

Challenges and Possibilities for Future Contributors to Online Journals

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Abstract: The rapid proliferation of online journals and other such publication outlets may have diluted the credibility of online journals and the scholarship they produce. This article engages the challenges and possibilities of online publishing. Drawing upon a review of the literature, this article examines the results of an informal survey designed to investigate the views of seven communication journal editors. While there is some discontinuity among editors as to how fast online publishing will gain credibility, they all agree that online scholarship will become a staple of the academic world and that this new outlet deserves attention.

Introduction

Most online journals are poor examples of what could be rich and illuminating forces for change in the currents of scholarly information. Actually, we should not blame the journals, but the editors, designers, contributors, reviewers, and readers. We are all to blame for the substandard scholarship that plagues the net. Most of all, we are to blame for accepting as wonderful those articles that are supplemented with irrelevant and outdated technologies. Some may wonder why the number of journals continues to increase and why more academics submit their work to these online vessels of shame. Perhaps, it is because this is the easiest place to get published.

Fortunately, these are overt generalizations, and mostly untrue of the journals in the communication field. Though not perfect, our journals serve a useful purpose in academia, and are growing in both quality and respect.

Electronic or online journals constitute the future of academic scholarship. Print-based scholarship will not disappear or diminish in importance, but it does seem that online journals will make considerable changes in the way in which we share our knowledge. Indeed, these electronic publications will change the very content of our discoveries. Much like adapting a novel for the cinema, moving our scholarship from ink to electrons can radically change its content. Instead of restricting our insights to two-dimensional pieces of paper, online journals allow us the freedom to present three-dimensional, extended, interconnected illustrations of our work, and offer to readers sound, movies, video-conferencing, hypertext and e-mail links, animation, alternative organizational strategies, online forums for discussion, reader-review areas, hit counters to assess readership numbers, citation databases, comprehensive search engines, rapid reviews of submissions, previews of issues to come, and a range of other possibilities.

This manuscript examines the challenges and possibilities of online communication journals and looks to give advice to those who might consider publishing online. Most tenure-track professors or those who hope to become one must realize that the

journals in which you publish sometimes say as much to review committees about the quality of your research as does the content of your articles. Among the considerations are whether it is a national, regional, or specialized journal, if it is peer-reviewed, the journal's acceptance rate for submissions, the journal's length of service, who has been and who is currently the editor, and who has published in the journal in the past. There is nothing among these factors that automatically blacklists online journals from enjoying the type of credibility that our traditional, print-based journals have savored. Yet, because an older, more traditional generation of academics decides the fate of those just starting their careers, some of the finest young scholars are scared into towing the line and publishing on paper.

The online journal and its respect are caught in this vicious circle wherein editors are prevented from building mainstream credibility. This is by far the biggest challenge. The following sections list, first, the most pressing issues for contributors to online journals and, second, the possibilities or reasons why one might wish to publish online. We conclude with the results of a brief survey of online communication journal editors that reflect their own angst and excitement over the future of online publishing.

Challenges

There are a number of challenges to the future success of online publishing. These might best be classified within three major categories. The first, technical problems, deals simply with software and hardware issues that stand as obstacles to the creation, publication, and dissemination of online articles. The second, security issues, deal mainly with issues of copyright and the protection of content integrity as articles are employed, altered, or replicated elsewhere on the Internet. The third, social or psychological problems, concerns the vast changes and habitual behaviors that scholars and readers must overcome in order for online publishing to reach its full potential. These three areas constitute a much broader range of issues than those discussed elsewhere in the literature.

Technical problems, though potentially easy to fix over time, pose a number of frustrations for those who edit, publish, and read articles online. These include such problems as format choice (pdf, html, ascii, or sgml), the longevity of the journal (Buckley, 1999), poor bandwidth/inadequate equipment (Lancaster, 1995), and design (colors, fonts, images, arrangement, links, endnotes and bibliographic material, and Netscape versus Internet Explorer display discrepancies). These are sure to be contained in the future, but, until then, they still deserve our attention as obstacles.

Security issues are also, in a sense, technical problems. They merit special reflection because of the possible legal implications involved. Some online groups, because they are highly controversial, are quick to initiate lawsuits against those who portray them in any negative light. Scientology, for example, is known for this. Those who wish to employ this religious group's web graphics as evidence for their arguments in an academic paper, should probably seek the assent of Scientology's public

relations officer before publishing (see Frobish, 2001) if they wish to altogether avoid the risk of being sued. Often, getting such permission to employ images is difficult. Other times, just locating the author and getting a response is even more exhausting. Beyond these obvious constraints, once published, online articles are easily altered, much more so than print-based publications (Lynch, 1994; Johnson, 1997). Furthermore, sections of articles can be easily cut and pasted into other documents on the web, often without the awareness of the original author and without the proper attribution. Such plagiarism is pervasive on the web and tracking and seeking retribution for such unethical and illegal behavior is almost impossible when your work might be replicated thousands of times.

