Introduction: Obsolescence

The old stuff gets broken faster than the new stuff is put in its place.
—Clay Shirky, “Newspapers and Thinking the Unthinkable”

In many cases, traditions last not because they are excellent, but because influential people are averse to change and because of the sheer burdens of transition to a better state.
—Cass Sunstein, Infotopia

The text you are now reading, whether on a screen in draft form or in its final, printed version, began its gestation some years ago in a series of explorations into the notion of obsolescence, which culminated in my being asked to address the term as part of the workshop “Keywords for a Digital Profession,” organized by the Committee on the Status of Graduate Students at the December 2007 Modern Language Association (MLA) convention in Chicago. However jaded and dispiriting the grad students’ choice of “obsolescence” as a keyword describing their own futures might appear, the decision to assign me this keyword was entirely appropriate. My work has circled the notion of obsolescence for quite a while, focusing on the concept as a catch-all for multiple cultural conditions, each of which demands different kinds of analysis and response. As I said at the MLA workshop, we too often fall into a conventional association of obsolescence with the death of this or that cultural form, a linkage that needs to be broken, or at least complicated, if the academy is going to take full stock of its role in contemporary culture and its means of producing and disseminating knowledge. For instance, the obsolescence that I focused on in my first book, The Anxiety of Obsolescence: The American Novel in the Age of Television, is not, or at least not primarily, material in nature; after all, neither the novel in particular, nor the book more broadly, nor print in general is “dead.” My argument in The Anxiety of Obsolescence is, rather, that claims about the obsolescence of cultural forms often say more about those doing the claiming than they do about the object
of the claim. In fact, agonized claims of the death of technologies like print and genres like the novel sometimes function to re-create an elite cadre of cultural producers and consumers, ostensibly operating on the margins of contemporary culture and profiting from their claims of marginality by creating a sense that their values, once part of a utopian mainstream and now apparently waning, must be protected. One might here think of the oft-cited reports published by the National Endowment for the Arts, *Reading at Risk* (2004) and *To Read or Not to Read* (2007). Each of these reports, like numerous other such expressions of anxiety about the ostensible decline of reading (a decline that comes to seem inevitable, of course, given the narrowness with which “reading” is defined: book-length printed and bound fiction and poetry consumed solely for pleasure), works rhetorically to create a kind of cultural wildlife preserve within which the apparently obsolete can flourish.¹ My argument in *The Anxiety of Obsolescence* thus suggests that obsolescence may be, in this case at least, less a material state than a political project aimed at intervening in contemporary public life, perhaps with the intent of shoring up a waning cultural hierarchy.

I’m beginning this new project by discussing my last project in no small part because of what happened once the manuscript was finished. Naively, I’d assumed that publishing a book that makes the argument that the book isn’t dead wouldn’t be hard, that publishers might have some stake in ensuring that such an argument got into circulation. What I hadn’t counted on, though, as I revised the manuscript prior to submitting it for review, was the effect that the state of the economy would have on my ability to get that argument into print. In December 2003, almost exactly seventy-two hours after I’d found out that my college’s cabinet had taken its final vote to grant me tenure, I received an email message from the editor of the scholarly press that had had the manuscript under review for the previous ten months. The news was not good: the press was declining to publish the book. The note, as encouraging as a rejection can ever be, stressed that in so far as fault could be attributed, it lay not with the manuscript but with the climate; the press had received two enthusiastically positive reader’s reports, and the editor was supportive of the project. The marketing department, however, overruled him on the editorial board, declaring that the book posed “too much financial risk . . . to pursue in the current economy.”

This particular cause for rejection prompted two immediate responses, one of which was most clearly articulated by my mother, who said, “They were planning on making money off of your book?” The fact is, they were—not much, perhaps, but that the press involved needed the book to make
money, at least enough to return its costs, and that it doubted it would, highlights one of the most significant problems facing academic publishing today: an insupportable economic model.

