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http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284316705

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The Digital Monograph and Primary Source Databases: Agenda Toward a Unified Conversation

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Abstract

In the realm of scholarly research and publishing in the humanities, much interest and activity has focused on the impact of digital technology on the academic monograph, and on the application of this technology to archival collections. In terms of the former, this paper addresses the discourse of the “future of the monograph,” focusing on statements made about the digital monograph assuming new online forms. In terms of the latter, this paper comments on primary source databases. Whereas the “future of the monograph” has been approached mainly as a question of form, the matter of primary source databases has been driven by issues of content with little attention paid to the impact of the digitized format on researchers. Yet, as uniform technical objects embedded in the shared space of the Web, the digital monograph and digitized primary sources should be viewed together. Doing so will allow us to see the features—and perhaps the futures—of both more clearly, and to make better assessments of the collections supporting digital scholarship in the humanities.

Introduction

Technical innovations have a way of taking time for us to grasp. Consider printing. Some two hundred years after its introduction, Louis Jaucourt readily acknowledged the sense of mystery originally surrounding its development. “Indeed, at first,” he wrote, “the invention of printing was regarded as a prodigy, even as sorcery” (Jaucourt, 2010). So, too, the Web was viewed with perplexity and amazement when it initially appeared, and we continue to reckon with its implications today.

In the realm of scholarly research and publishing in the humanities, much interest and activity has focused on two things: the impact of digital technology on the academic monograph, and the application of this technology to archival collections. In terms of the former, this paper addresses the discourse of the “future of the monograph,” focusing on statements made about the digital monograph assuming new forms in the online environment, rather than on the digital monograph as the online manifestation of the traditional print book. In terms of the latter, this paper comments on primary source databases, with the increasing prevalence of licensed as well as open access collections offering historical sources particularly in mind.

Whereas the “future of the monograph” has been approached mainly as a question of form and attracted much theoretical discussion, the altogether more practical business of primary source databases has been driven by issues of content with little attention paid to the impact of the digitized format on researchers. Yet, as uniform technical objects embedded in the shared space of the Web, the digital monograph and digitized primary sources should be viewed together, the concerns of each brought to bear on the other. Doing so will allow us to see the features—and perhaps the futures—of both more clearly, and to make better assessments of the collections supporting digital scholarship in the humanities.

The Discourse of the “Future of the Monograph”

Approaches to the “future of the monograph” examine a variety of issues. This article focuses on the monograph as a cultural object, apart from such related matters as the economics of scholarly publishing or the role of the monograph in professional evaluation practices. In this context, issues of form have so far predominated among statements put forward about the “future of the monograph.” Likely this emphasis has resulted from the time needed over the past 20-odd years to grow more familiar with the sheer technical innovation of the Web—a first stage of perceptual adjustment to an invention that, like printing, has seemed both prodigious and magical.

A collection of essays originating in a conference held in 1994, The Future of the Book provided an early example of the attempt to grasp the implications of the Web for humanistic scholarship. “What is the future of the book in this new era, as the end of the
millennium approaches?” asked Patrizia Violi (1996, p. 7). “Will the book as a material object still maintain some of its symbolic value, or will it disappear into the realm of merely virtual entities?” (p. 7). Echoing the same uncertainty, Geoffrey Nunberg mused, “One could be forgiven for assuming that anyone who talks about the future of the book nowadays will chiefly be interested in saying whether it has one” (1996, p. 9). Such doubts with respect to the continued existence of the book have tended to project a Darwinian image of change and often been prompted by concerns over the economic and professional viability of the monograph. But questions internal to the book itself have also been a source of speculation. Another contributor to The Future of the Book, Raffaele Simone, was interested in “the possible evolution in the near future of the textual body which is contained in the book independently of the destiny of the book as a physical object” (1996, p. 239). For Simone, the text was becoming (as it had been centuries earlier) dynamic—“open” rather than “closed,” as he put it (pp. 249–251 and passim). Examples abounded, all of them “considerably boosted by . . . the computer” (Simone, 1996, p. 250). One example, the computer manual, “exists not for nonstop reading but to be consulted at intervals, for occasional forays; changes are to be expected: ‘updating’ and a constant incorporation of new passages of text, even without an author” (Simone, 1996, p. 249). Thus Simone presciently flagged the concept of the update, which we take for granted today—and which no longer requires quotation marks when mentioned on the written page.

