**Green — Capturing**

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**Capturing Virtual Verse: A Needs Assessment on Access and Preservation of Online-Only Literature**

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Digital tools have transformed the small press and little magazine literary publishing industry in fundamental ways. Poet Sandra Beasley (2009) observed, ‘As glossy magazines die by the dozen and blogs become increasingly influential, we face the reality that print venues . . . are rapidly ceding ground to Web-based publishing’ (1). Online literary journals, e-zines, and print publications’ websites have enabled literary works to disseminate beyond cultural, ethnic, and nationalistic boundaries, and have broadened the possibilities for incorporating these works into research and education efforts.

But while online literary publishing has expanded the availability of literary works, discovery and documentation of online-only or ‘born-digital’ literature is extremely limited: Many online-only works can only be accessed by browsing individual publications or searching for specific works or authors. Furthermore, increasing numbers of print journals publish some works only on their websites, but these works are typically not indexed in the same manner as those published in the publications’ print issues.

In light of this issue, the authors launched a year-long investigation into access and discoverability of online-only literature, with a focus on online-only poetry, with support of an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) National Leadership Planning Grant. This long paper discusses the analyzed results of surveys and interviews conducted with creative writing faculty, literary publishers, and librarians, and examines how digital publishing and electronic literature have transformed the research environments and professional practices of literary publishers and scholars alike.

**Background**

N. Katherine Hayles (2007) defines electronic literature as ’digital born’, a first-generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer’. Online literary magazines descended from the zine culture of the mid-20th century, as photocopiers and mimeograph printing gave way in the 1990s to desktop computer publishing, and digital media already was being utilized in works of hypertext fiction and electronic literature created beginning in the 1980s (Wright, 2001; Hayles, 2007). Existing initiatives for documenting electronic literature include the Electronic Literature Organization’s ELO Directory (http://directory.eliterature.org/) and its Preservation, Archiving, and Dissemination study; the ELMCIP Electronic Literature Knowledge Database (http://elmcip.net/knowledgebase); the Australian Directory of Electronic Literature and Text-based Art repository (ADELTA); nt2 of Canada; as well as the work of the Consortium for Electronic Literature (CELL).

Despite these cataclysmic changes in the literary landscape, relatively little has been written about the impact of digital technologies and changing information behaviors in the literary arts. Paling conducted a series of studies examining uses of information technologies by literary publishers and writers, and also proposed a possible metadata schema for organizing literary works (Paling and Nilan, 2006; Paling 2008; Paling and Martin 2011; Paling 2011). Stevens and McCord (2005) also examined the preservation of e-zines and correlative factors for stability of e-zines. Green (2014) also recently explored the publishing behaviors of creative writing faculty members via a citation analysis of print and digital literary magazines.

But this is the first study to comprehensively explore the needs for access, curation, and preservation of online literary publishing via direct engagement with writers and publishers on the impact of digital technologies on research and professional practices in the literary arts.

**Data and Methodology**

This study examines poetry exclusively published on web-based media—ranging from static text on simple web pages to complex multimedia works—and for the purposes of this study is termed ‘online-only poetry’. The authors chose to focus on poetry, as it is one of the most prolific genres published on the Web, and the technologies used to create online poetic works are diverse and used for other literary genres as well.

To collect data input from stakeholders, the authors utilized a mixed methods approach of three online surveys and a subsequent series of nineteen individual interviews. The surveys and interviews were conducted with the three primary stakeholder groups identified by the authors: creative writing faculty, humanities librarians, and literary publishers. The respondent pool was gathered via several methods: For faculty, the authors identified institutions with graduate programs in creative writing with the Association of Writers and Writing Programs’ database; for literary publishers, the authors used the Poets & Writers Magazine Database to identify online journals and their editors; and the librarians were solicited via the listserv for the Literatures in English section of the Association of College and Research Libraries.

The authors received a total of nearly 200 responses to the surveys: approximately 960 writing faculty members in creative writing programs and departments were surveyed, with a response rate of 12.5%; approximately 152 humanities librarians were surveyed with a response rate of 58%; and approximately 945 literary journal editors and publishers were surveyed with a response rate of 13.4%. These response rates are on par with standard response rates to surveys. In follow-up interviews, the authors conducted seven interviews with creative writing faculty and professional writers, five with journal editors and publishers, and seven interviews with librarians. The surveys and interviews queried all respondents about their experiences in discovery, access, use, and preservation of online-only poetry, as well as publication practices with online journals and engagement with students, colleagues, and library users around online poetry.

**Analysis**

In the analysis of the survey and interview data, a significant number of writers and publishers observed that their poetic works had far broader accessibility, exposure, and impact from online publications than in print, and that online access had transformed their own reading practices as well. For example, survey respondents were asked to report on their online behavior regarding discovering and reading poetry, two activities that the authors regarded as connected but distinct for purposes of the survey. Respondents indicated that they visit the Web to read poetry with great frequency: 71% indicated they did so either daily (36%) or weekly (35%). Virtually all survey respondents (99%) reported using the Internet to read poetry, even if they were among the respondents who preferred print or expressed skepticism about the overall quality of work published online. As one publisher noted, ‘Publishing online permits greater access to, and for, a reading and writing audience. Not only due to the immediacy of publication release, but to the global nature of the Internet itself’.

The overarching goal of this study was to determine the need for, and interest in, an index to online-only poetic works. While our findings indicated enthusiasm for this prospective tool, the survey and interview revealed several issues related to its design and construction. One common concern was the curation of online poetry to indicate quality standards such as peer review; as one respondent noted, ‘We must be careful to retain as high standards for online publishing as we do for print’. Another major identified need was for features and functionality that would enable users to find and collect works by various criteria, or as one respondent put it, ‘It would be divine if there were something like Pandora for poetry!’ Respondents suggested metadata fields for categories such as genre, geographic location, and time period written, and they also indicated a desire to use the index to create and curate their own collections of digital poetry. Another notable need was for digital preservation of online-only poetry.

Suggested solutions to the access and preservation of born-digital poetry included a searchable index of online-only poetry, mobile phone apps, and an API feed of metadata, as well as potential collaborations with the organizations and stakeholders, such as the Electronic Literature Organization. But ultimately, most respondents did not see sharp divisions between the print and digital cultures of literary publishing. One respondent noted, ‘I want poetry online to help readers remember the page. In my best-case imaginings, online journals and podcasts get better, and print journals get better, and the online ones make it easy to get to the work and also remind people of other formats in which to experience it’.

**Conclusion**

One of the most notable results of the study was how literary culture long has navigated between the printed page and digital networks in ways that foreshadowed how many humanities scholars today intertwine digital tools and archival materials. As one poet noted,

Scholars I’ve met who specialize in digital media seem to be very invested in the idea of the opposition. . . . For me it is about an expanded set of artistic tools, presences, venues: diversity and range. It is not about \*reducing\* the range of these experiences to a digital experience.

This perspective on the experimental approach to the use of digital technologies in creative works reveals the expanding role of digital content in contemporary literary culture. This study shows how this transformation reveals a new avenue of humanities data curation that engages scholars, information professionals, and publishers equally in the essential work of making digital literature accessible to all.

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