

Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences

From modularity to relationality

other forms of writing, thinking & publishing

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BLOG:

From Modularity to Relationality: Other Forms of Writing, Thinking & Publishing

By [Miriam Rasch](https://networkcultures.org/makingpublic/author/michael/) (<https://networkcultures.org/makingpublic/author/michael/>), January 27, 2020 at 9:57 am.



(<https://networkcultures.org/makingpublic/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/2020/01/navigeren.jpeg>)

Navigation opens a hundred views.

Thought can be structured in different ways, just like the web itself – it can be centralized, decentralized or distributed. The way of structuring impacts thought itself, which is why such structures deserve more attention than they usually receive. We need to be working on our thoughts

(https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/series/did_you_get_the_l/contents/working-on-our-thoughts). In our research group

(<https://networkcultures.org/makingpublic/2019/05/21/visualizing-a-publications->

[parts-and-elements-and-the-relationships-in-between/](#)) we try to make this notion practical by directing our attention to modularity as a publishing strategy, necessarily accompanied by an approach of relationality (between modules).

Working through our ideas for somehow realizing the vision of a new kind of digital publication, our thinking was sharpened by the following scholars, theorists, and practitioners. Two concepts have functioned as guiding stars in the sky while thinking about the vision of this research: the 'carrier bag' as formulated by Ursula Le Guin and the 'hyper essay' of Peter Sloterdijk. The critique of modularity as formulated by Janneke Adema, Gary Hall, and Tara McPherson have been very insightful. McPherson also provides practical points to take into account, as does fellow urgent publishing traveller Paul Soulellis. Needless to say, this overview is very limited and our search is still ongoing, we'd love to get more input for further research. (For more inspiration, also see the posts on [Best Practices](#) (<https://networkcultures.org/makingpublic/2019/01/24/strategies-to-speed-up-publishing-some-best-practices/>).

The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction, Ursula Le Guin

In [The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction](#) (<https://ignota.org/products/the-carrier-bag-theory-of-fiction>) (1986) Ursula le Guin travels back in literary history to develop a radically different approach to storytelling, right from the very start. Stories have always focused on the hero slaying the beast. Why not ask what those collecting seeds and fruits have to tell? The carrier bag story opposes 'the linear, progressive, Time's-(killing)-arrow mode of the Techno-Heroic' in favor of a story 'full of beginnings without ends, of initiations, of losses, of transformations and translations'.

Changing the narrative means changing power structures. We cannot talk about urgency in changing certain societal issues without also thinking about how we are talking and writing and arguing ourselves. How do we carry our ideas? The carrier bag opens up avenues to challenge myths of origin and originality, authoritarian authorship, single-voiced narratives, hero perspectives, and definitive truths. Is a 'Carrier Bag Theory of Non-Fiction' possible, shaping publications that hold grains of knowledge and experience of various kinds and species, which can be laid out in different ways and directions? How would these forge meaningful connections and complex relations between contents, people, places and futures?

It is interesting to see what happens if you take the image of the carrier bag quite literally, as is possible in a digital environment, that has many beginnings without ends. In a digital publication conceived as a carrier bag one could collect many parts and content modules, that might interact in new and surprising ways among each other and with the reader. This seems to chime in with the notion of modularity as a strategy. Moreover, it gives modularity a critical weight, as the carrier bag not only conceives of a new *form* but also of a new type of *message*, relating the issue to what we call *urgent publishing*.

Essayismus in unserer Zeit, Peter Sloterdijk

Peter Sloterdijk develops the notion of a 'hyper-essay' in this speech from 1993. Essayists are writers who are used to handling multiple perspectives and resist the urge to find definitive answers. Hypertext changes the possibilities and position of the written text and its writer, giving the essay even more opportunities to flourish.

The increasingly complex world calls for a complex form, moving beyond linearity towards a text that resembles more a cloud. Knots, nodes, and intersections take over center stage. Instead of beginnings and ends, this essayistic form is overflowing, ever expanding, pouring out. The author is a navigator in this sea of references, quotes and thoughts. The most important element of writing is *selecting* and instead of making a linear argument about all the different inputs, the writer shows how the selection process took place and what possible pathways it affords. (See also this deep dive into the ideas behind interactive fiction: [Non-linear publication tools \(https://networkcultures.org/makingpublic/2018/12/13/non-linear-publication-tools/\)](https://networkcultures.org/makingpublic/2018/12/13/non-linear-publication-tools/))

Over the course of our research we encountered some necessary critiques of our idealized visions.

Posthumanities and the Critique of Modularity, Janneke Adema & Gary Hall

At the Urgent Publishing conference, [Janneke Adema and Gary Hall \(https://vimeo.com/344048731\)](https://vimeo.com/344048731) formulated a thoughtful but fierce critique of modularity. Modularity, with its roots in computer programming and as theorized by Lev Manovich, focusses on discreteness, standardization, and subsequent shareability. It functions well in a cultural industry that is highly commodified and that favors snippets over complexity. Rather than following such modular logic, we should try and develop other models of publishing. Especially when it comes to in-depth content it is important to think of other possibilities that respect process and quality.

Adema and Hall put forward a different publishing model that emphasizes relationality, rather than the finished object. It asks how a publication comes to life, grows, and moves. Who are involved in the process and how do those actors – human and non-human – relate to each other? What are alternative ways of gathering and binding information? Instead of working towards a finished object, they argue that we should think about how, where, and why boundaries between content are drawn, for example, or when a ‘cut’ is made in the publication process, and by whom, thus deciding when to present something in a certain form. These boundaries and cuts could be imagined to take place in different places, at a time earlier in the research process, or shared between a larger group of people (e.g. including readers).

