Developing a Writing and Publishing Strategy in the Internet Age

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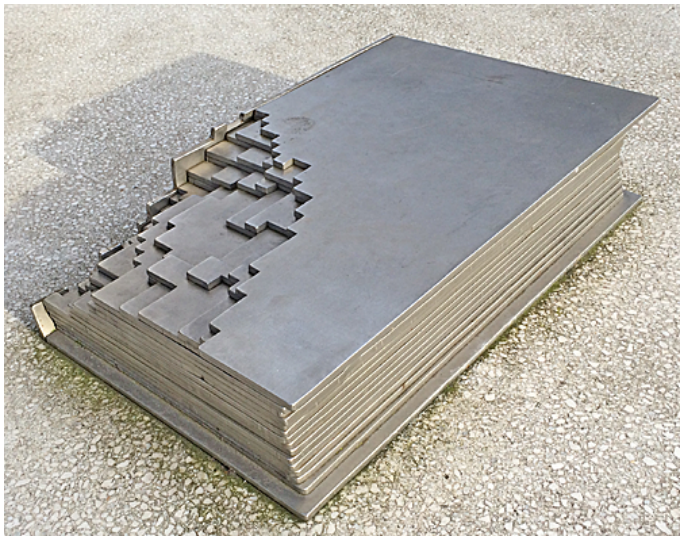

Researchers need to operate within networks, to disseminate their ideas, findings and critical insights. The Internet has expanded the spectrum of outlets, as well as publication and peer review processes. These notes are to help in honing skills in writing, editing and reviewing your own work and that of others. It's a case of strategic planning. What's the best outlet for each stage in the development of your research, and how can you get the most out of your writing? Richard Coyne is author of several books with MIT Press, Addison Wesley and Routledge, and with experience in co-authorship of scientific journal articles as well as texts with a cultural bent, both on and off line. Two of his students recently used their PhDs as the basis of books with mainstream publishers.

These notes are compiled from the author's blog posts.

Discussion

Here are ten tips for writing with a leisure audience in mind, ie a mass audience, particularly if you are a scholar.

1. Leisure readers like being let into a secret: the secret life of bees, Britain's hidden architecture, the secrets of my success. The suggestion of exposure can come through the title, but also in the body of the narrative.
2. Tips and tricks. Leisure readers don't usually expect to have their preconceptions overhauled, their paradigms shifted, but they are willing to be nudged. So lure readers in a way that suggests confirmation and improvement.*
3. Leisure readers don't necessarily get to the end of the article. So start with the main point rather than lead up to it. Newspaper articles do this. Sometimes editors cut the article off at some arbitrary sentence because of space restrictions.
4. Relate what you want to say to topics that are current and for which the mass media has already created exposure. This is a case of delivering what you want to say via a topic for which the audience is already primed. In other words, it's a way of showing very directly the relevance of what you want to say — if you want this. Think of the audience and your subject, but almost anything can be related to anything: Wikileaks and brain research; the London riots and the paintings of Caravaggio; Jane Austin and the Olympics?
5. Consider layering your work so that the more specialised material is addressed through information boxes, footnotes, codas, specialist pages, and links to other material and scholarly articles.
6. Audience building and media mashing. Link blogs and online articles to Facebook, Twitter and other social media in order to broadcast what you say and build up a readership. This can be automated.
7. Schedule yourself. Articles in the press, whether online or paper-based do not just appear when the writers have completed their work, but get aggregated and released at scheduled times and dates. Blog authoring sites allow you to set a date when your blog post will go public. You can write articles in advance and schedule release dates for each. Potential readers are creatures of habit — potentially.
8. Experts also like leisure reading. The people you are communicating with may be learned, but they may know nothing about your field. They probably don't want to be confused or talked down to, and neither do you when you read their works intended for a mass audience.
9. It is usually enough to establish, and then rest on, your authority. You don't need to call on all your scholarly powers of analysis to say something worthwhile. The Chancellor of the Exchequer is called on to explain and predict, but not to deliver lectures on economic theory. Your credentials can be conveyed through your job title or a simple strap line.
10. The web is still a new medium, with no rules or well-established practices. Experiment with new forms and new ways of saying things.

* This article is not setting out to challenge the reader, and is therefore banale in academic terms. What is leisure reading anyway? Why only 10 points? Is this article an attempt at parody and/or to be taken seriously? What is the trickster function in writing? Further help may come from

- Derrida, J., *Limited Inc*, trans. S. Weber, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988.
- Hyde, L., *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth and Art*, New York: North Point Press, 1998.
- Veblen, T., *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Amherst, New York: Promethius, 1998.

