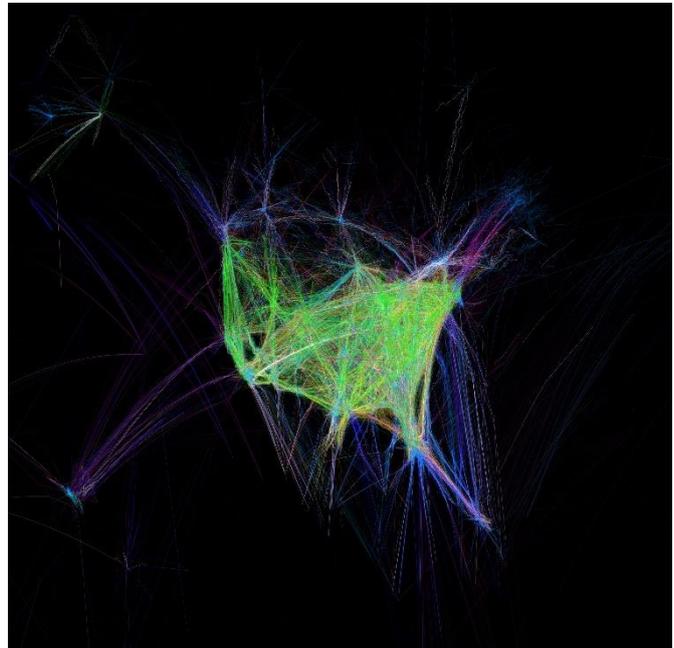


Borges' library and the blogosphere: in search of the seriously trivial

Dale Lately

November 2012

I'd never heard of 'text miners' till recently, but apparently there's a National Centre of them in the city where I live – bringing to mind ticklishly unlikely images of programmers arriving at work in hard hats or jamming a spanner beneath the spacebar. They're part of the growth industry of data mining, of course, and the fact that they exist at all is testament to a world that's gasping beneath the weight of its own archives – however incorporeal these archives may be.



Seventy years ago Jorge Luis Borges wrote a short story about a cosmically vast library that contained all possible books – a whole universe based on the inconceivable number of permutations a length of text would allow, making possible not only all the books ever written, but all the ones that *could* be written. What a wonderful conceit, at a time when print was still expanding, and the surfeit of magazines, supplements, fanzines, freezines that avalanched our world in the years before the web was beginning to emerge; when 'records' meant cavernous filing cabinets and punch cards, deep-recess

shelves and cryptic, Kabbalistic microfiches. When librarianship was still cinematic.

It was a richly imaginative idea in its day, but in the way of history, the metaphor of Borges' 'Babel' library has gained a relevance it could never hitherto possess. After all, could anything express better our long slogs through the blogosphere, the insipid pulse of Twittertopia or the unceasing verbal slurry of the internet, than this Piranesian prism of senselessness, of literature as chimera, of jumbled apocrypha and verbal ephemera?

True, the web's not *quite* on the scale of the whole universe, but to us helpless human beings it may as well be: to read what is posted today around the world in just one minute would quite possibly take more than a lifetime (and yes, I say 'possibly' because nobody actually knows; the web is simply too huge to be properly measured). There are estimated, or loosely guesstimated, to be 350,000,000 websites registered around the world, and like the universe itself the whole thing's expanding at an exponential rate. Surely humanity must be staggering dangerously towards a point of 'Peak Info', beyond which it becomes difficult to even make sense of what's out there? Actually, no – we reached that years ago. As thinking human beings, we're cockroaches crawling over a heap of irrelevance; from butter mountains to utter mountains – the task is not so much to find the good stuff, but to filter out all the dross.

Let's stay with Borges for a moment. The *Library of Babel* is part ghastly premonition, part seductive fantasy; the author was able to see the poetry of a world filled with almost infinite literary possibility – how it would not just replicate the great works of civilisation, but furnish us with the ones civilisation never got around to writing. As the poet himself put it, we'd find in there: 'the detailed history of the future, Aeschylus' The Egyptians, the exact number of times that the waters of the Ganges have reflected the flight of a falcon ... my dreams and half-dreams at dawn on August 14, 1934 ... the unwritten chapters of Edwin Drood, those same chapters translated into the language spoken by the Garamantes...' Such a library would not only contain the complete catalogue of the Library, but also a text detailing, point by point, every single inaccuracy and falsehood of that catalogue. And presumably there would be

another detailing every single inaccuracy and falsehood of *that*, too – and so on, like watching a piece of controversial draft legislation make its way through Parliament – or indeed, like watching a re-tweet going viral. A comment thread raised to the level of the cosmic. Like the web, the Babel library would be far more a place of *reproduction* than production.

