

Though nothing can bring back the hour

Tom P. Abeles

Tom P. Abeles is Editor of
On the Horizon.

Abstract

Purpose – This viewpoint paper aims to give a brief exploration into the problems facing the humanities in getting scholarly work “published” in a world where academic publishers are reducing their number of books published annually.

Design/methodology/approach – This is an extended review of the book, *Planned Obsolescence*, by Kathleen Fitzpatrick.

Findings – The humanities are changing as the electronic world opens new possibilities for both scholarly research and “publishing” in traditional and new forms. An obsessive concern with traditional publications for validating researchers is potentially limiting opportunities and increasing uncertainty in a world which is focused on science, technology and mathematics.

Originality/value – The humanities are poised on the edge of change. They can attempt to repeat the past, take a chance on the emerging alternatives or slip over the edge.

Keywords Humanities, New media, Media commons, Academic publishing, ICT, Electronic publishing

Paper type Viewpoint

Fitzpatrick, Kathleen, *Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy*, New York University Press, New York, 2011

I don't mind you thinking slowly. I mind you publishing faster than you can think (Wolfgang Pauli, as quoted in Lindsay Waters' *Enemies of Promise* (Waters, 2004)).

When thinking comes to an end by slipping out of its element, it replaces the loss by procuring validity for itself as *techne* (Heidegger, as quoted in Lindsay Waters' *Enemies of Promise* (Waters, 2004)).

The core university, the university of von Humboldt, Newman, Kant and others, is changing, globally. Both the undergraduate and graduate educational models are seeing new alternatives in delivery (virtual vs classrooms), open access courses and degrees, and third party verification of competencies such as MITx, an independent verifier of completion of the open access courses from medallion university, MIT. Fitzpatrick's book addresses in part an issue which strikes at the heart of the academy, particularly the humanities, the demise of the “book”, principally that volume which represents a scholar's oeuvre presented for promotion and tenure in the university.

That this is the core issue in this volume can be seen in the first two chapters, following the introduction, “peer review” and “authorship”, with a return to the penultimate argument, the chapter on the “university”. Fitzpatrick is not the first to address the problems, particularly in the humanities, with the current threat to the premier path for academic advancement, the book, as academic publishers reduce the number of volumes, which they publish. She will not be the last to join the ululations of those who see no substantive alternative for the traditional humanities scholar.

Emerging forms of humanities scholarship such as “New Media” or digital media face other challenges as they color outside of traditional lines. They are faced with a dual set of problems, recognition of the works as within the traditional discipline and the question of how to measure quality. It is an issue similar to the emerging discipline of heterodox economics. (*On the Horizon*, 19/1 and 19/4 on new media; issue 16/4 on the problems of publishing heterodox economics and volume 20 (2012-2013) forthcoming). For digital humanities, a new platform, Anvil Academics, for publishing and vetting, has been proposed (see *Inside Higher Ed*, February 13, 2012, <http://tinyurl.com/79jaat8>) Again, much of this book and the concerns, both explicit and implicit is the need for the academic community, particularly the humanities to exercise control over what is considered to fall within the boundaries of acceptable work, especially, for consideration for promotion, tenure and mobility within institutions.

This volume and the community at large seem less concerned as to the relevance of the scholarly output for the world outside of the Ivory Tower and even with other disciplines. This was true as the Royal Societies were formed and the academics preferred to remain inside the walls. In contemporary times, the humanities have seen concerns raised by others. For example, inside the Ivory Tower, physicist and mathematician, Alan Sokal challenged the post modernist (Sokal, 2003). While, outside, current focus on the value of college education is pushing science and technology to the point that academic institutions are looking seriously at allocating scarce resources away from the humanities.

Fitzpatrick has experimented with digital media as one of the forces creating the Media Commons (<http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/>) and she did send this volume out virtually to see how its reception differed from that of the standard review carried out by the publisher. Unfortunately this might be characterized as “coloring inside the lines” with an occasional foray of walking on the thin edge. The problem seems similar to that discussed by Roberto Poli as he describes the epistemological and ontological myopia of those who are practioners in the arena of futures (Poli, 2011). Poli suggests that while philosophers may have, for the moment, drifted away from the ontological questions, practices (such as futures, and other disciplines, e.g. humanities) may need to come to grips with their ontological underpinnings.

