Journal des Savants

FROM THE REPUBLIC OF LETTERS TO THE CLOUD LIBRARY

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As more books, journals, and newspapers make the inevitable transition to the electronic format, academics get the sense that the only scholarly materials one really needs can be found in the digital realm. Through the imagined voice of the Journal des Savants *— the world's oldest scholarly journal still active today — this article brings to the surface valid concerns about print scarcity, familiar terrain for not only Europeanists but for anyone who works in area studies. It objects to conventional metrics for determining scholarly value and reconfirms known perils of relying solely on the mass-digitization efforts of Google Books. Most importantly, the article questions an over-reliance on digital preservation repositories such as LOCKSS, CLOCKSS, Portico, and HathiTrust — key players in the so-called Cloud Library, or external network of trusted digital library collection and service providers. The push toward cloud-sourced collections comes at a time when research libraries are hastily embarking on ambitious cooperative regional initiatives to systematically de-duplicate their costly, problematic, redundant, and very much terrestrial print collections.*

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For all practical purposes, you can call me the *Journal des Savants*. I was founded in 1665 by Denis de Sallo, seigneur de Coudray, the bibliophile and adviser to the Parlement de Paris.[1] I emerged from the scholarly societies surrounding Louis XIV and his minister of finance Jean-Baptiste Colbert.[2] During my formative years, I passed through the capable hands of numerous editors, all with close ties to the Ancien Régime. The dutiful printing of my twelve quarto pages took place every Monday in Paris, and pirated editions soon appeared in printing hubs such as Amsterdam.[3] In fact, I owe my conservation more than three hundred years later to

the mere existence of these unauthorized Dutch editions and the high quality of their paper.[4]

Without question, I am the oldest scholarly journal in the world, and, after a brief hiatus during the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, I am still published exclusively in print format.[5] I have undergone a few title changes, as is customary for most academic journals. From 1683–86, I was known by my lengthiest moniker *Journal des Savants ou recueil succinct et abrégé de tout ce qui arrive de plus surprenant dans la nature, et de ce qui se fait et se découvre de plus curieux dans les arts et les sciences,* but the most enduring of my designations has been simply *Journal des Savants.*[6] My value to scholarly communication in the Republic of Letters during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and subsequent centuries is undisputed. In my first forty years—my adolescence if you will—I provided the prototype for more than sixty learned journals that sprouted up across the continent and in England.[7] Included among those that imitated my model of organization, production, and dissemination are *Philosophical Transactions* (London, established 1665), *Acta eruditorum* (Leipzig, 1682), *Nouvelles de la république des lettres* (Amsterdam, 1684), and *Giornale de'letterati* (Ferrara, 1688), *De Boekzaal van Europe* (Rotterdam, 1691–4), and *Galeria di Minerva* (Venice, 1691–4).[8]

While my original focus was mostly scientific—I published discoveries in all fields of science—I am quintessentially interdisciplinary. Since the beginning, I contained critical reviews of books on all subjects and obituaries of known erudites.[9] In the first three months of my existence, I became the vessel for scholarly reflections on texts such as Descartes' *Traité de l'homme* (*Treatise on Man*), La Fontaine's *Contes* (*Short Stories*), Corneille's tragedy *Othon*, and Bassompierre's *Mémoires* (*Memoirs*) among numerous other works of literature, history, theology, law, physics, medicine, and natural science.[10] In 1724 I reduced my publication frequency to every month, and the 1729 *privilège* granted me a fifteen-year monopoly to comment on works of science, painting, and sculpture, and also to report parliamentary sessions, university decisions, and foreign periodicals' coverage of the arts and sciences.[11] While careful not to cross into anticlericalism, I provided a forum for balanced discussion of scientific knowledge on which materialism and deism would later be based. In 1738, both memoirs on Voltaire's *Elements de la philosophie de Newton mis à la portée de tout le monde* were printed on my leaves,

and later in that same era, I befriended the Encyclopédistes and other Enlightenment thinkers.[12]

For me, the nineteenth century marked a noticeable shift from the sciences toward belles-lettres. It is perhaps for this reason that I am unequivocally regarded as Europe's first literary journal as well.[13] I was directed by a number of esteemed humanists including Pierre-Claude-François Daunou (1816–38), Pierre-Antoine Lebrun (1838–72), and Charles Giraud (1873–81), and my pages reflected the isms of the era—symbolism, naturalism, realism, romanticism, impressionism, Parnassism, positivism, and many more. Historian Barthélemy Hauréau, Léopold Delisle of the Bibliothèque nationale, and Gaston de Paris of the Académie française dutifully guided my publication through the fin de siècle and into the twentieth century.[14] Since 1908 I have been published under the auspices of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, one of five academies that constitute the Institut de France.[15] Under the firm and capable direction of René Cagnat, followed by that of Alfred Merlin, I survived both world wars and the Great Depression unscathed—there wasn't a single interruption in my publication cycle.[16]

Now in the new millennium, an issue is published twice a year and contains material on classical antiquity, the Middle Ages, and oriental civilizations.[17] A quick glance in the Online Computer Library Center's (OCLC) WorldCat reveals that approximately 160 libraries around the globe own at least one or more of my fascicules published after 1816, when my second series commenced.[18] However, I fear that less than a quarter of these libraries still maintain active subscriptions despite my efforts to offer moderate pricing: Current subscriptions are €73 (roughly US$100) a year.[19] I'm quite a bargain, given that the average cost of a subscription to an Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) title (i.e., a title that appears in one of three Thompson Reuters Web of Science databases) in 2011 is $1230 and prices are increasing steadily at a rate of 6 to 8 per cent a year.[20] In the first volatile decade of the twenty-first century alone, the price of a periodical subscription could skyrocket as much as 640 per cent, as did the price of a subscription to *Scientific American*, which was founded in 1845 and is not even half my age.[21] The most expensive scientific journals are known to have annual list rates as high as $39,082.[22]

While the electronic medium, I'm told, is the most effective way to distribute my content most widely to readers, the last four years of my

content remain accessible only in printed form. Whether this is a deliberate 'moving wall' or simply a convention, you'll have to ask those in charge of my publication. One way I differ from most academic journals is that my older issues have been made available free of charge on publicly supported open-access repositories like Persée.fr, where you can peruse my issues published from 1960 to 2006.[23] Gallica.org — the digital library of France's Bibliothèque nationale — hosts image captures of my printed volumes through 1940, and all volumes are keyword searchable.[24] You may also try looking for me in Google Books, the Internet Archive, or the HathiTrust Digital Library, where scattered fascicules have been digitized and optical character recognition (OCR) performed on the electronic facsimiles of my brittle pages, their contents now refashioned for the still unpleasantly illuminated LCD or LED screens.[25] While the promise of mass digitization and a lasting place in the so-called Cloud Library — or external network of trusted digital library collection and service providers — is alluring, the Google Books project has been broadly criticized for its lack of metadata, poor scan quality, OCR errors, and invariable modes of access.[26] HathiTrust — a partnership of more than fifty major research institutions and libraries working to ensure that the cultural record is preserved and accessible long into the future — seeks to remedy such problems. It has already reassembled some of my parts and provided access to them through digital scans from libraries like the University of Michigan, Indiana University, Princeton University, and Universidad Complutense in Madrid.[27]

My advanced age has liberated most of my issues from copyright restrictions, and my liberal-minded philosophy that encourages broad dissemination of knowledge steers me clear of modern annoyances such as single-source distribution rights, pay-per-use access models, and COUNTER-compliant[28] usage statistics. Because I am not included in ISI's Web of Knowledge — the world's leading citation database — it is impossible to measure the impact factor of the articles imprinted upon my pages. My value must be measured with different criteria, perhaps by the sociocultural significance of the authors I have published such as Leibniz, Malebranche, and Buffon.[29] Emerging impact metrics like those devised by the Eigenfactor Project might prove my citation influence or justify my value per dollar if I were included in its limited solar system of citations.[30]

As libraries throughout the world struggle to cope with unprecedented budget reductions and the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, I must confess that I'm preoccupied with my own survival. Journal sales in all formats continue to drop at alarming rates.[31] In 2007, 60 per cent of some 20,000 active peer-reviewed journals were available in electronic form, and predictions have been made that 95 per cent of all journals will ultimately be published in digital form.[32] For those journals that have not yet migrated to the born-digital model, the writing is on the proverbial wall. Since its 2006/2007 survey, the Association of Research Libraries has measured libraries' serials holdings by how many titles libraries have *access to* and no longer by how many they *own* in print.[33] Reasonable men and women from the most prestigious academic libraries reassure me that print and digital will coexist in hybrid libraries for the foreseeable future, but I see a shift in the opposite direction as more collections budgets continue to be diverted to exorbitantly priced electronic resources.[34] I'm told that *digital* will never be a substitute for *analogue* formats, but tantalizing concepts of cloud computing and cloud-sourced collections provoke trepidation over my demise. I understand that the all-digital and decentralized cloud library will provide significant library-space savings and cost avoidance as management operations for digitized print materials are deliberately and systematically outsourced or externalized to shared service providers, allowing my redundant copies to be de-duplicated across the research library network.[35] If it is predicted that library collections and services will increasingly be defined and sourced from external providers in order to reduce local infrastructure and operational expenditures, then which cloud will be my *trusted* source, especially in light of recent reports that Persée.fr is on the verge of vaporizing?[36]

I wonder if I will end up as a mere trace of what I represent, existing only as a Wikipedia entry like the one I stumbled across the other day, a eulogy to more than three centuries of publishing history.[37] Not only do I fret about whether I am destined to wind up disembodied or faultily scanned in these computing clouds everyone raves about, but I also worry about the long-term sustainability of such virtual cumulonimbi. Is there really enough room in LOCKSS, CLOCKS, Portico, and other trusted digital repositories to securely contain and preserve all my 346 years?[38] More importantly, what will happen when these dispersed digital data boxes or clouds cease being cost-effective for the publishers, libraries,

and external providers who have promised to keep them up in the air? As waves of serials cancellations over the past twenty-five years have resulted in research libraries decimating their print collections, similar economic pressures are now forcing them not only to cancel remaining print subscriptions but also to deaccession legacy print archives at unprecedented rates. This war against print, if you will, escalates and is economically justified as remote storage facilities reach capacity.[39] Overlooked by Google's initial mass digitization campaign, printed journals like me occupy the paradoxical ground of being the last to be digitally preserved and the first to be de-duplicated.[40] Will your library be next to cancel your subscription to the world's oldest scholarly, scientific, and literary journal, or will it be the one that retains its subscription along with all printed backfiles so that other less hybridized libraries still have a source to fulfill their inter-library borrowing requests? Why don't I save myself, you might ask, by taking a pre-emptive strike and simply migrating to the born-digital publishing model as most scholarly journals have? A novel thought—I'll pass it along to my associates at the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres.

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NOTES

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39. See the Center for Research Libraries' Print Archive Registry, http://archivereg.crl.edu; the Research Collections and Preservation Consortium (ReCAP), http://recap.princeton.edu; and the Western Regional Storage Trust (WEST), http://www.cdlib.org/services/collections/sharedprint/westinitiative.html.
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