

## The Mental Geography of Ebooks

By **Tony Horava**

So much has been written about ebooks: it's hard to keep track! For a change let's look at ebooks from a very different light – not the budgeting and licensing challenges, not the access problems, not the integration issues that we all face in our daily lives. Let's take a more conceptual and cultural approach. How are ebooks viewed by scholars and other professionals who are living through a sea change in the conduct of research and scholarship?

I'd like to sketch a few strokes of this new landscape and explore some of the implications, in order to connect the dots between our daily endeavours and the scholarly discourse that frames the use and integration of ebooks.

### What Is an Ebook?

Johanna Drucker describes the ebook as a multi-experiential artifact that expands our cognitive experience on several levels: "Textual, visual, graphic, navigational, and multimedia artefacts that are geographically dispersed in their original form can be aggregated in a single space for study and use, manipulated in ways that traditional means of access don't permit. The telecommunications aspect of new media allows creation of an inter-subjective, social space of shared use and exchange. Arguably, this latter is an extension of the social space of traditional scholarly or

communicative exchange mainly by the change in rate, the immediacy, and capacity to engage simultaneously in shared tasks or common projects."<sup>1</sup>

The telescoping of space and time provides a highly flexible form for dialogue and exchange, but even more importantly is the radically new dimension of how collaborative space can function not only as an "intersubjective" exchange but also simultaneously with other forms of scholarly engagement. In a few short years this phenomenon has become common and routine. A collaborative book project today takes place in a very different manner from say, 20 years ago, when time and space constraints were much more rigid, and the working tools were much more limited.

One could say that digital media and tools go around spatio-temporal barriers like water moves around stones, shaping its course to fit the circumstances. This also signals the ability to manipulate different types of book objects, e.g., text, graphics, and multimedia, in a seamless fashion, thus profoundly influencing our conceptions of how a book can be made. No longer is text the form that necessarily dictates the organizational backbone of a book – audio and visual content as well as data files can have a major impact, and this has de-centred the primacy of text.

Kate Wittenberg articulates this issue: "Must scholarly narrative necessarily be presented in linear form? Are there new ways to present an 'authorial voice' while allowing readers to structure the way in which they encounter a work? Are images and data supplementary evidence for points made in the text, or can they now become central organizing structures of a work? Is there value in being able to search thematically across many different works of scholarship in order to connect information in new ways?"<sup>2</sup>

This will have a profound effect on how ebooks are conceived and structured – as outward pointing, heuristic engines of knowledge that are open-ended in narrative possibilities.

### **Multiple Iterations**

Drucker also notes: "Date stamping and annotating the history of editions will be increasingly important aspects of the information electronic documents bear with them. The capacity to materially alter electronic surrogates, customizing actual artefacts, or, at the very least, specifying particular relations among them, presents compelling and unique opportunities."<sup>3</sup> This reflects the ability to co-locate, examine, and simultaneously analyze different versions of digital works, often based on print originals, as well as secondary materials for analysis and explication. This can provide the scholar and student with powerful new discovery tools, as new relations, associations, and influences are revealed and shared, such as phrase patterns and syntactic usage, and new linkages across disciplines.

It also points to a pressing need to manage multiple iterations of a book and its associated objects in a systematic manner, in order to avoid the oblivion of becoming cyber debris. "More than ever, research libraries generate projects once seen as the province of scholars working alone," writes Stephen Nichols, a professor of French and Humanities at Johns Hopkins University. "Individual faculty now perceive that research libraries have become the venue for large-scale digital enterprises. If they wish to advance their projects, faculty will have to work with their library colleagues – not only a gain for the undertaking itself but also a sure winner when they go to teach it."<sup>4</sup>

Carolyn Guertin takes this issue in a different direction. Instead of emulating the act of reading, she says, what we perform in these virtual spaces is a browsing of multiple

narratives. "The concept and practice of private space was born with the printed book. Prior to public education and widespread literacy, all reading was done in public and aloud. As the book became an affordable commodity, however, reading was translated into a private, silent act. In the digital narrative, the browser gains entry into the innermost thoughts of a narrator, sharing her privacy and intimacy as she explores, but this is also a collective text available to multiple readers and readings and varied forms of sensory engagement. It is a way of splicing each browser's voice in with the narrator's own, but without making any of us the author of the work."<sup>5</sup>

As a result, the concept of "story" is still a private and silent act. However, it has been transformed by a medium where cognitive and sensory experience can be refracted and recombined to create new meanings and narratives, in a remarkably easy fashion. The ebook therefore helps create a new understanding of the function of browsing, as it relates to our desire to spawn new expressions of the self through the generation of new narrative expressions.

