FCJ-227 Survey and Project: On the (Im)possibility of Scholarship in an Era of Networked Knowledge

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Abstract: There are at least two dimensions to the transformation in the character of scholarly publishing and the correlative shift in the networked conditions of production of scholarly work. The scope and scale of material available has radically increased and the mechanisms of judging scholarly value have been increasingly refined. Yet, we have not done enough to critically reflect on what these transformations have done to the experience of producing scholarly work. I am referring to the simple way that everyday activities of scholarship have been transformed. An obvious example is the practice of carrying out a literature review. This brief essay presents some notes on literature review preparation and abstract writing from the perspective of a mid-career academic who is committed to assisting their research students. It then argues there are two new meta-professional skills required of scholars to function in academia and in which our research students need to develop expertise. What if we could problematise the 'project' (or 'projectify' the problem)? Rather than the coordinates of the project being determined by the administrative burden of measurement and correlative productivity according to maximum gradients of anxiety (the neoliberal academic model), what if the 'project' was configured as an instrument for suspending practices of discovery according to the maximum gradients of curiosity (the post-neoliberal academic model)? This is the difference between passive and active affections that befall scholars as they are socialised as academics.

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Researchers concerned with networks have engaged with a variety of conceptual and technical problems and areas of interest. *Fibreculture*'s key focus has been any and all manifestations of network culture, with a particular interest in media. Our interest in scholarly publishing – both this journal, books and experimental forms – has long been as advocates for open access. We have critically engaged with shifts in the technologies of editorial production, publishing and then storage and retrieval.

The changes to the systems of scholarly and intellectual publishing over the last 30 years mean that academics, scholars and intellectuals of all types now have access to a huge array of material either with open or closed (paid) access. Let's call it the Google Scholar Effect. (Of course, it is more than the effect of Google Scholar and Google Scholar has its own specificities.) Writing in the early 2000s, and therefore before the advent of Google Scholar, Liu framed the transformation thus:

> *Traditional scholarly publishing is experiencing tremendous pressure for change under the confluence of the following forces and trends: the exponential growth of information production, the dramatic increase in subscription fees, the increasing storage cost of*

printed documents, and the increasing power and availability of digital technology. (Liu, 2003: 889)

Much of the early research on this situation focused on the digitization of scholarship, particularly the status of the journal article (Clarke and Kingsley, 2008; Carey, 2013). Then most of the subsequent generation of scholarship has focused on bibliometrics, measuring the value or impact of this digitized scholarship, particularly in the context of commercial publishers. An excellent example of this focus on the journal article as the basic unit of scholarship and the focus on the qualitative metrics is Larivière, Haustein, and Mongeon's (2015) examination of 45 million documents indexed in the Web of Science over the period 1973-2013 (comparing across and within disciplinary groupings). They show that the big commercial publishers had increased their share of the total output of scholarly production. The journal article may not be the best way of disseminating research but it is the best way for big publishers to measure the impact of journal articles in ways that reproduce social hierarchies of so-called 'impact'.

From another direction, riffing off Nigel Thrift's notion of 'Fast Management', Rosalind Gill posits the notion of 'Fast Academia' in the context of academia as a permanent state of emergency. The focus on producing something that can be measured (and managed) has transformed the character of the scholarly activity of publishing:

> *it is in relation to research that people feel most under pressure for it is here that our 'worth' is most harshly surveilled and assessed, and where we are subject to ever greater scrutiny. For it is not just a matter of whether you publish, but what you publish, where you publish it, how often it is cited, what 'impact factor' the journal has, and whether you are 'REF-ready'. (Gill, 2009: 238)*

Research students enrolled in a PhD nominally have four years to complete, with the expectation of actually only taking three years, and within the first year they need to complete a confirmation process. Similarly, academics need to find the time to keep up with developments in their field and ideally pursue new intellectual endeavours, all squeezed around other responsibilities, teaching, admin, continual 'innovation'. The social relations of publication and access once determined by gatekeepers of scholarly knowledge do not restrict the circulation of knowledge, but do restrict the circulation of value. Most university

administrators do not have a deep understanding of what academics actually do and instead rely on ranking systems of universities or even disciplinary clusters in a university as indicating the value of scholarly activity (Savat and Thompson, 2015; Murphie, 2014).

Hence there are at least two dimensions to the transformation in the character of scholarly publishing and the correlative shift in the networked conditions of production of scholarly work. The scope and scale of material available has radically increased and the mechanisms of judging scholarly value have been increasingly refined. Yet, we have not done enough to critically reflect on what these transformations have done to the experience of *producing* scholarly work. I don't mean work on research methodologies, which has seen an explosion of material. Plus there are certainly studies of the general transformation of the academic workplace. I am more referring to the simple way that everyday activities of scholarship have been transformed.

