## FORM FOLLOWS THE FUNCTION OF THE LITTLE MAGAZINE - John Holbo -

For those of us on the panel today—and many of you—blogging is a constant. I mean constant. We know what the things are—the several kinds of things—and we know that you have to feed them constantly, or they die. But today I'm going to talk more about blogging as variable, as potential yet unrealized. Some friends of mine at The Institute For the Future of the Book just worked up a WordPress template that's basically: journal article plus comment box. Why not? Maybe we should have a journal that, every issue, turns into a group blog with contributors to that issue as authors, and a few besides as discussants. Or maybe that wouldn't work. But at any rate: more like this, please.

Blogging does a lot of things well that academic publishing flat-out needs to do a lot better. Like circulation. Maybe you remember Stephen Greenblatt's 2002 MLA Presidential Address. And I had another piece by Peter Brooks lined up—published in 2003. Let me just give you the flavor. Brooks laments that critical culture seems moribund in part because review culture has atrophied; no more 'mediating organs'—like *Partisan Review*. So no hope of contact with the public sphere; this takes a lot of wind out of the sails. Greenblatt says we can't all be Lionel Trilling or Edmund Wilson, and the problem goes deeper. We aren't even reading each other. Never mind that the ivory tower can't contact the public sphere. The ivory tower can't even contact the ivory tower any more. If I write a scholarly book about literary criticism, how can I get anyone to read it?

Now, this is NOT a problem for blogs. In my own case: Crooked Timber—8,000 visits a day; and The Valve—5,000. Academic publishing not only should, but frankly needs to, tap that energy. But how? That's what I hope to tell you today.

I'm the editor of a line of books for Parlor Press. Glassbead books. Our first title is out. Looking For A Fight – Is there A Republican War on Science? It's not lit studies, but many of our titles will be. On the outside, it appears conventional, unassuming, a slight paper product. But inside it's a floorwax AND a dessert topping. I'm speaking metaphorically. Literally, it's a floorwax in the house of intellect; a dessert topping on the solid cake of spirit. Now how much would you pay! But wait: it's free! Much of the goodness of this book has to do with the fact that it's made of blog posts.

But let's get the problem before the solution. Two studies have just come out. First, a report by the MLA Taskforce on Evaluating Scholarship For Promotion and Tenure;

## http://www.mla.org/pdf/task force tenure promotio.pdf

Second, "Our Cultural Commonwealth: The final report of the American Council of Learned Societies Commission on Cyberinfrastructure for the Humanities & Social Sciences"

## http://www.acls.org/cyberinfrastructure/

I'm going to steer around tenure and promotion—but by means of a powerful and snappy argument I'll deploy in a moment. I'm not going to talk about publishing generally but cyberinfrastructure.

The past is paper. The future is electrons. Will the future be utopia? I think we've got maybe a 50/50 shot. I'm serious about this much: many responses to the publishing crisis have been too conservative—too preoccupied with 'conserving' rather than with reconstituting on the other side of the digital divide.

I was going to give a few illustrations of unhelpful bunker mentality. But let me boil down to a few maxims. First, necessity is not the mother of subventions. Just because you need money doesn't mean you'll get it. Second, don't let high-minded disdain for some <u>economic</u> supply and demand forces trick you into neglecting legitimate <u>intellectual</u> supply and demand forces. Third, if you get that cash, after all, don't expect it to fix the <u>intellectual</u> problem, which has a peculiar shape. Let me try to say this briefly.

James Madison said standing armies were the greatest threat to liberty—were standing invitations to tyranny, you see. It sounds strange, but a standing army of literary critics—that would be us; the MLA—are a threat to intellectual liberty, in that we are a standing invitation to the tyranny of the monograph. Or, if not that, something like it. Our number is, crudely, a function of the volume of undergrad papers that need grading; our number is not a function of any independent sense of a critical project or set of projects requiring approximately this many hands. We must produce work of 'scholarly value' yet our number is corrosive of our sense of it, which ends up having its level settled somewhat arbitrarily—an uncertain equilibrium point between pedagogic need and economic constraint. Not that we wouldn't all be happy to read a great book. I hope we know 'scholarly value' when we see it. But in the aggregate, 30,000 members of the MLA worth, we don't know it. This volume of production is—to repeat—a function of a demand for teaching credentials, not for scholarauthors. Scholarly overpopulation AND overproduction, with respect to intellectual demand, is deeply rooted in our institution. I don't think we need to beat ourselves up about it. It's good that kids get college educations. So here we are. But we need to acknowledge the shape of the problem. All the money you could hope to throw at it wouldn't buy a better conversation. For that you need serious, industrial strength mediating forms, specifically engineered to compensate for inevitable overproduction. You need to prevent the library from turning into some sort of disposal site for run-off from the industrial manufacture of professional humanists. If I may say so: before the web, there was no hope. Paper not strong enough. The good news is: we've got web.

