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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7wf111p2>

Journal

Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal, 5(2)

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Publication Date

2023

DOI

10.5070/R75259843

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Peer reviewed

Peer Review Models, Publication Types, Open Access, and the Future

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How do you view the relationship between digital publishing and peer review, or between self-publishing and peer review? Are there other ways to create and assess legitimacy and scholarly rigor in digital publication and self-publication spaces?

First off, we acknowledge that digital publishing can take many forms, from standard article or book formats that are enhanced by digital visualizations or interactivity to a variety of less text-centered formats. Likewise, digital projects may enter the world by means of self-publishing (Daniel's main area of expertise) or through more established academic and commercial publishers (Martha's main area of expertise). Peer review will shake out differently across these contexts, as will other factors around digital publishing, with each presenting its own challenges and opportunities.

In the realm of academic and commercial presses, we cannot help but think of the increasingly acknowledged academic labor bottlenecks around peer review. If finding qualified reviewers is a challenge generally, finding reviewers with the particular mix of digital and disciplinary expertise to review digital projects will be harder still, and these on top of the importance of including [diverse representation in reviewer selection](#). But this could also be a moment for innovation. One possible alternative that intrigues us is open peer review, a practice by which a piece of scholarship is released for public review while it is still in progress (see [other definitions](#)). Comments are submitted publicly. Scholars can then respond and revise.

In addition to making the peer review process more transparent, open peer review might help address the reviewer challenge by crowdsourcing peer review to find not just willing reviewers but the mix of expertise that might be required for a particular digital submission. *American Historical Review*, for which Daniel consults, not long ago [undertook just such an experiment](#) with a submission by Joseph L. Locke and Ben Wright. The article, [“History Can Be Open Source: Democratic Dreams and the Rise of Digital History,”](#) went through multiple rounds of public comment and author revision and was eventually accepted for publication in the journal’s December 2021 issue. The piece itself is a compelling read on the topic of digital publishing and crowdsourced scholarship, but the review process was just as notable as a demonstration of what an alternative peer review model might look like. Additionally, a somewhat less-involved version of this might be the practice of posting a preprint of an article as a way for authors to get early [feedback](#) on their research while also attributing their work to their names early on.

To push this further, who is to say that peer review has to happen before final publication? With some kinds of work, that is simply not possible, or at least not ideal. Self-publishing often fits this category, as it sits outside the formal peer review process baked into outputs like journals and books whether digital or print. Additionally, some kinds of digital creations are too involved or multifaceted to make any sort of meaningful in-process presentation feasible. Why not channel the postpublication review process as an analog for prepublication peer review? Take podcasting, for instance, a medium that is more often than not a self-publishing endeavor. A podcast can go out into the world, and the peer review can be the reception, perhaps some combination of published reviews of the project and streaming statistics. That is what happened when Daniel produced [Stories from the Epicenter](#), a ten-part documentary podcast about the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake and its effects on Santa Cruz County, California. The project did not go through a traditional peer review process, but it was reviewed after its release in 2020 in [The Public Historian](#) and [California History](#). Indeed, many academic journals are now regularly reviewing digital projects. One new journal, [Reviews in Digital Humanities](#), was created to tackle this specific challenge/opportunity head-on. Why not consider digital projects reviewed in this way likewise peer-reviewed publications?

Similarly, could a scholar seek comments on their in-progress digital project from colleagues or experts in their field? Could that person then list those contributions in their acknowledgments or via the [CRediT taxonomy](#)? Perhaps this strays beyond what we might consider traditional peer review, but it could be an alternative way to ensure scholarly rigor while being transparent about that process.

How can scholars measure the impact of their work in the digital realm as technologies evolve and transform? What are the potential impacts of shareability and virality on digital academic publishing?

Yes, what is impact? Or what is the kind of impact we are really aiming for? And how is impact demonstrated? Digital pieces can often be more readily tracked using altmetrics—things like numbers of clicks, shares, likes, or comments—which are over and above traditional measures like citation count and impact factor. Some publishers, for example, have created [maps that show live pins](#) where a publication is being read. Visualizing a publication's reach gives us a glimpse of use in a way that is otherwise harder to track if not digital. Still, not everything needs to go viral, nor will it. Reaching more discrete audiences in meaningful ways may be just as, if not more, impactful. Here, numbers won't tell the whole story. Rather, quality of engagement, rather than quantity, might be the more meaningful, if less straightforward, measure. The [Open Access Week](#) theme for 2022, "Open for Climate Justice," points to this directly with the description:

This year's theme seeks to encourage connection and collaboration among the climate movement and the international open community. Sharing knowledge is a human right, and tackling the climate crisis requires the rapid exchange of knowledge across geographic, economic, and disciplinary boundaries.

A webinar¹ about this theme conveyed that communities and advocates need to be able to find and access data and information, but those who need it the most often have great challenges in getting it. Climate justice is not the only field with this need. All fields grapple in some way with the intersection of digital publication, access, and impact. From a librarian perspective, impact is not just about a lot of impact—however you count that—but also about the information and data reaching the people who need it to further their work.

Also related to impact is what gets credit and why. Questions about credit are larger than whether a work is digital or not, but the digital realm adds more layers. Bibliometrics offers a long-standing area of analysis with various measures that can be problematic: the way that metrics are calculated paired with authors' priorities in choosing how and where to publish increases the nuance and complexity. What are the authors' priorities? How are priorities driven by what gets credit? Authors can push the needle on these priorities—and maybe even what type of work gets credit—through the choices that they make in how they publish their work.

