Predictions

George P. Landow, Professor of English and Art History, Brown University

HYPERTEXT the convergence of contemporary critical theory & technology

< P> If the technology of printing radically changed the world in the manner that Kernan convincingly explains, what then will be the effects of the parallel shift from print to computer hypertext? Although the changes associated with the transition from print to electronic technology may not parallel those associated with that from manuscript to print, paying attention to descriptions of the most recent shift in the technology of alphanumeric text provides areas for investigation.

One of the most important changes involved fulfilling the democratizing potential of the new information technology. During the shift from manuscript to print culture "an older system of polite or courtly letters -- primarily oral, aristocratic, authoritarian, court- centered -- was swept away . . . and gradually replaced by a new print-based, market-centered, democratic literary system" whose fundamental values "were, while not strictly determined by print ways, still indirectly in accordance with the actualities of print" (*PrintingTechnology* , 4). If hypertextuality and associated electronic information technologies have similarly pervasive effects, what will they be? Nelson, Miller, and almost all authors on hypertext who touch upon the political implications of hypertext assume that the technology is essentially democratizing and that it therefore supports some sort of decentralized, liberated existence.

Kernan offers numerous specific instances of ways that technology "actually affects individual and social life." For example, "by changing their work and their writing, [print] forced the writer, the scholar, and the teacher -- the standard literary roles -- to redefine themselves, and if it did not entirely create, it noticeably increased the importance and number of critics, editors, bibliographers, and literary historians." Print technology similarly rede fined the audience for literature by transforming it from

> a small group of manuscript readers or listeners . . . to a group of readers . . . who bought books to read in the privacy of their homes. Print also made literature objectively real for the first time, and therefore subjectively conceivable as a universal fact, in great libraries of printed books containing large collections of the world's writing. . . . Print also rearranged the relationship of letters to other parts of the social world by, for example, freeing the writer from the need for patronage and the consequent subservience to wealth, by challenging and reducing established authority's control of writing by means of state censorship, and by pushing through a copyright law that made the author the owner of his own writing (4-5).

Electronic linking shifts the boundaries between one text and another as well as between the author and the reader and between and the teacher and the student. It also has radical effects upon our experience of author, text, and work, redefining each. Its effects are so basic, so radical, that it reveals that many of our most cherished, most commonplace, ideas and attitudes toward literature and literary production turn out to be the result of that particular form of information technology and technology of cultural memory that has provided the setting for them. This technology -- that of the printed book and its close relations, which include the typed or printed page -- engenders certain notions of authorial property, authorial uniqueness, and a physically isolated text that hypertext makes untenable. The evidence of hypertext, in other words, historicizes many of our most commonplace assumptions, thereby forcing them to descend from the ethereality of abstraction and appear as corollary to a particular technology rooted in specific times and places. In making available these points, hypertext has much in common with some major points of contemporary literary and semiological theory, particularly with Derrida's emphasis on de-centering and with Barthes's conception of the readerly versus the writerly text. In fact, hypertext creates an almost embarrassingly literal embodiment of both concepts, one that in turn raises questions about them and their interesting combination of prescience and historical relations (or embeddedness).

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