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Reassembling Scholarly Communications

Histories, Infrastructures, and Global Politics of Open Access

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6 How Does a Format Make a Public?

Robin de Mourat, Donato Ricci, and Bruno Latour

“Journal,” “monograph,” “conference proceedings.” These are just a few names of formats that evoke the institutions and practices of the academic world. On the one hand, they summon a shared framework for thinking, reading, and writing; connecting specific institutions, infrastructures, and activities. On the other hand, they contain diverse and differentiated expectations depending upon disciplines, countries, and schools of thoughts. Moreover, if we compare them with the contemporary objects to which they relate, a certain cognitive dissonance may arise. Is an “academic journal” still a “journal” when it is less and less affected by its periodicity, and more and more distributed and manipulated at the level of granularity of its articles or citations? Is the expression “conference proceedings” still relevant when it stands for the online publication of audio or video recordings? What is an “academic book” when this expression designates artefacts spanning from collections of diverse fragments and excerpts found on the web, to e-reader oriented .epub compositions? If one acknowledges that the materiality of an academic text significantly affects the communication functions and practices attached to it, these displacements between names and experiences take on some significance. Names are far more stable than the actual practices and purposes that they imply. How, then, to qualify these displacements and the persistence of a format’s names? How do they affect the formation of scholarly communities in contemporary open and transdisciplinary collectives? How does a format make a public?

The format of an artefact generally refers to its *size* and *shape*, but also to its layout and technical structure. The term encompasses both measurement and organization. Format materiality should be understood from a technological as well as from an experiential perspective, where both dimensions are inextricably intertwined. While the format of an artefact designates a

set of characteristics, it also *orients* and *conditions* certain modalities of reading, writing, arguing, reflecting, and speculating. Indeed, the format of a given artefact is also the outcome of “a whole range of decisions that affect the look, feel, experience, and workings of a medium” to which this artefact belongs, as Jonathan Sterne puts it, the expression of certain assumptions and constraints affecting its producers.¹ In that sense, it is the expression of a boundary between production and experience.

However, if “format”—in its singular form—designates the material organization, practical frame, and productive background of a given artefact, the “formats”—the word in its plural form, allowing to situate *a format among others*—refers to a different process that is attached to a set of relations embedded within specific contexts. In this sense, formats can be seen as genres associated with a set of cultural techniques and sociotechnological assemblages, not understood as a predefined category, but rather as a contingent, fleeting, local, and collective dynamic; an institutional process of recognition instantiated in discourse.

Formats, then, are involved within *processes of recognition* in the sense that they relate to an operation by which a given experience or object becomes *affiliated* with previous experiences or objects, or with a broader identified category. This process implies that elements act as announcements, signals, and references, in order to set “horizons of expectations” that provide reference coordinates for interpreting a specific instance.

Formats are *institutional*, as they set positions and functions within a given collective. Formats are what are recognized by a certain type of audience, but they are also that which *organize* the whole range of practices and actors that constitute a publishing environment. We follow here publishing’s definition developed by Rachel Malik as “a set of historical processes and practices—composition, editing, design and illustration, production, marketing and promotion, and distribution—and a set of relations with various other institutions—commercial, legal, educational, political, cultural, and, perhaps, above all, other media.”² We stress here the fact that the *recognition* process of a format among others is not only a process happening “in the mind” of readers of writers, away from materialities and technical aspects of publishing, but rather an actual agent for organizing a broad range of material practices, including technologies and material setups allowing for a certain format to be *recognized* but also *acknowledged*.

Formats are, however, also *discursive*, as the recognition process of a format arises within an environment in which it gets its name. Following Siles's work on the format of the "blog," we understand formats as the result of local and dynamic processes of stabilization implying technological apparatuses and cultural practices.³ It is, however, important to remark that if formats are identified by their naming, working in an institutional fashion, this does not necessarily mean that all individual representations and practices driven by this name totally align or that the definition of what the name recovers is clearly defined.

