

Do online networks exist for the poetry community?

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1.0 Introduction

Having been involved in the previous Big Data project, Analytic Access to the Domain Dark Archive (AADDA), I was keen to work on this second stage because the issues we experienced, and the suggestions we had made for tools, had helped evolve the interface, and I wanted to see where it would go, and how it would develop.¹

Web archives are nothing new, but what BUDDAH has done, which is, I think, new in the field, is to ask researchers with little or no background in the digital humanities to use the UK Web Archive for their own research. It is this *use* of the archive which has allowed us to interrogate the interface and how it will be rolled out for wider use – not the data itself, but the way researchers will interact with it. This, to me, is the reason why this research is valuable. Meetings during the project were attended by researchers from various disciplines, as well as those involved with the technical side. Whether I am researching poetry or potatoes, and whether or not you care about either, is beside the point. The point is that I have been testing and developing the interface to the archive as a literary historian rather than as a web specialist. I believe that the fact that the project has used the experiences of both researchers and technical experts means that the findings of all of us, and the interface as it will be presented to the wider research community, have real weight and value.

2.0 Observations on the research process

There were two major differences between the research work undertaken during the AADDA pilot project and the research work during Big UK Domain Data for the Arts and Humanities: first, the new SHINE interface, including both a ‘sample mode’ and ‘advanced search’;² and second, the expansion of results, due to the indexing of all available data.

The ‘advanced search’ function of SHINE has proved incredibly useful. One can search for very specific queries, or search more generally and then filter. The search interface itself is also very well designed – clean and uncluttered, with the notes on the right hand side of the search boxes being helpful for first-time users. Being able to filter out results so easily was a big improvement on my previous experience as well. For example, the Amazon pages which plagued me during AADDA can easily be excised, excluding irrelevant entries and allowing a researcher to focus down quickly and easily. To be able to discard results and to be able to save queries were two ways of streamlining the process of ‘digging down’ to what one really wanted. The later addition of ‘saved searches’ and the ability to create corpora to return to also help with longer and more involved researches, as one does not have to start afresh each time but can return to, and manipulate, an already-defined set of results.

And while the expansion of available data is clearly a good thing, a large number of results can be a problem in and of themselves. For example, the simple ‘Adrian Henri’ search I started out with during AADDA, and which produced 1,847 results with that interface and dataset, would now, under SHINE, produce 8,115 results. More results, of course, equal better and more thorough research but they also mean that one cannot sift through to find the ‘false results’ in a way which was easy and

obvious with the much more limited AADDA dataset.³ However, the filters and advanced search options mentioned above clearly helped in this regard.

In terms of problems encountered while searching, it would not be beneficial for this report to list issues which have subsequently been corrected, and which will not be of relevance to future researchers, but I think it is worth noting here that I sometimes came across odd/unexpected pages from the Internet Archive, when clicking through from the original results page – this is not a fault of the UK Web Archive, or of the SHINE interface and the way it lists results, but is connected to how the Wayback Machine works. ‘Robots.txt’ was something I had encountered during the AADDA project, and it is frustrating as one will never be able to see that result, even though there is a listing.⁴ There was also the completely unexpected ‘page not archived’. Of all the times I have clicked through to a result hosted by the Internet Archive, I have never seen this. Unfortunately I was unable to capture this moment with a screenshot, but I was given the choice of seeing the page ‘as it appears live’,⁵ which, although clearly signposted by the Wayback Machine as such, means that the result is not in fact what you think it is going to be; it cannot be used as a capture from, as in this example, 2007, when it in fact links to what the page looks like in 2014. These are minor instances, but are something of which researchers should be aware of when using the resource – it cannot be entirely perfect every time, and, as has been discussed throughout the AADDA and BUDDAH project cycle, researchers must have proper training before using the interface, so that they understand how it works and how it should be used.⁶

3.0 My case study: online poetry networks

The research project I proposed aimed to explore poetry’s online presence, and whether or not networks exist. The idea was inspired by my work on the poetry communities of the British Underground, where a little magazine published in Birmingham would include a letter talking about the scene in Exeter to be read by someone in Newcastle. These links was often deliberately bypassing the metropolitan, with loco-specific scenes existing both for themselves and also being shared with people elsewhere. I wondered if this had translated to the internet. To use a common buzz phrase, has the internet made the global local?

