

Theorising digital scholarship – introducing the new edition

Cristina Costa¹ and Mark Murphy²

Vol 1, No 1 (2016), 1 - 4

The online version of this text can be found at socialtheoryapplied.com/journal/

¹University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK; ²University of Glasgow, UK

This is the first edition of our new online Journal, the Journal of Applied Social Theory, and it makes sense to launch the journal via a special edition on theorising digital scholarship. After all, the journal is online and fully accessible to anyone who wishes to read it (i.e., including those outside high education). It is also the journal wing of an established blogging platform www.socialtheoryapplied.com – a site co-edited by the co-editors of the journal, both of whom are experienced at using digital platforms (Wordpress, Facebook, Twitter) for publishing purposes. Digital scholarship is therefore of immense interest to us, and bringing social theory to bear on the field is an activity we both wanted to get our teeth into.

Those of us who engage in digital scholarship do so for a host of reasons, and it would be foolish to paint us all with the same brush. Some digital scholars see the web as a place that can free up writing, communication and dissemination activity – a welcome alternative to the slow and cumbersome way in which traditional scholarship often gets published. Publishing via the web gives one immediate access to readers and fellow scholars, and offers the opportunity at least to engage in discussion about issues of relevance in real time. Others do it for political reasons, as part of an open access movement that pits itself against an outdated and undemocratic publishing cabal. And there are those who have no other alternative routes to publishing apart from the digital.

But aside from the motivation, to be able to publish yourself and present your work to others in an easily accessible format that is open to anyone – well, how exciting is that? Very exciting, obviously. The association of new technologies with scholarly activity implies more than a process of digitisation of academic content; it marks a new shift in academic practice from a formal, one-dimensional type of communication to different forms of engagement with academic knowledge within and beyond the

academy. The emergence of DIY tools such as blogs, wikis as well as other platforms for open communication and social congregation has given rise to a digital scholarship culture that is epitomised by a perceived liberation of the academic as consumer, producer and publisher of knowledge for the public good. This liberation has had the effect of expanding and diversifying the field of digital scholarship. This can be witnessed for example o the proliferation of collaborative magazine-style websites like The New Inquiry, A Public Space, The Society Pages and Warscapes. But there are numerous other digital initiatives that share a commitment to open access and the sharing of knowledge across academic and non-academic audiencesⁱ.

But as with all forms of excitement, it tends to dissipate when confronted with the reality of digital scholarship. This reality is intimately tied up with the politics of higher education – the university and its hinterland. The challenges that would naturally be brought to bear on digital scholarship – time, engagement, impact, status, esteem – tend to be magnified in the world of academia. Those unused to the peculiarities of academic life might think that the opportunities provided by digital scholarship – publishing, access, impact, networking, dissemination – would prove manna from heaven for the dedicated academic, keen to promote their work and engage with a wider public. To some extent, they are right, but in other ways this innocent-eyed take is wide of the mark. The ideals of digital scholarship are tempered by the realities of academia, with its powerful prestige economy alongside the pressures of a diversified workload. While digital scholarship provides routes to publishing and impact, so important to the modern university – taking advantage of the digital revolution should come with an advisory sticker attached. Because it's not so much about publishing, impact etc., but the *right kind* of publishing, impact and the rest.

This is not to suggest that traditional and digital scholarship are polar opposites. They're not, at least they shouldn't be and this debate should not be seen in either/or terms. There is clearly much scope for them to complement one another, but so far they offer a confusing landscape within which to ply the academic trade, the 'should I/shouldn't I' question asked by many scholars who are keen to engage, but unsure as to the consequences. One of the reasons for this is the pace of change – the social media platforms have developed so fast while institutions and traditional publishers are doing what they can to catch up. The 'rules of the game' to quote Bourdieu, haven't even been written yet. So for many it is a question of 'stick, or twist'. To try and do both is a risky strategy.

