

Reviews in History* and peer review in the digital age

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In this paper I will discuss the development of the open access reviews journal, *Reviews in History*, and go on to consider some of the ways in which peer review, both pre- and post-publication, might evolve in the coming months and years.

The Institute of Historical Research, which is part of the University of London, established its web presence relatively early. In 1993 it set up what was then known as IHR-Info, a hypertext internet server in the terminology of the day. There were four stated aims for what would soon become known as a website: to serve as a bulletin board for the history profession, providing information about seminars, conferences and training courses; to provide a gateway to other 'electronic services' worldwide; to provide easy access to internet navigational tools; and most importantly for our purposes here, to act as an electronic publisher. Initially this was envisaged simply as making the IHR's print publications available digitally – although 18 years on it is easy to underestimate quite how innovative an approach this was. Soon, however, it was decided to experiment with online only publication, in the form of a reviews journal.

In many ways, this was an obvious development for the IHR. Our house journal, *Historical Research*, unlike the majority of generalist history journals, had never carried reviews. This was, in fact, a policy decision when it was launched in 1923, two years after the Institute itself. In his introduction to the first issue, A. F. Pollard wrote:

'[The journal's] function is primarily, if not exclusively, to provide a record of the work done at the Institute itself, and of the various activities ... which it has called into existence, stimulated, or provided with a home ... This limitation of scope helps to avert competition with existing historical reviews. It would be of doubtful advantage to historical learning if each university attempted to establish an historical review of its own, and it is no part of the object of the Bulletin to publish work which already receives the hospitality of print elsewhere. It is not therefore proposed to include ... reviews of historical works'.¹

* This paper was delivered at a conference on 'Scholarly communication in the digital age' held in Munich, 20–21 January 2011. The conference marked the launch of a new open-access reviews platform, recensio.net <http://www.recensio.net/Members/Eva/recensio.net> [accessed 30 March 2011].

¹ 'Introductory', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, i (1923), 1–2.

Today, it is hard to imagine an approach more at odds with the sharing and republication of material that occurs online, to the undoubted benefit of academic research. It was, however, motivated by the admirable concern of a new organisation to collaborate and support rather than to dominate.

The same introduction also includes an undertaking not to publish 'historical articles except such as deal with the methods and means of historical research'.² This was soon abandoned, and it is hard to see how the journal could have prospered otherwise, but the commitment not to publish reviews remained.

If in one sense, then, the establishment of an online reviews journal was the logical filling of a gap in the IHR's provision for historians, in another it was a step into the unknown. While the idea of electronic journals was not a new one in 1995, when the *Reviews in History* pilot project began, there was nothing quite like *Reviews* at the time. As Patrick O'Brien noted in its original manifesto, it had two unique features: it would review scholarly works more rapidly and at far greater length than was possible in traditional print journals; and, crucially, it would offer authors a right of reply. It is also clear that the impetus for the journal came from a fairly widespread dissatisfaction with scholarly publishing in general, and with the publication of reviews in particular. It is perhaps worth quoting Professor O'Brien at length here:

'Despite the proliferation of new titles, historical journals have hardly changed in format, content and function for several decades ... Critics of the way printed journals and their editors serve the profession welcome the challenge and the threat posed by electronic media to what they perceive as established structures of power ...

Granted the need and the opportunity to venture into electronic publishing, why concentrate upon reviews? ... my brief reply to that entirely pertinent question refers to the perception, widespread among historians, that too many reviews of scholarly publications ... provide an unsatisfactory service for readers, are unhelpful to authors, disappoint publishers and are an unreliable guide to the contents, quality and significance of many history books now published.'³

The contemporary resonances are clear, and the fact that we have yet to resolve many of these issues explains why initiatives such as recensio.net are so important and timely.

² 'Introductory', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, i (1923), 2.

³ 'Manifesto (1995 Original)', *Reviews in History* <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/content/manifesto-1995-original> [accessed 30 March 2011].

