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Opening lines of communication: Demanding access to quality avenues for research dissemination

Abstract
In Australia, discussions and deliberations around the (recently abandoned) Australian Research Quality Framework exercise (widely known as 'the RQF'), together with the even more recently completed call for input into the proposed research journal rankings for the replacement Excellence in Research for Australia initiative ('ERA'), have cast a more than usually searching light onto avenues for the dissemination of scholarly research. When considered in conjunction with such qualitative measuring in the UK and New Zealand, peer-reviewed publishing - academic books and book chapters, and refereed journal articles and conference papers in particular - have recently become the topic of an unprecedented degree of scrutiny. Exploring the processes of peer reviewed scholarly publication, and the access that readers and writers have to such publication in Australia, this article suggests that academic writers and readers need to be more conscious about all stages of the publication process.

Introduction: Peer-reviewed publishing and research evaluation

In Australia, discussions and deliberations around the (recently abandoned) Australian Research Quality Framework exercise (widely known as 'the RQF'), together with the even more recently completed call for input into the proposed research journal rankings for the replacement Excellence in Research for Australia initiative (becoming known as 'ERA'), have cast a more than usually searching light onto avenues for the dissemination of scholarly research. When considered in conjunction with such qualitative measuring in the UK and New Zealand, peer-reviewed publishing - academic books and book chapters, and refereed journal articles and conference papers in particular - have recently become the topic of an unprecedented degree of scrutiny.

Very rarely, it seems, is the link between conducting research and inquiry, and then reporting the findings of such research through publications and other means of dissemination, questioned. Dissemination, it is repeatedly argued, tests and authenticates the research process. Such a product-focused investigative methodology - focusing on the production and dissemination of the findings resulting from the research process - is usually discussed in utopian terms. Such positive expressions include sharing the new knowledge generated by the research, *enriching* information flow and *contributing to* public education and, thus, providing a *fair* return on the investment the taxpayer has made in the research thus reported. For at least a decade, however, it has been argued that the emphasis on scholarly publishing in academia has enriched the wealth of the giant multinational publishing conglomerates (Myers 2004; Wilding 2000), who do not pay writers for their content, but charge for access to it, to the detriment of those authors and their institutions. In response,

neoliberal, supply-side economic arguments have contended that the more the publishing industry profits from such increased dissemination practice, the more the often-cited 'trickle-down effect' will reduce the overall costs of scholarly publishing and improve publication options for all. Others have calculated, and eulogized, the significant amount of material that is freely available through open access journals and other means on the internet. *Ipso facto*, a better world for us all, whichever way the discussion is configured.

Yet, instead of this natural evolution of a superior cosmos, one of the predictable outcomes of having such evaluative review mechanisms focusing on publication forced upon researchers in the contemporary academy has been the raising of a range of questions about such mechanisms, and about the nature and purpose of research itself. As a result, the detail of these assessment regimes has been debated and interrogated. Questions raised include: what is to be measured and how; which biblio- and other metrics are to be utilised and whether they are valid (Seglen 1998); and the impacts of such standardised evaluative processes on individual disciplines and academics (Redden 2008). While the dual benefits of academic prestige and financial advantage (in the form of funding) are generally understood to be the ultimate prizes for those who are judged to be the 'winners' of this scheme (whether these be individuals and/or institutions), there has also been significant interrogation of the economic rationalist bureaucratic managerialism that underpins such evaluation processes. Around these discussions, there has been widespread consideration of whether such competition for funding between institutions, disciplines, work areas and individuals is the best, fairest, or most useful way to allocate resources (see, for recent examples, Goldsworthy 2008; Redden 2008). A number of high profile 'quality' journals have also been opting out from being included in publication ranking systems. Reasons for this choice include that such ranking mechanisms do not take into account where truly groundbreaking work may be published, are prejudicial to specialist and non-English language journals, and are being carried out by 'experts' of dubious capabilities (Newman 2008: 7). Most recently, the significant publisher Elsevier has announced that it is currently accepting manuscripts in 'all fields of human endeavour', these papers to be 'sorted out and published in any of our numerous journals that best fits' (Elsevier 2009). This is a submission and publishing process that further muddies the validity of journal ranking - as the various commercial pressures of publishing will also come into play in deciding what paper is matched to which journal.

