

Humanities Without Walls: Understanding the Needs of Scholars in the Contemporary Publishing Environment

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Publishing Without Walls: Understanding The Needs of Scholars in a Contemporary Publishing Environment²¹ (PWW), is an institutional effort to support digital scholarly publishing in the humanities, with a special focus on collaborative humanities projects and on humanities work at the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Our work is made possible by a four year grant awarded by the Andrew W. Mellon foundation. PWW has begun with two core series: one focusing on the outcomes of the Humanities Without Walls Global Midwest initiative and another concentrating on African American Studies with targeted outreach to scholars from HBCUs and memory institutions specializing in African American history and culture.

With PWW, we are initiating a digital scholarly publishing effort that is scholar-driven, openly accessible, scalable, and sustainable. PWW directly engages with scholars throughout the research process and aims to build publishing models that can be supported locally by a university's library, while also opening new avenues toward publication through university presses and other publishers. Our goal is to help scholars navigate the new opportunities presented by collaborative, multi-modal, and interim phase works.

PWW is a collaborative effort between a university library, an iSchool, a university humanities center and an African-American studies department. Each of the PWW partners participates, in an *outreach and education* effort to engage scholars with new forms of scholarly publishing, in a *publications and workflow* division that brings projects to the forms of publication that best meet the needs of the authors and best represents and conveys the content, and in a *research* effort designed to inform the development of tools and services.

Brief descriptions of two in process publications might help illuminate the sorts of challenges and aspirations that PWW is encountering. One author does work examining the spirit of innovation in Hip Hop culture and wants to create a digital field guide of sorts for gathering anecdotal information in urban communities, keeping in mind that these communities are often skeptical about the process of asking questions and conducting investigations. He sees two possible advantages in using digital publishing tools. One is that he has a large number of video and audio clips he'd like to incorporate. Another is that he'd like it to be easily accessible and open access so researchers could easily use it in the field. A very different digital publication concerns Native American animal hides that are owned by a museum in France. The author wants readers able to zoom in and closely examine high res images of the hides. His argument involves being able to visually compare images of different hides, which makes some kind of interactive interface desirable. The provenance of the hides has never been verified, and the author argues from a historical perspective that the hides originate from the central plains.

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The article was accepted to a prestigious textual journal, but with many revisions because reviewers suggested that the author was not using an approach that anthropologists or art historians would approve, and the author wishes to deploy some of the affordances of digital publishing to help establish the soundness of his case

The triad team structure of PWW was embedded within the initial application for funding and is a core component of its ambitions and design. The three interlocking parts of outreach and engagement, publications and workflows and research and evaluation are intended to identify and encourage projects such as these (and many others as well), to realize their publishing aspirations and bring them to an audience.

Outreach and education began its work with a series of workshops designed to encourage participation from our target communities and to provide deeper engagement around publishing technologies in digital scholarship. Outreach events have occurred both in person and online, in parallel with opportunistic outreach and consultation with scholars who identify themselves or who are identified by our team as possible good matches with our efforts. We are currently in the process of developing a curriculum, identifying locations and scheduling for a series of eight incubation workshops intended to directly engage scholars with the digital publishing tools that might best suit their needs.

Publications and workflow activities began with implementing a set of tools for publication and dissemination, followed by a period of developing internal workflows and procedures for supporting scholarly communication, workflows that have been defined, but, as is the way with workflows, are constantly refined as new projects emerge and as digital tools are updated and expanded. In addition to the work of production and publication, this team continuously enhances its consultation services to navigate challenges associated with digital scholarship and with bringing new scholarly works to fruition, and it attends to the development of a strategic social media promotion strategy to also bring those works to the world's attention.

Central to the design of PWW is the principle that project activities will be deeply informed by—and develop in step with—research into user requirements (and by user here we mean both the producers and the consumers of our publications). Project activities will also be evaluated and assessed to inform the recommendations and best practices that will be shared with peer institutions interested in developing similar collaborative services at their respective universities. The research arm of the effort is deploying a number of qualitative methods, notably interviews and focus groups, as well as a national survey of US-based humanities scholars, all informed by ongoing attention to the results of prior efforts to understand and support the scholarly communication needs of those scholars.

