Robert Kramer on Tim Tomlinson; Beverly C. Tomek on Stephen Eric Bronner; Andrea Scarpino on Lindsay Tigue; Carol Denson on Emily Pérez

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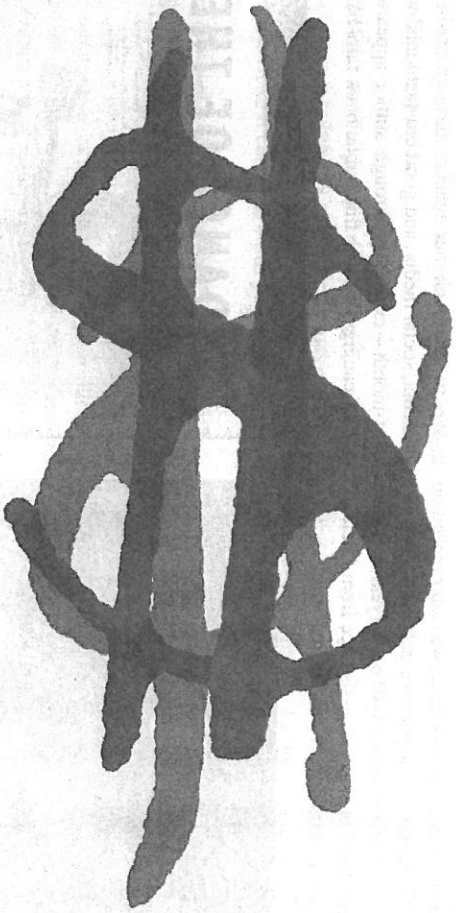

In Focus:

Corporate Fictions

with contributions from:

Ralph Clare,
Jeffrey R. Di Leo,
Robert Lestón,
Scott Rettberg,
Johannah Rodgers,
Kieran Smith,
Joseph Tabbi,
Alfred Thomas,
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Academia."edu"

Johannah Rodgers

The first question, "Why Are We Not Boycotting Academia.edu?", which was the title of a December 8, 2015 symposium organized by The Centre for Disruptive Media at Coventry University, is a crucial one. Unfortunately, it is also, at this moment in time, an apparently easy one to answer. The main reason "we" are not boycotting Academia.edu is because, as an organization backed by an estimated $17.7MM in venture-capital funding, Academia.edu has been able to successfully fulfill a need for a well-designed, easy to use, freely accessible, global repository of scholarly work across the disciplines. In fact, there is so much scholarly content posted currently on the site, including, it is worth mentioning, information about the 2015 Coventry University symposium organized by Gary Hall and Janneka Adema, that Academia.edu has become difficult to avoid.

Yet, as a privately-owned, venture-capital funded, commercial venture, Academia.edu has also been the object of some scrutiny, thanks largely to the attention brought to it by the 2015 symposium, a video recording of which can be accessed at Archive.org. The subject of two 2015 articles in the US-based magazines *The Atlantic* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Academia.edu was, more recently, profiled and criticized in the Canadian magazine *University Affairs* for its ongoing use of the .edu domain despite the fact that the site has no educational affiliation or function. And, however educational its wider mission to facilitate access to scholarly work may be, its business model, ever evolving and not publicly disclosed, is a for-profit one that depends on the free donation of intellectual property originally funded by a range of government and non-profit sources.

The pubicly available facts about Academia.edu are astonishingly consistent: It has a, somewhat inexplicably, large and growing user base that totals an estimated 46MM account holders (December, 2016) and 36MM unique visitors per month. It is free to use for its registered users and it is designed and architected to be at once easy to use and feature-rich, meaning, even if you do not regularly visit the site, it will stay in touch with you via e-mail to keep you abreast of new research posted by those "academics" whom you "follow" and the "impact" of your work based on the number of users accessing it. Further, unlike other existing scholarly databases, such as JSTOR or ProjectMuse, Academia.edu offers users access to analytics related to the reception and readership of scholarly work and a daily-updated percentile rank, i.e., top 1%, 4%, etc., of work and profile views relative to those of others "using," perhaps more rightly referred to as, "posted," on the site.

