

CHAPTER 29.

**ONLINE BOOK REVIEWS
AND EMERGING GENERIC
CONVENTIONS: A SITUATED
STUDY OF AUTHORSHIP,
PUBLISHING, AND PEER
REVIEW**

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In his extensive study of the book in early modern Europe, Johns (1998) argued that print's status as a reliable and credible communication medium did not derive from an intrinsic property of the technology. Rather, it was achieved through enormously challenging work—through trial and error, material processes, dialogue, review, and debate. Enacted in local contexts, such work happened amid plural constellations of authorship, publishing, printing, and gifting. For Johns, this enabled the presumptions of accuracy and fixity that Western readers often ascribe to the book, even as these characteristics are highly contingent, happening through processes that have been largely effaced by print technologies and hidden from the reader. The current move to the digital has unsettled the arrangements that helped print achieve credibility. The transition to the digital has demanded extensive reorganization of literate activity as stakeholders work to achieve similar presumptions of reliability that were naturalized into systems of print (also see Baron, 2009).

This ethnographic study conducted in an online community of professional poker players who have self-published e-books of poker theory examines how online authors use dialogue, debate, and review processes to legitimize digital writing. I document how participants manipulated the generic features of online book reviews to help self-published books achieve credibility, and I consider how the changing publishing procedures of writing can alter the review's rhetorical function. Such book reviews are recent iterations of a genre that has helped books achieve status for more than three hundred years.

THE BOOK REVIEW AS A CHANGING GENRE

This study aims to understand how literate people are learning—or failing to learn—to use reviews to negotiate shifting (or disappearing) relationships among authors, publishers, booksellers, and readers. Whereas brick and mortar booksellers once helped mediate these relations through decisions of which books to carry and how to arrange them in the space of the bookstore (Miller, L., 2009), and through explicit recommendations (Radway, 1984), book buying can now be mediated by algorithms, user-generated book reviews, and on-line communities. These discursive arrangements foster common problems of reviewing, problems inflected by easy self-publication that pressures the generic features of the review, as writers and readers must negotiate varying expertise, status differentials among authors and reviewers, and complexities introduced by anonymity. Digital systems also create different opportunities for manipulation and fraud than the opportunities that existed in systems of print. A now ubiquitous and easily published genre, book reviews challenge digital readers and writers to reckon with deep social issues instigated by technological shifts in systems of literate activity.

I approach the analysis through genre studies that conceptualizes genres as texts that mediate recurring social situations and, in the process, acquire fluid and flexible yet regularized formal features, typified characteristics that help people achieve social tasks (Miller, C. R., 1984). With over 300 years of history (See Roper, 1978, for the early history of the book review), the book review has acquired a consistent pattern often talked about as a hardened genre of evaluation with predictable conventions. The longevity of the book review means that is true to an extent. Although Motta-Roth (1998) found variation in discourse patterns when she studied academic book reviews, she also found that reviews have a number of consistent rhetorical moves across diverse disciplines, even though the disciplines had significantly differing epistemologies. However, as genre theory suggests, even if a successful genre has stabilized into seemingly static features, it still exists in a dynamic social situation subject to variation and change (Bazerman, 1988, p. 63). The generic dynamics of the book review often fluctuate according to rhetorical contingencies: the nature of the book reviewed, the length of the review, the status of the reviewer and her relationship to the author, and whether a book is reviewed anonymously. In one of the only articles to address the dynamics of writing in online consumer reviews, Mackiewicz (2010) found, for example, that consumer reviewers often asserted expertise online in multiple ways to establish ethos while publishing reviews about digital cameras (see also Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Because of variations in reviewing strategies and the flexibility of genres, and because generic formation

and change can “reveal the forces to which textual features respond” (Bazerman, 1988, p. 62), e-book reviews can disclose how writers and readers adapt to shifting conditions of writing and the properties of digital texts, and how those adaptations are becoming regularized as nascent generic conventions.

The economy of online poker instruction offers a strategic site to investigate issues of genre and textual reliability because dynamics common to digital writing spaces deeply inflect the practices in it. The writing of amateurs and professionals bleeds together in public discussions about the texts. Writing often traverses multiple media and information technologies, and the production of texts has been widely distributed across space and time in highly collaborative environments.

