Thinking of experimenting with digital scholarly publishing? Words to the wise

blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/04/03/writing-history-in-the-digital-age/

Kristen Nawrotzki and Jack Dougherty, co-editors of a born-digital, open-access, open peer-reviewed, and soon-to-be published digital humanities volume offer nuts-and-bolts advice on all aspects related to digital publishing and online collaboration. Transparency and openness thrive in a digital platform, but fundamentally, the most important element to consider is the content of the work itself.

Writing History in the Digital Age , a volume we co-edited, is a collection of scholarly essays on the topic of whether or how the use of digital tools has changed the ways historians write – and, therefore, conceive of — history. It is forthcoming in paper and open-access digital versions from the digitalculturebooks imprint of the University of Michigan Press. As befits the volume's theme, we engaged digital tools in its production in order to push the boundaries of what scholarly publishing looks like and how it works in our field. Thus, the volume was born digital, meaning that the ideas for essays originated and were developed in a series of public, online discussions. The essays eventually submitted underwent an 8-week open peer review process in which 71 individuals – including four expert reviewers engaged by the Press – contributed 942 comments totaling more than 83,500 words (on a manuscript which at that time had 120,000 words altogether). That peer review process led to the acceptance and revision of 21 of the 28 essays, the addition of a conclusion co-authored with two of our most thoughtful commenters, and the Press's final approval for publication under Creative Commons licensing terms.

In view of the queries we continue to receive from other scholars keen to experiment in similar ways with born-digital, open-access, and/or open peer reviewed scholarly publishing, we've put together a list of points to consider. These are based on our own experience with *Writing History*, in which over 20,000 unique visitors have visited our book-in-progress.

The concluding chapter of *Writing History in the Digital Age* , which we co-authored with Charlotte Rochez and Timothy Burke, is subtitled, "What we learned", and we hope that interested parties will find much of use there. What follows here is intended to complement that chapter in providing more nuts-and-bolts advice as well as prompts regarding digital publication efforts that may be very different to *Writing History*, whether in form or aim. Given that *Writing History* may be categorized by the triple-whammy — the trifecta, if you will — of being born-digital, open access and open peer review, we have loosely divided up our suggestions among those three, admittedly somewhat overlapping, categories. The points are listed in no particular order, and we may be adding to these from time to time on our site.

Co-editors Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki (via video chat from Germany) discuss open peer review at THATCamp RRCHNM 2012. (Photo by Dan Cohen.)

As is apparent from the *Writing History* site, we advocate transparency and openness at pretty much every turn, evidenced by our having made public nearly everything, from our initial proposal to the University of Michigan Press to reviewers' feedback to authors of accepted essays, and other material related to the process of creating this volume (but not private rejection letters to authors). We hope others will, too, so that we may all learn from each other.

Born-Digital

- There are numerous advantages to born-digital scholarly publication, including that it allows you to make use of multimedia in a way that traditional print does not, it brings your writing to readers more quickly, and it makes lighter work of collaboration, including the exchange of ideas between authors and commenters/reviewers. On the other hand, it's still relatively new terrain, which means that while it's good to take heed of lessons learned by others, you may well need to invent things as you go along. Don't let that put you off.

- Start small. Find a few like-minded colleagues and set out to accomplish some small, achievable steps (like our first handful of essays for a conference panel, published on a modest WordPress site) to build more trust and the necessary skills before taking on bigger digital projects.

- Every born-digital project is different and potential (or already committed) participants don't like feeling lost or confused. Clearly define the terminology you use to describe your project, its product and process. What do you mean by open review (vs. open peer review, vs. digital workshop…)? Be prepared to educate your authors and readers as to how to interact with your site and the software (however user-friendly it may be). Video tutorials can be very helpful in this regard.

- Open not only your content but also your process up to feedback from others and have a centralized place on your digital site for those queries and suggestions to come in, and for you to deal with them. And, of course, appreciate that feedback, even if it's not helpful in an obviously meaningful way. The fact that you receive feedback means that people care enough to give it to you, and that is a good thing.