The amount of time invested by so many in the administrative and other demands of such evaluative programs has also been much discussed, as well as the cynicism, dissatisfaction and ennui that they have undoubtedly promoted. The longer-term behavioural and other effects of such evaluative measures - on the research produced and the researchers themselves - will only be revealed in the future. Clear, however, in the shorter term, are the various levels of both resistance and compliance with which these evaluative regimes have been met. Resistance seems most often the result of a mixed reaction of anxiety, hostility and exhaustion. While this may be a response that is warranted, and even valid, it is dangerous in terms of individual and disciplinary academic credibility when so much in the academic arena depends on research production and its perceived quality. The second response - compliance - has ranged from resigned, submissive acquiescence to an active engagement within, and collaboration across, staff in disciplinary areas. This is especially apparent in the creative arts disciplines in various efforts to begin to define the nature of research in the creative arts (with much work inspired by, and then extending, Paul Carter's *Material Thinking* of 2004), and energetic efforts to ascertain how to measure the value of that research in terms of quality, impact and community contribution.

Peer-reviewed publishing: The basis of research scholarship or old technology?

A fascinating sub-thread through such discussions has been in relation to the processes of scholarly publishing itself. Recent research has proven what most of us already know: that academics across a range of disciplines largely support the peer review of the traditional range of scholarly publications as the foundation of scholarly communication. In 2008, a sizeable survey of academics by Mark Ware Consulting and Mike Monkman Media (MWC) found peer review the 'essential component of scholarly communication, the mechanism that facilitates the publication of primary research in academic journals' (MWC 2008: 1). It is worth considering, however, that regardless of how entrenched peer review as a form of verification seems, it is only a matter of decades - since the middle of the twentieth century - that the peer review with which we are so familiar today has become the institutionalised norm for academic journals and other publications. Moreover, those who want to publish their research findings in refereed journals as well as those who edit, referee articles for, or otherwise contribute to the production of such journals, note that the national evaluative mechanisms have increased the impediments that attend this process. Institutional imperatives regarding publication have led to growing numbers of manuscript submissions and the flow-on effect of rising backlogs and bottlenecks in journal production processes (Pannell & Williams 2003). The overall effect is a lengthier time to publication from initial submission. At the same time, academics involved in producing these journals, whether as editors, referees or in other positions, are increasingly finding such work classed as community or professional service - definitely a 'second rate' category after research and teaching in terms of academic appointment or promotion. In many cases, the already largely nominal allocations of time for such work are in the process of being slashed or withdrawn completely.

Also worthy of consideration is the rising volubility of criticism of peer review from within the sector. A large study by Jefferson et al (2002) asserts that editorial peer review, although widely used, is not only largely untested, but has uncertain effects. Even more recently peer review has been criticised as:

> unreliable, unfair and [that it] fails to validate or authenticate; that it is unstandardised and idiosyncratic; that its secrecy leads to irresponsibility on the part of reviewers; that it stifles innovation; that it causes delay in publication. (MWC 2008: 1)

Significant players in the field - editor of the British *Lancet*, Richard Horton, for instance - have noted that peer referee tests the *acceptability*, rather than the *validity*, of content, and that 'the system of peer review is biased, unjust, unaccountable, incomplete, easily fixed, often insulting, usually ignorant, occasionally foolish, and frequently wrong' (Horton 2000). It has also been noted that, as academic appointment and promotion become increasingly linked to publication output, there is evidence of increasing levels of academic misconduct in relation to academic publishing. In this, the 'publish or perish' mentality is impacting negatively on the ethical behaviour of writers, referees, editors and publishers (Calabrese & Roberts 2004).

Further criticisms advance the line of argument that traditional peer review is a manifestation of 'old ways of thinking' and little more than a prop of 'old technology' - that is, print publication. In response, newer forms of review have been posited - such as post-publication review, open group review (rather than blind review by a small number of reviewers) (van Rooyen et al 1999) and collaborative wiki-type cyclic modes of continuous authorship and review.

