EDWARD J. VALAUSKAS
Chief Editor, First Monday, http://www.firstmonday.dk/ and principal of Internet Mechanics, USA

PUBLISHERS, AUTHORS AND READERS: THE RIGHT TO READ IN A DIGITAL AGE

> "The unread story is not a story; it is little black marks on wood pulp.
> The reader, reading it, makes it live: a live thing, a story."
>
> Ursula K. Le Guin

We are here at this Conference to celebrate in our own ways the first Lithuanian book, a book in which its author clearly speaks to his readers, or in the technological slang of today, it is highly interactive. Martynas Mazvydas tells his readers in his own way that his book is significant and he urges his readers to read his work, to learn from it, and spread the word about it[1]. This Catechism, the author emphasizes, is worthless unless it is read, unless it has an impact, unless it draws attention. Mazvydas knew what every author of a document on the Internet knows, what every creator of a World Wide Web home page knows. If no one sees and reads your work, if no one gives you the slightest amount of attention, then what value does your creative effort really earn?

To create any work – such as a book, a report, a paper, a World Wide Web site – also means being an intellectual sorcerer of sorts, anticipating the desires of an audience. Mazvydas understood that he had a special audience awaiting his Catechism.

Reading is a subtle and difficult concept to understand, both 450 years ago and today. Both 450 years ago and today, talented and hard-working writers, artists, and others explore their media – be it print or the Internet. Any medium is a medium by virtue of its use as a means of communication – to find an audience willing to discover – on their own – a creative work, ready to take the time and effort to understand a new idea given a voice in paper or on a computer screen.

By creating a work – either on paper or with a computer – you assume by the mere act of distribution that others will find it worthwhile. You establish an unwritten contract with your audience as a writer and editor, boldly implying that "here is something worth your attention, please read and understand my ideas." Mazvydas

---

[1] As summarized by Vytautas Landsbergis at the Library of Congress; see Vytautas Landsbergis, 1997. "The First Lithuanian book – the 450th anniversary,"
http://daugenis.mch.mii.lt/atspindzai/Renginiai/congress.en1.htm

recognized this in the postscript of his Catechism addressed specifically to his readers[2]. Those of us who create on the Internet, too, invite our readers to digest our electronic thoughts and to write an electronic commentary to our attention. Those of us who write and distribute our ideas on the Internet make it a habit to include an electronic address in our papers and articles so readers can communicate with us, to complain, praise, or simply to know that we exist somewhere in this thing called cyberspace.

In exchange for our documents on the Internet, we – the creators of electronic information – expect readers to manifest their right to read in three ways. First, we hope that a reader will initially select our document from millions of others on the Internet, somehow to show a preference for our specific paper or journal or book in this electronic medium. Second, we expect a reader to devote time, that is to focus attention on our digital work, and as a result ofdevote time, that is to focus attention on our digital work, and as a result of this attention to indicate approval or disapproval directly to us by electronic mail or by electronic mail to other Internet users. These acts lead to a third way in which this right to read appears on the Internet. Our reader initiates specific acts that distribute a work to others or in some way advertises its existence, by mail messages, postings to different kinds of electronic bulletin boards, and through other kinds of exchanges[3]. These reactions to reading electronically are not completely unique. What makes them so special is that they happen in an environment where time and space are minimalized.

Let me give you an example. Last year, one of the articles that I wrote brought me in editorial collaboration with several colleagues and friends in the computer industry. The article itself very briefly discussed the importance of librarians on the Internet and it was based on some new and interesting research. The Christian Science Monitor decided to publish it and we were delighted because the Monitor enjoys a good reputation and is read around the world. I was traveling at the time, I actually was in Riga doing some workshops so I learned about the publication by an electronic mail message from one of my collaborators. The Monitor published the story both in print form and on its World Wide Web site[4]. Within a few days of its appearance in print, the story was distributed independently by Internet readers as e-mail attachments, as digital documents to tens of thousands of other readers[5]. For the Monitor, the story became one of the most requested stories in 1996. Internet readers praised the story, creating a

