

“I have seen things that you humanists don't even imagine...”

An Italian early experiment in open access publishing

Abstract

The “Bollettino telematico di filosofia politica” is an Italian experiment in open access publishing that started, the early nineties of the last century, with a transition from a traditional scholarly paper journal to an on-line publication. The paper presents some lessons gained from its experience.

On-line publishing empowers authors and editors and undermines the power of traditional gatekeepers, when their authority depends on their position only, not on their scientific excellence; even a lower-rank faculty member can interact directly with the public. Humanities scholars who realize that publishing, as a communication issue, is a core problem of their fields, and accept to learn the computer science they need, get a major gain both in visibility and in freedom.

The future presents two major challenges: to make more transparent to process of refereeing, by promoting selection through usage, and to accustom scholars to interact in a network environment.

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The “Bollettino telematico di filosofia politica”² is an on-line journal of political philosophy that resides, physically, on a server of the Pisa university Political Science faculty. The journal began to be issued under the title “Bollettino telematico di filosofia politica” in the year 2000, but its editorial group has a longer history. This history deserves to be told, because it may be useful as an illustration of a transition from the Gutenberg galaxy to the web.

1. *The beginnings*

Humanities journals used to be founded to give voice to scholarly groups. In the early nineties of the last century, a group of Italian political philosophy professors tried to give their discipline more visibility by creating a traditional paper journal, the “Bollettino di filosofia politica”, which was doomed to a short and contentious life. For university professors, it was fairly easy to obtain grants to pay for the publication of a journal and to access a publisher. Besides, they did not need to pay people to do editorial work: they could rely on young scholars that did it for free.

Such a practice needs to be explained to foreign listeners: in the Italian scholarly system it is widespread the so-called “academic slavery”. If you are an Italian university professor, you can convince young scholars to work for you without being paid, by promising them a tenure, in a more or less remote future, even if it may happen that such an unwritten promise remains unkept, if the professor dies, or changes his mind. From the narrower perspective of scholarly publishing, in the age of printing, young scholars could take part to a journal only as slave workers: and even if, in most cases, they were the *de facto* editors, they were slave editors. They were not in the position to obtain grants and to access a publisher by themselves,

The “Bollettino di filosofia politica”, as already mentioned, had a short and contentious life: the professors who were its founding fathers started an internecine conflict, and became increasingly difficult to attract contributors and to publish the journal on time. In such a grim situation, one of the slave editors, who had a passion - unusual among the humanists - for computers and the Internet, proposed a plan: transforming the paper journal into an on-line journal.

This scholar had learned HTML by herself and was fascinated by some new opportunities that the Internet seemed to offer. As humanist scholarly journals were usually founded as *media* to establish the academic power position of some persons or groups, their message was unessential; collecting dust on some forgotten bookshelf of a library was the usual gloomy fate of journals whose functions had very little to do with the sharing of knowledge among human beings. But the on-line publishing had another obvious advantage: it was far cheaper than printing. For this reason, the professors accepted her proposal. The “Bollettino di filosofia politica” was initially hosted in the server of a department of the Florence university faculty of law. And another innovation was made: while, to publish on most Italian traditional scholarly journals, a recommendation of some well-known professor is required, the new on-line journal declared itself open to the contribution of every scholar. The traditional system, odd as it may seem, works in the sense that there is no need to reject any article, because the professors who put their “good word” make a *de facto* preliminary selection. The openness policy, on the contrary, compels to face the possibility of rejection.

2. *Masters and servants*

Traditional paper journals are, as it were, black boxes. The referees are anonymous; the journey from the editors to the referees is unknown; it is also difficult to assess whether the alleged editorial board is the one that does actually the work. But if you have to deal with an editorial board that answers immediately by e-mail, proofreads your paper, produces a HTML version of it and publishes it one or two days after its acceptance, it is very easy to notice who actually does the work. In addition, it is true that on-line publishing costs nothing, if you can rely on university servers and young scholars that have gained some skills in HTML and web publishing, but, if you are an academic master, you fall in the uneasy position of depending entirely on your academic slaves, while it is becoming clearer and clearer that your servants do a work that is allegedly yours.

In the years of the new economy boom, the presence of an on-line humanities scholarly journal was new. For this reason the “Bollettino di filosofia politica” became far more visible than the old paper journal.

2 <<http://bfp.sp.unipi.it>>

These achievements exasperated the silent conflict between masters and servants, The old "Bollettino di filosofia politica" died, with some threatening remarks about the future academic career of the editor who had proposed to shift on the web. The young scholars and the professors who desired to continue such an experience founded the "Bollettino telematico di filosofia politica", that is hosted on a server of the Pisa university Political Science faculty.