THE CULTURE AND ECONOMY OF ONLINE PUBLICATION

The writers in this study author texts in a digital niche market against a background of participatory web culture. Henry Jenkins (2006) has used the term participatory culture to explain how people use web platforms to both create and consume cultural goods. Online niche markets enable users to congregate on the basis of shared and sometimes obscure interests, and they are poised to be of collective importance to digital economies (Byrnjolfsson, Hu, & Smith, 2006). In the poker niche, e-books contain rivalrous information that readers try to protect because the value of the information decreases as it spreads, many e-books are prohibitively expensive, and the advanced poker theory built on statistics and probability is of limited interest to the wider public. These dynamics give this study characteristics of a negative case compared to research of web writing that investigates participants writing in open systems and circulating their writing for free to acquire audiences (e.g., Alexander, 2006; Black, 2008). The value of this case, though, is to show how deeply the nature of information can influence the dynamics of writing and publishing in digital contexts.

While participatory culture helps frame e-book authorship, so too do the economics of digital texts. Networked computers, e-readers, and print on demand technologies drive down e-book reproduction and distribution costs, characteristics of digital texts that Porter (2009) has theorized as changes in rhetorical delivery. These technologies contribute to an ongoing reconfiguration of authorship, publishing, and reading. Bradley, Fulton, Helm, and Pittner (2011) have reported on how new distribution mechanisms have influenced the book trade: in 2010, “nontraditional” publishing happening through digital channels accounted for eight times the output of traditional publishing. Reprints of pub-

lic domain material and even spam comprise much of this output, but it also includes copious amounts of original content, including self-published books that likely number in the hundreds of thousands of titles produced yearly, though as Bradley et al. note (2011), accurate estimates are impossible.

Situated amid this output, my project focuses on the work of self-publishing authors. I'm pursuing the research question of how writers learn to become authors, publishers, and booksellers without the mediation of print institutions. Elsewhere I have argued that under these conditions, the work of publishing can be distributed through online networks in diverse configurations as literate activity (Laquintano, 2010). Prior (1998) defines literate activity as dialogic processes oriented toward specific goals that are situated, mediated and dispersed across diverse spheres of social practices (pp. 25-32). To the extent afforded by my methodology, then, I aim to theorize the kinds of literate activity that support the processes of self-publishers as they produce and distribute e-books using the internet.

METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a larger one that concentrated on the production, circulation, and reception of thirteen poker e-books distributed through the internet without formal publishers (see Laquintano, 2010). As a result of the rapid global spread of poker and the sharp rise in popularity of online gambling, a class of professional and semi-professional online poker players emerged in the past decade. Looking to increase earnings, or looking for more meaning in their lives, players began instruction businesses to satisfy demand for pedagogical materials. Some began subscription-based instructional websites that functioned as mass education, while others offered individual coaching programs. Self-published poker e-books emerged from these programs, either because a coach could not satisfy demand for his time, or because he had amassed coaching materials that could be marshaled into an instructional text. Aimed at a tightly defined niche of advanced players, the e-books were often several hundred dollars, priced to reflect the coaching rates of the players and their hourly playing rates. The e-books were produced, circulated, and advertised through blogs, discussion boards, and backchannels, and these writing spaces constitute the setting of the study.

I used theoretical sampling (Strauss, 1987) to locate and conduct multiple interviews with thirty-five participants who were writers, editors, or readers of the e-books. I also studied the writing of countless others who contributed comments about the e-books in public writing spaces, which became part of the

analysis. Of those I interviewed, most of the participants were males between the ages of 20 and 30, and the majority lived in the United States, although I interviewed participants from several European countries, too. I could not always determine the identity of the countless players who contributed public writing about the e-books. Some of these writers had long-established reputations on the discussion boards and public personas, and I could pinpoint their basic demographic information with reasonable certainty. However, anonymous participants contributed too, and although mostly unknowable, I analyzed their writing as well because it often mattered to the reception of the e-books.

