



Book Technology Real Intelligence



By Manar Harb

The first time – in a long time – I held a pen to write a letter to someone was several years ago, after poet Suheir Hammad updated her Facebook status and shared her mailing address publicly. She invited her fans to mail letters to her. The idea intrigued me and propelled me to write. I found myself rehearsing, picturing the words on the page, and imagining them being read by Suheir. Erasing and rewriting, it took five tries before I arrived at the final version. Engaging with the pen and paper to communicate my message brought me back in touch with my senses. The ability to see the thinking process in front of me while preparing the letter stimulated my brain cells and created a more personal relationship with myself and the recipient. It takes about one month to mail a letter from Ramallah, Palestine, to New York, New York.

Although modern technology may seem efficient, the idea about saving time through computer technology is an illusion. Time does not change. Our pace does, though, and so does our relationship with nature. Competing with machines and forgetting that we are mammals with beating hearts brings big cash money to the pockets of some. Look at the way computer technology is manufactured and treated. Standardized equipment operated through cheap labor at high operation costs produces large quantities of similar yet overpriced artificial products. Replacing the handmade quality of everyday items, such as clothing, shoes, and paper, has pulled ordinary people away from the tailored and custom-made elegance that has become a delicacy available only to the elite. However, embroidery and various other craft forms have the capacity to meet the demands and needs of a society.

Tapa, amate, rice paper, and papyrus are all precursors to the paper we use today. Tapa, a cloth-like material made mainly from the inner bark of the mulberry tree, but also from that of fig and breadfruit trees, was used for clothing, painting, and writing as early as 4000 BC, throughout the Pacific, southeast Asia, and Africa.¹ Rice paper refers to paper made from a variety of plants or from rice starch. While the former were used for writing and painting, the latter is used in a variety of East Asian cuisines. Amate has been produced in Central America from the time before the arrival of Europeans until today. Made from the bark of the amate tree, it was used for writing codices and given as precious gifts to distinguished persons. Papyrus was used in Egypt starting with the First Dynasty (around 3000 BC). Made from the pith (pulp) of the papyrus, it was used, like tapa, for a number of purposes besides writing. Documents were stored as scrolls; a blank roll, dated 3000 BC, was found in a tomb in Saqqara near Cairo. Of all the proto-papers, tapa was and continues to be the most widely manufactured. More material has been experimented with and used for writing. Copper tablets

Before information technology, there were books. Withstanding the test of time, these structures of folded or unfolded pages come in many shapes and styles and contain a wealth of knowledge.

and pottery with proto-Indic writings dated to 2200 BC were found in the Indus Valley, India. The earliest-known document written on parchment, a specially prepared type of leather, is an Egyptian scroll that dates to the Sixth Dynasty (2300 BC).² In China, incised divination bones were used in 1400 BC. Between 200 BC and 220 AD, during the Han Dynasty, the golden era of China, the creation of “true” paper, characterized by its hydrogen molecular structure, has been credited to Cai Lun.

Information traveled westwards. Following the battle of Talas (located in today’s Kyrgyzstan) fought in 791 AD between the Chinese Tang Dynasty and the Abbasid Caliphate, Chinese prisoners of war revealed the secret

(fig. 12) Ishi, true name unknown (Northern California), human display and janitor of the University of California Museum, Berkeley, 1911 - 1915 (accession #196)

From Danny, *the Last African American in the 22nd century*, 1994, accompanying text to a piece that was part installation, part performance and multi-media project as Danny interacted with the public and engaged in actions.





able to make up
on this body, but it was unlikely to appeal to the printers of his day. The
defect of the type was that the founder cast sorts that the compositor had to
into the required letters by cutting away unwanted strokes or points.
An example of these factorum sorts is **٢**, used for Ba **ب**, Ta **ت**, or Tha **ث**.
had to be made into one of the three by removing some of the dots. There
many such in the fount, both single and tied letters.

هَذَا بَلَاغٌ لِقَائِهِ وَلْيَنْبَرُوا بِهِ
وَلْيَقْلَبُوا كِتَابَهُ إِلَى اللَّهِ وَاحِدٌ
وَلْيَكْتَسِرُوا وَلَوْلَا آلاُ كِتَابٍ *

Fig. 49. Two-line English-bodied Arabic No. 73.
Resetting of part of the Elsevier type-specimen, 1758.
Reproduced from the *Fondries de cession*, 1908.

(4) Some of the statements in this paragraph seem to me
debatable. The two smaller Arabics could be used with
floating vowel points. Charles Fachelet thought them old-
fashioned because they needed a double alignment: medial
the **ك** and **د** required letters on two different levels be-
low and after them. But this is essential to an adequate
reading of Arabic.

types of different bodies (H.C.). Charles Fachelet
was, no doubt, based on the 1002 in French (1771)
typary specimen-book of 1771. Vowel-points are not
known, in **٢**. Handwritten letter **ب** on **ب** from
1768 in 1771. See List of type-specimens on p. 100
be found on the page showing **٢** from **٢**.

Floating vowel
Figures (3, 4,
Ligatures:

Great Primer Sy
plete, but th
script, Joha
With the be
punches cut
much concer
an asset in hi
nevertheless
suitable for r

A page from the book *Typefoundries in the Netherlands, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century: A history based mainly on material in the collection of Joh. Enschede*, by Ch. Eschede.

of papermaking to Arabs.ⁱⁱⁱ By 795, a papermaking factory using the new technology was started in Baghdad, Iraq. Muslim factories employed linen as a substitute for the bark of the mulberry, and the technology of papermaking initially flourished in Iraq, Syria, and Palestine, before moving to North Africa and Europe. The first paper mill in Egypt was built around 850, and by 1040 paper was becoming popular; by 1200 it had completely replaced papyrus. By way of Morocco, where the first mill was built in 950, knowledge reached Spain and the rest of Europe. A paper mill was set up in Bologna, Italy, in 1293, and the first paper mill in England was built in 1309.

Before rushing into a paperless world, think about the stakes at hand. Evidence regarding the influence of handwriting on brain growth, learning, and creativity continues to emerge. In “What’s Lost as Handwriting Fades,” an article featured in *The New York Times* (June 2014), Maria Konnikova relates research about how children express more ideas when they compose text by hand and consistently produce words more quickly than on a keyboard. The mind is stimulated, active, and creative when engaged with pen and paper. “There’s just a huge difference in the creative part of the brain when you are writing

and when you are typing,” says Molly McCarthy, a mother and Microsoft employee who makes sure her son engages in cursive handwriting.^{iv} The senses are activated in a different way than when interacting through a screen. Try it for yourself. And remember, while following the trend towards increased technology may work for some, sticking to “grandma knows best,” may be a better bet for you.

Manar Harb is a contributor to This Week in Palestine. In 2014, she launched Anonymous Letter Writing, an open platform tracing self-expression to handwriting, inspired by her letter to poet Suheir Hammad. The idea earned her the Writing and Community Engagement Fellowship from Mills College, 2015–2017, where she pursues her MFA in book art and creative writing.

ⁱ Roger Neich, Nick Pendergrast, *Pacific Tapa*, University of Hawaii Press, 2004.

ⁱⁱ Ancient Writing Materials, available at <http://www.skypoint.com/members/waltzmn/WritingMaterials.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Kallie Szczepanski, “The Battle of Talas: A Little-Known Skirmish that Changed World History,” *About Education*, October 2015, available at <http://asianhistory.about.com/od/centralasia/a/BattleofTalas.htm>.

^{iv} Joe Heim, “Once all but left for dead, is cursive handwriting making a comeback?” *The Washington Post*, July 26, 2016.