

If It Doesn't Exist on the Internet, It Doesn't Exist

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The following statements are directed at academic production and should be considered in that context. This does not include painters, potters, printmakers, book artists or metal workers. Yet.

I'm going to start right out by saying it: **If it doesn't exist on the internet, it doesn't exist.** I used to say this hyperbolically but as time has gone on, it's proved to be a truism, perhaps the paradigmatic truism of our times.

You might deny this until you realize that much of your self-worth is derived from Googling yourself; if you don't exist on the internet, you don't exist.

You get frustrated as I do when you are researching in front of your computer and what you're looking for doesn't show up on Google. Perhaps we are at the root of the problem.

It is our obligation as educators and intellectuals to make sure that the bulk of our production ends up there, preferably with free and unfettered access to all. This means not making materials available only for those affiliated with our institution, our students, or our colleagues, but giving free and unfettered access for all. Doing so means posting our works on the world wide web so that anyone, anywhere, at any time can have access to them. In this way, we will ensure that our work exists.

Problems of Access

Not everyone is able to have access to intellectual materials in the way that we do. Only a fraction of web users have access to proprietary subscription services like LexusNexis, ProQuest, or Factiva. Public libraries, which have limited or no access to these subscription services, are understaffed and under-funded. Most rural libraries are in a sorry state. Urban libraries, too, are not faring much better. In New York City where I live, the local Barnes & Noble is often used instead of our pitiful public libraries. In the Barnes & Nobles, consumers are allowed to use books for research purposes without having to buy them. A typical user will be slung into a soft chair next to a stack of dog-eared books, sipping a cup of coffee, taking notes on a laptop. It's a nice idea, but we all know the market-driven limitations of what Barnes & Noble stocks. Most likely what you've written is not going to be showing up in a Barnes & Noble any time soon.

I run UbuWeb, a large site dedicated to the free distribution of generally hard-to-find and out-of-print avant-garde materials. In May of 2000, I received the following short email at UbuWeb from someone named Meredith:

i really enjoyed your site. it made me think about different cultures other than the ones i experience daily living in a

small texas town.

I can't imagine that much of UbuWeb's materials are available in Meredith's local library. Chances are that they don't have much, if any, sound poetry, and I'll bet that their concrete poetry section is lacking as well. Odds are that the local Barnes & Noble isn't chockfull of this stuff either. If Meredith were ambitious, she might try searching the web and buying these items online. But then she'd have to fork out \$125 to buy a used copy of Emmett Williams' *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* or \$90 to purchase the *Revue OU* box set that compiles the entire run of the legendary French sound poetry magazine from the 1960s. Those two items comprise a miniscule amount of what's available to Meredith for free on UbuWeb, right in the comfort of her own living room. Meredith's note succinctly summed up what I had wished to achieve with UbuWeb: the creation of a distribution center for out of print, hard-to-find, small run, obscure materials, available at no cost from any point on the globe. UbuWeb embraces the distributive possibilities inherent in the web's original technologies: call it radical forms of distribution.

And because the original materials that UbuWeb hosts never really made money in the first place -- coupled with the fact that as sound, video and textual works, they easily translate to the web environment - - we can indulge in such high-minded utopian ideals. Certainly the latest bestseller or how-to book cannot engage in such radical distribution: the financial stakes are too high. But we are in a unique position -- I'd call it a privileged position -- to be able to give our work away, ensuring that it exists. When was the last time you received a fat royalty check for an academic book? You get my point. And with the advent and subsequent growth of the web, we have our perfect distribution mechanism.

I'm not saying don't publish on paper. By all means do, but make sure that your work is available in a non-proprietary digital form as well. For most of us, the book as physical object has bestowed credibility upon its author. Again, I can use myself as an example: I love books as much as anyone and in my CV, I'll cite the number of paper books I have published, and give only a passing glance at my web publications. I see myself as being on the cusp of a generation for whom books will certainly not mean what they have meant for us; ultimately I believe that books will merely act as a supplement to one's primary online experience. Suffice it to say that books aren't disappearing any time soon. Until an electronic reader is made available that approximates the experience of reading a book -- a technology that took 500 years to be perfected -- books remain necessary vehicles. Can you imagine taking a laptop to the beach to read an e-book? Not yet. But it will happen. So for the time being, our books need to have an online counterpart which extends, updates or in some way acts as a corollary agent to the paper edition.

