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Roundtable: Wikidemia? Scholarly Publishing on the World Wide Web

Roundtable

Wikidemia? Scholarly publishing on the World Wide Web

Welcome to the first *Working Papers* roundtable discussion. Our field of inquiry in the inaugural issue of our graduate journal is online publishing. A number of questions spring to mind when one considers the role of online publishing in academia. First, is it a relevant vehicle for academic writing? How will it affect the way we read, write and pursue our professional interests? Will current publishing practices become obsolete, and if so, when can we expect to read the last words of offline print culture?

Indeed, our roundtable topic is not so far removed from the title of the current issue: "Last Words", the selected proceeding from the annual graduate student conference hosted by the Graduate Romanic Association at the University of Pennsylvania. The issues we encounter as we consider the potential and realized effects of online publishing are pertinent to an issue where many of the papers engage with the notion of boundaries, genre, and new (textual, psychological, geographical, political) spaces.

In the space below, we have asked Reinaldo Laddaga, Michael Solomon, Gerald Prince, Charles Cooney and Glenn Roe a series of questions that touch on the changing cultural and textual landscape implicated in, and by, the Web.

- Reinaldo Laddaga
- Michael Solomon
- Gerald Prince
- Charles Cooney & Glenn Roe

First, a professional concern: is the Internet an effective medium for presenting research?

Reinaldo Laddaga: Absolutely. Actually, I don't think that it would be particularly off the mark to anticipate that the Internet will become in the near future the main medium for the distribution of research papers and even academic books. The advantages are many: economy, velocity, ease of access. The only visible problem, at this point, is how to set up mechanisms of selection and presentation to replace the ones that have been more or less functional for a long time in the world of print.

Gerald Prince: The Internet can certainly be an effective medium for presenting research. If the question indirectly refers to "career progress," the answer must be more cautious: so far as I know, research in our discipline published in electronic journals does not have the same weight as that published in more "traditional" journals.

Glenn Roe & Charles Cooney: We believe that online technologies have, and will, continue to help scholars expand the scope of literary research, but the role of scholars as interpreters of ideas and as experts in particular fields of knowledge will not change fundamentally.

While the proliferation of blogs, wikis, and other communal Web interfaces have facilitated the exchange of ideas, we think that traditional modes of scholarly publishing, whether online or in print, will continue to serve as the standard for establishing academic credentials. Submitting work that passes through the editorial process of peer-reviewed journals, while not a perfect system, generally ensures that intellectual products meet at least certain minimum standards of academic rigor and quality control. Young scholars starting their careers cannot rely solely on subjective modes of electronic expression such as blogs to publish their ideas and research because the academic community in general considers their validity dubious. Within this context, we do agree that the Internet can be an effective medium for presenting, sharing and collaborating on research. For instance, we can imagine scholars posting articles on a private site, inviting comments from peers (the wiki model), and then editing and adapting their research accordingly. We can also imagine a time when traditional print journals publish exclusively online, employing hyperlinks from citations and notes to primary or secondary electronic resources.

Do you consider the Internet a community space? What role do you see the Internet playing in the academic community?

*Michael Solomon***:** I am a bit surprised that you would formulate such a question in this day and age. Perhaps twenty years ago we could debate this, but today the role of the Internet has become completely embedded in our academic community. To question its status today would be tantamount to questioning the role that books played in an academic community twenty years ago. A more productive question would be to ask what would happen to our academic community if we no longer had access to the Internet.

No, the Internet is not a community space. I find the concept of "space" problematic even as a metaphor in this context. If you mean does the Internet make connections between like-minded people, absolutely. Does that mean we have a community? I guess so, but who cares?

*Reinaldo Laddaga***:** I see the Internet as a space that includes a very large number of places where there are many diversified processes of community formation. It would be useful, however, to be aware that when we use the word "community" in this context, we are designating social realities that are very different from those human assemblages based on place (as in "the community of Philadelphia") or profession (as in "the academic community") that we tend to imagine when we hear the word. Digital technologies, inasmuch as they allow for social formations where the formation of durable links is separated from the imperative of spatial proximity or the presupposition of pre-existing identities, should incite us to rethink what it is that we want to say when we use each of these words. With regard to the more restricted question of the role that it plays among us, in universities and other associated institutions, there are almost too many to enumerate them.

