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Academia 1.0: Slow Food in a Fast Food Culture? (A Reply to John Hartley)

<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/169>

Kate Bowles

"You could think of our kind of scholarship," he said, "as something like 'slow food' in a fast-food culture."

— Ivan Kreilkamp, co-editor of *Victorian Studies*
(*Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 2009)

John Hartley's entertaining and polemical defense of a disappearing art form (the print copy journal designed to be ripped eagerly from its envelope and read from cover to cover like a good book) came my way via the usual slightly disconcerting *M/C Journal* overture:

I believe that your research interests and background make you a potential expert reviewer of the manuscript, "LAMENT FOR A LOST RUNNING ORDER? OBSOLESCENCE AND ACADEMIC JOURNALS," which has been submitted to the " [sic] issue of *M/C Journal*. The submission's extract is inserted below, and I hope that you will consider undertaking this important task for us.

Automated e-mails like these keep strange company, with reminders about overdue library items and passwords about to expire. Inevitably their tone calls to mind the generic flattery of the internet scam that announces foreign business opportunities or an unexpectedly large windfall from a deceased relative. At face value, this e-mail confirms John Hartley's suspicions about the personalised craft of journal curation. Journal editing, he implies, is going the way of drywalling and smithying—by the time we realise these ancient and time-intensive skills have been lost, it'll be too late. The usual culprit is to the fore—the internet—and the risk presented by obsolescence is very significant. At stake is the whole rich and messy infrastructure of academic professional identity: scholarly communication, goodwill, rank, trust, service to peers, collegiality, and knowledge itself.

As a time-poor reader of journals both online and in print I warmed to this argument, and enjoyed reading about the particularities of journal editing: the cultivation and refinement of a specialised academic skill set involving typefaces, cover photographs and running order. Journal editors are our creative directors. Authors think selfishly and not always consistently about content, position and opportunity, but it's the longer term commitment of editors to taking care of their particular shingle in the colourful and crowded bazaar of scholarly publishing, that keeps the market functioning in a way that also works for inspectors and administrators. Thinking of all the print journals I've opened and shut and put on shelves (sometimes still in their wrappers) and got down again, and photocopied, and forgotten about, I realised that I do retain a dim sense of their look and shape, and that in practical ways this often helps me remember what was in them.

Nevertheless, even having been through the process he describes, whereby "you have to log on to some website and follow prompts in order to contribute both papers and the assessment of papers; interactions with editors are minimal," I came to the conclusion that he had underestimated the human in the practice of refereeing. I wasn't sure made me an expert reviewer for this piece, except perhaps that in undertaking the review itself I was practising a kind of expertise that entitled me to reflect on what I was doing. So as a way of wrestling with

the self-referentiality of the process of providing an anonymous report on an article whose criticism of blind refereeing I shared, I commented on the corporeality and collegiality of the practice: I knew who I was writing about (and to), and I was conscious of both disagreeing and wondering how to avoid giving offence. I was also cold in my office, and wondering about a coffee. "I suspect the cyborg reviewer is (like most cyborgs) a slightly romantic, or at least rhetorical, fantasy," I added, a bit defensively. "Indeed, the author admits to practising editorship via a form of human intersubjectivity that involves email, so the mere fact that the communication in some cases is via a website doesn't seem to render the human obsolete."

The cyborg reviewer wasn't the only thing bothering me about the underlying assumptions concerning electronic scholarly publishing, however. The idea that the electronic disaggregation of content threatens the obsolescence of the print journal and its editor is a little disingenuous. Keyword searches do grab articles independently of issues, it's true, but it's a stretch to claim that this functionality is what's turning diligent front-to-back readers and library flaneurs into the kinds of online mercenaries we mean when we say "users". Quite the opposite: journal searches are highly seductive invitations to linger and explore. Setting out from the starting point of a single article, readers can now follow a citation trail, or chase up other articles by the same author or on similar topics, all the while keeping in plain sight the running order that was designed by the editors as an apt framework for the piece when it first appeared. Journal publishers have the keenest investment in nurturing the distinctive brand of each of their titles, and as a result the journal name is never far from view. Even the cover photo and layout is now likely to be there somewhere, and to crop up often as readers retrace their steps and set out again in another direction.

So to propose that online access makes the syntactical form of a journal issue irrelevant to readers is to underestimate both the erotics of syntax, and the capacity of online readers to cope with a whole new libidinous economy of searching characterised by multiple syntactical options. And if readers are no longer sequestered within the pages of an individual hard copy journal—there really is a temptation to mention serial monogamy here—their freedom to operate more playfully only draws attention to the structural horizontalities of the academic public sphere, which is surely the basis of our most durable claims to profess expertise. Precisely because we are hyperlinked together across institutions and disciplines, we can justly argue that we are perpetually peer-reviewing each other, in a fairly disinterested fashion, and no longer exclusively in the kinds of locally parochial clusters that have defined (and isolated) the Australian academy.

