years. One had read a technical book, another remembered reading Harry Potter in grade school. For some this was the first semester in college but for others it was the last. Not surprisingly the ability of these students to be critical thinkers was absent. (Ypadilla)

¹ Dan Berrett, “Students May be Reading Plenty, But not for class,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1 May 2013. <http://chronicle.com/article/Students-May-Be-Reading/138911/>

But letting Long Form Reading go the way of the dodo is not the answer either, another commenter was quick to respond:

Sure we can incorporate a range of social media texts and analyze them critically. But the fact that students' reading habits have changed does not mean that those reading habits should force a change in our expectations concerning reading. Rather, it means that we have to work to help students change their reading habits so that they can succeed ... Facilitating [the] habit of not reading does nothing to help them develop as critical readers. (porcupine)

In 2007, the architect Richard Rogers won the Pritzker Prize for his modernist architecture, including the Pompadou Center modern art museum which shocked Parisian aesthetic sensibilities by putting the building's usually hidden pipes and shafts on the exterior. Rogers said that he would like to be known for "buildings which are ... what we call legible. You can read how the building is put together."²

I always start my history survey courses with a photograph of the Pompadou each semester, and I tell my students that I want history to be like that building – legible; by the end of the course I want them to know how history is put together.³ In like manner, the role of educators, librarians, and public cultural heritage repositories is more important than ever in helping young people, because reading is not just seeing; it makes something formerly opaque transparent and legible. And because reading is more than absorbing meaning from *text*, art museums do this too – presenting work in such a way that it becomes legible, “readable” to different audiences.

Books, Old and New

Interestingly, though academic reading may be foundering, there are more books and authors than ever. We are in a publishing boomlet, especially if you count self-publishing and fiction. Again, using academic publishing as a microcosm, paper textbooks are now joined with (and NOT fully replaced by) online and e-reader format books. The ads in my email inbox from textbook publishers are suggestive of their enthusiasm for new technologies promising to transform the book forever.

² Robin Progrebin, “Richard Rogers, Architect of Pompidou Center, Wins Pritzker,” NYT 3/28/2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/28/world/europe/28iht-prize.5.5063163.html>

³ This is the Sam Wineburg model of survey “uncoverage” rather than coverage. See, e.g. Lendol Calder, “Uncoverage: Toward a Signature Pedagogy for the History Survey,” *Journal of American History* <http://www.journalofamericanhistory.org/textbooks/2006/calder/>

To take one example: just this spring, McGraw Hill has unveiled what they describe as “the First and Only Adaptive Reading Experience” called SmartBook. Their SmartBooks pre-highlight certain content, leading readers through progressively more detailed versions of the same material to enhance review and recall, all the while generating “detailed reports [to enable] educators to gain insight into how students learn, while tracking their progress at both the class and individual student levels.” And they insist “This is the future in learning.”⁴

Knowing who’s read the book (and maybe, even more granular metrics – for how long at a time, how quickly, what parts they skip) – is being touted by “CourseSmart” – a Silicon Valley Startup, jointly owned by Pearson and McGraw Hill – as the next big thing in education. Now we can tell if they’re reading and get an “Engagement Index” from the stats generated as they access ebooks. I reserve the right to change my mind on this, but I see no value in forcing students to purchase access to a book that not only knows when it is being read, but tattles on its reader to the teacher. Big Sister Prof. Creepy.

CourseSmart, of course, loves this idea: “‘Before this, the publisher never knew if Chapter 3 was even looked at,’ said Sean Devine, CourseSmart’s chief executive. ‘We’ll ultimately show how the student traverses the book. There’s a correlation and causality between engagement and success.’”⁵

This reminded me of nothing so much (even down to its name) as UltraWord™, Jasper Fforde’s insidious fictional replacement reading technology to upgrade “the book” to something more digital, responsive, and multisensory, something more plugged into the neural network and infinitely more commodifiable. He writes, tongue-in-cheek, of UltraWord’s predecessors:

First there was OralTrad, upgraded ten thousand years later by the rhyming (for easier recall) OralTradPlus. For thousands of years this was the *only* Story Operating System and it is still in use today. The system branched in two about twenty thousand years ago; on one side with CaveDaubPro (forerunner of PaintPlus V2.3, Grecian Urn V1.2, SculptMarble V1.4 and the latest, all-encompassing SuperArtisticExpression 5). The other strand, the Picto-Phonetic Storytelling Systems, started with ClayTablet V2.1 and went through several competing systems (WaxTablet, Papyrus, VellumPlus) before merging into the award-winning

