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Editorial Note

Reevaluating Book Reviews: As Scientific Contributions

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Abstract: In the first part of this text, I would like to describe some advantages book reviews offer. The book reviews—providing the fact that they succeed in offering more than just a short content description to the reader—can also contribute to scientific discourses in a similar way regular contributions do. One of the reasons why book reviews currently often do not fulfil this possible function is due to the existing restrictions within traditional print media publishing. Additionally worth mentioning are actual standards within the scientific community which tend to underestimate the value of book reviews or review essays.

In the second part, I will discuss some developmental potentials in book reviews which up to now were hardly recognized: Especially with the Internet and its characteristics—nearly unlimited space resources; flexible publishing time and design of the contributions; chance for a direct exchange between researchers, for example using discussion boards—a re-evaluation of book reviews and review essays seems to be possible and reasonable.

Keywords: *review, review essay, dialogue, scientific exchange, perspectivity, online publishing*

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1. Preface

The rubric *FQS Review* is a fixed constituent of our online-journal since the first reviews and review essays had been published in the second issue in June 2000. For this occasion I wrote a short [Editorial Note](#), addressing all *FQS* readers as a kind of invitation. At this point, I would like to take the publishing of the actual issue to discuss some potentials, problems, and perspectives concerning *FQS Review*. [1]

2. Why Read Reviews? Why Write Reviews?

Reviews primarily are used to inform about new media units (books, CDs etc.) and to give orientation in view of the increasing number of scientific publications. There are

different audiences for reviews (with different interests): The authors or editors of a media unit perhaps are particularly interested in the scientific community's recognition and acknowledgement; for the publisher it might be especially important that the media unit wins against possible competing media units; the readers may appreciate some help in deciding whether to read and buy e.g. a book or not. As *FQS* Book Review Editor I am concerned with these three interests, and I try to consider them in an appropriate way. However, I would like to put forward another interest which appears to be substantial to me also as a writer of reviews: reviews should help to promote additional perspectives (here: within the field of qualitative research) and to open up new scientific discourses. [2]

The last mentioned interest means an additional approach to book reviewing: Instead of a pure content description, reviews should be written in favor of a critical view, embedding the media unit into the respective research context. Keeping this perspective in mind, reviews and review essays should fulfil three functions¹:

- *Description of contents*: The reader should get a first impression of (and insight into) the topics presented in the media unit. It is also necessary to clarify the pursued (explicit and implicit) objectives of the media unit, and to define to which group(s) of readers the media unit is addressed to.
- *Evaluation*: The review should contain a critical appreciation of the presented contents, i.e. it should be made clear to the reader to what extent the pursued objectives were fulfilled. To be able to unfold this critical appreciation, the review should additionally allow a kind of
- *Contextualizing*: Reviews should introduce the respective research field the media unit belongs to. Reviewers should at first acknowledge possible achievements and, secondly, stress future requirements. Doing this, the media unit helps to introduce the research area under consideration, and additionally to point out difficulties and possibilities for further research (nevertheless, the distinction between the authors/editors of the media units' position and the reviewers' critique should be as transparent as possible). Contextualizing requires a discussion—more or less—of the state of the art within the respective field the media unit belongs to, i.e. the media unit serves as a "representative" of this research field. This requires a reviewer who is familiar with the respective field and, in addition, is able and willing to develop an own emphases. [3]

To publish reviews and review essays, which fulfil the above mentioned demands, has to be a long-term aim of a journal like *FQS*, defining itself as a forum for scientific information and exchange. Unfortunately, up to now reviews (also in *FQS*) often are written in other ways: predominant are more or less self-limited summaries, and though review essays go beyond such a pure content description, the imbedding of the media unit into the respective research field is most times only realized in an arbitrary way. [4]

Since I am responsible for book reviews within the *FQS* Editorship, two questions come up from time to time and need a closer look:

1. Why are the three functions (description, evaluation, contextualizing) seldom considered in reviews and review essays in an appropriate way?
2. Why have reviews and review essays—compared to other contributions—a difficult status within journals (also our experiences within *FQS* show that reviews are less accessed and downloaded than regular contributions)? [5]

Both observations contradict my suggested energizing of scientific discussions including book reviews and review essays. Beyond this, the initially mentioned interests of the authors or editors (and the publishers, too) may not become fully satisfied, as the reviewed media unit are fewer recognized than desired. [6]

