

**Transliteracy :  
a trendy word or a real new perspective for information training ?**

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First, I want to express my warmful thanks to your association, and this for two reasons : first because I have the honor to be invited here to present some personal thoughts to your association, and also because it gives me the opportunity to come to Prague, this beautiful city. Actually it has attracted me for a long time now !

Then I have to confess that I'm not really used to make presentations in English... I think the translation of my communication is OK, but I'm asking in advance for your understanding, for my bad accent. Also, I'm afraid I won't be able to avoid some difficulties during our discussion in the end ! But I'm sure we will manage to understand each other though, as we are all "transliterate persons" !

Well ! Let me introduce myself, quickly : I am a professor and a researcher in the Information Science and Communication department at the University of Rennes 2. I'm the co-manager of a small structure of continuous training : it is called the URFIST in Rennes<sup>1</sup>. URFIST means Regional Training Unit for Scientific and Technical Information. There are seven URFIST like the one I manage in France. We are organized on a network basis, and our missions are training, watching and research on every aspect of information literacy, web tools and scientific information trends<sup>2</sup>.

The URFIST are dedicated to three different publics : PHD students, teachers, and also researchers and librarians in the higher education and the secondary education. I'm detailing all this to tell you that my daily job also deals with the issue that brings you here : it's to say "how to train students - especially PHD students - to information skills ?".

To help us on this point, let me tell you about the tutorial we have achieved with the libraries of the European University of Brittany. This tutorial is called Formadoct<sup>3</sup>. It's intended to help the PhD students, from any disciplines, because it deals with different aspects of scientific information. Unfortunately, it's in French, and we haven't translated it in English yet.

To conclude with the presentations, I work as a researcher on three topics :

- the evaluation of the information on the Internet: how users - especially younger generations- , how do they filter, identify or evaluate Internet resources ? How do they assess credibility or quality to this information they've found on the web ? etc..
- the second subject deals with PhD students and teachers behaviors about scientific information : what are their practical needs and expectations ?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sites.univ-rennes2.fr/urfist/>

<sup>2</sup> See our professional blog UrfistInfo : <http://urfistinfo.hypotheses.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://guides-formadoct.ueb.eu/index.php>

- And eventually, the most important research topic for me is about information literacy, information cultures and transliteracy. On these issues, I work within a national team which includes some twenty researchers (faculty and PHD students).

These people come from three different professional cultures : information and library sciences, IT, and media studies. And this leads us directly to the subject I'd like to tell you about : transliteracy.

### **What is transliteracy ?**

Is it only a trendy word ? Is it just a buzzword ?

This word – transliteracy - has appeared a few years ago. Today, it's getting more and more popular, especially in the United States and in Great Britain. Libraries are particularly interested in transliteracy, and it has been the central topic of the last FORMIST meeting<sup>4</sup>, in France, in mid-June 2011.

Also, last June in New Orleans, during the convention of the American Library Association, ALA<sup>5</sup>, a workshop about transliteracy has taken place.

In France, this concept is beginning to trigger various research projects. But obviously, it's still in its home countries – it's to say US and England – that this theme has generated the greatest amount of work, meetings and research.

First, as Sue Thomas and her colleagues do precise it, the linguistic origin of this term should be emphasized : *“The word ‘transliteracy’ is derived from the verb ‘to transliterate’, meaning to write or print a letter or word using the closest corresponding letters of a different alphabet or language”*<sup>6</sup>. We know that transliteration is a corresponding process between two different writing systems (for instance between the Cyrillic alphabet and the Latin alphabet). This is also the origin of many cataloging standards, which librarians are familiar with. But now, after transliteration, here comes transliteracy. And of course it has quite a different meaning!

According to its etymology, transliteracy is based on sciences and writing skills, that is to say, literacy, in the original sense of the word, as it was originally defined.

But we can't stay on this original meaning only ; now the concept of transliteracy has greatly expanded the range of the involved skills. Here is the canonical definition of transliteracy, as it is commonly used by everybody today: *“Transliteracy is the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and film, to digital social networks”*<sup>7</sup>.

