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## Hacking the Academy

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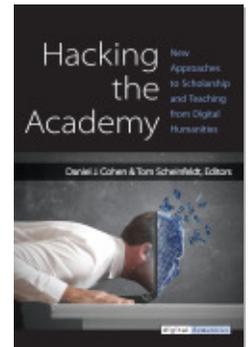
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# Burn the Boats/Books

David Parry

When Marc Andreessen, the entrepreneur behind the first mainstream web browser, was interviewed by the popular technology blog, *TechCrunch*, on the future of publishing—in particular, journalism—his provocative response was “burn the boats.” What he was referring to was the moment Cortez, fleeing from Cuba, and landing in Mexico, ordered his troops to “burn the boats,” preventing any possibility of return. The lesson: don’t defend lost ground; at times there is no going back; making decisions to insure that one does not consider a return is a good move. Andreessen’s point was that old print-based media forms are dead, and it does no good to try and reenvision them for the twenty-first century. Rather, journalism institutions need to boldly move to future web-based models, giving up on their print-based biases.<sup>1</sup>

Academics should similarly “burn their boats,” or in this case, “burn the books,” making a definitive move to embrace new modes of scholarships enabled by web-based communication, rather than attempting to port old models into the new register. Rather than providing the book with a digital facelift for twenty-first-century scholarly communication, academics should move past book-based biases—which structure scholarly communications, and instead imagine and execute digitally born scholarly forms—which leverage the evolving digital-media landscape.

This is not to suggest that we actually engage in book burning. Instead, we need to burn our love affair with books, and that out of reverence to the book, we stop treating it as the only, or even primary, means of scholarly communication. Not only are there better ways, but if academia wants to remain—or more skeptically, become—relevant, we ought to recognize that the book is no longer the main mode of knowledge transmission.

Faced with the transformation to a digital format, the newspaper industry chose to protect a business model, instead of preserving their social function. My fear is that academics are making the same mistake. Granted, this analogy is not perfect—there are contours and shapes, and nuance and details that matter here. They are not a direct equivalence, but the

underlying logic is the same. It concerns me that academics and intellectuals, with some exceptions, seem to be repeating this mistake, following the digital facelift model, asking how they can continue to do what they do now, but do it in the digital space, rather than asking how what they do has been fundamentally changed in the age of the digital networked archive.

It is worth distinguishing here between the materiality of the book, and the ideologies and biases we associate with the book. At the most basic level, a book is a dead tree processed and bound together in leaves of paper and stained with ink. But many of the things that we have come to associate with the book are not in fact coterminous with its material structure, but rather biases developed over the “Gutenberg Parenthesis,” the relatively brief period in human history when print was the dominant form of communication, following a long oral period, and now succeeded by a digital age that has much in common with preprint culture.

This librocentricism—or a book-biased way of thinking, where the book stands in for certain prejudices and ideas about knowledge—is pervasive. Notice how the word “book” often stands in for, or comes to mean, the entirety of the matter, as in *The Book of Nature*, to “throw the book at someone,” or “The Book of Love.” So often “book” comes to be an epistemological framework for knowledge, not just a material one.

The idea that knowledge is a product, which can be delivered in an analog vehicle, needs to be questioned. What the network shows us is that many of our views of information were/are based on librocentric biases. While the book treats information as something scarce, the Net shows us precisely the opposite—information is anything but scarce. Books tell us that one learns by acquiring information, something which is purchased and traded as a commodity, consumed and mastered, but the Net shows us that knowledge is actually about navigating, creating, participating.

Knowledge is no longer print-based, nor governed by the substrate of paper; indeed, while in many ways we might continue to harbor librocentric biases, as we move away from structuring knowledge to end up on paper, these framing structures will prove less and less necessary; indeed, may actually impede on our ability to participate in knowledge conversations.

We do not have to give up completely on books, freeing ourselves from all of the pages we have in our respective offices. Rather, we should start conceiving of our scholarship as if it will not end up in books—indeed it still might—but begin by asking ourselves what would scholarship look like if it were not designed to end up in books.

Here are some suggestions for this change:

*Stop publishing in closed systems.* If you publish in a journal that charges for access, you are not published, you are private-ed. To publish means to make public; if something is locked down behind a firewall where someone needs a subscription to view it, it is not part of the common knowledge base and thus might as well not exist. Academic journals are treating knowledge as if it is a scarce commodity: it is not; do not let them treat it as such. If someone wants to publish something you wrote, ask them if you can keep the copyright and license it under Creative Commons, and if they say no, do not give it to them, and find someone who will. Look for journals that publish only online, and only for free.

*Self-publish.* Publishing and editing are hacks based on the scarcity of paper; no need to carry it over to the new medium. Once, print-based publishing was the most efficient way to reach the largest audience. That is no longer the case, so let's get over our print-based publishing fetish. Publishing online allows you to engage a wider audience—faster, and more efficiently than any print-based journal. We think of an academic's role as presenting polished finished work and ideas, but this need not be the case. We should switch to presenting our ideas in process, showing our work—not just the final product.

*Digital publications must interact with the web.* A PDF document is not a web-based document. It is a print-based document distributed on the web. One of the principal advantages of the web is the way it connects, and operates as a network of connections within an ecosystem of knowledge where one can search, copy, paste, edit, and link with ease—none of which is true of a PDF. The PDF is just a way of maintaining print-based aesthetics and structures on the web. In the same way you wouldn't think of publishing a book without the appropriate footnotes, don't publish to the web without the appropriate live links.

*Get over peer review.* Peer review is another hack based on the scarcity of paper. Given the cost of producing knowledge, and the fact that academic journals or academic presses could only afford to produce so many pages with each journal, peers are established to vet, and to signal that a particular piece is credible and more worthy than others. This is the filter-then-publish model. But the Net actually works in reverse—publish then filter—involving a wider range of people in the discursive production. Why do academics argue for small-panel, anonymous peer review? One thing we know is that diversity of perspective enriches discourse.

*Aspire to be a curator.* We have to give up being authorities, controlling our discourse, and seeing ourselves as experts who possess bodies of knowledge over which we have mastery. Instead, we have to start thinking of what we do as participating in a conversation—an ongoing process of knowledge formation. What if we thought of academics as curators—people who keep things up to date, clean, host, point, and aggregate knowledge, rather than just those who are responsible for producing new knowledge. Do we really need another book arguing that throughout the history of literary scholarship the important field of “x” has long been ignored? No. But we could actually use some good online resources and aggregators for particular subject domains.

*Think beyond the book.* Think of the book as one form, not *the* form. Indeed, think of things that move beyond the book. What if what you are writing didn’t have to be stable, didn’t have to have a final version? What if you could constantly update, alter, and make available your work? There will be no final copy, just the most recent version. While the constantly-in-beta mode might concern those who aim for perfection, it can also be liberating when you realize that nothing is fixed, taking advantage of the fluidity of the Net. What happens when we give up on, or at least refuse to be limited by, librocentricism? What if a piece didn’t have to be 20 pages for a journal article, or 250 for a book? There are economic constraints that place limits on the size and shape of academic writing—how much better can we be when we get rid of these? What would an academic argument as an app look like?

To be clear: the book isn’t dead, but it is no longer central. Academia would do well to recognize this; to move into new directions, new grounds, where many already are. We should not continue to constrain our thinking by a librocentricism which no longer structures or limits the way that knowledge is produced, disseminated, or archived.

## Note

1. Erick Schonfeld, “Andreessen’s Advice to Old Media: ‘Burn The Boats,’” *TechCrunch*, March 6, 2010, <http://techcrunch.com/2010/03/06/andreessen-media-burn-boats/>.