Gresham's Ghost: Challenges to Written Culture

Naomi S. Baron

American University

Washington, DC USA

He was a savvy merchant and financier, counselor to royalty, but not above maneuvering for personal gain. Sir Thomas Gresham, founder of the British Royal Exchange and of Gresham College, is best known for the advice he offered Queen Elizabeth I upon her ascension to the throne in 1558. "The good and bad coin," he wrote, "cannot circulate together" (Selgin). That is, good coinage – coins that had been struck with the proper amount of precious metals and had not been debased by users scraping off shavings – would be hoarded.

Bad money (as we say today) drives good money out of circulation. People would tend to circulate only the "bad," debased coins, even though both bore the same face value. Gresham's advice to Elizabeth was timely, since her predecessors, Henry VIII and Edward VI, had been notorious for reducing the amount of silver in English coinage, with unfortunate financial results.

"Good" coins were sent abroad for international trade, where they were more highly valued than at home.

For "coin" substitute "writing," and replace the word "economy" with "written culture." The growth of online and mobile technologies has fostered a steady increase in the amount of writing we do. Where previously we spoke face-to-face or picked up the (landline) telephone, we now commonly write email, instant messages, or text messages. We air our thoughts and knowledge on listservs, in blogs, on Facebook, and on Wikipedia. The sheer amount of writing we are churning out is staggering. Is this writing explosion helping drive "good" writing out of circulation?

No analogy or metaphor is exact. Life is not literally a journey, and pity the poor woman who actually has flaxen hair. This chapter is called "Gresham's Ghost," not "Gresham's Law." The issue with writing is not that people are hoarding excellent prose or only shipping it abroad. Instead, the outpouring of text fostered by information communication technology may be redefining (some would say debasing) our standards for the written word. If "good" and "bad" writing bear the same face value, motivation for struggling to produce "good" prose diminishes.

For roughly the past 300 years, the English-speaking world has functioned in terms of what has been called a written or print culture. (We'll use these terms interchangeably.) Expanded use of the printing press, a rise in literacy rates (along with growing social mobility), the spread of Bible-reading through Protestantism, and increasing linguistic distinctions between written and spoken language were just some of the forces contributing to the establishment of print culture.

Societies change with time, and so do attitudes towards language. This chapter explores major assumptions that have historically defined our notion of written culture, along with contemporary challenges to those suppositions. In particular, we look at five dimensions of the written word in which contemporary attitudes towards reading and writing may be redefining traditional notions of writing. The issue is what these changes bode for the future of print culture.

PROFILE OF WRITTEN CULTURE

A favorite cartoon of mine, published in 1976 by William Hamilton, drolly illustrates the notion of a written culture, as understood by educated

twentieth-century Americans. Clearly trying to impress the woman he's

with, a writer declares, "I haven't actually been published or produced yet.

But I have had some things professionally typed." Having your work appear

in print has long been a measure of success in a written culture. Being

"professionally typed" is hardly as good, but at least better than handwritten

scrawl.

To speak of a society having a written culture is not the same as observing

that some people can read and write. Historically, it is not uncommon for

societies with sophisticated written works essentially to function as oral

cultures. In Classical Greece, literacy played an incalculably important role

in the emergence of philosophical thinking. Yet fifth-century Athens

retained an oral culture. Political and legal proceedings were

overwhelmingly oral, and literature (the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the works of

playwrights and poets) was intended to be rendered aloud, not studied as

written text (Harris).

Looking westward, England was largely an oral culture through the sixteenth

century. Wills were recorded, but until the seventeenth century did not have

independent legal standing apart from the oral testimony of those who had

witnessed them (Danet and Bogoch). While medieval literacy was important in the lives of the clergy and the new Anglo-Norman nobility, the number of people who could read or write was small (Parkes; Clanchy). Moreover, even those who were literate often heard texts rather than read them. In the words of J.A. Burrow, "People in the Middle Ages treated books rather as musical scores are treated today. The normal thing to do with a written literary text … was to perform it, by reading or chanting it aloud" (47).

The oral character of most literature persisted into the time of Queen Elizabeth I and the Globe Theatre. Shakespeare wanted his poetry printed, but is generally seen as having less interest in publishing his plays. Though quarto editions of individual plays appeared during Shakespeare's lifetime, the first folio compilation (which was specifically meant to be read) was done posthumously. Shakespeare largely composed his plays to be seen and, most importantly, heard (Kastan).[1] The Shakespearean stage used few props, no scenery, no costumes. To understand a performance, the audience relied on listening – a skill in which they were well-practiced from experience in church, Parliament, court, and taverns.

---

[1] Challenging this position, Lukas Erne argues that Shakespeare wrote different versions of some plays for publication than for the stage.

Development of a solidly written culture in the West was made possible by numerous social and technological transformations, the most important of which was printing. Although Gutenberg's Mainz Bible appeared in 1455, it took at least 200 years before print technology was generally accepted as a substitute for manuscript production and before there was a substantial audience for print (Chartier).

Why We Write

Why do people write things down? The reasons are many: professional, social, and personal.

Professional writing covers a multitude of functions. The oldest is administrative, evidenced by the use of Linear B for recordkeeping in Mycenean Greece, around the fourteenth century BC (Chadwick). Another professional use of writing is for commercial purposes. Samuel Johnson famously declared that only blockheads don't write for money, though in the early days of printing, courtiers and gentlemen typically eschewed publishing their poems to distinguish themselves from the new breed of poets seeking financial gain through print (J.W. Saunders). More recently, professional writing has become a form of hurdle-jumping, where students

must churn out research papers and university faculty must publish to get tenure.

Writing also fills social functions. Since the days of early modern Europe, members of the literate class have exchanged letters, poems, and stories (Ezell). As literacy rates grew, new writers sometimes relied on "complete letter-writers" to provide templates for all occasions (Hornbeak; Robertson). Over the past century, pre-written greeting cards became a billion-dollar industry.

And we write for personal reasons. We take notes at meetings and jot reminders to ourselves. More profoundly, some keep diaries, write poetry, compile commonplace books containing quotations from other people's writings, or publish "for the record" works others have composed. US political analyst Daniel Ellsberg famously exemplified for-the-record publishing when, in 1971, he provided the *New York Times* with a 7000-page secret RAND Corporation report. That document, which came to be known as *The Pentagon Papers*, revealed hitherto unpublished information regarding America's involvement in Vietnam. His motivation? To stop the war.

Attributes of a Written Culture

For a written culture to emerge, a sizeable number of its members need ways

of creating, disseminating, and deciphering the written word. People must

have access to the tools of production (be they personal computers or quills

on parchment) and knowledge of how to use them. A particularly complex

writing system may limit the number of individuals having the opportunity

to become literate, as happened in imperial China, or the amount of material

that can conveniently be printed, the case in Japan before the development of

word processing in the late 1970s (Gottlieb). William Harris argues that one

reason Classical Greece remained an oral society, despite the critical role

literacy played in its intellectual accomplishments, was that it lacked

efficient means of duplicating and disseminating texts. In the English-

speaking world, not until the development of affordable and reliable postal

systems did personal letter-writing become part of the general culture (Baron

2000).

A second attribute of a written culture is a particular attitude towards

authorship. Throughout the Middle Ages in Europe, an author was

essentially an intermediary for conveying divine inspiration or a

commentator on the writings of earlier thinkers. Respect for authors was typically delayed until after they were dead (Minnis). To the extent a living author supported himself from his writings, the money came almost exclusively through patronage. Modern authorship emerged from seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth-century confrontations over copyright – literally, who owned the author's original manuscript ("copy") and thus had the right to profit financially by replicating it (Rose; Woodmansee and Jaszi).

The newly-enfranchised authors who surfaced in the early nineteenth century were now the undisputed owners of their intellectual property, that is, the expression of their ideas. (The ideas themselves remained in the public domain.) Authors had the right to be paid by those who published and disseminated their writings, along with the right of propriety, protecting their texts against manipulation or degradation by others. With these new rights came added responsibilities. Authors needed to have something original to say, or at least an original way of saying it. Authors were legally answerable for the veracity of their works and bore increased accountability for the mechanics of their finished texts.

A further component of written culture is distinctiveness between speech and writing. Writing develops its own conventions of vocabulary, grammar, and punctuation. What's more, writing mechanics, including spelling, come to matter. As Philip Dormer (better known as Lord Chesterfield) famously warned his son in 1750,"orthography, in the true sense of the word, is so absolutely necessary for a man of letters, or a gentleman, that one false spelling may fix a ridicule upon him for the rest of his life" (Letter CXXIV, November 19, 1750 – Chesterfield 355).

