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On the Importance of the Collective in Electronic Publishing

Posted by [Kathleen Fitzpatrick](#), Guest Author, on 03/30/06 at 09:55 PM

One of the concerns that often gets raised early in discussions of [electronic scholarly publishing](#) is that of business model—how will the venture be financed, and how will its products be, to use a word I hate, monetized? What follows should not at all suggest that I don't find such questions important. Clearly, they're crucial; unless an electronic press is in some measure self-sustaining, it simply won't last long. Foundations might be happy to see such a venture get started, but nobody wants to bankroll it indefinitely.

I also don't want to fall prey to what has been called the “paper = costly, electronic = free” fallacy. Obviously, many of the elements of traditional academic press publishing that cost—whether in terms of time, or of money, or both—will still exist in an all-electronic press. Texts still must be edited and transformed from manuscript to published format, for starters. Plus, there are other costs associated with the electronic—computers and their programming, to take only the most obvious examples—that don't exist in quite the same measure in print ventures.

But what I do want to argue for, building off of [John Holbo's recent post](#), is the importance of collective, cooperative contributions of academic labor to any electronic scholarly publishing venture. For a new system like that we're hoping to build in ElectraPress to succeed, we need a certain amount of buy-in from those who stand to benefit from the system, a commitment to get the work done, and to make the form succeed.

I've been thinking about this need for collectivity through a comparison with the model of open-source software. Open source has succeeded, in large part, due to the commitments that hundreds of programmers have made, not just to their individual projects but to the system as a whole. Most of these programmers work regular, paid gigs, working on corporate projects, all the while reserving some measure of their time and devotion for non-profit, collective projects. That time and devotion are given freely because of a sense of the common benefits that all will reap from the project's success.

So with academics. We are paid, by and large, and whether we like it or not, for delivering certain kinds of knowledge-work to paying clients. We teach, we advise, we lecture, and so forth, and all of this is primarily done within the constraints of someone else's needs and desires. But the job also involves, or allows, to varying degrees, reserving some measure of our time and devotion for projects that are just ours, projects whose greatest benefits are to our own pleasure and to the collective advancement of the field as a whole.

If we're already operating to that extent within an open-source model, what's to stop us from taking a further plunge, opening publishing cooperatives, and thereby transforming academic publishing from its current (if often inadvertent) non-profit status to an even lower-cost, collectively underwritten financial model?

I can imagine two possible points of resistance within traditional humanities scholars toward such a plan, points that originate in individualism and technophobia.

Individualism, first: it's been pointed out many times that scholars in the humanities have strikingly low rates of collaborative authorship. Politically speaking, this is strange. Even as many of us espouse communitarian (or even Marxist) ideological positions, and even as we work to break down long-held bits of thinking like the "great man" theory of history, or of literary production, we nonetheless cling to the notion that our ideas are our own, that scholarly work is the product of a singular brain. Of course, when we stop to think about it, we're willing to admit that it's not true—that, of course, is what the acknowledgments and footnotes of our books are for—but venturing into actual collaborations remains scary. Moreover, many of us seem to have the same kinds of nervousness about group projects that our students have: What if others don't pull their weight? Will we get stuck with all of the work, but have to share the credit?

I want to answer that latter concern by suggesting, as John has, that a collective publishing system might operate less like those kinds of group assignments than like food co-ops: in order to be a member of the co-op—and membership should be required in order to publish through it—everyone needs to put in a certain number of hours stocking the shelves and working the cash register. As to the first mode of this individualist anxiety, though, I'm not sure what to say, except that no scholar is an island, that we're all always working collectively, even when we think we're most alone. Hand off your manuscript to a traditional press, and somebody's got to edit it, and typeset it, and print it; why shouldn't that somebody be you?

Here's where the technophobia comes in, or perhaps it's just a desire to have someone else do the production work masquerading as a kind of technophobia, because many of the responses to that last question seem to revolve around either not knowing how to do this kind of publishing work or not wanting to take on the burden of figuring it out. But I strongly suspect that there will come a day in the not too distant future when we look back on those of us who have handed our manuscripts over to presses for editing, typesetting, printing, and dissemination in much the same way that I currently look back on those emeriti who had their secretaries—or better still, their wives—type their manuscripts for them. For better or for worse, word processing has become part of the job; with the advent of the web and various easily learned authoring tools, editing and publishing are becoming part of the job as well.

I'm strongly of the opinion that, if academic publishing is going to survive into the next decades, we need to stop thinking about how it's going to be saved, and instead start thinking about how we are going to save it. And a business model that relies heavily on the collective—particularly, on labor that is shared for everyone's benefit—seems to me absolutely crucial to such a plan.