Gary Hall, We Started Building a Progressive Ecosystem for the Arts and Humanities – You Won’t Believe What Happened Next!

I had a whole other talk planned. But after this morning’s Brexit Party result, addressing this issue seemed more urgent. So, how do we explain Farage and the Brexit Party? And what can we do about them?

One explanation is that we’re currently experiencing what’s been called the 4th great transformation in communications. If the 1st transformation was the development of speech and language, the 2nd writing, and the 3rd print (which was itself accompanied by other modes of analog communication such as film and television), the 4th is the shift from analog to digital. Indeed, for some, we’re now in
the post-digital era, as the ‘disruption brought upon by digital information technology has already occurred.’

Historically, such transformations have often been followed by social and political upheaval, even war.

Printing was at the heart of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, for example, which broke the religious monopoly of the Catholic Church.

Now we’re all probably going to be long dead before anyone knows if we’re living through a period of change as profound as that. What we can say, though, is that so far those on the political right have realised the possibilities created by the new communications technologies far better than the democratic left. It’s like they’ve read Gramsci, and know that if you want to change politics you need to begin by changing culture.
We have Donald Trump, the first meme president of the United States; Jair Bolsonaro, the first president of Brazil elected using the Internet as his main means of communication; and the Vote Leave’s campaign’s highly sophisticated use of new technologies during the Brexit Referendum, as revealed by the Cambridge Analytica scandal.

Indeed, the right have been so successful in mainstreaming their ideas, they’ve completely transformed the political landscape. We now live in a ‘post-truth’ world of ‘fake news’, ‘alternative facts’, climate-change deniers, Holocaust deniers, anti-vaxxers, and people who are anti-immigration and anti-LGBT rights.[ii]

By comparison, the left has been conspicuously bad at achieving an equivalent degree of political transformation. Arguably, even the
impact of the #MeToo, BlackLivesMatter, and Extinction Rebellion protests has so far been more cultural than political.

So how can we use the new communication technologies for more progressive purposes that are attuned to today’s changed political landscape?

There are signs something of this sort is beginning to happen with:

- the kind of grassroots, bottom-up groundswell against the media and political establishment associated with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in the US and Jeremy Corbyn and Momentum here;

- the rise of platform cooperativism

- and calls for the monopolies of Facebook and Google to be broken up, and for people to own their own data,
as is being explored in Barcelona by housing activist turned city major Ada Colau.

It's with this kind of emphasis on using communications technologies for purposes grounded in the democratic principles of openness, redistribution and working collectively, that my colleagues and I align ourselves. Over the last 20 years we've been involved in developing more than 15 grassroots, scholar-led, open access projects for the production of free resources, infrastructure and the commons.

In 1999 we launched the Culture Machine journal of critical and cultural theory – which has just relaunched out of Mexico city.

In 2008 Culture Machine became a founder-member of Open Humanities Press, which involves multiple self-organising groups, all operating in non-rivalrous fashion to make works of contemporary theory available on a non-profit, free/gratis, open access basis. OHP currently publishes 21 journals, and has
published over 40 books distributed across 8 book series, as well as experimental, *libre*, OA books such as those in our Living Books About Life series.[iii]

OHP was in turn a founder member of the Radical Open Access Collective, a community of presses, journals and other projects, formed in 2015. Now consisting of over 60 members, this collective seeks to build a progressive alternative ecosystem for creating and publishing research, based on experimenting with a diversity of non-profit, independent and scholar-led approaches.

Meanwhile, in the Centre for Postdigital Cultures at Coventry University, and it’s Post Office research studio, we’re interested in reinventing hardware, software and network infrastructures – especially those involved in the production and dissemination of research: books, journals, seminar series, conferences. But also infrastructure that operates at a larger scale: archives, museums, libraries and so on.
And we’ve brought together people involved in a number of such projects. There’s myself from OHP, Janneke Adema and Samuel Moore from the Radical Open Access Collective, Marcell Mars and Tomislav Medak from the Public Library: Memory of the World shadow library…

The latest of these grassroots initiatives is COPIM, which comes from a consortium of 6 open access presses called ScholarLed. A strategic international partnership involving universities, libraries and technology providers, COPIM’s designed to realign open access book publishing, away from competing commercial service providers, to a more resilient, horizontal and cooperative knowledge-sharing approach, in which systems and infrastructures are collectively managed for the common good.

OK, so hopefully, by this point, you’re beginning to get a sense of how my colleagues and I are exploring new ways of working that
are consistent with the kind of politics we in the humanities often advocate for others.

1) Although we’re media theorists, we don’t always act as virtuoso authors – we often operate in terms of communities and collectives.

