Learned Societies and the New Media: A Survey

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Introduction

In the early 2000s, the later President of the International Federation for Modern Languages and Literatures (FILLM) David A Wells edited a collection of papers written "with a view to introducing and explaining the history, purpose, and function" of FILLM as well as each of the federation's eighteen member associations.[1] These papers were published in 2003 as an

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[1] David A Wells, "Editorial Preface to Presentations by the Member Associations of the International Federation for Modern Languages and Literatures," *Diogenes* 50, no. 2 (2003): 91. Wells served as President of FILLM from 2005-2008. Prior to that he was the federation's Secretary-General from

appendix to the journal *Diogenes* under the heading 'FILLM – History and Objectives.' The aim was to give

> An overview of the astonishingly wide and diverse range of activities which make up the very heterogeneous forms of academic engagement in the modern languages and literatures at the present time.[2]

Looking through these papers, one notices among many other things that the majority of FILLM's members already then made use of new media.[3] Of the nineteen associations, fourteen provided readers with a link to their website while one linked to the website of its journal. Only four gave no indication of being accessible online, one of these being FILLM itself.[4]

Looking more closely at the papers, however, an online presence does not appear to have been a main concern. Beyond simply stating their web address, the papers tended to discuss such issues in an offhand manner. The paper on the Internal Association of French Studies (AIEF) is characteristic. Here Louis Van Delft reported that the society had recently undergone a process of renewal during which "an Internet site [had] of course been created," but leaves it at that.[5] Some papers do go a little further and describe what sort of content could be found on the specific organization's website.[6] But, apart from Virginie Douglas who stressed that the newly created website of The International Institute Charles Perrault, France (IICP) was "a step towards reaching a larger number of people and making the Institute and children's literature

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1981-2005. For many years, he also acted as the representative of the Modern Humanities Research Association (MHRA) on the FILLM Committee.

[2] Wells, "Editorial Preface," 92.

[3] The term 'new media' is here used in a broad, colloquial sense (see, for example, Wikipedia *sub verbum*). But, as will be explained later, the chapter is mainly focused on learned societies' use of their own websites and social media accounts.

[4] Facebook was founded in 2004 and Twitter in 2006.

[5] Louis Van Delft, "International Association of French Studies (AIEF)," *Diogenes* 50, no. 2 (2003): 99.

[6] Cristina Robalo Cordeiro, "International Association of Lusitanists (AIL)," *Diogenes* 50, no. 2 (2003): 100; Gerard Gillespie, "The International Comparative Literature Association (AILC/ICLA)," *Diogenes* 50, no. 2 (2003): 118; Roel Vismans, "International Association for Dutch Studies (IVN)," *Diogenes* 50, no. 2 (2003): 130; Katie Wales and Mick Short, "The Poetics and Linguistics Association (PALA)," *Diogenes* 50, no. 2 (2003): 140.

in general better known," no one discussed the thoughts and ideas behind their websites or what sort of vision they had for it.[7]

That was 2003. A lot of water has passed under the bridge since then. For one, the media landscape has changed dramatically. It goes without saying that online media plays a much greater role in our private lives now and the same can be said for the lives of learned societies. The need to think closely about how learned societies make use of new media is therefore all the more pressing now than it was when Wells compiled the appendix. This chapter looks to give a general survey of how FILLM and its current members use their websites and social media accounts today. I will do so by first presenting what this group of societies do to create an online presence for themselves. In other words, which ones have a website, and which maintain a page or a profile on the most popular social media sites. Here, I will also give an overview of what sort of content they produce online. Secondly, I will give an assessment of the societies' way of using new media. This will involve considering how good the layout and design of their websites are; what sort of content they produce both there and on their social media accounts; and whether in light of recent developments it is a good idea for a learned society to maintain a social media presence at all. In this sense, the study can be said to have both a quantitative and a qualitative dimension.

In assessing the quality of the societies' use of new media, I will make some suggestions and recommendations for how they can improve their websites and social media accounts. These are presented because, as many scholars have pointed out, a learned society cannot be static in nature, but must be ready to adapt to changing circumstances in society at large.[8] I do not propose that the present crop of learned societies necessarily need to reinvent themselves dramatically, but, rather, that many of them ought to think more about how they present themselves online (and to whom) and how they organize themselves to make the most of their resources. Finally, it is important for me to stress that these recommendations should not be

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[7] Virginie Douglas, "The International Institute Charles Perrault, France (IICP)," *Diogenes* 50, no. 2 (2003): 121.

[8] See Chapters 2, 9, and 11 in this volume. See also James Hopkins, "The Role of Learned Societies in Knowledge Exchange and Dissemination: The Case of the Regional Studies Association, 1965-2005," *History of Education* 40, no. 2 (2011): 271; Dianne McCarthy and Marc Rands, "Learned Societies: A Bridge Between Research, Policy Making and Funding," *Studies in Higher Education* 38, no. 3 (2013): 482; Diane Scott-Lichter, "Learned Societies: Resilience Not Reliance Required," *Learned Publishing* 27, no. 2 (2014): 83.

taken as a gold standard, but rather as something to think about. They have been written to create a discussion, to spur ideas and dialogue.

This study thus looks to give a different perspective on the state of learned societies in the twenty-first century from the other chapters in this volume. Furthermore, looking beyond this volume, it will contribute to discussions about learned societies' use of new media by having a different focus from most other studies. Previous scholarship has mainly been concerned with issues surrounding Open Access publishing, the challenges and opportunities this presents for learned societies both in the Humanities and other fields.[9] It could be interesting to examine how the present selection of learned societies are affected by the questions surrounding Open Access publication, but, even though the issue cannot be ignored entirely, the study will mainly concentrate on how they use their websites and social media accounts more generally.

Definitions and Material

A. What Is a Learned Society

At the symposium where the chapters in this volume were first presented, the participants had quite different ideas about what constitutes a learned society. This is hardly surprising. Overall, scholars have recently found it hard to come up with more than tentative definitions. As James Hopkins has said, the main reason for this is that no one has yet attempted a comprehensive study of how learned societies in general have evolved during the twentieth century.[10] Scholars have a clear idea of the provenance and development of learned societies up and until the end of the nineteenth century, but due to the proliferation of such organizations in the twentieth century they have now partly lost the empirical basis on which to ground their definitions. It is not my ambition to initiate such a project let alone engage in any debates about nomenclature. However, given the uncertainties that exist around the term today, it seems necessary to say something about what I take it to mean in this particular context. Moreover, the definition will be useful later when I assess the content the learned societies in question publish on their websites and social media accounts.