To backtrack for a second: that there is a problem in the first place is something about which I hope, by this point, anyone reading this doesn't really need to be convinced; “crisis in scholarly publishing” has become one of the most-heard phrases in certain kinds of academic discussions, and organizations including the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), publishers such as Lindsay Waters and Bill Germano, scholars including Cathy Davidson and John Willinsky, and, perhaps most famously, past MLA president Stephen Greenblatt have been warning us for years that something’s got to give. So of course the evidence for this crisis, and for the financial issues that rest at its heart, extends far beyond my own individual, anecdotal case.

Though the notion of a crisis in scholarly publishing came into common circulation well over a decade ago (see, e.g., Thatcher 1995), the situation suddenly got much, much worse after the first dot-com bubble burst in 2000. During this dramatic downturn in the stock market, when numerous university endowments went into free fall—a moment that, in retrospect, seems like mere foreshadowing—university presses and university libraries were among the academic units whose budgets took the hardest hits. And the cuts in funding for libraries represented a further budget cut for presses, as numerous libraries, already straining under the exponentially rising cost of journals, especially in the sciences, managed the cutbacks by reducing the number of monographs they purchased. The result for library users was perhaps only a slightly longer wait to obtain any book they needed, as libraries increasingly turned to consortial arrangements for collection-sharing, but the result for presses was devastating. Imagine: for a university press of the caliber of, say, Harvard’s, the expectation for decades had been that they could count on every library in the University of California system buying a copy of each title they published. Since 2000, however, the rule was increasingly that one library in the system would buy that title. And the same has happened with every such system around the country, such that, as Jennifer Crewe (2004, 27) noted, sales of monographs to libraries were less than one-third of what they had been two decades before—and they’ve continued to drop since then. So library cutbacks have resulted in vastly reduced sales for university presses, at precisely the moment when severe reductions in the percentage of university press budgets subsidized by their institutions have made those presses dependent on income from sales for their survival. (The
average university press, as we’ll see, receives well under 10 percent of its
annual budget from its institution. We can only imagine what will happen to
that figure in the current economic climate.) The results, of course, are that
many presses have reduced the number of titles that they publish, and that
marketing concerns have come at times, and of necessity, to outweigh scholar-
ly merit in making publication decisions.

Despite the fact that *The Anxiety of Obsolescence* was finally published—
by a smaller press with more modest sales expectations—my experience of
the crisis in academic publishing led me to begin rethinking my argument
about the continued viability of the book as a form. Perhaps there is a par-
ticular type of book, the scholarly monograph—or, even more specifically
(given that marketing departments prefer known quantities), the first scholar-
ly monograph—that is indeed threatened with obsolescence. Even so, this
is not to say that the monograph is “dead.” Even first books are still pub-
lished, after all, if not quite in the numbers they might need to be in order
to satisfy all our hiring and tenure requirements, and they still sell, if not
exactly in the numbers required to support the presses that put them out.
The scholarly press book is, however, in a curious state, one that might use-
fully trouble our associations of obsolescence with the “death” of this or that
cultural form, for while it is no longer a viable mode of communication, it is,
in many fields, still required in order to get tenure. If anything, the scholarly
monograph isn’t dead; it is undead.

