

# **‘The Impact of the Humanities: or, What’s Next for Open Access’**

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### **Introduction: What the panellists are concretely doing in the field of OA**

Projects I’m involved with of particular relevance to this session are as follows:

I’m co-founder of *Culture Machine* (<http://www.culturemachine.net>). Culture Machine is an umbrella term for a series of experiments in culture and theory. Among other things it consists of:

- **The Culture Machine open access journal** for cultural theory and cultural studies (<http://www.culturemachine.net>). Edited by myself and Dave Boothroyd of the University of Kent, the *Culture Machine* journal is nearly 9 years old now.
- **The Culture Machine book series.** I’m mentioning to show that, despite some of the things I’m going to say later, ink-on-paper books are important and that I’m not against commercial publishers. Published by Berg, this includes:
  1. Paul Virilio, *City of Panic* (2005)

2. Charlie Gere, *Art, Time & Technology* (2006)
3. Clare Birchall, *Knowledge Goes Pop: From Conspiracy Theory to Gossip* (2006)
4. Jeremy Gilbert, *Anti-Capitalism and Culture: Radical Theory and the Global Justice Movement* (forthcoming)

- **The Culture Machine open access archive, CSeARCH**

(<http://www.culturemachine.net/csearch>)

CSeARCH was launched in March, 2006 and stands for Cultural Studies electronic Archive. CSeARCH is the only subject-based repository I am aware of to focus on cultural studies and cultural theory.

- Like Sigi Jottkandt, I'm a co-founder of the Open Humanities Press.
- Lastly, I'm the author of *Digitize This Book! The Politics and Ethics of New Media and Open Access* which is being published by University of Minnesota Press at the beginning of 2008. This looks at open access specifically from a humanities-orientated perspective.

## **‘Ask Not What Open Access Can Do for the Humanities, Ask What the Humanities Can Do for Open Access’**

Researchers in the humanities have developed very different professional cultures and intellectual practices to those in the scientific, technical and medical fields (STMs) who have dominated the discussion around Open Access (OA) so far. What I’m going to do is look at some of these differences, and point to a few of the challenges the OA movement is likely to face as it increasingly impacts on the humanities, and as the humanities in turn impact on it.

### **Monographs**

One major difference between the STMs and the humanities is the greater emphasis the latter place on books. To date, OA has been championed most extensively in the sciences. This has meant that the movement toward OA has been concentrated on the most valued mode of publication in *that* field: the peer-reviewed journal article. In the humanities, however – although there are of course differences between disciplines - it’s monographs published by respected international presses that tend to be the most prestigious. As OA is taken up in the humanities it will therefore be accompanied by an increased emphasis on the publication of *monographs*.

Nor is it the case that the authors of these monographs are unlikely to consent to publishing OA. In marked contrast to those of academic journal articles, book authors have been presented within debates around OA as always seeking royalties

or fees in exchange for their writings. This is another reason the OA movement has not focused too much on the self-archiving of books.<sup>i</sup>

Yet academic titles in the humanities often only achieve sales of somewhere between 200 and 600 copies. So very few book authors actually have much in the way of royalties to lose. Like ‘royalty-free authors’, they too are for the most part writing for impact.<sup>ii</sup>

Added to this are:

- a. what’s been called the ‘crisis in scholarly publishing’, as many publishers move away from producing monographs and even edited collections of new research, and focus on readers, introductions and references works instead;
- b. the associated shift to publishing books in hard-back only – which cost £50/\$99 a copy, and which very few people except institutional libraries and the author’s parents are likely to buy;
- c. short prints runs;
- d. the closing of independent book stores due to competition from Amazon at one end of the market and the large supermarkets at the other;
- e. and the fact that the major high street book chains are increasingly reluctant to stock academic titles.

All of which means OA has the potential to be extremely attractive to the so-called for-profit authors of books in the humanities, as they too stand to gain from the increase in potential readers and exposure ‘giving away’ their work OA can bring.

## **New Forms of Writing**

Another important difference between the STMs and the humanities is that scholars in the latter are more likely to see themselves as writers, and to view their texts, not just as vehicles for the expression of their ideas, but as pieces of writing in themselves. In other words, the writing itself really matters here; it's not just a neutral means of conveying ideas. As the movement toward the online publication of the research literature impacts on the humanities, we will therefore see an increased interest in exploring new kinds of writing online, many of which may raise difficult questions for conventional ways of maintaining academic authority and professional legitimacy, including peer review.

## **Peer Review**

For example, when it comes to peer-review, many advocates of OA in the STMs are self-confessed conservatives.<sup>iii</sup> This is partly strategic: it's a way of combating one of the main arguments levelled against OA by publisher trade associations and lobbyists: that if governments adopt OA policies it will undermine peer-review.<sup>iv</sup> And many in the humanities set great store by peer-review, too. Others, however, are inclined to view such conservatism as the attempt by a professional group to maintain a certain identity and authority 'in the face of an extremely dynamic, unsettling, and powerful reorganization... of society.'<sup>v</sup> After all, if electronically reproduced texts *are* positioned as being beyond the reassuring control of the traditional systems of peer-review, they would appear, in Stevan Harnad's words, as unreliable, their 'quality uncontrolled, unfiltered, un-sign-posted, unknown, unaccountable'.<sup>vi</sup> As such they would create a sense of anxiety among the profession. Is this one of the reasons perhaps OA advocates are so obsessed with peer-review? Is their insistence on defending it in article after article, email posting after email posting, an attempt to cope with this anxiety over their identity and

authority? (As Sijbolt Noorda said in his keynote speech at the beginning of this conference, ‘knowledge is our game’, so peer review must be done.)

