Why the Book?

by Sandra Braman

In the early 1980s, while in graduate school, I wrote a column for the weekly arts/entertainment/lifestyle newspaper of Minneapolis/St. Paul, City Pages, in which I reviewed anything that appeared on a screen, which at the time included television, video via cable and video art, computer software, microfiche, film, etc. That meant that on the eve of 1984—a significant year for one born in 1951 and getting a master’s degree in mass communications from a major state university in 1984—I was able to write a piece comparing media from a post-nuclear-bomb perspective (EMP, electromagnetic pulse, wipes out anything electronic, amongst other problems), concluding in fact that it was the microfiche—with a viewer lit by peddling a bicycle—that would be the best post-bomb medium for mass information storage, since it was small enough that one could tote a lot of them around (significantly not a characteristic of books), was capable of storing massive amounts of information, and was dependent on a relatively low-tech and therefore more widely affordable and accessible medium.

So why, now, still the book? On one level, of course, the answer has a relatively simple basis in the history of the sociology of knowledge as manifested in academia in general and in journal publication in particular. On another level, a more general question about the book is being asked: Why the book at all, anymore, since we now have so much else? Already in the mid-1970s a small Canadian publisher, Coach House Press of Toronto, was able to describe its activities as “post-book.” Coach House is an interesting example, because for a couple of decades its authors and those involved in the production of books were the cutting edge of the literary and artistic avant garde of Canada. Thus in the sense of whether or not the book survived as the container of narrative forms such as novels and poetry, Coach House represented an optimistic present and future in which the book continued to provide the best and most interesting “news.” (Ezra Pound called poetry “News that stays news.”) Its books were also remarkably beautiful, produced with great sophistication under the leadership of Stan Bevington, using bookmaking techniques that ranged from the most traditional to the most technologically advanced. (It was Coach House, for example, that in the mid-1970s was already re-designing typefaces to maximize the particular characteristics of computerized typesetting.) In the sense of whether or not the book continues to exist as an art form medium, Coach House too, then, clearly represents a sustained tradition. Nor did Coach House represent the restriction of attention to the book as a medium to an elite class, for to sustain itself the—
press produced, on contract from the government, things like textbooks used by grade school children in public schools across Canada—children who surely benefited from the fact that it was Coach House producing their geography books, and so on.

What, then, did they mean when they described their activities as “post-book”? Presumably what they meant was that as working artists their work manifested what has come widely to be known as “the postmodern condition” on a variety of levels. In a mutual interaction that had begun with Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s and continued with Derrida in the 1970s, the artists of Toronto did what those two philosophers described.

The point of course is that the arrival of new media does not—never did—mean that older media disappeared. Even studying Talmud—considered by some the ultimate act of literary culture—is actually an oral practice conducted by people sitting together in groups talking with each other, reading out loud. The book, too, continues as a medium, although its form and functions clearly have been changing and will continue to change.

The book is an interesting medium for us to study because it is the oldest medium (buying Walter Ong’s argument that the oral culture we experience today is “secondary orality”) that is still the primary medium for many of us in the world today, and because the social structures generated by a largely print history dominate an environment now trying quickly to adapt to an electronic world.

It is also interesting as a medium to study because it is, in a sense, “mature,” or perhaps “overripe.” Since there are in fact other wonderful media for storage and mass distribution in a powerful and often exquisitely aesthetic form (Gore Vidal’s recent book, The Screening of History, is convincing even to one as print-oriented as I), the book is now moving into forms and functions new in its history.

The Chronicle of Higher Education recently noted a resurgence of interest in the book across fields and the current spate of publication of books about books. I, for one, would hope that any “broadcast” curriculum or syllabus would contain some sustained attention to differences between print and broadcast culture—and, now, virtual reality, or cyberspace. The Journal of Communication is very interested in publishing work by those studying and thinking about the book, and invites submissions of this kind.