Originally, I aimed to do four things: first, to explore what spaces exist for poetry online (discussion fora, sites advertising readings, poets’ own pages, and so on); second, to drill down into specific websites and their link networks (for example, do poets link to other poets?); third, to see whether smaller sites mimic the Underground’s hesitancy to be associated with the major players (for example, does everyone link to the Poetry Society or bypass it?); and fourth, to explore whether online networks exist in and of themselves, or whether the online presence of a group is merely a kind of ‘place-holder’ or ‘directory’.

Admittedly, this was an ambitious undertaking for the time we had, but this report discusses just two sites which I see as an example of the two extremes of poetry’s online presence, and which demonstrate my wider researches on that fourth point. The first site, the aptly named www.thepoetryforum.co.uk, is a forum for people to share their work and comment on poetry, and the second, the changing online existence of the Oxford University Poetry Society, is what I call a ‘place-holder’.

The Poetry Forum has been online since 2006, with the first Internet Archive capture dating from 2007.⁷ The design of the site has changed over time,⁸ but the basic set up is the same: there are

different fora where people can post poems on, say, a certain theme, and can comment on and discuss other people's work, and engage in dialogue about poems.

I am particularly interested in the site for the way it has changed over time, in relation to how the community is created. In 2007, the homepage tells the viewer:

You are currently viewing our boards as a guest which gives you limited access to view most discussions and access our other features. By joining our free community you will have access to post topics, communicate privately with other members (PM), respond to polls, upload content and access many other special features. Registration is fast, simple and absolutely free so please, join our community today!⁹

The first instance of the word 'free' is bolded, and the final joining offer is hyperlinked to the registration page. Furthermore, this text is front and centre on the homepage, placed in a prominent position immediately after the top banner menu. This implies that membership is a key element in the use of the site: you do have access as a guest, but it is limited, and look at all the things you could be doing if only you undertook the 'fast, simple and absolutely free' registration. In 2008, the text – still prominently placed on the homepage – changes slightly: 'you *may* have to register before you can post', but you can 'start viewing messages' by selecting 'the forum you want to visit'.¹⁰

In 2011, the text reverts to the original wording, yet it has also been moved to the sidebar. While the text itself sets the Forum up as an exclusive club again – you *need* to register to take part, versus the 2008 wording where you *may* need to register – the placing on the page, on the left-hand sidebar, simultaneously downgrades the message visually, putting it to one side. Of course, to register is still simple, fast and free, but it shows the way the Forum has developed over time and perhaps indicates what the users want – commenters should have a profile, an identity that can be tracked and is a recognizable presence.

User profiles are an important part of the community creation of the Forum. Yog's profile, captured in 2008,¹¹ is a typical example. Various fields have been filled in, such as hobbies and mood, although there is no field to say where he comes from. It is an identity created for the Forum, and one which allows him (real name Trent) to post, comment, make friends and use the site. It does not matter who he really is (is he really called Trent?) or where he is from. Users are also encouraged to post in the 'Introductions' forum. Here are just two brief examples which show two different ways of using the Forum, once a profile like Yog's has been created: the first, Nemor,¹² who introduces himself as 'Will from Manchester', invites comment on his work, being new to poetry; and the second, MatLloyd,¹³ has a clear offline life as a poet already, links to work elsewhere, but also comments, after several welcome messages, 'it's nice to find a poetry forum people use'.¹⁴

The Poetry Forum is a particularly interesting example of a poetry sharing and discussion site, because it has clearly evolved over almost a decade, but is still being used. Posters have to create a profile to interact properly with the site, and this may be a plus for many. Comments can be traced back to a particular identity, with the aim of constructive criticism and the sharing of work. The site is free and open to all – anyone can share their work and get comments back from people they have never met before, or from friends they have made on the site. This is an example of how poetry networks do exist online, and how they are additional to what can exist offline. This kind of interaction and exchange would not have been possible before the internet – Will in Manchester,

Mat in Hemel Hempstead, and Yog wherever he is may never have met or read each other's work without the Poetry Forum.

