

But Should We Innovate?

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Four years ago Marc Renaud, the ebullient president of SSHRC, appealed to Canadian scholars in the humanities and social sciences to change our ways. Deploring the “death of a thousand journal articles,” most of them attracting at best a handful of readers, he called upon us to “go public or perish.” By “going public” he meant two things: seeking commercial partners and publishing our research electronically. Unless we did so, we were doomed to social irrelevancy and ever-decreasing public support. This year his message is more radical. In his most recent address, “The Human Sciences: The Challenge of Innovation” (available on the Federation website) he urges us to adopt strategies “to survive and succeed in this fast-forward age”: collaborating, especially with our colleagues in the natural and bio-medical sciences, focusing on contemporary problems, and making greater use of leading-edge technologies...in a word, innovating. Those who find Renaud’s analysis persuasive might ask how well Canadian medievalists are meeting this challenge. Those who do not might object that the challenge was never an appropriate one for us in the first place.

Certainly, there is no dearth of medieval projects that employ new technologies. Say one wants to learn Old English. Murray McGillivray’s website at Calgary offers approachable grammatical instruction, carefully tailored to meet the needs of students who have never heard terms like “dative” and complete with sound clips. From McGillivray’s site one can follow the hot link to Kevin Kiernan’s “Electronic Beowulf.” Now gutted to prevent undercutting sales of the CD-ROM, Kiernan’s site still gives a sense of what digitalisation can offer. Using backlit fibreoptic readings and digital enhancement, Kiernan’s team has been able to recover lost and faded letters. For those who can afford the cd-rom, the crumbling pages of the singed Cotton Vitellius codex are now available for repeated perusal.

Across the world, enlightened medieval libraries are offering electronic access to manuscripts that are too fragile or precious to be consulted. The Bodleian and the National Library of Wales have mounted high quality visual images, while the Digital Scriptorium, run by Berkeley and Columbia, is creating an expanding database of manuscripts in American libraries. Even the Bibliothèque Nationale has put up some of the images from luxury manuscripts of the age of Charles V, although one may need to go to a clearing house, such as Jesse Hurlbut's convenient DScriptorium (<http://www.byu.edu/~hurlbut/dSCRIPTORIUM/>), to find them. Such projects are not without their dangers. Among other things, they provide librarians with further excuse to deny access to the manuscripts themselves. But they offer tremendous advantages over microfilms and they meet Renaud's new criteria beautifully, drawing on leading edge technology and international collaboration, and even producing commercial spin-offs.

In the publication of our commentary, on the other hand, medievalists, like most scholars, remain conservative. While a number of journals are now available on-line, most simply reproduce the structures of print. Here there would seem to be room for innovation. Just as the explosion of academic commentary in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries led to new forms of indexing and organising manuscripts, so the current explosion might lead us to develop new forms of indexing and organising articles. What would it look like if one reconceived of the footnote as a hotlink, or laid out articles not as a single narrative but as a series of stages, each one of which could be explored at ever increasing levels of complexity, or organised text blocks as part of a map or diagram, as opposed to organising them as a scroll or as a series of equally sized pages? Whatever the merits of these particular examples, they do suggest that electronic publications are still, for the most part, rather like horseless carriages or those incunabula that are so difficult to distinguish from manuscripts, duplicating the layout and structure of earlier technologies. One might go further. In the world Marc Renaud describes, does it make sense to write monographs and journal articles at all? Should we not emulate Jerome McGann, one of the few scholars I know of who has wholeheartedly followed the technological imperative to its logical conclusion. McGann's most recent major project, *The Complete Writings and Pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, is published not as a book but as a "hypermedia research archive" (<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/rossetti/>).

Canadian medievalists should think twice, however, before we adopt "innovation" as our battle cry. After all, McGann only stopped writing books after he had written enough of them to secure his reputation. Canadian universities, anxiously playing the

ratings game, are more than ever prone to over-value academic “productivity” and count numbers of refereed publications. Genuine innovation, which may entail new and unrecognised forms of work and will certainly cut into productivity rates, will not necessarily meet with administrative approval. As for SSHRC, any scholar applying for funding needs to remember that it is the committee, not the president, that ranks the projects. Probably the greatest danger in embracing new technology, however, is simply dissipating one’s time. The flood of e-mail alone has now become a recognised crisis for harried middle managers and we are not far behind them. Mounting websites, producing powerpoint demonstrations, and other parts of innovative pedagogy can Hoover up hours, a recurring complaint among those instructors who use them. Often our real work begins when we unplug.

Terms like “fast forward” evoke a crisis in our personal economies of time that has been building for years. Well before e-mail appeared on the scene, the post-war expansion of the university system and the concurrent increase in academic publishing had already led to a world in which books were more often photocopied than read. The sheer quantity of commentary on authors such as Chaucer long ago became self-defeating (a problem I have yet to hear a single Chaucerian address). Interdisciplinary and theoretical challenges have added a new dimension to the problem. Ten years ago, at a conference on new directions in medieval and renaissance studies, Peter Stallybrass—a leading figure in the hot field of cultural studies—urged his more conservative colleagues to explore new approaches, warning us that “We all will have to do a lot more reading.” He did not tell us where we were to find the time. One example of someone who was doing the kind of wide ranging extra-disciplinary reading Stallybrass had in mind was Kathleen Bittick. Her 1998 study *The Shock of Medievalism* captures something of the centrifugal tendency of cultural studies and the frenetic effort to stay current that it demands. Some will find it exhilarating; others reckless. It is certainly scholarship on fast-forward.

Marc Renaud is a social scientist. His blithe championing of collaborative work that is directly related to contemporary problems as a model for us all reflects his own disciplinary formation. It has little to say about the slow, patient, largely solitary, reading of difficult texts in their original languages that is such a large part of what so many of us do. Perhaps our real failure, then, is not our reluctance to embrace new methods but our failure to defend old ones with sufficient vigour.

If we are to “go public,” one old model we could consider more often is the slowly-crafted and well-written book. Medievalists are never likely to form a quick response

team, rushing in to provide state-of-the art expertise on rapidly developing crises. We should not blame ourselves that one of the first popular studies of the medieval roots of the tensions in the Middle East, *The Far-Farers: A Journey from Viking Iceland to Crusader Jerusalem*, was written by a journalist, Victoria Clark. A better model for what we might try to do more often would be Margaret MacMillan's comprehensive *Paris 1919*, a substantial historical study that is also a current bestseller. In a recent interview in the *Globe and Mail*, MacMillan attributed part of her success to the coaching she received when delivering popular radio lectures and mentioned her role models, Simon Schama and Barbara Tuchman. Perhaps if we are to go public we should turn off our browsers and reflect on the enduring popularity of Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror*.

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