University of Michigan Press and Partners

Building a Hosted Platform for Managing Monographic Source Materials and Born Digital Publications

Michigan Publishing (home of the University of Michigan Press and a division of the University of Michigan Library), working in collaboration with colleagues at Indiana, Minnesota, Northwestern, and Penn State universities, intends to create a hosted platform for managing monographic source materials that is native to the modern collaborative infrastructure environment. The partners have been awarded $899,000 in support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to be spread over three years (April 1, 2015 to March 31, 2018).

During this time existing Hydra/Fedora repository infrastructure will be extended to accommodate the ingest and interactive presentation of digital materials linked to humanities monographs through stable URLs and Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs) printed in paper versions and additional clickable links in electronic formats. Our project is enabled by the widespread implementation of XML workflows in university presses (that allow granular linking to materials outside the book and the creation of multiple versions of the work from the same source files) and the development by libraries of robust data repositories with capable access and preservation layers.

Our initial focus is on meeting the increasing demand university presses are seeing from their authors for ways of presenting source materials alongside interpretation. This need is often described by authors as being for “companion websites” although this is shorthand for a range of different requirements as explained by Jennifer Vinopal and Monica McCormick in their useful paper on “Supporting Digital Scholarship in Research Libraries: Scalability and Sustainability” (Journal of Library Administration, 53:27-42, 2013). Writing about the challenges facing New York University Libraries (to which the Press reports), they describe “the ‘faculty Web site problem,’ an ever-growing number of requests for Web-based spaces and tools to collaborate on scholarly research and share the results . . ., requests that actually represent a diverse set of activities which can be achieved in a variety of ways.”

The activity needs particularly addressed by the proposed project include the preservation of related data (e.g., further images, audio or video files), the deployment of open source tools that allow users to interact with source materials (e.g., searching a catalog of material, rendering of 3D images), and the delivery of data in a way that individual items can be cited and use measured so that authors get credit (e.g., through the use of Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs), through application of quantitative and qualitative usage metrics).

While there currently is some disciplinary resistance in the humanities to the presentation of entirely digital publications, we view the “companion website” concept as a culturally acceptable stepping stone to achieving such integrated presentations of narrative and data. In other words, while linking source materials to interpretation presented elsewhere is the main use case explored in this project, the proposed platform is also intended to be capable of supporting entire long-form enriched digital publications, complete in themselves. Rather than forcing them
to narrow their presentation to fit the constraints of a print (or electronic print facsimile) monograph, we hope to empower scholars whose research has been enriched through the application of digital tools to also publish their results in a rich electronic format, under the brand of a university press, and in an environment where preservation of datasets, the availability of tools to manipulate them, and systems to allow citation and measurement all coexist.

During the project, source materials for five humanities publications which illustrate a wide range of intellectual property, production, and preservation challenges will be made available through the system. Four of these publications present “data” as separate from “narrative” but in one case (Gabii) the authors have chosen to present an integrated digital publication as their only output. These five case studies will provide a proof of concept for an extensible hosted platform which, the partners intend, can then be offered to other presses on a fee-for-service basis. A feasibility analysis for this service will be conducted by a business planning expert.

We believe that our project is distinctive in the way that it not only builds on established technology but also leverages
and advances strong existing relationships between university presses and libraries: All five presses are closely linked with their university library systems, four having direct reporting relationships, and this project will bring them even closer. Those libraries all share a commitment to the Hydra Project, are actively collaborating to build data repository infrastructure, and an Advisory Board of library/technology experts from the parent institutions will meet regularly throughout the project. At the helpful suggestion of the program officers, a series of collaboration and problem-solving meetings with other platform-development projects also invited by the Foundation to submit proposals to this grant initiative (led respectively by New York University Press and University of Minnesota Press) will also be held.

The outcomes of the project will be: (1) a proof-of-concept system and business plan for a fee-for-service hosted solution for monographic source materials; (2) the publication of an open source “solution bundle” for institutions using Hydra/Fedora who prefer to develop a local hosting option; (3) the development of a workflow and relationship model for presses and libraries working together to create enriched humanities publications that leverage their complementary strengths and systems, exemplified by five real publications.

The initiative leverages the new kinds of relationship that have been developing between an increasing number of university presses and their parent institutions’ library systems. Over 25% of AAUP members who self-identify as “university presses” now report to library directors, and those relationships are increasingly moving from operational to strategic in nature. The project represents an exciting direction for the development of the tools available to the growing Hydra Fedora community, facilitating the creation of a mediated publishing layer. More importantly, however, it has the potential to transform behaviors and relationships among important partners in the scholarly communication process:

● Through creating workflows that enable humanists to easily present rich electronic content either linked to their long-form publications or freestanding, the project opens the road to more innovative presentation of research by disciplinary communities who have often lagged behind their colleagues in science and engineering fields in engaging in digital publication.

● For university presses that are part of libraries, it creates a strong opportunity to extend those relationships beyond just administrative reporting or physical collocation to explore projects that truly leverage the complementarity between libraries and publishers.

● For libraries engaged in the creation of infrastructure for the management of data, the project provides rich case studies of how these initiatives can serve the needs of humanists as well as scientists and will encourage the framing of data repository development in terms of service provision rather than collection management.

The proposed project advances the sustainability of digital long-form publication in the humanities in a number of ways: From a business perspective, this project spreads the costs of the enriched forms of publication scholars are increasingly demanding across a broad range of institutional partners and leverages existing infrastructure development. It will develop a hosted solution to ensure longer term sustainability. While it most obviously engages with the challenge of enabling publications to interact on the web with primary sources and other related materials, the publication of the five case studies will also involve a rethinking of traditional production practices to allow granular linking to source materials, the involvement of rights experts in analyzing permissions needs, and analysis by data librarians of the level of preservation commitment that can be made to different types of linked material. Important issues of concern to publishers will also be worked through regarding the appropriate level, form, and documentation of peer-review for linked materials and the sales and marketing challenges of distributing both restricted and open access digital materials in a monographic environment designed for print products.

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