Peer review innovations in Humanities: how can scholars in A&H profit from the “wisdom of the crowds”?

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At the origin
Peer review forms

- In traditional paper-based publishing we distinguish:
  - **Single-blind** peer review
    - Most widespread form of refereeing
  - **Double-blind** peer review
    - American Psychological Association
  - **Open** peer review
    - Combines innovation with tradition
    - Rare in print journals but quite ordinary in Open Access publishing (BioMedCentral)
Scholars’ attitude to peer review

- Scholars’ attitude on peer review is generally speaking positive
  - ALPSP survey (2008) among faculty
    - 93% of respondents disagreed that peer review is unnecessary
    - The large majority (85%) agreed that peer review greatly helps scientific communication
    - 83% believed that without peer review there would be no control
    - 71% of the respondents perceived the double-blind as the most effective form of refereeing

But ...
Peer review drawbacks

- Concern about the effectiveness of the system
  - Undetection of mistakes and of falsifications
- Bias
- Delay in publication
- Costs
  - The minimum cost of refereeing has been estimated as $500 per accepted article by the American Institute of Physics (Harnad, 2001)
- Scalability problems
Peer review innovations in social web

• **Retroactive** peer review, performed through the overlay journals which select the content archived in repositories

• **Social peer review**, performed through blogs, wikis, social bookmarking tools like Connotea and Citeulike

• **Public peer review**, the social peer review embedded in the publishing workflow
  - Ex-post *PLoSONE*
  - Ex-ante *Atmospheric-chemistry-and-physics*
Quality assessment A&H

- Peer review in A&H is not a common practice:
  - Communities of humanists are **small, self-referential, scarcely cohesive**
  - The **monograph** is the predominant means of publication
  - **Quality control** is by far a greater concern in medicine and biology than, for example, in philosophy or history
  - Funds allocated in A&H are **scant**
Quality assessment A&H

- Some forms of quality assessment do exist in A&H too
  - **Monographs**
    - University presses editorial boards exercise a general form of quality control
    - Reviews (ex-post)
  - **Journals**
    - Journals internationally-oriented are mainly peer-reviewed
    - Journals oriented to local communities rarely adopt a peer review system
Digital Humanities

- Humanities are moving fast to Digital Humanities
  - for humanists as researchers the move to digital is not only a move from a format to another, but is also:
    - a way to explore the text, to profit of the power of the technologies in order to change the way research in Humanities is performed
      - Computational methods in Humanities are becoming widespread
      - Semantic Web
    - a way to foster the public debate, to recover the communicative function of the text
Social peer review in A&H

- Blogs and wikis, if embedded in the publishing workflow, have the potential to transform the peer review system, a practice never really established in A&H, from

"a system of gatekeeping to a mode of manifesting the responses to and discussion of a multiplicity of ideas in circulation" (Fitzpatrick, 2007)
CommentPress

- **CommentPress**
  is an open source theme and plugin for the WordPress blogging engine that allows readers
  - to **comment** paragraph by paragraph in the margins of a text
  - to **annotate**
  - to **gloss**
  - to **debate** on it
This site is powered by CommentPress, which allows comments to be attached to individual paragraphs, to whole pages, or to an entire document. To leave a comment on a paragraph, click the speech bubble to its left; to leave a comment on an entire page, click the link to “comments on the whole page” at right. To leave general comments on the entire text, click the closed book icon in the navigation bar. Comments are moderated for first-time unregistered commenters, but only as a means of spam-prevention; comments will not be filtered for content.

Additionally, registered users are able to post entries and comments in the blog, for a wider-ranging, more synthetic discussion. (I reserve the right to deny author status to anyone who spams the site, or who I have reason to believe is a spammer.)

The main text column and the comments column can be made wider by dragging their right-hand borders; if you’d like more room in the main text, you can close the toolbar by clicking on its handle (click the handle again to reopen). Footnotes are readable by rolling over a footnote marker like this [1]; they’re also included as commentable text in the notes pages at the text’s end.
Open Monograph Press

- A software developed by the Public Knowledge Project in 2009

- It provides the possibility to activate:
  - An incubation stage to assess the potential interest of the online communities for the monograph publication
  - An assessment stage to manage both an internal and external review process (Willinsky, 2009)
Up to date Humanists can count on a fair number of well-assessed repositories:

- CSeARCH
- The History and Theory of Psychology Eprint Archive
- E-LIS
- HAL-SHS
- Kultur
- The Nordic Arts and Humanities e-print archives,
- The PhilSci Archive

**Perspectives on Electronic Publishing** is an experimental overlay journal connected with electronic publishing.
Social Peer review opportunities in A&H

- Humanists can profit from the “wisdom of the crowds”
  - to begin to establish a costless qualitative evaluation system both for monographs and journals
  - to build and reinforce their reputation among peers
  - to strengthen the scholarly debate among scholars and non scholars (included students!)
  - to focus social attention on the humanities
  - to overcome the fragmentation in humanities
Social peer review drawbacks

• Concern about the real **effectiveness** of the system
  - Mainly ex-post quality control
  - Scarcely effective

• **Participation** of research communities in public debate may be scarce
  - Time consuming

• Collaborative work challenges the idea of **authorship**

But …
In the future

- **Distinction** between the different types of documents blur
  - blogs become a first approach to the scientific publication
  - the idea of “liquid publication”, “scientific knowledge object” (Casati et al., 2007) challenges the concepts of “text”, “version”, “edition”

- **Collaborative work** is becoming more and more common in Digital Humanities

- In a close future publishers, editorial boards, learned societies, and scholarly communities will find new copyright’s forms to protect the collaborative scholarly work