

A Forum on Electronic Journals: Change, Challenge, Opportunity

Part Three: In a Parallel Universe? A Response to Jeffrey Garrett's "Wood, Flour, Journal: How the Electric Turn Has Affected the Way Journals are Found, Used, and Read"

by Christine Wenderoth

Let me begin with a confession: all during the past presidential election, I felt as though I must be living in some sort of parallel universe from much of America. It's the only way I can make *any* sense out of other people's political views. I mention this only because I got that same feeling reading Jeff's paper: he and I must live in parallel universes. We are coming to such different conclusions...so we must be starting from different realities. And I want to go down this road a little bit, and ask the question: How are the realities a place like Northwestern University inhabits different from a place like the United Library, or the JKM Library, or the typical pastor's library? And I want to focus on three facets of these different worlds—the obvious two, (1) economies of scale and (2) the discursive nature of the theological disciplines; and the less talked about one, (3) a sort of reader-response theory that describes theological researcher behaviors and hints at some theological considerations.

But first the quotidian: let's start with economies of scale. We all know that the Northwestern Universities of this world are lots bigger than the United Libraries of this world. Or let me take the JKM Library as my comparison, since I know more about it and since it has no corporate relationship to that—how was it put?—"other local private university located about twenty miles to our south" and no way to benefit from its electronic resources. Nine million dollars is what Northwestern has to spend on acquisitions. JKM, which owns the eleventh largest theological collection included in the statistics of the Association of Theological Schools, had an acquisitions budget in FY09 of \$183,600, or 2% of Northwestern's. Only \$60,000 of that (or 0.67% of Northwestern's acquisitions budget) was available for the purchase of periodicals. And actually I thought I was in hog heaven when I moved to JKM from Colgate Rochester Crozer Theological Seminary in Rochester, New York; our budget there for periodicals was \$34,000. Well, what's all this mean except that when Jeff speaks about the lack of individual [journal] title selectability in the current e-journal scene as being "only bad if you are a selector," I must demur. I must respond, "No, it's bad if you only have an acquisitions budget that's 2% of the major players who are setting the terms for journal access." I would love to subscribe to JSTOR, for example. But the last time I looked, JSTOR would cost JKM an \$18,500 one-time Archive Capital Fee plus a \$7,300 annual access fee, or \$25,800—43% of our periodicals budget for the past year. And for that 43% we'd get scores and scores of journals we don't want and can't use. It reminds me of cable TV. I want Turner Classic Movies, and for that I have to get channel after crummy channel of sports, cooking, and reruns, all for one large pre-set fee I can't negotiate. Sorry, on the JKM budget, this is not an option. JSTOR includes too many things we don't want and not enough of those arcane little theological journals we do want. It also doesn't help that e-journal aggregators base their fees on a sliding scale that always puts theological institutions *way* under the minimum threshold. So we get to pay a base fee that per capita is much higher than the fees the Northwesterns and University of Chicagos of the world pay. It's not a level playing field.

Well, grumble, grumble, that's just crying "poverty," certainly something the market will correct eventually (right?) by lowering prices and including every little obscure journal published. Maybe. Doubtful, but maybe. In the

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meantime, though, let's not pretend we live in one big undifferentiated world. Some of us are less equal than others.