Social networking is another example of this phenomenon, as new communities of interest lead to collective narratives that unfold over time. This also points to the dethroning of traditional culture – the notion of a stable canon of knowledge handed down from the past is no longer a given. Creating new information in the digital era is often the product of self-directed online communities that follow their own forms of meaning and knowledge creation. The ebook competes for scarce attention by permitting multiple and multimedia points of entry into discrete intellectual units, be they chapters, sections, pages, or audio and video segments layered into the work.

Bertrand Gervais points to the paradox of volatility in the era of digital publishing: "The increasing liberty of the individual, who can easily publish texts and have them read by whomever is interested, is paid for by a certain precariousness of the texts themselves. The internet escapes traditional modes and mechanisms for the institutionalization of texts. Nothing guarantees the authority or even the authenticity of what is published on the web."<sup>6</sup>

### **The Role of Libraries in Preservation**

Here is an urgent reinforcement of the library's role in preserving the fragility of culture for future generations. As the internet promotes an egalitarianism of opportunity for

creating knowledge and sharing texts, the need for preservation and archival strategies becomes ever more important.

The evolution of Scholars Portal ([scholarsportal.info](http://scholarsportal.info)) in Ontario takes on greater resonance when viewed from the long-range perspective – imagine the student or professor 50 years hence trying to locate the stable digital objects (e.g., books) that will be key to their success. Our stewardship of this rich resource will prove essential for anyone engaged in learning and scholarship, whatever the form of pedagogical delivery. A trusted digital repository will be worth its weight in gold, particularly with the collaborative and workflow tools that underpin it.

Gervais also describes the need for ruthless selection and omission in order to survive the ceaseless onslaught of texts: “We are less concerned with finding texts, and more concerned with stopping the flood of texts coming in. We need to construct dams capable of holding back this incredible mass. The situation of overabundance forces us to look for ways by which to reduce the amount of texts, to organize data, and make it manageable, with search engines and automated text analysis. In fact, we do not want to read texts, we want to erase most of them. The need for selection is preponderant. ... If we are entering a new cognitive era, it seems to have omission as its core structuring principle.”<sup>7</sup>

Digital archives like Scholars Portal take on greater value when we see them as islands of faithful preservation and efficient organization anchored in a cyber-sea of irrelevance and trash. As we become ruthlessly selective in what we pay attention to, our internal filters need to focus on quality resources and meaningful experience.

“The key point to take away is that narratives of new media encounter, like all narratives, have no one necessary story, even if necessity is what seems to make their story go,” opines Alan Liu.<sup>8</sup> This is a consequence of the impact of the computer on linearity – the book as intellectual form is metamorphosed into a database that generates many possibilities, as driven by the preferences and learning approach of the user. This harkens back to the intersubjective, plastic mode of experience that Drucker describes above, but is also driven by the culture of sampling, mashing, and remixing that has developed with the web 2.0 mindset.

Derrick de Kerckhove views the digital medium as erasing

the boundaries between private and public experience: “The principle of hypertextuality allows one to treat the web as the extension of the contents of one’s own mind. Hypertext turns everyone’s memory into everyone else’s and makes of the web the first worldwide memory.”<sup>9</sup>

This is the opposite of Guertin’s view above. One has to wonder how the concepts of privacy and reading are transformed by this view of a beehive universe – privacy is virtually erased and reading is far from a solitary act. The digital format is viewed as having Orwellian implications for the way we live and think. Global memory of this sort needs the stewardship of those who can organize, archive, and make discoverable this collective knowledge.

