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Rogers, H (2016) Academic Journals in the Digital Age: An Editor's Perspective. JOURNAL OF VICTORIAN CULTURE, 21 (1). pp. 112-117. ISSN 1355-5502

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Academic Journals in the Digital Age: An Editor's Perspective

Helen Rogers

The place of academic journals in the scholarly eco-system has been radically challenged since I became an editor of the *Journal of Victorian Culture* in 2008. It has been an exciting time to be involved in curating an interdisciplinary periodical and experimenting in ways the journal format can adapt to the changing landscape of online publication, networking and communication. Yet though we now have a host of new resources and tools at our fingertips, the content of scholarly journals and articles – as James Mussell explains in this roundtable - remains remarkably similar to their forebears in the pre-digital, pre-social media age.¹ As I step down as editor, here I reflect on what we could do differently and which features of traditional publication we might wish to retain.

My initial thinking about the journal format was prompted by changes in my reading practices and those of my students as, increasingly, we accessed single articles online rather than in printed volumes stacked on library shelves.² How could *JVC* replicate the experience of dipping into an issue and browsing its back catalogue,

¹ Dan Cohen, 'The Ivory Tower and the Open Web: Introduction: Burritos, Browsers, and Books [Draft]', *Dan Cohen* (26 July 2011)

<<http://www.dancohen.org/2011/07/26/the-ivory-tower-and-the-open-web-introduction-burritos-browsers-and-books-draft/>> [accessed 11 May 2013].

² For the pedagogical implications of this shift, see George Gosling, 'Why Academic Journals Still Matter', *Musings* (26 October 2015)

<<https://gcosling.wordpress.com/2015/10/26/why-academic-journals-still-matter/>> and Katrina Navikas, 'Does the form of traditional academic journals mean anything to students in the age of online access?', *History and Today* (12 October 2015) <<http://historytoday-navickas.blogspot.co.uk/2015/10/does-form-of-traditional-academic.html>> [both accessed 12 November 2015].

especially when publishers' platforms are not easy to navigate? Journal archives on these sites are still difficult to search using keywords and I frequently struggle to identify content in *JVC*'s previous issues relating to a particular author or theme. When I became an editor, I envied the visual appeal of the open access e-journal *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, founded in 2005.³ Its content pages - with thumbnail images inviting clickbait by conveying, at a glance, each article's themes - are far more attractive than online platforms for traditional journals. In setting up the *Journal of Victorian Culture Online* <<http://blogs.tandf.co.uk/jvc/>> in 2010, I hoped we could recreate the magazine feel for *JVC*, tempting readers to view individual articles and browse across issues while providing opportunities for interaction and discussion.

However, *JVC Online*, with its Facebook <<https://www.facebook.com/JVConline/>> and *Twitter* <<https://twitter.com/jofvictculture>> feeds, soon acquired its own identity in bringing together an online community of Victorianists, under the dynamic editorship of Lucinda Matthews-Jones. Allowing real-time engagement with contemporary treatments of nineteenth-century culture - exhibitions, dramatizations, the release of digital materials, and so on - it has become more than a supplement. 'Victorians beyond the Academy', begun as an occasional feature in the print journal in 2010, has effectively migrated to *JVC Online* where timely coverage and interactive links have welcomed a diverse readership as well as critical reflection on the public engagement agenda.

³ Launched and run by the Centre for Victorian Studies, Birkbeck College, University of London, *19* <<http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk>> is now hosted by the mega journal platform, *Open Library of Humanities* <<https://www.openlibhums.org/>>.

Through our social media streams we have been able to interact - and share both blog and journal content - with independent scholars, creative writers, popular historians, curators and librarians who rarely have time or inclination to participate in academic conferences and publications. In an online survey of *JVC Online*'s users in 2013, nearly 20% of respondents defined themselves as independent scholars, a much higher proportion than found at academic gatherings.⁴ Similarly, *JVC Online* has brought into conversation a diverse cross-disciplinary community, from all age groups. Though we expected postgraduates and early career researchers to feature heavily in our survey, in fact the proportion aged 20-29 (24.75%) almost equaled that between 40-49 (23.76%), and the largest group was aged 30-39 (37%). While literary scholars predominate in the field's publications and conferences, they formed just over half our respondents (56%). Using the #twitterstorians hashtag has raised our profile among historians, now reflected in our contributors, readers and altmetrics; in 2014 *JVC* was ranked 7 in Thomson Reuter's list of history journals.