Socially, the value of writing emerges through such expression as reverence for tangible written volumes. Leather-bound sets of the complete works of Shakespeare are more highly prized than cheap paperbacks. Writing also provides a context for social affinity. Gatherings run the gamut from book discussion groups to literary speed dating at your local bookstore.

Finally, written culture has a cognitive dimension. To read is not simply to happen upon information but to encounter ideas or turns of phrase that affect us intellectually or emotionally. Zipping through the pages of *USA Today* is a fundamentally different experience from grappling with Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations.*

CHALLENGES TO WRITTEN CULTURE: THE BIG PICTURE

How have the uses and attributes of written culture stood up over time, especially in light of new computer-driven technology?

Challenging the Reasons for Writing

In professional life, the written word still holds sway, but the medium through which documents are prepared and disseminated is being transformed. Does the change in medium alter the impact of writing?

For many years, my university issued official announcements of lectures, road closings, and such via a daily voice mail message. Items of more lasting significance were sent as paper memoranda to physical mailboxes. When you opened a university envelope, you might pause to reflect on the printed page, perhaps sharing your thoughts with colleagues in the hall. Several years ago, communication was shifted to a single daily email, with headlines followed by quick summaries and a link for more information. A former dean's death is now sandwiched between tonight's basketball game and tomorrow's lecture on bulimia. If you neglect to scroll down the page, you miss the entry entirely.

In professional writing, the prospects of writing for a living are becoming increasingly worrisome as the publishing industry squeezes out "mid-list" books in favor of hoped-for blockbusters. As for hurdle-jumping, young and old alike receive conflicting messages about what constitutes appropriate written language. Traditional prose is yielding to PowerPoint speak, which Ian Parker and Edward Tufte argue represents a cognitive style quite distinct from that required for a well-constructed, sustained, maybe even elegant argument.

Likewise, written language in the social arena is being reshaped by technology. Lovers used to pen letters to one another; children wrote home from summer camp. Today, phone calls, email, or IMs largely substitute, leaving nothing to tie up with red ribbons or place in family albums. Try imagining Franz Kafka's "Emails to Milena" or Horace Walpole's collected IMs. Friends share their own poetry or short stories electronically, while writers-without-portfolio morph into book reviewers on Amazon.com.

Who today is psychologically driven to publish? Growing numbers of people are turning to online vanity presses such as iuniverse or Xlibris,

which guide would-be authors through the self-publishing process, collecting fees for their pains. And of course there are bloggers. Individuals are still writing, but the audience they serve often ends up being primarily themselves.

Challenging the Attributes of Written Culture

If the functions and forms of traditional writing are being reconfigured, so are attributes historically associated with written culture. Start with tools for access. In his book *Scrolling Forward*, David Levy (a computer scientist by training) asks whether people who object to reading text online are simply clinging to bound books out of nostalgia. Levy compares his childhood copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, published by Peter Pauper Press, with a web version, finding virtues in both. In the end, though, Levy prefers the printed version. Not only had Whitman carefully designed his collection of poems to be experienced as a book, but Levy's personal childhood history includes his relationship with a particular copy of the poems. He holds no experiential bond with the digital text.

In *The Myth of the Paperless Office*, Abigail Sellen and Richard Harper compare paper and digital technologies in terms of their respective

affordances (that is, the kinds of work or activities for which a medium is particularly well suited). In office settings, a lot of us still find it easier to mark up actual paper by hand than to do textual annotations online, and simpler to glance through a sheaf of printed documents than to rummage through their online equivalents. At the same time, the affordances of digital technology make online searching for specific words or storing information more efficient than performing the same tasks with physical documents. While enthusiastic organizational specialists predict the rapid decline of hardcopy print, many producers and consumers of the written word may not be ready to relinquish a medium they value for both its aesthetic and practical qualities.

The uncertain future of writing on paper (or reading from it) is matched by the puzzle of how the written word will be disseminated. For half a millennium, publishing houses have determined both which manuscripts are printed and what those published manuscripts look like. With notable exceptions such as Ben Jonson and John Milton, early modern authors were essentially excluded from the editing process, the task being left to compositors in the printing house.

Publishing houses still vet manuscripts, frequently massaging the logic, style, spelling, and punctuation of their authors. Despite their occasion grumblings, academics and popular writers alike have generally found the contributions of publishers to be beneficial. What happens when everyone with access to a computer can become a published author? Phase one of this scenario was desktop publishing. Phase two is cyberspace, where texts wait to be read online or downloaded. The vetting and editing jobs fall exclusively on the author's shoulders.

One hotly debated topic is the impact networked computing is having on historical notions of authorship and copyright. A fundamental challenge in copyright law – both in the US and in England – has always been how to motivate authors to create new works (from which they can benefit financially) while at the same time making those works readily available ("open access") to promote the common good.

Open access is a particularly salient issue wherever commitment to public interest is embedded in the cultural psyche. Nowhere have presumptions about the right to free access been clearer than in the grassroots computing community. Some of the earliest computer bulletin boards, such as the

WELL, can be traced to the 1960s counterculture of hippies and communes. At the same time, a "gift" mentality in the computer world at large continues to motivate free distribution of computer code and other intellectual property that would normally be protected by copyright (Turner; Taylor and Harper).

In the US, Richard Stallman's GNU project (part of his Free Software Foundation) created the GNU General Public License, the essence of which reads: "This program is free software; you can redistribute it and/or modify it ….This program is distributed in the hope that it will be useful." However, users are forewarned: The software comes "WITHOUT ANY WARRANTY; without even the implied warranty of MERCHANTABILITY or FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE."[2] Users may download and distribute copies, and even alter the software. The only caveat is that they need to indicate they have made changes. The assumption is that, as in the case of UNIX and Linux (both of which are open source), successive users will improve the functionality of the online offering. This same principle obviously underlies Wikipedia.

---

[2] http://www.gnu.org/licenses/gpl-howto.html.

What GNU did for software, the Creative Commons is now doing for other

kinds of intellectual property available online, including scholarship,

literature, music, and photography. Thanks to the pioneering efforts of

Stanford law professor Lawrence Lessig and his collaborators, Creative

Commons licenses were launched in late 2002. The goal was to find middle

ground between strict interpretation of copyright ("All rights reserved") and

loosely-defined statements of "free" software licensing.[3]

Creative Commons licenses offer writers and artists a range of options

regarding the kind of rights they wish to maintain or give away. Among the

choices:

- let others download and share your work, but not permit them
  to change it or use it commercially
- allow others not only to download and share, but also to remix
  or tweak, as long as you are credited and users license their new
  product under the same terms you have

---

[3] See http://creativecommons.org/about for details on the history of the Creative
Commons and how its licenses work. For discussion of why intellectual property should
be placed in the public domain, see Lessig.

▪ permit downloading, sharing, and revising (again, as long as

you are credited), but also authorize those creating derivative

works to profit commercially

Designers of the Creative Commons online materials have taken great pains

to craft clear text and imagery for users of content covered by Creative

Commons copyright, identifying precisely which use of that material is

legal. Realistically, though, the bulk of internet users continue to see online

content as free, with no strings attached. Fueled by the ease of copying (and

the gift culture mentality underlying so much of earlier computer culture),

"the availability of [digital information and networks] has bred a mindset

that seems to regard copyrighted works as available for the taking without

compensation" (*The Digital Dilemma* 133).

One approach to resolving this dilemma is to tweak the balance between

property and propriety. While authors of trade books understandably put a

premium on financial gain, most academics are less interested in large

royalties than in publication for reasons of hurdle-jumping (publish or

perish) or in publishing for the record. Initiatives such as the Public Library

of Science[4] provide free access to timely scholarship. Articles are covered by the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits users to copy, distribute, transmit, and adapt the work, as long as they give proper attribution to the original author(s).

If authors and artists can't count on profiting by selling their works directly, perhaps we should seriously consider a scenario concocted by John Perry Barlow, who is co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation – and former lyricist for The Grateful Dead. Barlow suggests that the band's business practices contain an important lesson for contemporary intellectual property holders. Unlike many musical groups, The Grateful Dead allowed fans to audiotape its concerts. The result was a lot of intellectual property circulating for free. However, with the group's growing popularity being fanned by circulation of those tapes, demand for tickets to live concerts soared (Barlow 362). This model has proven highly successful on social networking sites such as MySpace and YouTube, which give away free content (and try to generate a buzz) in the hopes users will pay for additional access in the form of live concerts or CDs.