As a registered user of Academia.edu, I have some first-hand experience with the site's functionality, its ease of use, and, as a result of both, several questions about its user base and the demographics of its 36MM unique monthly visitors. Although advertising itself as a platform with 46MM registered academics, the lack of any requirements for registering an account means that its user base is highly diverse and almost certainly not comprised of 46MM "academics," unless that term is understood in the very broadest sense possible. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2014 there were just over 1.3 MM job positions in post-secondary education in the US. Assuming that the US represents the largest post-secondary job market globally, the fact that this number, *in its entirety*, represents less than three percent of Academia.edu's user base is just the most obvious indication that the demographics of Academia.edu's user-base are wide-ranging. Further, having posted the table of contents to my 2014 first year writing textbook on Academia.edu, I know from comments posted by users downloading this material that over two thirds of those accessing this resource are undergraduates. While I am not suggesting that undergraduates should be prevented from accessing Academia.edu nor that they should not be encouraged to access research on the site, I do think it is worthwhile pointing this out as one discrepency in Academia.edu's advertised claims regarding its user base.

There is so much scholarly content posted currently on the site that Academia.edu has become difficult to avoid.

Designed at once to appeal to university administrators looking for quantitative statistics related to research employees' overall "impact factor" and to time-pressed and post-PTSD full-time and adjunct faculty members raised and perhaps fueled by comparative, and particularly, percentile rankings, Academia.edu clearly understands its target audience. Further, as a privately held company, Academia.edu is not required to disclose any financial records and how the company is generating or plans to generate revenue is a work in progress. However, possibilities for monetizing its very rich and freely donated content, which, aside from information about its ever growing user base, currently totals 16.9MM "academic" papers, range from the highly ambitious plan of data mining content for innovative and profitable product development plans, to the more mundane and currently operational one of hosting and selling advertisements for job vacancies on its site, a fact that is all the more ironic in light of the increasingly irrational economies fueling the growth industry that is now known as "U.S. higher ed."

What's In a Name? At Academia."edu," About $17.7MM

Though not an educational institution, Academia.edu retains the right to use the .edu domain address because it purchased the name prior to October 29, 2001 when new guidelines related to the use of the domain were implemented. In other words, with respect to its use of the .edu domain, Academia.edu is "grandfathered" in. While this fact has been widely reported, and as much as Richard Price, the founder of Academia.edu can be congratulated on his foresight and financial acumen in registering the domain name Academia.edu on May 10, 1999, the company's right to the continued use of the .edu domain is not guaranteed since this use is subject to US government policies that can be amended. In April, 2012, a proposed amendment to current .edu policy was introduced to assess the intent and purpose of the sites maintained by existing .edu domain holders and to disqualify those sites with "Use Inconsistent with the Purpose of .edu." Though never ratified, the amendment was open to public comment through July 3, 2012, and the eighteen comments posted pointed out both the long-overdue need for such an amendment and its potential drawbacks, particularly with respect to its possibly and somewhat intentionally vague language. A lengthy comment posted by Academia.edu founder Richard Price opposed the amendment in no uncertain terms, arguing that it was the scope of the definition of terms such as "educational" that were at issue and subject to debate, interpretation, and application.

Words, Their Values, Valuations, and Costs

I very much agree with Price's assessment of the situation. It is issues of definition that must be discussed, both what words mean and who is in charge of the dictionary, meaning, increasingly, *directory*, being used as a reliable reference source to define them. The US Department of Commerce oversees the policies related to the use of .edu domain names, and though this function has been outsourced, in exchange for $54K per year to the not-for-profit educational information technology association Educause (an organization with 2015 revenues of $32MM and a director who was paid a $450K salary in 2015) it is still responsible for addressing just what this word *education* and its virtual place-holder *.edu* signify to U.S., state, and local governments in 2016 and update its policies accordingly.