In 1995, then, the IHR secured two years' funding from the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) in the UK, as part of a wider eLib, or Electronic Libraries, programme. The first review, by Pat Thane of Olwen Hufton's *The Prospect Before Her: a History of Women in Western Europe, i: 1500-1800*, was published in June 1996 and received a response from the author. True to the stated intention of the journal, it was much longer and more discursive than would have been possible in a print journal, a total of 2,996 words. The response itself was longer than many printed reviews, coming in at 2,181 words. Overall it seems to have been a positive experience for both reviewer and author: the book was very favourably received, and the author engaged with a number of the points raised, pledging to take account of them in the second volume; nobody felt the need to comment on the method of publication.⁴

It was a rather different situation with the second review published, Geoffrey Hosking's take on Paul Dukes's *World Order in History: Russia and the West*. The first sentence set the tone: 'This is a very puzzling book.' The author's response is a robust one, significantly longer than the original review, but it is notable that he comments several times on the fact that this is a 'new venture'. It is never explicit, but it seems that Dukes is in some way conflating the medium with the substance of the review.⁵

These two early examples reveal both the value of the review and response format – positive and negative reviews led equally to discussion and debate – but also the relative suspicion, or at least uncertainty, with which digital publishing might be regarded by scholars. *Reviews in History* was not viewed simply as a reviews journal, it was always an *online* reviews journal, with an accompanying set of assumptions and expectations.

Originally, it was intended that the journal would deal solely with the history of Britain, expanding to cover Europe only once it was well established. Obviously the planned focus on Britain was abandoned at an early stage. That second, controversial review was of a book dealing with the history of Russia, and works of European history were well represented from the start. Review no. 39, published in July 1997, marked an increase in geographical coverage, as Robin Law assessed Paul Hair's *Africa Encountered: European Contacts and Evidence, 1450-1700*. Today, the scope of the journal is intentionally broad, thematically, geographically and chronologically.

⁴ P. Thane, review of *The Prospect before her: a History of Women in Western Europe, i: 1500– 1800* (review no. 1) <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1> [accessed 30 March 2011].

⁵ G. Hosking, review of *World Order in History: Russia and the West* (review no. 2) <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/2> [accessed 30 March 2011].

The speed with which reviews might appear online was highlighted in the journal's original manifesto, and this is clearly still one of the key advantages of digital versus print publication. However, the journal's editorial board, drawn from the constituent colleges of the University of London, was from the outset keen to exploit to the full another aspect of digital publishing, that is, flexibility of format. The length of a typical review (about 3,000 words) and the option for authors to respond both marked a move away from the traditional review format, but the journal also began to accommodate different types of review, most notably retrospectives and reappraisals. With the constraints of the word limit removed, it was decided that the journal would be an appropriate platform for lengthy reappraisals of significant works and individuals, or retrospectives looking at the work and career of late historians such as Conrad Russell. The first of these came early – the fourth article to be published was a retrospective of the works of Ernest Gellner, who died in November 1995, focusing on *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals* and *Anthropology and Politics: Revolutions in the Sacred Grove*. Other notable pieces reassessed Lewis Namier's *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, which in the words of the reviewer 'transformed the perceived political landscape of eighteenth-century Britain'; and, 40 years after its publication, E. H. Carr's *What is History?*, 'for many today ... the most influential book on history thinking published in Britain'.⁶ This aspect of *Reviews in History* has perhaps not been pursued as enthusiastically as it might have been, with reappraisals averaging fewer than one a year, but nonetheless they marked a move to what might be considered a hybrid journal, publishing substantively different reviews and articles.