How might digital publications include media beyond text? What opportunities or ways of reimagining the relationship between form and content are unique to digital publishing, and what risks or stigmas must those approaches contend with?

The possibilities beyond text seem almost endless, although usually text of some sort will still be involved. Digital platforms offer ways of serving up various kinds of non-text-centered media, from audio and visual material to interactive maps and other sorts of data visualization, to nonlinear argumentation and storytelling, to immersive elements like 3D objects and virtual reality, to audience feedback and interaction. The list goes on.

Again, we see differences depending on the publishing context. Self-published digital projects, depending on their particular form and medium/s, can take advantage of a wide variety of commercial and open source platforms. Omeka is a go-to for online exhibits. Scalar is often used for nonlinear writing and storytelling. ESRI's StoryMaps platform is another increasingly popular tool that allows one to seamlessly incorporate a wide variety of media. And there are any number of more specialized platforms and approaches to display 3D objects, interactive maps, data models, audio and video projects, and more.

Incorporating these non-text-centric digital projects into the platforms of established publishers can be much more challenging. Many such platforms are inherently limited by past conceptions of what a publication could or should be. Some may offer digital integrations like Manifold ([for example](#)). Others depend on using outside platforms to extend their capabilities, such as with Elaine Sullivan's 3D-enriched digital monograph [Constructing the Sacred](#), published by Stanford University Press with the platform Scalar. Without a doubt, many publications could take more advantage of digital affordances, though cost and labor involved in those endeavors will have to be addressed.

Although digital publications may seem less fragile than their analog counterparts, the infrastructure of computing and the cloud often results in shorter lifespans for born-digital content. How do digital publications interact with and alter the infrastructure of analog archives? How might digital publications be preserved into an indefinite future? What might the archives of digital publications look like ten, twenty, or fifty years from now?

Many of us have had that sinking feeling when a webpage, article, video, site, or other digital item disappears—a real, frightening, and all-too-common occurrence! This is often frustrating, and we think a lot about this issue in libraries because we

are often on the receiving end of such changes. A number of reasons could be the culprit, not just the infrastructure itself. A major factor, though, is the decisions made by the human beings who manage publications, platforms, and preservation. Moreover, their decisions about whether and how a publication is shared and preserved, such as format and backups, ideally should not just be considered later on when there is a final product to preserve but, rather, earlier in the publishing process.

What are those decisions, and who is responsible? Authors have some say over what their publication will look like and its lifespan through their choices of publisher, platform, and/or how to publish (e.g., open access or behind a paywall). However, the decisions that are in the hands of publishers can present more challenges. On the one hand, publishers may be nonprofit, [academy-owned](#), university presses, and/or society (and those categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive). These types of publishers tend to embody values like preservation and openness while still making selections about what to publish, its cost, and so forth. On the flip side, publishers may be commercial and private. They make less transparent decisions on what gets published, how much it costs, who gets to see it, and whether it remains available. Furthermore, digital platforms may be proprietary or open source, which offers publishing options—and conundrums—to authors. Such choices by humans influence the availability and preservation of publications not unlike analog options.

We can delve further into these considerations and choices, such as whether the author keeps all their rights when publishing or if they give some or all their rights to the publisher and/or platform. Yet another question is whether that publisher will continue to exist and make the work available—and what happens if they cease to exist. If the platform and/or publisher go dark, can the author take the content and be able to view it still? This is both a technology question and a copyright question. When a platform changes or goes away, the publication may not be usable elsewhere, or some preservation may be possible but lack full functionality. Aside from being able to take a publication elsewhere, the author may or may not be allowed to do so.

This laundry list of questions about the type of publisher and platform then brings us to still more questions about the type of publication. Long-standing academic outputs like articles and books have more infrastructure and preservation practices in place around them should a publisher disappear, server get destroyed, or some other disruption occur. The full text is often indexed in multiple places. Libraries own copies. Different versions are archived in digital repositories. Digital projects, however, are another story. Again, we ask, is the publication produced in

a proprietary or open source format? Also, how much does publication and maintenance cost? As they like to say, when something is free, you are the product.

Aside from publishers, platforms, and publication types, we also must talk about long-term goals for a publication. Is the publication meant to contribute to the scholarly record for the long term, or is it more ephemeral? If it is the latter, what is the plan for sunsetting the project? Sometimes the answer is not endless preservation but a sensible and graceful retirement plan for projects.

Looking ahead, many experts focus on this thorny problem, such as born-digital archivists. Libraries and archives are in the long game with preserving and thinking ahead so that publications, whether analog or digital, remain available, which is not without its many hurdles. What publications and their preservation look like will continue to evolve, but these considerations of where and how a publication is published—proprietary or open? rights retained or not? long-term or ephemeral?—are persistent and important to answer, and they shape the archive. What also needs to stay stable are the values behind preservation efforts, such as openness and trust, so that what is there now will be available in the future (if so desired).

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Notes

¹ T. Chalmers, E. Williams, and M. Granados, *What Is Climate Justice? A Pre-OA Week Conversation* (webinar), September 29, 2022, Open Access Week, SPARC, and Creative Commons.