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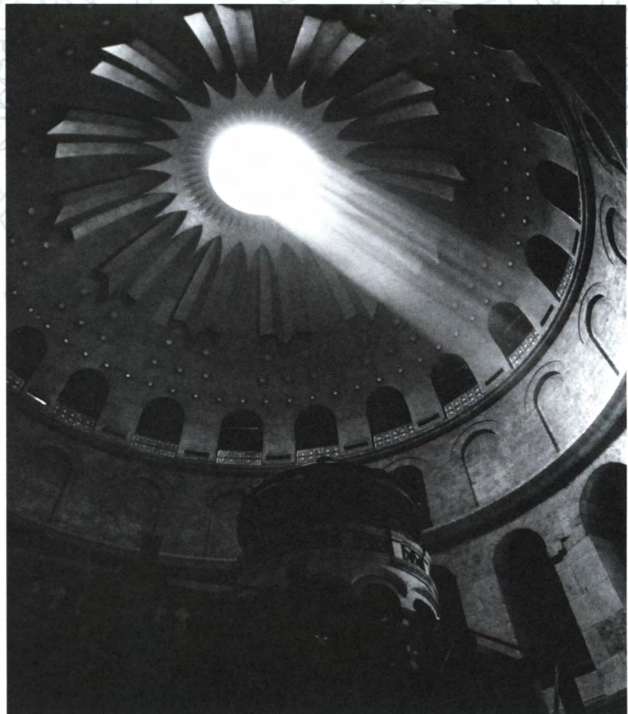
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Dissemination and the Digital: The Creation of an Academic Book Trailer

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Challenging Times

Academics who concentrate on the study of Islam live in challenging times. The proliferation of “popular” sources of news and information evokes both significant concern as well as tremendous possibility. This is true across the academy, not only in our own field. In a recent issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, a team of medical scientists analyzed 153 videos about vaccination and immunization on YouTube.¹ What they found was very disturbing. A staggering number of YouTube videos portrayed vaccinations in a negative light, and about half contained messages completely contradicting established medical science. Furthermore, the research team found that videos with negative portrayals of vaccinations were highly provocative and powerful, and received more views and better ratings by YouTube users than those videos that portray vaccinations in a positive light. The study concludes that this situation is extremely dangerous and that public health officials must consider how to effectively communicate their scientifically founded viewpoints through internet video portals.

The problem of misinformation is as worrying in the humanities and social sciences as it is in the natural sciences. In particular, scholars of Islam and the Middle East often have difficulty making their voices heard beyond the Ivory Tower in the highly charged public sphere. Academics regularly cringe at the shallow prattle propagated by TV news “experts”; many books on Amazon’s best-sellers lists would have a tough time making it through any sort of academic peer-review process; and the contents of internet websites, popular blogs, and YouTube often belong in the realm of fiction, popular imagination, and selective (mis)use of information. As the tectonic plates of

public understanding shift beneath our feet, often propelled by historical amnesia and cultural illiteracy, it is fundamental that funding agencies, governments, civil society institutions and we ourselves as academics take seriously the urgency of our intellectual centrality. This paper discusses the use of digital humanities dissemination techniques, with particular reference to an innovation that can help get academic books into the hands of the general public: the academic book trailer.

Scholarly Responsibilities, Digital Possibilities

Many would feel that with the publication of a monograph the academic's task is done: the research has been completed, the book has been written, the results have been circulated within the scholarly community, and reviews have been received. However, the well-known philosophical riddle is pertinent to consider, "If a tree falls in a forest and nobody is around to hear it, does it make a sound?" In our profession, we may ask a parallel question, "If an academic writes a book and nobody reads it outside of academia, does it make a difference?" The first question raises issues about observation and reality, while a facetious rejoinder to the second may demand clarification on whether or not the book could still be used for the tenure review. Whatever the case may be, it is my contention that we, in academia, seldom realize that with appropriate dissemination techniques, and without sacrificing our academic integrity, our research can make a significant impact on the public sphere. Thus, I have been actively exploring how this may be done using the modern technological tools at our disposal; tools which, sadly, are all too seldom employed.

The University of Virginia's *Summit on Digital Tools for the Humanities* reports that only about six percent of humanist academics have taken advantage of digital tools beyond the equivalent of Microsoft Word.² We are thus neglecting what is potentially our greatest opportunity to spread academically sound information. Examining the range of possibilities before us, Arthur and Marilouise Kroker write:

From the spectacular emergence of new media innovations such as blogging, podcasting, flashmobs, mashups, and RSS feeds to video-sharing websites (MySpace, YouTube), Wikipedia, and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), the how and what we know of contemporary society, culture and politics is continuously being creatively transformed by strikingly original developments in technologies of digital communication.³

Maintaining the highest quality of scholarship while reaching out to a broader audience is something that good scholars do almost every day, perhaps without even realizing it. We publish highly intricate studies in specialist journals, but at the same time we excite our first-year undergraduate students by explaining our research to them in terms they can easily digest. Research dovetails beautifully with teaching, and there is no reason why this should be confined within the Ivory Tower. For many scholars, our websites are already becoming extensions of our classes. With some innovative strategies, we can push the envelope even further, reach beyond the classroom, and enter the space of public discourse.