The architectural historian Indra McEwen presents a plausible explanation of why Vitriuvius chose to write *ten* books on architecture — rather than 7 or 14. Ten scrolls stack very nicely to form a pyramid with 4 at the base. 4×4 also makes the "supremely perfect number" 16 — the four cardinal directions multiplied by themselves. See

- McEwen, I., *Vitruvius: Writing the Body of Architecture*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003.

Pros and cons of Google Scholar

richardcoyne.com/2013/05/04/pros-and-cons-of-google-scholar/

Posted by Richard Coyne

As we ponder the ethics of Google's tax minimisation tactics, it's worth reflecting on how dependent the academic community has become on Google Scholar, now a major gateway through which to access academic publications.

"Pros and cons" can stand for ***pro***-ducers and ***con***-sumers (as well as "for and against"). After all, academic researchers are in the business of producing as well as consuming material available through specialised web search engines such as **Google Scholar (GS)**. I don't think I'm alone in thinking that GS really is changing research and writing practices.

Consumer-side

On the **consumer** side, GS is a citation index, enabling anyone on line to access books and articles, and to see who subsequently cited each of those publications.

So researchers can browse through threads of related publications. They can also see how often an article is cited, which provides clues to its significance in the field.

No doubt there are traps, particularly for students, but here's a potentially positive game changer from the consumption side.

Leaky boundaries

You access GS through search words and don't need to restrict your search to a particular subject area. So if you look up the word "melancholy" you'll get references from literature, psychology, philosophy, art and politics, just on the first few pages. That's got to improve communication between disciplines, shake up disciplinary differences, and may even reconfigure boundaries between disciplines. Something has to leak through.

I'm no longer surprised if a student essay on architecture references articles from media studies, psychology, engineering, and/or education. By most accounts good research is about making connections, and in the right hands GS operates as a kind of creative *connection machine* … more than a *confusion machine*.

Supply-side effects

Academics researchers are **suppliers** as well as consumers of online search content. Academic research and writing practices are changing in many ways, not least the way GS exposes the relationships between your research and that of others through citation data. Here are 10 supply-side effects.

1. If you've published academic articles or books, then it's interesting and sobering, to see who's cited your work, and you can follow up further leads, or work on addressing critique. Often GS indicates zero citations for a particular publication. Prior to GS, most of us were blithely ignorant of such statistics. Now we know, what do we do about it, if anything?
2. Whether you like it or not, anyone with access to a browser can see citation data about anything you've published. Non-science peer review forums, research assessment and grant awarding bodies, and promotions committees reject the idea that citation counts indicate quality or significance. But at least at a personal level, those little citation numbers appearing under GS search items are hard to ignore. However reliable they are, what do they mean for the researcher?
3. There are also summative "scores" such as the H-index to conjure with. If you have 10 publications each cited in at least 10 other publications then your H-index is 10. For "10″ substitute the variable x. Whatever your maximum value of x, that's your H-index. GS can calculate this for you, and publish it on your own GS author page (or user profile) if you want to create one, along with a corrected and edited list of just your publications. Researchers into research practices have shown that this figure can be manipulated. How do we use or resist such indices?
4. After using GS for a while you can see the huge difference in publication and citation patterns across different

disciplines. Books are popular in the humanities, journal articles in the sciences. Articles in science journals can have larger numbers of authors than in the humanities, there are more outputs per academic researcher, and the citation counts are generally higher.

5. Does a publication that's never cited have no influence? There's a time lag between publication and citation. Perhaps publications can exert influence in ways other than by being cited, such as influencing students, or the influence can extend to non-academic professional spheres.
6. We should be sceptical of citations counts as a measure of quality. Just because an article is cited frequently doesn't mean it's any good, and there's always the so called Matthew effect. Popular papers get cited because they are popular, amplifying the numerical difference between those at the top, and those at the bottom of the pile.
7. With a bit of analysis, GS exposes academic cliques who always, and only, cite each other.
8. GS also exposes authors who repeatedly cite the same sources, *the usual suspects*, and ignore the intermediaries, ie other less well known authors who also critique and review those sources. I've observed this in humanities and cultural studies areas. So Roland Barthes, Susan Sontag, Martin Heidegger, and Luce Irigaray may be generously referenced, but not other scholars who have deployed, critiqued, developed, refuted or applied such material. Perhaps changes in search practices will bring this material to light. There are fewer excuses now for ignoring the wider community of scholars.
9. In a way, GS provides a means of sniffing out the marginal, the un-cited, the otherwise referenced, and avoiding the popular and the obvious — hopefully opening new avenues for exploration. It also reveals topics that are "under researched."
10. GS enables scholars to present their own GS page, that lists only their own publications, disambiguated, canonic, up-to-date, and with links to the pages of co-authors. Add this medium for personal academic profiling to other relevant social media tools such as Academia, Mendeley, LinkedIn, FaceBook, Google+, and Twitter and that's a powerful network for letting the world know what you are up to. On the down side, it's an extra burden to maintain this relentless online presence, and renders the research enterprise somewhat individualistic rather than group-based. The tools primarily exist so you can profile yourself, not the team. It also floods the info-sphere with yet more stuff. Is it all needed?