While Google’s mission is “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful,”<sup>10</sup> it is libraries that perform this work without any commercial agenda in mind, by focusing rather on the values of our profession and our role in society that drive us in this direction (such as preservation, literacy, privacy, and intellectual freedom). Tradition maintains its presence in many unspoken but powerful ways.

## **Ebooks, Reading, and Writing**

With ebooks the medium is indeed the message, in a revolutionary manner that McLuhan could not have anticipated. The digital medium profoundly affects how we conceive of books and the nature of the acts of reading and writing. Arguably, the influence of this medium far transcends that of radio, television, or film on previous generations.

What are the implications for reading and writing in a digital world? The environment in which ebooks are created, viewed, stored, manipulated, and repurposed, opens up a million possibilities for exploration and communication of our response to these works; the shift for our era is as profound as the invention of moveable type was for Gutenberg’s. The boundaries of our imagination have been irreversibly changed; in fact there are no more boundaries.

What does it mean to read an electronic text that is interconnected with a wide range of other intellectual forms and media? How does a text on the screen function differently from a printed text? What are the cultural implications of texts that are printed out, consumed, and then disposed of? How does the shift from a stable, discrete object (i.e., a printed book) to a fluid electronic format

dependent on information technology affect the ways in which we learn, and affect our view of culture, and ultimately our personal development and self-identity? These questions are beyond the scope of this article, but many scholars puzzle over them.

New norms and understandings of communication and culture in a digital era are gradually emerging. There are no easy answers as our era is still very young. As library staff, most of us are digital immigrants and we bring our set of assumptions and values from the print world as to how books function, how one interacts with them, and how they promote learning and culture. We develop ebook collections, we handle all sorts of licensing and access issues, but most of us were raised in a different era where stability of texts in a physical form shaped our development and cultural understanding. We have had sustained relationships with print books – the act of deep reading of a physical artifact, and the tactile and reflexive memories associated with encountering the imagination through the handling of printed pages. Most of us can recall favourite books with great fondness, like a cherished friend from years ago. But can we imagine a relationship with an ebook? The very notion sounds odd. Juxtaposing the print book and the ebook in this manner is an illustration of how things have changed. Our cultural and intellectual identity is being intimately mediated by new technology that surrounds and informs our daily existence. It is clear that the digital medium presents a profound change in how we negotiate our understanding of social and intellectual life.

The mental geography of ebooks is a boundless, disorienting and fascinating landscape of new relationships, new modes of cognition, and new forms of communication where we proceed without any map or compass. With the exception of a few studies, such as the ebrary faculty survey ([ebrary.com/corp/newspdf/ebrary\\_faculty\\_survey.pdf](http://ebrary.com/corp/newspdf/ebrary_faculty_survey.pdf)) and the ongoing Superbook Project ([ucl.ac.uk/infostudies/research/ciber/superbook](http://ucl.ac.uk/infostudies/research/ciber/superbook)), it is a virgin land that eclipses the 500-year landscape of print culture – a culture whose values, practices, and assumptions have profoundly shaped most of us.

## **The Future of the Book**

What is the future of the book as a cultural benchmark? I doubt that the term book (the codex form) and its offspring (ebook) will survive another couple of generations – the traditional long form argument of scholarly communi-

cation will morph into an abbreviated intellectual entity that flows in all directions and embraces many media – text, audio, video, and data files – that interact and reflect each other in multiple, complementary, and unpredictable ways. Peer review of ebooks will gain equal stature with print books. Promotion and tenure committees will move with the times. Print on demand may become the prime support for those who wish to rely on the older format, and will likely be a viable and vibrant service for many years to come.