---

[4] http://www.plos.org.

In a similar vein, Barlow suggests authors should look to make money not from selling static, finished works but from real-time performances – say, download Stephen King's latest thriller for free, but pay to ask him questions online. I was intrigued to read in an ad, prominently displayed in the *New York Times* Book Review, that book groups could "Enter for a chance to win a phone call from Sena Jeter Naslund [author of *Abundance*, a novel about Marie Antoinette]."[5] While the concept might work well for media mavens who relish books tours, television interviews, and phone calls, how might social recluses fare? And what about dead authors whose copyrights (currently life plus 70 years in the US) have not expired?

An even deeper challenge emerges when we consider the product that is constructed during a live concert (or Naslund's phone chat) as opposed to the product generated through a studio recording or published book. The latter are edited; the former are not. Unlike live performances of the "same" work (which may differ from one show to the next), "finished" performances or books present just one object for review.

---

[5] *New York Times* Book Review, June 3, 2007, p.4.

Finally, there are questions of supply and demand. If anyone can access a work for free (or at very low cost), does the work lose its value in the public eye? Do authors of static texts become anachronisms? And if so, what are the consequences for written culture? To contemplate these consequences, we need to think about contemporary ways in which we value – and evaluate – the written word. To do so, we switch from a macro to a micro perspective.

UNDER THE MICROSCOPE: FIVE FACETS OF MODERN WRITTEN CULTURE

A montage juxtaposes images, each with its individual integrity but, taken together, offering a whole bigger than the sum of its parts. Our montage of challenges to the ways we now value and evaluate writing contains five vignettes: Text in the Fast Lane, Flooding the Scriptorium, The Print Paradox, Snippet Literacy, and Vapor Text. Taken together, they presage fundamental changes to the existing model of print culture.

Text in the Fast Lane

Why were all the students fidgeting? Recently, I showed a graduate class the first installment of a BBC television series keyed to the book *The Story of*

English (McCrum *et al*.). Produced in the mid 1980s with a leisurely narration by Robert MacNeil, the videos had proven a highlight of courses I had offered a decade earlier. McNeil's narrative had not become less inviting over time nor the history less vividly presented. Yet in the interim, students' notions of how long it should take to tell a story had drastically shrunk.

James Gleick's book *Faster* aptly identifies the problem in its subtitle: "The Acceleration of Just About Everything." We chafe at waiting for an elevator. We want questions answered right now. Deborah Tannen argues that fast talking is now ubiquitous among teenagers and on many television sit-coms. And we need to write quickly to respond to those dozens of daily emails.

Has hastening the rate at which writers create text undermined the attributes of written culture, especially the cognitive depth that writing (and reading) can bestow? If so, what are the consequences? And how did we became so obsessed with time?

Life on the Clock

If you have neither clock nor watch, it's hard to be fixated with spending or wasting time. Life on the clock in the modern world traces back to the needs of Christian monks in medieval Europe to know when to pray. Certain religious orders called for praying at set intervals each day. Given variations in seasons and latitudes (not to mention clouds, rain, or snow), the sun or the moon was not a reliable guide.

Water clocks were introduced into the West in 807 AD, when an embassy sent by Haroun al Rashid – the fifth Abbasid caliph, whose glittering Baghdad court was depicted in the *Thousand and One Nights* – presented one to Charlemagne. But this latest Holy Roman Emperor lived in the cold north, not Arabia, and water often froze in the winter, rendering such clocks useless. (The elephant that al Rashid sent probably didn't fare much better.)[6]

Gradually, mechanical clocks were developed, perhaps originating in China. By the fourteenth century, public clocks were making their way into churches, palaces, and town squares, lending authority and order to religious, administrative, and personal activities. However, even when every town or village had a clock, there was no guarantee the mechanisms all told

---

[6] Two classic works on the development of clocks in the west are Carlo Cipolla's *Clocks and Culture* and David Landes' *Revolution in Time*.

the same time. As late as 1841, London time was ten minutes ahead of Bristol time (Eriksen 43).

It was the railroad that brought a halt to local variation in setting time pieces. People wanted to know how long a journey would take and when they would reach their destination. More critically, railroad operators needed to reduce head-on collisions between trains running on the same track. The existing method – sending riders on horseback to warn oncoming trains that another train was approaching – was inefficient and increasingly impractical as rail traffic grew (Carey).

To pace trains safely required time schedules, and for time schedules to work properly, all trains – regardless of which company operated them – had to abide by the same standard. In 1883, standard time was established by American railroads. The following year, Sir Sanford Fleming, a Canadian engineer, was responsible for dividing the world into twenty-four time zones.[7]

---

[7] See Clark Blaise' *Time Lord*.

The Industrial Revolution, the emergence of standard time, and the growing

ease of transporting people (on trains) and people's messages (first via the

telegraph and then over the telephone) were to have a profound effect on

individuals and social interaction. There were now time clocks – both literal

and figurative – to be punched. Real-time communication over distances,

which the telegraph and telephone provided, often decreased opportunity for

reflective decision-making (Lubrano 120). In fact, an etiquette guide written

in 1914 counseled against issuing dinner invitations over the phone (rather

than in writing, as was traditional) because "the person invited [by phone],

being suddenly held up at the point of a gun, as it were, is likely to forget

some other engagement" or simply feel there is no choice but to accept"

(Hall 53-54). Writing seventy years later, Stephen Kern observed that "the

telephone … allowed people … to respond at once without the time to

reflect afforded by written communication" (69).

Epitomizing the new modern obsession with time was Lewis Carroll's White

Rabbit in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which appeared in 1865.

Rushing past Alice, the rabbit declared, "Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too

late." He then reached into his waistcoat-pocket, extracted a large watch, and

after looking at it, hurried on, troubled about being late for the Tea Party.

Time became inextricably associated with money when the American

engineer Frederick W. Taylor demonstrated that by breaking the production

process into distinct, timed tasks, fabrication of goods could be streamlined

(Nelson). Henry Ford, who hired Taylor to conduct time and motion studies,

prospered, while Charlie Chaplin's 1936 movie "Modern Times" offers a

poignant critique of Taylorism.

Moving Text into the Fast Lane

The monetary virtues of saving time have historically been an important

motivation for devising techniques to speed production of written text. One

early strategy, practiced by medieval scribes, was to use abbreviations

(Ullman 11; Rodriguez and Cannon). With fewer distinct characters to be

copied, fewer animal skins were needed to produce a manuscript.

The coming of the telegraph fostered its own truncated writing style

("BROKE. SEND MONEY."), reflecting the fact that telegrams were priced

by the word. The fewer words you wrote, the less you paid. In fact,

businesses in the early twentieth century raised abbreviated text to a near art

form, developing elaborate cryptograms for transmitting boilerplate phrases

and sentences. For instance, the British Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders created its own codebook. If I transmitted the single word *ixuah*, the recipient would decode it to mean "Quote price and earliest day of shipment," resulting in substantial savings at the telegraph office (W.M. Saunders x-xi).

Reducing the number of characters and words is one way to hasten production of text. An alternative is to speed up production of the letters themselves. Cursive writing emerged in Rome by the first century AD, facilitating more rapid generation of business and private correspondence than was possible with the traditional Roman hand.[8] European cursive scripts that physically joined letters together accelerated the writing process, since the pen didn't need to be raised after each letter. Later, the introduction of fountain pens carrying their own ink supply stepped up the earlier writing process based on quills (which needed sharpening) and ink wells (into which the quill had to be dipped repeatedly).

---

[8] See John and Dianne Tillotson's website on medieval writing, available at http://medievalwriting.50megs.com/writing.htm.

The real speed revolution came about with introduction of first typewriters and then computers. Once you learned to type, you could turn out more text in a given time interval than by hand. Accurate? Not always. But fast.

Is "Speed Writing" an Oxymoron?

Except for those flying westward, there are only twenty-four hours in a day. If I take an afternoon nap, the lawn doesn't get mowed. If I'm obsessing with my Facebook page, I'm not spending that time with my parents. Logic suggests that if I multitask (say, working on Facebook while on speaker phone with Mom), I may shoehorn in more than my 24-hour ration. An alternative strategy is to accomplish each task in less time.

A fast mowing job probably will do, but what about a speedily-produced composition? Should we actually be slowing down rather than accelerating the writing process? The answer lies not simply in the physical act of producing written characters (whether by hand or machine) but in the thought processes that hopefully go into constructing sentences and paragraphs. Speed is a virtue if you're running the mile, trying to increase profits on an assembly line, or competing on a TV quiz show. But fast thinking was not historically associated with the written word.

