What if academic publishing worked like fan publishing? Imagining the Fantasy Research Archive of Our Own

Nele Noppe

KU Leuven Libraries Artes, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

Suzanne R. Black

University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom

Kimberley Chiu

National Library Board of Singapore, Singapore

Argyrios Emmanouloudis

University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

Rhiannon Hartwell

Independent Scholar

Erica Hellman

New York University, New York, United States

Naomi Jacobs

ImaginationLancaster, Lancaster University, Lancaster, United Kingdom

Sarah Kate Merry

Centre for Postdigital Cultures, Coventry University, Coventry, United Kingdom

J. Nicole Miller

University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, United States

D. E. Pollock

Simmons University, Boston, Massachusetts, United States

Ludi Price

Centre for Library & Information Science, City, University of London, London, United Kingdom

Amy Spitz

College of Southern Maryland, La Plata, Maryland, United States

Paul Anthony Thomas

University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, United States

Serena M. Vaswani

Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, Philippines

Erika Ningxin Wang

King's College London, London, United Kingdom

Anonymous Contributors

[0.1] Abstract—Researchers, universities, and academic libraries develop a range of tools and platforms to make scholarship more accessible. What could these scholarly communications and open access projects learn from examples set by fandom and fan activists, for example, the fan works platform Archive of Our Own (AO3)? This conceptual paper, the result of a brainstorming session by scholars and librarians, proposes that a Fantasy Research Archive of Our Own should excel at making scholarly knowledge production into a visibly, enthusiastically collective endeavor that recognizes many kinds of contributions beyond the publication of traditional research papers.

[0.2] Keywords—AO3; Open scholarship; Open science; Platforms

1. Introduction

[1.1] Academic publishing and reward systems do not make it easy for many researchers to impact the world as they would like. For example, professional humanities scholars have a career incentive to focus on single-author articles in often pricey journals. This leaves little time for more accessible, collective ways of creating knowledge: contributing to Wikipedia and other open resources, engaging with nonresearchers, and so on. These problems are well known, and many researchers and organizations such as universities and their libraries have been working hard to give researchers more open options. They maintain open access journals like *Transformative Works and Cultures* (TWC Editor 2008), gather funds and expertise to support innovative publishing infrastructures, push for different forms of research assessment that reward more than a few narrow types of publications, and much more.

[1.2] In many ways, fandom has anticipated the need of the academy to "develop alternatives to corporate, for-profit scholarly tools and paywalled

journals that make scholarship inaccessible and unusably expensive" (Busse et al. 2017), including, for example, the many open projects of the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW). It is not much of a leap to consider how scholarly communications and open access projects can learn from examples set by fandom and fan activists.

[1.3] For half an hour on May 20, 2021, fan studies researchers and librarians at the FanLIS: Building Bridges symposium ([note 1](#)) took a break from the hard work of improving academic publishing in reality to dream a little bigger. What would be possible if researchers could publish their creations like fans can? If people with a stake in research used, say, the open source software behind the fan works site Archive of Our Own (AO3) (https://archiveofourown.org/) to create a platform, how would they use AO3-like features to do scholarship?

[1.4] This collective brainstorm became a Google document ([note 2](#)) brimming with possibilities (FanLIS Participants 2021). This short, conceptual paper summarizes that document by imagining how the Fantasy Research Archive of Our Own (FRAO3) might work. It relies on quotes and concepts from the brainstorming session and also on comparisons with existing open science/open scholarship concepts and infrastructure that offer some relevant framing and practical ideas.

2. The Fantasy Research Archive of Our Own

[2.1] First and foremost, the Fantasy Research Archive of Our Own (FRAO3) is free to use. Perhaps it is funded by donation drives like those that support AO3, or perhaps it is kept sustainable in the way of open scholarship infrastructure like the Open Library of Humanities publishing platform (https://www.openlibhums.org/) (Clemente Vega 2020), the Humanities Commons network (http://hcommons.org/), the Programming Historian tutorial archive (https://programminghistorian.org/) (Sichani et al. 2019), or the Zenodo research data repository (https://zenodo.org/). All these achieve financial stability, technical support, legal protection, and insurance against takeover by commercial interests through the support of universities, their libraries, political actors like the European Union, or individual users. In any case, the code behind FRAO3 is open source, and development and maintenance of the platform is managed by an organization that recognizes that scholarly communication models need to be cocreated with scholarly communities to have any chance of success (Rowley et al. 2017).

[2.2] The publications on the FRAO3 look different from traditional scholarly works. Even innovative publication initiatives tend to feature research in a particular format: a text of predefined length, sometimes including other

media or linking to underlying data files archived elsewhere, that presents the results of a finished study. On the FRAO3, the authors self-publish. They are free to experiment with styles and formats, limited only by their own knowledge of HTML. They can combine text, images, and videos with blog posts, conference presentations, and so on, in any language they choose. The publications range in length from single-image visualizations to book-length written works. Authors use "chapters" to subdivide works into meaningful sections that readers can view on screen separately or together. And regarding screens, the FRAO3 adjusts easily to most displays, and users can tweak their reading experience with customizable site skins.

