

(e)text: Error... 404 Not Found! Or The Disappearance of History*

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Abstract

This article questions the process of creating texts with digital technologies, rejecting Virilio's (1995) dystopian view of hypertext as being indicative of the written and spoken word's demise. Instead, I argue that the construction of digital text entails a disruption of the documentation process. Due to the unstable location of web text, readers are left without any point of reference, no benchmark for standards, except for institutional credibility, ingenuity and, perhaps, the use of peer review. Without re-direction, the value of any text-source is negated. The commercially driven context of the web renders every publication to be constantly 'in press', which can be cancelled at any time if domain space is not financed. Additionally, the speed of information production renders it impossible to

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document (personal) history. Memoirs, correspondence, and ideas are lost in the ether due to there being too much to 'back-up'. The disappearance of history is, thus, not only directed towards contributions of significant social and public interest. Rather, it refers also to the many interactions between people that previously might have made possible biographical manuscripts. The concern is not for seeking ways of documenting history in an electronic age, but to realise that, for example, emails do matter and ought never to be considered 'trash'.

(Pre)text

An inquiry into the difficulties of documenting and collating writing materials in an age of electronic publications could entail a complex technical debate about the development of bibliographical strategies. It would be possible to discuss how the vast amount of written material will be managed in this new age of publishing. Indeed, such attempts at understanding how databases will cope with e-texts, requires a significant amount of organisation (Bearman, 1995; Webber, 1995; Dementi, 1999). For example, Harnard (1995) distinguishes between different kinds of texts that demand alternative strategies and considerations in order to understand how electronic publication might affect them. Drawing a distinction between *trade* and *esoteric* texts (the latter referring to those writings that are intended for a small, specialist audience), Harnard recognises that the use of electronic publications for each will vary and present different kinds of challenge for the documentalist.

It is with the so-described esoteric publications that the current article is primarily concerned. The interest here is to understand the

significance of *information-becoming-digital* rather than being published in hard-copy. As Ruhleder (1995: 182) notes,

the culture of classical scholarship is undergoing such a change as more materials are becoming available in electronic form....These computer-based texts and search tools are changing the textual landscape of classicists' work. They alter the delicate linkages between past and present members of the professional community, and between scholar and text...

What are the consequences for inter-personal communication or understanding the other that derive from text becoming electronic? I suggest that the temporality of e-texts implies a techno-dystopian narrative for how information is communicated, relayed, and found. My concern is that, if the technology stops working and the works of critical cyber-authors are lost, where will history be found?

The constitutive elements of this article are structured to outline various issues and concerns related to the temporality of e-texts in the development of human knowledge *through text*. '(Con)text' presents literature that speaks to the problems with electronic text and gives a background of related issues. In so doing, it reveals two critical elements that lead to the main concerns of my thesis: the dystopian outlook on the prospects of electronic publishing and the nature of hypertext. '(Pro)text' responds to the previous literature, arguing in favour of producing e-texts, describing what gives them an interpretive edge over other methods of publishing. With this more optimistic view of how e-texts can provide greater opportunities for constructing meaning through language, '(Sub)text' offers a further problematisation of the new issues raised by the '(Pro)text' section. It

is offered less as a conclusion than as an introduction to a subsequent paper. Finally, it is important to note that this text is not intended for individuals seeking to learn about the possibilities of using electronic publishing. It is written primarily for cyber-theorists-authors-readers-publishers, collectively named within as *e-texters*.

(Con)text

Hybrid text means loss

In lay discussions about the development of writing for electronic publication, it is not uncommon to engage with notions of *loss* to describe the paradigm shift. Frequently, comparisons between e-texts and print copy provokes reactions that conclude the former as lacking some valued characteristics associated necessarily with the latter - though often quite what is this quality, aside from the aesthetic, sensory experience of holding an object, remains unexplored.

Loss of orientation

Virilio (1995) argues that the translation of texts to hypertexts and the opportunity of 'publishing' provided by the World Wide Web, results in a saturation of information that is difficult for a reader to navigate.

Together with the build-up of information superhighways we are facing a new phenomenon: loss of orientation. A fundamental loss of orientation complementing and concluding the societal liberalization and the deregulation of financial markets whose nefarious effects are well-known. A duplication of sensible reality, into reality and virtuality, is in the making. A stereo-reality of sorts threatens. A total loss of the bearings of the individual looms large. To exist, is to *exist*

in situ, here and *now*, *hic et nunc*. This is precisely what is being threatened by cyberspace and instantaneous, globalized information flows (Virilio, 1995, HTML).

