Publish and Perish

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In the spring of 2009, the University of Michigan Press sent out a letter by email to its authors announcing the end of business as usual at the press. Having entered into an agreement with the university library at Michigan, U-M press, the letter stated, had initiated “a transformative scholarly publishing model” in which all publications are to be made available primarily in digital format, with print-on-demand versions of texts available to bookstores, institutions, and individuals (Pochoda, Letter). Long-term plans outlined by editor Philip Pochoda call for books to be “digitized and available to libraries and customers world-wide through an affordable site-license program,” as most academic journals currently are. The announcement stressed the revolutionary potential inherent in the shift online by suggesting that digital publications will be “candidates for a wide range of audio and visual digital enhancements – including hot links, graphics, interactive tables, sound files, 3D animation, and video.” This is not, in other words, simply a change in models of distribution, but also potentially a radical metamorphosis in modes of scholarship in the humanities.

Over the last thirty years, university presses such as Michigan have been pushed by academic administrators to act increasingly as for-profit publishing ventures rather than like the promoters of heterodox scholarly inquiry that they were originally intended to be (Waters 5). This is but one aspect of a multifaceted transformation of the university which critics such as Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades have termed academic capitalism. As universities have cut back funding for both publishers and tenure stream faculty appointments, turning steadily more to the precarious labor of graduate students and adjuncts to staff their core courses, the academic presses have become the de facto arbiters of hiring, tenure, and promotion in the increasingly pinched world of the humanities and social sciences. The result, as a well-known letter published by Stephen Greenblatt during his tenure as president of the Modern Language Association in 2002 attests, is a crisis in scholarly publishing. As Greenblatt put it, many junior faculty members “find themselves in a maddening double bind. They face a challenge--under inflexible time constraints and with very high stakes--that many of them may
be unable to meet successfully, no matter how strong or serious their scholarly achievement, because academic presses simply cannot afford to publish their books.” As Greenblatt’s letter suggested, it has become harder to publish in general, and it is particularly difficult for junior faculty members to find publishers for their manuscripts. At the same time, the remorseless creep towards informal labor in both private and public institutions of higher education in the US has made it increasingly necessary to crank out books in order to find and keep a job.

The increasingly straitened circumstances of university presses have an impact on academic freedom, although that effect may not be immediately apparent. Key to the first document on academic freedom, Arthur O. Lovejoy and John Dewey’s “1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure,” was an attempt to differentiate the university from a business venture and teaching from private employment. As recent discussions of academic capitalism have documented, the walls separating academia from the dominant mode of information capitalism have been systematically dismantled over the last three decades. This shift has been particularly apparent in the sciences, which have become an important source of proprietary knowledge production intended to fill university coffers (Washburn). For sectors of the university in which knowledge does not take a concrete, commodifiable form, academic capitalism has meant hard times. In humanities publishing, this transformation of the university has inevitably affected academic freedom. The three key components of academic freedom laid out by Lovejoy and Dewey’s declaration include “freedom of inquiry and research; freedom of teaching within the university or college; and freedom of extramural utterance and action” (American Association of University Professors 299). Although the publishing crisis cannot be described as a form of explicit censure of inquiry or research, it nonetheless constitutes a structural transformation that imperils academics’ ability to disseminate their research. While the crisis may not directly obstruct academic research, that research will simply not get done unless there are venues in which to broadcast the results of such research. The crisis in publishing, it
could therefore be argued, menaces academic freedom in a far more insidious and sweeping manner than the high profile attacks of organizations such as Students for Academic Freedom on prominent radical scholars. In this regard, the publishing crisis may fruitfully be compared to the increasing casualization of teaching in higher education, whose destructive impact on academic freedom has been amply demonstrated in the context of recent labor struggles such as the one that unfolded at New York University in 2005-2006 (Krause).

