

# **Amodern 1: The Future of the Scholarly Journal**

**February 2013**

## **WE HAVE NEVER DONE IT THAT WAY BEFORE**

### **An Interview with Kathleen Fitzpatrick**

**Michael Nardone, Kathleen Fitzpatrick**

“We are entrenched in systems that no longer serve our needs,” Kathleen Fitzpatrick writes in *Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy* (New York University Press, 2011). In her study, Fitzpatrick scrutinizes specific points in the network of research production, evaluation, preservation, and circulation - from notions of authorship and the traditional peer review process to the role of the university press and library. Acknowledging the “wholly unsustainable economic model” under which scholarly publishing operates, she sets her focus on “the technological changes that many believe are necessary to allow academic publishing to flourish into the future,” while addressing in each scenario “the social, intellectual, and institutional changes that are necessary to pave the way for such flourishing.” In the following dialogue, Kathleen and I discuss institutional obsolescence, the publics and the production of her more recent work, and the future of scholarly communications. This exchange was conducted via email between New York and Montreal.

-Michael Nardone

**At the beginning of *Planned Obsolescence* you summarize the argument of your prior work, *The Anxiety of Obsolescence*, stating that “obsolescence may be, in this case at least, less a material state than a political project aimed at intervening in contemporary public life, perhaps with the intent of shoring up a waning cultural hierarchy.” How does this notion of obsolescence carry into your work on peer review and the future of scholarly communications? Can you elaborate on the power dynamics of what is or might be propping up the waning cultural hierarchy of peer review and scholarly publications as they have been practiced?**

Well, in a most obvious sense, the connection might be to suggest that some attempts to protect the ways that scholars have worked and published over the last half-century or so might similarly be in service of a kind of hierarchy – that efforts to protect traditional modes of publishing from fiscal demise, or even more, to ensure that these traditional modes of publishing retain their primacy over newer online forms, might in fact be motivated less by concerns about “quality” and more by a desire to preserve the kind of privilege that scholars who publish in exclusive venues have. Not least, this includes the power to determine what “quality” is. As Mario Biagioli has argued, peer review is a baldly Foucauldian disciplinary technology, but a peculiar one, as unlike the prison or the asylum, those of us who are most successfully disciplined go on to earn the right to discipline others. Is it any wonder that the ways that we attribute value to scholarly projects seem at times unmovably mired in tradition?

Just as with the authors that I studied in *The Anxiety of Obsolescence*, I do not mean to suggest that any of this motivation is conscious – that established scholars are purposefully attempting to prevent new kinds of work from competing with their own – but neither are dismissals of new ways of working entirely innocent. For all the obvious reasons, those who have the power to determine what counts as scholarly work want to ensure that their own values continue to be represented.

**One of the many intriguing qualities of *Planned Obsolescence* is how the book carries out its project both in its ideas, its content, and in its demonstration, the processes through which the text moved on its way to becoming a book. Will you trace a history of the text's early development, say, from what led you to write on the subject in the first place to your initial writings and presentations of this research?**

*Planned Obsolescence* has its deep roots in my blog, where I wrote a fair bit about some of the difficulties I was having placing my first book with a university press. Those posts led to a set of conversations that laid the groundwork for MediaCommons, the digital scholarly network that I co-founded with Avi Santo and the Institute for the Future of the Book. In the course of working on MediaCommons, I kept writing about the issues we were facing – the future of peer review, the new structures for digital texts, and so forth – and gradually realized that all of these various pieces were underwritten by the same argument: that whatever technological hurdles we were facing, the crucial changes necessary for a successful transition to digital scholarly communication were social and institutional in nature.

