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ACS 205 / Section 002

01 December 2004

The Decline of Print Culture

Print culture is currently in rapid transformation. The introduction of digital text versus printed text was only recently established. The current decline of print culture is occurring as a result of the revolution and shift of text's purpose and message towards digital culture. The value of the book is changing as George Landow points out, "…students today actually encounter the printed book as an object… to them the book has lost both most of its aesthetic stature and its sense of solidity and permanence" (Landow 211). The use of digital text has already led us beyond the book. The contrasting argument provided by Umberto Eco argues that books are a more practical way of recording information and passing it on to others. However, with the diffusion of digital text, the next generation is more likely to be avid readers without tangible printed books.

The regression of print culture is currently being witnessed through the public expression of technological stress. The public has rejected the ideology of digital culture by fear of the unknown and therefore remain immersed in the safety of print culture. This is shown through participant observations displaying the lack of true love and knowledge and it's affect on print culture within society. In my essay I intend to discuss the "digital age" as currently being diffused to a weary public marking the beginning of

Western culture already being beyond the book. I will also further investigate the possible symptoms and specifications distinguishing a dying print culture.

Through conducting a participant observation at *Word on the Street* on September 26th 2004, the reinforcement of the idea of a slowly declining print culture was seen first hand. The event partakers comprised mostly of those in their late twenties to early thirties. The quantity of those in their adolescence, expected to be the next generation of readers, was slim to none. The minors present at the event seem to do so only through the enthusiasm of their accompanying guardian and not so much of their own. It also seems as though the marketing team was successful in their advertising, as may participants stated that they were more attracted to the highly publicized event as a social gathering rather than declaring any form of genuine interest in the print available.

The morning crowd was told to be much more avid in print cultures, while the afternoon crowd seemed more interested in the events taking place. Many empty handed consumers surrounded the mainstream stages, such as the CBC stage. When asked why the decision to watch these performances, many honestly stated that they were simply drawn towards the largest crowd.

Word on the Street's attendees were flocked around magazines and self-help bookstands. While trying to view the commotion regarding the books, what was noticed was the layout of the content of the books themselves. Many self-help guides and magazines come close to the set up of Internet web pages. The books contained numerous amounts of lists, charts and sub headings that resemble the layout and content on web pages that provide information. Interestingly enough the popularity of point form and numbered sequences rather depicts the distancing of the readers from text narratives in

novels. Readers are more dependent upon the notion of gathering information at a faster pace, supporting the notion of a hyper-culture in which we reside in (Bain, 108). Thus explaining the interest readers have in the layout and content of magazines as well as self-help books.

Medieval text has a similar resemblance to the Internet style layouts. This may mean that digital technology is not altering the message and style of the text just the means of delivery. The layout of the Internet is similar to that of medieval text in the one page layout characteristic as well as the secluded boxes of information. This shows that the layout of digital technology seems somewhat recycled and does not tamper with the ideas and messages the text just shows them in a different medium similar to medieval text. The layout is created to be a quick and accessible read. "…[The] Information as the nutrients that need to be squeezed out of them [resources] and quickly ingested" (Levy).

Western society allows technological change to easily diffuse on a small scale, but bears difficulty in a relatively larger playing field. The public reaction to the introduction of digital text can be compared to the reaction that occurred when the printing press occurred. Guttenberg's printing press created opportunities for enhancement in authorship and mass reproduction. The printing press was questioned negatively at the time for its impact on print culture. The idea of mass reproduction posed a question to that of copyright and censorship was seen with the invention of the printing press in which religious organizations were not supportive of the opportunity to massively distribute "dangerous" new ideas (Cotter 325).

