



Englishmen in New York: Redefining academic publishing in digital spaces

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While the internet, culture and technology have been reshaping publishing and information media for years, academic publishing and scholarship still functions within a model that is effectively several hundred years old. It is time to start asking the hard questions about what it means to publish as an academic, how we engage with published research and how higher degree students engage with research publication.

While it is true that most journals now exist in an online format, the vast majority of these simply echo a print format in electronic form - the scholarly paper as a document has remained unquestioned, and persists despite often low levels of true readership. Yet, outside of academia, the definition of publishing is no longer limited to a 'container' of content. Text can exist in a contextual network and be framed by fluid, constantly changing content around it. Identified in this paper are issues in traditional publishing and some of the possibilities and considerations in breaking open the 'container' model to move into an open and dynamic online space. Central to this is the enabling of thesis and dissertation publication in alternative formats via the oScholar project.

Please note that this paper makes use of QR codes - a QR-enabled mobile device is recommended but not required when reading this paper.

Background

If we look at the commercial publishing industry, the last decade has caused huge changes in the way text is created and marketed. Easy to observe is the transition into electronic media - eBooks, digital magazines, newspapers and PDF articles. Each of these simply moves a familiar text type into an electronic domain and creates a successful market. This move has facilitated an immediacy and flexibility in a market's engagement with published material - one can now download an eBook in seconds and transfer it to any number of devices to be read anywhere. Earlier this year, Amazon announced that eBooks were now outselling print books (Sydney Morning Herald, 2011). This type of market shift can be defined as 'sustaining innovation' - a

technology shift that allows old things to be done in new ways (Bower & Christensen, 1995).

Perhaps less obvious, but of potentially greater significance, is the development of alternate publishing avenues via the internet. Electronic versions of traditional print media are no longer the only ways in which we engage with text. Blogs, websites, micro-publishing and social media have evolved as major players in the publishing market. Anyone now has the ability to publish, and the format of publication has become radically redefined in these media. Initially, this open and interactive form of unreviewed publishing was seen to be inferior. However, it has created an entirely new and extremely prolific and lucrative market that challenges the traditional concept of publication - an innovation termed 'disruptive' by Bower & Christensen (1995).

Academic publishing, by contrast, has expanded almost exclusively into the sustaining innovation market. Many journals are now available in electronic format and are catalogued in online databases. While most of these are locked behind paywalls and must be accessed via an institutional proxy, the open-access movement and advent of engines like Google Scholar mean many academic works are also freely available. Many institutions also provide databases for the open hosting of electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs). The traditional scholarly monograph has also developed into the electronic media, with many now available as either paid eBooks, or freely in whole or part via Google Books, Scribd and similar resources. However, in many cases, the format of these scholarly works is still the journal article or monograph - unchanged from the advent of academic publishing several hundred years ago. The way that we engage with the research and publication process is essentially unchanged. Effectively, academic publishing has ventured into a new domain - online - believing it to be an environment analogous to paper. Like the proverbial Englishman in New York, though, sooner or later it will become apparent that, despite some similarities, it is in fact a very different and strange world.

A number of key issues have been identified with the current methods of academic publishing - low readership (Reid, 2011), long lag times between submission and publication (Pannell, 2002) and lack of context (O'Leary, 2011). Reid observes of the traditional approach to moving academic publishing online that trying to create an economically viable system in which books can be written and published but only sell in small numbers is missing the point (2011). Engaging in the disruptive innovative practices prevalent in the commercial publishing industry offer a way to address some of these issues and move scholarly research into a new era.

Already some interest has been raised in this area - Swinburne's Institute of Social Research conducted a roundtable on scholarly publishing in 2009, which developed a series of five principles to sustain academic publishing into the future. Of these, two are particularly significant:

- Scholarly and scientific publications can and should be more broadly accessible with improved functionality to a wider public and the research community.
- The results of research need to be published and maintained in ways that maximize the possibilities for creative reuse and interoperation among sites that host them. (Swinburne Institute of Social Research, 2009)

While much literature can be found on the promotion of the former within the open educational resources (OER) movement, the latter point is significant in its implications for the stand-alone text model. O'Leary (2011) describes this as the 'container model of publishing' - current publishing methods are limited by an academic adherence to a stand-alone work that remains independent of any context around it.

