Commonplace •

Versioning and Iterative Publishing

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Change-logs or revision histories are increasingly integrated — both in the back and frontend — into platforms that accommodate collaborative and experimental forms of online academic writing in the humanities. A well-known feature from platforms such as [Wikipedia](#) and Github or Gitlab, additionally [PubPub](#) (the platform that hosts [the Commonplace](#) and is regularly used for humanities journal and book publishing) launched its [Activity Dashboard](#) recently, which provides a filterable log of changes made to a ‘pub’ or ‘collection.’ A version history remains available for readers to explore earlier releases, while a ‘pub history feature’ allows authors or communities the ability to return to or reinstall previous pub drafts.

Several publishers and platform providers have started to experiment with and accommodate more processual forms of publishing within the humanities. Next to PubPub, [The University of Minnesota Press](#) in collaboration with [CUNY’s Digital Scholarship Lab](#), have been doing so for example as part of the [Manifold Scholarship](#) publishing program for the production of what they call ‘iterative’ texts or publications, where material such as datasets, sound, video, and other digital content can be added to a publication-in-progress, in an ongoing-way as it develops. Foreseeing as they [state](#) ‘an emerging hybrid environment for scholarship, Manifold develops, alongside the print edition of a book, an alternate form of publication that is networked and iterative, served on an interactive, open-source platform.’

In an open access environment, there is both more opportunity for and (perhaps) interest in versioning humanities research and in showcasing revision. Yet this increased focus on accommodating versioning as part of the publishing process is not new, and in many ways, it emulates print publishing workflows. Revised, corrected, and updated editions as well as reprints have always been commonplace in a print context too. Disciplines such as textual criticism have dedicated themselves to the different versions and editions of works as part of the creation of critical editions, to engage with the textual variation of literary and academic works in a print environment.

Example of different book covers depending on the edition or publisher. Source: <https://openreflections.wordpress.com/a-differential-thesis/>

The focus on material and textual variation—introduced during and as part of the writing and research process but also as part of its publication and further dissemination and adaptation—has within this field led to a fundamental reconsideration of the book or the publication as a fixed object or entity we can return to or emulate. Instead, the focus here has increasingly shifted to more processual forms of publishing and fluid publications. Yet this conceptual shift notwithstanding, within most humanities disciplines and publishing processes, the so-perceived ‘final version’ or ‘version of record’ (generally perceived as a stable, fixed, or bound publication published by a press or publisher and written by a single author or a well-defined set of authors), remains dominant in scholarly communication and reward structures.

What I am interested in then is the following: how does the current interest in and uptake of research *versioning* have the potential to question and disturb these established practices and our focus on essentialized, bound, and object-based scholarship within the humanities?

This is one of the topics I have been examining closely as part of my own research and publishing practices. Over the last decade my book [*Living Books. Experiments in the Posthumanities*](#), has developed in an iterative way. From [blogposts](#) to papers and conference presentations, and eventually to a [thesis](#), a [wiki](#), a [CommentPress version](#), and several articles, *Living Books* further evolved into a [book published by the MIT Press](#), in addition to an [online PubPub version](#) that can be updated, remixed, and commented upon. Although this development trajectory (or most of it at least) is not that uncommon for a ‘formally published’ humanities book, experimenting with different versions, platforms, and media to communicate my research, served as an opportunity to reflect critically on the way the research and publishing workflow is currently (teleologically and hierarchically) set up, and how it has been fully integrated within certain institutional and commercial settings.

Top left: An earlier CommentPress version of *Living Books* (<http://www.openreflections.org/>).

Bottom left: Selection of draft chapters of *Living Books* made available on the *Openreflections* blog (<https://openreflections.wordpress.com/>).

Right: An earlier wiki version of *Living Books* (<http://www.openreflections.org/wiki>).

Front cover of *Living Books* for the print, PDF, and PubPub version.

