Style Revolution: A New Approach to Digital Scholarship and Collection-Building at the Columbia University Libraries

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Abstract:

Style Revolution is a partnership between the Columbia University Libraries, the Barnard College Department of Art History, The Morgan Library & Museum, and Designmuseum Denmark. It combines digital content curation, digital humanities pedagogy in the undergraduate and graduate curriculum, library publishing, and a new model of engagement for liaison librarians. Initially conceived by Professor Anne Higonnet of Barnard College, Style Revolution explores the radical history of fashion in France in the years following the Revolution. A website, built by graduate students in collaboration with Columbia librarians using an early prototype of Wax, a minimal computing framework for designing and implementing cultural exhibits, features some 400 fashion plates from the influential <u>Journal des dames et des modes</u> *(JDM). Digitized by The Morgan Library & Museum, these fashion plates, published between 1797-1804, comprise the only complete extant set of plates from this period. A companion Instagram account, curated by Barnard undergraduates, promotes the project and offers in-depth analyses of the plates and their reception. The latest exciting phase of Style Revolution has been the addition of Designmuseum Denmark (DMD) as a partner. DMD is digitizing the full text of the JDM issues from 1797 and 1804 so that the fashion plates and accompanying articles can be reunited. Upon completion of the text digitization, readers will be able to fully (and freely) experience the JDM through Style Revolution for the first time in 200 years.*

This paper focuses on the Columbia Libraries' role in stewarding the project, including opportunities and challenges presented by this vast undertaking. It will describe the key role of the liaison librarian, beyond subject expertise, and will outline the benefits of embracing minimal computing to facilitate student and faculty-driven digital projects, as well as the pedagogical insights gained from two semesters of project-based instruction at Barnard and Columbia.

Keywords: Digital humanities; Liaison librarians; Digital pedagogy; Public humanities.

Introduction

In their 2009 article for *Inside Higher Ed*, "Building Relational Capital", L. Goldstein and P. Sanaghan describe librarians as "cultural travelers" who can "travel throughout the different campus cultures [...] act as bridge builders and translators between different groups. Cultural travelers have tremendous influence and insight and have deep awareness of what is occurring on campus."[1] This combination of awareness, influence, and expertise in disciplines/research methods makes librarians natural partners on course-based digital humanities projects for both graduate students and undergraduates. In the case of *Style Revolution*, hosted by the Columbia University Libraries, we have been fortunate in successfully partnering on one such digital humanities project (with two external public institutions) that has helped us redefine our model for liaison librarianship and for digital pedagogy.

This paper will give an overview of *Style Revolution*'s scope and the technologies supporting it while also addressing the role of the liaison librarian as a stakeholder in this type of work. There are typically two alternatives for liaison engagement within the context of course-based digital humanities projects at colleges and universities. Often the only way a liaison can participate is by offering a traditional one-shot instruction session introducing students to research methods and materials (including primary and secondary sources) in the field or fields of study relating to the course and its project.[2] On the opposite end of the spectrum, a liaison might "embed" in the course, attending all class sessions, perhaps offering some instruction as needed, and/or leading a digital lab attached to the course during which students engage in the hands-on work of building their project(s). Many scholars have already debated the pros and cons of the labor-intensive (though rewarding) model of embeddedness, acknowledging the significant time commitment it represents for liaisons, who are increasingly expanding their portfolios of responsibility in the face of evolving research practices, especially in the humanities.[3] What I have learned through *Style Revolution* is that a hybrid model, in which the liaison attends some but not all class sessions, gives occasional short presentations on research methods and tools, and participates when possible in the informal conversations and group exercises that help produce the digital project, can be most effective.

I initially approached *Style Revolution* with an admittedly narrow vision for my own contribution: I planned to visit the graduate seminar early in the fall semester of 2017 and provide an overview of databases that would be useful to the students as they researched their final projects. I anticipated some follow-up consultations with individual students as they worked on their own exhibits but I didn't imagine any kind of long-term engagement for myself. It was during that one-shot presentation, after I had just demonstrated how to search for French dictionaries of the 17th and 18th centuries, which led to an excited discussion

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[1] Goldstein, Larry. 2009. "Building 'Relational Capital' | *Inside Higher Ed*." October 7, 2009. https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2009/10/07/building-relational-capital.

