

2014

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A FORAY INTO LIBRARY DIGITAL PUBLISHING: THE BRITISH VIRGINIA PROJECT AT VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

Like many of my colleagues at Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries (and elsewhere), I often contemplate the future of libraries in the digital age, even though the rapid pace of change leaves little time to envision the full transformation to come. Nonetheless, in August, 2010, as I mused on the Library of the Future – wondering if a mind-scan device would buzz around incoming patrons, instantly “read” their information needs, then chirp and flit in a bee-like dance to point them toward the most fruitful data to download on whatever personal tech they might be wearing ten years from now – two VCU humanities faculty members jolted me out of my Asimovian reverie. Professor Joshua Eckhardt (VCU English) and Professor Sarah Meacham (VCU History) asked to meet and discuss a project idea that would involve a partnership with VCU Libraries. By all means, I said, not realizing in that moment that, indeed, the Future is Now.

Joshua and Sarah, both specialists in early modern history, politics, and print culture, closely follow innovations in scholarly communications. They exemplify Rafael Alvarado’s insight that “Digital humanists are simply humanists” who apply in working with technology “a more or less deep conviction that digital media can play a crucial, indeed transformative, role in the work of interpretation, broadly conceived.” In our meeting, they outlined an idea for online access, through VCU Libraries, to rare and little-studied publications from the early English colonization of Virginia, in the first years of the reign of James I. The project would focus first on the Virginia Company sermons (so named for the corporation authorized by royal charter to undertake the “adventure”) preached in London, encouraging and justifying the virtues of settlement.

While I’ve often helped faculty and students by enhancing our print and electronic holdings in the humanities, this was our first discussion about engaging in a collaborative effort toward a potential digital publication. What Joshua and Sarah envisioned went beyond merely making unknown texts more findable, in order to generate new insights into this period of British and Virginia history. They wanted, rather, to explore a long-term partnership with VCU Libraries for digital publishing. Having received a grant to encourage research innovation from the office of the VCU president, Dr. Michael Rao, they were investigating new ways to disseminate scholarship to a national and global audience, in the process advocating for open access initiatives. Joshua particularly wondered if it would be possible to locate a new scholarly edition of selected Virginia Company sermons not only within our catalog, but to create within VCU Libraries itself a springboard for online publishing of these and other emerging faculty research.

The nature of the project initially seemed straightforward: Joshua and Sarah would work to fulfill the mission of the grant by gathering texts and providing editorial context for what had become often overlooked records of colonial ideology. In turn, VCU Libraries would explore ways to provide a home

for an innovative form of born-digital faculty scholarship. The idea of a digitally-published book, an edited collection of the sermons, was also put forth – an ambitious goal. Through conversations across the library, led by VCU University Librarian, John E. Ulmschneider, and Senior Associate University Librarian, John K. Duke, the intricacies of such a project quickly revealed themselves. The need to coordinate the contributions of library faculty and staff from diverse departments, both in terms of expertise and time, would require careful planning. The presentation of a foray into digital publishing also came in the doldrums of a severe economic downturn, a situation that incited considerable uncertainty on many fronts. The first step, then, was to gain a deeper understanding of the project goals, its feasibility, and the importance of the scholarship.

BACKGROUND

The Virginia Company, founded by royal charter in 1606 by James I, was tasked with enlarging English trade – and power – in the so-called New World. In doing so, through the establishment of settlements in lands named for the late Virgin Queen, Elizabeth I, the balance of trade, wealth, and influence would, it was hoped, move decisively to Britain’s favor in European affairs. Not wanting the venture to be seen, however, as undertaken for the sinful purpose of worldly gain, a series of sermons was preached in London, near the time for departures to Virginia. These sermons extolled the virtues of an enterprise that would expand the reach and glory of the holy word through trade.