The issue can be made clearer by drawing from the models of organizational change developed by Clayton Christensen (see his numerous books and papers on innovation, which are now, almost, iconic). Established institutions, products and services are often challenged by emerging alternatives. Many of these are fragile and far from the older, more robust, systems; but they meet needs of many. Over time the new alternatives find a firm footing and establish themselves at the expense of but not the destruction of the old system. The post secondary system is confronting this issue at all levels, including the production and dissemination of new ideas, in all disciplines.

The established organizations, humanities, here, will attempt to maintain the status quo through a number of conscious and unconscious measures. Publishing in traditional venues, books, controls whose work is accepted and thus who is considered for academic positions, promotion and tenure. The reduction in available options is pressuring the humanities to seek alternatives, which they can both offer as outlets and continue to exercise control under the idea that quality, as defined, serves as the criteria. The rapid rise of the internet, social media in various forms and a host of other factors are making that control less firm even as alternatives to the traditional university also arise.

Two major issues facing the “book” are the expansion of the number of researchers needing outlets and the increasing pressure to use this vehicle, a shrinking resource in a large part for the ultimate measure of the scholarly production. The shear increase in volume from just these two conditions coupled with the inability of academics to even have the time to follow relevant output can bring the system to collapse. The epistemic myopia, particularly for the humanities, grows like a cataract on the intellectual eye.

George Land, in his insightful volume, *Grow or Die* (Waters, 2004) echoes Christensen when he points out that systems need to continually grow, in a sigmoid pattern, similar to biological

organisms. But when that growth plateaus, continuation requires a change in how growth occurs. Failure to change leads to a return to the older form of growth and aberrant behavior. Either change occurs or the system becomes like Sisyphus.

This volume, *Planned Obsolescence*, is a paradigmatic example of a discipline, like Indian Jones standing on the cliff in *The Last Crusade*, hesitating to take the step, uncertain if there really is an invisible bridge to the missing chalice from the Last Supper. Before the Royal Societies were chartered, there existed the Republic of Letters, a community, which shared their insights, research and analysis by exchanging letters – a small, selective community. When the Crown issued Royal Charters there were two interesting phenomena.

First, there was a split between the researchers and academics and secondly, the Societies negotiated a “peer review” or self censorship, basically to satisfy the Monarch that no seditious materials would be published. This system, now radically expanded and intellectually conservative is one of the areas being challenged by changes in publication, though still very young. Fitzpatrick, like many of her colleagues tries to compare these one-to-one, which is what the US automotive industry tried when confronted by Japanese imports. It is a classic response to discount the new alternatives even though they are nascent.

Fitzpatrick does not address either the title of the book, *Planned Obsolescence*, or its subtitle, *Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy*. In the case of the discipline of economics, the faculties of the prevailing neo-classical models attempted to control the rise of heterodox thought by controlling promotion and tenure by requiring publication in select journals. In the end, the new ideas have a firm beach head. The “book” represents a similar control point in the humanities. The fear of a diminishing number of new volumes, regardless of whether they are significant (by measure of volumes sold, read or cited) is problematic because it forces creativity to seek other venues to establish credibility, outside of traditional controls. None of this is “Planned”.

The Academy is not co-extensive with a campus or with the humanities. Knowledge distribution has never been bound in a volume. This, currently is the fear of both academic associations and the publishers, profit and non-profit. All of these depend on profits from sale of journals and books. This community and that of scholars who editorially control content have to convince the larger community and the public at large of the utter collapse of The Academy if knowledge finds alternative paths for distribution and access. And it changes the role and function of The Academic. *Planned Obsolescence* does not approach this issue at the core.

Technology acts on the walls of the Ivory Tower like DMSO works on the skin. It allows foreign ideas in as well as making the walls transparent to those outside. Open Access allows knowledge to escape and allows virtual “academies” to form along with alternatives to the entire function of The Academy from providing education to carrying out research. A dynamic ontology requires a recalibrated episteme.

References

- Poli, R. (2011), “Steps in an explicit study of the future”, *Journal of Future Studies*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 67-78, available at: www.jfs.tku.edu.tw/16-1/A04.pdf (accessed 13 February 2012).
- Sokal, A.D. (2003), *Intellectual Impostures*, Profile Books, London.
- Waters, L. (2004), *Enemies of Promise: Publishing, Perishing, and the Eclipse of Scholarship*, Prickly Paradigm Press, Chicago, IL.

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: reprints@emeraldinsight.com
Or visit our web site for further details: www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints