

Bartlett in the digital age



BRADY WAGONER, ALEX GILLESPIE and GERARD DUVEEN on an internet archive of Bartlett's work, and how he may have viewed it.

THE work of F.C. Bartlett (1886–1969) has been recognised as one of the most substantial contributions to psychology of the past century. Yet much of his work has been inaccessible for scholars and researchers without access to a long-established university library. In order to address this problem, and make Bartlett's work accessible to all, we launched a new internet archive of Bartlett's work in March 2005.

Open-access internet archives such as this have the potential for restructuring our relationship to the published canon, and thus our own sense of the history of psychology, as well as aiding researchers in the public dissemination of the knowledge they produce. Interestingly, Bartlett's own research can help us to understand some of the potentials and pitfalls that online open access archives entail.

A revolution in waiting?

It is often asserted that the internet has the potential to revolutionise academia. Like

the invention of the printing press, digitisation can increase the accessibility of knowledge by reducing the cost and increasing speed of distribution. Digital indexing and searching enables academics to navigate much larger literatures, and online publishing facilitates more immediate communication. It is assumed that the digital revolution will lead to widening access. However, traditional forces stand in the way of these possibilities (Lessig, 2004).

Consider journal publishing. Between 1995 and 2001 the price of natural sciences journals has increased by 60 to 98 per cent (Valsiner, 2005). This undermines academic book publishing because library budgets have to be spent on purchasing 'essential' journals (Thompson, 2005). Since moving online, publishers have protected their position by constructing elaborate barriers, complete with toll booths.

The new system may seem innocuous: after all, it simply perpetuates the pre-existing system in which academics paid publishers to distribute hard copies of their journals. But there is cause for both academics and the public to be concerned. Is it fair that taxpayers pay, firstly for academics to produce knowledge and then for those same academics to purchase access to that knowledge? Moreover, should the taxpayer want to access that knowledge, or even have a look at what they have funded, they too must pay for access. While the present system may have been justified in a world of print, it is starting to look dangerously dated.

The natural and medical sciences are

leading the way in open-access publishing. BioMed Central is an open-access online publisher with more than 150 high-quality peer-reviewed journals. The National Institutes of Health, in the USA, now requires that outputs, from research funded by them, are publicly available. The Directory of Open Access Journals lists 220 peer-reviewed open-access journals in medicine and 169 in education, but only 63 in psychology (six of which are listed under education as well). Not only is there a quantitative difference, but the medical journals are more institutionally accepted and attract a wider readership.

New life for archives

Ironically, one of the most progressive domains in psychology has been the establishment of archives of classic papers. Liberated by the expiration of copyright, numerous rare and classic texts in psychology have found their way online and are frequently accessed due to their institutionally recognised importance. For example, the Mead Project has created a database for the work of G.H. Mead, Cooley, Dewey, and others; the William James Archive provides a range of more and less accessible documents; the Gestalt Archive contains several key gestalt psychology papers; and perhaps the most successful of all, Classics in the History of Psychology, hosts a wide range of classic psychology texts, and is accessed millions of times each year.

The F.C. Bartlett Archive is the most recent addition to this list. Sir Fredric Bartlett has been one of the most influential British psychologists: he was

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F.C. Bartlett Archive: www.bartlett.sps.cam.ac.uk

BioMed Central: www.biomedcentral.com

Classics in the History of Psychology:

<http://psychclassics.yorku.ca>

Directory of open access journals: www.doaj.org

Gestalt Archive: www.gestalttheory.net/archive

The Mead Project:

<http://spartan.ac.brocku.ca/%7EElward/>

William James Archive:

www.des.emory.edu/mfp/james.html

a co-founder of the Cambridge Department of Experimental Psychology, Director of the Cambridge Psychology Laboratory, and longtime editor of the *British Journal of Psychology*. At the University of Cambridge, Bartlett grappled with a diverse set of issues, including cultural transmission, remembering, everyday thinking, group dynamics, political psychology, industrial psychology, and more. Today, he is considered a forerunner of contemporary work on cognitive psychology, cultural psychology and ergonomics. His output includes such classic texts as *Psychology and Primitive Culture* (1923), *Remembering* (1932) and *Thinking* (1958). The archive contains an extensive selection of Bartlett's most significant books and papers, along with a complete bibliography and a scholarly introduction by Professor Alberto Rosa.