The kinds of digital production and dissemination being pioneered by the University of Michigan Press are germane to issues of academic freedom to the extent that they address the crippling crisis of academic publishing. The potential for significantly democratizing knowledge represented by such developments cannot be gainsaid despite the enduring significant inequalities of access to digital information. We are, however, a long way from such developments becoming the norm. Moreover, there has, to date, been relatively little theorization of this tectonic shift in the modes of knowledge production and dissemination (Hall 16). Professional organizations such as the AAUP have an important role to play in this transformation of publishing. According to a recent survey conducted by the Modern Language Association, 40.8 percent of the doctorate-granting institutions that responded had no experience evaluating refereed articles in electronic format, and 65.7 percent have no experience evaluating monographs in electronic format. Protocols for evaluating collaborative scholarship, an increasing norm within digital research and publishing, have still not been established (Smith). The situation, in other words, is still very much in flux. Sustaining academic freedom – in the relatively expansive definition of the term I propose adopting - should involve intervening in the nascent realm of digital scholarship to ensure that emerging protocols are based on considerations not simply of freedom but also justice.

The Crisis in Publishing is a Crisis for Academic Freedom
As most people involved in higher education know by now, academic work has grown increasingly precarious over the last three decades. The story of the downsizing of the professoriate has been told in many places, and will not be recapitulated at length here. For our purposes, it is sufficient simply to note the impact of this transformation on publishing. As the ranks of the professoriate came to be staffed increasingly with precarious workers, publication became more and more important. For those working their way into the profession as graduate students, it is now never too early to start attending conferences and sending off articles to scholarly journals. While this pressure has admittedly produced some at times risibly abstruse scholarship, it has also led to a lot of innovative work. As Tim Brennan recently observed, one has one’s most unorthodox ideas as a graduate student, before one is fully socialized – or, should I say, domesticated – by one’s disciplinary formation (Brennan).

The problem here is not so much with the quality of the scholarship, though, but rather with the quantity. As the number of full-time positions has decreased, competition for these slots has of course increased. Just as in other sectors of the labor market, an economically and politically induced glut of disposable workers has placed increasing power in the hands of managers. University administrators have consequently remorselessly upped the publication ante as they seek to strengthen their institution’s position in the competitive rankings game. Just as higher rates of rejections make their institutions look more selective and hence more prestigious on the undergraduate level, so more publications from university faculty stand to improve the institution’s position in all-important national rankings and branding wars. In countries such as Australia and Great Britain, the continuing life of the university even rides on such publications since central government funding hinges on the quantity and quality of faculty publications as measured by benchmarking mechanisms such as the Research Assessment Exercise. If benchmarking is not quite so extreme domestically as a result of the US’s mixed public and private educational system, the pressures for publication are equally if not more
intense. Even though research universities only constitute one fiftieth of all institutions of higher education, the influence of the intensifying drive to publish brought to bear on faculty at such elite and well endowed institutions has trickled all the way down to the nation’s community colleges.

In tandem with this pressure on junior scholars, university presses face crisis conditions. Once upon a time there was a virtuous circle linking scholars who needed to publish their research to well-funded university publishing houses that communicated such research to university libraries. These libraries would in turn purchase the scholarly journals and monographs where research was published. No more. Both private and public universities have cut funding for their publishing ventures, forcing them to bear considerations of marketability increasingly in mind when accepting projects for publication (Waters 5). Meanwhile, the cost of subscriptions to journals in the sciences and medicine has risen precipitously, siphoning off funding for book purchases. NYU’s library, for example, spends twenty five percent of its budget on journals from the European publisher Elsevier-North Holland and another twenty five percent on journals from two or three additional for-profit publishers who realize libraries are unlikely to terminate a subscription to a prestigious scientific or medical journal (Waters 29). The University of California system currently devotes less than twenty percent of its budget to books, for instance, and now often recommends that only one copy of a book be purchased throughout the system rather than allowing each campus to purchase a copy (Waters 36). Although academic presses are not expected to turn the kind of profit of a Bertelsmann subsidiary, their revenues have been hard-hit by diminishing orders from libraries and by the online trade in used textbooks (Pochoda, Interview). Academic publishers currently sustain large losses in the publication of scholarly monographs, recouping this money only through their site-licensed journal publications (Wissoker).

