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Forging a new kind of literacy

By CHAD GAFFIELD

In 1982, Northrop Frye, one of Canada's great literary critics and university professors, published *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. It was a monumental work, exploring translations and interpretations of words, letters and books written many hundreds of years ago, and it has gone on to be published in more than 22 languages.

Frye was an early adopter of technology and wrote his tome on one of the early personal computers. What few know, though, is that shortly before the book was to go to press, something happened to the large floppy discs on which it was stored and his almost-completed work was lost. Nor had he backed up his discs or printed out his manuscript. Fortunately for the rest of us, Frye's typing skills were legendary, his memory exceptional. He pulled out his old IBM Selectric typewriter and re-wrote the book in just a few short months. It didn't have as many footnotes as either he or his critics would have liked, but it was completed and remains with us today.

We have all witnessed a rapid evolution of our communication technologies, and this has driven new industries, patterns of dissemination, and mass consumption of increasingly diverse, personal production. The digital age has changed the value and meaning of literacy. References Frye assumed would have resonance for his readers—and which had resonance for the literate populations of past eras—would puzzle many a graduate student today.

New research in the social sciences and humanities is contributing to our understanding of this complex interplay of culture, technology and social change in a variety of ways. This research helps us understand the challenges, it guides our legislative and policy deliberations, and it informs future innovation. Three recent Canadian success stories underline the point.

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council funded the just-completed History of the Book in Canada initiative, which provides critical historical context for present-day questions: What is the future of the book as a central means of communication? Even more basic, what is a book? How can books be preserved? How and by what means should they be made accessible? What are the alternatives?

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The project explored topics that ranged from Aboriginal communication systems to multinational publishing companies. The results can be found in three spectacular books (published in English by University of Toronto Press and in French by Les Presses de l'Universite de Montreal); they also live in five databases that are available for future research, spatial analyses and, perhaps, applications we have not thought of yet.

Even though computerization of communication raises many questions about the meaning of literacy, a number of old questions persist. Early books did not have page numbers or indexes. Copies were difficult to make. They were not systematically preserved in archives. How many of our communications—our data collections, our emails, our research, our correspondence and our photos—are inaccessible because they are not indexed, or because they reside on some superceded or outmoded media?

The second research example addresses those very questions. Under the leadership of Professor Luciana Duranti at University of British ColumbiaBC, and through the SSHRC-funded InterPARES project, Canadian scholars are leading interdisciplinary international efforts to create guidelines and standards for digital records that are being implemented by governments, industry and the makers of technology around the world.

The goal is to ensure the preservation and accessibility of our records. The name InterPARES comes from the Latin phrase, "among peers," highlighting the enormous collaborative effort required to achieve this goal. Today, it also stands for International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems—and it is getting attention from the medical community, judicial institutions, agencies such as NASA and businesses such as the film company DreamWorks. Professor Duranti's achievements were recently recognized by the British Columbia Innovation Council when they presented her with the 2006 Frontiers in Research Award.

As a final example, the Canada Foundation for Innovation has invested $25-million to produce, store, and provide access to digital content, archival material, publications, audio files and other records. These records are critical for our students, professors and other researchers. Through these joint infrastructure initiatives with the Canadian Research Knowledge Network and the Synergies project, researchers pursuing complex global, social, cultural, political and economic questions will have unprecedented multi-institutional and interdisciplinary opportunities for collaboration and innovation.

We develop new technologies in response to our needs and desires. Those needs and desires, along with our behaviour, often shift in response to the new technologies—inspiring more innovation, which in turn drives more change. Many of these complex cycles are in constant motion in the world, and our new communication capabilities enable them to intersect and interact in unpredictable, non-linear and fascinating ways.

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