

Coping with an online mentality

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Recently my wife and I found ourselves finishing an excellent lunch in a Paris restaurant with a desert and coffee. Seated near the entrance, we witnessed several prospective clients being summarily turned away, not always in the friendliest of manners. This somewhat shocked, and certainly puzzled us, as we reasoned that these hungry passers by would have considered returning for a meal at another time if they had not been treated with such obvious disdain. On second thought, however, the waiter's behaviour wasn't perhaps quite so self-destructive as it initially appeared. Being of a traditional character, the restaurant catered to people with a matching traditional idea of eating out, including a traditional notion of the right time to have lunch. People who thought they could just roll up at 2:45 pm, when lunchtime was clearly over, were naturally not regarded to be worthy of their consideration. For such people, the McDonald's around the corner was deemed to be a suitable alternative.

In this brief essay I would like to pursue the notion that in the world of books we may be able to observe a similar clash as I have just described in the case of Paris lunch traditions. That is to say, the clash between publishers catering to conventional reading and buying habits, and the expectations of readers who don't consider themselves bound by the traditions and customs of the field. If asked, these readers might confess to regarding the traditions and customs of the book trade as antiquated, and no longer relevant in today's world of instant and constant access to information, and certainly not applicable to them. Incidentally, this essay is not based on any sort of empirical research, and rather than presenting detailed facts, and possible answers, it ponders some of the implications of such a change of mentality for the industry.

Publishers have had to adjust their practices to the unfamiliar expectations of a new reading public many times in the history of the book. These changing expectations have concerned both the content (the 'what') and the form (the 'how') of reading. One of the most extensive such changes occurred in most parts of Europe in the course of the nineteenth century, as a result of the sudden and unprecedented growth of literacy. Through the interplay of a constellation of factors—such as more and better education, and cheaper means and methods of book production—hordes of new readers were clamouring for new reading matter, with numbers growing as the century wore on.

In attempting to cater to this emerging market, initially the emphasis of publishers was on 'how'. Realising that these new readers were mostly from the lower socioeconomic strata, publishers notably attempted to market cheap editions of existing texts, preferably in uniform series. These were cheap to produce, and the series aspect had the advantage for the reader of recognisability. When a reader had once found a title in a particular series to

his or her liking, buying another title in the same series constituted a safe bet.¹

The policy of ‘the same but cheaper’, however, proved of limited effectiveness. It took a long time for publishers to discover (or at least to admit) that these new readers, in the lower socioeconomic strata, were not necessarily looking for the same books as existing readers, only cheaper. In fact, the new reading public was interested in entirely different types of reading matter, more suited to the popular taste. This led to new *genres* (‘what’) such as the detective novel or sensational literature (fiction) and the illustrated periodical press (non-fiction), but also to new publication *forms* (‘how’): serialisation in newspapers and cheap weekly periodicals; publication in instalments; and ‘penny dreadfuls’. Especially the last—cheap, pamphlet-like forms of entertainment fiction, usually published in weekly editions—ended up by the turn of the next century being produced all over Europe in never before seen bulk print runs. The new readers were not much at home in bookshops and preferred such less awe-inspiring *sales channels* as tobacconists and newsagents, where penny dreadfuls found a welcome home. In these establishments prospective buyers would not risk moralising interference from librarians, booksellers, utilitarian idealists, or the church. Penny dreadfuls were thus exemplary of the success of the combined force of a new ‘what’ with a new ‘how’ in reaching a whole new group of readers.

With the advent of the World Wide Web at the tail end of the previous millennium we can be said to have entered a new stage in the popularisation of access to bourgeois culture. That is not to say that the long historical process of widening cultural participation ever really came to a standstill; it continued throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with a sequence of ‘new media’, from photography to television, playing a major role. However, the Web, the newest of the new mediums, has given a potent new impetus to popular participation in the mediated exchange of knowledge and culture, and in book culture in particular. Just as participation soared in the nineteenth century, the twenty-first century again sees a strong increase, stimulated by the Web. Besides many similarities between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries in terms of the increase in readership, however, there are some differences, too. I will mention four.

