Sustainable Access: The Continuing Growth of British History Online

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In his introductory essay to a Special Cluster of *Digital Humanities Quarterly* titled simply "Done," Matthew Kirschenbaum asks "what does it mean to 'finish' a piece of digital work?" (2009). The contributions that make up that special cluster, as well as Geoffrey Rockwell et al.'s "Burying Dead Projects" (2014) respond to this question and discuss what the end of a digital project might look like. Digital scholarly projects are usually dependent upon grants to start them, grants to sustain them and, if they are fortunate, grants to allow them to finish gracefully. But what does it look like to continue . . . forever? How does a large-scale, permanent digital project—or a "digital undertaking," to use Susan Brown et al.'s phrase (2009)—live beyond grant funding?

This paper will present British History Online as a case study in how to effectively manage and sustain a project with no defined end point. As digital libraries, editions, and databases become more common in academic work, we must seriously consider best practices for sustaining, extending, and maintaining them. This presentation will add to this discussion by looking at the other side of Rockwell et al.'s coin: rather than burying a dead project, what does it look like to nurture a living one?

Context for this paper will include Anna-Maria Sichani and Aodhán Kelly's DH 2016 poster "You Better Monetize! Monetization Strategies in Publishing and Disseminating Digital Scholarly Editions," Jerome McGann's "Sustainability: The Elephant in the Room" (2010) and Nancy L. Maron and Matthew Loy's "Funding for Sustainability: How Funders' Practices Influence the Future of Digital Resources" (2011). Although the paper will briefly consider other digital projects and their business models, the purpose of this presentation is to examine one model in depth and consider how the values at the centre of DH can be sustained in a large, permanent digital project.

British History Online (BHO) is a fifteen-year-old digital library of printed primary and secondary sources for the study of British history, and like a traditional library, it has always been envisioned as a permanent structure. BHO is in the unusual position of being a long-term, sustainable digital undertaking. Few DH projects of BHO's age and scale are in the position of being self-sustaining and growing, with a permanent project staff, independent from institutional or grant funding, while providing free access to over 80% of their content. This paper is not intended to offer a one-size-fits-all solution to problems of sustainability, but it will take an honest and open look at the long-term viability of digital projects, considering questions of audience, impact and value. This paper will also look at how we define sustainability, what sustainability looks like when you cannot afford to implement something like BHO and the role of digital preservation.

Although it began with substantial grant funding, BHO was envisioned as a publication project that would continue indefinitely, never reaching a proposed end. This alternative model to the more usual short-term tool or archive-building project comes with a different set of challenges than a short-term counterpart: namely, generating reliable and regular income for continued maintenance and augmentation. In order to generate this income, an undertaking like BHO must have a business plan. The BHO team must regularly consider questions of access and restriction, priorities and privilege, as well as technical sustainability and scholarly integrity: what is digitised? Who covers that cost? Who has access? Providing access depends upon its sustainability, but sustainability means we must restrict access. While many other resource providers have the entirety of their content behind a subscription wall, BHO has been able to remain predominantly free, with only a fraction of its content made premium.

BHO was established thanks to funding received from the Andrew W Mellon foundation in 2002. After a one-year pilot project, BHO officially launched in 2003. It received several subsequent grants, including from the United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council, but has been self-sufficient since 2007. The project deliberately builds on the strengths of the Institute of Historical Research (IHR), where it is housed. BHO takes advantage of its close proximity to the Victoria County History, the Centre for Metropolitan History and the IHR's collection of printed primary sources, meaning that expertise is only a step away. The IHR has also been a leader in the field of digital

history since it first launched its website in 1993. Together, this means that BHO is well situated both culturally and pragmatically in order to remain useful and extensible in the long term. This institutional embedded-ness is not insignificant. BHO is designed to outlive funding grants or the involvement of any particular team member. As a fifteen-year-old digital undertaking, BHO offers an excellent model of what long-term self-sustainability might look like in the digital humanities.

BHO's collection currently consists of 1,280+ volumes of text, which have mainly been digitised through double-rekeying, producing transcriptions with an accuracy rate of 99.995%. BHO receives 10 million page views per year, as well as having 11,000+ registered users and 800+ paying subscribers. BHO is widely used by both academic researchers and members of the public, many of whom do not have access to institutional accounts. The website is not intended to be an end in and of itself, but rather a facilitator of research by providing access to high-quality digitised texts from anywhere in the world. In order to fulfil this mandate, BHO has to be sustainable and so the BHO team developed a business plan from the project's earliest days.

BHO has two main streams of income generation: subscriptions to its premium content and advertising revenue. BHO's premium content consists of a small subset of its collection. The premium content is fewer than 200 volumes, mainly consisting of two series from the UK National Archives: the Calendars of State Papers, Domestic and the Calendars of Close Rolls. These series were deliberately chosen to be especially appealing to academic researchers and academic libraries. The advertising appears to non-subscribing users and is managed by Google AdSense. The combination of subscriptions and advertisements means that every visitor to BHO contributes to its sustainability in some way. But it also means that every user, with their widely varying needs, essentially becomes a stakeholder whose interests must be considered. However, between the premium content subscriptions and advertising revenue, BHO generates sufficient income to cover staff time and server costs, as well as a total site rebuild in 2014. New content—over 40 new publications were added in 2015 and 2016 (approximately 13 million words)—is funded by either by surplus income or external projects seeking to extend the impact of their publications by adding them to BHO.

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