

Mirror, Mirror on the Web

The online version of a print journal must be more than just an electronic version of the original, writes Collin Brooke.

By [Collin Brooke \(/users/collin-brooke\)](/users/collin-brooke)

// October 11, 2005

As a technology specialist working in the humanities, there are times when it's difficult not to feel like a walking contradiction.

I'm accustomed, as an academic blogger for 2+ years, to near-instantaneous feedback on my writing and participating in networked conversations that can spring up overnight and disappear just as quickly. As an academic bound to certain research expectations, though, conversational cycles still occur at the speed of print, unfolding in some cases over a period of years. Blogging is less about occupying a different space than it is working to a different rhythm, a difference that can be difficult to explain to those who don't do it.

As a blogger, I subscribe to more than 100 [RSS feeds](http://www.xml.com/pub/a/2002/12/18/dive-into-xml.html), (http://www.xml.com/pub/a/2002/12/18/dive-into-xml.html) syndicated content from the blogs of friends and acquaintances, news sites, and filter sites for particular topics. As an academic, though, I struggle to keep current with a much smaller number of journals in my field (rhetoric and composition), and this even though most of them only publish two to four times a year. Undoubtedly, this is in part because of the difference between "work" reading and "play" reading; it's far easier (and usually more pleasant) to skim a handful of blog entries than it is to give sustained attention to a journal article, after all.

But it's more than that. Although the quantity and quality of writing that I read online almost certainly differs from the scholarly reading I do, I would argue that the biggest change is that I practice reading differently. And this is a truth that, traditionally, disciplines in the humanities have been slow to accept. We are still prone to thinking of technology as something added to what are already substantial professional duties, instead of conceiving of it as a way of approaching those duties differently.

I've had opportunity in recent months to reflect on my various reading practices. In the spring of 2005, I was named the associate editor of the flagship journal (*College Composition and Communication*, or *CCC*) in my field and given the task of rethinking and redesigning its Web site, a task that would potentially bring together these separate domains. Most of the journals in my field have Web sites, and their quality tends to vary even more widely than the journals themselves.

What almost all of these sites have in common, though, is their central mission, which is to mirror their respective print journals. In other words, most of these sites provide little content beyond what is already available in the journals themselves (and in some cases, much less or after a significant lag).

The fact of the matter is that I don't think of these mirror sites as part of my online reading. There are times where it is convenient to look up a piece of information online, but only rarely do I end up at a journal Web site when I do. Although I may not be typical in this regard, I use these sites so infrequently that they seem little more than a cursory obligation added to the workload of the journals' editors. As I began the task of rethinking CCC Online, (<http://inventio.us/ccc/>) then, one of my chief motivations was to practice what I've preached above, to conceive of the site as a way for my colleagues to experience the journal in different and (ideally) productive ways, rather than as a mere repository mirroring the print version.

All three members of the development team (myself and two research assistants) are active academic bloggers, and ultimately, it has been our experience with blogging, and with social software more generally, that has helped us in this process. In discussions of blogs, the tendency is to focus on content, on the identities of bloggers, and on the networking that occurs within and among these sites. In a more formal sense, though, blog platforms are simply content management systems, databases designed with an eye toward the kinds of publications that we now think of as blogs. Most important, perhaps, they are scaled for personal use.

In the case of CCC Online, we use Movable Type (<http://www.sixapart.com/movabletype>) for the site's infrastructure, which allows us to duplicate a number of the features typical to large-scale databases. We provide a dedicated search engine, for instance, and can notify subscribers about updates to the site, over e-mail and RSS.

While we have taken advantage of some of the generic features of blogs, we haven't turned the journal's Web site into a blog. The problem we're addressing isn't a dearth of information, but an overload. With the publication of a new issue of CCC, we add an entry for each article, and that entry contains metadata about the article: abstract, keywords, bibliography, and a permalink for the article itself (which remains password-protected for subscribers only). At the same time, we are slowly adding similar data for the journal's back issues.

Building a centralized archive for the journal's metadata allows us to do a number of things:

- It makes the contents of the journal available not only to search engines, but to bookmarking services like del.icio.us (<http://del.icio.us>), CiteULike (<http://www.citeulike.org/>) and others.

- It allows us to include insular links to the articles, allowing users to follow up on citations of other CCC articles.
- Through the use of bi-directional trackback links, we also include "Works Citing," links to essays that have taken up (and cited) a particular article.
- Finally, we use del.icio.us, a social bookmarking application, to offer users an associative interface for browsing the journal.

This last feature deserves a little more explanation. Providing a static page for each journal article allows our colleagues to bookmark those pages (and to tag them with their own keywords) in an application like del.icio.us. What we've done is to open our own del.icio.us account, and to bookmark each article, tagging them with both author-supplied and textually-generated keywords. The result is an associative network that goes beyond citation to connect articles on similar topics.

For example, Richard Marback's 2001 essay, "Ebonics: Theorizing in Public Our Attitudes toward Literacy," (http://inventio.us/coc/archives/2001/09/20_richard_marb.html) is tagged with the keyword "race." Clicking on that keyword takes a user to a page (<http://del.icio.us/coco/Race>) that collects the other articles from the journal with the same keyword, regardless of whether those articles cite, or have been cited by, Marback's.

In the case of each of these features, our focus is not on adding new content, but rather on devising ways for users to approach and/or manage the content we are already generating as a discipline. The principle behind each of these features is the same: we've tried to focus site development around the question of how the site might be used instead of what information the site contains.

CCC Online is in many ways still a mirror site, but it's a mirror that can be manipulated in a variety of ways, offering our colleagues different perspectives on the journal's content, perspectives that are impossible to duplicate in print. We've worked to make the site as productive as possible, integrating more efficient management of the journal's content with opportunities for exploration and invention.

Depending on the discipline or profession where you find yourself, our site may seem either painfully obvious or distressingly opaque. For our colleagues in the humanities, though, we hope it serves as a model of what we might accomplish by turning to social software to inform (and improve) our practices as readers and writers.

In addition to managing *CCC Online*, Collin Brooke is an assistant professor of rhetoric and writing at Syracuse University, where he also directs the composition and cultural rhetoric doctoral program.

Read more by

By Collin Brooke (</users/collin-brooke>)

Copyright Inside Higher Ed | [insidehighered.com](https://www.insidehighered.com)