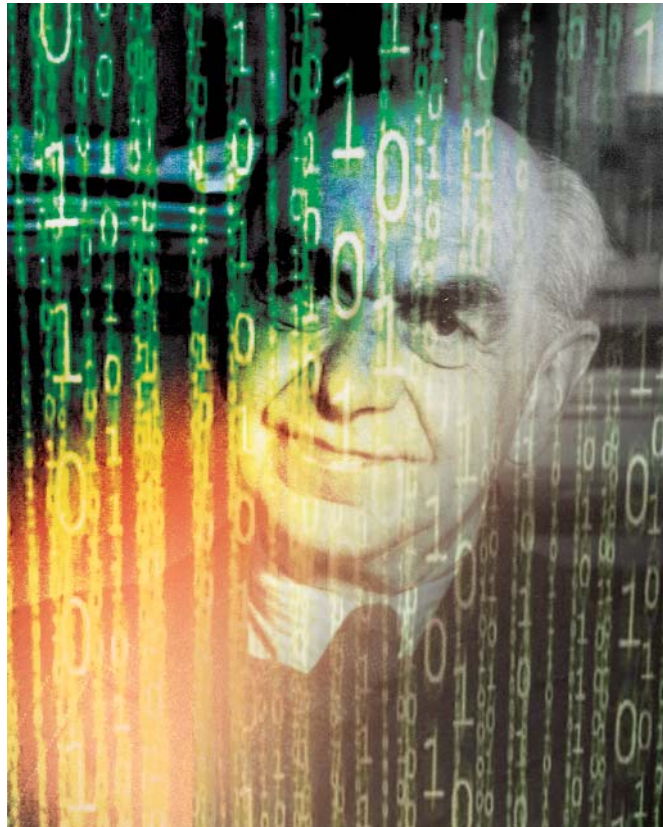
Are we 'conventionalising'?

Reading Bartlett's research today provides an interesting perspective on our relation to the novelty and potential of the digital revolution. One of Bartlett's research questions concerned the transmission and transformation of knowledge. In his studies on social memory, he developed the method of serial reproduction, which parallels the party game 'Chinese whispers'.

Using this method Bartlett demonstrated how unfamiliar ideas, narratives and images are assimilated into a given cultural group. Specifically, he describes a process of 'conventionalisation,' whereby the novel and unfamiliar is assimilated in terms of the familiar. Bartlett's articulation of conventionalisation should cause psychologists to pause. Are we 'conventionalising' the novelty of digital media? Are we denying the potential of digital media by virtue of construing it in terms of the logic of paper publishing?

One of the most remarkable features of digital media, which tends to be obscured in the process of conventionalisation, is that digital media can be endlessly copied

and reproduced at virtually no cost. Instead of conceiving of this as a major copyright problem, it is possible to see this peculiar property of digital media as a boon for academia. One of the longstanding critiques of academia, or the 'ivory tower,' is that it is distant, irrelevant and opaque to the public. Miller (1969) famously argued



that one of the aims of psychologists should be 'to give psychology away to the public'. But Zimbardo (2004), in a recent review of this issue, concludes that psychologists, despite having useful knowledge to contribute, have failed in giving this knowledge away. In this context, digital media present a great opportunity to make the work of researchers transparent and useful. Is it too much to hope that our research may one day be online and freely available to anyone who is interested, such that our knowledge is at least offered a chance to become useful and relevant to the wider public?

In his studies of the social transmission of information, Bartlett discovered conventionalisation might be accompanied by a high degree of 'social constructiveness'. Social constructiveness

refers to the way in which old ideas can be creatively appropriated into novel contexts. Our present use of Bartlett's ideas to speculate about the diffusion of psychological knowledge in the digital age is an example of social constructiveness. Social constructiveness is facilitated by the free flow of information; and thus again,

the internet, with its ease of communication, is ideal for facilitating this creative process.

By creating the Bartlett Archive, which has been funded by the British Academy, we hope that not only psychologists, but as wide an audience as possible, will engage with and creatively appropriate Bartlett's work. We suspect that Bartlett would have been pleased that his work was openly available on the internet, and that he would have been interested to see how his ideas can be transformed and adapted to contemporary issues. For our part, we have found that bringing Bartlett into the digital age provides a useful point of reflection for understanding the discipline of psychology today.

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