Book Unbound: An Exploration of the Material Forms of the Codex and E-book

Bonnie Mak, University of Illinois
Julia Pollack, CUNY -Bronx Community College

Abstract: This article explores how material form influences the communication of information in books across technological divides. Using the creative project, Book Unbound, as a starting point, the article explores forms of the book that are not tied uniquely to the codex. Furthermore, by discussing the familiar codex in relation to its digital counterparts, the article examines how materiality continues to be used to communicate, persuade readers and shape the process of meaning-making.

Keywords: codex; e-book; digital; materiality; paratext; reading; information; knowledge

As all the pieces in this special issue of Book 2.0 argue, the physical presentation of a book plays a significant – yet frequently overlooked – role in the transmission of information. This materiality may emphasize, augment or even undermine the verbal message of the book. But how exactly does the material configuration of the traditional codex or e-book contribute to the performance of meaning-making? And how is the dynamic to be identified and interrogated? After D.F. McKenzie’s proclamation more than a decade ago that bibliographical ‘forms effect meaning’ (1999: 13), literary scholars, book historians and graphic designers are still coming to terms with the implications of this relationship between materiality and interpretation. The creative experiment, Book Unbound, explored some of the ways in which the embodied object of the book can influence readerly reception by combining the approaches of art and design with the critical tools of bibliography, book history and new media studies. Inspired by the experimental tradition of the Fluxuskit, Book Unbound employed the architecture of a box to organize its space of inquiry, and similarly used humour and play to promote its investigation of the familiar material elements that constitute the book (Figures 1, 2). The box of Book Unbound was outfitted with compartments and shelves that were occupied by material fragments of both traditional and digital books. These fragments included the torn binding of a codex; shards of a
computer screen; chapter titles, headings and title pages; texts with XML markup; and images printed from digital files. Using this unconventional and mobile presentation of the codex and e-book, Book Unbound capitalized on the provocative arrangements of its pieces in support of an analysis of the materials of writing technologies. Isolated from their familiar surroundings and exhibited in Book Unbound, the materials of the codex and its digital counterpart could be studied for the performance of form in the transmission of knowledge.

Despite recent work exploring the materiality of e-books (Drucker 2013, Galey 2012, Mak 2011, Kirschenbaum 2008, Hayles 2005), the full range of strategies by which digital media produce, shape and transmit information remains poorly understood. To contribute to these ongoing conversations, Book Unbound positioned the very real materialities of both the traditional codex and e-book within the same scope of investigation. By highlighting the shared ways in which codices and e-books might communicate – through a preface or dedication or chapter headings or computational code – Book Unbound offered an alternative way to grapple with naturalized modes of graphic communication and unbind the ‘book-form’ from the codex. The project thus made reference to early efforts by Roger Chartier (1995) and James J. O’Donnell (1998) to situate digital books within a longer continuum of writing technologies that includes papyrus scrolls, which embody the books of antiquity, as well as handwritten and printed codices of the medieval and early modern periods. From this perspective, ‘book-form’ comprises not only the bound codex, but also scrolls that may be rolled or folded, tablets, loose sheets, pamphlets and digital media. By subjecting the emergent forms of the e-book to the same kinds of critical analyses that had hitherto been reserved for more conventional formats of the book, Book Unbound drew attention to the similarities of their respective modes of communication, and – by connecting past and present – suggested a way to explore the
relationship between materiality and knowledge-production that endures across time and technologies.

Just as the form of any book is ‘the site of potential for meaning production’ (Drucker 2013: 24), so too was Book Unbound a site for multiple interpretations. Such experimentations with Book Unbound called upon the materials presented, their venues of exhibition, as well as the individual predilections, prejudices and capacities of each viewer (Figures 3, 4). These contingent and rich processes of interpretation would be ill-served by any single attempt at literal description. Consequently, this article avoids a detailed exegesis of the project or analysis of its reception, preferring instead to use Book Unbound as a starting point for discussion. The present narrative offers but one itinerary through Book Unbound, and thereby sets out one possible manner of reading and understanding the project. Thus constituting a unique interpretation of Book Unbound, the article works at the intersection of documentary and theatrical modes of performance documentation so cogently described by Philip Auslander (2006). As Auslander supposes, the efficacy of this approach might best be identified ‘not from treating the document as an indexical access point to a past event, but from perceiving the document itself as a performance that directly reflects an artist’s aesthetic project or sensibility and for which we [readers] are the present audience’ (2006: 9). Indeed, Book Unbound is here depicted through a performance of interpretation that may bear only a fleeting resemblance to any lived event. Rather than striving for historical accuracy or comprehensive replication, the narrative seeks instead to reflect the sensibility and spirit of the Book Unbound project by modelling how its particular materials might be read.

