On Multimodal Scholarship

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In light of their newly designed website, the editors of *Ethnomusicology Review* have asked me to reflect on the role of the Internet in today's academic world. Their request was an honor and a challenge I could not resist. An editorial essay is not capable of covering the myriad facets of the topic. Discussing a few matters of our digital age, however, could be useful, particularly within the context of a professional journal such as EMR, a long-established and respected publication. Additionally, they invited me to write an essay rich in links and examples since the reader, you, could then explore the virtual territory I hoped to survey. This essay then demonstrates the practical ways that writing for the Internet enables more interconnectedness between topics, disciplines, and scholarship.

The relatively recent changes in the world of research and writing are exciting, even if they have a way of making me feel like I am getting too old to learn new tricks. I am almost jealous of today's undergraduates and graduate students, being able to form their research practices in the era of technological connectivity and accessibility. Without naming the specific products and programs I prefer, I marvel at our ability to search so many archives and libraries from our phones, or shall I say "smart devices." (Their utility as a phone seems less reliable than their data retrieval and display capabilities, depending on your company's choices for hardware, software, and service contract). On my handheld smart device, I can take a picture of a book and have that book's publishing information uploaded into a series of categorical lists such as "to buy," or "to borrow." These lists are waiting for me anywhere I can access a search engine (including my smart device). This same device enables me to open up the email I sent myself with the article I want to read this week. If I did not mind carrying the extra pound, I could open up another, smarter device, and make comments on the article, essay, or student paper. Being a scholar has never been accompanied by less paper and books, has never been as mobile, and, in certain ways, has never been more social.

Remember the days of doing fieldwork? The long weeks you spent alone in a foreign community, working out ways to learn languages and think about "culture" without the closeness of your friends and family? If you do, then you are officially "old." This summer I went to a still fairly remote village in Mexico for a fieldwork trip. My smart device had a signal. I could have real time text messaging and even video chats with my friends at any point. This same device's camera, video camera and audio recorder have substantially simplified data collection and fieldwork. And the recordings were uploaded to a server space that certain companies would like you to believe are like a cloud, up above you at all times, everywhere, holding everything you want. Sure, the sound and picture qualities leave something to be desired. But in a pinch, you could get a performer's permission and interview them without any of your field equipment being in the way. And when you returned back to your dusty tent, so to speak, you could post

your excitement on Facebook.

Professor Daniel Suslak, a linguistic anthropologist at Indiana University, used Facebook from his fieldsite—Oaxaca, Mexico—posting field photos this last summer. I saw images of him working with indigenous language specialists. I saw the waffles he ate before he ate them. I may have commented on them. These situations are not how we have thought of the fieldwork experience in the classical sense of the word: remote, isolated, and completely dependent on Others for sociality. Could you imagine, in another era, getting a Tweet from Claude Levi-Strauss? “Having pork w Dina @ Juruena. Menu was just scribbles. #kinship.” Or just imagine the long Skype calls between Colin Turnbull and Joseph Towles. Where would those be archived?

Remember the long days you spent figuring out what is in that darned archive? Again, you just may be old. Even the word “archive” seems to be without precise usage any more. If you wonder where a field recording is archived, you mean where it is stored. The *where* is important because that location is where you needed to go to do archival research, which almost always began with consulting, or in my case developing, the index. But archivists have been some of the most interested scholars in using digital technologies in their preservation work as well as in matters of accessibility. Blessed are the library scientists, for they shall inherit the digital humanities grant money.

Want to see Alan Lomax’s fieldnotes from Haiti? Click here [1]. Want to hear a Yoeme deer song from one of the legendary deer singers, Miki Maaso? Click here [2] for my shameless plug. How about an old-time fiddler and banjo player from south-central Kentucky? Click here [3].

Perhaps one of the most exciting of digital archives is the Ethnographic Video for Instruction & Analysis Digital Archive at Indiana University. They might just be the gold standard for preserving and making accessible their holdings. You can search their archives by genres, performance types, geography, instruments, languages, recording dates, depositors and more: www.eviada.org [4].

Most archives, even when they do not show you the archived items, have at least begun providing their indexes and searchable catalogues on the Internet. We wait, as most institutions hammer out a way for their holdings to be accessible on-line. At this point no one seems to be rushing to make *all* their holdings available digitally to any visitor to their site. Financial matters must be considered. And so it goes with publishing as well.

In a collection of essays, *Hacking the Academy, the Edited Volume* [5], an impressive collection of authors surveys the current terrain of digital publishing and raises vital questions about troubled waters for print publications. And the trouble is that people want their cash. Jason Jackson, a folklorist also at Indiana University, makes the eyebrow raising point that much of what we consider professional service (writing, reviewing, refereeing, publishing) is labor that often makes some corporation very wealthy. He makes the bold and seemingly salient claim that not only are we sometimes working for free when sending our articles to certain journals, but also that we labor freely for companies to serve shareholders that are antagonistic to our very work.

Jackson advocates that we should avoid publishing or peer reviewing or sitting as editors for any press or journal owned by for-profit firms. You can see one version of his argument here [6]. He is persuasive if also writing from a privileged position, having tenure at a prestigious university already. However, he is an advocate for Open Access formats precisely because he is aware of the unequal economics of scholarly publishing. He regularly blogs (http://jasonbairdjackson.com/ [7]) about Open Access issues, and was also one of the interlocutors in the influential and comprehensive discussion of Open Access scholarship, “Anthropology of/in Circulation: The Future of Open Access and Scholarly Societies,” which can be found here [8]. This collectively authored piece heralded what Kim Christen labeled our “post-Internet, remix culture where new tools allow new modes of discourse.” Christen, an interdisciplinary professor at Washington State University, brings the conversation about “openness” directly to the subject of archives (http://www.kimchristen.com/ [9]).

These scholars’ advice and warnings, like others in *Hacking the Academy*, can only be made in this utterly contemporary moment.

Never before have scholars had to simultaneously research and write, but then also have such an array of forms and outlets for that writing: blogs, screencasts, digital publications, journals and electronic journals. Both Vectors *[10]* and E-misférica *[11]* have directly brought academic publishing into a screen-based vernacular with impressive results. I enjoy the changing languages, the audio and video footage enriching the scholarship, and our ability to access scholarship without my university having to pay some corporation for a subscription. I would imagine the future holds more such possibilities; and I believe we should start imagining our writing, at least in ethnography and

ethnomusicology, as media-rich and multimodal in its design.

You thought just writing the book was tough? Now you have to actually consider the consequent variety of venues, audiences, intellectual property rights, E-book editions, etc. Maybe you want to share your intellectual insights quickly and effectively in a podcast. Michael Wesch, a cultural anthropologist at Kansas State University makes it look easy: http://ksuanth.weebly.com/wesch.html [12]. Or, maybe like my friend at Pitzer College, Alexandra Juhasz, you can write a book that will never be a book. She has written the first YouTube book about YouTube. Her *Learning from YouTube* (MIT Press, 2011) can be found here [13]. You have to see it to understand it.

In the case of Juhasz's project, as well as other digital "publications," writing is writing and editing still, but also film editing, web design, programming, and curating. Because as the author she walks the reader through the book in video clips, we move ever closer to all that has been meant by "performing." And if you are a graduate student aiming to enter a job market in a profession which is itself undergoing an identity crisis of sorts, you have to ask if you have been trained to succeed in a profession that values and rewards labor that it has, at this moment, a little trouble defining. Perhaps the best advice is the one that my mentor gave me year after year: take care of your work and your work will take care of you. But then again, he was a workaholic.

Thinking I should create a web-based scholarly publication, I had no idea it would consume so much time, money, and energy. When I completed what I believe to be one of the first ethnographic websites, *Vachiam Eecha/Planting the Seeds* [14], I was in my first year as an Assistant Professor. The year was 2004. People still used phones. No one "texted," except some deconstructionists; but they were just "writing." And my goal then was to use the form of a website to do what ethnographies did, from my understanding of them. I wrote descriptive narrative and interpretive analysis of the Yoeme culture. I included first hand narratives from the community. I featured photos, a timeline, and song lyrics. But unlike an ethnographic book, I could do more. Form affected content.

I was able to include video clips of the ritual I studied. I was able to line that video up next to footage of the same ritual filmed decades earlier. I could include ambient sounds from the villages. With a click of a mouse, the entire site's language would change from English to Spanish to Yoeme. I provided a discussion blog so people could contest my narrative, ask questions, and tell their stories. I also included images from a museum about Yoeme culture that was too far for many to ever visit. I brought the museum to them, in an idealistic sense. Of course, such skills were not mine: I relied on a small but incredible team of video editors, programmers and web designers.

I was also enabled, perhaps required as a critical thinker, to figure out how all of this material would be connected, presented, designed, and curated. And how would the aesthetics of this site follow Yoeme notions of design, space, and movement? And absolutely key to all writing, I had to consider issues of voice. If I truly wanted to engage Yoeme community members, academics, and the general public then scholarly-speak had to be combed out of my prose. I learned to count syllables and clauses, and to avoid the constant citing of other scholars and word choices that often do little more than affirm a type of graduate school brainwashing. Yes, the insider's language of academic writing is not only exclusionary but also self-justifying. Still, the more grave sin is that academic writing is painfully dry and tedious to the un-initiated.

After hammering out the desired, inclusive, narrative style, I wanted to share drafts with Yoeme collaborators before making it available to anyone. That meant taking to the pueblo their first personal computer. Having only written my work up to that point, the website enabled them to engage my work more directly. They made some changes but were very excited; bringing me documents to upload that they hoped would also be visible to everyone around the world. Specifically they immediately saw a way to publicize to indigenous rights organizations their decades of letters of protest with the Mexican government. Within an hour of seeing my drafted website, they perceived in the Internet a possible tool for decolonization. And in terms of the scholarly content of my research, I do not think they understood what I had been learning from them until they saw it, in their language, in a visually enticing manner, and outside of the realm of notational writing. And when my publisher, NYU's Hemispheric Institute, took the site "live," I can say I was expecting much like an academic journal for a couple hundred people to see the fruits of my labor. I had no idea it would get over 150,000 hits within the first couple weeks. You can see this site here [14].