One significant way in which the humanities have the potential to impact on OA, then, is through their very openness to the challenge that is presented to academic authority and professional legitimacy by digital modes of reproduction. This is not just a matter of exploring less traditional forms of peer-review (as Noorda suggested);<sup>vii</sup> it also involves a certain readiness to embrace and performatively assume the kind of paradoxes and ambivalences in academic authority that lie at the heart of much of the OA community’s defence of peer review to date.

For instance, the reliance of certain flavours of OA on established peer-reviewed journals of ‘known quality’ to provide accreditation with regards to the contents of e-print archives, means that a lot of OA academic writing is restricted to that which can be reproduced – at least potentially – in hard copy form.<sup>viii</sup> But what happens if and when academics write texts that are ‘born digital’, and which are therefore perhaps not necessarily recognisable as texts in the ink-on-paper sense?

A very obvious and rather tame example already being explored within the OA community is weblogs.<sup>ix</sup> Yet for all their popularity, it remains unclear as to exactly how scholarly blogs *are* to be evaluated and assessed. Should academics who publish their research in the form of blogs expect to have such work taken into account when it comes to hiring, promotion, and being included in e-print repositories in the same way as those who publish in refereed journals do? Or should such writing be dismissed as less serious and legitimate because it is difficult to certify by the established peer review processes? In which case do we need to develop new forms of quality control capable of giving credibility and authority to academic blogging?

## **The Future of the Academic Journal**

This prospective shift away from purely papercentric modes of certification need not necessarily signal the end of the academic journal; nor peer review. But it will involve us in devising new mechanisms for the maintenance of 'quality control' that do not approach digitally reproduced research as if it were more or less a prosthetic extension of print. Instead, standards and criteria will need to be developed which are capable of responding to the specificity of texts that *are* 'born digital'.

This applies not just to blogs but to all those new forms of scholarly writing and publishing which may eventually come to sit alongside or even replace the conventional journal and book formats: those currently associated with podcasts, wikis, p2p file-sharing, YouTube, Facebook, Second Life and so on. (Could we have a distributed, networked, participative, co-operative means of communicating academic research based on an open source p2p system, for instance?)

## **The End of the Author?**

Will this bring about the end of the academic author as we know it? I doubt it. The idea of author is too tied up with ideas that are intrinsic to liberal democracy, to modernity, and to late capitalism: the subject, individual, human and so on. A lot of other things will therefore have to change before we witness the end of the author.

But we will witness increasing attempts to experiment with ideas of academic authorship. We are already seeing something of this kind in the shape of those texts co-authored by large groups of often anonymous people (from a certain perspective, at least) using free content and open editing principles.

Wikipedia is the most well-known, but in a move directly inspired by Wikipedia, The Institute for the Future of the Book recently placed McKenzie Wark's then work-in-progress *GAM3R 7<sup>TH</sup>3ORY* online in a series of webpages, each of which contained a paragraph from the book and a box where people could post their responses to Wark's writing.<sup>x</sup> Wark's project was more a form of open peer commentary and open peer review than the kind of open editing found on Wikipedia. But in 2006 the writer Douglas Rushkoff was reported to be apparently exploring writing a wikified PhD at the University of Utrecht in which either the basic skeleton of his thesis is built upon by volunteers, or his original content is 'nested within layers of material contributed by collaborators'.<sup>xi</sup>

## **Piracy**

This in turn may encourage certain elements within the OA community to be a little bolder and more experimental when it comes to issues around intellectual property. Of course, distinguishing OA from digital piracy, peer-to-peer file sharing and so on has been another way of providing it with an aura of professional legitimacy.<sup>xii</sup>

But here again, as OA is taken up by the humanities, and especially as more and more battles against publisher lobbyists are won, I suspect a range of rather

different approaches will begin to emerge. Already, a lot of people in the humanities have a very positive attitude toward so-called ‘internet piracy’. In his recent book *Information Please*, Mark Poster even looks to a future in which peer-to-peer networks make possible a ‘new regime of culture’ in which copyright laws have been changed and media and publishing corporations have either disappeared or completely transformed themselves.<sup>xiii</sup>

## Conclusion

I want to end by stressing that the challenges to academic authority and professional legitimacy I’m describing here in relation to changing ideas of scholarly writing, peer review, authorship, intellectual property and so forth should not be interpreted negatively. Texts and authors have always been unreliable. It’s worth remembering that up until the middle of the eighteenth century the book was an extremely unstable object, with Shakespeare’s first folio including more than six hundred typefaces, along with numerous discrepancies regarding its spelling, punctuation, divisions and page configurations. As a result, readers had to make *critical* decisions regarding particular manuscripts, their identity, dependability and trustworthiness, and about what a book is and what it means to be an author, a reader, a publisher.<sup>xiv</sup> Since then, the development and spread of the concept of the author, along with mass printing techniques, uniform, standard, multiple-copy editions, copyright, established publishing houses and so forth has meant that texts have taken on the appearance of being much more ‘fixed’. Consequently, we are no longer asked to form judgements about a text’s authority and legitimacy. Such decisions are seen as having in effect *already been made*. They have thus been repressed, ignored, or just taken for granted and forgotten. From a humanities point of view, however, the digital mode of reproduction, with its loosening of much of

the stability, permanence and ‘fixity’ of texts, promises to place us in a position where we are *again* called on to actively respond and *make* such judgements and decisions. In this respect, one could argue that the shift to online open access publishing offers us *a chance* to raise precisely the kind of responsible questions regarding the authority and legitimacy of scholarly writing, authorship, peer review and intellectual property, that we really should have been asking all along.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> ‘Books... are not, and never will be, author give-aways’. Stevan Harnad, 'For Whom the Gate Tolls? How and Why to Free the Refereed Research Literature Online Through Author/Institution Self-Archiving, Now', 2001.

<http://www.ecs.soton.ac.uk/~harnad/Tp/resolution.htm>. Accessed 31 July, 2003.

<sup>ii</sup> A 2007 study for the Author’s Licensing and Collecting Society (ALCS) by the Centre for Intellectual Property Policy and Management at the University of Bournemouth, found that the average author in the UK earns one third less than the national average wage, that ‘typical earnings of a British professional writer aged 25-34 are only £5,000 per annum’, and that ‘only 20% of writers earn all their income from writing’. Centre for Intellectual Property Policy and Management at the University of Bournemouth. 2007. ‘Counting the Cost of a Writing Career’.

[http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/newsandevents/News/march07/counting\\_the\\_cost\\_of\\_a\\_writing\\_career.html](http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/newsandevents/News/march07/counting_the_cost_of_a_writing_career.html). Accessed 12 March, 2007.

<sup>iii</sup> Stevan Harnad, 'The Invisible Hand of Peer Review', *Exploit Interactive*, 5 April, 2000.

<http://www.exploit-lib.org/issue5/peer-review/>  
<http://www.cogsci.soton.ac.uk/~harnad/nature2.html>  
<http://www.princeton.edu/~harnad/nature2.html>.

<sup>iv</sup> See Peter Suber, ‘Will Open Access Undermine Peer Review?’, *SPARC Open Access Newsletter*, Issue #113, 2 September, 2007. <http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/newsletter/09-02-07.htm>.

<sup>v</sup> Samuel Weber, *Institution and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) 27.

<sup>vi</sup> Harnad, *ibid.*

<sup>vii</sup> Such as, for example:

- the kind of open peer-review the journal *Nature* recently experimented with;
- the system of post-publication peer-to-peer-review Kathleen Fitzpatrick of the Institute for the Future of the Book champions;
- the model provided by Digg, the news site where the community of readers themselves donate news stories they have found on the web, in blogs, podcasts, websites and so

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forth, and other readers then vote on them, the story which receives the most votes being put on the front page.

<sup>viii</sup> Harnad, *ibid.* What's more, this is the case regardless of whether this happens directly, by means of the sort of peer-review service that is provided by an actual *paper* journal, or indirectly, via that of an online-only journal 'of known quality'. For although the medium of the latter may be digital, according to what is a quite traditional paradox of authority, its quality control procedure (and hence the online journal itself) is necessarily dependent for its legitimacy on a system of peer-review that has its 'origins' in the paper world, and which is in turn dependent on that world for its own authority and legitimacy. For more, see my *Digitize This Book!* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>ix</sup> See, for example, Peter Suber's 'Open Access News' <http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/fosblog.html>; and Stevan Harnad's 'Open Access Archivangelism' <http://openaccess.eprints.org/>.

<sup>x</sup> [www.futureofthebook.org/gamertheory/](http://www.futureofthebook.org/gamertheory/)

<sup>xi</sup> Ben Vershbow, 'Open Source Dissertation', post on the Institute for the Future of the Book's if:book blog, 23 June, 2006. [http://www.futureofthebook.org/blog/archives/2006/06/open\\_source\\_dissertation.html](http://www.futureofthebook.org/blog/archives/2006/06/open_source_dissertation.html). Accessed 8 February, 2007.

<sup>xii</sup> 'It is a mistake to regard OA as Napster for science. For copyrighted works, OA is always voluntary, even if it is one of the conditions of a voluntary contract, such as an employment or funding contract. There is no vigilante OA, no infringing, expropriating, or piratical OA'. Peter Suber, 'Open Access Overview', 2006. <http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/overview.htm>.

<sup>xiii</sup> Mark Poster, *Information Please: Culture and Politics in the Age of Digital Machines* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 204.

<sup>xiv</sup> Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 31-2.