The Book is Dead - Long Live the Book

By Dr Sherman Young

Nearly twenty years ago, Julian Barnes wrote a terrific book called *A History of the World in Ten and a Half Chapters.* Amongst other things, it included a revisionist view of Noah's Ark as told by the stowaway woodworm, an account of terrorists hijacking a cruise ship and a thoughtful meditation on the novelist's responsibility. It's a great book. I'm not nearly as ambitious - nor as talented - as Mr Barnes, but I am cheeky enough to steal his conceit.

So I'd like to start this piece with A History of the World in four and a half slides . . . or paragraphs (with apologies to Julian Barnes).

A history of communication

In the beginning, there was talking. We had what many called an oral culture – one based on verbal story telling. Families and social groups gathered around campfires and regaled each other with stories, myths and legends. Information was passed on through time from storyteller to storyteller and shared by word of mouth. In the beginning, we talked – and it was good.

Then, writing was invented and with it came new ways to codify and organise societies and cultures. We began to form new relationships with information, creating and sharing it in ways that were previously impossible. Of course, not everyone was happy with the changes brought about by the invention of writing. Traditionalists complained and warned of its dangers – and suggested that it meant the end of many things; the loss of memory, and thus the passing of wisdom . . .. But the rest of us came to embrace writing and all of its joys and pleasures, and society moved on and learnt to live with a little forgetfulness, replaced by the ability to look up what we needed to know.

But it wasn't until we discovered a way to easily replicate and distribute that writing – to *publish* – that even more incredible change occurred. Gutenberg's contribution to printing and the creation of what we know as the book enabled the emergence of a literate – and eventually, an educated – population. Indeed, knowledge was disseminated more widely than at any earlier time in history, and the book, and its surrounding cultures, more or less created the modern world. The spread of words allowed the spread of ideas and emergence of what many consider civilised societies.

As Kevin Kelly (2008) suggested:

> From printing came journalism, science and the mathematics of libraries and law. . . . printing instilled in society a reverence for precision (of black ink on white paper), an appreciation for linear logic (in a sentence), a passion for objectivity (of printed fact) and an allegiance to authority (via authors), whose truth was as fixed and final as a book. In the West, we became people of the book.

Of course, not everyone was happy with the changes brought about by the invention of the book. Traditionalists complained and warned of its dangers – and suggested that it meant the end of many things; the loss of authority, the rise of anarchy, the end of an unquestioned wisdom . . .

But the rest of us came to embrace books and all of their joys and pleasures, and a more democratic society moved on and learnt to live with the joys of reading.

However, all empires fade and the age of print was replaced by the broadcast era. The last half of the twentieth century saw the dominance of the book displaced by electronic media forms such as radio and television. In

this world, people stopped reading books and began listening to boxes in the living room, then watching them, entranced by the moving image. In the West, and elsewhere, we became people of the screen.

Of course, not everyone was happy with the changes brought by the invention of radio and television. Traditionalists complained and warned of its dangers – the end of thinking; the emergence of a zombie population mesmerised by a flickering screen, hypnotised by moving images. But the rest of us came to embrace the electronic media form and all of its joys and pleasures, and society moved on and learnt to live with a little excitement on a Sunday evening :-)

What's more, some of us began to understand that we could engage critically – even with the broadcast media – and were not mere putty in the hands of media moguls of mass destruction. We were able to discern the good from the bad and could watch a Bruce Willis movie without being hypnotised into *becoming* Bruce Willis. In short, as the broadcast age grew more mature, we realised that we had become *adult* media users, savvy enough to figure out the good bits from the bad;

This was why so many celebrated the emergence of the Internet Age – which seemed to represent a maturing mediascape. One in which the primitive electronic technologies of the twentieth century were displaced by more sophisticated and sensible mechanisms. No longer was the screen just a place for transient moving images – it became a place where new connections are formed, new media possibilities enabled and citizens empowered in ways that still cause breathless utopian utterings. Many of us came to celebrate the computer and its personal computer descendants as well as online services and their subsumation into that thing we call the internet in all its hyper-connected multimedia glory.

