
Access for Whom? Rethinking Audience and Editorial Decisions through *Project Vox*

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Abstract

Broad access to online digital humanities projects raises questions about who our audiences are and how we respond to their engagement with our work. Using Project Vox as a case study, we highlight motivations and implications for providing audiences more access to decisions that shape the evolution of a project. In doing so, we hope to encourage critical discussion about how we conceive, assess, and engage the diverse audiences of digital scholarship.

Digital humanities practitioners may be familiar with Bertolt Brecht's proposal that radio ought to become "the finest possible communication apparatus in public life"-- a medium that "bring[s] the listener into a relationship instead of isolating him." (Brecht 1964) This thought is often cited as a visionary evocation of the internet, with all its potential for many-to-many communication and meaningful audience response. Yet even as Web 2.0 has realized this kind of open communication space, digital scholarly resources often have not tried to foster engagement with a broad audience. There are some obvious reasons for this tendency; esoteric subject matter comes to mind, as do limitations of time and resources. But audience diversity is generally taken to be the desirable and nearly inevitable outcome of "the democratization of access . . . that Benjamin recognized as a feature of mechanical reproduction," (Unsworth 1996) so it seems incumbent upon project creators to think critically about how to engage a diverse audience -- especially when

the perspectives of that audience may suggest new avenues of research, project development, or dissemination.

Can a project carry out its intellectual mission while also adapting to the needs of an unexpected but engaged audience? Underlying that question is an even simpler one: why respond to and involve anyone other than one's intended audience? These questions are not new (Jewell 2009, see also Gibbs & Owens, 2012 and Robertson, 2012), but our answers to them become more vital amid greater access to, and more affordances to engage with, humanities scholarship. The *Project Vox* team is contending with such questions as we plan our next phase of development.

[Project Vox](#) is a digital resource aimed at transforming the canon of modern philosophy, beginning with how philosophy is taught to undergraduates. To that end, *Project Vox* provides resources for teaching and research focused on women philosophers traditionally excluded from the western philosophical canon. The content and mission of the site imply a fairly narrow audience-- instructors of undergraduate history of philosophy courses -- and the *Project Vox* team designed and built the site with those readers in mind. Yet something unexpected happened when the site launched in March 2015: by academic standards, *Project Vox* went viral. Through wide sharing on social media and articles in scholarly and popular media (for a complete listing of citations and links to press coverage, see the [Project Vox publicity page](#)) it enjoyed a kind of publicity and uptake uncommon for a digital humanities venture, let alone a niche project aimed at a single discipline. A substantial part of *Project Vox*'s Twitter mentions could be traced back to a post on Feministing (which also accounted for significant traffic to the site, as captured through Google Analytics, Dusenbery 2015). Popular and scholarly media coverage included the Washington Post, the Times Higher Education Supplement, the London Times, and The Atlantic. Beyond the head-spinning gratification of positive public attention, the fact of this broader and unexpected audience invited us to think more critically about whether and how to accommodate them.

Naturally, it's easiest to ignore an emergent audience and continue to speak directly to an imagined group, regardless of the degree to which that group actually exists as a proportion of a site's readers. Andrew Jewell advocates this plan when he considers the audience of the *Willa Cather Archive*:

"How shall our editing practices change to address new audience needs?" I have considered this question

for some time and with some seriousness, and my current response is this: How the hell should I know? . . . [M]y response to the diversified audience has been not to change my practices at all, but to continue to make content additions that address the needs of the audience I know and, frankly, care about the most: other Cather scholars and teachers. For me, being a central resource to the most informed audience is a sign of great success. (Jewell 2009)

But it is also possible to adapt, and despite his stay-the-course rhetoric, Jewell acknowledges that his "understanding of audience diversity has inspired certain projects within the Cather Archive that address that diversity while also being useful for Cather scholars." (Jewell 2009). Finding exactly that kind of balance has become an unexpected but important part of our work on *Project Vox*.

In short, we want to adapt *Project Vox* to serve a broader, engaged community and support our core mission. This goal entails not only making *Project Vox* available as an open scholarly resource but also providing our audiences more access to and involvement in decisions that shape the evolution of the project. To cite one concrete example, a better understanding of our audience -- for instance, those who discovered our site through the Feministing tweets and posts -- may help determine the degree to which we acknowledge the English writer Mary Astell as an early feminist as well as a philosopher. In making such decisions, we want to clearly understand all of our audiences, their interests in our project, and how our mutual interests could be better aligned to improve and grow the site. Put another way, we want to cultivate the kind of audience-creator dynamic that Andrew Jewell cites as the impetus for creating a bibliography of Cather translations. This dynamic is also embodied in earlier instances, such as the Blake Archive for Humans website and Jon Saklofske's re-imagining of the Blake Archive via his NewRadial software. Both are concrete examples of how users of an openly accessible scholarly resource can have different ideas about the content and its use. Such phenomena force us to recognize divergences between intended and actual audiences and to consider whether we will respond (see Kirschenbaum, 2004; and Saklofske, 2012).

In this talk, we will describe the data and methods *Project Vox* has used to identify and engage its audience (including Google Analytics data, targeted Qualtrics surveys, and collaboration with user experience professionals). This work is currently underway, and by summer 2017 we expect to share how these results are shaping the development of *Project Vox*. We will

also be able to report on the work of our outreach and assessment coordinator, who is instrumental in engaging our audience and assessing the site's impact. (The very fact of having an outreach and assessment coordinator suggests some of the resource implications for prioritizing audience engagement, and we look forward to discussing the decisions we have made and continue to weigh.)

The questions of audience engagement are persistent and thorny, and they have been under-examined in DH scholarship. As Michael J. Kramer has recently noted, "[o]ne shift in the digital humanities that needs more attention is the changing, often contested, understanding of audience . . . How do makers wish to treat their audiences? . . . Should they be reconstituted as fellow makers? As active respondents?" (Kramer 2016). *Project Vox* is a public-facing DH project working to engage a broad user base without abandoning its scholarly rationale. By analyzing what we know about our audiences and sharing how we act on that information, we hope to provide a report of general interest to the DH community. And in striving to be transparent and methodical, we hope that our critical, sustained self-assessment can help to elucidate some useful approaches to engaging diverse audiences, which we consider an inherently worthwhile goal of digital scholarship.

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