Famous New Yorker cartoon by Barney Tobey: "Too bad about old Ainsworth. Published and published, but perished all the same."

Notes

- Access to academic journals will probably change in other ways as open access policies come into play. See Finch, Janet. 2012. *Accessibility, sustainability, excellence: How to expand access to research publications (Report of the Working Group on Expanding Access to Published Research Findings)*. PDF.
- Citation indexes have been around for years, but Google Scholar looks like a regular web search engine. If you don't already know — you can enter loose-fitting search terms, and something is bound to show up. You don't have to fiddle around entering terms into author, title and subject fields, and you can even misspell words. The search results returned include a mini abstract of the found articles, and a number indicating the number of times that article is cited by other articles, along with links to those article descriptions.
- Thanks to GS's extensive and growing databases, and Google's deals with publishers, you can read many of those articles online, and if you are operating from within a domain (via VPN) that subscribes to the right services, eg a university, then you probably have free access to even more articles. GS points you to books as well as articles, and even searches the full contents of many books. You may not be able to download the whole book, but you'll at least see a short abstract showing a few sentences that include your search terms. Many books in part are available in preview mode through Amazon.
- Unlike other citation systems, GS operates as a single access point to all these features, and if you take into account all the other resources of the web, including library search engines and document repositories, then you need hardly ever leave your desk, except to go out for a coffee, where you can do more of the same if the cafe has wifi.
- There are limits of course. GS only refers to text-based outputs. It doesn't process other highly useful research material such as blogs, private reports, exhibitions, creative works, designs, films, musical compositions, specialised archives, and experimental data, and you probably wouldn't expect it to.
- See the UK REF2014 guidance on how citation data is to be collected in assessing research in clinical medicine, biological sciences, chemistry, physics, computer science, economics, etc.
- Scholars regard SciVerse, Scopus by Elsevier as the more authoritative citation database. Not least, it discloses the journals that it has in its database. GS doesn't. You need to be in a subscription service to even access Scopus' basic search and metadata, and it's less friendly than the immediacy provided by Google's search engine, though perhaps

it's more powerful.

- and Universities as interpretive communities.

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About Richard Coyne

The cultural, social and spatial implications of computers and pervasive digital media spark my interest ... enjoy architecture, writing, designing, philosophy, coding and media mashups.
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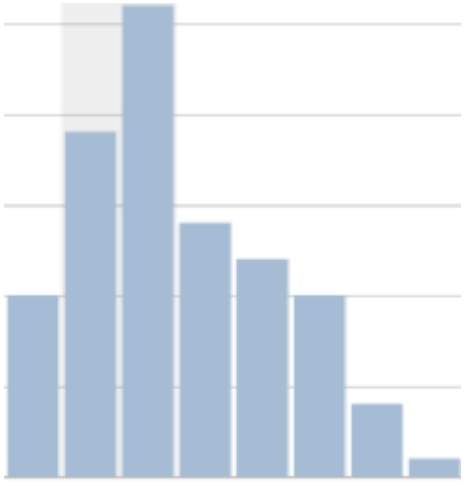
Profile yourself (Narcissus on line)

richardcoyne.com/2011/02/12/narcissus-on-line/

Posted by Richard Coyne

Concern in the press about cyberbullying, identity theft, and other online risks have all but eclipsed the interesting influences the Internet has on professional life. Social media are turning professionals into celebrity wannabes. See for example the Architizer website for promoting architects and their work, and the pop celebrity orientation of the architectural firm Bjarke Ingels Group (BIG) and their videos and book *Yes is More. An Archicomic on Architectural Evolution*, foregrounding their founder.

