Postmodern Culture: Publishing in the Electronic Medium

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Introduction

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Postmodern Culture was founded in 1990 by Eyal Amiran, Greg Dawes, Elaine Orr, and John Unsworth at North Carolina State University (professors Dawes and Orr have subsequently stepped

down as editors in order to pursue their research projects, though both remain on the editorial board).

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Postmodern Culture is a peer-reviewed electronic journal which provides an international, interdisciplinary forum for discussions of contemporary literature, theory, and culture. It accepts for consideration both finished essays and working papers, and carries in each issue fiction and/or poetry, book reviews, a popular culture column, and announcements. The journal does not consider essays dealing exclusively with computer hardware or software, unless those essays raise significant aesthetic or theoretical issues.

PMC comes out three times a year (September, January, and May) and is free to the public and to libraries via electronic mail. Each issue of Postmodern Culture carries a volume and number designation. The journal is also available on computer diskette and microfiche; it is distributed in a variety of diskette formats (Macintosh 3.5", IBM 5.25", or IBM 3.5"), but no issue will exceed 720 KB of data, the equivalent of one 3.5" or two 5.25" low-density diskettes. The subscription rate for diskette or microfiche is $15/year for individuals, $30/year for institutions (in Canada add $3; elsewhere outside the U.S. add $7). At the present time PMC has about 1,200 subscribers in 17 countries. The journal's ISSN number is 1053-1920.

The editorial board for Postmodern Culture includes researchers and writers in African American studies, cultural studies, film, Latin American studies, literature and literary theory, philosophy, sociology, and religion.

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The board members' primary responsibilities include reading essays for the journal (approximately four essays a year), inviting submissions, and helping to publicize the existence of the journal. Some have also contributed essays. Members were chosen because of their own performance in their field (or the promise of it--we chose some younger scholars who were highly recommended by their colleagues) and because they offer special knowledge of diverse disciplines, genres, and cultures.

The first volume (numbers 1-3) of the journal included essays on Latin American politics, eating disorders and spiritual transcendence, the theory of writing in the hypertext environment, William Gaddis's novel JR, the implications of the postmodern critique of identity for the Afro-American community, the rhetoric of the Persian Gulf War as presented in the New York Times, the politics of Sartre, AIDS and cyborgs, Ishmael Reed's The Terrible Two's, and representations of mass culture, postmodern ethnography, and other subjects.

The journal has also published popular culture columns on the televising of the Tour de France, Satanism and the mass media, and female body building, plus fiction by Kathy Acker, a hybrid theoretical-interpretive-poetic work by Susan Howe, a video script by Laura Kipnis, and a number of poems and book reviews.

Distribution

When an issue is published, its table of contents is distributed (using the Revised LISTSERV program) to all of the journal's subscribers. This file contains the journal's masthead, information about subscription and submission, the names of authors published in that issue, and titles, filenames, and abstracts for each item in the issue.

Subscribers can then choose to retrieve one essay, several essays, or the whole issue as a package, using a few simple LISTSERV commands (it is not necessary for individual subscribers to have a copy of the LISTSERV program running at their site in order to issue these commands). Essays can be retrieved as files or as mail, and all essays are stored in a file list maintained on the NCSU mainframe, so readers can get copies of material published in back issues at any time.

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We have found the LISTSERV program to be an extremely flexible and effective way to publish in this medium. It is widely used, and it is generally familiar to those who already participate in network discussion groups. It is also well-documented, and support for list owners is available both locally (from the postmaster and support staff at one's site) and through an electronic discussion group moderated by Eric Thomas, who wrote the program.

LISTSERV lists can be set up in different ways. For instance, one can set up a list so that all mail posted to it is automatically distributed to all subscribers, or so that all mail posted to the list is sent to the list editor for screening and/or compilation. Subscription to the list can be open or restricted, as can access to the names of other subscribers and to any files stored in association with the list. Furthermore, the ability to edit files on the file list can be limited to the editors, permitted to a designated group of readers, or permitted to all readers. List maintenance and list editing can be performed by different people (or by a number of people) at the same site or at different sites, and one can automate certain functions, such as the distribution of a designated set of files for new subscribers.

