

# 4

## Circulation

*Circulation* refers to what happens to a text once it has been produced. A “text” can be as simple as an email or text message, but a text can also be as complex as a Hollywood movie or graphic novel. One reason it is so important to think about circulation is because it helps us understand how texts get delivered from authors to readers, as well as where it might go, who might see it, and what they might do with it. Sometimes circulation is easy to identify and understand, like sending a postcard or leaving a voicemail. However, circulation is often a little more complicated. Whenever you read, send, post, share, watch, or listen, you are playing your own part in the circulation of texts.

### History of circulation

Aristotle suggested that in order to be an effective writer or speaker, a student must become skilled in five different aspects of communication: invention (generating ideas), **arrangement** (organization and order), style (words and grammar), memory (memorization), and delivery (speaking or writing).

Aristotle argued that delivery was just as important to communication as the ideas themselves or the language used to convey them. In ancient Greece, most ideas were communicated orally, through public speeches, debates, or conversations. For Aristotle, the concept of delivery meant giving speeches, participating in debates, or having conversations. Most simply, the concept of delivery has always focused on how an idea is shared from one person to another, between a speaker

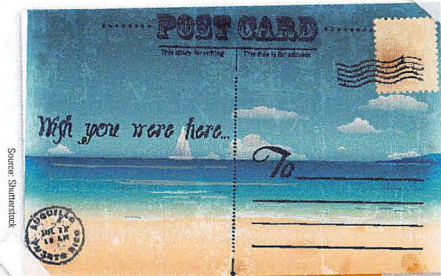


Figure 4-1

and audience, or an author and readers. Speech and performance were the dominant modes of communication in the ancient world, and so it followed that discussions of delivery focused on the spoken voice and bodily movement. Only with the development of bound and printed texts like books, newspapers, and posters did the ancient concept of delivery evolve to focus less on speech and more on the written word.

Recording ideas in printed texts was one of the first steps in allowing ideas to circulate in new ways. The first printed texts were created by hand, and making copies of manuscripts required scribes to copy one word at a time into a new manuscript. Because these texts were rare, most manuscripts produced by scribes ended up in the libraries of wealthy individuals or monasteries. Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in 1455 was one of the most important moments in the history of the circulation of the written word. His invention meant that books were more plentiful and less expensive. More people than ever before had access to the world of ideas. As the transition from quill to printing press illustrates, available technologies can affect everything about the circulation of a text: from how it's produced, to how it's consumed, what its material properties are, and who has access to it.

## Circulation today

This sort of transition, from one communication medium to another, has become increasingly common as new technologies emerge. The invention of recorded sound and radio radically shifted the way we produced and consumed texts. Certain types of texts were no longer limited by space and time. A symphony performed by an orchestra in London could be experienced by a banker in Cleveland months or years after the actual performance. The same can be said of motion picture cinema and broadcast television. Moreover, the development of radio stations, movie studios, and television networks has always been followed by amateur producers who take advantage of consumer technologies like ham radio, photocopiers, video cameras, or cassette tapes. All of these technological developments have produced new types of texts and new media.

As our writing and media technologies have become more powerful, our texts increasingly seem to take on a life of their own. This idea has never been more true than in our contemporary digital culture of websites, social networks, viral videos, and internet memes. There used to be a clear distinction between producing a text and distributing it. Writing a text and publishing a text were two different activities entirely. The same could be said for recording a song and playing it on the radio or making a movie and showing it in a theater. Writing and sending a letter was a process measured in days, not seconds. Making a movie required a production studio, rather than a smartphone. New technologies continue to emerge at an increasingly faster rate, and

the distinction between producing a text and circulating it is slowly disappearing. As a result, writers who have the best understanding of how texts are shared between people, how they circulate within and across social networks, will have the most impact and the biggest presence in the networks most important to them.

Wikipedia is an excellent example of the way that networked and digital technologies have changed the very nature of how certain texts are produced, circulate, and evolve in contemporary culture. For centuries before the World Wide Web enabled and democratized the digital publication and distribution of texts, encyclopedias were one of the most important and respected repositories of knowledge in almost any home or library. Encyclopedias were usually made up of dozens of expensive bound print volumes, each assigned its own letter of the alphabet. Unless a researcher had access to the encyclopedia's most recent edition, the information contained within its covers was likely outdated by some number of years. Even the most recent edition was likely written months or even years earlier, considering the lengthy process of editing and publishing bound books like these. These limitations were taken for granted in an age where print-publication dominated the circulation of texts. But there was no alternative. Acquiring a brand new, updated encyclopedia set every single year was a financial impossibility for most families and libraries.

Wikipedia was designed specifically to respond to these exact limitations and restraints. Although not a perfect solution to the challenges noted above, Wikipedia was accessible to any individual with online access, whether that be at home, school, or a local library. But accessibility is only one of the elements of circulation that Wikipedia addresses. Each of the entries within Wikipedia is constantly evolving. As new knowledge becomes public, as science charges forward, and political events unfold across the globe, Wikipedia is able to accommodate and incorporate those bits of

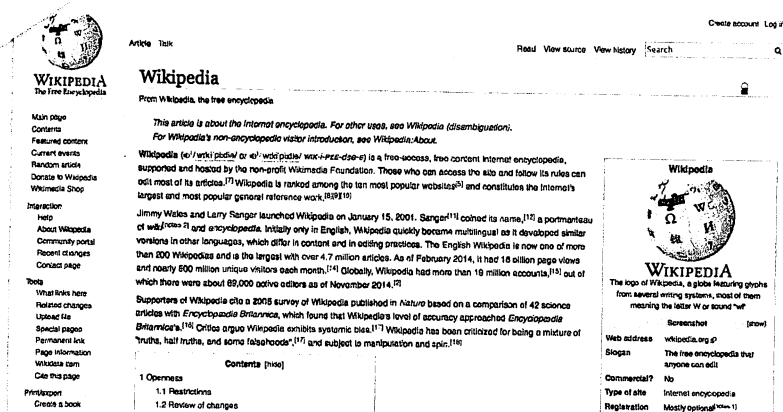


Figure 4-2



knowledge far more quickly and democratically than ever before. With the advent of Web 2.0 technologies, readers of Wikipedia have the option to participate in its existence as writers and collaborators. They can suggest corrections to inaccuracies or add emerging knowledge to the existing entries, and their suggestions become available almost instantly. This interaction, where the boundaries between reader and writer, producer and consumer begin to blur has resulted in one of the most comprehensive and accurate sources of knowledge ever produced.

