SCHOLARSHIP WITHOUT PUBLICATION: THE CASE OF THE CLASSIC MAYAN EPIGRAPHIC DATABASE PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION

Let me begin by saying that my remarks are confined to the effect of the Internet on scholarship and academic publishing in the humanities and interpretive social sciences, and that they are based partly on my experience as owner of the Mayan Epigraphic Database Project at the University of Virginia, but also partly on my training as a social anthropologist who has always viewed the Internet as a foreign country, a place and a culture to be studied and written about in the ethnographic mode. (One might call an ethnography of the internet *My Life in the Bush of Hosts*.) For those of you not familiar with the Mayan Epigraphic Database Project—or MED—it is a website that houses a database of various source materials for Mayanists interested in the decipherment of the hieroglyphic script. When completed, it will contain a set of digitized dictionaries, images, and—most importantly—Mayan texts, which will allow scholars to perform pattern matching searches and statistical analyses on a vast corpus of material.

In this talk, I will do three things. First I will give a brief description of the motivating theory behind MED. Second, I will describe my actual experience with it over the past two years. Finally, I want to take a shot at explaining why the site has fared the way it has.

MED: THE THEORY

A few years ago, when I became aware of the Internet and the World Wide Web, and began to experience the pleasures (and displeasures) of surfing the 'net, I was struck by one thing about this new technology that convinced me immediately of its lasting value:

That in spite of the fact that the Web and other Internet protocols exhibit all kinds of technological shortcomings—they are often slow, chaotic, and offer quite limited interactivity—they nonetheless offer a means of communication unparalleled in the history of the world in speed and geographic inclusiveness. The 'net is an extremely *fast* and *vast* network for the distribution and exchange of information. As such, the Internet must be viewed as a revolutionary *social institution* as much as a new technology, since all forms of social organization—from ant colonies to the capitalist market—are to a large extent structurally determined by the means of communication available.

Therefore, the Internet and electronic publishing should be compared not simply with books and other media, but with the social structures within which such media are used. Let me give you an example. Scholarship since at least the early Nineteenth Century has been intimately bound with the book and the scholarly journal (excuse the pun). But the book and journal have, in turn, formed the basis of a set of social practices and artifacts, including such things as libraries and academic conferences, much like the one we are in today. We can think of libraries and conferences as contexts in which the exchange of information—stored in packets called "essays", "books", etc—takes place. These contexts are simply distribution nodes for information packets, and they exist a network.

Now the key here is that these distribution nodes—the library and the conference—are constrained by space and time in unique ways, and these constraints determine the ways that people can exchange information in them. Specifically, distribution nodes differ from each other in at least three ways, depending upon their spatial and temporal boundary conditions: (1) the *amount* of information that can be exchanged; (2) the *speed* with which information can be exchanged; and (3) the *number of participants* who can exchange information.

Take, for example, the library. Libraries are **temporally unbounded**—they are open all year round—but **spatially bounded**—they exist in immovable buildings at a particular place. These constraints create a node in which vast amounts of information can be stored and made available to a large number of people. But it limits the degree to which interaction between participants can take place. Thus, a library is "interactive", but only if we expand our time frame to include decades and centuries. For example, it is often said that Western scholars are part of a “great conversation” that has existed since Plato.

In contrast, look at conferences. Conferences are **temporally bounded** in that they are scheduled events that may or may not be periodically held. But **spatially** conferences are **less bounded** than libraries, because although they take place in immovable hotels, they can move to different cities each time they are held. Thus, although a much smaller

number people can exchange ideas in this context, and can do so for only a short period, the conference allows for a much more rapid rate of exchange between participants between the library.

While we're at it, let's throw in another type of node: the seminar or workshop. Seminars are **temporally bounded**, but less so than a conference, since they can last longer periods. **Spatially** they are **bounded** like a library, since they take place in a room in a building. This context offers a high potential for collaborative work resulting from the exchange of ideas. But it also is highly restrictive in the number of people who can participate in the conversation.

Now, let's look at the Internet as a node. The Internet is practically unlimited in both space and time. In many ways, a web site can be viewed as an ongoing seminar in which anyone can participate for extended periods of time, and like a library in which anyone can deposit their work as well as read that of others. Being unbounded in both space and time, it allows for ongoing collaboration and conversation, and thus the potential effect on scholarly production is high.