A marked departure from traditional reviewing came with Richard Evans's riposte to critics of his *In Defence of History*, which had not in fact been reviewed by the journal originally. Responding to all of his critics, both in scholarly journals and broadsheet newspapers, in November 1999 he published an article in *Reviews* many thousands of words long, which was subsequently updated to take account of criticism of new German and American editions in particular. Evans's piece fed into the ongoing controversy about history and postmodernism, and prompted requests from his critics to respond in turn. The result was a free flowing 'Discussion on Postmodernism', which ranged over many months and showcased a number of different perspectives. Some contributions, like those of

⁶ A. Macfarlane, reappraisal of Ernest Gellner (review no. 4) <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/4> [accessed 30 March 2011]; P. Thomas, review of *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (review no. 32) <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/32> [accessed 30 March 2011]; and A. Munslow, review of *What is History?* (review no. 41) <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/41> [accessed 30 March 2011].

Professor Evans, were very lengthy indeed, others were a matter of a few paragraphs. This was true dialogue, beyond the necessarily truncated review and response format. It was not in real time – *Reviews in History* was not yet ready to open up discussion to anyone who wished to contribute, in an unmoderated forum – but it began to show what was possible with imagination and a willingness to experiment with publishing online.⁷

Continuing with this spirit of experimentation, the most recent departure for the journal has been the inclusion of reviews of digital resources, concentrating on those which are designed to support scholarly research. In 2006, the Institute and the Royal Historical Society were commissioned by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK to produce a report on the ‘Peer review and evaluation of digital resources for the arts and humanities’.⁸ Our starting point was that, while the mechanisms for the evaluation and peer review of the traditional print outputs of academic research were well established, if increasingly under pressure, no equivalent framework existed for assessing the value of digital resources, and of the scholarly work that leads to their creation. This was a particular problem as there was a great deal of research to indicate that many students and academics did not have the appropriate skills either to evaluate such resources for their own personal use or to act as reviewers for research grant applications with a significant digital element. Among the project’s 19 recommendations was one that ‘Scholarly journals should be encouraged to commission reviews of significant digital resources, and to publish them routinely alongside reviews of monographs and collected essays’.⁹ As an aside, it also recommended a more open and transparent approach to peer review, something to which I will return later.

The research that we conducted in order to produce this report revealed that academics were reluctant to act as reviewers of digital resources because they were uncertain how to go about it. It was not possible to ignore the medium, as one would with a book, and simply to review the content. Yet, lengthy discussions of the pros and cons of search and browse options were not what the majority of people wanted to read. An appendix to the report offered some suggested guidelines for reviewers which would help them engage with this relatively new form of scholarly publishing. It proposed that:

⁷ ‘Author’s response to his critics’ <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Whatishistory/evans.html> [accessed 30 March 2011].

⁸ ‘Peer review and evaluation of digital resources for the arts and humanities’ (London, 2006) http://www.history.ac.uk/sites/history.ac.uk/files/Peer_review_report2006.pdf [accessed 30 March 2011].

⁹ ‘Peer review and evaluation of digital resources for the arts and humanities’, p. 25.

‘In assessing a digital resource, it is important to consider content, usability, presentation and “added value”. A review should begin with a description of the resource, and then consider its role and purpose in a wider context, both historiographical and technological. Does it, for example, stand in scholarly and/or digital isolation? How innovative and/or significant is the resource? The review should consider the “added value” of digital over print delivery in the context of the resource under discussion.’¹⁰

These guidelines have now been adapted by Porta Historica, a European network of institutions involved in the editing of historical sources, to form quality criteria for digital source editions.¹¹

The *Reviews in History* editorial board considered the recommendations of the report, and in 2006 the decision was taken systematically to publish reviews of digital resources, whether open access or subscription based. The same right to reply that applies to book reviews is offered to resource creators and/or publishers, and the discussion that arises has the potential to inform the ongoing development of the resource under consideration. Websites and digital resources are never really complete, in the way that a book or journal article is complete, and points raised by reviewers may, funding permitting, be incorporated in subsequent releases or updates. The reviews published to date include assessments of such diverse resources as the *Illustrated London News Historical Archive*, the *London Transport Museum Film Collection Online* and the *Cabinet Papers Online*. Particularly successful was a review article by Mark Heller of four e-book platforms, *Gutenberg-e*, *Humanities e-Books*, *Medieval Sources Online* and *Oxford Scholarship Online*.¹² We view this element of *Reviews in History* as one to develop, both by increasing the number and frequency of reviews and by experimenting with options for additional comment from readers of the journal.