In the early 1960s, the classicist Eric Havelock proposed that the intellectual

accomplishments of Classical Greece could be attributed, in large measure,

to the development of full-fledged alphabetic writing during the eighth and

seventh centuries BC. Havelock argued that alphabetic writing enabled the

Greeks to unambiguously lay out their thoughts. While Havelock's claims

about the primacy of the alphabet are debatable, the more basic notion that

writing facilitates clear, logical, comparative, reflective thinking remains on

firm ground.

In their classic article "The Consequences of Literacy," Jack Goody and Ian

Watt identify the intellectual and social consequences of writing, specifically

in sixth and fifth-century Greece:

Literate societies … cannot discard, absorb, or transmute the past [in the
ways oral societies can]. Instead, their members are faced with permanently
recorded versions of the past and its beliefs; and because the past is thus set
apart from the present, historical enquiry becomes possible. This in turn
encourages skepticism; and skepticism, not only about the legendary past,
but about received ideas about the universe as a whole. From here the next
step is to see how to build up and to test alternative explanations: and out of
this there arose the kind of logical, specialized, and cumulative intellectual
tradition of sixth-century Ionia [precursor to the Attic Greek intellectual
tradition]. (344)

What Goody and Watt are arguing is that the kind of philosophical inquiry

we see in the likes of Plato and Aristotle – inquiry that challenged received

truths; inquiry that looked for logical relationships between ideas – was made possible by the physical ability to scrutinize historical accounts and propositions in a written form, coupled with reflection upon what was recorded.

In a similar vein, the historian Elizabeth Eisenstein suggests that centuries later, printing technology encouraged readers to reflect upon (and critique) the structure of other people's arguments. Thanks to the new availability of multiple copies of texts, scholars could sit in a single library and compare the writings of diverse authors rather than needing to trek from one library to another (the medieval custom) to view manuscripts seriatim.

Where Havelock, Goody and Watt, and Eisenstein point up the impact writing may have upon cultural practices and understanding, it was the sixteenth-century humanist Desiderious Erasmus who proposed that individuals could strengthen their minds through guided use of the written word. In his manual *De duplici copia verborum et rerum* ("On Copia of Words and Ideas"), Erasmus counseled young men to read the works of great (inevitably dead) writers and then copy out important passages into a commonplace book, following an older medieval tradition (Moss). These

passages were to be organized into conceptual categories, committed to memory, and then incorporated through paraphrase into the young man's own thinking and writing. The Renaissance commonplace movement, of which Erasmus was the best-known proponent, thrived up into the nineteenth century, with a gentleman's commonplace book serving both as a vehicle for and a chronicle of his intellectual development. The initial scribal act was a necessary component in this stepwise development in the life of the mind.

Copying longhand takes time. Those of us old enough to remember doing library research using small note cards rejoiced with the appearance of copy machines by the late 1960s. For the exorbitant fee of twenty-five cents a page, you could save yourself a lot of writer's cramp. As academics learned to type, first on typewriters and then on computers, we transcribed ever-larger amounts of text – when we weren't applying yellow highlighter to our mounds of articles, now printed out for a pittance. Text was back in the fast lane.

And more's the pity, says writer Nicholson Baker, who describes how he copies out passages longhand when he wants to understand or reflect upon the words of others:

Reading is fast, but handwriting is slow – it retards thought's due process, it consumes scupperfuls of time, it pushes every competing utterance away – and that is its great virtue, in fact, over mere underlining, and even over an efficient laptop retyping of the passage: for in those secret interclausal tracts of cleared thought-space…new quiet racemes will emerge from among the paving stones and foam greenly up in places they would never otherwise have prospered. (8)

Erasmus would have understood.

In the twenty-first century, is this measured pace any longer possible? Given how much writing we are doing these days, perhaps not. To get a handle on the problem, we turn of all places to George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion.*

Flooding the Scriptorium

Act II. Having learned that his daughter Eliza has taken a taxi to the home of Henry Higgins, Alfred Doolittle (her father) comes to collect her – or perhaps cash in on her good fortune. Doolittle proposes that Higgins may keep Eliza, in exchange for a five pound note. Higgins' friend Colonel Picking challenges Doolittle's pecuniary bid:

Pickering: I think you ought to know, Doolittle, that Mr. Higgins's intentions are entirely honorable.

Doolittle: Course they are, Governor. If I thought they wasn't, I'd ask fifty.

Higgins and Pickering are incensed:

Higgins [revolted]: Do you mean to say, you callous rascal, that you would sell your daughter for fifty pounds?

Doolittle: Not in a general way I wouldn't; but to oblige a gentleman like you I'd do a good deal, I do assure you.

Pickering: Have you no morals, man?

Doolittle [unabashed]: Can't afford them Governor. Neither could you if you was as poor as me.

A garbage man (British "dustman") by trade, Doolittle was indeed poor. If you are awash in the problems of securing daily sustenance, Christian morality may take a back seat.

Today we are awash with written language. What might we be trading off in return?

Some of my colleagues enthuse over what they are calling an epistolary renaissance. Thanks to computers, young people are generating increasing mounds of written text. The occasion might be email, online chat forums or diaries, IM, or blogs, rather than the Great American Novel. But what matters (so it is said) is that the next generation is doing a lot of writing.

Really? When properly nurtured, sustained writing experience can lead to both skill and a sense of personal and intellectual empowerment. However, just as singing off-key in the shower each morning doesn't increase your chances of making it to La Scala, merely churning out text is hardly the best way to improve your writing.

Once the computer turned us all into typists, the ever-growing online and mobile options engendered yet more text. I have come to call this phenomenon "flooding the scriptorium." Given all the writing we increasingly are doing, can we any longer afford, Governor, to pay careful attention to the words and sentences we produce? The proliferation of writing, often done in a hurry, may be driving out the opportunity and motivation for creating carefully-honed text. I like to describe much of contemporary American writing as following a "whatever" theory of

language: So what if I don't adhere strictly to old-fashioned rules of grammar and spelling? You get the gist of what I mean.

In principle, there is no reason we can't do some writing the old-fashioned way: multiple drafts, time between them to think, a couple of rounds of proofreading. In practice, though, word-processing programs beckon us to push "print," while email entices us to hit "send." The convenience of electronically-mediated language is that it tempts us to make a Faustian bargain of sacrificing thoughtfulness for immediacy. In the words of the Norwegian sociologist Thomas Eriksen, "if [email] more or less entirely replaced the old-fashioned letter, the culture as a whole will end up with a deficit; it will have lost in quality whatever it has gained in quantity" (59).

Eriksen tells the story of an internet company official who made no apologies for errors in materials the company issued. Instead, he informed a group of Scandinavian journalists that since internet journalists had to work very fast, rarely taking time to check sources, it was now the job of the reader, not the writer, to assume this responsibility (67). On the western side of the Atlantic, two written items caught my eye the same day in early April 2007. The first was an article from *Business Week*. Speaking of an online

stock-talk aggregation site called InstantBull.com, the article commented that "Overall, the site isn't much to look it [sic], but it is speedy" (Young). Failure to catch the error that the first *it* should have been *at* made the article not much to look at either. Even more troubling, though, was a piece on the front page of the *New York Times*.

The feature article was on the impressive talents and accomplishments of high-achieving American female high school seniors. One of the students was described as "a standout in Advanced Placement Latin and honors philosophy/literature who can expound on the beauty of the subjunctive tense in Catullus and on Kierkegaard's existential choices" (Rimer).

"Subjunctive tense?" The term tense refers to time, as in "past, present, or future." The term mood, which is what the author of the article needed, refers to the attitude or perspective of the grammatical subject regarding the rest of the sentence.

Perhaps the leader of the internet company can be dismissed as arrogant; given all the accurate proofreading at *Business Week*, maybe we should cut them some slack. So many words, so little time. It was a typo, anyway. I

worry more about the faux pas in the *New York Times*, a newspaper widely respected for its editorial integrity. I don't hold the reporter responsible for knowing off the top of her head the difference between tense and mood. However, between deadlines (text in the fast lane) and a flooded scriptorium (the story ran to thirteen pages when printed from online), neither the reporter nor her editor paused to ask, "Do we know what we are talking about?" Two millennia of seeing writing as a conduit for thought: down the tubes.

