

OPEN

2

Wearable Books

Michael Pidd

Abstract: *This chapter explores a dystopian world in which technology has become pervasive throughout academic discourse, controlling the way in which books are authored, read, cited, and assessed. However, this is also a parody of the present: our obsession with data and metrics; our suspicion of consumer technology; and our unspoken feeling that there are perhaps too many academic books in the world. Above all else, this chapter seeks to reinforce the importance of books as the carriers of ideas.*

Keywords: digital humanities; ebooks; humanities; ideas; Linked Data; peer review; printed books; technology

Lyons, Rebecca E. and Samantha J. Rayner (eds).
The Academic Book of the Future. Basingstoke: Palgrave
Macmillan, 2016. DOI: 10.1057/9781137595775.0007.

The Research Impact Framework of 2038 (RIF2038) was no more remarkable than previous RIFs in many respects. As a self-imposed audit of the impact of academic research by UK universities, it had been exhausting, expensive, hair-splitting, and largely ignored by the public for whom the Pub Enjoyment Index of 2031 remained a greater influence on undergraduate admissions. However, the RIF had become a bastion of the academic book in its wearable form. For those who pondered the future of academic books and, no less, the future of academic discourse itself, it was clear that unless the RIF changed its rules as to what constituted an acceptable submission (in other words, an acceptable catalyst of impact), Wearable Books were here to stay. RIF performance underpinned all promotions during each year's academic transfer window, so most scholars continued to spin Wearable Books without much questioning. Of course the fact that the RIF's rules were determined by the academics themselves, as they had been for time immemorial, tended to be forgotten by its critics.

However, dissenters of the Wearable Book did exist. It was not the specifically *wearable* aspect of the book that these people were unhappy with. There were plenty of media for accessing academic content, such as smart lenses that projected data onto the reverse of your eyelids, smart spectacles for the squeamish, and the electro-latex Data Projection Glove (reminiscent of surgical gloves) that pre-dated Apple's famous iGlove. Some people even accessed academic content on their television (unwearable books; because in those days the TV was connected to the Internet). Of course now we can easily summon sheets of interactive v-paper to appear thanks to the networked chip embedded in our hands. No, it was not the media that made Wearable Books alarming to some academics. It was the 'Linked Ideas' that underpin their content and the way in which these ideas were assessed.

It is perhaps difficult for many of us to recall that in the mid-2020s the use of Linked Ideas had emerged as the primary technical method for structuring academic discourse. It evolved from the earlier Linked Data concepts pioneered by Tim Berners-Lee, whereby structured information could be identified by computers, retrieved, and combined with other structured information in ways that were more meaningful for users. In other words, computers could appear to *understand* information. Initially Linked Ideas simply referred to a general set of technical methods for combining Linked Data, but the term gradually became associated with what happens when lots of information becomes dynamically linked

together: ideas form. Eventually academics began authoring not only research data (in the sense of information) but also concepts, theories, beliefs, and opinions using Linked Ideas methods.

The result was a new type of book. Books were no longer lengthy discourses from the perspective of a single individual. Books became narratives that located, retrieved, and assembled ideas from all written discourse based on the topic at hand. For example, when reading *Bracknell Lives*, Snaghen and Bootmender's book about crime and poverty in late twentieth-century Bracknell, their ideas concerning the influence of human agency on Bracknell Forest Council's evolving social policy would be interweaved with the counter-arguments from Numen, Steer, and James, respectively. However, Numen's view that only call-centre staff exhibited agency in Bracknell would be counter-argued by Howie's reference to a data visualisation of TV-licence dodgers in Winkfield. The book would also give helpful tips where appropriate, such as 'people who agree with Snaghen also think this ...' Readers would be led through a narrative that presented the tradition of argument and counter-argument. Readers were free to move on to the author's next idea once sufficiently illuminated or dulled by the present discourse.

Linked Ideas meant that the old distinction between articles, monographs, and co-authored books disappeared. Text was text. It was just a question of the length of an academic debate around an idea; the value of what was being said rather than how long it took for you to say it. Linked Ideas also enabled academic discourse and research data (the evidence on which academic ideas were founded) to be combined, enabling better scrutiny of one's interpretation of the evidence by others. During the early twenty-first century many academics had been peculiarly resistant to the idea of academic books moving into the same digital domains as their research data. Even ebooks were viewed with distrust. However, the rise of open content, the RIF, and the demise of academic print publishers¹ accelerated this change due to the citation effect that was created by the principle of 'if it ain't free then I ain't reading it'.

The beauty of Linked Ideas was that deliberately engineered academic algorithms were able to automatically identify, retrieve, and combine relevant aspects of other people's written discourse. Further, the algorithms would re-write the text in the process of assembling it, giving the illusion of a single-authored book without the discordance of different writing styles. Undertaking tedious literature reviews became a thing of the past, whilst those academics who failed to structure their books using

Linked Ideas methods would consign themselves to oblivion. Naturally, deliberately engineered academic tools had to be created that would assist with the process of authorship. These labour-saving tools would constantly scan an author's transcript and make suggestions as to where one idea began and ended, so that it could be tagged and identified as such. These helpful prompts were critical for ensuring that an academic's book was correctly tagged. You could switch them off if they proved too irritating, but that would be consigning yourself to oblivion. University libraries, who were the curators of Wearable Books, would never accept a treatise of unlinked ideas.

