

Joining the ‘great conversation’ – The fundamental role of annotation in academic society

Annotations can often be seen as an interruption, something to be expunged from carefully maintained library collections and the version of record. However, drawing on their research and writing practice, Remi Kalir and Antero Garcia present a different view of annotation, as a vital mechanism by which academics have historically connected and interwoven their own thinking with contemporaries and those who have gone before them. Reflecting on how new digital tools have re-invigorated annotation and contributed to the creation of their recent book, they suggest annotation presents a vital means by which academics can re-engage with each other and the wider world.

The everyday practice of annotation enables new forms of participatory scholarly communication and the democratisation of knowledge production. Whereas some may dismiss annotation as quotidian, we see great value in annotation helping academics to read, review, revise, and share scholarship. How so? Because, scholars are annotators.

We add commentary and criticism to manuscripts during peer review. We write upon student papers to assess an argument and provide feedback. For academics who study medieval manuscripts and well-worn books, marginalia are marks of cognition, communication, and can reveal traces of intellectual networks — indeed, [Milton annotated Shakespeare](#).

Nonetheless, annotation is often perceived as incidental and irrelevant when compared to the authority of a primary source. It is literally and figuratively marginal.

Recent developments highlight the promising role of annotation when producing, reviewing and revising, and also disseminating scholarship. To appreciate these innovations, a shared understanding of annotation is needed. We prefer a simple definition: Annotation is a note added to a text.

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A citation added to a manuscript is an annotation. An endnote or a translator’s gloss is annotation. Commonplace features of digital publications like links and open data are annotations. In-line commentary during peer review is annotation, too.

Annotation is elemental to scholarship.

Scholars are likely familiar with the so-called “Great Conversation,” or the idea in Western thought that we collectively participate in an iterative process of knowledge production through reference, review, and refinement. As our conversation continues over time, an ever-expanding network of annotation—through notation, citation, links, and data—traces an interconnected lineage of ideas and insight.

Annotation has been a valuable form of social and scholarly media that predates, by centuries, today’s social media platforms.

The strategic and socially connected addition of notes to texts is now powering new approaches to knowledge production, peer review and revision, and scholarly communication.

Take, for example, [Annotation for Transparent Inquiry](#) (ATI), an initiative of the Qualitative Data Repository. ATI is a project supporting social scientists to achieve greater transparency in their research. Whether with studies of [algorithmic fairness](#) or [human rights](#), scholars whose research is associated with ATI include a public layer of digital annotation atop their publication that can feature data citations and excerpts, analytic notes, and—when possible—links to data sources. Annotation, in the ATI project, helps scholars to make their knowledge claims more transparent and publicly accessible to academic communities.

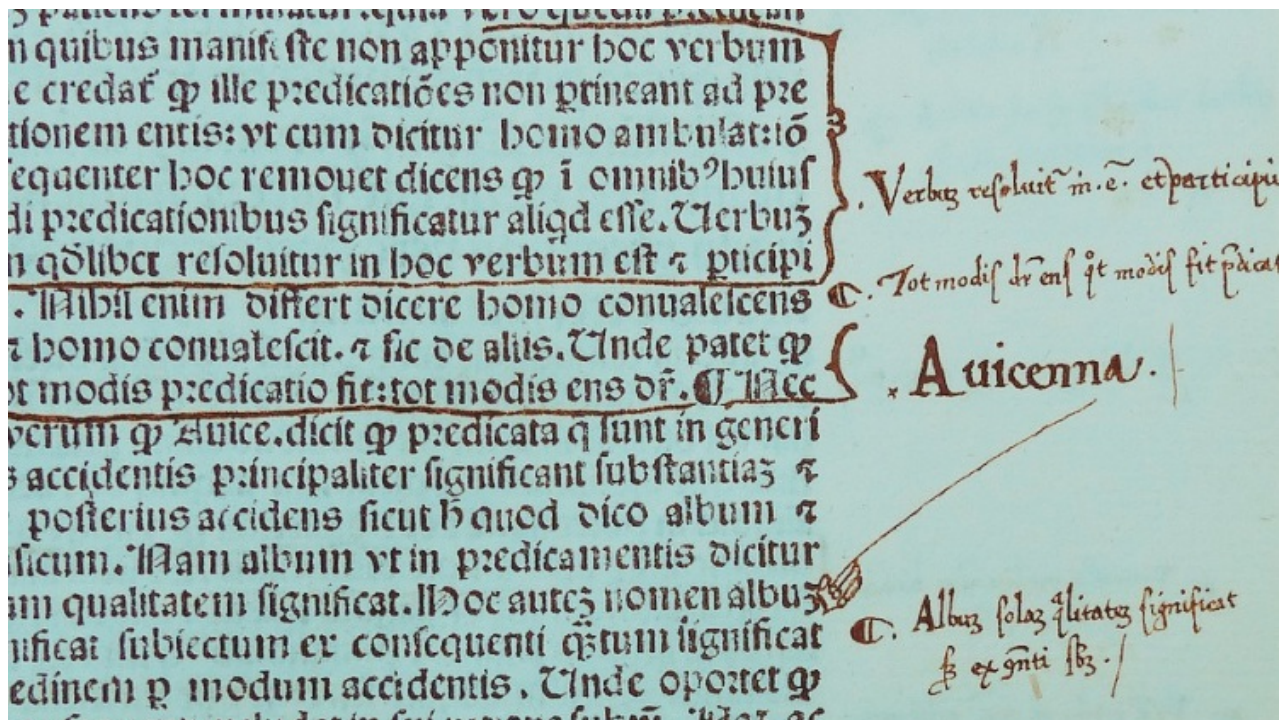


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Amidst deliberation about the [social value](#) and [culture of peer review](#), annotation is also a key characteristic in emerging open peer review (OPR) processes and the participatory revision of scholarship. Three [common OPR practices](#) frequently utilize annotation. The first is open participation, or an invitation for groups to review a manuscript through in-line annotation and forms of commentary. The second is open interaction, with annotation guiding back-and-forth exchanges among authors and reviewers. And the third is post-publication review, with readers commenting atop the published version of scholarship.

Pioneering OPR experiments, like Kathleen Fitzpatrick's [Planned Obsolescence](#), have informed subsequent and more systemic annotation-powered open review initiatives from [Springer Nature journals](#) and [open preprint archives](#). The impetus motivating many OPR efforts –including increased transparency, accessibility, and [participation in peer review](#) –has been actualised because of annotation.

Not only does annotation inform peer review processes, the practice amplifies the social qualities of research dissemination and scholarly communication. This is unmistakable on social media, and specifically with Twitter, as academics and publishers [share research and increase engagement](#). The literary critic [Sam Anderson observed](#), a decade ago, that “Twitter is basically electronic marginalia on everything in the world: jokes, sports, revolutions.”

Twitter features like quote tweets and hashtags encourage annotation as users add their notes—like a relevant comment or tag—to someone else's tweet. Scholars have taken keen advantage of these social media norms. Book titles become hashtags. Tags curate scholarly conversations and communities. Quote tweets are often literal quotes, as images feature highlighted article passages or handwritten book marginalia. The ubiquity of social media has reinvigorated the social life of scholarly annotation.

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As observers and advocates of annotation, we have invited opportunities for experimental and participatory approaches to the production, peer review, and communication of our work. Our book [Annotation](#) did progress through a conventional publication process structured by two rounds of anonymous peer review—first for the proposal and again with the full manuscript. Yet we wanted to do more, engage with multiple stakeholders, and layer divergent expertise into the substance of our book. Discussing the promise of annotation for open and democratic scholarship meant engaging in new processes ourselves.

The full draft of our recent book *Annotation* was made openly accessible via the [PubPub platform](#) throughout the summer of 2019. We invited anyone, whether colleague or curious reader, to openly participate in reviewing our work and engaging directly with us through in-line commentary. Over two dozen individuals voluntarily contributed their wisdom—and wit. Our exchanges totalled nearly 500 annotations and over 20,000 words. Some of these comments now appear in the final version of our book through a series of custom illustrations that demonstrate the discursive characteristics of scholarly annotation. And to encourage social media discussion, we created the hashtag [#AnnoConvo](#) (a shorthand of “annotation conversation”) to help readers share and curate their ongoing engagement.

As we wrote, revised, and shared *Annotation*—thanks, in large part, to the social and scholarly affordances of annotation—we were influenced by Andrew Piper’s keen discussion of reading as an ecosystem. [Piper has argued](#) that the complexity and value of human communication resides in “our ability to layer—or more artisanally understood, to weave—different modes of communication with one another to give those same words a deeper, more profound meaning.”

Academic publication persists amidst challenges of trust in peer review, criticism of expertise, and barriers to communicating the relevance of research. Annotation, in light of these concerns, is not a panacea. Yet for academics committed to a more inclusive “Great Conversation,” annotation is a strategic social practice to productively engage readers, advance research impact, and expand the democratisation of knowledge

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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