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Hacking the Academy

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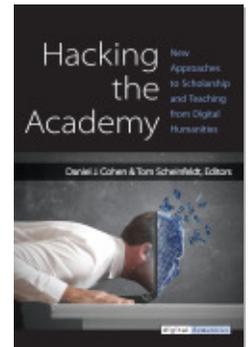
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Reinventing the Academic Journal

Jo Guldi

The web is thirsty for efficient, effective ways of retrieving useful information about the state of the field. This pressure creates an enormous market for those instruments that help individuals locate authoritative discourses and situated scholarship, and this, of course, is one of the traditional roles of the academic journal.

Academic journals are in the course of rethinking their management, methods, and publication standards. If they face this transition with courage and ingenuity, journals have the opportunity to plant themselves firmly as pillars of professional utility, scholarly collaboration, and authoritative knowledge as a public utility. Much of it may require thinking in terms of shifting communities and the life of information, and shifting sharply away from current journals' dependence on issue-by-issue websites and PDF servers like JSTOR. If you're a journal editor, the first step in a shift away may indeed be so radical as taking down your website, sharing information in new ways even more deeply integrated with the flow of information on Web 2.0.

There are four major ways to adapt academic publication to a Web 2.0 world.

- 1) Journals must pursue interoperability with the other online tools that are shaping the techne of scholarly practice.

Web 2.0 requires public visibility and interoperability with other web tools, in order that a searching aid should be found, adopted, and rendered relevant to the new research paradigms being adopted by scholars and members of the public alike. The more journals fit themselves into this paradigm, the better they'll thrive in the new order, finding readers both academic and paraacademic as allies. They will function usefully as finding aids for the most relevant, expert material in their disciplines.

In going Web 2.0, journals have the ability to mesh their publications with tools that will allow readers to better integrate journal essays with the rest of their research. A scholar using a research manager like Zotero and JSTOR currently can download the article PDF and the citation, ready for use in a footnote. Web 2.0 journals must go further into this zone: a scholar using Zotero, JSTOR, Google Scholar, and a social bookmarking tool can instantaneously find other scholars' opinions of a particular article, the names of the disciplines and subdisciplines they think it best applies to, and other articles of similar note to that particular scholar.

With these tools, every published article becomes easily interfaced with the tools new scholars are using to sort their data. Each visitor to a Web 2.0 service can refashion their own reading list from their colleagues' reading lists—cutting and pasting collective knowledge into an individual canon suited to their own project.

2) Journals have opportunity to reframe their role in the academy as curators of the noise of the web.

The web suffers from a crisis of authority, which is being met on the individual, rather than the collective and disciplinary level. For questions of disciplinary fields, for example, *Wikipedia* is likely to be irrelevant and useless. Far more useful, from my point of view, have been peer-to-peer exchanges on social-bookmarking and -networking sites like Delicious, LibraryThing, and Twitter, where colleagues in proximate fields have openly shared their course reading material, current research, and private canons.

On these sharing sites, individuals tag interesting citations with a series of terms most relevantly useful to their own practice. Users are less concerned with the interoperability of those selected terms than with the project of generating as many accurate, natural-language keywords as possible (folksonomy). The collected mass of these tags becomes an ultimate subject catalog to all the possible subject headings that might apply to any given website. Particular individual users become sources of authority for a given subject heading.

Journals have the opportunity to weave themselves as crucial threads in the fabric of online conversations if they begin tagging, becoming collective repositories of the best, collectively ratified articles and citations available for download on the web.

In a world where the primary tools for finding new scholarship are

tagged, social databases like Delicious and LibraryThing, the most efficient form of journal interface with the world might be for journals to scrap their websites and become collective, tagging entities. In the world of the traditional print journal, scholars vied to get a *Journal of Modern History* citation on their curriculum vitae because it stands for something. What if instead there was a filtered set of citations produced by those entities?

Such a stream of official citations could come to stand in for the private account of a collective recognized for setting a standard in the field, providing much the same function as the old print citation in terms of scholarly participation and professional standing.

Being collected in those entries could still stand for the product of collective vetting among recognized scholars.

Web 2.0 journals that take their primary responsibility as curatorial have no need for official publication from the university-press system. They are not dependent on the income model of the university press, and they have no reason to collect subscriptions: their purpose is disciplinary service and public access. There is no reason for the articles published in this format to be made private, or to require elaborate fee-charging mechanisms.

3) Electronic journals will have the opportunity to expand their curatorial mandate to include different forms of publication.