To this end, the article explores three material aspects of books – all featured in Book Unbound – that shape meaning in both the codex and its digital counterpart, beginning with the
role of paratextual devices in the configuration of text, and moving next to discernible traces of readership. The article concludes with a consideration of the broader infrastructures that position and re-position books in intellectual, physical, and digital spaces. The discussion thus considers how the physical configuration of books helps to constitute a message across conventional and digital platforms. Using Book Unbound as a recurring point of reference, the following journey offers a demonstration of the way in which the materials of the codex and e-book can be studied and analyzed as technologies of communication.

Paratextual structures, such as title pages, chapter titles and section headings demonstrate the continuous shaping of knowledge that takes place in both codex and e-book. These devices can accompany a text, and are often unique to particular iterations or editions, transmitting a specific date of publication, name of publisher or errata. Examples of such paratexts were bottled in laboratory glassware called culture tubes in the Book Unbound project (Figure 5). Thus exhibited with the visual cues of scientific enquiry, the paratext was recontextualized as a material object appropriate for closer scrutiny. Some culture tubes housed specimens of chapter titles and book dedications in particular. Equally in a codex or e-book, chapter titles might orient the reader towards a particular interpretation by creating expectations about the general contours of the text. This apparatus may have been produced by the author, but often reflects the handiwork or influence of an editor or publisher. Gérard Genette suggests that paratextual devices are part of a system of interpretation that can reveal the ongoing conversation between author, editor, designer and reader (1997: 2). These structures organize the reader’s engagement with the text: a preface can address the audience explicitly, while the dedication, despite being able to be seen by anyone reading the book, may construct and publicize a relationship with one specific reader. Such cues produce tensions and imbalances with which the audience must
contend; in this way, texts ‘dictate a posture and oblige the reader’ (Chartier 1995: 1). As revealed by the Book Unbound project, paratextual devices can transcend technological divides, shaping the experience of text whether in scrolls of antiquity or Asia, manuscript codices of the Middle Ages, early printed books or their digital counterparts. The bottling of paratextual devices in scientific laboratory equipment in Book Unbound thus stimulates a further meditation on the role of such interpretive frameworks that are materially manifest across different platforms.

Handwritten and printed lettershapes were also selected for display in Book Unbound to address the visible and material expression of words. In her examination of the aesthetic performance of typographic form, Johanna Drucker draws attention to the visual message that is always intertwined in the graphic transmission of text. Letterforms are designed in a particular cultural atmosphere, and their shapely expressions are testament to a rich and complex history. Drucker explains, ‘Writing inscribes many paradoxes and tensions in its materiality – between idea and material, personal experience and social order, logical structures of thought and the illogical record of lived experience’ (1998: 75). The handwriting or typeface that is transmitted in a codex or e-book, then, not only communicates a message through its words, but also creates a visual expression, an image, with its letterforms. The letterforms are manufactured to effect readerly responses with their graphic configuration; they may have been chosen to be self-consciously reminiscent of fifteenth-century humanistic learning or to be carefully ahistorical; they may even embody a confusing amalgam of contradictory intentions. The shapes of letterforms – their material disposition on the parchment, paper, or digital page – transmit an aesthetic that suffuses the readerly experience. The visual expression of the text thus sets
expectations by signalling to readers that they should anticipate an engagement with perhaps an erudite treatise, a fanciful historiette or an authoritative documentary record.