As coaches developed their programs and began publishing their e-books, I began tracking the public writing of all of the authors and to the extent possible, their readers. I followed the work of 13 authors and their e-books and the reception of their texts for three years. I archived discussions about the books on forums and blogs, including 42 book reviews with discussions that followed. I conducted interviews, and I occasionally asked clarifying questions through instant messaging programs. Between 2007 and 2010, trustworthy self-published poker texts were quite rare, and this sample represented most reputable self-published poker e-books written in English, although the numbers of these books have grown significantly since the time of data collection.

My analysis and coding procedures have been grounded in the data (Strauss, 1987). In the larger project, I established a series of provisional categories through initial coding of interview and web data. One of the provisional categories was peer review, and as I fleshed out the concept I noticed that authors imagined book reviews as important to the public image of their work. That insight drove another round of data collection, where I archived all of the book reviews I could find and the discussion threads attached to the review. As described above, this amounted to forty-two primary book reviews and several thousand discussion comments that followed them.

I analyzed the data for indications that peer review was occurring through the assessment and valuation of different characteristics of e-books. I found three common conventional patterns that recurred in most of the reviews particular to the technological conditions and in which writers came to terms with issues of credibility and the circumstances of publication. These conventions made rhetorical moves, by which I mean a “stretch of discourse that realizes a specific communicative function and that represents a stage in the development of an overall structure of information that is commonly associated with the genre” (Motta-Roth, 1998, p. 33). As a communicative function, the three patterns enabled reviewers to: 1) situate the value of the book amid other online learning options; 2) anticipate interaction with their audience; and 3) assess the digital affordances of the e-book. I then coded all of the review data again

for these three specific patterns and their characteristics. Not all of the reviews shared all of these three conventions, but they appeared in a pattern robust enough to suggest they were emerging formal features of the book review in this context. As online writing evolves, some of these conventions may yield to others, while some may become more widespread and durable. In the following section, I situate the book reviews in the larger systems of trust that I found helped establish the credibility of authors. I then delineate the three generic features that appeared as common patterns in reviews.

FINDINGS

Situated in larger systems of peer review and reputation, the reviews of poker e-books worked as spaces for interaction and functioned as nodes of attention that channeled awareness to an author's work and shaped its status. In this context, where publishing technologies have become radically distributed, reviews have helped mediate relationships among authors and their audience in the absence of formal publishers. My analysis shows that nascent generic conventions have emerged in response to these conditions, and these conventions illustrate how writers are coming to terms with credibility voids and the changing materiality of the text. Absent publisher, absent printed object, these reviews work to establish what counts as a book.

The larger infrastructure of reputation helped authors commercialize their work. Authors have acquired reputations from published results of websites that track the outcomes of the games, word of mouth, media exposure, and public writing. In a posting about the value of e-books, Mason Malmuth, owner of the industry-leading print publishing company TwoPlusTwo, summarized how the value of e-books was partially achieved through public forum contributions:

The best way to tell if this stuff is worth the money is through peer review. And specifically what I mean by this are his strategy posts on our forums and the reaction to them by our posters, particularly those who are considered the better players (Malmuth, 2009, Re: PLO book, post 167; All web data is left in its original, unedited version.)

While public response to an author's discussion posts shaped reputation, another form of review came through underground peer-to-peer file sharing of e-books. Not easily traced through ethnographic data, and often an act that

infringed on copyright, peer-to-peer file sharing surfaced in interview data as a de facto method of review, a digital equivalent of word-of-mouth recommending. The book reviews examined in this chapter, then, were a single element in a networked system that contributed to the formation of an author's reputation as a player and, importantly, as a teacher too.

The audience's response to the reviews suggested pluralism in their uptake. To potential readers, the reviews marked an attempt to assess the credibility of the book. To skeptical onlookers, reviews inflated the value of e-books they considered "snake oil." To owners of the websites where they were posted, the reviews channeled attention to their websites. My analysis concentrates mostly on earnest attempts to assess the knowledge contained in the books, but I draw some implications for this diversity of this uptake as well. The reviews consistently contained dominant features that have been established conventions of book reviews of information-rich texts. Motta-Roth (1998) identified four rhetorical moves ubiquitous in academic book reviews that included introducing the book, outlining the work, highlighting sections, and providing a closing analysis of the work (p. 49). These conventions appeared in most poker reviews, although in cases they were clearly absent, in part because some writers obligated to the authors published hastily written reviews. Perhaps the most prominent function, though, consisted of reviewers situating the e-books in relation to previously published material, as they addressed the same question used to justify the value of many print books: To what extent did the book advance new concepts, or to what extent did it present old concepts in a new or lucid manner? E-book reviews attempted to locate the book in a field of common texts, building imagined annals in which to situate a book's contribution. Reviewers made no distinction between print book and e-books; e-books were evaluated as much against each other as they were the history of print poker books that emerged in the 1970s and the 1980s.