Government investment in network and communications technologies related to the internet were intended to serve both commercial and public purposes. Just what the appropriate balance is between these two aims, sometimes, though not always similar, is open to debate. However, the privatization and commercialization of public resources, which are then monetized and sold back to the public, seems to be both a shady business practice and decidedly not in the public interest. What is more, Academia.edu's actual cost to public information and educational initiatives is ever growing and needs to be quantified. As university administrators look increasingly to private companies and their "free" services to supplement and, increasingly, replace internal information technology initiatives related to instructional, research, and curricular support, the question of what words mean, where and how their definitions are verified, and what real and virtual value is attached to them becomes all the more pressing. The Twitter "conversation" related to #deleteacademiaedu revealed that some universities—Arizona State, for instance—are in the process of "getting rid" of faculty websites. The college where I am employed, The New York City College of Technology at The City University of New York, has also made it harder, not easier, for faculty to create and host publicly available web sites at the college.

Regarding answers to the question of whether academics should or should not use Academia.edu, there is, to date, no consensus. Although most universities now maintain repositories of scholarly articles published by their faculty and these can be somewhat easily accessed by scholars unaffiliated with the sponsoring institution, unaffiliated users cannot deposit materials to them. The 2016 MLA Commons/CORE initiative is the most recent publicly available repository of scholarly

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publications. However, this project, like the Humanities Commons project is only for scholars in the Humanities. While I applaud these initiatives, both of which are "related" to ongoing Scholarly Commons projects at CUNY, where I am affiliated, I continue to believe that all of these initiatives need to be combined with university projects into a consortium model. The centralization of Academia.edu and its ease of use is unparalleled compared to any other scholarly repository that I have accessed. That said, I advise academics who have decided to continue using Academia.edu to post LINKS ONLY to that web site and upload their intellectual property to repositories hosted by unversities.

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Sukenick, with *ABR* serving as a kind of print-precusor to *ebr*, in a different media-form. As an institutionalized platform formed with the purpose of publishing the work of writers for other writers, *ABR* was self-consciously designed to counter a commercial publishing culture centered in New York: it was precisely, an anti-corporate corporate form. And at the same time, *ebr* was pursuing projects that had close affinities to another corporate body, Sukenick's Fiction Collective, still flourishing today as Fiction Collective 2.

Hypothesis Three: The corporation is structured as an "open unity" or an open totality: it is the enduring form, both abstract and concrete, of an act of creative *generalization* that has been undertaken collectively.

"Personality," etymologically the condition of wearing a mask, is, as Hobbes argued long ago, a *sign*: the sign of a provisional unity. As anyone who looks in a mirror knows, this unity is characteristic of natural persons as well as of "fictional" or "artificial" persons; it should be understood not as a unity of *completeness* (closed, final, metaphysical) but rather as a unity of *coherence*, a durable arrangement of bodies, substances, ideas, and forms, all placed in differing relations of value to one another. Unlike the unity of completeness, the unity of coherence is a *pragmatic* form that always in principle remains open to new elements. Our accounts of corporate ontology should recall the ancient category of *dispositio*, from the art of rhetoric: the corporation always implies an organization and arrangement, a *process* of giving form to matter and of finding matter for form. The very structure of its unity is "political," in so far as it depends upon a constant, ongoing calibration of the relative values that have caused the corporation to come about and that subsequently emerge from within its structures and in the wake of its activity. For its disposition is always also a *dis*-positioning, a *dis*placement or *re*-arrangement of elements, a perpetual motion-machine in which each value is always measured against all others: the corporation takes shape from this ongoing "dispositional" process.

This description may be understood both regressively and progressively: it characterizes the corporation as we usually understand it, in the form of the for-profit, commercial institution, which seeks to sustain itself through time in order to capitalize different aspects of the world as efficiently as possible. But it also describes corporate bodies like the Church, or the university (both also of course partly for-profit in their logic), each of which aspires to a different mode of universality; indeed, in both cases this universality is a fundamental premise of the institution.

Hypothesis Four: The universality of the corporation takes the form of a "common" structure, and the largest name for this structure is "pluralism"—but only when pluralism has been re-thought as a structure of the common *beyond* the problem of "difference."

