Peer Review, Scholarly Production, and a Provocation: Let's Blow Stuff Up

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Authority is supposedly grounded in wisdom, but I could see from a very early age that authority was only a system of control and it didn't have any inherent wisdom. I quickly realized that you either became a power or you were crushed.
– *Joe Strummer* (Vitale, 2012)

We have met the enemy and he is us.
– *Pogo* (Kelly, 1970)

The quotes above, referring to Joe Strummer and Pogo, are there to remind us that academics – those with PhDs or similar accreditations, jobs, potential jobs, wanting jobs in post-secondary institutions, and the institutional systems these individuals serve (whether begrudgingly or with gusto) – should be mindful that they are not the only ones who are having conversations about the transformation of scholarly publishing. In fact, the involvement of academics alone – whether "alt-ac" or "actual-ac" – in conversations about "scholarly" publication taints the game and narrows the perspective. The truth is that conversations about the transformation of scholarly publishing have been underway in numerous venues for some time now. To some extent these conversations manifest the reaction of academics seeking to control and maintain control over – however benignly and justly – a system of production that is in danger of slipping out of their control. In some ways, it is a parallel reaction to the news media's reaction to blogging – fears about a watered-down product, a lack of authority, and an "uncouth" form of discourse that does not acknowledge or participate

in the genre's sense of decorum and history. The feared result is an undocking of "scholarly" publishing from the academy, and thus the very definition of scholarly work, with all its prestige, job security, and citational authority, may well end up distorting the academic systems it has always supported. In other words, unable to rely on the inherent wisdom that credentials and institutional positions afford them, academics are striving to become a power in the future of scholarly publishing because they are well aware that if they don't, they'll be crushed.

The social contract and peer review

If a social contract is an agreement between a governing body and an individual, then peer review – a judgment about the merit of another's work in a similar discipline – can be labelled as such. The author agrees to give up her right to determine the authority of her opinion for the ability to be judged by her peers and obtain a higher order of authority than she might be able to achieve alone. If we then follow this line of reasoning, the individual also gives up any uniqueness of the opinion's form, so that the peer reviewer(s) can approve of, or shape it to, a more appealing or palatable, or defensible, or justifiable or publishable form. To summarize then, peer review is about conformity, both on the level of the opinion under review and the form in which it is, or will be, presented.

I have deliberately held onto the awkward word "opinion" above because I do not want to use "writing." Admittedly, it is a slight rhetorical shift to accommodate the broad-based venues for dissemination that fall into this commentary on transformation of scholarly publishing and peer review. At the same time, using "opinion" makes visible the base cause for all this discussion of peer review in new scholarly publishing contexts, particularly digital ones: we can no longer take for granted that the dominant form for scholarly opinion will be the polished written word. And, as much as scholars or peer reviewers might be reticent to admit it, we are often judging how the written word conforms to, or alludes to, or co-opts, or resists, a particular rhetorical format, at the same time as we might be judging intellectual value or innovation. To push this even further, we do not use peer review to judge process; rather, we use peer review to judge product.

So much of what we call scholarly opinion out there right now is blog posts, videos, course outlines, ad hoc conversational podcasts, tweets, Facebook posts, links, that scholarly process – the working through of ideas to arrive at some finite, finished, conclusive, point or opinion – has never been more visible. This visible process of academic production seems to be the direction scholarly publication is taking for now, but it isn't yet circumventing the authority of peer reviewed essays in academic journals. That noted, more and more the move from incongruous idea to polished scholarly production is a visible one that intersects with definitions of what constitutes authoritative scholarly work. Current conversations around the future of open access, dissemination, and scholarly communication focus on the possibilities within academic contexts, namely universities, colleges, and other post-secondary institutions, all of which have imbedded within them an apparatus of peer review. Even the platforms upon which new digital venues for scholarship emerge are born out of community structures akin to peer review – Wordpress, Drupal, Twitter, Facebook, Omeka, Gelphi, Zotero, Google all favour a community of practice rather than an

individual vision. All this to say that we probably need to rethink what we mean when we say "scholarly" before we begin discussing its transformation through emerging venues for publication. Put differently, what is the nature of the social contract between those with authority and those who desire it, when so much of what we call scholarly production takes place as process – always in a state of change or development – rather than presented as finished product?

