

The Nineteenth-Century Press in the Digital Age

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The Nineteenth-Century Press in the Digital Age

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To Laurel Brake

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Preface

This is a book about the nineteenth-century press but it is also a book about digital culture. Like many scholars in the humanities, I was rarely exposed to digital scholarship over the course of my training. I might have increasingly relied on email over the course of my undergraduate and postgraduate studies, accessed a number of journals online and, for my doctoral research, used a range of digital indices to search for and locate material, but my knowledge of the digital remained cursory and functional. I am from a generation that grew up with computers. The first in my household was the popular Apple II, a model that was launched the year I was born. I am, I suppose, a digital native and have witnessed the growth of personal computing first hand. Yet it was not until my position as postdoctoral research assistant on a digital project, the Nineteenth-Century Serials Edition (ncse), that I really engaged with the digital as a field of study in its own right. I was fortunate to be able to work closely with colleagues at the Centre for Computing in the Humanities at King's College London and able to attend two NINES summer workshops, one hosted by the University of Virginia in the early days of ncse in 2005 and another at Miami University, Ohio, after the edition had been published in 2008. The practical experience of using digital technology to model nineteenth-century newspapers and periodicals made me recognize the affordances of this new medium while teaching me new things about the older print media that I thought I knew so well.

There is something timely about writing a book about digital resources of nineteenth-century newspapers and periodicals. Both the academic monograph and the newspaper are embattled forms today, struggling for survival in a changing marketplace and among competing technologies. At a recent conference hosted by the Centre for the History of the Book at the University of Edinburgh called 'Material Cultures' in 2010, many delegates acknowledged that the resurgence of interest in the material forms of the book was prompted by the radical way these properties are transformed through digitization. Digital media might raise questions about what constitutes the book but, so far, the book industry remains in rude health. The various ereaders available from Amazon and Sony have helped nurture the ebook and Apple's tablet computer, the iPad,

provides further marketing possibilities for this form. What is remarkable is that the book has made the transition into digital form, even though it operates as something else entirely.

The scholarly monograph, however, has not been so fortunate. In the conclusion to this book, I endorse the arguments of the many scholars who have recognized that the monograph no longer serves the professional needs of the academy. Although the many announcements of the death of this form might be a little premature, it has long been in crisis and looks like it will continue to be so in the future. For some time, the publication of monographs has been trapped in a spiral of declining demand driving higher prices that in turn further diminish demand (Anonymous [British Academy], 2005, p. 70). Yet our institutions and professional bodies remain wedded to this declining form, using it as the basis for recruitment, promotion and the allocation of esteem. This means that scholars are under pressure to produce monographs that publishers find increasingly difficult to sell and libraries to afford. The monograph is an important scholarly technology, allowing an author to develop a substantive argument at some length. There are also well-established systems for review and preservation, ensuring books are noted on publication and made available for readers in the future. Yet the reason for its continued fetishization within the profession is largely to do with an entrenched conservatism that relates intellectual quality with the form of the bound volume.

So why publish a book about the digital? Well, as a sustained argument, my subject is suited to exposition over the course of a volume. There are other ways I could have published, of course: I might have published my arguments over a series of journal articles or as a whole within a peer-reviewed digital environment. Publishing online, especially within an open-access resource, would certainly have attracted more readers. The (gradual) development of institutional repositories provides somewhere where this kind of work can be curated, ensuring that it – or at least the data that underpins it – can be preserved into the future. My reasons for publishing a book are largely pragmatic. There is still a dearth of printed scholarship on the history of the media. As I outline in Chapter 1, there is a growing body of work about nineteenth-century periodicals, yet coverage of newspapers – let alone any of the other print forms produced by the press – is much more patchy. I am pleased to be able to contribute to Palgrave's *Studies in the History of the Media*. Their marketing department will endeavour to get the book into libraries and bring it to the attention of the various readerships to which they think it will appeal. As it is a book,

libraries, if they can be convinced to buy it, know what to do with it once it is in their possession. Lastly, publishing in an institutionalized format such as the monograph will do my career no harm. However, I am under no illusions as to the limitations of this print genre. It will appear in a very small run and only one person will be able to read a copy at once. It will be expensive, so very few people will buy it to read. It will be out of print almost immediately upon publication. There are advantages to this print genre, but it is in decline nevertheless. The future of scholarship is digital.