While success in this arena depends on how we write, it is equally dependent on how we market our writing. While “marketing” may seem like a dirty word to some in the academy, it’s actually something we do instinctively whenever we apply for a grant or propose a conference paper. Putting our research in the hands of the public is not all that different. In fact, virtually all granting agencies insist that dissemination beyond the confines of the academy should be considered an integral part of successful research. Effective marketing is simply a facet of effective dissemination. In today’s world, as the humanities and all other fields reinvent themselves, this must be a central consideration. Cathy N. Davidson, the Ruth F. DeVarney Professor of English and former Vice Provost for Interdisciplinary Studies at Duke University, contributed the following thoughts on this reinvention in a discussion forum hosted by HASTAC (Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory), which was led by Brett Boley, Chief Information Officer for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and Director of the agency’s Office of Digital Humanities (ODH):

I don’t know how Brett Boley or others might answer this, but I don’t actually find disciplines tragic...just in need of major refurbishing and a good dose of introspection about what it is they do, how willing they are to be irrelevant to a larger world, how they fight their declining (in the humanities) numbers, and how urgently they reconsider their shape and importance in the light of the new, global forms of knowledge being produced everywhere around them, and changing the timelines and the geography of knowledge production.⁴

The Tale of a Trailer

Recently, I wrote a monograph entitled *The Ismailis in the Middle Ages: A History of Survival, A Search for Salvation*.⁵ The book is about how a minority Shi’i

Muslim community, centred at the fortress of Alamut in Iran, managed to survive the thirteenth century Mongol invasions. When it was first released by Oxford University Press, I began to receive several emails from members of the general public who had read and enjoyed it. This intrigued me, as it had been published by a university press and approximately one-third of the book consisted of extensive references, many in foreign languages. I began to reflect on the interface between academics and the general public, and was influenced by books such as Russell Jacoby's provocative *The Last Intellectuals* and Stanford professor John Willinsky's *Technologies of Knowing*.⁶ This led to the conception of an elaborate project to create, with the help of a team of students, an academic book trailer (similar to a film trailer) and a website for the book, which are now available at <http://www.shafiquevirani.org/publications/ima/trailer.swf>.⁷ To the best of my knowledge, this represents the world's first academic book trailer and, I'm informed by Oxford University Press, certainly their first.⁸ Within a short time, the trailer and the accompanying website received tens of thousands of hits from over one hundred countries across the globe, and virtually every American state and Canadian province. The book has been repeatedly reprinted and was, for a while, on some of Amazon's best sellers' lists; I have been asked to give scores of book talks around the world; and several translation contracts are in the process of negotiation. What is of interest to our field is that *The Ismailis in the Middle Ages* is not all that different from dozens of academic books published every year, and demonstrates that these books can appeal to a broader public. The creation of the trailer took far less time than it took me to proofread my footnotes, and it was certainly a lot more interesting. Most importantly, it was an effective means for bringing academic research to the attention of a broad cross-section of people.

After displaying the book's title and other such information, the trailer opens with snippets from reviews the book received, as a happy baby is heard gurgling in the background. The scene soon darkens and the baby begins to cry uncontrollably as Genghis Khan's haunting decree for the destruction of the Ismaili community appears on parchment, "None of that people should be spared, not even the babe in its cradle." The sounds of war become louder. Shouts, hoof beats and weaponry are heard as the parchment goes up in flames. The first half of the book's subtitle appears: "A History of Survival." Scenes from a sixteenth century painting depict the Mongol hordes attacking the Ismailis in their fortress. Surrounded by the chaos of battle, the accompanying Persian manuscript text informs us: Hulagu Khan, grandson of Genghis Khan, "went up to look at Alamut, and from the greatness of the mountain, stunned, he took the finger of astonishment in his

teeth.” The painting, dating from 1596, was once in the personal collection of Akbar the Great, Emperor of India, and was designed by the famous Mughal artist Basawan. I discovered the original preserved at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond. As the battle cries fade into the background, the mood changes as a flute is heard and the second half of the book’s subtitle appears: “A Search for Salvation.” Verses of medieval poetry cited in the book are heard, as they are sung or recited in the original languages. These were produced in-studio specifically for the purpose of the trailer, and are representative of the three major linguistic and regional traditions dealt with in my research, Arabic, Persian and South Asian. Through the use of multimedia, these recitations bring a new aspect of scholarship to the fore that was impossible in the text version—in other words, they convey how this poetry *sounds* when recited. Thus, the new digital humanities tools available to us not only help to disseminate our work more broadly, but to deepen our scholarship in ways in which text alone is simply incapable. As the poetry is recited, images of the ancient manuscripts used in researching the book are seen, as are fabrics, a mausoleum, a castle, a caravan saray and other evocative representations of the regions and periods studied. The trailer concludes with a listing of academic awards that the book has won, and a statement that all author’s proceeds are being donated to registered charities. Finally, the viewers are connected to the book’s website.

