I seem to have been talking about relationships between poetry, the internet and digital technologies for some time. It was part of my PhD dissertation and the subject of a year long AHRC creative fellowship. My recent residency in Riga was an exploration of ideas of site specific writing, work produced on location, and their rapid distribution via a kind of website called a wiki. My latest poetry publications also deal in some ways with relationships between technology and the body, and the ways technology helps and hinders communication. My collaborative writing with Zoe Skoulding, which formed the basis for a number of performances and the results of which will come out next year in book form through West House Books were, in part, an exploration of relationships between identity and place, and the ways in which the disembodied virtual spaces provided by e-mail could be used to develop those ideas.

After I recently finished a chapter on poetry and virtual space and digital technologies, I breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that I’d finally finished with it and feeling I’d nothing more to say. Yet it keeps coming back. And the reason it keeps coming back is because relationships keep changing as technology advances. Its possibilities keep expanding.

I think my somewhat reluctant interest in the internet and digital technologies comes from a number of directions.

Firstly, the Internet changed my relationship with the loose poetic community I was part of. Located in north Wales but with a young family some way from the more cosmopolitan
centres of the activity, where the readings took place and where the publications came out, I was isolated from those who wrote most like myself or from those who might provide a critical audience for the work I was doing. I had difficulty knowing what was being published, or when readings took place. So the internet and e-mail provided me with information and a community. This has remained the case and I’m currently joint list manager for the public British and Irish Poets list and an active member of a closed list, UK Poetry. Through these lists I not only occasionally engage in discussion, although frankly they’re not the best medium, but also know of the publication of books, conferences, readings and calls for submissions. That information was available before, of course, but now there’s more of it. That’s why this paper is called a question of scale. I’m not implying that changes are necessarily qualitative, but rather quantitative.

Secondly the internet means that I have access to far more poetry. This is through the e-mail lists, where people post poetry, magazine style web sites (which I discuss later), e-books available for download, personal web sites etc.

Thirdly, and this has increased rapidly in the last year or two with the development of broadband, there is access to a vast amount of spoken word poetry. This is on specialist sites such as upenn.edu, the poetry archive, ubuweb, and the new ‘archive of the now’ from Brunel. There is work available from across the century, and in recent lectures on Yeats and Eliot I was able to access recordings of them reading their poems. There is also, an increasing amount of video material available (see Tom Raworth on ‘youtube’ for example).

Fourthly, despite tales of gloom in poetry sales from the book industry (1.4% of value of books sold in 2003 were ‘literature and poetry’. Gardening was 1.7%), there has been an
explosion in the publication of poetry books in the UK from two main sources, Salt and Shearsman. Salt publishes some forty new book length (100 page) collections of poetry a year and Shearsman some twenty-five (the same as Seren, the national publisher for Wales and a very established press). Both have extensive web sites. Both use new technologies to support their activities. Salt recently announced a total of 7 million visitors in the last year to their website and has just received a grant of £185,000 to further develop a technology driven publishing programme.

Fifth there has been a considerable increase in internet usage, with estimates of people spending twenty hours a week online and advertising income from the internet now exceeding that for television. On a more anecdotal level, despite being on no search engines and with a ‘private’ address, the wiki (a kind of mini web-site) I produced for my recent residency in Riga has had around 10,000 hits from over 15 countries. I’ve done nothing to it since mid-September, it was a project with a limited life-span, but it still got 1000 hits this month. This is in stark contrast to a similar project I carried out around three years ago, which got hits in the high hundreds.

What I want to do in the rest of this paper is, to some extent historicize and contextualise those changes, try to develop a kind of benchmark from which further research might take place, and identify some questions.

The first thing I’d want to say is that writing about the relationship between the internet, digital technologies and poetry and poetics can be both a beguiling and a baffling process. The internet redefines relationships between space, place and time, and changes relationships between people and places.
While one senses that the internet is new and different, then new and different from what? Is the history of the internet, for literary studies, part of the history of the development of the book, and the development of printing technologies? This is where Jerome McGann locates it in his book, *Radiant Textuality*, and he also makes a convincing case for comparing the ‘open’ concept of the library to that of the internet. Summarily expressed drawing on the history of the book would locate digital technologies and the internet in a history which began with the oral transmission of texts, through the handwritten manuscript to the printed book and its distribution. The internet, in this analysis, represents a next stage, in which restrictions of the publishing industry can be removed, and texts freely circulate in the virtual space.

