Frances Robertson Post-print culture?

[…] print culture cannot be reduced to one narrative; for example the introduction of print culture in the Middle East or in India did not necessarily lead to the development of a Western humanist mindset, but was instead often adopted in order to attack colonial rule or secular values. […] ‘print culture’ (as a kind of slogan) has also often been espoused by particular groups within the business of print, whether by printing house workers, publishers or academics, leading to very different characterisations of what print culture might be; and in the process, these views have often been attached to different mediums and visual languages. But below these assured professional voices, many printed objects have been produced in more infor­mal circumstances or in different working spheres. Against the more powerful expression of designers and associated discourses of exhibitions, academic monographs and critical commentaries, […] discredited, outdated and ‘merely decorative’ items also have weight. The example of chromolithographs, whether in women’s social exchanges in domestic spaces or in the development of ‘photos of the gods’ in India in the late nineteenth century (Pinney 2004), show that the worthy ideals of a single, progressive ‘print culture’ are simply the good taste of the ruling caste.

Breaking up print culture from any abstract overall meaning it may have, and looking at the particularities of printing techniques and mediums, also shows the social, political and economic costs and difficulties of change and innovation, combating more deterministic views of the march of print culture and indeed of visual culture in general. Looking at the materiality of specific mediums and examples shows those social negotiations in contact with the worlds of production, and the meanings of making objects in multiples. Printing techniques have always been derived from other procedures for making objects in multiples, some very ancient, such as stamping, branding and stencilling, and […] the development of printing reflects the state of surrounding technologies, whether these are expressed in steam and steel, chemistry, photographic imaging, or computing. Techniques for surface marking in print are at the very boundary of two- and three-dimensional making, and today some important applications of printing are sinking back into procedures for object crafting, and away from the production of textual content. For example, a Google search using the keyword ‘photolithography’ is now much more likely to throw up references to nanotechnology. Optical lithography is used for microfabrication of objects such as circuits (Sotomayor Torres 2003) in a continuation of the ways in which silk screen printing was also harnessed for fuse and circuit production earlier in the twentieth century (Kosloff 1958), while digital three-dimensional printing is now used increas­ingly for design prototyping or individual bespoke fabrication of material objects (Gerschenfeld 2007).

But against these new applications of print procedures, the advent of digital communication technology, whether as cyberspace (Benedikt 1992) or hypertext (Landow 2006) has been seen, often gleefully, as the end of print culture (Joyce 2001). Many rapid response books on the death of print appeared around the turn of the millennium with titles such as The Gutenberg elegies: the fate of reading in an electronic age (Birkerts 1994) or more bluntly (from the latecomer Jeff Gomez) Print is dead: books in our digital age (2008). Reviewers responded to this genre with their own crop of hackneyed jokes about the irony of this procedure, or the tonnage of dead trees. Sven Birkerts for example feared that the loss of printing would unweave the social fabric, erode language and destroy our sense of history (Birkerts 1994: 125-29) while more recent books such as The shallows: how the internet is changing the way we think, read and remember (Carr 2010) seemed to invite mockery by setting out to prove that we now lack the concentration to follow a sustained argument. These books do nevertheless all reflect serious anxieties; that digital communications appear to threaten those core values of print culture of clear authorship, of the perceived stability and fixity of texts, or that hyperlinks will encourage jumping and browsing so that we will lose interest in following the thread of sustained linear arguments or narratives that are carried in books. The short life of most websites and the open-access policies of most web servers, make digital content suspect to most academics. In short, digital communications threaten our social and consensual models of how information is to be made and agreed, and how knowledge is ordered. Other common fears about the death of print culture are more personal and subjective, usually focused directly on bookish pleasures that might be lost, such as the nostalgic atmosphere of old libraries, or the private pleasures of quiet reading in bed or the bath. Even before the development of commercially successful digital book readers, such as Sony’s digital ebook reader (2006) or Amazon’s Kindle (2007), many commentators feared that young people, ‘digital natives’, were no longer accustomed to reading or handling information in books (Thompson 2010: 312-68). Why would a student bother to walk to the library or consult an index with Google or Wikipedia at hand? While book historians Finkelstein and McCleery note a ‘natural closure’ of the ‘old print revolution’ in the electronic era (Finkelstein and McCleery 2005: 26), Elizabeth Eisenstein has claimed more boldly that print’s ‘sense of an ending’ began right from the start of the twentieth century due to incursions of previous new media, so that digital books are only a final confirmation of the end of print’s domination (Eisenstein 2011: 215).

Nevertheless, we can see that many of these fears are exaggerated and misdirected, and some of the cult of the ‘physical book’ is misleadingly rose-tinted. Not all books are fun to handle. William Morris’s complaint about unwieldy books in 1894 is still only too recognisable today: ‘you want a book to turn over easily, and to lie quiet while you are reading it ... the fact is, a small book seldom does lie quiet, and you either have to cramp your hand by holding it, or else put it on the table with a paraphernalia of matters to keep it down, a tablespoon on one side, a knife on the other, and so on, which things always tumble off at a critical moment’ (Morris 1999 [1893]; Peterson 1991). With e-readers, why go through this performance? Geoffrey Nunberg […] suggests a massive but selective cull of printed material would not be a bad thing: ‘books as such - that is, bound and printed documents - are not an interesting category. In modern industrial societies, the vast majority of books bear no cultural burden at all: they are parts catalogs, census reports ... repair manuals, telephone directories, airline schedules’ (Nunberg 1993). But whatever one’s stance, blanket statements such as ‘print is dead’ are still largely rhetorical and speculative. In relation to book use and production, print is still dominant. The volume of printed book sales has actually increased in the digital era, as communications and searching technologies support much more widespread browsing and buying, with online discussion groups and internet book sites such as Amazon. Used and out-of-print books are now much more easily available either through second-­hand book sites such as Abebooks, or as facsimile copies through print-on-demand services. Even though ebook sales have increased significantly in the few years they have been available (for example, moving from around 3 per cent of total book sales in 2009 to around 8 per cent in 2010), those sales are only a small percentage of the total. Printed books and print culture are still central elements of cultural life, although patterns of use, marketing and consumption are changing (Nunberg 1996; Thompson 2010; Striphas 2011). […] In these circumstances, John B. Thompson has argued that concentrating on the fate of the ‘physical book’ does not in fact offer the most important analysis of the effects of digital communications on print culture. Instead, the real impact of digital technology is on the workflow and operating systems of print production (Thompson 2010: 321). Until the late 1990s, most publishers used offset lithographic printing that was expensive in terms of initial set-up costs to print large runs of books. Digital technologies such as Xerox DocuTech systems or scanned PDF facsimiles allow short-run print-on-demand strategies. Instead of selling large numbers of (it is hoped) startlingly new best-sellers, publishers can in theory maintain a large digital back catalogue of titles that would only be printed when desired (Thompson 2010: 324-27).

Nor is print culture just about book production. Ephemeral and everyday uses of print have increased in many domains in the digital era: in advertising, in commerce and packaging, and in the office. The printing industry is domi­nated by massive business corporations whose activities are rarely talked about outside the trade and financial press, but whose output spans a whole range of products such as security and banknote printing, mail order cata­logues and packaging (Marshall 1983: 7, 54). If printers in craft unions have declined there is a still a vast workforce serving new species of printers (that is, machines), whether in large automated offset litho printing plants for newspapers and packaging, local copy shop equipment running both digital and offset operations or desktop printers. Workers in print culture include lower-skilled print workers, engineers, designers, marketing teams, and the buyers and users of printed products. The number of professional designers has increased enormously; creating a much more crowded labour market. [ … ]

The field of design and typography practices [also] expanded and changed from the 1980s with increasing marketing of personal computers to ordinary buyers without technical expertise. Word processing and design software developed for these products, suitable for all computer users, meant that many non­specialists began to create graphic designs, or at the very least began to take an interest in typography and design to an unprecedented degree. Apple Macintosh computers, introduced in 1984, were equipped for the first time with word processing choices about fonts (such as Chicago and Geneva) and layout, prompting users to take account of their text’s appearance. Such concentration on the visual, on appearance as a central factor in the writing process, marked a real change in way that readers evaluated their texts (Staples 2000: 20). All home software providers developed word processing packages and the number of font choices and layout options continued to increase. [ … ] Default settings and ‘style themes’ impose structure and a somewhat bland uniformity. However, digital graphics and new methods of designing type also created unexpected appearances and layouts that formed a jarring contrast to established ideas of print layout and design. [ … ]

