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The Digital Turn: User's Practices and Cultural Transformations



The Challenge of the Digital Turn

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The past fifty years or so have seemingly been a whirlwind of turns. There have been discussions in the social sciences and humanities about the linguistic turn, the cultural turn, the pictorial turn, the cognitive or performative turn. Doris Bachmann-Medick (2006) has found that the cultural turn can be divided into seven distinct turns: the interpretative turn, the performative turn, the reflexive/literary turn, the postcolonial turn, the translational turn, the spatial turn and the iconic turn. Most of them can be considered turns in scientific rhetoric and the apparatus of understanding, expressing new, transdisciplinary approaches which have enabled reconstruction of the objects of research and discovery of new ones. However, this book looks at the digital turn, in which, in addition to the changes in scholarship, ‘digital’ definitely also has a material and formal aspect to it, a significant shift not only in the forms, environments and technologies, but also in the much deeper influence on the socio-cultural relations and interactions that these new forms and environments support and foster.

The book you are currently holding has two sections: User’s Practices and Cultural Transformations. The aim of the book is to discuss how the digital turn in the cultural field has resulted in increasing attention being paid to users and their practices of consuming and creating digital content. At the same time this has resulted in some remarkable transformations both in cultural institutions as well as the forms and modes of cultural content.

The digital turn hereby implies that changes in the use and application of digital technology bring on changes in practice and in the relationships between cultural institutions and audiences. We approach the changes in society from the structural (institutional) as well as from the agential (audiences, users, individuals) perspective. Although it is clear that the rising importance of the digital or the new media influences cultural representations as well as forms of cultural participation and socialisation, the digital turn does not mean turning away or turning to a new direction of culture. The authors represented in this book share the view that there is no fear of new media pushing aside traditional cultural forms, acknowledging at the same time that the scope of this cultural change, involving both the digital and non-digital, is still far from understood (Lauristin). By offering their insights into this question, many of the authors in this book argue that the digital turn can be conceptualised only if seen as a part of the wider dynamic – the turn incorporates both digital and non-digital aspects of culture. Instead of celebrating a digital revolution we argue that what

we are seeing are evolutions within the cultural processes where the digital is only a part of the overall change.

The book brings together components of the classic model of text, producer and reader (Hall), where the practices embody the reading and producing of cultural heritage. These practices are seen as being on the intersection between individuals and structure, the embodied sets of activities that humans perform with varying degrees of regularity, competence and flair (Postill). In this book, the institutional practices and user (visitor, audience, author, etc.) practices meet.

User has a very open meaning in this book. On the one hand, users are ‘people who use’ the (digital) content of the heritage institutions, on the other hand, the usage itself is seen not as a passive consumption, but it has a distinct part in active meaning-making, production and participation.

The heritage institutions themselves can be seen as active users of existing digital environments (e.g. Facebook in the chapter by Schick and Damjkaer), creators of digital environments (e.g. Laak) as well as participants in cultural creation (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Runnel). This points to the blurring boundaries of users and producers summarised often in terms ‘producers’ or ‘prosumers’. Users have the capacity to change existing understandings of cultural resources by adding layers of information to institutional representations (Casado-Neira) and challenge the public and the private through personal identity management, simultaneously flaunting and hiding information (Koosel). While several of the authors in this book discuss how the individual meets the institutional, Bannier and Vleugels look, in their study, at how in the framework of Web 3.0, the cultural content generated by institutions and users collides with a third kind of cultural content, generated by machines, an opportunity offered by the development of a hybrid, semantic and intelligent web.

These examples also point to the blurring boundaries of the institutional and individual, the contestations of the structure and agency dichotomy as the institutions become agents and individual agents become parts of the structural fabric of cultural institutions.

Despite this we must not forget that while a multitude of examples support the understanding of the user per se as a participant in cultural processes, digital heritage does not automatically lead to an interactive and participatory culture, as Mostmans and van Passel show. This book offers critical insights into the user as a participant by questioning, especially in the context of cultural heritage institutions, how much the availability of heritage content actually triggers or facilitates participation. Sometimes, the usage of cultural content is still limited by basic questions of access, and as Weisen shows in his article about the accessibility of digital culture for disabled people, the issue of access is still far from being solved.

From the memory institutions' perspective, the digital turn is closely connected to the representation of current cultural heritage. New research looks at the issues of digital memory, approaching the new media environment as a memory space. This aspect of memory and remembrance brings an additional, diachronic, dimension to storytelling and new forms of storytelling emerge in literary and cultural historiography (Laak).

Different chapters of the book discuss the transformation of culture through a variety of practices on the one hand made possible through digital technologies, and on the other hand, brought to light and made visible because of other changes in society. Thus many chapters discuss the possibilities of participation within these cultural institutions not only enabled by digital technologies, but as an indication that participation is an important issue also without technological components (Carpentier; Olsson and Svensson) and can happen in different ways. As a part of the same discussion, Kaun and Östman direct attention to the idea of the playful and fun as a way to foster engagement and belonging.

