Can American Studies Find a Whole in the Net?

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I have a small book of family pictures that I often go through page by page with my two year old son. We use it to practice identifying all the family members: uncles, grandmothers, cats, and dogs. In this book there is one particular picture of me, in my living room, holding my son who was then only four months old. Every lime we would come to this particular picture, I would ask my son "who do you see in this picture?" For a long time, his answer was simply "TV." The first time he gave that answer, I did not even know what he was talking about, until I noticed that in the lower left corner of the picture, very small, was the television in our living room. To me this was clearly a picture of myself and my son; to my son, it was a picture of a TV. That is, the most visible thing in the picture and the thing which most excited him was the television. The fact that I hadn't even noticed the television in the picture until he pointed it out got me thinking about my television which I realized I never thought about at all. I became aware of how my television no longer seemed like a piece of technology to me (except perhaps – god forbid – when it is not working.) But most of the time, my television, as a material object and piece of technology is quite invisible. When the television is off, I don't see it at all; when it is on all I see are the images and sounds it is broadcasting.

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In this sense, my television is a lot like printed book technology, which by and large, also has an invisible status for our culture. Elizabeth Eisenstein makes this point in trying to explain a lack of historical attention to the impact of the printing press on Western culture. "Elaborate media-analysis," she argues, "does not seem to be required to explain current myopia about the impact of print. Since Gutenberg's day printed materials have become exceedingly common. They ceased to be newsworthy more than a century ago and have attracted ever less attention the more ubiquitous they have become." Writing in the later 1970's, Eisenstein adds, "the more printed materials accumulate, the more we are inclined to overlook them in favor of more recent, less familiar media. Articles speculating about the effects of television will thus find a larger market than conjectures about the impact of print. Because the latter has become increasingly less visible, repercussions that are actually being augmented and amplified at present are paradoxically believed to be diminishing instead."[1]

In the years between the later 1970's and the second half of the 1990's, the technology that has become most visible is computing technology, and even more particularly in the last five years, network technology, like the Internet and the World Wide Web. Indeed this is a singular moment in the development of information technologies precisely because of their heightened visibility. Neither ten years ago, nor ten years from now, will they be as conspicuous to Western culture (especially in the United States) as they are right now. Some facets of computing, I would argue, are already on their way to the kind of ubiquity and invisibility that print and television technologies currently have. My word processor, for example, is already fully absorbed into my field of vision. When I start my desktop computer and open my word processor, all I see is a blank page. I suspect that is the case for the vast majority of faculty in the United States and in many places overseas. I think that a similar case could be made for the increasing invisibility of electronic mail as well.

But network technologies, like the Web and the Internet, are extremely visible, and their potential impact, positive and negative, is currently somewhat of an obsession. The public explosion of network technologies

1 Elizabeth Eisenstein. *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in early Modern Europe.* Volume I. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 17.

is making fully apparent the slowly developing transformations that have been at work since computing technology expanded beyond large mainframe tools of calculation and data analysis to personal tools for a full range of professional and recreational needs. The Web gives the impression of making real the long unfolding dream of techno- enthusiasts for a world of connected information, where all documents are linked in a matrix of associational contexts, and are instantly accessible. In the whirl of this dream is the parallel notion that new technologies offer not simply tools but places to experience new worlds, to try on alternative identities, and to create virtual environments. Similarly, the Web or the Net (I use them here interchangeably), is a polyphony without a singular hierarchy, a place of articulation without a dominant monologue. Whether the Web looks to a user like Babel or multicultural democracy (or both), the "net effect" is a communications and information environment that collapses distinctions between senders and receivers, experts and amateurs, and public and private information. But unlike the word processor, or television, or books, the Web is still a medium that seems obsessed with its own framing. Or, to put that another way, at this moment in history we (i.e. its users) are extremely conscious of the Web because its interface is extremely self-conscious. The Web is a medium of surfaces. Which is not to say (necessarily) that it is a medium of superficiality. In *Imagologies*, Esa Saarinen and Mark Taylor argue, "Surface is no longer superficial; nor is it profound." In the new media culture, "the very opposition between depth and surface must be refigured. The approach of the surface, which has been a long time coming, has not yet fully reached arrival. The erasure of depth is the inverse image of the disappearance of transcendence." The ascension of the World Wide Web in the middle of the 1990's is commonly seen as the culmination of post-war media culture, (what Taylor and Saarinen call "simcult") a place and process where "surfaces fold into surfaces to create convoluted structures that are infinitely diverse, constantly changing and perpetually mobile."[2] This is why the Web so enthrals its enthusiasts and appals its detractors: the Web seems to be all surface, all frame, all interface. It is still an open question how much the surface nature of the Web is an inherent quality of the me-

