

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Journal of the National Collegiate Honors
Council –Online Archive

National Collegiate Honors Council

2009

Postmodern Prometheans: Academic Libraries, Information Technologies, and the Cut-and-Paste Aesthetic

Emily Walshe

Long Island University, C. W. Post Campus

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal>

Walshe, Emily, "Postmodern Prometheans: Academic Libraries, Information Technologies, and the Cut-and-Paste Aesthetic" (2009). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive*. 491. <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal/491>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Postmodern Prometheans: Academic Libraries, Information Technologies, and the Cut-and-Paste Aesthetic

EMILY WALSH

Long Island University, C. W. Post Campus

Last year, my sister-in-law served a Turducken for Thanksgiving dinner. I suspect that most people have yet to hear of it. It is a partially de-boned turkey, stuffed with a partially de-boned duck that has been stuffed with a partially de-boned chicken.

I am sitting behind the reference desk at our university library and thinking about that Turducken: how it was presented, how it tasted, and how it was consumed.

A student researching technological progress in the Romantic age approaches. She mentions Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and hands me her syllabus. I find the assignment nestled within a nexus of embedded applets and threaded discussions. The e-textbook contains a companion website provided by the publisher with dynamic links to template assignments and tin-can pedagogy.

She asks for abstracts; she prefers the bastardized texts (of course, this adjective is not hers). From an intuitive database, she clicks *MLA* and dumps an inestimable number of citations into her *Works Cited* page.

The current buzz in higher education about merging information technology departments with university and college libraries has me thinking about the postmodern mash-up and its effects on the research experience of undergraduates.

A mash-up is an optimal mix of commodity.

In a technical sense, it is hybrid software, like MapQuest, that overlays content from one source onto another. In an artistic sense, it is a re-mix of efficiencies (Lewis Carroll's *portmanteau* or Frank Zappa's *xenochrony*). In a cultural sense, the mash-up blends and blurs identity to the extent that the part can no longer be extricated from its whole: Branjolina on the newsstand or Turducken on the dinner platter.

In academe, we camouflage our mash-ups with phrases like *synergistic learning* or *edutopias*. For these paradigms, we imagine the epitomes of authority, taxonomy, and perpetuity somehow coalescing with laxity, proximity, and expediency.

I cannot help but feel that, apart from its nebulous economy, the push for integrated informational support within the university is driven by the hope that technology will somehow become “the living animal that animates the lifeless clay” of the library.

Librarians understand how dusty, decaying books can be enlivened by digitization and relegation. Students, who no longer have the time or the training to confront long monographic forms, prefer instantaneous access to abbreviated surrogates that basically do the trick. In the classroom, too, our lectures are often clipped and stitched in modular fashion, the power of PowerPoint, to fabricate for them a corporal semblance of ideas.

Honesty demands this acknowledgment: although academics know that only a piddling portion of the world’s recorded knowledge is on the web, it seems to be sufficient for students enamored of speed.

As our students, who are highly acculturated to wikis, blogs and RSS feeds, struggle to comprehend the notions of intellectual property or the principles of attribution, database vendors race to market postmodern-Promethean portals that mash up and map ideas for them. Libraries, in turn, are obliged to subscribe and, in so doing, repeatedly surrender ownership of the material in the name of access, which is ethereal.

More and more in higher education, educators are called upon to design and deliver technology-enhanced courses that seek the perfect operational mechanism to tie the student experience with the whole of human knowledge. We are emailing and texting our students and boldly keeping pace with new media literacies by Facebooking and Twittering and YouTubing our curricula. The dilemma is: to what end?

As a librarian, I have puzzled over this in recent semesters, observing both compelling changes in the information-seeking behavior of undergraduates and an indiscriminate rise in unintentional plagiarism.

How are our information technologies transforming the ways we conduct library research and understand intellectual property? Perhaps Web 2.0 and its culture of collaboration have unleashed new readership skills that we do not yet fully understand or even recognize.

Never before in human history have we experienced such an exponential growth of information production and distribution. Each month across the globe nearly a million new users join the Internet, adding to the 750 million already connected. Most of these users are generating their own content in the

form of wikis, blogs, digital video, and podcasting, thereby blurring the once-critical distinction between content-producer and consumer.

This situation poses major conceptual problems for the undergraduate researcher. Apparently, something in the technology leads to a default behavior, and we are just beginning to see its cognitive effects.

