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Introducing MediaCommons

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posted by Kathleen Fitzpatrick

UPDATE: Avi Santo's follow-up post, "[Renewed Publics, Revised Pedagogies](#)", is now up.

I've got the somewhat daunting pleasure of introducing the readers of if:book to one of the Institute's projects-in-progress, MediaCommons.

As has been [mentioned](#) several [times](#) here, the Institute for the Future of the Book has spent much of 2006 exploring the future of electronic scholarly publishing and its many implications, including the development of alternate modes of peer-review and the possibilities for networked interaction amongst authors and texts. Over the course of the spring, we brainstormed, wrote a bunch of manifestos, and planned a [meeting](#) at which a group of primarily humanities-based scholars discussed the possibilities for a new model of academic publishing. Since that meeting, we've been working on a draft proposal for what we're now thinking of as a wide-ranging scholarly network -- an ecosystem, if you can bear that metaphor -- in which folks working in media studies can write, publish, review, and discuss, in forms ranging from the blog to the monograph, from the purely textual to the multi-mediated, with all manner of degrees inbetween.

We decided to focus our efforts on the field of media studies for a number of reasons, some intellectual and some structural. On the intellectual side, scholars in media studies explore the very tools that a network such as the one we're proposing will use, thus allowing for a productive self-reflexivity, leaving the network itself open to continual analysis and critique. Moreover, publishing within such a network seems increasingly crucial to media scholars, who need the ability to quote from the multi-mediated materials they write about, and for whom form needs to be able to follow content, allowing not just for writing *about* mediation but writing *in* a mediated environment. This connects to one of the key structural reasons for our choice: we're convinced that media studies scholars will need to lead the way in convincing tenure and promotion committees that new modes of publishing like this network are not simply valid but important. As media scholars can make the "form must follow content" argument convincingly, and as tenure qualifications in media studies often include work done in media other than print already, we hope that media studies will provide a key point of entry for a broader reshaping of publishing in the humanities.

Our shift from thinking about an "electronic press" to thinking about a "scholarly network" came about gradually; the more we thought about the purposes behind electronic scholarly publishing, the more we became focused on the need not simply to provide better access to discrete scholarly texts but rather to reinvigorate intellectual discourse, and thus connections, amongst peers (and, not incidentally, discourse between the academy and the wider intellectual public). This need has grown for any number of systemic reasons, including the substantive and often debilitating time-lags between the completion of a piece of scholarly writing and its publication, as well as the subsequent delays between publication of the primary text and publication of any reviews or responses to that text. These time-lags have been worsened by the increasing economic difficulties threatening many university presses and libraries, which each year face new administrative and financial obstacles to producing, distributing, and making available the full

range of publishable texts and ideas in development in any given field. The combination of such structural problems in academic publishing has resulted in an increasing disconnection among scholars, whose work requires a give-and-take with peers, and yet is produced in greater and greater isolation.

Such isolation is highlighted, of course, in thinking about the relationship between the academy and the rest of contemporary society. The financial crisis in scholarly publishing is of course not unrelated to the failure of most academic writing to find any audience outside the academy. While we wouldn't want to suggest that all scholarly production ought to be accessible to non-specialists -- there's certainly a need for the kinds of communication amongst peers that wouldn't be of interest to most mainstream readers -- we do nonetheless believe that the lack of communication between the academy and the wider reading public points to a need to rethink the role of the academic in public intellectual life.

Most universities provide fairly structured definitions of the academic's role, both as part of the institution's mission and as informing the criteria under which faculty are hired and reviewed: the academic's function is to conduct and communicate the products of research through publication, to disseminate knowledge through teaching, and to perform various kinds of service to communities ranging from the institution to the professional society to the wider public. Traditional modes of scholarly life tend to make these goals appear discrete, and they often take place in three very different discursive registers. Despite often being defined as a public good, in fact, much academic discourse remains inaccessible and impenetrable to the publics it seeks to serve.

We believe, however, that the goals of scholarship, teaching, and service are deeply intertwined, and that a reimagining of the scholarly press through the affordances of contemporary network technologies will enable us not simply to build a better publishing process but also to forge better relationships among colleagues, and between the academy and the public. The move from the discrete, proprietary, market-driven press to an open access scholarly network became in our conversations both a logical way of meeting the multiple mandates that academics operate within and a necessary intervention for the academy, allowing it to forge a more inclusive community of scholars who challenge opaque forms of traditional scholarship by foregrounding process and emphasizing critical dialogue. Such dialogue will foster new scholarship that operates in modes that are collaborative, interactive, multimediated, networked, nonlinear, and multi-accented. In the process, an open access scholarly network will also build bridges with diverse non-academic communities, allowing the academy to regain its credibility with these constituencies who have come to equate scholarly critical discourse with ivory tower elitism.

With that as preamble, let me attempt to describe what we're currently imagining. Much of what follows is speculative; no doubt we'll get into the development process and discover that some of our desires can't immediately be met. We'll also no doubt be inspired to add new resources that we can't currently imagine. This indeterminacy is not a drawback, however, but instead one of the most tangible benefits of working within a digitally networked environment, which allows for a malleability and growth that makes such evolution not just possible but desirable.

At the moment, we imagine MediaCommons as a wide-ranging network with a relatively static point of entry that brings the participant into the MediaCommons community and makes apparent the wealth of different resources at his or her disposal. On this front page will be different modules highlighting what's happening in various nodes ("today in the blogs"; active forum topics; "just posted" texts from journals; featured projects). One module on this front page might be made customizable ("My MediaCommons"), such that participants can in some fashion design their own interfaces with the network, tracking the conversations and texts in which they are most interested.

