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Moving on by staying the same

James Mussell

What is curious about the academic journal today is that while it has managed the transition to digital without the sort of disruption found in other sectors of publishing (or indeed, other cultural industries more broadly), it looks as if it is still in print. The periodical is characterised by a peculiar form of progress, where new reading is encountered in old forms: every issue of a periodical offers something new, but what it makes it periodical is that this newness is tempered by a sort of recurring framework, which recasts novelty into a familiar form. Nearly all journals in Victorian studies are published on a digital platform of some kind, whether from their own site, those of their publishers, or through a large aggregator such as *Project Muse*.¹ The advantages of digital publication are well recognized – there are no opening times; more than one copy is available at once; content can be accessed by readers anywhere (usually subject to their institutional credentials) – and it is through such platforms that most scholars access research. Despite this shift, however, the thing that is

¹ Journals that provide access to content from their own sites include *Victorian Network* <<http://www.victoriannetwork.org>> and *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* <<http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk>>; those providing access through their publisher's site include *Victorian Literature and Culture* (on Cambridge University Press's *Cambridge Journals* <<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=VLC>>) and *JVC* (on *Taylor and Francis Online* <<http://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rjvc20/current>>); those publishing only in *Project Muse* include *Victorian Studies*, *English Literature in Transition*, and *Victorian Periodicals Review* (although each also runs its own, separate site) [all accessed 20 November 2015].

actually read, the article itself, has remained relatively unchanged. The scholarly journal has been radically redesigned, but in such a way that the article remains the same.

I want to know why this is. Why has the basic unit of scholarship not been challenged by digital tools, technologies and methods? If anything, it has become even more entrenched. While the web, especially with the emergence of blogging platforms, has removed many of the barriers to authoring and publishing, the journal article, usually a pdf, remains a static, text-oriented genre, ready for printing. This is not to downplay the effect of digitization on journal publishing. As I will go on to discuss, the entire process of publishing scholarship has been reconstituted, from the way authors prepare their manuscripts to the way that the final articles are accessed online. This transformation has not been easy and is still ongoing; indeed, it is here that much of the innovation in journal publishing can be found, whether this is the way that large databases redefine content, often using metadata and metrics in interesting ways; or the wholesale rethinking of the way journals are published and financed as represented by initiatives like the Open Library of the Humanities.² But periodicals work through a dynamic tension between continuity and discontinuity, between sameness and difference, and while novelty has been incorporated into the production of the academic journal it has had little or no effect on the genre of the article. This means that while digital tools and technologies underpin access to scholarship, their influence on the published scholarship itself is harder to detect. As this journal's own Digital Forum demonstrates, we write about different facets of digital culture, but we do so as if we were publishing in print.

² See *Open Library of Humanities* <<https://www.openlibhums.org/>> [accessed 20 November 2015]. Martin Eve set out the case for *OLH* in a Digital Forum in 2013: 'Utopia Fading: Taxonomies, Freedom and Dissent in Open Access Publishing', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 8 (2013), 536-542.

In what follows I examine how the genre of the scholarly journal has been affected by digitization. I argue that the digital modes of production, distribution and consumption continue to redefine what a journal is in the digital age, even while the journal article itself harks back to its origins in print. Focusing first of all on what is new, I look at how what makes a journal periodical has come under significant stress in the digital environment.

Whereas the vestiges of the print genre remain – issues and volumes; periodicity itself – these are subject to the logic of the database, where content is disaggregated and opened up for searching. In the second part, I turn to the file format of most articles, pdf, and consider how this has entrenched aspects of print at the expense of a richer engagement with digital media.

In conclusion, I argue that this curious situation, where the journal has become a database while the article pretends that it is in print, results from the way the academy credentializes publications. The corporate university wants knowledge divided into stable chunks of roughly the same size so that it can function as a kind of currency: the academic publishing industry has developed a way to service this demand while turning a profit. Caught between these two powerful institutions, we are left with impoverished tools with which to think.

Journals and databases

Journals are still published issue by issue, and those issues are still numbered in volumes. However, in digital form, articles are served from a database, one-by-one, their links with issues and volumes expressed through metadata rather than instantiated through paper and ink. Rather than read cover to cover, articles are accessed individually, often the result of a key-word search. This has the effect of breaking the link between the issue, the volume, and the journal itself. While the digital journal still gestures towards seriality, celebrating the latest set of articles and recording issue and volume numbers, it is a database first of all.

