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Practice what you Preach

Engaging in Humanities Research through Critical Praxis

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Abstract

This article explores how a cultural studies perspective can be used to critically analyse practices of conducting research within the (Digital) Humanities. It uses amongst others the example of the author's PhD dissertation currently in process, which is set up as a theoretical and practical intervention into existing discourses surrounding the dominant form of formal communication within the Humanities: the scholarly monograph. A methodology of *critical praxis* is seen as an integral part of the research project as well as an important step in developing academic or research literacy through actively engaging in the production of communicative norms and practices. Envisioning the book as a site of struggle over new forms and systems of communication within academia, the dissertation argues for alternative ways of thinking of and performing the monograph in an experimental manner. By making use of digital platforms, tools and media to share, remix and update the research as it evolves, the aim is to develop a digital, open and collaborative research practice. This will offer a practical critique of the dominant structures, politics and practices of producing and distributing research results. This article thus argues for the empowering potential of critically analysing and actively engaging with the dominant norms underlying communication in the Humanities as well as with the structures that determine academic literacy and the established and accepted practices herein. By arguing for a potential new future for the book within scholarly communication as an emergent and evolving form, based on accessibility, sharing, process and change, this article makes a case for new ways of engaging a critical praxis that is more speculative, open-ended and experimental.

Keywords

Critical praxis, PhD dissertation, scholarly monograph, (digital) humanities, open research, remix

On September 25, 2011, Media Studies scholar Kathleen Fitzpatrick wrote an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education entitled ‘Do “the Risky Thing” in Digital Humanities’. In this piece Fitzpatrick reflects upon advice recently given to a graduate student who wanted to produce a digital project for her final dissertation. Instead of doing the save thing and writing a traditional dissertation, Fitzpatrick advised her to ‘do the risky thing’ instead, and to experiment and present her argument in an innovative way. At the same time Fitzpatrick was careful to emphasise to the student the importance of making sure they had someone to cover their back. Fitzpatrick thus used her article in the Chronicle to make a plea for mentors and dissertation supervisors to support experimental digital dissertation work. (2011a)

The following article can in many ways be seen as an expansion of Fitzpatrick’s argument. However, although I applaud Fitzpatrick’s insistence on the importance of acquiring supervisory support when doing digital research, this article draws more attention to the responsibility and agency of PhD students themselves to, in Fitzpatrick’s words, ‘defend their experimental work’, and their ‘deviation from the road ordinarily travelled’. It will do so by amongst other looking at the reasoning and argumentation that lies at the basis of critical scholarly work that embraces the digital, and by illustrating this with examples hereof as well as from my own digital dissertation project (currently being conducted). Drawing further on the example of experimental digital dissertation work, I will offer a theoretical argumentation as to how the choices we make during the course of our PhDs and the way we conduct our research, says a lot about the scholarly communication system we want and envision. Drawing on Foucault and insights from cultural studies and critical literacy theory, I will argue that during the course of our PhDs and in the process of creating a dissertation, we are very much structured to produce a certain kind of knowledge and with that a certain kind of social identity. Developing critical and digital literacy through developing what I will call a ‘critical praxis’ can prevent us from simply repeating established practices, without critically analysing the assumptions upon which they are based. To enable us to remain critical of power structures and relations that shape knowledge, I will argue for the importance of PhD students to experiment with different forms of knowledge production as part of their research process. For the practices we develop and embrace whilst doing our dissertation work have the capacity to transform the way we conduct scholarly communication. Through them, I will argue, we can struggle for and enable the kind of politics and ethics we feel our systems should embody and we can start to produce knowledge differently.

Valuing the Digital

In order to establish where the importance of experimental digital work for Humanities scholarship lies, we need to explore how we can use digital tools and technologies in a critical way to enhance and improve our scholarship and our communication systems. Through the digital we have the opportunity to critically investigate and question the value of our established institutions and practices and, vice versa, through critique we can analyse and transform the digital to make it abide to a more progressive and open ethics and value system. In this respect,

experimenting with open and online dissertation work can be seen as the beginning of an exploration of what a digital Cultural Studies could look like. It is important to stress however, as cultural and media theorist Gary Hall has argued extensively, that in our experiments with the digital our ethics and politics should not be fixed from the start. (2008) We need to leave room to explore them within our experiments or as part of the process of conducting the dissertation.

