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Hacking the Academy

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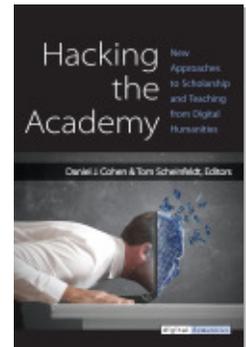
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Preface

Daniel J. Cohen and Tom Scheinfeldt

On May 21, 2010, we posted these intentionally provocative questions online:

Can an algorithm edit a journal? Can a library exist without books? Can students build and manage their own learning management platforms? Can a conference be held without a program? Can Twitter replace a scholarly society?

We asked for contributions to a collectively produced volume that would explore how the academy might be beneficially reformed using digital media and technology. The process of creating the edited volume itself would be a commentary on the way things are normally done in scholarly communication, with submissions coming in through multiple channels, including blogs, Twitter, and email, and in multiple formats—everything from a paragraph, to a long essay, to multimedia. We also encouraged interactivity—the possibility that contributors could speak directly to each other, rather than creating the inert, isolated chapters that normally populate edited volumes. We then sent out notices via our social networks, which quickly and extensively disseminated the call for submissions. Finally, we gave contributors a mere seven days—the better to focus their attention and energy.

Between May 21 and May 28, 2010, we received a remarkable 329 submissions from 177 authors, with nearly a hundred submissions written during the weeklong event, and the other two-thirds submitted by authors from their prior writing on the subject matter. This struck us as a major success for an untested model—one that we feel could be replicated to provide state-of-the-field volumes in many disciplines, to open debate in ways that journals and books are unable to do, or to aggregate existing works from around the web on a common theme.

From this large pool of contributions we have assembled what we con-

sider to be the best works of any size and shape (with the unfortunate exception of audio and video, which we could not put into print). Only one-sixth of the contributions made the cut; in general, we sought writing that moved beyond mere complaints about the state of the academy into more careful diagnoses and potential solutions. There are some rants, to be sure, but also many calm analyses of how academia could work differently.

Some biases undoubtedly exist in this volume. Because of whom we were able to reach during the event week, and how we reached them (mostly through blogs and Twitter), this book is largely written from the perspectives and concerns of our follow travelers in digital humanities—although this is a rather varied bunch, including scholars, educational technologists, librarians, and cultural heritage professionals. It is obviously the product of people deeply involved in the digital realm, and who look to that realm for addressing problems, rather than, say, labor unions.

We believe that the small window for submissions and the excitement about trying to reconceive how an edited volume might be put together lend this book a vibrancy and intensity (and yes, occasionally a stylistic informality) that might have been missed if we had had a standard year-long call for contributions, followed by arm-twisting for another year or two. This volume thus represents a good snapshot of how scores of engaged academics who care deeply about higher education are trying to further its original goals of learning, scholarship, and service, albeit in novel ways that may be uncomfortable for those with a more conservative bent.

But we hope more generous readers will notice that many of this book's themes, although perhaps dressed in new technology, actually attempt to revive age-old values and methods in the academy. For instance, our authors agree on the need for open access to scholarship—not only, or primarily, because the web has enabled us to post that scholarship online, but because it has long been an ethical imperative of teachers to share their knowledge as widely as possible. New modes of engaging students in the classroom with digital media are, at heart, less about the flashiness of technology and more about the need to move past the stagnation of the lecture into deeper, more collaborative—and ultimately, more effective—pedagogy. Perhaps this is why some of the suggestions herein, such as adding “unconferences” to scholarly meetings, are beginning to find an audience.

Finally, the reader may legitimately ask: doesn't the existence of *Hacking the Academy* as a book undermine its argument? Why put this suppos-

edly firebrand work into a traditional form? The answer is that we wanted this project to have maximum impact, and especially to reach those for whom RSS feeds and Twitter are alien creatures. Moreover, one of the main themes of this volume—and of digital technology—is that scholarly and educational content can exist in multiple forms for multiple audiences. What you have in front of you is but one form of a project called *Hacking the Academy*. The website—hackingtheacademy.org—will continue to host a much larger and more diverse version of the work, including themes and genres missing from the print edition. If this book is static, the overall project is anything but. You are encouraged to add your contributions to the ongoing conversation about how we can hack the academy together.