The most pressing issues are the social or psychological obstacles that frequently make users reluctant to change. Most serious is the fact that users do not like to read anything of length online (Olsen, 1994). A second very serious issue is that of attracting the finest of scholars to edit, review, publish, and read the journal's scholarship. Recruiting the best-known scholars to initially publish in a journal is crucial to that journal's reputation and credibility. A third concern rests with stimulating scholars to embrace new ways of working that are amenable to the practices of online communication (Harrison and Stephen, 1995). Burg and his colleagues (2000) note problems with this specifically in regard to the use of multimedia technologies. They argue that often authors are so comfortable using certain software packages, they resist adopting the more current techniques upon which editor's insist. These author/editor disagreements might hinder the developmental process and make authors more reluctant to contribute their work. A fourth major issue is that "electronic journals," according to Roes (1996), "play almost no role in scholarly communication." In one reference survey, "out of 4317 references counted in 279 articles in 74 peer-reviewed electronic journals, only 1.9 percent were references to electronic resources. Moreover, 80 percent of these references to electronic journals come from only three journals" (Harter, 1996). How are online journals ever to establish credibility when those publishing in them are not even employing the web as a scholarly resource?

Even if online journals are given the same respect as print-based journals, there might still be a problem of attracting membership. Making one's journal stand out from the crowd is difficult, if not impossible. NewJour (2001), a web resource that announces new electronic journals irrespective of the discipline, listed over 10,000 online resources. Manoff and his colleagues (1992) have written that "the problems of inaccessibility stem from two sources: lack of knowledge that the journal exists and lack of or difficulty with online access to the journal." The former problem may disappear as more services like NewJour surface. This latter problem may no longer be an issue as most universities offer web-capable computer labs for students and academics and most public libraries allow non-academics access to the Internet.

Possibilities

The possibilities for those involved with online publishing are abundant. Indeed, these online projects would have never begun if there was little promise for its

success or if they showed no advantage over print-based scholarship. The possibilities might be best classified into two categories. The first, technical capabilities, explores how the Internet and World Wide Web allows editors, authors, and readers to push the sophistication of their scholarship to new levels. The second, user-specific advantages, examines how online publishing can personally benefit those involved in online publishing, including how online publishing can work progressively to move a discipline forward in terms of the flow of information, disciplinary cohesiveness, and increasing levels of scholarly dialogue.

The following technical issues reveal some of the advantages of online publishing over the still dominant, print-based scholarship. Though not exhaustive, a list of technologies that could be employed by authors and editors was discussed in the opening portion of this document. Beyond this, however, there are many other advantages for online publishers. The online environment allows more all-around speed (Roes, 1996): authors can submit their work more quickly to editors, editors can send letters of acknowledgment and acceptance (and all of its variations) with less frustration, reviewers can access, read, and respond to submissions with more ease, and readers, especially those who are in foreign residence, can access and read articles the day the journal issue goes to press. The online environment allows the possibility for "experimental data, software, and even multimedia extensions like simulations" (Roes, 1996). Benschop (2001) has written that "electronic publishing can facilitate certain types of scholarship that generates products better represented in graphics, or in three-dimensional, animated, or moving visual representations." The online environment can, furthermore, facilitate the type of informal communication necessary for the generation of new ideas. Plus, "online journals can be used to distribute brief summaries of research or information about research in progress" (Benschop, 2001). For those disciplines wherein current research is crucial (medical, psychological, scientific, technological), new information can be easily merged with existing documents with altering technologies to keep those in the industry up-dated with the latest developments (Roes, 1996). Since space is unlimited in cyberspace, journal articles can also cover issues with more depth and complexity. For journals that wish to gain name-recognition, editors can purchase the rights to a web address that is short and easy to remember. The number of technical advantages is seemingly limitless, and as time progresses and the technology develops, the advantages are sure to parallel.

