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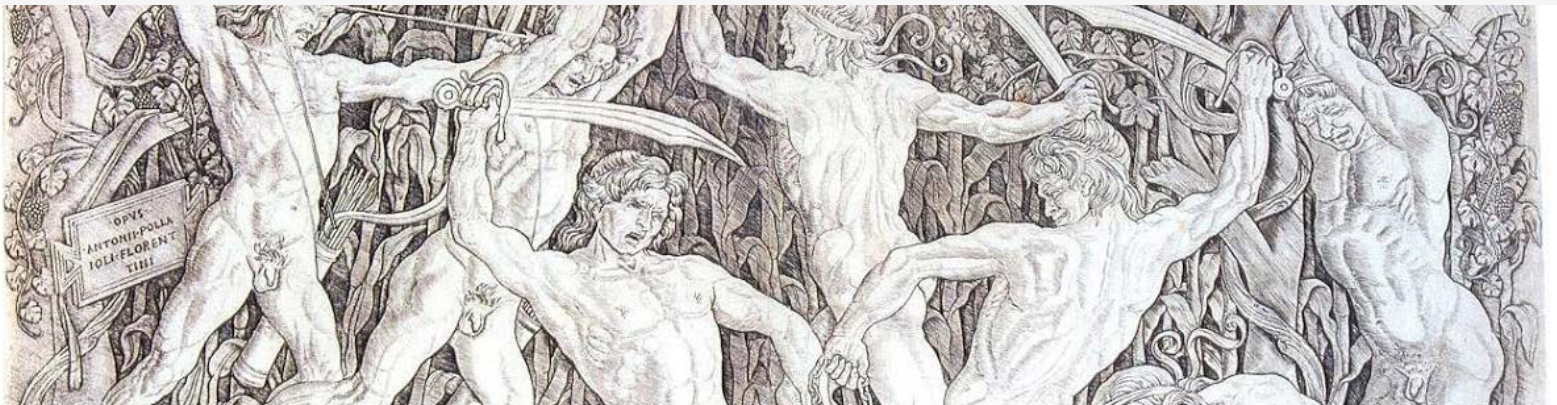
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THE CHALLENGES OF BEGINNING A SCHOLARLY DEBATE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Jo Guldi



C. P. Snow's *The Two Cultures* (1959) began a critical debate about the role of the humanities in an increasingly scientific world. It was also the receipt of such enormous criticism that Snow later wrote *The Two Cultures: A Second Look* (1963). In the last few months David Armitage and I have experienced a technologically-accelerated version of the same. In the 21st Century, this debate happens not only between colleagues, but also via pseudonymous blogs and retweeted punchlines.

When we published *The History Manifesto* in October, we set out to rouse a debate in the university, and in history departments in particular, about the methods and ambitions of our profession in a moment of global warming, growing inequality, academic specialization, and short-term thinking. The debate took off beyond our wildest dreams; usually positive, sometimes controversial, and even occasionally dipping into extreme ire as individual personalities took issue with our text, some of them choosing to duel in the footnotes instead of to engage the substantive, positive vision that we wrote to offer. A deliberation of this variety and passion on all sides is evidence, we believe, of a healthy engagement by the profession. Like other creatures, when historians are aroused, they experience emotions, sometimes violently.

Passion and critique redound on the internet, mirrored and intensified beyond the bounds of normal scholarly discourse, where debates are moderated by editors as well as conventions of reasonable politeness, in ways that can be particularly dangerous for junior faculty. In the voicing of criticism online, the norms of academic discourse disappear. Online enthusiasms that use heated rhetoric to suggest that an argument has been totally eviscerated can distract from the question of which data and issues are at the core of a professional debate, and which are illustrations that can be overlooked without harm to the major argument.

The even-handed, respectful tone of civil debate that we saw in published book reviews in history journals -- the majority of which were positive -- disappeared on Twitter and the blogs. A journal editor noted in his published introduction how the tone of the unsolicited critique of our book were out of keeping with normal practice at that journal. The norms of scholarly civility were tinged with a form of rhetoric colored by strong pronouncements. It is my intention here to raise the question of the degree to which those

strong pronouncements pertained to the culture and rhetoric of the internet, where one strand of academic debate originated as a result of our open-access publishing venture.

Online debates bring particular challenges when they concern the debating of footnotes that this debate has involved. In an earlier blog entry, I told the story of an anonymous twitter personality, "Pseudoerasmus," whose critique was cited by senior colleagues in their footnotes as evidence of sloppy scholarship. The critique appears largely to stem from an individual who is unfamiliar with historians' conventions of writing and footnoting. Where critics pointed to individual footnotes that could be tightened or prose made more accurate, we accepted their criticisms. Indeed, many of the most heated critiques that appeared first on the internet were leveled against details and footnotes rather than the major argument.

