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The Social Epistemology of Book Reviews

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Because 2019 marks the end of my first full year as Book Reviews editor at SERRC, I want to take this opportunity to reflect on what we've done in terms of promoting conversation and criticism around new books in social epistemology and to reflect on how we can apply insights from social epistemology to our book reviews at SERRC.

The Place of Reviews

Nominally, social epistemology has a close connection to the book review. As many readers of this journal will know, the term “social epistemology” was initially coined in the 1960s by the librarian and information scientist, Jesse Shera, to mean “the study of knowledge in society.” (Shera 1970, p. 86) Shera developed his work with colleague Margaret Egan and in the steps of fellow librarian Douglas Waples, concerned with the ways in which society reads: broadly, how it accesses, interprets, categorizes, indexes, and disseminates the written word and the role that librarianship, bibliography, and new methods of documentation could play (Zandonade 2004).

A library is a very particular filter of knowledge production. The Web may be seen as another, or as a collection of many. An academic journal yet another. These filters organize knowledge in society in their own way and we can, and do, evaluate this and make judgments of when it works well and when it does not work so well. Today, our access to information occurs within a wider ecosystem of filters that have flourished in the contemporary period, in tandem with the technological infrastructure to radically multiply and variegate filters.

For educators, reviews (from our students or are colleagues) are sometimes the primary means by which our performance and success are judged. Customer reviews – typically performed by the “[uncredialled curator](#)” – are available on almost any website with something to sell and new companies have formed whose purpose is to provide customer reviews alone. [Facebook](#), Instagram, Pinterest, and so on, use human and non-human filters to sift through vast trenches of information. I don't need to belabour the point – it's familiar to all of us.

Alongside the idea of the filter, has emerged a renewed prominence of curators, influenced by its powerful position in the art world. This curation comes with its own culture, its own beliefs, and [its own language](#). This language functions to exclude alternatives and police boundaries. And while an art curator's job may have once been to select what art was worth your attention, now, in an attention economy, a curator's job may be just as much to provide the means to deal with information overload.

To complicate things still further, we now perform much more personal curation – keeping tabs, messages, snippets, and screenshots as well as cultivating all kinds of algorithms that learn from our past behaviour and deliver to us more of what we saw before.

Thomas Frank calls this expansion of curation, not just into reviewing almost anything we consume, but into the very language we use and the ways we think, [curatolatry](#). He discusses

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how, responding to the newly-coined “fake news” (Faulkner 2018; Fuller 2016; Levy 2017), Barack Obama said:

We are going to have to rebuild within this wild-wild-west-of-information flow some sort of curating function that people agree to.

While Obama, in Frank’s view in common with other liberals, tends towards curation, Donald Trump is associated with the “refusal of curation. Trump does not reform or organize the chaos of the world...”

Frank warns at the end of his article:

“What they don’t agree upon, meanwhile, is simply ignored. It is outside the conversation. It is excluded. A world without fake news might really be awesome. So might a shop where every bottle of wine is excellent. So might an electoral system in which everyone heeds the urging of the professional consensus. But in any such system, reader, people like you and me can be assured with almost perfect confidence that our voices will be curated out.”

A Social Epistemological Interpretation of the Book Review

Would, should, SERRC perform a kind of curating function “that people agree to” to filter new books in social epistemology? I don’t think it does perform this function and I’m not sure that it should.

It is often alleged that book reviews tend towards mediocrity and nepotism, falling out of the publishing industry and, in academia, entrenched structures and metrics of hierarchy, prestige, and social status. To add to the miserable plight of the book review, they are not treated as prestigious publications or emphasized as lines on CVs (if listed at all).

They do not rank as highly as research articles or chapters in books or, indeed, books themselves. They do not generally rank at all on any metric that is used by academic institutions or funding bodies. Book reviews tend, therefore, to fall into the category of ‘service’ – gifts one is obliged to offer largely out of a sense of duty, responsibility, and morality.

This is lamentable. The first thing we are asked to do as students is review books. For many of us, the first thing we do when writing, or preparing to write, a paper, is to review books – to perform a literature review. Book reviews are not, primarily, a service to the author but to a wider audience. (If they were the former, one could easily email it to the author and avoid the hassle of formal publication.)

They do not simply repeat knowledge contained in the book but provide new knowledge as evidenced, I believe, by all of the book reviews we published in the last two years. Sometimes this is taken to be appraisal by an expert but I think that social epistemology can give us reason to take a second glance at this intuitive idea ([Social Epistemology 32\(6\) – special issue on Expertise and Expert Knowledge](#); Watson 2018).

We should be critical of the encroachment of curation and the perceived need to curate. In wider culture, the most well-known critics were not themselves trained in the field they reviewed. This is often held against them by artists and writers but if we do not see their purpose as being about expert appraisal, that criticism loses some of its force.

One reason for this may be that reviews tell us as much about the reviewer as the reviewee. Reviews, as Oscar Wilde observed, are autobiographical. Ambrose Bierce echoed this sentiment in his *Devil's Dictionary*. The entry for “review” reads simply:

To set your wisdom (holding not a doubt of it,
Although in truth there's neither bone nor skin to it)
At work upon a book, and so read out of it
The qualities that you have first read into it.

This view seems to suit us at *SERRC*. We are, as in our name, a collective and much more than curate we read and write about what happens to take our interest at that time. We think, often, out loud. If that interest spreads throughout the community, it is likely to be picked up and turned into a symposium or extended dialogue. Or perhaps not. Others are welcome to join our community if they are interested in contributing to these conversations.

18 Months, more or less

Nevertheless, and undeniably, book review editors have a role to play in organizing knowledge in society. My approach to editing book reviews since I took over has not been to gatekeep. “Is this interesting?” – usual caveats aside about the word ‘interesting’ – has been the benchmark rather than “Is this proper social epistemology?”

I took over as Book Review Editor part-way through 2017. In this short period, we have published [64 reviews](#) (and replies to reviews, and replies to reviews of reviews). Many of these have taken the form of book review “symposiums” where several authors take on one book, often featuring replies from the book’s author. Soliciting a range of views allows us to present a book from the perspective of scholars with different expertise and focus.

It encourages more in-depth and richer discussions of a book, and its surrounding intellectual milieu, and extends the conversation sometimes over a period of months. I believe that, in a small way, this facilitates a new ordering of knowledge around new books and, so, contributes to a new social epistemology.

It’s hard to focus on specific books given this long list but I can hint at some trends that we have been pushing, and will continue to push, in the new year. One concerns diversity and internationalization. When two of my National University of Singapore colleagues, Jay Garfield and Bryan van Norden, published an [opinion piece](#) in the *New York Times’ Stone* that argued for a greater role for “less commonly taught philosophies” (such as, but not limited to, Chinese or Indian philosophy) in the US curriculum, it caused a stir in the profession, and more widely.

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A great deal has been written about the subsequent book Van Norden published on the theme, *Taking Back Philosophy*, but I would argue that [our symposium](#), featuring seven scholars, including me, has added quite a bit to that conversation. A personal highlight for me was Steve Fuller's visit to the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore to speak on the subject. The full lecture can be heard [here](#). Another important intervention in internationalizing our catalogue has been the [symposium on African philosophy](#) and I intend to continue this global perspective in 2019.

One innovation of SERRC is that we encourage authors to respond. I often write to authors to give them what the media call a *right of reply*. I believe this is quite unusual in the academic reviewsphere. It's a method that is fraught with pitfalls and potential catastrophe but, I think, valuable for the ideas that frequently come out of it. Traditionally, a review is left hanging. The last laugh. Allowing authors a chance to respond can correct perceived inaccuracies but, more importantly, lead to new shared understandings.

As we enter 2019 under the deluge of our own personal *tsundoku* let's embrace a multitude of reviews and reviews of reviews.

Best wishes for the new year. As always, if you wish to review a book, or propose a symposium, for SERRC you may write to me at the address below.

Contact details: erickerr@gmail.com

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