I wanted to explore how we might generate and communicate our work differently and more openly at the various stages of its development. As part of the research and publication process of *Living Books*, I therefore actively tried out different platforms to publish versions of my research-in-progress and gather-together, remix, and reuse (often together with collaborators) different arguments presented within the book on, or making use of, [as I write](#), ‘those platforms, technologies, and pieces of software that favor experimentation, openness, interaction, multimodality, and interdisciplinarity’ ([Adema, 2021, 29](#)). The latest [PubPub version](#) of *Living Books* in many ways returns to its earlier iterations as a series of blogposts open for comments and further development. Each of the subsequent versions of this processual book

served different goals and functions along the way: from sharing and communicating research, to career progress and promotion; from further refining text and arguments with the help of colleagues and collaborators, to connecting them to and interweaving them with new ideas and works; or simply to explore what medial forms would fit the research best during its various stages.

Critiquing and reimagining our standard research and publishing workflows involves having a critical look at the way versioning (as well as version management and control) is currently (being) set up on web-based publishing and research platforms and how this often still draws on established practices from a print environment. What constitutes a version and at what point, and how do we conceptualize versioning? Based on my own experiences I want to put forward three general reflections or observations here in response to versioning practices as they are currently offered on humanities publishing platforms.

1. Versioning is not (always) linear

Versioning as practiced and applied within publishing workflows, both in print and digital environments, tends to be set up in a linear fashion, often using sequential numbering. There is often a starting point (an original release or version of record) and an endpoint or final version (or new release), all numbered along the way, e.g., a first edition, second edition, a first release, second release etc.. The question is, if we want to highlight and explore more processual forms of research, how can we start to break-down as part of our versioning practices such a teleological view of evolving stable research versions, which again runs the risk of us essentializing research objects, instead of for example, highlighting the different relationalities of publishing or the various interactions that are fostered through the research versioning process (with readers, reviewers, and collaborators, for example)? Research also often doesn't develop (neatly) linearly, but is taken up and remixed in different contexts, abandoned and picked up again, extended and aborted and returned to, further interlinked with other references and quotations, and networked with other communities and with other texts. Linearity, in this respect, is often a construct, something reconstructed in retrospect.

Such a sequential focus within our versioning practices also tends to draw our attention to the latest version (as visible on publishing platforms) or to the 'end result' of our research, as the version that is perceived the most complete, definitive,

authentic, and original, and with that the most valuable. It might be more interesting to explore *why* we bring out different versions (for example a Twitter thread or an article) of our research along the way, in *what* places and contexts, and what functions these different versions have had, and *how* they connect together and have informed each other. We might want to explore how we can engage more closely with the process of research and publication as it develops — a collaborative conversation — while also remaining aware that stabilizations remain necessary, but that these stabilizations perform different functions for their authors, for the research itself, in relation to the platforms they are published upon, and for the communities that they engage (e.g., registration, collaboration, feedback, annotation, evaluation, reuse, critique).

Versioning has the potential to break down — to some extent at least — the strict boundaries between research and publishing. In a print environment (but in a way this is also mirrored online in how in PubPub for example versioning is set up both on the front and the backend) commonly a distinction is made between versions (or ‘drafts’) that have been created pre-publication (connected to ‘authorial intention’ for example) and versions that have been created post-publication (first, second, revised editions etc.) often as part of a specific publication history, all of which is usually connected to medial affordances (hardback, PDF). As scholars publish their research-in-progress on digital publishing platforms, distinctions between pre- and post-publication stages become less clear and the boundaries between research and publishing more entangled. For example, in an online environment (open) review processes regularly happen at different stages or even continuously, i.e., before, during, and after formal publication. The traditional research and publishing stages of writing, registration, evaluation, and dissemination might need to be rethought in this context and perhaps reimaged in a less linear and final way. In this sense within more processual forms of research and publishing the distinction between *doing* research and *publishing or communicating* it, is increasingly eroding. Perhaps thinking of publication ‘iterations’ might be more helpful in this context.

Going back to the term also used to describe the Manifold project, the concept of iteration (of iterative texts and publications) doesn’t necessarily adhere to or inherently incorporates this linear fixation that haunts research and publishing, whilst at the same time highlighting possibilities for change, even in hegemonic contexts, where we can conceptualize iterability as a practice of both repetition and difference ([Derrida, 1988, 7](#)). For on the one hand, of course, iteration as a concept can be used to describe the established practices of knowledge production, dissemination and

consumption that we as scholars iteratively (and often uncritically) reproduce. But beyond the creative and critical potential that can lie in repeating practices, iteration as a concept also allows for the emergence of difference.