Therefore, formats stand for a certain play between difference and repetition, a paradoxical process of stabilization whose outcome, the "crystallization" of some practices into a specific name, can then act as a volatile agent of destabilization when this name is reused and related to more and more heterogeneous instances. The survival of long-lived academic formats—as these names that continue to be in use within academic environments—despite the diversity of the individual formats they designate, is certainly the expression of such a dynamics of stabilization, allowing some academic institutions—the Library, the Academic Journal, the University Press, and so on—to persist until today. They also persist as a certain set of local conventions for authors, readers, and reviewers to know what to expect from each other, how the format should deliver upon the expectations placed upon it, and how to maintain a cohesion among all the sociotechnological assemblages that run through scholarly communications. Formats play a great part in building horizons for writing, reading, and publishing practices associated with academic research in specific environments and disciplines. We will now focus on situations where these horizons become blurred and challenged by new collective environments and intellectual projects.

AIME: Making a Format for Transdisciplinary Publics

A substantial challenge for contemporary academic publishing can be seen in transdisciplinary, open humanities projects that seek to gather variegated communities of scholars around a shared inquiry or object. To that extent, several initiatives within the academy have experimented with new forms of publishing that reframe the way academic arguments are materialized and how they can be manipulated and encountered by hybrid and

transdisciplinary collectives. Whether it be through the reinvestments of prior academic genres such as journals or lexicons, or repurposing of previously private research tools as public and open-access spaces, these experiments actively play with scholarly formats to gather collectives of concerned participants in new ways. Among these experiments stands our project *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence (AIME)*.

AIME is a philosophical investigation that aims at learning “how to compose a common world” by redefining what should be understood under the adjective “modern” when describing contemporary society. To that extent, the project proposes a conceptual and empirical account of various “modes of existence” that can only be detected when they clash with one another in specific and localized empirical courses of actions.

The purpose of *AIME* was to gather a collection of empirical accounts that could help to outline a set of modes of existence. The project was initiated by Bruno Latour, who asked other scholars and stakeholders to enrich, expand, and criticize his initial propositions. The project therefore consisted in transforming an individual argument into a collective endeavor involving an active public capable of grasping the subtle nuances of the various modes of existences.⁴

The project’s challenge lay in the gathering of a *public*, constituted of scholars from various disciplines and backgrounds, but also incorporating practitioners, able to act as representatives of that for which they cared; for example, lawyers for the mode of *law*, priests for the mode of *religion*, artists for the mode of *fiction*, and so forth. The next step was to encourage them to contribute in a constructive way to the elaboration of a new, collective account of the modes of existence. Working with such a range of participants meant that the project needed to accommodate a diversity of backgrounds, skills (in close reading, digital literacy, composition, and oral discussion, for instance), and motives for contributing, whether they be advancing personal scholarly questions, defending an issue about which they care, receiving academic recognition, or simply satisfying their intellectual curiosity.

For these purposes, the *AIME* team—comprised of humanities scholars, designers, and engineers—has developed an *infrastructure* that aims to provide an underpinning for the various readers of the project, but that also involves some of them in the project’s documentation and amendment, transforming their status from *readers* to *contributors*. To achieve this, the project was designed as a *distributed collection* of different *editions* that

were dependent on each other, as shown in figure 6.1. These editions of the inquiry were as different as: a printed document, a website attached to several digital interfaces to the project, and a varying set of workshops and exhibitions. While they all revolve around the same shared purpose, the documents featured by these editions only partially overlap, and the activities they support are radically different—from bookish reading to slide-based digital composition, from oral document-based discussions to online collective writing—not forgetting exhibition-based thought experiments. Even though the editions were diverse and disparate, they were not developed in isolation. Grounded in Latour’s edited notes, we established a database to feed both web interfaces of the project. In turn, the web interfaces were used as stimuli for physical meetings, and vice versa. In sum, despite the diversity of editions, the *AIME* ecosystem is built atop a complex set of infrastructural relations. Hence, the notes of Bruno Latour have supported the web edition’s database as an empirical *mise en scène* of the *AIME* argument. The database has supported the web applications of the project to provide an empirical experience of the inquiry. The web application has