2 Mark C. Taylor and Esa Saarinen. *Imagologies: Media Philosophy.* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. "Superficiality1".

dium or whether it is due merely to what the Web must inevitably look like in this brief moment of accentuated visibility.

But it is quite clear that like it or not, tlie Web will be a primary environment for the future of making and recreating knowledge, no less important to scholarship and the academy than to other cultural enterprises. And if we are to consider what the impact of the Web might be on the field of American Studies, we might begin with tlie question, "What will we be looking at when the World Wide Web is invisible?" If the Web is to have any meaning for American Studies then it will have to be a place where we can find "content"—resources, materials, and perspectives. But what kind of content? How will the medium impact the nature of tlie knowledge that is found there? How will the Net change how we see our materials, how we access those materials, or how, as a scholarly community, we collectively work on those materials? And how will our relationship to our materials and subject matter shape how we see the Net?

It might be useful to see the impact of new Web technologies on American Studies in three areas: its media, materials, and (for lack of a better term) its methods. The affinities between the multimedia nature of American Studies and the capabilities of new multimedia and hypermedia technologies are the easiest to comprehend. American Studies has developed not only as an interdisciplinary field but as one rooted in multiple media: not just texts and images, but film and video, all forms of material culture from architecture to clothing, folklore, music and much more. And yet we work almost entirely in print as the medium for making scholarly and pedagogical knowledge. Jerome McGann makes the point that, in English studies, the "scale of the tools is changing." In the field of English studies, he says, with the availability of electronic tools and hypertext environments, practitioners of literary and bibliographic history no longer have to "use books to study books." McGann is concerned primarily with editing projects, reference tools, and scholarly editions, whose status as metatexts has always pushed the limits of readability, and whose multivalent structures call out for the implementation of research tools with "greater powers of consciousness."[3]

The same point could be said to be true for the study of culture: the scale

3 Jerome McGann, "Rationale of Hypertext." Institute for Advanced Computing in the Humanities. http://www.village.virginia.edu/public/jjm2f/rationale.html (9 September 1996).

of the tools are changing and it is no longer necessary for us to study the multiple media of cultural expression in text and flat pictures. Although it is still on the horizon for most users, the Web is a synthetic medium, where the confluence of multiple media into a single environment will increasingly be the norm. I'm not claiming that this will be inevitably enhancing, but I do assert that it will be transforming. When a field like American Studies, built on interdisciplinary connections across diverse materials, begins reproducing those materials in media that concretize that richness and multiplicity, the result will be more than cosmetic.

As much as the media of American Studies will change, so too will the scale of access to primary materials. Indeed, if there is anything that binds together the diverse fields and sub-fields of American Studies it is attention to primary cultural and historical materials. Just as it is critical to recall how tied our knowledge is to its technologies of delivery, it is equally important to recall how much of our teaching and research methodologies, as well as our professional hierarchies, are dependent on access to primary cultural and historical materials. One of the really key areas for change in American Studies lies in the potential for new technologies to enable a new expansive contact with primary cultural materials. Extensive contact with electronic primary materials will not only transform the whole idea of archival access (including its economics), but change the way archival collections are structured and delivered as repositories of resources.

