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On the Future of Academic Publishing, Peer Review, and Tenure Requirements

Posted by [Kathleen Fitzpatrick](#), Guest Author, on 01/06/06 at 01:19 AM

This is a guest post by Kathleen “[Planned Obsolescence](#)” Fitzpatrick. - the Management

[Inside Higher Ed](#) reported a few days back on the work thus far done by an MLA task force on the evaluation of scholarship for tenure and promotion, and on the multiple recommendations thus far made by the panel, whose members include current MLA president Domna C. Stanton, Donald E. Hall, Sean Latham, Leonard Cassuto, and our blogging friend [Michael Bérubé](#).

What follows is a lengthy consideration and extension of one of the recommendations made by this panel, as well as a sketch of one possible future, presented in the hopes of opening up a larger conversation about where academic publishing ought to go, and how we might best take it there.

Many of the recommendations put forward by the MLA task force have been long in coming, and many stand to change tenure processes for the better; these recommendations include calls for departments:

-- to clarify the communication of tenure standards to new hires via “memorandums of understanding”;

-- to give serious consideration to articles published by tenure candidates, thus decentering the book as the [gold standard](#) of scholarly production, and to communicate that expanded range of acceptable venues for publication to their administrations;

-- to set an absolute maximum of six letters from outside evaluators that can be required to substantiate a tenure candidate’s scholarly credentials, to draw those evaluators from comparable institutions rather than more prestigious ones, and to refrain from asking evaluators to make inappropriate judgments about the tenure-worthiness of candidates based on the limited portrait that a dossier presents.

These are, as I say, extremely important recommendations, and ones to which I hope the tenured among us will begin to hold our departments and our institutions. For my purposes, however, there’s one further recommendation that demands emphasis, one that stands a significant chance of effecting great change not simply in how the academy tenures its faculty but in how those faculty do their work, how they communicate that work, and how that work is read both inside and outside the academy. This recommendation is hinted at in the IHE article, but needs to be taken much further:

Sean Latham, associate professor of English and director of the Modernist Journals Project at the University of Tulsa, said that departments need to recognize that scholarship—good, bad and everything in between—is being produced online and needs to be evaluated without any media-based bias. “This process has begun without us,” he said.

Latham—to knowing nods in the audience—joked about how some professors who favor print journals somehow ignore the fact that most of the print journals’ readers these days are online, through various consortiums that make the journals available electronically. “If we read something through Project Muse, are we supposed to feel better because somewhere there is a print copy?” he asked.

If you're reading this, you're no doubt already on board with Latham's point. He's precisely right that the vast majority of scholarly articles are being distributed and consumed in electronic format (as is evident in the citations of many of my students, who seem at moments entirely unaware that many journals actually have print existences!). He's also dead-on in attempting to nudge our senior (and many of our not-so-senior) colleagues out of their continuing and unreasoning biases toward the primacy of print publication. But, at least as reported in IHE, Latham's interests largely focus on the online journal as a reputable venue for publication. My own interests, which I've gone on about at [great length](#) on other occasions, revolve around the future of the monograph, and ways that it might be made sustainable in a new electronic venue. But the issues raised by the MLA panel call our collective attention to two overarching questions: What exactly do we want the future of scholarship to look like, and what do we have to do in order to persuade our senior colleagues, our departments, and our institutions—all of which tend, if unconsciously, toward an obstinate luddism—that such a future is not only acceptable but necessary?

It's worth beginning with a somewhat prior question about the future of the academic book, however: whether the fetishization of the monograph as the gold standard of publishing in the humanities is misguided in and of itself, not simply in the ways that such an obsessive focus obscures other worthy forms of scholarship (most notably the article), but also in its failure to recognize that the book might simply not be the best form for scholarly communication in the first place. Not long ago, I overheard a colleague tell a student that scholarly books are not meant to be *read* but rather *consulted*. If this is how we consume research in the humanities—read the book's introduction for the overall argument; read the chapter that most clearly applies to our own questions for the detailed analysis—then is the production of the book itself no more than a vanity?