Reputation is important among responsible adults. It seems that social media and other Web 2.0 technologies tempt professionals to tilt their concern about reputation (or identity formation) in the direction of celebrity. After all, social media are mass media of a kind, and borrow concepts of celebrity from broadcasting. Depictions of Internet cultures are replete with examples of individuals who have elevated themselves from obscurity into the limelight through the Internet. Furthermore, low-cost mechanisms for self-promotion, star ratings, friends lists, "likes" lists, and collections of Twitter followers are surrogates for a celebrity fan base.



Social media also provide aids for assessing or manipulating **reputational success** in numerical terms. Tools for hosting personal web logs (blogs), such as WordPress, provide daily charts of visitor and hit counts. Professional academic credentials succumb to similar accounting. Through Google Scholar, citation indices for academic publications are as readily available as Facebook "likes."

In keeping with celebrity culture, social media encourage personal and **private disclosures**, or at least, the tools for presenting oneself professionally readily elide into tools for personal presentation. You have to decide whether to let your online professional persona deliver insights into your hobbies, holidays and family matters.

The scope for identity formation seems to be expanding, or at least changing. There will always be some group or other, no matter how small, amongst whom one can entertain unusual or **idiosyncratic interests**, and with whom one can readily identify. There is a group out there, possibly not yet formed, and unknown to you, amongst whom you can enjoy a ration of fame if you really want it.

Much has been said about the role of the Internet in identity formation. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), identity is the condition of being a single individual, having an identifiable character or personality, but also understood in terms of the individual's place within a group with which he or she associates.

With social media and Web 2.0 you have **control** (or at least the illusion of control) over how you project yourself to others, what you choose to make public or private, and the extent to which you might reveal different identities in different contexts. Part of this control involves letting you choose the extent to which you reveal your identity to different groups. Since the development of online chat rooms and online communities, the management of identity has become a major issue amongst its critics and commentators, with social media providing tools for negotiating and managing identity.

Unlike earlier, stand-alone computer applications social media applications require you to **profile** yourself. SecondLife requires users (residents) to invest effort in creating their own personas as 3D humanoid avatars, complete with clothing and accessories. Something similar (though less like dressing up) is required of GoogleDocs, LinkedIn, WordPress, and any number of other websites and applications with a social aspect. Reputation amongst one's peers is clearly a factor when any group comes together. It is fair to say that until social media and Web 2.0 it was unusual for computer applications to incorporate tools for managing online identities into their operations.

With social media you are **connected almost by default**. Part of the definition of identity involves connections with people, associating with the right group of other individuals (identifying with them), and letting it be known with whom you identify. The FaceBook "friends list" provides an obvious example of how group identity can operate.

It is only recently that I first heard of a university teacher enjoying a "following" through social media, eg blogging. It is not only those of the Y generation who might promote or sully their reputations through social media.

According to legal philosopher and theorist of hermeneutics Stanley Fish, an intellectual community is not "a group of individuals who share a point of view, but a point of view or way of organizing experience that [shares] individuals." Do we

have as much control over our professional identities as we think?

Also see Computer-supported collaborative distraction.

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Special thanks to Mario Andre Kong.

About Richard Coyne

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Discussion

richardcoyne.com/writing-texts-that-flow/

Aim for flow. Unless you are writing poetry or want to challenge your readers with clever word play, then you should provide as few impediments to fast reading as possible. If your writing is difficult then potential readers will give up after a while. Here's what impedes the reader.

1. Writing in the wrong style for the medium, eg sensationalistic and "evangelistic" writing in an academic paper: "The iPad is bringing about incredible changes in the way people consume media. Businesses should treat consumers as audiences rather than dumb marketing opportunities."
2. Colloquialisms. Don't use colloquial words and phrases in academic and formal report writing (business reports). Here are some words and phrases from the banned list: crazy, amazing, and really incredible. If in doubt look up words at www.oed.com.
3. Clichés and idioms are best avoided, but if used then you need to get them right, and web browsing can help. "After the dawn of time" should be "*Since*the dawn of time." Other idioms:Your university **ranks amongst** the best in the world; Rules about good writing are not **carved in stone**; I'm not prejudiced against pop culture — **far from it**; Don't **give up on** blogging. **Stick with it**.
4. Floating indexicals: indexicals are pronouns (they, it, them, those, these) that refer to something specific. These words "float" if it's not clear from one sentence to the next what the pronouns are referring to: "Parents don't seem to mind what their children watch. They like violent cartoons." Does "they" refer to the parents, the children or both?
5. Who is doing what to whom? If you write, "Children are now encouraged to watch nature programmes," then the reader will ask, "encouraged by whom?" "Children are now encouraged *by their parents and teachers* to watch nature programmes" is better, but still in the passive voice. The sentence is clearer, stronger and flows better if the main actors (the ones who do the encouraging) are at the start of the sentence: "*Parents and teachers* now encourage children to watch nature programmes."
6. Lack of evidence: you would need to provide evidence for that last statement, usually by referring to someone's report on the matter. If you can't cite any evidence then you could always turn it into a question, or don't say it at all.
7. The long lead in: often the reader, and even the writer, is unclear what the report is about until they get to some crucial sentence either half way through or even right at the end. When editing your work, hunt out this sentence or group of sentences and move them to somewhere near the start of the essay.
8. It depends on the subject matter, but often it's good to start an essay with a reference to what someone else (some authority) says about your subject.

