

Beyond Impact: OA in the Humanities

Open Humanities Press Presentation

by Sigi Jöttkandt and Gary Hall

Brussels, 13 February, 2007

The Crisis in Humanities Publishing

Compared with its stunning success in the sciences, the uptake of open access publishing has been much slower in the humanities and it continues to meet with resistance by many scholars, both junior and senior, who fear that publishing in open access journals will damage their careers. The urgency that has led academics and journal editors in the sciences to adopt OA as the standard method for publishing has not been felt as acutely in the humanities: partly because time-to-publication is of less importance to our research, and partly because humanities journal pricing has not yet reached the same stratospheric heights as in the sciences.

Nevertheless, library budgets for humanities journals are clearly decreasing. In addition, the bundling of journals by organizations such as Project MUSE and JSTOR has meant that in order to subscribe to electronic versions of the flag-ship journals, libraries now must subscribe to a package of access which, although they may include titles that they would not necessarily want to purchase, feature no-cancel policies for all of the titles in the bundles. This is causing concern as librarians feel themselves increasingly locked into a system in which they exert less and less bibliographic control over what is being bought by their limited funds.

Although these signs suggest that a “serials crisis” is immanent, the chief, immediate area of concern for the humanities is the “monographs crisis”: under pressure from shrinking university subsidies, academic presses are increasingly obliged to include concerns of profitability among their criteria when making decisions about which manuscripts to accept for publication. Because tenure and, increasingly, junior hiring decisions in the humanities are based on having published a book, many academics in highly specialized fields are finding themselves professionally disadvantaged.

Such a situation not only affects the careers and, potentially, the choice of research areas of individuals. It also impacts the humanities itself – both because a lot of excellent work is unable to find appropriate publication outlets and also because decisions concerning the production, publication, dissemination and promotion of humanities research are being made less and less by universities and academics on intellectual grounds, and more and more by scholarly and commercial presses on economic grounds. When ground-breaking research that develops new insights is rejected in favor of more marketable introductions and readers, it is clear that academia as a whole becomes “intellectually impoverished” (Hall 2007, p. 7).

Open Access Solutions

Open access publishing is the obvious answer to some of the most pressing problems confronting humanities publishing today. University presses can take advantage of its cheap delivery method in order to return to their original business of publishing scholarly research without being stifled by the fear that 'original' or 'high-level' research does not generate sufficient profits. Libraries can save on both journal subscription costs and on storage. Academics benefit from being able to access research from any location, by-passing the growing two-tier system that divides between research and teaching universities with its accompanying uneven library privileges.

Finally, in universities worldwide the humanities are increasingly being forced to use the metrics developed for the sciences to evaluate research output, including "impact factor" ratings. Transported into the humanities, however, such tools are not sufficiently robust to capture how influence is actually measured in humanities fields, especially since it is books, rather than journal articles, that are the principal mode through which our research is disseminated. By making electronic searching possible, for example, digital book publishing can play a major role in meeting at least some of the concerns of humanities academics that our indicators of research quality are not being adequately calibrated by the growing use of standardized bibliometric measures.

What is retarding OA in the Humanities?

The biggest problem is still the general perception by our colleagues that open access publication is not as academically rigorous as traditional print-based journals and books. For as long as this perception holds, OA will fail to offer a solution to the problems confronting humanities publishing.

We are, however, beginning to detect the beginnings of a shift in people's attitudes, at least towards electronic publication. The large majority of the most highly regarded journals already offer electronic subscriptions, and it has become commonplace to receive interlibrary loans as pdf documents via email. It is therefore not a question of the electronic delivery method itself that seems to be the cause of people's reluctance to embrace OA publishing in the humanities, but rather the fact that, because it is freely available, people believe it is not subject to the same academic standards of peer review and editorial oversight as research published in traditional toll-access venues.

Open Humanities Press

The Open Humanities Press was formed at the end of last year by a group of open access journal editors, librarians and IT professionals. Its aim is to counter the negative perception of OA publishing by addressing the problem at its source: people's perceptions. We are thus approaching OA in the humanities in the first instance as a branding exercise. Our strategy is to create an open access brand that people will trust and which will convey the message that OHP's open access publications are just as intellectually challenging, academically rigorous and professionally produced as books and journals produced by the best commercial publishers.

