Is There a Text in This Library?

History of the Book and Digital Continuity

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This essay argues for the importance of the study of production, distribution, and the cultural impact of texts in the education for digital librarianship. An argument is made for integrating historical viewpoints in coursework that will prepare master's library and information science (MLIS) students for digital librarianship. Several components of that approach are discussed in this essay. Their application in the classroom, which involved collaborative teaching using the Internet, is presented as well. This paper reveals how book historians may find new roles as interpreters of the transformation of the library, from a logocentric library, which traditionally provides a fixed physical framework within which texts are accessible to users, to a soft library delivered on distributed servers - as a knowledge continuum. The emergence of new modes of textual transmission, the changing concept of the text, and the need to create new social spaces in which texts are collected and used can benefit from an awareness of the production, distribution, and use of text in traditional media environments.

For historians of the book, libraries, profession and teaching in library school programs—a question of crucial importance is how to get across history, what needs to be included in that part of the academic program, and what historians can bring to the identity of the field. This essay sets up a broader stage for that discussion as seen by a

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humanities scholar. The essay identifies the questions we should ask, and exemplifies how historians of the book may respond to these concerns in the teaching environments of library and information science programs. The approach taken here demonstrates that the pedagogical approaches to digital librarianship should rely on the study of production, distribution, and the socio-cultural impact of texts.

INTRODUCTION

The title of this essay, “Is There a Text in This Library? History of the Book and Digital Continuity” invokes a paradox which arises from an assumption of the library as a place. At a time when book history has all but disappeared from library school curricula, it is necessary to its importance for understanding the new environments of textual transmission, for the changing concept of the text, and for creating the social spaces in which texts are collected and used. The title of this paper plays on the absurdity of the physical text. It also paraphrases the title of a seminal work of reader-response theory, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Fish 1980), which inaugurated a shift from study of text as a self-contained unit of meaning to study of what the text does for the reader. Similarly, society is facing the end of a logocentric² library in which the position of objects in the system (i.e., collection organized in a physical library) are fixed and sustained by the authority of the physical center. The shift from the concept of the text as a bounded

² The usage of this word corresponds to what poststructuralist theorists identify as the referent, or the framework that provides authority to texts. In many of its functions, the library as a place in which texts are collected and used is a framework for textual authority as determined by tradition, the canon of works recognized as standard or authoritative. The institution of the library aids in constructing such bodies of knowledge that are recognized as cultural heritage, established by a consensus of successive generations of readers, critics and educators.

physical entity, contextualized in a library, to an understanding of a protean digital text existing in a networked environment and social spaces we know little about, also brings with it a shift in how these texts are managed. The spatial metaphor of the “soft” library that Mitchell invokes in his *City of Bits* (1996) is a library without walls in which the electronic server has replaced the monumental architectural interfaces of traditional libraries (their reading rooms, their stacks, their shelves, their books, and their librarians). A shift from the text to its constructions by the readers’ receptions in reference to Stanley Fish, is paralleled by a dispersal of the physical spaces which provide access to texts.

Of course, a library without walls is not a place without texts! This essay aims to emphasize the importance of teaching about the issues of textuality and the social context of the transmission of texts, regardless of the medium in which they might circulate.³ Understanding these components, library and information studies students will become adaptable managers of digital continuity, recognizing new possibilities for managing collective memory. The integrity of the collections created in new environments depends on understanding the context of their original creation and subsequent research use. Moreover, the design of new presentation systems for these texts will be related to an understanding of the new genres as textual structures and social forms.⁴

³ The technical side of the issue of how these new places of the digital libraries are created, or their cost and management, is not the subject of this essay.

⁴ This has implications for the selection of items for inclusion in collections, but also in how these collections will be related to other materials available in the networked environment, or a model by which contributing collections act as a single entity through an interface. It is not by chance that many of the projects are focused on a single cultural phenomenon (e.g., *Uncle Tom's Cabin & American Culture: A Multi-Media Archive*, accessible at <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/utc>). Such projects have a power to attract collaborators who emerge as social groups sometimes referred to in the jargon as “editing collectives.” That participation occurs beyond institutional boundaries. Also, these projects are envisioned

DIGITAL LIBRARIANSHIP AND MEDIEVAL PALEOGRAPHY, THE STUDY OF PARATEXT, AND THE RISE OF SILENT READING

In addition to providing access to new texts and genres, libraries have focused on providing digital continuity to historical collections. And in order to create meaningful historical collections of texts in the digital environment, it is necessary to be aware that these materials represent objects that reflect certain cultural processes. Understanding the uniqueness of the materials and their historical impact is relevant for the selection process in the digitization of these collections. The research use of these materials requires librarians managing special collections to apply for grants to make them accessible to scholarly communities of users. Arguments directed to granting agencies should be based on an understanding of the production, distribution, and use of these materials in their original context, and assessing what they reflect about the society.

