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Scott A. Eldridge II

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Closing the Cover: Changes Coming to *Digital Journalism*


Scott A. Eldridge II 

Centre for Media and Journalism Studies, University of Groningen, Groningen, Netherlands

As of this writing, there have been somewhere in the neighbourhood of 80 book reviews in *Digital Journalism*, from Volume 1, Issue 1, when the journal launched in 2013 up to and including those published in this issue. This accounts for more than 80 books, with some comparative reviews, and these reviews represent the work of a group of around 80 scholars, with a few co-authored reviews and repeat reviewers. The reviews offer insights on weighty edited volumes and concise monographs, as well as perspectives on collected essays, theory-driven teaching texts, and published reports from research institutes. For the readers of *Digital Journalism*, these have provided a snapshot of what was going on elsewhere in the field of digital journalism studies, and what readers could gain by opening the cover of each of the books reviewed.

As someone who has watched these reviews come into being since its launch, the collective contribution these reviews and reviewers have made to *Digital Journalism* extends far beyond these broad descriptions. The books reviewed have come from all corners of the world, and the reviewers have too. Book reviews served as a platform for seasoned academics to offer their perspectives on developing research, but they also provided footholds to early career researchers looking to find their way into the field. Among these reviewers are names well known to readers of this journal and within this field, but also scholars from other disciplines, and practitioners working outside university settings. Most of all, what each review offered is an insight that readers, editors, and authors might otherwise miss in our efforts to keep pace with all the work being published in digital journalism studies. As a collective body of scholarly dialogue, it is a nice testament to what *Digital Journalism* has aimed to do and, over the nine years since the journal launched, they map the path of a field coming into its own.

With that perspective, it is somewhat sombre to announce that with this issue, Issue 10 of Volume 9, *Digital Journalism* is publishing the last of its book reviews. After nine years of offering reviews, we have reached a point where the challenge of publishing them outweighs the benefits. In this issue we feature a fine collection of book reviews as a capstone to this aspect of what *Digital Journalism* offers and in this editorial I reflect on the nature of book reviews, the process of bringing them to our readers, and the challenges within.

CONTACT Scott A. Eldridge  s.a.eldridge.ii@rug.nl

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A Journal Depends on Articles, but a Field Needs Books

“We still need books,” Bob Franklin said to me in one of our earliest conversations on the topic of academic writing. For all the contributions made in peer-reviewed articles and for all the impact they have in advancing a field, like journalism studies, Bob saw books as the ideal medium for drawing together the theoretical threads developing in articles, and doing so in ways that articles just couldn’t match. Articles have neither the structure nor the space to develop ideas at length, but books are places where readers can reflect on what is growing around us, and where authors can give ideas the room to breathe that they need. I have been fortunate to have had many conversations about books with Bob over the years, including a great many conversations while he and I co-edited some books ourselves. What can’t be overlooked in all of those chats is his great love of the books people have written, and the powerful contributions they have made to our field.

I first met Bob in 2012 during a trip to Cardiff with colleagues developing a research network that I would be assisting on. As a PhD student, I was still finding my way in the field, but after a dinner meeting Bob asked me quite nonchalantly for my thoughts on a recent book that had been written in my research area. I gave a thirty second precis, and he responded with something to the effect of “I’ll be in touch tomorrow.” The next morning an email arrived asking me to review another book, this time with a few hundred more words and some time to churn through it.

In Volume 1, Issue 1, of *Digital Journalism* there was my review of *Changing Journalism* (Eldridge 2013) and with it I began my time as *Digital Journalism’s* Reviews Editor. In asking me to take on this role for this brand new journal, Bob walked me through the expectations of being a reviews editor: Get in touch with publishers, find out what interesting books are on the way, and find people to review them. For many years this was my role with *Digital Journalism*, where from 2013–2017 I was Reviews Editor, and where I have kept Book Reviews as my responsibility since becoming Associate Editor in 2018. Who would have known then all the benefits that would come from this. Or the challenges.

The Nature of Book Reviews

The idea of having book reviews in *Digital Journalism* was, on the one hand, a straightforward evolution of a tried-and-true format for journals, including *Journalism Studies* and *Journalism Practice* as the trio of journals founded by Bob Franklin. The proposition was simple: Offer one or two reviews per issue to close out each issue of the journal, giving the reader something of a suggestion as to what they should read next.

Yet as ‘at home’ as they were in the journal, as a piece of writing, book reviews hold a strange place in our academic world as somehow both highly desirable and eminently avoided. Nearly everyone who writes a book wants a review of it. A review is something that gives them a sense of how well they did at what they set out to do, and offers more than just another citation score. Readers also benefit from reviews as an assessment of a new title before they dive in to reading it themselves. As do publishers, who value this sort of peer feedback when promoting their titles. As do most

reviewers who, in my (fortunate) experience, have jumped in with both feet when they've agreed to take on this task.

