Innis and e-texts :

Conducting the Interview

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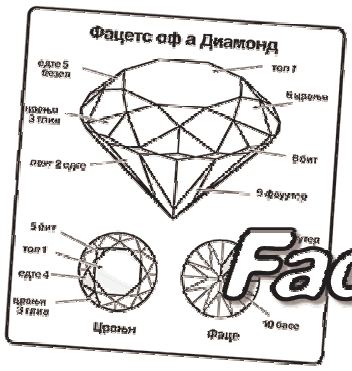

Introduction

Communication is changing: once we used books and now we use the Web; our shelves of bound journals are replaced by electronic documents; and our yellow legal pads and boxes of recipe cards have given way to PowerPoint and Palm Pilots. This transition is undeniable. The ramifications of the transition, however, are considerably harder to determine.

Certain commentators await the magnificent emergence of a new media for scientific communication. They see the precursor for this new *lingua franca* in an existing technology: Microsoft PowerPoint (LaPorte et al., 2002). Others damn PowerPoint for "foreshortening of evidence and thought, low spatial resolution… rapid temporal sequencing of thin information rather than focussed spatial analysis, conspicuous decoration and Phluff… [And] an attitude of commercialism that turns everything into a sales pitch." (Tufte, 2003)

The importance of electronic communication and documentation for scientific pursuits is becoming pronounced. Each major publisher (Elsevier Science, Taylor & Francis, Wiley Interscience, and Kluwer Academic Publishers) now offers journals in either partial or fully electronic form (Sweeney, 2000). As a further indication of this importance, an entire journal is devoted to electronic communication of scientific articles—*The Journal of Electronic Publishing* (http://www.press.umich.edu/jep/) —and an initiative has been

established to freely provide peer reviewed articles electronically: The Public Library of Science[1] (http://www.plos.org/).

Considering the varied opinions and the increased importance of electronic documentation for scientific communication, we must establish a means for studying these documents and their significance to researchers. Despite their electronic and ephemeral form, "e-texts" are still a type of media. Perhaps Harold Innis—the economist and media theorist—can guide our search. In his investigations of the communication patterns of empires, Innis noted:

> A medium of communication has an important influence on the dissemination of knowledge over space and over time and it becomes necessary to study its characteristics in order to appraise its influence in its cultural setting... We can perhaps assume that the use of a medium of communication over a long period will to some extent determine the character of knowledge to be communicated and suggest that its pervasive influence will eventually create a civilization to which life and flexibility will become exceedingly difficult to maintain and that the advantages of a new medium will become such as to lead to the emergence of a new civilization. (Innis, 1949 pg. 457)

Innis establishes two important aspects for any medium of communication: space and time. E-texts seem to have developed in direct response to the concept of space; they are infinitely replicable and easily transportable across electronic communication networks. Given Tufte's (2003) observation about "rapid temporal sequencing," the concept of time seems less self-evident in e-texts. Innis establishes the bound parchment codex as the

[1] The Public Library of Science recently (October 13, 2002) issued the first edition of their first journal: *PLOS Biology*. As of this writing (October 14, 2002) the PLOS server is still down due to excessive demand.

ideal medium for overcoming time. In comparison, our e-texts seem transient and ephemeral.

To understand the inter-relation of e-texts and researchers, it is perhaps best to understand how researchers conceptualize the time and permanence of e-texts.

Process

An interview will be conducted with a researcher to explore the nature of permanence and e-texts. A tentative questionnaire/guidebook has been created. It should be noted that the prose used is intended to be "skimmable" in an interview situation. In addition to questions, a number of "probes" are provided (Lofland, 1971). The process of developing the questionnaire is described in section *Reflections*.

Questionnaire

1. Preliminary Information
    a. Provide personal introduction
    b. Introduce project and purpose
    c. Confirm anonymity and can back out at any time
    d. Establish no wrong answers.
    e. If uncomfortable, no need to answer.

** SIGN CONSENT **

2. What kind of online searching do you do?
    a. Which search engines?
    b. Search by document type?
    c. Prefer web, PDF, other?
    d. Why web page instead PDF?

