

Digital Travail on the Way to a Dissertation **The Chronicle of Higher Education**

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As the child of two academics, I had a close-up view of life in the ivory tower. I saw the book-strewn desks, the longstanding collegiality, the intellectual satisfactions; I also saw the isolation, the administrative burdens, and the occasional professional backbiting. So when I decided to pursue a Ph.D. myself, I figured I had a pretty good sense of what lay ahead, of both the challenges and the triumphs. Sure, my own field (political science) was a little different from my parents' (classics). But at the end of the day, weren't we all toiling in the same fields of intellectual exploration?

If I'd stuck to the road mapped out for me, maybe we would have been. We could have had long family discussions about Aristotle and Plato: classical versus political interpretations. My parents could have stood proudly offstage as I received my degree -- while they were still young enough to stand.

But I had to go and get all computer-crazed, setting my sights on a dissertation about the politics of the Internet. That unleashed a pile of digital troubles, albeit troubles with clear precedents in analog academe. Problems like trying to win acceptance for a new field of research, finding colleagues who can talk both politics and tech -- not to mention the technical and moral hazards of doing online research, which presents entirely new methodological dilemmas. Forget about the myth of digital technology speeding you up: In academe, the Internet can slow you down.

The whole thing started with a brain wave right out of a Reese's peanut-butter-cup commercial. The summer I started studying for general exams, I was also shopping for a computer. On one side of my desk I had a pile of books about social democracy; on the other side, a pile of computer magazines. One day the two stacks collided, and I found myself wondering: What would Karl Marx have made of the Internet?

I soon discovered that my newfound interest in the politics of the Internet was a tough sell. The biggest problem was techno-skepticism: a general suspicion of both technology and the technologized.

From the beginning of my research, I faced challenges from the techno-skeptics. They were incredulous that I would forego pressing questions about the collapse of postwar social democracy in favor of investigating some freaky technological flash in the pan. That was 1996 -- the Stone Age, in

Internet time. So perhaps it's understandable that the most frequent question I faced was, "What makes you think the Internet is important?"

Hmmm. That was a tough one. Could it be the fact that I was already conducting 90 percent of my communication online? Could it be the rapid embrace of Web, e-mail, and bulletin-board communications by political parties, interest groups, and governments? Could it be that Internet banking, Internet commerce, and Internet entertainment were among our fastest-growing industries?

But in academe, those answers didn't cut it. My department didn't care how I did my banking; they wanted to know whether this technology was of interest to Aristotle, Machiavelli, or de Tocqueville.

That standard is hard to meet when you're talking about the Internet. Take the subject that eventually became my dissertation topic: "hacktivism," the phenomenon of politically motivated computer hacking. I'm going to be honest here: There is almost no mention of hacktivism in *The Prince*. And while some might argue that the hacktivist elite represents the realization of Plato's Guardian class -- well, Plato wasn't the guy making that argument.

So I've had to position myself in relation to scholars of more recent vintage and more limited circulation. (Let's face it: Not many publication records can compare with Plato's.) Even with these relaxed expectations, Internet-oriented scholars are scarcely crawling out of the woodwork.

One of the first technology scholars I read came to my campus not long after I entered the field. I was excited about the prospect of hearing from a kindred spirit. But I didn't have to wait for her presentation to have a meaningful conversation about information technology. When I met her in the library, she asked me for help with the "strange" object attached to the computer terminal -- a mouse, which she was holding in midair.

Since then I've learned to restrain my hopes for tech-minded colleagues. But as the Internet has grown, so has my selection of fellow Internet researchers. That, too, is a mixed blessing. When I first had my epiphany about the political relevance of the Internet, I could count the number of Internet-politics books on the fingers of one hand. Only three years later, the field had spawned a bookcase-worth of publications (I should know -- that's my bookcase).

Foolish me, I felt a pang of regret at the sense that I could have been out there on the vanguard. But then someone comforted me by explaining that I was lucky to be outpaced; now I could "speak to the literature." The possibility of "speaking to the literature" has made it easier for me to win departmental acceptance of my (admittedly wacky) dissertation topic. But now that I'm finally into the dissertation, I've discovered a fresh batch of research challenges.

The biggest problem is that despite the growing list of books on the Internet and politics, very little of my research can be done in the library. By the time a book on the Internet makes it into print, it's out of date. So I spend most of my time doing research online -- where I can easily slip into searching out the latest Bruce Springsteen track, instead of the latest computer hack. And I'm convinced that the most productive period in academic history came between the invention of the word processor and the invention of e-mail.

If I'm easily distracted online, I have only myself to blame. Unfortunately, there's no lack of witnesses to my digital meanderings. Those messages I posted to a musical-theater newsgroup or the Oberlin alumni listserv may come back to haunt me. It's a new twist on an old research challenge: the need to preserve objectivity. And while it affects anyone who uses the Internet, it's especially problematic for those of us researching the Internet community. That's because heavy Internet users are skilled online researchers. What do you do when your research subjects know more about you than you do about them? Academics leave an online trail of evidence of our research questions, predispositions, and experience -- all accessible using an Internet search engine. That has serious implications for research neutrality, as I discovered when one of my interview subjects posted my latest conference paper to his electronic newsletter. That makes it hard to keep control of the research agenda; my interview subjects now frequently frame their responses as rejoinders to my previous research.

But it can also work in your favor, especially when dealing with elusive subjects. After asking someone for an interview, I got this response back: "I have pretty much given up contact with members of the media, aside from the few that I trust. ... However, after reading your 'Digital Disobedience' paper, I am willing to talk to you in relation to your research."

Talking with computer hackers has shown me that suspicion of Internet researchers is by no means confined to academe. Now it's my research subjects who question me, and my advisers who urge me on with their burgeoning curiosity about the world of Internet activists. It's no longer a matter of convincing folks that the Internet is important; it's a matter of keeping up with my committee's volley of e-mails, and my chairman's appetite for hacker anecdotes.

That enthusiasm has allowed me to take the computer chip off my shoulder, and meet my advisers halfway. The epiphany came during a recent political-science conference, when I started hearing scholars in other fields allude to the impact of the Internet. I felt both excited (hey, they've heard about the Net!) and delighted (hey, they're talking to me). This is what intellectual work is all about: serendipitous intellectual intersection. And for the first time I thought: I want people to show up for my presentation and discover that it's relevant to their work, too.

I realized that I had come around to the idea that "speaking to the literature" actually matters. After all these years of work, I want my dissertation to have an audience that's broader than just my fellow gearheads. I want it to be of interest to other political scientists, other academics -- maybe even the occasional classicist.

Because ultimately, the scholarly challenges that unite us are stronger than the technological divide that separates us. Everyone wishes for more colleagues with truly intersecting research interests. Everyone faces challenges to the status of objective observer. Everyone wants more time in the blessed silence of the library, and less in the chaos of the office. If we have that much in common, maybe there's room for Internet research in the ivory tower. As long as the tower has a T1 line.

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