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Are the Internet and printed products interchangeable media?

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I'd like to begin my paper by describing an experiment: an experiment in writing which cuts across the boundaries between old and new reading experience, between time-honoured writing traditions and a new understanding of form.

“It's all about the internet kick, which for me (...) means speed, the here and now, activity”. With these words the writer Rainald Goetz initiated a much-admired writing project which he entitled “Junk for All”. From February 4th 1998 until January 20th 1999 he published daily texts on the internet; texts which particularly reflect the ideals of his own language: “everyday, accessible, hands-on”. In stages he thus created an internet diary, owing its form not only to the medium itself but also to a far more powerful edict: lack of time. Goetz deliberately called it the “Novel of the Year”. He pushed back the frontiers of the conventional “novel” form considerably. For “Junk for All” was in effect a novel, although it did not – at first – appear in book form.

But even if “Junk for All” may at first sight appear to anticipate a narrative culture independent of the printed book, a closer look puts this impression into perspective. For Goetz moves back towards the traditional publication form of the novel: “Junk for All” was indeed published in book form – and revealed itself as a text whose structure was able to fascinate its readers, both on the internet and in print. As the author writes, the original publication form – on the internet – was largely responsible for its outward appearance: “The dreamlike way in which the keys address the reader creates a kind of abstract You, an opposite number whose silence I feel attracts and guides me”. Nevertheless this innovative procedure, which his invisible public were able to reconstruct day by day and which thus made it extraordinarily authentic, lead Goetz to produce something which has been in existence since Gutenberg's day: a printed book.

“Junk for all” is one of the many writing experiments of the past few years on the boundary between the old and the new media which have emphasized both what books and computers have in common and what divides them. The latest example is the game “Tempo – the fastest book in the world”, put forward by the Literaturhaus Cologne on the occasion of World Book Day on 23rd April 2003 and supported by the Reading Foundation: A whole book was written, corrected, printed, bound and shipped in 12 hours, using not only the fastest available internet connections but also the traditional, time-consuming artistic hand-press procedures of (more or less) Gutenberg's time. Forty authors took part in the project; in his preface the literary critic Karl Otto Conrady emphasizes the playful and ironic aspects of the experiment, which naturally does not aim to compete with the new media in speed terms but is designed to draw attention to the apparently old and slow medium of the printed book. “That's the beauty of the paradox: We had to work as quickly as possible in order to realize the peculiar reality of the printed book on that particular day and draw attention to it; whilst in collecting the letters with the eye, which is what reading means, the requisite repose comes once more to the fore.

Both experiments have in common that the medium of the printed book “has the last word”. It stands at the end of a production process – both a creative and a physical process – and there is no question as to its validity as a form of publication. In this sense it is just as much a part of Goetz' form fantasy, which in his Frankfurt poetry readings he placed at the outset of the artistic production process, as is the classical modern author Frank Kafka, who wrote in a letter to the publisher Rowohlt of his “avarice” to “see one of my own books among your treasures”. There can thus be no question of the medium Internet and the printed product Book being “interchangeable” in any of the creative writing experiments I have mentioned. The exchange which takes place between the two media forms serves to underline the special, unmistakable characteristics of each.

So the “form fantasy” book does not seem to be about to be engulfed by a vision of the hypertext author of the future. It will still exist as an aesthetic medium on the side of the producers, even if, as we shall presently see as I take you on a historical tour, it has gone through great changes and will continue to do so.

But first I'd like to move on from the particular perspectives involved in book production in order to take a closer look at present trends and changes in reading culture generally. Do reading habits indicate that the “form fantasy” book is waning, becoming less attractive or indeed less meaningful, when compared to the new media?

Many studies have shown that the competitive struggle between the new medium Computer and the traditional media of the educated classes cannot be reduced to the trivial cliché “The computer is causing the disappearance of cultural reading techniques”. A current example is the study “Reading habits in Germany in the new millennium”, initiated by the Reading Foundation in cooperation with the Federal Ministry of Education and the weekly news magazine Der Spiegel. The study concludes that among the sector of computer users “there is a definite correlation with frequent and intensive reading”. Furthermore computer users have a greater affinity to books and reading, possibly because of their normally higher education standards but also because of their greater curiosity and imaginative potential. They read nearly five times as many non-fiction books as non-users. There is also a marked difference in their attitudes to fiction: 19% of computer users allege that they read fiction daily or at least several times a week, whereas only 12% of non-users say they do so. The study continues: “Significantly more computer users than non-users (70% to 37%) profess to having bought books in the previous year; as a result, they own on average more books than the non-users”