[2.3] Because FRAO3 relies on self-publishing, any discussion about and evaluation of a work happens after it is posted, not unlike preprints in some academic disciplines (iBiology 2016). Readers have a range of options for interacting with works, including comments that appear directly under the publications. The comments allow for threaded discussions between readers and authors, which improves the speed and quality of scholarly discourse. As one brainstorm contributor summarized, readers can use comments to "build off the main work immediately, without forcing scholars to (a) create a new piece of research, (b) hunt around for a scholarly venue, and (c) hope that the original scholar sees the comment/critiques/etc." Another pointed out that comments also can alleviate "misunderstandings or misreadings; if a commenter misreads the original work, the author could simply respond and clarify the point that is being critiqued."

[2.4] FRAO3 users wield the platform's interaction tools not only to react to the content of works but also to organize them in publicly visible ways. The "bookmarks" and "collection" features are useful tools for curating recommended reading lists and course syllabi. They also are a way for readers to provide additional commentary and categorization of works through bookmark descriptions and tags (note 3).

[2.5] The collection feature also is useful for organizing collective writing events, comparable to "challenges" on AO3 (Archive of Our Own n.d.a). Collections are for publishing journals, with the editors and contributors making good use of set publication dates and the FRAO3's ability to show works as revealed or unrevealed. Editors maintain subcollections for separate journal issues. Collections also are used to mastermind events like conferences. FRAO3 users also enjoy a type of collaborative project that is conceptually less well known in academia: the prompt meme (Archive of Our Own n.d.b). Here, users describe a research topic that they believe deserves investigation, and others can respond with (multiple) research publications based on the prompt.

[2.6] FRAO3 users also have dedicated tools to post new publications that are in direct response to the work of another author. Such new publications build on the original in multiple ways—for example, by offering follow-up research, translations into other languages, visualizations or other remixes, or any other content. Links to these related works automatically appear on the original work.

[2.7] Through its features and interface, FRAO3 welcomes experimentation. Users take advantage of this flexibility to post not only finished but also ongoing research for community review. Readers subscribe to "works in progress" to get alerts about new chapters. Authors invite discussions about drafts, the sources they are consulting, and other research materials. FRAO3 gives authors rudimentary moderation tools and the ability to disable comments on specific works. Some researchers create research journals to share their progress. Authors also use the "series" functionality to connect a publication with its underlying research materials. Some manage their full research workflow on FRAO3 to keep both the process and the results as accessible as possible in the spirit of open data and open scholarship (Bezjak et al. 2019, 12–14).

[2.8] Peer review and quality assessment on FRAO3 also happen through reader engagement. Not unlike citation counts for journal articles, comments function as a marker of, if not exactly quality, then at least notability. The number of comments on a work on FRAO3 is publicly advertised, and when searching for publications users can filter based on comment count. The FRAO3 offers other ways for users to signal that a work has value. Kudos, which function much like social media likes and can also be used in search filters, are a way for readers to signal unambiguous approval of a work. The number of kudos on a work relative to its number of hits indicates how many readers found it useful. Yet another way for works to gain acclaim is through the number of times they are saved through the bookmarking tool (again, a metric usable in search filters). In short, works on FRAO3 are evaluated based on open interactions between authors and readers, and between readers in general.

[2.9] A final distinctive feature of FRAO3 is its tag-based organization system. Authors apply a few mandatory and recommended tags that indicate, for example, disciplines, methodologies, and ethics approval status. Otherwise, researchers are free to add any tag for any reason. Some use only a handful of these "free-form" tags to describe works. Others add dozens of tags to contextualize their works: detailed content descriptions, calls for particular feedback, warnings about sensitive content that readers may want to approach with caution, and even the author's opinions about the work.

[2.10] Crucially, these myriad free-form tags are made useful for readers through the work of "tag wranglers." Behind the scenes, wranglers check tags on new works and create associations between keywords that have identical or similar meanings. According to one contributor, "Having the opportunity to freely tag, but have tag wranglers standardising those tags in the background" massively improves search and discovery on FRAO3. The platform's tagging system grows organically through direct user input, but wranglers channel that input into what is if not a "controlled" then at least a "living" vocabulary that is more than good enough to meet the needs of FRAO3 authors and readers (Johnson 2014). This mass of interconnected keywords gives users a great tool for deliberate interdisciplinary research (for example, through searching for "crossovers" between disciplines), serendipitous discovery of works from different disciplines, and fine-grained filtering and combination of search results.

