

## **On the Evolution of Content**

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“In the Beginning, there was The Word...”

— John 1:1

Just as Darwin posited that all living things share a common ancestor, today’s communication theorists might envision an “evolutionary tree” of media descending from the earliest spoken language to the new digital technologies that are emerging today. Based on what we know today, how will the media of today adapt and evolve tomorrow? We argue that a new branch of this “evolutionary tree” is sprouting; this paradigm shift in communication must be understood not only in terms of new possibilities for production, but also in terms of the ways in which people write, read, and create content. In short, we envision digital media as sparking a (r)evolution not only in form but *also* content.

As a side-note to the reader, we’ve included several binaries underneath each subtopic in order to lend clarity to our discussion. Drawing in part on Donna Haraway’s (1991) “Cyborg Manifesto,” (*Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge, 1991, pp.149-181.) we’ve included word-pairs that juxtapose “traditional” understandings of media with our visions for the future.

### **e-Books and tree-Books**

*Binary keywords: intangible-tangible, soft-hard, digital-printed, free-valued*

In recent years, the most obvious branching of the tree has been a simple division between printed and digital media, a dichotomy for which we coined the phrase “e-Books and tree-Books” in earlier publications.

Electronic publishing has made information infinitely easier to propagate, virtually immortal, much more populist and far less costly. It can also influence writing style. To quote an eloquent turn of phrase from e-publisher Richard Eoin Nash, “Less and less material is required to store and transmit intellectual property. The container of the idea begins to slowly disappear, leaving only the idea itself, no more palpable than a swarm of electrons.”

Nevertheless, the rapid rise of information in digital form has introduced new problems regarding the integrity of content. In the past, the time and expense required to render words in print served as a Darwinian “survival of the fittest” mechanism. But in 2007-2008, almost anyone can publish almost anything, with remarkable ease, speed and economy. Is it any wonder that it is has become harder and harder to separate the proverbial wheat from the chaff?

Yet even if print content appears more “trustworthy” to a discerning audience than digital content, there are at least two reasons why digitized information should trump the printed word, at least in developed nations. First, in developed nations, access to digital content is approaching ubiquity. As the cost of hardware and Internet access falls, the so-called “Digital Divide” is shrinking. An entire generation of people born after 1985 sees the personal computer and the Web as integral parts of life that have “always” existed. Secondly, developed nations are now more focused on conservation of natural resources than ever before; digitized information not only eliminates the need for the paper on which it would otherwise be printed, but it also eliminates other resources necessary to print, package, and deliver tree-Books to consumers.

However, tree-Books continue to dominate the reading world. This appears true even on college campuses where students are both tech savvy and environmentally friendly. One could counter-argue that there has been clear, consistent growth in the buying and reading of digital content since 2002, as documented in annual reports from the International Digital Publishing Forum (IDPF.org). We believe that the eventual adoption of digital media as the norm is inevitable, if only for economic reasons. However, we believe that this change will involve much more than mere economics; rather, *as new forms of media give rise to new ways of writing, readers must equip themselves with new ways of reading.*

Today, readers have an inclination to perceive *tangible* content such as tree-Books, newspapers, etc. as somehow intrinsically more valuable and authoritative than *intangible* material such e-Books. The extent to which readers are able to adapt to new information forms is essentially in understanding how, and to what extent, e-Books will supplant tree-Books. In order to talk about this change, we must first develop a nomenclature that accurately captures basic distinctions between different kinds of media.

### **“Warm” or “Living” Content**

*Binary keywords: dynamic-static, warm-cold, fluid-solid*

More and more digital content today is *dynamic* rather than static. It changes over time, by design. We call this content “*warm*,” as opposed to *cold* content, such as a printed book of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. By “warm content,” we mean media that assume that information can be updated or modified at any time. Warm content might look like Wikipedia.org, where every reader can also become an author, or it may take the form of a Print-on-Demand book, in which a single author may make almost limitless changes each time a book is ordered and printed.