3. How do you use e-texts?
    a. For monitoring: print, e-text?
    b. Storing: download, print, read online?

4. Do you work with e-texts?
    a. Collaborate? Word? PDF? PPT?
    b. Alternate uses e.g., PPT for brainstorming?

5. Tell me about the permanence of electronic texts?

Summary

NB. In preparing this assignment, I was unable to conduct the experiment on a member of our class (as per assignment instructions) due to time constraints. Instead, I conducted the interview with my wife, [Charlie Chaplin]. Although I am compromising [Charlie's] identity, I feel this information is important for the discussion provided in section *Reflections*.

The interview with [Charlie] was conducted on the afternoon of Saturday, October 11 2003 at [Charlie's] parents' cottage near Port Severn Ontario. We were seated across the kitchen table from one another adjacent to an open patio door. When testing the audio equipment, an immediate failure was noted. The antique recording equipment selected for the interview lacked a functioning recording head. Instead, a notebook computer was used as the recording device by recruiting the Microsoft (MS) Windows application "Sound Recorder." The computer lacked an external microphone so a pair of headphones for a portable cassette recorder was used as a microphone.[2] The sound quality provided by the computer recording apparatus was exemplary. MS Sound Recorder, however, limited the length of recordings to 60-seconds so the interview had to be captured in a series of sound bites. This periodicity introduced an artificial sense of tempo and clock-watching to the interview.

During the interview, I kept brief field notes on a prompt sheet. These brief notes allowed me to avoid repeated questions and also kept my attention on the interviewee. The notes were coded with a date and a participant number: 0167-133-472. The first and last series of digits were randomly generated by a spreadsheet. The middle set of digits retains some significance. The set identifies the interview notes as being from the first interview completed and provides some guidance to the interviewee's identity through a "Cutter Number"-like facility. Although this identification mechanism overcomes some of the problems I have experienced when collecting past interview data, it may be unacceptable in terms of protecting the interviewee's identity.

[2] See recommendations on portable recording equipment provided for contributors to the CBC Radio program *OutFront* (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 200?)

During the interview, the questions proceeded smoothly and the interviewee provided appropriate answers. Unfortunately, [Charlie] failed to provide the answers I really wanted. A description of the questionnaire's development that explains why particular questions were asked is provided in section *Reflections*. [Charlie] informed me that:

1. [Charlie] uses Google as a search engine of choice but will also narrow down the search scope to a particular university web site and use the provided search functionality.
2. [Charlie] does not purposely search for any particular type of electronic document (PDF, PowerPoint, etc.) on the web. [Charlie] does, however, expect to find access to PDF files in journal databases.
3. [Charlie] often saves PDF files to her local computer and will send them electronically to colleagues and collaborators. Without prompting, [Charlie] provided the caveat that [Charlie] only provides electronic documents to individuals who would otherwise legally have access to that document in accordance with copyright law. For particularly important articles, [Charlie] will make at least one hard copy for filing and may make multiple copies. [Charlie] is increasingly using screen reading to scan journal articles but will often print hard copies to skim, notate, and highlight.
4. [Charlie] uses electronic documents such as PowerPoint to collaborate. Several times [Charlie] has attended a presentation and noticed her own slides but in someone else's presentation. Often these slides have been heavily modified or "butchered."

5. [Charlie] has little conception of "permanence" with respect to e-texts. She seems to implicitly understand that electronic documents are highly variable but greatly appreciates their use in collaboration. Despite lacking temporal fixity, the use of e-texts to overcome space is highly valued by [Charlie]: "…there's the opportunity much more so to keep not reinventing the wheel when people you work with are doing very similar things."

A partial transcript for the interview is provided as Appendix.

Reflections

The process of creating and conducting an interview is fraught with difficulties. The first problem I encountered was formulating a list of questions. Most people are unaware of the Innisian concepts of Space and Time and few have applied them to e-texts. So I was unable to merely ask my interviewee: "What do you think about the concept of Time when applied to e-texts as a communication media?" Instead, I had to begin with basic questions that they could easily answer yet may provide some insight into their behaviours and opinions. A basic entry-level question is: "Which search engine do you use?"

Determining the order of particular questions was similarly difficult. I eventually turned to a card sort technique to organize my thoughts and create some structure for the interview questions and probes (Lofland, 1971).

During the interview I started to get irritated with my interviewee: they weren't giving me the answers that I wanted! They were *supposed* to identify differences in their searching behaviour and search for specific document types. Personally, when fishing on the Internet for some information, I give considerably more credence to PDF files than to straight text web pages. For me, PDFs have specific formatting and ease of archiving that leads to a sense of permanence. Unfortunately, my interviewee didn't articulate any preference for document type or demonstrate a conceptualization of permanence. As I became more invested in the interview, I recognized that my questions were becoming increasingly leading—taboo in interview research (Johnson, 2002; Lofland, 1971; Spradley, 1979).

