



Bob Brown's Machine Dream

Alex Sniatkowski

MA, English, New York UniversityMSLIS, Palmer School of Library & Information Science, Long Island University

Citation: Sniatkowski, Alex. "Bob Brown's Machine Dream." *Bridging Fields*, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2025).
<https://doi.org/10.33682/43zf-87sk>.

The rediscovery of Bob Brown's design for a reading machine provides new ways to examine reading practices, contemporary e-readers, and librarianship.

In June 1930, Bob Brown invented a reading machine. This reading machine was never manufactured. It exists today in the pages of an avant-garde literary journal and an anthology of modernist writers that includes Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams. This anthology was arranged to feed his machine if it ever came to be. Bob Brown's reading machine is ultimately a dream. It is the dream of a man who wrote too much and read too much and wanted to read more and wanted to do so faster. He was a literary stunt artist and a cookbook publisher who worked in the rare book trade and as a stockbroker, both of which informed the design of his machine. Brown never executed his vision, but that does not mean his proposal should be relegated to the dustbin of failed modernist experiments. Bob Brown's reading machine still provides a way to interrogate the way we read and the objects which we read. As a truly novel reading device, it allows us to examine our own contemporary e-readers and how they affect the fundamental principles of librarianship.

Bob Brown introduced his reading machine to the public, or at least the part of the public interested in work of the modernist avant-garde published in the pages of the literary journal *transition*. Brown imagined an electrically powered machine loaded with rolls of small printed text called "Readies." The machine was designed to unspool the

Readies over a back light and under an adjustable magnifying glass, projecting to the reader a moving text, like a stock ticker. His announcement reads as part manifesto/part advertisement for a technologically advanced method of reading, in which the reader reads without turning pages. He claims his machine will “budge type into motion, force it to flow over the column, off the page, out of the book where it has snoozed in apathetic contentment for half a thousand years.”^[1] For Brown, the reader is freed from moving their eyes over a block of words. Instead, the words are in motion, and the reader’s eyes are still, and a mechanical interface of buttons allows the reader to adjust the speed and size of the montage of text.

His description of the process reflects an exuberant attitude toward technological speed as an appendage for human cognition:

Extracting the dainty reading roll from its pill box container the reader slips it smoothly into its slot in the machine, sets the speed regulator, turns on the electric current and the whole 100,000; 200,000; 300,000 or million words spills out before his eyes and rolls on restfully or restlessly as he wills, in one continuous line of type, its meaning accelerated by the natural celerity of his eye and mind.^[2]

Brown aligns his invention with both the talkie and the phonographic record. He credits the former as the nominal source of his Readies, and throughout his manifesto, he refers to the spool of text as a “reading record.” He copies the mechanics of both media, adopting the spinning cycle of the phonograph and film, while replacing the projector or needle with a magnifying glass. For Brown, his machine demonstrates that there are new “oracular means... for carrying the word mystically to the eye.”^[3] He approaches reading as a physical activity that requires motion and effort by the reader. He asks for “a new reading medium that is in time with our day, so that industrious delvers in the Word-Pile may be rapidly read and quickly understood.”^[4] The Readies represent a revolutionary method of text transmission that displaces the work of the reader onto his machine in order to adapt reading practice to the proliferation of information and content in the early 20th century.

Brown declares himself a lover of the book, but he also believes its fixed form limits how much can be read by an individual reader. This becomes an issue as more reading material is produced with greater speed. His manifesto distinguishes between the production and consumption of texts. Brown acknowledges the revolutionary advances of the modernist avant-garde in the writing published by James Joyce and Gertrude Stein, but this shift, he notes, only attends to writing and production of books. Reading lags behind, fixed in “archaic medievalism.”^[5] He writes “I have lived with five hundred years of printed books and have felt the same papyrus that Nebuchadnezzar might have touched, and all this time I have lived in loving wonder... [of] the most efficacious manner of administrating the written word to the patient.”^[6] Brown is driven by a modernist desire for speed and efficiency. He dreams of a reading practice in which words gather meaning by their cumulative optic effect on the mind, rather than their unified arrangement on a page.

He imagines that his machine will disintegrate sentences for a montage of connected words that eliminate the syntactical structures that slow reading. He claims

that this method will make each word more efficiently produce its meaning. He provides a demonstration of what this might look like:

Myself-I-see-motherfather-newscopie-Optical-Writers-running round-rims-rhythmically-Eye-Writers-writing-endless-lines-for-reading-machines-more-optical-mental-more-colorful-readable-than-books – simple-foolproof-Readie-Machine-conveying-breathless-type-to-eager-eyereaders-tickling-Inner-ears-eyefuls-of-writer-right-before-receptive-ocular-brainportals-bringing-closer-hugging-readerwriter-now.^[7]

This excerpt displays a style of writing reflecting the stream of consciousness of Joyce and the ecstatic excess of Stein, as well as Tristan Tzara and the Dadaists. Its meaning remains intelligible, despite its deviation from conventional sentence structures. Articles are eliminated. Verbs pass by in participle form, possibly in a series of clauses describing what “I see,” or as fragments of action. Periods and commas are dispensed with.