Then there's the case of the late Stephen E. Ambrose, Director of the Eisenhower Center for American Studies, founder of the D-Day Museum, and author of twenty-four books, many of them bestsellers. Respected for his thorough research and incisive analyses, he was widely praised as a media consultant and historical expert. In January of 2002, Ambrose was accused of plagiarism, a charge he acknowledged as valid. Why would a capable scholar stoop to plagiarizing? The reason, said Ambrose, was time: He was in too much of a hurry to check whether the notes he used were made in his own words or directly lifted from published works written by others (Plotz). Two hundred years of written culture requiring authors to have something

original to say: down the tubes, in the name of pressure to flood the scriptorium.

In the interest of full disclosure, I admit to my own vulnerabilities when facing the slippery slope of too much writing and not enough time. Were you a fly on the wall of my study, you'd hear me grumble in resentment at having to write so much email and then proofread it all. Sometimes I feel I'm squandering my energies on producing ephemera, reducing the time (and concentration) available for serious writing. Given a choice, I always prefer a phone conversation or leaving voicemail rather than writing an email.

There's more. I confess to sometimes neglecting to capitalize letters when doing Google searches and to relying on spell-check to tell me if an expression (such as "spell-check") is two words, hyphenated, or one word. I'm increasingly prone to taping out a word on the keyboard and waiting to see if spell-check repairs my errors, obviating the need to type carefully, look up words in a dictionary, or simply think. Like a recovering alcoholic giving in to just one drink, perhaps I'll end up on compositional Skid Row.

King Lear: The Print-Out

When I was in college, my humanities professor, Richard Onorato, encouraged students to purchase two copies of the classical works we were reading: one paperback to mark up and then a hardback for our personal libraries. While few took him up on getting that second copy at this point in our young careers, we understood his message that the bound codex is something to be treasured.

Fast forward to the present. Yes, there are antiquarians who collect rare books, and leather-bound sets of Dickens still find an audience. But the status of a personal library has changed. In the nineteenth century, owning an extensive library had become a status symbol. In fact, the nouveau riche, many of whom cared little for reading, often purchased books by the yard to lend their residences the air of respectability. Over the twentieth century, the number of bachelor's degrees awarded annually in the United States increased over 60-fold (from almost 27,500 in 1899-1900 to nearly 1,400,000 in 2003-2004) (National Center for Educational Statistics). You would think that reverence for reading would climb accordingly. However, try selling a house in America that has yards of built-in bookcases. Likely as not, the realtor will temporize about how easy it is to tear out the shelving

and install a family entertainment center. Books are fine, but how many do you really need?

"Holy cow! What kind of crazy people used to live here anyway?"

Texts are increasingly seen as fungible. The proliferation of personal computers has led to an increase, not decrease, in use of paper. We print out email, online recipes or health advice, articles from the newspaper, chapters of books – the fruits of a flooded scriptorium. Many university courses post readings online, which students often print out. Given that Nietzsche, Shakespeare, and the Old Testament are all in the public domain, why ask students to buy printed copies, when they can run their own for the cost of

paper and ink? When the assignment has been turned in or the examination taken, out the pages go into the trash, along with the empty Coke cans and pizza boxes.

In what sense do you own a copy of *King Lear* if the pages are in print-out? Anyone who has photocopied an entire book, perhaps spiral-binding it to keep the pages together, knows it is far more unwieldy to handle than a traditionally-bound codex. The problem only worsens with sheaves of printed articles.

What if we forgo the printing step altogether and simply read everything online, whether as an ebook or a file downloaded to our desktop? While the environmentalist in us applauds saving trees, there are cognitive and cultural trade-offs. Professor Onorato had striven to nurture within his students an understanding that many written works were worth keeping: to annotate, to contemplate, and to re-read. If printouts discourage annotation, contemplation, and re-reading, online alternatives don't even leave the starting gate.

In a written culture, books in particular and reading more generally are valued as sources of learning, cultural transmission, and shared experience. Are books and reading serving these functions today?

The Print Paradox

For the year 2005, there were $2.6 billion in sales of hardcover juvenile books, up 60% since 2002.[9] Harry Potter obviously accounted for a sizable chunk of those revenues, but $2.6 billion (and just for hardcover) is hardly small change.

Children's books are not the only ones selling. The Book Industry Study Group reported that in 2005, US publishers' net revenues totaled $34.59 billion.[10] In the same year, American publishers issued 172,000 new titles and editions. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, that number is nearly three times as big as for 1995.[11] In the UK, there were 206,000 new titles for 2005 – representing a 28% increase over 2004.[12]

---

[9] *Wall Street Journal*, March 15, 2007, D1.

[10] May 22, 2006 news release of the Book Industry Study Group. Available at http://www.bisg.org/news/press.php?pressid=35.

[11] See Table IV.5 Book production: number of titles by UDC classes. Available at http://www.uis.unesco.org/TEMPLATE/html/CultAndCom/Table_IV_5_America.html.

[12] May 9, 2006 news release from Bowker, the publisher of *Books in Print*. Available at http://www.bowker.com/press/bowker/2006_0509_bowker.htm.

Are people reading all these books? The late Hugh Amory, senior rare book cataloguer at Harvard's Houghton Library, once mused that "perhaps the majority of the books ever printed have rarely been read" (51). I admit to having many books on my shelf that I purchased with great anticipation though still haven't gone through. What about all those hundreds of millions of other books that are printed and for which people are paying good money?

Given continuing growth in the number of books out there for young and old alike, you might expect two corollaries to follow: that the amount people are reading is also increasing, and that consequently, people are becoming more skilled as readers.

In the United States, statistics tell a different tale. We start with children.

Good Grades? Yes. Reading Skills? No.

For over thirty years, the National Center for Educational Statistics (part of the US Department of Education) has issued what it calls The Nation's Report Card, assessing the academic achievements of elementary and

secondary school students in the United States.[13] Subjects covered include science, mathematics, writing, and reading. Given all the federal attention being directed to education, you would think the scores would be rising.

Wrong.

A report on American 12-grade reading scores for 2005 was issued on February 22, 2007. The assessment was based on three types of activities: reading to perform a task (such as following written directions for a game), reading for information (of the sort found in textbooks or magazine articles), and reading for literary experience (meaning "exploring themes, events, characters, settings, and … language" in works like short stories, folktales, or biographies). For each subtest, 12-grade scores decreased between 1992 and 2005, with the biggest drop (12%) coming in reading for literary experience. While scores for Hispanic students (a population that doubled between 1992 and 2005) remained largely the same over time, results for both non-Hispanic whites and African American students dropped significantly. [14]

---

[13] Reports can be found at http://nationsreportcard.gov.
[14] http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2005/2007468.pdf.

Declines in reading scores go hand in glove with falling results for writing assessment, which were reported by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in July 2003. Only 24% of 12th graders were "capable of composing organized, coherent prose in clear language with correct spelling and grammar" (Hurwitz and Hurwitz). Before blaming students' email and IM habits, we need to look at the writing instruction those students were receiving. The NAEP found that teachers themselves often lacked writing skills and that writing assignments were commonly abbreviated, even in English classes:

nearly all elementary school students (97 percent) spend three hours a week or less on writing, about 15 percent of the time they spend watching television. Only half of high school seniors (49 percent) receive written assignments of three pages or more for English, and then only once or twice a month. (Hurwitz and Hurwitz)

No wonder children lack better writing skills.

Not surprisingly, children aren't doing much reading either. A study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, released in 2005, compared the amount of time children between the ages of 8 and 18 spend in various activities over the course of a typical day. Watching TV: 3 hours, 4 minutes. Reading: 43 minutes – most of which probably involved homework (38).

Ironically, on February 22, 2007 – the same day it noted declines in reading levels, the National Center for Educational Statistics issue a second report: "America's High School Graduates." The document presented findings on graduation rates, grade point averages, and number of advanced and challenging courses (such as Advanced Placement and second-level science offerings) students were taking. Those graduating in 2005 had grade point averages about a third of a letter-grade higher than those graduating in 1990. Ten percent of 2005 graduates completed a rigorous curriculum, up from 5 percent in 1990. Yet these are the same students whose reading scores were now the lowest since 1992.[15]

More advanced level courses and higher grades, but lower reading scores. Books galore for children, but not much interest in reading them. Yes, children are watching television, but they watched a lot of TV in 1992 as well. Perhaps we need to look at the message their parents might be sending about the value of the written word.

Who Guards the Guardians? Adult Reading Trends

---

[15] The full report is available at http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2007467.

On Saturday afternoons, it's impossible to find a seat in the café of my local Barnes & Noble. Customers fill the space, spilling over into the aisles and making themselves at home in spare nooks and crannies, often ensconced with piles of potential book purchases. Judging from the crowd, Americans would seem to be reading up a storm.

