

Review: what should reviews do in an online journal? Towards a New Format

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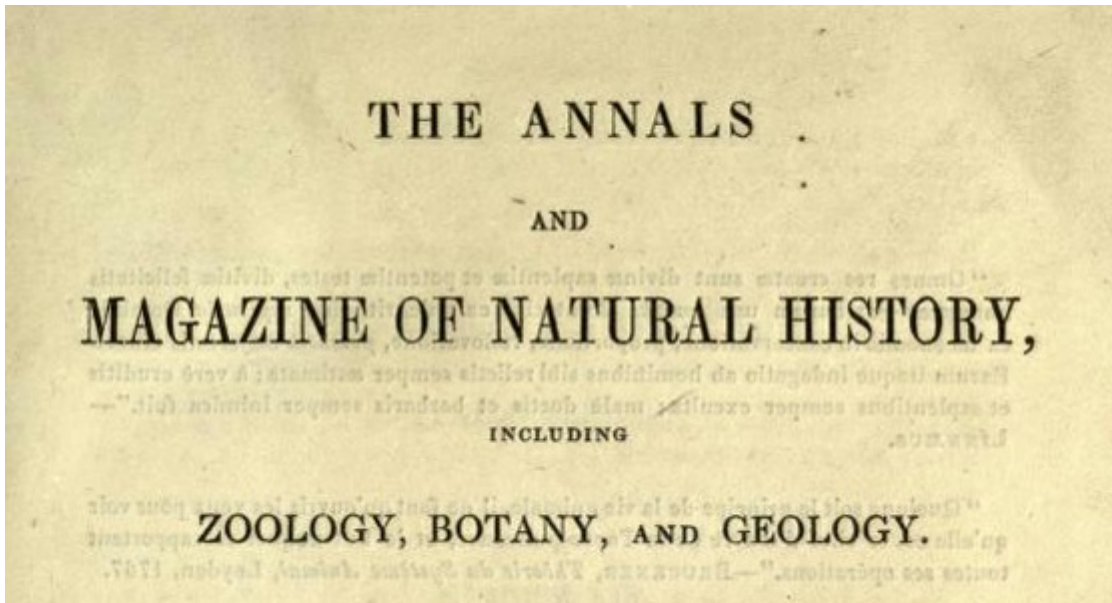
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Introduction

Shortly after I began my career as a PhD student, I became fascinated by the technologies and media formats we have used to create and communicate research. I started this career by looking at photography, but it also brought me into discussions about the nature of scientific publishing formats in the nineteenth century.

Figure 1

THE ANNALS
AND
MAGAZINE OF NATURAL HISTORY,
INCLUDING
ZOOLOGY, BOTANY, AND GEOLOGY.

(BEING A CONTINUATION OF THE 'ANNALS' COMBINED WITH LOUDON AND CHARLESWORTH'S 'MAGAZINE OF NATURAL HISTORY'.)

CONDUCTED BY

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HODGES AND SMITH, DUBLIN: AND ASHER, BERLIN.

1859.

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Title page, *The Annals and Magazine of Natural History*, Volume 4, published by Taylor and Francis, 1859

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Since joining the Science Museum Group this summer (2017), I have been able to come back to these two areas, but on slightly different tacks: my focus on photographs is much more object based than it has been previously, and my interest in publication formats is much more practice based. This latter interest has been spurred by the opportunity to work with the *Science Museum Group Journal*, for which I have recently been appointed as Reviews Editor. I am particularly interested in how we might be able to address the issues of 'generous scholarship' that Justin Dillion has pointed to in his Editorial for this issue, not just in the content of the *Journal* but as a central question in framing the open-access nature of the *Journal* itself.

In the context of this online journal, with a remit for 'generous scholarship', what, then, is the function of a review section for academic discourse? For the traditional humanities research journal, especially those that emerged during the first half of the twentieth century, a review section has been the space for subject specialists to critically comment on new works in their fields of expertise. Typically, reviews have meant book reviews, and have increasingly become more rigid in their content and structure. Reviewers, hedged in by their word length, tend to be limited in what can be said about the content and contribution of a book to a field of knowledge. While there are certainly different variations which allow for greater depth of discussion, such as the long book review offered in journals such as *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, the format tends to remain the same – single authored text which situates a book within a field of knowledge, placed at the end of a series of original research articles that make up the main content of a printed journal issue.

This format, however, is only the most recent iteration of the review. If you look at nineteenth-century journals such as the *Quarterly Review* or the meta-review format defined by the *Review of Reviews*, the entire content and purpose of some journals has been to create article-length reviews of cultural events or fictional and scientific literature. Early scientific publications, such as *The Annals and Magazine of Natural History*, also incorporated review sections within their pages, but opened the content of their reviews quite broadly to include book, scientific societies, public meetings and foreign news.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTICES.

Reports of Explorations and Surveys to ascertain the most practicable and Economical Route for a Railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, made under the Direction of the Secretary of War in 1853-6. Vol. x. Washington, 1859. 4to.

WE have already on two occasions noticed the work of which the present volume forms a part, as containing large and valuable contributions towards our knowledge of the Fauna and Flora of North America, and we have explained the circumstances which led to its production. The 10th volume, which has now been received, contains the 3rd and 4th Parts of the General Report upon the Zoology, and the separate Reports of several of the different Expeditions upon the same subject. Of the General Report upon the Reptiles of North America we are forced to content ourselves with the plates only, the War Department having "considered it advisable to omit the publication" of this portion of the work on account of "the General Natural History Reports having been extended so much beyond the limits originally contemplated." We do not thank the War Office for this. After bearing the burden of the nine thick quarto volumes already issued, it was hardly worth while to kick at the few sheets of letter-press necessary for the General Report on Reptiles, for which the plates had been already prepared. We fear, after all, that the Government at Washington have not quite liberated themselves from the penny-wise and pound-foolish system which prevails in relation to scientific undertakings on this side of the Atlantic. However, the plates, of themselves, will be of great assistance to those who are attempting to follow Messrs. Baird and Girard into the numerous new genera and species which they have created amongst the American animals of this class, and may, we hope, convince European naturalists of the validity of these new subdivisions, concerning which at present they seem to be rather incredulous*.

The General Report on the Fishes collected by the Expeditions, of which the War Department have favoured us with the letter-press as well as the plates, next follows. It is from the pen of Dr. Charles Girard, and, in our opinion, contrasts rather unfavourably with those upon the Mammals and Birds, already issued. The subdivision of genera is here carried to an almost incredible extent; the numerous supposed new species are but shortly and imperfectly characterized; and the whole execution, particularly from the misprints being glaring and numerous, bears evident marks of haste. For all that, such a general *résumé* of the present state of our knowledge of this class of animals, as found in the North American continent, cannot be otherwise than an important work, and one that the ichthyologists of Europe will do well to make themselves well acquainted with.

* See 'Catalogue of Colubrine Snakes in the Collection of the British Museum,' by Dr. A. Günther (London, 1858), and the same author's remarks in *Proc. Zool. Soc.* 1858, p. 385.

The emerging scientific journal *Nature* inherited this format from journals like the *Annals and Mag.*, offering a reviews section and a place for printing the correspondence of readers at the end of each issue. The legacy of this has informed the structure of the academic humanities journal: while we have done away with a correspondence section, reviews have been codified as the content to follow the primary work of the journal – to publish new, and original research.

However, now that the online journal is freed from the constraints of the printing industry, we are also free to redefine the parameters of the journal itself. *The Science Museum Group Journal* has already been working to redefine its remit: original research articles are no longer the singular content of the *Journal*, and we have opened this digital space to include original contributions by practitioners who can share their knowledge on the processes of museum curation, conservation and exhibition making. While the content of our journal has been driven by research which has come out of the Science Museum Group, we are not just interested in our own work and authorship. Academic discourse can only succeed when there are multiple voices and stake holders. The goal of the *Journal* is therefore to be a space for museum professionals, international scholars and practitioners to develop open, but rigorously grounded, conversations.

The question thus remains: what do we want the content of a review section to be when the horizons and sources of historical content are broadening, and the constraints of the format are open? The remainder of this article will suggest a number of opportunities for the future of the review section for this journal. We want to hear your opinions on what the shape and content of this section should be.

Opening the constraints of the format – who should create content?

Before we can consider what we want to include in the new review section, we need to think about how the content is created, curated and accessed. Do reviews need strict editorial control? Can we have new dynamics of content creation?

Public space to suggest what should be reviewed

Do we want to have an open section where any member of the public can suggest something to be reviewed? What should the mechanism for getting a review supported by the *Journal* be – number of votes, relevance of topic, editorial selection, etc.?

Multi-authored reviews

Should reviews which are inter or multi-disciplinary have more than one expert reviewer? Should this be encouraged as a working practice for reviews in general, or only on a case-by-case basis? Would multi-authors be optimal where there are several opinions surrounding the content that is being reviewed?

Expertise of the reviewer

In the context of a multi-disciplinary review section that incorporates practitioners and academics from different disciplines, what kind of reviewer expertise is desired by the readers? How important is the qualification/experience/scholarship of the author to readers of the review? Double-blind peer review is used for *Journal* articles to ensure a high standard of research, but do we want the review section to be more open? Or do we want reviews to be placed under the same scrutiny?

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Types of review content

The potential for creating new forms of review content means that we have an opportunity to make reviews and the processing of reviewing more relevant to academic discourse. It also has the potential to change the forms of knowledge that are

considered relevant to humanities research. What new content, then, do we want?

Book reviews

Are book reviews still useful for humanities researchers, and if so do we need to change anything in the structure of the review to make it more relevant?

Reviews of article special issues

Traditional book reviews tend to cover single and multiple authored monographs and edited volumes. However, the special issue, which presents a group of articles produced under a single theme, is becoming more common. Do we want reviews of these special issues and should they look similar to a review of an edited volume?

Museum reviews

Museums are an essential site for the conservation, curation and engagement of objects of cultural heritage, and are increasingly becoming essential collections and partners for humanities research. Would reviews of museums be useful in this context? How should they differ from exhibition reviews? Should they focus on how effectively a museum upholds its aims and objectives, or should they reflect a visitor's experience? Or, should the focus be on new movements in museums, such as engagement or participation metrics, or experiments in innovative display?

Exhibition reviews

Museum exhibitions tend to be temporary and typically do not include a permanent record of the content and vision of the exhibition once it is no longer on display. Can exhibition reviews record and evaluate the value of an exhibition to both research and public cultures? Should non-traditional forms of review be possible – such as audio, video or image based reviews? Considering that online publications have the unique advantage over traditional publishing in their ability to show high resolution images, video and audio, should this be a focus of the *Journal's* review section?

Digital resource reviews

New digital resources and tools for research are being established on a regular basis. Would informed reviews of these websites and tools be useful? What kind of information would be useful as part of the review – ease of interface, applicability of the resource to a range of disciplines, or critiques of digital resources more broadly? What kind of experience is necessary to be an expert reviewer of this content?

Workshop or conference reviews

Academic conferences and workshops are important sites for the communication and discussion of humanities based research – and act as important markers for subject specific communities. The content of these conferences, however, is rarely recorded. Would reviews of conferences and workshops be useful? Should they focus on the specific presentations which have the potential to be ground-breaking? Or should the review reflect more generally on the value of the event to the discipline?

Public event reviews

In a similar fashion to workshops and conferences, public events (such as science festivals or large public lectures) are becoming regular aspects of research engagement, the outcomes of which are rarely recorded. Would reviews of these events be useful? How should they differ from workshop or conference reviews? Should the review focus on the content a particular event communicated, or the relevance of the impact of the event to public audiences?

Television and radio programmes

Public programming based on historical research and performed by research experts is becoming an essential tool for public communication. Would it be useful to have reviews of some television and radio programmes which reflect humanities topics? Should these reviews reflect only new programming, or should they be open to past programming? What should the content of the review reflect?

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Co-creating our new format

In the spirit of our nineteenth-century periodical predecessors, we would like to offer a useful space for the reproduction and communication of content relevant to our readers. And we would like to do this in a way that fosters open-ended debate. This editorial is intended as a starting point, but we need the input of our reading communities to decide what the forms and functions of this section will be in the new contexts of the digital age. We are offering the forum; it is now up to you to help us define the format.

How to carry on the conversation

There are two options to express your thoughts about the content and shape of this review section:

1. Write to reviews@sciencemuseum.ac.uk
2. Discuss via the twitter handle @ResearchSMG

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

ALL communications for the Editor should be addressed to No. 192, Piccadilly, W. To avoid disappointment, contributions should be received on or before the 15th of each month. No notice can be taken of anonymous communications. All notes, queries, or articles for insertion, must be guaranteed by the name and address of the writer, which may be withheld from publication if so desired.

QUERIES.—Having been inundated with questions, we are compelled to announce that we cannot undertake to answer those of which the querist might satisfy himself by an appeal to any elementary book on the subject. We are always prepared to accept queries of a critical nature, and to publish the replies, provided some of our readers, beside the querist, are likely to take an interest in them.

We cannot undertake to return "rejected addresses."

A. G. R.—Your red fungus on Judas tree is *Tubercularia vulgaris*.

J. S.—Scarcely so thin as it should have been.

W. A. L. is thanked for his offer, but we receive "Hedwigia" regularly.

K. D.—Your shells are those of *Littorina obtusata*, the *Turbo obtusatus* of Linnaeus, and *Littorina littoralis* of Forbes and Hanley. R. T.

R. A.—Your black Staghorn fungus from decayed timber is *Xylaria hypoxylon*, very common.

W. B. MAXFIELD would exchange thin, unmounted sections of turtle bone for human or ostrich bone, or any kind of sponge spicules.—Address, Stone, Staffordshire.

APHIDES.—Mounted specimens of Aphides will be sent to such applicants as will pay postage for them, by addressing to Discipulus, School-house, Mulbarton, Norwich.

E. C. and C. B. C.—We do not comprehend your queries.

E. G. (Grasmere) sends us an abnormal form of inflorescence of *Genoa rivale* (Water avens), in which a "flower is disposed in a whorl about the stem, two inches below the terminal one." It has been forwarded to the herbarium of the Society of Amateur Botanists.

M. W.—The Micrographic Dictionary is published by Van Voorst (London), at 45s.

G. T. P.—We cannot insert such a list as you send, and can only announce that you wish to exchange Lepidoptera.—Address, 8, Clare Hill, Huddersfield.

VALLISNERIA SPIRALIS.—H. J. B. offers fragments of this plant, as well as Desmids from an aquarium, to correspondents.—44, Camberwell Road, London.

TESTACELLA MANGEL.—A few shells of this mollusk are offered in exchange for those of *Testacella Haliotidea*, var. *Scutulum*; or any of the foreign *Parvacella*.—Address, E. C., 7, Eidon Villa, Redland, Bristol.

H. J. B.—Mosses may be found almost anywhere. What species do you want locality for?

O. I. T. corrects an error at page 286 (1865). For *Althoa cerea* read *Althoa cereus*.

K. D.—What is "Crap," of which you inquire?

E. G.—The yellow fungus on bramble leaf is *Leocythia ruborum*, which generally precedes or accompanies the brand.

W. Ross.—Not a vegetable production at all.

H. B.—Cuthill's treatise on the mushroom will give you the information you solicit. A dark cellar is *not* essential. The soil moist, *not* wet.

H. H.—*Tetraphis pellucida* is not considered rare.

R. H. wishes to exchange land and fresh water shells for marine or others.—26, Swine Market, Halifax.

BOTANICAL BIBLIOGRAPHY.—"Pritzl's Thesaurus," published on the Continent, may doubtless be obtained through some foreign bookseller—Williams & Norgate, Asher & Co., or Bailiere. It is the most complete Bibliography of the Science published. A list of many of the works published since was continued until lately in the "Natural History Review."

W. W.—We are not supposed to know anything of those who advertise in our "Gossip" beyond their advertisements.

I. K.—Long lists of desiderata and exchanges must be inserted as advertisements.

M. A.—We expect that "British Reptiles" will really come in with the new year, and that you will be able to obtain it on application to the Publisher, at 192, Piccadilly.

R. O.—The dried specimens of fungi to which you allude may be had at the office of this journal. There are examples of 100 species, and the price is one guinea.

L. L.—We regret that your specimens were not named for you; but suppose that either they were too many, or in an imperfect state. It is possible that they may have been mislaid; but we have no recollection of the circumstances.

J. S.—The only work, of which we have any knowledge, on the parasites of birds and animals (*Asoplenia*) is "Denay's Monograph," published by H. G. Belin, of Covent Garden.

A. T.—We purpose devoting some space during the current year to fresh-water fish, with illustrations which will probably answer your purpose.

S. J. P.—We cannot attempt to answer queries on any other subject than Natural History.

R. A. C.—If you wish to make any progress in the study of plants, you had better do what you purpose thoroughly. There is no science without technicalities.

COMMUNICATIONS RECEIVED.—A. H.—L. S.—E. T. S.—L. L. C.—W. W. S.—O. I. T.—J. R. E.—E. C. Y.—W. A. L. R. H.—L. G. M.—J. A.—J. S.—A. G. R.—H. W. N.—T. S.—W. W.—W. F. S.—R. A.—D. P. A.—J. S.—W. Ross.—K. D.—E. A.—W. S.—H. B.—E. C.—T. P.—H. W. (Oxford).—G. T. P.—H. H.—M. W.—B. H.—J. E. Y.—J. A., Jun.—C. B. C.—G. S.—H. J. B.—H. U.—Prof. BERNARDIN.—J. W.—E. G.—A. N.—R. H.—M. A.—I. K.—S. W.—R. O.—W. A. S.—Annæ.—L. L.—M. A. P.—G. O.—R. A. C.—W. B.—S. S. T.—W. W.—J. S.—S. J. P.

CORRESPONDENTS will please to append their own names, or initials, to their communications, which may be withheld from publication if desired; but no notice whatever can be taken of anonymous contributions.

BOOKS RECEIVED.

"The World before the Deluge." By Louis Figuler. (Translated from the Fourth French Edition; pp. 448, 8vo., illustrated.) London, Chapman and Hall, 1865.

"The Book of the Pike." By H. Cholmondeley-Pennell. London, Robert Hardwicke, 1865.

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Geoffrey Belknap is the Curator of Photography and Photographic Technology at the National Science and Media Museum. He is a historian of Victorian science, visual culture and periodical history