This text is still insufficient for Brown. The unified hyphens that push the reader forward represent “a crude attempt to convey the optical continuity of reading matter.”^[8] Even in this excerpt, where reading is sped up by excising organizing inscriptions, the text is immobile. It “lacks MOTION, the one essential of the new reading principal.”^[9] Ultimately, it is still bound by the format of the page of the book that he seeks to overcome.

In 2010, the *New York Times* published “The Godfather of the E-Reader,” a cursory excavation of the legacy of Brown. This rediscovery encourages those interested in the history of the e-reader to “look past Steve Jobs and Jeff Bezos,” crediting Brown with “the dream of a truly revolutionary reading device.”^[10] Brown is easy to identify in the genealogy of electronically transmitted literature, but to position him as an ancestor to the current devices that support reading web text on the screens of various proprietary devices ignores the difference between his Readies and our current reading machines. It diminishes his vision to kickstart text into motion. It obscures the limitations of e-readers, which still rely on the rigid fixity that Brown desired to transcend. The reader’s eyes move over fixed columns of text on the screen. The reader might not have to turn a page, but they still need to work their hands to move forward in the text. Brown may have planned an interface with buttons to adjust the speed and size of the text, but once reading commenced, he intended that readers only had to let the roll of print unwind in front of them to progress. Contemporary e-readers have modified the process of turning the page, but once the reader starts reading, they are still compelled to undertake a similar action.

E-readers, and more broadly e-texts, are still fixed by the same reading formats as printed material, the codex and the scroll. They do not offer the moving type that Brown believed might allow readers to consume a million words “accelerated by the natural celerity of the mind.”^[11] Information production has only accelerated in the 100 years since Brown’s manifesto, yet we still read at the same pace with the same media, only now the content is transmitted through electrical currents and radio waves generated by sequences of code on servers that require massive quantities of energy. It

has had no effect on how we read. Our relationship with the text has only changed in so far as it is less present, flickering out of our environment once we are finished with it.

The differentiation between e-text and print text has shaped the course of librarianship for longer than the commercial proliferation of e-readers, although the acceleration of the digital migration of information in the early 2010s has naturalized these resources as an essential element of library catalogs. Library scholarship has centered around e-resources and their budgetary stability for the last decade and a half, often in relation to the pricing practices of publishers. The 2010s can be seen as a conflict between libraries and the businesses that supply their material, in which the two sides engaged in hostile negotiations over the purchasing and lending of e-texts and e-resources. Implicit in both the publishers' actions and the library literature analyzing e-resources was that the e-texts libraries loaned were somehow different than the physical books in the stacks. This has allowed for the erosion of fundamental library principles, chief among them first-sale doctrine, but also patron privacy and access to information.

Anne Klinefelter predicts this in her 2001 article, "Will the First-Sale Doctrine Disappear?" First-sale doctrine is the legal principle that allows libraries to loan items to patrons without infringing upon copyright restrictions. Klinefelter describes it as the fundamental law that allows libraries to function. First-sale doctrine existed as a common-law doctrine until 1976 when it was codified by the *US Copyright Act*, which states that a purchased copy of a work can be sold, traded, or loaned without consent from a publisher or copyright holder. The treatment of e-texts and print texts as different entities has provided the groundwork to circumvent this principle, with e-texts being subject to a different copyright code than printed books. It has allowed publishers and vendors to establish a new system for lending that allows them to restrict access to information, whether by predatory pricing or simply removing copyrighted material from their databases. [12]

So why then Bob Brown? An examination of Brown's Readies demonstrates an aspiration for an e-reader that is truly different from the book forms that came before it. While his Readies never came to exist outside of the pages he dreamed of escaping, his manifesto imagines a revolutionary reading technology. He presents a complete vision that attends to the ways that such a technology will affect syntax and grammatical structures, as well as the physical activity of the reader. This speculative device offers us a way to see contemporary e-readers and the e-texts they host as what they are – digitally migrated codexes and scrolls, ephemeral replications that are easier to disappear, take away, and restrict access to. Brown's Readies provide a framework to attack the ontological distinction between e-books and print books that has allowed publishers and vendors to erode library services. By engaging with his dream for the future of reading, we can lay the groundwork to resist the forces that seek to make reading more difficult in the present.

[1] Brown, Bob, "The Readies," *In Transition : A Paris Anthology: Writing and Art from Transition Magazine* 1927-30, 1990, p. 62.

[2] Ibid., p. 60.

[3] Ibid., p. 59.

[4] Ibid., p. 64.

[5] Ibid., p. 59.

[6] Ibid., p. 64.

[7] Ibid., p. 63.

[8] Ibid., p. 63.

[9] Ibid., p. 63.

[10] Schuessler, Jennifer, "The Godfather of the E-Reader," April 11, 2010, *New York Times*, <https://nytimes.com/2010/04/11/books/review/Schuessler-t.html>

[11] Brown, Bob, "The Readies," p. 60.

[12] Klinefelter, Anne, "Will the First Sale Doctrine Disappear?(Libraries Do Not Meet Exception Because of Their Nonprofit Restrictions)(Brief Article)," *Information Outlook* 5, no. 5 (2001), pp. 45-45.

Author Bio:

Alex Sniatkowski (he/him) is a student in the NYU-LIU Dual Degree Program (MA/MSLIS). His work has appeared in Bodega Magazine, The Southampton Review, Griffel, and Hobart.

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