2) Indeed, while we still publish conventional books and journal articles, our theory might not necessarily take the form of a piece of writing at all.

We’re increasingly opening our knowledge to being not just post-digital, but post-grammatological or post-literary to, by creating, publishing and disseminating our work in the form of films, videos, and virtual, augmented and immersive media environments.

3) In fact our theory doesn’t always involve authoring at all –
along with such affective labour as supporting and inspiring, it can also involve building, developing and maintaining far more than *authoring* –

as with COPIM and Marcell Mar’s work with UbuWeb and Aaaaarg.[iv]

Now it might appear the trajectory we’ve been on for the last 20 years has been about becoming a mobilizing force by scaling our work on creating common resources – from *Culture Machine*, to the 21 journals of Open Humanities Press, through the 60 plus members of the Radical OA Collective and so forth.

However, actually, we don’t want to grow any of these projects. We *prefer* to small scale or *non-scale* them, as some of my colleagues have taken to calling it, following Anna Tsing (although we’ve been working like this for 20 years): by developing
relationships with a diversity of others in different parts of the world through collaboration; and by allowing our content and infrastructure to be openly copied, shared and reiterated, free of charge.

We know some see the relatively small-scale nature of initiatives such as OHP and ScholarLed as a problem, because they don’t provide a complete answer to the economics of how to provide a universal eco-system for open access books. However, we’re not trying to produce a one-stop platform to rule them all, in the sense of Google Scholar, Academia.edu or Knowledge UnLatched. The diversity of the humanities means that such paternalistic attempts to impose a one-size-fits-all order onto its publishing ecology are ultimately doomed to failure. Besides, doing so leaves little room for experimentation when what’s needed is actually a variety of models – business and otherwise – not least to avoid becoming reliant on a system of Book Processing Charges that’s potentially unsustainable.

The 25 most cited books in the social sciences

Elliott Green, 'What are the most-cited publications in the social sciences (according to Google Scholar)?', LSE Impact Blog, May 12, 2016
But non-scaling is also important to us because it avoids repeating the centre/periphery model of the geopolitics of knowledge, whereby ‘there are just a few nations at the centre of the global academic networks who are exporting, and in effect ‘universalizing’, their knowledge. … and a whole host of other nations outside of the centre who … don’t have opportunities to publish, export, or even develop their own “universal” knowledge’. Developing in terms of collaboration and reiteration – rather than growth and expansion – helps prevent the reproduction of this state of affairs. It enables us to produce a pluralistic and multi-polar ‘network instead, one with a far more complex, … antagonistic, … and decentred structure.’ We can thus place more emphasis on privileging non-standard contributions from others, understood geographically, but also in terms of BAME, LGBTQI, working class and other nonconforming identities.[vi]

At the same time, by producing free resources and infrastructure in this way, ‘chains of equivalence’ can be established between our grassroots, community-led open access projects and a diversity of other movements and struggles locally, nationally and
internationally. They include those movements associated with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ada Colau I began with, but also those struggles associated with Unconditional Basic Income, 4-day week, Flat-Pack Democracy and the Preston model in the UK, along with Sea Watch, Docs Not Cops, and PLANKA.Nu internationally. (See our forthcoming Pirate Care conference for more on the latter 3.)

So, to conclude: as we've seen, those on the political right have been successful in transforming the political landscape, ironically, by acting as the left says people should: they’ve operated as a community with shared goals to collectively redistribute knowledge and ideas.

To this end, Farage’s Brexit Party has adopted the digital savvy electoral strategy of the Five Star Movement in Italy. Which has been to create a new model for political communications by using the possibilities created by the 4th great transformation in media technologies, to anticipate the decline of representative politics,
and shift to more direct forms of democracy using social media and the internet.

By contrast, while many of us in the arts and humanities are on the democratic left – writing books and articles about the importance of social solidarity, sharing and redistribution – we act like we’re right-wing. We operate as rampantly competitive, proprietorial individuals with a goal-fixated instrumentalism in that what’s really important to us are the number of books we publish and grants we win.

When it comes to HE leadership, few espouse the politics of Trump or Farage of course. Too many HE leaders, however, seem stuck in the world of Blair, Cameron and Change UK. It’s a leadership philosophy that, after austerity and Brexit, looks increasingly unfit-for-purpose.

What my colleagues and I are endeavouring to do, then, is work in grassroots, bottom-up, community-led ways that are:
a) consistent with the kind of politics we in the arts and humanities advocate for others;

b) but that also seem to be increasingly in tune with the changing political zeitgeist.\[vii\]

This is what our activities with Open Humanities Press, the Radical Open Access Collective, the Post Office and so forth is about. For us, working together as a community to produce a multi-polar system for creating, publishing and disseminating academic research is the only way we’re going to provide an answer to problems such as how to provide an eco-system for open access books.