Within the space between alterity and repeatability then lies the opportunity for change within our scholarship and publishing practices. For example, a publication existing in different material forms is both a repetition of the same text or content as well as an altered version of that what it repeats or copies (following Derrida, it is in repetition that the seed of the new — or the *other* — resides). With this in mind, the focus should perhaps be on how we can repeat our (scholarly) practices differently, how we can turn iterability into an emancipatory concept through which we can change and intervene (through) our publishing (and versioning) practices, even within restraining socio-cultural formations.

2. Versioning showcases the materiality of our publications

A focus on the iterability of our publications also helps highlight their materiality and how it matters whether a book is published in a print or a PDF version, or as a series of blogposts, for example, even if the content remains the same. But we can even go beyond iterability or iterative publishing as constituting simply a different *written* or *material* form of an authorial text here, where for textual scholar Jerome McGann for example, a specific *performance* or *reading* of a text also forms a further iteration of it. And beyond that our own interpretations or analyses of a text as scholars, can again form a further iteration. For McGann texts then should not be perceived as things or objects, but as *processual events*, where each version or reading of a text is both a performative and a — using his terminology — *deformative* act, where it further impacts the meaning of the text under analysis (while also further breaking down the linearity implied in sequential versioning, where the meaning or impact of a specific version can retrospectively change based on a certain analysis or response to it). In line with what I proposed earlier, McGann argues for a more dynamic engagement with texts, less focused on determining the exact nature of a text, or on what a text ‘is’, but on an ‘analysis [that] must be applied to the text as it is performative’, hence as it keeps on changing in different contexts ([McGann, 2004, 25](#)). Iterability might then be perhaps a more suitable concept to utilize in a context in which our formally published outputs in the humanities (our books and articles), even when perceived as fixed, stable, and bound, come in various material manifestations (from PDF to hardback), all with different agential impacts in the way our research is received, interacted with, and can (or cannot) further develop.

3. Versioning highlights community and collaboration

Finally, versioning has the potential to highlight the ‘communities of production and reception’ around research, or the manifold relationalities and conversations that research-in-process weaves. These relationalities are not always made as visible as they could potentially be within our established versioning practices. Versions of books and articles are often revised and updated by the same set of authors, and comments and (material) input from readers, audiences, reviewers, and collaborators are not always visibly integrated into new versions or as clearly recognized as they could perhaps be. Yet by versioning our research, or by presenting research in different contexts, from conference presentations to blog posts to twitter feeds and articles, we engage various individuals, communities, and material platforms along the way that all in different ways interact with, shape, produce, and refine our research, highlighting the intrinsically collaborative nature of research and publishing.

Think of the different audiences that are connected to each different performance of our research, at a conference, on social media, on a publishing platform. But also think of the different collaborators involved in the production of these events, and of the platforms and media in which we present our research (from editors and designers to software developers and marketers, to of course the software and platforms themselves). Open and processual publishing allows us to adapt our research to fit and respond to different contexts, communities, audiences, and platforms (and to explore whether other venues might for example better suit our research than a standard print publication), but it might also help us to provide credit to the different people and groups (and the various non-human agencies - from paper to screens, ink, printers, and trees) that have been contributors to the research; who have shaped it, enabled it, commented upon it, critiqued it, adapted it, or shared it, among others, and to expand research beyond its localization within individual human authors or bound material book objects.

Conclusion

Versioning software and platforms are already experimenting with this in various exciting ways, by enabling new forms of annotation and commenting on research-in-process, by linking and gathering versions and processual research closer together, by linking out to and creating networks with related works and projects, and by accommodating new roles for collaborators on research projects beyond traditional authorial ones (PubPub speaks in this sense of ‘community publishing’). Yet beyond technological developments it is up to us to likewise reimagine our socio-cultural

research and publishing practices, and to start recognizing that research is an iterative and collective endeavor, that comes in a plurality of material and performative forms.

Citations

1. Janneke Adema, *Living Books. Experiments in the Posthumanities*. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2021, 29. [↵](#)
2. Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Limited Inc*, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, Evanston, Il: Northwestern University Press, 1988, 7; Kaja Marczewska, *This Is Not a Copy: Writing at the Iterative Turn*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, 34. [↵](#)
3. Jerome McGann, *Radiant Textuality: Literature after the World Wide Web*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 25. [↵](#)