⁴ See also <http://techcrunch.com/2013/01/08/mcgraw-hill-kno-offer-a-peek-into-the-future-of-textbooks-theyre-dynamic-vocal-adaptive-bring-stats-to-studying/>

⁵ Tyler Mangrum, “CourseSmart E-Books Let Professors See if You’ve Actually Been Reading,” *HackCollege*, 15 April 2013. http://www.hackcollege.com/blog/2013/04/15/coursesmart-e-books-lets-professors-see-if-youve-actually-been-reading.html?utm_source=feedly&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Hackcollege+%28HackCollege%29

SCROLL, which was upgraded eight times to V3.5 before being swept aside by the all new and clearly superior BOOK V1. Stable, easy to store and transport, compact and with a workable index, BOOK has led the way for nearly 1800 years.⁶

In the fictional world Fforde's *Well of Lost Plots*, introducing UltraWord™ did indeed transform reading, but once read just 3 times UltraWord™ books “expired” and could no longer be accessed. Which serves as a cautionary parable about the real world, too - eBooks are seductively easy to obtain (No driving to a store! No shipping! Download now!) but – they can be locked, password-protected, deleted or altered by their commercial creators in ways that everyday users cannot override and they cannot easily be shared, lent, re-sold, gifted (or burned). eBooks, unlike books, are not tangible property but rather “digital assets” (along with digital musical downloads and social networking profiles) with questionable legal standing after their owner's death.⁷

Which in turn reminded me of the sort-of real-world news last fall (short-lived and confirmed false within a day) that Bruce Willis was planning to sue Apple over the rights to leave his iTunes library to his children in his will. Not true, but it reminded everyone for a while of the stormy legal gray sea of digital nondurables – into which books will topple if they are entirely reduced to bits/bytes. Hazards of the ebook age thus might include having to purchase, Groundhog-Day-like, the same digital copy over and over or works vanishing from the digital record because of copyright, both of which might be functionally equivalent to the fires and floods that used to haunt the nightmares of paper-book librarians.

Libraries, Old and New

Which brings us to libraries – a masterful “old” technology for managing massive amounts of data in the form of bound volumes, printed matter and other ephemera. The need for some kind of organizing schema became apparent in the 3rd century BCE, when the Library of Alexandria amassed the first big collection of texts. Alphabetical and then numerical schema came much later; James Gleick reminds us in *The Information* that even “a literate, book-buying Englishman at the turn of the seventeenth century could live a lifetime without ever encountering a set of data ordered

⁶ Jasper Fforde, *The Well of Lost Plots* (Penguin, 2003), 112.

⁷ <http://techcrunch.com/2012/09/03/bruce-willis-itunes-music-library/> - see also http://news.cnet.com/8301-13579_3-57505272-37/who-owns-your-downloaded-music-after-you-die/?ttag=gpwl

alphabetically.”⁸ The analog library’s magnum opus was the card catalog, remember those? Elegant oak-and-brass cabinets, through which one could identify and locate any book in a library of any size, using an infinitely scalable system that created order out of raw, uncatalogued chaos. All with just a typewriter and a printing press. Amazing.

May I wax personal for a moment? Libraries were a big part of my childhood – our elementary school library was a soaring two-story affair crammed with books right at the heart of the school, all the “pods” (this was the 1970s) opened onto it. Our town’s public library was nothing special, linoleum-tiled with narrow stacks, but I have very fond memories of carrying out a pile of books so tall I had to rest my chin on the top to steady it, of being allowed – even as a small child – to borrow whatever struck my interest. Both those libraries are long gone, buried under beautiful new renovations – but they kindled a deep affection for books, and in fact, now that I think about it, for SYSTEMS of books. Stories about stories.

Libraries now and in the future are far more than repositories for paper volumes; they are learning commons, internet portals, small business incubators and employment bureaus. One noteworthy trend is towards openness, transparency, and access. The micro-libraries in people’s front yards and in old phone booths generate instant community: put out two books with a “Take One” sign and you have just participated in an exchange of ideas.

The best example I can think of is the newly-launched-this-month Digital Public Library of America, which aggregates the metadata of its participating digital collections using an open source code to present a vast, searchable “cultural heritage repository.” First envisioned in 2010, the DPLA envisaged a bold mission to be “an open, distributed network of comprehensive online resources that would draw on the nation’s living heritage from libraries, universities, archives, and museums in order to educate, inform, and empower everyone in the current and future generations.” At the time not only had the Google Books project had hit legal snags, but in any case there was something about just trusting a for-profit corporation to provide unlimited open access that left scholars a little squeamish.⁹ Justifiably so. The DPLA thus emerged in true 21st century style – tweeted, conferenced, beta-tested, Wiki’d, listserved into existence and now: gaining some prestigious partners and foundation funding while it gets off the ground – with cloud-storage, distributed “hubs” rather than a single physical location, knitting together the extant world of digitized text, images, and objects (all

⁸ James Gleick, *The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood* (Pantheon, 2011), 59.

⁹ Robert Darnton, “The Digital Public Library is Launched!” *The New York Review of Books*, 25 April 2013, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/apr/25/national-digital-public-library-launched/?pagination=false>

with robust metadata “content”) in a mobile-friendly, easy-to-use website. It seems to me that the Worcester Art Museum’s dialogue day today is very much in this vein, as well.

Will the DPLA (or any virtual archive) replace the brick and mortar library? Not in the least.

Executive Director Dan Cohen spoke of the complementarity of different libraries in an interview for *The Atlantic*:

“[The DPLA is] not a physical library. There's still a lot that physical libraries do extremely well. They provide spaces for study; they provide meeting spaces, spaces for public readers; they also provide access to physical content that is better in physical form. I still, for example, love children's books in their physical format versus a digital format on my laptop.* [*Art books, too, I daresay] And also they provide Internet access for millions of Americans still. Public libraries are at the heart of their communities. ... If you actually look at foot traffic into public libraries, it is not going down. These are still very vibrant places. There is no way that we can replace that, that physical presence that public libraries have. But we want to work with them to see how we can expand their mission of providing open access to materials, which has always been a really strong component of American citizenry.”¹⁰

The week’s *New York Times* article on the Metropolitan Round Table played with this tension and symbiosis between real and virtual collections when it profiled a monthly gathering of NYC-area archivists, “coming out of their cloisters” like hibernating bears hungry for the red berries of conversation, collegiality, and (judging by the *Times*’ description of them) sartorial display. Archivists as hipsters. Concluding the article, this quotation: “As digitizing coaxes more of these bits of history out of the shadows, [one archivist] does not seem worried that her profession will become obsolete. Digital copies may abound, but archivists will still be in control of the magic thing itself. Or as she said confidently, ‘I will have the original.’”¹¹

¹⁰ Rebecca J. Rosen, “Now, With No Further Ado, We Present the DPLA!” *The Atlantic*, 18 April 2013. <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/04/now-with-no-further-ado-we-present-the-digital-public-library-of-america/274963/>

¹¹ Alison Leigh Cowan, “Leaving Cloister of Dusty Offices, Young Archivists Meek Like Minds,” NYT 28 April 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/29/nyregion/archivists-bringing-past-into-future-are-now-less-cloistered.html>

Concluding Thoughts on the Cheap and the Dear

Originals are hard to come by (except in art museums), whereas digital simulacra dazzle on every side. “Facts were once dear; now they are cheap.” And “when information is cheap, attention is expensive.” What becomes more vital is the process knowledge of how to cope with giant data, make sense from jumble, create stories from chaotic noise. Libraries and archives, as well as what we call on the internet search “engines” (evoking massive steampunk cogs, an industrial metaphor for the post-industrial age) provide the two essential coping strategies in the age of information abundance; filter (blog, aggregate, curate) and search (retrieve binary text-string needles from digital haystacks).¹² These functions cannot be left exclusively to the free market; cultural curators, educators, and keepers of library flames must be more than hirelings of “the next big thing.” Today as we consider possibilities and pitfalls in the future of legibility, narrative, and meaning-making (that is to say, books and libraries), let us have a long horizon backwards as well as a long one forwards. Because whether we build real spaces or virtual ones, we are building not just what will boost some “Engagement Index” metric, but what will nourish the human spirit from our collective “deep well of narrative.”

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¹² Gleick, *The Information*, 409-410.