

# In Defense of the *Long-Form*: Introducing *The Four Peaks Review*

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## INTRODUCTION

In "A Scandal in Bohemia,"<sup>1</sup> a bemused and frustrated Watson remarks to the great Sherlock Holmes: "When I hear you give your reasons, the thing always appears to me so ridiculously simple that I could easily do it myself, though at each successive instance of your reasoning I am baffled, until you explain your process. And yet my eyes are as good as yours." Holmes replies and the exchange continues:

"Quite so. You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear. For example, you have frequently seen the steps which lead up from the hall to this room."

"Frequently."

"How often?"

"Well, some hundreds of times."

"Then how many are there?"

"How many! I don't know."

"Quite so! You have not observed. And yet you have seen. That is just my point."

This distinction, between seeing and observing, marks much of the difference between commentary and insight, between participation and contribution. And yet, while seeing comes to most of us naturally, observation takes time, and training, and effort. It is a faculty rather than a sense, and one that must be cultivated. In many ways, this faculty is what the Master of Communication in Digital Media program hopes to provide to its students, and to facilitate in the larger Four Peaks community.

This academic journal is an effort to contribute to that hope and that facility, and to demonstrate that the rigorous work being done by MCDM students and faculty is more observation than sight, and that the skills, methods, and theories that we deploy within the MCDM help move the conversation about digital media beyond being merely comprehensive summations and specific bits of application; indeed the work done in this journal, in this issue, demonstrates that the MCDM is at the forefront of a conversation about the present and future of digital media, their cultural implications, their transformative and disruptive potential, and their limitations.

The articles included in this inaugural issue of *The Four Peaks Review* represent some of the best long-form writing in the MCDM community, and demonstrate the potential for rigorous, sustained analysis to contribute significantly to larger debates and bodies of knowledge. In this time of rss feeds, social networking and real-time searching, this long-form work in the form of an academic journal may seem antiquated, perhaps even antediluvian. I am writing this introduction to tell you that nothing could be further from reality.

To understand why, we will need a bit of background.

### **ALL YOUR STUPID ARE BELONG TO US**

Back in 2008, Nicholas Carr asked if Google was making us stupid, or at least more stupid than we already were.<sup>2</sup> Debate rage-flamed on, as it normally does with these sorts of topics. At the core of the argument was the assertion, backed by richly argued anecdotes and supplemented by empirical research data, that heavy Internet use eroded the attention span to devote to long-form reading and reflection. Google was doing the thinking for us, so Carr suggested, and we were increasingly content to settle into the cushy banality of the Internet as a substitute for serious thinking.

The crowd responded with a resounding "no," and pointed out that the Google revolution, which is really a revolution in the externalization of memory, freed up our brains for more important work than remembering bits of trivia. And besides, Clay Shirky noted, the big book that Carr celebrates, *War and Peace*, was never that interesting anyway. Decrying the "cathedral-like" structure of long-form prose-work, Shirky contended that such a model was an antiquated by-product of a culture of limited access to content, and that today, in a culture of abundance, "On the network we have, the bazaar often works better than the cathedral, from the individual mind to the overall culture."<sup>3</sup>

For the most part the debate mirrored a dispute that has happened many, many times before, and has its most explicit origin in the work of Plato. In one of the later Platonic dialogues, Socrates and Phaedrus have a short but significant conversation about the value of writing, and to explain his objections to the medium, Socrates tells a short story about Theuth, the inventor God, and Thamus the King of all Egypt. One day, Theuth presents a collection of new inventions to Thamus, the capstone of which is writing. He sells it as an aid to memory and to knowledge, but Thamus denounces it, saying: "The discoverer of an art is not the best judge of the good or harm which will accrue to those who practice it. So it is in this case... What you have discovered is a receipt for recollection, not for memory. And as for wisdom, your pupils will have the reputation for it without the reality: they will receive a quantity of information without proper instruction, and in consequence be thought very knowledgeable when they are for the most part quite ignorant."<sup>4</sup> If

this sounds familiar, it should: this debate repeats itself pretty much every time a new medium of any significance appears.

Indeed, the issue reared its head again in 2010, when Edge asked if the Internet was changing how we think. Hundreds of responses poured in, and many of the respondents noted that they felt that their way of thinking had changed, even if they valenced this change differently.<sup>5</sup> Kevin Kelley, of *Wired* editorial fame, suggested that he "happily" swims "in this rising ocean of fragments," and described his thinking now as "more active, less contemplative." The juxtaposition of terms is enticing (Kelley uses binaries to talk about media much as David Brooks uses them to talk about politics) if not entirely fair, given that "active" and "contemplative" are hardly competing forms of cognitive activity.