The peer review piece in particular developed out of the fact that, at every single meeting or conference presentation or demo or talk at which I described what we were doing with MediaCommons, the very first question I was asked was inevitably “what are you going to do about peer review?” It was clear to me that the answer that many people were seeking was that we would be just as rigorous about pre-publication peer review as the most highly thought-of journals, but it was equally clear to me that imposing that mode of blind, pre-publication peer review on a form of publishing that benefits most from open dialogue would be counter-productive. That piece evolved from a blog post into an extended talk, and from there into an article. And the same sort of thing happened with other issues we were exploring, until one day – literally, it was one of those shower revelations – I realized that I was about halfway through writing a book about the future of scholarly communication.

**At that point, did you envision what you were writing as an e-text made available for open review on MediaCommons or as published book with an academic press? I am curious about these two particular iterations of the text and how they were developed in relationship to one another.**

As I began thinking about shaping the various pieces I'd been writing into a book, I

approached NYU Press with a proposal for it. Eric Zinner, NYU's editor-in-chief, assumed from the start that I'd want to do something online with the book, but it caught him a bit by surprise when I asked to post the manuscript for open peer review. The responses I'd received to the early writing I'd done on open review practices were often intriguing but a little perplexed; what would a system like the one I proposed actually look like in practice? It seemed to me, then, that open peer review would be the most crucial part of my argument to model, and even to test; since I was making an argument about the benefits of new ways of approaching peer review, I really needed to put my money where my mouth was. The press agreed, and so we posted the full draft on MediaCommons for discussion in the fall of 2009, at the same time that the manuscript was sent to external reviewers in the traditional way. The online discussion continued for several months, after which I revised the text into the version that was released by the press in November 2011.

**Will you discuss the MediaCommons format in regards to those making comments and the visibility of that exchange? Did you invite colleagues to comment?**

As I'd done some early experimentation with CommentPress, and had written about those experiments in what became chapter 3 of the book, it seemed a natural fit for the online discussion of the manuscript. CommentPress, which is a plugin for the WordPress blog engine, enables a robust review process by lifting the comments from the bottom of the page, placing them instead alongside the primary text. Moreover, comments can be attached not just to a full page of text, but to a particular paragraph, allowing for a more fine-grained discussion of a text-in-process. Comments are also threaded, so that commenters can discuss with one another, rather than all comments appearing aimed at the original text.

Once the platform was in place and the text had been entered into it (a mostly tedious process of cutting, pasting, and a bit of hand-coding), I emailed nine colleagues who I thought would have an interest in the material. I asked these colleagues if they'd be willing to pop by, read a little, and leave a comment or two, just to get the discussion started before I announced the review process widely. Four of those colleagues did come by and leave some comments, and two of them read and commented all the way through the manuscript. Once there were enough comments in place that I felt would allow other folks to get a sense of the desire for discussion, I opened the review process widely. I announced it on Twitter, on Facebook, and on my blog, and word more or less spread from there.

**Were there commenters you did not expect, ones, say, entering the dialogue from other disciplines or from outside the academy?**

The commenters on the text came from a range of perspectives. Many of them were friends and colleagues, folks I follow on Twitter, scholars I attend conferences with, and so forth - the people I'd have wanted to share the project with, in any case. But the discussion drew in a number of commenters with whom I hadn't previously been in contact, folks from slightly different fields, and even some from outside academia altogether. Their contributions were crucial to the project, precisely because the kinds of specialized knowledge they brought to reading it were so different from my own. And different from one another's; there are a few great spots in the discussion where you can see reviewers disagreeing with one another's readings, in a really productive way. All of these comments were crucial to the process of sitting down and revising the book for print - and the best part, as far as I'm concerned, is that because each comment has its own permalink, and because most commenters opted to post under their own names, I'm able to give credit for the contributions their ideas made to the revised version of the text.