Postmodern Culture is open to public subscription, and its archived files are available for retrieval. Mail cannot be sent directly for distribution to the list. Only the editors post and edit items and maintain the list.

History

Some of our earliest discussion focused on the format in which we might distribute the journal. We considered various analogues and models for what we wanted to do, including interactive software such as electronic bulletin boards (for example, the Electronic College of Theory), hardware-or software-specific journals such as TidBITS (a HyperCard, Macintosh-based journal), and network discussion groups (such as HUMANIST).

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We decided that restricting ourselves to the lowest common denominator would increase our accessibility and make us available to a wider pool of subscribers. For these reasons, we settled on ASCII text transmitted by electronic mail as our format. ASCII text can be imported into almost any word processing program, and electronic mail can be delivered free of charge through Internet and BITNET, networks which connect thousands of sites around the world.

Our next logistical decision was to set up PMC-Talk, a discussion group which supplements the journal with an open channel for critique, informational exchanges, and the publication of non-juried submissions.

Finally, we elected to make the journal available on disk and microfiche, so that libraries which could not devote the hardware to making the journal available in its electronic mail form could still subscribe, and so that individual users who had no access to electronic mail could still have access to us.

During the Spring of 1990, we mailed several hundred letters to artists, scholars, and critics in a wide variety of fields. These letters met with a remarkably positive reception, and enabled us to assemble a first-rate editorial board and a very interesting first issue within a period of months. The response to our mailings is a strong indication that many humanists are prepared for the advent of electronic publication, and are eager to learn more about the possibilities of the medium.

The response we met with at our own institution has been equally encouraging. We have received financial and technical support from several parts of North Carolina State University (NCSU): the Computing Center, the Humanities Computing Lab, the Social Sciences Computing Lab, the Department of English (which has agreed, for instance, to give course reductions to the editors), the Department of Foreign Languages, the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, and the NCSU Libraries.

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Standards and the Medium

One of the questions we have considered in the course of putting together the first three issues is whether the medium in which we publish is particularly appropriate to a certain kind of essay. Is the "finished" work more appropriate in the print medium, while works in progress, collaborative essays, and interviews are more appropriate for an electronic journal? Or, is there room for both in this medium? Might the common sense of what it is that constitutes a finished work itself be transformed when the journal invites and publishes responses to the essay, and these appear only days after the essay had been published?

Postmodern Culture can serve to encourage more experimental scholarly writing. For example, we publish works-in-progress, such as Bell Hooks's investigation of the interrelations and contradictions of African American culture and postmodern theory, which invite discussion and allow scholars to open their work to criticism as they write, so that texts may in fact evolve as collaborative ventures between readers and writers. We have also published works which fall between or outside traditional generic categories, like a video script by Laura Kipnis, which

literalizes the metaphor of the body politic, mixing a biographical account of Marx's health problems during the writing of Das Kapital with a discussion of contemporary anorexia and bulimia.

We've also had to grapple with some more mundane questions which are nonetheless still quite important, since there is very little in the way of history or tradition to draw on. For example, how should we format the essays published in the journal so that they can be easily imported into whatever word processing software the reader might have? Margins, spacing, the designation of units of text, typographical conventions for underlining, boldfacing, italics, superscript, and subscript (these are not possible with ASCII text), must all be developed and tested with different users before we will know what works, what is clearly readable and understandable, and what users prefer.

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There are several other technical questions as well. For example, every issue of the journal will have to navigate the sometimes obscure connections between different networks--particularly between the non-commercial academic networks and the more widely available commercial carriers of electronic mail, such as MCI, AT&T, Sprint, and CompuServe. CompuServe, for example, limits the size of electronic mail transmissions which can be received into individual accounts, and that limit is well below what would be necessary to receive the journal.