What we face, in other words, is a kind of perfect storm in academia. Just as more scholars need to publish their work to win jobs, tenure, and promotion, university presses have been downsized. Moreover, as Phil Pochoda of the University of Michigan Press pointed out to me, because of the
increasingly inflated requirements for tenure and promotion, the sheer number of scholars seeking to publish has multiplied many times over while the number of academic presses has remained virtually the same over the last three decades (Pochoda, Interview). As a result, everyone has been doing more with less. Academic presses are publishing historically high numbers of books, but they are selling an average of only 275 copies of each title, as against an average of 1,250 thirty years ago (Waters 36). Faced with these difficulties, publishers have done an admirable job of maintaining their commitment to cutting edge inquiry. Nonetheless, it is increasingly hard for anyone except a small number of academic super-stars to publish original work in book form (Hall 5). It’s become an open secret among young faculty members that you need to have some sort of an introduction to a publisher from a (preferably famous) mentor just to get your foot in the door these days. Even with such help, however, work that does not play on the latest buzzwords is in most cases destined for the scrapheap.

Guarantees of freedom of research and inquiry similar to those to which the AAUP has been committed historically are increasingly hollow under these conditions. If one cannot find meaningful outlets in which to publish one’s research, such work will never have a chance to provoke public debate and, potentially, to need the protections afforded by the protocols of academic freedom. The rights for which the AAUP fights therefore stand to become a dead letter unless the crisis in publishing is addressed. The AAUP’s dedication to addressing the conditions of faculty teaching, research, and publication – as well as the public good in general - suggest that the crisis in publishing should be a matter of concern for the organization. Yet there has been little focused attention paid to the double bind faced by junior faculty members to date. This may perhaps stem from the largely negative definition of professional autonomy defended by the AAUP: freedom from meddling is a core tenet of organizational policy, just as it is of the liberal constitutional order in the US in general. The question that arises under present conditions, however, is whether such negative definitions, as valuable as they are, have ceased to have meaning for the vast majority of contemporary scholars given the structural
inequalities that determine the conditions of publication and individual utterance today.

The Digital Commons

Faced with this crisis, many scholars have begun to question current models of publishing. Why, for example, should faculty members struggle to get their research accepted by scholarly journals that continue to appear in paper form but that are predominantly read through restricted, subscription-based online databases such as Project Muse and JSTOR? Since few scholars in the humanities and social sciences expect to turn a profit on their writing, why not make that writing as accessible as possible by avoiding proprietary models of distribution? If this holds true for publications in journals, why should it not also hold for book length publications as well? Why not simply move the whole dog-and-pony show online, making sure that scholars rather than publishers or administrators retain control of publication protocols?

Such questions are particularly germane given the sweeping changes initiated by digital technologies. As knowledge production has grown more central to the economy of developed countries, production of and control over intellectual property has come to be a defining political and economic issue. A strong movement to maintain and expand open access to what is increasingly described as a networked or digital commons has developed – although the term movement is perhaps inappropriate since it implies a level of hierarchical coordination that is antithetical to the ethos of the digital commons (Bollier 295). This acephalic phenomenon, then, has developed remarkable forms of social networking, using digital technologies to develop radical collaborative democratic projects such as the Linux operating system and Wikipedia, both of which have been jointly authored by thousands of people working in disparate times and places. The struggle for open access has also been carried forward by legal activists laboring to expand the public sphere through initiatives such as copyleft. Organizations like Creative Commons, for example, have developed institutional mechanisms to
ensure that the highly restrictive copyright rules that dampen creative borrowing and invention today are not the only set of rules governing individual and collective authorship (Bollier). As Clay Shirky has recently argued, these diverse campaigns for “free culture” have leveraged digital technologies that are lowering barriers to social collaboration, thereby creating radical democratic organizational forms on an unprecedented scale (Shirky 18). Corporations are of course fighting this movement with all their massive resources, striving to retain proprietary control over the networked commons through steps such as pushing changes in intellectual property legislation in global organizations such as the World Trade Organization and prosecuting college students for downloading songs using now-ubiquitous peer-to-peer networking technologies.