And by the same principle, there's an upside to all the verbiage our own Babel library generates by the second. By sheer laws of scale, there must presumably be works of genius taking shape on a server somewhere – tweets of finely crafted beauty, Shakespearean emails, Facebook posts so sublime they effortlessly express the human condition – or at least the human condition as it was two seconds ago, beside a fun animated graphic that links to a website that sells cars and an advert for cheap holidays. They must *be* there, hidden in the depths. It's just that you need to do a lot of fishing to find them.

Take blogs. I'm not hugely enthused about blogs – and not because I think they're all badly written or trivial; just that you have to wade your way through a mountain of badly written or trivial ones before you find one that isn't. Of course anyone who points that out is immediately branded as a cultural elitist and clog-burning luddite who's wandered in dressed in a smock from the late eighteenth century, but I don't care. I think this drive to endlessly document our lives is another of the web's evolutionary dead ends. In the end, our lives just aren't that important.

Let me qualify that. Lives are always important. But not every single moment of them. In other words, random unadulterated happenstance doesn't qualify as worthy of ongoing commentary, the kind of commentary that fuels the splurgings and murmurings of the internet. I've heard bus conversations of great insight and sentiment, but that doesn't mean I spend my time listening to bus conversations. To say that all unedited reality is important just because it's 'topical' (in the sense that it 'happened recently') is like putting the twenty four hour footage of the Big Brother house on an equal par with Antonioni.

The majority of posts, comments and tweets are not *bad* – they’re just aggressively, offensively mundane. Trawl the seabed of the blogosphere and you gaze upon the towering peaks of mediocrity: inane comments; embryonic factoids and half-written thoughts; lazy hearsay, badly spelled jokes, and useless ephemera, all collated like a cloud of car exhaust and wafted onto the world’s computer screens. A form of gentle literary drizzle. The tyranny of the mediocre. We’re witnesses to the rise, and rise, of the seriously trivial.

When blogging got big in the mid-2000s, a web-friendly start-up publishing house sprang up to capture this new emerging, exciting market by turning ‘blogs to books’. A blog – say, the daily life of a call-girl stroke emergency surgeon and part-time amateur chef who also talked about last night’s TV *and* gave out funky fashion tips – would gain an audience and their “blog” would be gathered together and turned into something called a “book”, which is like the internet, but made out of paper. It failed. Most of the books sank without trace, the publishing house folded, and a few idealistic twenty-somethings were left to watch furniture being removed from rented office space as they concluded to themselves that perhaps there was a bit more to one of these “book” things than a list of someone’s favourite movies or a photo of a tree that looks a bit like Russell Brand.

Again, there are wonderful blogs out there, just as there are hidden gems in Borges’ library, not to mention the many excellent and carefully curated online journals that give literature a place on the web. But because the search engine hierarchies are based on popularity, and the people who drive the virals are often puerile youth with surfing time on their hands, we end up with a lot more lip-synching cats than proto-Shakespeares. People get up in arms about the right to free speech on the web, but in terms of its literary merits, most of this ‘free speech’ comes over at the level of a half-arsed, scribbled post-it note. Is this really a great work of civilisation we’re creating here? Is Twitter the evolving conversation of a society with something to say, in an age when we’ve all been promoted, via a modem, to the status of Plato’s Philosopher-Kings? Personally I doubt it. You can find good stuff if you search for it, but sticking your ear to the internet in search of the profound is like

eavesdropping on a T-Mobile exchange and hoping to hear a convincing explanation of Calculus.

And that's the point. Borges' library made works of great beauty possible, but it also buried them beneath a quasi-infinity of trivia. 'For every sensible line or accurate fact,' as he perceptively describes the library, 'there would be millions of meaningless cacophonies, verbal farragoes, and babblings'. I've encountered a few 'meaningless cacophonies' in my time; just tune into any comment thread (or watch your Facebook wall) and you'll find enough 'babbling' to furnish an entire commune of Dada poets. As he says himself, 'All the generations of mankind could pass before the dizzying shelves ever reward them with a tolerable page'. Apt indeed. In the age of data saturation, where we need to fund an office full of Text Miners just to find anything worth finding, humanity has to pass an awful lot of shelves before it gets to a tolerable page.

And there's the price you pay for being granted powers of composition on a cosmic scale; the chance to forge the sublime means a seemingly endless tissue of nonsense. Which reminds me, I haven't been in my local library for ages. God knows what Borges would have made of Twitter, though. I have a horrible feeling he'd have loved it.