Our activity on social media has also nurtured the growth of blogs in our field, which, few and far between in 2009, are now a vital part research culture. By 2013, 40% of our survey respondents had blogged on their own site or on a collaborative blog. As Lucinda Matthews-Jones discusses in this roundtable, blogging can provide

⁴ Helen Rogers and Lucinda Matthews-Jones, *Journal of Victorian Culture Survey* <<http://cs.createsurvey.com/publish/survey?a=29HnYR>> [accessed 12 November 2015].

postgraduates and emerging scholars with an introduction to writing for a broad, public audience rather than exclusively for specialists in their field. However, to realize the potential of blogging for scholars at every career stage, we might think more inventively about how interactive media can help us reshape traditional scholarship, including the journal article, which has changed remarkably little in appearance.⁵

The stasis of article publication is highlighted in the apparent reluctance of authors to engage explicitly with digital scholarship. In 2008 we aimed to kick-start regular discussion of the digital in Victorian studies with a special issue on 'Searching Questions'.⁶ Under James Mussell's editorship, the Digital Forum has become one of the most significant arenas for reviewing digital resources and approaches outside dedicated digital humanities publications. While the forum has nurtured digital conversations in our field – also evident in well-attended conference panels – it is striking how few of our article submissions foreground active use of digital materials and practices. 'Searching Questions' was preceded by a call for articles that were fundamentally concerned with digital concepts and methodologies or where the research had been 'born digital'. We looked forward to working with authors and our publisher to accommodate the interactive features of such scholarship within the journal, online and in print. But we received just one submission: Matthew

⁵ For examples of creative approaches to scholarly blogging, see Helen Rogers, 'Blogging Our Criminal Past: Public History, Social Media and Creative History', *Law, Crime and History* 5.1 (2015): 54-76,

<http://www.pbs.plymouth.ac.uk/solon/journal/vol.5%...>

⁶ Helen Rogers, Editorial, 'Searching Questions: Digital Research and Victorian Culture', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 13.1 (2008), pp. 56-7 <

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.3366/E1355550208000076>>

Rubery's insightful article on the history of audio books.⁷ Subsequent articles that are immersed in the digital can be counted on one hand.⁸

While it is often claimed that editors exert a conservative hold over academic scholarship, our experience at *JVC* points to a wider diffidence in the field in confronting the digital. At the very least, we should all highlight rather than disguise our use of online resources (including digitized books), by providing digital citations and links, and by acknowledging the search process (including keywords) and its limitations when discussing methodology. Editors may have to be more pro-active in encouraging experimentation if we are to radically re-imagine the digital article. For this reason, we plan to launch an annual competition to promote digital resources

⁷ Matthew Rubery, 'Play It Again, Sam Weller: New Digital Audiobooks and Old Ways of Reading', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 13. 1 (2008), pp. 58-79

<<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.3366/E1355550208000088>>

⁸ Bob Nicholson, "'You Kick the Bucket; We Do the Rest!': Jokes and the Culture of Reprinting in the Transatlantic Press', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17. 3 (2012), pp. 273-86 <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13555502.2012.702664>>;

Andrew Hobbs, 'The Deleterious Dominance of The Times in Nineteenth-Century Scholarship', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 18. 4 (2013), pp. 472-97 <

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13555502.2013.854519>>; Kelly J.

Mays, 'How the Victorians Un-Invented Themselves: Architecture, the Battle of the Styles, and the History of the Term Victorian', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 19. 1 (2014), pp. 1-23 <

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13555502.2014.889425>>; Sally M.

Foster, Alice Blackwell, Martin Goldberg, 'The Legacy of Nineteenth-century Replicas for Object Cultural Biographies: Lessons in Duplication from 1830s Fife', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 19. 2 (2014), pp. 137-160

<<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13555502.2014.919079>>;

Christopher Donaldson, Ian N. Gregory, Patricia Murrieta-Flores, 'Mapping "Wordsworthshire": A GIS Study of Literary Tourism in Victorian Lakeland', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 20. 3 (2015), pp. 287-307

<<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13555502.2015.1058089>>.

and essays, individual and collaborative blogs, as dynamic elements of contemporary research culture.