Virilio's *loss of orientation* implies that reading choices soon become arbitrary. This is not to say that the choice to read or to continue browsing is taken by chance or accident or even that it lacks personal meaning. Rather, it is a choice based upon partial knowledge: where there exist too many kinds of partial knowledge; the choice is arbitrary therefore. To build on Virilio, in the context of e-text, the very notions of *navigation* and *orientation* are misplaced. Taken literally, Microsoft's Internet Explorer slogan 'Where do you want to go today?' is often left unanswered or answered with an eager optimism for not wanting to know. A desire for orientation has been replaced with a desire for exploration. Consequently orientation is both lost and renounced to for the greater good of exploration: the web surfer as adventurer.

Loss of quality

The opportunity for e-texts to replicate quality standards associated with good publications removes the possibility of *finding* quality. The reader is liberated from elitist assumptions about mediocre texts and being uncertain about where one should begin looking for good written texts. This suggestion builds on Nunberg and Violi, who argue that 'Computers don't preserve the social and material boundaries... they disrupt the properties embodied in the notion of publishing' (1996: 124). Franking (1997) concurs, adding that:

I don't think removing control of publishing from the hands of a few communications conglomerates, whose bottom line is money, is such a terrible thing. Sure, a lot of junk will get published on the Internet. But, take a look at most of the books sold at large chainstores. Are they really the purveyors of any culture to which you want to be seriously connected? (HTML)

However, Virilio's thesis is directed to the possibility of *finding* quality. The difficulty with electronic publishing is not that quality will be lessened. It is not simply, as David Jay Bolter claims, that 'the authority of the author' (Bolter, 1991; p.153) is in question. Indeed, it can be argued that quite the opposite is the case. Where standards of quality are blurrier, e-texts reveal the author to the reader based solely on the written word. In the publishing structures of conventional publishing, the standards of quality associated with much written material are inextricable from their political context – the quality of the publisher's reputation, the composition of an editorial board, and so on. With e-text, each new reader must confront the written word in isolation; it must be evaluated on its own merit and not on the basis of where it is located or with whom it is associated.¹ This would seem a positive and liberating aspect of e-texts, where previously the very act of printing a text 'tended to give that form of the text an authority and a permanence which in fact it rarely deserved' (Reynolds & Wilson, 1974:187 cited in Ruhleder, 1995, p.193).

¹ In this sense, one might question whether it is a loss of orientation or a sharpening of focus that takes place through e-text. This omits the (con)text of the institution hosting the pages, but the subject of this discussion is not strictly in respect of institutional voices, but more about the inconsistency of archiving within such institutions.

An alternative position is to consider that e-texts present no significant challenge for the structures of social control. Instead, they replicate elitist conglomerates; a division between those who 'know' which are the best publications and those who cannot find their way cursing their search engines. From this perspective, the network age has the same connotations that social structures have always had (which has no bearing upon one's access to the Internet). One is not free from social constraints on the web. Indeed, the restrictions and barriers are *more* problematic because they are less visible and in binary code.

A good example of how this loss of quality (or explosion of quality) can reduce the merit of intellectual publishing is found in its impact upon plagiarism. With the overwhelming saturation of e-texts, it is far easier to be published (and to plagiarise) or for one to find an audience for whom one's work is interesting. The explosion of sub-disciplines in writing makes it possible to fit one's writing to the interests of an audience and bring to it ideas that are both new and old, innovative and mediocre. Plagiarism adopts a new guise in an era of saturated publishing, since it becomes far more difficult to detect and far easier to amalgamate different works into seemingly new (or sufficiently different) arguments. Increasingly, students at various levels are downloading their essays from the web, trying to fool the professors. This forces teachers to consider how best to assess key skills and understanding. It also forces questioning the standards of review for publishing.