SITUATING E-BOOKS IN THE DIGITAL ECONOMY OF INSTRUCTION

Reviewers went beyond intertextual evaluation to situate the e-books not simply against competing books, but also among competing modes of learning online. Reviewers assessed how the time and money needed to extract value from writing compared to subscription video resources, highly interactive personal coaching, free articles, forum posts, blog posts, and printed material. This rhetorical move, then, appraised the value of the book not just for its novelty of contribution, but also relationally against various multimedia.

The move to evaluate a book against existing multimedia appears in the following discussion posted in a thread of Ed Miller, Matt Flynn, and Sunny

Mehta's e-book on small stakes poker. This reviewer criticizes the laudatory tone of previous reviews before offering his own assessment:

I've finally finished the book and I found it to be pretty good, but I do think some of the hyperbole in this thread is a little overboard. The information in this book isn't anything new or groundbreaking, and if you are subscribing to any of the video training sites then most of this information should be familiar to you. What the book does well is driving those points home with a ton of well thought out examples. ("Spaceball," 2009, Re: review of SSNLHE, post 56)

In this estimation the value of the book does not derive from new knowledge, but rather from carefully planned examples that reinforce preexisting concepts. Although not homogenous, the video instruction to which the book is compared often tends to be more extemporaneously produced, with more loosely defined patterns of organization than the e-books. This reviewer has identified those differences, registering the book's value insofar as it organizes and illustrates existing knowledge in more extensive ways than could be found elsewhere in different media.

When reviewers measured the book's value against competing media, they recommended that potential readers consider their learning styles carefully before they bought a book, or that the book be purchased in conjunction with other modalities of learning. The assessment of a book became inseparable from the imagined learning styles of the potential buyers:

The book is good for people that are self-learners, or are already doing well at say 2/4 or above. ... The book was good for my situation, since I could read it faster than going through his 13 lesson coaching program. It is also much cheaper. Coaching would be better for someone needing a complete overhaul and confidence boost in their game (Ed-irisinghe, 2008, Bobbos Book, post 48).

Beyond just putting in time which is required of everyone to grasp the material, you should also consider how you learn. This book is very math heavy and reminds me of my engineering days (Townsend, 2010).

If you buy the book, you have to learn from it and be good at

thinking on your own. ... You have to be a receptive individual who is capable of self-critique and highlighting one's strengths and weaknesses ... You should combine the book purchase with hiring a top-level coach (Newman, 2009).

These recommendations consider the relationship among book learning and the emotional state of the learners, their ability for reflection, and the time it would take for them to extract information from the materials. The reviews show some consistency in their attitude toward the function of the book when it is compared to other media; the book enables, for example, self-paced learning in solitude in ways coaching does not. But this function is always contingent upon the personal history and learning style of the reader. To extract value readers must have certain characteristics as learners: formal education, dispositions, and preferences. These contingencies frustrate the possibility of imagining the writing's general trajectory in multimodal systems of online learning; it competes with and complements other media only ever in relation to personal learning preferences and styles.