Institutional Leverage is on Your Side

What do publishing houses and magazines do for their authors? In our field, they generally don't make them rich; instead, they create a context, a framework for the work to exist. The benefits of academic publication are almost always oblique: credibility, speaking engagements, job credentials, etc. With the web, we can extend the benefits of book publishing to enhance both our careers and the institution with which we are affiliated.

My colleagues Charles Bernstein and Al Filreis are doing just that with

PennSound, an enormous, open-access poetry sound archive. Because of its affiliation with the University of Pennsylvania, the site immediately became established as an authoritative distribution center. Charles and Al have found that it works both ways: Penn lends credibility to PennSound and PennSound brings a new international audience to Penn. It's a win-win situation. An independent site can establish itself in similar ways, but it's much harder and can take a much longer time. Institutional leverage is on your side.

Oblique but Substantial Benefits

And while we're on the subject of winning, let's look at some of the benefits of making your work freely accessible. The preeminent literary critic Marjorie Perloff's author page at the University of Buffalo's Electronic Poetry Center is stacked years' worth with years her work. Each year, the content list grows longer. Some of it has been published before, other essays have appeared in small journals, and much of it appears exclusively on her page. Marjorie continues to publish books -- often one a year -- but she tells me that most of her speaking engagements come as solicitations from her web page. Let's face it, books that traffic in the more arcane aspects of academia are expensive and often hard to get in many parts of the world. But almost everyone has access to the web (and if not now, they soon will). From this stems numerous opportunities.

I, too, have had an experience similar to Marjorie's. Last summer I was invited on a reading tour of Scandinavia. I read to large and enthusiastic audiences in Copenhagen, Stockholm, and Helsinki and met dozens of fans of my work. Much to my surprise, no one had ever seen any of the eight books I had published over the past decade. All of these books had been published by tiny independent publishing houses and were available for purchase by an equally tiny distributor. The European context for my work was what was on the internet. I like getting these invitations, so I make sure to post everything I publish on paper on the internet. While I have never received one cent from my experimental writing, due to the web, I have traveled the world extensively with all expenses paid, garnered honorariums and, most importantly, I've connected with an interested readership -- a peer group, really -- in an admittedly obscure endeavor. Without the internet, a writer in my position would never exist in quite the same way.

The Speed of Academic Blogging

The economic implications of web publishing are obvious by now, as is the speed with which the transfer and exchange of ideas is happening. Over the past few years, this tendency has increased with blogging. Even such established media outlets as The New York Times are requiring their reporters to blog constantly during the day; the paper that arrives on your doorstep each morning is hopelessly out of date; it's truly yesterday's news.

I'm not suggesting that you all become bloggers, but it's good to think about how long-held academic publishing practices can be questioned in this strikingly new media environment in which we are immersed. By the time your book is published, chances are that it might suffer a similar fate -- or worse -- to this morning's paper edition of The New York Times. I'm not saying that the field of, say, Romantic literature of the 19th Century moves at the same pace and with the same urgency as the escalating cost of gasoline, but I do think that we can learn something -- even if glancing -- from the blogging paradigm. Like

publishing or academic affiliation, blogging creates another type of community: peer-based consensus garners credibility. Blogging opens up instantaneous discourse with a group of like-minded thinkers. We all know of colleagues who post chapters-in-progress of their latest books on their blogs. Older proprietary ways of thinking would condemn this practice with the fear that your ideas would be swiped, brought quickly to the marketplace, rendering your efforts useless. On the contrary, what happens is the opposite. Like any twelve-step program alumnus knows: words are deeds. By showing your commitment to these ideas publicly, they are acknowledged by a given community as being yours. If it's available to the whole world, then anyone trying to swipe your ideas will be outed by the public knowledge that you're the one who has been working on this subject. Academic bloggers find that their community of readers often act as fact-checkers or engage the blogger in instantaneous debate over specific points before the book reaches the concretized state of print. Instant feedback on your work: does it get any better than that?