Understanding: reading language

A special feature of e-texts is their constructed *hyperness*, which is perhaps also their most familiar characteristic. Yet, for such an important term, hypertext is often used in a fairly idiosyncratic manner and often inaccurately and vaguely. It is not uncommon to confuse *text that is on a screen* with *hypertext*, which is text on a screen that can be clicked with a mouse. To clarify, distinctions must be drawn between e-text (that which is found on a screen) and hypertext (that which includes an `<a href>` html tag or other forms of coding information with which one can interact). The latter is hyper by way of it being linkable; it is possible to click on the text and to go elsewhere. Such text is active or, unlike other kinds of texts, it can be acted upon by a user-controlled pointer. Importantly, the possibility of hypertext presupposes the existence of plain-text – non-active or static text.² If all text were hypertext, then it would be a rather odd and disorientating situation. One would be perpetually travelling without stopping to read (*hyperblink*). Also, the use of the concept hypertext and its significance derives from it being linkable or active. This kind of text is conceptually interesting precisely because it challenges the static nature of plain-text or, more properly, non-hypertext. However, there is also a sub-level of hyperness that is omitted in this articulation, which, contrary to this previous description, refutes the importance of the term *text* in hypertext.

² From this, it can also be seen how one of the most common terms used in Internet jargon -- hyperlink -- is rather erroneous. Based upon the ideas presented about hypertext, for the term hyperlink to be sensible requires there to be links that are not hyper. In terms of the web, such links do not exist. A link is hyper by definition. There are no links on the Internet -- there are only hyperlinks. It is interesting to consider why it is then, that the term hyperlink is used at all, save for the accidental connotations it has with the world-wide web.

World Wide Webs

The Internet has not always been viewed through graphic-based browsers such as Internet Explorer (IE) and Netscape. As recent as 1996, many users were still using a text-based interface to view html pages. Such browsers would not display the html, and text was hyper, though text was white on a black background, comparable to the familiar MS-DOS screen format. In these early years, the world-wide-web, as seen through the current browsers and the sense of hyperness that derives from this new software, is relatively new. However, the replacement of old technology by new tends to focus critics on the spectacularity and innovation of the new to the neglect of the old. This is not surprising, as with new technology there are new and exciting implications becoming manifest frequently, such as the convergence of communication technologies.. One cannot fail to find something socially profound to discuss in this current age of computing changes. Accordingly, given the growing figures of Internet usage, it is conceivable that a vast majority of users were never part of the text-based browsing community of not so long ago. Undoubtedly, graphical browsers have completely overshadowed their predecessors, at least for most web surfers if not also for the technophiles.³ Thousands of 'web-designers' are now stuck in Chinese rooms, divorced from the language and meaning of HTML.⁴

³ It is relevant to note the vast communities of text-based MUDs and MOOs that run counter to this claim, though these users would seem firmly in the technophile category as it is intended here.

⁴ This reference to John Searle's (1980) challenge to Alan Turing's (1950) test for artificial intelligence means to imply that WYSISWYG users are, in fact, not intelligent programmers, but merely functional symbol-translators.

These matters are important because a great deal of cyber-theorising about hyperness tends to have neglected the earlier Internet years and their importance for defining what makes text hyper, this ideological interface. Such cyber-theorising also tends not to consider how a *graphical*-browser problematises the notion of text. This is alarming precisely because the term hypertext was not formulated with present and emerging technologies in mind. In the case of new software such as Macromedia's Flash, the use of hypertext, as a defining characteristic of either the web or of text, becomes even more inadequate. Indeed, for such software the text is often predominantly image than text, ungraspable and flat, layered with a virtual and invisible hyperness (and the same might be said of image-maps).⁵ Both image-maps and Flash are certainly hyper, but it is questionable whether they are text. Consequently, the sub-level of hyperness, which is really what is of interest when discussing hypertext, derives from the nature of the browser, rather than some new characteristic of text.

This argument suggests that the concept of 'text' will become increasingly uninteresting or useless. Text fails to describe anything meaningful about how people engage with information... Moreover, the term *hypertext* seems far more an accident of electronic writing than reflective of any necessary or important characteristic. With regard to the dominant vehicle of electronic publishing – the web –

⁵ It is not even clear that there is a relationship between the hyper and the text in hypertext in the case of image-maps. Within html, the image map is simply an attribute of the image within which text is not distinguished even though it is visible. Thus, the text aspect of an image-map is synonymous with its visual aspects, such as width, height, and border size.

hypertext is an additional component to e-texts. However, clear examples are emerging of how hypertext can be used to alter the nature of a text. In particular, McAdams and Berger (2001) demonstrate (as opposed to argue) how it is possible to challenge linearity in manuscript production without any significant disruption to the author's intentions to convey meaning.⁶ Increasingly, when preparing a manuscript for electronic publication, an author will construct the paper alongside the web-structure, allowing interactivity between the medium and the content, which has not been so relevant (or possible) in formal methods of academic writing.

