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# Gitelman's Paper Knowledge and Kafka's The Demon of Writing

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By Alexander von Lünen



[Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents](#)
Duke University Press, 2012, 224 pages

by [Lisa Gitelman](#)

[The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork](#)
Zone Books, 2012, 208 pages

by [Ben Kafka](#)

Ben Kafka and Lisa Gitelman, colleagues at New York University, have both written books about the intricate nature of paper as a medium. While

Kafka delves into the nature of paper as enabling agent of bureaucracy –
i.e. paperwork – Gitelman's focus is on "documents" and how they were
shaped by print and are now transformed by the digital.

Given the digitization of all things social and the recent debate about
issues for democracy through digital surveillance (Wikileaks, Edward
Snowden), books about specific media and their implications for
governance such as Kafka's and Gitelman's are tapping into current
issues.
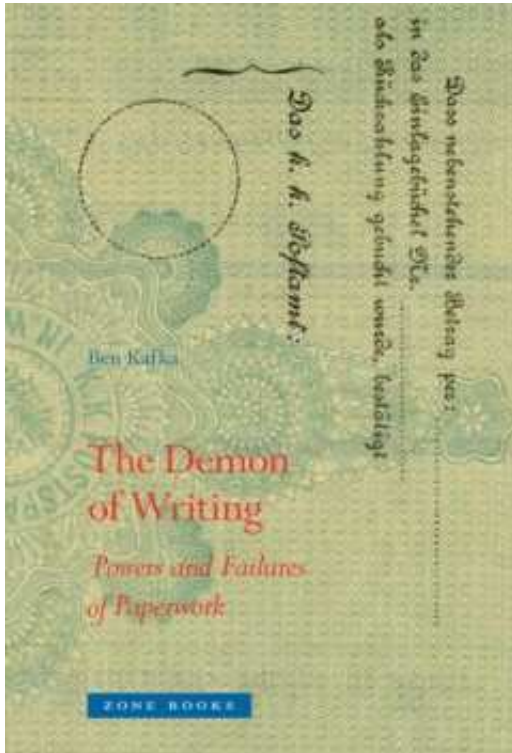


**The Demon of Writing**

*The Demon of Writin*g by Ben Kafka focuses on the meaning of a
particular medium (here: paper) for governance – specifically:
bureaucracy. His narrative revolves around "paperwork", which he
defines "to mean all those documents produced in response to a demand
– real or imagined – by the state" (p. 10). In what is probably one of the
most entertaining scholarly books ever written, Kafka uses the period of
the French Revolution to detail the travails of individuals exposed to the
madness of bureaucracy. The largest part of his treatise (three chapters)
narrates the stories of people caught up in this treadmill of paperwork. The
first chapter, for example, focuses on Edme-Etienne Morizot in
(pre-)revolutionary France, whose fate offers obvious parallels to the great
novel *The Trial* by Ben Kafka's famous namesake, Franz Kafka. Fired
from his job in the Ministry of Finance in 1788, Morizot has to endure

similar struggles, being sent from one committee to the next in the hope of finding an open ear; that is, of receiving the pension that was promised him.

While taking the reader on a roller-coaster ride of individuals struggling with the system, Kafka cleverly interweaves these accounts with some more general remarks about the history and nature of bureaucracy. For example, he shows that it was the Constituent Assembly and not Napoleon that invented administrative organization (p. 103); and that "modern political thought was both founded and confounded by encounters with paperwork" (p. 10); Kafka also points out that paperwork was a precursor to, if not the first step of, industrialization (p. 12). Quills and ink were not very efficient; bureaucracy resulted from a need for a division of labor, as societies became larger and more complex (p. 35). In connection with cheaper means of producing paper and the notion (advanced by the French Revolution) that public servants had to be accountable (now that they properly represented the people; p. 43), bureaucracy began to enjoy an unbridled existence.

Kafka does not equate paperwork with bureaucracy per se. He points out, for instance, that the Roman Empire, while bureaucratic, used far less paperwork (p. 54). "Modern" bureaucracy is therefore a markedly different form of governance than feudal bureaucracy, characterized by the availability of paper and the "paperwork" that ensues.