Again, wrong.

Start with the question of quantity. In 2002, only about 47% of the respondents in a study by the National Endowment for the Arts reported having read any fiction, poetry, or plays at all during the preceding 12 months – down from 54% in 1992. Not surprisingly, rates of reading literature rose with education and income, and females read more than males. However, when the data are broken down by age cohort, a troubling pattern emerges. The highest reading rate (51.6%) was for those aged 45-54. Outside of those aged 75 and older, the lowest rate (42.8%) was among adults aged 18-24. In the words of the report, "Accounting for differences in education, income, and other socioeconomic factors, people in this age group were about 15% less likely than others to read literature."

Are younger readers simply preoccupied with other activities such as television, movies, and the internet, and later destined to mature into active readers? A recent study of the reading skills of college-educated adults seems to put the kibosh on the maturation hypothesis. Comparing literacy levels over time for Americans who had gone through college, scores declined significantly between 1992 and 2003. In fact, in 2003, only a quarter of college graduates were deemed to have "proficient" literacy skills. (The percent for those with some graduate school training was only slightly higher: 31%.)[16]

If parents aren't reading (or not understanding what they read), we may have part of the answer behind declining literacy achievement levels in their progeny: lack of role models. However, another important piece of the puzzle may lie in the sorts of reading we ask young people to do.

Snippet Literacy

A few years back, I assigned my undergraduates Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone*. The class was discussing the effects of the internet on social

---

[16] The National Assessment of Adult Literacy is available at
http://nces.ed.gov/naal/pdf/2007464.pdf.

interaction, and Putnam's carefully-documented analysis of social capital in America offered a good frame of reference.

The students balked. Was I aware that the book was 541 pages long? Didn't I know that Putnam had written a précis of his argument a couple of years earlier, which they easily found on the web? One memorable freshman sagely informed me that people should not be reading entire volumes these days anyway. She had learned in high school that book authors (presumably fiction excepted) pad their core ideas to make money or enhance their resumes. Anything worth writing could be expressed (I was informed) in an article of twenty or thirty pages, tops.

Back in the day, assigning a book a week in university humanities and social science courses was typical in better schools – and still is in a handful. Now, though, many of us in academia feel lucky if students are willing to sign on for our pared-down curricular Book of the Month Club. In the words of Katherine Hayles, professor of literature at UCLA, "I can't get my students to read whole books anymore."[17]

---

[17] Address at the Phi Beta Kappa 41st Triennial Council Meeting, Atlanta, GA, October 25-29, 2006.

Students in the new millennium have grown up on SparkNotes, which outline the highlights of everything from *Great Expectations* to *Harry Potter and the Sourcer's Stone* (Weeks; Zernike). But it's not just college students cramming for exams on books they haven't read who buy into these quick alternatives. Some members of book clubs or people who want to appear "in the know" trade in old-fashioned page-by-page reading for short study guides. In the words of Justin Kestler, editorial director for SparkNotes, "Nobody's going to read that 500-page John Adams book [by David McCullough], but people still want to know what they missed and what they should retain" (Zernike) – perhaps an exaggeration, but indicative of a troublesome trend.

To be fair, my own era had Cliff Notes, not to mention Readers Digest Condensed Books. We also relied on introductions and secondary sources when we were too busy, lazy, or confused to work through primary texts. Yet today's college crowd has available a tool we did not: the search engine.

Search engines are a blessing. Unquestionably, they save all of us vast amounts of time, not to mention their democratizing effect for users without access to substantial book collections. But there's a hitch. Much as

automobiles discourage walking, with undeniable consequences for our health and girth, textual snippets-on-demand threaten our need for the larger works from which they are extracted. Why read *Bowling Alone* – or even the shorter article upon which it builds – when you can airlift a page that contains some key words?

Not all blame lies with our students. As high schools and colleges cajole their faculties into making greater use of the technology in which administrations have so heavily invested, professors increasingly assign series of articles and books chapters that can be made available to students electronically. Given copyright laws, we can't put entire books on electronic library reserve, but selections from books and journals are fair game. In the process we "helpfully" guide students to the heart of the matter we are discussing in class.

Admittedly, in the pre-online era when research necessitated opening dozens of books in hopes of finding useful information, no one read each tome cover-to-cover. It's also fair to say that given how scattershot our searches sometimes were (and the inadequacy of many back-of-the-book indexes), we often missed what we were looking for. But that said, we also happened

upon issues that proved more interesting than our original queries. Today's snippet literacy efficiently keeps us on the straight and narrow path, with little opportunity for fortuitous side trips.

Consider the "Find" function, which lets us search for a particular word or phrase in a document or on a web page. Alas, it seems my students often use it in lieu of reading online assignments. When I offer them links to web sites or journal articles for which my library has a paid online subscription, they happily contribute to class discussion or post comments on our online Discussion Board. However, when there is an article or book chapter that must be scanned before going onto electronic reserves, they balk. Am I unaware that you can't use the "Find" function on a scanned document? Could I please get them a "real" online version instead?

A related issue is the precise content of text themselves. Historically, one function of books was to offer diverse members of a community the opportunity for shared experience. Part of that experience came through having access to the same texts. Once the world of print settled down to producing exact copies of texts (essentially by the early eighteenth century), you might be sitting in Boston, England and I in Boston, Massachusetts, and

we could literally be reading off the same page. What's more, we valued an understanding of how a text might evolve over time. We wanted to know how Shakespeare's quartos differed from the first folio or how Whitman reworked *Leaves of Grass*. Libraries were interested in preserving earlier versions of literary manuscripts, documenting how a novel or short story developed from one draft to the next.

In recent times, however, technology has fostered a more ephemeral approach to the written word. I call the phenomenon "vapor text."

Vapor Text

Heraclitus said you can't step into the same river twice. Literally, of course, he was right. The water a holy man bathed in yesterday when he entered the Ganges is no longer the same water he bathes in today. Yet we all agree there is some persistent notion of "Ganges."

Written language can also be seen in terms of flux and permanence. Gerald Bruns speaks of the "enclosure" of print, reifying an author's words, which came about with the transition from the medieval manuscript tradition to the rise of modern print culture (113). While earlier readers knew to expect

minor differences between manuscript copies of the "same" text (due to scribal error, attempts at correcting the textual model, or introduction of the scribe's own perspective), the emergence of written culture ushered in a growing assumption that copies of the "same" printed text were, indeed, the same, down to the last capital letter or comma.

Increasingly, that assumption is now being challenged. A case in point is the textbook I commonly use in teaching a course on the principles of linguistics. In a recent edition, I had found several errors, which I took pains to point out to my students in subsequent semesters. They looked at me blankly. In their newer print run – though of the same edition, with the same publication date – the errors had been corrected. You can't step into the same text twice.

The issue of textual permanence becomes magnified with the introduction of language online. Newspapers used to publish a morning edition and a final edition. With the internet, the notion of an edition becomes obsolete, since text can be updated continually.

Remember the Advanced Placement Latin student described in the *New York Times* as being able to "expound on the beauty of the subjunctive tense in Catullus"? My son, who several years earlier had slogged through these same high school rigors, had called me the morning the article appeared, filled with righteous indignation when he spied the inaccurate grammatical term. Excitedly, he suggested, "I'll bet you can use this example for your book." I agreed, and, as is my habit, printed out the story from online, just a few hours after the hardcopy paper had arrived on my doorstep. But the offending "subjunctive tense" had already been corrected to "subjunctive mood." The grammarian in me was relieved, but I was left to puzzle over which version of the article counted as authoritative. Medieval scribes would feel right at home.

Newspapers have long printed corrections to errors in the previous day's paper, just as earlier, books used to include errata sheets (noting errors discovered too late to be corrected on old-fashioned linotype plates). These emendations have nearly always concerned matters of mechanical editing ("Columbus discovered America in 1492, not 1942") or objective information ("The person identified in the photograph as Al Capone was Al Franken"). Confusion of "tense" with "mood" bespeaks ignorance of

grammatical categories of analysis – and of journalists' responsibility to ascertain what they don't know before instructing others in print. This kind of error would have been difficult to imagine in the *New York Times* decades ago, before emergence of the "whatever" attitude towards the written word.

In the mid 2000s, Wikipedia became the poster child for online vapor text. Because anyone (with a few caveats) is free to edit any page, you never know if you are stepping into the same Wikipedia entry twice. A beneath-the-surface history of such changes is available, but most users of Wikipedia are unaware these backstage versions exist.