Animation theorist Paul Wells defines animation as "giving life" to something (Wells, 1998). In this dissertation I'll demonstrate how sound designers can *give life* to everyday objects by giving them digitally synthesised voices. …

9. Using too many words. "According to an OFCOM report, many of the people who watch television actually seem to rather enjoy the occasional television commercial" contains unnecessary words. Say, "According to an OFCOM report, many television viewers like to watch commercials." Edit and re-edit your work before submitting it. Successful fiction writers and journalists are good at making every word count. We can learn from them.

- http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/feb/20/ten-rules-for-writing-fiction-part-one
- http://davehood59.wordpress.com/2010/03/08/how-to-write-creative-nonfiction/

What follows is an example of writing that most people would find very difficult to read. There is no flow. Also watch out for

- grammatical errors
- unnecessary conjunctives (while, therefore, so, thus)
- sentences that are much too long and could easily be broken up to improve the flow
- familiar and colloquial terms
- assertions without evidence
- potted histories
- overstatements
- a grandiose start

Original paragraph

From the dawn of time, while living in caves, mans thoughts always were about better ways to represent the real world. Everyone really loves great pictures. Now they go to movies all the time which derive from magic lantern shows and the era of silent films, and then the first animations like Steamboat Willie, thus they now watch television in there spare time and YouTube to show off amazing videos, and the consumer is now the creationist. Their really challenged as no one can agree on its affects. Baudrillard argued that the excess of signs and of meaning in late 20th century “global” society had caused (quite paradoxically) an effacement of reality. Baudrillard is thought to be the greatest thinker in the 19th century.

Editorial comments

From the dawn of time, while living in caves, mans thoughts always were about

- Avoid giving the reader a history of the world
- Did we start in caves, in the forests, the prairies or the Garden of Eden?
- Avoid “man” as it looks gender specific (in spite of its etymology)
- “Mans” should be “man’s” as it’s possessive
- “Always” is too inclusive. There are always exceptions.

better ways to represent the real world. Everyone really loves great pictures.

- Do you want to open up a philosophical debate about what is meant by “real”?
- “Really” is an unnecessary qualifier; “great” is not specific enough, and is colloquial
- “Pictures” is ambiguous. Do you mean moving pictures or just visual images?

Now they go to movies all the time which derive from magic lantern shows and

- Poor sentence construction, and it’s too long and very unclear
- Not clear who “they” refers to
- It looks like a potted history of cinema and is inaccurate anyway
- I would expect a reference to a publication on the history of the moving image

the era of silent films, and then the first animations like Steamboat Willie, thus

- I don’t think Steamboat Willie was the first animation; easy to check online

they now watch television in there spare time and YouTube to show off amazing

- Not clear who is meant by “they”
- “There” should be “their”
- “Amazing” is imprecise and colloquial

videos, and the consumer is now the creationist. Their really challenged as no

- “Creationist” should be “creator”
- “Their” should be “they are” or “they’re”
- Not clear who they are.

one can agree on its affects. Baudrillard argued that the excess of signs and of

- “No one” is not specific enough
- There’s no need to point out that people disagree here.
- “Affects” should be “effects,” a noun; “To affect” is a verb, unless you are referring to emotions (affects).

meaning in late 20th century “global” society had caused (quite paradoxically) an

- This is in a more sophisticated style of writing and looks like it was copied from an unattributed source

effacement of reality. Baudrillard is thought to be the greatest thinker in the 19th

- That’s the wrong century and it’s an overstatement.
- The last sentence is in the passive voice so we have to ask, who thinks this?

century.