Digital equipment allowed designers and writers to craft a postmodern form of expression that deliberately stressed the ambivalent quality of desta­bilised digital typography, demonstrating an indeterminacy of meaning to set against the fixity and trustworthiness of graphic design derived from traditional typesetting (Brannon 2007: 353-64), or to break with established of good practice in other ways. Well-known examples include April Greiman’s ‘Does it make sense?’ contribution to the magazine Design Quarterly (issue 133: 1986). Here, an apparently normal issue of the magazine actually opened out to one single large poster, folded to the normal format size. When open, the poster presented unconventional graphic language laid out in unfamiliar style, designed and pasted-up entirely on computer. According to Heller and Pomeroy, this was completely new and astonishing. In 1986, most designers were accustomed to paste-up methods established in the era of photomechanical reproduction and felt that computers were ‘arcane, expensive and unfriendly’, producing uncongenial ‘bit-mapped type and imagery’. Greiman’s work asserted a ‘new level of authorship for design­ers’ using personal computers (Heller and Pomeroy 1997: 213-14). Such new graphic languages have quickly been assimilated into practice and into teaching, for example in the experimental and theoretical work of the gradu­ate school of graphic design at Cranbrook Academy of Art under Katherine McCoy. Through the 1980s and 1990s, the school developed graphic languages in print that reflected digital methods of working (and thinking), with layers of embedded information, non-linear progression of ideas, and an exploration of the decorative and expressive qualities of type (Heller and Pomeroy 1997: 147—50; Lupton and Miller 2010 [1994]: 192—99).

[ … ]

In contrast to high-resolution prints in advertising and other commercial communications, digital design is also used to generate everyday and fre­quently low-resolution print outputs in domestic and office environments. In The myth of the paperless office Sellen and Harper (2002) describe the changing uses of paper and print in digital office environments. The idea of the paperless office was, as they show, a journalistic future-gazing invention; nevertheless it caught hold with many business thinkers because paper was a ‘symbol of old-fashioned practices and old-fashioned technologies’ placed in unflattering contrast to new digital regimes of office computing (Sellen and Harper 2002: 5). Office managers became sensitive to the sight of piles of paper that they associated with incompetence. Clear desks, to some bosses, signified their employees were clear thinkers and efficient workers. In reality, Sellen and Harper found that just as the volume of books on paper has increased in conjunction with digital technologies, so office paper use has also increased substantially in conjunction with digital office technologies.

[ …]

The interaction between paper and digital ways of working has created new uses for an increased paper flow. According to Sellen and Harper, paper has certain ‘affordances’ (that is, possibilities for action) that are different from digital layouts of information. They found that paper is most useful for annotating, for shuffling around in a meeting, and for sharing and disseminating texts while working through a live project carried on by teams of people. In short, they asserted that printing on paper remains vital to ‘knowledge work’ but only for a very short period. It is a ‘temporary medium’ of creative development, whereas finished work tends to be stored digitally. Sellen and Harper predicted, correctly, that printers would increase in number, with smaller separate machines on individual desks in frequent use rather than there being one large communal printer. Equally they asserted, more playfully, the well-stuffed wastepaper basket ought to be recognised as the symbol of an effective and creative worker (Sellen and Harper 2002: 211-12). Their account of the print culture of the office challenges the idea that print leads to stability and fixity of texts, instead, in this usage, print becomes the forum for alteration, and digital storage is the medium of fixity. This description of paper use in Sellen and Harper was, however, focused on fairly private and hidden printing practices. Even though their findings may have been challenging to established managerial certainties, they were still interested in the same goal of efficient organisational function, and their account does not therefore address all the other more public and perhaps more frivolous uses of office printing technology that fill everyday environments. Ordinary home and office printers now churn out all kinds of posters and publicity materials […]. The same kinds of machines that are used to make Powerpoint presentations, memos and e-mails are also used to craft unofficial flypostings, lost pet signs, or the daily menus of bars or restaurants. Most productions like this are printed out on the cheapest setting possible, for printer ink is expensive, deliberately so, as the companies who make cheap individual printers are in business to sell disposable ink cartridges designed to fit only into their machines. As a result, much of the ephemeral printed material we encounter today has a mushy, greyed-out quality […], quite different from the sharp glossy blacks of cheap low-grade photocopies or offset lithography of previous eras.

Such examples of everyday printing, from print-on-demand book production, to commercial packaging or corporate communications, to office or home printing, show that digital graphic media are linked in various specific and localised ways to the material expressions of print and contradict a common assertion that we are now bombarded by texts and images that have somehow become dematerialised by new media developments.

