

Reduction of the Book

Abstract

As students attend university with computers in their book bags, scholars too are finding a new relationship to text. Where once the "lecture" was literally a monologue "reading" from the (single available) text book, today's students look at the lecturer from behind wi-fi laptops that make available an unlimited storehouse of textual information from classics to contemporary commentary. The scholar too is reducing the personal volumes from private libraries as more classic texts become available online in elegant hypertext format that links contemporary commentary and related literature. The scholar can, as needed, print a classic text or any portion of it in any format either in the original language or in translation. Meanwhile, each year more books are printed than in the preceding year, and used books are sold in buyer's markets, like Amazon or ABE, at drastically reduced prices. This presentation will present a brief phenomenology of the reduction of the book. The conclusion will summarize the psychic tradeoffs that are unfolding in education and cultural life.

Part I. Speaking of the "reduction" of the book has two meanings that can coalesce: (a) one meaning comes from the theory of technological evolution as advanced by McLuhan students such as Paul Levinson (*Soft Edge*, 1998); (b) the other meaning comes from the 20th-century movement in Phenomenology tracing itself back to Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). These two kinds of "reduction" blend into a single intellectual tool that highlights and brings into focus the contemporary engagement with books in an era of expanding digital text. At the same time, such a blend provides a way to critically optimize the use of digital text. Seeing the phenomenon of transformation is not a passive acquiescence to a hard determinism but an opportunity to envision "alternate modernities" within a soft determinism (Andrew Feenberg, 1995, 2002).

(a) Reduction in Levinson's framework relies on the notion of technological change as evolution (in the sense championed by Karl Popper). In this framework, technological innovation introduces variations into a marketplace that continually tests each variant until it is rejected, modified, or adopted into the repertoire of practical usages. In this view, human praxis is tied to the configuration and re-configuration of the human senses. A new technology is introduced to the market, and early adaptors install the technology and test it. The installation may fail to stick – such as the videophone - due to its complexity or immaturity as a product, or due to the inability of the human senses to find a convenient slot in which to adapt the product to the current configuration of the five senses in the contemporary constellation of technology. Like the videophone, many previous technologies have failed the evolutionary test of practical sensory adaptation. Reasons can be explored for the particular failures: Human vanity or sensory details inappropriate for simple messages? Some technologies never find an evolutionary niche. Other technologies find immediate success, such as the mobile phone. The mobile phone finds a niche in the configuration of human sensory activity even to the point where it becomes a hindrance or distraction from other sensory activities, such as driving an automobile while talking on a cellular phone. In time, successful technologies settle into their sensory niche. They are “reduced” to a comfortable, reliable, and familiar location within the configuration of sensory activity of human communication. A new technology does not replace other modes of communication but rather reduces other modes to their own proper niche. The television did not replace the radio but instead reduced the use of the radio to its communication niche such that one drives an automobile in which the eyes must stay on the road. Similarly, the portable DVD player finds its niche on international airplane flights or for children in the back seat of an automobile during long vacation trips. Each new technology reduces, without replacing, other technologies to their proper place in an expanding communicational environment.

Reduction is similarly happening with books and digital text, as Part II of the paper will show. Digital text does not replace the book, nor is the book required to re-assert its traditional territory in the ecology of reading and writing. Rather, the book undergoes a reduction in which its niche is clarified and strengthened, and at the same time, the digital text settles into its role in an expanding evolution of the cultural environment.

(b) Reduction in the derived Husserlian sense brackets the content of intentional activity in order to perceive the general structures of life experience (*Lebenswelt*). Because of Husserl's emphasis on experiential phenomena (hence "phenomenology"), the phenomenological reduction perceives, or at least attempts to perceive cultural transformations without ideational pre-judgments or bias. "Pure seeing" then is a looking at what is happening in cultural evolution without pre-determining if and where the new technology will eventually fit, if it is to find a niche at all in the ecology of human practices. This is not to say that approaching the phenomena remains "value-free" or without critical awareness. Articulating the phenomena in transformation occurs with a growing awareness of the trade-offs involved, the negative and positive human reactions to the evolution of the cultural environment. Envisioning the transformation heightens the awareness of the shifts in the ecological order of cultural practices. At the same time, however, the reduction of awareness keeps the focus clear of ideological preemptions. The reduction of the book is not a value judgment for or against digital technology.

In Part II, the scholar's eye observes the transformation of the book as its role changes in the practical use of private libraries as well as in the changes in student habits observed in university life. The observations seek to reduce preconceived values underlying book and print culture as well as to avoid the technological optimism that usually accompanies the introduction of new products. The final result will be a brief reduction of the book and the digital text to their respective niche positions within the evolving sensory configuration of current culture. Part III briefly analyses the trade-offs mentioned at the end of Part II.