February 2009

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Recommended Citation

Worthey, Glen (2009) "'Long Live the Corpse!' At Risk Open-Access Humanities Journals in LOCKSS," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 21: Iss. 1, Article 8.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2491>

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“Long Live the Corpse!” At-Risk Open-Access Humanities Journals in LOCKSS

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The library has always held the safekeeping of knowledge and culture¹ as its most fundamental mission — its very *raison d'être*. In our time, of course, we have many other important roles: to collect, organize and distribute information; to maintain a high level of information literacy in our communities through both our own research and bibliographic instruction; and to provide a safe space for intellectual inquiry (not to mention a clean, well-lighted place for finals cramming). But even if all these other missions were to fail in some financial or political catastrophe — even if our reference desks were to close, or our circulation and interlibrary loan departments were to cease lending and borrowing, or the comfy chairs in our most popular reading rooms were to be replaced with creaky wooden things — the one thing that always remains is the collection. The nightly closing of the library can stand in for such a catastrophe in a trivial way, representing this very same principle: when the lights go off in stacks and carrels, when all we librarians cease our shushing, when our interminable committee meetings finally, in fact, terminate, and we all go home; when all the doors are locked and alarmed — it's the collection that remains.

And what it is about our collections that we value most? Is it their breadth, their depth, their sheer size, as expressed in crunchable numbers? The uniqueness of this archival collection, the antiquity of that rare edition, or the ambient findability so granularly encoded in some digital meta-collection as it is accessed through our faceted and FRBRized next-gen discovery environment?² Of course all of these aspects of any collection are important, and any one of them could be the most important in any particular library context. But it is the collection itself, the material (or the immaterial representation of some material aspect) of the collection, that is of course the most fundamental. This is perhaps the deepest meaning buried in the otherwise mercantile “content is king” cliché. In fact, content is not so much king as the entire kingdom. A collection lacking depth is merely superficial, but a collection without content is not a collection at all.

Digital content is surely no different in this regard from non-digital content: it is the most fundamental component of any digital library, more fundamental than interfaces, indexes, and all other engines for search and display. Not only is it increasingly important to researchers, and usable in increasingly innovative ways, it is also probably the fastest-growing sector of most of our collections, as counted in any number of different ways (by budget, by the byte, or by the word). But in at least one exceedingly important way, digital content *is* different: it is fundamentally *transient*. We all know

how the accidental touch of a button or kick of a cord can obliterate a piece of digital text of any size, and it obviously takes a lot more than that to destroy a book — and all the more so an entire collection of books. Even printed ephemera like ticket stubs, posters, cartoons, and maps — content defined by its very transience — has a much better chance of survival than the most substantial of digital content.

Still, until very recently, the majority of digital collections that we create or license have been “backed up” by the paper originals from which they've been scanned or re-keyed, and of course it is these paper originals that have been the very stuff of all library collections from the beginning. So far, so good. In addition to taking full advantage of the digital format (the real benefits of which are outside the scope of this article), we do all we can to preserve and maintain our digital surrogates, just as we would any other investment in time or resources. But in case of some digital disaster, the tangible paper collection serves as an ultimate backup in a format proven by millennia of library practice. These digital collections are still transient, of course, but their catastrophic loss would not signal the absolute end of the content they contain.

There is one particular segment of cultural content, however, that lacks even this guarantee of permanence, and while it is potentially no less interesting or important than print-backed digital content, it is, in the truest sense, transient, ephemeral and at risk. After the discussion above of content in general, and digital content in particular, it is this segment of current cultural content that will be the focus of this essay: digital cultural content with no print analog as either source or backup copy. As it happens, digital content in the humanities often carries with it the particular danger of economic instability. On the one hand, science generally requires and benefits from substantial funding, and its expressions of knowledge (journals, etc.) are often integrated into a business model in which substantial money changes hands, so that, for better and worse, there are significant financial incentives for its preservation. On the other hand, both the costs and the rewards for producing humanistic knowledge are rather lower, at least in the fiscal sense.³

The Internet has been a boon to cultural production in many ways: it used to be expensive to produce a poetry journal, for example, and difficult to make much money selling it. Now, any poet (again, for better and worse)

can publish his poems in a blog, and any critic can likewise distribute her analysis to millions of readers, for next to nothing. Although this “user-created” content, this “Web 2.0” activity, has received most of the recent press attention (see, for example, *Time* magazine's 2006 “Person of the Year: You”⁴), of much more interest to libraries, and to us here, is the highest level of cultural production: our poet and critic, if they make muster in the peer-review process, can also be published (again, for next to nothing) in many of a large and growing number of thoughtful and high-quality Web-based magazines.

These magazines, reviews and journals are the digital equivalent of small-press poetry, academic, and other journals; their selection and editorial standards are strict, their production and intellectual values high — and they cost little or nothing (with the previous caveat) to produce, and are free to read.

Perhaps I'm doing a disservice to these great online journals by bringing them up in the same paragraph as the force that brought us not only **YouTube** and innumerable blogs, but also the endless (and often mindless) comments these inspire.⁵ But the point to be made is one more of contrast than of similarity. And just as movable-type printing brought us everything from broadsides and (eventually) junk-mail pizza ads to the *Gutenberg Bible* and *Hooke's Micrographia*, so too has the “free” Web brought us both **LOLcats**⁶ and the stunning literary magazines *Exquisite Corpse*⁷ and *The Absinthe Literary Review*,⁸ and it would be a terrible mistake to conflate them merely because of their common medium.

It is precisely the example of these two online literary journals, *The Absinthe Literary Review* and *Exquisite Corpse*, on which I will focus the rest of this essay, to make the case for paying attention to this most precious, and most at-risk, cultural content, for taking it seriously enough to devote the energy and effort necessary to preserve it not only for posterity, but also for ourselves. It's worth noting that the **LOCKSS** digital preservation program, which is described in greater depth elsewhere in this issue, is a near-perfect ideological and technological match for these open-access journals: it is both free, open-source software (which corresponds in spirit and in budget to this particular digital content), and library-based. We in the library, as we strive to collect and preserve our cultural moment in the form of its

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very best content, demand that these journals be available in stable form, and for the long term; and these journals themselves, in the person of their authors, editors, and readers, require some affordable and dependable mechanism to assure their longevity. **LOCKSS** software meets all these requirements.

The Absinthe Literary Review was established in 1998, and chosen as one of the first open-access humanities journals to be preserved by **LOCKSS**, in a concerted effort by a small number of academic libraries in the United States and the United Kingdom to identify and preserve this at-risk content. Although the act of preservation required some attention and (minimal) effort on the part of the editors (e.g., to grant permission to archive its content, and to post a manifest to that effect in all of its issues), *Absinthe* appears to have been more

against the grain people profile

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HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Academic libraries will still be striving to preserve, integrate, and deliver the best and most significant cultural content in manuscript, print, digital, and whatever other formats come along. Anything else would be a mistake. 🍷

Fig. 1: Home page of *The Absinthe Literary Review*, showing the **LOCKSS** logo and claiming (with some understandable exaggeration) to be “Chosen the most important online literary journal by the Stanford-based **LOCKSS** Archiving Program.” Accessed April, 2005, from ALR’s previous URL.

than pleased to participate, even advertising on its Website its inclusion in the **LOCKSS** program (see Fig. 1 below).

This proud announcement is accompanied by an alarming announcement that “*ALR* has suffered a severe hardware crash. All submissions and files are safe, but the summer [2005] issue will be substantially delayed until we can rebuild the support structure.”⁹ Adding insult to injury, during the time this technical failure was being corrected, *Absinthe*’s domain registration lapsed, and its URL was taken over by cyber-squatters, who are currently using the advertising-laden site for e-commerce (see Fig. 2 page 26), clearly hoping to profit from the real *Absinthe*’s prestige, its technical woes notwithstanding.

While it would be an exaggeration to claim that **LOCKSS** spared *The Absinthe Literary Review* a devastating loss, it is still a comfort both to its editors, and to us in the library community, to know that the content of *Absinthe* is, in fact, preserved. As of this writing (December 2008), *Absinthe* is back online with a new URL. If it had indeed fallen victim to its troubles, libraries in the **LOCKSS Alliance** would still have preserved its irreplaceable content.

Exquisite Corpse is the brainchild of poet, essayist, novelist, and public intellectual **Andrei Codrescu**, known to many NPR listeners for his wry cultural and political commentary on *All Things Considered*, and to lovers of independent film as the writer and star of the 1993 documentary *Road Scholar*, winner of the 1995 **Peabody Award**. The *Corpse* had an all too brief life in print as *Exquisite Corpse: A Journal of Books and Ideas*, from 1983 to 1997; since that time, **Codrescu** has edited an online version at <http://www.corpse.org>, a lively collection of poetry, art, translation, and commentary. The online *Corpse* was chosen for preservation in the **LOCKSS** program in late 2005, and was finally added to the **LOCKSS** lineup — that is, harvested and preserved in a substantial number of academic libraries across the world — beginning in February, 2006. See Fig. 3 on page 26 for the front page of one of the first issues preserved in **LOCKSS**.

The *Corpse* is just one of dozens of open-access literary and humanities journals selected by academic librarians and preserved in the **LOCKSS** system, but there was something especially poignant about this particular act of preservation: **Codrescu** and his *Exquisite Corpse* editorial and technical team work in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; between the time the *Corpse* was selected for preservation and the time it was actually preserved, Hurricane Katrina had intervened. Although

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Baton Rouge (and **Louisiana State University**, where **Codrescu** is a professor of English) was largely spared from the ravages of that awful storm, it was certainly a close call. A February, 2005, email announcement to the **LOCKSS** community made note of this fact:

Exquisite Corpse is an especially apt and important addition to the **LOCKSS** system, since both **Codrescu** and the "EQ" servers reside in Louisiana — a place which, perhaps more than any other in our times, reminds us of the fragility of our existence and the existence of our culture. We're fortunate that neither editor nor journal were lost or damaged by Hurricane Katrina; but the possibility of harm or even loss made our work to preserve *Exquisite Corpse* in **LOCKSS** seem all the more urgent.¹⁰

And as **Codrescu** himself wrote to the **Stanford LOCKSS** team in response to the preservation of *Exquisite Corpse*, with his typical irony and self-deprecation, "We are delighted. Now we can breathe easy and let posterity suffer."¹¹

Open-access journals are among the most vibrant expressions of serious literary culture today — and, dangerously, one of its most endangered venues. Poets have always lived on the financial fringe, but in the past, once their work was available in printed form, they had some reason to hope for a long life in the library. But in the digital world, the relative poverty (or, to give it a better word, the otherworldliness) of poetry and the other literary arts, carries with it an infinitely greater risk of oblivion, whether through technical or financial failure, natural disaster, or literary identity theft. If we care about preserving the content of the current cultural moment as we have the past, if we want our library collections to reflect the riches of human thought and creation, then we must do all we can not to forget these journals. After all, if *Absinthe* and *Corpse* and dozens of other small literary journals like them were in print, our libraries would do everything in their power to acquire

Fig. 2: Cybersquatters at the former URL of The Absinthe Literary Review, accessed November, 2008.

and preserve them. The Internet takes care of acquisition, but we also need **LOCKSS** — a low-cost, long-term, community-based and library-sustained mechanism — to preserve them. Let our poets and essayists create culture with whatever means they have, and for whatever profit they are able; but once it's created, it behooves us in the library to do our part to keep it safe. 🐼

Endnotes

1. The phrase "knowledge and culture" includes, of course, expressions not only from the "cultural" disciplines — the humanities and humanistic social sciences — but also from the physical and other sciences, as well as expressions of popular culture that may not yet have found an academic discipline to claim them as significant. As a humanities librarian, my focus here is on cultural products from my own discipline, but the examples that I use, and most of the principles I discuss, could easily be extended to the other disciplines.
2. **Peter Morville**, *Ambient Findability: What We Find Changes Who We Become*, O'Reilly, 2005. Although I employ this particular string of buzzwords somewhat tongue-in-cheek here, I hasten to add that I do believe there is real substance behind them — at least, most of them.
3. We're not considering here the unquantifiable suffering of the soul that a great poem can cost, or the torturous wracking of the brain that a great translation most often requires. Nor are we considering the cultural rewards had by a novel that moves and inspires untold future generations.
4. "It's about the cosmic compendium of knowledge **Wikipedia** and the million-channel people's network **YouTube** and the online metropolis **MySpace**. It's about the many wrestling power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes." (*Time*, Dec. 13, 2006; accessed on December 13, 2008, from <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1569514,00.html>.)
5. "Sure, it's a mistake to romanticize all this any more than is strictly necessary. Web 2.0 harnesses the stupidity of crowds as well as its wisdom. Some of the comments on **YouTube** make you weep for the future of humanity just for the spelling alone, never mind the obscenity and the naked hatred." *Ibid*.
6. <http://icanhazcheeseburger.com/>.
7. <http://www.corpse.org/>.
8. <http://www.absintheliteraryreview.com/>.
9. *Absinthe Literary Review*, accessed April 2005 from *ALR's* previous URL, which is not included here in order to avoid driving traffic to the current illegitimate site. See below for details about cybersquatting at this URL.
10. Email to the **LOCKSS Alliance**, 14 February 2005.
11. Personal email communication, 15 February 2005.

Fig.3: The Exquisite Corpse, issue 14 (Fall, 2004), accessed November 2008.