It’s never just been about open access, for us, though. It’s about transforming the way we act and think: how we create publish and disseminate knowledge – and with this our ideas of property, ownership, the author, originality, writing, the book and copyright.
Of course, all this is only a start. We’re just at the beginning of this transition in communications from analog to whatever lies in the post-digital future.

However, if we’re not going to wake up to more of this, we need to start exploring this new post-Gutenberg, post-neoliberal Galaxy now. And we need lots of experiments with doing so: not just those of my colleagues and I.

Students are doing so not so much out of characteristic hipster enthusiasm for vintage media (vinyl, cassettes, and so forth), as an attempt to develop forms of social networking that are not controlled by Google, Amazon et al. and their data-mining, monitoring, control, and capitalization of reading. See Florian Cramer, “Afterword,” in Alessandro Ludovico, Post-Digital Print: The Mutation of Publishing since 1894, Onomatopee 77, 2012, 163.

‘In a post-digital age, the question of whether or not something is digital is no longer really important – just as the ubiquity of print, soon after Gutenberg, rendered obsolete all debates (besides historical ones) about the “print revolution”’

(Alessandro Ludovico, Post-Digital Print, 2012)

Nick Thurston book

‘The post-digital names a technical condition that followed the so-called digital revolution and is constituted by the naturalization of pervasive and connected computing processes and outcomes in everyday life, such as digitality is now inextractable from the way we live while its form, functions and effects are no longer necessarily perceptible.’ (Maik Fielitz and Nick Thurston, Post-digital Cultures of the Far Right: Online Actions and Offline Consequences in Europe and the US)

ii [One result has been the rise of populist far-right political figures and parties in these countries, but also in France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Spain, Poland and Hungary. These are parties that seem to place liberal democracy itself under threat.]

iii Among other things, this involves us in exchanging our time, knowledge expertise and even our publications for free, both among ourselves and with other open access publishers. We see this gifting of labour as a means of developing notions of the community, the common and of communing that help to break with the conditions supporting the unified, sovereign, proprietorial subject.
And we’re organising horizontally in a non-competitive manner in order to collaboratively proliferate new models for property and ownership.

iv 3) This is because, for us, theory isn’t just a means of imagining our ways of being in the world differently; it’s a means of enacting them differently too. So our projects are performative or pre-figurative, in the sense they’re concerned not just with representing the world but also with intra-acting with it in order to make things happen. They’re ‘being the change we want to see’.

v

And one of the things we’re thinking about is, can we use non-scaling approach as a means of providing an alternative future infrastructure for cities, using the likes of Memory of the World as a means of commoning traditional municipal organisations and institutions such as libraries and museums.

But we’re also working on doing in the place where we are located: in Coventry as a city.

We are therefore turning our attention to the following questions: can the non-scaling model of development the CPC is pioneering with projects such as Open Humanities Press (www.openhumanitiespress.org), the Radical Open Access Collective ((http://radicaloa.disruptivemedia.org.uk)) and ScholarLed (https://scholarled.org) be applied to cities in order to transform them through the commoning of institutions and infrastructures?

Providing

Instead of having to rely on governments and multi-national companies (Amazon, Google, Uber et al), will cities and the different communities that live in them be able to take some of the ‘alternative’, open and collectively-created infrastructural elements that are being provided for them on a free, libre, open-source,
open data basis by transformative postdigital projects such as the CPC’s Mandela27 pop-up museum (www.mandela27.com) and Public Library: Memory of the World (www.memoryoftheworld.org) – and then build their own versions on a self-organising basis, adopting and improving those parts they want, and discarding the rest? Will this provide a more socially just and environmentally sustainable way for cities to grow in the future: by developing relationships with a diversity of others in different parts of the world through collaborative co-creation and custodianship; and by making their collectively created municipal institutions (e.g. postdigital libraries, museums, archives, universities and schools) and technological tools and devices (cryptocurrencies; apps; basic income wallets; digital trackers

vi The shared aim of all our different projects is thus to disarticulate the existing playing field and its manufactured common sense of what it is to be an academic today, and foster instead a variety of antagonistic spaces that contribute to the development of progression institutions and environments able to counter the hegemony of for-profit companies in scholarly communication such as Google Scholar, Academia.edu and Knowledge Unlatched.

vii It’s a shift – from representative to more direct forms of democracy – that can be traced at least as far back as the horizontal groundswell against the ‘old politics’ of the liberal and neoliberal establishments that was such a notable feature of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum.