Reading in an age of change
Margaret Simons on text in the electronic world

Like most seasons, this summer has been a time of books in my household, a place that, for the holiday period, has spanned the generations. Knowing I was going to write this piece, I have been watching the members of my extended family read.

My grandson turned two last week. Books aimed at his age group are full of things to touch and things to do: glitter, fur and holes, caterpillars that eat and penguins to be counted. ‘Reading’, if that is what he is doing, is an activity he shares. A few months ago, he was not sufficiently adept to turn a page by himself. Now he is discovering the rewards of doing so, since each new page has a picture of a duck, a car or a baby and he gets a thrill from saying the correct word or having me say it for him.

Then there are my own children – a son aged twelve and a daughter of thirteen. They like books, too. They take on extra chores to earn the pocket money to purchase a new Alex Rider novel – and for twenty-four hours thereafter, it is impossible to get them to do anything because they are reading, which, as they are apt to remind me, is a good thing and should be encouraged. Even Mark Latham said you should read to kids, my daughter points out.

Yet novels are only part of how they read. Once upon a time teenagers dominated the household telephone talking with their friends. Now the phone is silent and Facebook is their constant companion. My children are both reading and writing – and even participating in the invention of a new language, as they lol and soz and rofl away. They write their own narratives, with no time or distance between author and audience. And, for better or worse, their words live on, a permanent record of who they were and what they said during the long, hot summer of 2009.

Late last year, at the Media140 conference in Sydney, blogger Laurel Papworth addressed an audience of journalists on the question, ‘Do journalists do it better?’ As a backdrop, she displayed a running tally of new blog posts and entries on social media sites worldwide. The numbers moved faster than anyone could follow, mounting into the tens and hundreds of thousands during the five minutes of the talk. So much for the claim that the internet is destroying reading!

Papworth said:

Stop for a moment and think about your great-great-great-great-
grandmother. Who was she? Do you have videos or even photos of her? Do you know what she did when she was seventeen and a half? Where she went on holiday at thirty-three years of age? What she wrote about at sixty-four? Now move forward in time and consider what the next generation and the next generation and the one after will know about their great-great-great-grandparents. For the first time in human evolution we are co-creating the Human Narrative. Never again will our histories be held hostage to the victors, our stories forgotten, unwritten, unscribed. *It's not your content. It's our content. Our stories. We didn't give you the Human Story: we loaned it to you, and now we're taking it back.*

This is a very different kind of writing and a very different kind of reading from what you and I are engaged in as you absorb this piece. I am sitting in the heat of mid-January, writing these words. You are at a distance from me and yet we are connected. It is a highly abstract encounter, quite different to how we might relate if we were involved in a face-to-face conversation. I am relatively safe. You can't see the worst of my errors. I have deleted them. I am certainly appearing more poised, more in control, than I feel. These sentences have been worked and reworked, with commas moved and phrases deleted and shuffled around. This paragraph, the ninth that you are reading, is not the ninth that I wrote. And I have removed the spelling errors, the grammatical mistakes and (I hope) the plain stupidity of earlier drafts – not to mention the notes to myself to 'put something in about such and such' and 'don't forget such and such' and 'fix this up'.

There is a gap between reading and writing; reading might be linear but writing hardly ever is. Writing is more like papier-mâché than a paper chain.

When we think about reading, we usually have in mind the sustained and focused attention to text in which the author is implicitly accepted as guide, curator and narrator. Yet this is a tiny fraction of what it means to be literate. We tend not to credit, or even notice, all the other reading we do in a day – absorbing advertising messages, browsing the back of a cereal packet, glancing at a pay slip. Our lives are surrounded, enabled and limited by text.

One of the important ways that communication is changing is that text is becoming more important and our engagement with it less like paper chains and more like papier-mâché – more like the unthinking absorption of dozens of messages that each of us does every day. At the same time, reading and writing are moving closer together. They are becoming more important, and perhaps more dangerous and powerful.

The word ‘convergence’ is a cliché of the media industry. It is usually taken to mean that the separate media we are used to – radio, television and print products – are all becoming one, as different kinds of content – audio, text and video – blur. For example, newspaper websites include video and text. The ABC, once purely a broadcaster, now delivers millions of pages of text online. Books can be delivered electronically to be printed out at home. Digital radio can include some text and pictures. And so on.