Here, we begin where we must—self-reflexively. The symposium “Books on Books on Books” opens with art historian and book artist Johanna Drucker’s work on the history and present conditions of book art as an art form, a medium, and an industry. Michael Schudson follows with a discussion of books on textbooks in an other, different, round of self-reflexivity. Finally, librarian Kathy Hansen reviews recent bibliographies, reflecting upon shifts in disciplinary bounds and their archival consequences for books. The remainder of the issue attempts, as always, to take part in discussions across the range of the field. We continue to in-
vite participation in the book review section from the spectrum of the field—as reviewers and, should the occasion arise, in public debate via a letters section.

Let it be asked again: Why the book? Some of us believe, as Granary Books (Soho book art gallery and publisher) said to close the announce-ment of its 1991–92 reading series, that “The book is the spiritual instru-
ment of the species.” Or that, in words from the Other Side, the author (now said to be extinct), as the late novelist Douglas Woolf commented
on the dust jacket of Yal & John-fian, “I’m naturally devoted to the writ-
ten word. It’s the one thing man has that other animals do not. Parrots can
talk, flies can fly, monkeys can drop things, technicians can copy them all. If there were only one reader left in the world, I would write to that one as lovingly as I do now.”

It is to you, Doug—coeditor and copublisher of Wolf Run Books (a few chapbooks, and a magazine [read “storehouse”], VITAL STATISTICS; book dealer on the streets and through the mails; the man for whom the prima-
ry sex act was making paper, not love; Homo scribens—this issue is dedi-
cated.
Contents

8 Editor's Note

9 Book Review Editor's Note


12 Artists' Books and the Cultural Status of the Book by Johanna Drucker

43 Textbook Politics by Michael Schudson

  Textbooks in American Society: Politics, Policy and Pedagogy by Philip G. Altbach, Gail P. Kelly, Hugh G. Petrie, & Louis Weis (Eds.)

  Official Knowledge: Democratic Education in a Conservative Age by Michael W. Apple

  The Politics of the Textbook by Michael W. Apple & Linda Christian-Smith (Eds.)

  What Johnny Shouldn't Read: Textbook Censorship in America by Joan Delfattore

52 Bibliographies and Scholarly Communication by Kathleen A. Hansen


  Mass Media Bibliography: An Annotated Guide to Books and Journals for Research and Reference by Eleanor Blum & Frances Goins Wilhoit


  Journalism: A Guide to the Reference Literature by Jo A. Cates

  Walt Disney: A Bio-Bibliography by Kathy Merlock Jackson

  Bibliographic Guide to Caribbean Mass Communication by John A. Lent (Comp.)

  Bibliography of Cuban Mass Communications by John A. Lent (Comp.)

  Humor Scholarship: A Research Bibliography by Don L. F. Nilsen

  The Image of Older Adults in the Media: An Annotated Bibliography by Frank Nuessel

  Human Communication Behavior and Information Processing: An Interdisciplinary Sourcebook by Donald E. Phillips

Corporate Magazines of the United States by Sam G. Riley (Ed.)

Consumer Magazines of the British Isles by Sam G. Riley (Ed.)

Publication Peer Review: An Annotated Bibliography by Bruce W. Speck (Comp.)

American Graphic Design: A Guide to the Literature by Ellen Mazur Thomson (Comp.)

Untapped Sources: America’s Newspaper Archives and Histories by Jon Vanden Heuvel

65 Review Essays

65 Objectivity, Doubt, and the Two Cultures by L. David Ritchie

Knowledge of the External World by Bruce Aune

Scientific Literacy and the Myth of the Scientific Method by Henry H. Bauer

Science and Its Fabrication by Alan Chalmers

Value-Free Science? Purity and Power in Modern Knowledge by Robert N. Proctor

73 Talking to One’s Selves: The Social Science of Jon Elster by Timothy J. Brennan

Ulysses and the Sirens: Studies in Rationality and Irrationality by Jon Elster

Sour Grapes: Studies in the Subversion of Rationality by Jon Elster

The Cement of Society by Jon Elster

Nuts and Bolts for the Social Sciences by Jon Elster

Solomonic Judgments: Studies in the Limitations of Rationality by Jon Elster

82 Media, Communications Research, and African Development by Akin A. Akiyoe


Communication Research in Africa: Issues and Perspectives by S. T. Kwame Boafo & Nancy A. George (Eds.)

