

# The Modal Mode of Thinking About Scholarly Publishing

JEFFERSON POOLEY

**Abstract:** The essay argues that the study of scholarly communication would benefit from attending to a “modal” sensibility—that is, a self-conscious sensitivity to the differences that different mediums make in understanding published works of scholarship. The essay critiques the unreflective textualism that dominates the conversation on publishing. The claim is that the primacy of text, as the sovereign medium of academic communication, is a largely invisible parochialism. The essay points to examples and traditions of multi-modal publishing as an entry point to taking the medium-specificity of publishing formats as an object of analysis. Such experimentation has followed, sometimes closely, the emergence of new mediums of storage and transmission within the societies that scholars work. The mid-twentieth century birth of the modern medium concept made multi-modality a conceivable, self-conscious project. Even so, the discourse on academic publishing has rarely registered the implications, including for inherited text-based formats. The essay concludes with a call for media scholars, curiously underrepresented in the discourse, to take up this task, with reference to pioneering works in the field.

As scholars we are acclimated to the codex: glue-bound stacks of paper (or their digital facsimiles)—paragraphs and sentences and words, arranged in consecutive lines, paginated, and typeset. We adorn these pages with abstracts, headers, and footnotes, and assign them to chapters. We commit our thoughts to ink or pixels—to store and spread to others, accustomed like us to discrete and ordered symbols that, in themselves, look nothing like what they represent. Ours is a typographic world.

We almost never reflect on how strange this is, the whole textual edifice we built and dwell in. None of it is given; all of it is convention. Every one of our specialized bits of apparatus (such as the abstract or footnote or citation) has its own peculiar history, some of it surprisingly recent.<sup>1</sup> What our conventions share is fealty to the written

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1. On abstracts, see, for example, Fyfe (2024); on footnotes, see Grafton (1997); and on citations, see Blair (2010), esp. chap. 5.

word. They are, if anything, enhancements to alphabetic writing systems with their own stories of emergence and evolution.

Whenever and wherever the idea of “scholar” and “scholarship” became legible, the role was braided with writing. Scholars did not invent writing or printing or the typewriter, but we made avid, verbose use of each. Most of us, even the late-arriving natural and physical scientists, live in and among texts.

So pervasive is our textualism that we scarcely notice it. Scholarship just *is* writing. We may study crustaceans or film, but we report what we found in type. Few paint their findings or render them in dance. We mostly spell them out, one letter after another.

Writing is a marvelous medium. The written word is relatively durable and can be copied to safety. It is, depending on the canvas, light and portable too. Given its discrete and morselized character, a collection of letters can be composed, de-composed, and freshly re-composed. In most writing systems, moreover, words have a tendency to typify. They are not tethered by resemblance to any particular referent, so lend themselves to the simplifying abstractions that understanding requires. Thus, words on paper (or screen or vellum) make travel across time, space, and detail possible.<sup>2</sup>

There are, too, the benefits scholars have accreted to the form, the citation above all. We say we make knowledge together, but the *way* we do it is through brief, conventionalized strings that map to other typeset works. Otherwise, there would be no shoulders to stand on. The footnote is another precious gift—an infinite corridor of unlocked side compartments.

So scholars are lucky to have writing. The problem is that we don’t even notice.

Academics and publishers have experimented with textual form for centuries.<sup>3</sup> The recent settling into stable conventions, such as the reference list or the IMRAD journal-article template, has obscured all that ludic dabbling.<sup>4</sup> As a result, more recent acts of formalist dissent come off as radical when they are, instead, the latest chapter in an ongoing history of experimentation.

What *is* novel is the adoption of scholarly modes that add to, or leave behind, all those fixed pages of printed paragraphs. Fluid or hyper-textual or multi-modal formats have flourished in the last 50 years, often borrowing from the art and computer science worlds—with still more ferment since the turn of the millennium.<sup>5</sup> Experimentation has

2. This paragraph is indebted to John Durham Peters’s (2015, chap. 6) love letter to writing.

3. For one set of richly treated examples, see Trettien (2022).

4. On the references list, see, for example, Connors (1998, 39–45); on the adoption of the IMRAD format, see Sollaci and Pereira (2004).