Barry Smith, Director of the Institute of Philosophy School of Advanced Study at the University of London, is, to read his contribution, equally enamored with and fearful of the Internet's impact. "The real work," he counsels, "is done elsewhere, but we want the Internet to bring us the results. This leaves me knowing less about more and more." And while he remains mute on where exactly is this elsewhere, this Land of the Real Work, he does hint at the possibility that there are ways of knowing and thinking that require distance from the typical rhythms and flows of the digital life.

This concern about rhythm can also be tied to concerns over growing attention deficits. Haim Harari, a physicist and author, responded to the Edge question by lamenting: "Between Twittering, chatting and sending abbreviated Blackberry e-mails, the 'old' sixty-second sound byte of TV newscasts is now converted into one-liners, attempting to describe ideas, principles, events, complex situations and moral positions. Even when the message itself is somewhat longer, the fact that we are exposed to more messages, than ever before, means that the attention 'dose' allocated to each of them is tiny." Harari focused his complaints on the way scientific standards for reasoning and proof have suffered from the speed and concision of our conversations, such that "evolution is just a theory" and "global warming is a hoax" seem like viable and valid counters to scientific evidence and models to the contrary.

And this June, less than a week before publishing this issue, Wikipedia co-founder Larry Sanger described a growing Geek Anti-Intellectualism that decried long-form knowledge in favor of practical application and project-based experience. Addressing the "Geeks" who are the object of his derision, Sanger offers them a manifesto:

You don't really care about knowledge; it's not a priority... After all, academics are boring. A new world is coming, and you are in the vanguard. In this world, the people who have and who value individual knowledge, especially theoretical and factual knowledge, are objects of your derision. You have contempt for the sort of people

who read books and talk about them—especially classics, the long and difficult works that were created alone by people who, once upon a time, were hailed as brilliant. You have no special respect for anyone who is supposed to be “brilliant” or even “knowledgeable.” What you respect are those who have created stuff that many people find useful today.<sup>6</sup>

Plenty of people have offered responses, a few more vehemently and negatively than others, but most of the discussion has been remarkably polite. Many have raised substantive objections to Sanger's assessment of Geekdom's anti-intellectual tendencies, points that Sanger has since labored to address. Regardless, Sanger's basic premise can serve as a precautionary tale about what may come to pass if we find ourselves unable to accept that it has already come to be. Although utility and user/follower count remains fundamental to assessing value on the Internet or on mobile, Sanger's point is to suggest that there are types of knowledge that contribute to understanding (and to the production of higher quality products/services) that cannot be adequately subsumed within the popularity quotients we use to measure success. The problem, Sanger noted in his followup post, is that too many Geeks think there is a difference between anti-academic and anti-intellectual attitudes, claiming and re-shaping the latter for themselves at the expense of the former.<sup>7</sup>

The MCDM puts the lie to this claim. In our classes and our community outreach, we posit that the academy and the Geek are compliments to each other—that on our best of days, we proclaim with certainty that there can be no capacity to “make the change” without both theoretical and practical knowledge.

### **EMBRACING THE LONG-FORM**

For many digital media practitioners, such a dual emphasis may seem misguided. Some may even agree with it in principle, but behave in ways that indicate they don't in practice. For many of the hardest core mobile, Internet, and social media users and entrepreneurs, academic critique, theorizing and reflection might seem fine in the abstract, if only they had the time... but there is so much information out there already, so much to know, to do – there will be time for more sustained and serious reading when they're dead. Or their Internet goes down, which may be the same thing.

There are times, no doubt, when it can appear that the race to the bottom has been supplanted by the race to brevity. “A book is too long, read the review. A blog post is too long, tweet it instead. The tweet takes too much effort, just do a status update.” The race to brevity takes place on terrain so necessarily and miserably flat that the idea of the bottom makes no more sense than the idea of the top. All we have instead is a flat plane, the surface of a great pool, and we're all just marking the skipping stones of our professional and personal lives by counting the ripples. This is the context in

which Ashton Kutcher can race CNN to a million followers, and win; or the context in which the reach of publicity can be conflated with the level of quality.

I would never suggest that publicity and reach are unimportant. After all, what good is the best bit of writing in the world if no one ever hears about it, much less reads it? But I do want to suggest that the circulation of bits and bytes, of texts and images, produces the healthiest information ecosystem when we conceive of this circulation as operating both horizontally (prolific, wide-ranging) and vertically (aspiring to depth, to introspection, to communication in its literal sense, rather than merely exchange and/or broadcast).

Brevity may indeed be the soul of wit, but wit, we should remember, "is the salt of conversation, not the food."<sup>8</sup> Brevity has its place. Let's keep it there, where it belongs.