So although disaggregation irritates journal editors, a more credible risk to their craft comes from the disintermediation of scholarly communication that is one of the web's key affordances. The shift towards user generated content, collaboratively generated, openly accessible and instantly shareable across many platforms, does make traditional scholarly publishing, with its laborious insistence on double blind refereeing, look a bit retro. How can this kind of thing *not* become obsolete given how long it takes for new ideas to make their way into print, what with all that courtly call and response between referees, editors and authors, and the time consumed in arranging layout and running order and cover photos? Now that the hegemonies who propped up the gold standard journals are blogging and podcasting their ideas, sharing their bookmarks, and letting us know what they're doing by the hour on Twitter, with presumably no loss of quality to their intellectual presence, what kind of premium or scarcity value can we place on the content they used to submit to print and online journals? So it seems to me that the blogging hegemon is at least as much of a problem for the traditional editor as the time challenged browser hoping for a quick hit in a keyword search.

But there are much more complicated reasons why the journal format itself is not at risk, even from www.henryjenkins.org. Indeed, new "traditional" journals are being proposed and launched all the time. The mere award of an A* for the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* in the Australian journal rankings (Australian Research Council) confirms that journals are persistently evaluated in their own right, that the brand of the aggregating instrument still

outranks the bits and pieces of disaggregated content, and that the relative standing of different journals depends precisely on the quantification of difficulty in meeting the standards (or matching the celebrity status) of their editors, editorial boards and peer reviewing panels. There's very little indication in this process that either editors or reviewers are facing obsolescence; too many careers still depend on their continued willingness to stand in the way of the internet's capacity to let anyone have a go at presenting ideas and research in the public domain. As the many inputs to the ERA exercise endlessly, and perhaps a bit tediously, confirmed, it's the reputation of editors and their editorial practices that signals the exclusivity of scholarly publishing: in the era of wikis and blogs, an A* journal is one club that's not open to all.

Academia 1.0 is resilient for all these straightforward reasons. Not only in Australia, tenure and promotion depend on it. As a result, since the mid 1990s, editors, publishers, librarians and other stakeholders in scholarly communication have been keeping a wary eye on the pace and direction of change to either its routines or its standards. Their consistent attention has been on the proposition the risk comes from something loosely defined as "digital". But as King, Tenopir and Clark point out in their study of journal readership in the sciences, the relevance of journal content itself has been extensively disputed and investigated across the disciplines since the 1960s. Despite the predictions of many authors in the 1990s that electronic publishing and pre-publishing would challenge the professional supremacy of the print journal, it seems just as likely that the simple convenience of filesharing has made more vetted academic material available, more easily, to more readers. As they note in a waspish footnote, even the author of one of the most frequently cited predictions that scholarly journals were on the way out had to modify his views, "perhaps due to the fact that his famous 1996 [sic] article "Tragic Loss or Good Riddance? The Impending Demise of Traditional Scholarly Journals" has had thousands of hits or downloads on his server alone." (King *et al.*; see also Odlyzko, "Tragic Loss" and "Rapid Evolution"). In other words, all sides now seem to agree that "digital" has proved to be both opportunity and threat to scholarly publication.

Odlyzko's prediction of the disappearance of the print journal and its complex apparatus of self-perpetuation was certainly premature in 1996. So is John Hartley right that it's time to ask the question again? Earlier this year, the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* article "Humanities Journals Confront Identity Crisis", which covered much of the same ground, generated brisk online discussion among journal editors in the humanities (Howard; see also the EDITOR-L listserv archive). The article summarised the views of a number of editors of "traditional" journals, and offset these with the views of a group representing the Council of Editors of Learned Journals, canvassing the possibility that scholarly publishing could catch up to the opportunities that we tend to shorthand as "web 2.0". The short-lived [CELJ blog](#) discussion led by Jo Guldi in February 2009 proposed four principles we might expect to shape the future of scholarly publishing in the humanities: technical interoperability, which is pretty uncontroversial; the expansion of scholarly curation to a role in managing and making sense of "the noise of the web"; diversification of content types and platforms; and a more inclusive approach to the contribution of non-academic experts. (Guldi *et al.*)

Far from ceding the inexorability of their own obsolescence, the four authors of this blog (each of them journal editors) have re-imagined the craft of editing, and have drafted an ambitious but also quite achievable manifesto for the renovation of scholarly communication. This is focused on developing a new and more confident role for the academy in the next phase of the development of the knowledge-building capacity of the web. Rather than confining themselves to being accessed only by their professional peers (and students) via university libraries in hardcopy or via institutional electronic subscription, scholars should be at the forefront of the way knowledge is managed and developed in the online public sphere. This would mean developing metrics that worked as well for delicious and diigo as they do for journal rankings; and it would mean a more upfront contribution to quality assurance and benchmarking of information available on the web, including information generated from outside the academy.

