THE SCHOLARLY MONOGRAPH IS IN TROUBLE.

This isn’t news to anyone who’s been paying much attention to the state of university presses and university libraries over the last decade or so, of course. Libraries, already struggling with the exponentially rising costs of journals, especially in the sciences, have had their budgets cut, and have had as a result to reduce drastically the numbers of monographs they purchase.

In fact, as Jennifer Crewe points out in Scholarly Publishing: Why Our Business Is Your Business, Too, sales of university press books to libraries in 2004 were less than a third of what they had been two decades prior—and that figure of course predates the latest round of budget crises. The impact of these reduced sales on presses has been devastating, particularly as it has come at the very same time that budget cuts have slashed or eliminated university subsidies to their presses, effectively requiring them to live for the bottom line. As a result, more and more presses are making more and more publication decisions based not on the objective quality of a submitted manuscript, but instead on the potential for book sales that the manuscript represents.
YET IN THE MIDST OF SUCH CRISIS, the monograph remains an essential form, one that cannot simply be abandoned in favor of the less troubled economics (a relative concept, that) of the scholarly journal. A number of fields in the humanities still base their tenure decisions on a junior faculty member’s ability to publish a book with a reputable scholarly press, and while many scholars recognize the problematic nature of this standard, few institutions will be willing to change their practices until the highest-ranking among them have done so—and they show no signs of budging. Beyond the impact that the troubled economics of scholarly book publishing might have on the careers of young academics, however, lies the impact that it might have on the development of new scholarship. Book-based fields depend on the form’s expansiveness to explore sustained arguments, and while there are no doubt a large number of books that could have been published to the same or even greater effect as a series of journal articles, only the book has historically allowed its author to synthesize multiple smaller arguments in one coherent text.

A number of scholars are beginning to look for a digital form that might supplement or even supplant the printed book. These scholars—myself among them—are not only looking for a means of escaping the catastrophic economics of conventional scholarly publishing, but also hope to produce a form that allows for speedier publication, more immediate feedback from readers, and better interactions between authors and readers as well as amongst readers themselves. This crisis is the motivating force behind the book-length manuscript I’ve recently completed; this manuscript, entitled Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy, explores the social and institutional changes within the academy in the United States that would be required in order for such a digital form of scholarly publishing to be fully accepted. Among the changes that I argue would need to take root are shifts in the ways scholars conceive themselves as authors (understanding themselves less as individual, discrete producers and more as participants in an ongoing, collaborative conversation), the ways that we think of an individual text (allowing it to grow and change over time, for instance, rather than being singular and static), the ways that we understand preservation (being no longer the sole responsibility of the library post-publication, but instead a key component of textual production itself), and the ways that we structure publishing within the university mission (as a core component of its infrastructure rather than a cost recovery center).

Perhaps the most important change for scholars, however, will be a necessary change in the ways that we conceive of and execute peer review online. The process, I argue, must understand and work with the open design of the network, favoring what Clay Shirky has called a “publish, then filter” model, and taking advantage of the potential for open discussion of a text that can, like the text itself, develop over time. These changes may be alarming for many scholars, accustomed as we are to the closed, anonymous, pre-publication vetting processes of traditional peer review, but I argue in the manuscript that such processes, if imported into networked publication, will keep academic discourse from being an important part of intellectual life online.

In August 2008, I received an advance contract from NYU Press to publish Planned Obsolescence in book form, but I argued that the project needed to put its money where its mouth was, so to speak: that the book needed to go through the open, conversational peer review process I promote in the text. With NYU’s support, in October 2009, I published the entirety of the text online for open comment and review.
In doing so, I took advantage of another of my projects, MediaCommons, a digital scholarly network that my co-founder Avi Santo and I have been developing with the support of the Institute for the Future of the Book, the National Endowment for the Humanities’ Digital Start-Up Grants, and the NYU Libraries Digital Library Technology Group. MediaCommons is a digital scholarly network, promoting interconnection and dialogue amongst scholars and students of media studies, as well as other interested participants. With Drupal as its core architecture, MediaCommons’s emphasis to this point has been on the community aspects of the network, developing a rich network of peers interested in working in open, collaborative ways. Our intent has been to develop that community as the basis of a new mode of digital scholarly publishing centered around the open discussion and review of new texts.

