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Conviviality and standards: open access publishing after AI

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As new areas of academic research proliferate (and cross-pollinate), scholarly digital publishing makes it possible to grow online networks around research interests without relying on the slow, gatekeeping procedures of traditional print publishing. In this way, advances in digital technology continue to offer scholars a wider readership and more meaningful peer networks. But these benefits come at a cost.

Open access academic publishing, as envisioned by its early champions such as Kathleen Fitzpatrick, is not just about giving away free products to the public 'but is in fact a means of making clear the extent to which the academy's interests are the public interest'. (Fitzpatrick 2011, 161) The university system within the U.S. has embraced the idea of free in 'open access' but without a concomitant pledge to support a digital infrastructure that moves away from the for-profit models of traditional print publishing.

Without a reliable economic model, the labour of peer-reviewing, editing, formatting, distributing and marketing scholarly writing and research is, in many cases, taken on by the scholars themselves. Digital tools continue to make publishing workflows considerably more efficient and faster, but the unpaid labour involved is still a hindrance to any sustainable models for open access publishing of scholarly work.

Automation is often framed as a tool to increase productivity and efficiency by diminishing the role of fallible and slow humans in a technical or labour-intensive process. In the case of digital editing, the automation of grammar and spellcheck is labour saved for a deeper and more attentive reading of a text, where more subtle errors might lie in the author's very argument. Zotero automates away many of professional textual skills of scholarship. Content management systems help create and organise structured content in databases. Coming Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning technologies for publishers promise to improve not only editing texts, but detecting plagiarism, checking sources, seeking out peer reviewers, converting files, formatting for multiple platforms, marketing on social media and analysing metrics. Many of these 'intelligent' tools depend on Big Data to detect patterns. For example, predictive text on smartphones looks at the usage patterns across the web to determine the probability of the next word in a sequence. OpenAI, a nonprofit research company founded in 2015, has over the years released iterations of its Generative Pre-trained Transformer (GPT), a neural network that uses 'deep learning' to produce human-like text. The company has also released versions of its AI image generator DALL-E, which generates digital images from natural language descriptions called 'prompts'. In early 2022, many discovered OpenAI's ChatGPT, a conversational language model that can take a simple human prompt to code websites, translate programming languages, write convincing human emails, reports, proposals and class essays. The results are awe-inspiring, sometimes silly and deeply disturbing in the implications of how this technology might be used for spam, impersonation, misinformation and plagiarism. Matching many of these real concerns are the obvious potential benefits in assisting in the routine digital tasks that are time-consuming and not particularly human-friendly. Personalised AI assistants, using statistical machine learning and neural networks for automating tasks, will be able to streamline digital workflows by taking on the tasks of copyediting, scheduling, project management, site maintenance and budgeting. The auto-mation of labour might finally free the scholar-artist-publisher from the slow materiality of basic digital tasks and release them into the

electrified realm of pure thinking, creativity and expression. Of course, the only problem with this techno-utopian dream is that the most creative thinking often takes place within the slow, contingent and opaque physicality of living. Ideas and insight need the rich soil of conversation, encounter and debate within rituals of embodied and virtual togetherness, where chance thoughts collide. Open access publishers in the age of AI should embrace the benefits of intelligent tools, but must also seek the standards of human-scaled scholarship and creative work that prevents a publishing environment from becoming enslaved to its tools. If automation and machine learning allows a scholarly journal to exponentially grow their output and readership, is that a necessarily a good thing? How can we, instead, free individual thought and creativity and still collectively make value and meaning through shared passions?

In an age when communication tools are abundant and accessible, the challenges of open access publishing are only superficially technical and stem more from very human needs. Sometimes a publishing platform or tool requires outside professional skills, making costs go over budget. But a deeper challenge, unique to open access digital publishing, is in sustaining the participation of a volunteer community of scholars and creative thinkers. In general, people are motivated when they get paid for their labour, but they also are motivated by their own passions and interests. Funding through internal and external grants drives many digital humanities publishing projects and enduring academic journals, but such financial support is limited and often temporary. In an academic system, one based on merit and reputation, what are the incentives for what is often unpaid editorial labour? In my own experience of publishing in the digital humanities, I find that much of the energy and initiative comes out of a strong desire of scholars and artists to convene, make public and create value around their area of research or practice. Editorial work combines the deeply satisfying intellectual engagement with a field of study and the often mindless 'secretarial' work of moving files, checking errors and converting formats. To highlight some of these challenges and promises of building open access communities around research, I will share brief narratives

about my experiences with two open access journals: the *electronic book review* and its sibling publication *The Digital Review*.