As we examined the criticism, we found most of it to be taking issue with footnotes that could be fit the text better and summaries of economists' work that could be made more precise. Very little of the most heated criticism on the internet (or in the printed engagements that quoted the internet) engaged substantively with the larger arguments that we had made about the tradition of a place of political engagement in professional scholarship in the social sciences, or about the questions of time-scale raised by new work by our colleagues, or about how visualization and digital analysis can help to tell stories on a greater scale.

On the internet, claims that one of these complaints had destabilized our argument circulate like a rumor mill. A provocatively titled tweet ran, for example, "stunning take-down of the #historymanifesto!" The tweet easily circulated among even our friends and colleagues, and not necessarily because they agreed that the take-down was successful. "Retweets" very rarely equal

endorsement; I myself have been wont to retweet articles whose headlines I disagree with when I am saving them for myself to read later. Yet even in such cases the headline circulates nonetheless, perhaps because many people thought the text was important enough that a debate should be read. And for those who idly read the headlines on twitter, it was easy to get the impression that a "take-down" had happened. I wonder how many colleagues absorbed that rumor, and dismissed the need to read the book themselves. Even very clever people are sometimes put off by a rumor of that sort.

It is hard to debate online in spaces where identity is so fluid, as it can increase the vulnerability of a scholar up for tenure, while disguising some of her critics. It was me, the untenured member of our writing collaboration, who was targeted by an anonymous twitter personality for his original attack, on the grounds that due to her relative inexperience, it was she, not her senior collaborator, who must have been responsible for any errors in the text. The attack explicitly singled me out as the faulty party, an assumption that revolved around bizarre notions of authorship that certainly did not apply to our collaboration. In the process, standards of authorship circulating on the internet, not in the world of scholarship, were applied to tarnish my reputation as a scholar.

When scholars at other institutions and editors of journals in my field retweeted the headline of a "take-down," they may have appeared to some readers to be buying into this faulty understanding of authorship and intention. Without paying careful attention to how claims circulated and where, it would be easy for someone arriving at this conversation for the first time to misread the retweets as a vindication of the Manifesto's critics. Effectively, if such misunderstanding as I have construed has happened in the scholarly community, it would mean that the voice of one anonymous twitter personality and a handful of critics were

promoted above the dozens of positive reviews published in scholarly journals by accredited peers across the academy.

This is a dangerous system of ranking, and it represents a novelty in academic practice that we should note and try to understand as a mechanism. The academy has evolved, over time, its own standards for understanding praise, blame, and dissent, culling consensus through the slow-moving process of publication itself as well as the published reviews. Where much academic favor depends on reputation, besmirching rumors started on the twitterverse can do immense harm to the scholar whose career is just beginning.

Internet publishing also brings challenges in the form of the sheer workload that a scholar must take on in order to stay engaged. Praise, critique, suggestions and invitations flooded in over the first few months of the *Manifesto*'s release. We soon found that we were inundated by more than we could, ourselves, respond to in detail. Our critics, while small in number, were prolific writers and tweeters. Their schedule also differed in its intensity from that of traditional academic review, which has some respect for holidays and academic schedules; two senior scholars released their critique the day before Christmas Eve. The intensity of the same writers kept up over formal and informal blog entries that continued over the following months. In the five days after *American Historical Review* published our reply to our critics on its front page together with the editor's congratulations, one of our senior critics has released to the internet two further "take-downs". When traditional book reviews may take six months to two years to appear, and then tend to take the form of a single reply, the volume of praise and criticism that can meet a text with a life on the internet dwarfs that of traditional scholarly encounters, and it can be hard to navigate in the midst of the other academic obligations.

As I described in an earlier blog post, paying attention to which

feedback to accept and which to reject on the wide berth of the internet is more complicated than it is in the format of a traditional journal or book revision process, where the scholar responds to criticism from 3-5 pre-selected scholars with expertise in their field. But readers on the internet do not necessarily share the same expectations of expertise as the authors, or even as other scholars in the field. As any scholar who has passed through the process of revising an article for journal acceptance knows, the process of considering these critiques is time-consuming. In bulk, without the guiding hand of an editor familiar with the interlocutors who has his own vision of what feedback to prioritize, the process of revision can be even more time-consuming. Online publishing is not a arena that a junior scholar should enter without caution about the time-consuming nature of the work, should the debate take off.