Abby Smith points to the future scholar and the challenges for libraries: she argues that we will see “the emergence of digital humanists who [will] continue to focus on narrative, discursive, and essentially qualitative ways of investigating what it means to be human. It is these scholars, interrogating new forms of discourse, narrative, communication, community building, and social networking, who will spend most of their time on the open web and use wiki and blogging applications, social software, and other as-yet-undreamt-of applications. All these multimedia forms of discourse will present special challenges for collection development and preservation because of their inherent bias toward process over product, a bias that resists fixing expression in the canonical forms upon which analog preservation practices are dependent.”<sup>11</sup>

The future holds much opportunity and challenge, but will involve a fundamental re-thinking of how we understand our core roles of ensuring knowledge access and organization, research support, and preservation. The new world of “process over product” will challenge us. For example, what will a “collection” of ebooks look like? What tools and processes will underlie its organization and value? What will it mean to develop such a collection, particularly when we are accustomed to acquiring “finished” titles? Online communities of practice that bring scholars, research materials, and a suite of authoring and software tools together will become more ubiquitous. New scholarly organizations, such as NINES (Nineteenth-Century Scholarship Online, [nines.org/about/what\\_is.html](http://nines.org/about/what_is.html)) bring together rich content, collaborative discovery spaces, and analytical tools. New habits and expectations of scholarly communication are emerging. What are the library implications for an “inter-subjective, social space of shared use and exchange” involving multiple narratives?

And ultimately, how will all of this affect the human narrative – the big and small stories that help define who we are? It’s impossible to know. Only time will tell ...

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Johanna Drucker, "The Virtual Codex from Page Space to E-space," in *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies*, ed. Susan Schriebman and Ray Siemens (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), [digitalhumanities.org/companion/view?docId=blackwell/9781405148641/9781405148641.xml&chunk.id=ss1-5-5&toc.depth=1&toc.id=0&brand=9781405148641\\_brand](http://digitalhumanities.org/companion/view?docId=blackwell/9781405148641/9781405148641.xml&chunk.id=ss1-5-5&toc.depth=1&toc.id=0&brand=9781405148641_brand).

<sup>2</sup> Kate Wittenberg, "The Role of the Library in 21st Century Scholarly Publishing," in *No Brief Candle: Reconceiving Research Libraries for the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2008), 36.

<sup>3</sup> Drucker, "The Virtual Codex."

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Nichols, "Co-teaching: The Library and Me," in *No Brief Candle*, 34.

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Guertin, "Handholding, Remixing, and the Instant Replay: New Narratives in a Postnarrative World," in *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies* [digitalhumanities.org/companion/view?docId=blackwell/9781405148641/9781405148641.xml&chunk.id=ss1-5-6&toc.depth=1&toc.id=ss1-5-6&brand=9781405148641\\_brand](http://digitalhumanities.org/companion/view?docId=blackwell/9781405148641/9781405148641.xml&chunk.id=ss1-5-6&toc.depth=1&toc.id=ss1-5-6&brand=9781405148641_brand).

<sup>6</sup> Bertrand Gervais, "Is There a Text on This Screen? Reading in an Era of Hypertextuality," in *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies*, [digitalhumanities.org/companion/view?docId=blackwell/9781405148641/9781405148641.xml&chunk.id=ss1-5-3&toc.depth=1&toc.id=ss1-5-3&brand=9781405148641\\_brand](http://digitalhumanities.org/companion/view?docId=blackwell/9781405148641/9781405148641.xml&chunk.id=ss1-5-3&toc.depth=1&toc.id=ss1-5-3&brand=9781405148641_brand).

<sup>7</sup> Gervais, "Is There a Text on This Screen?"

<sup>8</sup> Alan Liu, "Imagining the New Media Encounter," in *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies*, [digitalhumanities.org/companion/view?docId=blackwell/9781405148641/9781405148641.xml&chunk.id=ss1-3-1&toc.depth=1&toc.id=ss1-3-1&brand=9781405148641\\_brand](http://digitalhumanities.org/companion/view?docId=blackwell/9781405148641/9781405148641.xml&chunk.id=ss1-3-1&toc.depth=1&toc.id=ss1-3-1&brand=9781405148641_brand).

<sup>9</sup> Derrick de Kerckhove. *Connected Intelligence* (Toronto: Somerville House, 1997), 79.

<sup>10</sup> Google, "Corporate Information," [google.com/corporate](http://google.com/corporate).

<sup>11</sup> Abby Smith, "The Research Library in the 21st Century: Collecting, Preserving, and Making Accessible Resources for Scholarship," in *No Brief Candle*, 16.

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