As a specialist in the literature, culture, politics, and religious controversies of early modern England, Joshua’s expertise extends to unpublished manuscripts that often circulated dissent among a small cadre. His focus on well-known figures, such as poet and later Dean of St. Paul’s, John Donne, is balanced by attention to more obscure voices from that cacophonous age. In researching seventeenth-century manuscripts and publications in the collections of the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond, he discovered a printing of the Virginia Company sermons. Reading them through, Joshua discerned elements of the preachers’ discourse that could enhance our sense of how an ideology of the moral and divine rightness of colonization was not without its critics at the time.

Contained within the sermons, it seems, are indirect quotations of the views of opponents against settlement in Virginia, voices that left little known published record of their dissent. The first sermon especially, preached by William Symonds on April 25, 1609, preserves through rebuttal the misguided and sinful (to Symonds) views of opponents: a faint trace of what was likely a very spirited debate. (Those against settlement seemed to have argued, for instance, that it would be unlawful and sinful to overthrow the monarch of the native people of Virginia.) The function of the sermons preached in London as a way to disperse power from above has been much studied, and is the focus of an exciting digital reconstruction of St Paul’s Cathedral and its courtyard preaching station, The Virtual St Paul’s Cathedral Project (virtualpaulscrossproject.blogspot.com/), by Professor John N. Wall and his colleagues and students at North Carolina State University.

Joshua recognized that the sermons showed an aspect of how the ideology of early English colonization in Virginia was fashioned, and how its final version leaves out the reservations, and probably the vigorous counter-arguments, of dissenters. The value of reading the sermons afresh, he notes, is borne out by their omission from one of the standard scholarly print editions of writings related to English colonization, David Beers Quinn’s *New American World: A Documentary History of North America to*

1612. This compilation, Joshua observes in his introduction to the digital edition of Symonds' sermon, "ran to five large volumes and 851 texts, yet had no room for the sermons." He adds that "The sermons preached to, and printed for, the Virginia Company in the months surrounding its second charter may qualify as some of the most overlooked documents promoting the colony." Quinn omitted the sermons for being of minimal interest, a decision that speaks to the importance of open access as a means to reconsider and enlarge the scholarly record. Thus the project, now called British Virginia, moved into a meaningful collaboration involving VCU Libraries professionals in digitization. How to design, upload, and distribute the online editions was our next step.

PROCESS AND OUTCOME

From our earliest conversations, a number of common goals and criteria were identified: ease of access to the publications; a format that would ensure stability and fulfill digital preservation standards for open access scholarship; inclusion within VCU Libraries catalog to emphasize the origin of the publications, promoting the project as a way to advocate for open access publishing that originates from within libraries; and most of all, an edition that blended the traditions of rigorous scholarship and publication, involving peer review, with an innovative way to distribute research and broaden scholarly communications.

In addition to the oversight of the library role in the British Virginia project by the University Librarian and the Senior Associate University Librarian, members of the VCU Libraries faculty and staff from various departments contribute to the planning and implementation of the publication model. John Duke established a library committee to coordinate our efforts and communications with Joshua and Sarah. In the department of Digital Technologies, Jimmy Ghaphery, head of the department, and Sam Byrd, the Digital Collections Systems Librarian, work closely with Joshua and Sarah on the format of the online text and also address preservation issues. Barbara Anderson, head of the Metadata and Discovery department, identifies the cataloging protocols for a born-digital publication, one of the first at VCU Libraries. As the library advisor for British Virginia, I represent the Collection Analysis and Investment department, coordinating communications and assisting with editorial matters and the peer-review process. Joshua and Sarah locate texts for possible inclusion, edit their own contributions, seek submissions, and oversee each step leading toward a final version of the editions. They were assisted by Neal Wyatt, a library professional and doctoral candidate in the Media, Art, and Text program at VCU.