Nonetheless, whilst acknowledging this space for openness and experimentation, there is something we can say about a politics of the digital that favours a more progressive and transformative outlook. Especially with respect to how the digital, or our digital practices, can be used to build new forms of resistance and can be applied to construct alternative ways of producing knowledge outside the exploitative realm of neo-liberalist institutions and conservative practices. However, and let me state this clearly, resistance and change do not come to take part with the help of digital tools and technologies automatically. The real problem is not a technological, but foremost an institutional one. Creating institutional change through the lens of the digital is necessarily part of a process of struggle in which the future of the digital and of our institutions are at stake. The potential of the digital within this struggle has been a subject of fierce debate. Within the discourse on net criticism for instance, the potential of change within and through networked politics is seen as small, where it is—rightfully—argued that the digital also has the potential to reproduce social inequalities and even to promote capitalist exploitation. (Terranova, 2003) However, although I am not disagreeing with these kinds of analyses—and I think they are important and necessary—we need to be wary not to fall from net criticism into net scepticism. The digital, in a configuration of events and networks of people and alternative practices, combining a shared interest and politics with a commitment to online social solidarity and community building—however small the effort—does have the potential to effect change. If we only look at the reach Open Access digital book publications have in comparison with their paper counterparts, we can see how the digital, or a digital Open Access politics, can be employed to reach a wider audience for scholarship and to encourage more direct interaction between authors and their public.¹

Many experiments with alternative forms of scholarly communication have arisen from what has become known as the Digital Humanities, which has been defined as ‘not a unified field but an array of convergent practices’. (Presner and Schnapp, 2009) For some within this community there is a division between ‘coders’ and ‘builders’, and those who are more interested in theory and politics and in what the digital can for instance mean to larger questions related to the nature and purpose of the university system. However, in my vision of what a digital humanities is and can be, I am more interested in how the Humanities, through the digital, or the digital with the aid of Humanities critique, can act as a disruptive (political) force, asking disruptive questions. With this I am in agreement with Fitzpatrick’s reflection on the Digital Humanities:

After much tension between media makers and media scholars, an increasing number of programs are bringing the two modes together in a rigorously theorized praxis, recognizing that the boundaries between the critical and the creative are arbitrary. In fact, the best scholarship is always creative, and the

¹ Ronald Snijder’s findings show that the Open Access publishing of books enhances their discovery and online consultation. (Snijder, 2010)

best production is always critically aware. The digital humanities seems another space within the academy where the divide between making and interpreting might be bridged in productive ways. (2012: 14)

The Digital Humanities can aid in reinterpreting the Humanities (in a continuous process that stretches beyond the digital). Gary Hall states that it is about what the digital (or scientific methods/computation) have to offer to the Humanities and vice versa, as he argues for a Humanities turn within the Digital Humanities, where it should ensure to ‘[act] as a responsible, political or ethical opening to the (difference, heterogeneity and incalculability of the) future, including the future of the Humanities.’ (2011)

What would a critique with and through the digital look like? For one, it can be beneficial to look at our established practices through the lens of the digital. One could argue that the coming of a new medium offers us a gap, a moment within which—through our explorations of the new medium—dominant structures and practices become visible and we become aware of them more clearly. The discourse, institutions and practices that have come to surround our printed forms of communication and that we have grown used and accustomed to, not only have fortified certain politics and ethics that we need to be critical about, these politics and ethics are also being transported into the digital were our practices and institutions are being reproduced online.²

This applies amongst others to the political economy surrounding scholarly publishing. The progressively unsustainable economic model for print book publishing is very worrisome, where the current monograph crisis shows that the printed monograph is no longer sustainable, as it is increasingly seen as a product that needs to make a profit according to market rules. However, as amongst others Fitzpatrick has pointed out, although the form of the book is no longer (financially) viable, it is still required for our academic careers, to gain tenure. (2011b: 4) New forms of digital publishing, like experiments with not-for profit Open Access publishing offer digital alternatives to this situation based on an ethics of sharing and cooperation.

In the same manner, the digital is enlisted in the struggle to critique established forms of (double blind) peer review in favour of more open digital forms of peer-to-peer review,³ as well as in the debate surrounding the function and value of our current forms of authorship and ownership. The author construct and the idea of ownership of a work, whether it is owned by an author or by the one who monetarily profits from it—i.e. the work’s publisher or in some cases the author’s university—can be seen to encourage the growing marketisation of higher education. When we question authorship and ownership, we also question these more general structures on which our modern universities are build.

