

The Changing Face of Graduate Scholarship in the Digital Frontier

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Introduction

The following is an outline of the author's remarks as presented at the ETD 2000 Symposium.

The WVU team is here to expose the advantages of implementing mandatory ETD programs; I prefer to reason in terms of inevitability; whether we want it or not, the text is no longer paper, the book is no longer solid, empirical, expensive, therefore credible stuff. Those in literature can appreciate this mutation from a privileged point of view: we were raised in the veneration of the book, the object; something holy, sacred about a dusty 19 century leather bound edition of let's say Edgar Allan Poe.

We need to rethink the modalities of scholarship, to rethink a whole process of communication; it has become imperative to rethink our thinking.

I- Description

Undeniable current necessity to better grasp the changing face of graduate scholarship; ongoing process; we live history, we're not supposed to see it, or to understand it. But no more contemplation: it appears a number one priority to describe and analyze the epistemological effects of cybernetic communication.

It is impossible to ignore the incidence of the medium upon the message. McLuhan in 1967, *The Medium is the Message* is saying the same as Jacques Derrida in 1985, "Il n'y a pas de hors texte."

Jackobson and structuralist theory at large provides us with an enlightening conceptual framework;

Essentials of communication, the universal axis:

Code
Sender ----- Message-----receiver
Medium

A scholarly study – any kind of “real” act of communication is easily described in these terms:

The sender: The starving professor

The receiver: the cruel and ruthless editorial board, then our beloved colleagues;

The code: English, Scientific, hell, even jargon;

The medium: manuscript, then journal, magazine

The message: why, but the article itself.

We'll underline the constant interplay between these different structural elements; Futile, if not dangerous to establish any type of hierarchy among these elements; any alteration affecting any of these elements will affect the totality of the structure;

Example of Email as a hybrid genre and its protocol; I'm sure I've received my share of insulting Emails and send it as well.

The printing press did not change books: it changed the way we write them and the way we read them.

II- Analysis

Change of medium, change of message; McLuhan, like Guy Debord and *La Société du spectacle*: the message disappears behind the medium, the reference is hidden by the spectacle - Hence the heavy responsibility of the academic community: our communicative process cannot find its place inside the comfortable neutrality of emptiness; research and writing must be more than ever at the forefront of curricula;

Bibliography class as a privileged ground: evolution over the last five years; Internet is no longer for the lazy and under motivated; to breath the book shelf dust does will no longer transform anyone into a brilliant, if slightly asthmatic scholar.

The students learn to use the data bases available on the Web, faster than faculty, and challenged some preconceived notions that professor do not easily let go.

Example of the outline; we end up in a more organic relationship between ourselves and the act of writing, without the intermediary of an external, formal structure. We wouldn't dare to do it before: how many times did we give up on a sentence so we wouldn't have to retype the whole page? What about typing without looking? The word processor has empowered us, faculty or students.

Example of the textual authority commanded by the printed page; we're all equal in electronic land; we all look the same, pretty good that is.

The destinatary has changed: from the committee members to the community. We write in function of our receiver, therefore the sender is changing has well.

The code must respond to an acceptable standard; Alan Sokal is "poking fun at our profession" (Moxley). But the issue is not only a formal one: epistemological aporia of modern criticism; the excessive rhetorical apparatus of post-structuralism criticism suddenly appears unacceptable; some credibility which could be preserved within a small circle of friends is lost: everybody can see what we do.

The message, the scholarly referent is therefore thought out in a different way from the very beginning.

Understandable fear of students, already mentioned, regarding copyright issues and intellectual property, besides, it's not like we should be wasting any chance we can have to publish in a scholarly magazine, we need a job and we need tenure; working towards the concept that a thesis or a dissertation is already a publication;

The referent of this act of communication has changed: from an administrative formality, it has become a true piece of scholarship; note the inclusion of the graduate

student within the landscape of the profession: that segregation between graduate student's endeavors and faculty achievement is doomed, condemned to disappear. Maybe that makes some faculty nervous, that the distinction will only be as obvious as the difference in the output quality. In the end, we all know that graduate students are better, more dedicated presenters and researchers than most faculty; so they are kept in the dark regarding many activities of the profession. Faculty can no longer consider student's publication as potential competition, despite the pressure. Working together within the same format is a more natural, organic organization of our epistemological activities.

Yes reassuring the students, facing the inevitability of the whole process; what about the faculty? "I don't believe in computers".

Some might say: "I don't believe in a mandatory ETD program". The answer is already there: it really doesn't matter, as long as the mandatory ETD program believes in you.