How has the Internet affected our discipline thus far?

*Reinaldo Laddaga***:** Not as much as it could have been anticipated a few years ago, perhaps, but still substantially. There are a few new online publications. There's a much greater fluidity in the intellectual exchanges. There has been not as much theorization as could be expected, as far as I know, on the impact of the Internet on the objects that we study (literature, for example). Although even this is changing. But it is not impossible that the main impact of the Internet will be, say, indirect: that it will have to do with the fact that its mere existence makes possible the development of new imaginaries and, hopefully, new theoretical models.

Gerald Prince: The Internet has affected our discipline in many areas: bibliographical research, data gathering, stylistic analysis, etc.

*Glenn Roe & Charles Cooney***:** Certain aspects of academic scholarship, such as the need for peer-reviewed journals, will not change, but research and research methodologies are already changing with new technologies.

Full-text retrieval and analysis systems, for example PhiloLogic enable scholars to run queries on large corpora of literary and other texts quickly and with incredible ease. Scholars are already researching speech-acts and language-use by characters of different ethnicities and genders in databases of theatrical texts, applying data-mining techniques to the field of literary inquiry. These technologies are helping us to enhance traditional types of scholarship while allowing us to tackle problems that were previously too large to consider practically.

Online tools for textual analysis and research have expanded the scope of research but have not fundamentally changed the nature of scholarship. Communal authorship is good for establishing a certain consensus of knowledge, but it lacks the depth, breadth and intellectual pointedness of an individual scholar's work. Wikipedia and other such community-informed sites are effective, like all encyclopedias, as repositories of general information, but cannot replace the expertise and knowledge of trained scholars.

Michael Solomon: This question is so broad that I hesitate to synthesize a response. To answer this, you have to ask a larger question about the nature of digital media, not just its mode of dissemination over the Internet. The single most important contribution that the Internet has made to scholarship is to give our work an increasing quality of at-hand-ness. This is an electronic re-fabrication of the Garden of Eden in which everything was always already there. The Internet creates a perpetual "here" and provides a new twist on Gertrude Stein's observation that "there is no there, there. Like medieval monks, we can plant ourselves at our desks and at the same time go everywhere. Think of Eriugena's oxymoron: "motus stabilis et status mobilis," motion in rest and rest in motion. God. The motionless mover. That's it, the Internet has given us all a messianic complex, exhilarating to be sure, but as mere humans, the weight of so much information and so little time becomes a tremendous burden and we long nostalgically, some in mourning, others with melancholy, for those golden years when all we needed to do was manage a few indispensable books.

Do the interface and new technologies of online publishing change reading practices? Do they change writing? What effects does online publishing have on authorship and the way we conceive of authorship?

Michael Solomon: The Internet allows us to gain quicker access to scholarly material and manipulate that material with greater ease. This has led to what we might call random-access reading; the ability to jump from alpha to omega and everywhere in between. Reading has become less linear and in this sense fulfills the technological advantages that the medieval scholars saw in book or codex over the rolls or scrolls.

We would like to assume that scholarly writing is primarily about the exchange of information. It's not; it is about the scholar and his or her status in the academic community. The material culture of scholarship has been radically threatened by the Internet because it threatens the status of the author. Scholarly work on the Internet gets cut, pasted, modified, and destroyed much faster than material scholarship. It pushes us toward evolutionary collective scholarship rather than fossilized individual achievement. We like to think of our scholarly work as the product of our own ingenuity and knowledge. Paper journals confirm this by providing us with palpable and tangible objects that we can "cherish" as our own. The Internet, however, is not a touchy-feely medium. What we think is ours quickly belongs to everybody.

Reinaldo Laddaga: It all depends. Much of online publishing follows the model of print. In these cases (as when a paper is distributed in Word or PDF format), I don't think that the difference in terms of practices of reading is particularly big. Of course, there are lots of productions for the Internet that can't be read at all as if they were printed. There are objects in the Internet (I'm thinking of online games, for example) to which it would be unproductive and even absurd to relate as readers. Something similar could be said about the question of authorship: the Internet allows for the distribution of objects authored in a perfectly traditional way. It also allows for (one could even say that it is uniquely suited to) collaborative practices of various kinds, from the production of texts by large collectives (like the Italian collective Wu Ming to new ways of articulating complex fluxes of discourse and image coming from heterogeneous sources in some blogs.

Is online publishing a mere simulacrum of a book/journal/newspaper/magazine, or a different animal altogether? Or, is it something in between?

***Reinaldo Laddaga*:** I suppose that I should repeat myself here: it all depends. There are online publications that imitate as much as possible the model of the printed narrative or essay, others that differ from this model as much as they can, and there are many hybrids in between.

***Michael Solomon*:** This is the most pressing problem with electronic dissemination of scholarly material. It is difficult for scholars and university administrators to think outside the "book" or the literary journal. Paper journals, with their many limitations, have dominated scholarly exchange for many years. Scholars are reluctant to embrace alternatives to the canonical journal article such as shorter or longer pieces of scholarship with embedded links, images, and dedicated space for comments, queries, and debates. Personally, I like the idea of erudite blogs in which individual scholars publish their works and allow these works to be linked to other blogs.

The sooner we eliminate paper journals the better. Already university administrations are moving in this direction as they continue to eliminate funding for long-standing journals. This stance, of course, is highly hypocritical in that the very institutions that are withdrawing support from traditional journals still demand that young scholars publish in this format for tenure and promotion.

***Glenn Roe & Charles Cooney*:** Large textual databases, like the [ARTFL Project](), remain book-centric, as they attempt to reproduce the codex in an electronic format. Electronic critical editions of books can change the relationship between book and reader by making paratextual resources such as commentaries, page images and textual variants easier to consult. Examples of this sort of online edition are the [Montaigne Project]()– a full-text searchable version of the *Essais* with overlapping editions and large format page images; and the only [online critical edition of Balzac's *Comédie humaine*]() which incorporates scholarly commentary alongside the corrected text.

Without a doubt, technologies are enabling greater degrees of cooperation among scholars as well as facilitating the dissemination of new and old learning. [Google Books](), for example, will provide access to millions of documents. It will be the job of both individual scholars and scholarly collaborations to find ways to exploit this mass of data, developing new techniques that extend traditional scholarship and push literary studies in new directions.

Are there theorists and scholars who attend to these questions in their work? What are their perspectives on this topic?

Gerald Prince: Many theorists and scholars—e.g. Espen Aarseth, Terry Harpold (who did his thesis at Penn and is now at the University of Florida), George Landow, Lev Manovich, Sherry Turkle— have attended to these and/or related questions. For starters, I recommend *The New Media Reader*, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort. Nick is now writing a thesis at Penn on interactive fiction and narratology.

***Michael Solomon*:** A big problem facing productive scholarly use of the Internet is the current crisis in copyright and fair-use legislation. Check out Lawrence Lessig's book, *Free Culture* and the [Creative Commons Website]().

Reinaldo Laddaga: There has been an explosion of publications in the last few years. Some of these publications deal with the question of the specific attributes of digital media (as *The Language of Digital Media*, by Lev Manovich, an excellent study that links new media to the tradition of film to establish their points of contact and divergence), some with the question of the relationship between literature as we have known it and digital textual objects (as *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, by Marie-Laure Ryan, or the writings of Katherine Hayles). I find particularly interesting the way that theorizations of artistic production in the Internet are producing new associations between disciplines: literary criticism and anthropology and economics. This propensity towards transdisciplinary theorization in Internet studies can be seen in edited volumes as Rishab Aiyer Ghosh's *CODE. Collaborative Ownership and the Digital Technology* and *First Person. New Media as Story, Performance and Game*, edited by Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan. Both of these books have been published by the MIT Press. And there are, of course, specialized online publications like *Electronic Book Review* and *Game Studies*, to mention just a couple.