[2.11] This level of interaction between authors and researchers at every conceivable step of a research project is possible because FRAO3 is designed from the ground up to prioritize interaction between people, with no particular emphasis or importance attached to the role(s) an individual might play on the platform. Although FRAO3 does not have much social networking functionality, it does center people and their contributions through its design choices. All user contributions link back to profile pages that users can edit to include relevant information, from their research interests and expertise to offers of "beta-reading" or other research help. Many also include links to websites and works elsewhere, although some take advantage of FRAO3's import and backdating functionality to simply save copies of all their works in one place.

[2.12] On FRAO3, all users have a great deal of agency to contribute, and this varied and energetic engagement by community members is what makes the FRAO3 a useful research ecosystem. Posted works by researchers are at the center of all communication, but that communication adds tremendously to any work's value. Obviously, reader comments on works in progress improve the content of that research. But even more key to the success of FRAO3 are all the visible and searchable traces that readers leave on works—kudos, hit counts, bookmarks—and all the organizational work community members contribute, from collections for collective writing projects to constant, intricate tag-wrangling. FRAO3 incentivizes meaningful contributions both through its interface and by rewarding community members with social recognition and visible impact. Just as the original AO3 values "fan work" of all kinds far beyond work creation (Price 2019, 11), the FRAO3 recognizes and celebrates "research work" of all kinds.

3. Conclusion

[3.1] As a first concluding note, FanLIS symposium participants had a remarkably easy time with this exercise, adding five pages of content in about 20 minutes. This speaks to the value of collaborative note-taking as an approach and to the creativity of the individuals involved, but perhaps also to the similarities between fannish and academic publishing that made inspiration flow fast and abundantly.

[3.2] Second, this brainstorm was brief and focused on a particular model of fan work publishing: AO3. A more extensive exercise would lead to more and different ideas, resulting from a more diverse range of fannish platforms and experiences. The brevity of the session also did not leave much room for evaluating how an AO3-like publishing model could play out negatively in an academic setting. For example, AO3 gives users options to delete content or remove their association with it, which could let scholars change the academic record to distance themselves from shoddy research. Other contributors highlighted that FRAO3 metrics can be gamed, that some commenters might behave as badly as the least helpful of academic reviewers, that some authors could abuse their power to moderate discussions in the comments under their works, and that the open source software behind the existing AO3 encodes the norms of a particular "progressive, feminist, predominantly white" (Lothian and Stanfill 2021) community, facilitating a well-documented perpetuation of structural inequality, especially racism.

[3.3] Third, it would be interesting to reverse this exercise and wonder how fans might use academic infrastructure. This could highlight that while academia remains dominated by entrenched systems there is also considerable innovation, and researchers already have countless new tools at their disposal to change how they produce and share knowledge. Many contributors to this brainstorm described academic infrastructure that already exists to some degree or is in the process of being created or expanded out of whatever corner of the academy it matured in. To give one example, data repositories already provide a way for researchers to openly distribute the research materials that underlie their publications, and they offer more sustainable and feature-rich archival, versioning, and sharing options than AO3 in many respects (Harrower et al. 2020, 28–29). Many other promising tools are developed in the context of open scholarship, research data management (Tóth-Czifra 2019), and digital humanities (Barbot et al. 2019). In a technological sense, all the building blocks of the FRAO3 are probably here.

[3.4] That FRAO3 remains a fantasy for now is not just due to busy schedules or limited awareness of open scholarship tools, which are often scattered and

rarely as well integrated as a platform like AO3. Researchers, librarians, and others with a stake in academic knowledge also have to contend with a range of legacy systems that are not easily built on or discarded. Worse, they often have little incentive to do the hard and thankless work of pushing for something new. But cultural change might come fast once the work is not so thankless anymore: when researchers reap genuine career rewards for opening up their research in every sense of the word, and when university librarians and others eager to take part in scholarship get FRAO3-like tools to engage with research and see their contributions—including organizational work—publicly rewarded.

[3.5] Perhaps that is the most inspiring part of the dream of an FRAO3. It makes the collective nature of scholarly work so visible, so self-evident, that any system of knowledge production not specifically designed to harness that community energy looks almost pointless in comparison.

4. Notes

1. The program for the symposium can be found at https://blogs.city.ac.uk/fanlis/fanlis-symposia/fanlis-2021/fanlis-2021-programme/.

2. The original Google document is located at https://docs.google.com/document/u/1/d/19PbNM8WwUVR8J4PDkm2w0Y9cLHa6sVoRt02ivgGdj9A/. An archival copy is preserved at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5774713.

3. Notably, what seemed to appeal to contributors is not so much AO3's bookmarking tool itself; after all, its features for organizing and sharing references to works are rudimentary compared with reference managers like Zotero (https://www.zotero.org/) or bookmarking services like Pinboard (https://pinboard.in/) (Cegłowski 2013). Rather, contributors highlighted how having reader bookmarks baked into a platform adds value to the platform as a whole.

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