This concept takes into account the whole set of interaction skill. These interaction skills are implemented by users when they are dealing with any kind of information or communication means : these may be oral, or textual, or iconic, or communicative, or digital, etc.. For instance, to know how to write (on a notebook, on his or her computer, on a blog), to know

<sup>4</sup> Proceedings are available on: <http://www.enssib.fr/bibliotheque-numerique/notice-49488>

<sup>5</sup> "Why Transliteracy at #ALA11 June 29, 2011 — Bobbi Newman

Why Transliteracy was the first of two panels at the American Library Association conference in New Orleans." on <http://librariesandtransliteracy.wordpress.com/2011/06/29/why-transliteracy-at-ala11/>

<sup>6</sup> « le mot translittératie est un dérivé du verbe to transliterate, qui signifie écrire ou imprimer une lettre ou un mot en utilisant les lettres les plus proches provenant d'un autre alphabet ou d'une autre langue. » Thomas, Sue et al. « Transliteracy: Crossing divides », *First Monday*, 3 Décembre 2007, Vol. 12, n° 12, p. 2. Available on : < <http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2060/1908>

<sup>7</sup> Thomas, Sue et al. « Transliteracy: Crossing divides ». *First Monday* [On line]. 3 Décembre 2007, Vol. 12, n° 12, available on: < <http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/2060/1908>

how to read (either a book, or a newspaper, or a website), to know how to communicate (either orally or with a written message, by mail, by chat), to know how to look for information (in a directory, or to make a request in Google), to know how to control the images (taking photos, managing them, understanding them, sharing them), to know how to manage with social networks (including one's digital identity), to know how to read the press and understand the information, using radio, television, movies etc.. : all these skills, all this knowledge and expertise would be the concern of transliteracy.

As you can see, the scope of transliteracy is really huge, and then trainers and researchers may get a bit discouraged ! But we are now going to see that this concept is really fruitful to think out new digital uses and digital skills.

### **Where does transliteracy come from ?**

I won't tell you a detailed history of transliteracy. But yet, two aspects of this history are significant, because they inform us about what is transliteracy today : first it's born in the Anglo-Saxon world, and then, it comes from the academic research culture, not from the libraries culture.

So, the transliteracy concept has a double geographical origin, since it was born and grew almost at the same time on both sides of the Atlantic ocean. This double origin is now reflected in two different approaches, significantly different indeed.

In the United States, the idea has been shaped up around the early works of Professor Alan Liu, in the Department of English at the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB). As he was making research on online reading, Alan Liu launched a research project - the Transcriptions research Project - which became the Transliterations Project<sup>8</sup> in 2005.

In this American approach, we can notice the use of the plural form "transliterations", still used nowadays in Alan Liu's team. This team is particularly focused on the technological, the social and the cultural aspects of online reading.

Actually, it's in Great Britain that the transliteracy concept has really developed, on the singular form this time. And it's the case thanks to Professor Sue Thomas.

She is a research professor of new media at the Faculty of Arts, Design and Humanities, in the De Montfort University in Leicester. In 2006, Sue Thomas has created a small research group, the PART group ; it means Production and Research in Transliteracy<sup>9</sup>.

Most of these researchers come from literary disciplines. They had been working for a long time on writing, computers, the internet and they were wondering about the impact of Information and Communication Technology on writing and literature. Note also that, since the very beginning, this small research group has been integrated into a larger interdisciplinary research laboratory, the IOCT<sup>10</sup>, the Institute Of Creative Technologies. The IOCT has been created in September 2006, at the junction of e-Sciences, Digital Arts and Humanities.

To make it short, the transliteracy idea covers a set of research projects on broad topics. It includes the effects of the digital revolution on reading, writing, literature, arts and sciences.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://transliterations.english.ucsb.edu/category/research-project>

<sup>9</sup> <http://nlabinetworks.typepad.com/transliteracy/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.ioct.dmu.ac.uk/>

Eventually, remember that first, it has developed first quite far from the world of libraries and information literacy.

That's why the educational dimension - about the training of users - is generally absent in Anglo-Saxon researchers' works. But recently, libraries have taken over the transliteracy concept. Many websites and blogs have developed on the subject<sup>11</sup>, and also articles<sup>12</sup>, blog posts, and various communications<sup>13</sup>... about the relevancy of transliteracy, and also about the links between this new concept and the respectable information literacy, which is a much more older notion.

### **Back to the socio-technical context : the "digital melting-pot"**

The notion of transliteracy is based on the observation of the multiple literacies which are implemented on digital networks:

Sue Thomas has written : "*We live in a world of multiple literacies, multiple media and multiple demands on our attention*"<sup>14</sup>. On top of writing and communication skills, you may now add many specific skills dedicated to the use of Internet. And one of the major challenges of digital technologies is this irreversible process. This process brings together ever more closely skills and cultures, which used to be very distinct from one another. That's why the metaphor of the "digital pot" seems interesting to me to describe this process. This digital pot blurs all usual borders ; it redesigns jobs, needs and practices. In this great "informational mix" due to the digital revolution, we can distinguish at least three different levels: the documents level, the tools level and the practices level.

