

## *Editorial*

### **Academic Journal Publishing: The Challenge and Potential of New Media**

Academic journal publishing in the social sciences and humanities is starting to explore beyond the world of printed paper. Most journals have improved their websites, especially subscription and payment procedures, but their publishing methods have remained curiously static. The majority of established journals online are little more than electronic versions of their hard-copy superiors. They do not exploit the possibilities and potential of internet publishing and the new technologies available to researchers.

Academic publishing in the social sciences and humanities faces the challenge of digital new media publishing. More than just adapt and keep up with developing technologies, however, it needs to actively harness these and create new methods and standards.

One aim that the *SOAS Journal of Graduate Research* will seek to pursue is developing and implementing such an approach in the course of establishing a serious online journal. It encourages interested authors to attempt, where possible, to integrate new media features into submissions. This will help to demonstrate how online and electronic journal publishing need not copy print convention but can create new, digital ones.

A further reason to pursue academic publishing innovation derives from the changing nature of 'fieldcraft' for new of academic researchers. The technology now available to students embarking on fieldwork opens up a range of new options. But what do researchers currently do with the digital photographs, audio files, and digital video recordings they harvest during fieldwork? At present there are few - if any - journals that can provide a suitable platform to showcase these to optimal standards.

Objections foreseen, and already made, to new media publishing include the argument that academic journal publishing should concern itself with loftier intellectual pursuits: integrating new media applications will dilute standards and run the risk of producing pseudo-academic *infotainment* belonging on the internet equivalent of magazine stacks, and destined to be rapidly consigned to the dustbin of failed, faddish New Ideas. Some might even smell a hidden hyper-postmodernist rat lurking in the background, waiting to announce itself in impenetrable prose and an onslaught of audio-visual cultural studies content.

Both objections would be misplaced. A fresh approach to online academic publishing could qualitatively enhance the experience of journals. The multimedia approach is certainly better suited to certain academic disciplines and subjects (although there is no reason why medieval theology, Tang dynasty history or others could not potentially harness new media applications). And the fact remains that the printed word should not properly, nor can it readily, be replaced to convey abstract thought.

There are many possible ways of integrating new media into appropriate branches of academic publishing. A few examples illustrate. First, the conventional way to present an anthropology article based on fieldwork is to write-up field notes into a text. As such, it is one-dimensional. Even though the text may transport readers through windows of closely observed phenomenon, such a text could be significantly enhanced by the addition of interview audio-files, music, or video-clips of events being described. Rather than be diluted, the academic content of the article could be enhanced through multi-dimensional communication and representation.

Oral history offers a second example. At its inception, this proved highly controversial for an examining system unused to the methodology and unwilling to accept it as legitimate. Now an established area of scholarly activity, oral history research design often sets out not just to make recordings of interviews but to place these audio files within a digital archive for public access. An electronic journal article based on oral history could easily and productively include whole or excerpts from field interviews in original languages.

This is not to advance a techno-prophet argument, but an attempt to stimulate debate about how academic publishing can harness new technology and the medium of the internet to enhance publishing, teaching and learning. And, action to do so.

Perhaps more traditional sensibilities will conjure up the spectre of a dumbed-down world of academic publishing. The suggestion is not that pure text journals are inadequate. Rather, that some of these could be significantly augmented by the use of new media applications. This represents the future of academic publishing. This is not intended as a challenge from a younger generation who have grown up with the internet, and for whom the idea of using a pen to write a thesis seems an improbable feat. It is merely a call to recognise that outside specialist scientific circles, social science and humanities have been slow to catch up with the potential of the internet and new forms of publishing and we need to change this.

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