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[9] See for example: Scott-Lichter, "Learned Societies," 83-84; Martin J. Bull, "Open Access and Academic Associations in the Political and Social Sciences," *European Political Science* 15 (2016): 201-210; Dan Pollock and Ann Michael, "The Impact of Open Access on UK Learned Societies," *Delta Think*, May 7, 2018, https://deltathink.com/news-views-the-impact-of-open-access-on-uk-learned-societies/.

[10] Hopkins, "The Role of Learned Societies," 258.

Although scholars today are reluctant to propose more than a working definition of what constitutes a learned society,[11] they do tend to offer descriptions that are largely similar to each other and Hopkins' own can be said to be representative.

> Modern learned societies exist to promote an academic discipline, sub-discipline or field. They do this through encouraging research, providing a forum for exchange and the means for research to be disseminated. They are not-for-profit organizations that do not exist primarily for the benefit or prestige of their members and are highly accessible to interested individuals and groups.[12]

In addition, Hopkins notes that they "share a commitment to the exchange and dissemination of knowledge" and that their main functions are:[13]

- To facilitate exchange and networking amongst its members through meetings and conferences.
- To publish journals and book series.
- To award prizes and bursaries.
- To provide educational and developmental opportunities.
- To represent its discipline, sub-discipline or field in wider society.

For some scholars, the phrase "do not exist primarily for the benefit or prestige of their members" is what sets a learned society apart from a professional association. According to Leon Benade, learned societies "exist to advance their society cause primarily by research and dissemination" while professional associations for their part "exist to support their members who work in practice."[14] Noting several other examples of scholars who insist on this distinction, Hopkins describes the distinction as an altruistic one. Learned societies are "through their charitable objectives concern with the 'public good' rather than with the private interest of their members."[15] The latter is the domain of the professional association. Hopkins

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[11] Compare particularly Chapter 11 in this volume.

[12] Hopkins, "The Role of Learned Societies," 259. Similar description can be found in, for example, Bull, "Open Access," 202 and Scott-Lichter, "Learned Societies," 83.

[13] Hopkins, "The Role of Learned Societies," 259-260.

[14] Leon Benade, "Learned Societies, Practitioners and Their 'Professional' Societies: Grounds for Developing Closer Links," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 48, no. 14 (2016): 1395.

[15] Hopkins, "The Role of Learned Societies," 261.

further notes, however, that the distinction is often not straightforward and, in fact, it seems reasonable to say that there is no clear difference between the two types of organization. As Dianna McCarthy and Marc Rands have rightly pointed out, many learned societies today find themselves functioning "as an intermediary, or neutral forum between research universities and government, providing a channel of authoritative research information to help inform policy making and as an academically respected authority for the dispersal of research funding."[16]

I highlight the tendency to make this distinction for two reasons. First, the Modern Language Association (MLA) is one of the organizations included in this study and, occasionally, it is described as a professional association and not a learned society.[17] I will maintain, however, that the MLA is an example of an organization that does not fit easily into either category. Even a cursory look at its activities will show that it fulfils the criteria put forward by Hopkins for what defines a learned society. Second, I will later argue that there is a line of thought which maintains that within the Humanities there is an urgent need to develop connections with people outside academia, and that most of the learned societies considered here do not make the most of new media to address such audiences.

B. The Societies

The learned societies under examination in this study are: FILLM and its member associations. This means that it will focus on a broad range of different organizations in terms of size, membership base, financial means and so on. The organizations do share a number of traits, however. Like the MLA, they all fit Hopkins' working definition of a learned society. In addition, they fulfil the requirements for being a member of FILLM. Broadly speaking, this means that they are committed to furthering the study of medieval and modern languages and literatures.[18] They are international in "aims and outlook, free of political aims, [...] independent of any form of external control" and "open to scholars of any nationality."[19] Each organization is governed by a constitution verified by its members – of which there are a

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[16] McCarthy and Rands, "Learned Societies," 470. Bull, "Open Access," 202, also adds lobbying to his definition.

[17] See, for example, entry on Wikipedia: "Modern Language Associations," Wikipedia, last modified December 28, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_Language_Association.

[18] "Membership," The International Federation for Modern Languages and Literatures (FILLM), last modified March 11, 2015, http://www.fillm.org/membership.html.

[19] FILLM, "Membership."

minimum of fifty – and controlled by a regularly elected committee. Finally, they have all been functioning efficiently for a minimum of two years. As for FILLM, it is a federation of other academic organizations and does not have individual members of its own, but, apart from this detail, it can be said to comply with its own membership requirements.

More specifically, this study focuses on FILLM and the following seventeen organizations:

- American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA)
- Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS)
- International Comparative Literature Association (AILC)
- Associazione Internazionale per gli Studi di Lingua e Letteratura Italiane (AISSLI)
- Asociación de Lingüística y Filología de América Latina (ALFAL)
- Association for Rhetoric and Communication in Southern Africa (ARCSA)
- Australasian Universities Languages and Literature Association (AULLA)
- Children's Literature Association (ChLA)
- The European Society for the Study of English (ESSE)
- Global Rhetoric Society (GRS)
- International Association for Dialogue Analysis (IADA)
- International Association for Scandinavian Studies (IASS)
- International Association for University Professors of English (IAUPE)
- International Society for the Oral Literatures of Africa (ISOLA)
- Kirjallisuudentutkijain Seura (The Literary Research Society [KTS])
- Modern Language Association (MLA)
- West African Linguistic Society (WALS) [20]

C. New Media

This chapter is interested in the abovementioned organizations' online presence and how they make use of new media. As noted earlier, I use the term 'new media' in a broad, colloquial sense. Practically speaking, this means that the following analysis focuses on the websites and social media accounts of these learned societies. By 'social media accounts' is understood pages administered, maintained and run by the organizations themselves on the most popular social media sites. In the present case, this means Facebook and Twitter. It could have included others too, but apart from a few exceptions none of the above organizations have accounts on other social media sites.

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[20] From here on, I will refer to each organization by its acronym.

It was intentionally specified that the social media accounts be administered, maintained and run by the societies themselves, because the present chapter is primarily concerned with sites that the organizations are directly responsible for. Naturally, it is possible to find information about each society on the internet which has not been published by the organization itself. Wikipedia is a good example of this. On the English language site, there are entries for FILLM, ACLA, AILC, ESSE, MLA, ChLA and WALS.[21] Likewise, for example, it is possible to find posts on Twitter which relate to an organization which does not administer an account on that platform. In this paper, this inadvertence is not treated as evidence of an 'online presence' and will not be considered any further. In addition to this, it must be mentioned that several of the learned societies in question have on occasion created sites which relate to a particular single event (e.g. a conference) or they maintain websites or social media accounts related to side-projects.[22] Although, such sites are probably more or less directly administered by the organizations themselves, they have not been included in this study. The reasons for this is to provide some limits to an already large material.

Finally, it is necessary to make two additional points. First, AISLLI, ALFAL and GRS all maintain sites online where I do not master the main languages (Italian, Spanish and Portuguese and Chinese, respectively). This means that, at times, there has been limits to how well I have been able to assess these sites. I will not point out specifically when that is, but leave it to the reader to infer from the context. Second, it must be stated that all the material was checked and verified for the last on time on 14 February 2019. Changes made to the organizations' websites and social media accounts after this date have not been considered.

Learned Societies Online: A Survey

This section looks to give an overview of how the learned societies in question appear online. It will begin by focusing on the organizations' websites before moving on to their social media accounts. The discussion is partly based on the information found in Appendix 2 and 3 and will

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[21] According to Wikipedia's policies and guidelines it is not allowed to create entries for companies and organizations which you represent in some capacity; in other words, there should not be a conflict of interest behind the entries. See "Policy and Guidelines," Wikipedia, last modified February 28, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Policies_and_guidelines.

[22] See for example: The website for FILLM's 2018 symposium in Vienna, Austria, http://fillm2020.univie.ac.at/fillm-symposium-2018/travel/; The MLA Action Network, https://action.mla.org/; or the Twitter profile for the *ESSE Messenger*, @EsseMEssenger.

be predominately quantitative in nature. A more qualitative assessment of the material is made in the following section.

A. Websites

As can be seen in Appendix 2, all of the societies maintain their own websites and ten have had their sites upgraded to be compatible with mobile devices. When it comes to quality and content, however, the websites vary quite substantially.

In terms of content, the societies' websites have many things in common, but some of them also include more unusual material. In general, as a minimum, the websites will include general information about the organization in question: a mission statement, constitution and statutes, board members, a brief history, contact details. In addition to this, most will also include information about membership and affiliation to other organizations (academic or otherwise); information about conferences, events, meetings and call for papers (although there are big differences in the number of these posted); prizes, awards, grants and bursaries; and publications (either the society's own or those of its members).

Among the more unusual segments, one notes the following. ARCSA, IADA, FILLM and ISOLA include multimedia content (such as photos and videos), although this is not always presented under a separate heading. ACLA has an archive with official documents available from as far back as 1974. Here one also notes that ACLA has a section entitled the 'State of the Discipline Report,' although this links to a separate website. The MLA's site is by far the most comprehensive of them all and it also includes the most varied content. It has information about its style sheet, of course. Then it has a career section (including job adverts, scholarship information, etc.) something we also find on ESSE's and ChLA's sites. It is possible to donate to the MLA, a possibility IADA also offers. The MLA has the most extensive resource section with lots of information, in particular relating to the importance of research into languages and literatures today. Resource sections can also be found on other sites – often mainly including links to relevant journals, websites or databases – but one notes that ChLA has a newly created section which focuses specifically on teaching and learning in relation to children's literature. Furthermore, the MLA also has a section for its Commons Network, which includes a discussion forum for its members and various blogs. Blogs can also be found on the websites of ACLA and FILLM, but in both cases they must be considered defunct. ACLALS links to its discussion forum on Yahoo Groups, which appears to be more active than the website, but apart from that no other organization offer that service. Finally, it can be mentioned that AISLLI's website contain very little information – the reason I highlight this will become

apparent later – while ARCSA's includes much which pertains to its links to the Centre for Rhetoric Studies, Faculty of Law, at the University of Cape Town (such as graduates from the centre and its visitors).

In terms of accessibility, most of the organizations' content is available to anyone visiting the sites. However, IADA, ChLA, AILC, MLA and ACLA, for example, do include information which is only available after registering and logging in. Almost all websites are available in English and for the majority this is the only available language. ALFAL's website is only available in Spanish and Portuguese while the GRS's can only be read in Chinese (it purports to have versions in English, French and Spanish too, but these are defunct). The AILC also have a French language version and the KTS has all its information in Finnish and some in Swedish and English. In terms of language options, WALS offers the most choice with the site being readily available in Arabic, Chinese, Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish.

B. Social Media

When it comes to social media, the picture is more fragmented (see Appendix 3). First, it must be noted that Facebook and Twitter are the main sites these learned societies use. Three of the organizations do have a channel on YouTube while none maintain a profile on Instagram and only one (FILLM) had a Google+ account when that service was still available.[23] The present discussion will therefore focus on the organizations' activities on the former two sites.

Of the eighteen societies, thirteen are represented (in one way or another) on Facebook while five are not. Seven maintain an account on Twitter, eleven do not. No organization is on Twitter who is not also on Facebook. In short, out of the eighteen organizations in question, five are not to be found on either Facebook or Twitter. In addition to this, it is necessary to note a few things. First, the GRS is a Chinese organization and might therefore be subject to governmental restrictions on its use of sites such as Facebook and Twitter—and similar questions must be relevant for WeChat usage in that context. Second, all the societies that are on Facebook maintain a page except ALFAL and WALS. The former is present as a personal profile under the name "Daniela Gonzales" (presumably the administrator) and the latter maintains a group. AULLA and FILLM both have personal profiles as well as their pages. Unlike FILLM, AULLA's profile is fairly active and appears to be used in conjunction with the page the society also manages. Finally, it must be mentioned that the Facebook accounts

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[23] Google began the process of winding up Google+ towards the end of 2018.

belonging to ISOLA, ARCSA and AILC must be considered virtually defunct, the last activity having taken place in November 2011, October 2012 and May 2013, respectively.

In terms of followers, the MLA stands out with over a hundred and ten thousand on Facebook and more than seven thousand on Twitter. In both cases, that is more than all the other societies put together. On Facebook, ACLA, AISLLI, ChLA and ESSE also have more than a thousand followers while on Twitter it is only ACLA and ChLA. Of the rest, their following tends to run in the hundreds. Apart from ChLA, the societies have a larger following on Facebook than Twitter, a tendency which is most likely due to the greater overall popularity of the former.

As is the case with their websites, the organizations' use of social media differ considerably. The first thing to notice is the kind of content they share with their followers. Where the societies will use their websites to distribute information about their own events and activities, and perhaps also that of their members, the social media accounts are used to publish more multifarious content. The social media accounts are used to distribute news that also appear on their websites, but on top of that several societies make use of e.g. Facebook to distribute information which does not appear on their websites. The best example of this is the MLA. Of the organizations who maintain an active account on Facebook and Twitter, the MLA stands out not only in terms of its number of followers but also in the kind of content it publishes and the regularity with which that content appears. One reason that the MLA has such a larger number of followers is no doubt that it is the most famous organization in this selection. Another can be that the content it produces on its social media accounts is not restricted to information relating to the association's own business. On a daily basis, the MLA shares links to several articles which, in one way or another, concern the study, teaching and status of literatures and languages today. The links can be of a serious nature, including political issues, but also more light-hearted. The MLA's Twitter account is slightly different in this respect, being more dominated by information which pertains to the association's own work and publications. Following the MLA's social media accounts not only gives you easy access to news about the association's own activities, it also provides you with regular articles which relate broadly to the study of literature and languages.

Some of the other societies use their social media accounts in a way similar to the MLA. AISLLI is an interesting case in this regard, because while the organization's website is rudimentary – existing as a subpage on the University of Pennsylvania website (under the pages on the Department of Italian Studies) – and rarely updated, their Facebook account is very active. It has the fifth highest number of followers of FILLM's members and these are served

with a great variety of news about Italian literature and language, with several posts every week. The information shared seems to include notifications about book publications and events, but also posts related to primary sources. Similarly, AULLA runs a website which, although more active than AISLLI's, is also more quiet than its Facebook account. There AULLA often shares articles and news relating the study of languages and literatures in general with a slight emphasis on Australian content. ALFAL is similar to AULLA and AISLLI in this respect.

ESSE is another interesting case here. The society maintains accounts on both Facebook and Twitter, but unlike the other organizations, its Twitter account is by far the most active. Here ESSE will regularly (daily) post especially call for papers. These seems to be the same one finds on their website. ESSE, however, does not use their Facebook or Twitter account to distribute news of a more general sort. The society restricts itself to using these as another outlet for the information found on their website. In this respect, ESSE is much like FILLM, ACLA, ChLA and KTS. It is just a whole lot more active, partly due to the great number of calls for papers that the society receives through its members.

Most of the societies' social media accounts are accessible to anyone who has a profile on Facebook or Twitter. As mentioned, WALS maintains a group on Facebook (rather than a page) and the society requires one to ask for permission to join thus keeping checks and balances on its followers in a way the others do not. The vast majority of the content posted is in English except what is found on the Facebook accounts of ALFAL (Spanish and Portuguese) and AISLLI (Italian).

Learned Societies Online: An Assessment

In the previous section, I gave a survey of how the learned societies examined in this study make use of new media. The survey was quantitative in nature. Mainly, it focused on giving an overview of what sort of content they make available through their websites. In addition, it was also discussed to what extent they make use of social media and what sort of content they share on such sites. By contrast, this section will have a more qualitative dimension. It will assess how well the societies use their websites and social media accounts. The discussion will focus on three areas: the layout and design of their websites; the sort of content they produce; and their use of social media. In assessing these areas, I will present some suggestions for how they could improve their online presence which, as mentioned earlier, should not be taken as a gold standard, but rather as topics for discussion.

Just as it is possible to distinguish the work of a skilled painter from that of someone whose repertoire is restricted to stickmen and three-dimensional boxes on a notepad, so it is also possible to distinguish a website designed by a professional from that of an amateur. This is not to say that there are not amateurs well-capable of constructing a good-looking website, but there will often be a tangible difference between a website developed by someone with a relevant education and well-versed in programming and that made by someone with limited practical experience. However, when assessing the layout and design of a website, there is no golden standard against which to measure. Among the current set of learned societies, few would disagree that the MLA has the most professional looking website, but to some it might also seem too corporate, even impersonal for a society that, partly, looks to form a community of likeminded scholars. Put differently, it is to some extent a matter of personal taste and opinion whether the layout and design of a given website is good or not, but, at the same time, it is also possible to assess the quality of a website in a useful and constructive fashion.

Since the MLA has already been mentioned, it seems appropriate to begin this assessment there. As mentioned, the MLA's website stands out. It looks the most professional: it is sleek, modern and it is easy to find your way through a relatively large amount of content. The societies that come closest to the MLA in this selection are ChLA, ACLA and GRS. Along with ARCSA, ALFAL, WALS and IADA, these credit their websites to companies that supply web-design solutions. It is not clear, however, whether these deals involve constant maintenance, or the organizations have paid a one-off fee for the construction of the site and maintain it themselves, but given the costs involved the latter seems more likely. In any case, the results vary quite a lot in quality. The three former appears the most elegant, professional and well-organized. Both ARCSA and WALS suffer from having a lot of dense, small text on the opening page, making it difficult to get an overview of the site. ARCSA's website also have quite confusing topic bars running along the top and left side of the screen. IADA has a very simple website that could be improved by having a more detailed topic bar at the top which would make the content more readily available. ALFAL's website looks a little less elegant than those of ChLA, ACLA and GRS, but it is well-organized and easy to navigate.

AISLLI and IASS, for their part, make use of local university sites and the results are good, although the former only offers the most basic information and content. ACLALS also use a university host, but the website looks nothing like that of the university in question and it must therefore be assumed that it is designed by the person who maintains the site. Of the three,

IASS's looks the most modern, but, although unassuming, ACLALS's is well-presented and simple to navigate. The result is a site which, in quality, looks more like those also developed by private individuals (FILLM and KTS) and those made from WordPress-templates (AULLA, ISOLA). These sites are decent, but they lack some of the cutting-edge look of, say, ChLA. Even though there is no information about who made them, IAUPE and AILC have good, decent websites; the layouts are simple and unpretentious.[24] I have saved ESSE's website for last, because it appears to be something of an anomaly in this context. The society updated its website not so long ago. The old one looked much like ARCSA's – very dense in information with a somewhat messy appearance – but the new, updated site looks very impressive: elegant and modern while still unassuming and simple to navigate even though it contains a lot of information. As far as I can make out, the site is made by a person who does not do web-design for a living, but their skills are clearly more advanced than those who have made the sites for FILLM and KTS.

What the layout of these websites show is that there is a proportional relationship between the money invested in a website and the quality of the outcome. The more money you invest, the better your website will (most likely) become. The MLA has the outstanding website in the selection, but the society also has entirely different means at its disposal than the rest of the organizations, having what looks to be a staff of four to twelve people working on its online content.[25] No other organization appears to have that sort of resources and expertise readily available. Working with much less money, the rest have either chosen to solicit a third party company to create the design and layout of their website; to use a university site; or found a skilled individual to create a website from scratch or with the help of a WordPress template.

When it comes to creating a good looking website that is simple to navigate, the material suggests that for organizations with limited resources the best option is to make a one-off purchase of a design solution from a third-party company with academics taking on the responsibility of maintaining it afterwards. This tends to have a positive influence on the quality of the site, although there are also examples which indicate that the model is no guarantee. An alternative is to find a talented individual who has time to spare and is willing to work for pittance, but this is not an easy task and highly dependent on luck. It is also possible to create

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[24] It should be noted here that the AILC has recently updated its website, but it is not clear how this has been done and if the society has drawn on outside resources.

[25] "The MLA Staff," The Modern Language Association, accessed February 27, 2019, https://www.mla.org/About-Us/Contact/The-MLA-Staff.

an affiliation with a university. This has the advantage that the costs are likely to be minimal and the society can (probably) draw on the resources and expertise of the university's IT department. But, at the same time, such a deal will most likely also rely on a personal connection (e.g. through an individual scholar's employment) and it is not certain that the affiliation can continue should the personal attachment come to an end.

Saying that the MLA has the best website in this selection runs the risk of making it sound as if all the other societies would like a similar looking website if only they had the resources. This need not be the case, of course. The MLA website looks the way it does partly because it has an extremely large international following and, partly, because it works to support its most important product, the MLA style sheet. None of the other organizations have a similar membership base and none have a product to offer which has the same wide-reaching influence and relevance in the academic community. The MLA's profile is different from the other societies and, therefore, it requires something else. The MLA website looks elegant and professional, but, as mentioned, to some it might also appear overly business-like if not even impersonal. Sites such as those maintained by, for example, IAUPE and KTS can feel more personal and accessible which can be advantageous when addressing a smaller academic community. When creating a website, it is important to think about the nature of the society, who it aims at and what sort of community it is meant to create. Making such considerations not only concerns the design and layout of the website, but also the sort of content it contains.

B. Content

Above, I presented an overview of the sort of content these learned societies produce on their websites and share via their social media accounts. It is now time to assess that content. Before doing so, however, I want to briefly return to the discussion about what defines a learned society. Most scholars agree that learned societies work to further the exchange and dissemination of knowledge by facilitating interaction within the academic community. Still, as, for instance, McCarthy and Rands have pointed out, they will often also find themselves in an intermediary position between academics and governmental agencies, trying to influence policymaking and the distribution of research funding. Put differently, we can say that, in general, learned societies can have two kinds of audiences: a primary one made up of their members and other scholars within the field and a secondary one consisting of people from outside academia such as, for example, politicians, civil servants and journalists. When assessing the content shared by these learned societies online, I will consider this dual audience. Naturally, it can be debated whether it is important for a society to use new media to engage a

secondary audience. Within the Humanities, however, there is a tendency to place great emphasis on the importance of strengthening connections with people outside academia and in what follows I will argue that, overall, this particular group of learned societies do little to engage a non-academic audience via their online sites and, perhaps, that is an opportunity missed.

In terms of content produced, this group of learned societies must be said to run websites and social media accounts that service their primary audience in a satisfactory manner. Some could improve their websites by including more information. For instance, IASS, ARCSA and AISLLI have no information on their websites about how to become a member and it is not possible to read ISOLA's statutes online. Some could organize their content better (e.g. ARCSA and IADA) and some could be more active on their social media accounts or delete them altogether (e.g. ISOLA, ARCSA and AILC). But, in general, the online sites of these societies all work to provide their respective members with the information relevant for their membership.

When it comes to addressing a secondary audience, the situation is different. People from outside academia are not likely to be interested in the statutes of the society, how to become a member or where the next conference is held. Rather, one would imagine them coming to a society's website with a task in hand looking for the most recent scholarship on a given topic or to get the society's view on an issue of general public relevance. In that case, a simple link to a journal or a book series will probably not be terribly helpful. They would want the information to be easily accessible – probably indexed, condensed and presented neatly – and they would wish to know what experts to contact. Content of this sort is rare in the current corpus. For example, FILLM has published a letter or two on its website lobbying for the protection of academic institutions.[26] Both are very hard to find, however. Likewise, AULLA and WALS have a history of engaging with policymakers, but there appears to be no information about this work on their websites or social media accounts.[27] ARCSA's website

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[26] "Save Languages in Groningen," The International Federation for Modern Languages and Literatures (FILLM), accessed February 27, 2019, http://www.fillm.org/news/2013/savelanguagesingroningen.html; "Save the Institute of English Studies, University of London," The International Federation for Modern Languages and Literatures (FILLM), last modified May 26, 2014, http://www.fillm.org/news/2014/saveies.html.

[27] See Kevin Lee, "The Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association (AULLA)," *Diogenes* 50, no.2 (2003): 106; also Chapter 3 in this volume.

includes links to interviews and segments about rhetoric published in the mass media while ACLA has published a "State of the Discipline Report" which could be considered relevant for a non-academic audience.[28] The ChLA has a section entitled 'Public Statements' which gives a concise overview of documents published by the society in response to issues and events of general public importance.[29] The society also has an impressive resource-section that could be helpful for, say, a journalist working on a story about children's literature, but it seems mainly aimed at academics.[30] The noticeable exception is once again the MLA whose resource section contains a lot of information that could be of interest to people outside academia.[31] It has, for example, a database in which it is possible to study staffing patterns at individual institutions of higher education in the US over time; information about language and literacy in the US; and the benefits of language learning. Everything is presented in an easily accessible fashion (e.g. in brochures and infographics). In addition, there is also a lot of information about the MLA's advocacy initiatives, including links to the MLA Action Network and other similar groups.

When it comes to social media, it is clear that, in this day and age, maintaining a page or profile on Facebook or Twitter is a good way of creating contacts to different kinds of people. As a way for a learned society to reach a secondary audience, however, they are not flawless. I will discuss a particularly problematic issue relating to the use of social media in the following section and here briefly focus on these sites as places to share content. Of the societies in question, a few do post content that could be said to be interesting to a secondary audience. The MLA and AULLA, for example, do regularly share information that deal with issues relating to the field rather than the learned society as such, and which could be said to be relevant for non-academics. This is all well and good, but when it comes to reaching a secondary audience, the societies are subject to the restrictions of the media itself. However

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[28] "Videos," Rhetoric for Africa (ARCSA), accessed February 27, 2019, http://rhetoricafrica.org/videos.asp; "State of the Discipline Report," American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA), accessed February 27, 2019, https://www.acla.org/about/state-discipline-report.

[29] "ChLA Public Statements," Children's Literature Association (ChLA), accessed February 27, 2019, https://www.childlitassn.org/chla-public-statements.

[30] "Scholarly Resources," Children's Literature Association (ChLA), accessed February 27, 2019, https://www.childlitassn.org/resources.

[31] "Resources," The Modern Language Association (MLA), accessed February 27, 2019, https://www.mla.org/Resources.

useful, a social media page is not the best place to present information that is meant to be retrievable later. They are based on a chronological, post-by-post, system that makes it difficult to find old material. When it comes to grouping or indexing your information – thus facilitating research – the only option is to use the ubiquitous hashtags. These are useful, but they do end up presenting the society's information together with all those other posts that have been assigned the same hashtag (whether on topic or not). Moreover, it is then the media's algorithms that decide what information is given precedence. In short, the societies examined here do not use social media to engage with a people outside academia in any meaningful way, but they are also subject to the restrictions of the media. For that reason, I will argue that when it comes to developing links to a secondary audience, a well-developed website is a much better tool for all parties and social media accounts are best used as secondary communication channels.

Overall, then, I will maintain that, apart from the MLA, none of the societies examined here use new media to engage with people outside academia in anything but a sporadic fashion. Their websites and social media accounts do not realistically work as resources to which journalists, politicians, governmental advisors and the like might turn for information on a topic of general public interest. Is this situation a problem? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

On the one hand, it is a basic function of a learned society to serve its academic membership base. It is therefore only natural that its website and social media accounts should mainly include information pertinent to its primary audience. And if a society does not have aims beyond bringing scholars together in some sort of academic community, then a website similar to most of those found in this corpus must be considered satisfactory. On the other, if the ambitions are greater and, for example, a society looks to make a secondary audience aware of the importance of the field and where it stands on issues of public significance, then something else is required. Of the societies discussed here, it would seem that only ACLA, ChLA, ESSE, FILLM and MLA explicitly state that it is an aim to build links with an audience outside academia.[32] As mentioned, AULLA and WALS do have a history of working with

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[32] "Constitution & Bylaws," American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA), accessed February 27, 2019, https://www.acla.org/about/constitution-bylaws; "Governance," Children's Literature Association (ChLA), accessed February 27, 2019, https://www.childlitassn.org/governance; "The Constitution," The European Society for the Study of English (ESSE), accessed February 27, 2019, http://essenglish.org/constitution/; "Mission and Strategy," The International Federation for Modern Languages and Literatures (FILLM), last modified March 11, 2015,

policymakers. It just goes unmentioned on their websites and social media accounts. However, it can be argued that such an audience is important for these societies since they all belong to the field of Humanities.

When Wells edited the appendix on 'FILLM – History and Objectives' for *Diogenes*, he stressed that it was written

> With a view to introducing and explaining the history, purpose, and function of these international learned societies […] at a time when the role of such bodies is often questioned even by professional academics working within the discipline, and their very existence largely unknown outside it, even to educated persons.[33]

According to Wells, the concluding message was unambiguous.[34] The reports from the societies illustrated that, despite a general lack of public support and appreciation, scholars had been able to generate ground-breaking, high-quality research. Moreover, he added, they made it clear that the kind of research assessment pervasive in much of the western world was a needless waste, having been installed not for the benefit of humanistic scholarship, but self-serving bureaucratic governments. The intended recipients were, as Wells put it, "governments, democratically elected or otherwise" and, in a sense, the entire appendix can be read alongside a growing body of scholarship which, in one way or another, looks to bring to the public's attention the value of the Humanities.[35]

Essentially, such scholarship has been written in response to a sense that in the past thirty to forty years the Humanities have found itself in something of a crisis. Broadly speaking, and from the perspective of the field, this crisis is characterized by a consistent increase in funding-cuts and bureaucratic jumps and hurdles, caused by governments that cater to the needs of a liberal market economy. As the author and journalist Alex Preston recently said of the situation

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http://www.fillm.org/about/missionandstrategy.html; "The MLA's Mission," The Modern Language Association, accessed February 27, 2019, https://www.mla.org/About-Us/About-the-MLA/The-MLA-s-Mission.

[33] Wells, "Editorial Preface," 91.

[34] Wells, "Editorial Preface," 92.

[35] Wells, "Editorial Preface," 92. See also: Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Jonathan Bate, ed., *The Public Value of the Humanities* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010).

in the United Kingdom: the universities, and especially the humanities, "are under attack by an austerity-obsessed government looking to maintain the excellence of our institutions at a fraction of the cost."[36] This process, this "corporate colonization of education" as Preston puts it, has further resulted in the creation of a "wall of bureaucracy," a "technocratic tyranny," which demands that academics "justify their existence according to the remorseless and nightmarish logic of the markets."[37] How well this echoes the experiences of humanistic scholars elsewhere in the world is a question open to debate. Similar scenarios have been described in, for instance, the United States, Australia, India and Scandinavia.[38] However, as Li Cai and Geoff Hall show in Chapter 8 of this volume, in China there is a growing interest in humanistic scholarship and education.[39] That said, in many parts of the (western) world, the situation is seen as critical and, whatever the cause, scholars in the Humanities tend to agree that something must be done to turn the tide.

The aim here is not to advance a set of arguments in defence of humanistic scholarship and education—such arguments can be found elsewhere both within the pages of this book and outside. Rather, I wish to consider how these learned societies could use new media more efficiently to strengthen the overall status of the Humanities. As mentioned, it is my opinion that few of the learned societies included in the corpus of this study maintain websites or social media accounts that, realistically, can be said to address an audience outside the field. On the one hand, this could be considered unproblematic. It is clear that much is being done elsewhere – through more traditional channels such as academic publishing (including Open Access) and the mainstream media as well as by other learned societies – and working to adjust the websites and social media accounts of these learned societies to suit another kind of audience could be

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[36] Alex Preston, "The War Against Humanities in Britain's Universities," *The Guardian*, March 29, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/mar/29/war-against-humanities-at-britains-universities.

[37] Preston, "The War Against Humanities."

[38] See for example: Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, 1-11; Ella Delany, "Humanities Studies Under Strain Around the Globe," *The New York Times*, December 1, 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/02/us/humanities-studies-under-strain-around-the-globe.html; Ravinder Kaur, "Lektor: Humaniora Udgør Rygraden i et Liberalt Samfund," *Politiken*, March 22, 2017, https://politiken.dk/debat/debatindlaeg/art5881186/Humaniora-udg%C3%B8r-rygraden-i-et-liberalt-samfund.

[39] This point is also made by Preston, "The War Against Humanities."

considered superfluous. This is a fair point. Many of the learned societies have scarce resources (both financial and temporal) and it must be up to each to decide how these are best deployed. On the other, few would disagree that, today, new media is pivotal for making information and knowledge of all kinds available to diverse audiences across the globe. Therefore, it can be claimed with some reason that most of these societies are neglecting an important channel of communication for bringing to the attention of a non-academic audience the value of humanistic scholarship.

So, what could be done? What would it take to engage a secondary audience in a meaningful and efficient way? A model of inspiration could be the History and Policy website.[40] This project was started by the historians Simon Szreter and Alastair Reid in 2002. The rationale behind was that politicians and their advisors did no longer have the time to read historical research published via traditional channels and something different was required if policymaking should have a chance to be informed by contemporary historical scholarship.[41] The basic premise for the project was therefore to develop an independent platform that would present "history in an accessible form in the public forum where policy is debated."[42] History and Policy can be said to have been successful in achieving its goals and, today, it is responsible for a large range of activities.[43] Among other things, these include:

- The publication of short, accessible policy papers and opinion articles aimed at non-historians that are easily searchable online.
- The publication of a newsletter.
- The organization of regular conferences, seminars and other events that work to bring historians and policymakers together.
- Training and consultation to its members and students on how to engage policymakers.

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[40] "History & Policy," www.historyandpolicy.org.

[41] Simon Szreter, "History and Public Policy," in *The Public Value of the Humanities*, ed. Jonathan Bate (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 219.

[42] Szreter, "History," 219.

[43] 'History and Policy' has grown substantially since its creation and, today, its network includes more than five hundred historians. See "Who We Are," History and Policy, accessed February 28, 2019, http://www.historyandpolicy.org/who-we-are. History and Policy has received substantial funding over the years and had considerable success in developing connections with politicians and their advisers. See Szreter, "History."

- Case studies of how historians have successfully been able to influence policymaking.
- Production of audio and video material. [44]

The project's website has been a pivotal tool all along and the fact that it looks professional and elegant and is easy to navigate for its users is certainly important. However, as the list of activities reveals, that is only one part of the project. A good website without the right content and other activities to support it, is next to useless. Moreover, as Szreter says, "the skills and energy of communication specialists are as vital to the effectiveness of this project in reaching its target audience […] as the website with its high quality papers written by our historians."[45] Put differently, to create something like History and Policy requires the mobilization of many people with different kinds of skills and expertise. This is no easy task, but the project does illustrate that it is possible to construct and develop a platform that genuinely engages policymakers.

What would it take to develop a website like the one maintained by History and Policy? First, it would be necessary to establish if there is a genuine need for such a platform; whether the job is already being done well through other channels of communication or by other organizations. For the current set of learned societies, it would also be important to consider the geographical context in which they would want to work. History and Policy was created specifically to engage with policymakers in the United Kingdom. Several of the societies examined in this paper have aims of an international nature and the question presents itself whether it is possible to create something like History and Policy for an international context? A second thing to consider has to do with resources. Funding will be important. It will allow for the soliciting of experts in web-design and communications as well as freeing up academics to produce the content needed and to engage directly with policymakers. But funding is not easily acquired and a project such as this will need other legs to stand on too. Here, I think it is important to find strength in numbers. Instead of relying on the commitment of a few individuals, much can be gained by starting out with a larger group of people who find inspiration in the goals of the project. If such a group has a mixture of skills (both academic and related to web-design and communications) and it is organized in a structured way with clearly laid out goals in sight, it could be possible to compensate for a lack of financial

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[44] For more details, see "History & Policy."

[45] Szreter, "History," 229.

resources. Such a collective effort could be organized within a single society. It is possible. But, perhaps there is also a possibility to think bigger and draw on the resources of larger networks. Take the current set of learned societies, for instance. They are all members of the same organization (FILLM) and therefore all share an interest in the study of modern languages and literatures. Are there resources and possibilities in this community which have not yet been explored?

Finally, I would like to retreat somewhat. Looking past the possibilities of cooperating on projects that will further the cause of the Humanities, there is probably room for these learned societies to improve within their current setups. It is my impression that many of them rely on a few individuals (if not just a single person) for the maintenance of their online presence (both websites and social media). Running just a basic website can be time-consuming and not easily aligned with a fulltime lectureship. Also, here I think much could be gained if the societies looked towards collective efforts. Rather, than having one webmaster, why not try to find one or two more to share the responsibilities? This would potentially free up resources, and perhaps even result in more lively websites and social media accounts.

Social Media Challenges

In this final part of the assessment, I would like to discuss the societies' use of social media in relation to what we have recently learned about the practices of Facebook in particular. During the summer of 2018 we all spent much of our time clicking through the privacy settings of many of our favourite websites. The reason for this was, of course, that the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) was brought into effect at the end of May 2018, requiring all who maintain a website within the zone to make sure its users have approved what sort of information is being collected about them. The GDPR had been in the works for some time, but it tied into the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal which, although reported earlier, broke out in March 2018. In the light of this scandal and the implementation of the GDPR, it has become increasingly apparent that learned societies that use social media as a means of communication are not immune to the more dubious sides to the internet.

Recently, these developments took a turn which, at least on the surface, would seem to suggest that learned societies could be faced with some tough decisions regarding their use of social media sites such as Facebook. In June 2018, the Danish newspaper *Politiken* reported that a recent ruling from the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) can have serious repercussions for authorities, companies and organizations that use Facebook as a way of

communicating with the public.[46] In short, the case started when, in 2011, the Data Protection Authorities in the North German region Schleswig-Holstein ordered a local educational institution to close its Facebook page because users (both with and without a Facebook profile) were not made aware that information about them was being registered and stored by the social media giant. The institution argued that it could not be held responsible for the information Facebook gathered about its users, but the verdict from the CJEU declared Facebook and the institution to be joint controllers. Consequently, any institution or organization maintaining a Facebook page is legally responsible for the tracking and storing of data by Facebook and can be held responsible for any violations to, say, the GDPR that Facebook might commit.

Although the specifics of the verdict are being assessed by the Data Protection Authorities (for example, in Denmark) and by Facebook itself, it might have serious repercussions. As the Danish lawyer Catrine Søndergaard Byrne says, the main problem is that no one really knows what information Facebook is gathering and what they use it for.[47] It will be very difficult for companies and organizations to stay on top of these issues and, subsequently, make sure that they do not lay themselves open to the legal and financial repercussions connected with a potential lawsuit. Byrne urges companies and organizations to seriously reassess how they use Facebook and ask themselves if, for instance, it is necessary to have a Facebook page at all, or if, perhaps, it is possible to lessen activities there by leading users over to a separate website where it is easier to control what is going on.[48]

Such issues are also relevant for learned societies who administer a Facebook page and they are even more pertinent for those who work with a strict budget and limited financial resources. Being held partly responsible for Facebook's data collection in a court of law and having to incur a subsequent fine is bad enough in itself, but it could spell the end for many of the organizations considered in this survey. On top of this, there is an ethical dimension to the issue. When the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal broke many private users of Facebook considered terminating their accounts on the site on moral grounds. Should learned societies be asking themselves similar questions? Are the methods of the company Mark Zuckerberg presides over such that it becomes ethically untenable to use its services? Are the financial repercussion and the ethical implications now so severe that it is necessary to

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[46] Jakob Sorgenfri Kjær, "Ny dom rammer alle, der har oprettet en side på Facebook," *Politiken*, June 7, 2018, https://www.pressreader.com/denmark/politiken/20180607/textview.

[47] Kjær, "Ny dom rammer alle."

[48] Kjær, "Ny dom rammer alle."

terminate any involvement with media? And should such a boycott – if one can call it that – be stretched to also include other platforms?

When thinking about such issues, it might also be worth considering what exactly it is the society gets out of a platform such as Facebook. Would something important be lost if connections were severed? For some of the societies studied here, the answer would appear straightforward. As mentioned, the Facebook accounts linked to ISOLA, ARCSA and AILC are all virtually defunct and closing those would cause no damage. For AISLLI, however, cancelling its Facebook account would be a much bigger issue. The question is not an easy one, but there more we get to know about the practices of social media and other tech giants, the more it seems to be a discussion worth taking.

Conclusion

Considering how big a role new media plays in our daily lives today, there is a need to think closely about how we use it. This goes for each of us individually as well as the organizations and societies we take part in. This study has looked to give a general survey of how a group of learned, academic societies – FILLM and its seventeen members – make use of their websites and social media accounts. The survey can be said to have had, first, a quantitative part and, second, a qualitative. In the former, I presented what these societies do to create an online presence for themselves. I gave an overview of where they can be found and what sort of content they publish. In the latter, I ventured to give an assessment of their online presence where I evaluated the layout and design of their websites; the sort of content they publish in relation to the aims and goals of learned societies in general and the ongoing crisis in the Humanities; and, finally, their presence on social media in light of what we have recently learned about the practices of, for instance, Facebook.

In giving these assessments, I tried to make some suggestions and recommendations for how these learned societies could improve the use of their websites and social media. As regards layout and design, I noted that the best solution for creating a good-looking website is to solicit a third-party company to do the initial template. Although the results were not equally impressive, the quality of the sites tended to be good. Also, it is a more reliable option than trying to find a skilled individual with time to construct a website or a university server. Finally, I stressed that a very professional website such as the MLA's need not necessarily be something strive for. Each society will have its own profile and the website should be designed accordingly.

When it came to assessing the content, I argued that a learned society tends to have two kinds of audiences: a primary consisting of the society's members and other scholars and a secondary made up of non-academics such as politicians, civil servants, journalists and the like. This group of learned societies are predominately focused on their primary audiences and, apart from some minor issues, they serve this audience well. The secondary audience hardly registers at all and I raised the possibility that this might be a problem considering the current state of the Humanities in some parts of the world. Here, my recommendations had quite broad ramifications. In drawing attention to the History and Policy website in the United Kingdom, I advocated that this group of learned societies should think carefully about the possibilities of forming a similar project to further the cause of the Humanities. This would in no way be an easy task, but, together, this group of learned societies contains a great amount of resources and if properly structured and organized it might be possible to create something similarly powerful.

The final part of my assessment also had wide-ranging ramifications as I tried to bring to the societies' awareness the problems surrounding the use of a social media site such as Facebook. The problems are not only moral in nature. The repercussions could be very tangible and maintaining a page on Facebook could (if push comes to shove) destroy the financial foundations for a learned society. In the future, it will be necessary for learned societies in general to carefully weigh the pros and cons of using social media.

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