

COVID, CO², and the future of the Digital Humanities 2022

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The coincidence, in the years 2020–2022, of COVID together with increasing worldwide concern about carbon footprints, would appear to culminate in an obvious direction for the future of the Digital Humanities: the necessity to push forward with mass digitisation so that scholars do not need to fly around the world to study unique objects such as manuscripts, and the move to exclusively digital publishing in order to not generate a carbon footprint for books and journals which, now in 2022, appears to be an entirely unnecessary luxury akin to driving around in a 1950s Cadillac. The proposition to abandon print publishing in academia may have been unthinkable even a decade ago, but in the current situation, and foreseeable future, it would be the most effective way for scholarship and scholars to make their contribution to de-carbonisation.

Despite being a great fan of the printed book and having had my first book published by Cambridge University Press back in 2000, it is time to contextualise print publishing in the very different context of 2022 because COVID and CO² awareness have completely changed our understanding of the world's priorities for survival in the long-term future.

Starting with the positive: mass digitisation projects such as archive.org, hathitrust.org, jstor.edu, academia.edu, proved to be fundamental resources during lockdown. Scholarly research went ahead, albeit imperfectly, because of the sheer quantity of books, journals and images currently available online. These digitising projects were established, at least in part, to redress the imbalance of scholarly availability, especially in former communist eastern European countries, where scholars did not have ready access to half a century of publishing. With open access worldwide – with the exception of countries that block or filter the internet – they have been a boon for scholars in developing countries.

On platforms such as academia.edu scholars can also upload their own articles and book chapters in order to make them available world-wide. In general, despite initial uncertainty, after a six-month embargo, scholars are allowed to upload a PDF of an article published in print format, on the understanding that, by then, the journal will have been purchased by interested parties. Journals that hope to attract more attention even encourage posting on sites such as academia.edu to raise awareness of their existence.

Yet mass digitisation requires a lot of time and money and a significant carbon footprint as items are scanned, page by page for example, in the case of analogue books and manuscripts, to get them to the point that they can be

uploaded. This is carbon-offset, in theory, by subsequent availability online resulting in almost all future consultation being online and, therefore, carbon neutral to the extent that no extra footprint beyond doing research online is generated. This also obviates the need for extensive travel by scholars to consult original material, at least in the first instance. Indeed, in terms of manuscripts, hi-res scans are often more readable than the original, given the ability to increase the magnification of the scan onscreen.

In terms of the *Journal of Art Historiography*, established in 2009, words from Richard Woodfield, its founding editor, seem appropriate:

As far as the journal was concerned, I never thought in terms of a printed version. I knew from experience with the *British Journal of Aesthetics* that printed copies could only ever have a limited circulation and never get out to places where they could be wanted. I was also an advocate, in meetings of the International Association of Aesthetics, of replacing its mailed newsletter by a website. Furthermore, when I produced the second issue of the IAA Yearbook I did so through a website, created by the British Council in Ljubljana and made available through the good offices of the British Council around the world. I was acutely aware of the shortage of computing facilities throughout the soviet bloc, and the backwardness of the Germans whose bureaucracy put the brakes on technological development. All of that is buried history now.

I was present at the first UK/JISC meeting to discuss the implications of Open Access (Jisc is a United Kingdom not-for-profit company that provides network and IT services and digital resources in support of further and higher education institutions and research as well as not-for-profits and the public sector: jisc.ac.uk). There were so few of us, we were seated around a table. The majority of those present were from research councils, and the Wellcome Foundation, and publishers. Its subject was the implementation of an Open Access policy and I was alarmed by its implications. The central problem was the Wellcome's concern that the scientific research they funded was not available in third world countries. A deal was struck whereby they would pay for the publication costs of any research they funded; the research councils followed suit. Universities also pay huge sums to have their publications in paid-access platforms that provides (typically via the internet) access to multiple databases that provide reference and citation data from academic journals, conference proceedings, and other documents in various academic disciplines.

When I set up the journal through the good offices of Glasgow University, I did think of creating a monographic series of books that could be freely available through PDFs on the internet and print on demand books. To that end I resurrected Glasgow University Press through obtaining a set of ISBN numbers, which they only recalled last month in 2022! In the end, I decided that was too much hassle and approached Ashgate to allow me to run a series through them. They got taken over by Taylor and Francis, who were then absorbed by Routledge, who were rather slow off the mark with

Open Access. The Germans are now streets ahead of them, seeing the money to be made out of universities through European Research Funding.

Interestingly, University College London now runs its own publishing house: PDFs of books are Open Access and high-quality paperback print copies are available at a nominal charge of £25. I would have beaten them to it at Glasgow were it not for the move to Birmingham. I think that the best model for publishing would be to follow the UCL example.

I must confess that all of this started long before anyone was speaking of carbon neutrality. I just saw the opportunities that the internet offered.

Now, in 2022, it is impossible not to consider carbon neutrality. Academic publishing exists in an entirely digital environment right up until the moment the button is pressed to print. So why is that button still being pressed? I was recently involved in editing a volume: *Historic Cities in the Face of Disasters: Reconstruction, Recovery and Resilience of Societies*.¹ This volume is available online, but it also was printed in physical form: over 666 patinated pages of text, 204 colour illustrations, hard-cover binding, enormous shipping costs and all this for what reason? So that it could exist physically – for whom? Certainly, for the authors, many of whom were junior, as well as the editors who had put in so much time and effort. Yet, at the same time, it was striking what a huge carbon footprint such a massive, heavy tome came with, and it seriously needed to be questioned whether this was worth it when it could equally easily simply exist digitally. This, possibly, will become the big question of the 2020s and beyond: on what basis can print publications be justified, with their considerable carbon footprint, when they exist digitally without that same footprint?

Journals have in many cases gone halfway along the path: available online are *The Burlington Magazine*, *The Papers of the British School at Rome* now published by Cambridge University Press, as are many other scholarly journals such as *I Tatti studies*, which is available online on JSTOR after the standard five year embargo. Why, therefore, considering their carbon footprint, are other scholarly journals still published only in print? *Kunstchronik* of the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte is published monthly and posted to subscribers; the more substantial *Mitteilungen of the Kunsthistorisches Institut von Florenz* appears periodically and is also posted out; the massive, weighty *Jahrbuch der Bibliotheca Hertziana* appears only annually as best, but is exclusively available in print and is also shipped around the world by post, at huge expense and significant carbon cost. If the *Journal of Art Historiography* has managed to exist, thrive, and be fully indexed in an entirely digital environment since 2009, perhaps this is the decade when institutions can have the courage, and the confidence, to go entirely digital and abandon print publishing?

¹ Fatemeh Farnaz Arefian, Judith Ryser, Andrew Hopkins, Jamie Mackee eds, Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021.

Electric cars, sustainable fashion, carbon offsets, flying planes powered by batteries or even seaweed: these are the significant efforts made in other sectors to move towards becoming carbon neutral. Scholars and academics need to meet in person to discuss and exchange ideas – two years of COVID induced lockdown made this clear – nothing can beat the sheer scholarly productiveness of talking in person to one’s colleagues. So, if travelling to conferences is to continue, but something has to give, our field perhaps has to sacrifice one of its (outdated) luxuries in order to reduce our carbon footprint: would not a massive shift to only digital book and journal publication be the least painful sacrifice to make?

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