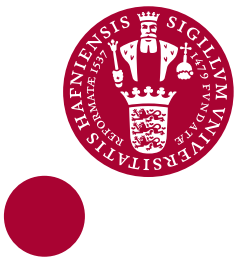

The Future of Text in the Era of Networked Digital Media

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One way to look forward, maybe the only one, is to look back.
In late 20th century the notion of text changed due to a range of epistemological issues. The classic idea of the text as an expression of the authors intention, was replaced by the idea of the text as an intrinsic system of values, structures and themes. This "new criticism" was again criticized for ignoring the issues of intertextual references, social class and cultural context, ending up in the question as to whether there was a text in this class? The 'work' itself dissolved into individual interpretations. Yet, at the same time the notion of text was extended to include also images and videos and possibly other sign modalities. In spite of this the materialization of the text was still considered as a fixed sequence of letters manifested on paper (or papyrus or parchment) and assumed to be invariant and thus an insignificant precondition in accordance with the predominant philosophical idealism within the humanities.

Yet, one question was missing, namely what about electronic representations of texts? Should the electronic format be considered an external and non-signifying material component? a new type of extralinguistic sign modality on a par with images, videos, sounds etc.? a new independent sign modality? or should it be considered a container that might hold other sign modalities? More fundamentally the question was raised whether, which, and eventually how, material characteristics of digital text could be utilized as signifying components and therefore included in the notion of text.

With the spread of digital media, the material characteristics of texts became still more significant. Electronic text allowed for an ever-growing range of semiotic features. Conceptually the point of departure was taken in the print paradigm which to a certain degree still fits a range of new texts formats, such as E-books, PDF-files, E-mail, Word-processors and text editors and professional manuals for specifying how to encode stable digital editions of 'print-like' text. Even so the digital version includes material characteristics which make the digital edition different from any printed version.

The difference is a consequence that digitization always imply that both content and processing rules are manifested and processed as sequences of the two letters in the binary alphabet. Digitization is itself a new kind of textualization. Thus, we can speak of texts defined within a print paradigm of linguistic alphabets and texts defined within a digital paradigm based on the binary alphabet. Among the most fundamental differences are 1) that the writer and editor positions are closed when the text is printed, while these positions remain permanently open as options for digital materials because the closure is coded and thus editable, even if it can be made difficult to transcend. Thus, digitization changes on a very fundamental level the types of possible relations between writer, editor, reader. 2) while the interface of a printed text is fixed in the text, digital text is characterized by the separation between invisible text and an perceptible and editable interface which translate (and interpret) the binary sequences to human recognition and allow for the ever-ongoing editing of content and of the addresses of this content on the hard disk/server. 3) The electronic text is based on the mechanical level of bit processing which allows for conditioned and automated operations as well as for automatized search, editing, scripting and

reading of the sequences. 4) While the printed text is delimited as a reading space by the fixation in time, electronic text always come with editable time dimensions. In principle each and any single bit or any sequence of bits can be ascribed its own time scale of variation and thus made a significant part of a message. The limit for the number of possible timescales is our human mental capacity.

The development of globally networked digital media since the 1990's widened the reach of these material characteristics and added new material characteristics. Networked digital media allow for synchronized global real-time, eventually interactive communication of any sequence of bits. Networked digital media can not only be connected, they can also interfere with each other. Any machine can be accessed (and modified) from any other machine on the network because the hypertext links from one address to any other address on the network may include scripts with instructions to be performed at the destination. Timescales can be defined for any kind of data, they can be built into a system or they can be specified by an editor or reader. Among the most important utilizations we find what can be labeled as Multiple Source Knowledge Systems which combine data from deliberately chosen sources of all sorts, some of them eventually in real time, and presented in coordinated constellations. Such systems are today already found in finance, meteorology, climate research, incorporating all sorts of data, some in real-time, from all over the globe. Others, such as search engines and similar services and the range of social media platforms are well known from everyday life. They may differ due to a range of media characteristics (datatypes, link structures, timescales of data, timescales for the window of interaction etc.). They also differ, however, due to purpose, cultural values, subject matter, thematic focus and to multimodal formats including dynamic and interactive visualizations.

Multiple Source Knowledge Systems fit well to the 21. century characterized by increasing global interferences and interdependencies. They can be used to local, regional and global monitoring including real-time data. Many such systems are developed within the range of issues addressed in the UN Sustainable development goals. They may include data from scanning the outer space as well as the interior of our bodies and everything, such as culture, in between. As known from the history of print, we can never predict future genre developments. What we can do is to specify how the processes of digitization both include and transcend the print universe of text and how the new textual universe based on the binary alphabet fits the agenda of the Anthropocene in which culture and society is to be seen as agencies in nature, and human practices enter into a global scale and connect the issues of survival of culture and society with the survival of the biosphere.

However, these systems have also become part of the problem as they require huge energy and labor resources to do their job, and threatens the privacy of individuals as all digital processes leaves their binary traces and cannot be kept within any closure as in a library of books. Still, we have seen the rise of a few global information monopolies. The binary alphabet, finally, can function as (programmed) agency and worldwide. Thus, the future of text will also be processed in a time-space full of tensions.