At the other end of the spectrum of poetry online is what I am describing as a 'place-holder'. I am aware that for web developers, the term 'place-holder' has a specific meaning, but my use of the term refers to a website where the page is static, with no provision for interaction between users as in the fora above. In the context of poetry's online presence, a place-holder would be something like this British Library events page, captured in 1996.¹⁵ It 'holds a place' – it gives the events a place on the web, but it does not do anything further.

For this report, the example of a site of this kind is one of which I have personal experience – the Oxford University Poetry Society (OUPS). The earliest web presence I have found for OUPS is the site captured in 1998, although it indicates that the society has been online since June 1997.¹⁶ This is a site hosted by the university itself, on the 'ox.ac.uk' domain. This site is different from the British Library events page in that there are links to other sites, a photo gallery, and so on, but the OUPS site is still at the other end of the spectrum from the Poetry Forum because the life of the society is not online. The online presence is only there in order to get you to engage offline. The site itself has changed over time, in terms of layout and design, but fundamentally the same aspects remain.¹⁷ There is a link to the termcard, telling you what events are on; contact and membership info, again intended to get you off the website; and links to their own magazine and other places of interest.

But what of the link to 'Members' poems' – surely that implies the same use as the Poetry Forum? In three representative captures – from 1999, 2001 and 2004 – the members' poetry sections are not precisely what one might expect. In 1999, there is David Shelley's 'Pests';¹⁸ and only 'Pests', it seems, or at least in all the available crawls by the Internet Archive for this period. There is no space for comment or discussion: just this page, with this poem. In 2001, the 'Members' poetry' link sends you to a page entitled 'Gravity Well'.¹⁹ This appears to be intended as an online companion to the society's magazine, 'The Reader'. One can submit poems to both, or just to 'The Reader', but not just to 'Gravity Well'²⁰ – a distinction which I think is telling. Yet I cannot actually find any poems on 'Gravity Well', in any of the captures. I do not know if this is because of a broken link, or because there is perhaps a kind of paywall that means that only users from the Oxford network can access the site, but ultimately there is no members' poetry on the site that I can actually read. Lastly, in 2004, there is not even a members' poetry section. In fact, the discussion and sharing of poetry, in this society, happens offline.

To turn away from the Web Archive and the internet itself for a moment, I must admit that my personal experience of OUPS has been useful for providing some contextual knowledge of the society. The general system is to have an invited poet read on a Thursday evening, with wine and a Q&A and books for sale. The other regular event is the Wednesday workshop, where members bring their own work and read and discuss it. In essence, OUPS does the same thing as the Poetry Forum, but it is in person. And while in theory anyone can join OUPS, just as anyone can register for the Poetry Forum, in practice it is open only to those physically in Oxford and, for the workshop, even more exclusively (in my experience) for Oxford University students. The society does not really need an online platform, because the action is perfectly suited to the real world.

In fact, I think there has been a deliberate choice not to bring the discussion online, from the lack of members' poetry in the 2004 site, to the <http://oxfordpoetry.blogspot.co.uk> inclusion of reports

from the Wednesday workshop which are not then themselves discussed further online.²¹ The ‘oxfordpoetry.blogspot’ site is interesting too because it has moved away from the university, no longer being hosted on its servers but on the public web. This discussion is now moving away from the Web Archive and onto the live web, and, in fact, away from the .uk domain space, but I think that it is important to note that OUPS has had a sort of erratic relationship with the web in recent years:

| Host/Site | Dates | Address |
|-------------------|---------------|--|
| University server | 1997–2004 (?) | http://users.ox.ac.uk/~oups |
| Blogspot | 2008–10 | http://oxfordpoetry.blogspot.co.uk |
| WordPress | 2012– 13 | http://oxfordpoetrysociety.wordpress.com |
| WordPress | 2013 | http://oupsofficial.wordpress.com |
| Own domain | 2014– | www.oxforduniversitypoetrysociety.com |