Consequently, despite seeming to be illogical, it can be conceded that hypertext is afforded its name because it appears to be more dynamic than the conventional printed text. (Importantly, then, hypertext is a comparative term.) Nevertheless, this concept of hypertext is still a rather narrow one upon which to base a discussion about the significance of e-texts. While one might understand the historical antecedents that render it so, it is not clear why hypertext has been elevated to a special status above other kinds of (e)text. More specifically, it is not clear that the hyperness of e-texts is their more interesting facet. Instead, the fact of the text being electronic

⁶ A further interesting aspect of the approach in McAdams and Berger (2001) is how its distortion of structure makes it problematic to cite the work. There is no homepage address in the conventional sense and one is left to include in the citation simply a reference to a folder. Arguably, the absence of a home page is fundamental in e-texts that aspire to disrupt linearity. Even if a reader can find their way through a text to their chosen end, it would seem important also to allow the possibility of a chosen (and thus arbitrary) starting point. However, I have not seen any single article attempt such an ambitious and conceptually problematic approach to writing.

(which is included within the term hypertext) is what raises the more disturbing discourse of losses.

The broader notion of e-text allows for a much wider discussion of how its medium disrupts what is understood by the term *text*. Indeed, other examples of e-text demonstrate how this is the case. In particular, within real-time interactions, e-text disrupts spatial and temporal boundaries. Due to the entire conversation being recorded while the participants type, the phenomenon of mis-understanding or mis-hearing – that priceless facet of humanness - is eliminated. There is no possibility for mis-hearing or forgetting something. It is even possible to go backwards in a conversation while it is still taking place, since the entire communication is recorded on the screen as it is written. As such, text-based relationships introduce a dimension of conversing that is not feasible to achieve in other contexts. Understanding the construction and relevance of hypertexts is thus critical to realising why it is that e-texts are alarming for e-texters (see (Sub)text).

(Pro)text

Despite the claim that the problem with e-texts is a variety of losses, which are strengthened by the responses to literature in (con)text, there are a number of positive aspects to e-texts that are important to recognise. Importantly, there is a middle ground between out-right pessimism and naive futurology. Substantial attention has been afforded to the issue of whether e-texts are better for the finances of academic institutions, by removing publishing and subscription burdens. Perhaps one of the best examples of the emerging electronic 'review machine' is found through the Bench>Press

(<http://benchpress.highwire.org>) manuscript processing system, which makes it possible for authors, reviewers, editors, and publishers to mechanise the process of review in publishing. Currently, Bench>Press works with a number of high-traffic medical journals, such as the British Medical Journal, the website of which also provides an excellent example of how the process of review and response can be found.⁷ There is a persuasive case for why this form of review and publishing is desirable for academic associations and individuals involved with publishing. The speed of review and the possibility for not being tied to a publication date need not detract from the importance of a publication.⁸

In contrast, Rohe (1998) suggests that standards within academia will not easily yield to the values of electronic publishing. Indeed, Ruhleder (1995, p.193) notes that, 'materials presented in electronic form are often granted an undeserved authority because of the "scientific" objectivity attributed to the medium.' However, this possibility does not lend credibility to the argument that such standards are inherently valuable... Instead, 'how to thwart prose' aims to establish further merits to electronic publishing on the basis of rejecting arguments that claim e-text does, indeed, entail a loss of something(s).

⁷ To understand how the Bench>Press system functions for an author or editor, it is most useful to register (for free) and try using the interface. It is further interesting to examine the British Medical Journal from the perspective of understanding how readers' responses provide an endless discussion board for articles. A particularly good example can be found in the recent paper by Moynihan (2003), which includes a significant amount of discussion.

⁸ CTHEORY is an interesting journal within cultural studies to study as an example of how 'becoming electronic' implies no less of a presence.

How to thwart prose

The claim about aesthetics

First, it is useful to address the importance of the aesthetic. One of the central questions that would appear to consume critics of e-text (and book lovers) is whether reading such media or e-books is less enjoyable than reading a printed, bound book. From this point of view, a printed, bound book has an aesthetic richness and depth that is unique. In contrast, an e-book is dry, hardware, cold and lacking in aesthetic value. First, it should be said that e-publishing does not necessarily imply having to choose one or the other. Home binding and normal printing allows for the reader to choose their preferred aesthetic experience of reading.