The thesis issue

Engaging higher degree research students in the research process and in a research community is an issue of current concern, especially in regards to retaining these students in continuing academic careers. Rowbotham (2011) discusses recent results from the National Research Student Survey, which indicate 54% of higher degree research students intend to pursue an academic career. Theses and dissertations - the product of higher degree research - are particularly vulnerable in our current publishing market. The adage of a thesis having a readership of five is not far removed from reality for paper-based theses. Electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs) fare better, being "100 times more likely to be circulated than print theses and dissertations" (Moxley, 2001: 61).

However, without the benefit of experience, reputation or peer review, it is likely that the work of many students will go unread and uncited. There is potential in the exploration of open and dynamic research publication to improve the experience of HDR students, and thus increase their engagement in research and academic publishing.

A particular issue with traditional thesis production, whether electronic or analogue, is the invisibility of the research process. To a postgraduate student, new to research and often lacking confidence, a traditional thesis published as one large work means it may be a year (or longer) before getting feedback from anyone other than the proverbial five. There is also no chance of the work being cited prior to the thesis being published. In contrast, most online publishing platforms support 'feed' publication - publishing smaller sections as they are written. In online spaces, "scale is not our friend. It may well be the enemy" (O'Leary, 2011). Esposito (2011) advocates "the art of the vibrant pamphleteer" - leveraging digital spaces to eliminate the constraints on length and time delivery and produce more dynamic text forms. This mode of publication opens up the research process to feedback, sharing and possible citation in a much more immediate environment - exposing students to research communities much earlier than a traditional thesis would allow. It also facilitates the sharing and 'mashing up' of data - "Consider: The coolest thing to be done with your data will likely be thought of by someone else" (Paolo Mangiafico; in Bonnet, 2009).

The social construction of texts outside of O'Leary's 'container' model is echoed in Cornell University's panel on the academic publishing crisis (2008: see fig. 1 for excerpt). Texts are a product of interaction between individuals with multiple roles and perspectives, rather than being a result of a single perspective.



Fig. 1 - Cornell Publishing Crisis Panel - video excerpt
<http://bit.ly/kyBENo>

The good, the bad and the ugly

Breaking down the container model and publishing thesis research in open, dynamic spaces brings with it the need to consider implications from a variety of perspectives. The issues are broken down into three categories - the good, the bad and the ugly.

The good

Moxley (2011: 61) outlines some of the opportunities that are lost by not publishing thesis research publicly online - wide readership, the ability to benefit from multimedia, a reason to produce high-quality writing and motivation to complete the research program. These 'lost opportunities' can be extrapolated to all research output and academic publishing.

In addressing the issues of readership, a reason to produce high-quality writing and motivation, Reid notes that "the audience for this fairly modest blog blows away the audience for your book. It blows it away in a month." (2011). Jones (2011) indicates that his PhD section of his blog has had 2000 hits. Wide readership is perhaps the most immediate benefit that can be found in publishing in online spaces. Cross-pollination via social media increases visibility even further - promotion within an online professional network can result in an immediate and wide audience. To give a quick and informal example, a blog post by the author published in the morning can expect close to 100 hits by the end of the day.

A particular benefit of publishing outside a 'container' that is not considered in traditional publishing is interaction - not only will the audience read the published work, some will also respond. Comments, retweets, bookmarking and tagging work to create the context that is absent in container publishing. These make up what O'Leary (2011) terms "critical assets" for online publishing.

An additional benefit in this area - one that highlights the disruptive nature of publishing in dynamic, online spaces - is access to research is not limited to those who have access to institutional proxy systems to access

paid articles and databases. As Fister (2011) notes of traditional publishing, “Do you know someone – maybe a recent graduate – who doesn’t have a campus ID and is wasting away? Too bad! Sharing with them is strictly against the rules”. Publishing outside of electronic ‘containers’ removes the restriction of paywalls and authentication and allow access to researchers not in traditional academic positions.