The traditional journal collects and publishes only three sorts of essays: the editorial, the peer-reviewed essay of new research in fifteen–fifty pages, and the book review. There is nothing platonic about these forms: they evolved from the culture of eighteenth-century coffee-house journals, reviewing the books in circulation, and the canonization of eighteenth-century essayists like Addison and Steele in the English curriculum of higher education at the end of the nineteenth century. They are considered the template for developing a reasoned, supported argument, and so the metric for measuring the ability to research, argue, and write.

The traditional canon of essays, editorials, and book reviews has excluded much of other forms of scholarship, the circulation of whose best models are of value to the scholarly community, including: syllabi, subject-division lists for qualifying exams, lectures, paragraph-sized notes/queries, lists of relevant new electronic tools, reviews of electronic tools, reports on best methods in the archives, and blog-sized opinions about exciting new directions for the field. An electronic journal has no reason

to exclude a twenty-minute audio segment, a selection of maps shared on SlideShare, or a video segment of a conference paper shared on YouTube. Properly curated, any of these categories would be of immense disciplinary interest, worthy of collection in a journal stream.

4) Against exclusive publication.

It is contrary to utility, in the world of Web 2.0, to maintain exclusive publication rights on an article. Exclusivity of publication places a text in only one domain. Yet nonexclusive text gets reproduced and recopied, circulated around the Internet, and rapidly floats onward to mimetic influence in other cultures, excerpted and referenced. For every Web 2.0 author, nonexclusivity and easy republication is ideal. For every would-be-idea-of-influence in the age of Web 2.0, easy reduplication is crucial.

Exclusivity has been the format followed by most online journals, which seek to mimic in form the traditional journal: one essay, neatly formatted, looking as professional as possible. Exclusive republication suggests the old model of authority, and is superficially reassuring to editors without actually promoting the real functions of the journal: disseminating ideas and establishing the authority of the journal-as-canon and disciplinary metric.

Significantly more desirable would be setting a different precedent: for all disseminated forms of the text to advertise the article's accreditation as having been curated by inclusion in the journal-as-stream. If this dissemination model is followed, the journal home page need not include reprints of the articles themselves: merely links to the original blogspace or university-housed PDF or slideshow where the material was originally posted, with all of its links, illustrations, video, and wallpaper as the author originally presented it. The journal's role is reduced to curation, not to presentation. Not having a use for a graphic designer, typesetter, or illustrations-layout person, the journal's workflow will be considerably reduced.

5) Broadening the criteria for participation.

Another major question opened by the age of the electronic journal is the issue of expertise. Like the essay, the journal peer-review process is

the relic of another age: an age of abundant, unbegrudging emeriti with plentiful leisure to foster the development of younger peers who had, on average, three years of training by way of a PhD. The limited number of peer reviewers and editors responsible for the operation of the journal at any given time is the relic of the system limited by the expense of the post office, the limited social networks of the people who invented the system, and the era of fewer PhD's on the world scene. In a new era, many of the burdens of editing and curation can be more broadly distributed to both the aid of the editors and the thriving of the discipline itself.

Journals have the opportunity to reconsider the distribution of time and responsibility. Is peer review a top-down mentoring process for scaling up the academic ladder, or will it be reconceived as an open playing field—a sort of open seminar for peer review, rather than a two-vetted-readers-read-you system? With the aid of wikis and commenting systems, it becomes possible for a single text to be usefully reviewed and edited by hundreds of individuals—vetting their understanding of significance, authentic fact, and argument flow. For young scholars, accreted small suggestions of other citations, references, examples, and counterexamples, from a wider array of supporters, could conceivably enhance an article on multiple levels.

Additionally, the thinking of interdisciplinary members of the broader academy might be usefully invited. The pressure of other ideas could hypothetically encourage the discipline to take account of the findings of related subdisciplines (invited participation from scholars in postcolonial studies for *Victorian Studies* issues on empire), the concerns of related fields (are economists convinced by new findings in economic history?), and the legibility of argument to the public (does this groundbreaking, relevant article on tyranny and empire actually parse to the average reader of the *New York Times*?).

6) The reconsideration of timelines.

In the age of Web 2.0, it is also possible for a writer to continuously revise an argument over an extended period of time—even indefinitely. For the sake of scholars' multiple projects, an indefinitely revised work is probably not ideal, but extended revisions, over the course of a year, become possible and useful for the author and the discipline. An article could be published as “officially under review” in a subcategory of the journal stream,

subjected to gradual wiki conversation for a year, and remain available to a reading public for the entirety of that time.

The product that would emerge at the end of a year of wiki-ratification would be very different than that at the beginning. If the author failed, in the course of wiki revision, to produce a stronger article than at the beginning, the article could be removed from the journal stream at the end of the year.