But this risk is taken on by many, including the editors of the journal - there is a large and ever growing community of journals and scholars that aim to bring scholarship into the digital age. The purpose of this risk taking is not one of opposing established practices, but rather one of considering the establishment of new practices by revisiting both the role of the academic and the relevance of academia, especially in relation to wider society.

With this in mind, this special issue brings together a selection of papers that reflect some of the debates emerging in this field of inquiry. As such, this special issue comprises papers on digital publishing practices, new notions and roles of digital public(ness), academic identities and the future of academic practice. These essays build on different social theoretical approaches not often associated with digital practices, thus making an original and intriguing contribution to a field of research still in its inception.

Cat Pausé's and Deborah Russell's paper, for example, makes use of feminist theories of intersectionality to explore the use of digital technology in academic collaboration and dissemination. Their aim here is to disclose the tensions academics face as the academy gets reshaped by the influence of social media on scholarly work. Anna Coopers' and Jena Condie's paper also elaborates on the disruptive effect of digital technologies in academia. However, their work, focused on Bakhtin's concept of 'Carnival', aims to develop understandings of how dominant structures are both disrupted and replaced by new practices. They also elaborate on how digital scholarship practices impact on professional identities or 'dialogical selves'.

Another paper exploring dialogical selves is that of Jon Rainford. Yet, his auto-ethnographic research links his reflections to the work of Margaret Archer as he explores the interplay between public reflexivity and internal conversation. In so doing, Rainford provide insights with regards to 'becoming'/'being' a researcher in a public digital space.

The paper that follows also focuses on the phenomenon of public digital scholarship and how academics build their identities online. Taking a different stance from that employed in Rainford's research, Bonnie Stewart's paper draws on Ong's theories of secondary orality and secondary literacy to study 'academic Twitter' as a phenomenon in which oral and literate traditions as well as audience expectations are collapsed. Stewart examines the risks of this collapse whilst also showing that networked engagement can result in opportunities not present in traditional scholarship practices.

Also focused on digital academic identities is the paper of Katia Hildebrandt and Alec Couros. Their work on digital selves and public identity explores the conceptualisation of identity through a poststructural lens, especially that of Foucault's notion of subjectivation. Hildebrandt and Couros reflect on the repercussions of approaching identity as fixed, unitary, and controllable on diverse digital phenomena and theorise the possibilities and challenges offered by reimagining digital selfhood as fluid, never complete, and conferring a constrained agency.

Last in this edition, but by no means least, is Mark Dawson's paper on the future of academic practice. Dawson's paper addresses the future of digital technology in scholarship practices. The paper, which follows the work of Derrida and Derrida's reading of the *pharmakon* in Plato's *Phaedrus*, provides a unique account of the

position, application and impact of digital technologies on academic practices, with particular emphasis on the role of the academic as a public intellectual.

To conclude, we hope that the selection of papers curated for this edition are of interest not only to those engaged in digital scholarship research, but also to those who are either curious or still hesitant about these new approaches. In this sense, the purpose of this special issue is two-fold: on the one hand, it is our goal to advance the theoretical debates in this area by making specific links with theories that may not be obviously associated with this field of inquiry, but which can clearly make a contribution to it. On the other hand, we also want to raise awareness about digital scholarship among and beyond academia as a publicly-faced practice with potential societal impact. Let us know what you think of the contents of the edition – we would be delighted to hear from you.

With best wishes,

Cristina Costaⁱⁱ and Mark Murphyⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ See for examples, the likes of [economic sociology](#), [Progressive geographies](#), [Anthropology works](#), [New books network](#), [Filosofia](#) and [Platformia Sociologica](#). There are also other online sites that act as centres and platforms for educational and conference initiatives – see the likes of the [Global Centre for Advanced Studies](#) and [Centre for Research in Social Sciences and Humanities](#).

ⁱⁱ Cristina.costa@strath.ac.uk

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark.murphy.2@glasgow.ac.uk