

to be the most immediate, universal and democratic written medium that has ever existed. But it is all happening too quickly for some people, and we have to face some uncomfortable facts: for example, it is already too late to campaign for Heinz to add punctuation marks to the Alfabetti Spaghetti, in the hope that all will be well.

Having grown up as readers of the printed word (and possibly even scribblers in margins), we may take for granted the processes involved in the traditional activity of reading – so let us remind ourselves. The printed word is presented to us in a linear way, with syntax supreme in conveying the sense of the words in their order. We read privately, mentally listening to the writer's voice and translating the writer's thoughts. The book remains static and fixed; the reader journeys through it. Picking up the book in the first place entails an active pursuit of understanding. Holding the book, we are aware of posterity and continuity. Knowing that the printed word is always edited, typeset and proof-read before it reaches us, we appreciate its literary authority. Having paid money for it (often), we have a sense

of investment and a pride of ownership, not to mention a feeling of general virtue.

All these conditions for reading are overturned by the new technologies. Information is presented to us in a non-linear way, through an exponential series of lateral associations. The internet is a public "space" which you visit, and even inhabit; its product is inherently impersonal and disembodied. Scrolling documents is the opposite of reading: your eyes remain static, while the material flows past. Despite all the opportunities to "interact", we read material from the internet (or CD-roms, or whatever) entirely passively because all the interesting associative thinking has already been done on our behalf. Electronic media are intrinsically ephemeral, are open to perpetual revision, and work quite strenuously against any sort of historical perception. The opposite of edited, the material on the internet is unmediated, except by the technology itself. And having no price, it has questionable value. Finally, you can't write comments in the margin of your screen to be discovered by another reader fifty years down the line.

Having said all this, there is no immediate cause