When academics discuss scholarly work, particularly within established academic contexts (conferences, meetings, journals), the term scholarly seems to trigger several assumptions: 1) a greater attention to details; 2) a more deliberate expression of an idea – that is, it takes longer to get through and to understand something scholarly; 3) a level of refinement that reflects careful thought and rumination by someone who knows something (more) about the subject under discussion; and 4) scholarly work tends to appear in academic journals, not newspapers generally, and mutes sensationalism in favour of the plodding details of analysis. Oddly, scholarly work does not seem to trigger assumptions about audience. And herein lies the big hit: assumptions about audience seem inherent. It is simply assumed that academics will read scholarly work and that they will thus be judging its scholarly (see list above) merits. Baldly, I am not sure this inherent view of scholarly work and its audience holds any more merit. To limit scholarship to scholars is inherently biased toward a process of peer review that establishes authority. Even more plainly, first readers – that is, peer reviewers – are often the only audience taken into account in the production of scholarly work.

To this end, I wonder what we mean when we use terms such as "scholarly community." We seem to be referring to some group of individuals who are scholarly or, who belong to a community that involves scholarship and study. In its broadest application, scholarly might well include students, academics, journalists, hobbyists, Comic-Con enthusiasts, SteamPunk Carpenters, and Grateful Dead fans. The point here is that to limit our sense of what establishes scholarly authority to peer review in the form we now practice it would seem totally irrelevant to the task at hand and reflect a boldfaced turn away from understanding the apparatus that underlies academic production. We simply would not be accounting for the possibilities of an expanded audience or authorship.

The formal cheat

As Dan Cohen (2010) notes, "[m]uch of the reputational analysis that occurs in the professional humanities relies on cues beyond the scholarly content itself." The comment is a not-so-subtle allusion to form and its role in determining authority when it comes to scholarly production. Authoritative scholarly production is that which is free of those awkward shifts in typeface, font size, margins, and spacing that mark developing scholarly production. As well, diction, syntax, thesis, topic sentences, visible structure (paragraphing), and colour come into play when considering the "intelligence" of the scholarly production (as an aside, I have always wanted to submit to a peer-reviewed journal with the entirety of my text in mixed colours). Suffice to say that assessing the form of scholarly production is an essential part of, and an efficient cheat for, determining its intellectual value.

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Cohen (2010) goes on to make the following point:

> The book and article have an abundance of these value triggers from generations of use, but we are just beginning to understand equivalent value triggers online—thus the critical importance of web design, and why the logo of a trusted institution or a university press can still matter greatly, even if it appears on a website rather than a book.

It is comments like these that make me think of Pogo's statement above: we are the enemy. Cohen is certainly no fool; that these value triggers mean anything marks us as superficially concerned with the authority of academic work. The form in which scholarship is presented – and the metonymy that form represents – performs a crucial function in determining its authority, irrespective of the actual content of that work. If the design or production of scholarly material is crap, we are justly skeptical of the peer review process and its integrity.

Where I think things break down is at the point of equivalency. Why are we looking for "equivalent value triggers" (Cohen, 2010) when the forms and modes of scholarly production are so different in a digital age? An audio commentary published online might be considered pre-textual and have none of the value triggers determined by the book or article; a video need not contain or represent any of the written cues of an article or book; a database, visualization, reconstitution, or remediation represents other formal constructs that defy equivalencies – unless we force them – with the book or article. In short, we might be guilty of looking for formal equivalencies where there are none and assessing the value of material based on outdated or outmoded formal criteria without any regard to the actual intellectual or subversive value.

I am often surprised by the academy's commitment to formal presentation. Department meetings have thrown a lot of spit around over APA, Chicago, MLA, or other styles. Much of the peer editing I have received and undertaken suggested word choices, syntactical shifts, structural re-positionings based on extensive reading of the written word. Many of the emerging venues for intelligent conversation interest me precisely because I cannot judge them formally, and it scares the shit out of me how uncomfortable I feel judging most insightful intellectual work outside formal considerations. Indeed, "it sounds good" might well be the only viable comment and a perfectly legitimate and justifiable one for peer review. So, what does this have to do with visible process? Well, it strikes me that we might want to turn our attention away from peer review of the product and toward peer review of the process.

The open peer review aside

I need to interrupt this line for a moment here to say that I am not an advocate for open peer review as it is currently being shopped. Nothing of what I am putting forward should be interpreted as an argument for opening the peer review process as it is currently practiced so that it is visible. Such a system would offer no real solution to any of the issues around value and authority that seem to appear when venues for scholarly publication shift. Moreover, I think the real issue around open peer review, and why it has received such little traction, is that it is open. As I suggest above, given the volunteer nature of peer review and the subsequent and inevitable reluctant uptake,

one of the issues is precisely that the process for peer review is visible. Open peer review problematizes – there is diction for you – the process of peer review because it renders the reviewer's commentary visible for all its potential superficialities, misunderstandings, precisions, trivialities, hostilities, encouragements, and helpful revisions. It makes the reviewer culpable for the review process rather than the suitability of the scholarly opinion under review. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but one to which most scholars, junior or established, are reluctant to subject themselves, given the possible ramifications. In short, it scares some of us.