In the conclusion to the book, I discuss the advantages of digital scholarship at more length. One of the results of the hegemony of the monograph is that the scholarship it contains becomes monographic. As I argue throughout the book, the digital has entirely different properties to print and so enables different types of scholarship. It is also a medium that is adept at simulation, hence the easy translation of the book into digital form. The digital does not threaten the future of the monograph but does constitute a much more effective way of carrying out and publishing scholarship. The digital has, however, had a profound and deleterious effect on print media, especially the newspaper. Whereas the cultural status of the book has ensured its survival as an exchangeable commodity, allowing publishers to exploit the potential for online commerce, the digital has displaced the printed newspaper as a medium for news. The printed paper was never really the best medium for news but, until the emergence of the web, it did an adequate job, surviving the advent of various broadcast media such as television and radio. Despite the often vocal claims of journalists, what made the newspaper valuable was not the informational content of news – this could often be obtained more quickly elsewhere – but the way it was packaged as part of the printed object. Newspapers, as Marilyn Deegan and Kathryn Sutherland remind us, are ‘the threshold for our adult relationship to print, the basic tool of our literacy that we all aspire to: people who never read anything else will read newspapers’ (Deegan and Sutherland, 2009b, p. 31). Throughout its existence, the newspaper has been the preferred print object through which readers mediated their lived experience. The news, as ostensibly current unmediated factual information, played an important part in verifying this experience, linking the representation of the page to the wider world beyond it. The newspaper, therefore, linked news to other textual genres, associating it with a ritualized act of consumption that helped structure the reader’s stance towards the things of which they read, while helping them to establish their own cultural identity and signal it to others.

The newspaper market has been affected by digitization in two ways: firstly, news has become decoupled from the newspaper as media; and secondly, the market for digital advertising is currently less remunerative than that in print. Although newspapers have always depended upon advertising revenue to be sustainable, it is the first of these that threatens the newspaper as genre. Digital media are perfectly suited to the distribution and consumption of news as information, and publishers, editors and journalists are still coming to terms with the decoupling of news from the newspaper. What the digital does well is collate and distribute information, bypassing the gatekeeping functions traditionally played by journalists and their editors. Not only are there a number of independent and grassroots producers of the news that take advantage of digital publication, but applications and technologies like *Google News*, RSS and *Twitter* liberate news from the outlets that publish it, allowing users to reconfigure it according to their own interests. Editors and proprietors of newspapers like to present themselves as in the business of selling news; however, what they really sell is a composite object, predicated in part on the way in which the news is told, packaged in a particular way to attract readers, whose attention can then be sold on to advertisers. Journalism – finding stories and, crucially, telling them effectively – remains important, but it has proved increasingly difficult to get readers to pay for the platform through which the news is published.

Publishers of newspapers are still trying to establish a way to make digital media pay. At the moment, most publications rely on some combination of free content (to sell advertising), specialist applications for various platforms (a way of monetizing delivery) and paywalls and subscriptions (charging for content). Yet the same medium that threatens the sustainability of both the printed newspaper and the way it is currently manifested in digital form provides the means through which we can discover the print media of the past. The printed products of the nineteenth-century press constitute an archive that is too large to navigate, contains too much material to read, and survives in a form difficult to access and navigate. The digitization of this print archive solves many of the bibliographic challenges that it presents and does so in a way that retains the look of the page. It has never been so easy to consult the nineteenth-century press (or at least, those parts that have been digitized) and we are now surrounded by images of nineteenth-century print. The nineteenth-century press, particularly newspapers and periodicals, were the central documents of the period. They were the way most readers learned of the world around them and realized their

own place within it. As objects, they circulated between – and allowed information to circulate between – groups of readers, consolidating their identities. As commodities, they were desirable and provided spaces of escape and fantasy, as well as providing the medium for political organization and unrest. Given the high price of books, these print forms were the only way many readers could access new writing. In this book I argue that the digitization of the press allows us to understand the nineteenth century in new ways. However, to do so we need to be able to do two things: firstly, we must be able to read the press through the forms in which it survives and situate these within their historical context; secondly, we need to understand how these forms change through digitization. The digital offers the means through which we can interrogate the media of the past, but this is only possible if we can interrogate the digital media of the present.

Acknowledgements

This book was conceived over the course of the Nineteenth-Century Serials Edition (ncse) (2005–8), but written during my first three years at the University of Birmingham (2007–10). ncse was a collaboration between Birkbeck College, the British Library, King's College London and Olive Software. It was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the resource, *Nineteenth-Century Serials Edition (ncse)*, was published in May 2008 <<http://www.ncse.ac.uk>>. The book originated in discussions between myself and members of what was known as the research team: Isobel Armstrong, Laurel Brake, Suzanne Paylor and Mark Turner. Initially, the book was to be co-written between myself and Suzanne Paylor, who was, like me, employed as a postdoctoral research assistant on the project. Suzanne contributed extensively to the early stages of the book, helping to map out its contents and draft proposals to publishers. The book builds on co-authored papers produced with Suzanne during the project and she has contributed to a number of the chapters. Suzanne is the co-author of Chapter 3, but her ideas and influence are throughout.

