

It's like the air you breathe

Libraries have always been filled up with text – on scrolls, in manuscripts, books, audio-tapes, microfiche, databases, e-mails, even text messages and tweets. Records of our knowledge are by and large in textual form. Yes, there are images, sounds, and textures, but the world of the mind is mostly textual. Or, is it? Changes in technologies for production and transmitting text have been associated with transformations of cultures. If digital technologies are changing the way we live and work, how do texts in digital form affect the way we think, write, and communicate our knowledge? Is the searchable text still the same text? Can we think deeper, wonder more, go further than it was possible before?

These questions followed me for a number of years before I finally left my nice job at a large university library (to the astonishment of some colleagues and friends) to pursue a full-time doctoral study at the University of Technology, Sydney. Bills still have to be paid and stomachs filled even when one is on the mind quest, so having a scholarship and a casual teaching job goes a long way in settling practicalities, providing flexible working arrangements (albeit 7am to 11pm), and freeing-up minds.

Once I was set up, I had to address my big questions. After many hours of reading and asking difficult questions of my Principal Supervisor, Professor Joyce Kirk, it was decided that I am investigating how scholars in literary and historical studies interact with electronic texts. These researchers are well-known for diverse and sophisticated interactions with text. If any group should reveal complexities of dealing with e-texts, it should be these humanities researchers. One of my favourite quotes on the topic comes from Jerome McGann, a humanist scholar, who wrote: 'Textual studies is ground zero of everything we do. We read, we write, we think in a textual condition. Because that is true, the new information and media technologies go to the core of our work'.

My research study, entitled *Roles of electronic texts in research projects in the humanities*, explores how scholars engaged with e-texts during the research process. Study participants were academic researchers who talked to me about their work, some of them recorded what they were doing on tapes and forms, and I read, or at least browsed, manuscripts and publications arising from their projects. After many months in 'data mud', I emerged with some answers (yes, temporary and statistically non-representative).

So, is text in a different format still the same text? E-texts aren't stable definitive objects like books. Study participants described them as if they had a gaseous or liquid state of aggregation: "It becomes like the air you breathe. It's very difficult to talk about because it's everywhere". A number of participants compared e-texts to a rich and unpredictable ocean. It is a "vast ocean of information out there and I can draw on that when I feel like it". Or, exploration of a textual database is like "going in fishing, pot luck to see what turns up". The lack of physical boundaries promotes a sense that different media and formats are merging together. The internet provides loosely ordered environments, which gather sources that traditionally do not exist in the same space. The speed in following hunches and patterns of information, combined with a lack of traditional reference points, underpinned participants' perceptions that they were dealing with a vast and rich, although unpredictable, ocean.

In some cases, electronic format didn't affect how scholars went about their work and e-texts were used to support traditional research process. However, searching across academic and non-academic sources, fast interactions, and the possibility of manipulating text led to new forms of engagement with text. Electronic access to large amounts of materials from different sources allows a scholar to make comparisons and see connections, which was not possible before. As one of the participants said, "we wouldn't actually have imagined making those sorts of links because it wouldn't be simple to do, so we wouldn't have even bothered."

The nature of e-text, electronic environment, and the way scholars interact with text promote blurring of boundaries between academic and creative genres. Many participants in the study were exploring or were interested in exploring possibilities of digital media to develop new forms of academic outputs. At the same time, established disciplinary traditions and practices have a very strong influence on researchers' decisions about presenting their work. These traditions are the main reason why e-texts are largely absent from academic publications.

Most scholars in the study said that they didn't know how their colleagues interacted with e-texts and mentioned a number of uncertainties related to the use of e-texts. They often mentioned their libraries as agents of change and expected or hoped for directions from the library how to find their way in digital environments. The question is how libraries can meet these expectations.

Records of knowledge are still bound to text, but text is changing. The fluid text requires flexibility and focus on information, rather than on knowledge objects. The concept of academic text is changing and our ideas of university collections and reference service will transform with it. Text is often part of multimedia and immersive environments. Librarians will need to go beyond the role of custodians and become players and participants in online spaces. Most of all, librarians have the opportunity to be heard as prominent voices in intellectual dialogues about the changing nature of knowledge.

How can we do this? What are the skills we need? These questions may be a beginning of someone else's doctoral study. Academic libraries are excellent in answering clients' questions and supporting their research. I'd argue that we have to make space for people to go on their mind quests without the need to leave libraries.

Suzana Sukovic, PhD
Research & Policy Officer, UTS:Library
Research Associate, Faculty of Arts, University of Sydney
suzana.sukovic@gmail.com