In this book, the archives, libraries and museums meet authors, individuals, tourists. The sociology and media studies perspectives meet the historical, literary and philosophical traditions. The aim of this diversity is to bring together different perspectives between the same covers, to share the positives of the interdisciplinary approach and to bring attention to the diversity of the field. The book takes the theoretical perspectives and examples of good practices and translates them into some universal ideas. At the same time, the forever-questioning nature of research translates into critical and analytical accounts of these practices. It keeps on asking whether the promises of new forms of culture, new online environments and changes in production and reception practices are significantly new. As the chapters in this book point out, different institutions are facing similar struggles, and not only can the best practices for the museums be found in other museums, but as Olsson and Svensson demonstrate we need to learn from others as well. They use the example of Moderskeppet, a web company representing the commercial sphere, analysing it as the best web practice to highlight the importance of interactivity and public contribution.

The discussions about the digital have mainly focused on the influence of technologies on the content – the artefacts, the texts and materials that have been made available online. In this book literary scholar Raine Koskimaa highlights how the invention of hypertext has given rise to a changed conceptualisation of the text itself. This, he argues, makes cultural logic gradually give way to the new logic of Castells's "Internet Galaxy". Koskimaa is supported by Markku Eskelinen, who moves away from the old cultural logics (represented by traditional theories of inter- and transtextuality) and brings to our attention the new types of

relations between and within texts as well as theorising them from a cybertextual perspective.

We feel that the digital and overall participatory transformations within society have called for increasing attention to the people. from the people. Often the new aspects of the digital technologies are seen to be inherently social. The new Web 2.0 is conceptualised through contributory and participatory aspects of cultural production. However, in this book, in the context of literature and cyberspace, Viires and Sarapik bring to our attention the fact that the creation of digital text can still be analysed from the perspective of essentially individual and solitary processes. This is important despite the increasing collectivism and the shared authorship and reader-viewer interactions that are increasingly a part of the text creation process. In addition, Beyl explores how the writer appropriates weblogs as a communicative medium, to explore as a tool of self-conceptualisation and as a tool with which to (de)mystify the author's aesthetic role and position in society.

The changing practices of cultural production and consumption have also meant that many cultural institutions feel the need to reinstate their positions within the structure of the society. What is the role of the library, when every book is digitally available for download? What is the role and practice of archives, when digital technologies seem to enable endless storage capacities? What is the role of museums in a world where the aura of the original seems to be under siege? Who is included and excluded in the practices of culture making, who is the author (Viires and Sarapik)? Or is the author long dead as proclaimed by Barthes (Carpentier)? When the world has taken major turns in the past twenty-something years, are cultural institutions the places for learning for the future or should the musty old cabinets be locked and sealed for future generations? Many of these questions are related to the digital turn, and they are discussed in the different chapters of this book. For instance, Lepik discusses how calling people users, visitors, stakeholders or audiences will make the relationship significant and, to a certain extent, re-instate the position of the institution. Carpentier looks at the history of cultural participation to argue that the seemingly novel and unique changes in power relations proclaimed by the "death of the author" slogan have been a part of the cultural process throughout the 20th century. However, this still does not mean that discursive structures as the conditions of possibility for the organisation of participation are simple or solved.

The digitisation of heritage is still too often seen as an aim on its own because the technology seemingly enables wider access and better availability of materials. Volt and Andresoo, and Weisen, among others, discuss the variety of challenges posed by digitisation relating to issues of access, long term preservation, formats, etc. The book as a whole, however, attempts to bring the discussion towards the

wider cultural implications of these challenges. The digital turn has resulted in different discussions across paradigms and focuses; the idea of the book is to bring together some of these discussions to learn from each other. Too often in the practice of heritage institutions the digital turn is seen as an aim on its own: the digitisation process is seen as a mediation of culture and a change of format as the only way to promote culture. In this approach, the digital turn is separated from the rest of the cultural process, seen as being over as soon as cultural content has been made available to the public via the digital. It also denies the self-critical awareness of the cultural institutions and other related stakeholders and sees them as one among the multitude of agents in a wider socio-cultural process, involving both the online and offline. Digital is often still a destination point. In this book the authors aim to challenge this view. In the closing chapter, Farouk Seif argues that technology is not and should not be the destination of our making. Rather, we should be looking forward to a future that transcends virtual reality and incorporates technical and technological aspects of culture as a part of the authentic experience.

Thus, this book looks at the range of different aspects of interrelations between technology and culture – but can we truly claim that this is the digital turn that we are facing? Many would see that the explosive growth of new technologies and platforms, processes speeding up and the increasing number of users are enough to justify the talk about the digital turn. The facts that these environments are increasingly considered normal and that our everyday lives are saturated with technologies are remarkable, but we think that they are still not a reason enough to talk about the digital turn. For us and for many of the authors in this book, the digital turn means a variety of complex changes in interaction with each other in our social and cultural environment. It means that the user is much more central to cultural processes, and the cultural elites have to consider a more diverse range of players in culture-making processes. The digital technologies make the public, the audiences and the users more visible. These interactions and produsages do bring new cultural forms, but as many of the texts indicate, they do not replace the old forms. Therefore we see that such a transdisciplinary book as this one, where the humanitarian and social sciences meet, provides a unique perspective on investigating the cultural processes in which the digital focuses the attention of the user on the collective and multi-party aspects of culture-making and consumption. The turn to the digital changes not only cultural forms and interactions, but also the institutions and their relationships with audiences. Therefore the two sections of this book, user practices and cultural transformations, are interdependent and can thus only shed adequate light on the true nature of the digital turn together.

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