Of course the digital is not only used as a means to critique established (print-based) systems and practices. It also tries to foreground a value system of its own, one

² As Christine Borgman argues, although e-publications have fewer material constraints, their form remains relatively stable or continuous to the printed book. In Borgman’s vision this is not a rejection of technology but a reflection of the constructive power of scholarly practices. Even though, as she states, the existing forms might not necessarily serve scholars well or best, new genres that take advantage of the fluid and mobile nature of the medium are only slow to emerge. Hence today’s online books look very identical to print books. (Borgman, 2007: 160)

³ Forms of open and p2p review are increasingly being experimented with, for example by the journal *Shakespeare Quarterly* and by Kathleen Fitzpatrick for her book *Planned Obsolescence* (2011).

that is amongst others being debated and formed within the community of Digital Humanities theorists and practitioners. (Spiro, 2012) Within this flexible value-system-in-development, the digital is seen as offering us the possibility to rethink our scholarly communication system along the lines of an ethos of openness and sharing. Based mainly on a reciprocal gift economy (free, online scholarship, open for re-use), it tries to stir our focus away from product-based market and consumer forms of thinking (including the book as a form of merchandise and the author as its owner). Information is here seen not as an object or a commodity but as a social good to be shared and reused to advance the community as a whole. In this sense the digital, and experimentation with new practices within the digital, offer us the opportunity to foreground conversation and collaboration, connectivity and interaction.

Developing a Critical Praxis

Producing a thesis or dissertation in an experimental form—from using multimedia to enhance the dissertation’s argument to more advanced forms such as hypertextual or multi-format dissertations—or even using research blogs or social media to further develop the argument of a print-on-paper thesis online, can be an important aspect of acquiring digital and critical literacy. For example, reflecting on studying for a PhD, historian Tanya Roth writes: ‘As digital tools and processes continue to offer larger benefits for [such] projects, it is increasingly important to make sure grad students understand what’s out there and how these resources and ideas can help them with their own research.’ (2010) As Roth makes clear, this is not an either-or-situation where ‘traditional skills’, such as how to write a research paper, also need to be part of the curriculum.

One of the reasons it is important when studying for a PhD to develop digital and critical literacy—which, I will argue, can be seen as a simultaneous process—is that it helps to develop and perhaps expand one’s research skills. But more importantly, it presents an opportunity to rethink and critically analyse certain ‘traditional skills’ and research practices that have become ‘normalised’ or have become the dominant standard both within Humanities research and within the process of writing and conducting a Humanities dissertation. From that position, using these new critical skills and tools, we have the possibility to start performing our practices differently. By actively and critically ‘trying out’ new (digital) tools and methodologies to see how they might fit the specific research project and/or argument that is being pursued, by performing the dissertation in an experimental or alternative way, and, as part of this, taking the digital as its object of research, graduate students may be able to develop what I will call a *critical praxis*. *Praxis* here relates to the process of bringing ideas, ideologies or theories into practice. It refers to how theory gets embodied in our practices. *Critical praxis* then refers to the awareness of, and the critical reflection on how our ideas get to be embodied in our practices, making it possible to transform them. Similar to Foucault’s genealogy as a theoretical method, critical praxis can be seen as a practical application of the same critical procedure and investigation. It refers to the institutional embeddedness of PhD students and the transformational agency of their practices. Praxis in this sense forces a link between practice and the political, where through self-critique we will be able to reconstitute and reproduce ourselves and our social systems and relationships.

The process of developing a critical praxis during the course of one’s PhD, examples of which I am outlining here, draws amongst others on ideas and theories on critical, digital, and media literacy. The insights of critical pedagogue Henry Giroux