While asking questions, I found it difficult to split my attention between my notes, the interviewee, and the rickety recording apparatus. When my attention drifted, the energy seemed to fade from the interview and we had a difficult time completing the questions. I was also aware of the setting's distractions: the cottage, the lake, the passing boats, beautiful trees, and a gorgeous day. Why were we doing an interview?

As the questions proceeded and my badgering of [Charlie] intensified, the impartiality of the interview began to evaporate. When [Charlie] mentioned copyright law, I could hear words I had delivered to my wife in a harangue. Our roles of Interviewer and [Charlie] disappeared and only George and Claire remained (see Spradley, 1979 for discussion of roles). The discussion became artificial as [Charlie]/Claire parroted my own theories in response to the questions. As our fatigue increased, other roles came into play: my role as

the husband who asks too many ridiculous questions; Claire's role as a scientist who has three grants due this week and whose data-set seems corrupted; my role as the son-in-law who promised to winterize the outboard motor; and Claire's role as daughter when the turkey needs dressed and the yams mashed.

The interview completed, I turned to transcription. I was aware that transcription introduces modalities into a text (Poland, 2002) but I didn't realize the difficulty of transcription—rewinding the track, scanning forward, deciphering the sounds, measuring the pauses. After diligently completing the transcripts, I read through them with the recording of the interview and was shocked by how many errors I had made. Partial sentences were dropped, odd turns of phrase reworked, and clauses had been reversed.

Conclusion

Claire is a psychologist. During her training, she once asked me to sit a Rorschach inkblot test so she could practice. Following that test, we both agreed that spouses should never conduct interpretative psychological examinations on each other. I'm adding interviews. A trial interview is certainly a wonderful exercise. I now realize the difficulties the interviews entail. I am unsure if I will use interviews to collect data for my dissertation but I am certain that I'll never again subject a loved one to a formal interview.

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Appendix

G: So we all use all sorts of different sorts of search engines, what kind... what kind of search engines do you use?

C: Google mostly... I also use internal search engines when I'm in the university web site or something like that.

G: What kind of documents do you search by?

C: Search by? For//

G: //Search for.

C: Umhhh... documents? (slowly) I search for copies of..papers that I've become aware of, for proceedings from conferences.. for scales and measurement tools.. for biographies of people... manuals.

G: Do you ever look for a particular format? Are you looking for powerpoint files instead of..

C: No.

G: Just whatever comes across the search engine?

C: Uh-huh [affirmative]

G: Hm. That's pretty interesting.

C: (chuckles) I use powerpoint files if I find them but it's always just kind of a surprise.

[gap]

G: So you primarily use pdfs to send to people as a communication mechanism.

C: Yeah... sometimes I've saved something that I'm just not sure I'm going to find again so it might not be there again so if I hit a really good powerpoint presentation that someone's done I save it... if it has a whole lot of good references and ways of explaining things.

G: Do you prefer to read these documents online or do you generally..print them out... or..what kind of media do you like to work to work (stutter) with these documents as?

C: It depends, um... I'm starting to use more reading them online just on my screen which is what I'd like to move to but right now if its just something that's really good that's going to be used in a couple of projects or with a couple of coauthors, I'll print a copy or two out... um.. but I used to print everything up but I'm getting away from that.

G: Yeah?

[gap]

G: So..it's an always evolving media?

C: Hm-hm [affirmative]

G: How so? Can you elaborate on that?

C: Well, I work closely with a couple of other people and we do a lot of similar presentations so we pool our resources but...I'll see a presentation done with slides that I recognize as having been from me, um, and they'll have gone a slightly different direction, um, or sometimes I'll think..been butchered by one of my the subsequent iterations from what I had started from.

G: Interesting, interesting. So you find... it's using powerpoint... do you find it's..effective for enabling communication?

C: Yes (exasperated).

G: It is effective?

C: Yeah.

G: Yet... there's the opportunity for mangling//

C: //there's the opportunity much more so to keep not reinventing the wheel when people you work with are doing very similar things.

NOTE: apparatus- long time recording. Wish I could switch back and forth and play recording with key strokes.