A few years after the appearance of The Future of the Book, another publication resulting from another conference invited several contributors to reflect on the theme of the monograph once more. In The Specialized Scholarly Monograph in Crisis, both Clifford Lynch and Teresa Sullivan reiterated the emphasis on form while suggesting that the content of scholarly books would eventually change too, even if the specific nature of that change still remained unclear. After considering some of the obstacles of that time to the migration of print books online, Lynch suggested ways of approaching the digital monograph as an innovative form in itself (1999, pp. 140–141). This “other path,” as he called it, “is to seek successors to the printed scholarly monograph that are actually designed as networked information resources, instead of printed works that have been translated to digital material” (p. 141, emphases in the original). He proceeded to identify features of the Web that would potentially alter the monograph—the Web’s nonlinearity, for example—at the same time acknowledging that “We can’t generalize from the current wave of experiments to a precise picture of the genres that will emerge in the early 21st century” (p. 141). Likewise, Teresa Sullivan stated, “The issue is not merely whether monographs ‘should be’ print or electronic; the issue is also one of what the electronic medium allows in terms of the evolution of a completely new genre” (1999, p. 162). Clearly, Lynch and Sullivan shared a sense that the very nature of scholarship was undergoing significant change.

Interest in transformations of the monograph has only continued to rise in the early 21st century. A search of the Google Books Ngram Viewer for the phrase “future of the book” shows a steep increase in its usage from 1989 or so to 2008 (when the corpus ends) (Google). More recently, some statements in the discourse appear to emphasize the phrase “digital monograph,” rather than the term “book”—perhaps linguistic confirmation of the disappearance of the “material object” entertained by Patrizia Violi? Either way, we do now seem to find greater readiness to address questions of content in scholarly works expressly intended for the Web. In 2013 Ken Wissoker asked, “How will the criteria and values for what makes a good piece of scholarship need to change?” (p. 135)? He knew that some time would yet be required to answer that question, but he brought concrete examples to the discussion and distilled the key issues forthrightly. “How does a reviewer for a scholarly press know,” he wondered, “what to suggest to the author in terms of revisions if we do not even agree on the form and genre to which the author is revising?” (2013, p. 136). Similarly, in “The Future of the Monograph in the Digital Era: A Report to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation” (2015), Michael A. Elliott straightforwardly declared that “We are entering a period of increased variation in humanities publication” (“Summary of Findings,” emphasis in the original). To be sure, Elliott (and the Emory University–based working group on behalf of which he was writing) echoed some of the statements on form already mentioned here. “As digital publication options proliferate,” he said, “we imagine a growing number of scholarly works in the humanities will be most effective in a digital environment. These may be high-quality, digital objects that are not intended to be read in a linear fashion—or they may be publications that require constant updating” (“A Changing Landscape”). But such observations formed part of an entire constellation of humanities publications envisioned by the Emory working group for the 21st century—the result of
careful research and deliberation signifying a new phase in what we make of humanistic scholarship and its relation to digital technology.

Matching the statements by Elliott and Wissoker are two recent projects worth highlighting. First, Stanford University Press (SUP) has published a digital monograph with no intended print counterpart. Enchanting the Desert (Bauch, 2016) is the inaugural release in a series of such works from SUP with support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, which is, in turn, supporting a handful of other university presses in related ventures (see Waters, 2016, “The Presses”). With more examples to come, we will surely have additional opportunities over the next few years to engage in meaningful discussions of digital scholarship in the humanities. Second, the JSTOR Labs report, “Reimagining the Digital Monograph: Design Thinking to Build New Tools for Researchers” (Humphreys, Spencer, Brown, Loy, & Snyder, 2017), presents a topic modeling tool developed for digital monographs of the standard sort—that is, for digitized monographs—but this same tool offers intriguing possibilities for analyzing Web-specific works like Enchanting the Desert too (see Humphreys et al., 2017, especially pp. 16–23). In short, the teams at both JSTOR Labs and Stanford University Press are furnishing applications and models that signal a new stage in the assessment of humanities scholarship situated on the Web.

