'Twitter': Practice in Writing
A recipe for Creativity & Creative Interpretation

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Abstract

This paper will explore how the way we read on the screen can create new forms of collaborative writing online. With reference to our 'Twitter: Practice in Writing' workshops in London 2014 and Vancouver 2015. As a younger generation move swiftly from print to pixel, reading no longer becomes deliberate and concentrated but rather a scan for information as our eyes follow an F-shaped pattern. Screen-reading encourages rapid pattern-making, provoking action, whereby words are merged with images. From scroll to moveable type, will twitter 'novels' give rise to twitter brains? How does it affect what we read and write? Has this change been recognized in the publishing industry?

Keywords

Screen; Reading, Writing, Graphics, Twitter, Novels; Brains: Technology; Type;

Introduction

In order to understand how screen writing and screen reading have evolved, a series of 'Twitter: a practice in writing' workshops were devised in London 2014. The first steps of this workshop devised ways for dismantling the most obvious and accepted of connections, be they between words, colours, shapes, or ideas. Then brought these elements together, in ways that have never been linked before. The critical issue here is that the new combination of colours/words/ideas must trigger new extensive connections and 'meaningful' associations in both the creator and ideally others. Mere linkages between disparate themes and concepts are insufficient, as witnessed in many drug-takers' meaningless ramblings or schizophrenics neologisms, creating only nonsense words.

We see the world, thanks to the creation in a new way because the extensive and therefore 'meaningful' associations have formed in our brains, previously triggered by these novel juxtapositions of previously disparate elements [3].

This changes clearly develops through our younger generations. Young people moved from print to pixel, today some 4.5 billion digital screens illuminate our lives. Words have migrated from wood pulp to pixels on computers, laptops, tablets and phones, with *our"...digital screens illuminate our lives... Letters are no longer fixed in black ink on pa-*per, but flitter on a glass surface in a rainbow of colors as fast as our eyes can blink...We are now people of the screen...these newly ubiquitous screens have changed how we read and write." *Kevin Kelly 2010*

Writing does not come naturally

The 2014 workshop was the starting point to illustrate the development of a framework that analyzed the use and production of typographic forms and text, which were influenced by the media-specific potentials of emerging technologies. The process aided design practitioners in their creative thinking and writing. The purpose of the workshop was to obtain a clearer understanding of opinions held by participants on the application and role of screen based text. By identifying the different natures of the interactive screen, media practitioners were able to experiment with creative methodologies. The workshop was designed to function as an ongoing series of experiments to further our understanding the nature of writing, and captured something of the elusive moment when thoughts turn into words. Moreover, the workshop explored how new media affects established design processes in terms of clarity of communication. If one is to achieve an understanding on the unique potentials of the development of typographic form, it is important to bear in mind the conditions in which the new media and new technologies influence the designing process.

The workshop outcome was informed by an understanding of the creative process as a holistic action with the capacity to simultaneously achieve both epistemological and ontological shifts. Furthermore it provided educators, researchers and students the opportunity to challenge the most obvious and accepted of connections, creatively, be they between a variety of words, that affected by colors, created by unique and experimental shapes, or innovative ideas. Whilst it became clear that they were not reading on line in the traditional sense, they were engaging in what is termed "power browsing' through links, blogs and all forms of social media. This is supported by the British Library's report (2008) where researchers found that everyone, *"exhibits a bouncing/flickering behavior, which sees them searching horizontally rather than vertically... Users are*

promiscuous, diverse and volatile." They navigate, they skim, and they pick out only key words.

Mass production

Despite the concerns raised in the previous paragraph, the usability of webpage's does allow for new forms of writing to emerge. These forms are based on interaction and dependent on the feedback of others through the unique meshing of graphics and words. It also rewards participation and performance rather than more contemplative behavior that print literacy has exhibited for generations. After all, post Gutenberg mass-produced books in the 15th century changed the way people read and wrote so that the technology of printing expanded the number of words available (from about 50,000 words in Old English to over a million today). More word choices enlarged what could be communicated but in contemporary society, less is more.

Using thumbs instead of pens, it appears that young people collectively write over 12 million tweets that comprise no more than 140 characters, per day from their phone. In terms of issues in contemporary writing, Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, A Visit from the Goon Squad *"an inventive investigation of growing up and growing old in the digital age, displaying a big-hearted curiosity about cultural change at warp speed"* [4], is an exemplar of what is happening. In her follow up work, *Black Box* propels a character from A Visit From the Goon Squad into the 2030s and a world of citizen espionage. But Black Box is only available as an eBook, and The New Yorker, on Twitter, first disseminated it. The tweets ran one a minute for an hour each evening, over ten days, starting on 24 May 2012.

