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Eighteenth Century Fiction Journal

Reflections.

Echoes of Meaning: Cheap Print, Ephemerality and the Digital Archive

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Abstract

This essay reflects on the paradoxical intention of capturing and preserving texts which were printed to be ephemeral and disposable by design. It considers the implications of this contradiction in the way we use and engage with eighteenth-century cheap print via subscription databases that include full text digitized editions of periodicals and newspapers such the *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspaper Collection*. The conversion of individual texts addressed to discrete moments into big data, which is more often searched than read, has led to new ways of modelling eighteenth-century print culture and brought about a genuine paradigm shift in the way we think about and interact with historical materials. At the same time though, this essay recommends some caution as we proceed. Cheap print that has miraculously survived this long, in one form or another, must not now suffer decontextualization or be lost amidst new canons formed by search criteria and hidden algorithms.

In April, at the very beginning of the first UK lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, York St John University library asked that, as a precaution in case government guidance requires the library to remain closed in September, module reading lists be adapted to ensure that all set texts are available digitally. Whilst this has caused problems for colleagues who teach modern and contemporary literature, my modules on eighteenth-century literature, and on early print culture in particular, have been relatively untouched. This fortunate turn of events is entirely thanks to subscription databases that include full-text digitized editions of periodicals and

newspapers. In the ‘new normal’, a 1712 issue of *The Examiner* will ironically be more easily accessible than a collection of poetry published in 2020. This phenomenon is especially striking, given that the bulk of these eighteenth-century texts were never meant to survive a week, let alone three centuries.

As Corker, a mercenary hack in Evelyn Waugh’s satire on the news-industry *Scoop*, explains: ‘news is only news until [you’ve] read it, after that it’s dead.’¹ This was even more true of the cheap print culture of the eighteenth-century public sphere, which was a necessarily ephemeral one. An issue of Joseph Addison’s *The Free-holder* (1715-1716), for example, was printed on both sides of a folio half-sheet and sold twice weekly. Its brevity meant it could easily address topical affairs whilst leaving readers with just enough to ruminate on until the next issue arrived a few days later. Mere days after its publication each issue was redundant, and as Amélie Junqua observes, newspaper editors and periodical authors were under no illusions about what happened to their words once they’d been read.² Most print became ‘bumfodder’ or ‘hygiene paper.’³ Cheap print operated on the assumption that it was disposable. Magazines, newspapers and periodicals are the mayflies of print culture.

This renders the enormous digital archives of such material that now exist online fundamentally paradoxical: vast repositories of once ephemeral materials, now frozen, trapped in amber awaiting perusal by readers they were never meant to reach. Digital archives, such as the *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspaper Collection* have transmuted these texts into big data. We no longer encounter newspapers in isolation but instead filter and refine results, relying on our computers to make sense of once inconceivable patterns. As Paul Gooding has observed, ‘instead of *reading* historical newspapers, we now *search* about the past.’⁴ Whilst these databases have afforded tremendous opportunities to remodel our understanding of eighteenth-century print culture, as Joad Raymond and Noah Moxham’s ground-breaking work on news-networks has already demonstrated, they also present new challenges.⁵

Alexis Easley warns, for instance, that the combination of vast databases of primary materials and a social media environment often led by activist impulses can lead to the

¹ Evelyn Waugh, *Scoop* (London: Penguin Books, 1943), 66.

² Amélie Junqua, ‘Eighteenth-century paper: the readers’ digest’, *Bellies, Bowels and Entrails in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Rebecca Anne Barr, Sylvie Kleiman-Lafon, Sophie Vasset (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 128-144.

³ Rebecca Anne Barr, Sylvie Kleiman-Lafon and Sophie Vasset, ‘Introduction: entrails and digestion in the eighteenth century’, *Bellies, Bowels and Entrails in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Rebecca Anne Barr et al (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), pp. 1-20 (p. 10).

⁴ Paul Gooding, *Historical Newspapers in the Digital Age: “Search All About It”* (London, Routledge, 2017) p. 20.

⁵ *News Networks in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Joad Raymond and Noah Moxham (Leiden and Boston: Brill Open, 2016).

‘decontextualization of historical materials.’⁶ Indeed, so vast have these repositories become that it is possible to get hits for almost any words, and with databases like *Gale Primary Sources* fetching up individual articles severed even from the paper they first appeared in, it is all too easy assume trends of significance and influence that were never truly there. As searching replaces reading, we must also be vigilant against the formation of new canons. We see only what the algorithms bring us, so whose voices do we lose due to unfortunate quirks of coding? Similarly, where collections were incomplete before being uploaded to these digital archives, missing issues are now twice lost and utterly unreachable to the online scholar.

A happier side_effect of the way these repositories manage data is that they capture not only the primary materials but also the archival processes through which they have survived. When using the *Burney* archive it is common to find texts_unhelpfully obscured by a Bodleian library stamp, applied not to the original text but to the microfilm copies later digitised to constitute the database. It is the foregrounding of the many levels of transmission between the text’s original publication and its eventual appearance on your screen that provides the key to navigating these paradoxical archives of once ephemeral material. These digitized texts can never be the texts they once were. This is literally true in material terms_since you are always interacting with a facsimile, but it also true of their function which expired the day after they were published. The vast majority of these texts were not meant to survive and those that were, like Joseph Addison and Richard Steele’s *Spectator* essays, did so by quickly changing formats and appearing in collected volumes: books that spoke to posterity rather than periodicals marketed on their topicality. These digital archives are tremendously valuable, but we must remember that they can capture at best echoes of utterances addressed to moments long since passed.

⁶ Alexis Easley, ‘Chance Encounters, Rediscovery and Less: Researching Victorian Women Journalists in the Digital Age’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 49.4 (2016) 694-717 (695).