Not only did the written word regain its place, but the technologies of production and distribution became cheap. The world became awash with words and images, sound and motion. In the West, we are still people of the screen, but the screen has been re-imagined. Indeed, some suggest that the new media forms encompassed the best of oral cultures, the best of print cultures, the best of electronic media cultures. Whereas 20th century media were expensive and complicated, the online world requires nothing more than a keyboard and a connection; whereas the whole business of radio and television demanded billions of dollars and political connections, the online world requires nothing more than desire.

> **Once we turned to each other in a circle around the campfire, then to pen on paper, and then to the book, and then to radio and television. Where once we turned to a plethora of different objects, more and more we turn online to a single place which encompasses all our knowledge.**

Of course, not everyone was happy with the changes brought about by the invention of the internet. Traditionalists complained and warned of its dangers and suggested that it meant the end of many things; the loss of authority, the rise of anarchy, the end of an unquestioned wisdom . . .. But the rest of us came to embrace the internet and all of its joys and pleasures, and society moved on and learnt to live with a little active citizenship…
Which is where we are today. Once we turned to each other in a circle around the campfire, then to pen on paper, and then to the book, and then to radio and television. Where once we turned to a plethora of different objects, more and more we turn online to a single place which encompasses all our knowledge.

But this is the half-slide or half of the picture. And this is because the internet age has only just been born. We are still building it – arguing about what it should be, how it should work, what it should do and who should control it. And uniquely in the history of information technologies, the internet provides a platform that actually allows its users to engage in its ongoing creation, its development and shaping. We are in the middle of the half slide and *we* are the people who can complete it.

The online world

Those of us who are old enough might remember the early days of the pre-world-wide-web internet – a time of usenet, ftp and gopher. At the same time that universities (and libraries) were discovering the joys of networked computing, the business world was trying to create parallel online services for consumers. Companies such as Prodigy, the Source, Compuserve, AOL and gEnie all provided online information services for a set fee. For the

most part, they were closed, or walled gardens where the attraction was not connection, but content. For example, Compuserve users were able to access particular encyclopedia, travel services, e-mail and stock market reports. At one point, everyone wanted to be an online service. Apple Computer launched eWorld in June 1994, about the same time that Microsoft launched the Microsoft Network. In 1995, in this country, Telstra proudly announced a joint venture with Microsoft called onAustralia. But it was short-lived. The late 1990s saw a collapse in the market for proprietary online services. In short order, most of them closed down.

A key factor in the demise of proprietary online services was the opening up of the Internet to commercial traffic. The 1991 lifting of restrictions on commercial data traffic confirmed the new role for the network. Another key driver was the ease of use introduced with the first graphically based browsers on the World Wide Web. All of a sudden, accessing the brave new world of information services became as easy as point and click. As it gained in popularity, with commercial Internet service providers connecting people to the net without enhancing (or inhibiting) their users' access to content, the Net ceased to merely be a messy, chaotic, free alternative to the commercial service providers, instead playing an additional role as the meta-network which incorporated all of the other networks – albeit some which still had walled gardens of content to which only its subscribers or members had access.

As the internet exploded, those online services essentially died. Users had spoken, and chosen open against closed, unlimited content over perceived quality and ubiquitous connectivity over tightly-controlled communications. This was web 1.0 and a new media technology which placed new media tools in the hands of users. Those tools created a very real tension between the control that media industries traditionally exercised and the very real desires that media users now have. It's not an overstatement to suggest that there was a cultural shift and a dramatic change in user expectations. Since web 1.0, we now expect our information to be available anytime, anyplace and for little cost. Arguably this was, and continues to be, the culture that drives much of what happens online. Many of us now inhabit a web culture, predicated on a sense of 24/7 anytime, anyplace connectivity, which we have embraced and accepted as second nature.

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Web 2.0

Which brings us to web 2.0. Without getting into definitional arguments, a big part of the web 2.0 is a redefinition of the user as content creator – through websites such as flickr, blogger, youtube and facebook. Axel Bruns calls this produsage, and it draws on a culture of creativity predicated on mashups and remixes – the notion that everything is built on the shoulders of others, which Henry Jenkins calls convergence culture. If the web 2.0 meme can be simply summarised, it might be seen in the title of 'We are the Web', Kevin Kelly's 2005 article in *Wired* magazine. In it, Kelly identifies a key theme in the web 2.0 discussion – the idea that "the producers are the audience, the act of making is the act of watching, and every link is both a point of departure and destination".