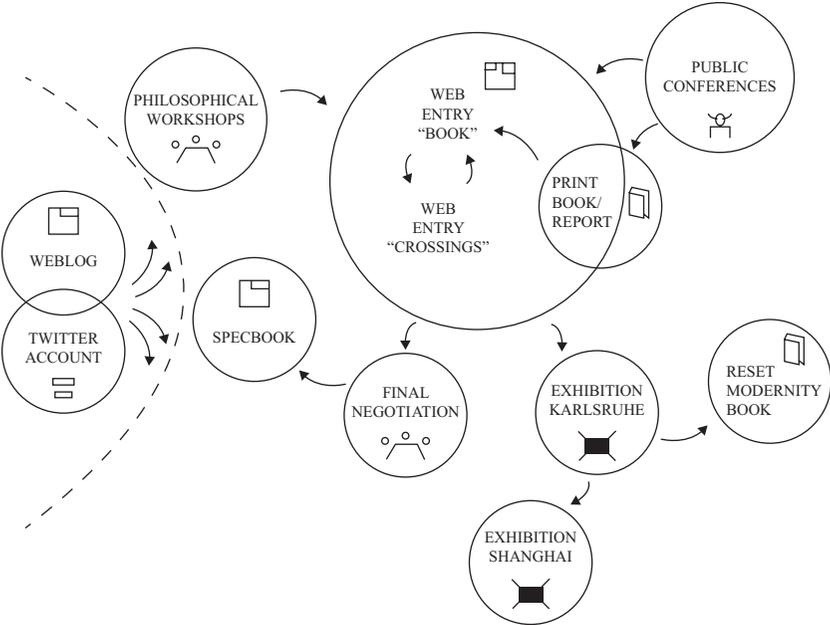


Figure 6.1 Schematic representation of the editions of the *AIME* ecosystem.

supported the contribution process, being used in physical meetings, which were in turn used to fill the database. The *ecosystem* of *AIME*, therefore, has been built as an interrelated set of dependences that could not be sketched in a linear way. This ecosystem as a whole was meant to act as an *infrastructure* for the inquiry itself, understood as a set of connected systems supporting the collection of empirical accounts.

While the *AIME* ecosystem was built as an *infrastructure*, it is nonetheless its *format* that has been experienced by its publics, for readers only encountered the project through one of its diverse outlets. The editions never appeared simultaneously to the public, both because they were not published synchronously but also because each new reader enters the project through a chance encounter with one of the editions and then discovers the others progressively, while situating each of these encounters within their preexisting cultures, practices and expectations. How, then, did the *format* of *AIME* act on the public engagement with the project itself?

How Horizons of Practice Shape Publics

We conducted a systematic review of feedback that described (and critiqued) the organizational and material infrastructures of the *AIME* project. This allowed us to grasp, to some extent, the contours and internal geography of the *public* constituted by *AIME*. In particular, the names used to describe the format of the project—“what it is”—played an important role in the phenomena of alignment and displacement, reinforcement and critique, gathering and antagonizing, observed through our review of the project editions’ reception, and usage. Indeed, we observed the different names used to describe the project’s setup and analyzed them with respect to the effects these names produced on the project’s engagement. For the sake of this chapter, we will set aside more recurring projects’ names—a “book” and a “website”—that would demand an extended analysis, and rather focus on three more specific of these diverse names: a “philosophy book,” a “blog,” and an “encyclopedic” format.