**In a note concerning Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford, you talk about how “proof of our profoundly individualist sense of accomplishment rests in the literary unthinkable nature of the multi-author dissertation.” Here, I am thinking of how this resonates with Karin Knorr-Cetina’s *Epistemic Cultures*, and how she analyzes the collaborative structure of knowledge production and “the erasure of the individual as an epistemic subject” in a laboratory setting.**

**But, are the practices that you are advocating in your discussion of open review and the humanities not necessarily a multi-authoring of research as is**

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**often practiced in the sciences, but, instead, a call to mobilize the technologies at hand to better frame the multivocality and interactivity that arises in scholarly discourse?**

I note in the chapter on authorship that, when I say that our work is likely to become more collaborative as we work in new, open, public environments, I do not necessarily mean that we're all going to be working on multi-author publications. In fact, in fields in which single authorship is currently the norm, we're likely to continue to develop new kinds of singly-authored work. What we'll nonetheless need to consider, however, is how we account for the roles that other authors play in the development of our texts and ideas. Open review processes will allow the contributions that readers make to our thinking to become visible, rather than leaving them hidden as they currently are; as a result, we'll need to develop a much richer sense of the role that conversation plays in the development of scholarship, and an accordingly richer mode of attribution and citation for the contributions made by our peers.

We've been working on this at MediaCommons through our open review processes; by making those review procedures persistent, a reader is able to return to a draft text to see how it develops from draft to final publication, and in that way can trace the genealogy of ideas as they emerge and develop in conversation between author and readers. Our hope is to develop a function for the site through which one could see all of the contributions that a given scholar has made across the network - not just their own original texts, but the comments they've left on others' work as well - to create a more complex portrait of what it is to be a good contributor to a community of practice. We hope as a result that such contributions to ongoing dialogue amongst scholars will come to be a core value in processes of scholarly assessment - that one's helpfulness will matter just as much as one's originality.

**In the making public of reviewer contributions, the dialogue between reviewers, and the development of a scholar's text from draft to final publication, there arises an entirely new textual body that was formerly accessed by only a few involved in the private production of research. These comments, exchanges, and genealogical traces are not only exceptionally helpful to the scholar who has embarked upon the research under review, but also to those who are - and will be - studying that particular research. Has there been any dialogue on the pedagogical implications of what becomes possible through these now-public exchanges?**

I don't off-hand know of discussions of those pedagogical implications, but I can certainly imagine the need to develop and teach new modes of genealogical, or even archaeological, engagements with critical texts and ideas. We've always used footnotes and other citations as means of tracking scholarly conversations backward in time, of course, but the inclusion of direct response to scholarly texts within the frames of those texts themselves will inevitably add new dimensions to the visible histories of the ideas with which we engage. We'll definitely need to teach our students how to engage with those histories - but of course we'll first need to teach ourselves.

**I am now reading [the white paper on open review](#) that you and Avi Santo have drafted, and following the comments and discussions both on and off the MediaCommons site. In paying close attention to one of [Ted Underwood's responses](#) - "I like 'open.' And I like 'review.' But do they need to be fused?" - will you discuss why the two terms, though doing "different sorts of work," ought to be conjoined?**

I take Ted's point; the open processes in which scholars engage on blogs have evolved on their own, and not all such processes demand to be transformed into formalized modes of review. But what we're discussing in the open review study is what formal review processes might gain by being opened up, by learning from those more naturally evolved processes. We are focused on this question because there are moments at which authors or editors or publishers want to submit openly-published material to formal review processes, or to mobilize open communities in the review of formal publications. We're not interested in "fusing" those two terms, but rather in thinking about when and how they might (and might not) work together.

**In *Planned Obsolescence*, you write "one of the most significant problems facing academic publishing today [is] an insupportable economic model." I**

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have before me the Harvard Advisory Council Memorandum on Journal Pricing, "**Major Periodical Subscriptions Cannot Be Sustained**," written just months after the publication of *Planned Obsolescence*. The first sentences of the Harvard memo state: "We write to communicate an untenable situation facing the Harvard Library. Many large journal publishers have made the scholarly communication environment fiscally unsustainable and academically restrictive. This situation is exacerbated by effort of certain publishers (called "providers") to acquire, bundle, and increase the pricing on journals." Will you elaborate on what it means when one of the world's wealthiest educational institutions says that it can no longer afford to purchase these journals and, in fact, suggests to its own faculty and students that they should seek out publishing their own work in open-access journals?

It's an amazing moment, and one that has called a great deal of attention to the situation facing academic libraries. When the Harvards of the world can no longer afford to pay the predatory prices being demanded by the major corporate publishers, it's clear that the entire system is headed for a serious breakdown – because if this is the situation at Harvard, what must the situation be at state universities? At regional comprehensive universities? At teaching-centered institutions? Harvard's extraordinary prestige gives it the ability to take the lead on issues like promoting open access and resisting the demands of corporate publishers, and it's great to see that the advisory council has seized the moment.

What remains to be seen is the effect that this memo will have, of course. As with the recent Elsevier boycott, it's not yet clear whether the statement will translate into action. Will the library begin to cancel subscriptions to unreasonably-priced journals? If they do, will the faculty support that action, or will they demand continued access to those publications? Will Harvard faculty begin to privilege open access publications as venues for their own work, over those with traditional forms of prestige? The statement is a terrific start, and a clear sign that we've reached some kind of crux moment – but what happens next isn't at all certain.

**In thinking about producing new forms of electronic textuality to meet the needs of scholarship, will you talk about any recent examples and models you have come across that are, in your opinion, promising breakthroughs?**

One very interesting model that I think is going to be increasingly important is that of PressForward, the new community filtering and journal publishing platform being

developed by the Center for History and New Media. As Dan Cohen has described it, PressForward is trying to work with the masses of scholarly work being published on the open web in a way that's appropriate to the web's openness; rather than using the traditional pre-publication mode of weeding out the bad stuff, PressForward attempts to do what Cohen describes as "catching the good," surfacing the most exciting and engaging work being read within a community of practice, wherever it's being produced. The PressForward staff recently published a six-month self-evaluation of how the experiment has gone thus far, and it's clear that they've got a bit of tinkering to do, but that they're already learning from and revising their processes suggests to me that it's a project worth paying close attention to.

There are also a range of tools for new kinds of scholarly production, like Scalar, a platform for publishing interactive multimodal long-form work being produced by the Alliance for Networking Visual Culture, or Neatline, a very cool mapping and timeline tool from the University of Virginia's Scholars' Lab. And then there are a number of projects that are working on what happens after scholarship is published online - how it gets discovered, how it gets reviewed and assessed - including TotalImpact and other projects working on article-level metrics. And of course we're working on a range of projects at the Modern Language Association that will hopefully bring some of these tools together for use by our members. We're in an extremely rich moment for experimentation in scholarly communication; it will be fascinating to see what new kinds of work tools like these help facilitate.

**Finally, considering your newly-created position with the Modern Language Association, can you talk about ways in which will you address the gap between the theory and the actual manifestation in practice of the changes in scholarly communications that you discuss?**

This is a very interesting and difficult question. What's got to change is less anything about the particular technologies that we use than the very belief systems of academics themselves. In order for open-access publications to attain a kind of prestige, scholars and administrators have to believe they're prestigious. It's a matter of shifting the values that we hold within the academy; some of that shift can be created through evangelism, which I see as one part of my role at the MLA, but some of it will only come through a slow process of facilitating new kinds of work, demonstrating what those new forms can achieve that traditional forms cannot, and then doing it again. At MediaCommons, we demonstrated the potential of open peer review practices through the discussion surrounding *Planned Obsolescence*; that

experiment persuaded Katherine Rowe and the editorial board of *Shakespeare Quarterly* to try out a similar process for a special issue of the journal; the *SQ* experiment then persuaded others to test it out as well. Not everything we try will work right off the bat, and some innovations may spread more quickly than others. But given the energies that are circulating amongst digital humanities scholars, and amongst scholars who are actively promoting new, open modes of communication, I fully expect that there will soon be more highly visible, highly influential examples that other scholars will wish to follow.

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