



Conference Report: Texts and Literacy in the Digital Age: Assessing the Future of Scholarly Communication

Corina Koolen

Free-Lance Researcher

Adriaan van der Weel

Book and Digital Media Studies, University of Leiden,
a.h.van.der.weel@hum.leidenuniv.nl

Throughout the Western world digital communication technology is rapidly invading a knowledge system based on centuries of print. Of late there has been considerable attention for some less attractive effects of this invasion. For example, Nicholas Carr's *The shallows* (2010) and Sherry Turkle's *Alone together* (2011) each see technological inventions unintendedly but infallibly targeting our weakest spots as human beings, appealing to a natural tendency to intellectual and social laziness. Both authors stress the undeniable fact that technology affects us — and strongly so. But about the extent to which technology actually *determines* social consequences the jury is still out. In Carr's mind there is no doubt that we are already falling for the allurements of digital communication technology hook, line, and sinker. Turkle, on the other hand, likes to believe that people can (and ought to) draw a line and actively resist their darker effects.

Whatever we like to believe, there can be little doubt that the changes wrought by technology are intrusive, and that they happen with unprecedented speed. The three-day gathering on new knowledge environments that took place on 15–17 December in the KoninklijkeBibliotheek (KB: the Dutch National Library) was therefore a very timely one. For three intensive days a heady mixture of scholars, librarians, and publishers from several countries and disciplines focused on the transition from the book as the long-time knowledge machine of choice to new knowledge machinery, invented to accommodate digital technology and our increasingly digital practices.

The three-day event started with a pre-conference day organised by the North American Implementing New Knowledge Environments (INKE) group on 15 December. Under the title *Research Foundations for Understanding Books and Reading in the Digital Age: Textual Methodologies and Exemplars* some twenty international scholars vigorously discussed the question how to determine the shape of the digital book. Historians, interface designers, and scholars of media studies joined the debate, asking what ought to be learned from the efficiency and effectivity of the paper book as a reading machine, and what new affordances should be invented to recreate similar efficiency and effectivity in the digital world. The magnitude of the INKE undertaking was underlined by presentations about the organisational challenges of running a project of its scope.

At least equally ambitious was the aim of the conference *Texts and Literacy in the Digital Age: Assessing the future of scholarly communication*, which took place 16–17 December 2010, at the same location. It aimed to advance our understanding of how producing and reading texts is affected by their digital (and increasingly multimedial) delivery. More particularly, it explored how scholarly knowledge transmission in the humanities and social sciences might change in the new digital environment, and what these changes might mean to authors, intermediaries and readers. Familiar as the book may be, it is surprising how little we know about the precise role of its materiality in the transmission process. Naturally, we know even less about how the virtuality of digital knowledge machines might affect the process.

In the first panel, Tony Hirst (The Open University, UK) and Panayiota Kendeou (Neapolis University of Pafos, Cyprus) approached the user and usability from two opposing perspectives. Hirst discussed the possibilities of granular academic publishing, whereas Kendeou stressed the importance of well-constructed long-form texts written by experts in changing incorrect (scientific) beliefs. The discussion after this panel focused on the middle ground: finding ‘correct’ information online. Can ‘the crowd’ be as valuable as experts? How will students discern valuable information? In other panels too, questions arose concerning the perspective on the developments: which should be seen as opportunities and which as threats? Although the advantages of the digital medium are recognised, notes of caution were regularly sounded about the danger of throwing out the baby with the analogue bathwater.

To facilitate the digital communication of knowledge libraries and publishers hold key positions. Vigdis Skarstein presented the Norwegian National Library as an advanced example of an institution whose entire philosophy is geared towards making all knowledge available digitally. In STM-publishing, the digital has been embraced particularly easily because of the factual nature of the information. The conference showcased various new forms of publishing in the sciences, with data and ontologies in which those data are represented, taking up an important role. Stefan Gradman (Humboldt-Universität) and Jan Velterop (AC Knowledge) showed how networks and nano-publications might change the way in which information is disseminated, extracting data from articles to generate scientifically sound assertions. Unambiguous concepts are crucial in this type of information extraction and so the question arose whether such publishing is feasible for the humanities, as concepts are often much less clearly defined. Moreover, in humanities publishing, ambiguity is not merely a disadvantage: interpretation is key and offers several different perspectives. The shift in focus from product to process however, is a notion that has permeated the humanities as well. Peter Verhaar (Leiden University) showed several examples of enhanced publications in the humanities, where the actual research data consulted by the author are available to the reader through the published article.

The exploration of the digital publication forms was balanced by (re)takes on print publishing. Anne Mangen (University of Stavanger, Norway) brought to the audience's attention the cognitive significance of tactile aspects of reading and the advantages of paper in embodied, multisensory reading. She argued that cognition is a form of embodied action and we should not separate the two. Through empirical and interdisciplinary research she hopes to give more insight into this not yet researched area.

Ray Siemens concluded the conference with a fiery plea: (humanities) researchers should take an active approach and take control. Instead of lamenting losses it is time to act and make positive interventions ourselves in a pragmatic, task-oriented, team-based way. We may not be able to reach a full understanding of books and reading in the digital age any time soon, but we can — and should — try and formulate the right questions.

Together, these theoretical and practical approaches during the preconference and conference laid the basis for new discussions and presented a starting

point for collaboration in shaping the future of (digital) literacy. The conference sketched the outlines of a research field that is in urgent need of further exploration, and started the dialogue between disciplines that have yet to begin talking together. The conference finished on a very practical note, with a productive meeting to discuss a joint application for European research funding as well as a way to place the subject more squarely in the focus of attention for future European calls for research proposals in the context of the seventh and eighth Framework Programmes.