Those familiar with the structure of more traditional publishing organizations will see in this team approach the familiar triumvirate of acquisitions, production and market research. And it is no coincidence that two of the architects of PWW have also spent considerable time in a University Press. But here those functions and relationships are reimaged for an academically located and embedded organization, capitalizing on the strengths of a diverse staff and its equally diverse set of skills: trained information science researchers, technologists, publishing professionals, humanities scholars and librarians well versed in both the scholarly communications ecosystem and the technologies that support it; many of those staff are resident in more than one of those categories.

To make concrete these interrelationships and illustrate their mutually reinforcing quality, it might be helpful to look at the process of a publication, with a caveat that the process is evolving and is expected to continue to do so throughout PWW's existence. That evolution is woven into the expectations and the very fabric of the initiative.

Outreach and education is engaged in ongoing identification and recruitment of projects that would benefit from PWW capacity, and in making preliminary judgments about the intellectual viability of the projects and ability to attract an audience. Advisory boards of scholars are available for consultation about those judgments.

Once the initial relationship has been established, an author meets with the publication team, often mediated by the outreach contact, to determine the viability of the project, the fit of our tools with the needs of the scholar and to identify whether any special resources would be needed to bring the publication to fruition. After these initial discussions, unless the publication team has identified significant barriers to success or the author has lost interest, PWW and the author then enter into a formalized understanding. At this point, we determine if the author also wishes to pursue publication with one of the university presses with whom we partner (the university presses of Michigan, Minnesota and Illinois), and, if so, the publications manager begins outreach and consultation with the press, engaging the author at appropriate points. With a broad, general understanding of the roles of each party established, the author works with publication team to develop the digital publication. At a time to be determined by both the author and the PWW team, the digital publication will be made available for any form of pre-publication review or vetting that has been designated for the project. This vetting will vary depending on the conditions of the publications, from full review by an editorial board, to review by a selection of experts and colleagues designated by the author, to open review by any interested party. Following review and possible revision, as well as consultation with a partner press if applicable, the publication will be launched and marketing and promotion will begin. Both production and outreach maintain a relationship with the author, engaging around questions of access and discoverability as well the identification and collection of metrics and other measures of success that will help our authors to articulate, to themselves and others, the reach and impact of their work.

What's not apparent in this description of the PWW process but is ubiquitously present is the research group, poised to both exploit and inform the outreach and production experience. Each author that comes into contact with outreach and publication and workflows is identified as a potential research subject, to be invited to participate in interviews and focus groups investigating the publishing experiences and expressed needs of scholars, both digitally and in print. In addition, the research arm of PWW draws upon the impressions and interests of the outreach and publication teams to help build its research protocols. When the relationships between the three teams are at their best, our research results inform outreach and education in refining the latter's approach to possible participants, and outreach and education suggests research paths as well as articulating author needs to the publication group. That publication group participates fully in research, to both influence the protocol design and to quickly gain access to findings that might inform and direct production decisions.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that these organizational relationships develop and progress without a considerable amount of contact, consultation and clarification. PWW makes ample use of that technique beloved by librarians everywhere, the meeting. Cross team communication and fertilization is built into the weekly meeting structure of PWW, so that no team meets without representatives from the other teams present (unless, of course, the demands of domestic or professional life interfere). In addition, all members of all teams have access to the agendas and meeting notes arising from those weekly meetings, and sharing of work and ideas is also encouraged through periodic "all hands" meetings as well as both reading and helping to write monthly reports created by the project manager, the head of Publishing and Scholarly Communication at the University library. And I'm sure it will surprise all of our listeners to hear, we also send a lot of email to one another, as groups and individuals.

The PWW teams are now deep into moving from a stage of collecting data—through both direct interaction with authors and through formal research—to the application of our findings to shaping our processes and systems.