Although such newer forms are not preferred by all, they do have benefits, in many cases offering significantly more timely, iterative and useful responses for authors to consider (Ware 2008: 4). Collapsed forms of writing, review and dissemination, such as collaboratively composed and edited web-based wikis, it is argued, not only utilise more sophisticated systems of creation, inspection and validation but are, moreover, more democratic and in line with twenty-first century modes of understanding authorship and knowledge transfer.

Readership behaviours

In 2007, writing in *Physics World*, Meho claimed evidence for the 'sobering fact' that as many as half of all refereed scientific articles are 'never read by anyone other than their authors, referees and journal editors' and, moreover, some ninety per cent of the articles published in academic journals are never cited (Meho 2007: 32). Despite the fact that this assertion is based on an analysis of citation tracking and the point is often made by many in the creative arts, as in the humanities, that the existing citation indexes do not apply to our disciplines, this does not discount the clear message that, at least in the sciences - the very disciplinary research model that the arts and humanities are often asked to emulate - there is a great deal of information being published that no one utilises in any real way.

Another study agrees, suggesting that even if published information is being accessed, it is not being read/used in any detail. The Ohio Library and Information Network (known as OhioLINK) is a consortium of Ohio's college and university libraries and the State Library of Ohio in the USA. The consortium services more than 500,000 students, academic and other staff at more than 80 institutions of higher learning. OhioLINK's Electronic Journal Centre, which makes electronic articles and journals available to OhioLINK members, uses transaction log analysis to measure the number of articles that users download, and other information. Begun in April 1998, this ongoing program is providing a wealth of information about user behaviour and a rich data source for a range of studies. A recent analysis indicated that all articles accessed through OhioLINK were, on average, viewed for under a minute, while abstracts were viewed for approximately half a minute (Nicholas et al 2006). Such 'reading behaviour' has been widely identified in relation to material available electronically and has been called 'power browsing' in a study by researchers from the UK's Centre for Information Behaviour and the Evaluation of Research (CIBER 2008: 31). This study found that, with regard to reading material on the internet:

> most visitors to scholarly sites view only a few pages, many of which do not even contain real content, and in any case do not stop long enough to do any real reading. This is either a symptom of a really worrying malaise - failure at the library terminal - or maybe a sign that a whole new form of online reading behaviour is beginning to emerge, one based on skimming titles, contents pages and abstracts. (CIBER 2008: 31)

This behaviour could be the result of the enormous amount of material available via contemporary technologies. *Ulrich's Periodicals Directory* (widely known as *Ulrich's*) claims to be the 'authoritative source of bibliographic and publisher information on more than 300,000 periodicals of all types' (*Ulrich's* 2009). The title of the compilation commemorates Carolyn Farquhar Ulrich who, in 1932, when Head of Periodicals at the New York Public Library, compiled the first *Periodicals Directory: A Classified Guide to*

a Selected List of Current Periodicals Foreign and Domestic, which, having gone through several incarnations, has become the current directory. The current listing includes academic and scholarly journals, Open Access publications, other peer-reviewed titles, popular magazines, newspapers, newsletters and zines, and is widely referred to in relation to the categorisation of publications for various purposes, including to authenticate their peer-reviewed status. In 2006, Morrison found that *Ulrich's* included some 56,777 journals classed as 'academic/scholarly', of which 24,340, or some 40 per cent, were identified as refereed, or peer-reviewed (Morrison 2006). Another study, by Björk, Roos and Lauri (2008), estimates the number of peer-refereed scientific journals in 2006 at 23,750 and the number of scientific articles published in that year as approximately 1,350,000 (2008: 1). With journal articles increasingly having a presence on the internet either through journal websites or availability through online databases, these researchers also calculated the number of articles which were freely available (including fully open access journals, and the various open access sites such as e-print repositories and homepages where authors post their own work), and came up with some 19.4 per cent of the yearly output (or some 261,900 articles) available freely on the Internet (2008: 1). I can find no such studies or estimates for either numbers of journals and articles in the arts and humanities or their availability, but suggest there would be some comparability in these figures and percentages.

So many journals: but are they the right ones?

For much of the latter part of the ERA journal ranking exercise in 2008, I was a visiting research fellow at the Australian National University (ANU) - one of Australia's premier research institutions. A portion of my research consisted of examining the university's extensive print and digital journal collections for material in relation to my current projects. During this process, it soon became apparent that a number of well-regarded and important journals were not only not held at ANU or available through their online databases, but were not readily available anywhere in Australia, either in print or online.