[2] Oakleaf, Megan, Steven Hoover, Beth Woodard, Jennifer Corbin, Randy Hensley, Diana Wakimoto, Christopher Hollister, Debra Gilchrist, Michelle Millet, and Patty Iannuzzi. 2012. "Notes from the Field: 10 Short Lessons on One-Shot Instruction." *Communications in Information Literacy* 6 (1): 5-23. https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2012.6.1.114.

[3] Hauck, Janet. "From Service to Synergy: Embedding Librarians in a Digital Humanities Project." *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 24, no. 2–4 (October 2, 2017): 434–51. https://doi.org/10.1080/10691316.2017.1341357.

among the students about building color and textile glossaries on their site, that I realized my continued presence as a facilitator of these kinds of conversations could substantially enhance the project and the students' learning outcomes. I had been offered a seat at the table because of my subject and "methodological expertise"[4] and I wanted to remain seated, alongside my technologist colleagues, in supporting this project for the academic year and beyond.

Project overview

So what exactly is *Style Revolution*? And how did the Columbia University Libraries become the partner and host of this multimodal exploration of costume history? Conceived by Professor Anne Higonnet, chair of Art History at Barnard College, the project is dedicated to the world's most original and influential style magazine, the *Journal des dames et des modes* (hereafter *JDM*). The French Revolution of 1789 enabled people of all social strata to reinvent themselves. Between 1797 and 1804, as the political turmoil of the early revolutionary years subsided and before Napoleon demanded a reversion to more conservative women's fashions, the *JDM* showed Europeans a markedly new way to dress. It tossed aside the strict parameters, materials, and styles that had once indicated an individual's permanent social rank, embracing instead an upwardly mobile culture of self-expression through consumer choice. This radical period freed men to dress according to their individualist preferences and, for a brief moment, women too enjoyed unfettered self-styling.

The *Style Revolution* site presents, online for the first time, a digital critical edition featuring all the *JDM* plates from the magazine's most innovative years, 1797-1804, together with their transcribed and translated captions.[5] We define 'digital critical edition' by using the 6 essential criteria laid out by Peter Robinson in 2002, especially that a digital critical edition must allow space and tools for readers to develop their own hypotheses and ways of reading in a platform that enriches the overall reading experience.[6] The *JDM* digital images were made from an extremely rare complete set of the engravings, in exceptionally good condition, belonging to The Morgan Library and Museum in New York—call numbers PML 5687, PML 5688, PML 5689. Thanks to the support of John Bidwell, Astor Curator and Department Head of Printed Books & Bindings, The Morgan not only consented to the digitization of the *JDM* plates but also to their public exhibition on the *Style Revolution* site.[7] Work on the vocabulary, text descriptions, locations, patterns, and historical context of the plates was begun by Professor Higonnet and the graduate students in her fall 2017 seminar, and is ongoing. In spring 2018, a group of Barnard College undergraduates co-created an ongoing companion Instagram that offers in-depth analyses of the *JDM* plates and opportunities to explore, in a highly visual digital media setting, the cultural contexts in

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[4] Here I refer to the conception of "methodological expertise" described on pp. 12-13 of: Cooper, Danielle, and Roger Schonfeld. "Rethinking Liaison Programs for the Humanities." Ithaka S+R, July 26, 2017. https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.304124.

[5] *Style Revolution*. Columbia University Libraries, 2017, https://stylerevolution.github.io/.

[6] Robinson, Peter. "What Is a 'Critical Digital Edition'?" *Variants: The Journal of the European Society for Textual Scholarship* 1 (2002): 43–62.