One could argue that Kafka's book is – in terms of topic and scholarly insight – not very different from the path-breaking work on bureaucracy by Max Weber (to whom Kafka refers briefly on three occasions). Indeed, much of the narrative echoes Weber's points, albeit in a much richer and more entertaining style. Both the promises and perils of bureaucracy are clearly outlined by Weber. The hope for accountability of public servants and a hope for a "simple and coordinated state" (p. 34), as well as the danger of the same public servants becoming so entangled in paperwork that they cease to serve the public and become automatons following an administrative script were all dealt with by Weber, in what he famously termed the "iron cage of rationalization". Given the nature of Kafka's narrative about individuals harassed and restrained by modern administration, one would also expect a stronger reference to the work of Michel Foucault, for example, in the discussion of "dissemination of power by paperwork" (p. 82) (Jon Agar's *Government Machine*, 2003, also comes to mind).

Rather, Kafka – unpersuaded by Bruno Latour's media ethnography – wants to focus on "unconscious processes" (p. 14). His stated methodology of choice is psychoanalysis, in an attempt at "renewing and reinvigorating psychohistory" (p. 16). His use of psychoanalysis aims to

stress "paperwork's symbolic function – its function of telling us about the world and what to do or what not to do to it" (p. 108). Psychohistory is a rather controversial concept among most historians and rarely seen these days. Oddly enough, this is also the case in Kafka's book. Very rarely does the book make explicit use of psychohistory, an absence which adds to its high level of readability, one might add.

My main criticism of Kafka's book is therefore not its shortcomings in terms of methodology, but his negligence of the digital. Given the prominence of e-governance and the "paperless office" in today's political discourse, one wonders why Kafka doesn't juxtapose the historic cases of bureaucracy running haywire with current debates. His conclusive chapter is indeed rather short (six pages), and he dismisses both e-governance and the paperless office as "wandering myths" (p. 149). While he makes a valid point about the versatility and durability of paper – a circumstance that will in fact guarantee its survival in administration for the time being – many of the issues he discusses demand attention to digital media.  After all, Kafka delivers the perfect sound bites for a debate of recent events. His central argument – that without paper, there wouldn't be any paperwork – is the perfect opener to a discussion about e-governance, that is, paperwork without paper.  Even more so is his remark that the committee (in the case of Morizot in chapter one) is a new kind of villain which requires a new kind of hero to defy it (p. 70). While the revelations by Edward Snowden about the NSA spying on people had not yet been made when Kafka's book was published (2012), the debate about Wikileaks was certainly ongoing. In the eyes of many, Julian Assange and Edward Snowden are exactly that kind of new hero defying the new villain: IT and the novel forms of surveillance and governance it enables.

In summary, Kafka's book, while extremely well written and a delight to read, leaves one wanting more. His topic – paperwork and its perils – begs for a discussion of the nature and meaning of media and their implications for governance on a broader level.

## Paper Knowledge

Lisa Gitelman provides much needed attention to digital media in her book, *Paper Knowledge*. As a matter of fact, her main topic is the idea of the "document" and its transformation from print to digital. Gitelman follows this transformation from nineteenth century blank form printing, to the appearance of photocopiers in the 1960s, to the emergence, in the 1990s, of digital documents such as Adobe's Portable Document Format (PDF).

In addition to "document," the second pillar of Gitelman's argument is the concept of "genre", which she uses to uncouple the debate from the ambiguities of the term "media". The concept of "medium", widely discussed since Marshall McLuhan's famous treatise *Understanding Media* (1964), remains fuzzy and hard to pinpoint. "Better, indeed", as Gitelman points out, "to admit that no medium has a single, particular logic, while every genre does and is" (p. 9). "Genre", in her words, thus "is a mode of recognition instantiated in discourse" (p. 2).

Gitelman's argument circles around these two terms: "document" and "genre". Documents, according to her definition, are not only imbued with "the social order that they inhabit" and "integral to the ways people think" (p. 5); documents are objects "framed as or entered into evidence" (p. 3). Documents are thus not simply meaningless objects, but are a "genre", both a "pattern of expression" and "familiar material objects" (p. 3). This holds true for electronic publishing as well.

Like Kafka, Gitelman dismisses the paperless office as myth on several

occasions, giving some very good examples to back up her claim. A good deal of her discussion of the photocopier revolves around the fact that people used them to copy computer manuals, such as the early UNIX manuals, leaving photocopies and digital documents deeply intertwined (pp. 98, 110). One wonders, however, whether this simply marks a transition period in which digital devices convenient enough to replace printed books had not yet entered the market. Especially in the field of computer manuals, many of them are happily used in digital formats nowadays.