One of the key areas that will change in the development of interactive, electronic archives is the relationship between the user and the archival materials. In part, this is the result of the enhanced ability to search and sort materials in electronic contexts but it is also the result of expanded access. When archives are only physically located in libraries and museums, a very narrow range of expert users have access. As electronic archives are made increasingly available in electronic environments such as cd-rom and the World Wide Web, they become 'public' documents, available to a very wide range of users. Consequently, the relatively clear boundary between the archive and the published artifact of the archive (the collection, anthology, the source study, interpretive history, or museum exhibition) is now blurring. And the logical result of that blurring is a rethinking of archival standards regarding the arrangement, organization, and presentation of archival materials.

As a general rule, the delivery of primary historical and cultural materials is the least developed area of the Web. Yet, even in its incipient stages, a growing range of primary materials are available on the Internet as well as through cd-rom packages. One of the leaders in this effort is the National Digital Library Program, the electronic collections division of the Library of Congress, which has already run a prototype project for five years called the American Memory project. The American Memory Project was a multimedia archive of primary materials that ran as a self-contained package, although many of those collections are already bn the World Wide Web, such as 1100 Civil War photographs from the Matthew Brady collection, 272 Constitutional Broadsides, 1600 color photographs of American life in the 1930's taken from the collections of the Office of War Information and Farm Security Administration, 2900 life histories (22,500 pages) from the folklore project of the WPA Federal Writers Project, 25,000 photographs of American life and culture from the Detroit Publishing Company, 45 paper print films of New York City at the turn of the century, 59 sound recordings of American leaders (1918-1920) and 11,000 pages of books and pamphlets from the Daniel P. Murray African American collection. The American Memory project is now part of the larger division of the National Digital Library, that has undertaken the digitization (i.e. conversion to electronic form) of one million special collection items a year for five years, making five million or their 57 million special collection items available on the Internet by the year 2000. These collections include the earlier ones as well as the addition of 12 new collections, including first person narratives of early California, some 18,000 play scripts and handbills from the American Variety stage, 4,000 panoramic photographs, and 10,000 pages of print and nonprint materials on the Coolidge era and Consumer Economy .

But the Library of Congress is only a small part of the story. If it were only major knowledge institutions like the Library of Congress putting primary materials online, the impact on the future would be significant but not profound. But because of the "distributive" nature of interactive media where every point of reception is a potential point of production, the number of production points putting special collections of primary materials online can and will grow at an extremely accelerated rate. On the one hand this may all seem merely like the promise of valuable resources. It will enhance scholars and learners who don't have good ac-

cess to libraries; it will certainly be a boon to overseas scholars; it will enhance teaching by providing greater access to materials. But beyond the basic enhancements to access, the proliferation of electronically accessible primary materials will have an impact on the fields of culture and history no less profound than other technologies of accessible information, like the paperback book. The exponential growth of primary materials will substantially enhance our ability to access the texts that comprise the "national memory" (both its public and it vernacular record); the proliferation of primary materials will change the way we think about publishing and accessing texts as well as our modes of accessing and harnessing textual evidence. That may in turn change the role of the scholar, the nature of editing, and the creation of exhibitions and public collections.

Indeed, "primary materials" will comprise a significant answer to the question, "what will we be looking at when the World Wide Web is invisible?" The real power of these materials will not come from sheer access to primary resources, but the connections that can be made across them and the visibility of the process of work being done on them. Kevin Kelly argues that entities like the Web (i.e. a distributed, decentralized network) "is more a process than a thing. In the logic of the Net, there is a shift from nouns to verbs....It's not what something is, it's what it is connected to, what it does. Flows become more important than resources."[4] The play of "surface upon surface" that characterizes the Web is in part a whole new repertoire of tools for packaging materials and creating connections across them. In this sense, the technologies of the Web are extensions of many of the chief elements of print technologies that Eisenstein and others point out as coming into practice as a result of the printing press. "Over the centuries," as George Landow observes, "scribes, scholars, publishers, and other makers of books have invented a range of devices to increase the speed of what today are called information processing and information retrieval. Manuscript culture gradually saw the invention of individual pages, chapters, paragraphing, and spaces between words. The technology of the book found enhancement by pagination, indices, and bibliographies. Such devices have made scholarship