In the first place, especially in its 2.0 incarnation, the Web fosters not only passive but also active participation. A phenomenal number of new forms of writing are being actively practised, ranging from email, texting, and other forms of personal messaging via maintaining a semi-public social media presence to more public forms of expression such as commenting, blogging, and tweeting. Secondly, change is happening much faster than before. It took several decades for nineteenth-century publishers to discover the real interests of the new reading public. In the meantime, established publishers could survive

¹ See, for example, Lisa Kuitert, *Het ene boek in vele delen: De uitgave van literaire series in Nederland 1850-1900. Bevattende velerlei wetenswaardigheden, alsmede nieuwe gezichtspunten en overwegingen met betrekking tot de geschiedenis van het Nederlandse literaire boek in de tweede helft van de negentiende eeuw* (Amsterdam, De Buitenkant, 1993), and Adriaan van der Weel, *Onbehagen in de schriftcultuur. Leesrevoluties in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw* (Amsterdam, Leiden University Press, 2007).

on the strength of the status quo and the conventions of cultural hierarchy. Thirdly, the emancipatory aspect of the process of widening cultural participation is changing. In the nineteenth century emancipation was for a large part a matter of the lower socioeconomic strata aspiring to gain access to the privileges of the establishment. In addition to having a different, more popular taste in reading (which the book trade had to discover and respond to), many new readers were thus also eager to discover the existing 'what' and 'how' of the establishment, generally accepting that it would help them to move up the social ladder if they acquainted themselves with these. This enfranchising motive is largely absent today, or is at least a great deal less important. This makes the current process of widening cultural participation less a two-way phenomenon than it was in the nineteenth century, and as a result less socialisation in the 'bookish' habits of higher socioeconomic classes takes place. (That is, if such bookish habits persist at all: the symbolic capital that books represent would seem to have been subject to notable inflation in recent years.) In the fourth and last but certainly not the least important place, there is evidence of less longitudinal, cross-generational socialisation. Reading habits of older generations are not inherited by younger generations.² This discontinuity is also evident in education, where the tendency is to adapt the choice of educational materials to the changing habits of students' existing media use rather than attempting to inculcate a particular media use top-down. As schools embrace electronic learning environments, they cede more of their traditional socialising role, which hitherto used to foster cultural continuity in media use.

This wholesale transformation of reading culture is not a reason for cultural pessimism per se: culture has always changed. However, since major changes are taking place at such great speed, it becomes an ever greater challenge to assess their consequences. If we can obtain an insight into the mechanisms involved, this might help us gain at least some control. One net effect of the speed of change, for example, is that different cultural stages follow each other more rapidly, with several stages overlapping in time. Indeed, new developments occur so fast that we find ourselves ill equipped to deal with them, and might in fact be preparing ourselves for the previous war. The many kinds of social challenges this presents include specific challenges to the book industry, and it is these that I would like to discuss in particular.

The chief challenge in the field of trade book publishing is the same demand–supply mismatch that we have just observed in the nineteenth century (and in the case of the French restaurant scene I began with). So can we indeed observe different co-existing stages in 'what' and 'how', and if so, what are the differences? I think we can indeed identify three such co-existing stages. As far as 'what' (or book contents: texts) is concerned, I would suggest that we can, very roughly, observe an increasing predilection on the part of consumers overall, but especially among members of the younger generations, for shorter and more easily digestible texts. At the same time, the publishing industry remains overwhelmingly geared towards the production of conventional book-

² See Frank Huysmans, 'De openbare bibliotheek in Nederland en de veranderde leescultuur sinds 1975' [Public libraries in the Netherlands and the changed reading culture since 1975], in: *Jaarboek voor Nederlandse boekgeschiedenis* 14 (2007), 179-192.

length texts of between forty-nine (the minimum number of pages stipulated in the famous 1964 UNESCO definition of the book) and, say, one thousand pages (roughly the maximum number of pages that can be handled in a single binding). Changing consumer tastes will obviously affect the nature of the content in the longer term, although it is a great deal less obvious yet in what way.

If the ‘what’ has not yet crystallised, and remains a matter of speculation, the ‘how’ question is easier to observe and quantify. I would like to categorise ‘how’ into forms that result from the manner of *production*, and forms that result from the manner of *delivery*. The manner of production divides into one of three forms: analogue, digitised (i.e., as roughly digital equivalents of analogue texts), and digital (i.e., ‘digital-born’ texts). By ‘digital’ I mean that a text shows clear signs of the digital sphere from which it originates (for example in terms of its multimodality, or use of hyperlinks). This tripartite division is not a literal categorisation, but rather reflects modes of thinking about texts: what I will be calling ‘mentalities’.

In parallel with this tripartite classification of the production format, I would like to pose a similar classification in terms of delivery and consumption. That is to say that the manner of the texts’ delivery and consumption falls into one of three categories: the conventional print mentality; digital pragmatism; or an ‘online mentality’. By ‘print mentality’ I simply mean traditional modes and channels of publication. Incidentally, this print mentality remains remarkably resilient, especially if we compare text with music and film, which have only a residual analogue presence. Books continue to be published in a paper form in massive numbers, and—so far—they retain a pervasive presence in everyday life. By ‘digital pragmatism’ I mean the digital equivalent, roughly, of analogue ways of gaining access to texts: for example, having texts available as e-books. The third of my categories, the ‘online mentality’, by contrast, represents a marked departure from conventional ways of thinking about access to content. Not only does the online mentality expect access to take place in a fully multimodal and converged online context in which text takes equal position with music, film and video, and games, but it breaks out of the hierarchical mould that characterises the other two mentalities. It expects, for example, to locate content which is available online 24/7 directly by (fulltext) searching rather than having to go through any form of institutional filtering represented by publishers, bookshops, critics, or library catalogues. The prospective online consumer has set himself up as the spider in a homespun network of programmed personalisation, which will alert him to all things worthy of his attention. His is a participatory, user-centred, habitat.

