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Review of Gitelman, L. (2014) Paper Knowledge

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## REVIEW BY SARAH EVANS, NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY

Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents

Lisa Gitelman
Durham, North Caroline: Duke University Press, 2014. 224. Non-fiction.

#TCVol5Evans

Media histories are valuable in an age when an increasingly high percentage of our lives are mediated through new and constantly evolving technologies. By conducting such excavations one can see the influences that guide technologies' inception, growth, and decline as they facilitate societal changes. Typically, media histories are performed through the recovery and analysis of various documents providing support for a particular occurrence or argumentative position. Though seemingly objective, these evidentiary artifacts are shaped by the same types of sociocultural, economic, and political influences as the technologies that produce them. Through tracing a media history of this neglected genre, Lisa Gitelman's *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents* establishes documents as artifacts of epistemological import. Gitelman identifies documents via their utility, or what she calls the "know-show function." She argues: "Documents help define and are mutually defined by the know-show function, since documenting is an epistemic practice" (p. 1). Four chapters, focusing on small-job printed blanks, typescript books, xerography, and the PDF respectively, comprise Gitelman's account of notable milestones and ruptures in document history. This insightful book is situated within a media history landscape wherein we do not just delve into the pasts of major media like computers and televisions but also those of photocopies and receipts.
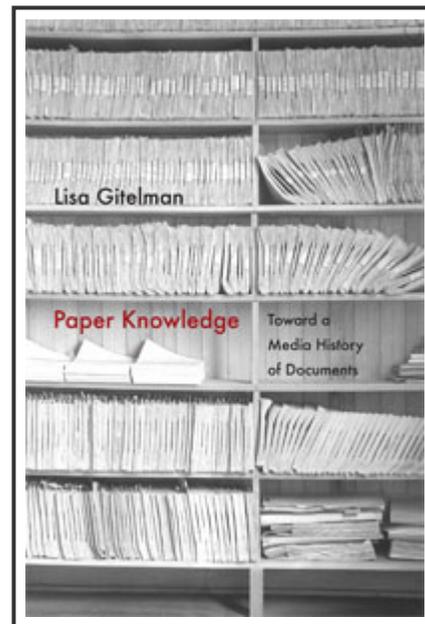
Starting with an examination of fill-in-the-blank forms, "A Short History of _____," establishes these documents as more than incidental texts necessitated by expanding businesses that required record-keeping of goods, people, and exchanges of capital. Gitelman positions blanks as inextricably linked to capital and traces their influence across document subgenres. She explains how the use of nominal blanks in fictions (seen in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" (1845) for example) allowed closer identification with the characters and events, thus giving the work greater economic viability. Conversely, blank spaces in forms work to prevent identification with their issuer, regulating a cold and efficient bureaucratic process. Gitelman argues: "By dividing mental labor, blanks *make bureaucracy*, directing and delimiting fill-in entries that form the incremental expressions of the modern, bureaucratic self" (p. 30, emphasis mine). Despite their text-based nature, blanks produce users (as opposed to authors or readers). Documents can be read so as to verify their legitimacy but to perform this check is to employ the document, to confirm its representation of ethos. Ultimately, the assumed credibility of documents are born from their issuer, and in some cases unauthorized replications constitute false claims of authority, sometimes known as counterfeits.

However, the relationship between authority and documents shifts in the early twentieth century. "The Typescript Book" explores some of the first widespread instantiations of amateur printing and reproduction techniques, including typewritten content, carbon copy and mimeograph, among others. Grounded in the seemingly perpetual scholarly fear of an inability to

access resources, this chapter illuminates the significance of Robert C. Binkley's (1931) *Manual on Methods of Reproducing Research Materials* as a repository of early document reproduction techniques. In keeping with Gitelman's overall methodology, there is a focus on the discourses and practices that surrounded these reproduction techniques, as opposed to focusing on the processes themselves. The sentiment that "any" reader can be a writer emerged during this time period. Further, access to these reproduction techniques led to an increase in "folk knowledge" as people gained the ability to represent themselves through copying genealogical documents and other records. This chapter's emphasis gestures toward the book's latent themes of amateur document [re]producers and labor, topics Gitelman explores tangentially in the third chapter and explicitly in the afterword.