[7] Higonnet, Anne. "Style Revolution." The Morgan Library & Museum. *Secrets from the Vault* (blog), June 13, 2018. https://www.themorgan.org/blog/style-revolution.

which these plates were consumed by a voracious, trans-Atlantic reading public of the 18th and 19th centuries.[8]

Style Revolution's other public institutional partner, Designmusem Denmark (DMD), joined the project in spring 2018 through a remarkable set of circumstances, the kind of scholarly kismet that highlights the incredible opportunities afforded by open scholarship and a willingness to embrace non-proprietary technologies and methodologies in the academy. One of the undergraduates enrolled in Professor Higonnet's course at Barnard was a Danish exchange student majoring in Art History who worked at the Designmuseum in Copenhagen prior to her semester in New York and who would resume her employment upon returning to Denmark. During one of the course sessions, Professor Higonnet mentioned that her research into the fashion plates had led her to believe that the text of the *JDM* issues from those crucial years, 1797-1804, could be found at that very design museum. It was a real eureka moment as Professor Higonnet, with the help of her student, was able to negotiate a digitization project with DMD using her own research funds. *Style Revolution*'s commitment to open scholarship helped convince DMD of the value of digitizing the text, given the remarkable prospect of reuniting the plates and their accompanying articles for the first time in two centuries on a site that would be freely available to scholars and enthusiasts all over the world.

Digital pedagogy and public humanities through minimal computing

Before I discuss the pedagogical principles and learning outcomes of both the graduate seminar and the undergraduate course, I want to provide some context about the digital humanities landscape at Columbia University and at Barnard College, Columbia's sister school. The Columbia University Libraries' Digital Scholarship team has established over the last three years a programmatic approach to "supporting both instruction and production around digital methods, technologies, and platforms."[9] Barnard's Digital Humanities Center, newly opened in 2018, did not exist when Professor Higonnet was developing *Style Revolution*, so she connected with the Columbia University Libraries in search of a potential partner. Columbia's Digital Scholarship Coordinator, Alex Gil, a renowned literary scholar and pioneering DH practitioner, worked with Professor Higonnet to develop a series of courses that would teach art history students about this significant period in French political and costume history through the lens of an open access digital curation project. As it happened, another Columbia colleague, Digital Humanities Developer Marii Nyrop, was polishing an early prototype of Wax, a minimal computing framework for designing and implementing cultural exhibits. *Style Revolution* presented the perfect pilot project for launching Wax.[10]

As Professor Higonnet and Alex Gil designed the graduate seminar that would build *Style Revolution* and teach a range of digital skills from web development to data management to plain text editing, they considered various pedagogical questions: What does it mean for students to organize, catalog, and describe primary sources? To conduct research and build their own exhibits using these materials? To utilize GitHub for version control and

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[8] "Style Revolution Journal (@style_revolution_journal) • Instagram Photos and Videos." Accessed April 26, 2019. https://www.instagram.com/style_revolution_journal/.

[9] "Digital Scholarship | Columbia University Libraries." 2018. Accessed April 26, 2019. https://library.columbia.edu/services/digital-scholarship.html.

[10] Nyrop, Marii. "Wax | What Is Wax?" 2019. Accessed April 26, 2019. https://minicomp.github.io/wax/about/.

collaboration? To edit HTML, CSS and JavaScript, all in the service of sharing the *JDM* plates and their own research on 18th-century French culture with a wider public? In her definition of "curation" for *Digital Pedagogy in the Humanities: Concepts, Models, and Experiments*, Julia Flanders describes how it can "bridge an experiential gap between students and the things we ask them to study" and how it "gives students valuable exposure to a variety of work processes—transcription, classification, metadata creation, writing, editing—and to the supporting tools and systems through which that work is done. It also offers a behind-the-scenes understanding of how public data resources are developed and supported, which can both demystify the resources themselves and also empower the students as participants."[11] Crafting *Style Revolution* as a public resource served to instill these curatorial values in its students and enabled public-facing institutions with significant cultural heritage mandates like The Morgan Library & Museum and Designmuseum Denmark to harness their own resources in joining the project.