Some attempts at correction

~~From~~ Since the dawn of time, ~~while living~~when humankind lived on the prairies and in caves, ~~mans~~ our thoughts ~~always were about~~focussed on better ways to represent the ~~real~~ world. ~~Everyone really loves great~~Most people like pictures. Now ~~they~~ people go to ~~movies~~ the cinema. Before then they attended ~~all the time which derive from~~ magic lantern shows and ~~the era of~~ silent films~~., and then the first animations like~~ Early animations such as Disney's Steamboat Willie were amongst the first synthetically generated commercial moving imagery~~, thus they n~~. Now people watch television in ~~there~~ their spare time and view YouTube ~~to show off amazing videos~~clips~~., and t~~The consumers ~~is~~ are now also the ~~creationist~~creators. ~~Their~~ They're ~~really~~ challenged ~~as no one can agree on its affects~~by the effects of these new media. According to a Wikipedia entry, "Baudrillard argued that the excess of signs and of meaning in late 20th century ~~"~~global~~"~~ society had caused (quite paradoxically) an effacement of reality." Media theorists think highly of Baudrillard's ~~is thought to be the greatest thinker in the 19th century~~contribution.

Here's an even better rewording

The idea of visual representation has a long history (Mitchell, 1995). Our affinity with the visual image extends to twentieth and twenty-first century film, video and animation. The popularity of YouTube suggests that the consumers of visual images are now both creators and producers. What is the effect of this new model of "prosumption" (Toffler, 1980) on the media business? Perhaps the philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1994) has something relevant to say here, especially in light of his insistence that globalised society has somehow "effaced" reality.

- Baudrillard, Jean. 1994. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. S. F. Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan press.
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Here are some references on how to write well.

The quantification of the intellect

richardcoyne.com/2011/11/05/the-quantification-of-the-intellect/

Posted by Richard Coyne

Who cares about research? Much research in the UK is publicly funded, through grants, university infrastructure and salaries. The latest research exercise (REF) foregrounds the issue of ***impact***. How can research communities demonstrate the value of their research to society at large? There's economic and social impact, where research leads to better products for the marketplace, competitive advantage, and benefits to health, welfare and prosperity. Impact can be subtle, slow to develop, long term, more the product of a research community than an individual piece of research. In fact it's all about ***influence*** rather than impact.

The economic and social influence individuals and groups exert is a ***qualitative*** matter, but inevitably leads to a consideration of ***quantities***, and large numbers at that. It's about audiences en mass: footfall, demonstrably large numbers of readers, visitors, users, consumers and beneficiaries. Research impact is about mass media, the massification of the intellect, or at least it nudges research in that direction.

The emphasis on public accountability under the rubric of *impact*, combined with the growth in the Internet as a powerful broadcast medium, provides both a challenge and an opportunity in dealing with research and mass audiences.

How does research get noticed? The tools are there for anyone with access to the Internet to publish: messages, comments, articles and whole tomes for everyone to see, to garner feedback, and even construct a network of followers, readers, and fans through social media. You can construct a persona and orchestrate your own publicity machine. All of this operates under the exposure of numbers: page views, hits, visitors, friends, followers, citations, subscribers. Quantities are conspicuously present on the Internet — to be viewed, compared, gloated over, embarrassed about, and provide evidence for influence, reputation and impact, assuming there's an audience.

Numbers also plunge information into the shadows. What do punters do with information they visit on the Internet … if they do? What is its influence? Over 10.8 million viewers were entertained by *The X FactorResults* on ITV1 last weekend (BARB), the most often viewed video on YouTube has over 180 million hits (currently Evolution of Dance – By Judson Laipply), the Guardian Newspaper currently averages 232,566 sales per issue (and falling) (ABC), the top-selling book series is the *Harry Potter* stories (over 45 million according to a wikipedia entry), and the average paper in the life sciences is cited about 6 times (Maslov and Redner, 2008).

Does each of these media products have comparable intellectual impact or influence, and is the unit of measure the same in each case (1 Harry Potter reader = 1 Guardian reader = 1 reader of a research paper)? Do researchers have to have dual citizenship: scholars *and* citizen reporters? Do we have to restrict our communications to bite-sized chunks, to trade in unresolved dilemmas and dichotomies, sensationalise the issues, connect to popular topics, gloss over fine distinctions, provoke with unanswerable questions, or float from one topic to another and never settle on a conclusion?

- Maslov, Sergei, and Sidney Redner. 2008. Promise and pitfalls of extending Google's PageRank algorithm to citation networks. *The Journal of Neuroscience*, (28) 44, 11103-11105. Online.