The bad

The difficulty with publishing outside of traditional containers - journals, monographs and conferences - is its visibility in the current research system. The Australian Research Council clearly defines journals and conference papers as the two media in which it will acknowledge research output (a search for the word blog on their website, for example, yields no results at all). As institutions rely heavily on research rankings and funding, non-ranked, openly published research is unlikely to be granted consideration. However, free of these considerations, theses and dissertations are a potential way to lead in new forms of academic publishing.

Current tracking and archiving systems are also ill-suited to acknowledge publications in non-traditional environments. While tracking and archiving are easy tasks to perform when considering publications from a website perspective, current systems for measuring scholarly impact are limited to traditional container formats. Ingraham (2005) describes the issue quite nicely:

‘...scholarly argument is fundamentally rooted in print. Scholars communicate with well-developed and commonly understood conventions... Such conventions do not currently exist for emerging electronic media. From a semiotic perspective, this may be viewed as a problem of rhetoric. The effectiveness of an academic argument rests partly on the quality of the evidence, partly on the robustness of the reasoning, and partly on the representational conventions through which the argument is mediated’.

It is clear that new ways of evaluating academic discourse are required. Additionally, the systems in place for evaluating the experience and qualifications of reviewers is not easily transferred to the online domain, where anyone is free to comment, and new methods of evaluation are required here also.

The ugly

Perhaps the most daunting aspect of open, dynamic publishing is that it renders one very specifically accountable for what has been written. The traditional double-blind peer review process is replaced by a review audience of tens, hundreds or thousands immediately upon clicking ‘publish’, and unlike journal review feedback, both positive and negative review is public. An additional hurdle is the interactive, contextual nature of working in online spaces - ‘trolling’ and negative comments and postings are part of the environment. However, it should be noted that publishing online does not increase the amount of criticism and negative review, simply the exposure to it - one previously would have to wait for a paper to be written critiquing one’s own paper, and the criticism would have to be accepted for publication. Most criticism does not see the light of day in traditional publishing containers - and as Pannell (2002) outlines, peer review feedback is far from timely, and often anonymous.

The oScholar project



Fig. 2: oScholar project site
<http://bit.ly/kwm1as>

One example of a potential pathway to foster disruptive innovation in the publication and dissemination of theses, dissertations and research is the oScholar project. The project is based on the open-source WordPress platform, and allows HDR students and academic staff to create their own site for open research publication. In addition to the standard, easy-to-use publishing tools, oScholar also incorporates tools to enable referencing,

citations, multimedia and social media interaction, as well as analytics software and a social media analysis database.

The development of the platform was largely informed by O’Leary’s ‘container theory’, and was designed to foster the creation of a social context for published work. All “critical assets” named by O’Leary - tagged content, research, footnoted links, sources, audio and video background and “good old title-level metadata” - are incorporated. The addition of a connection to Amplify - an online microblogging and reposting service - allows Mangiafico’s “mashup” of research content by readers.

To provide some way of redressing the difficulties inherent in tracking, archiving and transparent review processes in dynamic digital spaces, oScholar uses standard Google analytics software in addition to a ThinkUp social media analysis database. ThinkUp allows tracking, geotagging, and archiving of social media comments and interactions, which are transparently linked to an individual’s online presence. These go some way towards designing new ‘representational conventions’ in which academic argument can be mediated (Ingraham, 2005).

Conclusion

The current culture of open and dynamic dissemination of text online as a disruptive innovation has the potential to generate some significant improvements to academic publishing, particularly in regards to the publishing of theses and dissertations. While there are some issues inherent in adopting disruptive processes, the potential for creating an environment in which it is possible to develop new methods of scholarly discourse analysis is significant. Projects such as oScholar offer the ability to begin to move into these new spaces, and provide a case study for formally recognising theses, dissertations and other research output in dynamic, online spaces.

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View the annotated reference list on Diigo
<http://bit.ly/mGVGMa>

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The author wishes to acknowledge Mitchell Parkes and Sue Gregory for their input into this paper.

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Please cite as: Thorneycroft, S. (2011). Englishman in New York: Redefining academic publishing in digital spaces. In G. Williams, P. Statham, N. Brown & B. Cleland (Eds.), *Changing Demands, Changing Directions. Proceedings ascilite Hobart 2011*. (pp.1244-1249).

<http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/hobart11/procs/Thorneycroft-full.pdf>

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