The poet Ron Silliman, whose blog has become somewhat of an anchor for the poetics community, recently marveled at what's happened to him since in the year since his blog's launch. I'll excerpt from a long list:

- I've had to become more rigorous in my reading, to actually think a little about what to read next & why
- My mental map of contemporary poetry has changed profoundly
- I've had to acknowledge the presence of an entirely new generation of poets & recognize that they really are the "poets of today," however you might care to define that.
- I've met, online & sometimes later in person, a huge number of interesting new people & gotten to know several folks I'd already met quite a bit better
- My correspondence has gone up dramatically
- So has the arrival of books in the mail - twenty books in one week is not uncommon.
- I've been able to spread the word about some poetry I care about a lot.
- My own poetry is being solicited at a much greater rate than I can possibly manage.
- I'm being invited to read more often - so much so, in fact, that I've learned to say No for the first time in my life. I've turned down trips to Oregon, Finland & several places in between as a result.
- Writing here has pushed my own poetry forward in ways I would not have expected & which I don't think (yet) I can fully articulate.

In yet another sense, for Ron and for millions of others, if it doesn't exist on a blog, it doesn't exist -- so much so that Google has just launched it's own Blog Search, which indexes blog listings as they happen. Yet one more way to check your existence, minute-to-minute.

CDs are Dead

I will now make another claim you are sure to find outrageous: CDs are dead. As a matter of fact, all static, non-networked media is dead. This includes CDs and DVDs, which are quickly going the way of the zip drive. There used to be a claim that a non-networked computer -- a

stand-alone workstation -- was really not a computer. The thinking -- correct in my opinion -- went: if it's not networked, it doesn't exist; if it's not able to be shared, it doesn't exist. Older media needs to be digitized in order to exist.

Again, I'll use myself as a case in point. Nobody loved rummaging through used record stores like me. I have over 10,000 LPs to show for it and an equal number of CDs. For thirty-five years, most of my spare time was spent hunting down discs. But these days, I rarely open a gatefold of my beloved LPs and even more rarely do I crack a jewel case. Instead, I turn to my hard drive which is stacked with many more MP3s than my physical space can hold. And the thrill of the hunt remains: everything on my drive was procured through web-browsing or file-sharing.

And sharing is the operative word. I feel that my LPs are now only truly valuable (read: socially) when they are digitally transferred and shared. Otherwise they sit on my shelf, a slab of vinyl for the enjoyment of me and my three fetishist, nostalgic friends. My reel-to-reel and cassette tapes suffer a worse fate as they literally degrade with each passing day. Businesses that are flourishing today like Netflix are finished; they use the web as an interface for distributing singular copies of material objects, but in failing to distribute the actual intellectual materials on the web, they are already doomed. See how different iTunes and its success is. Because they distribute digital content on the web, they are succeeding wildly. Obviously, given time and sufficient bandwidth, Netflix and their competitors will migrate to the web. Again, iTunes knows that if it doesn't exist on the internet, it doesn't exist.

Like iTunes the BBC knows better. Their interactive Media Player will use peer-to-peer technology to deliver hours of TV and radio content completely legally and free of charge. But the big hitch is their restriction on the content which prevents it being played beyond seven days from its original broadcast date. Major media concerns have an interest in digital materials "expiring" after a certain date. With iTunes proprietary AAC format, there is a limit to how many times a file can be copied before it expires. Fair enough. Commercial is commercial.

However, what we're interested in is unrestricted access to non-commercial, educational materials. So, in this instance by exist, I mean something exists when it can be shared, altered and re-circulated. Proprietary materials that do not live within this eco-system -- even when compromised by time-stamped "expiration" -- are doomed to wither into oblivion.

The New Radicalism

In concluding, I'm going to drop a real secret on you. Used to be that if you wanted to be subversive and radical, you'd publish on the web, bypassing all those arcane publishing structures at no cost. Everyone would know about your work at lightening speed; you'd be established and garner credibility in a flash, with an adoring worldwide readership.

Shhhh... the new radicalism is paper. Right. Publish it on a printed page and no one will ever know about it. It's the perfect vehicle for terrorists, plagiarists, and for subversive thoughts in general. In closing, if you don't want it to exist -- and there are many reasons to want to keep things private -- keep it off the web.

