Blogs and the Public Sphere

In the spring of 2004, with the Democratic primaries for the U.S. presidential election heating up, I came across a liberal political weblog with a wide readership, The DailyKos. As I played around with the site, visiting it for links to news I wasn’t finding elsewhere, reading conspiracy theories, watching videos of the Dean Scream and President Bush flipping off the camera in a well-known clip from when he was governor of Texas, I started wondering what many of us who are interested in 18th century culture have wondered in this dawn of the Information Age: is the blogsphere a public sphere? Has the defunct bourgeois public sphere, largely transformed into passive audiences at home in front of TVs – killed, as far as we knew, by mass media and vast populations in the modern nation state – been revived by new media?

Like the public sphere Jürgen Habermas discusses, this virtual public meeting place relies on reading and interactivity. A reader of a modern blog is certainly different from a consumer of media in Benedict Anderson’s imagined community, “moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time.” The “American [who] will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000-odd fellow Americans … has no idea of what they are up to at any one time,” but who “has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity” (26), can now talk back to the media. More importantly I think, well-designed, intelligently programmed sites now allow readers and viewers to engage in discussion and even rapid correspondence with other readers. While these Americans – and British, Irish, Chinese, Indians, Venezuelans, and so on – are...
still not meeting, they do not need to take their “steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity” on faith anymore. This interactivity is a radical difference in the way we are able to experience the “news.”

In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich argues that media has always been interactive:

All classical, and even moreso modern, art is ‘interactive’ in a number of ways. Ellipses in literary narration, missing details of objects in visual art, and other representational ‘shortcuts’ require the user to fill in missing information. Theater and painting also rely on techniques of staging and composition to orchestrate the viewer’s attention over time, requiring her to focus on different parts of the display. With sculpture and architecture, the viewer has to move her whole body to experience the spatial structure (56)

While this is true, it was clear that on this political blog people were interacting in a way that differed significantly from the filling-in activity of a reader faced with an ellipsis, or the juxtaposition in the mind of illustration and text in which the reader of a medieval illuminated manuscript engages. More importantly for an enterprise with a specifically political aim, this interactivity was significantly different and richer than that of the reader of a daily paper or the watcher of the nightly news. Sometimes intelligently, sometimes in echoes of others, often with emotion and frustration, the participants of the political blogosphere were certainly not adding much to the aesthetics of the text they were reading, but they were most definitely adding to its multivocality, and there was a fair amount of rational debate mixed in with all the overflow of powerful feeling.

Alastair Hannay argues that publics exist in public places and are necessarily “embodied.” The web is not. But Michael Warner contends that a public is an imagined relationship between the text, reader, and other texts:

Publics have an ongoing life: one doesn’t publish to them once and for all (as one does, say, to a scholarly archive). It’s the way texts circulate, and become the basis for further representations, that convinces us that publics have activity and duration. A text, to have a public, must continue to circulate through time, and because this can only be confirmed through an intertextual environment of citation and implication, all publics are intertextual, even intergeneric. (97)

While I find Warner’s definition persuasive, I have some sympathy with Hannay’s insistence that the public is live people meeting in public places. This is why I am still not convinced that the digitized words of readers and writers that make up the blogosphere have truly made that crucial step toward reinventing the public sphere
for our century. But I am fairly certain that if anything resembling the kind of public sphere that existed in London's coffee houses in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is possible today, new media is the vehicle that makes it so.

Why Defoe's *Review* Belongs on the Web

Critics credit Joseph Addison and Richard Steele with inventing the genre of the essay periodical with the *Tatler* (1709-11). England’s first daily paper, the *Daily Courant*, began publication in 1702. Defoe’s *Review* (1704-13) fits uneasily into this history. The *Review* was neither a newspaper, though it reported news, nor a periodical, though it contained essays. Defoe’s single authorship, his policy of writing what he liked, and the democracy of print in Queen Anne’s reign made the *Review* a unique meeting of a private journalistic sensibility with a growing reading public. Along with other early English periodicals, the *Review* helped create that public, as Jürgen Habermas initially pointed out, and shape a community of readers.