If we return for a moment to our comparison with the nineteenth century, today we cannot yet clearly discern the new genres that we saw emerging then.³ However, we can observe the emergence of new forms and delivery channels. As they did in the nineteenth century,

³ A possible exception is the ‘long form’: shorthand for a form of investigative journalism of greater than ordinary feature length. To judge by the mushrooming number of sites devoted to this genre, it is experiencing significant popularity. See, for example, <http://longreads.com/> and <http://longform.org>.

these again bypass the established institutions of the book trade, with the WWW taking the place of the news stands and tobacconists.

If, as I suggest, the last of these three mentalities has any real basis in fact, this is the one that would demand most attention of the book industry in order to formulate an adequate response to it. Much has been done in recent times about digitising workflow (for example, using xml, content management systems, and databases), delivery modes (for example, e-books and apps), and sales channels (online). However, such digital pragmatism is not enough, just as it was not enough for nineteenth-century publishers to simply repackage existing titles. The main challenge for the book trade (both publishers and booksellers) lies in connecting with the online *mentality*—and the mentality of the reader of the future.

I would like to examine the behaviour of the ‘online “generation”’ in a little more detail, and suggest how this behaviour may be linked to the inherent properties of the online medium.⁴ I place the word *generation* between quotation marks because even though the online behaviour that can be observed may, as I suggested earlier, naturally be more prevalent among younger generations, grown up and growing up in an online condition, this behaviour is less likely to be exclusive to a particular new generation of consumers than that it betrays a more widespread additional mentality. Just as this online mentality is not confined to the younger generations, reversely not every member of the younger generations necessarily, or fully, develops such an mentality.

The internet is available at any time for communication, media consumption, and accessing (and buying) products and services. The online activity it fosters is governed by the characteristics inherent in the internet as a two-way communication infrastructure: instantaneousness, ‘democratic’, two-way traffic, with potentially full equality of producer and consumer of information. The ‘online mentality’ resulting from frequent use of this communication infrastructure is characterised by the expectation that desires are instantly gratified; that content is freely accessible (or virtually so); and that the user is in control. This control is expressed for example in the way access to content is ‘self-filtered’, through setting preferences, creating profiles, listening to peers, and so on. The resulting consumer mentality can be succinctly expressed by two sentences: ‘If information doesn’t reach me, it’s probably not important to me’, and ‘What can be done online, must be done online’. The latter is not just a matter of simple convenience, but also the corollary of the sense of control the consumer experiences online—a control that is often lacking in the real world.

Imaginably, the prevalence of such an online mentality may spell all sorts of social changes in the longer term. However, for the purpose of this essay I would like to look at more

⁴ More about the concept of inherent properties of technologies in Adriaan van der Weel, *Changing our textual minds: Towards a digital order of knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester UP, 2011; see also ‘Pandora’s box of text technology’, in *Jaarboek voor Nederlandse Boekgeschiedenis* 20 (2013), pp. 201-4 (online at http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/wgbw/research/Weel_Articles/VanderWeel_PandorasBoxOfTextTechnology_2013.pdf).

immediate economic effects. I think these are at least two-fold. First of all the online mentality clearly tends to bypass the traditional ‘publication circuit’ and its value chain, and secondly, it seems likely that the virtual, non-material nature of all internet traffic is leading to a mindset that regards access as more important than ownership. Consumers share information and entertainment of all kinds outside of conventional markets, and this behaviour is not limited to home-made expressions, as on YouTube or Flickr, but extends to materials originating in conventional markets. Because their model is an access one, they are acutely aware of the fact that each additional act of access occurs at zero marginal cost. They are much less aware that there was a cost in creating the material in the first place, or if they are this is regarded as a contribution to the ‘freedom of information’ that characterises the internet.

If access is indeed becoming more important than ownership, it makes sense, for example, to assume that the relationship between the producer and the consumer of textual content is likely to move towards an all-you-can-read model of some sort rather than the conventional sales model of individual titles.⁵ This leaves notably booksellers (who are disintermediated) and authors (whose income stands to be severely reduced) in an unenviable position. Still, an all-you-can-read model is what characterises the Web as a whole already, and insofar as the traditional ‘publication circuit’ is not bypassed altogether, I would argue that this is therefore a natural model suggested by the inherent properties of the digital medium. Since in the digital scenario there is no possibility of ownership (all consumption being governed by license agreements), and digital information knows no scarcity and no marginal costs, this model is thus clearly about the provision of services. Moreover, the model emphasises the importance of ‘access devices’: the hardware through which it is possible to gain access to reading material. Unlike books—and this is a further complicating factor—these tend not to be products made by publishers. As far as such hardware is concerned, publishers can only respond to market developments as they occur (such as the introduction of the tablet as a reading device). Moreover, the profits do not go to the book trade but to the tech sector.

