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Navigating Media, Technology, and Narrative: Considering the Digital Turn in Scholarly Publishing

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Though it may seem counterintuitive to digital publishing, reflecting on analog bookmaking practices underscores the multimodal potential that has always underpinned the production of scholarly communications. In a medieval manuscript, for example, the content on a page might include text, illustration, marginalia, commentary, and rubrication, and the relationship between these elements shapes the way in which the narrative is understood and approached by readers; any modification to these formal features could alter how the content is interpreted, and indeed, scholarship exists that addresses the consequences of such changes from one edition of a text to the next. Bringing together formal and narrative elements in order to shape the reader's navigation of content in an analog format is not dissimilar, then, from the requirements for producing a digital publication, insofar as such projects also oblige authors to carefully consider how the placement of multimodal enhancements like digital maps, image collections, and video and audio clips will inform the relationship between media, text, and scholarly argument, in addition to the reader's interpretation of those components. Yet digital publications also introduce new challenges for authors and publishers, particularly in terms of time, cost, and preservation, which might deter potential projects from realization. As academic fields look to future modes of publishing, particularly born-digital or hybrid models consisting of digital and print formats, it is worth remembering that multimodality, creativity, and innovation have long been central

to the creation and sharing of scholarly communications, in order to approach new methods of publication, including digital, as a continuation of long-standing efforts to produce rigorous scholarship and not in opposition or ancillary to these aims. Rather, the collaboration and considerations central to developing and preserving a digital publication, in addition to the inherently broader audiences a digital publication can reach, point to ways in which new modes of publishing can continue to produce meaningful scholarship as well as open the field to more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable practices.

The affordances of digital publication are manifold, especially for scholars engaging in visual, cinema, media, and performance studies, whose scholarship would be otherwise flattened or condensed to a singular representative image in a print format. By engaging in multimodal content, that is, integrating various combinations of video, text, images, audio, maps, or other digital enhancements within a project, digital publications can look beyond text and more effectively pair scholarly narrative with supporting digital tools. For example, a scholar exploring theories of time or space might consider designing nonlinear pathways of reading a project that provide multiple points of entry for audiences to engage with the narrative, rather than selecting a linear structure that encourages readers to adhere to a specific path of navigation, such as following a traditional table of contents. Likewise, digital platforms make it increasingly possible to expand the range of content, linked or otherwise, within a project and to develop multilingual components that more appropriately reflect the language(s) of the community the scholarship explores, in addition to speaking to the scholarly community. Significantly, digital tools and platforms can also make it possible to thoughtfully engage in accessible practices. Publications can support alt-text, which describes visual content, screen readers, and transcriptions that facilitate more equitable access to scholarly publications. Such digital affordances, ranging from creative content to design, to narrative, to accessibility, underscore how creating open access digital publications is an important step toward broadening the visibility of scholarship beyond specialty audiences and facilitating more accessible scholarship.

Yet multiple barriers exist to producing digital publications. A significant number of scholars motivated to develop digital publications lack access to the resources, time, and support for their projects, raising the risk that developing digital publications is limited to well-funded institutions. This challenge is particularly relevant for early career, adjunct, and independent scholars, or anyone working in a contingent capacity, who may not have access to grants, financial or technical support, time, or equipment to realize the multimodal components of their project, and may also face hiring, tenure, and promotion committees that have yet to develop a system for evaluating digital publications. Despite these challenges, the

multimodal affordances of digital publications point to a potential transformation of traditional approaches to scholarly publishing that may expand the resources available for producing such projects in the future. For example, while a gap can emerge in communications between the author and the editorial team under the traditional print publication model, in the case of digital publications, this collaborative effort necessarily begins sooner; the author must be acutely aware of the ways in which readers will navigate the digital project, and therefore must think strategically about the integration of digital tools, media, and design just as much as about sustaining a scholarly argument across chapters. Rather than an author handing off a project to be edited and formatted, there is a necessity to bring together different areas of scholarly, digital, and editorial expertise early in the conversation in order to fully conceptualize the relationship between narrative and form within a digital platform.

The steps for editing and evaluating digital publications must also undergo transformation in order to appropriately consider the unique affordances of digital publications. One obstacle to developing digital publications is that of identifying peer reviewers who can evaluate both the design and the digital infrastructure of a project—that is, how the publication is navigated and the relationship between narrative and form—as well as critically engage with the scholarly argument. Many institutions have limited digital humanities resources and courses, which indicates that there does not yet exist a generation of scholars who are positioned to evaluate the uniquely interdisciplinary considerations of a digital publication. While this might be viewed as a challenge to the traditional peer review model, insofar as digital publications require an expansion of the typical number of reviewers for a project or may disqualify a go-to reader in a given field, it also opens up space for thinking critically about the role of the peer review process. Given the collaborative approach required to produce digital publications, the peer review evaluation must also become more collaborative. That is, editors must give equal weight to the digital design, layout, and navigation as they would to the scholarly argument, or begin to look beyond traditional review models in order to develop new forms of evaluation that value considerations like accessibility and user experience just as much as narrative. The issue of peer review for such interdisciplinary content points to the need to more proactively address the review processes industry wide so that they expand to address more considerations inherent to the digital format.

Another significant consideration of digital publication is long-term sustainability and preservation. Technology evolves rapidly, and many projects currently being developed use platforms and tools that will need to be upgraded in the future in order to continue to function, until they reach a point where upgrades are no longer possible. While there are sustainable practices scholars can undertake

to preserve their digital projects for a longer period, including minimal computing, there will likely be a point—ideally far in the future—when the digital publication may no longer function as originally intended. Future archives of digital publications currently being developed might demonstrate the potential range, as well as limitations, of such multimodal enhancement. Nevertheless, there are still timely and meaningful reasons to pursue digital and born-digital publication, especially if the scholarship engages in multimodal content that is best expressed in a digital format. Beyond this practical but essential motive, there are also compelling reasons to develop scholarship in a format that has the capacity to prioritize collaborative, accessible, inclusive, and creative content; by integrating multimodal digital enhancements and producing scholarship that is inherently collaborative and interdisciplinary from its origin, digital publications can contribute to transforming what scholarship can look like, who it can represent, and how it can connect with broader communities of readers. Digital publications can thus offer new, iterative, and accessible pathways for creating and sharing scholarship, and importantly, offer a space for creativity and fun that might connect projects with unanticipated yet curious audiences outside academic specialties.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to pivot to digital methods for teaching, carrying out research, and sharing scholarship continues to be felt acutely as scholars grapple with obstacles that continue to prevent them from connecting with research materials and engaging with colleagues. It is thus vital to critically engage in this transformative moment within scholarly publication in order to expand opportunities for sharing scholarship and to resist perpetuating practices that marginalize underrepresented voices. How can digital tools and platforms be leveraged to develop digital publications that are more accessible and inclusive, and that create more space for elevating new and diverse forms of scholarship? And how do digital publications establish their scholarly legitimacy while actively pursuing new modes of digital expression? These are some of the central questions motivating many scholars pursuing digital publications, especially as the number of open access publishing platforms continues to expand the reach of scholarship beyond traditional academic boundaries. As the number of digital and open access publications grows, the questions of audience and platform will continue to resonate across disciplines and lead to conversations about how scholarship is produced and evaluated, in addition to how the very process of scholarly writing is transformed itself, given the necessity to consider broader communities of readers and address unique multimodal features.

As an essential resource for sharing future scholarly communications, digital publications offer a unique path for creating and assessing scholarly rigor through multimodal enhancements within projects by requiring readers to navigate

the relationship between media, technology, and narrative. Given their collaborative nature, digital publications furthermore create an opportunity to produce more equitable and inclusive scholarship that expands visibility for different ranges of labor and multimodal content integral to producing a born-digital or hybrid publication. And finally, by addressing both specialist and global audiences, digital publications offer an opportunity to engage with increasingly diverse and global audiences. By fundamentally transforming the scope of scholarly communications, the unique affordances and considerations of digital publications introduce an opportunity to engage in the creation of more accessible, equitable, and innovative scholarship, in addition to providing a bridge to future forms of scholarly publication that continue to transform traditional academic boundaries.

As contemporary publishing fellow, Cosette Bruhns Alonso spearheads a pilot collaboration between the University of Pennsylvania Library's Center for Research Data and Digital Scholarship and the University of Pennsylvania Press to design and develop digital publications through innovative uses of multimodal and interactive digital enhancements. She collaborates with campus partners, including the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books, and Manuscripts, the Schoenberg Institute for Manuscript Studies, Penn Museum, and the McNeil Center for Early American Studies to develop sustainable digital publications driven by faculty research and archival collections. Beyond the University of Pennsylvania campus, she works to advance collaborative, accessible, and antiracist digital publishing practices as a member of the Library Publishing Coalition's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee. Prior to joining Penn, Cosette held the position of Diversity in Digital Publishing & Italian Studies Postdoctoral Research Associate at Brown University, where she facilitated the NEH Institute on Advanced Topics in the Digital Humanities, *Born-Digital Scholarly Publishing: Resources and Roadmaps*, and supported the editorial and digital development of faculty publications. She holds a PhD in Italian studies from the University of Chicago and a BA in philosophy from the New School.