Africa's Media Image by Beverly G. Hawk (Ed.)

The Cold War Guerilla: Jonas Savimbi, the U.S. Media, and the Angolan War by Elaine Windrich

90 Health Communication Research Reconsidered: Reading the Signs by Leah A. Lievrouw


Images of Disability on Television by Guy Cumberbatch & Ralph Negrine

Persuasive Communication and Drug Abuse Prevention by Lewis Donohew, Howard E. Sypher, & William J. Bukoski (Eds.)

AIDS: A Communication Perspective by Timothy Edgar, Mary Anne Fitzpatrick, & Vicki S. Freimuth (Eds.)

Gerontology and the Construction of Old Age: A Study in Discourse Analysis by Bryan S. Green

Promoting Cultural Diversity: Strategies for Health Care Professionals by Kathryn Hopkins Kavanagh & Patricia H. Kennedy

AIDS: Effective Health Communication for the 90s by Scott C. Ratzan (Ed.)

Case Studies in Health Communication for the 90s by Eileen Berlin Ray (Ed.)

Mass Media Images and Impact on Health: A Sourcebook by Nancy Signorielli

Perspectives on Health Communication by Barbara C. Thornton & Gary L. Kreps (Eds.)

Tele-Advising: Therapeutic Discourse in American Television by Mimi White

100 (Mostly) Critical Views of Gulf War TV by Keith Kenney

War and Television by Bruce Cumings

The Persian Gulf TV War by Douglas Kellner

Television and the Gulf War by David E. Morrison

Triumph of the Image: The Media's War in the Persian Gulf, a
Global Perspective by Hamid Mowlana, George Gerbner, & Herbert I. Schiller (Eds.)

What Is Historic About Television? by Michael Cornfield

Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History by Daniel Dayan & Elihu Katz


The End of History and the Last Man by Francis Fukuyama

Playing on TV by Mimi White

Quiz Craze: America's Infatuation with Game Shows by Thomas A. DeLong

Daytime Television Gameshows and the Celebration of Merchandise: "The Price is Right" by Morris B. Holbrook

Prime Time and Misdemeanors: Investigating the 1950s T.V. Quiz Show Scandal—A D.A.'s Account by Joseph Stone & Tim Yohn

The Maturation of Communication and Terrorism Studies by Robert G. Picard

Tales of Terror: Television News and the Construction of the Terrorist Threat by Bethami A. Dobkin

Terrorism and the Media by David L. Paletz & Alex P. Schmid (Eds.)

Media Coverage and Political Terrorists: A Quantitative Analysis by Richard W. Schaffert

Sagas of Women Journalists by Jo Thomas

Taking Their Place: A Documentary History of Women and Journalism by Maurine H. Beasley & Sheila J. Gibbons (Eds.)

Equal to the Occasion: Women Editors of the Nineteenth-Century West by Sherilyn Cox Bennion

Ida Tarbell: Portrait of a Muckraker by Kathleen Brady

A Woman at War: Storming Kuwait with the U.S. Marines by Molly Moore

Women on Deadline: A Collection of America's Best by Sherry Ricchiardi & Virginia Young (Eds.)

A Voice of Their Own: The Woman Suffrage Press, 1840–1910 by Martha M. Solomon (Ed.)