3. Some Possible Reasons for the Continued Underestimation of Reviews

I would like to mention three possible reasons (partly interrelated) which could help in understanding why reviews are still underestimated

- Besides very few exceptions²⁾, reviews lead a kind of "shadow existence": Most journals only publish rather brief review notes. The briefness of reviews comes partially from the restrictions imposed by the journals' scope, and from the often times very strict instructions (e.g. towards number of words) put forward by the journal editors. Also in *FQS*, some reviews limit themselves to a pure (and some times very short) description of contents. I attribute this to the fact that many reviewers are socialized more or less primarily by publishing in the print media. (Maybe the reviewers have "internalized" that more detailed reviews face the danger of being dropped out. Respectively they are only published if the particular journal composition permits this; several times I have experienced that reviews are shifted again and again from one issue to another, sometimes taking up more than a year between the completion and the printing of the review.) [7]
- Maybe obliged to such experiences, it apparently became generally accepted that reviews hardly help to promote an in-depth discussion. Eventually reviews, written as discourse-essays, are only assumed to be published in (the few established and specialized) journals—for instance "Contemporary Psychology". Within their five-page "Guidelines" for reviewers you will find the following suggestion: "Do not abstract the book. Talk about it and in doing it so indicate the range and nature of its content." (p.1)³⁾ [8]
- Finally, I would like to mention another and in my opinion a very important difficulty: writing a review is—compared to other writing activities—not well acknowledged within the Scientific Community. Let me mention two examples: First, a colleague of mine very indignantly commented that another colleague "dared" to mention book-reviews in his list of publication while applying for a job (because—in my colleague's opinion—he tried only to increase his numbers of publications). Secondly, reviews usually remain unconsidered by university evaluations done for the allocation of budget: So e.g. the current "Efficiency Measurement for Research and Teaching" at the Technical University of Berlin does not list reviews. A member of the commission which is assigned with the evaluation team told me (after I asked him why reviews are not part of the entry list) that the question whether reviews should be counted or not had caused some debates, finally however the commission came to the result that reviews should not be recompensed with "points"—because the reviewers "only" handle the work of other researchers. And he added, a scientist can write own books, articles and so on, instead of writing "reports" about others research (achievements). Such attitudes do not consider at all that reviews—beyond

scarcely summarizing contents—may have their own value. In contrary to the common attitudes, e.g. Contemporary Psychology places high value on reviews as reflected here: "CP reviews are not infrequently cited as sources of ideas." (op cit., p.2) [9]

Based on the points mentioned above it is not a surprise that a cycle is created: compared to other scientific publications reviews are less recognized, and additionally the question may arise why write reviews at all, because in the same time an own (better evaluated) contribution can be written (especially as in the case of job applications, the search committees some times ignore reviews in the applicants' publication lists—a kind of "mild" practice, the curt version might be to enumerate the listing of reviews against the respective applicant as mentioned before like: he/she only trying to impress the commission members). [10]

4. FQS-Reviews

4.1 Some first experiences

At the starting of the rubric *FQS Review*, it had been of substantial interest to increase the acknowledgement of book reviews. To realize this interest is probably easier for an on-line than for a print journal due to several reasons, (depending on the special character of on-line publishing):

- *Flexible space resources*: In contrast to the exactly calculated space of print journals, on-line publications (thus also reviews) have more flexibility and can cater to the authors', the editors' and the readers' interests. And though on-line journals also provide guidelines/specification e.g. in regards to suggested maximum length, these specifications often are just a rough marker (actually within *FQS* our first attention is given to the contents, not to the formal length of a contribution). But nevertheless most of the authors I had been in contact to refer again and again to presumed "given" instructions, and they apologize if they do not exactly meet these "instructions"—a practice probably dedicated to their former experience (in most cases: exclusively) with print publishing. [11]
- *Flexible ways of presenting contributions*: One special feature of on-line media is—though up to now still unused to a large extent—to use new ways of presentation. Towards writing reviews: a given review could be held on a first text level rather brief (also in regards to its clarity); optionally additional in-depth information could be made available for the reader using hyperlinks to access further text levels (but also other—visual or audio—data kinds), so the reader has the freedom to decide if she/he would like more information or not. For example in-depth information about each chapter of a monograph may be available using such hyperlinks, while these chapters are mentioned in the main text only casually. [12]
- *Flexible publication times*: Unlike the partly necessary postponement of reviews (and other texts) usual in print media, on-line journals are free to publish the reviews immediately after they pass the evaluative review successfully. Thus, we published separately two reviews and one review essay in September, and two reviews and three review essays in November, all belonging to the third