Although print culture was simply being transformed its renovated exterior did not sit comfortably with many. William Ogburn's cultural lag theory best describes the

resistance of accepting a dying print culture. "The acceptance of new technology is hindered by one behavioural aspect of society: a resistance to change. Technology introduces change that temporarily destabilizes society and, until society adapts, a period of transition occurs" (Bain 108). Technology is a social agent to change in way print culture will be formed into digital culture. Once the idea is diffused amongst mass culture the acceptance will come easily. Judging on the observations of the next generation's interest in events like *Word on the Street* could show how the change has already been introduced to them and is being diffused easily from an early age. The transformation will not happen instantly however is slowly in progress of changing print culture.

George Landow in *Twenty Minutes into the Future* suggests the idea that we are already "beyond the book" (Landow 211). In this article Landow suggests that the next generation of young adults will lose their attachment to print books. Similar to my findings at *Word on the Street*, Landow points out that to young readers "…the book has lost both most of its aesthetic stature and its sense of solidity and permanence" (Landow 211). The idealized notion of the sensual pleasure of reading books seems to apply less to the upcoming generations because they have been desensitized to the idea of digital technology. The part of society refusing the change towards the digital age is comprised mostly of older generations (observed as participants at *Word on the Street*) that have just recently been introduced to digital technology. Western culture has become reliant on efficiency and hyperactive results. Therefore digital resources supply the instant gratification and adaptability that fast paced culture relies on (Landow 214). Landow introduces the idea that the simple words of 'new technology' regarding print culture worry many people. However, one must realize that books were also a form of

technology that was also refuted. "…We might move beyond the book, we must not treat all previous information technologies of language, rhetoric, writing and printing as nontechnological" (Landow 215). The notion of texts being written on two physical surfaces then fixed is different from digital technology. Digital text can be changed, duplicated and joined with other texts, thus proposing a more fluid print method (Landow 218). The stimulation of digital text provides the next generation with a form of affective interactive text. Hypertext allows a vast array of information that cannot be contained in tangible forms to all. All of these characteristics of digital print technology as well as the desensitization and dependence of young adults upon digital print shows how we are already creeping "beyond the book" (Landow 211).

Print culture's message and purpose are taking a different form. The idea and message of the text itself are being converted into digital text; the only loss is the tangible text. The ideas embodied in printed text are one of the main social reasons of regretting the idea of digital technology. The idea of reading a virtual text on a screen differs from the current idea of the sensuality of reading a printed book. "…One must distinguish between the text itself and its physical embodiment in a particular delivery vehicle, reading site, or machine" (Landow 218). Once one is able to do this one becomes capable of having the same attachment with the digital text as one would in a printed book. Many readers of digital text have the habit of printing it into a physical printed text in order to read it. This tends to happen because people are not completely used to the idea of digital text. The digital text is still produced and accessed digitally therefore by printing it still makes it a digital text. As Landow says, the text can be alter and manipulated by many, therefore printing the text plays a part in the altercations one can make to digital text.

Printing digital text does not take away from the fact that its original state was on a screen as digital text. Digital text has changed not only the physical attributes associated with text but it has morphed the ideologies attached as well.

The plethora of information available digitally is widely used within the school curriculum of many young adults today. Young adults have been exposed to the amount of information and easy accessibility of the digital text more so than of printed books. Therefore they have been taught to accept digital technology at a young age. "They [digital learning resources] present ideas logically and in suitable steps, presenting an attractive interface which supports independent learning… the best are flexibly designed so they can be used in a variety of ways" (Belben 49). The interactive stimulation presented with digital text is far more effective than dry books on the current hyperactive audience. The dependence these young adults will have on digital technology will eventually be the turning point of making it more accessible and widely used by mass culture.

Overall the digital age presented in George Landow's article is in the process of pushing at an early age the next generation of young adults "beyond the book" (Landow 211). The technological stress of accepting the digital age is a common characteristic of society when change occurs. When the idea of the digital age diffuses completely through Western culture, it will be welcomed as a norm rather than as a threat. Print culture is currently declining based on my observations and research, while digital technology begins to introduce different stimulants that the printed book does not. Western culture is currently on route to accepting digital technology over print culture and eventually creating a universal library.

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