# Printed Radicality

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## Abstract

The static and unchangeable printed page seems to be hardly considered in years 2010s as a key tool for political and radical strategies, as human beings are constantly looking at a few personal screen-based devices, most of them updated in real time. But there are a few cultural elements in traditional media, which are still playing a decisive role in the circulation of culture. Among them the recognition of their aesthetic "forms," even if digitised in both design and content. The familiarity with those forms is based on metabolised "interfaces" (we're all culturally "natives" when it comes to radio, TV, and print) that makes them almost invisible, especially when translated for the digital realm, delivering the content in a more direct way. And since we recognise those forms instinctively, we "trust" them, and so we trust their content.

## Keywords

print, publishing, fake, library, digitalisation, plagiarism, wikipedia

## Newspaper as (fake) political imaginary

The form of the newspaper is still one of the most recognisable. What we can consider as the modern form of newspapers has only slightly changed since the 19th Century (except for the inclusion of pictures and colours), becoming a daily medium for quite a few generations, establishing itself as an aesthetic standard and a defined cultural object with its specific interface. That's why artists and activists have often used newspapers as an identifiable information environment and a daily object at the same time. From Andy Warhol's "Headlines" series [1], with huge reproductions of particularly dramatic front pages as frozen in time, to "Modern History" series by Sarah Charlesworth [2], tracking the use of the same picture on different front pages. But a specific conceptual manipulation of newspapers (and the conventional ecosystem surrounding them) has been employed by artists and activists to foster specific ideas. The "fake" newspaper, or accurately reproducing a real newspaper arbitrarily changing its content, has always been able to question the instinctive trust we have in this medium. If making fake copies and freely distributing them in order to attract public's attention (but then revealing as mere advertising flyers) is a remarkably old practice, dating back to the end of 19th century [3], the conscious use of those fakes as a political medium is more recent. In this respect, there are a few effective examples emerging especially in the 1970s. "Il Male" [4], for example, stemmed during the rise of leftist political movements in Italy, and especially the "Creative Autonomism" student movement in 1977. It conducted a few campaigns through fake journalistic "scoops" (all being simultaneously plausible and surrealistic) rendered in major Italian newspapers layouts and attached next to newsstands, generating sometimes quite harsh reactions and a lot of discussions in the streets. In the same years another two actions (officially anonymous) were accomplished. In 1979 in Poland, a fake of the major propaganda newspaper Trybuna Ludu was distributed during Pope John Paul II (Karol Wojtyla)'s visit to his homeland, sporting the banner headline "Government Resigns, Wojtyla Crowned King."[5] And in France, in 1977, a fake Le Monde Diplomatique was anonymously distributed to a certain number of subscribers, featuring very satirical comments on the Rote Armee Fraktion's Stammheim Prison bloodbath [6]. Thirty years later an impressive fake newspaper distributed in several thousand copies invaded the streets in New York City, on November 12, 2008: "The New York Times special edition" by The Yes Men in collaboration with Steve Lambert and The Anti-Advertising Agency, and anonymously sponsored. [7] It was set in the near future (July 4, 2009), featuring only positive news, briefly plausible after Barack Obama's election as U.S. President. The New York Times layout, fonts and graphic design were painstakingly reproduced (including the usual advertisements, satirically changed as well), so the majority of the public was easily fooled. A large network of volunteers distributed it for free in the city, even in front of the New York Times headquarters, without any legal repercussion. What was embodied here was the public imaginary, the articulated hope this historical event generated, historicised then altogether in a stable and recognisable format, without the daily compromises of major media. The group produced another few fakes, one of them in the form of the International Herald Tribune. Italian artist Paolo Cirio, instead, made a project composed by a web application, a workshop and an action in 2011, called in Veritas, It is centred on Italian newspapers, inviting people to invent their own story that can be composed as a headline sheet with the newspaper logo of choice, through the project's website. Then it's fairly easy to print it out and attach it (during the night) close to local

newsstands. [8] The use of fake newspapers in political campaigns has proven not to be a thing of the past. The classic strategy of purchasing a full front page ad, designed to look just like the real front page has been used many times. The Liberal Party in British Columbia did it in 2013, disguising the ad as "official" information, and so generating a whole national media case with polarised reactions about the Party ethics and the high risk of misleading the readers. [8] Even more, in 2011 there was a more direct political newspaper scam, when police identified a network of infringers who had been illegally producing and distributing fake copies of Ziarul de Garda and Timpul, two of Moldova's leading newspapers, trying to manipulate the public opinion ahead of elections by publishing negative articles about the pro-Western ruling coalition. [9]



Figure 1. Il Male, 1978, fake of "La Repubblica" front-page.

