Gatekeepers in a digital wasteland

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It is already a cliché to announce the demise of the book in the wake of the digital revolution. While it might be unwise to stake our futures on the printed-and-bound codex, it seems doubtful that a shift in way words are delivered will result in the downfall of long-form writing itself. What does seem questionable, however, is the persistence of the current publishing model in which publishers act as gatekeepers. In the 'democratized' digital republic enabled by self-publishing, what threatens to remain is a waste land in which the inhabitants elect their culture via a ballot of sparsely distributed consumer capital. The 'book' looks likely to persist. What may not is the current way in which we decide what is worthwhile between the (digital) covers.

To put it in analytical terms, there is a breakdown in the system of value. In academia, fear of this breakdown has intensified in reaction to the recent rise of open access publishing. The term 'open access' actually denotes the removal of price and permission barriers to scholarly research. For example, instead of readers paying for access to one of my thrill-a-minute academic articles on Thomas Pynchon, and then being beholden to copyright statutes, I instead make the article freely available to download and I license the work for readers to re-use as they see fit, so long as they cite me.

To understand why this is revolutionary, you have to understand a little about the way academics have traditionally produced and published their work. To write my research articles, I am paid by an institution, the University of Lincoln, where I also lecture. When my writing is complete, I submit my work to a scholarly journal, which then arranges for it to be peer reviewed – by other academics.

If my article passes the threshold for entry (often only after revisions have been implemented), the piece will be published.

The publisher traditionally earns money by selling subscriptions to these journals to university libraries – which are willing to pay because researchers need to access the material. In almost all cases (certainly in all cases in the humanities), academics are not paid by the publisher at any point – neither for the work they submit, nor for the labour that they invest in peer reviewing the work of others. Academics do not expect remuneration from publishers, either. (At least, not for articles: books are a different matter and I have heard of payment in the field of medicine for peer review work – but still not of payment to the author). Instead, academics undertake these tasks because it is seen as part of their job as researchers working for an institution.

The major problem is that the cost of providing access to all the journal articles that university researchers need has outstripped both library budgets and inflation. Since 1986, the cost has beaten inflation by a startling 300%. Therefore, even as some (but not all) academic publishers make an exorbitant profit (Elsevier, for example, made £768m profit in 2011 on a 37% margin), academics are often unable to access the material that is crucial to their research because their institutions cannot afford to subscribe to every journal.

As both a response to this budgetary crisis and from a desire to use technology for public good, a movement was born to move academic publishing online and to remove the need to pay for access to scholarly material. There are many good reasons for this, both societal and economic – one of the more compelling is that an educated populace in a democracy should be able to access the academic research that it funds through taxation. However, making material available for free can prove remarkably expensive. Two different proposals for open access have therefore emerged. On the

so-called 'green' route, published material must still be paid for, but copies of the work are deposited in institutional libraries, albeit sometimes with an embargo, and often not in their final state. Under the 'gold' model, by contrast, material is made available freely at the source. Of course, this still has to be paid for by someone – and, under gold, the most notorious business model is one in which the author pays. (Although in the reality of academia it is envisaged that it will not be the author, personally, who pays, but his or her institution and there are other business models such as the library partnership model I am proposing for the *Open Library of Humanities*. At the risk of sounding like a plug for my own project, we're trying to ascertain whether a large number of libraries would each be willing to pay a small amount so that everybody can benefit from subsequently free access; in short: can enlightened self-interest overcome its selfish, possessive element?)

It will not surprise many that debates about open access to academic research are numerous, heated, convoluted and sometimes petty. My main point, here, is that open access and digital publishing forces us to question the value judgements that we make – not just on academic work, but on other kinds of authorship and publishing too.

Typically, judgment of academic work occurs at the stage of peer review. Historically, our strict standards were not just an attempt to militate against information overload and drive up quality but were also designed to ensure that journals would stay within their page budgets; dead tree is relatively expensive. In a digital environment, these physical restraints do not apply. The Public Library of Science journal, PLOS-ONE, has altered the standard of entry to a level of 'technical soundness', rather than 'importance' or 'novelty' – the traditional criteria. So long as a body of peers deems the work to be scientifically good, no matter how unimportant it might seem, it can be admitted. This has led to accusations of trivialisation. The fear is that if we do not replicate artificial

scarcity online, we end up with rubbish. (This is perhaps bolstered by the fact that PLOS-ONE's most cited article is on the predilection of fruit bats to oral sex.)

