

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 announcement of its 1991–92 reading series, that “The book is *the* spiritual instrument 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 *Ya! & John-Juan*, “I’m naturally devoted to the written 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 primary sex act was making paper, not love; *Homo scribens*—this issue is dedicated.

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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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