While there has always been a web presence, different committees have jumped around from place to place, and have not really maintained a clear location on the web. Each site has had a termcard and contact information, but, as can be seen from the table above, the society has had four different addresses in the last four years. This lack of consistency perhaps indicates that there isn’t really a need for a concrete and well-maintained website, or it could be that often a new committee feels as if it has to be a new broom, but in contrast to sites such as The Poetry Forum, which have maintained the same address for a decade, those looking for an OUPS website are faced with the brilliant visual of two ‘we have moved’ messages on the (itself short-lived) <http://oxfordpoetrysociety.wordpress.com> site.²² Using OUPS as an example of a ‘place-holder’ has shown that a poetry network can have an online presence which on the face of it has little or no interaction with online users, or even have a precarious online presence, and yet still be a thriving network, with the website intended to get people, conversely, offline.

This section of my report, detailing a small part of my researches for this project, has compared just two different ways in which poetry networks exist in the digital age, but the reason I chose to detail these two is because they are, for me, clear examples of how *different* online poetry networks can be. The Poetry Forum brings people together from wherever they are in the world; OUPS is public in theory, but very loco-specific in practice. This strikes me as part of a continuum, linking back to the British Underground and their ways of communicating via post and in person. What the internet has done for poetry networks is to allow instant connections between individuals, but ultimately the same thing is happening now as has always happened: people are sharing their work and creating communities both on and off the page, and on and offline.

4.0 Conclusions

Little magazines, print networks and ideas of coterie are not new to literary historians, but I believe that certain aspects, and the ways they are evolving in the ‘digital age’, are new to literary

researchers. I believe that finding out how readers and writers interact with each other online, in the 21st century, will become more important as we progress, and I hope that my case study could help point up how the UK Web Archive might support such researches.

The Big UK Domain Data project, its AADDA precursor, and the varied case studies undertaken by each individual researcher have proven, in my mind, the clear benefits of web archiving for all researchers, not just those in the digital humanities. There is enormous potential in the UK Web Archive, and the fact that the archive covers the period that it does. Any researcher wishing to look at, say, how individuals interact with each other online or at how entire websites interact through links will find the UK Web Archive (which links through to the Wayback Machine) a significant resource.

It is not the live web, and should not be treated as such when using the SHINE interface, but there is a wealth of information available which will be additional and valuable to many – not only for those looking at interactions as mentioned above, but also at past iterations of current websites, ‘lost’ websites, previously untapped digital resources, and much more. As our contemporary lives turn more and more to the digital, so too will our historical research, and the BUDDAH project has shown that, with the correct training and the right tools, web archives can be an incredibly useful research resource.

¹ The report from my AADDA experiences, with a case study on Adrian Henri and the Liverpool Poets, can be read at <http://domaindarkarchive.blogspot.co.uk/2012/11/sentiment-analysis-and-reception-of.html> [accessed 20 Jan 2015].

² UK Web Archive: Shine version 1.0, <http://www.webarchive.org.uk/shine/> [accessed 20 January 2015].

³ There are no ‘false results’, but as I said in my AADDA report, it was easy to spot the results which were irrelevant to one’s specific research, such as, for me, ‘Henri/painter’ searches referring to Henri Matisse as opposed to Adrian Henri.

⁴ If the result which is blocked is a link to a newspaper, and the ‘robots.txt’ is due to the paywall preventing access, you can of course circumnavigate this by going to the British Library to find that specific entry in the newspaper’s own archive, but this is a time-consuming way of discovering whether or not something is useful!

⁵ The Poetry Forum
<http://web.archive.org/web/20071217061123/http://www.thepoetryforum.co.uk/forumdisplay.php?s=a057b553d303d10f66cd14bc4a544ae3&f=75> [Internet Archive, site captured 17 December 2007].

⁶ For example, even something as simple as the concept of a *capture* of a page being connected to the *crawl date* of that site, as opposed to when the content was actually posted, is worth stating clearly and often when introducing new users to web archiving in general.

⁷ The Poetry Forum

<http://web.archive.org/web/20071030082057/http://www.thepoetryforum.co.uk:80/> [Internet Archive, site captured 30 Oct 2007].