The suggestion that one particular type of book might be thought of as
undead indicates that we need to rethink, in a broad sense, the relationship
between old media and new, and ask what that relationship bodes for the
academy. If this traditional mode of academic publishing is not dead, but
undead—again, not viable, but still required—how should we approach our
work and the publishing systems that bring it into being? There’s a real ques-
tion to be asked about how far we want to carry this metaphor; the sugges-
tion that contemporary academic publishing is governed by a kind of zombie
logic, for instance, might be read as indicating that these old forms refuse
to stay put in their graves, but instead walk the earth, rotting and putres-
cent, wholly devoid of consciousness, eating the brains of the living and sus-
ceptible to nothing but decapitation—and this might seem a bit of an over-
response. On the other hand, it’s worth considering the extensive scholarship
in media studies on the figure of the zombie, which is often understood to
act as a stand-in for the narcotized subject of capitalism, particularly at those
moments when capitalism’s contradictions become most apparent. And, of
course, there’s been a serious recent uptick in broad cultural interest in zom-
bies, perhaps exemplified by the spring 2009 release of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. If there is a relationship between the zombie and the subject of late capitalism, the cultural anxiety that figure marks is currently, with reason, off the charts—and not least within the academy, as we not only find our ways of communicating increasingly threatened with a sort of death-in-life, but also find our livelihoods themselves decreasingly lively, as the liberal arts are overtaken by the teaching of supposedly more pragmatic fields, as tenure-track faculty lines are rapidly being replaced with more contingent forms of labor, and as too many newly-minted Ph.D.s find themselves without the job opportunities they need to survive. The relationship between the zombie status of the scholarly book and the perilous state of the profession isn’t causal, but nor is it unrelated, and until we develop the individual and institutional will to transform our ways of communicating, we’re unlikely to be able to transform our broader ways of working.

Just to be clear: I am not suggesting that the future survival of the academy requires us to put academic publishing safely in its grave. I’m not being wholly facetious either, though, as I do want to indicate that certain aspects of the academic publishing process are neither quite as alive as we’d like them to be, nor quite as dead as might be most convenient. If the monograph were genuinely dead, we’d be forced to find other forms in which to publish. And if the book were simply outmoded by newer, shinier publishing technologies, we could probably get along fine with the undead of academic publishing, as studies of forms like radio and the vinyl LP indicate that obsolete media have always had curious afterlives. There are important differences between those cases and that of academic publishing, however: we don’t yet have a good replacement for the scholarly monograph, nor do we seem particularly inclined to allow the book to become a “niche” technology within humanities discourse. It’s thus important for us to consider the work that the book is and isn’t doing for us; the ways that it remains vibrant and vital; and the ways that it has become undead, haunting the living from beyond the grave.

A few distinctions are necessary. The obsolescence faced by the first academic book is not primarily material, any more than is the putative obsolescence of the novel; a radical shift to all-digital delivery would by itself do nothing to revive the form. However much I will insist in what follows that we in the humanities must move beyond our singular focus on ink-on-paper to understand and take advantage of pixels-on-screens, the form of print still functions perfectly well, and numerous studies have indicated that a simple move to electronic distribution within the current system of academic publishing will not be enough to bail out the system, as printing, storing, and
distributing the material form of the book represent only a fraction of its current production costs (see Crewe 2004). In fact, as many have pointed out, digital forms may be more prone to a material obsolescence than is print. Consider, for instance, the obsolescence one encounters in attempting to read classic hypertext fiction such as Michael Joyce’s *Afternoon* (1987/90) on a Mac these days: Apple fully retired its support for “Classic” mode with the advent, on the hardware side, of Intel-based processors that can’t boot into OS 9, and on the software side, the release of OS 10.5, which eliminated Classic support for PowerPC machines as well. Couple this forward march of technology with the fact that Eastgate, the publisher of many of the most important first-generation hypertexts, has after more than eight years still failed to release those texts in OS X-native editions. Technologies move on, and technological formats degrade, posing a set of dangers to digital textual futures that the Electronic Literature Organization has been working to bring into public view, both through its “acid-free bits” campaign and through its more recent work with the Library of Congress to archive digital literary texts (see, e.g., Liu et al. 2005; Montfort and Wardrip-Fruin 2004). Without such active work to preserve electronic texts, and without the ongoing interest of and commitment by publishers, many digital texts face an obsolescence that is not at all theoretical, but very material.