A fascinating example of just how powerful the idea of circulation can be is the internet phenomenon of fake news, which—though it existed before then—came to light during the 2016 presidential election. The sole purpose of most fake news stories is to be circulated; authors make money based on the number of clicks. However, some fake news stories are intended to sway public opinion about particular issues or people. In both cases, those that are written just to circulate and those written to influence people's beliefs, these stories are deliberately written to contain misinformation. These are hoaxes, not satire: satire calls attention to itself as untrue, whereas fake news tries to convince readers that it is true.

“Successful” fake news authors have mastered the art of circulation: they think about who their readers are and produce easily shareable content, anticipating that their readers will spread the news via social media. One fake news story in late 2016 spread the lie that a pizza parlor in Washington D.C. was the site of a child sex slave ring led by Hillary Clinton. This story motivated a man to show up at the pizza parlor with guns, allegedly to free the children (Kang and Goldman). The power of the written word in the age of the internet is profound due to the increased means of circulating what we write, but the story of the pizza parlor reminds us that circulation without considerations of **ethos** and ethics can be truly dangerous, too. (See the piece by Jenkins et al. in this textbook for more about circulation and spreadability.)

Google and Facebook have made steps to change their algorithms to reduce the visibility of fake news stories, but the danger of being taken in is still present for anyone who spends time on the internet. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions have shared a list of tips for identifying fake news stories (Figure 4-3 on the facing page).

## Circulation and other concepts

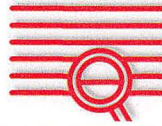
It's one thing to think about circulation in terms of viral videos, Internet memes, or popular movies and television, but it's just as important (and more practical) to think about circulation in terms of texts being exchanged among a smaller group of people who share a common **field**. For instance, a scholar might write an article for a journal, and he or she could reasonably assume that it would only circulate among his or

# HOW TO SPOT FAKE NEWS



## CONSIDER THE SOURCE

Click away from the story to investigate the site, its mission and its contact info.



## READ BEYOND

Headlines can be outrageous in an effort to get clicks. What's the whole story?



## CHECK THE AUTHOR

Do a quick search on the author. Are they credible? Are they real?



## SUPPORTING SOURCES?

Click on those links. Determine if the info given actually supports the story.



## CHECK THE DATE

Reposting old news stories doesn't mean they're relevant to current events.



## IS IT A JOKE?

If it is too outlandish, it might be satire. Research the site and author to be sure.



## CHECK YOUR BIASES

Consider if your own beliefs could affect your judgement.



## ASK THE EXPERTS

Ask a librarian, or consult a fact-checking site.

Figure 4-3

her fellow scholars interested in that topic. Scholars have a sense of the people who might encounter their texts, so they can make intelligent guesses about their audience's expectations regarding the features of the **genres** they are producing: citation styles, referencing the work of

previous scholars, or using certain words that might only be familiar to the people among whom the texts circulate.

Certain types of text afford different types of circulation. It's not likely that you'll see a brilliant meeting memo being shared among Facebook friends, and you likely know better than to include a link to your favorite cat videos as part of your job application materials. If you want something to be shared among friends, you're more likely to produce an **image** with a caption or a video, maybe even a blog post. If you're responding to a request for job application materials, you'll write something meant for one or two specific people, and you won't have to worry about producing a text that could be easily shared outside the company with whom you are applying. When looking at circulation and **affordances**, it's best to think about them as being dependent on each other.

If you want something to circulate to as wide an audience as possible, there are certain choices you can make about the modes and genres you take advantage of to produce your text. If you want to be someone who is well-known and respected for being able to do tricks on your bike, you'll likely put together a demo or highlight video so it can be shared among as many people as possible. On the other hand, if you know that you're only going to have access to email or a text message to communicate your idea, you can guess that it won't circulate much beyond the people you send it to directly. Sometimes circulation will be limited or determined by the affordances of the materials to which you have access. But at other times, you might have a very specific sense of the audience among which you'd like your text to circulate, even if it's just one person, and you'll select your materials accordingly.





## Writing with circulation 6

With so many texts competing for our attention and our memory, it's important to understand how texts operate in people's everyday lives. Knowing how they might encounter a text, or when it might be most appropriate for them to receive it, will often make the difference between being noticed and being passed over. Some things to consider:

- What sorts of things make a text memorable? Why do I notice or remember certain texts and not others?
- How are texts circulated in my particular **field**? What **genres** circulate most?
- In what sorts of social networks do the people I'm trying to reach participate most? Do people participate more as a consumer, producer, commenter, or sharer in these networks? Do they share things from one network on another? Why?
- What sorts of experiences, good or bad, have I had with the means of publication on the Web that focus primarily on **alphabetic text** (for example Google Docs, blogs, Tumblr, Twitter, wikis, forums, and message)? Which ones do I prefer and do I think my audience will prefer, and what is it about them that attracts me to them?
- What are the **affordances** or constraints of the various methods available to me for circulating my text?