To embrace fully the interactive potential of hypertext and the new media, however, we **may** have to give up the printed journal, while continuing to give readers the option to download and print on demand. Sadly, this would deprive the falling number of individual subscribers of the pleasures, attested by some readers, of receiving and handling a print issue, but it would have numerous advantages. Fixed page budgets mean most academic journals operate tight word limits. Few accept articles over 10,000 words while others allow as little as 6,000. Word limits encourage authors to be concise but can prohibit essays drawing on extensive archival research or interweaving several scholarly debates; precisely the reasons we consider longer article submissions at *JVC*.

Released from the tyranny of print, however, articles could range in length from short, pithy interventions to heavily documented research essays, of the kind E.P. Thompson would now struggle to place. As more museums, galleries and libraries open their digital content, authors could display images in addition to embedding links; engage more closely with visual and material culture; and use illustrations to reinforce analysis while making the reading experience more stimulating and pleasurable. Authors could experiment with different lines of enquiry and modes of

argument, offering readers alternative routes through their essay rather than always following a linear direction to a single point of conclusion.⁹

The advantages of online publication have been championed by the open access movement, which has mounted a trenchant, though by no means unified, critique of academic journals and publishers. In some quarters this has been coupled with calls for traditional (usually blind) peer review mechanisms to be replaced by open peer review. In this model, authors publish scholarship on an online platform where essays are open for comment and evaluation by self-selecting reviewers. The open comments system means the review process is transparent and the once hidden labour of anonymous reviewers is recorded and credited. Subsequent readers can trace how an article has evolved through each re-draft and assess the author's responses to readers' recommendations. Once peer review is crowd-sourced by the online community, editors would no longer intervene significantly in the writing process but instead select and 'badge' articles for their journal, which could operate without the costs and overheads of traditional publishing.¹⁰ But would this not make

⁹ See for example, William G. Thomas, III, 'Writing A Digital History Journal Article from Scratch: An Account', available *DH Project* (2007) <<http://digitalhistory.unl.edu/essays/thomasessay.php>> [accessed 12 November 2015]. The essays recounts the experiment in creating a digital article based on the Valleys of the Shadows project as an interactive / 300 page article. See William G. Thomas, III, and Edward L. Ayers, 'An Overview: The Differences Slavery Made: A Close Analysis of Two American Communities', *American Historical Review*, 108 (2003), pp. 1299-1307 <ahr.oxfordjournals.org/content/108/5/1299.full.pdf> and *The Differences Slavery Made: A Close Analysis of Two American Communities* (2003) <<http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/AHR/>>

¹⁰ Jo Guldi, 'Reinventing the Academic Journal', *Hacking the Academy: New Approaches to Scholarship and Teaching from Digital Humanities*, ed. by Daniel J. Cohen and Tom Scheinfeldt (Michigan: Michigan University Press, 2013)

editors more akin to research assessors and journals little more than a ranking platform?

There are a few notable examples of crowd-sourced, pre-publication peer-reviewed journal issues, edited collections and monographs but it is notable that attempts to generalize the model, at least in the humanities, have not yet proved successful.¹¹ As two of its pioneers, Katherine Rowe and Kathleen Fitzpatrick acknowledge, open peer review depends on a ‘community of trust’ that takes time and care to build.¹² It is also notable that online journals with comment facilities receive very few comments from readers. Similarly, as Lucinda Matthews-Jones points out in this roundtable, time-pressed readers are much more likely to interact with blogs and articles with ‘thumbs-up tweets’ or in ephemeral exchanges on their own *Facebook* timeline, rather than in sustained discussion in comment sections. But if the academy is not yet geared up for open peer review, there are also positive aspects of traditional editorial practice and peer review that we might be well-advised to retain.

<<http://www.digitalculture.org/books/hacking-the-academy-new-approaches-to-scholarship-and-teaching-from-digital-humanities/>>; Tim Hitchcock and Jason M. Kelley, ‘Reinventing the Academic Journal: The “Digital Turn”, Open Access, & Peer Review’, *History Workshop Online* (22 April 2013)
<<http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/reinventing-the-academic-journal-the-digital-turn-open-access-peer-review/>> [accessed 2 May 2013].

¹¹ Hitchcock and Kelly launched an Open Scholarship Project (described in ‘Reinventing the Academic Journal’), but few articles received comments and the site is no longer available.