But the word ‘convergence’ has broader meanings. I think we are facing a technology-driven convergence of activities. The internet has become, like the telephone did before it, an essential tool for both leisure and work. And, although it carries video and images, the internet is devoted to text. Even the internet-based telephone service Skype has added a text-based instant messaging service; YouTube also allows text. For my children, social interactions are overwhelmingly centred on text in a way that was not true for my generation of telephone-addicted teenagers.
We don’t do this new kind of reading and writing by ourselves. It is closer to my two-year-old grandson’s experience with books – social, interactive and active. It is an act of creation and, I suspect, increasingly a necessary part of engaged citizenship.

Over the summer I read the latest winner of the Booker Prize – Hilary Mantel’s stunning novel *Wolf Hall*, set in the time of Henry VIII. Mine was traditional reading, carried out quietly and in seclusion, requiring long periods of concentration and with me accepting Mantel as narrator and guide.

Henry VIII is fascinating not only because of his many wives but because his era was the moment at which the past begins to become understandable to modern sensibilities. It was a time of struggle over authority and power, involving the individual, the church, the state and the monarchy. Mythology still blurred with history but the idea of authoritative accounts was beginning to take hold, with the myths retreating. The invention of the printing press suddenly allowed the ideas of Martin Luther and others to be distributed across the known world. Mantel’s central character, Thomas Cromwell, writes laws that recognise treason as a matter of words as well as actions, for words, written down, printed and distributed, had taken on a new and subversive importance. The Bible was available in an English translation for the first time and reading it was a crime punishable by death. In the politics of Tudor England, the power shifts and upsets caused by the printed word were a constant, inescapable source of alarm, hope and change. It was a frightening time as well as an exciting one.

Once, reading and writing were overwhelmingly the preserve of men in monasteries – the powerful, in other words. The printing press changed that. Today, it’s common, and correct, to worry about the concentration of power involved in the ownership of printing presses and broadcasting licences. Yet it is also true that most advances in technology have been democratising. Noam Chomsky argued that the modern media is about the manufacture of consent rather than revolution or even reform. Yet even in that argument there is the recognition that in the modern world what the masses think matters. To hold power, it is necessary to manufacture consent, because people remote from each other recognise that they share common interests, that they are part of the same group. Modern democratic society would not be possible without the printing press.

So what of the technological innovations of our own time – the internet and digital media – which are surely at least the equivalent of the printing press in their disruptive effects? It is helpful to get a grip on what is new, and what is not. I think that, up until a couple of years go, there were two really important changes brought about by the internet.

The first was that it dramatically lowered the barriers to participation, placing the tools of publication in many more hands. It became possible, in the western world at least, for almost anyone to publish material to the world within minutes of deciding to do so. This was new in human history, and enormously significant.

Readers now faced an endless variety, and hence an urgent need to sort what was interesting and worthwhile. There were so many guides and narrators – so many writers – that new methods had to be found to work out who to trust with that precious part of our attention devoted to reading. (At least Hilary Mantel’s Thomas Cromwell could be sure which books it was important to read – they were the ones that were being burnt!) Yet there was opportunity, too, in the tsunami of material not endorsed or authorised by any publishing house or editor. To make the most of the opportunities it was necessary – as it
remains necessary – to move beyond the ‘brands’ of established media empires and publishing houses. What is the point of the masses being empowered if the prospect sends us scurrying back into the arms of the familiar power brokers, too frightened to step out on our own?

The second important innovation brought about by the internet was the hotlink – the ability to include in a text a direct link to other texts, other ideas. Internet-based writing can serve as a portal to information, working on several levels, with the reader taking self-guided tours rather than following an author’s beaten track. If we look forward twenty years, I think we will find that a great deal of writing will have adopted new structures, and our methods of reading will have changed as well, with more papier-mâché and fewer paper chains.

Now there are more innovations upon us. 2010 will be the year in which e-readers become mainstream.

Long before twenty years have passed, most of our reading will be done on e-readers or through material printed on demand. Physical books will still be important for some kinds of reading. My two-year-old grandson will still want his tactile experience, and there will be books to cater for him. There will still be coffee-table books and some books will be kept in physical form for sentimental reasons or to signal to those browsing our bookshelves what kind of reader we are. But despite all this, the role of the old-fashioned book will be different, diminished. Bookshops will become shopfronts in which we can browse catalogues and order a volume printed on the spot.

E-readers and print on demand will further lower barriers to entry. Niche publications will become more feasible because the costs of printing and distribution all but disappear or, at least, can be outsourced to the reader. There will be even more material available, even more choices to be made before we decide which authors to accept as guides and narrators, even more opportunities to discover the radical and uncomfortable.

In many respects, all these changes – the lowered barriers to entry, the changes to the structure of text – are already with us. And yet we are only just beginning to glimpse what the internet is actually about.

Most of what we’ve seen so far has been about more efficient methods of doing what we were doing before. Email is a version of letter writing. Web pages are another form of broadcasting or publishing – bringing the work of one person or a group of people to a potentially mass audience. But now we are encountering something entirely different and new: the web as a tool of intellectual and social collaboration – what some call social networking and others refer to as Web 2.0.

The pace of change is utterly astonishing. Nielsen Online’s figures show that social networks and blogs are now more popular online activities than email, which is now regarded as a comparatively ancient technology – it is, after all, at least thirty years old!

Social networking is not only the fastest growing phenomenon on the web but one of the fastest growing, most quickly adopted and highest growth media of all time. The take-up has been many times faster than for mobile telephones or, if we cast ourselves back a few decades, radio, television and newspapers.

It is both exciting and frightening. On the upside, social networking is already presenting answers to the pressing problems brought by an over-abundance of information. How do we work out what is worth reading? Through the recommendations of our extended social network. How do we work out if something is reliable? Through a history of interaction and through
reputations established in the crowd – in other words, in much the same ways that we always have, but in contexts made boundless and more efficient by the impact of technology. Already, social networks are an important determinant of what young people choose to read.

Where will this take us and, more importantly, what are its implications for reading? I don’t pretend to know, but as 2009 folded into 2010 there were a couple of straws in the wind. Google released a preview version of its Google Wave. In a presentation to a convention of geeks in the United States, the designers explained Google Wave as an attempt to rethink email as if it were being invented now.

The result is a social networking and collaboration tool in which groups of any size can share content and collaborate on projects, communicating in a manner that is somewhere between blogging, email and instant messaging. You can watch Google Wave being demonstrated on YouTube. Clearly, it changes what it means to write. Reading, and writing, become collaborative and social. There is no seclusion, no one-way flow between writer and reader. Everyone is involved, all the time.

This article, for example, might be delivered both in the form you are reading now, and as a wave. The references to Laurel Papworth’s talk, to Nielsen figures and to the Google Wave presentation would be embedded links. But there would also be the potential for all readers, or at least all subscribers to Overland, to engage directly with me, not only weeks after I have written this piece but even as I write.

Another straw in the wind. Google also announced what it called its ‘living story’ project in collaboration with the New York Times and the Washington Post. The result was an experiment in publishing news stories online, with material presented in a wave-like structure featuring updated new developments and rich background information. The template was clunky but the spirit of the innovation was clear – news reading and writing as a continuous rolling event, incorporating many aspects and points of view, and serving as a moderated collaboration between sources of information and consumers of information.

If we fast-forward fifty years, or perhaps a century, these changes, now embryonic, will have altered not only how we read but also how we think.

One possibility – and this seems to me to be the direction in which we are travelling – is that we will be less individualistic and more collaborative and community minded. Creativity will be seen not – or not only – as residing in the individual but rather as the product of the interaction between the individual and the audience. Of course, there will be excellent messengers who are recognised for their talents, just as there were balladeers and messengers in the pre-literate world. But they will be constantly enmeshed with their audiences.

I am not suggesting that this is all to the good. Perhaps this new kind of reading and writing will be an addition to the secluded, sustained absorption of text rather than a replacement. I hope so, because if all reading and writing becomes collaborative I fear that we may lose our dark and private spaces, and our many necessary secrets. Privacy will be altered and reduced. Perhaps we will lose our sense of individual agency. Reading will be less about consent and more about engagement; writing will be less about power and more about invitation.

And yet perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps we will still want to take our e-readers into private spaces and absorb their content silently, consenting once again to
the writer's power. Yet who can doubt that this kind of reading will take up less of our time and intellectual energies than it does today?

Let me take the last step up the age ladder of my family. My father was also staying with us over summer. Thirty years older than me, he is still working out how to use his mobile phone but email – that ancient technology – is his main means of staying in touch with friends around the world. He reads local newspapers for the crosswords. He takes the Guardian Weekly in print form and is dismayed by the idea it may be delivered only online in future. He had not heard of Twitter until I told him about it.

Of course, he was called to sit down and read to my grandson. He pointed to the dog in the book, and my grandson made the connection with the dog in the room. The experience of reading was not a thing by itself but something intimately associated with the growth of a mind, with socialisation and even with motor skills.

Perhaps, in this very ordinary and familiar convergence of an infant's growth, we can glimpse something of our future.

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