Her own journey into C19 printing is a prime example of this intertwined space. Gitelman starts with the observation that "the term 'print' was always in flux, referring to changing technologies and practices" (p. 7). Where "printer" once referred to a trade, it now refers to a device sitting by the edge of your desk. The same is true for "computer", obviously: once describing a person doing computations with pencil and paper (and maybe an abacus or mechanical calculator), for three generations or so now it is solely known as a digital, programmable machine. One wonders if the same fate is in store for the document as well; maybe one day "document" will be entirely associated with digital media, just as the word "file" already is largely a synonym for "digital file". Gitelman makes that point early in her book when she outlines the immediacy of the concept of "document" and its instance as paper for the designers of digital media (p. 4). Gitelman delivers more examples of this by describing, among other things, the transformation of print in the nineteenth century. She does this by showing the role blank forms started to play in public administration; a form of governance only enabled by the ability to print forms in large quantities at a low price, made possible by big steps in printing technology in the 1800s. Blank forms became so ubiquitous – and here Gitelman's book interfaces nicely with Kafka's – that it pushed paperwork to new levels. (Indeed Gitleman refers to Kafka's book on three occasions.) "Blank forms work on their face to rationalize work, but they are also one small part of the way that bureaucracy assumes an objective character" (p. 31). Referring to Max Weber's point about the perfection of bureaucracy through dehumanization, Gitelman describes the ambition of bureaucracy to rid itself from all emotions and subjective judgements, an ambition epitomized by *blank* forms.

Again, one wonders why the seminal work of Foucault finds little to no mention in this discussion. Gitelman's assertion that "the people who designed and deployed them [blank forms] were thinking ahead to their filling in" (p. 24) is exactly the kind of discursive framework that Foucault spoke of as *advanced organizer*.

Despite not drawing explicitly on Foucault or other philosophers, Gitelman provides further examples of the notion of how technology transformed our

handling of resources. She eloquently outlines the challenges of photocopiers to copyright, for example. Copyright was contested in the nineteenth century already by cheap, pirated reprints of popular novels and cartoons. These, however, could be stamped out by the police relatively easy, given the size and cost of printing presses. Photocopiers, on the other hand, through their low price, speed and ubiquity would break down that barrier (p. 108). Here, too, we detect a parallel to current debates about copyright infringements and digital media. Not only has the industry tried to steer legislation to maintain its market share, but the advent of new media/technology has challenged and ultimately transformed our understanding of copyright, and thus its very nature.

Gitelman's account of the rise of the UNIX operating systems, which was characterized by its nature of copying and annotation (p. 98—99) – both the code and manual – provides obvious similarities to today's social media and Alvin Toffler's term of "prosumer", i.e. the blurring of distinctions between "producer" and "consumer" (p. 150). She gives several examples of this notion, including that of "amateurdom" as a means of overcoming monopolized cultural debates. Where previously discourse was controlled by magazine editors with the "Letters to the Editor" used as a fig-leaf (pp. 78,145), social media now allows everyone to utter their thoughts to the world, for better or worse. Filing – once the primary privilege of bureaucracies (p. 32) – was brought to individuals first by photocopiers and then by computers: "Filing, like reading, has become a means of self-possession" (p. 93).

*Paper Knowledge* is thus a well-rounded exploration of publishing technology and how it transforms every aspect of our lives, from the way we are governed to the way we read books and news.


**Conclusions**

Both books are relevant contributions to the debate about the transformation of governance through new media. Both show us the effect that the ubiquity of certain media – paper, print and digital publishing – has on administrative practices. Kafka and Gitelman's books are thus important both for academic discourse in media studies, as well as for public debates about current challenges in governance. While Kafka's focus is more on historic cases of bureaucracy gone wild, Gitelman's approach is somewhat broader. Her favoring of categories like "genre" and "document" over the rather fuzzy "media" is a promising angle which hopefully will inspire future studies in this field.

While both books have their methodological weaknesses, they are also

both eloquent, informative and great food for thought. This concerns Kafka's book to a greater extent. While extremely well written, it leaves much to be desired methodologically. His negligence of e-governance is also a shortcoming, stoked by his tying of modern bureaucracy to the medium of paper.

Comparing the two books is therefore somewhat difficult. In a way, they complement, rather than contrast with, one another. Gitelman picks up the story where Kafka leaves off. Kafka deals with the age of the French Revolution, i.e. the late eighteenth century, while Gitelman starts her treatise in the nineteenth century. Kafka elaborates individual fates entrapped in bureaucracy – the micro level, while Gitelman looks at general issues – the macro level. Readers interested in either level of inquiry might therefore consider both books, or pick the one closest to their own scope of interest to begin.

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Image credit: "boat" (2012) by zhu jinshi, xuan paper, bamboo and cotton thread, 590 x 137 x 165 in. (1500 x 350 x 420 cm)
image courtesy of the rubell family collection, miami

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