Let's go on to obvious point #2, the discursive or narrative nature of the theological disciplines (by which I mean theology, church history, biblical studies, and pastoral studies at the very least) which theological libraries and seminaries and journals serve. Jeff notes in his article that "our users often find themselves thrust into the middle of individual articles or book chapters" in the world of e-journals, and later admits that "the ease of intrusive consultation, ignoring contexts and extended complex arguments, and the far-too-easy extraction of content from the larger contexts which form its organic home contribute to a climate of distractedness, a climate of the toggle, if you will" characterize the reading practices of e-resources. (Or as others have put it, many scholars no longer cite articles, they raid them.) It is not irrelevant, I think, that Jeff refers to the new generation of e-journal readers as "consumers of information." Indeed. The problem is, theology (let's use that as shorthand for all of the related disciplines) is not an *information*-based discipline. It's not that we don't provide lots of information in seminary training, or that pastors and scholars don't need information—of course they do—but information does not constitute the heart of theological wisdom. As Edward Farley wrote back in the 1980's, the overarching goal of the theological curriculum is a "theological understanding," which is an "aptitude for theological reflection and wisdom pertaining to responsible life in faith," (*Theologia*, p.153) a theological *habitus*. This cultivation of *habitus* requires things like community, context, complex and sustained arguments—precisely those things that Jeff admits electronic texts do not encourage. As theological educators, we librarians have some responsibility to care about theological understanding, and to foster an environment in which theological reflection thrives. As such, I'm saying we need to think critically and carefully, therefore, about changes in research resources and methods to ensure they do what we as theological educators and people of faith need them to do, and not simply cave in to the "inevitable." In other words, e-journals as Jeffrey describes them do not seem to recommend themselves to theological inquiry, and we should rightly be suspicious. At least before we give in to the lure of the new.

To continue down my Luddite path, I would like to move to a consideration of a modified reader-response theory. In other words, before we declare "journal" or "book" to be a commodity in the singular, as Jeff recommends, let's look at actual behaviors of actual theological researchers to see if the behaviors Jeff describes fit in our theological corner of the world. It so happens I've done a little study of this, doing nothing more radical than asking faculty members at my two seminaries (McCormick Theological Seminary and the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago) to describe to me what they do when they research. I spoke to folks from all the traditional theological disciplines and made sure I talked to men, women, young scholars, and those tottering into retirement. The results of my little study were published in both the annual conference *Proceedings* of the American Theological Library Association¹ and in modified form in *Currents in Theology and Mission*. I note two findings here: (1) the single most important resource for faculty research is not anything in print electronically or otherwise but their network of colleagues, and (2) theological faculty use online search resources and write electronically (meaning, on a word processor) but are still very print oriented. In fact, there is a prejudice against e-resources. In a striking conversation I had just this month with an Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago theologian—an internationally and much-published scholar—about the future of the in-house journal *Currents in Theology and Mission* now that its long-time editor has retired, and the journal is apparently costing LSTC \$20,000 annually, I suggested we consider publishing *Currents* on-line only. This theologian was horrified, and *quite* sure that no reputable scholar publishes

¹ Christine Wenderoth, "Research Behaviors of Theological Educators and Students: The Known and the Unknown: Introduction," *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 61 (2007): 178-183.

on-line. He was *clear* that e-journals are derivative, and access should be considered a matter of convenience only. I was frankly blown away that an accomplished scholar would think this way and could only imagine that he thought online publishing means non-juried, non-edited wiki sorts of things. My point is, he clearly lives in a parallel universe to Jeff!

A more sophisticated look at theological reader response, however, comes from my JKM colleague Anthony Elia. Elia has recently completed an M.L.S. at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, and distilled his thesis in a paper given at the 2008 American Theological Library Association annual conference in Ottawa under the title “Beyond Barthes and Chartier: The Theology of Books in the Digital Age.”² In this paper, Elia reports on his interviews with theological faculty to get at their attitudes to physical texts (which he calls “book-objects”) versus their attitudes towards e-texts. He reports on the emotional bonds these scholars have with their books, their awareness of books’ tactility, proximity, spatiality, aesthetics, semiotics, and kinesthetics. And out of this he comes to two interesting conclusions: first, that “book-objects possess a certain power in the way they influence us” as opposed to computers and e-texts; and secondly, that the relationship between the book-object and the human body is a key point to understanding how texts function and how research is optimally engaged. Elia claims further, *pace* Roland Barthes and Roger Chartier, that book-objects as such “are part of a narrative of reception histories, both our individual reception history; and our cultural reception histories.” “To depart wholly [and quickly] from a deeply entrenched set of histories—individual, generational, familial, and cultural histories—is ...an ill-thought, poorly planned and frankly irresponsible [course of] action.” I’ll translate this into crass terms: Let’s not look at the research behaviors of undergraduates as the basis for making important decisions about our scholarly future. Let’s look at the research behaviors of scholars in the fields of theology who know and love what they are doing *before* we come to any quick decisions. I’m not saying we should ignore the undergraduates. I’m not saying we should ignore the finances. I am saying let’s *also* look deeply into our tradition and communities for whom we publish before we pick out a direction.