We are concerned that the journal should be available to non-academic subscribers, so we will be working to make existing connections work and to open new ones. We will also be exploring possibilities for using visual materials, which include faxing graphics to subscribers on request or transmitting through the networks compressed graphics files in commonly used formats. As the networks update their own hardware (especially with the introduction of fiber-optic cables for data transmission), new possibilities in the use of interactive software will also become available. All of this makes it likely that the format and the nature of Postmodern Culture will continue to evolve, even in the immediate future. We have learned from print publication to work around problems and limitations in production and dissemination, but these problems do not pose as serious a threat to electronic publishing. Electronic technology is evolving so quickly--compare current desktop technology with that available ten years ago--that today's problems (e.g., distributing graphics over the nets) will in all likelihood be solved soon. We do not need to develop standards and techniques that accept today's limitations, but to build into our medium a flexibility that will anticipate and accommodate upcoming change.

The Future of Electronic Serials

In order for a publication in electronic media to succeed in serving even the most traditional purposes, such publication obviously needs to be available to the public--to students, to researchers, and to interested readers.

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An electronic publication can keep its back issues on a file list (an electronic log of reserved files) where network users may retrieve them, but not everyone has access to the networks, and there is no guarantee that a file list maintained by a given electronic mail account-holder will always be there. If a journal moves to another institution or ceases publication, how will researchers have access to essays published by the journal?

In the same way they do for print journals, libraries should provide that access. Many libraries have local area networks and can make electronic publications available to patrons on those networks; many more libraries have online card catalogs, and might use some of those terminals to provide access to electronic texts. It makes sense for libraries to use computer resources to deliver publications which originate as electronic text, since computerized access brings with it powerful capabilities for searching, indexing, and analyzing texts even from remote sites. However, until most libraries have the facilities to present full text online and most readers have the skills to use such services, we feel that it is important for electronic publications to be available in several formats.

Electronic publications are likely to proliferate sooner than most now expect. Although electronic text may never replace print, it is likely to dominate where information storage, retrieval, and manipulation are more important than the aesthetic qualities of a printed text. Economic reasons alone will force letters out of their time-honored sanctuary in wood-products and into the electronic ether. It will soon seem as illogical to print archives, data banks, government and business documents, and much scholarly material as it already is to catalog the holdings of large libraries on three-by-five cards.

Today, we still produce limited numbers of books whose physical well-being must be guarded at regulated institutions around the world. We must have these objects shipped to us or travel to centers where they are collected. Compare this to a situation where a library would not house a given number of volumes, but would provide access to all books in an international network of libraries. In this scenario, all books would be available to anyone with a library card. Even the aesthetic appeal of electronic text is bound to improve as computer equipment becomes more portable, more sophisticated, and simpler to use.

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Such revolutionary flexibility holds dangers too--technological freedom and the control of information may be flip and flop of the same switch. For example, if commercial organizations step into academic electronic publishing, then they may come to limit redistribution of such publication or insist on copyright restrictions that may serve their financial interests but not the interests of the research community. In effect, this is the case with print publication: much of it is determined by the financial interests and possibilities of commercial presses--a condition which seems so inevitable that it is virtually transparent.

Highly developed technological flexibility may depend on private-sector support in the long run. The government now subsidizes the networks, but threatens to cut its support by the end of the decade. It is hard to say if and how the financial support and interests of commercial enterprises will affect the contents and availability of electronic serials. The nets now offer an ideal international venue for small-budget, limited-interest discussion groups and serials that may not have had a chance for wide distribution in print, but all this may change if the nets go private.

Conclusion

Electronic publishing needs the encouragement and participation of the profession so that it leads where we want to go. Libraries should take an active role in making electronic publications-- journals now, books in all likelihood later--available to their users; universities should recognize scholarly activity in the electronic field and see their support of such developments as wise investments; and the profession should recognize the legitimacy of electronic publications where issues of tenure and promotion are involved.

For their part, the publishers of refereed electronic journals--and of other electronic work in the future--should both work to maintain professional credibility and take into account the needs of an audience that is likely to be diverse and large.

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