An obvious example is the practice of carrying out a literature review. The problem is particularly severe when it comes to higher degree research students tasked with developing and then demonstrating mastery over a given disciplinary area. This brief essay presents some notes on literature review preparation and abstract writing from the perspective of a mid-career academic who is committed to assisting their research students. It then argues there are two new meta-professional skills required of scholars to function in academia and in which our research students need to develop expertise.

Literature Reviewing in an Era of Networked Scholarship

Most research students need to carry out some sort of literature review. Even the most unstructured research experience normally involves a series of structured explorations of a scholarly field, discipline or body of work. This process involves refining a set of interests and concerns and developing them into research questions or at least a thesis statement. The standard for advice on how to carry out a literature review seems to be an article published by the editors of the journal MIS Quarterly, Jane Webster and Richard Watson, in 2002. It has been cited over 5000 times. They provide extremely useful practical advice that can be adapted for most contemporary research projects. The article sets out how to map a field by focusing on

generating lists of authors and concepts and then reading across all of this work to synthesise it. I tend to think about this process as one of finding your allies and then reading their work until saturation (i.e. stop when you only discover further repetition). The Webster and Watson piece is an engineering style approach to an intellectual problem that already anticipates being replaced by automation. There are a series of steps that are extremely practical and allow researchers to carry out an analysis of a field based on researchers and concepts. This could be adapted by computational linguists and natural language algorithms to automate the production of literature reviews.

For many research students there is a point at which you learn at an accelerated rate because you figure out how to learn for yourself. In a sense you become your own teacher as you cut through swathes of material to isolate and focus on the work relevant for your research problem. As well as carrying out research, research students are learning how to become researchers. It is often the responsibility of the supervisor – sometimes with or sometimes without institutional research training – to guide and support students though this process. There are at least three complications, depending on the nature of the project.

First, working in an area involving research on media, communications and technology means that there is often a very large amount of material on any given topic; this body of work is so expansive that it seems without end. This is the infinite scholarship problem. Contemporary platforms of scholarly convenience actively harm intellectual practice. For example, a fundamental practical problem for many new students is they are digital native scholars. They have not experienced the rhythms of analogue, mostly print-based knowledge production, circulation and importantly reflection or digestion. Their experience of scholarship has mostly enjoyed the convenience of Google Scholar and the like. The readerly culture of previous iterations of professional scholarship have been replaced by a screening and scanning culture of scholarship that circulates as networked knowledge. The resultant practice of fast-paced utility reading adopts some of the targeted hierarchising of algorithmic information systems. The problem here is not the convenience of Google Scholar but the way this convenience evaporates slower rhythms of thinking and intellectual work necessitated by non-digital scholarship. There is an entire movement assembled around slow scholarship and so on that emerges from this (O'Neill, 2014).

Second, needing to revise an existing literature review at a later stage of the research process (during analysis and publication) introduces critical problems to do with the ideals of scientific method and the production of knowledge. The state of knowledge in a given discipline can definitely shift in the two years of this process in a 'new' three-year PhD program or even in the one year or less of pilot programs. Part of this is because of the pace of contemporary scholarship. This is the continuously changing discipline problem. I'm sure everyone has reviewed work that feels like a grab bag of ideas lifted from various sources and included in a superficial way in the first 30% of a journal article. What are some workarounds? How can we approach this as supervisors, reviewers and researchers? The key problem is thinking about how to situate the literature review when there is a tension between the intellectual endeavour of engaging with existing work compared to satisfying the demands and constraints of disciplinarity.

Third, if we are encouraging students to engage with complex theories or philosophies, then the task becomes extremely challenging for student and supervisor alike. My example is encouraging students to read Deleuze; it feels almost negligent because of the extremely challenging character of the work and the time required to even read (let alone appropriately digest) in a critical way all the relevant literature. Established academics at least read Deleuze's work as it was published or translated. But Deleuze was writing for a specific French audience, so to read and understand Deleuze properly means reading at least Kant. Now there is a huge body of primary texts, and an everlasting production of commentaries. The actual problem gathers an almost slapstick dimension of impossibility.