FQS issue. We will continue this publication practice also in the future, because on the one hand it helps to inform our readers about new books etc. keeping them up to date. On the other hand we are interested in this practice as we like to draw our readers' attention to this kind of scientific publishing and in encouraging a dialogue amongst them (against a tendency that reviews are not accessed as frequently as other contributions if they are published only with the regular issue). So one possible decision in the future might be to additionally publish special issues with reviews dedicated to different topics in the field of qualitative social research. [13]

- *Direct exchange*: Also in contrast to print media, on-line journals provide the possibility for a direct interaction between the author of the review, the author/editor of the reviewed media unit and the readers. So for instance, the author/editor can pick up some aspects from the review and reformulate these (or defend his/her position), or he/she can offer remarks and supplements using the discussion-board; readers may ask for further information or—if they are familiar with the media unit—they can also add additional perspectives. But unfortunately, until now this important function to support scientific exchange e.g. via the discussion-board is hardly used at all. So in the future one important aim will be to assist persons interested in using this technical improvement and sporadically offer chats with the author/editor of a media unit, with different reviewers and with interested readers. [14]

4.2 Some future extensions and suggestions worth considering

Besides the potentials already mentioned, which above all spring from the special characteristics of the Internet and which may also contribute to a necessary re-evaluation of reviews, further options are possible. Actually we are discussing three additional perspectives: (a) the multiple discussion of one media unit, (b) the review of "classics" and other "older" (and fewer "prominent") media units, as well as (c) reprints of previously published reviews and recent comments should be published. I would like to describe these three suggestions briefly, in order to illustrate how reviews—understood as a critical introduction into a research field, based on the discussion of a media unit—can open discourses. [15]

Multiple discussions are possible e.g. by taking up reviews to certain media units (partly from print journals co-operating with *FQS*). Publishing different reviews about one media unit hopefully will make it clear that reviews also represent their own kind of reading/understanding, i.e.: they are statements, written from (disciplinary, school-oriented etc.) points of view. The aim of such a procedure is to receive a range of reception styles for one media unit. [16]

The idea not only to publish reviews of current media units but gradually also to include reviews of "older" media units is led by a similar concern: while the previous interest was to show that reviews differ in regard e.g. to the disciplinary affiliation or to special interests of the respective author, using older media for reviewing additionally helps to become aware of changes in time, of the historical character of reception. To realize this, two ways may be useful: besides the new discussion of so-called classics (and such media units which could be regarded as classics, but did however so far received only few attention), reviews published long time ago could also be re-edited as a kind of reprint, but accompanied by a comment from the reviewers' current perspective, differentiating as clearly as possible between the reviewer's "old" and his or her "new"

approach to the respective unit. Both ways of introducing a modern perspective hopefully will help to recognize—using examples important for qualitative research—how and also why (formerly positive or negative) evaluations proceed in the continuation of (scientific) history. [17]

Most efforts mentioned as necessary within these Editorial Note are obliged to our idea of re-evaluating reviews because of their potentials for scientific discourses, and it will take time to realize this idea. But not enough: to promote their realization especially will depend on the support of all persons involved and interested in the further development of *FQS Review*, i.e. the authors/editors of a media unit, the reviewers, and—last but not least—the readers. Without their active participation, the potentials of on-line publishing remain unused, which means in the long run to limit oneself to the electronic version of an off-line journal instead of using the creative and innovative function the Internet may fulfil for scientific exchange. [18]

Having the developmental targets of a online-journal like *FQS* in mind I hope that review notes and review essays published in this issue will not only raise the readers' interest, but will also be seen and used as a first step into the sketched direction. [19]

Notes

1) Though review essays more strongly than review notes may serve these evaluation and contextualizing functions. [<back>](#)

2) An important exception in Germany is "Handlung Kultur Interpretation [Action Culture Interpretation]", a journal that aims at using review essays also for a critical dialog between the disciplines; worth mentioning for the Anglo-Saxon space is especially "Culture & Psychology". [<back>](#)

3) These guidelines are not publicly accessible; they are dispatched to reviewers as a guidance for their work. [<back>](#)

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