This lack of availability raises another question in terms of the research evaluation exercises discussed above: what is the real value of publishing work in a journal - externally judged as 'excellent' or not - to which one's nationally-based colleagues, students and fellow researchers have either no, or only very restricted, access? Of course, most of our university libraries will order an article from another library either nationally or overseas. However, this will certainly entail a charge of some kind involved for the academic and/or his or her research area, and certainly an amount of paperwork and/or various levels of other effort involved in accessing such a service - factors which (in the already noted information-rich, but time-poor, academic environment) may make the attempted retrieval of this material just too much trouble to pursue. This effort may include such steps as: working out how to action such an (often irregular) request in the rapidly changing information environments of our institutions; locating the correct research centre and/or other cost code to include on such a request; perhaps having to have such a request signed or otherwise authorised by someone else; walking the paper-based form over to the library and lodging it, or expending the various levels of time and frustration that may be involved in making an online request; managing the progress of the project for which this (delayed) piece of information is to be included; monitoring the request's progress and answering any queries in relation to it; and, finally, retrieving the article from the library, pigeon hole or wherever the process determines it will be delivered. There may be more paperwork involved in receiving/retrieving the material, as well as the physical

task of returning after use, if this is required. Loan restrictions usually prohibit the borrowing of an entire issue or volume of a journal, let alone the run of years that allows the detailed study of the content of an individual journal through time, while copyright restrictions limit the percentage of a single issue or volume that can be copied and, thus, supplied - usually one article or 10 per cent of the publication.

All of the above becomes more vivid when viewed in the environment of inadequate, and unequal, funding for Australian universities of at least the past decade, with university library collections one area that has borne the brunt of these cutbacks. 'Savings' are frequently made in library collections by stopping subscriptions to specialist journals, and/or by not purchasing back copy runs of existing or new journals until they are requested by academic units, and not always then. In some universities, some of the responsibility for purchase requests has been devolved to academics, and what is acquired (or not) depends at least in part upon the assiduousness or lobbying ability of those individuals. Often, a print journal purchase request will be met with the reply that an electronic version is available through a database, but not all institutions subscribe to all databases, and their subscriptions change. The journals included in databases can also change. Most databases do not supply the full run of all (and especially older) journals and there is often a time lag before the most recently published journal articles are included. Six months or a year's delay are the most common intervals in operation, but this period can be lengthier (*Ulrich's* 2009).

Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings

One such journal of interest to those in the discipline of writing is *Moving Worlds*, subtitled *A Journal of Transcultural Writings*. *Moving Worlds* is a biannual international peer-reviewed journal, published by the School of English and the University of Leeds in the UK. Currently in its eighth volume, sixteen themed issues have been published since 2001, with its lists of contributors including major international names, emerging scholars and researchers, as well as Australian contributors from a wide range of disciplines. I discovered the journal due to an issue focusing on food writing ('Food, Culture & Community', 6.2, 2006), but soon also discovered through a search of the Libraries Australia database, available through the National Library of Australia (NLA), that this title was 'not yet held in an Australian library' (*Libraries Australia* 2009).

This lack is a notable omission from the national collections as *Moving Worlds* not only publishes high quality scholarly research, but also creative, critical, literary and visual work, as well as notice of a wide range of new international books and reviews of books in this important subject area. Each issue features a selection of poetry and/or short stories and more personally inflected articles as well as more conventionally accepted academic/scholarly work. Its standing call for papers specifically notes that the journal seeks to publish scholarly as well as more personal modes of writing. In this, *Moving Worlds* notes that it is 'open to experimentation, and represents work of different kinds and from different cultural traditions' (*Moving Worlds* 2009). Although featuring the most famous of writers, such as VS Naipaul, its editorial selection also aims to promote and publish emerging writers alongside the better-known. In this, the journal's central concern is in the 'transcultural', what the editorial board defines as 'the movement of cultures across national boundaries, and the productive transformations resulting from these crisscrossings'. This means that its content is both germane to and useful for Australia and Australians. While it seeks to service regional, national and international audiences, at the same time the journal seeks to promote the diversity and richness of communities from the

global to local scale. This, together with *Moving Worlds*' location at a university which has played a pioneering role in the field of Commonwealth and postcolonial studies, means that many of the journal's themes (and its readers) are keenly relevant to, and for, Australia readers and writers. Indeed, there is at least one Australian-based academic on its editorial board.

