



BOOKS: COMMUNICATION

What Will Become of Readers?

Michael A. Keller

So many ideas intersect in this compact book that one hardly knows which to select for comment. At the University of Pennsylvania, James O'Donnell is both professor of classical studies and vice provost for information systems and computing. From the many strands of his academic life he has woven a consideration of the "connections among speaking, writing and reading today." *Avatars of the Word* is, however, about ever so much more than those connections. The implications and importance of the book's contents are worth serious contemplation by all intellectuals—especially those who contribute to and draw from peer-reviewed scientific discourse. The threads of *Avatars* lead from Socrates and Plato; through the Alexandria and other libraries, codices, Augustine, Cassiodorus, and both old and new liberal arts; to the virtual library, hyperlinking, distance education (and other threatening attributes of the 21st-century university), and the life of the mind in cyberspace.

The term avatar is found in tens of thousands of items on the World Wide Web. The word is generally used in information technology with the same meaning that O'Donnell intends, "in the sense of 'manifestation'—the form in which some abstract and powerful force takes palpable shape for human perception." The Oxford English Dictionary reports that the word entered English from Sanskrit for "the descent of a deity to the earth in an incarnate form," and had assumed the meaning used by O'Donnell by 1850. What a powerful idea the word conveys in this era of so many accessible means of global communication.

To supplement the book, O'Donnell provides its own avatar at <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/avatars> and references numerous other URLs. The book itself is incomplete without reference to many of these resources and their hyperlinks. And so it becomes a model of its own main theme.

O'Donnell does not lead one through the histories of writing, literacy, or communication. Readers are thereby spared

the usual recitation of the historiography of prominent notions that mark many academic books. Many readers of *Science*, however, consequently may miss discovering that the ancillary sciences of history (among them epigraphy, paleography, and diplomatics) are in fact scientific and that many of the objects studied in such fields have transmitted the ideas and fundamental concepts of science itself from early antiquity to the present day. Although works such as Felix Reichmann's *Sources of Western Literacy: the Middle Eastern Civilizations (I)* are also beyond the scope of O'Donnell's bibliography, they certainly complement the ones cited in the brief but excellent bibliographic notes at the end of the book.

These days scientists and other scholars, librarians and other information professionals, and policymakers of assorted stripes are investing time, energy, and money to promote the useful arts and sciences. Among the numerous tasks and processes they support are modes of communication; the work of librarians, archivists, and museum curators; and the component duties of authors, editors, and publishers. O'Donnell interweaves his examination of these topics with excursions. He considers the instability of text in cyberspace and its implications; nonlinear reading focused on the organization and management of knowledge (although he does not deal with collaborative work in the creation of scholarly reports and records); the distribution of scholarly information through the Web and the challenge of such dissemination to intellectual property laws; and the force of personalities in the teaching process and, by implication, in the research process. The cautious (Sven Birkerts) as well as the reactionary or superficial (Allan Bloom, Charles Sykes, Roger Kimball, Page Smith, Dinesh D'Souza, and David Samrosch) are dispatched with grace in order to comment critically and, in my view, accurately on the state and the possibilities of the university (including the possibilities affected by information technology).

Elsewhere O'Donnell has remarked, "Universities are triumphant testimony that technologies rarely supplant one another" (2). This notion is reflected in the book and is fodder for rich debates, especially from

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the perspectives of scientists, technologists, and medical researchers. I predict that when, after a century, others look back at this period of transition, our era will be recognized for the amazing transformation of scholarly communication that occurred because of networks of computers and the prescient thinking and actions of a few editors and publishers. Despite its context deep in the humanities, O'Donnell's *Avatars of the Word* is a book for those pondering the nature of communication—in research, in teaching, and in life.

References

1. F. Reichmann, *Sources of Western Literacy: the Middle Eastern Civilizations* (Greenwood, Westport, CT, 1980).
2. J. J. O'Donnell, *Chron. Higher Educ.* 44, 87 (13 Feb. 1998).

BOOKS: ANTHROPOLOGY

Mead Misrepresented

Martin Orans

Calling himself as the Kenneth Starr of anthropology, Derek Freeman claims to have found "the smoking gun" in a crime of misrepresentation committed by Margaret Mead. He identifies a letter written by Mead to her mentor Franz Boas as the smoking gun. Freeman says this letter corroborates his interpretation that Mead was hoaxed by two Samoan women into believing Samoa was a promiscuous society that "did not attempt to curb the sexual activity of adolescents." The alleged crime is that Mead made such an assertion in her book *Coming of Age in Samoa (I)* and elsewhere.

The alleged crime never took place. Mead's generalizations and evocative descriptions certainly leave one with an impression of more permissive female adolescent sexuality than actually existed or is consistent with her detailed statements (2, chapter 4). But offering this impression is the extent of her misdoing. In *Coming of Age*, Mead specifically excludes from sexual freedom the taupou (holders of a title given to virgins), those of "noble birth," young adolescent girls, and those living with a pastor's family or in a church school.

**The Fateful Hoaxing
of Margaret Mead
A Historical Analysis
of Her Samoan
Research**
by Derek Freeman

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