

The Internet as hypertext or archive

Description

Hypertext has been taken up by some as representative of a radical decentring of texts, authoring and documentation. George Landow was one of the advocates of this way of conceiving of literature: "We can define *hypertext* as the use of the computer to transcend the linear, bounded and fixed qualities of the traditional written text" which was after all "linear, bounded and fixed" (Landow, 1994 ; Landow, and Delany, 1994 p.3).

So a hypertextual document is cross-linked, interlinked, within itself and with other documents, so that readers can explore avenues of thought raised by the text, and even contribute comments and notes, which are in turn shared and hyperlinked. This is what the World Wide Web has become in the twenty first century, particularly as instantiated in services such as blogs and Wikipedia, though it is characterised less by links than by search.

Wikipedia is of necessity highly structured and instrumentalized, with tags, temporal markers, trace records, and other devices to facilitate navigation, search and to improve confidence in the authority of the encyclopaedia entries, a true archive. Contrary to the ideals of hypertext, readers do not seem to want free-formed, democratically disorganized text. Hypertextual linkages have been largely supplanted, at least in practice, by the ubiquitous operations of extremely rapid indexing and search, on a massively global scale, particularly through the Google search engine. Hypertext has become a massively indexed archive of whatever gets written on the Internet.

Jacques Derrida's concepts of intertextuality have been invoked as a way of understanding the web, but the web has more in common with the notion of the archive than with intertextuality. Derrida's concepts of the archive seem more relevant here: the simultaneous and contradictory impulse to both conserve and to destroy.

Category

1. Voice and text

Tags

1. archives
2. Derrida
3. hypertext
4. intertextuality

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