

Section 2. Writing and Knowledge

The inspectability, durability, and transportability of writing has led to widespread collaboration in the production, evaluation, and distribution of knowledge. Writing has also fostered institutions and other forms of social organization that produce and rely on knowledge. Writing as well has formed readily accessible and socially shareable external memory in reference books, archives, files, libraries, digitized searchable collections, and the internet. Textbooks and collections form the canonized material of schooling. Writing has consequently become almost synonymous with the production, availability, and access to knowledge.

The canons of investigation and reporting for written genres in disciplines and other fields that rely on knowledge have directed what information we gather about the world and the form in which we know it. These specialized organs of inscribed knowledge are as particular and narrow as our physical sense organs that collect light or sound only in certain frequencies and from certain directions. How we inscribe knowledge has been refined by methodological writing that evaluates our collection of experience, the design of instruments, and form of data. The differing canons of arguments in academic and nonacademic fields consequently shape the kinds of analysis and theories that elaborate the meaning of the inscribed experience.

What is inscribed, shared, and recorded forms the basis for the workings of law and governance, political and activist organizations, journalism and publishing, corporations and finance, health and medicine, religions and belief communities, arts organizations, education, and many other fields of activity. While individual experience may be idiosyncratic, written knowledge creates the basis for shared social understandings, perceptions, action, and coordination. Writing offers means for regulations and agreements that guide organized activities. The chapters of this second section, “Writing and Knowledge,” consider the consequences of the emergence and distribution of written knowledge for our current organization and experience of life.

The first chapter in this section, “Local and Distant Knowledges, Local and Distant Minds,” considers the tensions and challenges that individuals and organizations face as they receive and participate in knowledge networks that extend beyond the local. The more extensive and varied the knowledge networks one finds meaning and value in, the greater the tensions with the local conventional beliefs and knowledge. People know different things and think different thoughts depending on the communicative networks they are part of. Even more, some institutions, such as religions, schools, hospitals, sciences, or international corporations, bring distant knowledges into local settings, fostering tensions with local visions of the world. Maintaining a knowledge-rich society and avoiding authoritarian regimes of official knowledge present ongoing and increasing challenges in an ever-more cosmopolitan world.

The second chapter, “What Literate Societies See: The Methodical Gaze of Genres,” considers how methods of interacting with and recording the world arise within specific social groups pursuing their interests. Any society comes to know the world through those methods of experiencing, recording, and reasoning about the world, as pursued by the different social groups within the society. The aggregate of these methods makes possible the knowledge circulating in the society, but the differences among the kinds and methods of knowledge of different groups within a society can create differences and conflicts, as different groups of people know different things in different ways.

The third chapter in this section, “Making the World Scientifically Thinkable: Inscribing Experience Methodically and Its Cognitive Consequences,” specifically addresses how internal and external processes come together in knowledge production. Internal neurological processes of perception, sensation, and motivated action are influenced and directed by the semiotic environment. The methods we use for collecting, selecting, and aggregating data are saturated by semiosis and provide the semiotic data and concepts by which we can think as individuals and epistemic communes.

The final chapter of this section, “The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Writer: The Growing, Unsatisfiable Hunger of Connection,” examines the personal consequences of the proliferation and differentiation of knowledge as individuals are able to learn from writers from different times and societies. While for some the presence of these potentials can foster self-conscious adherence to limited perspectives; for others it opens possibilities of greater individuation of knowledge, meanings, and point of view. This individuation of perspective, however, can further distance individuals from those immediately around them.