I would like to turn now to the way in which the functionality of the journal has developed over the past 14 years, in response to developing technology and more importantly to the changing requirements of researchers. Thanks to the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine, we can see what the early *Reviews in History* looked like. As you might expect, it is pretty basic by today’s standards. The journal is a simple list of reviews and responses, with minimal navigation at the bottom of each page. The text is more or less unformatted, with no linked footnotes for example.¹³ The site changes

¹⁰ ‘Peer review and evaluation of digital resources for the arts and humanities’, p. 28.

¹¹ Porta Historica <http://www.portahistorica.eu/editions> [accessed 30 March 2011].

¹² See <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/reviews/by-type/digital/all> [accessed 30 March 2011].

¹³ Internet Archive Wayback Machine <http://replay.waybackmachine.org/19970705050808/http://www.ihr.sas.ac.uk/ihr/reviews/rrmenu.html> [accessed 30 March 2011].

over time: navigation begins to become more prominent, with the appearance of a left-hand menu and there is now an option to email the *Reviews* editor.¹⁴ Compare this to the current site, which offers a range of navigational options and additional features.¹⁵ Readers are offered a number of ways into the material, from a custom Google search at the top right hand corner of the screen to various means of browsing. Browsing by type, which can be filtered further by date or title, presents the entire collection – ‘All reviews’ – but also divides it into Digital Reviews, Textbooks, Book Reviews, Review Articles and Retrospectives. The subject browse uses a schema which runs across the whole of the IHR website and categorises reviews by type, for example Cultural History or Historiography, by geographical area and by broad period. Finally, there is a ‘people’ browse, for those interested in reviews and responses by particular individuals. This indicates both reviews written and books reviewed.

In addition to these new ways of navigating reviews, you will notice at the right hand of the screen that users are presented with a number of opportunities for interaction and further reading. At the most basic level, it is possible to sign up to receive the weekly reviews email digest, which at the time of writing goes out to 3,341 subscribers internationally. Below that is a link to the IHR’s Twitter feed, which currently has 1,525 followers. It presents general information about the IHR and the history profession, but also publicises new reviews each week, as you can see at the top of the page. The third link on the page, to the IHR Digital blog, takes users straight through to those blog posts which are tagged as relating to *Reviews in History*. Here, as on Twitter, there is the opportunity for people to comment on and ask questions about the highlighted reviews, or to recommend them to others who might be interested.

Additional functionality is available at the level of the individual review. This review, by Simon Morgan of Fred Inglis’s *A Short History of Celebrity* offers both a list of related reviews within *Reviews in History* and links to selected reviews published elsewhere, in this case in *The Guardian* and *Independent* newspapers, the *Wall Street Journal* and *eHistory*, produced by Ohio State University in the US.¹⁶ In the past, the addition of related links of this type has been a relatively time-consuming activity which in some cases required a degree of subject knowledge and familiarity with the literature in a particular field. However, the list of related reviews seen here is generated

¹⁴ Internet Archive Wayback Machine <http://replay.waybackmachine.org/20010417022110/http://ihr.sas.ac.uk/ihr/reviews/revmnu.html> [accessed 30 March 2011].

¹⁵ *Reviews in History* <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews> [accessed 30 March 2011].

¹⁶ S. Morgan, review of *A Short History of Celebrity* (review no. 994) <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/994> [accessed 30 March 2011].

automatically by a module of the Drupal Content Management System which delivers the journal. The matching that occurs is not simply on the basis of keywords in the title of the book, but is context-sensitive and uses a more complex semantic approach. There are occasional oddities in selection, but by and large we have found it to be extremely accurate and the automation of the process allows the operation to be significantly scaled up.