The stronger reaction to such claims is to note them as being reflective of sentimentality for tradition rather than a critical theorising on the aesthetics of book reading. Certainly, there might be something aesthetically pleasing about reading a printed book, just as there is something uniquely aesthetic about handwriting. However, the aesthetic experiences are interchangeable: a computer aesthetic can replace a printed aesthetic. The desire to open a book does not exist for some inherent quality or aesthetic of book opening or reading. It is replaceable with the aesthetic of, say, disk loading or booting-up.

It can be conceded that, still, there is a demise of the art of handwriting with the emergence of e-text. However, art is morphic by nature and it might be expected that the movement of fingers on a keyboard can entail a rhythmic, creative aesthetic experience, which

is also pleasurable.⁹ Arguably, touch-typing has many elements that make it a creative and aesthetically pleasing activity, besides simply what is written on the screen. The sound of a tapping keyboard can evoke as much aesthetic content as a pencil scribbling along a page. Indeed, the breadth of digital, computer art that exists today strengthens this idea.

Thus, the value of text associated with handwriting seems contingent and its manifestation as pen and paper is arbitrary, as was its manifestation as quill and ink or hammer, chisel or slate.¹⁰ This does not seem to be the case in some languages such as Chinese, where the importance of creating the written word is inextricably tied to it being hand-written. For some, such writing is more similar to painting than to writing. But this only reinforces the artistic, non-literal, importance of writing, which does not seem lost in e-text, merely altered. Indeed, Coniam (1992) is critical of such value in any case, considering it to be a case of extreme misplaced emphasis rather than richness tied to the art of writing.

The claim about learning

A more pragmatic concern about the development of e-texts as a standard reading and writing medium derives in part from similar fears about how the typed word will affect the levels of ability to write

⁹ Indeed, it is only for the fact that typing, computing, and word-processing in general have been more associated with work than anything else that they have such non-artistic connotations. This need not remain the case with the dissolution of boundaries already taking place with PC game-playing (rather than console) and the integration of the home computer with other non-work aspects of life.

¹⁰ This kind of discourse leads into a rather nihilistic approach to aesthetics, which might require further evaluation.

with a pen or pencil. (However, one might raise comparable fears in relation to how the electronic calculator gives rise to idle minds, unable to think for themselves.) Fears of this kind can be seen as synonymous partially with a fear of the machinic, which one might also link to the claim about aesthetics. Focusing specifically on the case of e-texts, it is unclear whether there is any basis for considering that people will learn less effectively through e-texts than with printed copy. A reasonable approach is to recognise both forms as providing different kinds of learning opportunity. However, it does not seem persuasive that the production of e-texts will be to the detriment of learning. Indeed, current trends in education suggest a trend towards greater interactivity in learning, and the emergence of endless CR-ROMs is some reflection of this interest.

Nevertheless, Coniam (1992) argues that the transition from pen and paper, to keyboard and screen changes the way in which one approaches writing. Already computing has changed the way in which children learn mathematics. However, Coniam does not perceive this to be negative since electronically mediated education provides the opportunity to focus upon the content of the written word rather than the skill of handwriting. As Coniam argues, this provides a greater appreciation for other aspects of text-production, such as the perception of form. Coniam claims that, 'Keyboard and display will make composing, creating, expressing and story-telling easy and fun instead of boring and hard. "Look what I did!" will be the cry, not "Do I have to copy it over?"' (HTML). This is not to endorse a rejection of hard-work or to conclude that learning to write by hand is necessarily boring and that learning should be driven by computer interactivity. Rather, it is to note that there is something special about a computer-based form of learning that seems to be particularly conducive to

enhancing learning, if it is used well, and that this might supplant other kinds of teaching method.