The idea of making good of such productivity has been the motivating philosophy behind MED. The web site would act as a spatially and temporally unbounded social space for the exchange of information, and thus combine the best of both libraries and seminars. This would allow for lots of things to happen that normally could only take place in the context of a seminar or a workshop. For example, participants could contribute interpretations of texts and have others comment on them. But it could also allow for things to happen that really could not happen without a great deal of organizational effort. For example, by allowing participants to contribute to the database, MED would leverage the fact of universal and unconstrained access to create a virtual workforce that could build a database much bigger than I alone could create—or than any other individual could create. Thus, MED would literally be a kind of "coop" or "commonwealth" of information for Mayanists.

MED: EXPERIENCE AND EXPLANATION

The reality of MED has been somewhat different. Over the past two years, I have had a number of people write me about the site with enthusiasm, and it has been referenced by many other web sites, as well as in the online edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. I have also attended conferences, such as the American Anthropology Association meetings, where I have been approached because people recognize my name from the site. [Since the time this paper was delivered, MED has also been referenced in *Current*

Anthropology.] However, in spite of the demonstrable interest in the site, few have actually contributed to the site, in spite of the fact that the *Handbook* contains all of the information necessary to do so.

Now, there are a number of causes that one might posit to explain this situation. But the most significant, I think, is that there are still precious few "real scholars" on the Internet, although that number is growing. (At the University of Virginia, the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities is a notable exception: there, among others, Jerome McGann of English and Ed Ayers of History, both highly respected in their fields, have created Internet accessible archives. It has been the guiding philosophy of the Institute's director, John Unsworth, to use the Internet as a means of collaboration among whom I am calling real scholars.) The question is, why do so few scholars in the humanities make use of the Internet as a medium in which to conduct research?
There are a number of possible reasons.

For one, it's more fun to go to conferences. For another, scholars in the humanities are often technophobic or at least uncomfortable with computers. However, I believe there is a more compelling reason for the absence of a vigorous use of the Internet by scholars to exchange information: *The Internet threatens to disrupt the traditional means by which scholars establish their reputations.* And reputation—also known as "recognition" or "prestige"—is what to a great extent motivates scholars' careers.

The Internet subverts the traditional process by which reputations are produced in at least two ways: First, the ease of information storage and access it provides threatens to disrupt monopolies on the control of information. Scholars very rarely make public the vast stores of primary materials on which their secondary research rests. This is because scholarly reputation often rests on being the curator of primary materials. This is especially true in archaeology and anthropology, since although anybody can *interpret* a text, not everyone can *own* the text, and control its retrieval from the past or another culture. The need to control information can sometimes go to the degree that there is often a willingness among scholars to create an artificial scarcity of information.

The second way that the 'net subverts the process of reputation production is that it introduces a strange new form of writing that few understand, much less perceive. I refer not to hypertext *per se* but to the *collective nature of authorship on a website* such as MED. If everyone contributes to a database of primary materials, then everyone owns it—which is to say that, in effect, no one owns it. This problem becomes more acute as work becomes interpretive, as in the decipherment of particular hieroglyphs.

Now, both of these causes relate to deep seated notions of intellectual property that are more profound than the legal notions associated with this term. And given that, as I believe, it is neither practical nor desirable to transform our notions of property, even in relation to virtual information, *the web will not be a viable arena for academic publication until intellectual property rights can be guaranteed.*

In the debate that often surrounds the rise of the Internet as a medium of publication, those who represent academic interests and those who represent commercial interest are frequently at odds. But this should not blind us to the fact that both parties fear the loss of property of one kind or another. In fact, it may be that the solutions needed to protect copyrights for publishers may be adapted to the needs of scholars as well, much as they may resent this association.

To conclude, I think the lesson to be learned is that although the spatial and temporal unboundedness offered by the 'net creates a great potential for information exchange, the social dimension must also be considered. When I first conceived of MED, I did not consider the role played by what might be called social space as a determinant of informational space. Now I would say that the success of a project like MED depends upon recreating the social conditions for production of recognition. Only when this is accomplished can we begin to think of ways to transform our deep seated notions of property and recognition by means of the new technology—if indeed, we want to change them.

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