Interestingly, such thinking is reminiscent of discussions around interactivity which dominated the early days of the new media. A useful approach is John Hartley's thinking about interactivity: "This term", he says, "describes what in an older technology is called 'writing'". Hartley argues that the definition of literacy has gradually expanded to include writing as well as reading, but that in public, mediated communication, hardly anyone gets to write – something that is now changing: "This is where journalists have had the upper hand for so long: they can 'write' in public. But now, worryingly for them, anyone can join them; readers are transforming into writers in the interactive media".

Of course, it's not just writing in the textual sense. The web is multimedia; the days of text dominance are long gone, the popularity of flickr, youtube, vimeo and others is testimony to a new media literacy. Indeed, there is the suggestion that some kids use youtube (Helft) rather than google as their primary search engine. It may seem counterintuitive to those of us steeped in the idea of words, but for many, it makes sense. Others have even suggested that there is a paradigm shift occurring in which a new screen fluency – the ability to parse and manipulate moving images – is becoming common and as important as the ability to parse and manipulate words (Kelly, 2008).

Our information future

All of this points clearly to an information future that exists entirely online, on the interconnected computer network that we call the internet. Our information will be drawn from online sources, which will be a development of everything we have seen to date – one which, by allowing invisible and ubiquitous connectivity, becomes second nature. Donald Norman wrote *The Invisible Computer* a while ago and while he was speaking of specific issues of interface, usability and technology adoption, the term makes an awful lot of sense. Soon, people will stop talking about using a computer, or logging onto the internet, or going online. Soon the device will be invisible, second nature, so that we focus on the content not the thing. There are already invisible computers in the sense that we don't think of them as computers. The television is one obvious example, but there are others such as the mobile phone; devices that contain immense computer power that we just use and that are invisible in that usage.

We won't go online; we will always be online. There'll be no interruption to service, no dial-in and sign-up and log-in – just always on, 24/7 connectivity to the cloud.

Hand in hand with invisibility is ubiquity. Soon, everybody will have access. Everybody. In some places, this happens already with computers, but other devices are starting to emerge. The first port of call when a question beckons is Google, and this trend will only become more prevalent. Because we'll be constantly connected. We won't go online; we will always be online. There'll be no interruption to service, no dial-in and sign-up and log-in – just always on, 24/7 connectivity to the cloud.

Of course, none of this is new or startling – it's just an extrapolation of things that are already happening. It's totally apparent that the world of information is already online; that people already think and do the things I'm suggesting and the answers to all the tough questions are searched for in the virtual realm and nowhere else.

The book

So, as an academic with an interest in the death of the book, what, then, of books in this brave new world? I think that the key problem is that book culture is confused with print culture; booklovers – authors, publishers, readers – get worked up about the printed object and attribute all kinds of mystical qualities to some dead tree pulp bound together with glue. Some of this love is romanticised nonsense, some of it is a battle for industrial survival – the desire to keep doing things the way things have always been done – and some of it is a misguided notion that because existing technology is not good enough to replace print on paper, then it never will be. As Jeff Jarvis said, "in the online information world, print is where books go to die". While we keep confusing books with printed objects, then books will remain less than relevant in the post-web 2.0 worlds.

Of course, books have been shifting to the electronic domain for many years. The use of interactive multimedia is common for reference and educational texts delivered via the web or CD-ROM. The ability to embed electronic exercises, audio, video and directed learning creates an entirely new genre of book which transcends and expands what books have traditionally been. But beyond these experiments, long-form texts have been slow in shifting to the electronic realm; the history of e-books is a frustrating one with a decade of false starts. Arguably, we are now at a potential tipping for the e-book. After many years of trying, there seems to be momentum in that space, and both industry and users are beginning to accept its possibilities. In the US, Amazon's Kindle has captured the public's imagination, if not yet its dollars, and the idea of reading books on an electronic screen is no longer the domain of strange geeks. And Apple's iphone has driven a significant demand for casual electronic reading, with millions of e-books being downloaded from its App Store. Here in Australia, the consumer e-book market is languishing, but other sectors appear strong. For example, the academic realm appears to be flourishing. At Macquarie University (my institution), there has been a dramatic increase in the number of electronic books purchased by the library - from 895 e-books in 2005 to 68,000 in 2007. During the same period, the number of printed books purchased remained relatively stable, with about 16,000 bought annually.

It's clear that in education, the centre of the knowledge universe is shifting from page to screen. Tim Barton writes of a Columbia University Classics class in which 70 percent of undergraduates cited a book published in

1900 even though that book was not on any reading list. Those students had not suddenly scoured second-hand bookshops for long out-of-print titles or discovered dusty treasures in their grandparent's attics. The reason that so many had discovered a book more than a century old in preference to newer titles was that the full text of that work was available online on Google Book Search. Despite this, the range of titles available online is still very limited. As Barton suggests: "In a world in which students consult not shelves but keyboards, too many of those [books] remain out of sight, exiled to those shelves, where, every year, there is a virtual conflagration not unlike the fire at the ancient library at Alexandria, as last copies of precious books crumble slowly to dust, or are damaged, stolen, or lost".

But e-books aren't just about reading. Even as the range of e-book offerings expands, some are taking advantage of web 2.0 technologies to reinvent how books can be created and published electronically. For example, Gamer Theory is a hypertext by McKenzie Wark that consists of a series of linked chunks of text on a website. Promoted as a networked book, it was open for comments as Wark wrote the book, developing his themes by drawing on the contributions. Finally, it was published as a print on paper book by Harvard University Press. Another example is Yale University Press and its experiments with mounting books on a wiki platform, which presents a new free collection of scholarly books published by the Press to which anyone can contribute through comments, summaries and links. The site also makes available a free, downloadable PDF version of each book. Yale also has its Books Unbound project which attempts to make the collaborative experience more accessible. The site posts books in their entirety and allows comments from readers on individual paragraphs and chapters.

These innovations challenge the definition of a book, and what makes it different from (say) an interactive website, or a wiki. Traditionalists will argue for the defining material nature of the printed object, and it's undeniable that the process of print provides particular constraints that make definitions easier. But it's possible to identify characteristics of content that are unrelated to form. Arguably, a book is not a *thing*; a book is a *process*. What distinguishes a book is not its physicality, but the premium of time that it demands of both its authors and its readers. Notwithstanding the need to have a decent idea and something worth saying, writing a book is a time-consuming process. It takes a long time to commit to the 40 or 50 thousand words that even a relatively short book requires. The time required to write a book affords authors the opportunity to dig a little deeper, so books are not compelled to react to current events with the same sort of urgency required of other media forms, allowing a more reflective and thorough approach.

While other media forms demand huge investments of time, there is a difference. Feature films, music albums and videogames all involve casts of thousands, budgets of hundreds of millions and years to produce, but most of the time devoted to making a film or a computer game is spent constructing a reality from the director's imagination. Time is required to figure out *how to make the content visible*. In a book, that work is delegated to the reader. Once a book is written, it's the reader's turn. Books are incomplete; words create a space that has to be negotiated by a reader in order to be meaningful – the interactivity happens inside the reader's head – so books demand more commitment from readers.

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Ultimately, books are about slowing things down and forcing readers to slow down with them. If the rest of the text-based media – from websites through blogs, twitter and facebook – is 'people talking' (EFF, 1996)or the 21st century expression of an ongoing human conversation, then in the online realm books represent *people thinking* before talking. The value of such a book culture goes without saying in a world as fast paced as ours likes to think it is.

I think that the challenge for those of us who love books is to integrate that book experience into the online one and to ensure that books and book culture remain a cornerstone of the new information age. By all means have screen literacies – the new multimedia possibilities offer incredible opportunities for entertainment and pedagogy; but we need to ensure that text literacies remain and that we still understand the importance and power of the written word. We need book literacies and the knowledge that books do things that other forms cannot; that even in the 21st century, there is the need to slow things down and add time to the equation. We need to find ways to support authors and publishers who may be struggling to work out new business models; we need to have conversations about territories and copyright and create the conditions whereby the new

modes of publication and distribution result in more books, and better books – not fewer books and worse ones.

But allowing books to be defined by their printed form is a death sentence. As the world's knowledge moves to an online electronic environment, confining the work that books do to ink on paper means that we will all lose something significant. Books need to be a part of the online environment, not sequestered away as relics on dusty bookshelves. And in this post web 2.0 environment, where the tools and content of the information universe are increasingly built by its users, it is down to us – teachers, librarians, authors, readers, yes, even academics – to build ways for books to retain their rightful place in the world's information systems.

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