

## Rancière and the demise of the book

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*This article was prompted by an online debate on Mirandalink called 'The Demise of the Book is Imminent' posted by the founder, Christina Preston. The MirandaNet Fellowship is a sister membership organisation to Naace, but with more researchers amongst the members from edtech professionals.*

*Those who are interested in the relationship between professional debate and underlying philosophical considerations will enjoy this piece. Indeed, this academic discussion is not just about books, but about whether students have the right to have access to all the new media tools of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in schools and about how much teachers should embrace the new pedagogies that relate to new media.*

In their online debate, *The Demise of the Book is Imminent*, MirandaNet members' illustrate the multiple perspectives and views on the matter of the book's demise as well as the bizarre, pullulating, zombie-like death the book actually seems to be undergoing, if indeed it is dying. Preston's call to debate relates that it was 20 years ago that this particular debate was originally sparked. Indeed, Will Self in *The Guardian* (2014) talks similarly about the fate of the novel caused by the availability of 'novels' in digital form:

"In the early 1980s, and I would argue throughout the second half of the last century, the literary novel was perceived to be the prince of art forms, the cultural capstone and the apogee of creative endeavour..... I believe [now] the serious novel will continue to be written and read, but it will be an art form on a par with easel painting or classical music: confined to a defined social and demographic group, requiring a degree of subsidy, a subject for historical scholarship rather than public discourse. The current resistance of a lot of the literate public to difficulty in the form is only a subconscious response to having a moribund message pushed at them.

Colleagues in the edtech field have to take a pragmatic approach to the 'here and now' in the classroom where simplicity of form and availability of information is important. In contrast, I take an academic reflective stance to the demise of the book focusing on the ideas of a philosopher called Rancière. What interests me is how to apply Rancière's ideas to this aspect of contemporary culture. This article draws specifically upon Rancière's canon of educational theory and particularly his depiction of 'the ignorant schoolmaster' (Rancière, 1991). His argument is that even if teaching is the science or mastery of explication (Rancière, 2002), the source of intelligence is the book. So, a Rancièrian perspective on a topic of debate regarding 'the demise of the book' is a useful one, mainly because Rancière is not arguing against school or access to education, but to its mode of delivery and the use of power; and the inculcation of a pedagogised society that occurs and further propagates itself.

Undeniably, the use of the phrase 'delivery technology' in relation to printed books caused consternation within the MirandaNet debate and led to the bigger question of 'whether books and screens are just different delivery mechanisms for precisely the same stuff, or is there more to it than that?' This is crucial in the reading of all of the following considerations. Because as the debater, Tony Fisher, a teacher educator from Nottingham University, states: If all we think about is different 'delivery' of identical stuff, we are perhaps missing some more subtle, more elusive, yet possibly quite important aspects and implications of our choices of technology.'

Indeed, the delivery of 'identical stuff' holds resonance with the political impulses of what *equality in education* is to some neo-liberal, Essentialists who want to keep information transmission pedagogies as the main teaching strategy. Implementing a Rancièrian perspective, on the other hand, means that as professionals we should ask questions about the choice of technology and the consequent change in engagement, because it is key to ensuring that new technology do not simply promulgate the same stultifying effects of the traditional education system and its pedagogy. As a replacement for the book, any digital system should be unencumbered by the traditional book format in order to ensure an equality of intelligence from the onset and to allow intellectual emancipation.

Two main factors for a change from the book culture are being considered by the participants in the debate. Firstly, there are numerous fiscal considerations, from the points of view of education, society, readers, authors and publishers. The second factor is cultural, and what the demise of the book, or conversely, the rise of the eBook and other cogent digital technologies might hold for society, education and democracy. The two factors are inextricably linked, and it would be reductive not to recognise this. So, for ease I will address them jointly, throughout the interpretation of participant's comments from the debate.

Bronner, Ellis, and Miller, deliberate over the digital social setting (Bronner, 2014; Ellis, 2012; Miller, 2012). Within their work, there is a recognition of a need to reorganise cultural frames relative to the subject, instead of attempting to interpret innovative forms through traditional frames (Poole, 2015). This is the aim of this article: to question the philosophical stance, as Fisher does, of any new mode or medium's incipience, before we can truly comment on its benefits or flaws. For example, if we were to apply a Rancièrian lens to the use of new technology within education we should first query whether it emancipates or stultifies.