---

[2] In translation from the postscript, "My dear brother, you will realise while reading that now this language manifests itself," from Vytautas Landsbergis, 1997. "The 450th Anniversary of the first Lithuanian book," ☐ HYPERLINK

http://daugenis.mch.mii.lt/atspindzai/Renginiai/00000004.en1.htm

http://daugenis.mch.mii.lt/atspindzai/Renginiai/00000004.en1.htm

[3] See also Michael Goldhaber, 1997. "The Attention economy and the Net," First Monday, Volume 2, number 4 (April), available at http://www.firstmonday.dk and also Philippe Aigrain, 1997. "Attention, media, value and economics," First Monday, Volume 2, number 9 (September), available at http://www.firstmonday.dk

[4] Bonnie A. Nardi, Vicki O'Day, and Edward J. Valauskas, 1996. "Put a Good Librarian, Not Software, in Driver's Seat," Christian Science Monitor (June 4), p. 18, and at http://www.csmonitor.com/

[5] See for example Klaus Junkes-Kirchen's re-posting of the Monitor essay on June 11, 1996, at http://www.hbz-nrw.de/mlist/inetbib/199606/19960611.html

demand for it in both print and in electrons and photons, and for a while we all – authors and publisher – enjoyed a brief fling of digital fame. All thanks to our readers scattered around the world on this electronic medium.

Mazvydas would have been a very active user of the Internet, had it existed in his day. His Catechism would have reached a global audience, all by his act of creating a single copy of it on a server say in Königsberg. His electronic mailbox, no doubt, would have been overflowing with cheers from Lithuanians scattered around the world, and probably advice and corrections for future editions. Indeed, his readers probably would have re-posted and republished the Catechism on other computers elsewhere in the world to reduce Internet traffic to the Baltic, something Mazvydas no doubt would have allowed. Why? Because his words would have reached even more readers.

Mazvydas would have felt at home with the Internet's emphasis on reading a great diversity of information, of its recognition of the rights of readers to not only read but comment on and distribute ideas. The Internet, because of its super-abundance of information, in its own way, has elevated the act of reading to a new level of importance. Why? Because the mere act of reading an electronic paper means that that given work is more important than any one of tens of thousands of other electronic documents, that it specifically and especially deserves attention. In turn, this attention is a turbine that drives much of the invention and circulation of information found on the Internet. Without attention, documents go into a digital netherland where they are no longer revised and updated. Eventually they disappear altogether. With attention, digital information grows, expands, and most importantly multiplies. Readers on the Internet move with their keyboards from one end of the globe to the other, searching for just that right fact, that tell-tale remark, that all-important Catechism, that deserves their attention.

Digital Reading as a Stimulus

This attention given by readers to electronic text has several important effects. Readers recognize that paper-based information and computer-based information function very differently. Studies have shown that we read more slowly from a computer compared to paper, up to 30% more slowly. Because of the flicker of computer monitors, we actually lose more information that we think when we read from a computer screen, and studies have indicated that these losses can be as high as 40%[6].

Because of the attention we give to electronic information, and the ease in which we can communicate with others electronically about our reading discoveries, Internet-based reading nevertheless has become a real stimulus for the reading of traditional print materials. Internet-based reading is already having an enormous impact on the reading habits of the young in new exercises designed in some classrooms. Let me provide you with just a few examples.

In North Carolina in the United States, high school students send electronic messages to their Internet pen pals in Scarsdale, New York. The students in these two

---

[6] Summarized in Edward J. Valauskas, 1994. "Reading and computers – paper-based or digital text: what's best?," Computers in Libraries, Volume 14, number 1 (January), pp. 44–47.

very different high schools in two very different parts of the United States shared at one time a common distaste for reading and writing at the start of this project. In the beginning, students in both groups were asked to read a few books in printed form and then to share their experiences in reading these books by electronic mail with their distant peers. Within a few weeks after the start of these electronic classes, the students began to demonstrate a new enthusiasm for reading, stimulated by positive peer pressure with their pen pals. Teachers noted that the students' electronic mail messages to each other discussed which books they were reading, which characters they liked or didn't like, which plots worked and which didn't – all from two groups of students who initially said that they never read.