About Richard Coyne

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Shallow reading

richardcoyne.com/2013/02/16/shallow-reading/

Posted by Richard Coyne

The Internet is changing the way our brains work, according to Nicholas Carr in his book *The Shallows*: "what the net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation" (p.6).

For all its benefits, he thinks the web habituates us to browsing, clicking, skimming and jumping around information. So it's harder now to read books and other substantial texts in a deep and concerted way. At best, we are now dumbed-down pseudo-intellectuals who flit along the surface rather than going deep, and this tendency affects anyone habituated to Internet use, not just the young who have been brought up with it.

I thought I would test this tendency in myself by treating Carr's book in just this way, by reading the Amazon preview – skimming, skipping and jumping through it, and allowing myself to be distracted by extraneous associations and links. I might buy the book later.

Beneath the negatively flowing shallows of the book's polemic glides a countervailing current — that this tendency to explore interconnections and associations is no bad thing. The opposing view to Carr's celebrates the fact that habituated web users don't rely on the linear narratives provided by texts as presented by their authors, but construct their own narratives.

Reading is now a co-creative process, and in any case, readers are also writers, as they cut and paste, appropriate, assemble, cross-reference and diarise via social media commentary, not to mention blogs, reviews, opinion pages, emails, tweets and text messages. Carr warns us against this superficial profligacy. But Don Tapscott, in his book *Grown Up Digital* to which Carr refers, tells us to embrace it. According to Tapscott:

I believe that we will see that being immersed in an interactive digital environment has made them smarter than your average TV-watching couch potato. They may read fewer works of literature, but they devote a lot of time to reading and writing online. As we will learn, that activity can be intellectually challenging. Instead of just numbly receiving information, they are gathering it from around the globe with lightning speed. Instead of just trusting a TV announcer to tell us the truth, they are assessing and scrutinizing the jumble of facts that are often contradictory or ambiguous. When they write to their blog or contribute a video, they have an opportunity to synethesize and come up with a new formulation, which leads to a giant opportunity for them. The Net Generation has been given the opportunity to fulfill their inherent human intellectual potential as no other generation (p.98).

So I've now been distracted by the Amazon preview of *Grown Up Digital* as well, pending a proper read at some later date. The comparisons are useful.

Going pop

With the license granted by both authors to entertain or test distracting associations (negative or positive) I felt led to distract myself further by reflecting on the style of literature represented by these two books. Here's what I believe.

1. Best-sellers such as *The Shallows* and *Grown Up Digital*, address a leisure reading market. The books make few intellectual demands on the reader. They can focus attention, provoke, and at times they can be inspiring. After reading *Grown Up Digital* I might feel inclined to listen more to what Net Generation kids have to say, rather than bracketing them as ignorant and unruly (if I ever did).
2. Within the books is a thread of reasoning that social scientists term "technological determinism." Carr and Tapscott seem to think that the outcomes and effects they describe are *caused* by the technology. The social, cultural and political forces that encourage such technological developments (eg smart phones, the web), and the technology's part in complex institutional, educational, economic and infrastructural networks get sidelined. This keeps the story focussed and simple.
3. The presentations in such books are *scientistic*, ie there's an appeal to the authority of science. Both writers appeal to brain science in particular. Knowing that the brain is capable of restructuring in response to new stimuli, such as

clickable information sources, is not much different to saying that we are capable of learning and adopting new habits. According to Tapscott, we used to think that brains do not change and grow. Apparently, “Modern scientists have now disproved this theory” (p.99). To have such confidence is *scientism*.