The various nodes in this network will support the publication and discussion of a wide variety of forms of scholarly writing. Those nodes may include:

-- electronic "monographs" (Mackenzie Wark's [GAM3R 7H30RY](#) is a key model here), which will allow editors and authors to work together in the development of ideas that surface in blogs and other discussions, as well as in the design, production, publicizing, and review of individual and collaborative projects;

-- electronic "casebooks," which will bring together writing by many authors on a single subject - a single television program, for instance -- along with pedagogical and other materials, allowing the casebooks to serve as continually evolving textbooks;

-- electronic "journals," in which editors bring together article-length texts on a range of subjects that are somehow interrelated;

-- electronic reference works, in which a community collectively produces, in a mode analogous to current wiki projects, authoritative resources for research in the field;

-- electronic forums, including both threaded discussions and a wealth of blogs, through which a wide range of media scholars, practitioners, policy makers, and users are able to discuss media events and texts can be discussed in real time. These nodes will promote ongoing discourse and interconnection among readers and writers, and will allow for the germination and exploration of the ideas and arguments of more sustained pieces of scholarly writing.

Many other such possibilities are imaginable. The key elements that they share, made possible by digital technologies, are their interconnections and their openness for discussion and revision. These potentials will help scholars energize their lives as writers, as teachers, and as public intellectuals.

Such openness and interconnection will also allow us to make the *process* of scholarly work just as visible and valuable as its *product*; readers will be able to follow the development of an idea from its germination in a blog, through its drafting as an article, to its revisions, and authors will be able to work in dialogue with those readers, generating discussion and obtaining feedback on work-in-progress at many different stages. Because such discussions will take place in the open, and because the enormous time lags of the current modes of academic publishing will be greatly lessened, this ongoing discourse among authors and readers will no doubt result in the generation of many new ideas, leading to more exciting new work.

Moreover, because participants in the network will come from many different perspectives -- not just faculty, but also students, independent scholars, media makers, journalists, critics, activists, and interested members of the broader public -- MediaCommons will promote the integration of research, teaching, and service. The network will contain nodes that are specifically designed for the development of pedagogical materials, and for the interactions of faculty and students; the network will also promote community engagement by inviting the participation of grass-roots media activists and by fostering dialogue among authors and readers from many different constituencies. We'll be posting in more depth about these pedagogical and community-outreach functions very soon.

We're of course still in the process of designing how MediaCommons will function on a day-to-day basis. MediaCommons will be a membership-driven network; membership will be open to anyone interested, including writers and readers both within and outside the academy, and that membership have a great deal of influence over the directions in which the network develops. At the moment, we imagine that the network's operations will be led by an editorial board composed of two senior/coordinating editors, who will have oversight over the network as a whole, and a number of area editors, who will have oversight over different nodes on the network (such as long-form projects, community-building, design, etc), helping to shepherd discussion and develop projects. The editorial board will have the responsibility for setting and implementing network policy, but will do so in dialogue with the general membership.

In addition to the editorial board, MediaCommons will also recruit a range of on-the-ground editors, who will for relatively brief periods of time take charge of various aspects of or projects on the network, doing work such as copyediting and design, fostering conversation, and participating actively in the network's many discussion spaces.

MediaCommons will also, crucially, serve as a profound intervention into the processes of scholarly peer review, processes which (as I've gone on [at length](#) about on other occasions) are of enormous importance to the warranting and credentialing needs of the contemporary academy but which are, we feel, of only marginal value to scholars themselves. Our plan is to develop and employ a process of "peer-to-peer review," in which texts are discussed and, in some sense, "ranked" by a committed community of readers. This new process will shift the purpose of such review from a gatekeeping function, determining whether or not a manuscript should be published, to one that instead determines how a text should be received. Peer-to-peer review will also focus on the development of authors and the deepening of ideas, rather than simply an up-or-down vote on any particular text.

How exactly this peer-to-peer review process will work is open to some discussion, as yet. The editorial board will develop a set of guidelines for determining which readers will be designated "peers," and within which nodes of MediaCommons; these "peers" will then have the ability to review the texts posted in their nodes. The authors of those texts undergoing review will be encouraged to respond to the comments and criticisms of their peers, transforming a one-way process of critique into a multi-dimensional conversation.

Because this process will take place in public, we feel that certain rules of engagement will be important, including that authors must take the first step in requesting review of their work, such

that the fear of a potentially damaging critique being levied at a text-in-process can be ameliorated; that peers must comment publicly, and must take responsibility for their critiques by attaching their names to them, creating an atmosphere of honest, thoughtful debate; that authors should have the ability to request review from particular member constituencies whose readings may be of most help to them; that authors must have the ability to withdraw texts that have received negative reviews from the network, in order that they might revise and resubmit; and that authors and peers alike must commit themselves to regular participation in the processes of peer-to-peer review. Peers need not necessarily be authors, but authors should always be peers, invested in the discussion of the work of others on the network.

There's obviously much more to be written about this project; we'll no doubt be elaborating on many of the points briefly sketched out here in the days to come. We'd love some feedback on our thoughts thus far; in order for this network to take off, we'll need broad buy-in right from the outset. Please let us know what you like here, what you don't, what other features you'd like us to consider, and any other thoughts you might have about how we might really forge the scholarly discourse network of the future.

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