In another project, elementary school students in Nebraska were encouraged to read, and through electronic mail, describe to other students the characters in their books by impersonating and describing them in digital messages. This use of the online medium with imagination forced the students to carefully dissect the novels and their characters. In these classes, called "Characters Online," students developed challenging discussions of books with fellow students and teachers. Students improved their writing and language skills too as a result of creatively translating fictional characters into messages to their fellow students on the Internet[7].

These classes are just a few examples of how Internet-based reading has been encouraging reading of all kinds, especially the reading of traditional books and magazines in print. Reading is a personal act but it is also infectious, and the Internet has become a conduit for the spreading of this most delightful disease. Students, with their computers and books, are understanding this most basic pleasure of taking an idea from paper, of enlivening an idea by translating it into their own words, and then sharing those words with others. These students are experiencing in their own ways some basic rights of access to information.

Rights of Access: A Personal and Private Ritual

Readers have long known that their ability to read grants them the fundamental right to use information for personal and individual intellectual gain. In spite of much thunder and lightning from publishers over the use of intellectual property, readers have enjoyed for centuries the right to examine and browse a work; to read a sentence, a chapter, or an entire book in any fashion and at any time that suits their fancy; and, to share their intellectual discoveries with friends, colleagues, and total strangers[8]. These are part of the basic rights of readers to any work.

In the print world, there is little attempt to control or to understand how readers exactly use books, magazines, and journals. Publishers and authors learn precious little from sales reports or photocopying data sent to copyright clearance centers. Reading is highly individualistic and incredibly private. I, as a reader, will

---

[7] These and other case studies are described in Kristina M. McSalis, 1997. "Children, reading motivation, and the Web," available at http://www.gslis.utexas.edu/~krist/webver~1.htm

[8] For further details, see L. Ray Patterson and Stanley W. Lindberg, 1991. The Nature of copyright: A Law of users' rights. Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, pp. 193–196.

share my reading experience only with those I select; authors and their publishers will only occasionally discover in a most unsystematic way how I really digest a book or a magazine.

The Internet and the way it works in making information available changes this relationship between publisher and reader, between author and reader. With the Internet, as an editor, as an author, and as a publisher, I have a better idea who might be reading a given paper in the journal that I edit, called First Monday, thanks to computers logs and other records.

Defusing the Rights of Readers

The information collected by these logs gives me as an editor a great deal of information about my readers, more than I could ever expect if my journal appeared in print. With these digital records, I can determine which articles within a given issue are popular and where exactly they may have been read and when. I could, if I wanted to, try to track down some of the readers of First Monday – and we have some four to five thousand readers every week – and ask them specific questions about a given issue. Or I could modify advertisements in my journal in such a way so only certain readers would see certain ads at certain times. These techniques for targeting my audience would be hard to duplicate if my journal was paper-based and distributed through normal channels.

Many digital publishers and editors, like me, are using some of these techniques to study their electronic audiences and improve their products. Some publishers are using these techniques – and others – to control access to information, reducing the rights of readers with new tools such as electronic watermarks and controlled CPUs[9]. These strategies are interesting experiments to develop content controls on the Internet, content controls that publishers have enjoyed for decades in print. For the most part, these technological attempts at reducing access will fail economically and technologically in the long run. A greater threat to the rights of readers comes not from publishers or authors or editors. It instead comes from those organizations that fear criticism, and try to control their critics on the Internet. The most spectacular recent case involves the Church of Scientology, which stopped an Internet-based critic, Dennis Erlich, by taking him and his Internet service provider and the operator of an electronic bulletin board to court. The Church claimed that Erlich, Netcom (the service provider), and Tom Klemesrud (the bulletin board operator) all violated the Church's copyrights of its works. Specifically, the Church claimed that Erlich, a former Scientologist, took published and unpublished materials of L. Ron Hubbard and posted them on the Internet in violation of the Church's copyright. Erlich, using materials that he secured as a former member of the Church, felt that he was justified in using these materials as evidence to construct his digital criticism of the Church. Netcom in its defense claimed that it was impossible to monitor the activities of every user of its system, a system that sees millions of keystrokes every day. Tom

---

[9] Nick Szabo, 1997. "Smart contracts: Formalizing and securing relationships on public networks," First Monday, Volume 2, number 9 (September), available at http://www.firstmonday.dk

Klemesrud, as the manager of an online discussion group focusing on the Church, felt that the lawsuit would have never occurred had Erlich decided to praise, rather than criticize, the Church online[10]. The case, which has been fought for years, has only recently seen an out-of-court settlement by Klemesrud. More importantly, no matter what the outcome, the Church of Scientology has effectively used the courts and copyright law to control this medium, to essentially silence its critics in the United States and in Europe.

