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Andrew Jewell

University of Nebraska at Lincoln, ajewell2@unl.edu

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New Engagements with Documentary Editions: Audiences, Formats, Contexts

Andrew Jewell

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This paper is an effort to think about something different than the *creation* of documentary editions. It is an effort to think about the *reading* of them. Specifically, I want to think about the ways the reading of documentary editions is changing, or how it might change. First, however, a caveat: much of what I say is speculative and anecdotal. Though others' research has been consulted, I'm heavily influenced by what I observe is happening with readers of my own editing project, *The Willa Cather Archive*, a digital thematic research collection dedicated to the life, work, and environs of the American author.

That said, I want to consider existing trends more broadly, guess about future practices, and contemplate how we, as documentary editors, might respond to the altering modes of readership.

I. The Changing Audience

Though I'm sure exceptions abound, the dominant model for distributing documentary editions in the age of print has been to sell large volumes at large prices. This model has required an audience with either significant financial resources, significant devotion to the content, or, most commonly, ready access to a research library. The audience has been reasonably narrow and predictable. To some degree, scholarship

depends upon a narrowly-defined audience; if we could not direct our work to our specialist peers, we would waste significant time re-walking old ground instead of pushing into new territory. But unlike many jargon-rich expressions of professional scholarship, documentary editions are often discernible to a wider audience. We are, after all, providing access and context to primary materials, and hopefully learning about and reading the primary materials is a foundational act of the educational process.

If it is true that the content of most documentary editions is scrutable by a decently large and diverse audience, and I think it is, then the only real barrier to reaching that audience is amplifying the ability to access that content. Digital publication, particularly free online publication, provides significant amplification. In my four or so years editing the *Willa Cather Archive*, where all of the content is free to anyone with a web browser, I have been struck again and again by what I learn about the audience that encounters the digital site. You see, in creating the *Cather Archive*, I have been most attentive to the audience of specialist peers that I feel I know best: fellow academics and teachers who have made Cather central to their research and classrooms. However, I am also conscious not to create navigational structures or use language dependent on specialist knowledge, using widely-known genre terms like “Short Fiction” or “Multimedia” instead. This combination of free content and an interface dedicated to straightforward simplicity has resulted in a wide, international audience. In 2008, the site was seen by about 80,000 unique visitors and got nearly 1.3 millions hits. According to site usage analysis, I know that visitors to the site in the last couple of months have come from 108 countries, and readers from places I did not know had a significant Cather readership (including Malta, Tunisia, Chile, China, The Netherlands, and Iran) are spending

substantial time on the site. A recent article in the journal *Teaching Cather* even featured a photograph of a classroom in Thailand where the students were studying Cather novels and projected on the wall behind the professor, a woman proudly holding Vintage Press editions of Cather novels, was the homepage of the *Willa Cather Archive*.¹

As powerful as the statistics, however, are the interactions I've had with users, largely via email. I've been contacted by a graduate student in Portugal, a high school student in Pennsylvania, a businessman in New York, and a fact-checker for *The Nation* magazine. These interactions have led me to realize that the audience is much broader than I realized, and much larger than any audience I ever received for a print publication. Also, this audience finds our online edition not only because they are self-identified as interested Cather readers, but because search engines lead them to hidden bits of knowledge deep in the site. In my favorite example of this, I was once contacted by the Music Hall Guild of Great Britain and America and asked about the source of our claim that singer Lottie Collins was famous for a can-can dance that showed off her sparkling suspenders (Cather reviewed a performance by Lottie Collins, and our annotation mentioned this delightful detail; the Guild wanted to know because they were considering the purchase of a pair of sparkling suspenders purported to be Collins's for their collection).

Some editors may learn of this potentially wide and varied audience and wonder, "How shall our editing practices change to address new audience needs?" I have considered this question for some time and with some seriousness, and my current response is this: How the hell should I know? The defining feature of the broader

¹ *Teaching Cather*, 7.2 (Spring 2007): 11.

audience that encounters free, online documentary editions is diversity: it comes from around the world, from a variety of perspectives and educational levels, and with a variety of goals. So, in practice, my response to the diversified audience has been *not* to change my practices at all, but to continue to make content additions that address the needs of the audience I know and, frankly, care about the most: other Cather scholars and teachers. For me, being a central resource to the most informed audience is a sign of great success, so, though I am careful to avoid decisions that would unnecessarily alienate other audiences, I do not take initiatives specifically designed to increase the popularity of the *Willa Cather Archive* with the masses. That said, my understanding of audience diversity has inspired certain projects within the *Cather Archive* that address that diversity while also being useful for Cather scholars. For example, building on the work of student research assistant Hannah German, we are preparing an updated and greatly expanded bibliography of Cather's works in translation. Other projects are far ahead of the *Cather Archive* in such multi-lingual initiatives, though. The *Whitman Archive*, for example, has published important translations of Whitman's poetry in Spanish and Russian and is working on German.

The most powerful response I've had to my growing understanding of the relatively large and diverse audience, though, is pleasure. I'm simply pleased that work I do is accessible to so many, and that, in my very limited way, I'm able to interact with so many people who share my interest in this American writer, people with whom I likely would never encounter in another way. I got into academics fully aware that the audience for research I might produce would be small; I've often joked that I hoped my articles would reach at least half a dozen people, counting my mom. To be reaching, in some capacity,

tens of thousands of people is very satisfying indeed.

II. *How Will Documentary Editions Be Read?*

It is conventional wisdom nowadays that the dominant publication medium for large documentary editions will soon be—and maybe already is—digital media. Acknowledging that digital publication is dominant does not, however, answer the leading question: how are such documentary editions read? Digital publication can result in a significantly varied readerly experience. Consider, for example, a basic question that each reader must confront prior to the reading: how does one access the content? Our default answer—or at least the answer my mind goes to first—is a web browser. The reader uses a personal computer to access the internet, and then navigates to the URL where the content lives.

That explanation oversimplifies the complexity of the situation, however. First, what is the “personal computer” the reader is using? Is it desktop computer, a laptop, a PC, a Mac? Which web browser are they using? Is it an old version or a current version? Or, perhaps, their computer is not a desktop or laptop at all, but instead is embedded in their phone or MP3 player. Recent surveys suggest that about one-third of Americans use handheld devices to engage with the Internet and 19% of Americans check the Internet with a mobile device on a daily basis.² Second, what happens when the reader, on whatever machine they choose, reaches the URL where the content lives? Do they identify themselves through a login and password (indicating, perhaps, that they have paid the requisite fees for usage), or can they anonymously peruse the content? Is it free

² Horrigan, John, “Wireless Internet Use,” July 22, 2009, Pew Internet and American Life Project, <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/12-Wireless-Internet-Use.aspx>

or does it cost? Finally, once they have the words or images in front of them, do they “read” it, or do they search it? Or do they download it and run text analysis routines? Or do they find a document that delights them and share a link on a social networking site?

My point is that we cannot fully predict how readers will interact with digital publications. We can design beautiful websites, but we cannot expect every view of that website to be the same for each user. According to usage statistics of the *Willa Cather Archive*, fourteen different browsers accessed the site in September 2009, and no browser now dominates the way Microsoft’s Internet Explorer used to. The most popular browser (Internet Explorer) was used by 48% of visitors, but further drilling down into the statistics shows that Internet Explorer users accessed the site with three different versions of the browser. The variety is overwhelming. As an editor of a low-budget project, can I afford to care that Internet Explorer 6 users don’t see the transparent layers of the PNG files the same way Firefox 3.5.2 users do? I don’t think I can.

In certain respects, publishing in the digital age means relinquishing control over the reader’s experience. As many folks are quick to point out, control over the reader’s experience has always been an illusion; regardless of the technology, individual minds and bodies will engage texts in varied and unpredictable ways. True enough. However, in the age of digital access, the abstract heterogeneity of the reader is compounded by the material heterogeneity. Readers of the *Papers of John Adams* may open a large book checked out from a research library, or they may access it on an iPhone while grocery shopping.

As editors of documentary editions in the digital age, how should we respond to this variety of access points? We should accept it, and we should celebrate it. Moreover,

we should, to return to my optimistic motif, enjoy it. Though experiencing pleasure in this situation requires us to accept a certain lack of control over interface—and we all know that those drawn to professional editing aren't usually those who possess a flippant attitude toward such details—we do not have to lose control over the core of our editions: the texts, the annotations, the apparatus. Our scholarly mission and integrity remains intact with digital publication. And, with increased modes of access, we increase the likelihood of readers encountering our content.

Also, we should do what we can to make our data accessible to those who may want to do creative digital scholarship with it. Recently, Jon Saklofske at Acadia University in Nova Scotia, who is interested in “the ways that the interfaces through which we access and manipulate information (including archival information) determine perceptual understanding, meaningful interpretation and critical paradigms,”³ has taken the rich data that constitutes the *William Blake Archive* and reorganized it through his application “New Radial,” which is based on the open source Prefuse toolkit. In doing so, he has completely reoriented the user to the content: departing from the editors of the *Blake Archive*, Saklofske's tool presents Blake manuscripts in large, intersecting circles of page images, circles that are reconstituted based on user-generated choices. For example, one can see circles of manuscripts representing “Innocence” and “Experience” from Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, or one can see all the manuscripts held by a single repository, like the British Museum. Saklofske's work is exciting, partially because it models the possibilities at play when project editors treat their readers generously. By permitting Saklofske to design a new interface for the content of the

³ See Saklofske's description of his research interests at <http://socrates.acadiau.ca/courses/engl/saklofske/newradial/>

Blake Archive, the editors demonstrate an appropriate intellectual commitment to the integrity of the data, but do not restrict the opportunities for that data to be organized and visualized differently. Such a choice makes the data of the *Blake Archive*, makes the edition itself, more powerful, more relevant, and more widely read.