As I discuss in chapter 4, however, the apparent ephemerality of digital text in fact masks unexpected persistences. Let me point, by way of example, to my more than nine-year-old blog, which I named *Planned Obsolescence* as a tongue-in-cheek jab at the fact that I’d just finished what seemed to be a long-term, durable project, the book, and was left with the detritus of many smaller ideas that demanded a kind of immediacy and yet seemed destined to fade into nothingness. The blog is the perfect vehicle for such ephemera, as each post scrolls down the front page and off into the archives—and yet, the apparent ephemerality of the blog post bears within it a surprising durability, thanks both to the technologies of searching, filtering, and archiving that have developed across the web, as well as to the network of blog conversations that keep the archives in play. Blogs do die, often when their authors stop posting, sometimes when they’re deleted. But even when apparently dead, a blog persists, in archives and caches, and accretes life around it, whether in the form of human visitors, drawn in by Google searches or links from other blogs, or spam bots, attracted like vermin to the apparently abandoned structure. A form of obsolescence may be engineered into a blog’s architecture, but this ephemerality is misleading; the ways that we interact with blogs within networked environments keep them alive long after they’ve apparently died.
I want to hold up alongside the blog’s persistent ephemerality the state of the scholarly monograph, which I’d argue faces an obsolescence that is primarily institutional, arising from the environment in which it is produced. If, after all, there’s something obsolete about the book, it’s not its content; despite my general agreement with calls to decenter the book as the “gold standard” for tenure and place greater value on the publication of articles, there’s a kind of large-scale synthetic work done in the form of the book that’s still important to the development of scholarly thought. Nor is the problem the book’s form; the pages still turn just fine. What has ceased to function in the first academic book is the system surrounding its production and dissemination, the process through which the book comes into being, is distributed, and interacts with its readers. I mentioned earlier that the message I’d received from that press, declining my book on financial grounds, produced two immediate responses. The first was my mother’s bewildered disbelief; the second came from my colleague Matt Kirschenbaum, who left a comment on Planned Obsolescence saying that he did not understand why I couldn’t simply take the manuscript and the two positive readers’ reports and put the whole thing online—voilà: peer-reviewed publication—where it would likely garner a readership both wider and larger than the same manuscript in print would. “In fact I completely understand why that’s not realistic,” he went on to say, “and I’m not seriously advocating it. Nor am I suggesting that we all become our own online publishers, at least not unless that’s part of a continuum of different options. But the point is, the system’s broken and it’s time we got busy fixing it. What ought to count is peer review and scholarly merit, not the physical form in which the text is ultimately delivered” (Kirschenbaum 2003).

This exchange with Matt, and a number of other conversations that I had in the ensuing months, convinced me to stop thinking about scholarly publishing as a system that would simply bring my work into being, and instead approach it as the object of that work, thinking seriously about both the institutional models and the material forms through which scholarship might best circulate. I began, in early 2004, to discuss in a fairly vague way what it would take to found an all-electronic community-run scholarly press, but it took a while for anything more concrete to emerge. What got things started was a December 2005 report by the online journal Inside Higher Ed on the work that had been done to that point by an MLA task force on the evaluation of scholarship for tenure and promotion, and on the multiple recommendations thus far made by the panel. At the request of the editors of The Valve, a widely read literary studies–focused blog, I wrote a lengthy con-
consideration of the recommendations made by this panel, and extended one of those recommendations to reflect one possible future, in the hopes of opening up a larger conversation about where academic publishing ought to go, and how we might best take it there.

Many of the recommendations put forward by the MLA task force (expanded in the task force’s final report; see Modern Language Association of America, December 2006) were long in coming, and many stand to change tenure processes for the better; these include calls for departments

- to clarify the communication of tenure standards to new hires via memorandums of understanding;
- to give serious consideration to articles published by tenure candidates—thus, as I noted, decentering the book as the gold standard of scholarly production—and to communicate that expanded range of acceptable venues for publication to their administrations;
- to set an absolute maximum of six letters from outside evaluators that can be required to substantiate a tenure candidate’s scholarly credentials, to draw those evaluators from comparable institutions rather than more prestigious ones, and to refrain from asking evaluators to make inappropriate judgments about the tenure-worthiness of candidates based on the limited portrait that a dossier presents;

and, perhaps most importantly, at least for my purposes,

- to acknowledge that scholarship of many different varieties is taking place online, and to evaluate that scholarship without media-related bias.

