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Bibliography for the new media

From the scroll, codex and myriad other manuscript forms to the printed book the world has seen many ways in which the written word could be transmitted. As once the manuscript codex dominated the Western world, so does its printed successor today. Still today, ours is the Order of the Book. Several newer media have presented themselves in the course of the past century, notably radio, film, television. However, in spite of the gloomiest predictions, the mass media have failed to cause the book’s demise. Nor have they even begun to rival the status of the book as the single most effective vehicle for the preservation and transmission of human knowledge. We may study television, film, and radio: but the primary manner in which we communicate our research results is still through print.

After the invention of the World Wide Web in 1991 the networked computer started its meteoric rise. Its tremendous rate of growth has not abated since. E-mail, e-commerce and just about e-everything continue to insinuate themselves into our daily lives. This digital global network is also increasingly employed for the publication and distribution of books, journals, newspapers, periodicals, and other texts that would once have been published solely in print. The invention of the Internet and more particularly the World Wide Web has turned the computer from its role as a mere digital aid in the production of printed paper into a fully fledged medium for the transmission of text.

The advance of the World Wide Web, and thereby the challenge it presents to the printed book, is clearly unstoppable, and it touches the heart of the order of the book. Whether replacing or merely complementing their printed counterparts, the WWW offers an impressive panoply of digital newspapers, journals, fanzines, railway timetables, e-books and learning materials. The examples can be multiplied effortlessly. As these publications move into the digital element they may or may not be transformed from their print appearance, functionality, extent, degree of up-to-dateness, etcetera. Yet their relationship to their print forebears is always obvious and often close. In addition, the digital element has engendered wholly new digital genres of writing such as the web log and the discussion forum. Even the most passionate defender of the culture of the book will need to face the fact that digital forms of text are bound to affect the function and status of print in society, and the printed book in particular.

Clearly, the World Wide Web has become a serious competitor to the paper-based book and other print-based publication forms. But it would be a mistake

1 The term is Michael Heim’s, from Electric language. A philosophical study of word processing (New Haven & London 1987); see esp. pp. 101-3.
to regard it as just another challenge, after radio, film, and television. A challenge it is certainly, but one of a different order than that posed by the twentieth-century mass media. Unlike television, film or radio, the Internet shares with the codex the technology of writing. McLuhan’s prediction was that books and print would no longer be central to Western culture. The influential essayist George Steiner followed him, pronouncing that the world was coming to the end of an historical era of ‘verbal primacy’. However, in portraying the Internet as a challenge to the paper-based book, I am less concerned with a shift of modalities (any decline in the status of the word in favour of, say, the image), than with a shift of media in the transmission of what remains essentially the same verbal text. For the Internet is still predominantly a verbal medium, script based, even if it integrates words closely with image and sound. Among the many modalities that the computer facilitates (text, still and moving images, speech and music) writing is – still – central. This is not to say that a shift in modalities is not going to take place; just that it will be a very gradual change, of which we are only seeing the very beginning.

Given these strong continuities between the www and the functions of the printed book, book historians need to consider to what extent the discipline is to concern itself with this latest text-based medium. As it is, the demarcation is an ad hoc and largely implicit one. Even such a squarely digital publication as the online book history resource Bibliopolis in the Netherlands, though it continues right to the end of the twentieth century, omits to deal with the advent of the World Wide Web. None of the prestigious histories of the book that are currently in the process of being written in the English-speaking world are projected to deal with the book’s digital transformation. As Wim Heijting has made clear in a very perceptive review of recent Anglo-American book history handbook titles, these handbooks, too, all exhibit a similar implicit, rather abrupt caesura. None of them attempt to define where they stand vis-à-vis digital

3 Such a shift has been posited by many besides McLuhan and Steiner. See for example Mitchell Stephens, The rise of the image the fall of the word (OUP 1998).
4 Writing is also crucial in how the computer facilitates all of these modalities, through various markup and programming languages, which usually employ some form of English (see Lev Manovich, The language of new media (Cambridge, Mass. etc. 2001), p. 47).
5 Bibliographers is D.M. McKenzie’s preferred term in Bibliography and the sociology of texts (London 1986; expanded edn. Cambridge, Mass. etc. 2000), but historians of the book – in which I include the older bibliographers – seems more apposite.