It is all a valuable lesson in how one negotiates accountability. To some extent, the system of scholarly publication as it is currently structured strives to give academic production authority by keeping the identity of those who are taking part in the process of it gaining authority a secret. The principle behind this is that reviewers would feel constrained to offer their true opinion if things were visible. Much of the process of peer review is invisible to those who consume the final product, and this is always reason for a good push in on that cloak. Open peer review should really reveal a process of exchange and engagement. There is nothing about it that needs to be secret. If one needs secrecy to voice true opinion, then there is something rotten in either the system that encourages that secrecy or the viability of the opinion. One essential tenet of trucking in contemporary, Western scholarship is the openness, transparency, free exchange and transfer of knowledge, whether stable or unstable. Opening up the secret process of peer review does not change anything; it merely illustrates the failings of the current system in upholding that essential and unwavering tenet.

Tracking changes

Now, back to the point: what the current shifts in contexts for scholarly production offer us is a way to track changes and to turn our attention to peer review of the process behind a scholarly production. It is probably about time to mention Kathleen Fitzgerald (2011), who has written extensively about peer review and its role in emerging digital contexts. She asserts that peer review must move to a model more akin to a network for scholarly publication. Indeed, she suggests that,

> until we 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. (p. 48-49)

I am all in for an ongoing conversation and a communal culture in place of an individualized race to publish or perish, particularly where it concerns – as it does Fitzpatrick – the systems that govern academic institutions. However, I'm more interested in what happens when the conversation is not "among scholars."

The discussion around the future possibilities for peer review or scholarly production seems to get pinned as one that needs to take place amongst certain people in certain venues, with certain credentials, and for certain reasons. It is all very Stonecutters. Given the increasingly public nature of the scholarly process, it seems somewhat naïve

to think that the discussion or community is so limited. In fact, it seems that the real transformation taking place is that people who are not scholarly, in the traditional sense, are accessing scholarly production, for free, online, because we put it up there – or Aaron Swartz did. The big transformation is that, for the first time in some time, a lot more people – who might not even be scholars themselves – are watching scholars' work and want to get involved, making snide comments or trying to get involved in the systems that govern the processes behind the production of that work. And again, this pisses some academics off.

Of course, it shouldn't piss anyone off, but, as our institutional systems suggest, professional scholars are not always great at following tenets about community, collaboration, free exchange, and openness. One area we are often touchy about is the transparency of our process – especially in the humanities, where I am and where the impetus for this commentary is clearly based. As a rule, professional humanities scholars do not publish their rough drafts or speak to the definitive process for writing an essay. However, we frequently require our students – particularly undergraduates – to reveal their processes to us so that we might check for plagiarism or help understand or nurture a developing rhetorical flourish. In order to complete a doctoral dissertation, a graduate student must be supervised and is responsible for submitting numerous thesis drafts to a supervisor before offering up a complete dissertation on the subject to another committee of review. In this regard, the process is all out there to be seen – everyone knows who everyone is; but once you leave the bosom of training, it is all a mystery – your genius just materializes and is assessed by like-minded peers, who review things for accuracy, viability and formal considerations.

All that noted, there is no way I am willing to go back to an iterative submission process, and I doubt there is the communal energy of professional scholars to do so either. But we are talking about transformations here, not remediating old systems. What needs to happen is for peer review – or, more appropriately, the system that helps determine the authority of scholarly production – to employ the digital environment: software, hardware, and computation. At the same time, the scholarly community needs to make a commitment to use this same digital environment to record process as an essential component of producing scholarly work. If the digital environment is enabling a transformation in scholarly publishing and communication, let it also enable systems for determining the authority of that transformed production by basing it in the algorithmic analysis of the process behind its production. Simply put, we need to harness the power of the digital environment to record and display the process – to track the changes – that leads to a scholarly opinion or conclusion.