Yet the history of the internet is also part of the history of electronic mass media, of radio, film and television, and could be located in the development of ideas of the ‘global village’ and the ‘society of the spectacle’ through the works of Marshall McLuhan and Guy-Ernest Debord. In this context the internet represents a further development of the communicative facilities of mass media, providing both a means of storing and transmitting information by transnational ‘media providers’, yet also turning anyone with a personal computer into a media provider. If the ways political power, social norms, national identities and the consumer society are asserted and maintained is through the ability of the mass media to construct and transmit texts and images, then the way in which the internet and digital technologies allow anyone with a personal computer to contribute is its most democratizing or revolutionary potential. The internet and digital technologies potentially provide a free space, free of the control that accompanies official media sources, and within which a bewildering diversity of images can be constructed, manipulated and distributed.
The visual nature of the internet and virtual space, means that tracing ideas of visual perspective from the Renaissance, through Cubism, and to the present might provide a further context in which they can be examined. If the development of perspective in the Renaissance was about the development of the viewing subject, as much as it was about that which was being viewed, and the fragmented subject of the Cubist painting represented the fragmentation of the subject viewing the painting, then peering through a screen into a ‘virtual’ space without scale or fixed perspective will similarly construct a different subject; performative, inclusive, constructive and slippery.

The history of the internet and digital technologies must also lie in the more general history of culture and society, and in the changes in relationships between language, geography, nationality and identity and subjectivity of which the internet is both product and producer. The universality of the internet and digital technologies, and the way they can be pressed into the service of a variety of social and political agendas, adds to the difficulties of analysing and examining its relationship to current poetry practices.

It is therefore, within this range of possibilities, difficult to know where to start. On the one hand to write about the internet risks trying to redefine all cultural and social relationships, while on the other it is simply an addition to the ongoing development of interactive information and communication technology such as the radio, television and telephone. The questions seem both wide reaching and epistemological but can also be simplistic and pragmatic; how fast can it communicate, how much information can it hold and what can I do with that information? It is for these reasons that I take a more stranded approach, untwining some elements of activity and examining them in temporary isolation in an attempt to break through the mirror effect of the internet and the way it reflects back a
distorted but complete image of the world. In isolation the links to other and previous
practices become more evident, and within these histories minor narratives more closely
related to poetry practice emerge; and in particular the relationship of the internet to small
press publication.

I’ll give an example of one of these strands. For the contemporary poet the internet and
digital technologies provide, simultaneously and collectively, a place of writing, a means of
manipulating and editing text, a means of distribution and a place of storage. In his essay
‘What is the History of Books’ Robert Darnton outlines his ‘model circuit’ between author
and reader for the book, a circuit made up of author, publisher, printer, shipper, bookseller
and reader as the ‘elements that work[ed] together for the transmitting of texts’. The writer
on the internet can create a ‘short circuit’, linking directly from author to reader and missing
out publisher, printer, shipper and bookseller. There are different responses to this, ranging
from celebration that the power of the publishers is broken and new and more imaginative
forms of writing can be freely available, to concern that the ‘market’ will be flooded with
unedited and indiscriminate bad writing.

I am not, however, forecasting the death of the book. The development of new publishing
technologies and the internet as a marketplace through websites, seem to have secured the
immediate future of the poetry book, and two major new poetry lists in the UK have been
established via Salt and Shearsman. The usual limitations to maintaining a substantial
catalogue of poetry, the need for a significant financial outlay at the time of printing, for a
high number initial print run and the need to store the books have gone, to be replaced by a
‘just-in-time’ service that can respond to fluctuating sales. Similarly, as bricks and mortar
bookshops, with only a few exceptions, struggle to give half a shelf to the more bland poetry
from the more mainstream publishers, online bookshops such as Amazon can maintain a long list of books on a virtual bookshelf. The short-run stapled poetry pamphlet can sit alongside the best seller and be available anywhere in the world at 24 hours a day. This example of the ‘digital economy’ means that books that would have been previously unpublished as uneconomic, can now become economic, and that books that would have struggled to be distributed outside of a small number of the cognoscenti, can be available to all.

Examined from within the history of publishing and the book, the conclusions seem potentially contradictory. On the one hand the history could be written as a narrative of increasing alienation, reducing the embodied experience of language to the visual apprehension of pixilated surfaces. With online publishing and reading work on screens even the tactility of the object of the book has gone, and a picture of a real object replaces a real object. I’m not sure whether I’m reading or watching, and some of the elements I normally have under my control, such as the ability to read more slowly or quickly, or to go back over something I’ve read, or the ability to read the work in a different order (what McGann calls ‘Deformation’) is taken out of my hands.