I would argue that the kind of work that has in recent years been done by the scholarly monograph remains necessary to the humanities, regardless of how that monograph is actually read. While the individual chapters of many monographs might have been—and in many cases were—published as free-standing articles, by and large, those books' introductions could not have been published in any other form. The synthetic work that those introductions do—stepping back from local instances of the phenomenon under consideration to construct a broader landscape against which a large-scale argument can be made—remains crucial to the advancement of certain kinds of knowledge; such synthesis, moreover, requires the weight of the extended analysis only made feasible to this point by the expansive and yet subdividable nature of the book. This is not to say that the *only* arguments worthy of valorization in the humanities are those that come in large packages; in fact, much of the most important work in literary studies in recent years has been done in articles. I am simply arguing that the monograph remains valuable (and, indeed, necessary) as a venue for a certain form of intellectual work.

Having said that, it seems apparent to me, as no doubt to many of you, that for the monograph to maintain any viability into the future, it must move online. Like the kinds of journal distribution mechanisms that Latham mentions, this could most easily be slotted into existing academic structures through electronic distribution via PDFs or print-on-demand technologies. As Bob Stein suggests, however, on the [Institute for the Future of the Book \(if:book\)](#) blog, scholarship that is allowed to exceed the bounds of print, that takes full advantage of the technologies available to documents that are “born digital,” promises to have the greatest effect on shaping what the future of scholarship might be. We've seen the leading edge of this future-shaping in academic blogging, which has enabled [connections and conversations](#) of the sort that formerly developed only at conferences or among colleagues to flourish across greater distances, for longer durations, and among more scholars than ever before.

What I want to argue, as one stroke in a sketch of the electronic publishing scheme of the future—the “what do we want” question—is that blogging might have much to share with the born-digital monograph. Among the technologies that these digital texts can take advantage of are of course the apparent ones, such as the inexpensive inclusion of illustrations, among them still images, of course, but also audio and video clips, or the use of linking to create both webbed internal structures for texts and to bring external sources within the text's frame. There are other technologies, however, whose scholarly uses might not be so immediately apparent but that might produce the most radical change. Among these

I'd argue (and have [argued](#) in the [past](#)) that trackbacks, as a means parallel to bibliographies of tracing scholarly discussions not simply backward in time but also forward, might reshape the nature of doing research; that versioning, as a means of allowing a text to continue changing even after it's been published, might reshape the processes of academic publishing; and that comments, as a means of including conversation *about* a text *within* the text, might reshape the nature of peer-review.

Let me take each of these on in turn. It remains somewhat shocking to me that an academic indexing system such as the MLA Bibliography has not yet found a way to incorporate a technology like trackbacks to researchers' advantage. While the implementation requires programming skills far greater than mine, the principle is simple: when your most recent article appears, wherever it appears, and is indexed by the appropriate bibliographic services, it should be mined not only for its title, author, publication data, keywords, and so on, but also for its bibliography. That bibliography currently allows us to trace conversations backward in time, but if the bibliographic information mined by the indexing software triggered a ping that was picked up by the records of those cited texts, each of those texts would thereafter carry, in its indexed entry, evidence that the text was cited by you, among x number of other future scholars, each of whom responded to the text's argument in slightly different ways, thus enabling researchers to track conversations *forward* in time. (The sciences have of course been all over this for years via citation indexes. Of course the institutional reliance upon such citation indexes as a metric of any given article's "importance" in the field might be something worth subjecting to a bit of critical scrutiny.) All of this is made comparatively simple within an online publishing environment, however, in which trackbacks would have the added advantage of creating directly followable links among texts, materializing the ongoing nature of scholarly conversations, allowing any given text, via its descendants, to continue growing beyond its conclusion.

Versioning, as employed in most wiki software, would have a similar effect to that last, though within the individual text. It makes no sense for electronic texts to mimic print by becoming fixed; electronic texts should be free to continue to grow and develop over time, but that change should somehow be marked within the text, made visible to readers. In this fashion, by enabling an author to continue working on a text even after its publication, but by making the history of changes to that text available, the process of an argument's growth and change could become part of the text itself. This would enable, in conjunction with commenting technologies, the processes of academic publishing to be radically changed, allowing authors to get new material into circulation much sooner. Scholars would no longer be at the mercy of the often appalling time-lags between a text's submission and acceptance, and between acceptance and publication. Instead, articles and monographs could be posted relatively early in their life-spans, as pre-prints or even submissions—perhaps with some indication of that status—and then the debate and discussion that they produce, and the shifts in the author's thinking that result, could take place in the open, as part of the process of the work itself.