III. Can Readers of Documentary Editions Avoid Reading Altogether?

I'll admit it: the most popular part of the *Willa Cather Archive*, according to usage statistics, is not the arduously-produced scholarly edition of her journalism, nor the dozens of online editions of the periodical publications of her fiction and nonfiction, it is the gallery of images. Of course, for many digital scholarly publications, texts have almost always been supplemented with other multimedia content. This ability of the computer to show readers both text and image is what motivated some of the earliest and most influential digital scholarly editions in literary studies, such as the *William Blake Archive* and the *Complete Writings and Pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Hypermedia Archive*. But, unlike these editions of writers who were also visual artists, in the case of the *Willa Cather Archive*, the image gallery is fairly disconnected from the texts. We provide about 2600 images pulled from three institutions and offer a visual history of Cather, her family and friends, her environments, and even the history of the Willa Cather Foundation in Red Cloud, Nebraska.

It is possible, perhaps even commonplace, for certain users of the *Willa Cather Archive*, or any number of similar sites which are built on a foundation of edited texts, to experience the site without even reading anything that might be called an "edition." As I've remarked before, the *Cather Archive* isn't properly a "documentary edition," but

contains such editions in the larger framework of a thematic research collection. The larger collection contains audio, video, images, text analysis tools, and interactive maps. Though there are digital editions which retain an almost exclusive emphasis on texts, many more have embraced the diversity of content that digital publication allows, resulting in editions surrounded by extensive multimedia contexts.

Though it is hard to imagine an argument that claims providing historical photographs of the edition's subject is irrelevant, it is easy to imagine a documentary editor uncomfortable with the thought of "readers" predominantly just looking at the pictures. Personally, as an editor confronted with just such a situation, I temper my discomfort with the optimistic thought that the pictures are not isolated, but are surrounded by texts. That is, no single piece of content on the *Cather Archive* exists in a vacuum, and the diversity of the content may, in fact, draw people in the door and encourage them to browse around. More importantly, though, we have sought to imagine scholarly tools that utilize the highly visual nature of digital technology. For example, we have created a Geographic Chronology of Willa Cather's Life, which provides a map-based timeline for the biography of a woman who was constantly in motion and responding to her travels in her writing. This geographic chronology was motivated initially by a desire to intentionally bring a different method of seeing content to the site; rather than just texts and a photo gallery, I wanted something that would powerfully and distinctively communicate something important about the subject of my research. Moreover, as one of my colleagues pointed out, this interactive map, which links to images and texts in other parts of the *Archive*, becomes a novel interface for navigating the content of the *Willa Cather Archive* as a whole. Though the vision isn't completely

fulfilled yet, the Geographic Chronology, which is published alongside the rest of the *Cather Archive*, can become, like Saklofske's "New Radial" version of the *Blake Archive*, a re-imagining of the *Willa Cather Archive*'s content.

For some of you, the readership of the documentary edition that I've described--one that is diverse, unpredictable, and most comfortable casually glancing at pictures on their cell phones--might sound terrifying. And, frankly, I think I empathize with that perspective; despite a career that regularly intersects with cutting-edge technology, I'm a fairly old-fashioned guy who likes to read paper books and can't understand why anybody enjoys reading others' "tweets." But, one thing I learn and re-learn constantly is that my preferences and perspectives are not universal and that I should not make choices exclusively imagining an audience made up of myself multiplied. Instead, as an editor who wants his content to be read by as many people as possible, I do what I can to avoid needlessly preventing unexpected engagements. I cannot predict precisely how and when and who will read my edition, but I can try to make it easy for them to read it. That, I think, should be a central goal as we edit in the twenty-first century: generosity toward the reader. At the most basic level, that means we should make design choices that do not excessively limit compatibility; we should make our data available not just through our interface, but through downloadable files; we should collegially welcome efforts to aggregate or reinterpret our data; and, whenever it is possible (and it often is not), we should make our editions free. The documentary edition of the twenty-first century will be more relevant—and more widely read—when it offers its audience such an openhanded welcome.