Observation

Making the 'black box' transparent: publishing and presenting geographic knowledge

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The last 15 years or so have witnessed an increasing volume (and diversity) of critical analyses of the production of geographical knowledge. These have sought to expose the ways in which both production and content are produced through, for example, colonial and imperial (e.g. Said 1978), gendered (e.g. Domosh 1991) and racialized (e.g. Sibley 1995) power geometries. One under-explored focus of such critiques to date, however, concerns the 'spaces' (sites) and 'processes' (mechanisms) of present day publication and presentation, through journals and book publishers and seminars and conferences, and how transparent, constructive, rewarding and, ultimately, 'fair' these spaces and processes are (although see Berg and Kearns 1998; Minca 2000; Berg 2001; Gutiérrez and López-Nieva 2001; Short *et al.* 2001; Moss *et al.* 2002).

For many, particularly postgraduate students and faculty at the start of their careers, geographic dissemination is a set of spaces and processes best encapsulated through the notion of a 'black box'. It has inputs (e.g. submitting a paper or abstract) and outputs (referees comments, acceptance, rejection), but a lack of clarity exists concerning what happens between one and the other. How does the publishing process work? How are papers and book proposals evaluated and decisions made? Who decides what sessions are held at a conference and who gets to present? These are questions most of us learn through experience, by submitting papers, writing

books, by offering to organize sessions, and so on. And even then, it is not always clear as to 'how the system works'!

The widespread perception of these black boxes' existence and role in regulating the dissemination of geographical knowledge has been brought home to us in a number of ways. First, there are our own anxiety-, hesitancy- and uncertainty-laden experiences in submitting papers, book proposals and abstracts; in dealing with feedback and undertaking revisions; in attending and organizing seminars and conferences; and in refereeing for journals. Second, we have taken part in numerous discussions with colleagues and students disgruntled by the general lack of transparency in how journals, publishers and conference organizers operate. This was particularly the case within sessions held at the Association of American Geographers conferences in New York (2001) and Los Angeles (2002), entitled 'Meet the Editors'. Here, conference attendees were invited to ask the editors of several leading journals any question they desired. These sessions were well attended, with discussion built exclusively around questions that sought to reveal how the editors actually perform their jobs and make decisions. Finally, in his role as an editor of *Social and Cultural Geography*, the first author regularly corresponds with potential contributors with regards to clarifying how the journal operates.

That the 'black boxes' of publishing and presenting are power-laden spaces is simply illustrated by the manner in which they are policed by gatekeepers who employ selection procedures. While fairness is aspirational, it is clear that this is not always achieved. Sometimes, the black box constructs a particular set of conditions that do discriminate and exclude, either by providing cover for personal bias or through rules/procedures that favour particular criteria. An example of the former are referee's comments that are destructive rather than constructive.[1] Examples of the latter provided a rich vein of discussion at the International Critical Geography Conference in Békéscsaba, Hungary, June 2002. Here, one of the dominant themes of sessions and conversation was English language and Anglo-American hegemony in the production of geographic knowledge; how English has become the global, academic lingua franca for both journals and conferences, and how the gatekeepers – editors and referees – of so-called international journals were almost exclusively Anglo-Americans, who it was posited favour ideas and writing that was similar to their own (see Minca 2000; Gregson *et al.* 2001; Gutiérrez and López-Nieva 2001; Short *et al.* 2001). In addition, delegates noted that the customs and body language at international conferences are also becoming dominated by Anglo-American conventions (Kitchin in press). Of course, conferences also exclude in other ways, such as being held in venues that are inaccessible to disabled people.

Given our personal commitment to performing geographies that matter – to make productive interventions into geographical endeavour – we have sought to provide a resource that makes the 'black boxes' of dissemination more transparent. To this end we have produced geo-publishing.org,[2] an online resource, and have persuaded editors and publishers to sign-up and endorse the site's content and message (including the editors of *Area*).

Geo-publising.org is both a pragmatic and political project. It is pragmatic in that it strives to make the structures and processes of geographic dissemination more transparent and thus help students and faculty disseminate their work in a less anxiety-inducing way. It is political in that it seeks to open up the industry of publishing and organizing conferences to scrutiny. Here, for example, the site outlines guidelines aimed to curtail destructive refereeing, place centre stage English language and Anglo-American hegemony as issues that need to be addressed urgently, and stresses the need to make conferences and presentations as inclusive and accessible as possibly with regards to venue, materials and language.

The site does then present some challenges to orthodoxy. We would, however, be the first to admit that the site also reproduces the present hegemonic order. The site does work, in Foucault's terms, to discipline authors and contributors, suggesting ways to ensure smooth passage through 'the system'. In this sense it is useful to the publishing and conferencing industries as constituted as it largely reproduces the systems as are. However, we feel, it also does make structures and processes more transparent and offers some challenges that will, if followed, make geographical dissemination more inclusive and accountable. In addition, the site is an evolving and developing space which seeks to reflect upon issues of concern and critique through periodic and timely updates, and seeking comments, feedback and views from its users concerning their own experiences and ideas for the future. As such, we hope it is a useful contribution until such time that others feel it necessary to organize and/or radically overhaul present exclusionary and uncertain elements of the spaces and processes of dissemination.

Notes

1 Indeed, we have often wondered what might be learnt (in terms of any process of 'creative-destruction', or perhaps 'destructive-creation'!) by documenting and making transparent how papers and chapters 'evolve' (or simply change beyond all recognition) from an author's first draft to end-product.
2 Geo-publishing.org is best accessed at http://www.may.ie/ nirsa/geo-pub/geo-pub.html

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