

Media Reviews

Review of Dissertation Reviews, (<http://dissertationreviews.org/>)

Most graduate students have a pretty good idea of the flaws in their own dissertations even as they hand them over to their committees. Then, after defence, they hopefully have an even clearer idea of what needs to be revisited, emphasised or pared as they start thinking about publication. Knowledge of the flaws in one's own work are fairly pronounced at this stage, along with the hope that they can be remedied along the path from dissertation to monograph.

But that has not stopped institutions from increasingly making dissertations available online to a global audience. What used to exist only as a single paper copy in a university's warehouse migrated to microfilm collections available by interlibrary loan, but are now full-text searchable, PDF-published and downloadable, persisting in an accessible digital archive, forever.

Despite the dizzying access to completed dissertations, Thomas S. Mullaney, editor of the Dissertation Reviews website and associate professor of history at Stanford University, senses that 'Graduate students themselves encounter dissertations only rarely, with coursework tending to focus almost exclusively on published monographs, edited volumes and articles'. Mullaney writes, in describing his vision for Dissertation Reviews, that graduate students too often 'juxtapose their dissertations-in-progress against published monographs, failing to appreciate that a huge chasm separates these two genres (and they often become deeply discouraged by the contrast)'.

Dissertation Reviews publishes synopses of recent dissertations in seventeen fields. True to the project's roots in coverage of new research in Chinese history, most of the fields are Asian, with a few fields covering topics such as the history of science and technology, print and media cultures, and bioethics. The site seeks to give the dissertations it reviews, and the genre itself, a higher profile and, in effect, to help curate the wilds of the dissertation databases.

Dissertation Reviews is pointedly non-critical. Not even constructive criticism, apparently, is allowed in these reviews. Mullaney makes his case for this policy on the site: 'whereas a book is understood to be a "finished product" that can and should be submitted to rigorous analysis and critique, a dissertation is by necessity a "work-in-progress" that requires a particular kind of handling'. In answer to the question of how then are the authors supposed to benefit from being reviewed, Mullaney notes that reviewers are expected to send authors their criticisms *privately*. But even these communications are guided by the websites' editors.

This decision to be non-critical (and, really, the entire idea of reviewing dissertations) is driven by the increased professional pressures involved in the first years of an academic career, pressures that have marked off the 'early career' as something distinct and potentially very fragile. In addition to the pressures of just finding a job, these early careerists face both increased pressure to publish and an increased teaching load, especially if they are attempting to convert their dissertation into a book while using contingent employment as a bridge to a tenure-track job.

Dissertation Reviews aims to help the early career academic make the leap from dissertation to book, with private comments, while publicising the research and topic in a non-critical manner in public. It puts the early career academic's work out there, but allows it to bypass a potentially scathing review in a journal. Dissertation Reviews is a sign of the times, a response to trends in early academic careers, and its a curious one, given that it is committing to avoid criticism and offer tips only privately at the same time that others are experimenting with open peer review models and highly public assessments of research.

Will Dissertation Reviews help the early careerist? We can only speculate at this early stage of the project, and since the really constructive comments are private, we can only really speculate on the benefits of what we see: the non-critical synopses. There probably is value in being selected for review, and in having someone else publicise your work. Dissertation Reviews claims that their new posts can garner some 300 page views in the first week, which is impressive when you consider how specialised many of the topics are. The site notes that it hopes to help panel chairs find presenters for conferences, which would be a boon to panel chairs as well as early career academics. But as the site grows it will need a much more extensive and thought-out tagging system to improve discoverability of particular articles.

One place where Dissertation Reviews, or projects like it, could have an impact is on the phenomenon described by a graduate student's remarks to the American Historical Association's Committee on Graduate Education, and reported in the committee's *The Education of Historians for the Twenty-first Century*: the pressure to publish, this student noted, can 'lead...to a situation where [dissertation] topics that might have been more original in design become more conventional in order to survive'.

A middle ground, such as Dissertation Reviews, between the dissertation committee and publication could offer hope to students faced with this choice. If those students see a stopping-off place after the PhD, but before the long slog to a monograph, they might see that there's an option between getting something out into publication now versus taking time to develop a new interpretation or explore new archives. Fewer 'conventional' dissertations could be the result. And perhaps the nagging knowledge that one's dissertation will live on in a database, flaws and all, may be tempered by the knowledge that it will also have a life in a non-critical and supportive review.

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doi:10.1017/mdh.2013.29

Wellcome Library Moving Image and Sound Collection, (<http://wellcomelibrary.org/about-us/about-the-collections/moving-image-and-sound-collection/>)

Forget John Ford's *Arrowsmith* (1931), Milos Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) and Preston Sturges' *The Great Moment* (1944). While such films, to be sure, offer unique insights into the popular representation of modern medicine, scholars in recent years have unfettered themselves from Hollywood to examine medicine's more dynamic audiovisual past. Whether as an instrumental aid to clinical observation, a pedagogical tool in medical education or as a means for disseminating public health messages, moving