



Ithaka S+R



Ithaka S+R is a strategic consulting and research service provided by ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to helping the academic community use digital technologies to preserve the scholarly record and to advance research and teaching in sustainable ways. Ithaka S+R focuses on the transformation of scholarship and teaching in an online environment, with the goal of identifying the critical issues facing our community and acting as a catalyst for change. JSTOR, a research and learning platform, and Portico, a digital preservation service, are also part of ITHAKA.

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Speeding up the system of book reviewing, so that more books are reviewed, in a way that is cost effective for journal publishers, helps promote book publishers' lists, and provides communities of scholars with the information they need about new research, is an idea whose time has come.

Authors and publishers of scholarly books have long bemoaned the length of time needed to publish reviews of scholarly monographs. From the time needed to identify suitable academic reviewers, to mail them a printed book, to have the reviewer carefully read the work and deliver a considered piece of analysis, to editing and publishing the review itself, often takes years. While top scholars might (might) receive expedited treatment, in the past, authors have hoped for good reviews to spur sales, while fearing that the first glowing reviews could arrive just in time to see their title declared out of print, for lack of sales.

Indeed, in 2013, almost 90% of the book reviews in *American Anthropologist* had copyrights of 2010 or 2011 (two or three years earlier than the publication of the review). The oldest reviewed book had a copyright year of 2008, five years earlier. Not one item from 2013 appeared. Speeding up the system of book reviewing, so that more books are reviewed, in a way that is cost effective for journal publishers, helps promote book publishers' lists, and provides communities of scholars with the information they need about new research, is an idea whose time has come.

In July 2014, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) received funding from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's Digital Information Technology Program to help underwrite the development of a new digital prototype for book reviews. This prototype will be a website that supports a digital workflow from the publisher's electronic files all the way through to online publication of the review.

This prototype will provide three improvements to the current book review system:

- **Wider audiences for book authors.** The book review prototype will facilitate faster reviewing; ideally reviews will publish simultaneously with publication. The published reviews will be available open access and support social engagement (e.g., sharing reviews on Facebook, Twitter) and richer product information.
- **Lower costs for journal publishers.** This new process will mean journals will spend less money on postage and typesetting, and less time and expense inventorying books. For reviews that appear only online, journals will save typesetting charges.
- **Reduce costs to scholarly presses.** The book review prototype will accelerate reviews and save presses expensive efforts in mailing print

books. Book reviews will publish on an open access site, thus giving more readers more opportunities to hear about newly published works. These reviews will sport “buy it now” options, thus facilitating discovery and also purchase among interested readers.

BACKGROUND

The time delay between a book’s publication date and its review’s publication date results from an antiquated print-centric workflow. Consider the current situation: Publishers mail books to elicit reviews. But book review offices move, as often as every two years. Publishers thus mail some of their books to out-of-date locales or sometimes to journal editors, who often do not share offices with the book review editors. While these misrouted books may be rerouted, they may not be sent until there is a full box to forward. Whenever these books arrive, someone has to enter them into a database to keep track of what is available for review. The book review editor invites scholars to review and then mails the book to that reviewer.

In one study at AAA, only 17% of the books received actually ended up being reviewed.

This print-centric process has opportunity as well as temporal costs. In one study at AAA, only 17% of the books received actually ended up being reviewed. Most publishers who hear this number express shock at this extremely poor yield, not realizing as many as four of the five copies they mailed now sit at obsolete offices, or never were assigned for review, or went to reviewers who failed to write reviews. In addition to publisher costs, this workflow also drives up journal office expenses. The journal incurs postage costs, but also staffing costs as someone tracks and mails the books to the individual reviewers. The journal expends money when it typesets, then prints and mails the book reviews within the bound pages of its journal.

Some disciplines have made the leap to publish book reviews online and outside of the wrapper of the journal. For instance, the *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* is an admirable example of online book review publishing and provides traditional textual analysis with links to prior and related reviews, while also offering a commenting feature through its blog. But many of the cost and time investments in producing online reviews remain, and we have not found examples of formats that harness the possibilities of e-commerce and the full potential of the web. The AAA book review prototype will seek to maximize web publication not only by publishing online, but by adding “Buy It Now” options and links back to publisher’s sites. Publishers will be able to upload cover images to enrich the book reviews. The site will include sharing tools, so that book reviews connect to informal scholarly communications and comments. Instead of shackling readership of these

reviews to the subscription base of the journal, we hope our open access site will let anyone interested in the contents of the book discover new works and launch virtual discussions. And, we anticipate the time between book publication and review will be significantly reduced as reviewers will have access to the books electronically, in some cases before their publication.

DIGITAL-CENTRIC PROCESS

Funding from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation's Digital Information Technology Program will help underwrite the development of a new digital prototype. This website will use a plugin initially developed at the Freie Universitat at Berlin on the Open Journals Systems (OJS), an open source platform that anyone will subsequently be able to use for any discipline or any other journal using OJS. Publishers will upload book descriptions into the system. These book descriptions will use a metadata standard called ONIX to facilitate the ingest of publication data. Publishers will upload digital files; they will have full control over what they elect to upload. After a reviewer accepts the review, and after that reviewer agrees to the copyright terms and a DRM statement and a deadline to submit review, then the reviewer will be given authorization access to the digital proofs. Reviewers later will upload their words into the database for approval and then publication online. Final book reviews can include cover gifs and links to the publishers' sites. Reviewers will still receive a complimentary copy of the book, but only after submission of the review.

Anyone who has used OJS or a commercial analog like ScholarOne, Editorial Manger, or Bench>Press to manage the peer-review of journal articles will immediately know that these programs offer tremendous benefits like serving as the collective memory of reviewers and their tastes. Editorial office software also prompts late reviewers, generating messages "automagically" at defined triggers. These features will greatly aid the labor of book reviewing. For instance, the OJS book review prototype enables accretion of anthropologists and their interests even after the book review editor changes. In another instance, the book review prototype will generate notifications of publication of reviews to the community of scholars who share keywords with the book descriptions including the membership of the AAA, to the author of the book under review, and to the publisher of the book.

If publishers elect to upload uncorrected page proofs, or even postprint manuscripts, reviewers may write their book reviews as the book is being printed. Reviews and their antecedent publications could go live

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simultaneously. AAA is leaving it up to publishers to define which files types they would prefer to upload.

AAA believes that a digital workflow benefits our discipline by helping our members' books become more visible and by aiding the university presses that help our academics further their careers. Clearly many scholarly presses agree. Nineteen publishers have already agreed to participate and the AAA hopes this number will grow. We anticipate some hiccups and the prototype will run alongside our existing book review offices. This means that some journals may elect to use the prototype as a mechanism for generating the contents of their book review section. In these cases, the reviews will publish on the open access online site and also, some months later, in the print gated journal issue.

In the summer of 2015, AAA will assess the prototype to see what improvements may be needed. Because AAA publishes some 18 journals that publish reviews and published nearly 200 book reviews in 2013, we believe a new workflow could ultimately replace the print-centric process and greatly enhance the value of book reviews in anthropology. More importantly, because the prototype is available for any journal that implements OJS, other disciplines could adopt this workflow and aid in rejuvenating book reviews across the humanities and social sciences.

RESOURCES

Bryn Mawr Classical Reviews: <http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2014/2014-08-11.html>

Open Journals System is open source peer-review software available from Public Knowledge Project: <https://pkp.sfu.ca/>

Alfred P. Sloan Foundation: <http://www.sloan.org>