So: if we stage the end of the Gutenberg era as some sort of *Bücherdämmerung*, we squander a fantastic opportunity. Gestures of doomed idealism are only noble if idealism is doomed. We've got good work to do.

You can guess—you won't be wrong—that I'm a bit starry-eyed about the wonders of a post-scarcity publishing world. A webpage, from the point of view of circulation, is practically Kantian in its sublimity. Still, letting myself get lost in the stars invites a feet-on-the-ground objection: the cost of academic publishing, as it stands, is not due to the cost of buying heaps of dead trees. What costs is not media but mediation. Not paper, but the fact that what's on the paper has been painstakingly acquired, edited, peer reviewed, quality-

controlled. I'm going to address this correct point by arguing that new media isn't the ideal endpoint but the ideal starting point for new mediation. That's when things get golden. I hope.

Now, the tenure and promotion angle. The first thing to say is that this is a really important issue. Thanks, Michael, for your taskforce work. But I have a bone to pick, one line from the report.

Thus we can state that faculty members hired to tenure-track appointments over the last ten years have been tenured in ways—and at rates—similar to their predecessors. There has, to date, been no "lost generation of scholars" from the tenure track. (p. 27)

This is an important thing for the committee to have established empirically. Nevertheless, a perfectly good *a priori* proof was possible, and should have been offered in addition, on pain of two distinct problems potentially running together. There is—I suspect—*a real* risk of a 'lost generation' due to the adjunctification of the profession. On the other hand, when you confine yourself to actual tenure-track appointments, it's clear tenuring rates will tend to stay constant. Granting tenure is expensive, hence the adjunct problem. But putting people up for tenure and not tenuring them is expensive, too. If you do it a lot, you look dysfunctional. As a rule, it isn't going to happen. What will happen is that, in a perennially tight market, candidates will be obliged to generate the greatest possible impression of productivity. That's far from optimal. This is what the task force ends up concluding: benchmarks stringent and somewhat out of whack. I just thought I'd say it in a sentence: not lost generation but deformed—and, by extension, an unhealthy intellectual ecology.

The forms of academic publishing follow two functions: intellectual and institutional. You publish to share ideas, contribute to knowledge, take part in conversation. And you publish to fill your CV. These functions don't HAVE to pull apart. But when they do, which function should form follow? Obviously intellectual. I'm not going to argue for that. I'm just going to draw a negative corollary: when form fails to follow function—intellectual function—it devolves into vanity publishing.

Vanity publishing is a dire insult—so let's think hard. It's interesting that the term denotes a vice on the part of the <u>publisher</u> but encodes a vice on the part of the <u>author</u>. As Nietzsche writes: "The vain man wants not so much to predominate as to feel himself predominant; that is why he disdains no means of self-deception and self-outwitting. What he treasures is not the opinion of others but his own opinion of their opinion." Vanity publishing is typically defined as: charging for publication of someone's work, then charging the author again for a copy of the work. This distinguishes between copy-editing/book-making, for a fee, and feeding delusions of authorial grandeur, for a fee. But it is interesting that, in a strict sense, almost all academic publishing qualifies as 'vanity'. Our institutions, as agents, pay for bits of themselves—us—to publish; then they buy the books for their own libraries. I don't think it follow that academic publishing is just 'vain', however. Let's turn that Nietzsche line into a better definition: vanity publishing is arranging for publication of your work in a form that is self-deceptive or self-outwitting, in that it effectively aims not at shaping the opinion of others, but at shaping the apparent shape of the opinion of others. Your book is hardbound, promising solid influence. Handsome artifact. Makes a sound if you rap it with your knuckle. (But only 200 copies sold.) Here is Lindsay Waters, from Enemies of Promise:

