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Cultural Politics and the Born Digital

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Author

Schmitz, Dawn

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The Born-Digital Manuscript as Cultural Form and Intellectual Record

Dawn Schmitz

Archivist, Department of Special Collections and Archives, UC Irvine Libraries

Time Will Tell, But Epistemology Won't: A Conference on Richard Rorty's Archive

University of California, Irvine

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Any given form of cultural expression entails particular social, economic and technological conditions of production, distribution, and reception.

I believe this is a useful starting point for those who study culture and for archivists who work to preserve and make accessible to researchers the records of cultural production. Today I will limit my discussion only to the technological conditions that are entailed in the creation of **born-digital manuscripts**. This is a unique set of conditions that has implications for how born digital scholarly manuscripts are handled in the archives and how they can be studied as records of a scholar's intellectual production.

We call a manuscript *born digital* if it was originally created using a computer word-processing program and was accepted by the archives in digital form. The term *born digital* is meant to distinguish such a manuscript from other forms of manuscripts you might find in a collection of scholarly papers, including **handwritten** manuscripts, **typescripts**, and even **printed-out** word-processed documents.

But, crucially, the term *born digital* is also meant to differentiate from other *digital* forms. In its **Glossary of archival terms**, the Society of American Archivists notes that "Born-digital information is distinguished from digitized, the latter describing a document created on paper that has been scanned..." As this suggests, we use the term *born digital* to mark a distinction from digitized surrogates of analog manuscripts: we add to **digital** the modifier **born** to communicate to researchers about how these manuscripts were originally *created* not just how they are presented for use today.

What were those conditions of production? The earliest of the Richard Rorty born-digital manuscript files in our collection date to the late 1980s (although I've recently learned that Rorty began using computers for writing years earlier.) The advent of the electronic mediation of writing, which became available to many American academics in the 1980s, represented a new way of communicating and a new way of configuring the writing subject. That this shift occurred even before the advent of the Web, hypertext, and social media is sometimes easy to forget.

In *The Mode of Information*, published in 1990, Mark Poster noted that computer writing, as contrasted with writing using earlier technologies such as pen and typewriter, “**dematerializes the written trace.**”¹ A new *immateriality* is brought to bear when letters and words are formed from computer code displayed by pixels. In this configuration, the writer is confronted with a form of representation that approaches that of the mind or the spoken word. As words are typed, transformed, erased, and moved around at roughly the speed of thought, mind-body dualism is disrupted. The writing subject is radically decentered, with the machine enacting feats formerly only capable by the human mind or body, such as deriving synonyms or moving paragraphs. Along with this disruption comes the recognition by the human being of itself in the machine. **In Poster’s words:**

The mirror effect of the computer doubles the subject of writing; the human being recognizes itself in the uncanny immateriality of the machine.²

Thus, with the mirror effect enacted, a **new form of subjectivity is experienced.**

By taking Poster’s theorization of the writers' subjective experience of computer writing and applying it to scholarly manuscripts, the stark difference between the analog and the born-digital form of manuscripts begins to become clear. One consequence of this difference, as Poster himself predicted, is that because electronic manuscripts lack the individuality and uniqueness of analog

¹ Poster, Mark. *The Mode of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990): 111.

² Poster 112.

forms they also lose one measure of their value to scholars and collectors. The manuscripts lose their value as artifacts.

But the computer mediation that is intrinsic to the creation of born digital files can sometimes alter the form in ways that make born digital manuscripts unique and useful types of records. Not only are words encoded in such a way that they can be searched if the right technology is applied, but also word processing software can be programmed to automatically perform actions that affect the creation not just of individual documents but entire manuscript collections. These actions are the instantaneous creation of multiple drafts and the automatic timestamping of drafts.

Rorty evidently had a file backup application enabled in his word processing program, possibly one that was automated. The result of this, together with his evident lack of interest in file management and deletion (a lack of interest for which we are grateful!), was the creation and saving of numerous backup files. Hence many drafts of his writings were instantaneously, and in some cases automatically, created.

One of the many examples of this dynamic in our collection is the set of manuscripts titled "**The Decline of Redemptive Truth and the Rise of a Literary Culture**," of which we have **ten distinct drafts**. This is a paper that Rorty presented a number of times and versions of which he eventually published under a different title.³ **Most of the drafts** begin with some version of the memorable line:

Questions such as "Does truth exist?" or "Do you believe in truth?" seem fatuous and pointless.