Finally, you will notice that clear citation guidance is offered for each review, at the top of the page. The name of the reviewer, the title of the book, and the number and URL of the review are provided, along with a record of the time and date at which the review was accessed. There is still considerable confusion about how to cite digital material, and some evidence that researchers may in fact be reading something online and going on to cite a print version. This does not affect a journal like *Reviews in History*, which is only available online, but if digital journals are to be promoted and cited it is important that researchers are guided as to the precise form they should use in references.

We are constantly looking for ways in which we can enhance the reading experience for visitors to *Reviews in History* and will be implementing a range of tagging options in the next few weeks, as here for the IHR's series of seminar podcasts. Users are offered the option to share and/or bookmark a particular post through Digg, Facebook, Google, LinkedIn, StumbleUpon, Twitter and the soon to be defunct del.icio.us. Further ahead, the obvious next step is to open up the review process more widely, encouraging readers to contribute their comments and opinions alongside those of the authors and invited reviewers. The concern here is how to make sure that inflammatory content is filtered out without the burden of moderation becoming prohibitive, and again this is something to which I will return.

Integration of *Reviews in History* with library catalogues, bibliographies and other finding aids is also under consideration. This has already been implemented for the Bibliography of British and Irish History, published by Brepols on behalf of the Institute and the Royal Historical Society. Here you can see the bibliographic record for Matthew Grant's *After the Bomb: Civil Defence and Nuclear War in Cold War Britain*, with a link at the bottom of the screen to the review of the title in *Reviews in History*.¹⁷ We have only been able to do this because both *Reviews* and the Bibliography are managed by the Institute, and for the time being it remains a manual linking process. However, as

¹⁷ Bibliography of British and Irish History
http://apps.brepolis.net/bbih/search.cfm?action=search_simple_detail_single&startrow=1&endrow=1&search_order=year_desc&ACCESS=restricted%20OR%20public&TITLE=after%20the%20bomb&PERIOD_CLOSE_MAT_CHES=0&search_selection= [accessed 30 March 2011].

books begin to become available online, with associated Digital Object Identifiers or DOIs, one may conceive of a situation in which library catalogues routinely link to a range of reviews at the item level.

In addition to this development work, the last couple of years have seen a significant change in the rate of publication of reviews. When the journal was launched, reviews were published individually and rather sporadically. In its first full year, 1997, 29 reviews were published – or a little over two a month. In 2010, four reviews were published each week – or more than 200 a year. Last December saw the publication of the journal's 1000th review, but the next 1,000 will take far less than 14 years to produce.

As functionality has been enhanced and the frequency of publication increased, so too has usage grown. The original project plan for *Reviews in History* made no statements about anticipated usage of the journal beyond the fact that readers should be drawn from 90% of the history departments in UK universities and that there should be more than 1,000 registered subscribers by the end of the two-year pilot. This last might seem rather optimistic in light of the fact that subscriber numbers now stand at just over three times this figure, but information gathering behaviour has changed significantly in the intervening period. While most if not all journals still make use of email alerts for Tables of Contents and so on, email does not dominate in the way that it did even a couple of years ago. Far more people are now aggregating information feeds through services such as Google, selecting the data that they want to receive rather than passively consuming it. I would expect that the increase in basic subscriber numbers that we have seen over the lifetime of the journal will begin to flatten out, but this will be more than compensated for by other forms of access.