We can get a sense of this difference by considering the integrity of the issue. In print, the issue is fundamental. It is conceived and edited as a whole, is produced as a discrete object, and is the thing that is handled and read by the reader. In digital form, however, the issue has very little integrity. I know of no digital platforms, for instance, that allow the reader to turn from the end of one article into the beginning of another; instead, the only way from article to article is by returning to the table of contents. That such movements are vertical, an awkward scurrying up and down rather than moving directly from one article to another, makes clear the shift from the linearity of print to the data structure that informs the digital journal. Instead of the horizontal relationships between articles, the digital journal only conceives of articles as the children of issues.

A necessary product of journal publishing, in print or digital, is the creation of an archive, but the material condition of this archive affects the way its contents behave. Such archives, as they develop one issue at a time, assert a flattening effect, making them difficult to navigate. As a result, even the print archive has been more amenable to search than browse. In the nineteenth century, it was common for journals to provide their own annual indices, erasing the differences between issues by making volumes searchable. In addition, publications such as *Poole's Index* made whole runs searchable, not only erasing the difference between volumes, but between publications, too. However, even when using such tools, the issue still asserts itself within the print archive: as page numbers provide the means of locating articles, issues maintain their integrity even when bound. The digital database, though, disaggregates content, the relationships between journal, volume, issue and article becoming solely a matter of metadata. At least in print one can open up volumes and random and flick through pages; in digital form, the researcher must navigate through uninformative layers of metadata like

volume numbers and issue numbers before reaching the more useful information brought together in the table of contents. While browsing is possible, it is search that is prioritized as a mode of access, especially for those journals published alongside others within large databases.

It is only in the table of contents that users can still get a sense of the issue in a digital journal. As a result, some journals have experimented with how this might be developed. *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, for instance, only publishes themed issues and so has an investment in the integrity of the issue. In all of its instantiations (it is a decade old) it has tried to offer an attractive representation of its contents so as to bring out the continuities that run throughout. Attention has also been paid to browsing. In its current form, managed at the backend through the Public Knowledge Project's widely-used Open Journal Systems (OJS) and published to the web using a custom Django app, users can see issues represented as a set of tiles and, in the article view, filter using a faceted browse. Nonetheless, the sidebar on the homepage offers users a list of either four latest articles or the four most popular, both of which ignore the structure of the issue and allows users to jump straight to an article.

Although the digital journal is primarily a database that delivers articles, journals are still published periodically in issues. The question here is who this seriality serves. Although readers probably do feel the year punctuated by the arrival of issues in the post (I know I do), I suspect the publication of the latest issue online has less impact. While notifications of new issues, circulated along with tables of contents, serve to alert readers to what has been published, it is easy for such notices to get lost amidst the swirl of digital ephemera. If new issues of journals are to have an impact time after time, their editors and publishers need to

establish publication as an event in digital terms. This means using the full panoply of social media tools to attract and maintain attention and curating the subsequent discussion. To an extent, this is what already happens: although new issues of JVC, for instance, are not announced on listservs like Victoria as a matter of course, they are on social media such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* and one of the things that *Journal of Victorian Culture Online* does is provide a further venue for the discussion of content from the journal. However, the tendency to make articles available as soon as they are ready further weakens the integrity of the issue and makes it harder, once the issue is ready, to compete for readers' attention. Following the sciences, publishers have privileged speed over the integrity of issues, getting material out as soon as possible. Such an arrangement suits authors, who have little allegiance to the rest of the issue, unless it is a special themed issue of some kind. And, of course, for those readers accessing articles, whether through social media or databases, the issue means very little. While Taylor and Francis allow users to post notifications of a particular issue to social media directly from *Taylor and Francis Online*, it is much more common to see announcements of individual articles. With these pressures aligned against the publication of an issue as an event in itself, seriality increasingly appears one more generic anachronism inherited from print.