The Potential of the Digital Humanities

Humanists, in particular, will appreciate the capacity of the rhetorical effects of design, and of the power of art and music as forms of mediation and transmission, as used in the trailer. The ubiquity and spreading influence of digital technologies has allowed us to explore new methods of academic inquiry, to develop innovative ways to analyze and organize humanistic knowledge and, in this case, to design fresh forms of cultural communication. “Digitization allows the gathering of moving image, still image, music, text, 3-D design, database, geological survey, graphic detail, architectural plan, virtual walk-through and so forth into a single environment,”⁹ affirm Schnapp and Shanks, who add their voices to the growing cadre of humanists testifying to the importance of embracing the new media. In their highly influential “Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0,” Presner and Schnapp challenge us to realize that we now occupy

a universe in which: a) print is no longer the exclusive or the normative medium in which knowledge is produced and/or disseminated; instead, print finds itself absorbed into new,

multimedia configurations; and b) digital tools, techniques, and media have altered the production and dissemination of knowledge in the arts, human and social sciences.¹⁰

The opportunities are boundless for harnessing new methods of both analysis and knowledge mobilization that have become available. However, McPherson bemoans our failure to do so:

We have been slow to explore the potential of interactive, immersive, and multimedia expression for our own thinking and scholarship, even as we dabble with such forms in our teaching. With a few exceptions, we remain content to comment about technology and media, rather than to participate more actively in constructing knowledge in and through our objects of study.¹¹

To conclude, the creation of an academic book trailer for *The Ismailis in the Middle Ages* is but one example of how academics might choose to employ new digital tools to great effect. A report of the American Council of Learned Societies Commission on Cyberinfrastructure for the Humanities and Social Sciences, entitled, *Our Cultural Commonwealth*, outlines a number of the opportunities and challenges of the new digital tools available to scholars. It urges academics to “lead rather than follow” in this digital revolution.¹² It was in this spirit that the trailer and website for my book were created, attracting a large generalist audience to an academic book, and providing a model that Oxford University Press and others can replicate for future scholarly publications. Not to attempt wider dissemination of our research beyond the Ivory Tower is to leave a vacuum, which is then filled with “popular,” and often inaccurate, sources of information. The American Council of Learned Societies report lauds the fact that the “remarkable connectivity [of the internet] has brought scholars into broader communication with non-scholarly audiences,” and notes that “Scholars who have created Web sites based on their work are often pleasantly surprised that their work has found entirely new audiences—or, rather, that new audiences have found their work.”¹³ ✦

End Notes

¹Jennifer Keelan et al., “YouTube as a Source of Information on Immunization: A Content Analysis,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 298, no. 21 (2007).

²University of Virginia, “Summit on Digital Tools in the Humanities: Report on Summit Accomplishments” (<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/dtsummit/SummitText.pdf>, 2005), p. 4.

³Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker, *Critical Digital Studies: A Reader* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2008), jacket.

⁴Cathy N. Davidson, “Humanities 2.0: Promise, Perils, Predications,” HASTAC Discussion Forum on the Future of the Digital Humanities,” <http://www.hastac.org/forums/hastac-scholars-discussions/future-digital-humanities>.

⁵Shafique N. Virani, *The Ismailis in the Middle Ages: A History of Survival, A Search for Salvation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁶Russell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Noonday Press, 1987), John Willinsky, *Technologies of Knowing: A Proposal for the Human Sciences* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

⁷The original URL was <http://www1.utm.utoronto.ca/shafiquevirani/ima/>.

⁸I later learned of the existence of other, non-academic book trailers. The first was apparently made public in 2002 by Sheila Clover of Circle of Seven Productions, see <http://www.cosproductions.com/about>, accessed January 31, 2011.

⁹Jeffrey T. Schnapp and Michael Shanks, “Artreality (Rethinking Craft in a Knowledge Economy),” in *Art School* (Propositions for the 21st Century), ed. Steven Henry Madoff (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), p. 147.

¹⁰Todd Presner, Jeffrey Schnapp, et. al., “The Digital Humanities Manifesto 2.0,” UCLA Mellon Seminar on the Digital Humanities, <http://stanford.edu/~schnapp/Manifesto%202.0.pdf>.

¹¹Tara McPherson, “Introduction: Media Studies and the Digital Humanities,” *Cinema Journal* 48, no. 2 (Winter 2009), p. 120.

¹²Commission on Cyberinfrastructure for the Humanities and Social Sciences, *Our Cultural Commonwealth*, ed. Marlo Welshons (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 2006), p. 10.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 14.