Yet the mass circulation book has itself been described as reducing the shared and collaborative process of reading out loud or storytelling, where teller and listener shared a specific context in time and space, to that of visual apprehension. With the book and the individualized practice of silent reading, the experience of the text (as Michel de Certeau says in his essay ‘Reading as Poaching’ becomes visual, whereby ‘the text no longer imposes its own rhythm on the subject’ and ‘reading frees itself from the soil that determined it’. The eye, rather than the voice, becomes the principal instrument. This is a problem exacerbated
by the technology of printing and a developing literate population who shift from the extended appreciation of a small number of books to moving fairly quickly over a large numbers of texts.

Anyone familiar with browsing the internet will easily recognize the parallel with internet surfing, where apparently unlimited numbers of texts are often scanned quickly, barely read, as the mouse hovers over the next link. The internet and digitalization therefore further distances the reader from the text, and the physical object of the book is reduced to dots on a screen.

There is a counter argument, that digital technologies and the internet, rather than continuing the process of abstraction that the book is responsible for, reintroduce some of the elements of the oral transmission of poetry. They can reintroduce the voice as the medium for transmission. Performance via digital technologies and distributed via the internet can give the poem duration and a rhythm and share characteristics of time-based art, such as film or music. The technology can introduce a variety of extra semantic elements, some of which might stand in for the body language of the live performer, and they can combine work from different art-forms. Increased bandwidths and increasingly intuitive digital tools mean that transmission of information does not simply mean the verbal, even for the relative amateur, but can include still and moving images and sound. On a more simple level the free verse line, which operates visually as well as aurally, can be both heard and seen. Other technologies (and wikis and blogs are a good example) support collaborative and communal processes of writing. The combination of these facilities could be said to reintroduce to texts some characteristics of a shared human experience of literature from before the mass circulation of books.
If the virtual space of the internet can be characterized as ‘open’, then this is nowhere more evident than in the development of the online poetry magazine. Digital technologies and the internet have meant that more books are more easily available; they have also brought about more significant changes in the form and function of the ‘little magazine’. Paper-based poetry magazines are varied in their intentions. The can seek to represent a nation or region, (Poetry Wales for example), a particular approach or set of ideas (see the early history of Harriet Monroe’s magazine Poetry and its role in the development of Imagism and the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E journal), to develop a community of writers and readers or simply to provide a space which seeks to publish the best work it can find. There is, however, a clear sense throughout the twentieth century that magazines have provided an avenue of publication for experimental forms of writing that would struggle to get accepted by more established publishing houses, as well as supporting new writers in developing a track record that may result in a first collection. The number of magazines that have existed even in recent years is bewildering (see http://www.poetrylibrary.org.uk/magazines, and the ‘Little magazines Project’ at http://www2.ntu.ac.uk/littlemagazines/). Some have only lasted an issue or two while others go on for decades. They range from the glossy and perfect bound to the temporary and the stapled. From the 1960s to the 1980s the advent of low-cost reproduction techniques led to a spate of publications, often modelled on political flyers, and operating in a ‘gift economy’ in which poets were not paid for their work and income from the magazine, if any, simply paid for reproducing the next issue. These were distributed outside of conventional literary circles, and were as often linked to art schools as literature departments in universities. The advent of personal computing and desktop publishing software in the 1980s meant that magazines could be produced which were indistinguishable from more ‘professional’ products. Despite these technological advances, the difficulties of
selling and distributing magazines meant that many found difficulty in sustaining themselves on a more permanent basis.

This imperfect history of magazine poetry conceals a rich tradition of diverse practices. In some ways the internet and digital technologies seemed to provide all the answers. Unlimited space meant that the restrictions on the amount of poetry in each issue could be lifted, and distribution through the internet was free. There was a downside, that there was no real way of charging money for the magazine, but given that, in many cases, in a paper-based world this simply paid for printing and distribution and contributed little or nothing to the published writer or the editor, this was not necessarily the barrier it might at first appear. As John Tranter, the editor of the internet magazine Jacket puts it: ‘magazine subscribers subscribe; that is, they pay money. My readers get Jacket for free. Obviously I’ll never get rich that way. But it sure beats trying to edit, print, publish, distribute and sell a print edition of a literary magazine. I’ve been there, and done that’ (http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/review/pr89-1/jacket.htm). In the same article Tranter describes the internet as a ‘paradigm shift’ in magazine publishing and he gives his motivation for editing and publishing Jacket:

I enjoy editing the poems and articles and taking photos of people and designing the pages, and I even enjoy writing the HTML (hypertext markup language) typesetting code that underlies the pages. Jacket exercises all my various talents – and it’s fun. It has also enlarged my circle of friends by a factor of about ten. And I feel I’ve enabled a lot of writers to find a wider international audience for their work, especially younger poets. I received a lot of generous support and assistance when I was a young writer, and it’s good to be able to give something back.
While the ethos of online publishing might have similarities with more radical paper-based magazines of previous decades, the product, the online magazine, has significant differences. The alternative poetry magazine of the 1960s and 70s was characterized by impermanence, limited space and low circulation, while the online magazine is characterized by unlimited space, permanent availability and potential worldwide circulation. Not only will the current issue be available to anyone with an internet connection, but all back issues will be archived and available to anyone, all over the world at all times. John Tranter’s *Jacket* ([http://www.jacketmagazine.com](http://www.jacketmagazine.com)) is a good example. Since first appearing in October 1997 there have been some 30 issues (by 2006) with no sign of any letting up. What is remarkable is not only the longevity and regularity, but also the scale of each issue. Although early issues contain what would be expected in a substantial print magazine, say a couple of articles, a selection of poems and reviews, later issues have contained, by paper and print standards, significant quantities of materials. By issue 28, the latest complete issue at the time of writing, there are another three features, each made up of about a dozen articles, three interviews, around 35 items under ‘Reviews and Articles’ and poems from around 32 poets. This is a scale and a diversity impossible to imagine in print, yet it is also work, given freely by poets and critics of some reputation, and who have published extensively through conventional routes. This is not a magazine for beginners and, in fact, unsolicited poetry submissions are not accepted, but contains work by and about some of the major figures in modernist and postmodern writing. *Jacket*, and the name itself is an ironic gesture towards the magazine’s virtual existence, echoing the phrase ‘don’t judge a book by its jacket’, seems to combine qualities of both the concrete and virtual worlds, enjoying the space that the technology offers yet also monitoring that space carefully through the editing process. Although the paper-based world is mimicked in the way work is collected into ‘issues’, each with a date and with a standardized layout there is, of course, no practical reason why the
material couldn’t be organized thematically into ‘interviews’, ‘reviews’, ‘poetry’ etc. rather
than dated issues. The ‘search’ function turns the archive into an infinitely expandable online
single issue. Hibbard, in his review of the online magazine *Big Bridge* talks of the way in
which ‘one continuous issue is to some degree the main attraction of ejournals’ and how
‘with hypertext, limitless billows of virtual space and links reaching to links, ejournals can
connect to an infinity of material’. I know what he means but perhaps the notion of
continuous is not the right one. As a reader in the archives of these magazines I tend to cut
across their seriality, linking between first and last issues by virtue of one in the middle and
then doubling back to take another route through. The search engines and databases that
make up the archives have no notion of the issue, and search on terms that sit outside time.
Categories of works by individual writers and themes in articles and reviews form new
patterns in the material. In this case, once it is past its sell-by date and archived (although in
the case of *Jacket* they are presented as a living archive) for the online magazine the issue
number becomes irrelevant. For the paper-based version it is all important of course, and the
only way that elusive articles can be tracked down.

In tracing the impact of the internet and digital technologies through the history of the book
and the poetry magazine, I have tried to draw together the ways in which they both mirror or
develop the past and indicate the future. The internet plays a major part in the way it
structures and distributes knowledge, supports the manipulation of knowledge into new
forms and supports rapid and complex forms of communication. In poetic terms it is more
‘open field’ than ‘closed lyric’, and to quote Doreen Massey ‘there are always connections
yet to be made, juxtapositions yet to flower into interaction, or not, potential links which
may never be established. Loose ends and ongoing stories.’
I’ve identified the following questions:

There is no doubt that there is now more poetry, more different poetry and it is more available. Has this changed patterns of readership? Are the same number of books being sold, but spread across more publishers? What do a million hits on the salt website or 10,000 hits on my partlyinriga site (I’m pretty sure no other publication of mine has been seen by 10,000 people) mean? Are there qualitative conclusions that can be drawn out of these quantitative statistics?

Can/is the combination of new technologies, the internet, online sound and video performance, and older technologies such as the book and the live reading, develop new markets?