

# Breaking the Book: Contrasting Paradigms of Print Culture

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I opened *Breaking the Book: Print Humanities in the Digital Age* (2015) (which, paradoxically, I read in digital form on a smartphone) with a lot of anticipation. Laura Mandell is a scholar of eighteenth-century literature, and an enthusiastic pioneer and advocate of digital collections such as Early English Books Online ([EEBO](#)) and Eighteenth Century Collections Online ([ECCO](#)) for studying early English texts. Therefore, I expected this book to have insights into how digital texts differed from print, and how academic discourse can make effective use of digital resources, for example to analyse texts. What the book contains, however, is much different. Rather than being an assessment of digital texts, *Breaking the Book* is much more ambitious: it emphasises changes in print culture for much of the book, only considering digital publishing towards the end. Mandell asks, “how does the book machine work,” by looking at the history of the printed book. The book concludes with a manifesto for print humanities - not, in fact, a manifesto for digital humanities at all, but a claim for how digital print can transform “the book machine.” Nonetheless, a reader will see this book more as a contribution to the history of the printed word than a study of digital humanities.

Mandell’s main argument, which I find compelling, identifies three key “medial ecologies” - 1700, 2000 and 1800 (“in that order”) - and makes a very telling contrast between the “coterie” print culture of 1700 with the mass print culture that had become established by 1800. Coterie print culture is publishing for a small audience, of course, and characterised by authors making frequent changes to the books they publish - in many ways closer to circulation in manuscript than the print culture with which we are familiar. Thus, Alexander Pope treated his own published books as if they were manuscripts, that could be revised substantially at any time - not just his own books, but others’ books also (including his edition of Shakespeare).

This is contrasted to the age of mass print, exemplified by Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, one of the earliest best-selling print titles, with over 12,000 copies sold in the first month of publication. Key to the mass print age is an implication that the text of a printed book is perfect and without error.

Finally, the year 2000 offers a glimpse of the possibilities of digital publication, which appear to include the possibility of annotating a text once more, as took place in 1700. This time, however, the annotations are courtesy of a digital textual model that enables readers to tag metaphor, simile, stylistic features, and so on, to create a truly annotated edition. Right at the end, Laura Mandell states that we should enshrine in a digital edition such things as ambiguity, repetition and symbol [p183]. Although such a vision is now

being realised, I believe it constitutes only a small part of the transformation that digital texts can provide as an educational tool. But that's a subject for another review.

Mixed with the main comparison of print culture, 1700, 1800 and 2000, is an argument about different kinds of language: ordinary language, the language largely derived from speech, which we use in our everyday discourse, and "book language." Clearly there is no question that the language of academic monographs is very different to ordinary language. Perhaps more controversial is what Mandell claims academics use book language for:

*"Academics publish books to clear up the confusions of ordinary thinking by redefining the meanings of words ... Publishing books while educating people to read them is implicitly, I would argue, the goal to which most humanities scholars in the academy devote their lives of teaching and writing." [p29]*

This activity is described by Mandell as "bookwork." This is a very heroic vision of the academy; my view is rather different. In the sciences, by contrast, scholars are typically motivated by the search for "truth", even if such truth may in fact be far more socially mediated than many of them assume. Only a very small minority of research scientists would see their role comprising any kind of education. But even in the humanities, I don't think the situation has changed so dramatically since I was an undergraduate; I don't think any of my teachers were dedicated to global education in the way Mandell describes.

Has the year 2000 enabled this educational role? Mandell claims, "We publish disciplinary monographs now...that wish to reform customary language with their own, much more carefully articulated idiom." But, she claims, academic book-language "fosters the fantasy that mass-printed disciplinary books can change common language, clear it up, and this utopian fantasy is shared by ... all modern disciplines of the book." Mandell appears to acknowledge that the if an academic's aim is educational, there is little evidence that they have an effect on everyday language.

*"In our medial ecology [2000], now the fantasy that publishing books can legislate linguistic usage, trumping ordinary language is not something any currently active literary critic would seriously maintain: decades of culture wars and conservative backlash in the U.S. have demonstrated how little political impact can be had by 'public intellectuals.'"*

This does not prevent Mandell discussing at length the role of the public intellectual - not something I expected in an assessment of digital humanities. Part of her critique of the mass print book culture is her condemnation of the mystique of print publication, the idea that when words appear in print they have a kind of magical correctness. It is not clear to me what Mandell is arguing for here. She is certainly an advocate of committed writing: "Since when have we ever thought that academic work in the humanities was an 'end in itself'?" [p138] - but I've encountered many humanities scholars who think just that. Does that make them less of a scholar? Political commitment is not "breaking the book" - there are plenty of examples of committed writing from the academy, which combine critical rigour with a thought-through political message, for example, E P Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*.

I should emphasise that I am quite drastically simplifying the author's argument in the above account to reduce it to a clear outline. The book is the result of wide reading, and can be engaged with at many levels.

I felt that more could be made of the development of technology around the discovery and reading of digital texts. The book only touches on developments in technology that are moving from string-based discovery to true semantic concept matching. In the Conclusion, Mandell writes how she worries that “we’ll import the worst of book culture into the use and abuse of digital archives of our cultural heritage, just as books and articles have become rather unusable pdfs on screens of all sorts, unsusceptible of being marked by reading hands.” [p150] We certainly don’t want unusable PDFs, but it was academics who asked and who ask for them, compared to any other delivery medium available, such as HTML.

In a book defending the role of the print humanities academic, I was surprised that there was no discussion of the professional situation of the university lecturer. Their academic advancement is based around the number of papers and books that they publish, not on their success in influencing common language. A jaundiced view might suggest that many academic humanities books have little effect on common language because they were never intended to be read outside their peer group. In fact recent thinking is questioning, just as there seems to be little need to have print journals any more, whether we need to have printed books at all?