An Interview with Aaron Barlow

by Sean Scanlan

Aaron Barlow is an Associate Professor of English at New York City College of Technology (CUNY) and is currently serving a three-year term as Faculty Editor of *Academe*, the magazine of the American Association of University Professors. He has written extensively on New Media and Film within Cultural Studies contexts. His most recent book is *The Cult of Individualism: A History of an Enduring American Myth*.

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Abstract: Aaron Barlow shares his views with Sean Scanlan on the problems of traditional peer review. Barlow is Faculty Editor of Academe, the magazine of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). According to Barlow, his own views on business-as-usual peer review and academic publishing are becoming more radical the more he studies its issues. His key concepts are openness and change. Fear has the potential to hold back young scholars, but, according to Barlow, the winds have changed so much that people performing tenure review would have to strongly argue against a candidate who breaks new ground in open publishing. Barlow is hopeful about the future and encourages scholars to seek newer publishing formats.

Keywords: peer review, open peer review, AAUP, academic publishing, tenure review

The following is an email interview between Sean Scanlan, the editor of *NANO*, and Aaron Barlow, Faculty Editor of *Academe*, the magazine of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP)

BACKGROUND:
Aaron Barlow's critique of business-as-usual peer review gained some press at a 2012 Modern Language Association conference panel titled "The Future of Peer Review." Scott Jaschik, the editor of insidehighered.com, reported on this panel (full disclosure: *NANO*'s editor, Sean Scanlan, organized and moderated "The Future of Peer Review").

At the conference, Barlow ended his presentation with this salvo: "Blind peer review is dead. It just doesn't know it yet." This quote was widely tweeted and retweeted. After the conference, Barlow gathered more of his thoughts and published them as an article on his blog audsandens. In it he discusses the dishonesty that is part and parcel of how articles pass through the gates of peer review. The current process has many faults, and a quick summary of them would run as follows: it is slow, biased, easily abused, and too much like a lottery. Barlow ends his post by saying that newer journals will survive and thrive if they embrace "openness and digital possibilities and the new sorts of post-publication review."

SEAN SCANLAN: As Faculty Editor of *Academe*, the magazine of the American Association of University Professors, undoubtedly, you know about the problems associated with managing behind-the-curtain operations of a major publication, and, of course, you know about sending articles to journals in a "blind" situation. Has your position mellowed from your belief that traditional "blind peer review is dead"?

AARON BARLOW: No. If anything, I've become more radical. Nobel Laureate Sydney Brenner said recently "peer review is hindering science. In fact, I think it has become a completely corrupt system." I think he is right, and not just in the sciences. Fortunately, entirely new models for academic "publishing" are being developed now. Included are websites devoted to individual scholars and groups, "social media" sites like academia.edu, open access and open source online journals, and much more. Because many traditional academic journals have fallen under the control of tightly managed for-profit corporations or have not opened themselves up to open online sharing, their importance is beginning to fade--the conversations are moving elsewhere. Outside of technical fields where on-going "insider" conversations are quite necessary, there seems little continuing need for the old-fashioned niche journal, especially in the humanities. Few of us await with tingly anticipation the new issue of Pynchon/Wallace Quarterly for we have already followed the relevant conversations online--perhaps even through Twitter.

SS: Your answer seems to have the idea of "change" as its foundation. And it does seem that change is occurring at an increasing speed, but perhaps not at the speed that you would like to see. For example, besides Nature's well-known example, we should include *Kairos* and *Shakespeare Quarterly* as publications that have experimented with new

forms of open peer review—with varying degrees of success. What ideas do you have about issues of access and the world of ideas in the academic world in general?

AB: We don't have to accept limitations to access today; we can take advantage of so many new venues for presentation of scholarship that it is now possible to side-step situations of constriction. As a result, even in print, the importance of the old-style peer-reviewed journal, with all of its associated restrictions, is fading. The blind peer-review model is just too cumbersome, and does not facilitate discussion the way anthologies, for example, do. The editors of anthologies collect essays in response to outreach and their own CFPs, and work with their authors to produce a one-shot publication that has a great deal more flexibility than can be found in most peer-reviewed journals. Personally, it has gotten to the point where I don't bother with those journals at all, but am seeing two or three of my book chapters appear a year, sometimes in response to calls, sometimes in response to editors reaching out to me. As one such editor myself, and doing just that sort of reaching out, I have submitted a two-volume set to my publisher; these articles probably would all have difficulty finding places in traditional journals, but all of which offer a piece to what will be, I hope, a substantial overall contribution to understanding of the anthology's topic. The set turns out to have been more designed by the group of contributors than by me--and it moves in ways that have surprised me and that should prove useful to readers once it appears next year. It is much harder for something like that to happen in a journal, which constrains, rather than stretches, thought. That anthology, *Star Power: The Impact of Branded Celebrity*, will appear from Praeger this August. Another project showing more directly how a different sort of peer review can be put in place, is *The Invasion of the MOOCs: The Promises and Perils of Massive Open Online Courses* which recently appeared through Parlor Press. Edited by Steve Krause and Charles Lowe, it was published less than a year after it was first proposed. This was possible because Krause and Lowe asked all of those they invited to contribute to also serve as an open peer reviewer for two other articles. Not only did this speed up the process, but it allowed for much better review than one normally sees. I know that my contribution gained a great deal from reviewer comments and our subsequent discussions and I suspect the same is true for other contributors.

In addition, anthologies of this sort suit contemporary libraries, I believe, more than do traditional periodicals. Shelved by the Library of Congress system, they encourage use of physical searches in library stacks, searches that can always lead to surprise and serendipitous discovery, leading readers away from dependence on online searches alone. This may sound trivial, but I think it is rather important. Periodical searches (which should be used, too, of course), even in the stacks, don't rest on the same sort of organization ... and the more types of organization available, the more likely that something unexpected but useful may be discovered. In addition, the vetting for libraries is quite different from that for journals. It is based on public reviews, knowledge of publishers and their editorial processes, past performances, and the needs of readers within the particular environment. The librarians may not be specialists in the particular relevant fields, but they are specialists in readership and research, so they make choices as well-founded (if different) as those of peer reviewers. This is important to the role of academics as "public intellectuals," for it broadens audiences from specialists to learners of all sorts and eases pressure from the forces for insularity.

By their very nature, most of the older academic periodicals are inward looking. They "speak" to small groups of people--something, again, necessary within certain specialties, but these are very few. Scholars should always be attempting to broaden their audiences. Even specialists in arcane areas taking years of training just to enter the conversation should be aware of this: After all, Bertrand Russell did not only produce *Principia Mathematica* but *The ABC of Relativity*. All scholars need to be constantly working toward increasing accessibility to their work--even if they are, perforce, also speaking to colleagues in ways outsiders find inaccessible. Returning to scholarly anthologies for a moment, by this token, all anthology chapters should be made available online as well as in print, singly and as a whole (something already true of *The Invasion of the MOOCs,* which is even available for free download on the publisher's website). Individual scholars should be able to present their own chapters on their websites without risking the ire of publishers. This can be important for the scholar, particularly the one looking for tenure or promotion, because it increases the availability of the work and allows the scholar to track not just citations but actual views--and to address audiences far beyond groups of academic specialists.

SS: Since *NANO* is not immune to these ideas and discussions, what advice would you offer to young academics who must navigate the uncharted waters of open-peer review and non-standard, non-blind peer review publications? In particular, many scholars have vested interests in seeing open-source journals become prestigious, but they aren't there yet. Further, these scholars want tenure, but new journals do not carry the same weight as some of the older, more established journals. The adventurous young scholar who goes the open-source, open-review path might not gain promotion and tenure as quickly as the one who focuses on nailing down a few articles in print journals. What is the new scholar to do? And, on the reverse side of this same coin, perhaps you could also provide advice to those who perform tenure review.

AB: Any scholar who manages to break barriers between scholars and the broader public will also likely break through to tenure and promotion. It is fear that holds people back, fear of the establishment in one's field; a public profile is probably the best way of easing such fears. Though it does not always work (witness what happened to Norman Finkelstein and, in Kansas, to David Guth), most public intellectual activity garners respect--even from senior faculty who make the decisions on many of our professional lives. When one's work is clearly taken seriously beyond small academic silos, it is hard for anyone to claim (though some may try) that the work is not worthy. True, there is still a taint to "popularizers" in some academic departments, but this is becoming more and more rare as even very specialized discussions become publicly available (at least in part) and as scholars discover the dangers of ignoring popular debate (dangers most clearly evident in what passes for public debate on climate change). As college administrations are going to back most young scholars with positive public profiles, those performing tenure review are going to have to make sure they can make strong cases in denying tenure. To do this, they are going to have to learn much more than many of them now know about the new possibilities for publication. That act of learning may well change their attitudes. I certainly hope it will!

SS: I think that many readers will applaud your emphasis on the public access of new ideas and on the need of both tenure-seekers and tenure committees to educate themselves on the newest publishing forums, formats, and possibilities. Switching gears slightly, from a larger debate to a more personal vantage point, what is the editorial process at Academe? Are the articles peer reviewed in the traditional sense?

AB: Because *Academe* is not a scholarly journal but is a magazine addressing the scholarly community, its position is much closer to that of a periodical like *The New Republic* or *Harper's*. I choose the feature articles and then pass them on to the Executive Editor, who either accepts or rejects my choices. I look for articles on issues of interest to the academic community, not for original scholarship. As the Faculty Editor is limited to a single three-year term, the editorial perspective changes with some frequency, making sure there is continuing breadth in points of view.

SS: Follow-up: what do you think of Wikipedia? Do you use it? Do you think it should/could be more academic, or do you like the fact that it is public and has no advanced degree requirements?

AB: Like any good dictionary or encyclopedia--or even the reference section of a library--Wikipedia is a starting point. It gives a certain amount of information, yes, but its real value lies in where it can lead. I would hate to see it become more academic, though I would like to see growth in the number and profile of academic wikis. Here, like elsewhere, I want to see more, and more openness. Not more constraint.