ANTICIPATING INTERACTION

Like the e-books whose value they colored, book reviews were also self-published: they suffered from the same crisis of credibility as the e-books. In a click-to-publish environment, the credibility of any single review had limitations, and their status as self-published texts led potential readers and recreational onlookers to scrutinize reviews on public discussion boards. The publication of a book review thus functioned less as an end point to the evaluation of a book and more as an opening point of discussion. Two genre conventions emerged from this constellation. The first convention was a disclaimer disclosing reasons why the reviewer was not an objective evaluator. The disclaimer worked as a mechanism that facilitated productive discussion and steered the written interaction away from ad hominem attacks on the reviewer, lest s/he be accused of posting inflated reviews to increase artificially the value of the book. The following disclaimer came during an emotionally charged review thread: "DISCLAIMER: I am a personal friend of all three authors; however, I'm also fair, and a goddamn genius to boot" ("Cer0_z," 2009, "Re: review of small stakes," post 20). Taken in context, the playful comment of "Cer0_z" is a rhetorical attempt to defuse the tone of the heated review thread in which it was posted. Because third parties would usually expose personal relationships between author and reviewer, he documents his relationship to the authors before providing a positive review of the book. This disclaimer surfaces as a response to the

freedom of self-publishing, and its rhetorical effect seeks to prevent the discussion thread from devolving into simplistic critiques of the reviewer's ethos. It focused discussion on the merits of the book, not the allegiances or credibility of the reviewer. Disclaimers came attached to reviews if the reviewer knew the author, if the reviewer was a student of the author, or if the reviewer received a free copy of the book in exchange for reviewing it. Although these relationships have often existed among reviewers and authors in print culture, without the ethos of a print venue endowing a review with credibility, they become a necessary point of articulation to sustain productive discussion in an emotionally charged writing environment.

When reviewers treated the review as a site of interaction, the second rhetorical move that emerged anticipated the author as an active audience member of the review. Although only a small part of establishing reputation, e-book authors understood reviews directed attention to their work, and they read reviews, monitored discussions of them, and intervened when asked to. Authors engaged in these discussion threads with rhetorical dexterity to avoid the appearance of "shilling" their own work. This constellation of activity regularized as a generic feature that anticipated interaction with the author's future literate activity. Here we see the alleged potential of the e-book's affordances—easy revision and redistribution—appear as a recurring feature in e-book reviews:

So on an overall scale of 1 to 10 ..., I would give this book an 8.8. Keep in mind that Tri gave me this book before it was completely finished, and my review may encourage him to add a section or two, at which point I would probably edit this review (Haynie, 2009).

In this section the reviewer exerts agency on the book's reception and the book's production. The reviewer writes to both reader and author, noting both the book and his review are contingent upon future literate activity he attempts to shape. This recurring relationship between reviewer, author, and revisable text created a synergy that surfaced in reviews as "wish lists" of potential improvements that ranged from global additions to local corrections, including the request for additional chapters, better editing, and layout improvement. These lists exposed weaknesses in the quality of the books, suggesting the author make revisions before distribution or in subsequent versions. Feedback helped reviewers negotiate status differentials between themselves and authors, providing space for the language of critique to be cloaked in the language of revision. In other words, suggestions for revision often softened critiques of the books, providing a qualifier that diffident reviewers used to hedge the harshness of

their review. Reviewers seemingly used this convention as a social lubricant in a niche where many people knew each other and shared a sense of community.

The addition of author as audience member showed reviewers often expected—and evaluated—interaction with the author that moved beyond the point of sale. Reviewers expected authorship to bleed into private exchanges:

I think a private forum would add tremendous value to the book, and since most people are going to have questions after reading it, many of which will be the same questions, the best way to answer them would be posting responses in one location available to everyone that bought the book (“Irishman07,” 2008, Re: Bobbos book, post 257).

I would like to add that after buying the book I have IMd Rob a few times and hes answered some of my questions, which was probably worth nearly as much as the book itself (“Squizzel,” 2008, Re: Bobbos book, post 260).

In these reviews interaction that happens via literate exchange surrounds the texts and contributes to their value. This extended engagement results partly from the ease of an author interacting with his audience online, but also because of textual distribution patterns. Given the ease with which copies of their book could be shared freely among readers, writers provided incentive to potential purchasers by answering questions through private forums and “office hours.” The reviewers thus reflected on an author’s availability and willingness to help, a point that emerged as a consistent evaluative feature of the book reviews.