4 Kevin Kelly. Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, and the Economic World. (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1994), p. *27.*

possible, if not always easy or convenient to carry out."[5] These elements of apparatus that accompanied book technology served especially from the Renaissance forward to "stabilize" print. The technologies of textuality and linking embodied in the Web are simultaneously a reversal and an extension of the apparatus of stabilization. They are a reversal in the sense that hypertexts and documents in electronic space do not have clear lines of hierarchy or boundaries of closure, and hence serve to open the text up in new ways. Yet, in other very powerful ways, these shifts are extensions of the post-printing press apparatus. As Landow argues, "Electronic text processing marks the next major shift in information technology after the development of the printed book. It promises (or threatens) to produce effects on our culture, particularly on our literature, education, criticism, and scholarship, just as radical as those produced by Gutenberg's movable type."[6] Just as devices like tables of content and indexes serve as powerful "search engines" for readers to exercise some intellectual control over printed books, so too will the array of search engines (both of the Web in general and of specific text and image corpora) enhance the ability of users, both expert and novice, to access and manipulate electronic materials. In the same way that regularized editions, pagination, and cataloguing standardization have played major roles in the creation of international scholarly communities, the technologies of the Web will further transform the ability of international scholars to achieve what we might call "simultaneity" and "concurrence". Whereas regularized editions enabled two scholars in two different places to talk about the same text (in two different instantiations) in the same way, electronic tools offer an environment both for accessing the same text from two different places and for collaborating on it. Throughout the Web, new collaborative technologies come in a variety of forms, too numerous and diverse to describe here, ranging from collaborative spaces where users interact in "real-time," to "asynchronous" collaborations where – through electronic mail, communication forums, or hypertext environments – scholars work on common problems and materials. There are growing numbers of examples of online collaborations, often in tandem with the

5 George Landow. *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 19.

6 Ibid.

creation of online archives of primary materials. The collaborative Rosetti Archive and Valley of the Shadow Civil War Projects at the University of Virginia are two such projects. In both these projects, multimedia archival materials are brought together in a single interactive environment. Although the two projects differ in many ways, they share the common goal of opening the process of interpretation into a collaborative space where there is no single "owner" of the material.[7]

Even in the case of primary texts separate from elaborate collaborative projects, it will become increasingly possible for writers of criticism and history online to make targeted links, not only to specific texts, but exact locations in specific texts. One such example is the "anchored HTML" system developed by Tom Thurston and David Phillips in an electronic, hypertext version of Jacob Riis's How *the Other Half Lives*.[8] (HTML stands for Hypertext Markup Language, and it is the rather simple coding script that stands behind the World Wide Web). In Phillips and Thurston's version of Riis, every paragraph of text is assigned a number (unique in each chapter). Behind each number is a very simple code that "names" that paragraph by that number. This kind of simple naming system that allows online authors to make targetted references (and direct links) to primary materials will be critical to the inevitable development of disciplinary writing practices, where both the interpretive narrative and the archival materials are online and electronically accessible.

In these and other kinds of electronic texts, the line between readers and writers blur (as hypertext theorists have been insisting for years) by creating textual resources into which individual users can attach their own interpretations and extensions. They also represent the intersection of two powerful capabilities of electronic spaces: manipulation of information and human collaboration across time and distance. These new interactions are just one manifestation of what I call the "convergence of distributions" – the heart of the electronic future for historical and cultural study. The "convergence of distributions" or the convergence of "distributed tendencies," is taking place in three key areas: the "distributed

7 The "Rosetti Archive" is located at http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/rossetti/rossetti.html; the Valley of Shadow Civil War Project is at http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/vshadow2/. (9 Septmeber 1996).