As you can see, this opening sentence underwent a few changes from the first version to the last one in our collection, a small example of how the manuscript as a whole can be tracked across many different versions that have fairly substantial changes.

³ Essay was eventually published under the title "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre" in: *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein* (2004), ed. Richard J. Bernstein, Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Fraser; *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers* (2007); and *Rorty Reader*, (2010) ed. Christopher J. Voparil and Richard J. Bernstein

This chart represents how researchers could sort the drafts of this title chronologically if they wanted to track changes to this manuscript through time. Here we can see:

- In the 1st column the timestamp on each version (the date the computer recorded as the last date the file was updated and which we consider the "date of creation")
- In the 2nd column the name of the computer file supplied by Rorty and his computer (which we didn't use to provide titles to the manuscript; we opened and read each file to supply the title).
- In the 3rd column the number of the floppy disk on which the draft was found (these are the random numbers we assigned to the disks, which we found in no order)
- And in the 4th column approximately how long each draft is, suggesting each draft is different.

The files were electronically de-duplicated during processing, so we know each of these drafts has at least minor differences from the others. In many cases there are major changes from one draft to the next.

This set of drafts provides a record of Rorty's progress as he worked his way through this particular manuscript, a record of intellectual production made possible by the inherent qualities of the born-digital files as they were created and as we received them – in multiple, in some cases automatically generated, dated drafts.

Now that I've talked about the usefulness of the record created by born-digital manuscripts, I should at least briefly mention one of the many problems encountered when processing them.

One obvious concern we had when faced with the files on **Rorty's 77 floppy disks** was whether we could even open them with the software we have available. We were fortunate that, due to the relative simplicity of these text-only files, we were able to open and read almost every one of the files by taking a few basic measures.

However, as with the conditions of production, a curious subjectivity is experienced in the *processing* of computer-mediated documents. In opening any word processing file, the human manuscripts processor relies on the computer to interpret the information. This is a much different problem than is presented with analog forms. With paper manuscripts, it may be that when opening a box or paper file we are faced with the ravages of water damage, mold, pests, paper discoloration, ink fading, torn or missing pages. When these things happen, information is lost. But in the context of born-digital manuscripts, unique problems of *interpretation* and thus authenticity are manifest.

For example, consider how our software interpreted this born-digital file that Rorty created in 1988. The display of extraneous characters, representing probable substitutions for some of the characters Rorty typed, presents an obvious case in which the encoding by Rorty's software is not entirely compatible with the decoding conducted by our software. While this manuscript has value, this example of data corruption shows the potentially serious consequences of our failure to emulate his software system.

Despite problems we faced such as this one of authenticity -- problems that make so evident the consequences of the **"dematerializ[ation] of the written trace"**-- we in the Department of Special Collections and Archives believed it was important to make these born digital manuscripts part of the Richard Rorty Papers. Realizing the files represented little duplication with the paper manuscripts in the collection, we knew we couldn't simply put the disks on the shelf.

For a brief time we did consider printing out the files and making them accessible in paper format, but we but decided against doing this for many reasons. Just speaking for myself, I felt this went against the very nature of this cultural form. From the moment of creation these manuscripts have manifested built-in capabilities to be searched full-text, sorted, and **called up in various ways we could facilitate with the right interface design**. Printed-out word-processing files don't have the inherent qualities of born digital manuscripts, which is why we don't call them born-digital despite the fact that they were actually "born that way."

And I want to note, also, that *digitized* manuscripts do not have this kind of functionality of searching and sorting inherently, and many lack this functionality even if countless labor hours are spent writing metadata and performing transcriptions. For example, **this undated manuscript** can most definitely be digitized, but presenting it to researchers digitally is not exactly inherent in the form -- nor is it simply a matter of scanning.⁴

The ability to gain the full value of born digital manuscripts as **records of intellectual production** is only possible because of the singular machine-mediated way in which these manuscripts were created originally, as well as how they were processed in the archives and made available to researchers. They should be handled and used with the full acknowledgement of how they reflect a double subjectivity.

⁴ "Matter and Event": draft, undated. Richard Rorty Papers, Box 9, Folder 3.