From June to October 2016, the Research and Evaluation team conducted a large-scale survey of scholars' publishing practices and perceived needs. The Research team distributed the survey through targeted listservs

and social media venues in the hopes of obtaining an adequate number of responses from different disciplines and a variety of institutions. The Outreach and Education team influenced the distribution of the survey by connecting the Research team with channels for disseminating it to scholars from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and humanities scholars in niche communities. In total, the survey received 250 responses from scholars in the United States.

The survey's objectives were to understand: the scholars' current publishing practices, their objectives for publishing, and their perspectives on traditional and digital publishing as readers. The survey was also conducted to provide, both the Outreach and Education and Publishing and Workflow teams with information to influence the design and implementation of our shared service model. In order to achieve these research goals, we designed the survey with approximately 30 questions. In general, the survey is divided into these broad topics: authors' experiences in print and digital publishing; their publishing objectives; experience and familiarity with digital publishing tools and platforms; publishing services and support; and experiences with publishing as readers of scholarship.

The survey did not just capture quantitative data. We designed it to include free text responses to questions to allow scholars to elaborate on their experiences with print and digital publishing. One of the trends we identified is that respondents have generally positive attitudes toward digital scholarly publishing but believe their colleagues are more skeptical. This is most likely a result of our sampling protocol since our survey targeted scholars interested in digital scholarly publishing.

Nonetheless, the free text responses provide insight into the perceived benefits and disadvantages of using digital tools. Overwhelmingly, those who responded to the free text question "Can you share more about your attitudes toward digital publishing?" identified open access as being a major benefit of digital publishing both as a consumer and as a producer of content. Of the seventy-eight who responded to this question, thirty-four either explicitly mentioned open access or alluded to the benefits of open access. Several scholars stated that they frequently read digital open access scholarship. One respondent described being an eager consumer of digital content but acknowledged struggling to understand how to use the tools as a creator of content:

"I see the potential and the usefulness of digital publishing and I use a lot of open access work to develop my own thinking and my scholarly projects. I am not always certain that I know how to present my ideas and arguments well, so that they communicate effectively in digital formats. Likewise, I am not always certain that I know how to use digital tools well. Some software is difficult to figure out how to use. Sometimes formatting and tool use can be immensely frustrating. But I love to consume well-made, well-written, well-done digital work. Indeed, I prefer digital to print in most cases."

Another participant emphasized that the medium is irrelevant and that content above all is important: "I think we make too big a deal out of whether something is digital or print. I don't care. I just care about the content and sometimes the process, meaning peer review."

A third respondent explained that it is difficult to generalize about his peer's attitudes towards digital scholarly publishing:

"My colleagues' attitudes span the entire range from proselytizing to crying, "Heresy!" It would be impossible for me to assign them a single value out of four options. Probably most are mildly skeptical as consumers of content and very skeptical (because they feel unqualified) as produc-

ers of content, but some are definitely enthusiastic about producing content, and a few maintain the party line that digital content is ipso facto not scholarship.”

Preliminary analysis of both the free text and numerical data captured by the survey began in the summer of 2016, and the Research and Evaluation team has since conducted an exhaustive question-by-question analysis. Some interesting findings are emerging from the data. One of the survey questions of particular interest to the PWW Production team asked participants to identify whether they had used, heard of but never used, or not heard of certain digital publishing tools. Early on in designing PWW, we decided on adopting a suite of tools. This question helped us gauge how familiar participants were with those tools and potentially identify other tools we could incorporate. Of the suite of tools we are supporting, 29% of participants had used Omeka, 22% had used OJS, 18% had used Scalar, and 10% had used CommentPress. Only 3% of participants had used Open Monograph Press and Pressbooks and 4% had used Commons in a Box. WordPress, which 69% of respondents reported having used, is a tool we are not supporting, however CommentPress, Commons in a Box, and PressBooks are based on WordPress. These findings are helping us determine how familiar potential authors will be with the tools we are supporting and adjust how we design one-on-one consultations accordingly.

Another finding from the report that directly influenced our production workflow is the observation that 92% of participants felt comfortable using word processing software while only 21% of participants felt comfortable using texting markup (e.g. HTML, XML, TeX/LaTeX). This observation reinforced our decision to support a Word-based production workflow. We also used the survey to identify challenges that scholars faced in previous digital publishing experiences. Getting adequate editorial, technical, and financial support emerged as the most challenging aspects of digital publishing. This reinforced the experience that outreach and education team members were already reporting that these needs for support needed to be explicitly addressed in early conversations so as to both set and manage expectations on the part of both PWW and authors. Our Publications and Workflow group is working to address these issues through consultations with pilot project participants where we help them design editorial workflows and provide one-on-one technical consultations.

The team structure of PWW was built with the intention of continuous exchange and engagement with both each other and the scholars whom we serve, and this intention has largely been affirmed in the first two years of our project. But ambitious projects inevitably encounter challenges, and ours has not escaped that inevitability as we strive to reconcile the needs, skills and goals of the partners. While the teams share ultimate goals, there are differences in the strategies and priorities guiding their activities, and each team is understandably devoted to working in a way that best demonstrates its effectiveness and maximizes its productivity. For example, outreach is intent on building good relationships with authors, with the goal of arriving at an agreement to publish, an intention that may create pressure for production to assure a degree of publishing support that production is not confident it can provide. Outreach is eager to meet the unique needs of its authors and their publishing projects, while production frets about generalizability and sustainability. Production's educated pragmatism about the capabilities of available digital publishing tools and the resources needed to support those tools might lead it to make decisions other than those suggested by research. Research, despite its best attempt to recruit participants that broadly and diversely represent the communities of scholars which PWW hopes to serve, might not reach the scholars that outreach encounters and attempts to engage, leading to a sort of tussle where research expects outreach to bring in the scholars while outreach expects research to find those scholars.

To the credit of both the organizational structure and its constituent members, none of these challenges have flared into hostility. Instead, each is taken as an occasion for reflection and an opportunity to inform the development of an organization that evidences the flexibility and sustainability that was espoused at its incep-

tion. While I would not want to blithely suggest that all our challenges and perhaps competing interests can be overcome if we just talk to each other, I would advocate for the self-conscious examination of those competing interests and an openness to joint consideration of how to reconcile them, resulting in a deliberate and shared organizational development.

In our initial proposal to the Mellon foundation, PWW proposed a model that offers to scholars high-quality, consultation-intensive publishing support, and put forward, as one of its goals, the creation of “a new model for the conceptual development of scholarly communication.”² In elaborating on this model, we described “a framework for library-based mediation of innovative scholarly communication,” a framework with a variety of possible outcomes. For instance, we are establishing a new pipeline for consideration by university presses, but also offering guidance on making informed decisions about self-publishing and about the labor and other considerations involved in establishing a new, independent imprint. The same self-consciousness that I have described in the collaborative and reflective organizational approach of PWW is a self-consciousness that we aspire to develop in our authors, potential and realized. We engage them in articulating their publishing goals and educate them about the options available for realizing those goals, helping them to make a strong case for their publishing choices.

Ultimately, PWW aspires to create a model which might inspire and inform similar efforts at other institutions. Documentation on all our products and processes will be shared, amongst other places in our own digital publication. This paper is one early foray into sharing that model without our community.

This paper has been authored by two members of the PWW teams, but it reflects the experience and input of the entire organization. In addition to the two named authors, this work is made possible by our colleagues at the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign: Megan Senseney, Research Scientist, School of Information Sciences; Associate Professor Harriet Green, English and Digital Humanities Librarian and Interim Head, Scholarly Communications and Publishing, University Library; Christopher Maden, Research Programmer, University Library; LaTasha Velez and Justin Williams, Research Assistants, School of Information Sciences; Marilyn Thomas-Houston and Joshua Lynch, Outreach and Education, Publishing Without Walls.

Notes

1. <http://publishingwithoutwalls.illinois.edu>.
2. Quotations throughout this paragraph are excerpted from the 2014 request for grant funding to the Andrew WW. Mellon foundation.