# Debates in the Digital Humanities

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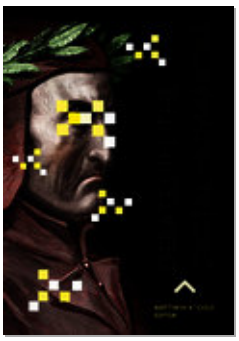

Published by University of Minnesota Press

## The Social Contract of Scholarly Publishing

DANIEL J. COHEN

When Roy Rosenzweig and I finished writing a full draft of our book *Digital History*, we sat down at a table and looked at the stack of printouts.

"So, what now?" I said to Roy naively. "Couldn't we just publish what we have on the web with the click of a button? What value does the gap between this stack and the finished product have? Isn't it 95 percent done? What's the last five percent for?"

We stared at the stack some more.

Roy finally broke the silence, explaining the magic of the last stage of scholarly production between the final draft and the published book: "What happens now is the creation of the *social contract* between the authors and the readers. We agree to spend considerable time ridding the manuscript of minor errors, and the press spends additional time on other corrections and layout, and readers respond to these signals—a lack of typos, nicely formatted footnotes, a bibliography, specialized fonts, and a high-quality physical presentation—by agreeing to give the book a serious read."

I have frequently replayed that conversation in my mind, wondering about the constitution of this social contract in scholarly publishing, which is deeply related to questions of academic value and reward.

For the ease of conversation, let's call the two sides of the social contract of scholarly publishing the *supply side* and the *demand side*. The supply side is the creation of scholarly works, including writing, peer review, editing, and the form of publication. The demand side is much more elusive—the mental state of the audience that leads them to "buy" what the supply side has produced. In order for the social contract to work, for engaged reading to happen, and for credit to be given to the author (or editor of a scholarly collection), both sides need to be aligned properly.

The social contract of the book is profoundly entrenched and powerful—almost mythological—especially in the humanities. As John Updike put it in his diatribe against the digital[1] (and most humanities scholars and tenure committees would still agree), "The printed, bound and paid-for book was—still is, for the

moment—more exacting, more demanding, of its producer and consumer both. It is the site of an encounter, in silence, of two minds, one following in the other's steps but invited to imagine, to argue, to concur on a level of reflection beyond that of personal encounter, with all its merely social conventions, its merciful padding of blather and mutual forgiveness."

As academic projects have experimented with the web over the past two decades, we have seen intense thinking about the supply side. Robust academic work has been reenvisioned in many ways: as topical portals, interactive maps, deep textual databases, new kinds of presses, primary source collections, and even software. Most of these projects strive to reproduce the magic of the traditional social contract of the book, even as they experiment with form.

The demand side, however, has languished. Far fewer efforts have been made to influence the mental state of the scholarly audience. The unspoken assumption is that the reader is more or less unchangeable in this respect, only able to respond to and validate works that have the traditional marks of the social contract: having survived a strong filtering process, near-perfect copyediting, the imprimatur of a press.

We need to work much more on the demand side if we want to move the social contract forward into the digital age. Despite Updike's ode to the book, there *are* social conventions surrounding print that are worth challenging. Much of the reputational analysis that occurs in the professional humanities relies on cues beyond the scholarly content itself. The act of scanning a CV is fraught with these conventions.

Can we change the views of humanities scholars so that they may accept, as some legal scholars already do, the great blog post as being as influential as the great law review article? Can we get humanities faculty, as many tenured economists already do, to publish more in open access journals? Can we accomplish the humanities equivalent of FiveThirtyEight.com, which provides as good, if not better, in-depth political analysis than most newspapers, earning the grudging respect of journalists and political theorists? Can we get our colleagues to recognize outstanding academic work wherever and however it is published?

I believe that to do so, we may have to think less like humanities scholars and more like social scientists. Behavioral economists know that although the perception of value can come from the intrinsic worth of the good itself (e.g., the quality of a wine, already rather subjective), it is often influenced by many other factors, such as price and packaging (the wine bottle, how the wine is presented for tasting). These elements trigger a reaction based on stereotypes—if it's expensive and looks well wrapped, it must be valuable. The book and article have an abundance of these value triggers from generations of use, but we are just beginning to understand equivalent value triggers online—thus the critical importance of web design and why the logo of a trusted institution or a university press can still matter greatly, even if it appears on a website rather than a book.

Social psychologists have also thought deeply about the potent grip of these idols of our tribe. They are aware of how cultural norms establish and propagate

themselves and tell us how the imposition of limits creates hierarchies of recognition. Thinking in their way, along with the way the web works, one potential solution on the demand side might come not from the scarcity of production, as it did in a print world, but from the scarcity of attention. That is, value will be perceived in any community-accepted process that narrows the seemingly limitless texts to read or websites to view. *Curation* becomes more important than publication once publication ceases to be limited.

## NOTES

This chapter originally appeared as "The Social Contract of Scholarly Publishing" (http://www.dancohen.org/2010/03/05/the-social-contract-of-scholarly-publishing/).

1. http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/25/books/review/25updike.html.