are essential herein. Following Giroux, cultural processes and power relations are seen as integrally connected in shaping our (educational) institutions. This takes place amongst others through the production of social identities, where certain values and knowledge systems help shape the production, reception and transformation of a particular kind of identities. For instance, as I will argue here, structures and practices underlying knowledge production in a field enable a specific value system to emerge that (re)produces a certain kind of social identity, namely that of the PhD student and ultimately of the academic scholar. Importantly however, for Giroux a cultural politics and critical pedagogy ‘can be appropriated in order to teach students to be critical of dominant forms of authority, both within and outside of schools, that sanction what counts as theory, legitimate knowledge, put particular subject positions in place, and make specific claims on public memory.’(2000) Developing a literacy that expands ‘beyond the culture of the book’ is in this respect essential, Giroux claims. Not just to learn new skills and knowledge but to be able to use these to both critically examine and analyse different (multimedia) texts and to *produce these texts and technologies differently*. Giroux thus sees literacy foremost as a critical discourse, as a precondition for agency and self-representation. Educators McLeod and Vasinda draw further on this (referencing McLaughlin and Devoogd) when they say a critical literacy involving multiple media demands of us to expand the concept of text, where text also can include sociocultural conditions and relationships. (2008: 272) Hence developing *critical praxis* can be seen as a method to critically analyse the sociocultural conditions and relationships that constitute academia and based on that, to produce the PhD dissertation (and with that the PhD student) and ultimately the scholarly field and system in which it functions differently.

That being said, I do not envision any particular kind of critical praxis, including the ones outlined in this here, can be used as a ‘normative method’ or a route map towards conducting a PhD in the digital age. The ‘reflection on the self’ as a social identity that a critical praxis envisions is in this respect highly personal and contextual. For this I draw on cultural studies scholar Handel Wright and the form of autoethnography he applies in his article ‘Cultural Studies as practice’. For Wright ‘doing cultural studies’ means most importantly an ‘intervention in institutional, sociopolitical and cultural arrangements, events and directions.’ He sees cultural studies as a form of ‘social justice praxis’, one that warns against theoreticism and that blurs the boundaries between the academy and the community. In his description of what ‘social justice praxis’ means or what it should do he chooses not to use a model-based, more prescriptive method, but follows a more modest approach, one in which he adopts Gregory Jay’s (2005) idea and strategy of ‘taking multiculturalism personally’ to ‘taking cultural studies personally’, in order to advocate and explicate cultural studies praxis. (Wright, 2003: 809)

The examples of critical praxis that I mention here should thus not be seen as authoritative models of what a critical praxis should be, but only illustrate and describe what it possibly *could be* within the specific context of for instance a Humanities dissertation. In this specific case, the university, the course of the PhD itself and, more specifically, the dissertation or the monograph become the subject on which the critical praxis focuses. Wright also stresses the importance of addressing one’s own practices and institutions as sites of critical praxis: ‘In addition, I want to reiterate that the university itself must not be overlooked as a site of praxis, a site where issues of difference, representation and social justice, and even what constitutes legitimate academic work are being contested.’(2003: 808)

The (Re-)Production of the PhD Student

As stated before, critical praxis offers an opportunity to actively rethink ‘traditional skills’ and established research practices, and with that what is still perceived as the conventional or ‘natural’ process of doing a PhD in the Humanities: creating a single-authored, static, print-based argument in long-form, which should ideally be publishable as a research monograph. This ‘natural process’ of doing a PhD—which of course is anything but—can be seen as a product of certain dominant ideas and discourses that function to shape how a graduate student is to write or author a dissertation. As such, this established convention or process provides a road map to becoming a scholar in which the dissertation serves as a model as to how to conduct research and, ultimately, how to produce a scholarly monograph. Game Studies scholar Anastasia Salter reflects on this state of affairs remarking that ‘the traditional dissertation as product reflects the dominance of the book: it creates a monograph that sits in a database. The processes of the Humanities are to some extent self-perpetuating: write essays as an undergraduate, conference papers as a graduate student, a dissertation as a doctoral student, and books and journal articles as a professor.’(2010)

The importance of being aware of and critiquing such dominant discourses, however, not only lies in exploring the tension between how, on the one hand, they reproduce ‘traditional scholars’ and how, on the other hand, the PhD and the PhD thesis are supposed to be, as political theorist Angelique Bletsas states in ‘The PhD Thesis as ‘Text’’: ‘(...) the foundations of ‘new scholarship’ and as such are integral to the production of new thought and new scholars.’(2011: 9) It is important to be aware that these discourses relating to knowledge production during the PhD process have, as Bletsas argues, certain subjectification effects. She shows how the dissertation is not only about finishing a static text but also about finishing as a person: as she puts it, the accepted thesis completes the student as a discursing ‘subject’. In other words, the PhD student as a discursing subject is being (re) produced in and by these dominant discourses; and with that, a certain kind of scholar, and a certain kind of scholarly communication system are also reproduced.