From such a history, there is a sociological lesson to be learned: on-line publishing empowers authors and editors and undermines the power of traditional gatekeepers, when their authority depends on their position only, not on their scientific excellence; even a lower-rank faculty member can interact directly with the public. Another lesson is peculiar to the humanities: the scholars who realize that publishing, as a communication issue, is a core problem of their fields, and accept to learn the computer science they need, get a major gain both in visibility and in freedom.

3. Visibility and recognition

The "Bollettino telematico di filosofia politica" is a refereed journal. It publishes, like paper journals, articles, news and book reviews; and, unlike paper journals, hypertexts and hypertextual bibliographies. It offers Italian translations of classical and contemporary texts. The translations of classical texts are usually made to give students and the wider public a free access to important philosophical works. As regards as texts written by living authors, it is fairly easy to obtain their assent to the flattering proposal of a translation of their works. Moreover, we have recently added some interactive functions, like a wiki and a blog. It is remarkable that, because of the poverty of Italian university and research, we cannot rely on a good system administrator: all the things we do depend only on our work and our computer skills, and on the help of friendly computer scientists. But it is a worthwhile work. Humanities should be studies for the human beings. Their texts are of no use if they are detained in dusty books, with dustier copyright chains: they have to be widespread among men.

The pages of the "Bollettino telematico di filosofia politica" receive a very high ranking in all the major search engines and give its authors and contributors a fairly

good visibility, which in Italy is very unusual for young and – above all – independent scholars. We have only two intertwined problems: the Italian legislation on the public "comparative evaluations" by which scholars obtain academic tenures, and a kind of academic splendid isolation.

The Italian law was written in the age of printing: for this reason only printed texts are recognized as publications, even if very liberal judging committees may choose to assess them as valid titles. Therefore, we are in a paradoxical condition: articles that are more widespread and public than the ones issued on printed journals might not be recognized as publications. For this reason, some scholars avoid to publish with us. However, strangely enough, some other scholars get very annoyed and sometimes threatening when a submitted article of theirs is rejected or we fail to mention their precious books. They perceive that our journal has a higher visibility than any paper scholarly journal, but do not realize that a rejection would not be a tragedy if they tried to learn to create their on-line journals, instead of depending from the skills of others.

4. From the web to the paper

In the field of humanities, scholarly journal articles are usually preliminary or partial works, whose destination is to be assembled in a book. The field of books, however, is in the hands of copyright fierce defenders, the book publishers. If we succeed in convincing a book publisher to agree on a free non-commercial distribution of digital documents, we can have our cake and eat it, too, by publishing articles on the web, as a step to printed books that comply with the Italian law on "comparative evaluations".

Paradoxically, scholarly book publishing can transform its traditional weakness in strength:³ as in Italy they have no hope to find a market suitable for them, the book publishers use to ask scholars to pay the printing of their books. And, if authors pay, usually by means of state research grants, they are in the position to negotiate. So, we asked to our local university press, Plus, to print a small amount of paper copies, but

3 See J. J. Esposito, *The devil you don't know: The unexpected future of Open Access publishing*, "First Monday", Volume 9, Number 8 — 2 August 2004 <http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue9_8/esposito/index.html>.

to allow a free non-commercial distribution of their PDF versions on the web. Such an operation involved no risk for the publisher, because we covered its expenses with our research grants, as usual, and asked authors to do, as usual again, the editorial work. But by choosing to print a very small number of copies and to use digital printing, we were able to save much more taxpayers' money than usual.

As the project involved no risk for it, Plus accepted, even if it was rather skeptical. The book series *Methexis* (participation) was born.⁴ And the publisher received a pleasant surprise: it discovered the power of the so-called viral marketing. The readers that downloaded the e-books not only disseminated them and advertised them for free, but a large amount of downloaders chose to buy their paper versions. It is more comfortable to read a well-printed book than to look at it on a computer monitor, if the text is worth reading.

This way of publishing produces a remarkable outcome: it makes it possible to offer the readers texts that any commercial publisher would reject because of lack of foreseeable market rewards. For instance, Mary Wollstonecraft is well-known among the historians of political thought as an eminent precursor of feminist thinking, but no Italian publisher has ever accepted to translate into Italian her discussion with Burke, *A Vindication of the rights of Men*, even if it sketches the conceptual framework of the next and more famous *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792). But such a translation is contained in the first book of the series *Methexis*, and may be viewed as a result of the freedom involved by open, independent publishing. If we accept that research in any field should be independent from the publishers' market calculations, such a freedom may enhance it.

