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Edge cases as academic possibility - Talking Humanities

6-7 minutes

What are edge cases, and why do they matter? Dr James O'Sullivan, a digital arts and humanities lecturer at University College Cork, puts flippancy aside to unpick these uncanny constructs that are born of digital apparatus and reside somewhere between book and not book.

Edge cases are uncanny constructs that skirt the bounds of those scholarly structures so familiar to our discipline. The most familiar, and the one with which we remain largely infatuated, is that of the printed monograph, the weighty tome whose worth is measured by the dust it unsettles when dropped on a surface.

Flippancy aside, the monograph remains the dominant currency of our field – this isn't about readership figures or the perceived popularity of forms, the reality of the academic job market is that *books count*, perhaps as much as ever. There are, of course, many good reasons for this, but to extol such virtues would only serve to detain this brief contribution. Books are wonderful. Print has many desirable traits – let's leave it at that.

When we speak of the monograph, we naturally refer to specialised treatments of a particular subject, but almost instinctively, we tend to associate the codex as the embodiment of any such inquiry.

While the inextricable connection between form and content is such that one cannot simply privilege one over the other – to neglect form entirely would mean inattention to the expressive realities of constraint – when assessing scholarly materials, we should at least attempt to be less seduced by the shape that meaning assumes.

Edge cases reside somewhere between book and not book, and are, increasingly so in contemporary contexts, born of digital apparatus. They are bookish in that they seek to impose order upon new knowledge and critical insights, but they are less bookish in that they resist the long-established conventions of scholarly communications and publishing typified by the codex. Edge cases matter, because as scholars, we are still obsessed with books, print or digital, and it is time that we started to encourage explorations beyond both the page as paper and the page as screen. They also matter, more substantively, because valuable scholarship is not receiving sufficient recognition on account of its adopted form.

The brief report I completed for The Academic Book of the Future project, later published in *Convergence*, outlines and explores a sample of edge cases, using these exemplars as a means of showcasing why it is that such outputs should be considered the equivalent of more enduring forms. Why is it that we associate the monograph with print, when it is *content* that largely dictates the value of scholarly production?

Form, the report suggests, should have little bearing on perceptions of critical rigour and interpretive quality. The suggestion that we are already at a point where such works are considered the equivalent of their antecedents is misplaced, and supervisors or colleagues who advise their juniors or peers otherwise are doing their a disservice to charges – 'traditional' publications, be they print or

digital, are still the best way to enhance one's prospects.

The projects I draw attention to – *I ♥ E-Poetry*, *Pathfinders*, *Radio Nouspace*, *Infinite Ulysses*, *Poetics of the Archive*, and *Christianity & Culture* – all represent the levels of intellectual engagement, cultural significance, and original content that we would expect of a monograph. And yet, despite this scholarly equivalence, the creators and contributors to such edge cases, not necessarily these specific projects, do not receive the professional acknowledgement deserved by their efforts.

However, it is not just about professionalisation, it's about detaching ourselves from deep-rooted assumptions regarding how it is that we should publish our work. Scholarly communications in a digital world needs to move beyond the prevailing concern with ebooks. Digital publishing has so much more to offer scholarship than a means of remediation – transforming print books into digitised print books, or writing to a page you scroll through instead of turn, only serves to reinforce standards we should be seeking to problematise.

Contemporary scholars take many forms – they are archivists, programmers, designers, artists, cultural commentators – the mechanics of publishing need to shift if we are to satisfy increasing variance within the scholarly record. And we need to be prepared to adequately assess such variance.

It would be infeasible to situate all types of edge cases within a stable taxonomy, and it is true to say that, some might be skeumorphic in that they are best suited to traditionally bookish qualities. Edge cases are not always so radical. There are times when a scholar may simply want to accompany an essay in a

printed journal with supplementary digital materials, such as interactive graphs or datasets.

And edge cases are not intentionally experimental merely for the sake of being strange: surveying investigators from each of the projects documented in my report, a common trend emerged. These projects are digital because the content they are sharing cannot be facilitated by the page. If the academic book of the future is to build on the strong foundations of the past, we need to give it the scope to be assembled, shared and assessed in a fashion that fosters possibility.

Dr James O'Sullivan (@jamescosullivan) is lecturer in digital arts and humanities at University College Cork (National University of Ireland). He has previously held faculty positions at the University of Sheffield and Pennsylvania State University. His work has been published in a variety of interdisciplinary journals, including *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, *Digital Humanities Quarterly*, *Leonardo*, and *Hyperrhiz: New Media Cultures*. He and Shawna Ross are the editors of *Reading Modernism with Machines* (Palgrave Macmillan 2016). Further information on James and his work can be found at josullivan.org**.**

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