One of the things that makes the current situation intolerable for such publishers [those seeking to promote genuinely interesting, innovative work] is that in these circumstances an imprint functions in precisely the opposite way it is supposed to work. In a healthy situation an imprint wins a book readers. In this situation - were publication is subordinate to the tenure mill - a quality imprint means that no one needs to read the book because such an imprint means a book is of a certain meritoriousness and therefore does not need to be read. The emotional capital a publisher tries to win for his or her imprint is frustrated in our climate. (p. 38)

Then there's cost. But really I've made the point already: high-minded indifference to profit no proof of intellectual honor. A system for haphazardly sprinkling 200 libraries with copies of your book, at great cost, is intellectually inefficient. In an age in which it is possible to distribute a book as a PDF for free, you might be better off vanity publishing the true old

fashioned way; just plain self-publishing. Learn to lay your book out decently. Build a website, start a blog; arrange for print-on-demand through lulu.com. But now it isn't peer-reviewed and all that. Well yes, we've lost quite a lot, haven't we? I'm not proposing so much as provoking.

Put it this way: What we need now is a taskforce for evaluating scholarship NOT for promotion and tenure. We ought to get clear about what the system would look like, ideally, the better to beat back inevitably deforming, institutional demands.

Form Follows The Function of the Little Magazine. That was the title of my inaugural post at the Valve. It nodded to Trilling, "The Function of the Little "Magazine". My point was that blogs can be wonderful Little Magazines. But today my point is a bit different. But academic publishing aspire to the status of Little Magazine? I think we can take the term in a sense that avoids the apparently hazardous genre slippage. In that first post I quoted a spot of Democratic uplift, courtesy of Trilling's essay.

From the democratic point of view, we must say that in a true democracy nothing should be done for the people. The writer who defines his audience by its limitations is indulging in the unforgivable arrogance. The writer must define his audience by its abilities, by its perfections, so far as he is gifted to conceive them. He does well, if he cannot see his right audience within immediate reach of his voice, to direct his words to his spiritual ancestors, or to posterity, or even, if need be, to a coterie. The writer serves his daemon and his subject. And the democracy that does not know that the daemon and the subject must be served is not, in any ideal sense of the word, a democracy at all.

About this, three points. First, I want to be a public intellectual. I want one foot in the ivory tower, the other in the public sphere. And I don't just want to wear two hats. I want the two roles to be mutually informing. Now, not every academic wants this. But many do. And even my most contentedly specialist colleagues will admit that there need to be some academics performing this sort of bridging function—some commerce across the ivory divide.

Second, even specialists can affirm the spirit of that quote from Trilling, which just goes to show that he was really talking about a bit more. What did the quote actually say? Basically, you don't write an idiotic paper just because you expect your audience to be a bunch of idiots. The publishing system ought not to compel you to deform your writing, by your lights. Any objections? Of course not.

Finally, Trilling's essay was written on the occasion of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of *Partisan Review*. After 10 years they had 6,000 subscribers. Slightly more than the Valve, slightly fewer than Crooked Timber. God, we bloggers are lucky.

Now let me sell you my book. In the last year and a half, at Crooked Timber and the Valve I have organized and/or participated in a dozen 'book events'—eight on literary subjects. At Crooked Timber, a pair of novels; at the Valve we've done *Theory's Empire*, Moretti's *Maps, Graphs and Trees, The Literary Wittgenstein, How Novels Think*. We did Walter Benn Michaels' latest and, last but not least, Michael's latest.

What is a book event? It's a massive, multi-author online review; mini-virtual conference. Several reader meet author. That is, within a loosely specified period, several authors write reviews, critical notes, essays, any collection of words they believe constitutes effective engagement with the work. They serve the daemon with blog posts. And these events are now being published as books by Parlor Press. This book is an anthology of posts about Chris Mooney's *The Republican War On Science*. Now we get to the hidden goodness of it:

- 1. It's a free PDF download from Parlor. Or buy it from Amazon for 10 bucks.
- 2. It's Creative Commons. You're pre-cleared for any non-commercial use.
- 3. In three months we've gotten a couple hundred downloads and made a few dozen sales. That even before hitting up the libraries. Good for us!
- 4. It's pretty ok. As Chris Mooney says—this is our blurb: "You guys worked me hard". It's 100 pages of review matter. Wouldn't you want your book to get a 100 page review?

