Scripturient: Rewriting Literacies

Informationism

What would change about your work if you read, or even wrote, a poem on waking up every morning? To what new things would you attend?

Perhaps it would sharpen your turn of phrase and ear for language. Perhaps you would notice different things about your inner or outer worlds, or the always-blurry boundary between the human environment and nature at large. Even a snatch of birdsong might yield insights to the poetically-minded information professional.

The opening stanza of Helen Heath's poem *The Anthropocene* describes a walk in Wellington, the capital city of Aotearoa New Zealand, in which she hears "the phone that sounds like a ruru", a kind of spotted owl.

I am walking up Aro Street, on a late spring evening between pools of lamplight and darkness, well, as dark as it gets in the city. A ruru calls, I check my phone for messages — nothing. A ruru calls, I check my phone for messages — a ruru calls. I put my phone back in my pocket. The warm night air presses against my face, insects in lamplight dance their version of a mating call. Are all songs and dances about reproduction? A ruru calls, the night air passes.

Helen is an award-winning Kiwi poet whose first book, *Graft*, was the first work of poetry or fiction to be shortlisted for New Zealand's most prestigious science book prize. She is also communications adviser for the Kiwi library association LIANZA.

Helen's writing speaks to a tradition of poetry called Informationism, which explores technological change, technical jargon, and the interconnectedness of the "information society". As *Scripturient* seeks to push the boundaries of traditional literacy, I invited her to join us in this edition so that we can explore what information professionals could learn from poetry and its practice.

Poets of the Informationist school, which began in Scotland in the 1990s, insist that it is vital to question what we mean by, and what we feel about, knowledge. Their work examines the power structures by which knowledge and information are defined and controlled.

"Informationist writers seem like a natural fit for librarians," Helen explains, "considering the core work that librarians have always done is making sure that people have the information they need, where and when they need it and in the format in which they find it most useful."

When a poet explores these questions, some of the boundaries and concepts that information professionals take for granted can be tested or enriched. This is poetry for the age of complexity, in which humans' information technology, with all its inbuilt assumptions, has become deeply entwined with the natural world.

Helen argues that this is part of a wider change identified by theorist Donna Haraway in her *Cyborg Manifesto*: "Evolution has blurred the lines between human and animal; 20th century machines made the lines between natural and artificial ambiguous; microelectronics and the everydayness of cyborgs confused the lines of physicality...The internet and virtual worlds have further blurred the boundaries."

Helen is now interested in artificial intelligence research, and the concept of embodied embedded cognition. This is a theory that intelligent behaviour arises from interactions between brain, body, and environment. "I think that our knowledge of the world is inseparable from our bodily experience. When you carry a mini-computer in your pocket everywhere you go and wireless connectivity is reaching more and more remote areas, we become everyday cyborgs in nature."

Thinking through these issues with a poet's mindset may challenge our professional assumptions, yielding new insights and discoveries. It can break the frames through which we normally see our lives, and notice new flows of information – from both the natural world into our new digital domain, and from human technology into the wider environment.

"The Anthropocene" begins with a phone that sounds like a bird, and then tells of another bird which has learned to imitate the "digital trill" of a 1980s push-button phone; meaningful signals spilling across the boundaries between the human and animal worlds. Perhaps it takes a poet to help us notice the secret life of information.

Anyway, the point I'm getting to is the ringtone — that soft but insistent brrip, brrip — I heard it today, 30 years later in the song of a tūi outside my window. A song that could never be answered by me, only another tūi, with the same ringtone, creating what feels like an infinite calling loop.

Did a tūi learn this call in 1983 and pass the song onto its descendants over the last 33 years? I imagine the slow progression... Or is this a more recent acquisition, learned from a nostalgic ringtone on someone's cell phone last summer as they walked home from the train station? I don't hear birds singing a telegram. **IP**

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