140 Book Reviews

140 The Transparent Society by Gianni Vattimo / reviewed by Brian G. Chang

142 Mutual Misunderstanding: Skepticism and the Theorizing of Language and Interpretation by Talbot J. Taylor / reviewed by Janet Skupien

145 The Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture by Yuri M. Lotman / reviewed by Arthur Asa Berger

148 Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America by James Davison Hunter / reviewed by John J. Pauly


154 News and Dissent: The Press and the Politics of Peace in Canada by Robert A. Hackett / reviewed by Colleen Roach

156 The Exploding Political Power of Personal Media by Gladys D. Ganley / reviewed by Thomas L. Jacobson

159 Arab and African Film Making by Lizbeth Malkmus & Roy Armes / reviewed by Yosefa Loshitzky

162 The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era by William J. Mitchell / reviewed by Jef Richards

165 Negative Political Advertising: Coming of Age by Karen S. Johnson-Cartee & Gary A. Copeland / reviewed by Ronald J. Faber

167 The Formation of Campaign Agendas: A Comparative Analysis of Party and Media Roles in Recent American and British Elections by Holli A. Semetko, Jay G. Blumler, Michael Gurevitch, & David H. Weaver, with Steve Barkin & G. Cleveland Wilhoit / reviewed by David L. Paletz

169 The Ethics of Authenticity by Charles Taylor / reviewed by Clifford Christians

172 Images of a Free Press by Lee C. Bollinger / reviewed by Theodore L. Glasser
174 British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture by Chris Waters / reviewed by Geoff Mulgan

176 On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word by Simon Frith & Andrew Goodwin (Eds.) / reviewed by Eric W. Rothenbuhler

180 Women Watching Television: Gender, Class and Generation in the American Television Experience by Andrea Press / reviewed by Ivy Glennon

183 The Devil's Candy: The Bonfire of the Vanities Goes to Hollywood by Julie Salamon / reviewed by John Weispfenning

185 Playing Cowboys: Low Culture and High Art in the Western by Robert Murray Davis and West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns by Jane Tompkins / reviewed by Jostein Gripsrud

188 Starstruck: Celebrity Performers and the American Public by Jib Fowles and Stardom: Industry of Desire by Christine Gledhill / reviewed by Thomas Guback

191 Television and the Exceptional Child: A Forgotten Audience by Joyce Sprafkin, Kenneth D. Gadow, & Robert Abelman / reviewed by Amy Aidman

194 Technology Policy for Small Developing Countries by David J. C. Forsyth / reviewed by Jean-Claude Burgelman

197 The Management of International Tourism by Stephen F. Witt, Michael Z. Brooke, & Peter J. Buckley / reviewed by Hamid Mowlana & Ginger Smith

199 Computers in Third-World Schools: Examples, Experience and Issues by David Hawbridge, John Jaworski, & Harry McMahon / reviewed by William Jong-Ebot

203 Work in the Fast Lane: Flexibility, Divisions of Labor, and Inequality in High-Tech Industries by Glenna Colclough & Charles M. Tolbert II / reviewed by Jon Bekken

205 Beyond Hypocrisy: Decoding the News in an Age of Propaganda by Edward S. Herman / reviewed by Donna A. Demac
This issue of the *Journal of Communication* is about books—a medium of mass communication whose demise, we believe, has been much exaggerated. As is our custom, we offer an extensive review of new books in communication. But we have extended our reach to include nuanced and self-reflexive essays on the book as fine art object, on the politics of textbooks, and on bibliography as scholarly communication. Hence the overall title of the featured symposium, “Books on Books on Books . . .”

The guest editor for this issue is the *Journal*’s book review editor and Renaissance person Sandra Braman. From her introductory essay—a quodlibetic reverie on “why the book”—through the art work and photographs, to the essays and reviews that follow, Professor Braman has put together a movable feast that pushes the all-too-familiar boundaries of this journal. We welcome you to an engaging (and we trust, literate) conversation about Art, Truth, and Discovery.

Mark R. Levy
Editor

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