Strengthening Scholarship and Expanding Outreach: Which Technology for What and Whom?

Our move into JSTOR and then the latter’s link-up with Google has greatly enhanced exploitation of journals hitherto only accessible through hardcopy, and in the process has raised our journal’s international visibility, and thus outreach. Nevertheless we face raised expectations as to how research can be communicated and then used interactively, above all from the rising generations and from those working in more technically based disciplines. Our collaboration in interdisciplinary projects is an important way of developing our own discipline, as I am personally aware from working on a GIS-based urban history project, funded by a department of geography. But should technology play the leading role—as opposed to a more subsidiary, enabling one—in our policymaking when considering how to strengthen scholarship and expand international outreach in our particular discipline? Indeed, how far could technology be capable of achieving these—primarily humanistic—ends? Recent intellectual advances in the discipline have to a great extent been due to a preparedness to listen to voices—of women not just men, of draftsmen and building site workers as well as designer architects, of indigenous peoples as much as their colonists—previously unheard because ignored or even deliberately suppressed. I am concerned that dependence upon a high-level electronic platform, while opening up new avenues of interactivity will do so at the expense of restricting access. I don’t just want to hear the voices of the Harvard-educated Obamas but equally of the students in traditionally black colleges in the deep South, alongside Antipodean aboriginals, Chinese ethnic minorities, and students and faculty from less well-endowed colleges in the “First World,” where progressive adoption of electronic technology is increasingly dividing a single, discipline-defined audience into a series of separate audiences, differentiated according to access to technological resources. Simultaneous publication in electronic and hard copy will inevitably lead each author to prioritize one of those two (albeit overlapping) audiences, with more profound, intellectual implications than may have been anticipated.

Over a quarter of a century ago a British economist (in fact a German émigré) warned against letting the potential of new technology—which he defined as mere “know-how,” and which Dalibor Vesely has long equated with techne—dictate policy at the expense of more humanistic concepts of value (and, in Vesely’s case, of poiesis). He developed a concept of “intermediate technology,” a kind of lateral thinking that adapted lower levels of technology, those truly accessible to all and adapted to their real needs—in innovative, user-led ways, rather than more blindly adopting the latest technologies as and when they appeared. Like the SAH he believed that we should “turn the potentiality into a reality,” continuing “to the benefit of man.” How far we manage to include that latter part, in its widest sense, that also concerns me here.

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Notes
1. Although JSTOR intended to move over from scanning hard copy to acceptance of electronic files directly from their periodicals’ editors or publishers, it seems that they intend to take the post-electronic files, which will therefore preclude their optimum exploitation by readers, as suggested above.

The Big Picture

Print versus pixel? For a long while the media debates have tended to detour into the details of personal comfort and cultural custom—whether you like to read on the screen, or enjoy the tactility of print, or whether the web as a platform feels too flimsy, too bloggy, to support the gravitas of discourse. It’s been easy to overlook the big picture. But the big picture is now plain: the future of journals is online. (Books are a different story, and another forum.)

The economic and environmental benefits of eliminating paper-and-ink production and petroleum-based distribution are undeniable. Still more compelling are the editorial opportunities. The ability to feature topical essays and timely reviews; to augment traditional visual formats with slideshows, webcasts, video, and film; to encourage interactive dialogue; to deepen texts and images with hyperlinks; and to enlarge readership and reach by expanding from limited subscription to open access format—all promise to make scholarly and trade journalism livelier and more responsive and influential.

But ultimately the big picture frames more than the future of academic and professional publishing. Digital communication is more than a new medium; it’s a new system—a system with its own networks, practices, expectations, opportunities. (For a terrific analysis of web-as-ecosystem, read Here Comes Everybody [New York: Penguin Press, 2008], by NYU instructor Clay Shirky.) The rise of this system is driving changes in architecture and design...
culture, and at the heart of these changes are velocity and volume; which is to say that ideas and information now circulate so quickly, and in such abundance, that there’s little chance that any of them will stick, will develop the traction, the constituency, to become influential, to become—and this suddenly sounds very last century—an ism.

Consider modernism—the ism that so fundamentally shaped twentieth-century theory and practice. As a movement modernism arose in the twenties (more or less); in the thirties it came to America via exhibition and emigration; in the late forties it emerged as the leading design idiom for the atomic age, and in the fifties and sixties it triumphed as our national style. For half a century, then, modernism functioned as an organizing idea, or set of ideas, providing a framework for practice, a narrative for history, a central ideology (and then orthodoxy) for the discipline.

What I want to emphasize here is that this large and long influence was due not only to intellectual weight or aesthetic merit. It was due just as much to a cultural context in which the preeminent medium of intellectual exchange was laborious to produce, costly to market and distribute, and tightly managed by professionalized networks of editors and publishers. In the Gutenberg galaxy, publication was a privilege and a prize, authorship a distinction; output was more limited, the pace more measured. Ideas and arguments, words and images, had time to circulate, incubate, gain momentum, take hold.

This context—this system—is now fast receding, and the question of what we are gaining, and losing as we move definitively into the digital age will doubtless be argued for years. But it’s not too soon to see that we are experiencing not just the end of print’s dominance but also the end of a certain well centered and clearly structured intellectual and literary culture. None of the movements that followed modernism, not pomo or decon, has lasted long. Modernism might prove to be the last powerful ism (which is maybe why it continues to fascinate). And print culture, for so long the indispensable agent of intellectual life, now seems to have been not inevitable and essential but contingent. As the eerily prescient Marshall McLuhan put it in Understanding Media (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964): “It is the framework that changes with each new technology, and not just the picture within the frame.”

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Benefits and Caveats

We all recognize the broad outlines of the changes that digitality is imposing on print culture, and as American newspapers go belly-up daily, the inevitability of those changes and the urgency of our own adaptations become ever clearer. For publications dealing with modern and contemporary arts such as Art Journal, the online realm presents tremendous opportunities as well as some real challenges at the practical level. While discussions about digitization have been underway for many years at Art Journal, including conversations held jointly with JSAH, we have so far taken a cautious approach.

First, the obvious benefits for Art Journal of publishing in the digital realm include, among other things, the capacity to stream moving images and sound, which could potentially allow a more adequate demonstration of arguments about time-based or proprioceptive projects; the ability to hyperlink to other web-based information, including images, texts, and media clips, which could obviate permissions costs for our authors; and a refined and media-sensitive approach to online and digital art projects. These are significant formal benefits, and they dovetail with the massive cultural shifts from print to visuality, from reading to scanning, from linear to parallel or networked thought wrought by the digital era. Additionally, certain practical benefits would seem to emerge as well, from broader and more readily global distribution, to ease of access, to reduced printing costs, to (potentially) a greener footprint for the Journal. There is also the possibility of linking peer-reviewed journal content, which has at least a six-month turnaround time from submission to print, with more immediate and informal formats such as blogs, frays, or even, though I find it hard to imagine, tweeting. And sharing a platform with other peer-reviewed journals such as the JSAH provides for the very interesting possibility of real collaborative adventures in scholarship in the future.

Yet all of the benefits of fully entering the web-based realm do come with caveats. Among the broadest concerns are these: Membership-driven organizations like the College Art Association rely in part upon the draw of subscriptions to their journals for revenue. And access to the internet is hardly global; it should more properly be thought of as primarily urban (hence the Obama administration’s push for a relayed national connectivity); it is also subject to censorship (see China). And, as Art Journal unfortunately discovered in 2008, international distribution comes with its risks. While we might like to think there is a global legal climate in which human rights to expression and thought have at least some nominal protections, in fact nation-states have their own laws and values, many of which seem, in