



FORTNIGHT

# KILLING DIGITAL CURATION

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I just moved to Cambridge, and on my way to work from the northern edge of town is a large pub that is invariably empty. The sign of the Sir Isaac Newton bears an unceremonious apple that crowns his lustrous wig. Ciders must be the house specialty.

Newton, an icon of science, is also an icon of Cambridge as town and University. Recently, nearly three centuries after his death, the mathematician and natural philosopher—as well as *alchemist*, mystic, parliamentarian and Royal Mint warden—became news again. The Library of the University of Cambridge has digitized the notebooks and correspondence of Newton. “[Cambridge gives Newton’s papers to the World](#)” was the headline, as the University inaugurated its “digital library.”

If you are anything like me, most of the daily stimuli that triggers your synapses is digital. The web is for fun, and for labor. As an individual, I read news online. I look up a quick factoid on Wikipedia. I find my friends on Facebook or Skype or Flickr. As an academic, I use Google Books to find excerpts that either fill my lecture notes, or become assigned readings in my courses. I query Google Scholar to compose reading lists. And I am always on professional email watch. Still, the archive seemed as secure to me as that bastion of old revolutionary technology: ink on paper.

I was not paying attention.

## THE DIGITAL EXHIBIT

University and national libraries are quickly funding their way into a digital presence. Funders, corporate or philanthropic, are ready to bank the effort because bringing collections online aligns with commitments to the public interest. Harvard University recently received support from the Sloan Foundation to conceive a [Digital Library of America](#), after its partnership with Google Books ran into a barrage of litigation over copyright and criticism from the intellectual commons movement. The European Union is further along in similar efforts with [Europeana](#), a portal for various collections held across nations. It is all work in progress.

The content inaugurating these digital venues is dignified and over-researched. It also tends to be visually rich: the map, the photograph, the ornate print or the tortuous scribble. As an intellectual historian specializing in economics, I can count only a couple of digital archives that could be of use for my work. Some efforts are even redundant: The Newton papers at Cambridge had already been used [in](#) an online exhibit ,itself paralleling a 2001. Portions of the collection have already appeared in a multitude of print publications.

I just discovered Harvard University’s “[Sunk in Lucre’s Sordid Charms: South Sea Bubble Collection](#)” and “[Coin and Conscience: Popular Views of Money, Credit and Speculation](#).” Both select from the Harvard archives representations of economic life that sit somewhere between the learned and the popular. I might draw on them for teaching and illustration, but in researching the past 70 years I work with a record that remains close in time, but distant from the digital gaze. The print I read is copyright-protected by the wishes of author, family or collection owner, and subject to only delicate and sanctioned reproduction. The content that gets digitized has well-established value in its hard copy, and has travelled widely in our culture. What does one gain in remaking it online?

One may gain direct income. A library struggling to manage donations without storage space that digitizes can sell its originals to private collectors, or arrange from them to travel in exhibits across the globe. What is preventing such a radical move is that we

don't yet see the web as a site for conservation. Cyberspace is exhibit space.

Archivists, librarians and historians are being recruited to act as digital curators. George Mason University's Center for History and New Media developed boutique software to manage archival content online, OMEKA. They **showcase how to exhibit the archive**, with a range of model methods ranging from commentary on individual texts, to the display of documents on a chronology.

### A NEW CURATION

Many cited the internet as a "new frontier." This powerful American trope implies riches that lie beyond the horizon: new products and business practices for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But the internet can also be seen as a commons. In his book *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, Fred Turner has historicized the relationships between hippie communalists and some of the most dynamic entrepreneurs behind the personal computer, online fora and new media publishing. Both as frontier and as commons, the internet as Turner imagines it is a space for transformation and discovery.

Digital archives are not yet so transformative. They have followed a traditional understanding of the identity and practices of the curator. In them, the curator is a well-credentialed expert that has some intimacy with the materials that are being made digital. The curator reproduces the object, and supplies along with it instructions to steer an audience's reading of the artifact. The curator places the object in relation with other objects to establish connections and order, towards a perspective that goes beyond the sum of the parts. **Inventing Europe** is an exhibit in this mode. It displays materials from the history of technology in relation to European political history—for instance, technologies that kept Europeans enclosed in their nations and denied them a wider community of belonging. It is a museum, a chronology, and an underground map, all at once.

Another example is UNESCO's **World Digital Library** that packages digital culture into continents. In both instances the curator is offers a grid by which we may read the objects. Inventing Europe tells us that technology makes politics. UNESCO tells us that the world is equal in cultural achievement.

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### ENCOUNTERS

The curator is an author who selects, organizes and displays. Doing so online may extend the features of the display and slight change the mechanics of the organizing, but it has so far not disrupted the roles and identities of those speaking for the heritage made digital. We are not learning anything from moving the artifact to the web, and we are not creating new artifacts. If we want these artifacts to become *compelling* in their digital instantiations, for use and abuse, I suggest that we demand a new kind of curatorship. We should extend the postmodern "death of the author" to a "death of the curator."

What best characterizes cyberspace is its plasticity; how it can be endlessly edited by innumerable hands. I have not found a single digital archive that asks for any kind of participation from its audience, not even in an off-hand comment at the bottom of the screen. I can offer no assurance that participation by the lay would be enlightening and informed, but wouldn't it be interesting to try?

What kind of culture would be created if, when given the Newton papers, the world is allowed to reshuffle them? Jorge Luis Borges, in a famous passage of his 1942 essay "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," speaks of a *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge* that classified animals in the unique categories of: those that belong to the Emperor, embalmed ones, those that are trained, suckling pigs, mermaids, fabulous ones, stray dogs, those included in the present classification, those that tremble as if they were mad, innumerable ones, those drawn with a very fine camel hair brush, others, those that have just broken a flower vase and those that from a long way off look like flies. What kind of insanely thoughtful categories would emerge if the sharing of the artifacts extended to control over its organization and display?

My provocation calls for a new kind of experimental curation that does its speaking after the fact. The digital exhibits we are being offered simply track the frames provided by the originals' preservation in academic and library settings. Eliding the discourse of how the object must be organized, digital curation might develop a language to think about how the object is organized by others, and use the object as a way to elicit new communities,

new understandings and new culture. One can conceive a digital curation that sends a call out for programmers, hackers and the chronically bored. Digital heritage must be about mediating encounters. We can now activate the objects of the past through web spaces and communities.

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