MediaCommons Press was thus founded in October 2009 as a venue for the publication and open peer review of writing in media studies ranging from article-length to book-length, whether single- or multi-authored, and whether purely text-based or multimodal. MediaCommons Press uses the Institute for the Future of the Book’s CommentPress, a freely available open-source plug-in for WordPress, that allows readers to comment in the margins of an online text at a range of granularity, from the paragraph to the page to the text as a whole. As the text itself is published as WordPress “pages”—i.e., outside of a blog timeline—the system’s blog functions allow for further community discussion of the text as well.

Publishing Planned Obsolescence online thus not only served as an instantiation of the book’s own arguments, but also as a test-bed for the publication and review processes that MediaCommons Press will employ. Along the way, we’ve run into a number of issues that highlight ongoing needs for development of both our technological and our scholarly systems.

ISSUE #1: Labor

The first issue to note is the most basic: despite the relative ease of use of both WordPress and CommentPress, there’s still a tremendous amount of labor required to transform a lengthy written text from a word-processed document to a working website. The text has to be loaded into a significant number of WordPress pages, through a tedious, messy, and error-prone process of cutting and pasting, and each page will very likely require some degree of reformatting in order to translate manuscript conventions to the conventions of online discourse.

Perhaps the most time-consuming part of this process as I put together the Planned Obsolescence website was coding the text’s many footnotes. Jeremy Boggs of the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University gave me a very nice, lightweight script that produces tooltip-style pop-up footnotes, but the text and marker of each footnote still had to be cut, pasted, and hand-coded.

Altogether, building the book site took about 24 hours of labor, after the software was installed and configured. On its own, this figure doesn’t sound too unreasonable. However, labor is already one of the greatest costs in existing publishing operations, and access to labor is one of the greatest difficulties facing new digital publishing models. For a press to add 24 hours of extra labor to the production process of each text it publishes would be prohibitive—much less for the press to add that extra labor at the review stage, when it’s still considering whether or not to publish the text. And while 24 hours isn’t that much for an individual scholar to tack onto the process of writing and preparing a book manuscript, the technical nature of the task may wind up causing a fair number of scholars to look for someone else to do the work for them. (Whether that should be the case is another issue entirely; my sense is that these publishing technologies are rapidly becoming the word-processors of the early twenty-first
century, and thus that scholars pressing the production of their digital publications onto staff will soon go the way of scholars employing typists. But that’s perhaps a subject for another article.)

In any case, whether the digital publication is being created by an individual scholar or by a press, a need exists for tools that can help automate the process. There’s some interest in the digital humanities community in building a WordPress plug-in that would allow a user to import RTF documents into WordPress posts; such an import tool would greatly reduce the overhead of producing lengthy CommentPress publications. And reducing that overhead will likely be necessary for the form to proliferate.

**ISSUE #2: Community Participation**

Once the site was fully built and operating on our development server, I asked a small group of readers whom I knew to be interested in the subject to take the first crack at reading and commenting on the text. Once they had seeded a dozen or so comments in various parts of the text, we migrated the data to the live server and announced the text’s availability.

The seeded comments served two primary purposes, the first of which was to demonstrate to readers potentially unfamiliar with the CommentPress form how the discussion system might be used. As MediaCommons Press publishes subsequent texts, this purpose for the staging-and-seeding process may fade away; readers will have other examples available to them, demonstrating how commenting works. However, the second reason for having a few committed readers seed comments was simply to prime the pump, so to speak—to get the conversation started.