4. Popular literature operates with extremes. It’s either all good or all bad; we are getting smarter or dumber; more connected or more isolated. It overuses overstatement and exaggeration.
5. The language is that of the “paradigm shift.” The pop digital literature sets out to convince us that we are missing out on some important insights, and then admits us to a set of secrets. In this case we need to tune in to the Net Generation.
6. In keeping with the demands of leisure reading, the arguments are emotional and emotive. Any narrative, however prosaic or abstract, has this. But for leisure reading the means are set firmly on the personal: you the reader, me the author, or a third party. It’s not enough that Tapscott interviewed some adolescent activists at a venue “where you can literally bump into Bill Gates, Bono, Google CEO Eric Schmidt, and Pakistan’s President Pervez Musharraf all in one day” (269), but the introductions were facilitated by “British actress and screenwriter Emma Thompson,” who said “get ready to be inspired.” My own superficial speed reading habits compel me instinctively to jump these sections.
7. Calls to action: in a way, such books are long drawn out manifestoes. They seek to be instrumental and change behaviours, generally by offering advice. Much of that is geared to business, but sometimes how to keep your political party in power. For Tapscott, “Hire more young people,” “Don’t broadcast to Net Geners. Think interaction, not unidirectional communication” (268). The book is an instrument in itself, a means of garnering livelihood or profit for the author, and so it needs a large market.
8. Pop literature of course breaks many of the rules of academic writing. It selects evidence to make its case, generalises from too few cases, makes scant reference to intellectual context, and fails to subject its hypotheses to the scrutiny of opposing voices. But academic writing often does this too.
9. In order to keep the story simple, popular non-fiction writers either deliberately or unwittingly ignore the massive literature in social science, history, philosophy, cultural theory, media studies and the arts and humanities in general that has a bearing on the topic at hand. The only foray into English literature entered into by Carr or Tapscott is the observation that EngLit teachers are finding it harder to get students to read books. Never mind what those books might be saying.
10. Popular non-fiction has the capacity to become part of the phenomenon they purport to describe. I never worried whether or not Marshall McLuhan was right about the way electronic media change the way we think. His books changed the way many people thought — about how technology changes thinking. This is why I think some popular books need to be read (or browsed) by academics. Some books rise from the shallows to exert considerable cultural influence, to be explained, explored, contextualised, criticised and possibly resisted. They also provide evidence of opinion and insight. Dare I say, as they are *shallow*, they can be skim read with ease, or dipped into.

Shallow reading is just like deep reading in that we come to the text with our own baggage, ie our own presuppositions about what the text contains. The peril of so-called “shallow” reading is that we miss out on many of the opportunities to let the text challenge our presuppositions.

Without the analysis, comparisons, stories, associations and nuances offered by the full text we may simply use it to reinforce our own prejudices. So as a confessed shallow reader of *The Shallows* and *Grown Up Digital*, I’m probably just reading into the texts what I want or expect to see. This is all about hermeneutics, about which more could be said. See blog posts tagged Interpretation.

References

- Carr, Nicholas. 2011. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. New York: WW Norton.
- Tapscott, Don. 2009. *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Note

About Richard Coyne

The cultural, social and spatial implications of computers and pervasive digital media spark my interest … enjoy architecture, writing, designing, philosophy, coding and media mashups.
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Written any good books lately?

richardcoyne.com/2010/09/11/written-any-good-books-lately/

Posted by Richard Coyne

A recent article in the Times Higher Education (THE 2-8 Sep 2010, pp.36-39) by USA author and professor of English Dale Salwak, laments the decline in deep, appreciative reading of substantial texts: “The frenetic sound-bite-length snatches of thinking that electronic media flourish on simply preclude the calm, focused, revelatory process that reading represents.” Reading practices, at least amongst academics and students, are certainly changing.

Access and availability have developed rapidly over the past 10 years. The access to complete articles, particularly through Google Scholar, JSTOR, and online journal subscription services has increased. Presumably previous centuries also saw radical changes in the forms through which texts were consumed: inscriptions, parchments, scrolls, illuminated manuscripts, heavy tomes, pamphlets, posters, and lightweight paperbacks. Now we can add short text formats on mobile phones, urban screens, screen-based publishing, portable e-readers.

To add to the changes in reading I would add that we need to pay attention to the bourgeoning of new writing practices, with which reading is inextricably connected. One well-read colleague once confessed he was actually more interested in writing than reading. For some scholars, reading makes them want to write all the more. Such well-published academics are at one extreme of the spectrum of those who feel a compulsion to write, a process abetted by digital tools for generating, editing, correcting, and distributing texts. The new media outlets include blogs, on-demand book printing, public e-journalism of various kinds, and collaborative writing (through wikis). Conventional publishing outlets are adapting to the new media of reading and writing. Routledge authors are asked to provide blog-like chapter summaries suitable for disseminating content on the web and through e-readers via whatever electronic developments might arise in the future.

Attention focuses on the quality of these texts, how works are judged, and whether there will ever be a sufficient pool of readers to consume so much writing. Of course, a handful of interested readers may be sufficient to justify the effort of the writer, and authors have time on their hands. Geert Lovink’s book “Zero Comments” brings to light the issue of writers without readers. The question now remains as to whether bloggers are sufficiently well-read to be able to situate what they write in a broader intellectual context. Is our increased propensity to write compensating for our apparent lack of deep, sustained reading?

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