So what do you do if *you* have a novel to write and you are not a Pulitzer Prize winner but you have something to say about your world and want to do this by creative participation? Artist Cory Arcangel's new book is a compilation of those who couldn't resist tweeting the words "working on my novel". Working On My Novel [2]. It's a compilation of tweets, found on twitter by searching for the phrase "working on my novel", and re tweeted by Arcangel's account of the same name. This is but one example, but as the artistic boundaries, in some cases, between producer and consumer in increasingly blurred; the relative ease of digital creation through twitter novels for example and online distribution and feedback may lead to production by the masses that rival production for the masses. The distinction between the producer of culture and the consumer of it is blurred. This is the one of the findings from the Twitter: Practice In Writing workshops from June 2014.

Publishing Industry

Drawing on debates informed by a series of roundtables at the Guardian newspaper (2013, London, UK) and the National Endowment for Science, Arts and Technology (2014, London, UK), writers, lawyers, publishers and economists explored the issues that are impacting on the global publishing industry. Whilst much of the debate tends to focus on digitization and on the transformation of products (books to e-readers, paper to screen) and the developments - called "social creativity"- there appears to be an unlimited source of innovation for social and economic aims. The value of alternative working as well as business models including the formation of new publishing consortia, new cooperative and participatory practices were acknowledged. This has led to the emergence of new economic models that challenge the boundaries between what we have traditionally considered to be the public, private and common realms [7]

For example, there are many small presses in the UK that bridge the gap between writers, new writing and industry, seeking experimentation and innovation where the question of nurturing relationships and collaboration is the primary concern. Smaller presses like SALT, INFLUX or Gallery Beggar Press in the UK ('high class boutique' presses) who publish up to 12 title a year (SALT) or 4 (INFLUX) but the same challenges are face large or small, risk versus money, good editors as good readers and no book sells itself, authors are always key. CompletelyNovel [5] is a self-publishing platform and book community, specializing in print-on-demand publishing which hosts an eclectic mix of authors writing across a whole spectrum of fiction and non-fiction.

What is a Book? What is a Novel?

"Siri write me a novel…"It's pretty easy to make 50k words of nonsense…we want to see is code that produces alien novels that astound us with their sheer alienness. Computers writing novels for computers, in a sense." Stephen Fortune, 2014 [fig 1].

So what is a book or indeed what is a novel? " Ulises Carrion (1985) poses such a question in his essay, '*The New Art of Making Books'* [1]. A book is a sequence of spaces and since each of these is perceived at a different moment, a book is also a sequence of moments; it is an autonomous space-time sequence. The content of a book is contained within the volume of the book. Elements or blocks of the content – both identical with the elements of the book and independent of it and from them texts, images- are organised within the space of the book.

The relationships between them are spatial rather than linear. Whilst the content of the book is organised and
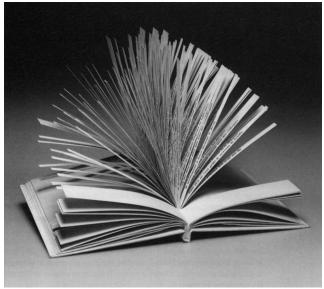

Figure 1. Raymond Queneau's One Hundred Trillion Sonnets

structured simultaneously in space, it is perceived consecutively in time and the time sequence only realised in the process of reading.

It is the reader who chooses where to start in the process of reading, where to stop, how and what to read, how fast, how slow and how attentively. Another example is the "A Thousand Plateaus" written in a non-linear fashion, and the reader is invited to move among plateaux in any order . It shows how such distinctions are operations on the surface of a deeper pasture with further complicated dynamics [8] These stylistic choices are entangled in the book's content, as made apparent in the introductory section on "rhizomes"." Furthermore experimental approaches in writing also appears in Katherine_Hayles book 'Writing Machines' and in Tom Philips "A Humament" where both are exploring alternative techniques of the words through painting, collage and cut-up practices to create an entirely new version of existing writing.