Sadly, the view from behind the reference desk appears increasingly peripheral and predeterminate. Amid the fast-flowing streams of ubiquitous content, students often defer to the abstract, the immediate, or the prominent. The widespread cultural preference is for highly concentrated, digestible chunks of information; and this is precisely what information suppliers are providing.

Rather than examining material slowly and deeply, students have adapted the large-scale practice of power-browsing, where the act of *viewing* routinely supplants the act of *reading*. Online researchers, students and faculty alike, are searching horizontally rather than vertically, in a kind of skimming activity: they view one or two pages from a site, or one or two lines within a page, and then bounce out to glance elsewhere.

Researchers spend at least as much time flitting across the digital landscape as actually engaging what they find there. And when they do find valuable material, they squirrel away large amounts of it, especially if it is free, in the form of dumps, downloads, and prints that they never revisit, read, listen to, or use.

This flicking and hoarding, this consumer-like behavior, is leading to the development of new intellectual capacities that are terribly difficult to assess. What is clear, however, is that online information providers have answered the researcher's need for greater simplicity by developing highly circumscriptive portals that codify information for them. Content aggregators, like RSS feeds, eliminate the need to search for information. Instead, it shows up naked, mechanically stripped of its context, in our inboxes, courtesy of a favorite website or e-publisher.

Federated searching mechanisms, which cluster and tag information to provide unified searching over multiple data sources, further reduce the burden of the researcher by normalizing natural language with the language of the discipline. Thanks to swift and sophisticated taxonomies in indexing, students no longer need to learn, adapt to, or negotiate the language of their discipline. In true student-centered spirit, these processes forever accommodate them.

Google's massive indexes, which rank search results by an algorithmic measure of incoming links from other pages, have basically become a popularity contest where the skilled manipulation of metadata all too often overrides the precepts of information authority, relevancy, and impartiality.

The hallmark of web 2.0 technology, we must remember, is the separation of form and content; in the library world, this has led to an inexorable rise in the abstract and annotative.

To abstract means to extract or withdraw. In research, this practice describes a document's content to assist in determining relevancy within a specific course of inquiry. Now, however, the abstract functions as the document's surrogate, serving as the lone point of reference and often supplanting the complete text.

With the proliferation of periodical databases, students have immediate subject access to journal literature online and, curiously, are not going any further than the descriptive surrogate. Even with numerous full-text databases, providing not only instantaneous access to articles but also intellectually appealing mechanisms with which to search and manipulate their text, students continue to point and click and cite the abstract. In this practice, I remain perplexed. Instead of *directing* a course of inquiry, abstracts are *eclipsing* it.

This emerging preference for the surrogate has put a whole new spin on library work. Time and again, students exploit the abstract, the *part*, in an attempt to apprehend the *whole*. Anything analogous, fluid, or extended in the research experience is lost in pointed digital delivery. In the worst cases, research papers have become cut-and-paste assemblages of the abstract and annotative: Turducken-ized overstuffings of de-boned ideas. Students never consult nor conceive of original thought in the process.

Too often, web-mediated instruction offers myriad variations on the Frankensteinian theme of blended identities, leaving faculty to wonder why students cannot effectively develop and situate their ideas in an academic context. Professors look for trace hints of humanity in their students' papers and yet fail to provide the conceptual foundation for research and information literacy that they so desperately need.

Like Frankenstein's monster, these newly formed info-archipelagos within the academy may have proportional limbs and brilliant features, but they are, in essence, just unhallowed progenies of the cut-and-paste aesthetic, strung along the wide and disparate sea of knowledge.

The academic library is the original place where information and presentation converge to allow for novel forms of reuse. If libraries must merge with IT, and if our classrooms must harmonize with the greater blogosphere, then we must avoid the mistake of Victor Frankenstein, whose arrogant endeavor, instead of contributing to human knowledge and broadening humankind's experience, led to capitulation and limitation.

Throughout our honors programs, professors must teach our millennial learners to honor the sovereignty of original thought, especially their own, by

EMILY WALSH

resisting the popular, Turduckenist impulse to pare down and stuff and pare down and stuff and pare down and stuff.

Because we are not in the business of stealing fire: our business is sparking it.

The author may be contacted at

Emily.Walsh@liu.edu.