Chapter three, "Xerographers of the Mind," explores how "Xeroxing became a way…of seeing documents as documents" (p. 102). Indeed, Xerox technology affects the ways in which we access, research, read, and circulate documents. Through vibrant case studies notably including the paradigm example of xerography, The Pentagon Papers, Gitelman analyzes the embedded expectations surrounding photocopies, including their status as a particular type of document. She reminds us: "all documents are not photocopies but all photocopies are documents" (p. 110), as this differentiation allows for the rupture of formerly sacred lines demarcating insider and outsider knowledge. By looking at Xerogaphy as a process that both identifies documentable material and produces documents, readers are encouraged to recognize an imperative distinction: photocopies are not selfsame with their parent document. The act of photocopying both confirms the significance of a document's content and allows for the document's convenient access and retrieval. The popularity of photocopying marks a move from reproduction as a means of access to a means of archiving. Since this allowed for wide circulation of copy-written materials, scholars interested in copyright issues will appreciate Gitelman's inclusion of this topic as it pertains to reproduction techniques of the past, present, and future.

Gitelman addresses the contemporary PDF as a culmination of the document's lineage in "Near Print and Beyond Paper: Knowing by *.pdf." The overall force of the chapter is less pronounced than those previous due to the inherent banality of the PDF as an overly ordinary, at times frustrating, format. Gitelman duly emphasizes this nature in her recognition that PDFs are so familiar that no "exemplary PDF" exists, yet she succeeds in viewing this document outside of our current time in order to see its place within a historical ecosystem of influence (p. 116). A middle ground between the analog and digital, the PDF looks and "acts" like print but is unquestionably not print (p. 115). Gitelman adds that whereas typescript books stimulated readers to become writers, "PDF technology works to encourage reading without writing" (p. 130). This document format is rich with suasive ethos and retains authority while supporting high transferability. Gitelman concludes by stating "PDF technology imagines its users…at the same time that actual users continue to imagine and reimagine what PDF files are for, how and why they work, and thus what they mean" (p. 118). Through this acknowledgement we can better understand the embedded affordances of today's electronic documents when making choices between rigid PDFs, flexible Microsoft Word documents, or "living" Google Docs.

Refusing a "neat conclusion," Gitelman ends her book by stating it is a "gesture… 'toward a media history of documents' without completing" it (p. 137). Her Afterword revolves around suggestions for further areas of research, namely that of a theme running closely in tandem with document history, the amateur. Despite her reluctance to give in to the dreamy nostalgia that often surrounds zines, she highlights the strong influences of consumer culture and technology availability that constitute the social atmospheres in which amateurs and Do-It-Yourself-ers thrive. Though brief, her discussion of the effects of Do-It-Yourself on cultural production serves as an appropriate conclusion to her document history.

Demonstrated through themes of authorship, reproduction, labor practices, and the amateur, Paper Knowledge underscores the importance of investigating vernacular texts by showing readers how past document formats shape our understanding of today's documents and the epistemologies they create. By historicizing this genre rendered nearly invisible by its ordinariness, Gitelman reveals how the very bits of ephemera that constitute much of our historical knowledge can be understood as entities in and of themselves; documents encompassing their own unique histories outside their applications while also being uniquely demarcated by them. She succeeds in uncovering, "the assumptions about documents that have been built into PDF (portable document format) technology, and how…using that technology help reinforce or reimagine the document" (p. 18). Media scholars of all walks will appreciate her meticulous and thought-provoking analyses of the surrounding practices of some of our most commonplace—yet immensely influential—media artifacts.

Biography

Sarah Evans is a PhD student in the Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media program at North Carolina State University. Her research areas include game studies, rhetoric, and critical media studies.

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