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Peer reviewed

Postpublication, Measuring Impact, and Multimedia

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How do you view the relationship between digital publishing and peer review, or between self-publishing and peer review? Are there other ways to create and assess legitimacy and scholarly rigor in digital publication and self-publication spaces?

For my digital monograph I worked with a traditional academic press to get my work peer-reviewed by colleagues in my field. But the digital aspect certainly added new wrinkles to that process. The peer reviewers evaluating my work did so before the final version of the project was ready—they did an early review of the written manuscript, images, and some videos, but they weren't reviewing the fully final published project with all the interaction that was part of the final web-based publication. So I think it is clear that making a direct one-to-one transition between traditional book publishing and web-based publishing doesn't necessarily work.

We may decide that in the digital environment we should emphasize *post-publication* peer review in the form of scholarly reviews and critical engagement with digital publications instead. In my own discipline of history, there is a long tradition of book reviews that provide a type of postpublication assessment by scholars, and those can be weighted very heavily in evaluating the quality of a scholar's research. In many of the sciences, how often an article has been cited is one way to estimate its importance on the larger field. So I think there are already existing ways to think about alternative forms of peer review besides the initial prepublication blind review led by a press.

For people doing experimental digital work that they feel strongly should be made public (especially works they self-publish), if they aren't necessarily interested in first going through review by a press or journal, thinking about ways they can get their projects reviewed after the fact seems important. Just because something is published digitally doesn't mean it is not or should not be rigorous scholarship. And if you have done the work to make something that is rigorous and that provides something useful to your field, you want to make sure that your effort is credited in your field.

How can scholars measure the impact of their work in the digital realm as technologies evolve and transform? What are the potential impacts of shareability and virality on digital academic publishing?

Finding ways to measure how your work is being accessed and by how many people is certainly important. Getting analytic data from the web publishing platform can help scholars make an argument about the importance and reach of their digital work, especially if you are interested in public humanities or public scholarship and you are publishing via digital methods in order to reach the greatest possible audience. Because I published my digital monograph with a press, they send me the analytics of who is accessing the monograph online, and that has provided me with really useful information: both the numbers of unique users accessing my materials but also where those users are from. This allows me to see the international impact of my work, which is especially important because my field of Egyptology is so global. When they first sent me that list after the publication had been out for one year, I was really thrilled to see that all the major countries were hubs of Egyptology, including of course Egypt, which means that I know that my colleagues and students around the world are finding the project and using it.

How might digital publications include media beyond text? What opportunities or ways of reimagining the relationship between form and content are unique to digital publishing, and what risks or stigmas must those approaches contend with?

One of the major strengths of digital publication is the ability to include multimedia, and it is the reason that I published my own monograph digitally. There is no 2D book format that would allow me to do the kind of dynamic presentation of 3D models that was important to my own study. At the time when I began the project, none of the online publishing platforms that I was interested in using

actually worked with 3D content. So I approached the Scalar project and asked if we could collaborate on making their really excellent publishing platform incorporate 3D. That cooperation really allowed me to reimagine what my book could do, and what its purpose would be. I have longform narrative text (like a traditional history monograph), but it also allowed me to create a deep archive on the history or the excavations of the site of Saqqara at the same time. In literature, that is usually called a “scholarly edition” and usually focused on the history of a text; it isn’t really a tradition in history. So the affordances of the digital allowed me to really do something that isn’t traditional in the field but that can be used by scholars in multiple ways. I’ve received a number of emails and comments from other scholars in my field that indeed they use the project especially for the archive.

One of the risks with doing digital publication is that people consider your project “just a website.” One reason I decided to publish the project in a format that parallels the monograph and that I went through a traditional academic press is that I wanted to break from that stigma. I think it’s really important that digital scholarship be taken seriously, and because the current environment in the humanities really prioritizes initial peer review, I wanted to go through that process to create an example of a digital “book” that worked in a way that was fully equivalent to a traditional book but actually exceeded the book’s limitations. I think that once a clear set of precedents are set, where we have really great scholarship that comes out *only* in digital format, and where people see that it’s not an example of “less than” a book but instead “more than” a book, those kinds of stigmas will be broken down. But it is true that we are not there yet.

Although digital publications may seem less fragile than their analog counterparts, the infrastructure of computing and the cloud often results in shorter lifespans for born-digital content. How do digital publications interact with and alter the infrastructure of analog archives? How might digital publications be preserved into an indefinite future? What might the archives of digital publications look like ten, twenty, or fifty years from now?

These are extremely fraught questions and I’m afraid I don’t have good or easy answers. Hundreds of years of using books in very similar formats means that we as a global society have developed expensive and effective infrastructure, like libraries, to store and sustain that medium. We know how to do it, and we’ve been pretty successful at that. The fluid nature of digital content and online platforms means that parallel infrastructure is not really there for the digital world. In my own digital projects across the past fifteen years, I’ve seen a number of changes in

web publishing that meant my projects no longer worked and they had to be renewed, which is expensive and time-consuming.

Because I worked with an academic press for the digital monograph, they were very concerned with archiving and sustaining the digital content. So I had a digital specialist from the press help me with many of these issues, and they worked to archive my materials in the press's university library. That is of course one advantage of working with a formal press; they are interested in archiving their material and maintaining its accessibility and you as the individual scholar don't have to be solely responsible for that.

At the advice of the press, I created multiple ways to access and document my content, including videos of me reading the monograph and utilizing the 3D models so that someone watching that video could see the original intended interaction even if the web browser broke in a decade. That of course necessitates that people can still watch an MP4 in 2030 or 2040. That is not something I can guarantee. Certainly there are many academic presses and university libraries that are working hard on thinking through these questions, and no individual scholar can solve this problem. So I do see a major value for publishing your scholarly work with some kind of journal, web archive, digital library, or press, in that your work then becomes part of a whole collective of materials that they are interested in sustaining. I can imagine a future where a library or university is converting thousands of files from what are now standard formats like MP4 or PDF to the new future version of those platforms. And as a scholar you want to make sure that *your* materials are one of those moved from the old technology to the new.

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Dr. Sullivan is an Egyptologist and a Digital Humanist. Her work focuses on applying new technologies to ancient cultural materials. She acts as the project coordinator of the Digital Karnak Project, a multi-phased 3D virtual reality model of the famous ancient Egyptian temple complex of Karnak. She is project director of 3D Saqqara, which harnesses Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technologies and 3D modeling to explore the ritual and natural landscape of the famous cemetery of Saqqara through both space and time.

Her field experience in Egypt includes five seasons of excavation with Johns Hopkins University at the temple of the goddess Mut (Luxor), as well as four seasons in the field with a UCLA project in the Egyptian Fayum, at the Greco-Roman town of Karanis.