Habermas’s familiar description of a public sphere dominated by informed, rational debate, applies to much of what the *Review* sought to do. Defoe began publication by discussing England’s war with France, using the rhetoric of polite argument to advocate for the land campaign on the continent and warn his countrymen about the magnitude of French military power. In 1706-07 the *Review* mostly dedicated itself to persuading its readers to support the union between England and Scotland. Throughout its publication it worked to support the Robert Harley ministry’s policies by engaging in rational debate on its side.

But, while Habermas’s focus on the readers, discussions and meeting places – the coffee houses that became so important in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century London – dominates his account of the early public sphere, and in my view rightly so, there is a place for the author in this. Defoe’s active choice of a style of argumentation – he considered himself an historian, and often discussed Louis XIV’s major battles throughout the seventeenth century in the pages of the *Review* – plays a major role in the emergence of the *Review*’s public.

When I decided to produce an edition of Daniel Defoe’s *Review*, I knew I wanted to test whether new media was reinventing the public sphere. I saw the *Review* both as a text worthy of study and as an important text in the early bourgeois public sphere as laid out by Habermas. I am also at work on a print edition of Defoe’s *Plan of the English Commerce* (1728) for AMS Press as part of the Stoke-
Newington Edition of the *Works of Daniel Defoe* and have discussed the idea of an edition of the *Review* as part of the project with the general editors. But a print edition would necessarily be a library edition and most likely very expensive and non-circulating. John McVeagh is currently editing just such an edition for Pickering & Chatto. While I don’t think his edition is making another print edition unnecessary, I have problems with the fact that such a re-presentation of the *Review*, while maintaining its print format, completely stops its motion through time. It becomes a work rather than a text, to use Roland Barthes’ distinction. Defoe’s *Review* was actually intended to be read and discussed according to a rhythm dictated by its periodical circulation and coffee shop consumption. It was meant to move in time and space, something a non-circulating library edition obviously cannot do.

In addition to the modern phenomenon of the politicized blogosphere, I was starting to see websites focused on literature appear on the web. The most notable for the decision to present Defoe’s *Review* in blog format was Phil Gyfford’s electronic version of *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*. Pepys’s diary reads wonderfully well this way and is, for many reasons, an ideal text for a new media project. Other excellent new media projects are in the works as well, including sites like the *Thomas Gray Archive*, *The Proceedings of the Old Bailey*, and several others.

**Editing the Text**

This edition aims at reproducing the first edition of Defoe’s text as exactly as possible, basing its text for volumes 1-4 and 6-8 on the set of the *Review* in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. The Ransom Center houses one of the nearest-to-complete sets of the *Review*, along with a second copy of the first volume. I have examined the first two volumes of the British Library’s set of the *Review* as well in the course of my research. While it is a more complete set than the one housed in the Ransom Center – the most complete set extant, as far as is currently known – it has seen much more use over the centuries. While it is certainly a readable copy, its pages are considerably darker, and its ink is much more worn than one finds in the Ransom Center’s two copies of volume one.

The project’s editorial policy is based on the Modern Language Association’s guidelines for editors of scholarly editions. The weblog format and the opportunity for interaction that such a format makes possible in terms of discussion and comment will hopefully lead to ongoing discussions about the text itself, narrative forms, material shapes of texts, communities of readers, and whatever else readers consider relevant. This site will be added to until all nine years of the *Review* are
online. This version of the Review is annotatable by users and fully searchable by keyword and topic.

The word “technology” often terrifies those of us in the humanities. As George P. Landow notes, “many humanists contemplating the possibility that information technology influences culture seem to assume that before now, before computing, our intellectual culture existed in some pastoral nontechnological realm … Digital technology may be new, but technology, particularly information technology, has permeated all known culture since the beginnings of human history”(46-7). This quotation goes to the problem that many of us engaged in the editing of scholarly texts face in the Digital Age. While most of us probably come to the practice of editing texts at least partly through a love of the predominant form that texts have taken at least since 1450, we must deal with the fact that the history of the book and the history of the text are, if not diverging, undergoing significant strain. This is of course truer in the realm of scholarly publishing, with its low or non-existent profit margins, than it is in trade publishing. Quite simply, more and more editions of extensive texts are appearing in electronic formats, and even more will do so in coming years. So, inevitability and expense play a part here.

