The World of Digital Literature

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Abstract

The World Wide Web is an enormous publishing system, every user can publish texts and documents world-wide. This communication space, where information is used collectively, is based on the concept of hypertext, the networked reading and writing of texts, the effort of organizing content associatively.
The consequences are fundamental changes compared to traditional text production and distribution. Multiple authoring, globalization and individualism, new sales strategies of publishing houses, book stores, authors and artists - all this results in new possibilities as well as risks for literary production outside the market-driven best-seller charts.

1. The WWW is a publishing and distribution medium and can be used for these purposes by all users. Mini-media and middle-media are added to the range of classic mass media. The mass media are losing their discursive power.

2. A collectively produced universal text with a large community potential and a high anonymity value is emerging.

3. The new space is settled and interpreted as various stakeholders engage with it at different levels of power, using strategies that grow ever more similar. These subcultures can be reached globally.

4. On the Net there is no verifiable identity.

5. As culture is considered a commodity by the information industry a dynamic is introduced to the very notion of culture, leading to new issues in various fields (e.g. authorship, copyright, the notion of the work, quality). Literature is leaving its traditional locations, the Net is offering new ways of articulation and representation. This is linked with economic, social and aesthetic shifts. Judgements are increasingly formed via communication (polling) in a move from expert opinion to majority opinion. Relations between publishing houses, completion dates, bookshops, authors are changing. Voting becomes the model according to which judgements are formed -

6. The IT industry is gaining a high profile in areas previously reserved to the book market. At the same time, publishing houses are re-defining the focus of their work.

7. Due to the strong tendencies towards individualism that come with globalization, the individual has to assume more responsibility.

8. The Net calls for disparate, fragmented texts; these are circulated world-wide, constantly refer to one another and can be found again and again in innumerable combinations, often as polytexts.

9. More than ever, the aesthetically difficult forms of literature and art, unsuited for marketing by the entertainment industry, need a lobby of their own. The shift in cultural values places more emphasis on subject matters that can be exploited globally than on local goods. Small-scale publishing is replaced by do-it-yourself publishing. At the same time, liberalization leads to spending cuts in subsidies to literature, thus shifting responsibility to private sponsors.

The Net as a Participatory Medium

"The dream behind the Web is of a common information space in which we communicate by sharing information. Its universality is essential: the fact that a hypertext link can point to anything, be it personal, local or global, be it draft or highly polished."[1] By making this demand on the WWW Berners-Lee laid the foundation for the Net as a participatory medium. Every person who has a computer and Internet access is given an opportunity to publish documents on the WWW. This is a far cry from the expensive and cumbersome medium of book printing – everybody can be his or her own publisher. The WWW is a huge publishing system consisting of numberless micro-audiences. In principle, the Net is accessible world-wide and "for everyone" but in fact it is primarily available to the higher social strata in the industrialized nations and calls for the dominating English language.

In her 1995 article "Cyberspace is Not Disneyland" Amy Bruckman described the Net as "a finger-painting party. Everyone is making things, there's paint everywhere, and most work only a parent would love. Here and there, works emerge that most people would agree are achievements of note. The rich variety of work reflects the diversity of participants. And everyone would agree, the creative process and the ability for self expression matter more than the product."[2] The WWW created an almost boundless world of people writing and publishing what is called 'personal narrative' in the United States. The personal narrative community forming the mini-medium is not interested in quality, sales or profits. In a global network of media you can find contacts for any topic. Websites can be developed easily and quickly using software

such as Blogger. The term Weblog, denoting innumerable diary projects, is derived from it.

Weblogs, which apart from their diary function also fulfil the task of reporting about other weblogs and sites, and to discuss their contents with friends, acquaintances and other users, form the middle-media level. This is where stories are gathered, sites are presented, where things are assessed, decried, and discussed. Metafilter (www.metafilter.com) was one of the first weblogs that started to collect and recycle content on a private basis. The sites of the newly emerged middle media level shows how the Net advances the production of polytexts: texts recur, refer to one another, are passed on, translated, quoted in newsgroups, analyzed and re-published on the Net. Commercial middle-media sites use this communicative principle by combining it with the number of user visits. Plastic calls it "recycling the web", for The Vines it is "The Encyclopedia of Everything, Built by Everyone". Polling models become ever more widespread when quality needs to be assessed on the Net, and this is also true of literature (www.t-online.de/literaturpreis/ or www.delreydigital.com).

Hyperfiction and the German-Language Literary World

Hyperfiction is literary theory and practice, media critique and aesthetic model at the same time. The digital narrative form claims post-modern literary theory and practice, models of linguistics, literary reviews and literary utopias for itself. The concept of hypertext, in conjunction with the computer, promised that the narrative form would change radically: hypertext would replace the novel. Big words repeating themselves: God is dead, the book is dead, the novel is dead.