Because we are digitizing everything, the definition of a document itself has radically changed : today we are not any longer in stable documents environments, in a steady and well marked documentary world. On the contrary, we are faced to aggregation phenomena, ongoing deconstruction and reconstruction of signs and documents which are circulating on the networks, on and on. In France, this phenomenon has been called the "re-documentarization of the world". It means a permanent and unlimited mixing of the many digital traces. For example, a photo may be taken somewhere by someone, tagged by someone else, and then embedded in a document, or re-used in another context by another person, etc.. Though, documents are always "documented" and "re-documented", that is the idea of "redocumentarization". This documentary blurring blows up the limits of the document itself, and it has major implications for the different literacies we've already talked about, especially those of information, documentation, computer literacy and media. Indeed, knowledge and expertise which are now necessary for any production or use of digital documents whatsoever...these knowledge and expertise then, now intermingle computer skills, but also information and media skills.

On the top of this first blurring, we can add the tools hybridization, plus the convergence of their functions. Every day, we use information tools which look like real "Swiss army knives": we use them to look for information, to identify it, to write comments about it, to select it, to integrate it into a personal database, etc.. For instance, tools may be personal and

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<sup>11</sup> For instance this collective blog *Libraries and Transliteracy*, created in February 2010 :

<http://librariesandtransliteracy.wordpress.com/>

<sup>12</sup> For example : Ipri Tom, « Introducing transliteracy. What does it mean to academic libraries? », *College & Research Libraries News*, novembre 2010, vol. 71, n° 10, p. 532 -567. Available on :

<<http://crln.acrl.org/content/71/10/532.short> >

<sup>13</sup> See Susie Andretta's communication, during the 2009 IFLA meeting: [Transliteracy: take a walk on the wild side](#)

<sup>14</sup> Thomas, Sue et al., « Transliteracy: Crossing divides », *First Monday*, art. cit., p. 2

collective tools at the same time, such as social platforms for sharing bookmarks, customizable web pages, etc..

Finally, concerning the users practices, the mixture is at its maximum. With web giants like Google, users are now developing a wide variety of practices, which are at the same time informational, communicational and organizational. Users are sliding from information research, to planning management, and then from the classic mail to a social network, and at the same time, we are looking for a book and tracking a particular event, etc.. On the Internet, we perform every kind of task with no distinction, using our intuition, and, of course, in an interactive way.

To be sure to understand this concept of transliteracy, we must start from this basic observation : in their daily practices, either they're using some tools or producing documents, Internet users do mobilize a large number of skills, expertise and knowledge, which come from different fields and cultures. Librarians know about it today: we can no longer train students to search library catalogs or databases without taking into account their actual practices of Google or other tools, we can not ignore how they evaluate the information on social networks, or how they manage their digital identity, etc..

Today then, we can not stick anymore to Information literacy in its strictly information and documentary meaning. This definition is no longer adequate today to think out all these skills which are spontaneously implemented while using the Internet.

### **Global approach or analytical approach ?**

How can we manage to think out this hybridization of different skills ? How can we encompass the interweaving of the many cultures which are mobilized when using the networks? Which theoretical and methodological approach can we adopt ? Two types of answers are emerging. To make it short, it can either be an analytical approach, or an holistic approach.

On the one hand, the traditional approach is the analytical approach: it is to identify, define and distinguish all the literacies which are mobilized when using digital networks: *information, library, media, visual, critical, computer, digital, network, ICT (Information and Communication Technologies)*<sup>15</sup>... *literacy*<sup>16</sup>. This approach has been the major one for a long time, and it has generated a great deal of research work. The historical producers of each kind of literacy are primarily tied to the specificity of their own culture : then it's their natural starting point when they think out the phenomenon of hybridization practices, and also the links between these different cultures. In Descartes country, the analytical approach is clearly prevailing, it has been dominant for many researchers, including myself. I had called this perspective "the territories issue" of information literacy, and I have participated in several studies about the relationship between the three major information cultures : media, information-documentation and computers. We've also worked on the type or relationship between these cultures : is it more like neighborhood, association or hierarchy ? For example,

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.ictliteracy.info/>

<sup>16</sup> See examples of literacies identifications: <http://www.readingonline.org/newliteracies/semali1/>,  
<http://www.noodletools.com/debbie/literacies/>, <http://www.slideshare.net/reneehobbs/21st-century-literacies>,  
<http://www.slideshare.net/oledeuff/quelles-littraties-pour-quelles-conceptions-de-linformation>



what are the common territories between information literacy and media literacy, what kind of links can be established between ICT education and information training, etc<sup>17</sup>.