The challenges involved in fostering discussion are no small matter; motivating and sustaining the desire in users to participate in online communities has been the issue over which many innovative digital projects have stumbled. Even more, motivating scholars to participate in the frankly selfless processes of peer review has long been a challenge within scholarly publishing, as any journal or university press editor can confirm.

The question, ultimately, is how new modes of scholarly publishing can work to inculcate generosity. This is easier said than done, perhaps; as a commenter on Twitter noted after hearing me give a talk about peer-to-peer review, “being helpful is not really part of academic culture.” Persuading scholars to take the time to participate in the process of reviewing, discussing, and assisting in the development of other scholars’ work won’t be easy—unless doing so is somehow in their interest.

There are two potential means that we can see for encouraging such self-interested altruism. The first is ensuring that the network within which scholars are publishing and commenting is composed of a community to which they are committed, and to which they feel responsible—the community of their peers. Noah Wardrip-Fruin, who conducted an experimental blog-based review of his book-in-progress, *Expressive Processing*, noted that prior such experiments had sought to create new communities around the texts as they were published, and argued that “this cannot be done for every scholarly publication,” and, moreover, that there are in many cases existing communities that can be drawn upon to great advantage. Such communities might include existing online social networks, but they might also include the clusters of scholars who already interact and discuss projects with one another in different formats, via disciplinary organizations and other professional groups, field-based listservs, and even more informal writing groups. Making use of such existing communities will be necessary to motivating participation.
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in online review precisely because scholars are already committed to the success of those groups, and to the opinion that those groups hold of their own work.

Beyond such professional responsibility, however, I argue in Planned Obsolescence that a key factor in motivating participation in new modes of online peer review will be the visibility that these processes will provide for what is now an unrecognized—indeed, an invisible—form of academic labor. Allowing scholars to receive “credit” for the reviews they do, both in the sense of making visible reviewers’ critical role in the development of arguments and texts and in the sense of rewarding good reviewing, could help foster a culture in which reviewing is taken seriously as a scholarly activity, and which therefore encourages participation in review processes.

ISSUE #3: Linking Text and Network
Of course, in order to foster such a culture, we need to determine and to demonstrate by example what “good reviewing” is, such that we can reward it. That determination will require that this publishing system develop some means not just of reviewing a text, but of assessing the comments that are left by reviewers. This process of reviewing the reviewers will be crucial to any open publishing and review process, as authors and readers will need to be able to judge the authority of the commentary that a text has received.

There’s thus both carrot and stick involved in building the scholarly review community; the carrot is the ability of reviewers to contribute something positive to the community and be rewarded for it, while the stick is the ability of the community to call out those members who don’t contribute positively. This community regulation of peer review standards—not just the standards that texts under review are held to, but the standards that reviews themselves are held to—has the potential to greatly improve the quality of scholarly communication in a broad sense, reducing thoughtless snark and focusing on helpful dialogue between authors and readers.

In order for that community regulation to develop, however, we need to have reliable knowledge of who our reviewers are and what work they’ve done within the publishing network. For that reason, we’re working on building a bridge between the CommentPress system in use at MediaCommons Press and MediaCommon’s Drupal-based scholarly network. That network provides an extensive profiling system—one might describe it as “Facebook for scholars”—that allows members to define their research interests, to import RSS feeds from their blogs and other online writing, and to develop an online portfolio with citations and links to their scholarly publications. These profiles are a means for scholars to find one another, to share their work, and to create new collaborations.

Linking the peer reviews that scholars write on MediaCommons Press texts to their MediaCommons profiles will allow those texts’ authors and readers to better contextualize the reviews, understanding through those links the perspective from which the reviews have been written. Moreover, including the reviews in the information in a scholar’s profile—and, further, including the community’s assessment of those reviews—will allow the community to see clearly which members are active in the reviewing process, which members are highly thought of as reviewers, and which members could stand either to become more active or more helpful as reviewers.