Other members of the ncse project team also contributed to the development of the book. Working closely with Ed King (British Library), Chezkie Kasnett (Olive Software) and the brilliant scholars at the Centre for Computing in the Humanities at King's College London – Gerhard Brey, Arianna Ciula, Marilyn Deegan, Tamara Lopez, Eleonora Picozzi, Harold Short, Paul Spence, Simon Tanner, Paul Vetch – shaped the book in many different ways. Working with ncse also allowed me to attend two NINES Summer Workshops. The first, at the University of Virginia in 2005, occurred during the early stages of the project and was crucial for grounding me in the broader context of the digital humanities. The second, at Miami University, occurred in the summer after the publication of *ncse* in 2008. At both workshops I learned a great deal from both delegates and representatives of the host institutions. At each, I was struck by the intellectual generosity of all involved.

The book was written during my first three years at the University of Birmingham. The university has proved a welcoming environment and a stimulating place in which to work. I have enjoyed many fascinating discussions with colleagues interested in nineteenth- and

twentieth-century literature, including Clare Barker, Jan Campbell, Steve Ellis, Andrzej Gaziorek, Dave Gunning, Deborah Longworth, Ian Small and Marion Thain. An early version of Chapter 3 was presented at the Text and Cultural Construction Seminar at Birmingham, hosted jointly by the Institute of Archaeology and Antiquity (IAA) and the Institute for Textual Scholarship and Electronic Editing (ITSEE).

Parts of this book have been presented to various audiences in Britain and the United States. A record of presentations on behalf of *ncse* can be found on the *ncse* website. Some of my thoughts about copyright and digital materiality were first drafted in a presentation to Deloitte in 2008. At the NINES workshop later that year I had the opportunity of reflecting on *ncse* as a published edition in a paper about digitizing journalism. My attendance at this workshop was made possible by a British Academy Overseas Conference Grant, for which I am very grateful. Shortly after my return I presented a paper on seriality and genre at the annual meeting of the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals (RSVP) in Roehampton. A draft of Chapter 2 formed the basis of a paper presented at a symposium organized by the Centre for Textual Scholarship at De Montfort University in 2009 and part of the Introduction was presented for that year's meeting of RSVP in Minneapolis. In 2010, I presented portions of the book to 'Material Cultures: Technology, Textuality and Transmission' at the University of Edinburgh and 'Digitized History: Newspapers and their Impact in Research into Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Britain' at the British Library. A seminar paper at the inaugural meeting of the Periodicals Research Cluster at Salford University in April 2011 allowed me to present key arguments from the book while I was in the process of revising the manuscript. I thank the organizers of all these events for the opportunity to present work and the various audiences, present and on *Twitter*, for their useful comments and questions.

I would like to thank Nicola Gauld for her constant love and support. My parents, Daphne and Dick, and my brother, Ian, have always helped in any way they can. My friends have been more than willing to provide welcome distractions when necessary.

Throughout the preparation of this book Laurel Brake has been a valued colleague and friend. Laurel is both an expert in nineteenth-century print and a keen advocate for the digital. This book is dedicated to her.

List of Abbreviations

AHRC	Arts and Humanities Research Council
CAPTCHA	Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart
CCH	Centre for Computing in the Humanities, King's College London
CSS	Cascading Style Sheets
<i>DMVI</i>	<i>Database of Mid-Victorian Wood-Engraved Illustrations</i>
GIF	Graphics Interchange Format
GUI	Graphical User Interface
HTML	HyperText Markup Language
IAA	Institute of Archaeology and Antiquity, University of Birmingham
<i>ILN</i>	<i>Illustrated London News</i>
ITSEE	Institute for Textual Scholarship and Electronic Editing, University of Birmingham
JISC	Joint Information Systems Committee
JPEG	Joint Photographic Experts Group
MARC	Machine Readable Cataloguing System
METS	Metadata Encoding and Transmission Standard
MLA	Modern Language Association
MODS	Metadata Object and Description Schema
NAVSA	North American Victorian Studies Association
ncse	Nineteenth-Century Serials Edition (project and resource)
NEH	National Endowment for the Humanities
NINES	Networked Infrastructure for Nineteenth-Century Electronic Scholarship
OCR	Optical Character Recognition
PDF	Portable Document Format
PNG	Portable Network Graphics
RSVP	Research Society for Victorian Periodicals
SDUK	Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge
SHARP	Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing
TEI	Text Encoding Initiative

TIFF	Tagged Image File Format
UCREL	University Centre for Computer Corpus Research on Language
USAS	UCREL Semantic Analysis System
VPN	<i>Victorian Periodicals Newsletter</i>
VPR	<i>Victorian Periodicals Review</i>
XML	eXtensible Markup Language
XSL	eXtensible Stylesheet Language