Shifts in technical sophistication correlate to certain personal advantages. Cost is virtually negligible, for instance (Benschop, 2001). There are no printing or typesetting costs, no distribution costs, strong reduction of mail costs, no necessary subscription fees, and no more shelving or acquisition costs for libraries (Roes, 1996). Commercial subsidiaries are a major ideological and philosophical problem as some argue that it could lead to commercialization. Since costs are limited, the issue of commercialization is curtailed (Roes, 1996). For those reading online articles, editors and designers can offer users effective search capabilities to find information they need in a timely manner (Borghuis et al, 1996). Those using online articles for their own research may benefit from electronic journals since they have access to all of the information at their fingertips (Borghuis et al, 1996) and can directly check the

references and citations during the reading of an article (Benschop, 2001). This means, of course, fewer visitations to the library, which may impede the progress of the writing process. Editors who wish to gain a larger readership for their electronic journals can join aggregators such as Project Muse, JSTOR, or Project Gutenberg, and partner with other journals that are closely related in content.

Survey Results

An abbreviated survey reveals the experiences and perceptions of editors of online communication journals. Seven journals and their editors were contacted via e-mail correspondence and asked whether or not they would participate. Of those seven, six journals are represented by responses from seven editors and co-editors. The journals involved included the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *The Electronic Journal of Communication*, *The American Communication Journal*, *Kairos: A Journal for Teachers of Writing in Webbed Environments*, *Postmodern Culture*, and the National Communication Association's newest journal, the *Review of Communication*. Each editor was asked to answer questions covering six major issues and each responded with their thoughts. The survey asked the following questions:

1. Do you see any major changes to the nature of online publishing in the future? How might those changes affect scholars who want to submit articles for review?
2. What should a scholar consider before submitting an article for review to an online journal as opposed to a print-based journal?
3. Why would an author want to publish in an online journal as opposed to a print-based journal? What is the major advantage to online publishing?
4. Would there be any reason for an author not to submit to an online journal? What is the major disadvantage to online publishing?
5. Do you believe that there is a stigma associated with online publishing (less credible, less scholarly)? If there is, do you think it is soon to disappear?
6. How might you assess your role in the larger academic community as the editor of an online journal?

Answers to the first question were unsurprising, though helpful in confirming with more recency the editorial perspective. Thomas Benson (2001), editor of *Review of Communication*, wrote that the biggest change "will be in the possibility to publish more pages and thus welcome a greater diversity of approaches." James Inman (2001), co-editor for *Kairos*, believed the same: there will be "more diversity in electronic publishing and that the diversity will help offer reasonable options for scholars publishing in electronic journals." Stephanie Coopman (2001), editor for *The American Journal of Communication*, argued that, since "more and more paper journals are publishing their journals online," "online journals will gain in

respectability." Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication editor Margaret McLaughlin (2001) also thought it feasible to see "all scholarly journals" move to "electronic form as well as print form." In fact, she said it was already happening in many cases. Pushing further, James English (2001), editor of *Postmodern Culture*, claimed that "the text-only article is likely to become rarer" and that, in fact, "scholars will in effect build scholarly article-websites and invite journals to visit them." Douglas Eyman (2001), the other co-editor for *Kairos*, moved away from this concern and claimed that a change was occurring in the reviewing process; he "noticed that online publishing has taken steps to create relationships between reviewers and authors, privileging a mentor-like role for reviewers." While *Kairos* is still blind-review, he argued that they add a "second stage of review that is almost collaborative."

Answers to the second question were also unsurprising. Editors Benson, Inman, English, and McLaughlin seem to have had a consensus when they asserted that the most important consideration for scholars before submitting their work is to find out what the school or its review boards think about online publications for tenure and promotion. Other editors focused on alternative issues. Teresa Harrison (2001), editor for the *Electronic Journal of Communication*, argued that scholars ought to consider the prestige of the journal, whether or not the journal targets the right audience, and what its standards are for publication. Eyman focused on this last point and said that scholars ought to ask "does the journal publish linear articles that need no additional editing beyond what needs to be done for a print-based journal? Or does the online journal require hypertext or multimedia?" Coopman wrote that authors need to "write in a style that is accessible to those outside academe and the discipline who might stumble onto the site" and use recent sources and current events since "currency is critical in Internet time." Coopman's first point may be decisive for those who wish their work to reach a diverse audience and gain respectability.

Answers to the third survey question agreed with the literature. Coopman and English both wrote that online publishing offers fewer space restrictions, easy integration of images, alternative formatting possibilities, hyperlinking, audio and video, and a wider audience. In fact, Inman argued that the opportunities for multimedia might allow for "new types of textual interaction." Inman, English, Benson, McLaughlin, Harrison, and Eyman all concentrated on the wider audience component. Eyman extended his answer and focused also on the ability to link directly to primary sources and the option to publish extended works. Harrison wrote about alternative formats, color, pace of publication, and the urge to participate in the experiment. McLaughlin pointed to the "ease with which his/her article can be retrieved, which may mean that his/her article will be cited while a similar piece in a print journal will not if the journal isn't carried at all libraries or if human nature remains constant and we do what's easy (cite the one on the web)."