I do not think, though, that the future of academic journals is the branded database. The popularity of the special issue, which asserts both the integrity of the issue and its timeliness, demonstrates the specific role the journal plays in scholarly life. If the journal simply becomes a repository for articles, each published when ready, then we lose those facets of the journal, its timeliness and ability to frame a debate, that make it so valuable as a genre. Without the pressures of publishing for priority that drive scientific publishing, perhaps digital journals need to develop new temporalities. The rhythms we have inherited from print

largely serve the archiving function, allocating content a place in the series rather than intersecting with the lives of readers. It may be that more frequent publication, with shorter issues, is more suitable for digital media; or, conversely, that a publishing rhythm is less important than being timely, and so issues should be published when best rather than to a timetable set out in advance. Either way, we should probably find out.

The look of print

While the ways journals are produced, published, and read has been transformed through digital technologies, the journal article itself has remained remarkably unchanged. While this provides an important sense of continuity, whether to ensure that a digital version of an article resembles the same article in print, or that new digital articles in a particular publication resemble their predecessors in the volumes on the shelves, it locks past forms, developed for a different publishing medium, into scholarship in the present.

The dominant format for scholarly publications is the pdf. As Lisa Gitelman has recently argued, the success of this format derives from the way it takes ‘the look of printedness’ but separates it from paper and ink.³ Pdf’s origins are in PostScript, the language that constructs page images from instructions sent to a printer. What pdf does is get the page ready for printing, but make the printed document available onscreen. As Gitelman writes, pdfs ‘make the visual elements of documents - layout, letterforms, figures, and so on - portable across platforms and devices’.⁴ This is a format designed to mimic the appearance of printed

³ Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Towards a Media History of Documents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 114.

⁴ Gitelman, p. 118.

documents of various kinds, while also lending them the fixity of print. In other words, pdfs ‘print’, but not necessarily to paper.

Pdf allows the formal codes of print scholarship to be translated readily into digital form. The result are articles, of a fairly standard length, with few images, and in black and white. Pdf also encodes aspects of the materiality of print. The article is divided into pages, for instance, each of which occupies a certain amount of space and can be read one by one. The combination of these two features, the appearance of print and its behaviours, lends the pdf a fixity that other forms of digital publication do not have. As such, the pdf is easy for users to recognize – it is a digital form of a printed object – and so it is treated in a similar fashion. However, these similarities and differences mean that journal articles in pdf do not take full advantage of the possibilities of the digital medium. Although the technical difficulties associated with images disappear in digital form (although expensive reproduction rights remain a problem), images are still rare and usually only appear in black and white. The assumption that scholarship is best expressed through writing also means there is little engagement with other media, audio and video for instance, regardless of their ubiquity in society more broadly. This investment in the forms of print mean that we lose the many voices (and faces) of scholars, preferring instead that knowledge appears written in a handful of genres, to a set of formal criteria, with only the barest (but, crucially, citable) link to whoever produced it.⁵

As Gitelman points out, pdfs ‘are bounded and distinct’ and so take part in ‘the micrologics of enclosure and attachment’:

⁵ I have in mind here the supposed ‘voice from nowhere’ that Laura Mandell identifies with criticism and argues is a product of book culture. See *Breaking the Book* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), especially p. 141.

Just as an e-mail attachment must exist before the e-mail message that makes it one ("Attached please find..."), so PDFs are already authored entities, understood as distinct from the written systems in and by which they are individually named and potentially manipulated or downloaded.⁶

This recapitulates the economy of print, where an author writes and a publisher disseminates the finished object that the reader consumes. Not only does this preclude any kind of formal interactivity – commenting, editing, collaborative authoring – but it also maintains the difference between scholarship and whatever is under discussion. Digital versions of many primary sources are available online (and it is often the digitized version that is really under discussion) but, even when cited online, they are rarely included in any substantial way.

Equally, although there has been some attention recently to the way that data is published in the humanities, the norm is to publish visualisations rather than link to the datasets themselves.⁷ Not only does this exclude the data, making it unavailable to scrutiny or re-use, the reliance on visualisations that look as if they are printed restricts what it is possible to visualise. The page imposes limits and, while such constraints might be productive, it has serious repercussions for those wanting to visualize social networks, maps (with their attendant data), databases, or even long lists of figures.⁸

⁶ Gitelman, p. 133.

