

Electronic Publishing and Philosophy

by Francis P. Crawley

Philosophers today know what they need to do in order to secure a position and move toward advancement in their profession. No one continues to assume that good teaching and active departmental work alone will provide job security or the possibility for promotion. Perhaps more than ever, today's philosopher must continually produce high-quality scholarly writings, if not original contributions to the field, which are open to peer scrutiny, evaluation, and rebuttal. The pressure to produce publishable material begins in graduate school and continues beyond one's first appointment, into the years of tenure, even at times into retirement (when there is finally time). The growing number of conferences and publications in philosophy attests to the insistent demand that philosophers publicly take well defined positions, ones based on research and ones they are ready to defend.

Only ten years ago, when the second edition of this *Guidebook* was in preparation, the choice among media for publication was obvious: the philosopher needed to decide whether her ideas and the supporting research would be best presented in the concise form of a scholarly article in a journal or the more extended form of a monograph. Of course, there was always room for variations on a theme; however, the final product sought lay in the structuring of research and ideas in such a way that they received the kind of permanence we had been taught to expect of worthwhile achievements in philosophy: the printed word on paper. CD-ROM, the Internet, and electronic journals were still very much in their infancy, only playing a marginal role in academic publishing.

The last edition of this *Guidebook* did contain, for the first time, "A Note on Word Processing," which celebrated the advantages of using word processing programs for preparing texts and encouraged professional philosophers to explore the possibilities. However, times are rapidly changing. Among my freshmen today, although there are some struggles during the first weeks of the academic year regarding my insistence that all papers must be typed, ninety percent of the papers I receive are produced with the assistance of a word processing program; the remaining ten percent are typed on the more traditional typewriter. I do not know a single masters or PhD student today preparing a thesis or dissertation without the assistance of word processing. "Ten years ago" in the history of philosophy may not be much more than the wink of an eye; in the history of electronic technology "ten years ago" is an enormous geological time span.

Today, the choice of media for publishing in philosophy is many and varied, and expanding rapidly. If the changes in publishing were simply quantitative, opening up more places to publish and creating a rapid increase in the volume of philosophy literature annually available, then—while there would remain cause for investigation and analysis—this *Guidebook* would itself need do little more than list the changes. However, the use of electronic, especially digital, media has an increasing qualitative (as well as quantitative) effect on publishing in philosophy. Since published works largely define philosophy as a discipline,

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the current changes in publishing are inevitably having their effects on how we practice philosophy. Philosophers today are becoming increasingly aware of the uses new media open up for expressing ideas within the arena of philosophical debate. More importantly, that arena itself is taking on new dimensions.

Words and Places

Two fundamental factors play a central role in philosophical writing: one is the message or idea we want to convey; the other is the audience to whom we address ourselves. We are usually quite conscious of the first, the thesis, struggling to make our points clear, avoiding ambiguity, arguing sensibly, and simply getting matters right. At the same time, although we are usually more or less aware of whom we are addressing, the audience often plays a more distant role in the development of our ideas. While such things as tone, references, and length are readily adapted to the situation in which we are either presenting or publishing a paper, the central idea and the structure of the argument need hardly change. Making allowance for a few minor adaptations, the “same” paper can be presented at a local inter-departmental meeting where we know all of the participants well, presented again at an international conference where most of the participants are new faces for us, and then published in a journal that enjoys either limited or wide circulation.

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As more and more academics, scientists, and philosophers take to alternative media for developing and communicating their ideas, the questions “What is my thesis?” and “Who is my audience?” begin to play a more prominent role in deciding where to publish. The more traditional media of books and journals still hold center stage when it comes to establishing oneself within the profession. However, while books and journals provide the most secure channels for attaining professional recognition, they are increasingly viewed as limited by scientists and scholars alike. The Internet is moving in as the preferred vehicle for exchanging ideas and information. A key factor here is time. The manuscript for a journal article or book may take up to a year or more to get through the editor and reviewers before appearing in print. This means that often the focus of a scientist or academic has shifted by the time her research appears in print and receives comment from the audience she is addressing.

Computers and computer networks today come ever closer to conveying ideas and arguments at the speed of thought. Though philosophy has always been a reflective activity, philosophers today are discovering a new and stimulating field for developing their ideas. The ability to publish in real time and the availability of more immediate responses are structural changes in the profession that are rapidly influencing the practice of philosophy. Philosophy is becoming less an account of debates between established texts and leading commentaries, and much more a lived discourse on problems and issues in contemporary society. Cyberspace has made it possible for philosophy to return to the much more public space of the agora, where daily conversation among philosophers and sophists is not subject to the bureaucracy of publishing houses and a litany of reviewers.

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In the agora of cyberspace the philosopher also finds an audience (or audiences) of a greater variety from the ones she had grown accustomed to with the printed word. The first reference to the identity of a correspondent is usually an address—not a name or a face, not a man or a woman, not even professor or student. The discussants on the Internet begin to know one another in the unprejudiced and egalitarian atmosphere of conversation structured entirely by its participants. It is essentially an interactive community where participants are, not simply the passive recipients of ideas or information, but active contributors to the development and dissemination of the ideas and information they receive. The pursuit of knowledge, as well as the sharing of acquired knowledge, becomes increasingly a community activity.