On the other hand, there is the global and unified approach. Whether they are writing, reading, information, or communication skills and practices, these skills and practices are thought under the aegis of a single concept : transliteracy, or also the concept of digital literacy. It is interesting to underline the proximity of the definitions of transliteracy and digital literacy. Paul Gilster is the actual inventor of this term in 1997 : "*Digital literacy is the set of attitudes, understanding and skills to handle and communicate information and knowledge effectively, in a variety of media and formats*"<sup>18</sup>. In this definition, we can almost read the definition of transliteracy as we have seen before.

Therefore, one important question does appear : what is the relationship between transliteracy and the specific literacies ? For Sue Thomas and the British researchers around her, transliteracy would be "above" all other literacies. They claim that literacy doesn't "replace" media and digital literacies, but it does contain them : "*transliteracy does not replace, but rather contains, "media literacy" and also "digital literacy"*"<sup>19</sup>. For Susie Andretta, "*Transliteracy is an umbrella term encompassing different literacies and multiple communication channels*"<sup>20</sup>. Sue Thomas even thinks about transliteracy as "*a unifying ecology not just of media, but of all literacies relevant to reading, writing, interaction and culture, both past and present*"<sup>21</sup>. Here she refers to the schools of thought dealing with the convergence (like Henry Jenkins), or the media ecology (like McLuhan). She poses transliteracy as the "mother of all literacies," and transliteracy does accompany the historical transition process to the numeric world, which affects all aspects of life, society and culture.

These two approaches, the comprehensive one and the analytical one, are not that opposed. On the one hand, the interest of transliteracy comes from its broad spectrum. This wide range can understand at the same time the cross-disciplinary skills, and also their convergence, which are generated by the digital practices. On the other hand, this generic term can not in any way dilute the uniqueness of each literacy : media literacy is very different from computer literacy, which is itself distinct from information literacy, etc.. It is essential to identify those specific skills, and, moreover, to identify the specific cultures which are mobilized when using the networks. A good way to illustrate this back and forth movement between specific skills and transversal skills is to have a look at the evaluation of the information on the web.

### **Is information evaluation the leading figure of transliteracy ?**

What is the evaluation of information on the Internet? It's a process of different operations which may be difficult, or even complex. What is it about ? filtering the results of a search engine, understanding the nature of a website, clearly identifying the author or the publisher of a resource, judging the credibility of this resource, measuring the authority of the author on the subject, assessing the reliability and the quality of the information, learning to appreciate

<sup>17</sup> Serres, Alexandre. « Information, media, computer literacies : vers un espace commun de la culture informationnelle ? », *Séminaire du GRCDI, Rennes, 14 septembre 2007*. Available on : [http://culturedel.info/grcdi/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/seminairegrcdi\\_aserres\\_territoirescultinfo.doc](http://culturedel.info/grcdi/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/seminairegrcdi_aserres_territoirescultinfo.doc)

<sup>18</sup> Bawden, David D. « Digital Literacy ». In : *SciTopics* [En ligne]. [s.l.] : [s.n.], 2008. Disponible sur : <[http://www.scitopics.com/Digital\\_Literacy.html](http://www.scitopics.com/Digital_Literacy.html)> (consulté le 16 Avril, 2010)

<sup>19</sup> Thomas, Sue et al., « Transliteracy: Crossing divides », *First Monday*, art. cit., p. 4

<sup>20</sup> Andretta, Susie. « Transliteracy: take a walk on the wild side ». In : *World library and information congress : 75th IFLA general conference and council, 23-27 August 2009, Milan, Italy*. Milan : IFLA, 2009. p. 3  
Disponible sur : <<http://www.ifla.org/files/hq/papers/ifla75/94-andretta-en.pdf>>

<sup>21</sup> Thomas, Sue et al., « Transliteracy: Crossing divides », *First Monday*, art. cit., p. 2

the relevance of the resource in relation to one's information needs ... All these skills are intermingled in this process, and they are actually required to evaluate information. And I must insist on the fact that knowing how to evaluate information is a great educational challenge. What is at stake ? We are dealing here with training new generations, those who are called the "digital natives", to train them then to self-judgment and thought, to instill the culture of the doubt into them, to train them eventually to "the art of filtering", as Umberto Eco recommended in a recent interview<sup>22</sup>. We can not get into the details of the many issues which are at stake when we are talking about evaluating the information : they may be educational, public, political, cultural, etc.. The thing is, I want to demonstrate that the evaluation of information on the Internet is a good example of transliteracy. And indeed it goes far beyond the only documentary skills. Why? For two reasons : first, the wealth of the skills and cultures which are mobilized, and second, the fact that these skills and cultures are tightly intermingled.