Webster and Watson's approach is premised on mapping-based scholarly practice in fields where claims of relevance are self-evident. In other fields that are inherently inter-disciplinary, the practice of searching and mapping becomes a process of critical textual production. A case needs to be made for inclusion or exclusion, and then for how such a text is incorporated. In an era of neo-disciplinarity, Foucault's (1972) discussion of commentary is instructive for thinking about the ways texts can be included in a given discipline. He critically explores the various internal and external rules of reproducing 'disciplinarity' in both senses of the word. Contemporary masters of scholarly commentary frame disciplinary genealogies by using rhetoric to reduce the field of possible significance. The problem can be framed in terms of

narrow or broad contextualisation of scholarly perspectives on a given problem. What is the limit of this context? Disciplinarity becomes a solution, but one that enables scholarly production by, at a minimum, hobbling curiosity.

Toscano presents an alternative version of commentary in his preface to Eric Alliez's *Signature of the World*, which is itself a commentary that frames Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy?* Toscano presents a contextualisation of commentary as an intensive process of becoming attuned to the conceptual problems that serve to guide philosophical thought:

> *The crux of the matter is that pedagogy is not restricted to a set of operations aimed at facilitating access to a preexisting object, nor, conversely, is it a divining practice that coaxes, from a subject of teaching, some latent cognitive content. […] As a truly transcendental exercise, learning (and the commentary as one of the guises learning takes) eschews the empirical actuality of a solution, endeavouring instead to link the subjectivity of the apprentice (or the commentator) to 'the singular points of the objective in order to form a problematic field.' Rather than as a mediator between the (ignorant) reader and the (final) text or doctrine, a commentary can thus be conceived as a novel problematisation of the ideal connections that define a particular philosophical object, a repetition of the text that does not seek to identify its theses as much as turn heterogeneity into consistency, uniting differences to differences, and open the work in question both to the 'empty time' or Aion of the event and to the specific virtualities of a contemporary situation. (2004: xi-xii)*

This requires a tremendous amount of work, not only reading and engaging with a given field, but also tracing the intellectual genealogies of such fields. This is the broad contextualisation of scholarly perspectives. Do students have the time for this? Do we have the time for this? What happens if this kind of philosophical thought dies out not because of malicious intent by murderous administrators cutting programs, but because the (neoliberal) audience is simply exhausted and does not have the capacity to engage?

Projectification

There is a tendency to privilege two ways of framing scholarly activity. First, as research, and second, as the outcome of a project. As discussed above, this is so that scholarly or intellectual activity can be measured in particular ways that are of value to the globalised institution (for example, in the form of metrics that 'count' towards international rankings). The formal dimensions of a 'project', in this management model, are derived from disciplines that would regard themselves as 'science' (Nadal Burgués, 2015). Anthony Giddens' much contested assertion that in 'post-traditional societies' identity is now a 'reflexive project of the self' generated a huge amount of research about identity. What if the actual insight was about the more mobile way post-traditional societies can parse human endeavour, including the reflexive performance of one's biographical identity, into the metaphysical form of the 'project'? The concept of the 'project' itself has epistemological and ontological baggage, which in the case of the university is assumed by individual scholars as pertaining to the character of academia. The etymology of 'project' "a plan, draft, scheme" is derived from the Latin *proiectum* "something thrown forth".[1] The concept of the "project" allows us to gather together a set of human endeavours and furnish them with a singular set of goals. (Academia is at the vanguard of the projectification of everyday life. This is part of the way that everyday life is increasingly surveilled [and self-surveilled], which enables the continuous flow of life to be analysed as discrete and actionable chunks.)

What if we could problematise the 'project' (or 'projectify' the problem)? Rather than the coordinates of the project being determined by the administrative burden of measurement and correlative productivity according to maximum gradients of anxiety (the neoliberal academic model), what if the 'project' was configured as an instrument for suspending practices of discovery according to the maximum gradients of curiosity (the post-neoliberal academic model)? This is the difference between passive and active affections that befall scholars as they are socialised as academics. Scholars successful at navigating contemporary academia already do this, of course. Projects at every level. For example, to return to my problem of students reading Deleuze's work. The only way to learn and engage with Deleuze's body of work is to treat it as a meta-level project that transcends specific deliverable (and measurable) outputs.

Can we take back the 'project' from those who would use it to measure activity and use it as a tool for gathering together heterogenous temporalities into actionable outcomes?

Biographical Note

Associate Professor Glen Fuller is the Head of School, School of Arts and Communication, at the University of Canberra. His three primary areas of interest include critical accounts of media industry innovation, discourse and media events, and media and affect (enthusiasm). His current project researches cycling culture in the broader context of media culture, active transport policy, and cultural geographies after automobility. He has been an editor of the *Fibreculture Journal* since 2014.

Notes

[1] https://www.etymonline.com/word/project

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