DIGITAL AFFORDANCES

When book reviewers anticipated author revisions, they were working in a larger trend to address the material characteristics and digital affordances of electronic books in book reviews. E-books represent the changing conditions of materiality of technologies of reading and writing, a condition whereby even the definition of what constitutes a book becomes socially negotiated and contingent, and writers exploit or ignore various affordances of the digital text. Reviewers thought through this fluidity and the changing form of the book, as we can see in Andrew “Foucault” Brokos’s review of Tri Nguyen’s book about Pot-Limit Omaha. The review at large and this passage in particular address how the quick publication of an e-book can make it responsive to current game conditions:

The text provides plenty of examples and in-depth analysis of advanced concepts like blockers, backdoor draws, and floating. It just makes me realize what a tall mountain there is to climb. Thankfully, Nguyen also emphasizes how many players in today's PLO games don't have an inkling about any of this stuff, which is reassuring. It does beg the question of the book's longevity, though. There's a mix of tactics that seem fundamental to playing the game well in any context and those designed to exploit mistakes and tendencies common in contemporary PLO games. It will be interesting to see how long the latter remain viable. Since *Transitioning* is an e-book, Nguyen could theoretically update it, though to my knowledge he hasn't promised anything like this (Brokos, 2010).

In this portion of the review, an assessment of poker content mingles with an assessment of the technological potential of the e-book, which produces ambivalence in the reader: on the one hand praise for the book's immediate responsiveness to the dynamics of contemporary poker trends, on the other hand questions over the permanence of the material. The book form as a medium of communication does not come under question; rather the concern derives from the temporal relationship between the expertise of the book and its relevance for future players. The expectations—and anxieties over—temporal stability has less to do with the technology itself, and more to do with how the book's legacy induces the reviewer to conceptualize the relationship between time and stability. The legacy of the book as a slow medium provokes uncertainty toward a text's value whose relevance might fade quickly.

Hesse (1996) has addressed the relationship between books and time in ways that anticipate Brokos's ambivalence. Using work on the history of the book in eighteenth-century France, Hesse argues that the book's mode of temporality enabled it to become a revered medium of communication. Perceived to be an "unhurried form of mediation" (Hesse, 1996, p. 27), the book was censored less because it less often responded to unfolding events the way incendiary—and quickly produced—political pamphlets. For Hesse, the potential change in the book's mode of temporality becomes a pivotal difference when moving from print to digital form. Hesse's modes of temporality are an elegant way of expressing the umbrella concept of Shirky's (2008) well-known formulation of new information technologies: "faster is different" (p. 161). Torn between the unhurried legacy of the book coloring his expectations for durability, and the affordance of the e-book's quick responsiveness, Brokos confronts these temporalities with both ambivalence toward the object's stability, and as an oppor-

tunity to observe the unfolding of the history of a specific book. The outcome becomes a curiosity for the reviewer, an “interesting” point of observation and an opportunity to bear witness to the consequences of technological change.

The relationship among book, time, and value extends beyond the durability of content to ruminations on rapid dissemination and the consequences to the buyer. In this example, a reviewer reflects on the book’s materiality, worrying that a substantial investment will diminish through rapid dissemination:

Before I talk about some of the details of the book, I want to talk about its “packaging.” First of all, you aren’t getting a hard copy, so you are essentially paying for an “e-book.” I think most people knows this. Before purchasing, you are to agree to not distribute his book to anybody period. I kind of want to talk briefly about that concept. Surely, in a perfect world, all buyers are honest and won’t break their agreement. But we don’t live in a perfect world. People lie and do a lot of shady things. It’s very easy for the book to get distributed, especially being in the digital age and there is almost no way to track who distributed. As a consumer, you SHOULD be a little worried that something you paid \$750 today might be worth \$0 tomorrow because anyone can obtain it from a one-click download (“SirNeb,” 2008, Re: Bobbos book, post 35).

Addressing the liabilities of the e-book’s affordances becomes a preliminary move to discussing the e-book’s content. The perceived value hinges on a readership willing to protect it because poker strategy decreases in value as more people have it. Eschewing the notion that a book’s value derives from widespread distribution, the reviewer weighs potential value as a risky investment contingent upon the possibility that readers will respect copyright. Its worth depends on limited circulation. The evidence I have collected suggests the authors’ books sustained commercial viability for between six to eighteen months before they lost their monetary value, either because sales slowed, or because widespread sharing of free copies on the internet, in their original form or in unauthorized translations, diminished their value.