Governments, too, fear the Internet and its ability to spread criticism. In countries along the Pacific, several governments have made it difficult to use the Internet or even to legally acquire the basic technology of a computer or a modem without a license. In Indonesia, for example, a professor was jailed last year for distributing a message on the Internet that described student protests against the government[11]. In spite of this harsh sentence, the Indonesian government still fails to understand how the Internet works and how it might be used to its own advantage. Some of the most restrictive acts against the Internet and a right to read and access digital information have been created by those legislators and politicians with the least experience with the Internet and its effectiveness as a medium[12]. I only need to mention here the case of the United States Congress which passed a law in 1996 that tried to control the Internet, revealing to many Congress' own lack of experience with the Internet and its contents[13]   The United States Supreme Court – with far more experience with the Internet and a far greater respect for readers and freedom of expression – threw this law out in June, 1997.

Future Prospects

With the growth of the Internet, there has been a parallel rise in the use of information in all of its forms. Readers more than ever are enjoying a right to read and to access information as never before. But on the horizon, there are still threats to this expansion of reading from ill-advised and totalitarian governments, paranoiac politi-cal and religious groups, and overzealous publishers.

Over four decades ago, the United States experienced a particularly painful period when what was labeled by some as politically objectionable and socially suspi-

---

[10] For summaries see Jonathan Rosenoer, 1997. Cyberlaw: The Law of the Internet. New York: Springer-Verlag, pp. 62–66.

[11] Andreas Harsono, 1996. "Indonesia: From Mainstream to Alternative Media," First Monday, Volume 1, number 3 (September), available athttp://www.firstmonday.dk

[12] "One journalist who covers Congress reporting during the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which included the language of the   Communications Decency Act, that the senators who wrote the bill had never even used a computer, much less had access to the Internet or even e-mail." From Wayne Rash, Jr., 1997. Politics on the Nets: Wiring the political process. New York: W. H. Freeman, p. 138. See also Pamela Samuelson, 1996. "On Authors' rights in cyberspace: Questioning the need for new international rules on authors' rights in cyberspace," First Monday, Volume 1, number 4 (October), available at http://www.firstmonday.dk

[13] See, for example, Jonathan Wallace and Mark Mangan, 1997. Sex, laws, and cyberspace: Freedom and censorship on the frontiers of the online revolution. New York: Henry Holt, pp. 173–191.

cious information came under attack. Librarians and publishers recognized this threat to reading, and in 1953, they crafted a document simply known as the "Freedom to Read."

The words in this document reflect their times in their concern over print, in that age when computers filled entire buildings and digital networks were the stuff of science fiction. But many of the words in that document equally apply now in this electronic age. Let me read you just an excerpt from this document:

"Books are among our greatest instruments of freedom. They are almost the only means for making generally available ideas or manners of expression that can initially command only a small audience. They are the natural medium for the new idea and the untried voice from which come the original contributions to social growth. We believe that free communication is essential to the preservation of a free society and a creative culture. We believe that these pressures towards conformity present the danger of limiting the range and variety of inquiry and expression on which democracy and culture depend. We believe that every   community must jealously guard the freedom to publish and to circulate, in order to preserve its own freedom to read."[14]

These words more than ever apply to the Internet and to a right to read.

About the Author
Edward J. Valauskas is Chief Editor, First Monday, http://www.firstmonday.dk/ and principal of Internet Mechanics. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the Library and Information Technology Association (LITA) and the Professional Board of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). E-mail: ejv@uic.edu

---

[14] This statement, the Freedom to Read, is part of the official policy of theAmerican Library Association and the Association of American Publishers; it is available at various locations on the Internet including http://web.its.smu.edu/~dmcnickl/miscell/rightrea.html