## Plagiarism (from print to digital and vice-versa)

Newspaper fakes incorporate some forms of "plagiarism", mostly related to misusing a "standardised" visual form.

This has been technically feasible since the mechanical reproduction of print, and even more with the lightning-fast speed and accuracy of digital (re)production. But the plagiarism of content is much older, and the very concept of plagiarism dates back to the Roman Empire. It was used for the first time by Roman poet Martial, complaining that another poet was "kidnapping" his verses, so he called him "plagiarius", which literally means "kidnapper." These were the verses he used to express his feelings:

*Fama refert nostros te, Fidentine, libellos*
*non aliter populo quam recitare tuos.*
*si mea vis dici, gratis tibi carmina mittam:*
*si dici tua vis, hoc eme, ne mea sint.*

*(Fame has it that you, Fidentinus,*
*recite my books to the crowd as if none other than your own.*
*If you're willing that they be called mine, I'll send you the poems for free.*
*If you want them to be called yours, buy this one, so that they won't be mine.) [11]*

There are plenty of more or less famous cases of literary plagiarism in history, but only some of them were publicly admitted (like the script of the TV series Roots, admittedly plagiarised by his author in some passages from the novel "The African," published nine years before). In contemporaneity, plagiarism seems easier than ever, especially taking advantage from "big data" sophisticated sources like Wikipedia, and so a few critical artworks have been developed consequently. Belgian artist Stéphanie Vilayphiou investigates how free software can deeply question the fixity of the printed page once it's digitised, and how the defensive copyright practices, historically consolidated can be challenged. In particular she writes various transformative software to create controversial versions of literature classics. Specifically, in her net art piece "La carte ou le territoire (The map or the territory)" [12] she selected a controversial book, Michel Houellebecq's "The map and the territory", which became renown and discussed in France for its evident quotes from Wikipedia, never acknowledged by the author nor by the publisher. She retrieved the book's digitised text and then wrote a software filter which parses it in sentences (or part of it) looking for them in the millions of digitised texts contained in Google Books, eventually finding the same sequence of words in any other books. The results are rendered then in their original typefaces, and the parts matching Houellebecq's book are highlighted in yellow. Visually the book is entirely transformed in a sequential digital collage of quotations (whose original authoritative printed context is still maintained in the background), definitively loosing even the last bit of originality. Vilayphiou ultimately questions originality and authorship through software automatisms, turning them into trackable

and technically demonstrable collective thinking. Another example of artistic practice deliberately using other people's writings in a specific context is Traumawien's "Ghostwriter" [13] series. The Viennese group performed a virtual "action" with their own software robots compiling and uploading hundreds of e-books on Amazon.com with text directly stolen from YouTube videos' comments, as if they were abstract dialogues. They have defined it an "auto-cannibalistic" model, and these e-books sport a very classic paperback layout as spontaneous instant books, redirecting the endless flow of comments in a specific form and freezing them in time. This action is obviously re-contextualising the original meanings, setting them in a new scenario and in a new literary form: from personal notes not necessarily relating each other, into a single continuous and sometimes surreal dialogue. What happens in the passage from one medium to another, is that the original spontaneousness and sometimes naïveté of the text once rendered as a book assumes the formal character of the adopted layout. The paradigm of access to "big data" is embedded in practices like the above mentioned, and the software programmer's vision is the only limit to what kind of results and new (digital and printed) forms can consequently be created.
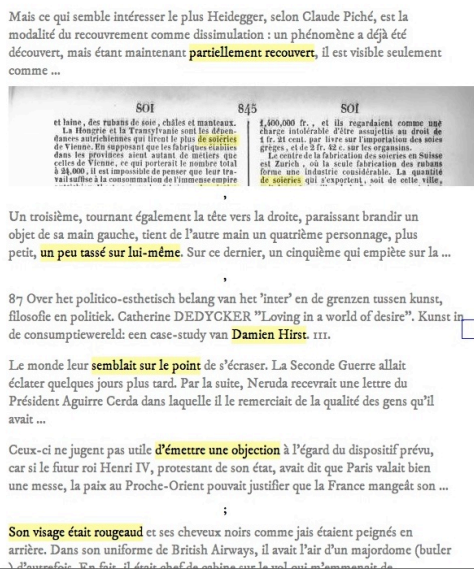


Figure 2. Stéphanie Vilayphiou "La carte ou le territoire" screenshot, 2012.