Actually, evaluating the information, more than any other activity on the web, does mobilize and require the full range of literacies, and even beyond. As far as I'm concerned, I would rather talk about cultures, rather than literacies. I think that there are at least five types of cultures which are involved, with varying degrees, in the process of evaluating information.

The first culture which is involved is the "general culture", including historical and scientific knowledge. It stands here as a set of basic knowledge and general benchmarks to understand the world. General culture can not be reduced to a simple set of "skills", and then it remains difficult to characterize and define it. It is clear yet that it would be very difficult for a user to evaluate information on the web without this basic general culture.

The second category is very broad. Actually it includes all disciplinary cultures with, of course, varying levels of proficiency, from the beginner to the expert in the discipline. In fact, the knowledge of the particular discipline is a key prerequisite to be able to evaluate the content of information and its quality, etc.. How is it possible to evaluate a resource in economics or physics if you do not have the slightest fundamentals in these disciplines?

The third culture is ours : it is information literacy, or the information and documentary culture. It includes advanced use of tools, research methods, and information sources, etc.. But it also requires to understand some information key-notions, like a source, a document, a support, or the indexing process, for instance.

To know how to evaluate information on the Internet also requires a basic computer literacy, or digital literacy. Here I mean the knowledge, the understanding and the practical use of some basic principles about computers, networks, the Internet and the web itself. Many students - even digital natives - do not know how to read and decode a URL. They are struggling to identify the support of an Internet resource : is this a blog, a wiki, a forum, a customizable page, etc.. ? They mix up the Internet and the web, and their "mind map" of the Internet is often partial, or inaccurate. Now, the mastery of these basic computer skills is one of the conditions to be able to evaluate information.

Finally, the fifth culture is the media culture, it's to say the knowledge of mediation, media sources, how they work, what are their rules, their main issues, etc.. Media culture (or media literacy) is fundamental to be able to evaluate information, and vice versa, it is also one of the main goals of media education.

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<sup>22</sup> Interview with Umberto Eco, « Je suis un philosophe qui écrit des romans », *Le Monde*, 12 octobre 2010, p. 27

Thus, these five cultures – and we could add the image culture on top of these – these five cultures are involved, with varying degrees, in the process of information evaluation. They shape the basic framework of many skills which are finely intermingled. And for now, we have not even mentioned the basic writing and reading skills, it's to say literacy within the first meaning of the word: Obviously, to be able to evaluate information first requires a good command of writing and reading. All these cultures, all these skills are mixed, they have even become hybrids, and this is why the evaluation of information seems to embody the very notion of transliteracy.

### **In conclusion, what is the interest of transliteracy for the librarians and for their students training activities ?**

Librarians' Information literacy remains a centerpiece of transliteracy, and it would be absurd or stupid to dissolve it in a broad and blurred set. I repeat : transliteracy is not a substitute for information literacy, it helps to overcome it, and also to make the links between information literacy and the other literacies.

Globally speaking, transliteracy could be a perspective, not a unified perspective, but a common one, a shared perspective, both for research and education. So for the educators of various literacies, transliteracy is interesting to build a better link between these different literacies which used to be separate. It's true especially for information training, computers training, media and image education, and also communication on the Internet. There are reference systems for different skills, there are programs and training contents, there are educators dealing with different literacies, and until now, all these have been partitioned, confined to their own territory, and indifferent to their neighbors. For how long is it still going to be so ? How long can media training, documentation training and computers training still remain cut off from each other ?

I will conclude and offer a direction for thought and work : according to the importance of this issue, it would be useful to consider the evaluation of information on the Internet as a common axis. This axis is shared by the three main literacies : information, media and IT. It then requires a collective reflection, we need to first identify and then deconstruct the different skills and cultures which are mobilized around the "art of filtering."

Transliteracy could then become a fruitful perspective for linking the contents of these different courses. This is an invitation to develop teamwork, in order to build together new knowledge about information, communication and the media in the XXI century.

Thank you for your attention and now, over to you for discussion !

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