Another example of the way in which the material disposition of a book can inform reception is through marginalia, commentary or devices that may vary across different iterations of a text, and furthermore accrete over time. In both handwritten and printed books from the medieval and early modern periods, images of hands with pointing fingers were frequently employed by designers and readers to highlight certain words or passages. Called ‘manicules’ by William H. Sherman (2007), these graphic devices can be individualized, decorated with an elaborate lace cuff or styled with an impossibly elongated index finger (Figure 6). Manicules survive in the margins of the pages, or even within the text block, and operate in concert with other paratextual materials of the book to shape the reading performance. The pointing finger of the manicule makes its intercession explicit, as it emphasizes selected parts of the text, making such passages more visible than others.

Book Unbound wrested the manicule from its conventional lodging on the page of the codex (Figure 7). By translating the manicule into life-sized dimensions, the project brought forward for examination another instance by which the material configuration of the book can shape the reading experience. The manicule is quite literally an editorial hand that provides instruction to the audience through its gesture. Understanding how the manicule functions on the page of the codex can elucidate analogous dynamics in the digital environment. Indeed, elements within the e-book likewise shape reception: these editorial coercions may or may not be as obvious as the graphic manicule, but nevertheless have a similarly critical role in the transmission of knowledge. As Alan Galey intimates, ‘digital objects do not speak for themselves; someone always speaks for them’ (2012: 240). For example, some e-books are
produced using transcriptions that have been marked up by editors with computer-readable tags. The XML tags – visible in the source code of an online transcription – identify and define specific parts of a work, such as the name of the author, the gender of the author, a title, the body of the text, as well as its sections, paragraphs, illustrations and captions. By structuring the text with such code, editors discipline the activities of their readers. The computational code configures how the texts are to be received; certain kinds of searches and certain kinds of reading are fostered and privileged through the markup, and thus offer a kind of pointing finger that is embedded in the text itself. In the Book Unbound project, XML tags were re-cast as traces of an editorial hand that direct the reader’s experience of the book, and their exhibition brought to light how the material disposition of digital text, like its non-digital counterparts, can encode and encourage particular readerly engagements.

Book Unbound also considered the dynamic relationship between books and the disciplines of knowledge. Because systems that classify knowledge are used to organize both the intellectual and physical landscapes around the book, they contextualize the book’s message and necessarily shape our understanding of it. For example, Melvil Dewey developed a scheme for organizing knowledge in the library in the late nineteenth century, and his system is still employed by institutions around the world today. In his Decimal Classification, featured in the Book Unbound project, Dewey includes a subdivision for ‘shorthand’, a method of rapid writing (Figure 8). An early edition of Dewey’s Decimal Classification groups ‘shorthand’ under the general class of ‘Useful Arts.’, and ‘Communication. Commerce.’. Shorthand was followed by such topics as telegraphy, cables, signals, and other signalling devices. By 1922, however, telegraphy and telephonic communications had been re-classified under public services and utilities, and thus no longer appeared as close intellectual associates of shorthand. Meanwhile, a
preceding section grew into a comprehensive scheme for business methods, office organization and administration, thereby enveloping shorthand in a different context. Today, shorthand is grouped in the Decimal Classification under the class for ‘Technology’ and ‘Management and Auxiliary Services’.

Consequently, a book about shorthand from the nineteenth century – although in some sense materially the same – would have found itself surrounded by a variety of neighbours in the library over time. And yet that book is in another sense materially different because of broader movements in society. The shifting intellectual context may re-position the book within the spectrum of knowledge and, correspondingly, within the physical space of the library, thus presenting it anew to readers. According to the chronology described above, the book about shorthand was once understood as one of many ‘Useful Arts’, but is now re-framed as a kind of technology of ‘Management and Auxiliary Services’. A similar dynamic is likewise manifest in the digital environment: the eighth abridged edition of Dewey, featured in Book Unbound, is currently classified by one online source as ‘reference’, and by another as ‘mathematics’. Described in these divergent terms, the same book is presented simultaneously to readers in various ways.

