

Chapter 9

Reviewing in the Age of Web 2.0:

What Does Web Culture Have to Offer to Scholarly Communication?

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ABSTRACT

With digitalization increasing, scholars' reading habits and communication methods are also changing, thus affecting the field of traditional reviewing in the humanities. The expert formulating a comprehensive review of a recently published work, will, in the medium term, see a scholarly community working together. In the age of Web 2.0, the disadvantages of a traditional book review, which usually does not allow for a reply or an open discussion, become apparent. This chapter describes (the preconditions for) these changes, as well as other issues in the current field of reviewing, that will eventually not only increase the speed of reviewing new publications in general, but will also, in compliance with the nature of this field, make it more focused on process and detail, more interdisciplinary, more flexible, and more international, thus adapting the model of "live" reviewing procedures as already established in the commercial book market.

INTRODUCTION

Leaving Reviewing 1.0¹

Scholarly communication takes many forms. Though it may sound like a generalization, the speed of communication in the natural sciences tends to be faster than it is in the humanities.

Perhaps it can also be said that in the natural sciences there is more direct communication between scholars, because here developing research results within a group is traditionally common practice, and publication and communication are usually manifested through articles. This in itself ensures that colleagues tend to react to a publication more quickly than their counterparts in the humanities. The traditional book review is virtually unknown in the natural sciences where

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-2178-7.ch009

the evaluation process is generally based on peer review, and practically always prior to publication. In contrast, in the humanities and social sciences the magnum opus—the qualifying text that is developed by a single scholar over several years, and then released, traditionally still via a publisher and in print—remains crucial. All in all, it is a rather cumbersome medium regarding publication and communication. At least within the European scholarly community, peer review does not take place prior to the publication of a monograph, but afterward. A newly released monograph often only attracts the attention of the author’s colleagues because of a review published in a journal. According to Thomas Meyer, academic journals publishing book reviews

have established themselves as “guardians of quality” within a scholarly book market—monographs are still the common output format of scholarly research—because they not only ensure that minimum standards are maintained in publishing, but also shape the expectations and demands of readers and authors with their assessment and criticism. [My translation] (Meyer, 2011)²

In a similar way, Ylva Lindholm-Romantschuk describes the review itself as a “gatekeeper,” since “[b]ooks represent intellectual innovations and are evaluated in terms of their value to the scholarly community. ... A negative review may prevent the ideas in a book from reaching a wider audience” (Lindholm-Romantschuk, 1998: 41) and vice versa.

This shows that the process of reviewing in the humanities has to be clearly distinguished from reviewing procedures in the field of the natural sciences. Here, articles are often reviewed by anonymous peers prior to publication; in the humanities, this process takes place after the publication of (mostly) monographs, through the very distinctive text genre of the book review. In contrast to peer review, this can be called a “public evaluation of research” (Lindholm-Romantschuk,

1998: 85). As a matter of course, the reviewer appears as an author, and the review is added to his or her list of publications.

Book reviewing emerged from a completely different scholarly tradition than peer reviewing. The processes for this form of review—such as finding suitable reviewers (who are increasingly often young scholars)—may begin one or two years after a text has been published, and are very different from the “advance” peer reviewing typical in the life sciences.³ In Germany, some new approaches in open peer reviewing are found in the humanities, such as the *Kunstgeschichte Open Peer Reviewed Journal* online.⁴ However, the common practice of post-publication reviewing in the humanities is still dominant, and is therefore the focus of this chapter.

The journal editors act as the primary filter, as they explore the book market and actively contact reviewers about recent publications of interest. The reviewer then writes the review, usually pro bono. The time between a book being published and the writing, editing, printing and publication of a review of it can be as long as two years. Depending on how often the publication running the review appears, another year’s delay may not be unusual.

The book review in the humanities is not just a crucial means of scholarly communication, but unlike other text genres, puts more emphasis on an accepted understanding of the term “expert” or “peer.” Traditionally, the editors of review journals will ask scholars who are believed to be “experts” in a particular area of research to write a review of another scholar’s recent publication of a text in that area. Here, “experts” are those who are considered capable of appropriately judging the methodology and results of a new monograph, as well as placing it in its scholarly context. The development of the Internet has revealed this traditional process to be slow, often rather monotonous and inflexible, and mired in a hierarchy. Communication between the reviewer and the author reviewed is impossible — unless it

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