At the theoretical level, hyperfiction as a form of computer literature of the eighties and early nineties dealt with its raison d'être within the canon of literature. Works remain bound to the book as a medium, precisely what hyperfiction was against, and the book, declared dead, stayed the measure of all things. Caught between the limited technical possibilities of early software and the definition of a new medium (computer, hypertext) via an old one (book, writing), hyperfiction failed to stand its ground.

In the German-speaking countries the reception of "computer literature" came via the United States, and in particular via the hypertext concept. It embraced the message of the death of the book along with the metaphor of the network. Hypertext became deeply engrained as a synonym of digital literature. The discourse has continued to determine the debate about literature and New Media in

the media, in science and aesthetics until today. A debate about the death of the book, the limits of writing, the power of the author, the reader…

The literary world considers these points identical with New Media and bides its time.

Many of the ideas, demands and utopias linked with hypertext and hyperfiction seem to have been incorporated in the WWW. Power distributed among users, co-determination in fora such as www.plastic.com, anonymous authorship, changing identities, plagiarism, publishing for all – these have been taken over by Net Art and the IT industry. In an interview Mark Amerika, the operator of Alt-X, describes these developments as technological in nature: "Hypertext is a composition and publication tool at the same time. As it was only available on disks, it did not reach the general public, and nobody knew about it. It did not have that third aspect: the character of a marketing tool. That was added with HTTP."

Content Business

Changes for Publishers

Since Gutenberg's days the administration of content and the determination of quality features had been a task assigned to the publishing industry. Digital communication and publishing media have, however, brought about a shift of paradigm in this context. Multi-media groups are mingling with the business, an increasing number of authors seek to avoid them by using their own structures. The print media publishers have their contacts with authors and strong brands, but it remains to be seen if these are strong enough to survive the change-over to the new medium.

To date, the new technologies had the strongest impact on encyclopaedia publishers. The contents of encyclopaedias, short entries organized along lexical lines are specially suited for use on the Net and with the help of New Media. Ten years ago, the Encyclopædia Britannica cost roughly DEM 1,000.-, today it can be bought on CD-ROM for DEM 169.-. Microsoft mingled with the business, publishing the "Encarta Encyclopaedia" on CD-ROM in 1996. From 1990 to 1997 the sales of printed Encyclopædia Britannica versions fell by almost 90 per cent. The publishing house was sold, the new owner wanted to market the lexicon online. Access to the Web Encyclopaedia could be subscribed to at 5 US-dollars a month. However, it did not work out – since the autumn of 1999 the Encyclopædia Britannica can be queried on the Net free of charge.

Content as the most important commodity sold by publishers is subject to change both in terms of definition and economic meaning. Contents hitherto defined as culturally valuable are losing their significance in the information society since they do not lend themselves well to exploitation in the New Media. Short units of text with a specialized content are in demand, of the kind which can produce new contexts when combined with other content. One and the same text can figure in different languages, contexts and on several sites on the Net. These polytexts have little in common with the classic model of the book. The Internet as a "content industry" is threatening the classic business segments of the publishing industry while at the same time offering new opportunities. Literary publishers are in particular oriented on the model of the book, a fact that is also reflected in their all but exclusive commitment to the e-book.

The distribution of discursive power in the media has changed. Attention is spread over a much wider range. There is a tendency towards outsourcing in parallel with developments in the media, and frequently, the New Media are involved here: there are no transport expenses, and proof-reading, clipping services, public relations, distribution are spun off. Publishers' ideals such as the lasting value of a work are replaced by the constraints of topicality and production, a new generation of readers is emerging, people who have come to know the screen as a means of reading and communicating on a par with the book. The classic understanding of what it means to be a publisher has come under discussion, the cycles of production and innovation become shorter. Topicality turns into a criterion for quality. Works can be exploited for as long as they are protected by copyright, and after that all that remains is adaptations and stagings.

At the same time, politics increasingly expose publishers to the free play of market forces, e.g. when abolishing reduced postage for periodicals.

The New Publishers and their "Solutions"

The "new" publishers on the Net present themselves as open fora accessible to everyone. The literary world which has grown for centuries to become a control mechanism regulated by quality and access is losing power. It is only the Net that makes the uncontrolled world-wide mushrooming of texts and documents possible, with all its advantages and disadvantages. It is certainly advantageous that subcultures find it easier to organize themselves, that small-scale publishers, fanzines, a wide variety of interest groups can be found and reached world-wide.

Publishers define themselves as information service providers, they have stopped publishing for certain media formats as they focus on the needs of their respective target group instead. They produce content to be processed for various media formats as and when required. For this purpose data must be stored in a neutral form so that they can be easily used and re-used in different media. The concept of

publishing independently of a medium aims at converting data to a uniform digital format and storing them.

Publishing independently of a medium does not so much point to creative solutions but rather to the protracted and cumbersome change-over to new production structures. The change-over will take a few more years. If you want to know the status of creative force in many New Media publishing houses, all you have to do is look at some of their websites. They usually consists of a static list of titles with blurbs and authors' portraits, as well as dates of completion and related events. At the level of form, hard-cover and soft-cover books are complemented by new "book formats": in the case of the e-book, the digitised text is processed as a "book" but not printed. The e-book introduces a new price category in the book trade.

In the case of print on demand, the text is published in the form of a book again: when a book is ordered, it will be printed and delivered. This pays off in runs below 500 copies, otherwise offset printing is more profitable.

Another important aspect can be found in the changes ensuing for the distribution and organization of texts in the new contexts of the Net.

Changes in Copyright

As computer technology tends to encompass all media, content is defined as the totality of digital data: images, sounds, text and software, user data, e-mail addresses, archives, news groups. Standards concerning production and business processes which had hitherto been accepted are starting to change, as are cultural and societal conventions.

In February 2001 various communities cried out in dismay: Google, a search engine operated by IBM, bought the Usenet Archive. Usenet is a collection of news groups bringing together more than 500 million messages, "more than a terabyte of human conversation," as the PR text on the Google site said. The package, the price of which was not disclosed, also contained software, various domains and trademarks. The value of this collection of messages sent and opinions voiced by individuals is derived from the fact that it can easily be searched when turned into a data base. The totality of entries is more valuable than the sum total of the parts. A work placed on the Net in the form of contributions of individuals acquires economic value. Those who contributed did not get anything.

Those who operate the server, manage mailing lists or news groups have the best access to the data of a community. This kind of multiple authorship shifts the copyright problem. No longer does one publisher negotiate terms with one author, the owner of the technical equipment negotiates with a large number of authors who may even remain anonymous.

This new kind of knowledge acquisition by publishing groups acting globally can also be found in publications in the field of the natural sciences. A few large companies are dominating the market. While scientific treatises could be read in libraries and photocopied, the big scientific publishers have now increasingly moved towards publishing such content in electronic form only. As a consequence, libraries no longer subscribe to a journal but pay for the number of readers who looked at an article. "Looking" is the right word because printouts are prohibited. This means that scientific knowledge can no longer circulate freely: a limiting factor for researchers who do not have sufficient funds at their disposal as well as those whose university or library does not have the required technical equipment. The archives of knowledge are in jeopardy, too: the reliability of digital storage media is unknown, CD-ROMS are expected to last for 50 years but nobody has yet been able to verify that. So far, scientists made their publications available to scientific journals free of charge and assigned the copyrights to the publishers. The Public Library of Science calls for making scientific articles available to the general public free of charge after a protection period of six months during which publishers can generate a profit.

Changes for Authors

Print on demand, often praised as "the liberation of authors" because they have the means of production at their disposal now, also creates completely new requirements for authors. On the WWW they are sellers and buyers, authors and reviewers at the same time. The innumerable opportunities of publishing, the fact that publishing houses increasingly define themselves as pure service providers require more management and PR skills from authors.

In contrast to e-books, print on demand (POD) aims at publishing a text in the form of a book. POD benefits from the electronic format because, unlike books, its storage costs are negligible: 150 pages of text in PDF format require roughly 600 KB storage space. There is no returns provision in POD because a commission to the author becomes due once a text has been printed, and double sales must be ruled out. For this reason book dealers must in any event pay POD books they ordered. It remains to be seen whether book dealers will offer many of these low-number editions. Thus, the customers will not have much of a chance of seeing the book before buying. For this reason publishers acting in a global media environment will need a well-structured network of contacts with known interests so they can identify and grasp their opportunities on the market. Authors will become interesting as both target groups and groups of publishers, new structures will emerge, seeking, either free of charge or against a fee, to attract attention for the books mainly produced by do-it-yourself publishing, offering PR, proof-reading, graphic art and advertising services, from the creation of a website to the presentation of the book.

Authors, barely liberated from the dictatorship of the literary world, will not only enjoy new freedom but will also have to accept new obligations. When authors become publishers, they also have to assume new tasks. The instructions of the POD provider bod.de called "This is how it works" fill no less than nine web pages. Commercial and communicative skills are called for, in some cases, e.g. with Del Rey Digital, copyrights must be given up before one can participate in a forum.

Open-ended definitions of literature, interdisciplinary work in the totality of the literary world, made possible by additional know-how on the part of all those concerned (creative workers, operators, scientists), as well as flexible approaches by those in charge of exploitation and the representation of interests will be required for the literature of the coming years.

Notes

1. Berners-Lee, Tim: The World Wide Web: A very short personal history. <www.w3.org/People/Berners-Lee/ShortHistory.html >

2. Bruckman; Amy: Cyberspace is Not Disneyland: The Role of the Artist in a Networked World. 1995
<www.cc.gatech.edu/~asb/papers/getty/disneyland.html>