¹² Katherine Rowe and Kathleen Fitzpatrick, ‘Keywords for Open Peer Review’, *Logos: The Journal of the World Book Community*, 21.3-4 (2010): 249-257.

Reviewers tend to report on specialist aspects of essays under consideration. Part of the editor's role, however, is to ensure articles work not just as stand-alone pieces but speak to the journal's wider readership. *JVC*'s editors work hard to encourage authors to show how their research can interest a broad and interdisciplinary readership in order to maximize its influence. This involves helping authors highlight their central claims, flag their argument and extend its significance beyond their specialist concerns. It also means encouraging them to write clearly and economically for an audience including students as well as experts in their field. Almost all of us benefit from this kind of editorial intervention – I certainly do – but it is labour that is probably done most constructively 'behind the scenes'.

While the merits of traditional peer review may outweigh the largely unproven claims of open review, *JVC* has welcomed the move towards open scholarship. However, the mixed economy of open access that currently operates – at least in the UK – has important consequences for the status and reach of our contributors' research. Mandates by HEFCE and the Research Councils now ensure that 'publically funded' scholarship is made either 'gold' open access (instant OA paid for by Author Processing Charges) or 'green' open access (either made OA on publication with no charge; or the pre-print version, made OA through a repository of some kind, usually after an 18 months embargo). This means readers can have very different levels of access to articles in a single issue. RCUK awards cover Article Processing Charges for its funded researchers, though only a tiny proportion of our authors receive such funding. Articles supported by these grants have been among our most downloaded essays and consequently are likely to be more cited. In view of the increasing use of

altmetrics by funders, employers and recruitment panels, there is a danger we create a virtuous circle where funded open access leads to more citations which leads to further funding and career enhancement.

While we encourage our publisher to make other articles open access for short periods of time, we need the help of our authors and readers to maximize the circulation of all scholarship in our field and ensure continuing conversations.

Through social media we currently promote articles when they are published on our journal platform, when the print issue is released, and again when authors post a blog about their article at *JVC Online*. But as Lucinda Matthews-Jones points out, authors could give their articles another lease of life when they come out of the embargo period. In addition, our authors and readers could write blogs to coincide with upcoming anniversaries and events when relevant articles from our archives could be made open access. Similarly, readers could offer to edit, with a published introduction, 'virtual issues' comprising archived articles on a particular topic or shared agenda.¹³

It seems likely that academic journals will keep evolving as reading and online habits continue to change. Recent years have seen considerable debate over academic journals in which editors tend to be cast as gatekeepers. Less attention has been

¹³ See for example, the virtual issue on 'Folklore and Anthropology' at *Past and Present*, with articles open access until the end of 2015, edited with a new introduction by William Pooley, 'Native to the Past: History, Anthropology, and Folklore', *Past and Present* (2015)
<http://www.oxfordjournals.org/our_journals/past/anthropology_folklore.html>.

given to the constructive ways in which editorial boards have been involved in making journals focal points for scholarly communities, dialogue and experimentation. If the current mixed market for academic publication is to continue, commercial publishers and academic presses will have to play a much larger part in promoting journal content (and at a fair price) rather than leaving it to the unpaid labour of authors and editors. But academics too will need to take responsibility for sharing online the work of their peers and introducing students to the new forms and forums of scholarly communication. The alternative is that universities will stop investing in scholarly publication. Our research will be directed to institutional repositories, where it will disappear into impersonal silos, discoverable only via research management sites. That will be no place for conversation or creativity.

Keywords: academic article; academic journal; altmetrics; blogging; digital scholarship; editorship; electronic publication; open access; peer review; public engagement; print publication; social media; readership; referencing; virtual issue

Abstract: This article provides an editor's perspective on academic journals in the transition from print to online publication and the move towards open access. It considers the challenges facing scholarly publication but contends the new media and social networking provide opportunities for radically rethinking what constitutes an academic article and a scholarly journal. While editors and publishers are frequently charged with acting as 'gatekeepers', the article argues that resistance to change has also come from authors, particularly evident in the failure to reference

their use of digital resources. Above all, it claims, experimentation is inhibited by journals retaining the traditional parameters of the printed issue, with their restrictions on length and use of multimedia. Journals, it proposes, can become a focal point for academic communities, dialogue and experimentation, but this requires all scholars to be pro-active in sharing online the work of their peers and introducing students to the new forms of scholarly communication.