An interest in our region is evident in the current issue of *Moving Worlds* (8.2), which is on the theme of '"New"' New Zealand'. This issue features fiction from Paul Dagarin, Alison Glenny, Sara Knox and Carl Shuker, as well as poetry by Robert Sullivan, Gregory O'Brien, Joan Fleming, Geoff Cochrane, Anna Jackson and Charis Boos, alongside a range of articles on subjects as diverse as cultural rhetoric and national identity, 'creative multiculturalism', Vincent Ward, and sacred objects in the British Museum. Forthcoming issues of *Moving Worlds* include 'Chotro: Adivasi Voices and Stories' and 'Region/Writing/Home: Relocating Black, Migrant and Diasporic Writing in Britain'. The editors state that they welcome ideas for themed issues and articles, and perhaps a focus on Australia or Australasia would more closely align its potential for publishing with potential readerships. This could only occur, however, if this journal is purchased by our university and public libraries in Australia.

Journals of creative nonfiction and life writing

Faced with this absence in our library collections, I was interested to see if this situation was an anomaly or a common occurrence. What I found is sobering. For instance, despite the genre of creative nonfiction being taught at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in a significant (and growing) number of Australian universities, and honours, masters and doctoral theses being produced in, and about, creative nonfiction at those universities - and also in spite of my own efforts to have a number of university libraries subscribe to these journals - the key journal *Creative Nonfiction* (which has been published since 1993) is only held in two university libraries in Australia. It is, moreover, not held by the NLA. Other leading print journals in the creative nonfiction genre, *Fourth Genre* (published since 1999) and *River Teeth* (published since 1999) are, like *Moving Worlds*, not held in any university or public library in Australia.

In the sub-genre area of life writing, important journals are similarly not collected completely or equivalently across the country. The key international journal, *Biography*, published in Honolulu by the University Press of Hawai'i for the Biographical Research Center since 1978 is currently available through a number of online databases, including Expanded Academic ASAP, Project MUSE, EBSCOhost, OCLC FirstSearch and ProQuest, but not all university or public libraries' online subscriptions include full material from all journals, and this is especially true for those with content ranging over a thirty-year time span. Of the thirteen university libraries with current or past subscriptions to *Biography*, only two hold the entire collection of issues. The print version of the influential *Auto/Biography: The Bulletin of the British Sociological Association Study Group on Autobiography*, published since 1992, is not yet held in any Australian library in the *Libraries Australia* database. Theoretically informed and focused, *Auto/Biography* has played an important role in my own work as it not only published work that thoroughly explored a wide range of theoretical, epistemological and empirical issues relating to biographical and autobiographical writing, but also took an interdisciplinary approach to this field of research. It certainly contributed to the development of the growing academic interest across a range of disciplines the representation of lives. Published by Sage, this journal ceased publication at the end of 2006, however, subscribers can continue to access content up to the end of 2006 via

ingenta.com and OCLC FirstSearch databases. *Life Writing*, a journal that comes out of Perth, Western Australia, has since 2004 published work that deals with any of the numerous aspects of the contemporary meanings of life narrative. The journal has a particular focus on investigation that aims to incorporate interdisciplinary perspectives, recognising that the growing field of life writing - broadly, biography and autobiography in all their forms - is one in which discipline areas such as anthropology, cultural studies, history, literature, philosophy, psychology, sociology and various creative arts areas such as visual and writing studies are contributing. While print editions of *Life Writing* are held by twelve university and one college library, as well as the NLA and one state library, only four of these institutions hold complete runs, and there are no holdings at all in Tasmania or in regional areas of Australia apart from Newcastle. The online version is not collected by any library.