Linked Ideas enabled a revolution in peer review and assessment, subsequently adopted by the RIF. Academic peers were able to comment on a colleague's work instantly using the very same Linked Ideas methods and deliberately engineered academic tools. However, all responses had to be accompanied by a 'like' or a 'dislike' indicator for RIF counting purposes ('likometrics') because it was no longer considered practicable to actually read books for assessment. In the USA where academic books were driven by the tenure system, it was generally accepted that 1,200 'likes' were needed to secure a tenure, although these could be spread across multiple ideas, whilst 800 'likes' for an individual idea would promote it to the status of a fact and eligible for inclusion in *Wikipedia*. Since every 'like' had to be accompanied by a full, critical response to the academic's idea, and this in turn could be liked or disliked by other peers, computer science departments had been required to debate the minutiae of counting algorithms at length in published works that nobody ever read. Further, any ideas that received too many 'dislikes' would be relegated automatically by the algorithms. In other words, it was unlikely that a disliked idea would be incorporated into the discourse of a Wearable Book.

Wearable Books and Linked Ideas had originated in the sciences where lengthy discourse was not of interest, and had been developed in response to what had already been happening with popular fiction. Printed books were antique, the subject of book historians, and new books were only ever printed in paper or ebook formats as novelty gifts for Christmas and Father's Day. All useful printed books had been digitised and ingested into the universe of Linked Ideas long ago.

However, it was in the humanities that dissenting voices began to be heard, culminating in the RIF2038 when a university somewhere in Yorkshire included a printed monograph by the historian Professor

Audrey Chad as part of its submission. The subject of the book was unmemorable. It was unclear to the RIF panellists whether the book should be accepted or disqualified; whether they should count it or read it. Chad was asked if she would digitise the object and re-submit, but she declined to do so. Not even as an ebook.

As she would later say, ‘It can be stultifying to be required to work within the constraints of the Wearable Book format, deafened by the constant noise of competing academic discourses that are the stock-in-trade for Linked Ideas, always reminding you that your own ideas are not an island.’²

In Chad’s opinion there was sometimes a value in reading a lengthy, reflective work on a particular topic without the intrusion of other people’s views; hearing a single voice articulating one person’s ideas, irrespective of whether the ideas are transformative or not. This, she argued, was the genius of the old monograph in its printed form. Further, Chad argued that footnotes and a passing reference to primary sources could sometimes suffice, rather than blurring one person’s discourse with the immediacy of evidence. ‘Leave it in the repository! #StopTheData’ she famously twerped.

Chad’s book did little to influence the RIF, but it did give rise to Print Humanities and new ways of communicating research. It showed that non-digital methodologies can enable you to answer existing research questions from new perspectives, as well as explore new types of research questions that would be inconceivable using digital techniques. For example, writing slowly and at length could become a tool for thinking. Crucially, Print Humanities enabled academics to begin disempowering the class that sociologists now dub ‘the knowledge elite’: the people who understand how the technology of knowledge works, such as programmers, designers and engineers, as opposed to the consumers who simply use technology for access to knowledge, such as academics and others. Technology companies had been in the vanguard of this shift towards a knowledge elite in the early twenty-first century, but eventually even humanities scholars had need of a technologist in order to undertake research and publish their findings. Gradually – beginning with the transformation of the ebook into an unnecessarily over-complicated hypertext ‘journey’ – technologists dictated the shape of discourse.

Print Humanities is now emerging as a serious and respected body of methods within humanities research and communication. Practitioners have their own Manifesto. Barely a week goes by without a new Chair

in Print Humanities being advertised, and the next RIF is expected to explicitly permit printed monographs, which will go a long way towards making printed books an acceptable part of the discourse ecosystem. The printed book's future is likely to be disruptive, with some academics declaring that it is here to stay and others believing that it will be a short-lived fad. Some colleagues even argue that Print Humanities should be treated as a new discipline. What is certain is that the future of the Wearable Book and Linked Ideas is no longer guaranteed. As such, a consortium of key stakeholders – academics, librarians, technologists and opticians – is now needed to explore what academic books might be like in the future.

Likes: 1,198. Dislikes: 7.

Notes

- 1 Most publishers merged with super-media companies to cash in on the trend for VR Fiction and the 'new novel' phenomenon.
- 2 Audrey Chad (2039) 'Towards a Manifesto for Print Humanities'. In Tap and Spile (eds). *Proceedings of the Northern Powerhouse*. Yorkshire. Available for download in lens, spectacles, iGlove and TV formats. [Click here](#).



Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/version4>