Within this community, knowledge itself takes on a much more public face. The traditional distinctions between the categories of author, publisher, reviewer, commentator, reader, and archivist begin to fade as the texts or conversations themselves gain their authority from their use. The stronger and more attractive works in cyberspace tend to be the ones to which many hands (minds) have contributed, ones where it is increasingly difficult to identify either authorship or date of origin. These works tend to adapt the shape of an active, living conversation. Critique and rebuttal take on new forms, as do exegesis and interpretation, when philosophers encounter words and arguments in the dynamic medium of electronic interchange as opposed to the more embedded medium of the printed word.

The discussion groups are the bedrock of the Internet. These discussion groups allow philosophers a daily forum for engaging specific topics in their area of specialization or in related areas. The discussion groups are generally headed by a manager, who is responsible for maintaining the list of subscribers and seeing to it that ideas and information circulate smoothly. Managers are not authors and they are not publishers; neither are they final authorities. They devote their time and energy (and often quite a bit of extra-curricular time and energy) to ensuring the smooth flow of discourse. The subscribers post ideas they have on the topic of the discussion group and they respond to messages posted by other members of the group. Thus, the ideas develop and build through a natural process of discussion, argumentation, dispute, and rhetoric.

The discussion groups have become places for presenting scientific findings and engaging pressing concerns in society, as well as a medium for quibble and gossip. Today, in many areas of academics and even philosophy, these discussion groups are setting the research agenda and acting as the first line for sifting through the chaff. If you have an idea concerning philosopher 'x' or theory 'y', and you are considering developing it into a publishable article, you might do well to read through the postings on or related to your topic and then e-mail one or two subscribers who appear particularly knowledgeable. In the short run, it is likely to save you valuable time in research and also provide you with several different approaches to consider in developing your idea. In the long run, it may very well save your article from either outright rejection by a journal editor or a thorough rewrite.

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Finally, although a contribution to a discussion group does not warrant an entry under Publications on your vita, colleges and universities are beginning to understand the added value active participation brings to the intellectual life of an academic. Within a discussion group one acts (or interacts) in a more or less public domain without a need to claim uniqueness in authorship or point of view. The Internet opens up the opportunity for philosophers to act both publicly and privately in a community that is fundamentally democratic, international, and multicultural. Even the philosopher who stubbornly refuses to yield to the arguments of others has a role to play in a community whose first interest is the conversation that increases our knowledge.

Perish the Word

In the last ten years there has been an enormous growth in the number of journals in philosophy and related fields. Much of this has to do with increased specialization in the discipline as well as the growth and splintering of science itself into further subdivisions. In the same period subscription prices for academic journals have more than doubled. The budgets of university libraries simply have not been able to keep pace, and there is a growing tendency of deacquisition among libraries as they struggle between the demands of professors and students and the soaring prices of journals and books. At the same time, academics, scientists, and publishers have been exploring alternative media in order to reduce costs and establish more efficient means for accessing and storing publications. One important innovation here has been the use of CD-ROMs as a medium for recording and distributing journals and books. Anyone who has used, for example, *The Philosopher's Index* on CD-ROM for more than half an hour would consider it enormous punishment to have to return to the library stacks the next time she wanted to find the latest publication by her favorite philosopher.

Perhaps the most remarkable innovation here has been the enormous growth in electronic journals and newsletters. Although few E-journals have gained the professional prestige of the more established printed journal, this is by far the fastest growing area in publishing today. One of the most attractive aspects of the Internet for scholars is its unfettered and egalitarian atmosphere; but this is also seen by many as one of the biggest threats to serious academic and scientific work. In this environment of "anything goes," where there can be few established rules for order or authority, science (and with it philosophy) risk spinning off into an unwieldy hegemony of babble. While the Internet enlarges the freedom of speech and the freedom of access to information, it also endangers the traditional standards that have guided scientific investigation and discourse. This situation is further complicated by the fact that there is, as of yet, no broadly reliable system in place to ensure that the costs of producing E-journals will be recovered. Up until now most online journals and newsletters have been the result of volunteer efforts by scientists and academics eager to decrease the time needed to broadcast new ideas.

However, recent developments in producing high-quality scholarly journals in

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a purely electronic format have shown that these problems can be overcome. Scholars no longer need to push aside fundamental standards in favor of expediency. Indeed, many E-journals now publish according to strict requirements of peer review. There is even good reason to believe that the peer-review process can be improved through the use of the Internet. Following in the footsteps of scientists and academics, some of the larger publishers of journals are beginning to put their journals online while still running a profitable business. Indeed, if the trend continues, many publishers of academic journals will find it necessary to place their publications online if they want to stay in business.

The printed word in philosophy has, since even before the time of the Greeks, enjoyed an enormous degree of constancy and duration. The author of a work, once penned and published, had secured a place in the great tradition—even if that place was lost and needed to be recovered by someone at a later date.

We are still far from either printing or entering the final word on publishing philosophy. In many ways, we are fortunate to have the advantage of a crossroads, with the choices and possibilities that it both holds open and opens up. Clearly, the future for the media of publishing philosophy has little to do with the plans or decisions any group or institution would want to enforce. How we publish philosophy in the future will depend on the practices we individually and collectively adopt today in the face of the technological developments in the communications media. Indeed, one is tempted to say that the very nature of philosophy itself will, in the future, depend on these practices.