

Changing our textual minds: Towards a digital order of knowledge. By *Adriaan van der Weel*. Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2011. 241 pp. ISBN 9780719085550.

In recent years, a number of books have been published proffering insight into how digital technologies are impacting and will impact on the ways in which we read, research, write, learn, and collaborate: Andrew Keen's *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture* (2007) and Don Tapscott's *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation is Changing Your World* (2008) (for the better, according to Tapscott) are representative examples. *Changing our textual minds: Towards a digital order of knowledge*, by Adriaan van der Weel (Bohn Professor of Modern Dutch book history in the department of Book and Digital Media Studies at Leiden University), is a welcome intervention in this literature. His study is notable for its focus on text (where anxieties seem to cluster most acutely) rather than "new media" or media generally and its examination of text from the disciplinary perspective of book studies, or at least that strand of book studies that believes that the discipline should "deal with the history of textual transmission at large" (p. 3). The advantage of a book studies perspective for this subject is that it is highly sensitive to historical continuities and discontinuities between digital and earlier mediums, which can expose the inaccuracy of some claims made about the uniqueness (both positive and negative) of the digital medium and its social impact.

"The chief purpose of this book is to 'make visible' the digitization of textual transmission and what it entails, and to assess its (potential) impact," (p. 2) states van der Weel in the "Introduction"; In Chapter 1 he writes, "This book tells the history of how computers became a medium for the transmission of text and what that means for our textual universe" (p. 9). Together, these statements touch on the major components of van der Weel's inquiry: starting with the "working hypothesis" (one that is not, he acknowledges, without its critics) that "mediums, like language, have an influence on the way we think and, by extension, on society" (p. 17), and that they help "to determine the way we think" and therefore "help to determine our culture and our identity" (p. 6), his goal is to provide a descriptive historical account and comparative analysis of the three inventions and revolutions in the modality of text as materialized in the written, print, and digital mediums, and study their sociocultural impact. Ultimately, this analysis is to help arrive at a greater understanding of the digital medium, what its impact will be, and how we might intervene in the role it will play in the world: "The last, but not least, of our concerns is the very real possibility

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that the transformative power of the computer will prove to be vastly greater than that of any medial technology. ... The least we can do is try to understand the nature of the technologies and their potential for change and try to define what we want from them, in relation to their potential” (pp. 20–21).

In enumerating the impact of the technologies of writing and printing on Western societies, van der Weel points out that not only were both of these technologies regarded with deep misgiving by some (he references Plato’s view on writing in the *Phaedrus*), but that these technologies had effects and were put to uses that were unintended and unforeseen when they were first invented. Gutenberg likely had no inkling that the standardization that printing facilitated (down to the level of the individual page) and the development of sophisticated typographical conventions would significantly contribute to greater precision and exactness in the representation of knowledge or that his printing press would act as a major stimulus for new writing rather than being primarily a means to replicate previous writing. More broadly, print culture made it increasingly difficult to control the dissemination of writing, changed the relationship between authors and readers (an author could no longer control or have a clear idea of his or her readership), and, as reading became a widespread, solitary, and self-directed activity, increased individualism—effects which Gutenberg neither planned nor anticipated.

Van der Weel argues that the increasing opportunity, importance, and indeed necessity, of the development of literacy in Western societies was both an outcome of printing and an impetus to the development of a highly-complex and diffused print culture, or, the “Order of the Book,” which he sees as having triumphed in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Although challenged by the arrival of the “new media,” which has led to ongoing speculation about the “death of the book,” van de Weel maintains that “the Order of the Book is hardly less vital today than it was in the nineteenth century” (p. 97), in large part, he points out, because print culture has incorporated new technologies, including digital technology, in book creation, production, and most recently, dissemination (via e-books and e-book readers), and because the book still retains significant cultural capital.

In his discussion of digital textuality, van der Weel starts by reminding us that, despite the invention of computers as machines to perform numerical calculations (and which were never intended to process text), in today’s computers, text has a central and predominant place, from what computers are used for (e.g., email) to how they function (e.g., markup, programming languages). As a counterpart to the “Order of the Book,” the networked digital computer has created a “new kind of information space,” which van der Weel, borrowing a term coined by Ted Nelson, calls the “docuverse.” Van der Weel discusses the changes that the “docuverse” is making to our textual practices, from the “websurfing” consumption of texts, to the instability of digital texts due to disappearance, invisibility of alteration, and technological degradation and obsolescence, and to the manipulability of digital interfaces on which we read text: “The conclusion seems inescapable that not only the technological characteristics of books and the digital medium but also their social consequences are indeed very different” (p. 192).

Changing our textual minds is valuable for encapsulating the long history of textual transmission, from writing to digital text, and also for synthesizing the scholarship on this history and its social effects. While those well-versed in this history will perhaps find in the book nothing particularly new or ground-breaking, its admirable breadth and citations and references make it useful as a comprehensive introduction to the subject of what text has been, is, and may become. Thankfully, van der Weel eschews fevered pronouncements that the computer is creating either a heaven or a hell on earth. Pointing out that recurring predictions that new mediums will extinguish existing mediums are “never fulfilled” (p. 103), he cautiously offers in his conclusion some possible scenarios as to what the future might hold for the book and digital text and how this might change textual practices, while admitting that, while it is clear that significant medial change is occurring, it is impossible to predict where that change will lead.