Electronic Publication: Intended and Unintended Consequences

In the last couple of decades, Digital Humanities has evolved from an idea in the air to a call for action to being thick on the ground of practice. The humanities, broadly conceived, have always depended on publication. But by now we have come to recognize that digital does not simply supplant print publication. Rather, it complicates the research and publishing landscape with explicit and implied critical challenges. The issues we encounter in digital publication are often, and importantly, issues of how we recognize and deal with unintended consequences. These consequences even lead us to question what we had—until now—considered to be our mission. Unanticipated results present the inevitable conditions under which we will be operating for now and in the near future. Sometimes, of course, unintended consequences are outright failures—lessons learned, as we prefer to say. But beyond learning from our mistakes, I want to suggest a more nuanced stance: that we resist the impulse to immediately judge an unintended consequence as good or bad, that we instead accept the world’s inherent complexity and be more attentive to where it might take us. Unintended consequences often offer creative opportunities and propose new directions.

Let me take as an example a project we started at the Getty Research Institute (GRI) about six years ago. The GRI holds the papers of the firm Goupil & Cie, an important art dealer in Paris and New York that handled major European artists such as Edgar Degas. Art dealers keep track of their inventory in stock books, ledgers in which every object is assigned a number, and relevant information is noted. If you study the art market, stock books are the gold standard of evidence. The Goupil archive has seventeen of them, and dozens of scholars have come to Los Angeles to examine them. The fragile ledgers were deteriorating with use, and our conservators wanted to restrict their handling, so we digitized them. On the web, missing their materiality and intuitive sequentiality, the stock books were harder to search. The Provenance Index, a pioneering digital project for the study of collecting and provenance that the Getty has run for over three decades, designed a new database for Goupil: http://piprod.getty.edu/starweb/stockbooks/servlet.starweb?path=stockbooks/stockbooks.web, published online and linked to digitized images of the stock books. Recently, we began to pay attention to our web metrics. We discovered that whereas in the previous decade we had a few dozen scholars come to L.A. to consult the Goupil archive in person, in the first year the Goupil stock books were available online, we received more than 17,000 visits—far exceeding our earlier notions of heavy usage. We were astonished. Our motive had been to offer access and searchability while preserving the delicate originals. It was only when we published the database that we discovered the high level of interest kindled by this kind of resource. It is worth pondering whether this unanticipated level of interest was not a priori, but rather occasioned, at least in part, by the availability of the resource.

Inspired by this unintended consequence, we decided to digitize the stock books from a recent acquisition, the huge archive of the important art dealer Knoedler & Co. We are doing the same with the stock books of the famous Duveen Brothers Gallery archive, also at the GRI. Ultimately, we hope to devise ways of linking to dealer archives held in other repositories, because art dealers often worked in collaboration. The stock book database makes it possible to conduct research on big data, and to analyze and visualize the networks that comprise the art market—this is the unintended consequence of a project prompted by the need to protect crumbling old paper and fragile bindings from damage from handling.

For a second example let me turn to a project developed by my colleague at the GRI, Murtha Baca, a pioneer in the digital humanities and a great proponent of collaborative scholarship. I had the good fortune of observing from up close as she developed a new tool to conduct and publish collaborative scholarship. The tool, called The Getty Scholars’ Workspace, enables collaboration on any kind of document with text or images. The pilot project focused on Pietro Mellini’s 1681 Inventory in Verse, an obscure and idiosyncratic
document of 12 folios that gives the highlights, in *terza rima*, of paintings hanging in the representational rooms of Mellini’s palace in Rome.

An international team of scholars worked with Murtha Baca and her co-principle investigator, Nuria Rodríguez Ortega, from the University of Málaga. They met in person a few times during the research phase, but most work was done remotely—with the collaborators on their home continents—using the Scholars’ Workspace tool itself. The scholars were able to communicate and share findings, to correct or question aspects of the translation, and to upload images of paintings. At some point, Murtha Baca decided not that the research project was complete, but rather that it was ready to be published. I should stress that it is not, or at least not yet, possible to publish something like Mellini directly from Scholars’ Workspace; publication was an elaborate, unique and independent design.

When we started to discuss the transition of the project from its research phase to its published state, we found ourselves asking questions of the digital publication format we never would ask of a print book. The most difficult of these was the notion that it should be subject to updating. In principle, it seemed to some of us that it should. With a printed book, we accept without question that new information inspired by its publication is not susceptible to incorporation in any practical sense. But in the digital world, there hovers a vague prospect that such feedback could somehow be incorporated.

In the end, the research project that began in the Scholars’ Workspace was transformed into Pietro Mellini’s *Inventory in Verse* (1681): [http://www.getty.edu/research/mellini/complete-facsimile](http://www.getty.edu/research/mellini/complete-facsimile), a sleek and attractive digital publication with wonderful features that you could never get in print. A video of the manuscript’s pages being turned by hand conveys a sense of the object’s size and materiality. The zoomable digital facsimile is easier to read than the original. Any combination of facsimile, transcription, and translation can be viewed and compared side by side. But ultimately in publishing it, we closed down the process of research—just as with a printed book. It is interesting that we should even expect, if only half-consciously, this publication to continue its life of becoming as if it were social media. We seem to discover only by actually doing the thing, and confronting the unintended consequences, that there are unspoken assumptions and expectations associated with electronic publication. That digital can solve certain problems or transcend certain limitations of print publication. And sometimes that is true, or perhaps it will become true in the future.

The roster of unintended consequences will only grow, and for some this engenders unease. Others are enthusiastic in principle about the opportunities of digital publication, but they are made anxious by the paroxysms of process, by the need to upend familiar workflows, by the disappearance of traditional revenue streams. They are dismayed that old hierarchies of expertise are disrespected. What happens when human resources departments revise job classifications and pay scales for digital content specialists become much higher than for print editors of similar years of experience? Staff with advanced humanities degrees are dismayed that IT engineers and user experience designers command higher salaries than scholars, curators, and authors whose research and writing are the purported raison d’être of the enterprise of humanities publication. It is an awkward reality that experience and wisdom are losing out, and the advantage goes to the generation entering with new attitudes and skill sets that digital projects require. The game is changing, and to some it just does not feel fair. This unintended consequence permeates our workplace, and we should give some thought to how we can manage it better.

Does the reception of unintended consequences differ essentially from the customary mentality or pattern of action of a pre-digital era? I rather think it does. We had been used to planning projects in a way that led to certain anticipated results. Of course, we were often surprised, but our normative operating assumption was of reasonably predictable outcomes. In our current domain, that no longer seems to be a valid operating assumption. Every electronic publication, every digital endeavor with which I have been involved, has turned out to be an experiment, whether we went into the project in that spirit or not. This is frustrating if we approach such projects with expectations of predictable results. It is hard to report to our bosses or to our funders that things did not turn out according to plan, especially if the result is framed as a failure. But there is
much to be gained if we can embrace the concept of unintended consequences as a positive and genuinely progressive feature of our moment of accelerated exploration.

Pietro Mellini’s Inventory in Verse (1681) http://www.getty.edu/research/mellini

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