Perhaps what Stephen Ramsey (2011) calls "algorithmic criticism" could also be applied as an algorithmic approach for determining the authority of process, if not product. By twisting Ramsey's words a bit, I will offer that, like algorithmic criticism, this algorithmic approach to tracking the visible changes in the production of scholarly material

> proposes that we create tools – practical, instrumental, verifiable, mechanisms – that enable critical engagement, interpretation, conversation, and contemplation. It proposes that we channel the heightened objectivity made possible by the

machine into the cultivation of those heightened subjectivities necessary for [signaling the authority of scholarly] work. (p. 77)

In sum, the value of intellectual, scholarly, academic (whatever you want to call it) work does not come from peer review or validation; it comes from the work's viability in an ongoing public conversation. If all we are really looking to safeguard against with peer review is the opinion that is ad hoc, lazy, misinformed, disinterested, skewed, repetitive, or otherwise unsuitable, then a glance at the rigors of its formative processes will often show true intentions. We would do well to encourage the openness of digital systems for measuring such rigors rather than invent – or reinvent – current systems for determining the authority of completed work as we have in the academy now. Make everything in the process open, everything in the process subject to review, and let the peers discuss value in terms of pushing knowledge forward rather than as a form of suitability. After all, the acquisition of knowledge is enabled less by the format in which one receives information than by the value inherent in its purpose.

Rip, mix, burn

Bottom line: we're doomed; but that's a good thing. Nothing should last forever but nothing. My hunch is that scholarly publication and the systems for determining the authority of such publications – like peer review – will go the way of music and the myriad scenes that accompany each genre of music. Ultimately, genre pockets will turn up and produce new pockets that inevitably recognize the chain that led to the current position. Determining authority will be up to the group and there will be little fanfare about it until a critical mass builds that force a change, again. There will be sages, there will be haters, there will be plenty for all and some awesome rare stuff for the truly invested to find and exploit like it never existed before.

Scholarly publishing might want to start thinking now about how genre influences the gambit. I mean, what genre is scholarly publishing anyway? It could be a book, it could be a song, an album (of photos, of words, of drawings), a movie, a cue card, a tweet, a raspberry pi. No matter what it is in the end, the process by which it materializes remains to some extent unchanging: iterative, collaborative, and exchange-based. Peer review is interesting, because it is one of the only real systems of governance for scholarly dissemination controlled by practitioners – those who make the stuff.

What discussions about the future of scholarly production and its process reveal most is how control – and the need to have it – dominates movements forward. Of course, any discussion of control conflicts with emerging sensibilities around collaboration and openness. New practices for producing scholarly work – at least those we are paying lip service to, like collaboration and open access – mean ceding control necessarily before one even begins the project. Alternatively – and this is truly terrifying for most – these new practices hold the prospect of losing control after one has put so much individual work into the production of scholarship and the process of bringing into being.

Looking at scholarship and the processes that govern its production are important for precisely this reason: we are all re-makers. We like to claim, especially in the digital humanities, that we are busy building things, but the fact is that we are better at

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blowing things up, dissecting topographical lines of force and patterns that appear within "whole" or "built" texts. That is not to say that scholarship cannot be about making or building; but, if we're going to take the fundamental tenet of peer review (and the authority it carries with it) forward with us into the transformed world of scholarly publication, then it needs to transform, not transfer – that is, it needs to be re-made. Foregrounding the materiality of process is one way of doing that; and it gets us out of being responsible for messy conversations about the role of form in determining value, except where it needs to do so. It might also save us from trivializing an important part of what it means to publish and produce scholarly work. If we make things out of other things, and I think scholarly publications are all about doing that, then the shavings left over from that making ought to suggest labour, thought, contour, and revision, independent of any system of valuation or authority.

A provocation

One of the predominant shifts of our age is the shift from ownership of something (the physical possession of it) to access (the ability to encounter it). Let's reset the dialogue about scholarly publishing and deal with access, not necessarily open access to the finished scholarly production, but open access to the process of producing it, and for everyone, not just those who volunteer. Let's make access part of standard practice. There are other standing issues here too: the dominance of the English language in scholarly production (and its platforms both emerging and established); access to software and the platforms (and hardware) that software needs to work properly; and access to adequate bandwidth and consistent open, unblocked, internet connections. While the list of restrictions to access is long, it reveals how complicated and intertwined our systems and processes for scholarly publishing are – more tools and more making only clutters the tangled box of chords in the closet. I would like to think that we are moving to disentangle the act of scholarly production from the structures of constraint, but I do not see much evidence of it. The new tools represent new straightjackets, new clothes for the emperor: they look interesting, they are fun to play with (who doesn't love playing with a straightjacket!), they make us feel like we are "doing" something – but for whom? The answer to that question often turns inward – we are making it to help ourselves be better humanists (or whatever).

At this point, we need to return to Pogo (1970) and Joe Strummer (Vitale, 2012). What if we are the problem? What if the system itself (its form *per se*) produces its own authority, independent of any wisdom? Let's look at our audience; let's look at the possibilities that new audiences create and what new audiences expect; let's re-make parallel structures to reveal our own problematic instances (let's track our changes). Finally, let's push against the currents that seek to re-establish authority under different covers by pushing for open structures at every point in the process of developing and producing scholarly work. Dissent, dissent, dissent.

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