Let’s also look at actual research behaviors. In the backwater world of theological libraries, paper still has its fans. At least that’s the impression I get from my own library’s circulation statistics. In 1997, 14,035 physical item circulation transactions were registered at JKM. A decade later in 2007, 57,488 circulation transactions were recorded. Clearly, somebody still relies on paper resources, as untrendy as that may be in other academic disciplines. We should not ignore these behaviors.

Elia’s research branches out to two other conclusions. First, research into the human-text interaction makes it quite clear that we’ve been fed a false dichotomy between the supposed inert physical text and the dynamic linkages of e-resources. Don’t buy that dichotomy for a minute. On the one hand, physical texts are not inert. As Elia, Barthes, and Chartier show us, these texts interact with people in lively and enlivening ways. More to the point for us librarians, centuries of cataloging and indexing have placed physical texts in dynamic relationship to us and *to each other*. Even the way we Americans *shelve* library materials in a classified relationship to each other means they are anything but inert. Similarly, as Jeff rightly states, keyword searching has no agency or inquisitive spirit of its own. *All* searches are humanly derived and enlivened. Media has nothin’ to do with it!

The second conclusion is more a hint, but a hint shared by others, including Chicago Theological Seminary theologian and then-President Susan Thistlethwaite, who in 1999 gave a paper at the American Theological Library

² Anthony J. Elia, “Beyond Barthes and Chartier: The Theology of Books in the Digital Age,” *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 62 (2008): 104-116.

Association annual conference entitled “Virtual Reality Christianity.” She, like Elia, mused about embodiment—books’ embodiment, our own embodiment, and yes, God’s own embodiment. She didn’t declare virtuality heretical. She merely cautioned us as theologians to “think theologically about what is happening to us as human beings” under the aegis of technology.³ In the interests of time, that is where I’ll leave it as well—that we as Christians, with certain commitments to embodiment, need to ponder the theological meanings of this “electronic turn” before turning down the “inevitable” path of electronic publishing whole hog. Is electronic publishing an expression of techno-gnosticism and, if so, should we go there?

Lest I seem completely resistant, however, let me conclude with reference to another theologian—songwriter and performer Janis Ian. Back in 2002 she wrote an article titled “The Internet Debacle” which got posted all over cyberspace. Something like 52,000 people read and responded to this posting—a few more than regularly read the *Anglican Theological Review* or *Theological Librarianship*, I think. She created a storm and was branded a traitor by many of her industry colleagues. For she had come to the conclusion that downloading wasn’t ruining the music business, that the new technology, in fact, afforded a paradigm record companies should embrace. It was time for the industry to stop treating their audience as criminals, she said, by encrypting their products and in effect encouraging theft. Ian recommended instead that there be “one big site that would offer downloadable music...” and [that] all the record companies get together, make their catalogs available online at prices people would be willing to pay, and cultivate the *trust* of the very audience who kept them in business.⁴ Sounds amazingly like the model Jeffrey is recommending today! Obviously I have some problems with that model as the one-size-fits-all solution to the issues facing publications like the *Anglican Theological Review* and facing small (by comparison to major research libraries) theological libraries. But I think Ian is right in this regard: Whatever path we take into the future, let that path be based on the mission of our publications, an economic model that suits both producers and audience, and a *trust* in our audience whether that audience be pastors, scholars, or libraries.



³ Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, “Virtual Reality Christianity,” *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings* 53 (1999): 229-237.

⁴ Janis Ian, *Society’s Child* (New York: Penguin/Tarcher, 2008), 334-5.