Catering to the online mentality thus means for all parties in the value chain that they have to answer the question how to survive free content: that is to say, the combination of sources completely outside the conventional publishing value chain, and sources taken by consumers out of the value chain and into an economy based on ‘sharing’. What is there to sell (or what would a consumer be prepared to buy) when so much content is free? How can authors, publishers and booksellers negotiate the shifting power relationship that follows from the consumer’s experience of control (as evidenced in, for example, self-filtering)? Perhaps above all, how can they market the importance of engaging with content that is not only not free, but may also be more demanding? (Incidentally, the very notion that such reading matter that is non-popular and yet worth buying exists is being undermined by numerous developments, such as prominently the current drive to make open access to academic literature mandatory, as is currently happening in varying

⁵ See Adriaan van der Weel, ‘From an ownership to an access economy of publishing’, forthcoming, *Logos*, 2014.

degrees and through various mechanisms in the UK, the US and the Netherlands.)⁶

The mentality in the publishing industry is obviously going to have to reflect all the various mentalities that consumers display, including this pervasive but elusive online mentality. Identifying the demands of readers with an online mentality in terms of both content and delivery is no mean challenge. The overarching concern is how to turn around product-oriented conventional thinking to consumption-oriented thinking. If content is being perceived as a service instead of a product, it makes sense for publishers to behave like service providers. If consumers rely on social media to filter what they think they need to pay attention to, that is where marketing needs to happen.⁷ Again it follows from the inherent properties of the digital medium that logging use is a natural business practice for all internet-based parties. However, an additional challenge, at least in the short term, but perhaps for the foreseeable future, is the hybridity of the market. No-one knows at what speed the conventional mentality will recede, presumably to be replaced by an online mentality—let alone how the online mentality itself will evolve. To prepare for the future in such rapidly changing circumstances it is clearly not enough for publishing to pursue this elusive ‘online mentality’. It is equally necessary to keep publishing for the (very tenacious) analogue mentality, as well as, for the time being anyway, to digitise conventional operations. Having said this, though this hybridity concerns the industry as a whole, it is of course not necessary for every player to cater to all segments. Each publisher can make a judicious decision on the most promising markets given, in Bourdieu’s terms, their existing habitus and forms of capital.

If the analysis I presented in this essay is in any way correct, it follows that there is a need for the book industry, and especially trade publishing—the least captive market of all major fields of publishing—to do market research. Compared to the nineteenth century this time it did not take very long to discover that tastes re ‘what’ and ‘how’ are changing, but it is a lot less clear in what direction these changes are taking the industry. The book trade has never done as much marketing as other branches of industry. The argument has always been that each book is different; the book does not constitute a replacement market. Fair enough, but here we are not talking about individual titles but about the future of the industry as a whole, so this excuse loses its validity. We clearly cannot speak of a *reading* crisis, with probably more written information being produced and consumed than ever before in history. But it does appear that a *buying* crisis is looming in the book industry.⁸ The sort of market research that is called for is not the sort that individual

⁶ About the wider implications of open access to the perception the value of (digital) textual information, see Adriaan van der Weel, ‘The Trojan horse of Open Access’ (forthcoming, in *TXT*, 2014, ‘Exploring the boundaries of the book’, Leiden, Department of Book and Digital Media Studies).

⁷ See Susan Danziger, ‘Discovering digital communitiess: Connecting with book buyers in their natural habitat’, *Logos* 21:3-4 (2010), pp. 109-118. While the scale of the likes of Apple, Google, Facebook and Amazon may not be easily achievable, direct communication with customers, including client profiling, is certainly within reach for publishers employing a B2C business model.

⁸ In addition to the difficulty the industry is experiencing in communicating with the

publishers should or can perform; it is the sort that policy makers, educationalists, and the book industry need to engage in collectively. For surely it makes sense to find out *what* various identifiable segments of the market would like to read, and *how* they would like to access their reading, and how much and how they would be prepared to pay for it.

That our literacy is changing is one thing. Culture is a process of continuous change. To be aware of the possible effects of the changes is quite another, and we need to cultivate this awareness to formulate adequate responses in our day-to-day lives, both individually and as a society.

younger generations of potential buyers, there is also the problem of an overall market contraction as more readers take to e-reading: the turnover in e-books being lower than the turnover generated by equivalent sales in paper books.