These were extremely important recommendations, but there was a significant degree of “easier said than done” in the responses they received (particularly the last one), and for no small reason: they require a substantive rethinking not simply of the processes through which the academy tenures its faculty, but of the ways those faculty do their work, how they communicate that work, and how that work is read both inside and outside the academy. Those changes cannot simply be technological; they must be both social and institutional. This recognition led me to begin two projects, both aimed at creating the kinds of change I think necessary for the survival of scholarly publishing in the humanities into the twenty-first century.

The first of these is MediaCommons, a field-specific attempt to develop a new kind of scholarly publishing network, which my collaborators and I
have been working on with the support of the Institute for the Future of the Book, a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Digital Start-Up Grant, and the NYU Digital Library Technology Services group. MediaCommons is working to become a setting in which the multiplicity of conversations in and about media studies taking place online can be brought together, through projects like In Syndication, which aggregates a number of the leading blogs in the field. We’re also publishing a range of original projects, the longest-running of which is In Media Res, which asks five scholars a week to comment briefly on some up-to-the-minute media text as a means of opening discussion about the issues it presents for media scholars, students, practitioners, and activists. We hope to foster that discussion as part of a much broader scholarly ecosystem, understanding that the ideas we circulate range in heft from the blog post through the article to the monograph. Those heftier forms are published through MediaCommons Press, a project in which we produce longer texts for open discussion, some of which move through the digital phase on their way to a primary life in print. (For example, we launched an experiment in open peer review in March 2010 on behalf of Shakespeare Quarterly, for a special issue on Shakespeare and New Media.) Other projects are meant to have a primary digital existence, including Nick Mirzoeff’s The New Everyday, an experimental “middle-state” publication. But the chief importance of MediaCommons, as far as I’m concerned, is the network it aims to build among scholars in the field, getting those scholars in communication with one another, discussing and possibly collaborating on their projects. To that end, we’ve built a peer network backbone for the system—Facebook for scholars, if you like. Through this profile system, members can gather the writing they’re doing across the web, as well as citations for offline work, creating a digital portfolio that provides a snapshot of their scholarly identities.

Working on MediaCommons has taught me several things that I mostly knew already, but hadn’t fully internalized: first, any software development project will take far longer than you could possibly predict at the outset; and second, and most important, no matter how slowly such software development projects move, the rate of change within the academy is positively glacial in comparison.

My need to advocate for such change is what led to this project, for although numerous publications in the last few years have argued for the need for new systems and practices in scholarly publishing—to name just two, John Willinsky’s The Access Principle (2006) and Christine Borgman’s Scholarship in the Digital Age (2007)—these arguments too often fail to
account for the fundamentally conservative nature of academic institutions and (the rhetoric of a David Horowitz notwithstanding) the similar conservatism of the academics that comprise them. In the main, we’re extraordinarily resistant to change in our ways of working; it is not without reason that a senior colleague once joked to me that the motto of our institution (one that I think might usefully be extended to the academy as a whole) could well be “We Have Never Done It That Way Before.” As Donald Hall has noted, scholars often resist applying the critical skills that we bring to our subject matter to an examination of “the textuality of our own profession, its scripts, values, biases, and behavioral norms” (Hall 2002, xiv); such self-criticism is a risky endeavor, and those of us who have been privileged enough to succeed within the extant system are often reluctant to bite the hand that feeds us. Changing our technologies, our ways of doing research, and our modes of production and distribution of the results of that research are all crucial to the continued vitality of the academy—and yet none of those changes can come about unless there is first a profound change in the ways that scholars think about their work. Until scholars really believe that publishing on the web is as valuable as publishing in print—and more importantly, until they believe that their institutions believe it, too—few will be willing to risk their careers on a new way of working, with the result that that new way of working will remain marginal and undervalued.