Here, then, I offer some practical recommendations and theoretical questions with the goal of furthering the discussion of digital scholarship in the humanities:

**Recommendations**

- Increase the discoverability of the newest digital monographs by promoting cataloging of and metadata creation for these works. As I write, WorldCat contains only two records for Enchanting the Desert (one from the Stanford University Libraries and the other from the Internet Scout Research Group at the University of Wisconsin–Madison). If such contributions are to be recognized, read, and evaluated, and the issues they raise discussed, they must first be found.
- Create a single discovery platform for the works in question. In time, this tool could link up with the descriptive efforts recommended above, but, for now, a combined title list drawn from those university presses with an interest in this area would be a helpful starting point.

**Questions**

- How do we define a “digital monograph”? Is such a definition needed?
- Will notions of, and interest in, the digital monograph vary by discipline, subfield, and so on?
- Will conventional descriptions of the extent of a work remain part of the description of digital monographs? In WorldCat, for example, we find a qualitative description of Enchanting the Desert as “the equivalent of a book-length examination of Henry Peabody’s 1905 slideshows of the Grand Canyon” (WorldCat, “Summary” and “Abstract”).
- What guidelines might be created for updating Web-only digital monographs?

**Primary Source Databases**

If the discourse on the “future of the book” has been driven by questions of form, then the creation and use of primary sources databases has been based on content. Yet we have little sense of whether (and, if so, how) the digitized format of these collections impacts the research experience on a cognitive or perceptual level. While digital access to original sources clearly represents a watershed for historical research, we also lack a studied or systematic grasp of the use of these materials in scholarly publications, such as information regarding the frequency of their use or the types of content being used. To the extent that such questions remain unexplored, we risk approaching the online sources in too positivistic a fashion. More than 50 years ago, E. H. Carr cautioned against the 19th century’s “fetishism of documents” (1961, p. 15)—something we might recall amidst the current proliferation of digitized primary sources. Doing so could yield still more useful and usable primary source databases.

A roadmap for assessing digital archives would start from the premise that the experience of researching physical archives involves more than viewing documents. As Arlette Farge writes, “Contact with the archives begins with simple tasks, one of which is handling the documents. . . . One cannot overstate how slow work in the archives is, and how this
slowness of hands and thought can be the source of creativity” (2013, p. 55). Robert Darnton likewise proposes distinctive aspects of using original rather than copied sources in a comment he makes on microfilm reproductions of newspapers. “Microfilm,” he states, “will not do, not only because it is riddled with faults and gaps but also because it fails to convey the texture of the printed page—the way headlines, layout, touches of color, and the tactile qualities of broadsheet and tabloid orient the reader and guide the eye through meaningful patches of print” (2009, pp. 117–118). The experience of working directly with the originals thus shapes understanding in crucial ways. Conversely, an entire series of questions might be asked about the digital format itself—and its implications for how we make sense of the digitized historical sources that we find online. As Maryanne Wolf has observed, “we still know very little about the digital reading brain” (p. 8)—a statement that appeared in 2010, but that is certainly worth remembering in the present context.

To assess the impact and use of primary source databases, then, I suggest the following research agenda:

- Conduct studies of researchers using the same sources in different formats (print and digital), which could yield clues to the scholarly impact of primary source databases.
- Consider the possibility that insights from such studies could be applicable to the evaluation and modification not only of digital archives, but also of physical archives.
- Study the frequency of use of digitized primary sources in scholarly publications and the types of content being used. What would a methodology for such studies entail?

Conclusion

Ideally, the suggestions offered in this paper will be the basis for collaborative endeavor among librarians, scholars, and publishers alike. Viewing the digital monograph and primary source databases within a single frame will allow us to ask new questions of both and to bring new perspectives to the digital collections that support humanities scholarship.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Julie Linden (Yale University Library) for her helpful comments on the presentation on which this article is based.

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