From rejecting the claims to aesthetics and learning, it can be argued that e-text offers an opportunity to confront traditional methods of producing and engaging with text that are innovative and beneficial. McAdams and Berger (2001) argue that this can be the case for a wide range of texts, stating that:

it is not only desirable but also necessary to move journalistic, nonfiction, and even scholarly writing in a direction made possible by hypertext...hypertext forms improve the reader's experience of reading, and therefore, hypertext is better for telling particular nonfiction stories. (HTML)

Moreover, to the traditionalist who would still claim that there is something special about print copy, Marshall Poe has a particularly appropriate response:

Of course there are those who feel that the death of the old model is a step backward into barbarity. These are the same people who feel TV is evil incarnate, computers are soulless machines, and pop lyrics aren't modern poetry. They will go away, and we will all be happier and better informed. This is not to say that there is no downside to the new world of academic publishing. For example, we book lovers will have to say goodbye to piles of cheap remainders in the basements of bookshops. In the e-book/POD world, every book will have an owner. But I for one will not be sorry to see even remainders go – it's embarrassing to see your books there, languishing, unread, unwanted. (*ibid*, 2001, HTML)

(Sub)text

There are further levels of loss that have been alluded to in this analysis, though they are of a somewhat different nature. This (sub)text will be described as the *disappearance of history*, though it derives from other kinds of loss that have also been omitted.

Loss of content

The first of these losses develops the underpinning theoretical texts, notably Virilio's, which claim that the emergence of e-texts necessitates a loss of orientation and quality. The reader is saturated by texts, where pictures are no longer graphical, but codified and read as such. In a struggle for orientation, the (e)texter is unwittingly seeking to refute Wittgenstein and get between words and the world. Stripping away all elements of non-text, the avatar engages with a pure noise, a singularity. As Kroker and Weinstein (1996) reveal:

Data is the anti-virus of meaning - telematic information refuses to be slowed down by the drag-weight of content. And the virtual class seeks to exterminate the social possibilities of the Internet. These are the first lessons of the theory of the virtual class (HTML).

Indeed, there are markers of these pseudo-classes in the structure of websites.¹¹ Simplistically, the different classes can be characterised

¹¹ This reference to a virtual class bears only a fleeting likeness to that conceived in Kroker and Weinstein (1996). Indeed, it might be more a sub-culture that is denoted by my commentary, which endeavours to reveal a techie culture of authors out there, that see through the Information Highway in an academic (and thus, non-commercial) sense. This culture is not one that seeks ownership or exploitation of the web, but sees that it offers a mode of communication that is approaching greater clarity as its users become more cognisant with how to handle it.

as either the "what you see is what you get (WYSIWYG)" kind or the "HTML writer" kind. The exigent author is unimpressed with flash graphics and animation, preferring uncomplicated hyper-links and small, functional, plain text. They are concerned with such questions as: Are you only a reader? A browser? A writer? Do you have animation on your website? Do you fill the screen with graphics? Do your links work? Do you use freeware? Do you write in HTML? Can you edit code? Websites reveal one's cyber-status, not through their content or by the information provided within them; their cyber-status - or, more accurately, the cyber-status of their author - is revealed in the HTML, the underpinning code. The information presented is a waste product of the HTML.

Consequently, word and image are re-negotiated through e-text, but this negotiation does not lead, to the dominance of image, as might be the impression based upon surfing the commercial or public-relations websites. Rather the re-negotiation occurs through the dominance of abstraction, non-images and non-words - no less symbolic, but codified differently - an Esperanto of binary, html, and the written word as image. The leading websites (insofar as challenging the notion of textness) are not those with the most exciting interactive, flashy graphics. Indeed, the notion of interactivity has very little bearing upon the problematisation of text. It is, as Sewell (1992) notes, a process of *textualisation* in all aspects of text creation.¹² The author, reader, publisher and, notably, the text itself, coalesce with an ambition of re-representation.

¹² One might wish to draw a comparison between Sewell's language and that of Sandbothe's (1998) *scriptualisation*, which seem to be discussing rather similar ideas.

Loss of data

There is a further loss that is not accounted for by the (pre)text to this article. While it has been suggested by the (pro)text section that the emergence of e-text is a desirable situation, it is not without further concerns. This leads to the final and main contention of the present thesis, *the disappearance of history*, for which 'loss of data' is a prelude.

The loss of data is encountered by most world-wide-web users in the following message: "Error!...404 Not Found". This iconic HTML message is displayed whenever a page is no longer archived on the server to which the Uniform Resource Locator (URL) is pointed. It is, perhaps, comparable to arriving at a person's address and finding that the house is no longer there.