That there is an ongoing appetite for reviews of historical material, from both within and outside the academy, is clear from the usage statistics for *Reviews in History*. While statistics have been derived from log files for the lifetime of the journal, last year we implemented Google Analytics, which allows a much more detailed breakdown of viewing numbers and patterns. From 1 March 2010, when the new software was installed, to the end of the year, *Reviews in History* served 702,756 page views – more than 70,000 a month – derived from 424,154 visits. Just under 79% of these visits are defined by Google Analytics as 'new'. While acknowledging that the same person may access the site from a different venue (at home rather than in a university department, for example), this suggests a reasonable core of users who return to the site more frequently. This is borne out by the figures for sources of traffic. Around 80% of referrals come from search engines, with Google responsible for

three-quarters of that total, as you might expect, and a further 8% or so from sites which link to *Reviews*. However, 11.5% of referrals are described as direct traffic, for example people typing in a *Reviews* URL or clicking straight through to the site from an email alert. Also worthy of note, and something which is repeated across all of the Institute's web services, is that the pattern of access broadly mirrors the academic year, with usage peaking annually in October and November and trailing off during the long summer break.

The geographical breakdown is relatively unsurprising, with the UK and the US dominating (just above and below 36% respectively). However, 208 other countries are represented in the list, with Canada, Australia and many European countries featuring highly. For interest Germany accounts for 1.6% of visits during this period. All of this is to say that demand is evident, and the trend of usage is upwards. There is an appetite for reviews of scholarly historical material, whether books or digital research resources, which extends beyond the academy to the wider community interested in history. We have plenty of anecdotal evidence of this wider general interest, from school children and secondary school teachers who have contacted us to talk about their use of *Reviews in History* in the classroom to feedback from users who have developed an interest in history after retirement and so on. *Reviews in History* is an unashamedly academic publication, which largely deals with scholarly monographs, but this is obviously no barrier to access on a large-scale by people from a range of backgrounds and with a variety of research skills and interests.

Some of you may have heard of the impact agenda which is currently concerning research councils, and consequently universities, in the United Kingdom. Departments and academics are increasingly required to provide evidence of the value and impact of their work within society, whether socially and culturally or, more difficult for the humanities, economically. Digital publishing, and the ability to track readership and usage online in a way which is not possible for print materials, can offer considerable help in this area. If an author is able to show that his or her article or review has been read by many thousands of people, both nationally and internationally, demonstrating impact immediately becomes easier. Of course, statistics are open to any number of interpretations, and web statistics in particular are notoriously difficult to analyse; nor is it the case that quantitative data should outweigh qualitative in any evaluation process. However, the existence of such data can be valuable for authors, and it can also provide the editors of open-access online journals with a clear case for publishing with them.

The question of open-access is the final thing that I would like to discuss in relation to *Reviews in History*, before moving on to talk about some of the more general issues relating to peer review in a digital environment. When the journal was established, there was a sense that it would somehow become self-sustaining. In his original manifesto Patrick O'Brien expressed the hope that 'When our support from public funds runs out in two years time, "Reviews in History" will be recognised as useful for the advance of the subject and will be commercially viable'.¹⁸ The use of the term 'commercially' is interesting here, and the sentiment reappears in the updated editorial statement written by David Cannadine five years later in May 2000: 'we are anxious to enhance our coverage, [and] to secure our financial future'.¹⁹ Both of these imply an intention to pursue some type of charging mechanism for the journal, perhaps moving to subscription access once it was established as an indispensable part of the research landscape. If such a business plan ever existed I am not aware of it. Over the years there has been some discussion about the introduction of charging in some form, but this has never been seriously pursued. Only a very short time after its launch, a commitment to open access simply became part of the ethos of the journal, even though the only way in which this could be maintained was through the application of core funding. Much of the discussion around open-access journals today concerns viable business models, for example how an author-pays approach will work in the humanities where so much material is produced by independent researchers without a university affiliation. If we were launching *Reviews in History* now, no doubt this would have been a consideration, but thankfully it is not one that we have had to address in this particular context.