This process has started with the rise of special collections in the 1970s, which coincided with the cultural studies movement. It was then that an awareness of the research potential of neglected ephemeral and popular materials made a strong impact on building such collections and making them accessible for research uses. Now libraries

as hypermedia archives, meant to be used for “pleasure, study, or intensive research” according to a blurb at *The William Blake Archive* home page (<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/blake>). They are interactive and performative texts, virtual multimedia events. The *Rossetti Archive*, as conceptualized by Jerome J. McGann (<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/rossetti/rossetti.html>), is a multi-media archive that truly makes it impossible to conceive of the library, the archive, and the museum as distinct information spaces for display of information objects. Nevertheless, these distinctions remain important as institutional contexts for preservation of these artefacts, and for managing information that is distributed about the artefacts. The institutional processes through which the contributing collections and editors create these

have an unprecedented opportunity to reach even broader audiences for the special collections via digital interfaces and consolidation of the collections dispersed in different locations with the possibility of access and searching. New uses for the collections are both scholarly and popular, which presents a unique challenge for the presentation of collections that were meant for research use. Moreover, public libraries and archives are becoming active players in digital library initiatives. From a field for specialists, special collection librarianship becomes a relevant body of knowledge in M.L.S. curricula.

The historical approaches that are relevant for the design of new presentation systems for these texts, as noted earlier, are related to cultural uses of texts and developing an awareness of physical manifestations of text in other contexts of literacy.⁵ Some possible areas for comparative study of historical processes and the digital environments include the historical study of literacy, and the conventions for presentation of text, as well as what such processes reveal about the cultural status of texts. The historical study of literacy involves the study of transformations of the writing spaces and writing systems, the history of punctuation, and typographical forms. As well, what layout and internal organization of the text reveal about the uses of texts in general. These bodies of knowledge are fundamental for understanding the transmission of texts in the digital environment.

virtual libraries, but also the impact of various funding agencies, including the government, is integral to the study of the study of the digital library.

⁵ The electronic text departs from the rules of the printed text. Some features of digital literacy are comparable to issues that literary historians are discovering about texts that have circulated outside the literary canon, namely, popular texts that were transmitted in contexts where oral tradition was strong. These contexts of restricted literacy represent a paradigm of text in which text and image are of equal prominence in its visual interfaces with the reader.

The effect of the typographic organization introduced by the nineteenth-century newspaper, for example, which depends on various devices in order to enable fast reading and absorption of text (Tschichold 1998, 212), is one such relevant body of knowledge for digital librarianship. Similarly, two-column layout and combination of visual and textual information in magazine and newspaper design can teach how to evaluate the impact of such texts on reading and extend this knowledge to new environments.

The articulation of the text related to the practices of reading is noted in connection to the rise of silent reading in the late Middle Ages. Transcribing text without spacing preceded this transformation in the nature of literacy. Malcolm Parkes' *Pause and Effect* and, more recently, Paul Saenger's *Space Between Words* interpret the history of punctuation and the visual presentation of text as effects of changing literacy practices. Saenger has shown that the evolution of the ergonomics of the text for reading is tied to the changes in the modes of textual transmission and has been linked to their increased availability among the lay population reading in the vernacular, preceding the invention of printing. He shows that cognitive processing of continuous text without punctuation or word division (known as *scriptura continua*) was possible in an oral environment of transmission (in which texts were read aloud). With the rise of silent reading, there was an increase in the use of punctuation as a means of visual organization of meaningful units of text, along with other ways of their logical arrangement.

The study of calligraphy (styles of writing and scribal hands), of type, and their effect on reading (Moylan and Stiles 1996), and of the structure of the book and how humans interact with the writing spaces and tangible media are other important components in understanding artefactual manifestations of text. Armando Petrucci

demonstrated in his work (1994) that it is possible to study paleography as cultural history; such studies have high application in LIS curricula to challenge the internalized notions of literacy that prevent the understanding of electronic texts.

The structure of text extends to its paratextual features,⁶ such as title page information, footnoting, markers of internal structure of the text, and other features of texts that are involved in their formatting. Retrieval of information from the texts and their semantic implications has to be approached historically, studying their significance in relation to the contemporary reception or production of text, or the status of text in general. The history of visual interfaces is an important aspect of teaching the history of the book with a view of digital continuity because this knowledge has strong implications for the structuring of electronic writing spaces.