OHP's Editorial Board

Given our colleagues' frequently well-justified fears that their careers will suffer if they publish in open access venues, if the perception of OA publishing in the humanities is to change, it must be headed by the leading figures in our field, that is, by people whose careers are already so well established that they would suffer no negative consequences from publishing OA. This is why OHP's first act was to form a high-profile international advisory board. The ease with which this was accomplished, indeed the invariably enthusiastic response to our invitation from top scholars in our fields, makes us think that there is already a significant body of interest and support for OA in the humanities, which just needs to find a viable outlet.

OHP's three divisions:

OHP will consist of three divisions: journals, digital books, and a research gateway

1. In a first phase, the journals division will be made up of a consortium of the top OA journals in the critical theory sector. We have chosen to focus on critical theory first, because this is the area best understood by the academic members of OHP's steering group; second, because theory has been particularly hard hit by the changes to academic publishing described earlier (due to what publishers and students often perceive as its 'difficulty' and inaccessibility); and third, because theorists as a group are perhaps more open to experimenting with different and new forms of writing and publishing. The idea behind the consortium is that journals will gain greater individual visibility and credibility through association with each other and with OHP. With this we are trying to imitate something of the success of the BioMed Central model.

Like BioMed Central, we will also provide an OA conversion kit for print journals who wish to convert to open access and be considered for OHP's stable. Unlike BioMed Central, however, OHP will not be acting as a for-profit publisher, for although access to the journals themselves in Bio-Med is free, authors are charged a fee to publish in them, for some journals as much as 1800 euros per article. OHP, by contrast, will be free to both readers and authors since most editorial work for humanities journals is already conducted in-house by the academic editors, who either donate their time to the journal or are given reduced teaching loads by their departments in return for what is considered this "service to the profession".

2. The books division will focus in the short term on reprinting classics by foundational thinkers in our designated fields whose copyright has since expired. Books by new authors in carefully targeted areas will be released once a sufficient market for OA publishing has been created and fully established.

3. In tandem with our books and journals divisions, we will be building an OA research gateway. This will be a searchable archive of all OHP content that we hope will one day enable us to successfully compete with toll-access consortiums such as MUSE and JSTOR.

Support from University Administration

We can identify two main reasons why OA is not being picked up as rapidly in the humanities as in the sciences. The first, as we've said, is our peers' lack of

understanding of what OA is, and how it benefits them by breaking down the barriers of access that inhibit our research. But the second reason, just as important, is our colleagues' fear that publishing in OA journals will negatively impact their hiring and promotion opportunities. This means that OA in the humanities can only succeed if it is also given support at the highest levels of the administration. We would like to see universities recognizing OA publication as having at least equal if not greater merit than publications in toll-gated venues.

Open Humanities Press is addressing the first issue by creating a high-profile open access publishing house to try to alleviate peoples' fears about the quality of OA publications. But to address the second part we must rely on university administrations' active support for OA publication in promotion review cases and hiring decisions. This is why today's event, the signing of the Berlin declaration on open access by the Rectors of Belgian universities, is so enormously encouraging to us at OHP.

What's next with OA?

I thought I'd follow on from what Sigi's said and end by pointing to some of the interesting issues and questions that are likely to be raised once open access (OA) does start being taken up in the humanities to a more significant degree. This will also hopefully help us to think about what happens after we have signed the Berlin Declaration. Or, as more than one speaker has asked today: What is next with OA?

To date, the process of digitizing the academic research literature has almost invariably been understood in terms of providing an increase in the amount of material that can be stored, the number of people who can then have access to it, the potential impact of that material, the range of distribution, reductions in staffing, production and reproduction costs and so on (1). Within the sciences especially, which is where debates regarding open access have featured most prominently, there has been relatively little detailed consideration of the philosophical and ethical (as opposed to moral) questions digitization raises for academic and institutional authority and legitimacy. It is some of these questions that I'm going to focus on today.