Like transnational corporations, universities have sought to profit from the intellectual property produced in research labs, libraries, and classrooms. This attempt to monetize knowledge has even affected scholars in relatively unprofitable fields such as the humanities. In the early part of the decade, for example, Columbia University established a for-profit venture entitled Fathom.com that was intended to make money by disseminating university teaching over the web (Bollier 286). Who exactly owned lectures on Shakespeare and Dante therefore became a burning question, much to the alarm of scholars at Columbia and other participating institutions. Questions about academic freedom followed quickly after those regarding issues of intellectual property. These questions became moot, however, when Columbia’s venture failed after M.I.T. took the radical step of making all of its courses available online for free. In the wake of this tussle over proprietary versus open access models of knowledge dissemination, a broad, international campaign for open educational resources has developed (Bollier 288-292).

The Open Access (OA) publishing movement hinges on an analogous attempt to exploit the resources of the Internet and of computerization in general to transform research. As the anonymous authors of the recently posted Digital Humanities Manifesto, sounding very much like a radical avant-
garde art group such as the Situationist International, argue:

Digital Humanities have a utopian core shaped by its genealogical descent from the counterculture-cyberculture intertwinglings of the 60s and 70s. This is why it affirms the value of the open, the infinite, the expansive, the university/museum/archive/library without walls, the democratization of culture and scholarship, even as it affirms the value of large-scale statistically grounded methods (such as cultural analytics) that collapse the boundaries between the humanities and the social and natural sciences. This is also why it believes that copyright and IP standards must be freed from the stranglehold of Capital, including the capital possessed by heirs who live parasitically off of the achievements of their deceased predecessors.

The links between the movement for a radical democratic, anti-capitalist networked commons and initiatives in the Digital Humanities such as open access publishing are laid out quite clearly here. As I discussed in the previous section, the difficult economic conditions faced by university publishers and the managerial prerogatives of academic bureaucrats have imposed an artificial economy of scarcity that affects younger scholars in a particularly dire form. Consequently, the appeal of a post-scarcity digital economy, one grounded in challenging the increasingly restrictive proprietary claims of academic capitalism, should not be particularly surprising.

Notice, however, that the claims of Digital Humanities extend beyond simply making scholarly research more widely available, as valuable as such initiatives are – particularly in terms of redressing the widening knowledge gap between the global North and South. In addition, the digital revolution is represented in the manifesto as transforming the character of research itself, shaking down established disciplinary walls and promoting novel forms of collaborative inquiry. As the manifesto states, digital technologies promise to push the kinds of data mining and cultural analytics pioneered by scholars such as Franco Moretti in *Graphs, Maps, and Trees* to new levels as it becomes possible to track and interpret large-scale trends within massed cultural artifacts like the novel.
In addition, scholarly research appears to be on the threshold of freeing itself of the stranglehold of printed culture. Humanities scholars can overcome the artificial disciplinary divisions between print, audio, and visual texts to carry out and present research in multiple genres. Journals such as *Vectors* have already pioneered this approach, with articles like David Theo Goldberg and Stefka Hristova’s “Blue Velvet” presenting a fascinating blend of text, image, and sound to explore the reconstruction of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Such experiments are only the beginning. Emerging genres such as the video diary promise to lift blogging out of its predominantly print-based mode and allow for fresh temporalities and novel archival explorations (Coleman). The danger in such initiatives, of course, is that fascination with the new palette for research and representation will lead to research-light digital texts. But this is probably only a byproduct of the birthpangs of Digital Humanities, one that will fade as multiple genres of networked scholarly initiatives gain ground.

A corollary of these new forms of digital research and publication is the transformation of authorship. Although theoreticians have been proclaiming the death of sovereign subjectivity for some time, protocols for evaluating scholarly publication have remained resolutely tied to surprisingly traditional constructions of the author. But how can an article such as Goldberg and Hristova’s be evaluated without crediting the many researchers and designers who are involved in producing such a palimpsestic text? On the *Vectors* website, Goldberg is credited as author of the article and Hristova is credited as “information architect,” but Eric Loyer is also cited as “designer programmer” and a whole series of acknowledgements are appended that include other scholars as well as the people of New Orleans in general. How will such complexly authored textual artifacts be judged by tenure review committees, most of whom, as I have already remarked, remain almost totally ignorant about emerging digital scholarship? To what extent will the criteria for graduate work, tenure, and promotion shift as younger scholars begin to engage with these new technologies? How will issues of intellectual property and academic freedom be adjudicated when texts are no longer stable and single-authored, but
instead take on the multiple layers of Goldberg and Hristova’s article, not to mention the incessantly mutable and dizzyingly polyphonic quality of a Wikipedia page? As it becomes increasingly apparent that digital scholarship need not be simply what Gary Hall calls a “prosthetic” extension of print culture (10), will current institutional protocols shift in order to enable such changes or will they function as a dampener on the radical possibilities unfolding in the networked commons?

Conclusion

Like most things digital, the shift to online publishing of scholarly research is proceeding apace. During late July, 2009 I interviewed a member of the Open Humanities Press (OHP). Begun several years ago, OHP, Kyoo Lee explained to me, is an initiative designed to leverage the substantial academic capital of its distinguished international editorial board to support a stable of open access journals. These journals are peer reviewed and publish articles that conform to what Gary Hall would call paper-centrism. The point is thus not so much to experiment with radical new forms of writing but rather to establish the scholarly authenticity of online journals, ensuring that junior academics can feel free to publish online without worrying that their tenure review committees will look askance on such venues. Yet, in tandem with this legitimation project, as Lee argued, OHP intends to push some of the trends towards interdisciplinary work championed in the Digital Humanities Manifesto, a determination reflected in the highly heterogeneous group of journals currently publishing under the OHP e-imprint.

Trumping these exciting developments, however, within less than a week of my conversation with Lee, OHP rolled out an innovation that the two of us had discussed as something on a relatively distant temporal horizon: a group of online, open access book series. At present there are five discrete series planned, although, as Lee described to me, the number can be expanded almost indefinitely as members of the editorial board see fit. Even more startlingly, the OHP book series is completely
dissociated from any press. Instead of such a traditional arrangement, the series is to be published in conjunction with the University of Michigan Library’s Scholarly Publishing Office (SPO). Given that, as I explained at the outset of this article, the University of Michigan Press is itself pursuing an online publishing initiative aggressively, it is not exactly clear what the future venue for scholarly publications of all stripes will be. Nor is it clear how all of the institutional arrangements will be handled. Will the proceeds from print-on-demand publications of OHP books be sufficient to cover the costs of managing submissions and conducting peer review? How will the claims to a unique vocational attention to the book as object and to the importance of the collaborative labor brought to books by university presses be handled in the OHP/SPO publication process? And to what extent, finally, will the vexing questions about publishing autonomy and academic freedom raised by editors such as Ken Wissoker come into play if the OHP initiative publishes texts that stoke the public controversy of, say, a Ward Churchill book?

As I have outlined in this article, I believe that the crisis in scholarly publishing is also a crisis for academic freedom, if we interpret the term in an adequately broad sense. Just as the turn toward precarious labor has made notions of academic freedom superfluous for an increasing percentage of the academic workers, so the crisis in publishing has made it progressively more difficult to disseminate one’s research and, hence, to intervene in scholarly and public debates. In addition to outlining the intertwined nature of the publishing crisis and issues of academic freedom, I hope to have suggested the extent to which the move online, while it might unplug the bottleneck that afflicts scholarly publishing, raises a host of complex questions related to issues of academic freedom. No doubt additional troubling questions will emerge as online, open access publishing moves forward and, in so doing, reshapes the terrain of scholarship.

Given the quick mutation of the terrain I have surveyed, it is unlikely that theoretical or institutional efforts will ever be able to respond to developments on the ground adequately.
Nevertheless, it seems to me that organizations such as the Modern Language Association and the AAUP have a responsibility to reflect on the shifting character of their mandate in relation to the digital revolution. We cannot assume that digital publishing will be a purely liberatory move. As Kyoo Lee put it during our interview, in order for things to be free, something must be unfree. Indeed, David Golumbia has argued at great length recently that the Internet and the realm of computationalism in general is far more a mechanism of surveillance and control today than it is one of radical, grassroots democracy. Questions of who will fund and supervise electronic publications and what sort of mandate they will have to protect academic freedom will inevitably loom larger as more and more scholarly work goes up online. It seems to me that we need to try to anticipate the controversies that are likely to emerge as this paradigm shift takes place. An organization such as the AAUP has a vital role to play in ensuring that the much-vaunted freedom of the Internet is maintained and expanded as scholars conduct increasing amounts of their lives and work online.
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