In this way, the stick in the carrot-and-stick approach to encouraging participation in an online reviewing process might allow the community to develop a “pay-to-play” relationship between reviewing and publishing, in which the right to publish one’s own texts within the network can only be earned by participation in the review process.

It goes without saying that such a system will need to balance the desire to make the scholarly community self-regulating with certain fail-safes to prevent abuse of the system—avoiding logrolling, cliquishness, exclusionary behavior, and so forth. But we hope that by making all aspects of the reviewing system public and visible, and by tying the reviewing process to the community itself, we can promote an ethos of collegiality that will help guide the system’s development.

ISSUE #4: Creating Assessment Metrics
Beyond developing and regulating the system of publishing and review, however, we need to find ways to communicate the value of the work that is produced within this publishing network to the scholarly community at large. Much of the resistance of scholars to new modes of digital publishing tends to focus around concerns that texts published in such venues won’t be taken seriously, and therefore be seen to “count,” by their colleagues, their departments, their deans and provosts, and their promotion and tenure committees. And worse, to some extent, they’re right: scholars and administrators accustomed to evaluating print-based research products often don’t know how to assess the quality or
impact of born-digital scholarship, and tend therefore to underestimate its value to the field.

Numerous attempts to close that gap in the assessment of digital scholarship are underway, through projects sponsored by disciplinary organizations such as the Modern Language Association, as well as through policies developed at individual institutions. The documents being produced and circulated by these groups are helping to reshape the thinking of many review bodies with respect to the tenurability of scholars who work in digital forms.

However, such documents tend to emphasize “peer review” in a fairly traditional form, and ensuring that promotion and tenure committees take seriously the kinds of open review that texts such as those published by MediaCommons Press will undergo will no doubt require further intervention. But as Michael Jensen of the National Academies Press has argued, web-native scholarship has the potential to provide a much richer and more complex set of metrics through which the importance of scholarly texts can be judged. Such metrics, which form the basis of what Jensen has called “authority 3.0,” will make use of a range of data including numbers of hits and downloads, numbers of comments, numbers of inbound links, etc., gauging the impact a text has had by the degree of its discussion around the web. But it will also make use of more sophisticated, less popularity-driven data, including such factors as the “reputation” of a press, an author, or a reviewer. As a result, these developing metrics will not focus simply on quantity—how many people have read, discussed, or cited a text—but also on the quality of the discussions of a text and the further texts that it has inspired.

The “review of the reviewers” that MediaCommons proposes to develop might help provide some of those new metrics of scholarly authority. By computing a reviewer’s reputation based on the community’s assessment of the quality of his or her reviews, we can then bring that reputation to bear on subsequent comments by that reviewer, indicating clearly to readers involved in promotion and tenure processes which opinions are generally considered authoritative by the community. The use and interpretation of such metrics will never be as simple as the binary measurement that traditional peer review provides—either a text was or was not published in a peer-reviewed venue—but they will enable us to develop a much more informative picture of the impact a scholar’s work is having on the field.

**NEXT STEPS:**

The next project MediaCommons Press will publish is meant to be a direct intervention into the kinds of peer review processes employed in scholarly publishing. *Shakespeare Quarterly*, a print-based journal that has been in publication since 1950, will publish a special issue focusing on “Shakespeare and New Media,” edited by Katherine Rowe of Bryn Mawr College, and the editorial board has agreed to experiment with our open review process for essays included in this issue. It is our hope that authors, editors, reviewers, and readers alike will find the process fruitful, and that this experiment with a hybrid digital/print publication mode might encourage other publishers to test out open review as well.

We are actively seeking further projects at MediaCommons Press, and will over the next year develop new tools to address the needs we uncovered in the publication of *Planned Obsolescence*. In the end, we hope that our work might help pave the way for the production of new systems and new structures that will support the scholarly monograph well into the future.

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**RELEVANT LINKS**

- Institute for the Future of the Book’s CommentPress [www.futureofthebook.org/commentpress/](http://www.futureofthebook.org/commentpress/)
- MediaCommons mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/