However these results are only a partial reflection of media use reality. For it cannot be denied that not only do people read less, they also read “differently”. German reading strategies are changing. In the past five years there has been a rapid increase in the number of sporadic and non-readers. People no longer read so continuously – there is a strong tendency towards reading information nuggets; paper-zapping has taken over. The resignation threshold in relation to long texts has sunk. The number of readers reading several books at once “in parallel” has doubled in the past 8 years. Readers select the parts they find interesting. Above all they are less and less willing to invest time in reading. For time has become one of the most valuable commodities, for readers as for others. Years ago Jean-François Lyotard, the French philosopher, afforded the book no future, for the book “is the quintessence of slowness”. It is therefore no wonder that the number of people who daily open a book has halved since 1992 (especially among the young).

To a certain extent it seems that readers have adapted their strategy to fit the way in which they use electronic media.

But there are other forms of behaviour: the sector of intensive readers (and they comprise more than a third of all readers) has increased in number somewhat over the last few years, and these readers actually do buy and read more than formerly. They feel at home in their surroundings, allow sufficient time and take pains to create the required atmosphere for concentrated reading and for reflection on the content. Fiction plays a decisive role in the world of the intensive reader. Nevertheless, it is usually non-fiction or educational literature which is responsible for breaking records. Readers of these categories tend to have an instrumental relationship to their books; as soon as a book has fulfilled its purpose it is laid aside.

The emphasis of the study on “Reading habits in Germany in the new millennium” did not, however, lie only on the question as to whether the amount of time spent on reading will decrease in the future but also on whether the computer will replace the book. Comprehensive interviews conducted with over 120 readers and non-readers played a central role in the clarification of this question. The results showed that for most people reading from a monitor screen meant changing the way they actually read the text, quite apart from the technical aspects. The qualitative interviews indicated that even younger computer users did not enjoy reading from the screen. This reluctance was especially marked in the case of fiction. “Novels as e-books? No, it seems somehow tasteless. OK, it may all be the same in the end. But I’d miss turning over the pages. I wouldn’t find it a pleasure”.

Fiction still appears to a large extent to involve the reading of books. The former chairman of the German Publishers’ Association, the publisher Eugen Ulmer, made this point at the conference “The Results of Gutenberg”, held in 2000 by the Reading Foundation. “I can’t somehow imagine any customer downloading 15 who-dunnits as holiday reading and taking them down to the beach as e-books. The books we produce are far too aesthetically pleasing for that; it’s simply a pleasure to leaf through a book”.

So we can confirm that up to now the results of contemporary reading research do not indicate in any way that the book is interchangeable with electronic media forms, and there seems no likelihood of the book disappearing.

However different these two media forms may be in technological and content-reception terms, their users can develop significant synergies as long as they possess real reading competence and are thus prepared for the new media. An interesting future lies ahead here:

neither of these media will be able to survive without the other. It's quite clear which is the chicken and which is the egg: To surf the information highway you need to be able to read, and that means you need to be able to read books. The ability to use this new medium is directly related to reading ability. Not without reason did the PISA study – as no other study before – make clear how essential high levels of language and reading skills are, and will remain, for all other forms of learning, whatever these may be. There is no alternative to reading (and comprehension) or to learning to read at an early – that means at an appropriate – age. And here newspapers and periodicals are essential!

This will, however, come as no great surprise to those versed in the history of reading. Language and reading skills have always been regarded as the basis of understanding and judgement. Anyone wishing to form his own opinion was obliged to read – and still is. It is extremely unlikely that the present media revolution will alter this in any way.

Even though the media are not interchangeable - neither for producers nor for receptors – and the book is not challenged in any essential way by the internet, it does not take a prophet to predict that media and reading habits are about to experience radical changes. This again means that the “form fantasy book” may not pale into significance, but it will certainly undergo a transformation: the reader generation a hundred years from now will probably find the books of today as strange as a contemporary of Gutenberg would find modern paperbacks or – odder still – the books with which we attempt to entice small children to “read” – books made out of material, pop-up books, books as games or bath toys, even edible books. It is, of course, a matter of pure speculation as to what innovations the future will bring. It is nevertheless worthwhile imagining what may possibly await us, for the changes at present taking place seem to indicate that the third media revolution is following a similar pattern to that of the second.