From the editorial side, reviews can sit awkwardly alongside the traditional article. Unlike their companions in this journal's pages, book reviews do not go through peer review. They are editorial endeavours with someone guiding the process, editing and overseeing the review through its revisions, and signing off on the final version. This also offered an opportunity to work with reviewers who, often, were trying a format that was unfamiliar to them. As an editor, this was a privilege to help bring out the strength of a review.

The goal from the start was to push reviewers towards critical engagement rather than just a summary of the books they were commenting on, and on this our reviewers delivered more often than not. Through each of the back-and-forth rounds involved in refining a review, editing was incredibly rewarding. Working with reviewers pushed me to locate in their writing the core of what they were trying to say about a work and bring this out (sometimes more easily than others), and to suggest lines of critique that were not unduly critical. At other times, this was a chance to help a reviewer find their voice, and through working with each draft, to encourage them to dare to be critical. I think, and hope, that this also helped me improve my own prose, and make my own arguments that much crisper.

So Why Stop Now?

Early on, the review editing process was somehow easier. Books would arrive from publishers unsolicited, bringing to my desk all sorts of texts I might have otherwise missed. Some were never going to be sent out for review (e.g., a book on Clint Eastwood's America that said nothing on the matter of digital journalism), but many were. For each of these, reviewers were recruited by drawing on a mix of my and Bob Franklin's existing contacts and, failing that, online searches to find someone well-suited for the task. Books were shipped out, and reviews came back. And editing commenced.

Over the years, however, this process has become more difficult. Rather than publishers reaching out with books in their catalogues, I was trying to hunt down upcoming titles and match these to potential reviewers. This particular shift was more inconvenience than obstacle. The greater challenge was finding reviewers who were inclined, or even allowed, to write a book review. Book reviews, due to their brevity and their 'second status' in journals simply don't register on scholars' CVs, particularly when time is limited and institutional pressures ask early career researchers to devote their time strategically towards publishing peer-reviewed, high impact, articles. Veteran scholars, who have the experience and overview to offer critically engaged feedback, fall on the other side of this spectrum, and often have too many commitments (the benefits of experience and success) to squeeze in one more writing obligation.

You can see this in the volume-by-volume number of reviews we've published. In the three issues that comprise Volume 1, *Digital Journalism* published 10 reviews, and in the next two volumes we published 11 and 12. From there (with the exception of Volume 7, when we published 13 reviews) the number of reviews per year hovered

around eight, even as the journal itself grew in both number of issues per volume and also in terms of prominence within the field and in the number of authors eager to publish in it.

The developments we were witnessing are not unique. At any conference there is likely to be at least one moment when current and veteran reviews editor gather to commiserate over similar experiences. Looking back over these conversations and over this trajectory for *Digital Journalism*, the first signs of change came a few years into my tenure as reviews editor as it became clear that there was an increased pressure on scholars to publish peer-reviewed articles as universities, governments, and funding bodies embraced metrics-driven evaluations of research and researchers. The directives were clear: Work on article-length, peer-reviewed publications. This was driving not only the larger approach to publishing, it was also limiting the freedom to write something 'different'. This was particularly true for early career and tenure-track researchers who were warned not to write things that did not match particular expectations. For early career scholars, doing anything outside the prescribed publishing targets was a risk, and book reviews were seen as risky. I grew familiar with the response "I would love to, but ...".

Occasionally at first, and later much more regularly, scholars would agree to review a book only to respond months later that they simply had not had time and could no longer write the review. The subtext was that while also working towards tenure, applying for grants, or trying to get their own peer-reviewed work into a top-tier journal, the review was not a priority. Sometimes another reviewer could be found who would step in, but this was rare and in time the urgency to review a book that was several years old faded. As I sit here in my office, I can pick out from my shelves the books that 'timed out'. I look at each with a sense of regret that new reviewers could not be found. At other times a partially finished review would come in, handing the reins over to me to edit the draft into shape. Wrote one reviewer sending along an unfinished draft, "I'm not sure how much finesse I've got left in me, but done and to you is better than perfect and never in your queue." For others, the hand over was less nuanced. One reviewer sent theirs in asking me to "just fix what you need to", and another said "I just accepted all your changes, I didn't have time to check it".

As rough as the drafts of these reviews could be, I could see that the reviewers had not walked into these corners intentionally. Rather, these missives came to reflect how this particular form of academic engagement and dialogue was, for many, a burden they regretted having said yes to. In the past two or three years, it became clear that these pressures were only growing, affecting the number of potential reviewers more significantly. Where even a few years ago the review was seen as an avenue for PhD researchers who had been advised to try writing a review as a way to hone their skills, reviews are now avoided in the face of pressure to finish a doctorate with as many peer-reviewed articles in tow as possible. For mid-career researchers, who were previously keen to review as they too would be joining the ranks of book authors wanting a review, this door has been closed for them, as national and regional academic cultures moved away from valuing the book as a mode of output in favour of the article. Yes, there have been those scholars who enjoyed the craft of reviewing, both for their own sake and as a contribution to the field (to whom I am forever grateful), but their

numbers have also been declining. And in the end, you can only call in so many favours before the well of available reviewers starts to run dry.