The physicality of text is a very strong component of encounters with text in new contexts of textual transmission. Developers of the early prototypes of electronic books (cf. the MIT Media lab project *The Last Book*)⁷ have recognized this. The XRCE STOW Group project, *Affordances of Paper*,⁸ also attests to the importance of understanding the structural aspects of the book and of paper as the writing surface in interactions with the new media.

⁶ These elements are analyzed by Gérard Genette (1997).

⁷ J. Jacobson, B. Comiskey, C. Turner, J. Albert, and P. Tsao, "The last book," *IBM Systems Journal* 36(3) 1997. Available: <http://www.research.ibm.com/journal/sj/363/jacobson.html> (Accessed April 2000).

⁸ Abigail Sellen and Kenton O'Hara, *Affordances of Paper*, Available: <http://www.xrce.xerox.com/research/stow/projects/aop.html> (Accessed April 2000). This research aims to understand the "persistence of paper in the workplace" through a behavioral analysis of how its physical properties support human work and interaction. The term "affordance" indicates property, deriving the term from J.J. Gibson's use of the term to refer to the potentials and possibilities that the interaction is offered by the nature of an object or medium (<http://www.xrce.xerox.com/research/affordances/home.html>).

The study of popular texts and informal writing spaces (diaries, forms) shows how texts may be a written arena for oral production and textual interactions of communities on the margins of dominant culture. This awareness may help recognize similar patterns in textual interactions in another informal social space; the Internet. Therefore, digital literacy, as print literacy has shown, is not limited to visual reception but is a function of social interactions. It would be possible to elaborate on these interactions at every stage of the production, circulation and reception, using relevant examples of print and digital literacy.

TEACHING HISTORY OF THE BOOK FOR THE DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

Examining a case study begins to demonstrate how understanding of the cultural uses of texts may help future practitioners make connections between book history and electronic literacy, and how issues relevant to print culture can be taught in the digital environment. The project incorporating this approach involved a joint teaching effort including a library science program and American Studies.⁹ The students in both classes contributed their work to a centrally maintained online bibliographic database¹⁰ of

⁹ This joint effort was initiated through an invitation by John Unsworth (University of Virginia, English Department and Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities) posted to Humanist Discussion Group (27 Feb. 1998). He proposed sharing the assignment he developed, which included web-accessible database of information about *20-Century American Bestsellers*. The author of this essay applied the assignment in the History of the Book course, which she offered in spring 1999 at The Catholic University of America. The assignments and an extensive body of course materials and the database (Available: <http://www3.isrl.uiuc.edu/%7Eunsworth/courses/bestsellers/> (Accessed May 1, 2007). Original website URL: <http://www.engl.virginia.edu/courses/entc312/s99>).

¹⁰ This bibliography is maintained in Msql 2.0 database, and consists of interface pages in HTML, and interactive forms written in perl12 script. The database and interfaces are developed, and owned by John Unsworth.

twentieth-century American bestsellers. They had to work on a succession of five modules of an assignment. In conducting research, they relied on the resources posted on the course website and used additional material developed specifically for library school students. After choosing the bestseller title, students had to analyze its physical characteristics, publication history, and reception of the work.

Contextualizing the American Bestseller: Description of the Project

The assignment consisted of five modules including bibliographic description, publication history, a biographical sketch, study of contemporary reception, and a critical essay.

1. Quasi-facsimile method developed by descriptive bibliography was applied to the transcription of titles and other information from the title page and the cover.

Bibliographic description thus included information on the structure of the container, the condition of the paper, and notes on type, binding, and illustration. Students also made notes on reader interactions with the text (such as wear and tear, and inscriptions).

2. *Publication history* involved identification of various editions of the text.

Bibliographically important distinctions of edition, state, and impression were introduced to the students at this stage. This called attention to slight differences in the packaging of the text as commercial product as revealed in binding variants, and differences in the nature of illustrations, and paper stock. Determining editions from other publishers, last date in print, promotional material, and sales figures, translations, performances in other media, serialization, and sequels and

prequels were among the elements that the students needed to discern. This research-intensive component required extensive use of bibliographic sources online and in print, as well as the use of trade publications such as *Publishers' Weekly*. There were several purposes of this assignment. First, it initiated a close-up view of publishing as reflected in sources contemporary¹¹ to these bestseller titles, all of which were published between 1900 and 1925. It also made students aware of publishing as an industry and the connections between first trade edition publishers and reprint edition industry. The connections with other texts and genres (silent film, and the contemporary theatrical productions) positioned these works in the market and in relation to actual audiences at the time of original publication. Lastly, this exercise enabled the students to replicate in their work the research process undertaken by historians and literary scholars.

3. The *author's biographical sketch* was prepared as a link for understanding the political aspects of authorship, and the overall context of creation of the work.
4. The assignment documenting *contemporary reception* involved assessment and direct quotation of critical essays and reviews. Its particular value was in establishing an awareness that the original creation of the text and its public acknowledgment are two aspects that are equally important in the process of cultural production and cultural legitimation.
5. The *critical essay* allowed the students to organize their findings, focusing on the bestseller as a phenomenon, which is an outcome of social, political, or economic

¹¹ These sources included book trade publications, the *National Union Catalog*, *Pre-1956 Imprints*, *Cumulative Book Index*, etc. but also research of Library of Congress old card catalog which contained information about copyright deposit copies. Some of these historical resources have no online equivalents.

relations that constitute the book trade. In that context, the figure of the author could be conceived as a historical and cultural construction. As an optional feature, the students could contribute a full electronic text of the novel, applying SGML-tags for paragraphs, chapter headings, and adding a TEI header.¹²

DISCUSSION

Each module of the assignment discussed here was modified to be adapted for the library and information studies curriculum, without compromising its original intent. The assignment called for an extensive use of information sources¹³ in various formats. The students were introduced to all aspects of the study of books, including the techniques of descriptive bibliography, historical sources for research of the book trade, and reception history, and positioning the work and the author's life in a broader social context. The sources also revealed lateral connections between American fiction and other contemporary genres and manifestations of the work. Because it called upon students to scan images of illustrations, chapter pages, bindings, and to become aware of the difficulties of writing succinctly for the web, the assignment introduced an awareness of presenting information in the electronic environment.

¹² The TEI header would be added into an online form from which is supplied by the Electronic Text Center at the University of Virginia. That text is linked to the database of bestsellers and becomes part of the electronic text clearinghouse at the University of Virginia's Electronic Text Center.

¹³ It was adapted to encourage the students to use the extensive resources of the Library of Congress Main Reading Room, thus socializing them to complex tasks of combining sources as they understand their scope, uses, and limitations, getting an experience of the ambiguity and open-ended nature of the research process.

The process of completing the assignment through the five stages presented here required students to conduct original research of primary sources, ranging from manuscript sources to copyright records and secondary literature. But, as importantly, it also required students to publish online,¹⁴ an experience that for many of them was an obstacle that, once surmounted, had a deep emotional impact as some of their comments indicated. They were introduced into a new form literacy. By publishing their work online, they also became part of a virtual community, which consisted of other students/authors whose work they consulted and against which they matched their own accomplishments.¹⁵

At the same time, the assignment provided an environment in which the students could use technology without explicitly focusing on it as a thing in itself. When technology is taught for its own sake, as a skill set rather than a medium of literacy with transparency that media with which we are familiar with have, this happens often enough. In contrast, the process of socialization into the world of digital text, and the process of asynchronous collaboration, and participative authorship as components of their experience with technology was emphasized. At the same time, the pedagogical purpose of the project in increasing an awareness among the students about the text as a material object and a reflection of cultural processes which involve textual transformations in a variety of media accomplishes the traditional objectives of book history coursework.

¹⁴ Apart from entering their work in online forms, to contribute it to a centralized database, they also had to select items to scan and integrate them with their assignment.

¹⁵ The question of accessibility to their work in draft form raised issues of privacy, but even more of the nature of the authorship itself. The need to identify a cut-off date for the final cut or version (which translates into the moment at which grading process begins) also taught an important lesson about digital textuality and the arbitrary construction of what constitutes an authentic and authoritative text.

CONCLUSION

This essay identified the concerns, traditionally those of book historians, that have a strong impact on understanding the context in which the electronic medium supports reading, and the context in which information technologies provide access to collective memory. It is crucial to make connections between aspects of the information technologies of the past and those evolving today, and to identify examples of historical knowledge relevant for understanding digital text. The interfaces needed for the delivery of electronic text would benefit from such awareness. This essay concludes with a case that demonstrates how such relevance can be conveyed in the teaching environment, presenting an instance of collaborative teaching. The collaborative nature of the project about which this essay reported, brings together two teaching environments. This is an acknowledgment of interdisciplinary (and international) environment which can be included in other classrooms. The collaborative and collective nature of authorship that this project exemplifies is a natural form of interaction in an electronic medium, and it gives students the opportunity to get socialized into this type of environment of textual production.

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