Together, these burdens -- the inflation of trivial critiques, the spread of rumor generated in communities with different standards for authorship and excellence, the weight of time to keep up with a discourse at volume -- generate particular vulnerabilities for junior scholars of any gender who engage with discipline-wide questions on the internet. By engaging in open-access publishing, where the text freely circulates to a public -- and not just a public committed to visiting the bookstore, paying money, or accessing a subscription behind a paywall -- they may inadvertently may place their reputation in the way of anonymous critics, academic incivility, and rumors spread by casual retweets.

The burdens of online criticism also redound differently through the hierarchy of the academy. For me as a junior scholar, the weight of these debates has particular ramifications for the processes ahead of me. The stakes are, of course, extremely real: rumors of scholarly malpractice or an ethical breach can result, especially in junior cases, in losing one's job. Will the relevant committees and meetings be swayed by these voices from the

internet? There is no sanitary cordon that shields senior voting colleagues from debate online. When they meet it, will they interpret it as the sign of a passionate debate erupting in the context of a new technology that makes way for more heated debate than past generations of scholars have witnessed? Or will they be alienated by the fervency of the voices of some of our interlocutors and the intensity of their communications? The committees who will try to understand my case have likely viewed few examples of similar cases before.

Public opinion matters in those rooms, and it is not the only thing that matters; scholarly consensus matters, and a range of opinion from the extremely positive to the extremely negative may be a sign of successfully engaging a disciplinary-wide controversy. Engaging with new forms of publishing and critique in the name of helping our institutions (departments, universities, libraries, and publishing-houses) to evolve may be taken as a sign of a commitment to institution-building. How my own case will be read has not yet been decided, although my hope is that they will be cognizant of the importance of engaging the issues at the heart of our discipline that cause such passionate eruptions, as well as the vitality of working with established academic publishers like Cambridge University Press in frontier spaces of innovative publishing.

I would necessarily advise caution, or at least a clear-eyed sense of reality, to younger scholars contemplating the same path. Nevertheless, it is a collective burden that we come to understand the evolving nature of scholarly discourse online, together with the opportunities and challenges it represents.

My engagement with the discipline of history and new opportunities represented by the digital was commissioned by a series of awards and fellowships, from a Mellon fellowship in

Digital History to a later fellowship at the Metalab to my current position as an assistant professor of Britain and its Empire who has been encouraged by senior faculty, my chair, and various administrators around the university to continue research, publishing, and teaching about these new technologies. My opinions and work did not come as a surprise to any of those bodies of scholars.

For me, the research, teaching, and publishing experiment of *The History Manifesto* followed seamlessly from the writing, research, and teaching about the digital humanities that I had been pursuing for six years already. My own contributions to *The History Manifesto* should be read in that light: the fruit of an officially-sanctioned project of research, teaching, and publication. I was the junior partner in a collaboration, offering my experience with digital tools and the possible audiences for history, reporting on an ongoing conversation with a senior partner who happened to be at the time chairing a major department of History. We hardly set out to offend our fellow-historians; instead, we were excited about new possibilities for research methodology, theories of history, publishing opportunities, and even political engagement on the part of history, and we wanted to report on this excitement to our fellow historians so that those who approved could play along themselves. We also hardly suspected that the criticism of a few senior faculty would find its way to the front page of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, inflated from a few colorful tweets whose content revolved around editorial suggestions about footnotes and illustrations into a headline about shoddy data and ethical breaches in publishing.

I myself do not believe that these charges would have happened were it not for open-access publishing and our attempt to engage an online community. Senior scholars might have still expressed their displeasure at our conclusions, but their opinion might have been

limited to traditional venues, as its circulation would have as well. In other words, we are still very much learning about the opportunities and limits of scholarly engagement online, and about the way that scholarly engagements may open up new challenges for the junior faculty who are first to engage them.

The virtue of having a text published online is that it immediately solicits input from readers. As advocates of rethinking publishing have noted for some time, online publishing has the opportunity to make less formal the traditional roles of anonymous reviewer, pre-publication, and post-publication manuscript. Immediate feedback gives authors the opportunity to constructively reflect on critique at any point in the publication process. We have not been shy about singing the praises of this kind of engagement, blogging in November about constructive criticism of a visualization. In January, we released a revised version of the text, both online and in hard copy, that took into account particular online criticisms of our phrasing and individual footnotes. We tightened ten lines of prose and changed five footnotes to better reflect the environmental debates in economics, although we did not substantively change our arguments. It is important for historians, other scholars, and publishers to contemplate what this new model of ongoing feedback offers to scholarship, raising humanism to the level of a field that can fluidly benefit from ongoing collaboration.