The *electronic book review* (*ebr*) was created in 1995 as an online space for critical writing and reflections on the then new and exciting forms of computer writing. Founding editors Joe Tabbi and Mark Amerika published 12 issues of the journal at the University of Colorado Boulder under Amerika's AltX Press, the first online space for a wide range of experimental, multimedia forms of writing. *Ebr* had to eventually meet the needs of the academics who, 10 years later, were affiliated with institutions that had more formal requirements for publishing. An editorial board was formed and, while still open access, the site had to, by necessity, abandon the hand-coded site of its early years and take on the look and presentation of a more formal academic online journal. When I joined *ebr* in 2018 as Managing Editor, the journal was going through another major platform transition. The site was on an older version of the content management system Drupal, which required a significant upgrade. There was no money to pay a professional for this, so there was discussion of handing over 20 years of *ebr* essays to a university repository that would shut out much of the active web. I made the case to move the site from Drupal to WordPress, a far more accessible content management system that would ensure the longevity of an open access site that thrived on the unpaid contributions of academics and their students.[1] I attribute the continued retention of a volunteer editorial team at the *electronic book review* to two factors: (1) the small but enthusiastic global community of digital humanities scholars taking on the small and large duties of publishing and (2) the ease of new content-management systems and other automated processes in the editorial workflow that frees up the scholars from *some* of the technical work for more focused work on the scholarly community and their research interests.

1   Open access academic publishing must still negotiate the requirements of scholarly publishing standards, much of which is cosmetic. WordPress themes tend to look like blogs, so in the design of *ebr* there was attention to paratextual details, such as posting the urls of DOIs, offering PDF versions of essays and making sure the layout design was more in line with conventional journals.

The first issue of *The Digital Review* (*tdr*) came out in June 2020–25 years after the founding of *ebr.* The idea started within *ebr*'s monthly editorial meetings. Many of us were lamenting the loss of those more experimental forms of critical writing in the early days under AltX. The idea was born to create an annual publication as a way to re-vitalise these forms of digital scholarship and essay writing. With a small internal grant from Washington State University Vancouver, where I am affiliated, we launched the first issue with the theme and title *Digital Essayism*. I teach classes related to web development and design and have a research interest in digital publishing. The grant was able to pay stipends to my undergraduate students who helped me design and build the site in HTML and CSS. We were pleasantly surprised that six international early career scholars volunteered their time as co-editors and that a great many authors, well established in the field, submitted (without pay) exciting new work for this inaugural issue. Lai-Tze Fan, one of our *ebr* editors, took on the role as editor for the second issue on *Critical Making, Critical Design.* She was able to gather seven co-editors for an ambitious issue with 16n multimodal essays and seven academic essays on the subject of digital research creation. Laura Hyunjhee Kim, the editor for the third issue focused on *Digital Performance*, also took on the main editorial workload by gathering resources and assistance within her own network. With each issue of *tdr*, the technical requirements of development and design were settled early on and later streamlined with accessible templates for each successive issue editor. The majority of the remaining edi-torial labour was in the selection of new work to publish, the ongoing communication with contributing scholars and artists, copyediting and the editorial introduction and framing of the issue theme.

The sustainability of the *electronic book review* and *The Digital Review* is based on the simple idea that scholars are most drawn to work that brings them and their research into contact with others in their field. This social dynamic, an important metric of success in open access publishing, is not much discussed in the hype over AI and ML in the publishing industry at large. In a 2019 white paper called *The Future Impact of Artificial Intelligence on the Publishing Industry*, the authors write:

Using information from processed data, AI can not only classify and categorize new customers, but it can also be used to predict their buying patterns as well as instances where otherwise loyal consumers might turn to a competitor (Lovrinovic 2019, 6).

