

Hot New Medium: Text

The written word is flourishing like kudzu vines at the boundaries of the digital revolution. By Paul Saffo

Littera scripta manet – the written word remains. Though it was recorded almost two millennia ago, Horace's maxim echoes a surprising fact that lurks in today's digital revolution. An ever-growing media palette has failed to dislodge the centrality of the written word from our lives. We talk endlessly about new tech-arcanas like video and virtual reality, but the conversation orbits around the stuff of this page – text.

In fact, the written word doesn't just remain; it is flourishing like kudzu vines at the boundaries of the digital revolution. The explosion of e-mail traffic on the Internet represents the largest boom in letter writing since the 18th century. Today's cutting-edge infonauts are flooding cyberspace with gigabyte upon gigabyte of ASCII musings.

But we hardly notice this textual explosion because, mercifully, it is in large part paperless. Vague clouds of electrons flitting to and fro over the Net have replaced pulverized trees lugged by postal carriers. This has spared our landfills, but it has also obscured a critical media shift. Words have been decoupled from paper. Like the stuff of Horace's affection, text is still comprised of 26 letters, but freed from the entombing, distancing oppression of paper, it has become as novel as the hottest new media.

In fact, our electronic novelties are transforming the word as profoundly as the printing press did half a millennium ago. For starters, we are smashing arbitrary print-centric boundaries among author, editor, and audience. These categories did not exist before the invention of moveable type, and they will not survive this decade. Just as monk scribes at once wrote, edited, and read, information surfers browsing online services today routinely play all three roles: selectively scanning, absorbing, editing, and creating on-the-fly in real time. The printing press gave life and reach to the word, but at the terrible cost of making text formal and immutable. Printed words became as immobile as flies in amber, and readers knew that they could look, but not change.

Electronic text has become a new medium that combines print's fixity with a manuscript-like mutability. Flick a key and volumes of text disappear in virtual smoke; flick another and they are replicated over the Net in a flash. Severed from unreliable paper, text has become all but inextinguishable. E-mail passed between Oliver North and his Iran-Contra conspirators survived numerous attempts at expungement, and now resides in the National Security Archives for all to inspect, even as historians naively lament that the switch to electronic media is depriving them of important research fodder. They needn't worry; paper may be on the skids, but text is eternal.

Immortality may be the least of the surprises that this new medium of electronic text will deliver. Video enthusiasts are quick to argue that images are intrinsically more compelling than words, but they ignore a quality unique to text. While video is received by the eyes, text resonates in the mind. Text invites our minds to complete the word-based images it serves up, while video excludes such mental extensions. Until physical brain-to-machine links become a reality, text will offer the most direct of paths between the mind and the external world.

Video suffers from a deeper problem, one of ever diminishing reliability in the face of ever more capable morphing technologies. By decade's end, we will look back at 1992 and wonder how a video of police beating a citizen could move Los Angeles to riot. The age of camcorder innocence will evaporate as teenage morphers routinely manipulate the most prosaic of images into vivid, convincing fictions. We will no longer trust our eyes when observing video-mediated reality. Text will emerge as a primary indicator of trustworthiness, and images will transit the Net as multimedia surrounded by a bodyguard of words, just as medieval scholars routinely added textual glosses in the margins of their tomes.

Of course words can be as false as images, but there is something to text that keeps our credulity at bay. Perhaps the intellectual labor required to decode words keeps us mentally alert, while visual stimuli encourage passivity. Studies conducted during the Gulf War hinted at such a possibility: Researchers found that citizens who read about the war's events in daily publications had a far better grasp of the issues than avid real-time TV news junkies.

Proof of text's persistence is everywhere. I encountered the strangest instance of electronically incarnate text in a Tibetan Buddhist institute located in California. Inside its sanctuary were enormous prayer wheels filled with mantras printed in state-of-the-art microtype onto tightly rolled sheets of paper. My host explained that their motorized spinning spreads an aura of beneficial energy outward, and the more mantras the wheels contain, the greater the benefit. Imagine the consequences when someone concludes that the Internet amounts to a globe-size virtual prayer wheel, just waiting for the right virus to pack mantras into its interstices. It is just the sort of immortality that would please a good god-fearing Roman like Horace. ■ ■ ■

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