There have also been signs of diminishing returns from the supply side. To save costs, publishers have increasingly shifted to online review requests, no longer dedicating representatives to reach out to journals. To reviewers, they now send e-books, no longer offering a hard copy of a book to the reviewer. This was always a small, but not insignificant, incentive when inviting reviewers as it gave the reviewer a tangible piece of recognition for their work (and, in my experience, these review copies were then handed down to new scholars cracking into the field, keeping up some of the better collegial traditions).

Journal publishers have also signalled that the review is a low priority of their offering. Even when not saying so directly, one only needs to look around at the websites of journals across the field to see their diminished stature, with reviews sometimes relegated to 'online only' status and other times forgone altogether. While editorial honorariums are rather small in the grand scheme of things, they are rarely if ever available for book review editors. With each of these developments, the writing on the wall became clearer, telling us sometimes subtly and often explicitly that book reviews were less and less of a priority.

While all these shifts contributed to our decision to stop running book reviews, this has not been reached simply or easily. As an editorial team, Oscar, Kristy, Edson, and I have seen book reviews as an avenue for academic citizenship, and a chance to demonstrate engagement with the field. They offer a bridge between the peer-reviewed output within journals and the larger research field that we all work within. Before reaching this point, we tried other approaches, incentivizing editorial board members who could meet their peer-review quotas in part by reviewing books. Two years ago we also experimented with managing the reviews across a team of volunteers dispersed around the globe. This made the lift a bit easier and I, for one, have been extremely grateful to Rich Ling, Susan Forde, Basyouni Hamada, Henrik Örnebring, and the rest of the reviews team who shared with us their own expertise and networks to bring new reviewers into the journal. When seeing new reviews come in for my editorial sign off, there were moments where continuing with them seemed tenable. When we then explored whether we could offer a dedicated reviews editor an honorarium to incentivize the role, we were told there was no budget for this. In the end, and despite everyone's best efforts, it has become impossible to ignore that as the field of digital journalism studies has grown, and as academic publishing has evolved over the past years, the role of book reviews has diminished in their wake.

Something that Will be Missed

What such reflections on the challenges facing book reviews fail to capture, and what makes the book review such an interesting piece of work within academia, is the nature of the dialogue embedded in each review. Book reviews call on each of us to put a name to our feedback, to engage openly with the thoughts and ideas of our peers in a critically engaged dialogue, and to stand by it in a way that (at least publicly) peer review and citations don't come close to reflecting. They are an interesting

challenge when one considers that the standard book review is one of the shorter, if not the shortest, forms of academic writing, and that the book itself is the longest version of what we do when we put our ideas to paper. The review forces the reviewer to think long and hard about what they're saying and then to make that point clearly by pairing brevity with breadth.

For all the challenges the job presented, I will sincerely miss editing book reviews. Editing reviews was a way for me to think alongside colleagues and hopefully, by offering feedback on their work, showed where their contributions could be a boon to the field. I have trails of thoughts scribbled throughout my notebooks inspired by reviews. A line from the last review I edited is on a note taped to my computer reminding me not only of an idea I enjoyed reflecting on, but of how crisply and cleanly a phrase can convey a complex idea. I have bought books based on a colleague's review, and have stepped in to write a review based on a book I was so excited to read myself.

I am grateful that as many reviews found homes on this journal's pages as have done. I have a particular bias for these reviews, but in conversations over the past few months I have come to realize that these reviews made a meaningful contribution to these early years of *Digital Journalism* as the journal established its place among journalism journals. Looking back on these reviews helped remind me, and hopefully the journal's readers, of the conversation we're all involved in.

While 80 reviews might not seem like a towering amount of content when you consider the sheer output of an academic journal that, in its earliest years, published three issues each volume and now produces ten, it nevertheless reflects the place book reviews have had within this journal, steadily ticking along with the growth and expansion of *Digital Journalism*. Put differently, if we were to bind together these 80 reviews of, on average, 1,000 words each, it would make up a book on its own. This would be a book reflecting on the emergence, growth, and maturation of the field of digital journalism studies as it has taken shape. It would be a book with dozens of co-authors, each offering their own insights into this transformative field. Some book that would be; I would love to read a review of it.

It has now been more than nine years since my first book review. Written while house sitting and looking after a cat named Archie, in it I suggested: "Writing about journalism in the twenty-first century is challenged by the fact that journalism is, as this title suggests, always changing" (Eldridge 2013, 172). So too is this journal, and this is just one of the changes it has gone through and will surely go through. As we bid farewell to book reviews, and as I also step down as Associate Editor, I can only look forward to what those will be and what new chapters will be written in this field.

Scott A Eldridge II
University of Groningen

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ORCID

Scott A. Eldridge  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2184-1509>

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