The loss of data encountered when receiving this message necessitates that it is not simply quality that cannot be found. Rather, it is also that the e-text and all of its information or data is temporal, contingent upon the location and *outlook* of the host. This is particularly relevant in respect of web-based texts. Within academia, electronic journals are located increasingly within university servers rather than publishing house websites, though the university website is a frustratingly unstable entity (and it is not clear that the domain of publishing houses offers any greater stability). Frequently, journals are lost, no longer published, or simply moved to another location without reference or mention – even to the current readership. For the prospecting reader, endeavouring to understand what has happened to any such publication becomes insufferable. The problem is accentuated by enthusiastic academics who wish to set up their

own resource of articles or e-journal, but whom do not register their publications with archiving bodies or international registers. The work might be critical for the discipline to which it speaks, but it exists only for as long as the servers are active. When the server or hosts move, the work is lost.

One might respond by suggesting that efficient linking and communication will ensure that significant works are not lost. Indeed, print copies will still exist, as users will tend to print out the work. However, accepting Spinello's (1999) conclusions, it might be the case that linking will be insufficient as it is not clear that all kinds of linking will be morally or legally justifiable. As Spinello explains, the saturation of legislation surrounding the use of the web may collapse any possibilities for such links for the good of the reader. Something as simplistic as 'deep-linking', has given rise to significant legal disputes. Spinello describes the case between Ticketmaster and Microsoft, where one of Microsoft's sites 'Seattle Sidewalk' (a recreational guide),

provided many links to related Web sites including a link to Ticketmaster, which operates a popular ticket selling Web site. That link, however, bypassed the Ticketmaster home page and went directly to the respective pages for purchases to events listed in the Seattle Sidewalk page. For instance, a listing on the Seattle Sidewalk page for the Seattle Symphony would include a direct link to a Ticketmaster sub-page that would allow users to purchase their symphony tickets.

This process of deep-linking caused concern for Ticketmaster due to its claim for lost revenue due to users not being exposed to extensive advertising and announcements posted on its homepage.

Such legal difficulties concerning the linking of information provide systems of protection for rights holders rather than authors or readers – comparable to present circumstances in the majority of academic publishing.

Loss of History

Electronic communications make possible reaching iconic authors, official persons, and immediately finding lost friends and family.¹³ If it is not possible to find a person's email, then it is not complicated to guess what it might be if one has some rudimentary information about where the individual works. Contacting these kinds of people, no matter how brief and trivial the interaction, makes possible the collapsing of social barriers that have previously existed due to space and time, though more importantly, through accessibility. There is always the possibility that one's contact will be welcomed and will provide an opportunity for dialogue. Sceptics will claim that the postal service has offered such possibilities for many years and that electronic communications are simply a faster version. Indeed, such persons might argue that email devalues communications because it is so accessible for people who have a computer and telephone connection. From such a perspective, the idea of writing a letter by hand still has a special value that demonstrates a greater sincerity for wanting to make contact with someone, where email simply requires clicking on a screen and keyboard.

¹³ See the recently famed Friends Reunited. <http://friendsreunited.com/>

However, electronic communications offer a degree of immediacy (speed) and anonymity (and even intimacy) that makes easier the time and self-image loss that is risked by entering into such interactions (Sewell, 1992). Arguably, writing an email does not require the same level of self-commitment than does letter writing. For this reason, it offers the opportunity to be bolder with one's correspondence. In response, there might be a trade off for this liberating technology. The greater speed of communication is negated by temporal presence of such information. This claim is not based upon the physical presence of email or lack of it. Rather it suggests that the magnitude of email that the average daily user receives and sends, creates a greater difficulty to manage one's correspondence. Additionally, this volume of contact makes it far more difficult to maintain a record of one's correspondence, thus reducing the depth of communications. In this sense, I suggest that electronic communications are becoming "out of control" in a way that refutes Bey's (1997) idea that the most out of control method of communication is the postal service (snail mail). We are misled into believing that the current status of email is an indication of how the future will look. Already, email is becoming overcome with spam and the volume of email lists further adds to the improbable ability to engage with text in any in-depth manner. There is, then, a sense of space-time-compression (Kitchin, 1998) within cyberspace though, paradoxically, e-texters continue to lack enough time. Space-time-compression seems far too limited a description of how life in cyberspace is managed.

However, the significant point is that the loss of control through email is on the part of the user, as opposed to the delivering system. For

the e-texter, emails are sent and often lost, unless one keeps a record of all mails – a process that is made even more difficult by software and hardware swapping.¹⁴ One's personal contact network is so much more vast through the web, that speed is exchanged for depth. E-texts mean that personal correspondence is not printed out in hard copy. Nobody will ever know with whom I was writing, because one day these emails will be deleted or I will have other interests and the past will not seem relevant to keep. There is no time to back-up every single email. It is too much work. The desire for the historical documenting of interactions is replaced by the desire for speed. Electronic correspondence does thus, not only replace letter writing, but also conversation. Couple this technology with the hugely popular text-messaging from mobile telephones (at least in Europe) and one can observe a silencing of culture, deafened (and blinded) by the written word.