Moving away from the specific experience of *Reviews in History*, what are the wider challenges and opportunities facing peer review in the digital age? There is some agreement that traditional forms of peer review are beginning to show signs of wear and tear. In 2006, for example, the British Academy established a review 'in response to concerns that the system of peer review to assess the quality of research submitted for publication is showing signs of strain, partly resulting from the growth of e-publishing and the number of cases of plagiarism, but also because the increasing specialisation of subjects is making it even more difficult to find suitable referees'.²⁰ This statement, of course, refers to pre-publication review, but the boundaries between pre- and post-publication review are becoming ever more fluid with advances in digital publishing. The publishing process

¹⁸ 'Manifesto (1995 Original)', *Reviews in History* <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/content/manifesto-1995-original> [accessed 30 March 2011].

¹⁹ 'Manifesto (2000)', *Reviews in History* <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/node/4496> [accessed 30 March 2011].

²⁰ British Academy, 'Peer review: the challenges for the humanities and social sciences' (London, 2007) <http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/peer-review.cfm> [accessed 30 March 2011].

itself has been transformed by the new technologies available, with self-publication, completely bypassing the peer review process, becoming an option for ever larger numbers of people with a modicum of web expertise. With publication easier than ever before, and with published texts open to almost continuous revision, are traditional forms of peer review still fit for purpose?

The Institute's 2006 report, which I mentioned earlier, stated confidently that, broadly speaking, there were two main stages of peer review and evaluation: 'pre-completion or formative review, and post-completion or summative review'.²¹ Just four years later the position is not so clear. There have been a number of experiments, in the US in particular, which blur the boundaries by opening up what might once have been called pre-publication review. Perhaps the most well known of these is the *Shakespeare Quarterly* open review experiment. This saw four essays slated for publication in the journal special issue, fittingly titled 'Shakespeare and new media', subjected to transparent and open peer review online. The editors invited comment from, it goes without saying, Shakespeare scholars with relevant research experience, but also, interestingly, from an undefined 'other readers'. Anyone commenting on an essay was asked to register his or her name, in order to guarantee the rigour of the process, and presumably to help the authors and editors assess the value of the suggestions and annotations. When the special issue was published it included an insightful editor's introduction to the questions being addressed and a summary of the experiment itself. Katherine Rowe picked out some key points which had been drawn out in the course of the reviewing process:

- it opened to question who might be considered an expert in a particular subject and how that expertise might be established;
- it placed new burdens on reviewers, already struggling in an anonymous context to formulate criticism in a way which would not be seen as negative or destructive
- perhaps counter-intuitively, the ongoing engagement required by the process made open peer review more labour intensive than the more traditional closed form
- and finally, while such an exercise could not have been undertaken without recent technological advances, the technology could still not support the variety of ways in which scholars wished to contribute.

²¹ 'Peer review and evaluation of digital resources for the arts and humanities', p. 15.

The comments gathered during the peer review process have been gathered and published alongside the essays, essentially becoming part of them and continuing to influence the way in which the final texts are consumed.²²

While those involved with the production of the *Shakespeare Quarterly* special issue seem generally to view it as a very positive experience, it is not without problems, as members of the team acknowledge. For example, there can be no doubt that the peer review process is fundamentally altered by taking place in a public forum. It might be argued that this is all to the good – removing anonymity may prevent the overly negative reviewing which all journal editors will have experienced from time to time, and which can prove particularly damaging for early career researchers. Whatever the case, the knowledge that what one is writing will be available to all necessarily affects what is said. It is in this sense that pre- and post-publication evaluation and review may begin to converge, with the former as readily available and subject to the same criteria as the latter. Another concern, highlighted by Kathleen Fitzpatrick in a paper at the recent 2010 Digital Humanities conference held at King's College London, was the way in which the process seemed to hinder reviewers from engaging with a text in its entirety. Reviewers commented on particular passages and paragraphs but assessment of the work as a whole was largely missing. This wider perspective is obviously an essential element of a well written review, at no matter what stage in the publishing process it occurs.