This resonates with John Hartley's endorsement of wiki-style open refereeing, which as an idea contains a substantial backwards nod to Ginsparg's system of pre-publication of the early 1990s (see Ginsparg). It also suggests a more sophisticated understanding of scholarly collaboration than the current assumption that this consists exclusively of a shift to multiply-authored content, the benefit of which has tended to divide scholars in the humanities (Young).

But it was not as a reviewer or an author that this article really engaged me in thinking about the question of human obsolescence. Recently I've been studying the fragmentation, outsourcing and automation of work processes in the fast food industry or, as it calls itself, the Quick Service Restaurant trade. I was drawn into this study by thinking about the complex reorganisation of time and communication brought about by the partial technologisation of the McDonalds drive-thru in Australia. Now that drive-thru orders are taken through a driveway speaker, the order window (and its operator) have been rendered obsolete, and this now permanently closed window is usually stacked high with cardboard boxes. Although the QSR industry in the US has experimented with outsourcing ordering to call centres at other locations ("May I take your order?"), in Australia the task itself has simply been added to the demands of customer engagement at the paying window, with the slightly odd result that the highest goal of customer service at this point is to be able to deal simultaneously with two customers at two different stages of the drive-thru process—the one who is ordering three Happy Meals and a coffee via your headset, and the one who is sitting in front of you holding out money—without offending or confusing either. This formal approval of a shift from undivided customer attention to the time-efficiency of multitasking is a small but important reorientation of everyday service culture, making one teenager redundant and doubling the demands placed on the other.

The management of quick service restaurant workers and their productivity offers us a new perspective on the pressures we are experiencing in the academic labour market. Like many of my colleagues, I have been watching with a degree of ambivalence the way in which the national drive to quantify excellence in research in Australia has resulted in some shallow-end thinking about how to measure what it is that scholars do, and how to demonstrate that we are doing it competitively. Our productivity is shepherded by the constant recalibration of our workload, conceived as a bundle of discrete and measurable tasks, by anxious institutions trying to stay ahead in the national game of musical chairs, which only offers a limited number of seats at the research table—while still keeping half an eye on their enterprise bargaining obligations. Or, as the Quick Service Restaurant sector puts it:

Operational margins are narrowing. While you need to increase the quality, speed and accuracy of service, the reality is that you also need to control labor costs. If you reduce unnecessary labor costs and improve workforce productivity, the likelihood of expanding your margins increases. Noncompliance can cost you. (Kronos)

In their haste to increase quality, speed and accuracy of academic work, while lowering labor costs and fending off the economic risk of noncompliance, our institutions have systematically overlooked the need to develop meaningful ways to accommodate the significant scholarly work of reading, an activity that takes real time, and that in its nature is radically incompatible with the kinds of multitasking we are all increasingly using to manage the demands placed on us. Without a measure of reading, we fall back on the exceptionally inadequate proxy of citation. As King *et al.* point out, citation typically skews towards a small number of articles, and the effect of using this as a measure of reading is to suggest that the majority of articles are never read at all. Their long-term studies of what scientists read, and why, have been driven by the need to challenge this myth, and they have demonstrated that while journals might not be unwrapped and read with quite the Christmas-morning eagerness that John

Hartley describes, their content is eventually read more than once, and often more than once by the same person. Both electronic scholarly publishing, and digital redistribution of material original published in print, have greatly assisted traditional journals in acquiring something like the pass-on value of popular magazines in dentists' waiting rooms. But for all this to work, academics have to be given time to sit and read, and as it would be absurd to try to itemise and remunerate this labour specifically, then this time needs to be built into the normative workload for anyone who is expected to engage in any of the complex tasks involved in the collaborative production of knowledge.

With that in mind, I concluded my review on what I hoped was a constructive note of solidarity. "What's really under pressure here—forms of collegiality, altruism and imaginative contributions to a more outward-facing type of scholarship—is not at risk from search engines, it seems to me. What is being pressured into obsolescence, risking subscriptions to journals as much as purchases of books, is the craft and professional value placed on reading. This pressure is not coming from the internet, but from all the other bureaucratic rationalities described in this paper, that for the time being do still value journals selectively above other kinds of public contribution, but fail to appreciate the labour required to make them appear in *any* form, and completely overlook the labour required to absorb their contents and respond."

For obvious reasons, my warm thanks are due to John Hartley and to the two editors of this *M/C Journal* issue for their very unexpected invitation to expand on my original referee's report.

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