⁷ See, for instance, Trevor Muñoz, 'Data Curation as Publishing for the Digital Humanities', *Journal of Digital Humanities*, 2 (2013) <<http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/2-3/data-curation-as-publishing-for-the-digital-humanities/>> [accessed 9 November 2015]

⁸ The solution to date has been to publish digital annexes. For a well-known example see William G. Thomas III and Edward L. Ayers, *The Differences Slavery Made: A Close Analysis of Two American Communities* <<http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/AHR/>> and the discussion published as 'An Overview: The Differences Slavery Made', *American Historical Review*, 108:5 (2003), 1299-1307. For more on these publications see Helen Rogers's contribution to this Digital Forum. For a further example of the digital annexe, see *Virtual Victorians: The Digital Annex* (2015) <<http://www.virtualvictorians.org/>>, which accompanies the collection *Virtual Victorians*, ed. by Veronica Alfano and Andrew Stauffer (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

Perhaps there is a place for pdf. If the trend is for disaggregation, whether articles separated from issues or chapters from books, the pdf offers a way of creating stable units, where the processed file looks the same regardless of the device that displays it. Even the tendency to publish inactive links (where links appear at all) might be defended as a defense against link rot. But my argument here is that the logic of the pdf has prolonged the look of printedness by disavowing the interconnectedness of digital culture. This is not just a case of technical opportunities missed, but rather the uncritical transfer of a particular structuring framework, originating in a specific and time and place to answer specific technical challenges, into a radically different context. The pdf is, after all, a picture of a printed page. The uncritical conflation of scholarship with the look of printedness suggests we have ceased to think hard about the importance of form.

Journals Incorporated

We have been seduced by the recapitulation of old forms inherent in serial publication. In some ways, being held in thrall by print has been useful. Runs of periodicals stretch over time and so some sort of continuity with the past must be maintained. Equally, there are risks inherent in the transition to a new media and the pdf provides a convenient format for dissemination and preservation. However, in slavishly applying the norms of print, we have missed the opportunity to step outside of it and so recognize the way it shapes the production of knowledge. Our scholarship, which has always been shaped by the modes through which it is published, has become an anachronistic backward glance at the old world of print.

It easy, when articles look so much like they always have, to be satisfied with the status quo. However, we need to experiment more, both in the way we write and the way we publish.

And this means continuing to rethink our relationship with the institutions that entrench the journal in its current, impoverished form. It is tempting to cast this as ‘them and us’, with the managerialist academy on one side and a predatory publishing industry on the other. The challenge is in recognizing that the behaviour of scholars is at the root of both of these. Institutional requirements, whether this is getting jobs, tenure, or mechanisms such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK, demand that we assess one another’s published work. While some are better placed to take risks than others (and the burden of risk-taking certainly should not fall on junior members of the profession), we could all usefully guard against relying on uncritical assumptions as to what good scholarship looks like. Similarly, we cannot let the appearance of print dictate our relationship to publishers. Given that the barriers to publishing have fallen (even the look of printedness is easy from the desktop), we cannot afford to remain the passive clients of the publishing industry, providing content for free and then buying it back again.⁹ However, while the hybridity of the digital journal provides cover for some of the less scrupulous academic publishers, whose pricing mechanisms have not adjusted to take into account the digital economy, publishers are our collaborators, not our enemies.¹⁰ We have much to learn from the industry, not least about how to produce content and get it read while paying the bills. As scholars become cannier, placing content in a wider range of publications and, at times, becoming publishers in their own right, we will be better placed to recognize what is at stake: what there is to learn, when to collaborate, and what we might do for ourselves.

⁹ See Bethanie Nowviskie, ‘Fight Club Soap’, *Bethanie Nowviskie* (2010) <<http://nowviskie.org/2010/fight-club-soap/>> [accessed 9 November 2015].

¹⁰ While I was drafting this, in early November 2015, the editorial board of *Lingua* resigned in a protest at Elsevier’s charges to make articles open access. See Ellen Wexler, ‘What a Mass Exodus at a Linguistics Journal Means for Scholarly Publishing’, *Chronicle of Higher Education* (5 November 2015) <<http://chronicle.com/article/What-a-Mass-Exodus-at-a/234066/>> [accessed 9 November 2015].

The current dominant form for the digital journal represents an awkward compromise. A combination of institutional pressure, commercial interests, and scholarly conservatism has meant that digital tools and technology have been used to model print. Form, as always, operates at the threshold of reader and writer, establishing the framework within which something is read. If we continue to write as if in print, the academy will become increasingly out of touch, an antiquated institution that refuses to recognize the conversations going on beyond what it can only understand as the edge of a page.

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