In order to elucidate this idea it will be helpful to ventriloquize a frequent objection, one that proceeds from the commitment to difference as a critical and political principal. No group is open to everyone, says the objection: groups are coherent in their unity only because they exclude. The corporation is no different, and in fact churches prove the point even more clearly than for-profit corporations, which after all *do* aspire to a kind of universality (of address, of consumption, of alienation). All churches have their dogmas, their heresies, and their infidels. Universities are highly skilled in the art of exclusion, subordination, and alienation, as we know.

If from an historical or empirical perspective the truth of this objection seems irrefutable, at the same time it seems equally true to say that when considered empirically and pragmatically the edges of these exclusions are very difficult, and perhaps impossible, to identify. As deconstruction as taught us, one is never *not* in relation to another—some relation always remains. The true problem is thus not one of difference or of exclusion but of *scale and mode of relation*: has one's analysis of the structuration of the corporate body, both intrinsically within itself and extrinsically in relation to other groups, been conducted at a fine enough scale so that these points of relation become explicit? Once these points of relation have been established, categorized, examined, is it not possible for a point of contact or intersection to be redrawn so that it becomes a point around which a new corporate formation begins to take shape, overlapping—rather than opposing—the first? Put more abstractly, when does a part form a new whole? How does the whole that part forms differ from the whole from which the part has been taken?

The problems of scale and modes of relation that constitute corporate groups derive from the essentially *pluralist* ontology of the corporation, which permits the discovery of heretofore unrecognized organizing principles and purposes, and thus also for new affiliations—or, if one prefers, for new disruptions. The disruptive potential of the pluralist analysis of corporations is important to bear in mind, lest it appear (mistakenly) that there may be no opposition among corporate forms, only neighborliness: that antagonism has softened into a nudge, a stickiness or entanglement, at best a handshake or a passing affiliation, at worst, disinterested tolerance or apathy. But of course points of relation can become strongly charged and often become points of conflict; indeed, the coherence and the identity of any corporate group emerges from *the organization of this conflict into a form of coherence* that can endure. A pluralist philosophy of corporations does not require harmony and agreement; indeed, it is equally likely to produce *a more precise account of confrontation*. If the corporate group takes its shape from an ongoing process of translation among competing systems of value, as I believe that it does, then this process is obviously never frictionless. This is true *inside* of corporations as well as between or among them.

Hypothesis Five: The value of the corporate form lies in its capacity to give structure to the invention of ideas that might motivate collective action.

The corporate form offers the resources for new political compositions—for understanding the political as a "compositional" process. At the same time it will be important to recognize corporate forms that *already* exist and that might be re-occupied, re-personated, and re-activated. The university, for instance, must be translated into the *universitas* that it should become—a gesture of possibility or of utopianism that is indispensable to the political imagination, as both Plato and Aristotle recognized. Nor will the composition of the *universitas* ever be only material: it will have an ideational component and will require a "theory." And its compositional process implies both a *more* and a *less*. It will require *more* than spontaneous action, *more* than protest, *more* than networks, which are never durable enough and which must be thickened in many different ways; they require the codification of procedures, the invention of new structures for communication and action, and the formation of archives that may serve as repositories for a collective "memory" of actions and utterances. To re-occupy the corporation, in short, implies an embrace of *institutions*, both in theory and in practice, an implication that is antithetical to some notions of politics. But at the same time these institutionalized forms must be *less* than the large-scale institutional categories that often populate political discourse and political theory. They will be smaller, more subtle, more flexible than "State" or "nation" or "people" or "society." The corporation is the meso-layer of institution situated *between* the one and the many: it is the form of the more-than-one when the more-than-one wears the mask of the person and begins to speak and act for itself.

Some of us are doing this now: you are in fact doing this now, insofar as you participate in groups that may be described according to the definition offered above—and there is no one who does not participate in such groups in some way, including *ebr*. The question is one of recognition: do you participate with knowledge of your participation, or not? Are you participating *deliberately*?

Would you like to do so? www.artsofcorporation.org.

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