5. Out of the black box

The "Bollettino telematico di filosofia" began just as a transfer of a journal from the paper to the web. However, we soon have to realize that such a move was too simple, because it did not deal with the new communication opportunities offered by the net. We began by publishing a journal of static HTML pages, written "by

4 <<http://bfp.sp.unipi.it/ebooks/index.htm>>.

hand"; now we use XML-Docbook document basis and we convert them with xsltproc and *ad hoc* engineered XSL stylesheets. They may be surprisingly useful in the field of humanities, because they make very easy to produce documents with complicated hypertextual structures. But there are more steps to be done.

The very architecture of the web gives the opportunity to find a way out of the isolation of each single scholarly journals in the humanities field, and to encourage scholars to work in wider groups.

Moreover, we would like to overstep the so-called editorial black box. When a printed journal rejects an article, the article remains unpublished. Its readers can certainly check, by reading a journal, which kind of works the journal chose to publish, but the have no way of assessing which kind of papers it chose to reject. In the world of printing, the costs do not allow to print the rejected articles, and it is unavoidable to select them *before* their publication. The power of editors, as gatekeepers, is somewhat obscure. On the other hand, "in the digital world, the selection process works differently. It allows publishing (the equivalent of printing and disseminating here) at much lower prices and with much greater flexibility to add, remove, and correct, should any error occur. With the lowering of economic and skill barriers, a form of publishing empowerment takes place and, as a result, the need to select is no longer significantly tied to technical and economic constraints. In fact, in the digital world, selection through usage becomes the dominant question to be addressed and solved"⁵ A digital journal could even afford to publish, in a separate section, the article it rejects. This is, for instance, the editorial policy of Indymedia.

6. HyperJournal

The "Bollettino telematico di filosofia politica" next step will be the adoption of Hyperjournal as a content management system, which is being developed on the basis of our experience and needs. For

5 Jean-Claude Guédon, *In Oldenburg's Long Shadow: Librarians, Research Scientists, Publishers, and the Control of Scientific Publishing*, ARL Proceedings, May 2001 <<http://www.arl.org/arl/proceedings/138/guedon.html>>

this reason, I simply quote an excerpt of its presentation, on its web-site:⁶

HyperJournal is a software application that facilitates the administration of academic journals on the Web. Conceived for researchers in the Humanities and designed according to an intuitive layout, it permits the installation, personalization, and administration of a dedicated Web site at extremely low cost and without the need for special IT-competence. HyperJournal can be used not only to establish an on-line version of an existing paper periodical, but also to create an entirely new, solely electronic journal. In comparison with existing software applications, HyperJournal introduces three major innovations:

1. Dynamic contextualization automatically transforms cross-references contained in journal articles into hypertextual, bidirectional links. When the reader views an article published in HyperJournal, a contextualization bar provides immediate access to a) all the articles the author has cited, and b) all the articles that cite the article currently being viewed.

2. The HyperJournal Network. Dynamic contextualization is not limited to one journal only: it connects all the journals that use the HyperJournal software in a distributed, semantically structured and scalable peer-to-peer network. Compatibility with the Protocol for Metadata Harvesting of the Open Archives Initiative ensures maximal interoperability between the HyperJournal Network and other electronic publications. The HyperJournal Network thereby creates a space in which knowledge is freely shared and readily accessible. Rather than using mere keyword searching or importing artificial conceptual tables to organize this space, HyperJournal transposes the time-honored system of scholarly citation into an electronic environment.

3. HyperJournals versus "core journals". By clicking on an author's name, the HyperJournal system automatically searches the entire HyperJournal network and produces a citation list that includes all the articles written by the author, all the articles the author has cited, and all the articles that cite the author. Comprehensive bibliometric lists can thereby be composed without the need to

rely on the manual consultation of a small set of "core journals," often exclusively in English. In this system, by contrast, it will be the actual give-and-take of academic discourse, registered automatically on the network through citations, which will signal the prestige of a journal (even of small niche journals written in so-called minor languages) and establish the reputation of scholars. In addition, through the use of (semantic web) RDF describers, bibliometric lists can be constructed that distinguish, for example, between positive and negative citations.

The experience of the "Bollettino telematico di filosofia politica" is not yet finished. It started just as the transfer of a marginal scholarly paper journal on the web, to discover open access publishing before the worldwide explosion of such a movement, and to learn that an on-line journal cannot be simply a *replicant*, because it produces new opportunities and new, unexpected connections – to make us see things that humanists don't even imagine...

6 <<http://www.hjournal.org/overview>>