When Johannes Gutenberg was posthumously voted “Man of the Millennium” a few years ago in the full flood of the media spotlights, the honour conferred on him at the height of the internet euphoria seemed to convey an important message. The modern knowledge-based society still stands firmly on the shoulders of Gutenberg's invention of moveable-letter printing. Indeed it owes its very existence to this invention, which was epochal in every sense of the word, for modern knowledge society really only began when Gutenberg's printing works first started production. In fact the process still continues today, redefining society's contours and itself creating the prerequisites for innovation and new developments. On taking a closer look, we discover that the development of the “knowledge society” is a surprisingly continuous process in spite of all the spectacular technical and social changes.

The media revolution unleashed 600 years ago by Gutenberg's invention soon spread to all areas of daily life. It was at that time that people first began to speak of the creation of a “knowledge society” which would integrate all humankind. So the knowledge society on which we today base our progress and which at present faces a further leap forward, originated in Gutenberg's time. It had a dual foundation: publishers and printers on the one hand, authors and readers on the other. Both have wrought greater changes in the world than any previous factor, including war.

Gutenberg's invention made possible great cultural, political and economic changes. A modern middle-class society emerged which gained in self-confidence as it grew. The traditional rank-based society gradually dissipated; in its place there developed new middle-class structures centred on the one hand on the “economic citizen” – merchants, artisans, entrepreneurs – and on the other on scholars and educated public servants. New forms of daily

life evolved, bringing with them not only increased intellectual and material freedom to the individual but also another valuable “ware”, namely freely available time.

All these factors appear to have been repeated and intensified with the advent of the information society and its most important medium the internet, whereby society is now determined along international or “global”, and no longer national political lines. Apart from this, however, the present phenomena are not new but merely a repetition of what our forefathers went through and with which they came to terms with great success.

The sea-changes of that time were of especial significance for the acquisition of education and, above all, of reading skills. Low educational standards and the lack of financial resources had meant that there had been few book-readers. This was to change – books, whatever their content - became much more freely accessible.

It was at this time that the first mass-media evolved. The new printing technique made not only large production runs possible but also new forms of layout and illustration. In order to attract attention, emphasis was often deliberately placed on garishness; content was reduced to a sensationalist minimum.

Pamphlets appeared for the first time, alongside newspapers, which quickly became vehicles for political propaganda, accompanying and commenting favourably on military campaigns. It rapidly became clear that the new techniques could be used to communicate not only information but also disinformation. According to contemporary reports, pamphlets were even then more actively engaged in reviling the opposition than in presenting the author's own case, as the literary critic Füssel from Mainz once wrote.

Book production and readership at first developed at a slower rate than those of the newspapers. For a long time book readers were in the main scholars and clergy. But increasing numbers of non-fiction and subject-based books began to appear, alongside practical guides for every imaginable area of daily life. The subject spectrum was enormous.

The first great libraries were founded to house the growing numbers of books, and these were gradually made accessible to the public. Many of them still bear their great names of old and are landmarks in the cities and other institutions responsible for their maintenance

The professionalisation of the “new medium” and the social changes which accompanied it had not only led to an improvement in those conditions prerequisite to education and thus to a rise in the number of readers. The changes – and this is the point I particularly want to make – influenced above all readers’ mentality and thus the way in which they read books, and this became a characteristic of the modern era, as Peter Burke wrote in his book on the early modern period.

Up until this time people had grown up within a rigid structure which held the written word and books in general in awe. Some people had such respect for books that they dared not take them home (that this is no longer so will be readily confirmed by those involved in the administration of the theological and law libraries at any of our universities). Many texts voiced the authority of the Church and appeared to possess eternal validity. The reading of these books was a ritual imparting a sense of security and remaining unchanged for centuries.

This now began to change rapidly. Readers began to discover freedom. Freedom was no longer a mere wish or a dream, it became a reality. Thus letterpress printing was probably the

most significant factor in all those dramatic developments both within society itself and in the arts and sciences which had their roots in the early modern era. The media revolution wrought radical changes in important communicative areas and paved the way for a new form of knowledge society. It was the new medium which made possible new forms of thinking and acting. The medium was no longer just a means of transporting knowledge as it had been in former times but itself became an integral part of the scholarly process, became itself the message.