Alan O’Shea already argued in 1998 for the importance of cultural studies theorists to pay attention to their own institutional practices and pedagogies and the way knowledge is produced and disseminated herein, something he felt up to then had been lacking. O’Shea warns for the ‘tendencies towards self-reproduction’ in higher education, effects which are not pre-given but outcomes of specific struggles. As O’Shea states, echoing Bletsas argument, ‘the practices in which we engage constitute us as particular kinds of subjects and exclude other kinds. The more routinised our practices, the more powerfully this closure works.’(1998: 515) O’Shea however warns not to overemphasize the extent of this closure, focusing on the many-sided complexity of the regimes of value underlying our educational institutions, where different regimes co-exist and overlap and people move between them. He conceptualizes these regimes as ‘a field of contestations’, where we are always already positioned *within* certain institutions and practices:

The cultural critic is always-already positioned *within* institutions. To speak publicly at all you do not have to belong to a *state* institution, but you do have to operate within one set or another of ‘institutionalized’ codes and practices, with historically determinate modes of production, distribution and

consumption.(O'Shea, 1998: 518)

Critical Praxis as Self-Assertion

Drawing further on O'Shea and Bletsas, I will argue here that to change our institutions from within we should start with critically examining our own position and practices and how these are reproduced. At a time when digital projects are still perceived within the Humanities as 'risky', developing a form of digital or multimedia literacy (including related skills) in experimenting with these kind of digital projects or practices, can be positioned as a process that goes hand in hand with developing critical literacy in general. It provides students with a means and an opportunity to critically rethink, through critical praxis, some of the dominant discourses and established notions—including connected ethics and politics—concerning how to conduct a dissertation, and with that, ultimately, how to write a scholarly monograph.

Let me emphasise here that I am not claiming that critical praxis can only be achieved or learned by experimenting with digital projects, methods and tools. Rather, I am arguing that at this specific moment these tools and methods can be employed to trigger critique and rethinking of some of our established notions concerning scholarship and scholarly communication—including authorship, peer review, copyright, and the political economy surrounding scholarly publishing. What is more, this critical praxis should be applied just as much to digital methods and to how research is being done within the Digital Humanities. Especially insofar as digital projects reproduce notions and values from the dominant, established discourses. Not all digital projects are inherently and necessary critical, experimental or even 'risky'; they just have the potential to be so. Furthermore, I would argue that acquiring digital literacy means acquiring various kinds of literacies, including 'traditional' print literacy. Media theorists Kellner and Share argue for the importance of developing forms of 'multiple literacies' as a response to dominant forms of literacy as they are socially constructed in educational and cultural practices and discourses. Multiple literacies, in the sense of media literacy, computer literacy, multimedia literacy and digital literacy, also include books, reading, and print literacy. (Kellner and Share, 2005: 370)

As Bletsas states, drawing on Foucault, there is 'no standpoint in the field of knowledge production which is 'innocent' or outside of power relations.' (2011) Bletsas describes the tension that you need to be accepted and formed by, and comply to, a certain discourse, before you can critique this discourse. And just as knowledge is inherently political, so I would claim doing a PhD or writing a dissertation is also a political act. The process of resisting being formed in a certain way is, for me, something that already starts during the period of studying for a PhD, this being a time when we begin to evaluate critically which of the values that get reproduced in scholarly communication we should cherish. The PhD can therefore be seen as an intervention in the production of knowledge, in which one adopts a position concerning the future of scholarly communication.

In order to maintain this position of the 'interventionist potential' of the PhD process, I will necessarily not theorise the closure of the dominant discourses within academia and the subjectification effects they have on social identities in a, as O'Shea stated, 'overemphasized way'. For this I draw on Foucault's later work in which he advances the possibility the subject has to develop agency within subordinating

systems. In Foucault's words 'individuals are the vehicles of power', they reproduce power in a positive, productive way. (1980) But they also have the power to produce power in a different, creative way. Foucault scholar Eric Paras sums up these changes in Foucault's work as follows: 'The individual, no longer seen as the pure product of mechanisms of domination, appears as the complex result of an interaction between outside coercion and techniques of the self.' (2006: 94–95) Drawing upon the later Foucault, performing the PhD and one's social identity as a student and scholar can be seen as no longer a matter of self-defence but rather of self-assertion. As Paras states, becoming a subject is in Foucault's later thought less 'an affirmation of an identity than a propagation of a creative force.' (2006: 132) It is a creative effort rather than a defensive one. In this sense Paras emphasises the potential in the later Foucault for the subject to reflect upon its own practices and to choose among and modify them following techniques of the self, those specific practices that enable subjects to constitute themselves both within and through systems of power.