Not surprisingly, the availability of warm content has increased in recent years. Current “Print on Demand” technology allows tree-Books and e-Books alike to evolve over time. In addition to the dynamic databases that are already common in the online world, we will soon see printed materials like phone books and alumni directories updated in real time as the information contained in them changes.

Will warm content become the norm in the future? Will cold content become extinct? And what new challenges can we expect as warm content becomes increasingly widespread?

First, let's consider warm content from the production side (we'll later look at it in terms of consumption). Let's start with an example from the pre-digital era. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, best-selling author John Updike was known to revise his novels when new editions were published. As a result, his publishers rendered a new book design for each edition, which included Updike's changes. This was remarkable in the days of hot lead or phototypesetting, and thus Updike's changes cost his publishers a substantial amount with each new edition.

In addition to the high costs Updike's publishers assumed, there was also a potentially deleterious effect on literary scholarship. Imagine yourself an Updike scholar: perhaps you published a paper in 1962, quoting from the 1960 first edition of *Rabbit, Run* published by Knopf. But Updike re-wrote the book for the 1963 Penguin edition — and again for the 1995 Everyman edition. Is your 1962 study now obsolete or inaccurate? Might you unknowingly misinform readers, or be faulted for misquoting Updike if a cited passage later changed?

While a “living” book like a real-time alumni directory delivers real practical benefits, the example of Updike illustrates a problem that existed even in the print world years ago. And the problem will grow exponentially in the digital world, as the number of digital texts with warm content skyrockets, each potentially dynamic and subject to change in the blink of an eye.

This raises the question of what, if anything, researchers and scholars can do to “watermark” content in some way that provides a common frame of reference? In a world where a nearly infinite number of editions are theoretically possible, which one will serious readers consider definitive? Indeed, can *any* draft of a living document serve as the authoritative one?

### **Producing and Consuming Living Documents**

In addition to the basic division between cold versus warm content, there is a subtle, yet compelling question: *will living documents retain established reading and writing conventions?* Or, instead, will there be substantial changes in the way writers write and readers read?

While writing varies widely depending on the form (poetry, e-mail, blog, novel, for example), each form has its own conventions. Without these conventions, writers might find writing difficult. However, conventions serve not only to ease the task of the writer, but also to make different forms of writing accessible to readers. In *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), Ian Watt connects the novel as a new written form to the prevalence and accessibility of letter-writing for personal correspondence in Britain during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Watt argues that the widespread use of

letter-writing changed the way individuals experienced the written word. Thus, the style of novel-writing — particularly its attention to the minute details of life — was made imaginable to authors through letter-writing. At the same time, the prevalence of letter-writing created an audience that could mentally relate to the medium of the novel, as early novels drew on various recognizable conventions in letter-writing.

Now, fast-forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century: we noted before that, in spite of unprecedented levels of tech savvy and environmental concern in industrialized nations, print media still hold appeal over digital media, as print content is seen as having more integrity than digital content. We believe that the paradigm shift from cold to warm content has been stilted not because of a lack in production capabilities, but because readers and writers are not yet as equipped to *read and write* warm content as they are to *read and write* cold content. Yet we maintain that new reading and writing habits tailored to the digital age are indeed evolving. Drawing on Watt's discussion of the novel and letter-writing, what prior, widespread social practice might predispose people to find the idea of "living" documents understandable?

Let's apply Watt's argument about 19<sup>th</sup> century letter-writing to the way people compose electronic mail today: without a doubt, the way most people express ideas in e-mail differs from their mode of expression in material destined for print. For example, it is generally acceptable to compose e-mail without capital letters, or to use abbreviations more often than is typical in printed materials, LOL. So it seems safe to state that new media are already changing how individuals experience the written word...but to what degree?