⁸ See, for example, the following four captures of the Poetry Forum, from 2007, 2008, 2011 and 2013: <http://web.archive.org/web/20071129204241/http://www.thepoetryforum.co.uk/> [Internet Archive, site captured 29 November 2007]; <http://web.archive.org/web/20080129184347/http://www.thepoetryforum.co.uk/> [Internet Archive, site captured 29 January 2008]; <http://web.archive.org/web/20110808164613/http://www.thepoetryforum.co.uk/> [Internet Archive, site captured 8 August 2011]; <http://web.archive.org/web/20130809072353/http://www.thepoetryforum.co.uk/> [Internet Archive, site captured 9 August 2013].

⁹ The Poetry Forum

<http://web.archive.org/web/20071030082057/http://www.thepoetryforum.co.uk:80/> [Internet Archive, site captured 30 September 2007].

¹⁰ The Poetry Forum

<http://web.archive.org/web/20080129184347/http://www.thepoetryforum.co.uk/> [Internet Archive, site captured 29 January 2008].

¹¹ The Poetry Forum,

<http://web.archive.org/web/20080306014207/http://www.thepoetryforum.co.uk:80/member.php?s=08f796050b8e6ba7b8422fc1daf88738&u=148> [Internet Archive, site captured 6 March 2008].

¹² The Poetry Forum

<http://web.archive.org/web/20080131193837/http://www.thepoetryforum.co.uk:80/showthread.php?s=ae3e6db70331353605d1523fc789de60&p=6751> [Internet Archive, site captured 31 January 2008].

¹³ The Poetry Forum

<http://web.archive.org/web/20071130182018/http://www.thepoetryforum.co.uk/showthread.php?p=4403> [Internet Archive, site captured 30 November 2007].

¹⁴ The Poetry Forum

<http://web.archive.org/web/20071130182018/http://www.thepoetryforum.co.uk/showthread.php?p=4403> [Internet Archive, site captured 30 November 2007].

¹⁵ The British Library

<http://web.archive.org/web/19961030110528/http://icarus.bl.uk:80/events/psevents.html> [Internet Archive, site captured 30 October 1996].

¹⁶ OUPS <http://web.archive.org/web/19981201062905/http://users.ox.ac.uk/~oups/> [Internet Archive, site captured 1 December 1998].

¹⁷ See, for example, captures from this domain space in 1991, 2001 and 2004:
<http://web.archive.org/web/19981201062905/http://users.ox.ac.uk/~oups/> [Internet Archive, site captured 1 December 1998];
<http://web.archive.org/web/20010411031801/http://users.ox.ac.uk/~oups/index.htm> [Internet Archive, site captured 11 April 2001];
<http://web.archive.org/web/20040208230235/http://users.ox.ac.uk/~oups/index2.html> [Internet Archive, site captured 8 February 2004].

¹⁸ OUPS
<http://web.archive.org/web/19990508212113/http://users.ox.ac.uk/~oups/mempoems.htm/>
[Internet Archive, site captured 8 May 1999].

¹⁹ OUPS <http://web.archive.org/web/20010407202740/http://users.ox.ac.uk/~oups/poetry.htm>
[Internet Archive, site captured 7 April 2001].

²⁰ OUPS <http://web.archive.org/web/20010407202740/http://users.ox.ac.uk/~oups/poetry.htm>
[Internet Archive, site captured 7 April 2001].

²¹ Oxford Poetry Blogspot
<http://web.archive.org/web/20120801060711/http://oxfordpoetry.blogspot.co.uk> [Internet Archive, site captured 1 August 2012].

²² Oxford Poetry Society WordPress site <http://oxfordpoetrysociety.wordpress.com/> [accessed 20 January 2015]. Of course, OUPS also has a Facebook presence, with a 'group', an 'official page' listing events, and, in fact, plenty of comments and 'likes' and interactions from users in the online world, but I believe that Facebook is a different kind of web presence than the websites I am discussing, and should not – I hope – contradict my thesis of the life of this society being offline.