DISCUSSION

Book reviews help answer the question of how writers learn to produce books and become authors without the mediation of publishers. Reviews rep-

resent not only assessment of books, but also spaces for opening sustained discussion that provides back and forth interaction. This interaction acts as a surrogate for the presumed authority that marked print publications. At times unruly, the discussions channeled attention to the book and lent it partial credibility; the discussion joined backchannel recommendations and file sharing as ad hoc measures readers took to assess the text's value. Writers participating in the discussions participated in processes of sustained authorship: the immediate relationship among authors and readers fostered exchange that produced effects similar to those of formal print publishers: publicity, credibility, and peer review.

Johns (1998) identified processes that worked to establish the legitimacy of print work; and the processes that work to establish the credibility of digital text are similar insofar as they are situated and localized processes of debate and negotiation. The processes I have detailed in this section represent a deeply contextual instance where the characteristics of the book and the interaction that surrounded them surfaced as genre conventions. They provide evidence of how the destandardization of traditional publishing procedures occurring via digital environments enables the nature of information found in texts to exert intense pressure on writing practices. Although it's possible these conventions will not surface in other contexts—and indeed they might collapse with the poker economy—documenting them provides evidence of the measures participants will take to exploit properties of new writing technologies in the service of achieving value for their work. As I will note in the following section that draws implications from the study, though, the greatest value of the findings for genre studies may be that I derived many of them from publicly available data: digital technologies leave traces of the processes writers use to legitimize them, traces that were not as accessible in print culture.

IMPLICATIONS FOR GENRE STUDIES IN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS: TRACES OF UPTAKE

Reflecting on the methodological challenges of reconstructing the contingencies on which the perceived stability of print rests, Johns (1998) notes processes of print cultures were often dedicated to their own effacement, a necessary erasure in order for the book to be seen as an inherently reliable, stand-alone technology. In a similar matter, Bazerman (2004) highlights how the challenges of reconstructing generic uptake limit our understanding of the concept. Bazerman suggests this challenge has partly prevented writing scholars from moving beyond an understanding of genre that too often focuses on uptake by “naturalized” users of it. In other words, only understanding genre from the perspective

of the intended audience can limit our understanding of generic reception. In the age of print, different readers could understand genres in different ways, and that understanding was often hidden from the view of researchers in invisible acts of reading separated from the writer in space and time. For Bazerman this presents an obstacle to more “carefully researched, observed, and analyzed knowledge” in writing research (p. 321).

With these limitations in mind, I want to suggest that because contemporary writing technologies begin to help reconfigure boundaries of space and time that underpinned Bazerman’s print-based assumptions of generic study, and because contemporary writing technologies offer readers unprecedented access to respond to reading through public writing, the data inscribed on digital writing spaces can contribute to a multifaceted and plural understanding of generic uptake. To the serendipity of scholars studying contemporary writing and knowledge production, the social processes through which web writing achieves credibility are often rendered visible through archival processes inscribed on the very writing technologies that enable participation (e.g., revision histories on wikis and comment sections on blogs). Online writing technologies register uptake, not in a holistic manner, but through trace data left on social reading and writing technologies as writers respond to each other and the genre systems in which they write; this affordance enables us to observe some of the difficult work of digital cultures in the making.

The data showed diversity of uptake when participants responded to the changing conventions of book reviews. As I have suggested, only some participants read book reviews as an attempt at publicly peer reviewing knowledge. While poker insiders read them as a legitimate effort to evaluate new e-books, extreme skeptics read them as poker professionals trading endorsements with each other in an effort to swindle “suckers” of their money; authors read them as feedback that could inform revisions on a text; and website owners read them as nodes of attention that either concentrated—or diverted—literate activity and thus money from their website. Each of these groups registered their uptake through online discussion boards, and each had vastly different stakes in the success of the genre and its characteristics. Genres and the responses to them as they register on web technologies can show us how readers respond differently to similar texts, and to how the shifting roles of authorship amid changing technological conditions work their way into the fabric of a long-established genre. Online book reviews reveal how peer review systems operate that help legitimize born-digital knowledge. They also provide new data for writing inquiry, traces of processes that disclose the tangled work of writing and knowledge production as authors and readers negotiate shifting relationships in digital environments.

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