8 Jacob Riis, How *the Other Half Lives*. http:Nwww.cis.yale.eduiamst11d/inforev/riis/title.l1tm1(22 September 1996).

communication" of interactive technologies, the development of a "distributed epistemology" (or "distributed knowledge") and the growing emphasis (at least in the United States) on "distributed learning." Whatever will be the long term impact of new technologies on a field like American Studies will result from the convergence of two or more of these distributive tendencies.

"Modern Media of communications," says James Carey, [i.e. traditional broadcast media] "...widen the range of reception while narrowing the range of distribution. Large audiences receive, but are unable to make direct response or participate otherwise in vigorous discussion."[9] In traditional broadcast media, the ability to alter the message is not distributed between sender and receiver. In mass media, such as television, as Nicholas Negroponte puts it, "all the intelligence is at the point of transmission" and none or very little of it at the point of reception. (Negroponte points out that, obviously, he's not talking about the programming when he speaks of intelligence, but the ability to alter and control the "content" of the message.)[10] Interactive media could not be more different. In interactive media (such as the Net), most of the intelligence – or at least a large portion of it – is held at the point of reception, and therefore increases rather than reduces distribution. Interactive media, such as the Internet, turns any point of reception into a point of transmission (i.e. at any point where text can be read, text can be produced or reproduced). As much as some interactive media may look like conventional media – video games looking like movies, for example – the fundamentally different distributive quality of interactive media sets it apart as belonging to a distinct category of technology and a distinct paradigm of human communication.

The cultural theorist Mark Poster calls this new era of interactive media the "second media age." Yet, it is quite apparent that the first media age – the "broadcast era" – is far from being supplanted by the second. Rather, as with the long-term juxtaposition that we can expect between print and electronic texts, broadcast and interactive media will coexist for some time to come. "The second age," however,

9 James Carey, *Communication* as *Culture: Essays on Media and Society.* (New York: John Unsworth, 1990), p. 12.

10 Nicholas Negroponte. ***Being*** *Digital.* (New York: Knopf, 1995). pp. 19-20.

"deflates the pretensions of what now appears as a first age to having not been an age at all. Until now the broadcast model has not been a first age but has been naturalized as the only possible way of having media – few producers, many consumers."

With the incipient introduction of the information "superhighway" and the integration of satellite technology with television, computers and telephone, an alternative to the broadcast model [of communications], with its severe technical constraints, will very likely enable a system of multiple producers/distributors/consumers, an entirely new configuration of communication relations in which the boundaries between those terms collapse. A second age of mass media is on the horizon."

This distributive effect, the shift from a one-to-many to a many-to-many model of communication is one of the most important features of the new media, and provides the fundamental groundwork for a great many changes in social structure and subject formation. The implications are great as well for knowledge-making practices of academic disciplines. In contrast to McLuhan's model of broadcast communications – where tele-media shrinks the space betweenpoints of reception – interactive media has an additional counter effect of enlarging the space in which communication can take place, thereby enlarging the space in which scholars and students can conduct their intellectual work. The enlarged space of interactive media enables the visualization and manipulation of objects, as well as the capacity to experiment with textual arrangements, organization, and argument. What is "distributed in interactive media is not just the ability to "talk back" but the ability to produce and reproduce knowledge.

Less rapid, but just as profound, as the advent of a second media age, is the paradigmatic changes that have occurred throughout the constituent fields of American cultural and historical studies over the last thirty years. One way to think about these changes collectively is see the evolution of "distributed knowledge." By that phrase, "distributed knowledge," I want to imply several things. First, and most broadly, I mean the general opening up of what counts as a culture's history – broadening beyond a narrow view of intellectual or political history, or canonical and aesthetic approaches to literary expression. Well known to all of us is the

11 Mark Poster, *The* Second ***Media*** *Age*. (Oxford, Polity Press, 1995).

expansion of cultural and historical studies to include social history, so-called "bottom-up" history, the history of the marginalized and excluded, the expanded literary canon, as well as the mainstreaming of the study of everyday life and the extreme widening of the definition of what constitutes a readable cultural artifact. This all adds up to a "distributive epistemology" because how we look for our knowledge – what counts as viable evidence of cultural meaning – is more widely distributed across fields, text, objects, and populations than ever before.