Some of the praise of online publishing has been overstated. Critics of traditional publishing in academia like Kathleen Fitzpatrick have argued that publishing on the internet could potentially free the humanities of abuse by removing the temptations to abuse that were structural in the blind peer review system used by academic journals, a system that shields senior scholars while promoting discrimination against junior scholars, women, and minorities. Our own experience with online community criticism suggests that blind peer review possesses a monopoly neither on anonymity, nor

on senior scholars flexing their power to promote and denounce new ideas, nor on outright hostility.

There is a vein of feminist criticism where "dangerous places" are viewed as a positive challenge for radical intellectuals. Indeed, in the news cycle of the past year, the female game designers and their advocates were attacked on twitter with threats of gang rape and murder in the "GamerGate" controversy, demonstrating what an unsafe space the internet can be. But the women in question rallied, many of them refusing to go offline, several of them publishing incredibly moving memoirs of their experience. Some of them, including Anita Sarkeesian and Randi Harper, fought back with games and code, the tools of the attackers themselves. In so doing, they have turned a vicious fight into an opportunity for building solidarity between women in technology and rallying consumers of video games in the direction of social awareness.

Academic attacks are almost certainly easier to endure than rape and death threats. All the same, engaging our interlocutors has been far from easy. On the internet, whether we are academics or gamers, we tame unsafe spaces by continuing to show up, and by continuing to insist on high standards for intellectual exchange and civility. We create safety by advocating for the respect due to vulnerable individuals like women, junior scholars and minorities. We have to show up in order to claim the spaces that need to be claimed.

Is the internet itself really to blame for these heated emotions? Perhaps not; it might be the nature of manifesto-writing or polemic essays on the state of the academy in general that arouses so much emotion. Writing decades ago, C. P. Snow would've recognized that pattern after the flood of articles and letters, "praise, blame... accumulating at an accelerating pace," that piled in after he published *The Two Cultures* (1959). "Do certain kinds of animosity

lead to an inability to perform the physical act of reading?" he asked. "The evidence suggests so." Snow's own conclusion, published four years later as is rather like our own: the resulting hubbub was about a *Zeitgeist* in conflict; the particular acts of vitriol or praise, in the end, "hadn't much connection with me." The same might be said for the victims of sexual aggression in many eras, before the internet and including it: they needn't take the aggression personally, for at the end of the day, the emotions come from deep cultural sources around us.

On the other hand, the internet is most certainly a new sphere of civil discourse. We might imagine that humans need to learn how to inhabit it, how to behave in public. Perhaps we are only beginning the process of learning what to say in public, and our culture (as well as our institutions) need to be patient as we do so. Just as publishing houses and educational institutions need to come to understand anew the rules for engagement in an age of open-access publishing, just so we as scholars will have to convene to make up our minds about when we accept the word of rumor, twitter, or a handful of internet-published critics, and when we defer to the published authority of our traditional journals.

On a more individual level, we as scholars or as public intellectuals participating on the internet have ethical choices to make about the tone we take when leveling criticism at a peer. Should we throw out civil discourse because we are limited to 140 characters and are thrilled by the prospect of a retweet of a scandal-mongering headline? Should we target a scholar's reputation as a whole when a complaint is with an illustration, a footnote, or a political point of view? Journalists have done an excellent job of documenting, these last few months, how rumor spreads on the internet, and some have made a case that we are seeing the development of a new culture of public shaming, unparalleled, perhaps, since the Puritans.

Public intellectuals of all kinds today must make up their minds how they participate online, given that a technology for constant circulation of opinion and critique arrives in the middle of a culture that cleaves to event and scandal, that circulates headlines without necessarily agreeing with them. As anyone who has run a seminar knows, keeping sage opinions and even-handed reading is a skill that has to be cultivated alongside an attention to detail. Even hackers online are forming a new consensus outlawing "gratuitous negativity" from their boards in the name of promoting more critical thinking.

In *The History Manifesto*, we argued for the importance of taking the long view on the university, the environment, and the economy, topics about which we argued that historians have a great deal to contribute. If we apply that lesson to our own experience, we might reason that it takes a long time to develop rules for productive debate in a new social context. The internet may not be there yet, even when one's interlocutors are also respected scholars capable of civil discourse in many spheres.



Battle of Bosworth by Philip James de Loutherbourg