5. On the last quarter of the twentieth century, see Arnold (1995), Hockey (2004), Rieger (2010), and Turner (2013, chap. 8); on more recent experimentation, see Fitzpatrick (2011, chap. 3), Adema (2021, 216–48), and Adema et al. (2022, parts 1–2).

followed, sometimes closely, the emergence of new mediums of storage and transmission within the societies where scholars work. The middle third of the twentieth century was an important register. By then, the onrush of new formats over the preceding century—with scrum-like accumulation—had rendered the notions of “medium” and “media” freshly legible.<sup>6</sup> There were, of course, earlier attempts to deliver scholarship on the screen or over the air. But the mid-twentieth century birth of the modern *medium* concept made multi-modality a conceivable, self-conscious project. We have had a riot of experimentation since then, with galloping momentum in the last three, post-web decades.

The surprising thing is that this riot has barely registered. If it had, the near-monopoly of writing would look more like what it is: a choice, with gains and losses over the alternatives. Instead, most scholars are modal ethnocentrists *and* oblivious to their chauvinism.

The message of multi-modal scholarship is that the medium matters. You can’t unsee medium-specificity when you are working in more than one. The gift of experimental publishing is to expose the *parochialism* of the codex and its descendants—that it is one mode among a host of others. Non-textual works, in particular, force the unreflective textualist to learn that her default way of knowing has (like all mediums) its own refractions.

With a nod to my home discipline of media studies, I call this sensitivity to the differences that different mediums make the *modal mode of thinking*. It is a pity that only rarely has this soft-formalist frame been applied to the study of, and discourse around, scholarly publishing. One reason, perhaps, is that most of that work is itself rendered in print. It’s hard to isolate the significance of letters-in-a-row when your own analysis is also set in fixed lines and pages. So the peculiarity—the sheer contingency—of our collective and long-standing embrace of writing has largely escaped notice.

A partial exception is the history of the book, a field that has attended to form and format in material detail. Scholarly books and other published works, as “scholarly” became a distinction with meaning, have been objects of interest in the field.<sup>7</sup> More recently, a small body of work on the history of the scholarly journal has disrupted the idea that anything like a stable form existed, despite the prevailing seventeenth-century origin story.<sup>8</sup> In a different, more future-oriented key, another small literature, on “experimental” or post-print books, has reflected on their codex-bending implications.<sup>9</sup>

Individual scholars in and around these fields have dug deeper: Johanna Drucker, N. Katherine Hayles, Lisa Gitelman, and Janneke Adema in particular.<sup>10</sup> They are, each of them, media scholars of one kind or another. That is no coincidence, given the

6. On the mid-century settling of the medium concept, see Shechtman (2020, 2021) and Guillory (2010).

7. A pair of recent overviews are Howsam (2015) and Blair et al. (2021).

8. Two recent, superb studies in this vein are Fyfe et al. (2022) and Csiszar (2018).

9. See, for example, Adema (2021) and Adema et al. (2022).

10. See Drucker (2014), Hayles (2021), Gitelman (2014), and Adema (2021).

sensitivity to form that is the field's distinctive trait. Under the loose label "media theory," a contested canon of published writing has made the case that modes, mediums, and formats matter. For roughly 60 years now, media scholars have grappled with a parade of storage, exhibition, and transmission technologies that took successive hold, one after another, starting in the early nineteenth century.

I have already referred to that unrelenting march—of audio and visual and space-conquering forms—that brought the modern sense of "media" and "medium" into existence. Books, newspapers, movies, radio: These were *media* in the new and necessary sense of the word. More kept coming, television in particular, and by the early 1960s, enough pressure had built to end the academy's sometimes-snobbish moratorium on their study—which is to say, media studies. When Marshall McLuhan exchanged his "medium is the message" slogan for celebrity, the formalist die was cast. Few took McLuhan seriously, not least McLuhan himself, and yet a sensitivity to modes and mediums had taken hold.

My claim is that the study of scholarly communication—or, if you prefer, scholarly media—would benefit from that modal sensibility. The discourse around academic publishing is its own complicated, para-academic formation, a sketch of which is beyond the scope of this brief essay. It is enough to say that its main contributors—librarians and library scientists, nonprofit publishing figures, consultants to the outsized for-profit sector, and a smattering of other academics—publish in a mix of trade outlets, as well as academic venues and the rare popular site. The primacy of text, as the sovereign medium of academic publishing, remains invisible.

That should change. And media scholars, curiously underrepresented in the scholarly communication discourse, should light the way. We have one foot outside the Gutenberg galaxy already. But we're also, like all academics, at home and comfortable with the sequential, letterpressed inheritance. We pioneered the video essay and have embraced its audio and podcast-serial counterparts. We have the standing to say that the scholarly message can't be extricated from its medium—a point to be explicated in prose or, better yet, exemplified in form.

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