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Pirate Philosophy:
For a Digital Posthumanities

Gary Hall. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016).

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Reviewed by Justin M. White

“Does the struggle against the neoliberal corporatization of higher education not require us to have the courage to transform radically the material practices and social relations of our lives and labor?” (p. xiii).

Gary Hall’s work aims to explore a “pirate philosophy” for critical humanists that approaches the digital humanities in such a way that they no longer will only consider how open data, digitization, and networked computing affect or define them. Instead, the chapters meander through the ways in which the (post)humanities provide a narrative concerning how information is shared and created that will have a profound impact on their own disciplines as well as the material and conceptual ways our society approaches scholarly communication. While the concept of pirate philosophy is woven throughout the book, the chapters can each stand alone as essays concerning how digital humanities, the book, the scholarly journal, authorship, and copyright affect the practice of academics. Each chapter is a chance for reflection — a chance to reevaluate

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■ **KEYWORDS:** Piracy (Copyright); Academic writing; Humanities-Technological innovation; Communication in learning and scholarship; Scholarly publishing; Open access publishing.

how embedded our “critical” ideas are in the modes of scholarly production, and how those modes and formats affect our understanding of our own labor and our ownership over the knowledge we produce.¹

What exactly is *pirate philosophy*? You may be unsurprised to learn it is not a school of thought, or an application of one to scholarly publication or the humanities, but rather a discussion of the way that academics should approach the materiality of their own work: how we produce it, how we share it, and how we take ownership over it through our conceptualizations of individuality and authority (note the etymologies of “author” and “authority”).² Hall bases his title on the etymology of the term pirate: to make an attempt, to try, to test, to endeavor. Rather than discussing the philosophy of pirate parties, Hall instead asks us to test and challenge our assumptions, and test the existing structures that law, custom, and the academic prestige economy compose against the new forms of culture that the digital landscape allows. Given that definition, it might be worth noting that focusing on the phenomenon of digital piracy and its politics will lead the reader astray. The brilliance of the title may be a bit distracting from the task at hand, but once definitions are covered (extensively in chapters one and five, which are the closest approximations to an introduction and conclusion), the concepts begin to fall in place.

There is no predicting where a pirate philosophy will lead. The people acting on the edges of new institutions (the file sharing and networked communications that break copyright law) can draw only from their own legitimacy to do so (p. 141). How people react to these institutions and their effects, such as the impossibility of enforcing copyright or the benefits of widespread materials, will change the landscape and modes of production. How academics react to new modes of production will in turn affect even the legitimacy of what is currently labeled piracy. To give an example of one change already in wide adoption: the creation of works to be freely shared without copyright via Creative Commons (or in other cases, self-piracy).

This book is a bit heavy on philosophy, which I suspect may strike some library-oriented readers as strange. Librarians aren’t used to seeing issues important to us, such as the future of scholarly communication, put into such an “abstract” framework. This format is required, as philosophical arguments often are, because the materiality of these arguments has not appeared yet. As of yet, there is no concept of a post-human university, or a real collaborative sharing of knowledge that de-centers the individual and focuses on the transmission, manipulation, and addition of knowledge.

There are several specific arguments and analyses laid out concerning forms of production that are currently in place, but might not have the transformative power we imagine. For example, though open software has been very powerful in shaping the way interoperable systems have been developed, it is also vulnerable to cooption by neoliberal forces, using free resources to then enclose

and extinguish open options. This exact approach was taken by Microsoft in its famous Embrace, Extend, Extinguish practice. The same is true of open science and open data: freely distributed material, created often at the public expense, which then serves business interests by cutting research costs. But these concerns are not necessarily the crux of the issue. They merely demonstrate that “openness”, however defined, can play into various interests.

This is not to discount Open Access, but merely to paint it as neutral towards the goal of changing the mode of scholarly production and communication. It presents an opening, as does the refusal of academics to publish in journals that do not meet sufficient standards of openness (p. 135). It allows academics to rethink publishing and the academy as a whole. Some academics have gone as far as to abandon a traditional career in the goal of spreading knowledge for free. One prominent voice in this is the YouTube channel PhilosophyTube, which was created by a former graduate student who wanted to give away his degree in a free and publicly available forum.³

Much in the same way that we haven’t seen a manifestation of Hamelink’s “An alternative to news”,⁴ there is no current infrastructure in place to put some proposed alternative methods of scholarly production into wide use. However, we do see glimmers of the idea, such as the transmission of and addition to news that Twitter tags can supply, or the army of editors and contributors that Wikipedia gathers under its banner. Scholarly blogging has also provided a means for comments to take part in the development of academic writing. These new structures of communication and authorship have become surprisingly mainstream, despite their disruptive potential. It’s the very conservatism of academia that prevents new forms taking hold and radically changing the way in which we do our scholarship.

Chapter five goes into the more practical actions people have taken in the direction of withdrawing their academic labor in such a way that it affects the production of that labor. For instance, Peter Suber’s announcement in 2012 that he would not publish in journals belonging to the Association of American Publishers until they disavowed their support of the Research Works Act, which prohibits Open Access mandates on federally funded research. Hall followed Suber’s example (p. 134).

Pirate Philosophy is a work that reflects the critical tradition of the author and the “struggle” against our own complacency that pirate philosophy evokes and encourages. It also realizes how the critical tradition, particularly as used by the humanities, remains embedded in the norms of the academy, complete with the trappings of traditional, paperbound formats that maintain the prestige economy of academic publishing. It is not a guidebook, but more of a meandering exploration of the topics involved, and not always utilizing the same critical lens. Focusing on particular manifestations of scholarly communication, as I did when approaching this book, will lead to frustration. It is not intended to

give final pronouncements on Creative Commons, or copyleft, or any other system of academic scholarly production. Though this is not a manifesto or handbook for the politically engaged, Hall does bring into focus the necessity of academics really struggling with their position not just in the production of scholarly knowledge, but how to authentically live as human beings. It is a call to action without any explicit rallying cry, except to appeal to the best pirate philosophers within ourselves.

NOTES

- 1 I want to note upfront that because this book is focused around challenging academic assumptions, I will engage directly with you in asynchronous conversation. To pretend there is an authoritative writer whose opinions can be conveyed only in a dispassionate and detached manner is to take part in the same lack of introspection Hall discusses. To get us into the proper mindset for this exercise in self-criticism, I have decided to get this (relatively unimportant) vestige of authoritative tradition out of the way.
- 2 Online Etymology Dictionary. *Authority*. Retrieved from http://etymonline.com/index.php?term=authority&allowed_in_frame=0.
- 3 PhilosophyTube. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/user/thephilosophytube>.
- 4 Hamelink, C. (1976), An alternative to news. *Journal of Communication* 26, 120–123. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1976.tb01947.x