The Sociology of Texts

In 1985, D. F. McKenzie famously gave a series of lectures on what he referred to as the “sociology of texts.” McKenzie argued that any text, and by text he referred to “verbal, visual, oral, and numeric data” (13), reaching its audience via print must be read as a product of the inherently social history of its transmission, each stage in that transmission having a significant impact on the way in which the text is understood. For students of any text, McKenzie argued, knowledge of its production and transmission is prerequisite to achieving a full understanding of its cultural meaning.

Imagine, for example, the process by which a high school student receives his or her copy of Romeo and Juliet.

Digital re-writings of the Harry Potter series.

The version that eventually reaches our high school student is, according to McKenzie, a product of this complex social history; an amalgam of the many versions and transmissions that have existed previously. As each new reader has done before him, the student reads the text, assigning new meaning and value and creating yet another new version.

The Sociology of Information

If McKenzie’s argument warranted attention in 1985, it does so even more now. In his lectures, McKenzie urged bibliographers to consider all versions of a text as they constructed its history, and the application of that same theory has important implications for today’s librarians as they work to organize and preserve fast-moving digital texts.

McKenzie argued that a sociological approach to texts “directs us to consider the human motives and interactions (involved) at every stage of their production, transmission, and consumption” (15). This theory challenges the notion of a single, or limited number, of authoritative texts, instead arguing for the significance of all versions of a text.

Since then, the development of the Internet has led to enormous increases in the speed at which information can be generated and transmitted. Documents circulated digitally move frequently and rapidly amongst a potentially enormous community of viewers, each of whom may alter, move, republish, quote, or otherwise ‘re-write’ the document. With each instance of transmission, the way in which the document can be understood shifts. Its meaning becomes bound up in its history within the dynamic Web environment.

Implementing McKenzie in Digital Libraries

Faced with this dynamic environment, the development of the digital library allows for the implementation of McKenzie’s theory in a way that traditional libraries cannot match.

Digital libraries are better able to store and represent the many incarnations of digital information: video; audio; images; text; games; and Web pages, to name just a few. Hyperlinking gives digital library users the ability to navigate through separate versions of a text quickly and effectively, and, given the right tools, comparison of versions is more easily, and arguably accurately, achieved.

Furthermore, a potential for user contribution can be seen as a means of collection development, documenting the social history of a text. Documents, annotations, and keywords supplied by users can provide an effective means for emphasizing the sociological nature of texts. The evolution of Web 2.0 technologies has seen the general public take on a greater role in the curation of information; incorporating this interaction into digital libraries could result in a social system of librarianship responsive to McKenzie’s sociology of texts.

But . . . Isn’t this Google?

The danger, of course, is that a McKenzian approach to digital libraries and the curation of information is actually nothing more than Google. Google and other search engines certainly provide access to a wide range of texts and their various incarnations.

What distinguishes digital libraries, however, are the processes of selection, organization, and maintenance central to the library’s mission. If, in order to compile a collection favorable to the McKenzian approach, digital librarians invite user contribution, it needs to be done in such a way that maintains the organized structure of the collection. Sroka, writing about a digital archiving project that incorporated user-generated content, notes that the practice is “somewhat controversial given its unrestricted nature and the lack of controlled terminology and hierarchical structure associated with traditional indexing schemes” (183).

Nevertheless, the value of user contribution should not be dismissed due to matters of logistics, however complex. The role of the digital librarian must continue to expand, as it has in the wake of recent technologies and possibilities, in order to provide an infrastructure for the production and transmission, in addition to the preservation, of information.

References


Dorothy Waugh
School of Library and Information Science
Indiana University Bloomington
dfchalk@indiana.edu