Even more radical was 'Hacking the Academy', a crowd-sourced publication edited by Tom Scheinfeldt and Dan Cohen.²³ The book was sourced within a week in May 2010, drawing on blog posts, pre-existing texts and material written specially for the occasion. Much of what was published was submitted using agreed Twitter hashtags. A total of 329 contributions were received, a figure which was ultimately reduced to 70. Decisions about the material to be included in the final publication were influenced by comments and discussion on social networking sites, where the project received a great deal of attention. You can, in fact, see at the bottom of this table of contents that one of the articles included was nominated by an individual not the author from his Twitter account. The status of the reviewer here in some way echoes the status of the author – his role in suggesting content for publication is as valid and worthy of recognition as that of the writer. In this example, the role of the publisher also becomes more or less obsolete, as each chapter exists in its

²² This paragraph is drawn from the excellent *Shakespeare Quarterly* special issue on 'Shakespeare and new media' http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/mcp/press/ShakespeareQuarterly_NewMedia/ [accessed 30 March 2011].

²³ Hacking the Academy <http://hackingtheacademy.org/> [accessed 30 March 2011].

original form only and no single style is applied. The Table of Contents simply links through to the original blog post. However, it is instructive that the editors are still having the material published as a traditional edited collection, in print, by the University of Michigan Press. Digital humanities researchers are the group most likely to engage with such innovative methods of publishing and reviewing, but the questions that such experiments pose for the academy as a whole are worth pondering.

There is in particular much to be learned by editors of online reviews journals which are seeking to incorporate Web 2.0 in the reviewing process. Crowd-sourcing of peer review can demonstrably work, given the right set of circumstances, and while the technology of social networking does not yet fully support the demands of academic assessment everything which might be required is already feasible. If developing the reviewing process in this way is indeed desirable, then it is academic culture which needs to change. Authors are understandably uncertain about opening up their work to general public comment, whether that is before or after publication. Once a book has been published, it is already possible for anyone to review it on a site such as Amazon. However, in practice, scholarly monographs are unlikely to be the focus of much attention; and in such a forum negative comments may also easily be dismissed as ill-informed. Crowd-sourced reviewing in a more academic context, however, is very different and it will no doubt take quite some time before conventions begin to emerge and best practice is established. At a digital humanities panel session at last November's North American Conference on British Studies, there was considerable support for the view that multiple evaluations may only serve to increase an author's uncertainty. It is hard enough to reconcile two contradictory reviews, so how will a researcher deal with 20 or 50 or 100? The counter-argument, convincingly argued by Dan Cohen, is that access to a range of opinion will ultimately allow a clearer picture to emerge – if there are 20 reviews of a book and only one is hostile then it is easier for both authors and the potential readers of their work to gauge what people think. One negative review when only two have been sought is, in this view, much more problematic.²⁴ The fact that, as the example of the *Shakespeare Quarterly* seemed to show, such an approach to reviewing might end up taking more time than a system which is already overloaded is more difficult to resolve. And it is closely aligned to concerns about who precisely will engage with an open reviewing process. Anxieties about being overwhelmed by comment and opinion in such an environment might well give way to problems in securing sufficient people to make crowd-sourced reviewing work.

²⁴ See <http://ihr-history.blogspot.com/2010/11/digital-humanities-and-british-studies.html> [accessed 30 March 2011], for a summary of this panel session.

The solution will probably lie somewhere between traditional methods of peer review, at whatever stage, and the radical approach taken by those involved with 'Hacking the Academy'. Thoughtful review by a single author may usefully be supplemented by comments and suggestions from a wider community, some within higher education and some from outside. The scholarly commitment to attribution may require that the anonymous nature of much online comment proves to be unacceptable, and that the identity of those contributing reviews should always be published. 2011 is an exciting time to be involved in scholarly communication and reviews journals and platforms like recensio.net have the opportunity to transform the way in which the discipline develops in the future. Reviews might once have seemed unfashionable, and academics reluctant to take them on, but they are ideally suited to a contemporary digital culture which supports participation and the public expression of opinion.

Jane Winters, January 2011