Answers to the fourth question might be most helpful for those scholars who are not yet tenured faculty. Many of the editors referred back to the problem of tenure review boards and perceptions of online journals as undeserving of the same respect given to print-based scholarship. Coopman wrote that "not everyone is comfortable

in the online environment, so potential readers may not access a website to read an article." Inman argued that "if a work is best in print media and is best disseminated to the desired audience through a print journal's readership, it should definitely appear in print." Harrison asserted that the longevity of the journal can be a key problem. If the journal disappears, so does the article. Benson recognized the same difficulty and said that authors ought to consider the "possibly ephemeral nature of some online journals -- a danger in itself and of course one that repeats at merit review time."

Answers to question five were interesting, with some editors making predictions as to when the credibility issue will cease to be a problem. Coopman wrote that in communication studies there is such a stigma, but in other disciplines such as chemistry, it does not exist. She asserted, though, that "we're already starting to see it disappear, particularly as well-respected scholars publish in online journals." English wrote that it is slowly disappearing "as a result of the widespread dilution of the peer-review process." Harrison wrote that the stigma will disappear in ten years as the younger scholars succeed the current generation of academics. Eyman argued that it will happen in two to three years. McLaughlin was less definitive on the issue, claiming that it will disappear within the next five to ten years. Contrary to these editors' opinions, Inman confessed that he hopes that it "doesn't disappear for some time." He continued:

When someone raises that stigma, it gives me, as an electronic publisher, an important opportunity to articulate advantages of electronic publishing and also to suggest ways print and electronic publishing can work together towards providing the strongest and most diverse possible scholarship for various academic communities. If the stigma isn't raised, I lose many of these valuable opportunities for conversation and discussion.

Answers to the survey's final, more personal question, were often noble in nature. Inman stated that "I imagine myself as one of many editors in both print and electronic media for the advance of knowledge in the various disciplines we call home." McLaughlin claimed that her major role in all of this was in "seeing to it that a high-quality, universally accessible scholarly journal is available free of charge to students and researchers" -- one that "can help to define a field and its leading scholars, helping it to coalesce from a loose assortment of researchers working in [a] disparate discipline, perhaps previously without an opportunity to know of each other's work." Eyman wrote that, for him, "editors can effect [sic] their discipline -- based upon the choices they make both in terms of the direction and scope of the journal and in terms of the articles accepted for publication." This, for Eyman, can "ultimately contribute to disciplinary discourse in important ways." Harrison saw her role as editor as someone who can lead the communication discipline into the electronic age, which can only be done properly when editors of online journals publish and distribute the best scholarship. English asserted that his journal "serves a useful purpose in publishing lots of work by unknown, younger scholars and exposing them to many more readers than any print journal can hope to do." This can, he said, "exert a more pronounced and interesting effect on the academic

community." Coopman wrote that her job was "selling others on the idea of reading and submitting articles to online journals" and "encouraging my colleagues in the academy to think of audiences outside our little world and seeing online journals as a way to make our research more accessible." Benson summed it all up rather nicely by stating that "I think we are trying to create a model of excellence."

Discussion

What is hopefully clear in the preceding perspectives is that there is much agreement among journal editors in the communication discipline regarding the challenges and possibilities of online scholarship. Their wisdom is convincing and worth the attention of junior scholars who are considering experimenting with electronic publishing. Indeed, their opinions are noteworthy for scholars of all levels since electronic publishing seems to be growing in importance and in respect. A time may come, for instance, when scholars will be expected to publish online and show not only their analytical skills, but their ability to properly arrange and format web-based arguments while integrating all of the new media technologies. One thing is certain -- change is in the air, and those who are left uninformed about these important issues are sure to suffer certain consequences (tenure, promotion, merit pay, notoriety, respect, and so on).

Journals in the communication discipline are earning some attention for their level of scholarship, which may eventually eliminate their credibility problems, but they need to push even further and adopt a wider range of strategies if they are to be considered cut-rate examples of electronic publishing. They have yet to embrace many of the new technologies available today and can experiment even more with the way in which articles are reviewed. Very few authors employ audio and video technology, and it seems as if editors are reluctant to make such recommendations. Journal editors could utilize a peer-review system whereby readers can comment or extend upon the content of published articles and, ultimately, rate the significance of the article much like a book reviewer would. Editors could initiate forums following the publication of some articles that would allow authors, editors, and readers to discuss issues together through technologies such as Microsoft's NetMeeting or through more web-friendly systems such as java-based chatrooms. The possibilities seem endless, but the time to start exploring these possibilities seems clear enough.

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