Recently several digital media researchers such as Katherine Hayles (2002) and Matthew Kirschenbaum (2008) have begun to move away from ‘virtuality’, to the materiality of digital communications, looking at the ‘actual “stuff” of media - the nuts, bolts, and silicon’ (Kitzmann 2005: 681). Kirschenbaum, for example, has engaged with ‘counterintuitive’ evidence of textual stability and data recovery after traumatic damage, in order to challenge current assumptions of the ephemeral mutable nature of electronic textuality. He combats most writing on new media that remains focused on conceptual, textual layers of meaning imbued with a kind of ‘screen essentialism’, accepting current display technologies as an invisible window into virtuality. Instead Kirschenbaum investigates the material matrix governing electronic writing and inscription, examining physical processes of storage, inscription and processing (Kirschenbaum 2008: 1—35).

[ … ]

To environmentalists and human rights activists, ‘cyberspace’ is a deceptive lie that obscures both ‘ecology and labor’ in the production and life cycle of digital equipment (Markley 1996: 77, cited in Kirschenbaum 2008: 35). Equally the ‘myth of the paperless office’ or the ‘death of books’ also obscure the environmental and human labour questions that are connected with the materiality of digital-print interactions in all their forms. Many different kinds of hybrid print/digital cultures coexist, and not always easily, from the corporate to the home-made. Currently, optimists and book-lovers look to the notion of an easy-going ‘post-digital’ print culture that will encourage a ‘return to civility’ (Jenkins 2011) and would exploit digital technology for its convivial sociable qualities. The term first appeared around 2000 in works such as The postdigital membrane: imagination, technology and desire (Pepperell and Punt 2000), which emphasised the values of live experience, asserting after the previous decade of techno-euphoria the virtues of being human rather than the dream of becoming a digital entity. In relation to books, ‘post-digital’ print culture attempts to be pragmatic, open and socially responsible, valuing some books, but trying to balance scarce resources. Publishers like OpenBook, for example, publish in a range of formats, as paper or ebooks, and as downloadable PDFs. In addition, all their books are available free to read online through Creative Commons licence arrangements. Adherents of ‘creative commons’, like this publisher, believe that open access is not just socially useful but also is good business, increasing sales.

Printing enthusiasts also sustain a similar ethos of creative commons, maintaining presses and techniques in part-time printing practices. In art schools, many graphic design students still study letterpress, composing text by hand setting, and printing on hand presses as a part of their training, building on the letterpress revival of the 1980s (Lupton 1996: 33; Jury 2006; Rivers 2010). The creative ferment of this part of their lives remains, and many graduates maintain a fluid identity, working as designers, teachers and printers in turn, even though some parts of their work may not make much money.

[ … ]

Nevertheless, many current exhibitions and publications now take place with established artistic and academic sponsors somewhere in the background. For example, a recent publication Splitting the atom on Dalston Lane: the birth of the do-it-yourself punk movement in March 1977 (Williamson, 2009) presented an assembly of contributors that included printers, poets and artist collectives, and a text that gave testimony to the many stages on the way to publication. As a result, this very slim volume conjured two very distinct environments, both a psycho-geographical excursion around the shabby former stomping grounds of the band Desperate Bicycles, and a recent cultural event at the British Museum [in London], celebrating these past exploits. In Glasgow [Scotland] we can see a similar diversity of working environments in the practice of one typographic artist, Edwin Pickstone, who is a letterpress specialist. Like [Johanna] Drucker, Pickstone reflects on the long history of his medium, on its many revivals, and on previous avant-garde critiques of the role of printing and typography in society in his work. To do this, he maintains multiple roles as a typographic craftsman, conceptual artist, academic tutor, graphic designer and jobbing printer.

[ …]

Copyright laws and agreements began with printing. Copyright issues, and battles for control of intellectual property continue but are changing in the digital era. To the opponents of tighter copyright legislation, the battle is still framed in the terms described by William St Clair, that is as a price-fixing and monopoly agreement in the merchant’s favour (St Clair 2004: 43-45). The author and publisher copyright system established in the nineteenth century has now grown and ramified with new forms of mechanical reproduction such as photography, music, film and digital communications. Different national legal systems, and the values they uphold do not mesh together. New technologies do not fit easily into existing legal frameworks, giving enterprising poachers and pirates the chance to grab or share other people’s work. In the digital era many artists and publishing corporations feel particularly endangered by the spectre of free copying and sharing on the internet because it allows instant worldwide communications and datacopying (Goldstein 2003; Lessig 2008; Johns 2009). Against these anxieties, general internet users value that ‘free’ content. In addition, many people value the empowerment of rapid and free exchange of information and debate. Currently, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, arguments about control versus freedom in the digital realm are complex and increasingly embittered. Potentially corporations and internet providers are in a position to exert much more copyright control over consumers than in recent print periods. For example, with the ‘celestial jukebox’ system, providers are in a position to limit the number of times that even a legitimate subscriber can access their downloaded content, in contrast to the amount of use that can be wrung from a book, LP record or videotape (Goldstein 2003: 25; Lessing 2004; 2008). In early 2012, while the United States legislature was considering two controversial bills, SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act) and PIPA (Protect IP Act), the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia imposed a 24-hour protest blackout of service in opposition (‘English Wikipedia anti-SOPA blackout’ 2012), prompting vociferous counter-accusations from powerful corporation bosses against the ‘political’ involvement of this content provider.