- We've said this elsewhere, and we think it's worth repeating: In open peer review it's not just about publishing; it may also be about unpublishing what you've already made public. Be clear about how many versions of an open peer reviewed work will remain publicly accessible under your aegis and for how long. Will the open peer review version and comments be removed from public view once the ultimate version of that work has been published? What happens to the open peer reviewed version of work that does not get carried over for publication in your journal or volume? Such decisions have a significant effect on the "life" of scholarly works, including their accessibility and citability, as well as authors' chances of having them accepted elsewhere in the case that they do not succeed in open peer review in the first instance. For our part, all versions of essays submitted to *Writing History in the Digital Age* remain publicly available, and we encourage the citation of the various versions much as working papers are cited in other disciplines, with the ultimate version then serving as a capstone (or tombstone, in Paul Krugman's description.

- Back everything up! (Details about this in paragraph 5 at http://writinghistory.trincoll.edu/how-it-works/.)

Open Source & Open Access

- Share with readers the details of the open-source web content management system you use. Info about ours is available at http://writinghistory.trincoll.edu/how-it-works/

- Your intellectual property policy ought to be made 100% transparent, and all contributors – including commenters — should be informed about its implications before they type anything on your pages. Think ahead to what a university press or other outlet might require for a derivative publication of material on your site. We decided upon a Creative Commons BY-NC license for ours. We also set up a detailed editorial and intellectual policy statement that explained all steps of the process, and required contributors to check the box that they had read it before submitting their essays. Our commenters retained the copyright to their own words, but had to agree to this statement before clicking on the submit button: "I understand that my name and comment will be shared publicly under the Creative Commons license for this site."

- Communicate with the software designers and others to trouble-shoot, draw on their experiences, to improve upon what's available.

- Keep your eyes open for software updates and for new plug-ins as well.

Open Peer Review & Participation in General

- When seeking participation, offer a long lead time and have the scheduling of different phases made clear so potential participants know what's coming and when. It worked well for us to keep phases of development (online brainstorming, composition, open peer review) to about 6 weeks each, though we ended up extending the open peer review to 8 weeks by popular demand. This sort of scheduling helped us to keep momentum going. It also let people know that if they couldn't participate in one phase (e.g., they hadn't time to write an essay by our deadline) they could still jump in at the next phase. It also meant we had a major PR wave about every 6 weeks, announcing the start of the next phase and specifically mentioning the type of participation we sought.

- Campaign for your project to get it the eyeballs on which it will depend. Shake hands and kiss babies. Give out badges (or at least home-made business cards and stickers) to spread the word. Talk your project up at conferences, offer to visit nearby campuses, speak to colleagues' students and students' colleagues (you get the picture) to invite them to visit your site to share their views. Tweet, use Facebook, (guest)blog, and use discussion-group mailing lists and platforms (H-Net networks or others, as appropriate – example of our text here). Contact the newspapers, have your institution or local organizations feature your work on their homepage or blog.

- Include at least some low-threshold means of participation for readers to dip their metaphorical toes into commenting/reviewing without having to commit whole-hog up-front.

- Make all contributors responsible for spreading the word about their own contributions and the volume/project as a whole. Consider having a GoogleDrive or other shared document where contributors can share with each other their strategies and other info regarding their PR/outreach efforts, both to avoid unnecessary duplication and to develop and highlight new means of reaching potential participants/readers. Authors and the editors should invite people individually to participate (we used email for this, mostly), and try to engage them personally.

- Encourage all contributors to put some "skin in the game" by commenting on each others' texts and to reply/respond to online comments as appropriate. One of the great benefits of a born-digital edited volume is that all contributors can see and comment on all parts of it, which can result in a more coherent volume of essays which productively cross-reference each other, whether in agreement or debate. Commenters feel encouraged to participate much more extensively and intensively if they know their ideas are being read and responded to.

Fundamentally, the most important element is the content of the work itself, and whether it speaks to issues sufficiently important for readers to want to engage with it. Without that core quality, none of these recommendations will guarantee success for your born-digital, open-access, open-review scholarly work. But when paired with quality writing, these suggestions can improve the likelihood of better communication between readers and authors, something which can benefit the scholarly enterprise immeasurably. We hope they also offer a sense of the scope and scale of the editorial labor behind *Writing History*, which we have experienced not only as eminently do-able, but also as enjoyable and meaningful in ways very different from our experiences working on conventional scholarly publications.

Portions of this text are excerpted from Kristen Nawrotzki and Jack Dougherty, "Words to the Wise: Things to consider when experimenting with digital scholarly publishing (March 2013),"in Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki, eds. *Writing History in the Digital Age* . Forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press. Trinity College (CT) web-book edition, Spring 2012, http://writinghistory.trincoll.edu/evolution/our-words-to-the-wise/

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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