If we envision critical praxis as both a critical project and a creative, transforming, and transformative one, part of this creative impulse lies in the potential to, as Cultural Studies scholar Ted Striphas calls it, 'perform scholarly communication differently—that is, without simply giving in, in Judith Butler's words, to "the compulsion to repeat."' (2011). He argues that the norms of scholarly communication that we perform today through a 'routine set of practices' were forged under historically specific circumstances. To which we might add, circumstances that might not in (their entirety) apply today. This triggers us to ask new questions about these practices and to start performing them differently. As Striphas adds, much more creatively and expansively (expanding our repertoire) than we currently do with the ultimate goal to 'enhance the quality of our research and our ability to share it' (2011)

Applying this to the course of a PhD means that, instead of seeing PhD students as being completely produced by the practices they reproduce and the knowledge systems that enforce these, we can see these practices and institutions not as constituting, but as shaping them. However, this doesn't underestimate the power these shaping practices and systems have. As O'Shea argued before, the more repetitive these practices become, the more thorough and self-perpetuating this shaping-process also becomes. (1998) Nonetheless, as students, and as academics, we have the possibility to creatively act within these frameworks, to struggle for a more open and progressive knowledge system, performing scholarly communication differently. That being said, we should remember O'Shea's critique of these (dominant) systems being monolithical. There is a complex power struggle taking place within academia for certain kind of knowledges and knowledge systems. This struggle can be seen to revolve around having or obtaining the power to create the possibilities to transform the structures that will enable certain kind of values to be produced. The digital realm for instance has the potential to promote a more progressive knowledge system based on values of sharing, openness and cooperation, one that struggles against institutional inertia and conservatism, and the perseverance of neoliberal market values in education. The kind of knowledge that can come out of such a more progressive system, I will argue, might be hard to realize if we keep reproducing our print-based practices within the digital realm, practices that might (no longer) be able to promote these values to the fullest in an online environment. It is this struggle over the future of our scholarly communication system that the examples of critical praxis—including my own dissertation—focus on.

Re-envisioning our Research Practices

The traditional PhD dissertation or the ‘natural PhD process’ follows many of the elements of a paper-based view of scholarly communication, increasingly inhibiting progressive practices and knowledges—such as I have outlined above—to come to the fore. Consequently, what I am arguing for is a critical praxis that explores (and remains critical of) alternative practices and structures that enable values based on a politics of sharing, openness and collaboration. These values are of the utmost importance in promoting and furthering (digital) scholarship where opening up knowledge and freely sharing and re-using research results will enable scholarship to build upon earlier thoughts and ideas. In the largely print-based scholarly communication and publishing system that we are increasingly adopting online too, our research practices run the risk of becoming more and more alienated from this alternative view. Knowledge is commodified and objectified in our increasingly profit-driven publishing systems and in our performance and assessment systems, where scholars are being judged according to their sole attributions to scholarship (single-authored journal articles and books). Although we now have the technological possibilities to reproduce and distribute information online virtually for free knowledge still runs the risk of being stowed away behind access and payment barriers. Within this system it becomes hard to promote values based on sharing, accessibility and collaboration. Hence I argue for critically looking at and rethinking these paper-based structures and practices so that we can reproduce them differently in a digital system.

Related to this, I will argue for a critical praxis that critiques established notions of authorship and stability, trying to envision how we can perform them differently in our research practices. Increasingly these notions of authorship and stability don’t fit with the new (digital) practices that are being developed in the sciences and increasingly also in the Humanities where different forms of collaborative processual knowledge production and sharing are being explored.⁴ Furthermore, these print-based notions of authorship and stability are embedded within a discourse that envisions humanities scholarship as a system based on (single) authors in competition with each other in an attention economy based on creating scholarly objects that determine an author’s value within that system. The notion of a stable scholarly object also becomes increasingly difficult to maintain in an environment that encourages continual updating and change. The digital offers us the possibility to experiment with updating material, linking out and referring to other works—in the process of which—creating a network of texts and resources, and to remix and reuse material in a collaborative fashion. As Fitzpatrick explains, the online realm stimulates the open-ended nature of networked writing: ‘All three of these features — commenting, linking, and versioning — produce texts that are no longer discrete or static, but that live and develop as part of a network of other such texts, among which ideas flow.’(2011c)

