

Ahead to the Past:

Scholarly Communication Returns to the Seventeenth Century

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Thinking and research and writing have always depended on technology for production and communication, from clay tablets to pencils to the Internet. Seen from this perspective, the key inventions might be the alphabet, paper, printing, the typewriter, and digital media. When there are large changes in the technology for recording and communicating thoughts, there are also changes in the institutions of research and writing. We are in the midst of one of those revolutions now, and our technologies for research and scholarly communication are in flux, as older institutions get shaky and the shape of new institutions remains obscure. In many ways, our situation today resembles the more informal networks of the 1600s and 1700s rather than the professionalized processes that were dominant in the 20th century.

If you look at the writings of philosophers in the 1600s and 1700s, such as Descartes and Leibniz, you will see that their writing was a mix of letters, self-published books, and a few articles. In the century and a half spanned by Descartes and Leibniz, both of them had very active correspondence, especially Leibniz, whose many interests and travels led him to maintain wide professional connections. When Descartes wished to gather comments on his *Meditations*, he was able to solicit objections from most of the major philosophers in Europe, and he published them along with his responses. There was potential for Descartes to become the connector for the new philosophy, but he was too private a person to take on such a public role. Instead, his friend Fr. Marin Mersenne did much of the work of connecting Descartes to other thinkers. Leibniz, on the other hand, was always out in public; he carried on spirited correspondence with many people. But, it was another man who helped set up a new mode of connection that included letters and published articles. That man was Henry Oldenburg, who was not so much a researcher as a connector and linker who kept researchers in contact with one another. A German, Oldenburg lived in London from 1652 on, and he founded and edited the first-ever scientific periodical in Europe, *Philosophical Transactions*. Oldenburg was also secretary to the British Royal Society, itself a new creation, and he acted as a clearinghouse for the science of his day. Scientists began to be linked in a network that favored those who had access to its relatively rapid means of communication and debate.

In the 19th century, the situation began to change again. There was no new writing technology, but new social arrangements developed. More and more, especially in Germany, research and writing was published in large books and in journals. Journals in philosophy and science began to multiply; many of them did not last very long, but they provided an outlet for particular

schools of thought that came and went. The universities gradually played a larger role as centers of research and communication. They became centers of research in more precisely defined academic disciplines, which were institutionalized in the newly potent universities. In the 1600s and 1700s, none of the important philosophers worked at universities. In the 1800s, most influential European philosophers were associated with the academy, although there were important exceptions, such as Marx and Kierkegaard, who never were connected with a university, and Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, who both left the academy. It is significant, though, that while they were able to publish, these academic exiles influenced the professional discipline of philosophy only long after their deaths. In England, important non-university philosophers such as Bentham and the Mills had more influence throughout the 1800s.

Now the scene is changing again. If I published a book or article, others might review it, discuss it in their books and articles, disagree, agree, qualify, and take up other attitudes or discussions. What is new is that all these items, which once would have had to be searched for laboriously in a library, could now be found linked together on the Web. These links might include blog entries, articles, Web journals, Facebook comments, bibliographical references to libraries and print items, and even email messages that were archived in some accessible fashion. What is also new is that no one would have to maintain the list of these contributions to the discussion. An Internet search could index this scattered archive, and internal links would take the reader through portions of it. The whole linked discussion, which would include both formal and informal publication, would become available in a new way as a unit, rather than as hidden trails to be followed in libraries. This makes for a much richer field of discourse.

We can no longer assume that all of the work being done on any particular issue will be gathered into printed books and journals. Thus, in many ways, we are returning to the patterns of the days of Leibniz and Oldenburg in the 17th and 18th centuries. In those days, there was far more self-publication, fewer gatekeepers, and more reliance on well-connected people like Oldenburg, who made references and pointed people to things they should read and individuals they should correspond with. Instead of gatekeepers there were native guides through the jungle. Of course, there were concerns about the qualifications of the guides, but that was also true about the gatekeepers.

If you examine the way Descartes relied on Mersenne to assemble dialogue partners or the way Oldenburg connected scientists of his day, what went on looks very similar to what happens on blogs, where certain high-profile bloggers develop links and references that suggest to other people the direction their reading might go. We have a pattern that resembles the earlier one: self-publication with few gatekeepers, native guides making recommendations, and connectors who know the field, all of which lead to strong and pervasive informal communication that is

linked and made public. Journals and books can no longer dominate and filter the conversation.

There is, of course, one enormous difference between today and the 17th and 18th centuries, namely, that far more people are involved. The result is an avalanche of information and opinion being self-published. There are also crowds of guides offering their suggestions. What is new and what is needed are tools for dealing with a vast expansion of information and links and suggestions for paths through the thickets. Those tools are developing, but we do not know what form they will take.

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