Because the editions needed, as the editors stressed, to be in the open-access equivalent of a universal language, pdf was chosen as the publication format. The ability to download and print the editions, no matter the researcher's location, was paramount; pdf has proven itself a durable and user-friendly method for digital text. The process of assessing and choosing a publishing platform required deliberations about the look of the editions, when balanced against the imperative for preservation compliance and ease of access. Our existing DSpace model was chosen, being a way to both customize the presentation of British Virginia while also ensuring its durability; the ability to link from our catalog directly to the editions located in DSpace, designated as VCU Digital Archives, was also crucial to the goals of the project. From years of experience at VCU Libraries working with DSpace to house electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs), which allows VCU authors to have control over the publishing and the look of their texts, its advantage for the customization needs of this project were clear.

The work of bringing the edition to publication was undertaken by Joshua, Sarah, and Neal. Joshua edited the sermon by William Symonds, first preached on April 25, 1609, and provided an introduction and contextual annotation. His editorial work was then peer-reviewed, and corrections and suggestions incorporated into the text. During this process, Joshua determined that not only would each edition comprise a digital typescript of the text of the sermon, but also a digital facsimile of the original printing. Neal assisted in the formatting of the facsimile; the appearance of the original printing itself was captured in the pdf typescript using InDesign. For the cataloging of the completed edition, ensuring global access, Dublin Core was used for the metadata, to integrate the project with Marc-based records.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE, NOW

The rise in e-book collections, and growing emphasis on Patron-Driven Acquisition (PDA), marks a seismic shift in library collections, moving from a largely print-based library to a digital environment. This new library-scape will foster the creation of new ways of experiencing knowledge – from multimedia textuality to 3-D printing, so that researchers will author artwork, literature, scholarship, and as yet undefined forms of knowledge from within the library itself (including the mobile library that accompanies researchers wherever they may be). Already some emerging electronic databases are characterized by what may be termed “e-mmersiveness,” the immersion within a digital wealth of historical texts, images, and information of other kinds that incites a deepened sense of the experience of the historical moment and the individuals who lived through it.

The outcome of these advances for the collections of academic libraries suggest the development of “local” collection creation: for scholarship, this means the discovery and dissemination of new contributions based upon material within the library’s collections, which in turn enhances the local collection. Building on the tenets of open access, such contributions will foster scholarly communications and research in a more direct, dialogic, and equitable manner. As the collections model that has prevailed for many decades, a model that saw individual libraries acquire one, or multiple, copies of a print item, transitions to a model of shared collection strategy and shared resources, the importance of those unique holdings in a given collection will lead to highly innovative contributions across academic disciplines. By preparing for this future now – it is moments away – libraries can merge their archival role within culture with the equally crucial role of providing a dynamic, experimental environment of digital creation and authorship. “Libraries have long been in the ‘content business’ – however, rather than merely providing access to content,” Ajit Pyati argues, “they are taking more active roles in the development of content itself.”

For Joshua and his colleagues, the benefit of locating British Virginia within a library publishing model not only continues and advances the tradition of the idea of a university press (as more and more such presses will become digital), but reaffirms the role of libraries and academic publishing in the digital age. “Historical research and editing have long depended on libraries,” he notes, “especially their special collections. British Virginia does so too. British Virginia collaborates with a library that is too young to have pertinent original sources: VCU’s own. Like most university libraries, VCU’s library does have the computer resources to publish: i.e., the digital equivalent of a press. In fact, it has a more robust computer infrastructure than do many older libraries with richer holdings. British Virginia puts together a younger library’s computer power with an older library’s original sources, strengthening the research

profile of the former and increasing access to the resources of the latter” (personal communication, October 23, 2013).

For VCU Libraries, British Virginia represents a first step toward a deeper involvement with, and promulgation of, research and publishing by our faculty that is born-digital. The success of this project has drawn the attention of faculty and students across the VCU community, who are bringing ideas to the library for a variety of digital publications. This interest has sparked further discussion about identifying and developing a more robust publishing platform for these vanguard initiatives (John Duke, personal communication, December 5, 2013). Best of all, the expertise that will arise from these projects can be shared openly, to encourage, assist, and fulfill the digital publishing goals of libraries across the world. It’s an exciting future, right now.

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