There is a second sense for a "distributed knowledge" implied by the first that extends to the notion of subjectivity and perspective (or more accurately, intersubjectivity and multiperspectivism). Regardless of where one is situated across modernist or postmodernist constructions of this problem, all cultural history and analysis tales place in a context of academic inquiry that has challenged the unity and integrity of a single "voice" speaking in isolation or autonomy. Whether practiced as an analytic methodology or not, the context of cultural criticism challenges that texts (and subjects) be seen as "distributed" across the texts that construct them and to whom they are addressed.

Finally, both the first and second sense of a distributed epistemology further imply a third distributive condition within cultural and historical knowledge: that abandonment of the dream of a unitary cultural narrative and the possibility of writing a single "history" of a "people". In this sense, knowledge is forever distributed across a plurality of cultural experiences and texts, without the prospect of being remade into an explanatory coherence except in the context of its own multiplicity and complexity.

At the same time that the field has undergone a distribution of epistemology, there has been (at least in the United States) a movement toward a concomitant shift in pedagogical practice that might be called (for the sake of parallelism) "distributed learning." Distributed learning is a general term for a range of practices that include student-centered pedagogies and process approaches to learning. Practices that encourage collaborative work, the development of ideas and skills rather than the exclusive emphasis on finished product, and the distribution of authority in the classroom from the teacher to the students, are all implied in the phrase "distributed learning." Although relatively unexplored in the context of interdisciplinary cultural history, the linkages between "distributed learn-

ing" and the other two distributive tendencies, already have some notable pioneering precedents. The field of composition instruction and particularly its subfield of computers and writing has been experimenting with the affinities between electronic text production and process- based learning for nearly twenty years. Similarly, feminist theory and womens studies has been experimenting almost as long with alignments between theoretical content of feminist approaches and reconstructed classroom practices. The same is increasingly true with many phases of Ethnic Studies. Now, these ltinds of alignments are also spreading to other areas, particularly in English literature, where an expanded canon and shift to cultural studies approach to literature is developing an increasing discourse in distributing authority in learning settings.

The convergence of these distributive effects form a crossroads for the field of American Studies and all areas of culture and history study. And it is the potential in this meeting point of forces that stood behind the creation of the American Studies Crossroads Project, an international project on technology and education, sponsored by the American Studies Association.[12] One of the primary goals of the project is to help generate frameworks for the international field of American Studies for anticipating and shaping the transformative effects that new media will have on interdisciplinary study of the United States. That conversation is in its earliest stages.

The hypertext fiction writer and critic Michael Joyce has said of the World Wide Web: "we will get used by what we get used to." I take that to mean that before the Web becomes entirely invisible to us, we need to be sure, as a field and as a community of scholars and teachers, that we have had a hand in shaping it. In part, that means that we need to open a field-wide conversation about the affinities between new technologies and the issues and methods most central to American Studies. We need to consider the affinities between interdisciplinarity and hypertextuality; we need to begin assessing different models for mapping the complexities of cultural discourse with electronic tools that are designed to display complex relationships; we need to explore how we might begin integrating dialogic technologies of all ltinds into intercultural study and the analysis

12 The American Studies Crossroads Project is located on the World Wide Web at http://www.georgetown.edu/crossroads/.

of multivocalism; we need to understand the realignment of national boundaries (both in response to globalism and tribalism) in part through the spread and saturation of worldwide international technologies and the creation of virtual communities.

Some might say it is too early to take up these questions, that there is no evidence yet that new technologies will be so transforming or make changes in such substantive ways. I would argue that now is the only time to take them up. We will only be able to see our possibilities for whatever short period of time that we can still see our technologies.