AIME “is a philosophy book.” Despite being continuously labeled as an “interim report” in our project team’s vocabulary, the output was published by bodies recognized for providing that genre of artefacts (Harvard University Press and La Découverte for the respective English and French versions, for instance), and has been called as such by most of the reviews.⁵

Moreover, the digital edition points to a space explicitly labeled as “book,” while not fitting with the experience expected from what is commonly associated with this name (the codex, for instance), whether it would be print or even electronic—a complex and highly interactive four-column interface; the print edition, on its side, lacks or betrays what one could expect from the format of a “philosophy book,” because features such as footnotes or references are not presented within it, but are included in the digital edition. Despite repeated announcements of this fact, as well as notes in the peritextual forewords, within the core of the text, and in the project’s blog or public presentations, we observed that many reviews (including from subscribers to the mailing list of the project!) did not take into account the form of the digital editions, and some critiqued the lack of textual apparatus and empirical evidence—while it was abundantly available online. These misalignments produced unexpected interpretations of the very content of the report.

AIME “is a blog.” This label was assigned to one of the openly accessible formats in several ways: as an oppositional stance about the way coinquirers’ contributions were specified in their roles (contributions to content rather than comments), as a comparison anchor for assessing the features of the project as more or less innovative, and eventually as an actual part of *AIME*’s vocabulary for describing one of the editions of the setup (*AIME*’s official blog).

AIME “is encyclopedic.” Interestingly, the project was called such on several occasions, although this appellation was not used within the team’s own internal vocabulary. Further, in contrast to the other examples quoted above, it was used as an adjective, rather than as a clear nominative label. When looking at these designations, it is clear that some commentators associate *AIME* with an encyclopedia from the systematic nature of Bruno Latour’s proposition of modes of existence. That said, others seem to home in on the presence of controlled vocabulary—strongly signaled in typographic design, and in the open web edition’s layout—to qualify the project as encyclopedic. This presupposition provoked claims and critiques; for instance, about the absence of some topics from the book, and a precise inquiry about the approach to language performed by the project itself. Interestingly, and adjacent to the strict “encyclopedic” naming of the project, old and new formats of the encyclopedia collide in this movement of association as the collective nature of *AIME* has also prompted its

association with Wikipedia. As a result, the project has been approached by communities of persons interested in wiki technologies, who in return asked about the absence of some features and the dissonance with a wiki's traditional editorial projects in the *AIME* project.

The labels used in published reviews of the project are just a subset of clues that point to a broader set of recognitions that we have witnessed in oral exchanges and interviews around the *AIME* project. Through a series of displacements and comparisons, the project was understood, interpreted, and used in a variety of ways by the actors gathered around it. The distributed strategy of *AIME* has clearly produced a variety of sticking points that were understood in the framework of specific recognition processes, successfully assembling around the project a diversity of actors coming from different backgrounds and having entered into the collective from a variety of its instances. The result of this aggregation process has fostered, among other outcomes, a total of 134 contributions and 61 unique contributors to the web editions, and a "specbook" collectively written by a group constituted both of Latour's familiar collaborators and of new participants encountered through the project. However, the distributed, open strategy of *AIME* and the peculiarity of its different editions has also generated a wide range of expectations and requirements about the methodology and infrastructure of *AIME*, taking advantage or disadvantage of these in order to develop specific sense-making practices. If *AIME* is not relatable to any previous way of conducting and staging a philosophical inquiry, its constitutive editions have been. The *formats* of *AIME*, therefore, jointly produced plural *horizons of practices* where a collective adventure could take place relying on the *infrastructure* of the project. These horizons had both an influence on the composition of the public—who got *in* and who did not—and on its conduct, shaping practices and attitudes in a variety of ways.