- 5. Chris' book is rendered transparent to the web in a good way. He'll be found by the right search engine inquiries. The book, you might say, now has the metadata tagging it deserves.
- 6. It's effortlessly interdisciplinary. We get all kinds, as contributors go. In this case, political scientists, philosophers, a sociologist, a computer scientist, an MBA, a lawyer, an economist—that's par for the course, really.
- 7. Last but not least: it's a book, so I get a line on my CV. That is, you can now take it to the beach, so it must be scholarship.
- 8. No, seriously. The primary life of the event was digital; so, possibly, the real action concerning this book is over. But, damnit, this book led a full life. Literally thousands of people read at least a bit; hundreds of people discussed it, leaving comments. That thing Lindsay Waters said about how crazy it is: ideas go between covers like corpses into coffins? We fixed that.

Now, all that remains is to do the same thing for every single academic book. A simple normative principle. Every scholarly book published in the humanities should be widely read, discussed and reviewed. Because any scholarly book incapable of rousing a modest measure of sustained, considerate, intelligent discussion shouldn't have been published as a book. Turning the point around: in the information age, any book worth the time and expense of publishing, that fails to be read, discussed and reviewed—has been catastrophically failed by the mediating function of the academic culture in which it was so unfortunate as to be born.

Let me conclude by generalizing; blueprinting rather than just holding up samples.

We need three <u>kinds</u> of things, with ascending grades of utopianism. But no practical utopianism at any stage. The only obstacles are stubborn instutitions that we can easily imagine being quite different.

First, new media, made possible by new technology. New publication forms. If anyone complains that this mucks up the credentialing process, tar them as vanity publishers until they are properly ashamed of themselves.

Second, new mediation, made possible by new media. Not every book event is brilliant, but the form is just fantastic. Every author wants one. And should get one. Keep battering those institutional benchmarks until they reward this stuff in proportion to its vital importance to the conversation.

Third, let's return to the case of the self-publishing author. The loss of peer-review and other mediating functions of academic publishing as we know is pretty intolerable, even in exchange for great circulation. But now: suppose we 'event' this author. What do we have now:? Post-publication peer review. Of a highly rigorous sort—and transparent—although it's highly unconventional, admittedly.

Do you see what I just did? Give me my book event—and I invent not just one new kind of book but two. This one, which we've got. And a more utopian one, which admittedly we don't got: a post-publication peer-reviewed book, potentially.

Am I advocating self-publishing? No. I am advocating experiments on the scale of what I am doing with Parlor, better described as micro-publishing. I can't do everything, but I can do many things 'good enough'. What I am counting on, in part, is that efficient new media allow for efficient new mediation. Through better distribution you get to the point of enabling distributed, at least partially post-publication quality control.

Does this kill traditional publishing? For a hundred reasons, no. First, because if this works, they will get into the game. Publishers are smart about what is going on. They want to do the right thing. I have no fear for their survival, but in 20 years what they will be doing is sure to look radically different. But we knew that already, so my little plans haven't changed that. Second, to the degree that they don't get into this particular game I want to play, I just freed them up to play their game better. There will always be big projects. Projects with large anticipated circulations, justifying lavish editorial costs and expensive added value and quality control. I just freed the big publishers to ignore projects that don't look like that. The big boys can, thanks to me, drop a lot of bad bets with a better conscience. We'll be there to catch them in our micropublishing net. And we'll give them a better shot at good

conversation than they ever had under the old system. And what sane scholar can demand more than that?

At this point I go on talking for another half hour about power laws, 80/20 (20% of books are sure to get 80% of the attention); the long tail, and how my ideas are, in effect, plans for maximizing the circulation of all that stuff under the thin end. But we really don't have the time. (And I am very sorry the severe brevity of my presentation makes me sound like I don't see all the obstacles in the path of what I have proposed. Of course I do.)