This suggests the most massive potential change that a move of the monograph into a truly electronic mode of publishing might entail—a vast transformation in both the mechanisms and the purposes of peer-review. What if peer-review took place not prior to publication but on texts that have already been made public? What if that peer-review happened not anonymously, in back-channel communications with individuals other than a text's author, but in the open, in direct communication between reader and author? Technologies ranging from commenting to, as John Holbo suggested in a recent [post](#) on The Valve, a more elaborated P2P system, could be made to serve many of the purposes that current peer-review systems serve (most importantly for institutional purposes, the separating of wheat and chaff), but would shift the process of peer-review from one that determines whether a manuscript should be published to one that determines how it should be received. Such a P2P system raises some potential pitfalls, of course—most notably how to make sure that the new system doesn't simply re-manifest the exclusionary manner in which the old sometimes functioned, through a Shirky-esque "[power law](#)"—but in conjunction with versioning, as described above, such a move of peer-review to a post-publication process would allow for the ongoing discussion and revision necessary to all scholarly thought.

There are a couple of implications of this shift that bear some immediate consideration, as we begin to think about how to bring such change about: first, these new technologies introduce what is to some

scholars an unnerving sense of collaboration in intellectual work. Such collaboration, however, is only unnerving to those of us in the humanities; work in both the sciences and the social sciences is heavily (and in some fields, entirely) reliant upon the multi-author text. What this new system of publishing and review implies, however, is less a move away from individual authorship than a recognition that no author is an island, so to speak, that we're all always working in dialogue with others. Even in a radically collective and collaborative electronic publishing system, the individual author would still exist (and would still maintain some form of "ownership" over her ideas, via some means of Creative Commons licensing), but would do her work in material relation to the work of others, in a process of discussion and revision that now takes place behind the scenes, but that I'd argue is important enough to be moved out in front of the curtain. More importantly, however, such changes in the processes of academic publishing would return scholarly communication to the gift-economy mode within which, as I have argued [elsewhere](#), it was always intended to operate, a mode in which all gains in knowledge produced by individual research are made not for the advancement of that individual, but for the collective benefit of the whole.

A second problem in bringing about such a radical change in peer-review, however, is the need to promote a new understanding of peer-review within our institutions, such that texts published within such a system would be taken seriously by college and university review and promotion committees. Such a new understanding is already desperately needed; one of the problems in academic publishing right now—what makes the economic hardships of the current university publishing system not merely a change but a crisis—is that, as Stephen Greenblatt pointed out some years back in his letter to the membership of the MLA, too many academic institutions rely on presses to make their tenure decisions for them. The granting of tenure should not be reliant on whether the vagaries of any publishing system did or did not allow a text to come into circulation, but rather on the value of that text, and on the importance it bears for its field. Peer-review thus demands to be transformed from a system of gatekeeping to a mode of manifesting the responses to and discussion of a multiplicity of ideas in circulation.

In order for this change to take root, however, with as little potential for damage to the careers of junior scholars as possible, tenured scholars are going to have to take the first plunge. Latham is absolutely right in the poking that I quoted earlier: until the biases held by many senior faculty about the relative value of electronic and print publication are changed—but moreover, until our institutions come to understand peer-review as part of an ongoing conversation among scholars rather than a convenient means of determining "value" without all that inconvenient reading and discussion—the processes of evaluation for tenure and promotion are doomed to become a monster that eats its young, trapped in an early twentieth century model of scholarly production that simply no longer works.

These are the ideas I've been tinkering with for a while now at [my own blog](#) and at the [ElectraPress](#) site, but now I put the question to you: what do *you* want the future of scholarly publishing to look like, and what do we need to do not simply to make it happen but to make it flourish? Imagine the ideal publishing process of the future, one that doesn't simply move old processes and textual forms online but that makes genuine use of new technologies to transform the ways that scholarship is done, and communicated, and consumed. How does it work, and what makes it possible?