### **How to Read like a Techie...**

While it is tempting to think of different forms of writing as giving rise to neatly separated writing conventions, these conventions are oftentimes blended (take, for example, James Joyce's rendering of the novel). Moreover, when no clear-cut conventions have developed for new forms of the written word, conventions might be "borrowed" from other written forms. Hence, artifacts from the pre-digital world still influence the process of writing in today's world.

As we compose the very words you are reading here and now, we are mindful of traditional journalistic conventions such as word count. The question is, for whom are these writing conventions observed? Some might argue that digital presentation makes moot the question of whether this is a 2,500 word feature article for a magazine, versus a 10,000 word booklet or a 50,000 word book. *But what about the reader's expectations?* We believe that relatively few readers today want to spend hours reading a lengthy report online... thus, in spite of the elimination of production limitations from earlier times, writers today still observe conventions of the past for the comfort of their readers.

As with the lingering perception that printed material somehow holds greater weight than intangible content, here again we see conventions of pre-digital times influencing today's communication. Whether the habits of readers will change and evolve in response to new

ways of presenting writing is the most important question we address about the future of content. Moreover, we must be cautious about how we approach new questions regarding readers and reading habits. Continuing to treat “readers” and “writers” as separate will retard our ability to come to grips with this new branch on our “evolutionary tree” of media, since media such as Wikis and blogs suggest that readers and writers can often be one in the same.

### **The Collective as Author**

“...The powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse.”  
— Walt Whitman

If the distinction between readers and writers is blurred in the context of warm content, the idea of a singular writer also seems inappropriate. We suggest that collective writing must be perceived as a more legitimate form of authorship in order for warm content to be viewed as trustworthy.

An interesting example of collective authorship from the dawn of the digital era is the 1984 horror novel *The Talisman* by Stephen King and Peter Straub. It may earn a footnote in literary history as one of the earliest collaborations over the Internet, but some reviewers at the time noted a lack of cohesive writing style. *People* magazine awarded *The Talisman* the top spot in its yearly ‘Worst of Pages’ list: “In horror fiction, two heads are better than one only if they’re on the same body.”

Moving to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we see a growing trend toward collective authoring in new media. But many suffer from a lack of authority; anyone may add a footnote to literary history (or world history, for that matter) on Wikipedia.org, regardless of qualifications.

However, wikis and blogs can also “devolve” to print. Do these tree-Book renderings enjoy a perception of greater value and authority, because they look like “real” books or journals? The *Journal of New Communications Research* (SNCR, 2006-2007) is already available as a peer-reviewed, print-on-demand book. At this point in time, it seems likely that the tree-Book version is perceived as holding greater authority than the blog itself.

### **Completing the Circle**

Earlier in this report, we observed that the convention of vetting prior to publication in the pre-digital age served as a Darwinian “survival of the fittest” mechanism. While the technological and economic constraints of print publication have largely disappeared in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we believe that the perception (correct or incorrect) that tangible content deserves more weight than strictly digital content will persist.

We predict that rendering content in tangible, printed form, *even when the content is itself dynamic*, will continue to set a kind of benchmark in the immediate future.

But changes in the *process* of writing, and resulting changes in the expectations of readers, present more profound implications for the evolution of content in the new millennium.

There is little doubt that current trends toward the publication of dynamic, collaborative content will continue to grow. Whether promising new ways for writers to develop content will improve the quality of that content is a question that remains open. Likewise, the expectations of readers are already evolving in response to new media. But how readers will read in a world where the volume of available content expands exponentially, and is largely dynamic, remains a question that deserves serious study.

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#### **About the Writers**

Harvard graduate **Danny O. Snow** has been widely quoted about new publishing technologies by major print, broadcast and online media coast-to-coast, including AP, NPR, UPI, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and others. He has also served as a contributing editor to *BookTech: The Magazine for Publishers*, as a panelist and moderator at national publishing events such as the North American Publishing Company's "PrintMedia" expos and PMA's "Publishing University," as senior planning consultant to Lulu.com, and as a POD book publisher with Unlimited Publishing LLC.

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