A critical praxis will thus trigger us to rethink institutions and practices that are at the moment still very much part of, and reproducing, an economics and politics based on a power structure that has been inherited from a print-based situation. Striphos argues that we need to get beyond the blind copying of print writing practices into the digital realm arguing for experimentation with the form, content and process

⁴ See (Spiro, 2009) and (Simeone et al., 2011) for examples of collaborative projects in the (Digital) Humanities.

of scholarly publication. There is no compelling reason, he argues, why we need to conform to “papercentric” conventions in the online world when we can also explore and make better use of the interactive features the web offers to rethink the paper-based distribution and assessment methods we are repeating in the digital realm. (Striphas, 2010)

A Digital, Open, and Collaborative Research Practice

To illustrate what a critical praxis might look like, and how it can envision and create such an alternative system, I will focus—amongst others—on my own PhD dissertation in-process, which can be seen as an experiment in developing a digital, open research practice by exploring the possibilities of remix, liquidity and openness in the dissertation’s conduct and format. By positioning the medium of the book as a major site of struggle within the Humanities over the potential application of some of the new, digital forms and systems of communication that are increasingly affecting academia—such as Open Access publishing, open peer review, and liquid books⁵—my dissertation argues for the importance of experimenting with alternative ways of thinking and performing the academic monograph. Starting with the long-form argument that is the PhD dissertation itself, I hope to actively challenge and critique the established (print-based) notions, politics, and practices within the field of the Humanities, in form, practice and content.

Within the Humanities scholars increasingly experiment with conducting their research in a more open way, following the idea of open research or open notebook science, which involves publishing one’s research as it evolves (including drafts and raw data) instead of only publishing the research results. Examples of scholars that are experimenting with (new forms) of online publishing and who can thus be seen as developing or practicing forms of critical praxis are for instance Ted Striphas, who posts his working papers online in his *Differences and Repetitions* wiki, and Gary Hall, who is making the research for his new book *Media Gifts* freely available online on his website as it evolves. Kathleen Fitzpatrick put the draft version of her book *Planned Obsolescence* online for peer review using the CommentPress Wordpress plugin allowing readers to comment on paragraphs of the text in the margins. Examples of PhD students involved in open research are librarian Heather Morrison, who posts her dissertation chapters as they evolve online and English student Alex Gil, who is putting his work for his dissertation online on electroalex.com, using the CommentPress plugin.

The focus in the above cited examples—as in the conduct of my own dissertation—on openness, open research and open access, not only functions as a means to experiment with new practices of producing and distributing knowledge, but can be seen as a direct critique of the material conditions under which Humanities research is currently being produced. Striphas, who perceives cultural studies as a set of writing practices, has scrutinized the way these writing practices are currently set up and function by looking closely at the material conditions by which they are produced, distributed, exchanged and consumed, i.e. by exploring the politics and economics of academic publishing. The choices we as scholars make or—as Striphas emphasizes—that are made for us when we publish our research results are very

⁵ Books that can be continually updated or added to, published under the conditions of both open editing and free content; i.e. books in/as wikis.

important. Striphas underlines both the systemic power relations at play as well as our own responsibilities in repeating these practices or alternatively choosing different options. We need to have better access to the ‘instruments of the production of cultural studies’, i.e. the publishing system, and to the content that gets produced, by exploring and taking control of ‘the conditions under which scholarship in cultural studies can—and increasingly cannot—circulate.’ Striphas thus emphasizes our roles as scholars *within* this publishing system, which serves as a good example of critical praxis in action. This to in Striphas words ‘perform our writing practices differently, to appropriate and reengineer the publishing system so as to better suit our needs.’(2010)