In what follows, then, I focus not just on the technological changes that many believe are necessary to allow academic publishing to flourish into the future, but on the social, intellectual, and institutional changes that are necessary to pave the way for such flourishing. In order for new modes of communication to become broadly accepted within the academy, scholars and their institutions must take a new look at the mission of the university, the goals of scholarly publishing, and the processes through which scholars conduct their work. We must collectively consider what new technologies have to offer us, not just in terms of the cost of publishing or access to publications, but in the ways we research, write, and review.

In chapter 1 I argue that we need to begin with the structures of peer review, not least because of the persistent problem they present for digital scholarship, and the degree to which our values (not to mention our value) as scholars are determined by them. Peer review is at the heart of everything we do—writing, applying for grants, seeking jobs, obtaining promotions. It is, arguably, what makes the academy the academy. However, the current system of peer review is in fact part of what’s broken, of what threatens a vibrant mode of scholarly communication with obsolescence. As I explore in
the next chapter, a rather extraordinary literature is available, mostly in the sciences and social sciences, on the problems with conventional peer review, including its biases and flaws. It also requires an astonishing amount of labor, for which academics can’t currently receive any “credit.” And thus when Kirschenbaum says that “what ought to count is peer review and scholarly merit, not the physical form in which the text is ultimately delivered,” I agree, but at the same time feel quite strongly that the system of peer review as we know it today is flawed, a backchannel conversation taking place between editor and reviewer that too often excludes the author from its benefits, and that too often impedes rather than assists in the circulation of ideas. For that reason, I want to force us to take a closer look at what we mean when we say peer review, and what it is we expect the process to accomplish, in order to make sure that we’re not installing a broken part in a new machine.

A dramatically changed peer-review system such as the one that I propose, however, would require us to think about new structures of authorship. In chapter 2, I argue that a turn from pre-publication review to post-publication review will almost certainly necessitate a parallel turn from thinking about academic publishing as a system focused on the production and dissemination of individual products to imagining it as a system focused more broadly on facilitating the processes of scholarly work, as the time and effort required to maintain a community-oriented, gift-economy-driven system of peer-to-peer review will oblige scholars, much like the developers of large-scale open-source software projects, to place some portion of their emphasis not on their own individual achievements, but rather on finding their self-interest served by the advancement of the community as a whole. This is a utopian ideal, of course, and it largely goes against our training as scholars, particularly within the humanities; what we accomplish, we accomplish alone. (Or, as a commenter on Twitter put it after hearing a talk of mine, “Being helpful is not really part of academic culture.”) As I reconsider authorship within digital networked publishing structures, I argue, using the example of blogs, that what we will need to let go of is not what we have come to understand as the individual voice, but rather the illusion that such a voice is ever fully alone. Roland Barthes, of course, claimed back in 1967 that no text is a single “line of words,” but that each is instead a “multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original: the text is a fabric of quotations” (Barthes 1967/86, 52–53). We have long acknowledged the death of the author—in theory, at least—but have been loath to think about what such a proclamation might mean for our own status as authors, and have certainly been unwilling to part with the lines on the CV that result from publishing.
Digital networks, as structures that facilitate interaction, communication, and interconnection, will require us to think differently about what it is we’re doing as we write. As the example of the blog might suggest, communities best engage with one another around writing that is open rather than closed, in process rather than concluded. If we were to shift our focus in the work we’re doing as authors from the moment of completion, from the self-contained product, to privilege instead the process of writing, discussion, and revision, we’d likely begin to “publish” work—in the sense of making it public in readable form—earlier in its development (at the conference paper stage, for instance) and to remain engaged with those texts much longer after they’ve been released to readers. Although this idea makes many scholars nervous—about getting “scooped,” about getting too much feedback too soon, about letting the messiness of our processes be seen, about the prospect of never being fully “done” with a project—it’s worth considering why we’re doing the work in the first place: to the degree that scholarship is about participating in an exchange of ideas with one’s peers, new networked publishing structures can facilitate that interaction, but will best do so if the discussion is ongoing, always in process.

This foregrounding of conversation, however, will likely also require authors, who are in dialogue with their readers—who are, of course, themselves authors—to relinquish a certain degree of control over their texts, letting go of the illusion that their work springs wholly from their individual intelligence and acknowledging the ways that scholarship, even in fields in which sole authorship is the norm, has always been collaborative. (We resist this, of course; as Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford [2001] have pointed out, no matter how much we claim to value the collective or collaborative, the proof of our profoundly individualistic sense of accomplishment rests in the literally unthinkable nature of the multi-author dissertation.) Sometimes the result of these new conversational publishing practices might be productive coauthoring relationships, but it need not always be so; we may instead need to develop new methods of citation that acknowledge the participation of our peers in the development of our work. Along the way, though, we’ll also need to let go of some of our fixation on the notion of originality in scholarly production, recognizing that, in an environment in which more and more discourse is available, some of the most important work that we can do as scholars may more closely resemble contemporary editorial or curatorial practices, bringing together, highlighting, and remixing significant ideas in existing texts rather than remaining solely focused on the production of more ostensibly original texts. We must find ways for the new modes of
authorship that digital networks will no doubt facilitate—process-focused, collaborative, remix-oriented—to “count” within our systems of valuation and priority.

In the later chapters, I explore a number of other such changes that will be required throughout the entire academic community if such new publishing practices are to take root. Publishers, for instance, will need to think differently about their business models (which may need to focus more on services and less on objects), about their editorial practices (which may require a greater role in developing and shepherding projects), about the structures of texts, about their ownership of copyright, and about their role in facilitating conversation; they’ll also need to think in concert with libraries about archival and preservation practices, ensuring that the texts produced today remain available and accessible tomorrow. Universities, in the broadest sense, will need to rethink the relationship between the library, the university press, the information technology center, and the academic units within the institution, reimagining the funding model under which publishing operates and the institutional purposes that such publishing serves—but also, and crucially, reimagining the relationship between the academic institution and the surrounding culture. As new systems of networked knowledge production become increasingly prevalent and influential online, the university and the scholars who comprise it need to find ways to adapt those systems to our needs, or we will run the risk of becoming increasingly irrelevant to the ways that contemporary culture produces and communicates authority.

In the end, what I am arguing is that we in the humanities, and in the academy more broadly, face what is less a material obsolescence than an institutional one; we are entrenched in systems that no longer serve our needs. But because we are, by and large, our institutions—or rather, because they are us—the greatest challenge we face is not that obsolescence, but our response to it. Like the novelists I studied in my first book, who may feel their cultural centrality threatened by the rise of newer media forms, we can shore up the boundaries between ourselves and the open spaces of intellectual exchange on the Internet; we can extol the virtues of the ways things have always been done; we can bemoan our marginalization in a culture that continues marching forward into the digital future—and in so doing, we can further undermine our influence on the main threads of intellectual discussion in contemporary public life. The crisis we face, after all, does not stop with the book, but rather extends to the valuation of the humanities within the university, and of institutions of higher education within the culture at large. We tend to dismiss the public disdain for our work and our institutions
as a manifestation of the ingrained anti-intellectualism in U.S. culture, and perhaps understandably so, but until we take responsibility for our culture’s sense of our irrelevance, we cannot hope to convince it otherwise. Unless we can find ways to speak with that culture, to demonstrate the vibrancy and the value of the liberal arts, we run the risk of being silenced altogether.

And we will be silenced, unless we can create new ways of speaking both with that culture and among ourselves. We can build institutional supports for the current, undead system of scholarly publishing, and we can watch as the profession itself continues to decline. Or we can work to change the ways we communicate and the systems through which we attribute value to such communication, opening ourselves to the possibility that new modes of publishing might enable, not just more texts, but better texts, not just an evasion of obsolescence, but a new life for scholarship. The point, finally, is not whether any particular technology can provide a viable future for scholarly publishing, but whether we have the institutional will to commit to the development of the systems that will make such technologies viable and keep them that way into the future.