

New York University

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To the vector the spoils

When I arrived on the Gold Coast for the Writing 2000 conference, I relaxed on the bed, up in my hotel room, and flicked on the telly. The first show to come on was *Wheel of Fortune*. There was a young woman in a long black dress on the show. Her only job is to turn over the letters when the contestants guess them right. The young woman's name is Sophie Faulkner. She was one of the top graduates in her year in the media studies course run by my department.

I mention this just as an example of how weird the relationship is these days between tertiary education and the media. Sophie actually sought help from a colleague of mine once, not on how to do research or to get a reference, but to ask advice on whether to sign a contract to appear in Wonderbra commercials.

On my way to give a lecture recently, I spotted a group of young women all standing in a circle. They were figuring out how to send text messages from one mobile phone carrier to another. They do this quite regularly in my lectures. They sit next to each other, punching abbreviated text messages into their phones. It's a hi-tech version of passing notes in class.

Only 70% of my first year media students have email addresses. A higher percentage have mobile phones. The internet is boring. Or a boy thing. Or just not suited to the mobile lifestyle of students who, in Sydney, mostly live at home and have to organise their social life on the run.

I saw a magazine cover recently touting the 'wireless revolution'. Warily, I bought it, clipped it and filed it. Media technology 'revolutions' now come so close together that a lot of people still remember the failed promises of the last one when the new one is doing the rounds.

Surveying my undergrads, it's clear that they are cynical about the promises made for new media. But they buy into new media anyway. Jock Given from the New South Wales Communications Law Centre tells me there is a significant problem with credit card debt among people in their twenties, the cause of which is onerous mobile phone contracts.

So: a few points to begin with. Firstly, media is something everyone is immersed in, and that young people in particular know they are immersed in, although they may not like it.

Secondly, this is I think part of the reason for the growing popularity of media studies. My department grew by 20% in undergraduate enrollments in 1999 alone. It is a business with a one million-dollar turnover. In three years that will be two million.

Thirdly, it concerns me that I now find it quite natural to think in these terms. Like my students, I've become something of a pragmatist. Markets. Opportunities. I'd probably take a Wonderbra contract too, only I haven't had any offers.

But here's the fourth point: nobody buys the promises any more, just the product. The internet has been oversold. It's not just dot.com stocks that have been oversold; new media in general has been oversold. People looked at the new media and saw all these possibilities. What they didn't see is that every media, without exception, is about possibilities, although not necessarily the same possibilities.

What can it mean to say that all media are about possibilities? Media do two things. They get information from one place and time to another place and time. This is the aspect of media that has to do with similarity, representation, and all that.

But the other dimension of media is the kind of possibility it offers for people to do other things with that information. This is the aspect of media that has to do with difference.

Put the two kinds of difference together and you get, not just possibility, but virtuality. Which for present purposes I'll define as sustained possibility, the ever openness of things to become otherwise.

Now, all media are virtual, and all virtuality is media. It doesn't matter what shape or form or colour. So what happens is: people see a new media for the first time and see its potential, and associated the new media with potential, when in actual fact all media are by definition potential.

This is as true for the dot.com technoboosters as for the hypertext boosters, such as George Landow and Michael Joyce. They were people with a textual background, mostly, coming out of literature. In their first confrontation with media, they very astutely noticed the virtuality of the particular media they got their hands on, such as the *Storyspace* program. What they didn't see is that all media has potential of much the same kind, although in different proportions.

What is hypertext? Any book with an index and a contents page. I agree with Darren Tofts that *Finnegan's Wake* is still the most radical hypertext, multimedia work yet produced.

I mentioned that, at Macquarie, we've had this tremendous growth in media studies. And what are we teaching these growing numbers of students? Writing, mostly. Professional and creative writing. We still teach audio visual production, but to limited numbers. It's just too expensive to teach, and there's just too few opportunities. And not all audio visual production students can do Wonderbra commercials to get a toehold in the television industry.

So we're teaching writing, but in the context of thinking about writing as media. Or as I would prefer to term it: writing is not just textual, it's vectoral. Writing is a way of potentially moving information from one place to another, plus it's the potential to do something with that information once moved.

Basically, I think the whole metaphor - and it is a metaphor - of 'text' and 'writing' as synonyms for communication, as they have been deployed in the so called New Humanities, was a bum steer. It was a way of collapsing the very different potentials of different kinds of media, of different qualities of vector, into an image that doesn't capture the right differences. Talk about text makes a fetish of the code, and misses the significance of the channel - to put it in the old communication model.

Once we free writing from its metaphoric work of standing in for all communication, we can start to see more clearly how writing in the strict sense fits with nonwriting, particularly with more analogue forms of communication, such as with sound and colour and movement, propagated by fluxes of electrons, down a wire or through the air.

What you discover is that writing is very much a controlling vector, and skill in writing is very much a master practice in relation to radio, television and cinema. At least in the west, and at least for now.

I'm tempted to call this 'secondary literacy'. Walter Ong talks about 'secondary orality', or the return of orality, after the long dominance of the potentials of literacy. New media vectors open new possibilities for all of our inherited modes of communication. Just as the electric age opened up the virtuality of the oral and aural, the digital age is opening up the virtuality of literacy.

So what is it that one teaches students how to write when one teaches writing? Well, one way to go about it is to think about the amazingly wide range of situations in the media environment in which writing is the key practice, and teach students how to write in any such situation whatever.

Writing, if you know how to do it, is an amazingly flexible, portable and powerful tool for getting anything done in any media. It can make you a lot of money. It can get you quite a bit of power. It can bring you prestige, renown, and a more lasting fame than Wonderbra commercials.

So in relation to teaching writing, I don't separate the teaching of professional from critical or creative writing. I think, ideally, students should acquire some competence in all kinds of writing. I also think they should acquire competence in writing for the page, for the screen, for the air, and for the internet. Perhaps even for mobile phones.

There's a much more professional orientation in the way I teach writing at Macquarie to what might be practiced in creative writing programs. But I think a bit of this approach might work for teaching creative writers too. I want my students to be equipped both to analyse existing opportunities and to create new ones. I want them to be able to assess the kind of money, security or liberty any given writing situation is likely to offer.

This is a somewhat different approach to the ethics of writing to the one proposed at the *Writing 2000* conference by Anne Surma, but they are not unconnected. Perhaps it's what happens to you if you live too long in the insane 'new economy' of Sydney's inner suburbs, but I want to teach ethics, aesthetics and rhetoric in the context of the three great concerns of Sydney life: money, power and real estate.

I have no idea how the market or the culture of writing is going to change over the next ten years. I have plenty of theories about it. I have lots of examples of things I think are pointers to the future of writing. But I have no sure knowledge. So I think it unwise to foist untried models on students. Rather, I want to equip them with the ability to analyse the potential of any given media moment for themselves, and make better than random decisions about whether to write in a given context, under what terms and at what price.

Tess Brady mentioned in conversation during the conference that there is a difference between theory for reading and theory for writing. Theory for reading - theories of texts and representations - aren't quite adequate. Theories for writing - a theory of vectors and their potentials - is I think a quite different animal. I think the best source for it is probably communication theory, rather than literary theory or cultural studies, neither of which have ever had much to say about the specific qualities of different media, among which writing is only one media, if a strikingly powerful media.

It was Harold Innis who wrote so cogently, apropos ancient Egypt, of the difference between writing on papyrus and writing on stone. Papyrus is a vector through space. Stone is a vector through time. With papyrus you can construct an effective empire; with stone you can construct a powerful theocracy. In Innis' view, the various periods of ancient Egyptian history can be read as ones in which the scribes were ascendant, then the priests, each writing along quite different vectors.

We have inherited from the nineteenth century an amazing theodicy of the book. Even the most radical outposts of poststructuralist theory share with the new critics and other schools of literary criticism a reverence for the book. But we're blind to the simple fact that the book, that sacred vector of wisdom through the ages, is useless without the postal system, by which all texts, including books themselves, spread their authority over space.

Or in other words, it's taking the book as a paradigm that blinds us to the multitude of vectors and their potentials. The internet wouldn't seem so new if we thought less about its difference from the book and more about its amazing similarity to, and continuity with, the telegraph. The telegraph, which, as Tom Standage says, was the Victorian internet.

The telegraph left its imprint in the book, in Hemingway's prose, for example. It lent its name to many newspapers and radically transformed what newspapers do. The news story was an artefact of the telegraph era and is now finally passing with it. But notice that the book and the newspaper still continued to exist, alongside the telegraph, and will continue to exist alongside the internet, although both their form and content have already been changed by them.

I've been involved in a few perverse projects lately. I co-edited a book called *Readme!*, published by Autonomedia, which is an anthology of new media theory from the nettime internet listserver. How perverse! Turning cutting edge media theory, on and about the internet, into a book! But we thought of the book as a different kind of vector, that's all. A slow vector, built for transmitting information across time.

I worked on a free newspaper called *Bastard!*, which put together texts gathered via the internet on the Kosovo/Konsova crisis. It was sub edited in Sydney, London, New York and Amsterdam, and designed in Zagreb. It was printed separately in eight countries and given away free. Here it was more a question of extending the spatial reach of the internet with a 'printout' that could be transported - or smuggled - to parts of the world the internet vector doesn't reliably reach.

With Bernard Cohen, John Kinsella and Terri-Ann White I co-wrote a book called *Speed Factory*, using the internet to create a linear, anti-hypertext that will be published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press - I hope - in 2001.

These are all projects that explore the possible relations between new and old media. And also the relations between the money economy and the gift economy. You could get all the texts in the *Readme!* book from the net for free, but without the ordering, editing and sub editing that went into the book. And you could get them sooner. And guess what? The book sold out.

McKenzie Wark has been a leading Australian voice in media studies over the last decade. At the time when this paper was delivered as a keynote address at the Writing 2000 Conference (Gold Coast, June 2000) Wark taught at Macquarie University, in Sydney. He currently teaches at New York University.

Notes and Letters

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