How does a *format* make a *public*? In an academic context where, as Andrew Murphie has put it, "ecological contaminations between all forms of publishing are rife, so that publishing is now a kind of 'chaosmos,'" *AIME*'s experience has taught us that distributed and open publishing strategies foster a complex tension between aggregation—pulling heterogeneous members into the collective—and participation—developing common practices and endeavors.⁶ The distributed collections of various editions implied by multimodal strategies of inquiry foster a play of repetition and difference in which the *format* of a project—as the set of points of encounters with

its constitutive *infrastructure*—yields the *recognition of formats among others* that gather new participants into the research collective; doing so, the latter bring with them diverging *horizons of practices* that concur to drive the actual appropriation, transformation, and opening of the infrastructure.⁷ If not always easy to handle, the displacements and divergent perspectives on the project not only succeeded in bringing a wide range of different scholars and practitioners into the debate, but also in fostering unexpected perspectives and fueling rich discussions around the project's issues. If format—singular—acts at the boundary of production and experience, formats—plural—are essential to understanding the way in which this boundary is traversed by the heterogeneous public of transdisciplinary scholarly projects.

The contemporary environments of scholarly publishing are constituted *de facto* by a set of places, organizations, technologies, and forms that vastly overflow the geography traditionally covered by dedicated institutions such as publishers and libraries, and their related models of practice and positions in academic worlds. This implies radical changes for these dedicated institutions themselves, as a rich literature in bibliographic and information sciences has shown. Nonetheless, one can also wonder how these new geographies will continue to transform the way *researchers* conduct and envision their work. As we have shown through the account of the *AIME* project, the role of publishing-related activities continually evolves beyond traditional functions of research dissemination to transform the very core of their activity. First, this transformation operates on a methodological plane: instead of practicing publishing as a way to present achieved results or even to test intermediary hypothesis, format-led research enables publishing activities to genuinely act as research methodologies, because they center upon encounters of concerned individuals within a meaningful infrastructure to put a specific issue to work. Second, this evolution deals with an aesthetic and *design*-related transformation: how can the thoughtful and patient deployment of a research process into complex “postdigital” settings affect, refine, and transform its research questions? How then should we understand the nature of the *arguments* being built in these processes, and find ways to account for them in subsequent works? There is here a *thingness* at work in the research processes that marks an unprecedented role for *materiality* and its related design processes in sense-making practices. Third, this transformation deals with the political and organizational definition of what can be called a *research collective* today: how to

take advantage of the aggregating power of open and proteiform formats yielded by multimodal publishing strategies? This question acts at the same time as a promise for renewed research collective formations, and as a challenge—if not a radical questioning—for institutions, in a context where formats make publics, set expectations, and orient sense-making practices as much as well-defined organizations.

Notes

1. Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 7.
2. Rachel Malik, "Horizons of the Publishable: Publishing in/as Literary Studies," *ELH* 75, no. 3 (2008): 709, <https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.0.0016>.
3. Ignacio Siles, "From Online Filter to Web Format: Articulating Materiality and Meaning in the Early History of Blogs," *Social Studies of Science* 41, no. 5 (2011): 737–758, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312711420190>.
4. The notion of public is understood in this chapter in Dewey's particular sense of a collective constituted of "all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for" in the frame of a specific issue, as opposed to a more general understanding of the notion. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1927), 15.
5. Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).
6. Andrew Murphie, "Ghosted Publics—the 'Unacknowledged Collective' in the Contemporary Transformation of the Circulation of Ideas," in *The Mag.Net Reader 3—Processual Publishing. Actual Gestures*, ed. Alessandro Ludovico and Nat Muller (London: Open Mute Press, 2008), 105, http://www.andrewmurphie.org/docs/Ghosted_Publics_Murphe.pdf.
7. For a more specific development into the relation of the AIME project to openness, see Donato Ricci et al., "Clues. Anomalies. Understanding. Detecting Underlying Assumptions and Expected Practices in the Digital Humanities through the AIME Project," in *Designing Interactive Hypermedia Systems*, ed. Everardo Reyes-Garcia and Nasreddine Bouhaï (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), 185–211, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119388272.ch6>.