These qualitative and quantitative changes were by no means always seen in a positive light. No less a personality than Conrad Gesner, biographer and author of the monumental *Bibliographia universalis* of 1545 in which 10,000 books by 3,000 authors were recorded, deplored the “confusing and harmful proliferation of books”. An Italian colleague complained that there were meanwhile “so many books that we scarcely have time to read their titles”. And it is reported of a famous English author that he despairingly asked a colleague in astonishment “Surely you don't read books all the way through, do you?”. By the end of the 17th century things were in such a state that the general dissatisfaction could neatly be summed up in a single phrase: the expression “book flood” was born.

As a consequence, people began to adopt a different attitude to reading, moving away from the idea of intensive, reverential reading towards a free and extensive approach to the text. The traditional “reader” mutated to become a “user”.

As the quantity of recorded knowledge increased, so did efforts to access it in as short a time as possible. This led to the creation of the first “databases”, reference works which could be utilized without the need to plough through long treatises. This in turn led to further changes in the way in which people approached and comprehended text. New demands were made on the way in which content and form were presented (today we would call this layout).

An intensive, long-running and sometimes bitter discussion ensued on appropriate methods and their limitations. How could reference works be constructed as effectively as possible? How could a comprehensive overview of current knowledge be maintained in spite of its fragmentation? How could knowledge be so structured that it could be further processed and at the same time be of lasting value?

Present attempts to control the swamping of our daily and knowledge environments by information from electronic sources are only another way of looking at these same questions. In actual fact we have amassed a great deal of experience over the last few hundred years. The human brain is quick to learn – if only it is given a chance!

The new type of encyclopaedia which evolved at that time became the expression of the emerging intellectual emancipation of its readers. They were no longer prepared to rely on the monolithic texts of the past which laid more emphasis on philosophical systems and faith than on facts. The more people read, the more sceptical they became; they were no longer prepared to believe everything they read.

This scepticism was furthered by the discovery that an increasing number of publications were faked – the result of the rapid increase in book production and the expansion of the market. Even an authority such as Montesquieu was not immune: “Whenever he [Montesquieu] wants to justify one of his eccentric views, he quotes some custom or other from Japan or some other distant country he knows nothing whatever about”, the prominent contemporary writer Johnson accused his French colleague.

As these sorts of doubts grew, literature lost its exclusive claim to credibility. As a result, people began to develop an interest in the original source material and it became standard practice for all serious literature to cite the sources used. Readers must be enabled to verify for themselves; they no longer wished to depend on others for their judgments. Thus a further prerequisite for the development of a modern knowledge society was realized.

Diderot, the creator of the famous Encyclopédie which heralded a new era of information provision, once formulated the aim of this great work thus: “To change the way people think”. This was a clear goal and he achieved it. The Encyclopédie contributed decisively to the genesis of the intellectual sea-change which, as is well-known, was soon to be followed by a political revolution. The age of emancipation had dawned and the process which was to lead to an open knowledge society, ever more present in the public eye, was irreversible.

When we take a closer look at the problems which ensued at the onset of this process, problems which also contributed to its direction and reinforcement, we can easily recognize all the main questions still confronting and troubling us today, at the advent of the third media revolution. I am quite certain that the unremitting changes taking place in the media landscape and in our forms of communicative and informational behavior will not only not lead to a reduction in the importance of the print media but to the very reverse. We cannot interpret the path they have taken since Gutenberg’s day in mere “technological” terms, and thus as variable and adaptable. What I have tried to show is that print has above all influenced our mentality, intellectual attitudes and behaviour, creating a culture of cognition, knowledge and ability which is deeply rooted in our being, no doubt because it is a part of it.

No other medium has undergone such an impressive change in the course of the last few centuries as print: in form and appearance, in content presentation, in functionality and not least in its effect on society. The technology of printing on paper has been optimized step by step over more than 500 years and there is no reason to suppose today that its potential for further development is exhausted. The book will continue to maintain its unique and indispensable position within the media mix and alongside the screen media.

But the new media will also continue to optimize their presentation, interacting with the “messages” and content peculiar to them; this process will not only be influenced by practical questions of form and distribution but also by their users. It is almost as if the trail, with all its consequences, has already been blazed by the printed word.