## Printing as a risky strategy

In the end of years 2000s there has been a few famous and dramatic cases of sensitive information leaks: Wikileaks and its small galaxy of information-wants-to-be-free "heroes" (Julian Assange, Bradley Manning, Edward Snowden) publishing secret or classified information from anonymous sources, and Aaron Swartz and his brave act of freeing the copyrighted academic knowledge of JSTOR [14] (Swartz committed suicide in 2013). The leaks' transmission and acquisition has been totally digital, but then traditional media has been deeply involved to make this information "public" (and implicitly to somehow certify the scale of the action with their innate "authority",) including printed ones, mainly newspapers. At a smaller scale, there are other cases using print as a tool for liberating secret information. Carl Malamud, for example, an activist dealing with the fact that vital parts of US law are secret and that you're allowed to read them only paying a quite high amount of money, has founded Public.Resource.Org [15] organisation, which digitises, and eventually re-publishes public domain materials. He has scanned, OCRed and re-published in print, codes like the "Public safety codes of California" or the "District of Columbia Official Code" including in the print a statement that says "being law, any claim about their copyright by the authorities is "null and void."" Answering the question "why print copies?" Malamud says that the print edition limits distribution with no "side effect of infinite copy" that scares standard and legal people, so making his efforts somehow still acceptable. In this case print is turned into a legally strategic medium of distribution, because of its slow duplication standards, as newspapers have been equally strategic for Wikileaks, being part of a clever tactic that considers the different role and weight of the respective medium, in order to seamlessly accomplish an effective distribution of the content.

## The library, ultimate cultural centre vs. big data repository

*"(Libraries) are nerve centres of intellectual energy [...] knowledge is power [...] and that power should be disseminated and not centralised."*
Robert Darnton, Harvard University library director [16]

The physical library is one of the crucial spaces where the discourse about the new relationships between traditional and digital publishing is taking place. On one side the "global virtual library" is closer than ever with Google investments worth millions of dollars to digitise millions of books, and with plenty of other similar efforts at different scale, including some remarkably vast, independent and shared. On the other end the physical library's historically values as meeting and research space for citizens are simultaneously reclaimed and challenged. Funding cuts and innuendos about its obsolescence in the digital era, are dramatically permeating both common sense and institutional policies. Some libraries are reinforcing their role through digital initiatives, like the Toronto Public Library, which launched a Fahrenheit 451-themed alternate reality game, where people where invited to play it in the

city through telephone calls with the motto "Join the literary resistance." [17]

And the push on libraries to "reinvent themselves" can effectively be rethought taking the exchange of physical books as a starting point to expand the knowledge in new directions, creating less conventional models for that. So beyond platforms like BookCrossing [18], using a web-based platform and a simple social mechanism to share books in public places, the main question seems to be about which social role the exchange of knowledge can implement. For example there are different efforts in building what could be defined as "spontaneous citizen library". There are attempts on a small scale like the Little Free Libraries [19], a few thousands wood boxes scattered around the world where people can take or leave books, or Ourshelves [20], a San Francisco lending library open to everyone, with almost 300 members and 3.000 volumes, built around its community, planning to replicate around the city [21]. And if we take into account that Wikipedia has specific templates to add information in its pages about the availability of related content in local libraries [22], spontaneous social mechanisms connected to a self-managed physical exchange can be easily enabled. These kind of initiatives can question the library as a centralised facility, reconfiguring it as the outcome of a community, opening new possibilities. Teaching how to digitise books, for example, for example, could dramatically expand access, especially to forgotten titles which Google Books won't include or give access to for different reasons. Then involved people should assume their own responsibility in scanning and sharing, on a personal and independent level in building their own cultural history, preserving (physically) and sharing (digitally) all the knowledge that they think it's worth, as it has been done with music since the early 2000s.

## Conclusions.

The historical importance of the printed page as a medium has still a great influence in cultural dynamics, and it can be used to trigger innovative and radical processes when approached with the new opportunities offered by digital technologies. Active and critical strategies can be then developed using the combined qualities of those two media. The most effective radical efforts has been historically supported by an innovative use of media and technologies, which has grounded the vision of new social and cultural models. The re-appropriation of public imaginary through printed fakes, the plagiarised use of online content on print, the ability to create social libraries, and the sharing of digitalised content, can structurally redefine the printed medium, turning it into a crucial opportunity to rethink our relationship with knowledge, both in contemporary and historical perspective.

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