Classification schemes and library architectures are developed in particular socio-political milieux, and thus reflect the spirit of their time. By examining the successive editions of the Decimal Classification from its initial date of publication in 1876, modulations in the organizing of knowledge can be charted over the span of a century. Moreover, the re-classification of knowledge that works in relation to emergent social and cultural trends becomes evident by tracking how these same editions of the Decimal Classification are described and arranged in the digital environment today. Given that codices and e-books are now traversing the
boundaries of brick-and-mortar libraries and online spaces, how will classification systems organize different media across these different contexts? Will such infrastructures accommodate or reflect the unique characteristics and materialities of different book-forms as foregrounded by *Book Unbound* and its sister projects (Mak & Pollack 2013)? Will the logic of such systems similarly be made explicit so that future historians of knowledge may excavate the ways in which classification schemes are modified over time?

**Conclusion**

The foregoing itinerary through *Book Unbound* explored how the materiality of books has always shaped reception, from the annotated manicule in the medieval manuscript, to the paratext of the printed book, to the XML tags of the online transcription, to the shapely letterforms of each. This was but one possible tour of *Book Unbound* which lingered over particular items as they gave rise to further reflection. The article thus suggested an interpretation of how the contents of *Book Unbound* might index particularly communicative aspects of books, and how their materialities might work to persuade readers. The narrative also examined classification systems and the organization of information across technological platforms and spaces, and considered the ways in which such changing infrastructures operate to re-configure the significance of books in society and thereby influence our engagement with them. By showcasing an interpreted instance of *Book Unbound*, the foregoing article performed the practice of meaning-making, and enacted one mode by which material forms might shape understanding.

*Book Unbound* and the article are studies of the performative materiality of books across the analogue and digital divide. Despite the differences between the material of the codex and the material of the e-book, both function in similar ways, serving to elicit particular responses from
their audiences. The Book Unbound project and the present narrative sought to foreground the
commonalities of the performance of materiality across technological platforms, and thus
cultivate a history for the emergent trends in book production with new technologies. A grasp of
the long traditions of graphic notation, annotation and organization of knowledge as they were
refined through the Middle Ages and early modern period might serve to stimulate exciting
innovations in graphic communication in the twenty-first century and beyond. Indeed, an
exploration of the long and compelling history of such materialities provides a rich store of ideas
with which we may begin to craft an unbounded future for the codex and its digital counterparts,
as well as for book-forms as yet unimagined.

Figures

Figure 1: Material fragments of codex and e-book, on display in Book Unbound.
Figure 2: Book Unbound, foregrounding the materiality of digital books.

Figure 3: Interpreting Book Unbound with Julia Pollack.

Figure 4: Audience members engage with Book Unbound.
Figure 5: Partial spine of a codex. Chapter titles and section headings from a book, divided into culture tubes.
Figure 6: A manicule, or pointing hand, that draws attention to lines 787–8 of Seneca’s Hercules Furens. University of Illinois, Pre-1650 MS 24. 15th century. Courtesy of the Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Figure 7: Life-sized manicule in Box Unbound.
Figure 8: An edition of the Decimal Classification and Relative Index devised by Melvil Dewey in the foreground; manicule in background.

References


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Anna Chen and Valerie Hotchkiss of the Rare Book & Manuscript Library at the University of Illinois.

**Contributor Details**

Bonnie Mak is assistant professor at the University of Illinois, jointly appointed in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, and the Program in Medieval Studies. Her research explores the production, design and circulation of knowledge across time and technologies. Her first book, *How the Page Matters*, published by the University of Toronto Press in 2011, traces the materiality of the page from antiquity to the modern day. A second book, on the cultural history of digitizations, is in progress.

Julia Pollack is reference and instruction librarian at CUNY-Bronx Community College and independent artist. She received her Master’s degree in Library and Information Science from the University of Illinois in 2012, and is co-author of ‘The Performance and Practice of Research in “A Cabinet of Curiosity: the Library’s Dead Time”,’ which appeared in *Art Documentation* in 2013.

**Contact Information**

Bonnie Mak  
University of Illinois  
501 E. Daniel Street  
Champaign, Illinois  
61820 USA  
bmak@illinois.edu

Julia Pollack  
Bronx Community College  
2155 University Avenue  
Bronx, New York  
10453 USA  
jang.pollack@bcc.cuny.edu