Following these examples, by making use of digital platforms and tools, all the research for my thesis—notes, drafts, chapters, etc.—will be made available online, as it progresses, via multiple outlets. To reach out to a wider readership and to connect with a peer community of sharing and collaboration, various social media outlets are used, including a weblog where first drafts and short pieces related to the dissertation are posted. The blog builds upon an existing readership (I have been blogging since 2008) and aims to connect with a wider community, by making extended connections via Twitter (a microblogging community) and Zotero (an online open source reference system enabling people to collect and share references and resources), two outlets heavily used by scholars and the wider public interested in the digital. More advanced chapters will be published on a multimedia platform, where the possibility to create, edit, and read in a collaborative setting, and the possibility to make mashups and remixes of text, video, sound, illustrations, images and spoken word, will be explored. This platform will be used to find out what it means to communicate research in an other than textual format, to have different multi-medial versions of the research whilst at the same time experimenting with bringing into practice ‘multiple literacies’. (Kellner and Share, 2005) Furthermore a wiki will be used where the authorial ‘moderating function’ still at work in the blog and the multimedia platform will be left behind. My intention is to use the wiki to explore what it means to let go of authorship as a form of authority. In the wiki environment the author can no longer (solely) be held responsible for the text or research, where the text will know no final version, it can be further commented upon, and it can be updated, remixed and re-used (in principle) indefinitely. Finally, as part of the requirements of the PhD to produce a single-authored written piece of work in long-format, one of the versions of the dissertation will be exactly that—a traditional argument on paper. The intention of the dissertation project is to create different versions and parts of the dissertation argument, existing on different platforms, that then come to function as nodes in a multi-format, interlinked network of texts, notes, draft, references and remixes, where no part is more or less important than the other parts, nor will one text necessarily form the end-point or final version of the dissertation project.

This critical praxis will thus follow the idea of open research mentioned before, by which anyone can track what has been done (openness), can comment on the research (social), and can add to it (collaborative, remix, liquid). This possibility to reuse, remix, and modify (scholarly) material, can be seen as one of the most contested forms of openness (Adema, 2010: 60), as it actively challenges the established print-based notions the current system of scholarly communication is build around (i.e. stability and authority). This more radical form of openness has the potential to problematise these notions not only in the current context, but also from a more historical perspective, showing how the pillars of academia (stability, authority,

authorship) are merely precariously upheld constructs, maintaining established institutional, economical or political structures. (Johns, 1998) The possibility to expand and to build upon, to make modifications derivative works, to appropriate and update content (within a digital environment), shifts the focus in scholarly communication from product to process and can be seen as a critique of the increasing commodification of the book as product.

As this is foremost an experiment in creating a critical praxis following an ethos of sharing and openness, part of the critique will also focus on the process itself: is it possible to easily connect to a community? Will people actually reuse and remix the content or feel comfortable to do so? Will the processes of collaboration, community input and reuse and adaptation actually limit the authorial intentions at work in the text? However, even the failure to achieve these intentions will be a valuable lesson, as it might show us the strengths of our established practices and institutions, and the challenges we are facing in adapting the digital to our needs.

Conclusion

I have tried to show here, building on existing literature on critical and digital literacy, and using examples of critical digital scholarship—including my own dissertation—various possible ways of developing a critical praxis. The specific example of my dissertation focused on establishing a digital, open and collaborative research practice by looking at the possibilities of remix, liquidity and openness in the dissertation's conduct and format. Critical praxis here not only serves to critique established notions of how to write and conduct a dissertation within the Humanities, it also helps to develop new digital research practices that enable sharing, openness, and remix of the research during its ongoing development.

Referring back to the beginning of this article and to how Kathleen Fitzpatrick mentioned that doing a digital project within the Humanities is still seen as a 'risky thing', this research project will encounter both tension and paradox. The paradox lies in the fact that to become an academic within the present system, we in many ways still have to adhere to the present structures and systems, resulting in the tension earlier described by Bletsas, where we have to conform to the rules, regulations and practices that we at the same time try to critique and transform. However, following amongst others O'Shea and Striphos and the later Foucault, I maintain that we are able to transform these practices from within. Nonetheless, as in any struggle focused on changing a system from within, compromises have to be made to deal with the tension between 'outside coercion and techniques of the self'. That being said, I hope that the example of my dissertation has shown that by developing a critical praxis during the process of conducting a PhD, we can then continue to develop this further once our scholarly career progresses. As part of this process we will be able to actively produce and promote alternative communicative norms, politics and practices, which will aid us in the struggle to critique and transform the established academic power systems. As I stated before, the examples I have mentioned here—including my own dissertation—should not be seen as normative models, but I nonetheless hope they inspire other students and scholars to develop their own form(s) of critical praxis to aid them to produce themselves and their institutional practices differently.

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