

Academic Book Reviews – a Low-Rank Genre?

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NordMedia Network launches an online resource to support the production of academic book reviews. Our point of departure: renew the review! We suggest that book review is an overlooked genre with importance and relevance for many, and that it should be rediscovered.

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Have you ever written a book review? It's not surprising if your answer is no. Many established scholars with exceptional international records have zero book reviews on their list of publications.

Writing reviews of academic books is not typically taught in doctoral programs, where the focus beyond the research article lies on conference papers and abstracts, or press releases and policy briefs, or popularizing texts such as letters-to-the-editor, blog posts, or even peer reviews. Nothing on book reviews.

“We sometimes feel like we send out review copies of books into a big black hole – and reviews can be frighteningly scarce!”

– Annika Olsson, Nordic Academic Press

Producing book reviews is not particularly encouraged by anyone. The merit systems do not reward it, departments don't get financial advantages for them, and it seems academics have not adopted a “reviewer culture” to actively seek books for regular review.

Book review is a genre where the reviewer presents, contextualizes, and evaluates a newly published work in his or her own field of expertise. Academic book reviews typically have a carefully defined intended audience, linked to the journal where the review is published. Book reviews present metacoverage that is an important indication of the historically situated reception of a new research piece. As such, they can also be research material for scholars and an area of academic inquiry.

Online support community in the making

This spring, NordMedia Network launches an online resource to support the production of academic book reviews. The idea is to build up a support community for those who would like to try out a genre they are not yet familiar with, and to provide tools, resources, and knowledge exchange on how to do it in a proper way. With this goal, the community is not only relevant for junior scholars – such as doctoral and postdoctoral researchers – but also senior academics with either experience to share or a desire to learn more about the genre themselves.

Reviewing literature requires a lot of pre-knowledge about the context the new piece of work is situated in. Junior scholars may struggle with feelings of inexperience, while senior scholars cannot necessarily find time for writing, or again, are simply not familiar with the genre. Both, however, could benefit from their academic peers to get started.

We intend to collect pedagogical support material for initiating and conducting book reviewing. We also want to design an online peer-support process that academics can enter to receive pre-publication feedback for their review text and to develop their reviewer identities.

“It is a way of keeping the scientific debate going.”

– Jonatan Leer, *Mediekultur*

Once ready, we would also like to collaborate with scientific journals with book review sections. We will offer the online resource for free to all journals – Nordic and international – to support their production of English-language reviews. Regular collaboration and information exchange with book review editors would also be something that could be included in the community activities.

Looking at the infrastructures

How does the system function? Our Academic Book Review Community began by having discussions with book review editors, book publishers, and review authors to capture the requirements and structures of the book reviewing scene.

Two Nordic book review editors – Ivar John Erdal from the Norwegian media studies journal *Norsk medietidskrift* and Jonatan Leer from the Danish media and communication research journal *MedieKultur* – highlighted the importance of initiating contact with book review editors. Review editors actively seek book reviewers for new books that they keep monitoring. Reviews are, indeed, typically written upon an invitation.

“On the rare occurrences that people approach me and say, “Ok, this new book is coming out – can I please write a review of it?” then it's Christmas and the birthday at the same time.”

– Ivar John Erdal, *Norsk medietidskrift*

Anke de Looper, acquisition editor at John Benjamins, shared that publishing houses make efforts to reach out to book review editors and potential authors to have them review newly published books. However, only part of the published material – maybe half, according to her – get reviewed.

Renewing reviewing?

At its worst, book review typically adopts a very static and constant form, being virtually the same as a book presentation. In its very definition, a review should, however, look back at the production context of the product that is being reviewed, creating an added value for the reception of the work. In book reviews, it is possible to develop ideas and arguments – to read books from different perspectives and arrive at new insights.

“A book review is most useful if it's published in a journal that's specifically for an audience that would otherwise not think the book is relevant for them.”

– Anke de Looper, John Benjamins Publishing Company

While there is a lot of talk and forums to discuss the development of research articles, there is not very much discussion about the development of book reviews. We are interested in how articles can be turned into open access, but no one really discusses the open access publishing, aggregation, curation, and collection of book reviews. Abstracts in research articles are produced in video form, but there are not remarkable intentions at journals to turn academic book reviewing into a podcast or vlog form.

As the book review editors remark, book reviews are frequently read sections. They are important for book publishers to get a hint of the qualities of books they publish, for researchers to get an idea of the content of a new book, and for the interested audiences beyond academia to follow new research.

You can find the **Academic Book Review Community page** at *NordMedia Network* under *Collaborations* in the main menu. We will continue producing videos and tutorials in the future. If you have ideas and suggestions regarding the Academic Book Review Community, please contact Maarit Jaakkola, maarit.jaakkola@gu.se.

Renew the review

Academic Book Review Community

Our new initiative intends to support researchers in writing reviews on recent academic literature in the field of media and communication research.

[Visit the community page →](#)

Photos: [Lacie Slezak](#) and [Kimberly Farmer](#) at Unsplash

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