In this debate, there seems to be a resignation to the unequivocal evidence of the paper book becoming a lesser used technology. The influence of digitised texts on the culture of the codex does not go unrecognised either, in that publishers are struggling financially to compensate for fewer paper books being sold. Even academic journals are making their content freely available online, alongside Open Licensing and open data formats, newspapers fold. But bookshops continue to close, and libraries too (Kennedy, 2014).

However, as we would expect in some views there is an element of protectionism creeping in. Whether this is purist, stultifying, or the act of a Luddite, it would be unethical to assume. There are nonetheless some statements that confirm there is still no replacement for the appreciation of reading a book: the absorption, the challenge, the otherworldliness,

the wonder and excitement that is wrought by the printed word, and the printed word alone. Of course, we can use our status as authorised 'transmitters' and give our knowledge so others may use it (Jacotot, 1836-1837; Rancière, 2006). But from a Rancièrian outlook, this is 'stultifying' the learner's 'will': to expect the manner in which an individual might comprehend what we offer (Rancière, 2010).

Nonetheless, within society we see public-spirited campaigns: where schools and children are given free books; book clubs are set up to encourage the use of the local library during the summer school holidays; and the somatically pleasing features of books are extolled: 'the weight and smell of a volume in our hands and the sense of control over turning the page'. Not to mention, the 'worth of linear content, the power of reading and individual authorship', as if they were the corporeal incarnations of Gutenberg minds. Such panglossian<sup>1</sup> meliorism, nostalgias and sentiments abounded within the debate (Self, 2014; Winston, 2010). But beauty aside, do these reasons propel equality, or does the traditional fiscal stranglehold of publishers and the subsequent dissemination of knowledge bring into question the true nature of the traditional technology's equality? Intrinsically, Flintoff is 'still fairly critical of large entities forcing knowledge behind paywalls and single-channel, non-critical distribution models'. Further idealistic positions such as extending free eBook services for all, beyond the worthy inclusive practice of providing them for print-impaired learners would dissipate the fiscal and cultural inequalities, and, from a Rancièric position, would banish stultification, and 'break out of the non-critical delivery system into a process predicated on student engagement – with an evolving narrative depending upon learner choices', perhaps even augment autodidacticism, which exists in movements such as Edupunk; self-education without the guidance of institutions or masters.

If it is down to economics, the 'one thing that could kill the paper book as a delivery technology' it seems is cost. Conversely, consideration is also given to 'what will happen if libraries close and a company achieves a monopoly? If the past is any guide, costs will go up.' The availability of the eBook or accessing knowledge through technical means supports the position that Rancière takes when he states that suggesting working class youth are excluded from the higher education and that, their cultural inferiority being a result of their economic inferiority is merely a rudimentary understanding.

To enquire about these concerns, we must ask to what extent digital technology has replaced analogue technology? And subsequently, ascertain whether the stultifying effect of explication is breaching the new virtual realm? That a new technology automatically brings new opportunities may be such a stultifying perception. Indeed, as Self's (2014) awareness of political elitism points out it is not beyond reason that: 'tilting at this papery windmill of artistic superiority actively prevents a great many people from confronting the very real economic inequality and political disenfranchisement they're subject to, exactly as being compelled to chant the mantra "choice" drowns out the harsh background Muzak telling them they have none"(Self, 2014).

While some participants in the debate just do not want to have to make a 'choice' based on preference, others state there has not 'been a 'ubiquitous book' format for centuries', citing

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<sup>1</sup> Marked by the view that all is for the best in this best of possible worlds : excessively optimistic

numerous 'choices' from pop up books to sensory tactile books for toddlers and babies. Some participants think that 'as technology matures and emerges there will be a continual development of usage patterns' where older technologies are 'superseded but not replaced by digital technologies.' However, ultimately it was widely held that all mediums in some fragmentary manner would remain usable; providing 'choice'.