A further example of textual fluidity involves page numbers. The norms of twentieth-century scholarship required writers to be quite precise when they referenced works written by others, including specific page numbers, especially when using a direct quotation. Language online has rendered these norms of scholarship problematic. Consider newspaper articles that are accessed online rather than in hardcopy. The pages you might print out have no relationship to the section (and page) in the original. Sometimes the online newspaper informs you what page (in hardcopy) the piece began on, but if it's a long article, who knows what hardcopy page your quotation

appeared on? Many online journals offer a similar challenge. You can always unearth the original page span, but many publishers reformat their hardcopy journals for online viewing, making exact page numbers difficult if not impossible to procure.

Should precise page references matter? Yes, if your norms of objective research include the ability for another person to pinpoint your textual findings, much as scientific experiments must be replicable for us to countenance their results. However, if we adopt a "whatever" attitude towards the mechanics of written texts, a similar nonchalance towards citations is hardly surprising. In fact, it has becoming fashionable among some postmodern literary critics (and teachers of rhetoric) merely to daisy-chain the names of several authors ("Marx, Foucault, Habermas") whose work is presumably relevant to the topic at hand, without making reference to specific works.

The notion of explicit reference is being replaced by general allusion. Woe be unto today's authors who offhandedly throw out names such as Ludwig Wittgenstein's (in the philosophy of language) or Leonard Bloomfield (in linguistics), both of whom radically altered their understanding of their

subjects over the course of their careers. For Wittgenstein, compare the approaches articulated in the *Tractatus* and in *Philosophical Investigations*. In Bloomfield's case, his 1914 book on language was heavily influenced by German mentalist models of psychology, while the more famous 1933 *Language* affirmed a behaviorist orientation.

What if we take the notion of vapor text yet a step further? What if we do away with text altogether?

THE FUTURE OF WRITTEN CULTURE

Remember the phonograph? Today you would be hard pressed to find stores selling needles for playing records on a stereo, now that the technology has been put out to pasture by compact discs and iTunes. But when the phonograph was new, some people envisioned it might supplant the written word.

Thomas Edison's invention in 1877 was designed as a recording device into which businessmen could dictate letters without the aid of a stenographer. The resulting etched cylinders would then be mailed to the intended recipients, creating a written record that bested an ephemeral telephone

conversation. A decade after Edison's first scratchy recording of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" on a sheet of tin foil, the machine was refined enough to render human speech accurately.[18]

By the late 1880s, the era of the music recording industry was still a few years in the offing. Not until 1890 were coin-operated cylinder phonographs installed in saloons – the precursor of the juke box and, eventually, the home record player. Yet already, the air was charged with possibility. Writing in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1889, an acquaintance of Edison named Philip Hubert enthused about the potential of the phonograph: "As a saving in the time given up to writing, the phonograph promises to far outstrip the typewriter" (259) and "I really see no reason why the newspaper of the future cannot come to the subscriber in the shape of a phonogram" (260). In fact, Hubert mused that "It is even possible to imagine that many books and stories may not see the light of print at all; they will go into the hands of their readers, or hearers rather, as phonograms" (259).

In that same year, another vision of the phonograph's future appeared, this time written by Edward Bellamy. In his 1888 utopian novel *Looking*

---

[18] For discussion of the invention of the phonograph, see Gitelman and the Library of Congress' American Memory site, http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/edhtml/edcyldr.html.

Backward, Bellamy had explored what a socialist America might look like. Now he envisioned the future of print. His story, published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, was entitled "With the Eyes Shut."

The tale begins with a man boarding a train to visit a friend. The protagonist finds himself (first on the train, then when he reaches his destination) in a world in which there are essentially no books. Instead, the notes we leave for our spouses, the novels we read to pass the time, our morning newspaper have all been replaced by devices that resemble MP3 players onto which podcasts have been downloaded. Reading has given way to listening on one's "indispensable," which people carry with them at all times, much like today's mobile phones.

The advantages of the portable phonographic devices were many: People's eyesight (and posture) improved, since they no longer strained to read text or hunched over in the process. The drudgery of writing letters was alleviated, and you could review incoming correspondence at your leisure (much like listening to voicemail). Mothers didn't need "to make themselves hoarse telling the children stories on rainy days to keep them out of mischief"

(743). Instead, children could listen over and again to stories on their

indispensables (a role played today by CDs, television, and the computer).

In Bellamy's imagined universe, children in school

are still taught [reading and writing]; but as the pupils need them little after leaving
school – or even in school, for that matter, all their text-books are phonographic – they
usually keep the acquirement [of reading and writing] about as long as a college graduate
does his Greek. (744)

Hardly a compliment. Bellamy envisioned that "Students and men of

research, however, will always need to understand how to read print, as

much of the old literature will probably never repay phonographing" (744).

Written culture reduced to antiquarianism.

At the end of the tale, Bellamy comforts his readers that the new world of

reading "with the eyes shut" was just a dream. At the close of the nineteenth

century, literate culture was booming. The rise of mass literacy was matched

with a massive production of books (Kaestle *et al*., Lehmann-Haupt;

Weedon). Even when the phonograph became nearly as ubiquitous as the

landline telephone, Bellamy's vision of sound replacing print did not

materialize.

And today? Whatever eventually becomes of modern written culture, it

seems unlikely that its material manifestations will be disappearing any time

soon. People will still read and write, paper mills will continue to do a brisk

business, and manufacturers can count on making bookcases for years to

come. What's more, despite the growth of open source and Creative

Commons licenses, there is no immanent threat to authorial copyright on

published works that have substantial sales potential.

And yet voices from a number of quarters foresee the importance of fixed,

printed works diminishing in favor of what people such as Ben Vershbow, a

fellow at the Institute for the Future of the Book, call the "networked book":

With each passing year, our culture moves ever further from the familiar
rhythms and hierarchies of print into a vast network of machines….we're
headed into a fully networked culture where words and documents are
constantly in motion and conversation is the principal mode of inquiry.
We're learning to read and write all over again.

In 1995, William Mitchell disparagingly described books as "tree flakes

encased in dead cow" (56). The same year, Nicholas Negroponte envisioned

a post-information age in which the newspaper we receive is uniquely

personalized to our interests, rather than a document shared across readers

(164).

At least for now, Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble continue to do land-office business in marketing the printed word, bound between covers. The issue is what roles reading and writing, books and paper will assume in the cultural life of the coming decades. Among the questions whose answers remain uncertain are these:

- READING: How much reading will be done online versus in hard copy? How many people will be "serious," patient readers?

- WRITING: How much writing will be done manually (with pen and ink or at a keyboard) and how much through voice recognition devices? How many people will write how much? About what? In what style?

- AUTHORSHIP: Will the late-eighteenth-century model of authorship be replaced by one with different assumptions about the need for individual creativity? Will new forms of marketing or even patronage be necessary to support people trying to write for a living?

- COPYRIGHT: Will copyright be replaced by licensing or open source? Will traditional notions of copyright be applied to some works (such as trade books) but not others (for instance, scientific articles)?

- PUBLISHING: Will books in the future largely be published only on demand? Given increases both in the rate of self-publishing and in traditional publishing house costs, will authors become solely responsible for editing and formatting their works?

- LANGUAGE STANDARDS: Are we entering an era in which the mechanics of written text are viewed as less important than we have believed them to be over the past 300 years? If so, should – or can – we attempt to reverse the "whatever" attitude?

One plausible scenario is what we might call "print culture sans print". Writing might continue to be culturally valuable, but handwritten missives or printed codices would decline in importance. Under this scenario, we would become increasingly comfortable relaxing with ebooks or studying complex texts online. We might learn to produce well-edited works without resorting to printing out physical copies to mark up by hand, and could expect developments in computer hardware and software to facilitate annotating online text so as to rival the affordances of paper.

This scenario would encourage some additional changes in our notion of written culture. Printed books that continued to be produced might become

essentially collectors' items; concerns about spelling and punctuation could slacken (following the present trend) without denying the importance of writing as a cultural artifact. We can imagine a society in which many of the values of print culture would be maintained without relying primarily upon familiar print technology and editorial assumptions.

An alternative scenario would be "print sans print culture." Print might remain a physically prominent component of our cultural universe, but the multifaceted aspects of western written culture would diminish in importance. Printed works might persist, but for different ends. Think of university diplomas that are still written in Latin. The text looks impressive (and highly suitable for framing), though practically none of the recipients can decipher it.

What might the future look like? It's tempting to fall back on history, to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when printing presses were starting to proliferate, but before print had helped create the western-European cultural assumptions that we have identified as print culture.