The ethical issues open access enables us to bring to attention were one of the main reasons I got involved in setting up an open access archive - even though with *Culture Machine* (www.culturemachine.net) I've been publishing an open access journal since 1999. I became interested in setting up the cultural studies open access archive CSeARCH (www.culturemachine.net/csearch) not just for the usual reasons that are offered to justify taking the 'green' road to OA (i.e. self-archiving) over the 'gold' (publishing in OA journals): that an archive is cheaper, because it doesn't require expensive gate-keeping/copy-editing; or that it enables greater ease of searching and retrieval than a widely dispersed array of journals. Or that, when it comes to promoting the wider adoption of open access, it's easier to convince academics to self-archive their research - because they will be able to appreciate the advantages it offers them both in terms of gaining increased feedback on their work and developing their reputation through the enhanced levels of recognition and citation impact it can bring - than it is to convert the existing journals to open access, as publishers of the latter are more likely to feel they have something to lose from doing so: namely, income from subscriptions. The reason I wanted to get involved in establishing an open access archive is because it seems to me that an archive is capable of placing us in a position where we have to

make ethical decisions over what can be included in it, and with what authority and legitimacy, in a way a journal simply is not.

For instance, a 'serious' academic journal, even an online open access one such as *Culture Machine*, for all its advantages (which are numerous, not least among them the fact that, because it is open access, we were able to achieve a circulation of 10 times the typical amount for an equivalent paper journal in the humanities in the first 10 months of *Culture Machine's* operation alone), will primarily publish peer-reviewed articles that are recognisable as 'proper' pieces of scholarly writing or research. Yet along with e-prints of peer-reviewed essays, an academic open access archive can also potentially contain books, book chapters, journal editions, conference papers and lectures. And that is before we even bring ourselves to consider artifacts of a more unusual nature which could also conceivably be collected in even the most serious of academic archives, especially in the humanities. I'm thinking here of lecture notes, drafts of work in progress, manuscripts, photographs, sound recordings, letters, diaries, personal correspondence. But I also have in mind 'laundry notes and scraps' like the one stating "I have forgotten my umbrella", which was found among Nietzsche's papers after his death and about which the philosopher Jacques Derrida has written at length; or even the content of dreams, such as those of the novelist, theorist and playwright Hélène Cixous, which are detailed in her notebooks and which are now included as part of the Cixous archive at the Bibliothèque National de France. And that is to restrict ourselves solely to instances which, although 'quirky', are already authorised.

Let me quickly give you a very brief example of the kind of very interesting questions and decisions we are likely to be faced with in the coming years as open access is increasingly taken up within the humanities. Currently, as we all know, the legitimacy and value of an academic text is judged by peer review. However, the move to a digital format creates problems for our current system of peer review. Already it's increasingly hard to tell when surfing the web what is legitimate knowledge and what is not, what is 'crap', as Rector Prof. Rentier put it this morning, precisely because electronic publications don't have the same aura, the same air of legitimacy, as a published book. Now, the way most electronic academic publications have attempted to address this issue to date is by imitating their paper counterparts: in their 'page' layouts; their publication of material in the form of 'papers' written in a linear, sequential form; their reliance on International Editorial Boards of established academics who have already proven themselves in the 'paper' world; but most especially in their peer reviewing processes. They do so because they need to try to reassure the University about something that is still relatively new by demonstrating that they are providing recognisable forms of quality control. And of course what I've just described is precisely the strategy Sigi, David and I, and the rest of the project's Steering Group are pursuing with Open Humanities Press. Because if we didn't, we'd risk not being taken particularly seriously. But we might also ask: to what extent can we continue to insist that digitally reproduced texts conform to the standards, hierarchies and protocols of the paper world? (After all, when it comes to academic journals this format is over three hundred years old now.)

What happens, for instance, when, as is already happening in the digital humanities and in some contributions to *Culture Machine*, writers stop attempting to transfer print-based conventions into the electronic medium and produce work that is instead specific to the digital mode of reproduction? There are various examples one can give

here: not just hyper-text, which is quite dated now, but: texts in which the technical and cultural practices of electronic writing are combined, as in codeworks, which Katherine Hayles has written on recently (2). Here notions of authorship are problematised, as codeworks are produced by entities such as MEZ, antiorp and Jodi, which may or may not be machinic, and which blur the boundaries between art and literature.