For large publishing companies with a paying customer base, AL and ML use the company's Big Data with their customers to 'maximize' and 'optimize' so as to return more profits. The new tools aim to improve content personalisation, content translation, auto-tagging and SEO. The greatest impact of AI on publishing, according to the white paper, is in marketing and sales. For the open access publisher there are different needs from this same technology. How can our promised intelligent tools improve a human-scaled serendipity rather than simply be the slaves to profit motives? The danger of AI in all fields is an outcome that finds humans beholden to systems that only an AI can perform and understand. What remains of scholarly digital publishing as a human activity if AI and ML absorb all of the labour involved? Scholars (as researchers, writers, editors and publishers) might be freed to concentrate on pure ideas, but the very idea of 'publishing' might become a black box. Publishing is making small human-scale clearings in the thick and wild tangle of data. Removing technical barriers and potential friction in publishing workflows can make way for a greater flow among scholars in the evaluation and dissemination of research and theories, but how might AI make scholarly digital publishing more 'convivial'.

The countercultural, some would say anarchist, Catholic Priest, Ivan Illich, wrote about imposed technical systems encroaching upon human systems of interaction. In his 1988 *Tools for Conviviality*, he considers a 'convivial' society as one in which individuals have the means, tools, incentives and desire for collaboration, in which individuals participate in a collaborative or collective endeavour that is not coercive, but rather enriching and even 'joyous' to the individuals involved.

I choose the term conviviality to designate the opposite of industrial productivity. I intended it to mean autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of

persons with their environment; and this in contrast with the conditioned response of persons to the demands made upon them by others, and by a man made environment. I consider conviviality to be individual freedom realized as personal inter-dependence and as such of an intrinsic ethical value. I believe that in any society as conviviality is reduced below a certain level no amount of industrial productivity can effectively satisfy the needs it creates among society's members (Illich 2021, 11).

Conviviality escapes a rigid hierarchical and standardised process and seeks out diverse and innovative voices because it is sustained by individuals who choose to be a part of something that is at once self-serving and for the greater good. Scholarly digital publishing, especially open access publishing, is already modelling this kind of shared labour in the service of both the individual scholars seeking to publish their work and the fields of research of which they are a part. Outside of the industrial models of the past and current hyper-capitalist publishers, 'publishing' is essentially enthusiastic groups participating in and bringing value to cultural forms. There is certainly self-interest in bringing out one's own scholarly and/or creative contributions to a group, but that satisfaction can only be meaningful if there is a strong community to share with in the first place.

What the labour of publishing does, whether it is volunteered or paid for, is to select and present work with a level of care that meets a set of standards set by a community. Within an academic community, publishing standards will necessarily be quite strict with respect to textual presentation – spelling, grammar, rhetoric and paratextual elements. Academic publishing has a rich history that combines core humanistic values and standards of craft and industry. But standards change as technologies and cultures evolve. These can include stand-ards to not always follow conventions, but rather seek out novelty and fresh approaches to ideas. A publisher can set a standard for publishing controversial or challenging works. Standards – in editorial selection, presentation, production value and community building – defines the signature brand of a publisher. With new modes of multimedia and computational writing, there are technical and design

standards. Standards that respect the unique expressions of the digital author, no matter how unstandardised the work is. There are also standards by which publishers choose platforms and tools, determine workflows in peer review, editing and attracting subscribers.

Janneka Adema, in her book *Living Books*, discusses the idea of a 'Radical Open Access' as an alternative approach to what some have critiqued as a neoliberal bias in favour of 'free content' and 'free labour' from academics. Radical Open Access, as experimentation with and openness to a diversity of forms and voices, can act as a critique of traditional publishing and play with the boundaries of what publishing and authorship can be.

> ... forms of radical open access book publishing can be envisioned and performed as part of affirmative, continuous strategies directed toward rethinking our market-based publishing institutions, as well as the object formation that takes part through forms of academic capitalism. Although open access, in its neoliberal guise, also has the potential to contribute to this object formation, I have made a plea for reclaiming open access by focusing on its potential to critically reperform our print-based institutions and practices and on its capability to experiment with new ideas of politics, scholarly communication, the university, and the book (Adema 2021, 177–8).

Contrary to conventional opinion on the matter, the coming AI publishing tools might, if handled with care and attention, bring about *more* human engagement, conviviality and radical experimentation to open access publishing without sacrificing humanistic and scholarly standards. The very idea of open access assumes a reorientation to knowledge production and dissemination; it is not about fitting a collective endeavour into some standardised form, but about freeing individuals in their collective desires to pursue and share what is most important to them.

Independent digital artists, game creators, podcasters, video creators and e-lit authors were and are the most innovative digital publishers.

Their creative pursuits, often without payment, foster much of the more institutional innovations in open access publishing and in the digital humanities. The early marketing for the desktop, the laptop and later the mobile phone emphasised the knowledge worker as an independent publisher working at home or while camping by the lake. The same ethos of freedom and individuality fuelled social media with platforms and tools for blogging and media podcasting. It seems that many authors have fulfilled a dream of independence by doing away with 'publishers' altogether. Or rather the independent authors have just become their own publishers, and are now tethered to maintaining publication standards, potential liabilities and their own popularity ratings. Today we have multiple publishing platforms and tools that allow the individual scholar-writer-artist to publish with direct payments from readers. Newsletters such as Substack have tiered subscription fees. Advertising funds the most popular podcasts and video channels. While paying authors and creators directly is all very healthy for the growth and spread of cultural forms, it remains up to the single author to do the significant work of publishing – the textual care, along with the marketing and networking. New tools and platforms will continue to automate much of this labour, making the individual author even more 'independent'. However, according to the warnings of Ivan Illich, the tools that seem to free us from tedious tasks end up enslaving us because we become dependent on the tools to do the work, rather than selecting the tools that assist us in creating the work.

> The crisis can be solved only if we learn to invert the present deep structure of tools; if we give people tools that guarantee their right to work with high, independent efficiency, thus simul-taneously eliminating the need for either slaves or masters and enhancing each person's range of freedom (Illich 2021, 10).

More conviviality in open access publishing does not mean handing all work over to virtual agents or assistants. A Siri or an Alexa might come in handy to do quick searches or perform a series of minor tasks, but a more convivial tool would work more deeply with human creativity and analytical skills. Scholars, publishers, artists and

craftspeople naturally develop their own quirks and oddities in their work process. An AI assistant should be malleable to the human worker and adaptable to their needs. As a managing editor, I am tasked with moving documents through peer review, copyediting and HTML formatting. I rely on automation for the different stages of converting Word documents to HTML, but a single button that completes all the tasks without my attention would remove me completely from the process. A convivial AI publishing tool might mirror small sets of repetitive steps in a process worked out ahead of time by the editor, but the workflow should always be visible for continued human design and tweaking. I am always looking for more ways to automate such tasks, not to escape the service work, but to free up more time and energy for myself and my colleagues to focus on the high publishing standards and aims set by the team. Tools should carry us into the work we actually care about, in the way a carpenter with good tools can enter into the flow of working with wood. Convivial publishing tools would ideally help academics go more deeply and meaningfully into research, writing, editing and engaging with their colleagues.

In the frantic race for clicks just to survive as a publisher, it is easy to imagine AI and automation only amplifying the empty mimicry of today's media environment and diminishing the more human-scaled efforts at making public original thought and creative work. It is easy to imagine corporate publishers going where the future money will flow – towards multisensory virtual experiences. With AI assistants, teenagers might conjure the most popular immersive games. Media companies big and small will continue to gamify popularity algorithms. With the flow of public and private funding the digital humanities will also develop inspiring, sensory-rich learning environments. But what about the smaller academic or niche journal publisher? While there are concerns with any new AI technology, especially the human biases embedded in data algorithms, AI tools targeted for repetitive and labour-intensive publishing tasks can open an opportunity to shape a renaissance in convivial scholarly publishing that sacrifices neither academic standards nor individual innovation and creativity.

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