Academic-style scholarship, long-form journalism, non-fiction essays: these represent a different way of responding to the digital ebbs and flows that increasingly structure the sediment of our lives. They represent a way of stepping back and thinking, of contemplating, rather than merely reacting. In that they are at once both a form of action and a prescription for action. They produce value by facilitating understanding, both on the part of those that compose them, and hopefully, for those that read them. They produce value by making detailed and nuanced debate possible, such that even readers who disagree can learn something through the articulation of their objections. These sorts of values and benefits are available in other media, the best of the Web's blog posts and reporting, to be sure, but they find a unique instantiation in long-form work. *The Four Peaks Review* will attempt to demonstrate this, again and again.

In addition, we should understand that long-form work is one of the many channels that are themselves transformed by these new media technologies. Whereas once these sorts of works would sit on dead tree and bound in leather on the dusty shelves of some library stacks, today we can publish, distribute, and promote these works online, reaching audiences who might not have local access to the printed versions. Rather than being a relic of the past, long-form work is as much a part of our digital future as is any other media, even if it has thus far received less popular attention.

We start with this first issue. Brook Ellingwood starts us off with a reflection on the changing realities of identity on the Internet, from the anonymity of "no one knows you're a dog" to the increasingly strong tether between real and virtual identities in Facebook, Amazon, and other dominant platforms.

In "Mapping Crisis," Joseph Pavey offers a vision of what mobile technology and geo-location can do to help address disease outbreaks in under-developed areas, and how those technologies can be integrated into map displays that could help both medical personnel and unaffected populations.

Dean Hudson explores the "Disruptive Distribution" channels that have, time and again, changed the game in the music industry. In this first part of a two-part series, Dean explores those disruptions that have led us to the current moment, the mother of all disruptions: digital distribution. The second part of this series will be published in our Winter 2012 issue.

Mary Janisch returns to the hot topic of privacy, and does so with a keen focus on the rather interesting tactics teenagers adopt to be able to negotiate increasingly public and online identities alongside their need for a certain minimum threshold for privacy, even if only from their parents, who are now also wandering the Zynga-adorned hallways of Facebook.

In a study of gaming in sub-Saharan Africa, Alison Fiorita investigates the current state of ICT infrastructure, the potential for the gaming market, and the possibility that gaming may itself offer transformative potential for individuals throughout the region, and especially in South Africa, Nigeria, and Kenya.

Elizabeth Hunter considers the changing nature of the personal screen over time, and prepares some qualified predictions about the possibilities for those screens in the future. With each summer bringing a new mini-revolution in tablet computing, e-ink, and touch-screen displays, her essay could not be timelier.

And finally Cat Chien analyzes a medium that might have started as an analog staple but that is increasingly going digital and shrinking: the billboard. She looks to the past to draw conclusions about the future of this core advertising technology.

All seven of these essays demonstrate the capacity to observe rather than merely the use of sight. These seven MCDM students have done excellent work, and as the editor of *The Four Peaks Review*, I am inordinately proud to present them as our inaugural issue.

### **THE FUTURE OF THE FOUR PEAKS REVIEW**

*The Four Peaks Review* will be published twice a year, once in June and once in December, and will present the best of the long-form work being done by the larger MCDM community. These issues will vary slightly in formatting: the summer issue will offer a careful and curated selection of work being done, regardless of topic, while the second will devote half of its space to a special theme section dealing with the sort of changes and disruptions going on in the world of digital media. These themes will draw on student work, faculty, and members of the larger Four Peaks community.

As editor, I would encourage all students and faculty who wish to contribute to do so, and I would encourage faculty to nominate student work that merits special attention and consideration.

Thank you for coming to *The Four Peaks Review*. Now sit back, relax, and read.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, "A Scandal in Bohemia," in *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes* (Edison, New Jersey: Castle Books, 1976), 11-25.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" *The Atlantic*, July/August 2008, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/6868/>.

<sup>3</sup> Clay Shirky, "Why Abundance is Good: A Reply to Nick Carr," *Britannica Blog*, July 2008, <http://www.britannica.com/blogs/2008/07/why-abundance-is-good-a-reply-to-nick-carr/>.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, *The Phaedrus and Letters VII and VII* (New York, New York: Penguin, 1973), 96.

<sup>5</sup> The Edge Annual Question 2010: How Is the Internet Changing How You Think?, [http://www.edge.org/q2010/q10\\_index.html](http://www.edge.org/q2010/q10_index.html).

<sup>6</sup> Larry Sanger, "Is there a New Geek anti-Intellectualism?" June 6, 2011, <http://larrysanger.org/2011/06/is-there-a-new-geek-anti-intellectualism/>.

<sup>7</sup> Larry Sanger, "Geek anti-Intellectualism Replies." June 8, 2011. <http://larrysanger.org/2011/06/geek-anti-intellectualism-replies/>.

<sup>8</sup> Apocryphal quote attributed to William Hazlitt.