Or, academics publish their research and ideas in the form of weblogs. Now, of course, for large numbers of academics blogs amount to little more than online diaries and scrapbooks. For an increasing amount of others, however, they are coming to be regarded as a highly effective means by which writers and researchers can access people in the community at large, thus entering the public sphere of debate and enabling them to become, in effect, a form of public intellectual for the 21st century. That said, even the most ardent of their advocates would acknowledge that publishing in an academic blog is very different, in terms of its status and credibility, to publishing in a refereed academic journal, simply because the two modes of reproduction are not subject to the same kinds of peer-review. Indeed, for all their burgeoning popularity with academics, it remains unclear as to exactly how academic blogs are to be evaluated and assessed. When blogging is undertaken by academics, should it to be considered a private, amateur hobby? A part of their professional responsibility as publicly funded scholars? Or something in-between? Such questions takes on an even greater urgency when it comes to hiring and promotion committees, as the case of Juan Cole testifies. According to a letter published by the US Chronicle of Higher Education, Cole failed to acquire a post at Yale University because of his blogging activities. Should academics who publish their ideas and research in the form of blogs, and who are able to reach a large audience in doing so (Cole's blog is reported as receiving 200,000 readers a month), expect to have such work taken into account in the same way as those who publish predominantly in books and referred journals do? (3)

My last example concerns texts which are co-authored by large groups of often anonymous people using wikis, free content and open editing principles. Without doubt Wikipedia is the most well-known of these, but in a move directly inspired by Wikipedia, The Institute for the Future of the Book has also recently placed McKenzie Wark's current work-in-progress GAM3R 7TH3ORY online in a series of webpages (www.futureofthebook.org/gamtheory/), each of which contains a paragraph from the book and a box where people can post their responses to and comments on Wark's writing. Wark's project is more a form of open peer commentary and open peer review (or even peer-to-peer review) than the kind of open editing found on Wikipedia. But the writer Douglas Rushkoff is reported as apparently exploring writing a wikified Ph.D. at the University of Utrecht in which either the basic skeleton of his thesis is built upon by volunteers, or his original content is 'nested within layers of material contributed by collaborators' (http://www.futureofthebook.org/blog/archives/2006/06/open_source_dissertation.html).

How, then, are such digital humanities texts to be judged and assessed? Are they to be judged and assessed? Or are they to be simply dismissed as somehow being improper or illegitimate simply because they cannot be easily reproduced in ink-on-paper form, and so are incapable of receiving accreditation by the conventional peer review processes? And on what basis can we make such decisions? Are the pre-established paper standards and criteria for judging, reviewing and certifying academic work sufficient for responding responsibly and doing justice to digitally reproduced texts? Or

does the different nature of electronic publishing require the invention of new standards and criteria for the maintenance of 'quality control'? Indeed, are we not going to need a new knowledge, a new grammar, a new language and literacy, a new visual/aural/linguistic code of the digital that is capable of responding to the singularity and inventiveness of such texts with an answering singularity and inventiveness?

Endnotes

1. This paper is a brief extract from my forthcoming book on open access, *Digitize This!* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis and London).

2. See N. Katherine Hayles, 'Deeper into the Machine: The Future of Electronic Literature', *Culture Machine* 5, 2003 (<http://culturemachine.tees.ac.uk/Cmach/Backissues/j005/Articles/Hayles/NHayles.htm>); also available in CSeARCH (<http://www.culturemachine.net/csearch>).

3. For more on the case of Cole, see the discussion on the If:book blog (www.futureofthebook.org/blog/) of the *Institute for The Future of the Book* (www.futureofthebook.org). This discussion is dated 01.08.2006.

Dr. Sigi Jöttkandt
Researcher
Jan van Eyck Academy, Maastricht
sigij@telenet.be

Dr. Gary Hall
Senior Lecturer
Middlesex University, UK
Co-editor of Culture Machine <http://www.culturemachine.net>
Director of the Cultural Studies Open Access Archive
<http://www.culturemachine.net/csearch>
My website <http://www.garyhall.info>