This would also allow the book as we’ve known it for so long to take on different forms, generate other forms of authority, and make different kinds of knowledge possible. We cannot maintain a critical stance towards ‘old’ forms of publishing and writing, without changing the formats and presentation of that critique in itself (see also Adema’s & Hall’s essay about the Posthumanities (<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/j/jep/3336451.0019.201?view=text;rgn=main>)).

Designing for Difference, Tara McPherson

Tara McPherson (also referenced by Adema and Hall), develops a critique of modularity that goes into the heart of computation. In her article Designing for Difference (<https://read.dukeupress.edu/differences/article-abstract/25/1/177/60700/Designing-for-Difference>) she unravels how code itself functions as ‘a realm determined by math, physics, or reason, apart from the messy realms of culture’. In her book *Feminist in a Software Lab* (2018), McPherson elaborates further on the question of modularity, computation, code, and the cut.

The model with which code is generally understood, McPherson writes, underestimates cultural influences and prioritizes modularity over relationality or complexity. Looking at coding from the perspective of ‘the stack’ means focusing on these discrete compartments and individual layers instead of on the connections and traverses between them. Moreover, McPherson argues that discrete, simplified, and reduced bits of code correlates to certain tendencies in society and culture such as discrimination, making the search for different tools and models especially urgent. For example, interpretative analyses do not fit naturally with database structures.

McPherson follows Karen Barad's idea of the 'agential cut' to think of other conceptualizations of code, and thus, of cultural productions that use computational logic (such as publications perceived as a collection of modules). The cut, as stated above, is a decision that is made, which makes it important to know why and from where someone is doing the cutting. The cut is not intended to standardize, as happens when working towards modularity, but allows for difference. The big question, according to McPherson, is thus how to design digital tools that allow for such differences. The *Vectors* journal and the Scalar publishing platform that McPherson is involved in, are examples.

Designing for difference means designing for 'potential futures and becomings' – concretely speaking, allowing different pathways to open and foregrounding the collaborations between different actors in the production of a publication.

Theory to Practice

Some practical guidelines for new ways of digital publishing can be extracted from *Feminist in a Software Lab*:

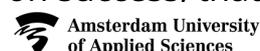
- Think about the point of view: of the cut, but also of a database used;
- enable exploration of content by the reader over mastery;
- seek possibilities over critique – critique will follow on its own;
- ambiguity and complexity need to be consciously constructed, will not occur naturally when using contemporary technology;
- resist the temptation of the template;
- aim for interdisciplinarity and intersectionality in both content and production;
- allow for horizontal reading and writing practices, instead of vertical ones;
- use a strategy of defamiliarization in design, to make the reader stop and think;

- in other words – use friction as a strategy, just as well for the content;
- thus demanding slow reading for urgent matters;
- let portions of the content unfold at key moments;
- and so play with linearity without abandoning it;
- foreground collaboration, for example by including a designer's or editor's explanatory statement;
- think of ways to close the gap between archive (database) and analysis.

Paul Soulellis

Paul Soulellis (<https://soulellis.com/>) teaches and produces new publishing methods and strategies, among others under the moniker of 'Urgentcraft'. His practice goes against the grain of the neatly divided database, perfectly bound-up book, or continuous feed of the post. He seeks how to balance fast publishing on urgent topics with a queer perspective that turns away from the focus on success, that might be

 (//)



called the audience.

Soulellis' talk on Urgentcraft

(https://docs.google.com/document/d/1gLnHQq2VjPrsRRB_wA-DTmHsRBreET09e-ZpT-j-ez0/edit) (2019) ends with a list of possible tactics for urgent crafters, that echo others mentioned here, such as: 'Practice a slow approach to fast making', 'Acknowledge complexity and contradiction in making', 'Resist design perfection / stay with the mess', 'Fail to provide the perfect read (resist legibility)', and 'Prioritize communal care as a never-ending practice'.

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[Publishing&body=https://networkcultures.org/makingpublic/2020/01/27/from-modularity-to-relationality-other-forms-of-writing-thinking-publishing/.](https://networkcultures.org/makingpublic/2020/01/27/from-modularity-to-relationality-other-forms-of-writing-thinking-publishing/))

MOST RECENT READINGS

Governance and Scalability: Circles of trust and federated platforms

By campatzidou, February 6, 2020

Independent publishing platforms are often small in size and human resources and usually not able to afford advertising and other forms of paid visibility to increase their audiences. In the framework of the Making Public project, we are prototyping a tool that creates relations between content items located in different publishing platforms, and provides recommendations to readers.

[\(https://networkcultures.org/makingpublic/2020/02/06/governance-and-scalability-circles-of-trust-and-federated-platforms/\)](https://networkcultures.org/makingpublic/2020/02/06/governance-and-scalability-circles-of-trust-and-federated-platforms/)

Organizing Content for a Modular Digital Publication

By Kimmy Spreuwenberg, January 6, 2020

Written by Pia Pol Introduction Making a digital modular publication is never easy. Modular publishing has its own set of requirements and challenges. Modularity on the backend of projects is a much accepted and preferred strategy. Cutting the work up in blocks makes for a clear and easier to handle workflow. But what happens if [...]

(<https://networkcultures.org/makingpublic/2020/01/06/organizing-content-for-a-modular-digital-publication/>)

The Oxymoron of the Academic Zine

By Silvio Lorusso, December 10, 2019

Can there be such a thing as an “academic zine”? The very expression sounds like an oxymoron: whereas the academic qualifier came to suggest a hierarchical power structure; a linear, waterfall-like knowledge production process, an indifference towards the way in which form shapes content and can be content, or, more precisely, the standardization and crystallization [...]

(<https://networkcultures.org/makingpublic/2019/12/10/the-oxymoron-of-the-academic-zine/>)



(<https://twitter.com/INCAmsterdam>)



(<https://vimeo.com/networkcultures>)



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