Journals of food writing

In my current area of research interest, food writing, the crossover quarterly journal *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* from the University of California at Berkeley is one of the most important international venues for new ideas. *Gastronomica* includes works of creative nonfiction, poetry and fiction works as well as scholarly articles, and an extensive review section that logs a significant part of the important new food writing published in the USA and elsewhere. *Gastronomica* is held by four university libraries in Australia; however, only one of those and the NLA hold a complete run of the journal from 2001. Although available online through OCLC FirstSearch Electronic Collections Online and ProQuest databases, these electronic versions do not convey the sophisticated design of this publication, which has made a strong feature of incorporating and featuring visual artworks into its refined aesthetic layout. *Meatpaper* - a new print journal of 'meat culture' (also out of California, but San Francisco in this instance) - is similarly design-focused in presentation, and also features artwork and creative nonfiction prose in its content. Its editors describe the journal as comprising 'art and ideas about meat. We like metaphors more than marinating tips', and this journal has fast become the repository of the sharpest cutting-edge in food writing. Yet *Meatpaper* is not currently available in any Australian library. Published since March 2007, and currently with its seventh issue in print, only limited back issues are available for purchase and personal subscription is the only means of reading.

Scanning just a few more of the most important, and older, journals for studying food writing does not offer a more satisfying situation for Australian scholars. A full run of *Food, Culture & History* (from London, published since 1993) is held by only two universities and one State Library with no copies available in Tasmania, Queensland, Western Australia or the Northern Territory; *Food Culture & Society* is held by five university libraries, but only in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia. *Food & Foodways: Explorations in the History and Culture of Human Nourishment* in only held by one university library in Western Sydney, although later issues are available through OCLC FirstSearch Electronic Collections Online and Academic Search Premier. Copies of *Food & History* (published since 2003 by the European Institute of Food History), *Food Through History* (published since 2003) and *Food in American History* (published since 2005) are not held in any Australian library.

One of the most important and enduring journals dealing with food writing is *Petits Propos Culinaires*, subtitled *Essays and Notes to do with Food, Cookery and Cookery Books*. Founded by Alan Davidson, editor of *The Oxford Companion to Food* (1999), *Petits Propos Culinaires* has been published three times a year since 1979. Now edited by Tom Jaine and published by Prospect

Books in the UK, only incomplete runs of the journal are held by five university and TAFE libraries in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia, as well as by the State Library of South Australia and Sydney's Powerhouse Museum's Research Library. Although a small selection of this writing is presented in Davidson and Helen Saberi's *The Wilder Shores of Gastronomy: Twenty Years of the Best Food Writing from the Journal Petits Propos Culinaires* (2002), this compilation is itself only held by two Australian university and two public libraries, in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide.

Concluding remarks

While the above is not offered as any empirical or representative survey of journal holdings in Australian libraries, it is based on expert personal knowledge of the genre areas of creative nonfiction and its popular subgenres of auto/biographical and food writing, and the (reputable) listings of the *Libraries Australia* information portal. Furthermore, personal experience and anecdotal evidence lead to the conclusion that this unedifying situation is indicative of more widespread trends in specialist research areas in writing, editing and publishing, as in the arts and humanities more generally.

As dissemination and publication outcomes are of premier importance not only in higher education institutional discourse around research outcomes and quality, but also in the professional practice of all writers in the academy, this situation appears to require at least careful consideration. To me, it suggests that Australian academics need to be more assiduous in becoming aware of what journals are available in our public and university collections. The next step is to lobby these libraries to purchase access to, or copies of, journals that may be of use in our work and to our students. This usefulness is not just when, as academics, we are performing the role of researcher-readers. It is also when carrying out the function of researcher-writers, who want to not only to attempt to fulfil mandated requirements to seek quality publications for our work, but who also want broad, and broadly visible, dissemination of our research findings and other writings. To put it more bluntly - I don't want just to passively tick the boxes on dissemination with regard to my own publications. I want to know that my ideas can, and will, be engaged with. I want to be read, and I want to be read by my peers.

One feasible response is for academics and research managers not only to contribute thoughtfully to the ranking of journals as part of the governmental research evaluation exercises, but also to complete a careful audit of what journals are available (and unavailable) to local researchers and readers. Such an audit could inform not only what advice teachers and scholars of writing are giving libraries regarding the serials to which we, and our students, require access, but those in which we seek to publish. In the wider arena, academics can recognise that these linked areas of reading, writing and publishing, and research, peer review and publication quality, are important, and require thoughtful probing and on-going discussion within - and across - disciplines.

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