More insidiously, the new litigious atmosphere of digital ‘zero-tolerance’ against piracy by large media corporations, defending their publishing and archive holdings, threatens ‘fair use’ conventions. ‘Fair use’ is the established legal convention that copying or quoting parts of works without copyright charges or penalties is legitimate for academic purposes. Without this neutral territory for operation, say defenders of fair use, no one could possibly operate in the vaunted knowledge economy that is supposed to replace manufacturing in the West. Increasingly, if there is any doubt about whether an image or quotation might annoy a copyright holder, it is now much more likely for publishers to self-police and censor themselves and their authors rather than risk a legal battle. Ted Striphas and Kembrew McLeod have argued that in current circumstances ‘fair use’ is a right that must be defended, not simply because of its importance in the academic sphere, but as a civic duty. Aggressive control of intellectual property by corporate interests now extends deeply into many aspects of everyday life. For example, battles about GM crops that are deemed to be eligible for copyright protection are important because at base this is a battle for control of food production and access to daily nourishment. The science of copyright protection now gives much more power to copyright holders, from ‘terminator crops’ to the coded working of digital information that limits the amount of access to material. With this in mind, say Striphas and McLeod, everyone should be alert to defend the principle of ‘fair-use’ in their own patch wherever possible (Striphas and McLeod 2006).

As well as the idea of copyright and the development of social systems for the defence of intellectual property, other concepts from print culture have been transported into the digital realm, notably the kind of technological determinism that claimed the development of printing formed a new kind of consciousness for humans. Adherents of ‘visual culture’ for example often dismiss the importance of print communications in our lives today because at some level they believe that non-linear digital thinking is now dominant (Mirzoeff 1999; Coupland 2010). This way of thinking rejects the idea of print culture not because it is technologically determined, but because it is an outmoded deterministic regime. Instead of fearing the death of print, many ecstatic visions of digital culture welcomed it, for example when The alphabet versus the goddess (Shlain 1998) conjured the destruction of the patriarchy that would surely follow from new visual and non-linear communication on the web (Crow 2006).

With the numbers of practitioners, students, interested spectators, academic historians, and other contributors noted in this chapter, print culture as both practice, production and discourse about print is evidently not at all dead. Ordinary people now take an interest in design and the previously arcane topic of typography through exhibitions, books (Loxley 2004; Garfield 2010), television programmes and films, for example Gary Hustvit’s *Helvetica* (2007). The approach of popularising texts often emphasises personal stories and anecdotes, as for example in Simon Loxley’s narrative of ‘Frederic Goudy, type star’ (Loxley 2004: 93), in contrast to new approaches to print culture by scholars and academics who investigate wider systems and networks of practice in social and economic contexts. Johanna Drucker has argued that the expansion of resources for study is encouraging this change in method: ‘as networked (and print) resources grow, the artefacts available for study expand ... as the available inventory of materials expands, this history will not be limited to an inventory of artefacts to be thought about, but will include a lively critical discourse about ways of thinking’ (Drucker 2009: 72). Indeed, in relation to ‘ways of thinking’ it is important to assert cultures of print as a contemporary, and not simply a historical phenomenon. In contrast to the triumphalist celebration of print in the nineteenth century, the vast range of contemporary print activity is hidden by the deliberate anonymity of large corporations, and eclipsed by the excitement of digital culture to the extent that the older words for the workings of the mind, such as ‘impress’ and ‘imprint’ have been displaced by newer metaphors as we talk about ‘hard-wiring’ or ‘programming’ the brain. Currently digital and print mediums are mixed up in many ways, are expressed in many kinds of action, and invoke many different struggles for cultural and economic power, so that future print cultures remain to be made, and remade, neither ‘impressed’ nor ‘hard-wired’ into our brains.

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