Tempting, yes, but perhaps not very useful. The early modern European citizenry, which possessed minimal literacy skills and had restricted access to reading or writing materials, has little in common with a population that is overwhelmingly literate, is awash in books, and has cheap paper and pens – and computers. The future of written culture will be a product not only of education and technology but of the individual and social choices we make about harnessing these resources.

REFERENCES

Amory, Hugh. "The Trout and the Milk: An Ethnobibliographical Talk." *Harvard Library Bulletin* 7(1) (1996): 50-65.

Baker, Nicholson. "Narrow Ruled." *American Scholar* 69, Autumn (2000): 5-8.

Barlow, John Perry. "The Economy of Ideas: Everything You Know about Intellectual Property is Wrong." *Intellectual Property: Moral, Legal, and International Dilemmas*. Ed. A.D. Moore. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997. 349-371.

Baron, Naomi S. *Alphabet to Email: How Written English Evolved and Where It's Heading*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Bellamy, Edward. "With the Eyes Shut." *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 79(473) (1889): 736-745.

Blaise, Clark. *Time Lord: Sir Sandford Fleming and the Creation of Standard Time*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2000.

Bruns, Gerald. "The Originality of Texts in a Manuscript Culture." *Comparative Literature* 32 (1980): 113-129.

Burrow, J.A. *Medieval Writers and Their Work*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Carey, James W. "Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph." *Prospects*, The Annual of American Cultural Studies. Ed. J. Salzman, 8 (1983): 303-325.

Chadwick, John. "A Prehistoric Bureaucracy." Diogenes 26 (1959): 7-18.

Chartier, Roger, ed. *The Culture of Print: Power and the Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe*. Tr. Lydia G. Cochrane. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.

Chesterfield, Earl of. *Letters to His Son: On the Fine Art of Becoming a Man of the World and a Gentleman*. Oliver H.G. Leigh, ed. (with topical headings and a special introduction). Vol. 1. Washington, DC: M. Walter Dunne, 1901.

Cipolla, Carlo. *Clocks and Culture, 1300-1700*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1978.

Clanchy, M.T. *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307*. Second edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.

Danet, Brenda and Bryna Bogoch. "From Oral Ceremony to Written Document: The Transitional Language of Anglo-Saxon Wills." *Language and Communication* 12(2) (1992): 95-122.

The Digital Dilemma. National Research Council, Committee on Intellectual Property and the Emerging Information Infrastructure. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2000.

Eisenstein, Elizabeth. *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.

Erasmus, Desiderius. *De copia verborum ac rerum (On Copia of Words and Ideas)*. Tr. Donald B. King and H. David Rix. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1963.

Eriksen, Thomas H. *Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age*. London: Pluto Press, 2001.

Erne, Lukas. *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Ezell, Margaret J.M. *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

Gitelman, Lisa. *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999.

Gleick, James. *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*. New York: Vintage Books, 1999.

Goody, Jack and Ian Watt. "The Consequences of Literacy." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5(3) (1963): 304-345.

Gottlieb, Nanette. *Word-Processing Technology in Japan: Kanji and the Keyboard*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2000.

Hall, Florence Howe. *Good Form for All Occasions*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1914.

Harris, William. *Ancient Literacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Havelock, Eric. *Preface to Plato*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963.

Hornbeak, Katherine Gee. "The Complete Letter Writer in English, 1568-1800." *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages* 15 (3-4) (1934).

Hubert, Philip G., Jr. "The New Talking-Machines." *The Atlantic Monthly* 63(376) (1889): 256-261.

Hurwitz, Nina and Sol Hurwitz. "Words on Paper." *American School Board Journal* 191(3) (2004): 16-20.

Kaestle, Carl F., Helen Damon-Moore, Lawrence C. Stedman, Katherine Tinsley, and William V. Trollinger, Jr. *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading since 1880*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991.

Kaiser Family Foundation. "Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-Olds." 2005. Available at http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/Executive-Summary-Generation-M-Media-in-the-Lives-of-8-18-Year-olds.pdf.

Kastan, David S. *Shakespeare and the Book*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Kern, Stephen. *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.

Landes, David S. *Revolution in Time: Clocks and the Making of the Modern World*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983.

Lehmann-Haupt, Hellmut. *The Book in America: A History of the Making and Selling of Books in the United States*, second edition. New York: Bowker, 1951.

Lessig, Lawrence. *The Future of Ideas: The Fate of the Commons in a Connected World*. New York: Random House, 2001.

Levy, David. *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age*. New York: Arcade Publishing, 2001.

Lubrano, Annteresa. *The Telegraph: How Technology Innovation Caused Social Change*. New York: Garland, 1997.

McCrum, Robert, William Cran, and Robert MacNeil. *The Story of English*. New York: Viking, 1986.

Minnis, A.J. *Medieval Theories of Authorship*, second edition. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1988.

Mitchell, William. *City of Bits: Space, Place, and the Infobahn*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995.

Moss, Ann. *Printed Commonplace-Books and the Structuring of Renaissance Thought*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

National Center for Educational Statistics. Digest of Educational Statistics: 2005. Table 169. Historical summary of faculty, students, degrees, and finances in degree-granting institutions: Selected years, 1869-70 through 2003-04. Available at http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d05/tables/dt05_169.asp.

National Endowment for the Arts. "Reading at Risk." 2004. Available at http://www.nea.gov/news/news04/ReadingAtRisk.html.

Negroponte, Nicholas. *Being Digital*. New York: Knopf, 1995.

Nelson, Daniel. *Frederick W. Taylor and the Rise of Scientific Management*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980.

Parker, Ian. "Absolute PowerPoint." *The New Yorker*, May 28, 2001: 76.

Parkes, M.B. *Scribes, Scripts, and Readers: Studies in the Communication, Presentation, and Dissemination of Medieval Texts*. London: Hambledon Press, 1991.

Plotz, David. "The Plagiarist: Why Stephen Ambrose is a Vampire." *Slate*. 2002. Available at http://www.slate.com/?id=2060618.

Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.

Rimer, Sara. "For Girls, It's Be Yourself, and Be Perfect, Too." *New York Times*, April 1, 2007: A1.

Robertson, Jean. *The Art of Letter Writing: An Essay on the Handbooks Published in England during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd., 1942.

Rodriguez, Felix and Garland Cannon. "Remarks on the Origin and Evolution of Abbreviations and Acronyms." *English Historical Linguistics, Papers from the 7th International Conference on English Historical Linguistics*. Eds. F. Fernandez, M. Fuster, and J. Calvo. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1994: 261-272.

Rose, Mark. *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Saunders, J.W. "The Stigma of Print: A Note on the Social Basis of Tudor Poetry." *Essays in Criticism* 1 (1951): 139-164.

Saunders, W.M. *The Motor Trade Telegram Code*. London: The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, Limited, 1921.

Selgin, George. "Gresham's Law." *EH.Net Encyclopedia.* Ed. R. Whaples, June 10, 2003. Available at

http://eh.net/encyclopedia/article/selgin.gresham.law.

Sellen, Abigail J. and Richard Harper. *The Myth of the Paperless Office*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002.

Tannen, Deborah. "Did You Catch That? Why They're Talking as Fast as They Can." *Washington Post*, January 5, 2003: B1, B4.

Taylor, Alex S. and Richard Harper. "Age-Old Practices in the 'New' World: A Study of Gift-Giving between Teenage Mobile Phone Users." *SIGCHI: ACM Special Interest Group on Computer-Human Interaction*. Minneapolis, MN. New York: ACM Press, 2002: 439-446.

Tufte, Edward. *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint*. Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 2003.

Turner, Fred. *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Ullman, B.L. *The Origin and Development of Humanistic Script.* Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1960.

Vershbow, Ben. "The Networked Book." Forbes.com, December 1, 2006. Available at http://www.forbes.com/2006/11/30/future-books-publishing-tech-media_cz_bv_books06_1201network_print.html.

Weedon, Alexis. *Victorian Publishing: The Economics of Book Production for a Mass Market, 1836-1916.* Aldershot, England: Ashgate. 2003.

Weeks, Linton. "The No-Book Report: Skim It and Weep." *Washington Post*, May 14, 2001: C1.

Woodmansee, Martha and Peter Jaszi, eds. *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994.

Young, Lauren. "A One-Stop Shop for Stock Chat." *Business Week.* April 9, 2007: 98.

Zernike, Kate. "Book-Club Smarts in a Nutshell: Get Notes." *New York Times*, July 19, 2002: A1.