Interesting reasoning occurs here due to the background of the web being considered an egalitarian space based on open standards; a place where 'choice' means equality (Power, 2009). As Lynch states, in mute advocacy of Rancièrian 'will' and 'inferior superiors' (Rancièrè, 1991): 'Give the people a choice to decide how they want to use information and what the constraints are. Then whether or not paper-based books survive will be down to informed choice. That is what education is all about.' This view is, of course, assuming that the web as a platform itself is, indeed, an egalitarian space.

Howard (2012) extinguishes the myth of the web being an egalitarian space. Born from countercultural movements, but progressively institutionalised, to Howard's mind (2012) the web enables vernacular expression but only through an institutional structure or software, e.g. Twitter and Snapchat. So it cannot be emancipatory. This hybridisation echoes paradoxical sentiments of the balance between equality and inequality, but ultimately if the book is moribund and the replacement is compromised (even if ironically), we must seriously question whether intellectual emancipation is possible digitally.

Moreover, if indeed the consciousness of equality is dubious, it is not merely the apparent lack of instruction we must question, but whether the seditious belief itself stultifies ergo creating inferiors (including those in a supposed superior position). It is a self-fulfilling prophecy either way. Equality of intelligence is a necessary condition for an egalitarian society to exist. The belief in the existence of inequality has a corrosive impact on society: 'Treading water only works so long, then you die' is a very good analogy for resistance to inevitable change, but nonetheless we must be wary of the trap Rancièrè illuminated for the progressive and being complicit in inegalitarian progress.

So, from Rancièrè's policing logic which we could ascribe to the web from Howard's analysis, perhaps the egalitarian logic that should confront it, is the freedom of usage: or 'the ease with which the media lends itself to situated cultural practice'. This same ease could also be more readily policed or stultified. The next stage then, if not hybridisation, could fundamentally be open source coding or 'creative commons licensing so that teachers and pupils can freely re-use the content; books in schools will largely be for aesthetic or historical effect.

Thus, in McLuhan's memorable phrase, being the possessor of a 'Gutenberg Mind' ensures a correlated demise, akin to the literary critics: Conceivably in a step towards Rancièrè's organic, naturalised society, we must henceforth consider emancipation as non-linear and plural. Self goes on to suggest that actually 'Gutenbergers' (Self, 2014) are unable to fully appreciate the ramifications of dynamic, non-linear communication, like the somewhat satirical conversation between MirandaNet debaters, Carlsen an edtech teacher educator from the US and Lynch, an adviser in the Midlands, because it is literally out of their oppressively socialized (or pedagogicised) comprehension. The warning is that the

incipience of the new digital technologies is not merely going to annihilate the codex<sup>2</sup>, but potentially emancipate the Gutenberg palimpsest<sup>3</sup> of a mind itself. This could be the manifestation, away from the institutional control that is required to allow us to reconsider emancipatory education; a Freudian cause (Galloway, 2012; Guénoun & Cassidy, 2004; Self, 2014) within a non-institutional, even folkloric sphere.

This manifestation brings to light the indubitable fact, from my point of view, that the virtual world should be recognised as part of the physical world and that vernacular digital communication is essentially redefining the folk and their 'will'. It is a view that suggests through the presentation of more than Self's (2014) metaphoric ouroboros<sup>4</sup> of the books' senescence<sup>5</sup> producing creative writers, the dangers of allowing a stultifying cultural ouroboros to become even more deeply engorged through its own digitisation.

*The MirandaNet debate in full is here: <http://mirandanet.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Appendix-for-Mirandanet.pdf>*

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<sup>2</sup> A **codex** (/ˈkɒdɛks/) (from the Latin caudex for "trunk of a tree" or block of wood, book), plural codices (/ˈkɒdɪsiːs/), is a book constructed of a number of sheets of paper, vellum, papyrus, or similar materials.

<sup>3</sup> A manuscript or piece of writing material on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing.

<sup>4</sup> Symbolic representation of coming full circle (cycle) The **Ouroboros** is an ancient symbol depicting a serpent or dragon eating its own tail. The name originates from within Greek language; (oura) meaning "tail" and (boros) meaning "eating", thus "he who eats the tail".

<sup>5</sup> the condition or process of deterioration with age.

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