My then department chair at Indiana University, Professor Emeritus Richard Bauman, made an incredibly wise decision: he wrote eight senior scholars and asked for an official review of the website, asking specifically for comments on the site's original contributions to scholarship. He then put into motion, along with my senior colleagues in the department, an effort to more specifically clarify in the merit and promotion requirements, an inclusion of digital publications and web-based scholarship. I was fortunate to spend my early career years in such

a supportive department. But I also know that the changes they were considering were not about my work as much as a change in the scholarly tides. This was about seven years ago.

By now, is credit for digital scholarship the norm across the academy? More importantly, can you expect to get credit for web-based scholarship in your field or in your department? The Society for Ethnomusicology [15] has six position statements [16] on their website, yet has not affirmed the role of digital scholarship and web-based research in their profession's guidelines for merit and promotion. Contrast this absence to affirmative and inclusive statements made by the American Foklore Society [17], or the Society for Visual Anthropology [18].

What counts as scholarship is no longer solely evidenced by an academic manuscript published by an academic press. That being said, I did write a "real" book before my tenure review at UCLA. I believe this to still be the standard across many top research universities, at least for tenured professorships. I also have articles published by peer-review presses in "real" journals, the kind you can hold. For me the process has been a bit like my take on naturopathic medicine: complementary not alternative. I am working on a solely digital project now in that it will be accessible on computers and smart devices. I am also working on another book, the physical kind. My particular scholarly performances move between genres and venues as need be for the content.

I advise my students to always think about their audience: Who do you want to reach with your work? And although I sound thoroughly California, I tell them to do what brings them joy, no matter the form. I have students theorizing and curating indigenous rock "art," making films in west Africa with tribal sorcerers, as well as performing and studying music among Huichol bands whose videos have gone "viral" on the web. How their work will look years from now (films, books, websites, museum exhibits, music . . .) is less important than how they are contributing to conversations they care about, their methods of researching, and whether they are making more friends in the world. Perhaps by the time they finish their dissertation, we will not be discussing how to revise the document into a book. I will probably avoid raising the topic first, fearing that I will seem "old."

I remember when I was an undergraduate a professor showed me his first book, written longhand on legal pads. Most of my professors still had typewriters. Typewriters! I find it hard to believe they were not taking their horse and buggy to campus and working by the light of oil lamps. I remember as a graduate student setting up several of my professors' first computers for them. Now, one of my graduate students uploads her dissertation drafts directly to my server so that I can make editorial comments on it and she can then look at those comments a second later on another continent. I feel less lonely working on my current book than I did my first one. I get text messages, messages from various social media "apps," video chats, and yes, even Tweets [19]. I can use the on-line research tools of multiple libraries, search engines and cross-platform bibliographic programs. I feel completely plugged-in to all the ways the Internet has made a scholar's life seemingly easier, at least as a University-based professor at an American institution.

And as a person who was an undergraduate during the rise of the personal computer and the capitalization of the microchip, who has literally crossed the digital divide as I earned my graduate degrees, I am undoubtedly able to say from experience that with all this connectedness, this social media, and this digitization, the core intellectual work remains the same. I personally use the skills of critical reading, writing and thinking no matter the finished project's form. That affirms for me, also, how to proceed as an educator, advisor and mentor.

If journals change formats from paper to digital editions, if the delivery technologies transition from physical books to digital readers, then such changes prove that the academic community is like the "small communities" of our ethnographic research: we are responsible for strategizing and developing ways of engaging new technologies in a manner that evidences our most integral values. And this strategizing requires an interrogation and perhaps realignment of those values. Such mapping is best not left to publishers, administrators, regents or politicians. We are seeing changes in higher education unlike any other in my lifetime. Now is the time to set the course ahead proactively on our terms. By prioritizing the validity of digital and electronic publishing in our professional organizations and departments, the market-driven publishing interests will have no choice but to follow us.

Source URL: https://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/journal/volume/16/piece/459

Links:
[1] http://www.loc.gov/folklife/lomax/fieldnotes/scans/02.html
[2] http://hemi.nyu.edu/cuaderno/yoeme/yn/noki-tools.php?clip=song

[3] http://www.stg.brown.edu/projects/davenport/CLYDE_DAVENPORT.html
[4] http://www.eviada.org/
[5] http://www.digitalculture.org/hacking-the-academy/
[6] http://jasonbairdjackson.com/2009/10/12/getting-yourself-out-of-the-business-in-five-easy-steps/
[7] http://jasonbairdjackson.com/
[8] https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/handle/2022/3167
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[12] http://ksuanth.weebly.com/wesch.html
[13] http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/learningfromyoutube/
[14] http://hemi.nyu.edu/cuaderno/yoeme/content.html
[15] http://www.ethnomusicology.org/
[16] http://webdb.iu.edu/sem/scripts/aboutus/aboutsem/positionstatements/position_statements.cfm
[17] http://www.afsnet.org/?page=PromotionTenure
[18] http://societyforvisualanthropology.org/?page_id=464
[19] http://twitter.com/#!/davidshorter