But the last edition of the Review produced was also involved in technological change and its effect on texts. Arthur Wellesley Secord edited a facsimile edition of the Review for a small subscription of 475 institutions back in 1938. This text is the one most readers of the Review in our time have used. While it would seem that facsimile editions are, if done right, as good as the original, the fact is that even this use of technology – the mirror up to nature school of editing – has its effect on the text. Secord assembled all four major editions of the text in one place and had the best pages from each photographed. By “best” he meant the ones that photographed cleanest. He calls his Review a mosaic, and the modern reader has no way of knowing which pages come from which copies. In my editing I have already found several discrepancies between Secord’s edition and the copy at Ransom Center – which was probably added to as the press run was underway. Earlier I mentioned the Pickering & Chatto edition of the Review. This edition is being made from a computer scan of Secord’s facsimile, which the editor then proofreads and edits. This means the edition is the copy of a copy, and more importantly, the copy of a copy whose main editorial policy was directly tied to the technology used to create it rather than anything having to do with the text’s wording or changes in that wording over the print run.

The early eighteenth-century periodical, while not wrestling with a new technology, faced the challenge of using the technology available to them in new ways, and
these new ways generated new communities of readers. Defoe’s public, as I have tried to show, was both a public sphere in the Habermasian sense and a social imaginary. Also, a controlled and projected set of this public, Defoe’s fictional Scandal Club, provided public verdicts on and instruction to his social imaginary. “In the [early eighteenth-century] social imaginary,” as Mary Poovey has argued, “publicness and privacy were actually two sides of a single coin. Periodicals … provided rules for the individual’s most solitary behaviors … but, because they were promoted in print, these rules brought the sphere of intimacy into the glare of public norms” (137).

While modern editors do not face quite the same challenge – we are not providing rules in any sense, even for what our readers do with our texts – there is a parallel, but almost in the form of a photographic negative. Rather than using a familiar form to deliver unfamiliar content, those of us editing online editions are using familiar texts – or at least established ones – in relatively unfamiliar forms. The reason for doing so in my case is that in many ways Defoe’s Review functioned more like a modern weblog than like the periodicals that developed from the Tatler. The democratic qualities of the Review – its inexpensiveness, wide circulation and its role as a catalyst for discussion in London’s coffee houses – provide the guiding spirit for this edition, which functions as a weblog and a wiki.

McGann has argued that “a critical edition has to include in its theory and historical procedures the capacity for an objective self-analysis … Ideally, a critical edition should not be produced, and ought not to be evaluated, without situating it clearly in terms of its present orientation and set of purposes” (100). My edition’s form is a direct response to both. The Review’s periodical form and rhythm are integral to any understanding of how it functioned in its field of production and reception. The modern weblog, while different in significant ways from early eighteenth-century print culture, is best able to mimic Defoe’s form, rhythm and the accessibility of his work. My purposes include generating debate and discussion about the Review onsite, and in that way generating the opportunity for the formation of a public, or perhaps a social imaginary, something I hope the form I have chosen will facilitate.

This edition of the Review’s present orientation is perhaps less clearly identified than its purposes. As I have stated, I am interested in seeing the response to a text moving through time rather than resting in space. I think this will create a reliable base text with a much less predictable apparatus and discussion. In that sense it is a project trying to give away a great deal of the authority that editors usually exert. But, as McGann writes, “[a]uthority is a social nexus, not a personal possession.
The authority for specific literary works is initiated anew for each new work by some specific artist, its initiation taking place in a necessary and integral historical environment of great complexity. Most immediately ... it takes place within the conventions and enabling limits which exist for the purpose of generating and supporting literary production” (48).

As those conventions and limits shift we find ourselves on uncertain ground. Hopefully the edition of the Review we are generating will find a readership, and hopefully that readership will behave something like a public. This particular public, limited to those with an interest in early eighteenth-century periodicals, will no doubt be more of a “critical audience ... formed by those select parts of the populace with the education and resources required to appreciate and consume cultural artefacts” (Hannay 33). I do not expect it to function with the passion and mass participation of the political blogosphere since, after all, if proponents of its community-building possibilities are right and it is the new public sphere, the most I can hope for with this edition is a discussion that echoes and debates the first incarnation of this phenomenon.

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Works Cited