Academia is a strange case in the digital publishing world, though. Trade publishers need commercially successful authors if they are to remain solvent. Yet from anecdotal experience, editors do not take positions at literary publishing houses solely on the basis of sales potential. Instead, many trade publishers cross-subsidise. A good example of this is Bloomsbury's stance on the novelist Russell Hoban, whom I knew during his later years. Hoban's only 'hit' novel had limited cult appeal; *Riddley Walker* is written in an esoteric, invented, phonetic, future dialect. However, even before the Harry Potter series transformed their fortunes (and although they were not the original publishers of *Riddley Walker*), Bloomsbury were committed to publishing Hoban's later work, despite its inability to turn a profit. This is a clear instance of high-culture 'value' working in symbiosis with populist value.

The system that long produced literary value in this way also depends on a mass body of readers delegating their authority to an 'expert' editor. As readers, we have trusted publishers to ferret out the good stuff. But things are changing. In 2006, *Time* magazine proclaimed person of the year to be 'You'. The choice was derided as a gimmick, but it should have been seen as a warning – at least for publishers who see themselves as the gatekeeper of quality. While, in many areas, the distributed power of 'You' has facilitated unprecedented, collective social good – Wikipedia being an excellent example – in other areas it smacks of an individualism that overrides genuine expertise and authority, despite its ostensibly collectivist cloak.

There are certainly problems with the existing mode of gatekeeping in the trade world. Why, for example, should a privileged group of editors decide what has literary merit? What is their

qualification to make such a decision? The problem that faces us, however, is whether the existing system, flawed and elitist as it may be, produces better results than when value judgements are made, instead, by 'You'. I can offer several reasons why it might indeed be better.

Firstly, the current publisher-gatekeeper model still allows an editor to cross-subsidise and experiment. If we are all our own gatekeepers operating under a system of monetary exchange, we will work individually for our own self-interest, and any work that is commercially untenable will become artistically untenable. For evidence, look at how the publisher Salt has had to expand into fiction while abandoning its celebrated single-author poetry collections. Secondly, production of digital objects tends towards the worst form of commodity fetishism. By this, I mean that we often mistakenly believe commodities to be priced for the materials that constitute the physical object (quality of paper, weight to ship, etc) rather than for the labour invested and social relations that the object masks. For instance, it is often thought that digital books should be cheaper than physical books, as though the object's physicality were the chief cost in producing a book. As authors will know, better than anyone, it is not.

As we move towards digital dissemination, there is a pricing race to the bottom. If the 'object' is something that can be distributed freely and exists only in the form of ephemeral on-screen text, there is a tendency to believe that it should be provided at *no cost*, against all common sense and awareness of the labour involved in the production. Top-slicing platform providers with monopolistic inclinations will see no incentive to discourage this continual price erosion, so long as the price remains above zero and so long as they dominate the market. As that statement is evasive and my editor has asked for a more concrete example, I might as well just say: Amazon. To bargain for the labour rights of authors, in the face of this price erosion, existing publishing houses as collective entities representing authors may be better placed than isolated self-publishers.

Within my word limit here (page budgets!) my argument is, in places, doubtless reductive, overly charitable to publishers and open to a charge of naivety. But although the systems of labour compensation are different in academic and trade publishing, that difference allows us to appraise how and what we value. And it is clear that in both spheres digital publishing has engendered what you might call an 'anxiety of value'. Perhaps this anxiety is nothing more than a form of cultural conservatism: a fear that our *own* value systems may no longer hold. What we need to collectively decide, however, is whether the forms of value that markets produce are those that we would willingly engender through a truly democratic discussion. We must also understand that all the ways in which we create and assess value are the result of historical accident. Indeed, if we were to start from scratch today, we would undoubtedly publish purely online. Open digital access to both academic and 'trade' material would just be called 'publishing', which might work for the former, but would be problematic for the latter, to say the least. In spheres outside academia, who could say for sure what would we have by way of literary art?