Readers, while welcoming the new generation of electronic reading devices, still buy predominantly paper copies of books. Time and again the conversation leads to blanket statements about 'the end of books' where little attention is paid to the vast potential for new hybrid forms of text, and the fundamental shifts in the writing-reader axis that the new technologies are enabling. Attributing too much agency to technology is often tantamount to the abdication of responsibility, and we are concerned with broadening the discussion toward notions of ethics, collaboration, property and creativity. Is it possible that there is a potential transformation in the *relations* rather than *objects* (books, devices) that characterise the publishing industry?

You turn the page and guided or confronted by its structure, you manipulate the book – and through the interaction between book and reader something is revealed. Sven Birkerts (1946) in The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in the Electronic Age calls this 'deep reading' because we, the reader, are free to "indulge our subjective associative impulses; we dream our lives in their vicinity" and we hear "in the theatre of our auditory inwardness, voices that we conjure as our own as a sound print of the self." (ibid:146)

Birketts has a pessimistic perspective on reading in the electronic age since the printed page and the circuit driven, emerging (defined as information) technologies are not 'kindred' but are staged in opposition, undermining, what he states in his introduction as 'the once stable reader-writer' exchange. In Maryanne Wool's words (2008) "How much syntax is lost. Where is the "slow reading" movement? Will we become Twitter brains?" The brain, after all, is as plastic as words; writing can be as collaborative and social as individually conceived. In fact, as Woolf argues the brain was not designed for reading, as there are no genes involved as there are for language and vision.

The brain has adapted to read, so for one of the authors, my brain has to learn shortcuts to deal with one form of non-linear reading (there are exceptions of course).

Was this ever so? Lawrence Stern's cult classic novel, The Life and Times of Tristram Shandy, written in the mid 1700s, is a rambling mock autobiography packed with eccentric characters, elaborate wordplay and lots of typographical and diagrammatic interaction. In attempting to tell the story of his life, Shandy goes back in time trying to explain to his readers what has shaped him, frequently digressing from his tale according to whatever interesting subject appears to him. He does not even get to the part where he is born until volume three.

An experimental book, hardly neither linear in time nor chronological in structure, is now considered a postmodern tour de force, visually exploiting the resources of print so that the physical shape of the book is expressive to touch and sight concurrently. Chapters are misplaced only to reappear later, out of sequence and out of time. Fragments of learning and intellectual scholarship are peppered with doodles, blank pages and distinctive punctuation that is almost captured in the film 'Cock and Bull' (taken from Tristram Shandy's last sentence) a cinematic labyrinthine directed by Michael Winterbottom in 2005.

Digital thinking

As leading author and developer Dean Johnson ('https://twitter.com/activrightbrain' and author of *#1 Design iBook 'Digital Publishing: The Next Steps'*) has noted, designers, working across platforms, need to re-examine usability. Often rarely an issue for simple print formats with centuries of familiarity, usability now needs to be a major consideration. Today, digital skills – and, even more importantly, a digital mind–set, a willingness to engage

creatively with the new possibilities digital formats create – are a vital part of every publishing department, graphics design school or thinking about writing a collective Twitter novel as we are exploring in our workshops A project that can include writing techniques in collaboration of different mediums, such us interaction, animation and sound. . But, stop for a moment and just look at Twitter and its brisk 140-character declarative sentences.

Creativity and Innovation are supposed and proposed to be key drivers of the UK economy particularly when subsumed under the 'creative industries' label. Can new forms of technology contribute (alongside the old forms of technology) to the re-prioritisation of relations between writers and readers, designers and prosumers, publishers and technology developers, industrialists and inventors? Our twitter workshops and CREATe roundtables suggest that they can. The merging of text and technology (as in YourFry) is but one commercial example [10]. Stephen Fry and Penguin's *YourFry* project has been created to ask questions about the nature of how we create and publish autobiography in the digital environment. The web is responsive, interactive and chaotic – what if the conventional autobiography is thrown open to the web? What might the results look like, what form might they take?

So what do you do if you have a novel to write? Go to Twitter, and tweet about the work you're not doing, of course, Maybe record it, annotate it, use a picture to describe it further, print it record it again, post it and so on…

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Janis is an artist, writer and curator, Professor of Visual Arts, Goldsmiths University of London. As Associate Pro Warden, Creative and Cultural Industries, her current research project, 'Whose Book Is It Anyway? IP, collaborative business models, and questions of ethics and creativity in digital publishing forms', focuses on cultural rights and is funded by the UK Arts and Social Science Councils via the CREATe consortia.

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