From this description, it is a little clearer how the textualising of language makes it impossible to track history. A suitable analogy might be to suggest that it would be comparable to recording all of one's personal interactions, every telephone conversation, every lunchtime chat. Such has become the obsession with text-based information. Each single interaction becomes an event in electronic correspondence. The dinner-table conversation becomes an observed and recorded ritual.

Internet Relay Chat (IRC) records conversation, giving a moment of disjointed time, which, when read back seem ridiculous. Yet, these

¹⁴ A reasonable analogy for such a process would be to transfer all the data in one's agenda, while also keeping a track of the correspondence that has been made -- forever -- with each person within its contents.

moments are lost upon clicking the cross in the window, which promptly closes it and deletes the record. Memories, moments, and conversations are immortalised in the written word and, seconds later, lost. In the end, there is too much to record; too much information. Delete the email. Delete the conversation. Delete the memory. Delete history.

Nevertheless, the seductiveness of speed has rendered a situation where electronic texts imply the end for the printed and spoken word. As Sandbothe explains:

In computer mediated communication features which previously served as differential criteria for the distinction between language and writing are becoming entangled. The transitions between language and writing become fluid. The traditional distinction of spoken language as a medium of presence is undermined by the 'appresent presence' of the participants in the written conversation of on-line Chat....It is this performative writing of a conversation in which language is interactively written instead of spoken, that I call *the tendency toward scriptualization* of language (1998, HTML).

This is the case both for personal correspondence and for writing substantial works. Work now depends upon technological crutches to justify and sustain increasing levels of output. Consequently, users are saturated with information and memory is replaced with hard-drive space. Technology makes writing possible by bringing to one's immediate attention all the works that have been causal in creating knowledge. Rather than having to remember facts, arguments, meanings, thinkers or ideas, one is able to find the evidence that reinforces the partial memory or imprint of ideas. Indeed, this is

necessary for e-texters, since it is not possible to remember all the works that inform ideas. Fortunately, neither is it necessary to do so. Personal bibliographic database software such as EndNote or ProCite allows one to work in a similar manner to IBM's super-computer, Deep Blue: strategise an idea, establish what must be its key components, retrieve them, select through content searches which are the relevant aspects, and arrange in a coherent structure following standardised formats. Writing has become a conceptual art form in cyberspace. The idea is then made manifest by the technical (unskilled) process of writing. However, the reason for why this seems disturbing is that one fears what will happen if the technology no longer functions. If the PC shuts down and never starts up; if the web is suddenly no longer there, what then? What if it isn't available at "http:..."? Will the author be reduced to the impotent capabilities of a programmeless robot? Will ideas and theories continue to evolve at the same pace with the same level of insights?

The possibility of e-texts to become the dominant medium of delivering information is alarming specifically because it threatens enlightenment values of recording and documenting. The obsession with preserving historical actions, biography and autobiography are complicated by the fluidity of information within e-text. Therefore, the challenge for e-texters is to ascertain how to re-define what constitutes the making of history. The keeping of records requires radical re-theorising. Indeed, the concept of a "record" might require removing altogether. This process requires evaluating what is historically valuable about texts and questioning what aspects of publishing are important to preserve. From this analysis, neither hyperness nor textness seems sufficient to demonstrate what is profound about the re-construction of text through hypertext.

Instead, one might feel a sympathy for Moulthrop's (2000) conclusion that, "Hypertext," after all, begins with that nasty four-letter word' (HTML). For Moulthrop, there is a strong sense of having been cheated out of knowing what is significant about this electronic world of multi-texts. It is suggested here that the focus should be on the manner in which people engage with e-texts, not their being 'hyper', but the way in which weaving through and between texts changes an appreciation for knowledge and how it is constructed. There is a context to e-texts that makes the paper onto which the words (e-text) are placed, which makes it socially significant. If cyberspace is, indeed, a 'consensual hallucination' (Gibson, 1984, p.51), then it is because it fools users into seeing only the text, hyper or otherwise, when the focus should have been on what is behind the text and between the lines, the (sub)text.

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