Both courses taught by Professor Higonnet in 2017-18 included "Experience in the public organization and dissemination of knowledge" as a core learning outcome, alongside the development of specific technical skills and intellectual engagement with the history of identity.[12] One of the most critical choices made when designing this entire pedagogical endeavor was the decision to employ minimal computing methods, meaning a substantially higher learning curve for the humanities students who would build *Style Revolution* than would be expected if WordPress or a comparable platform had been selected. According to Global Outlook::Digital Humanities (GO::DH), a special interest group under the umbrella of the Alliance of Digital Humanities Organisations, minimal computing "refer[s] to computing done under some set of significant constraints of hardware, software, education, network capacity, power, or other factors." Minimal computing, or mincomp, deliberately eschews proprietary software and platforms in the development of digital humanities projects and sites, in an effort to produce high-quality, low maintenance scholarship that is ethically produced, managed, and widely disseminated, reducing barriers to access and learning. It teaches students how to use technology in equitable, innovative ways and encourages them to ask questions about "meaningful differences [that] emerge across economical, infrastructural, and material conditions" in the practice of digital humanities.[13] There are so many out-of-the-box tools that can be used to create digital exhibitions, including Omeka, ContentDM, and MOVIO. Though many of these tools are open source, the back-end requirements for hosting and maintaining them, all while fighting the constant threat of obsolescence with the limited funds and staff time that most academic institutions can allocate for these projects, is a Sisyphean task that is generally unsustainable.

With mincomp, specifically Wax, a purposefully lightweight, extensible workflow, Professor Higonnet and her graduate students, as well as the ad hoc team of librarians (Alex, Marii, and me), constructed *Style Revolution* as a static site that requires no complex communicating with a server, making it cheaper, more secure, and easier to maintain in the long term. One of

[11] Flanders, Julia. "Curation." *Digital Pedagogy in the Humanities: Concepts, Models, and Experiments*. 2017. MLA Commons." Accessed April 26, 2019. https://digitalpedagogy.mla.hcommons.org/keywords/curation/.

[12] Gil, Alex, and Anne Higonnet. "Style Revolution, Digital Edition." (syllabus, Columbia University, New York, 2017).
     and
Higonnet, Anne. "Fashion Revolution, Instagram Art History." (syllabus, Barnard College, New York, 2018).

[13] "About · Minimal Computing." 2019. Accessed April 26, 2019. http://go-dh.github.io/mincomp/about/.

the most appealing aspects of employing Wax to create digital exhibits is that: "The skills needed to create Wax sites are agnostic. This means they are largely transferable for use in other digital projects. 'Learning Wax' does not mean learning how to use a platform. It involves learning the fundamentals of web development, data management, and plain text editing while leveraging a few great open source libraries and frameworks along the way."[14] With Wax, which offers total control in terms of design and layout, *Style Revolution* students were also able to experiment with tools like Canva and Pictochart to create mockups for their individual exhibit pages and to incorporate infographics as well as a timeline into the site. One student even used Google Earth to create an interactive map documenting the "fashion hotspots" named in *JDM* plate captions as well as the locations throughout Paris where the *JDM*'s offices were located and where the journal was printed and sold.[15]

Although I've just highlighted many of the technological and pedagogical benefits that mincomp can afford, it is important to acknowledge that mincomp is not always the approach that best fits a course-integrated digital humanities project. I will say once more that the learning curve is quite high and the skills required, though they are applicable in many other digital projects and contexts, are not easily developed. Even in our own *Style Revolution* instance, Professor Higonnet opted to focus the graduate seminar on the more rigorous process of building the site, while the undergraduate course focused on digital media through Instagram, with interested undergraduates given the opportunity (though not an explicit requirement) to create individual exhibits for the site in addition to their Instagram posts. So while I advocate the use of mincomp and tools like Wax wherever possible, I recognize that there are other tools and methods that may be more accessible for less advanced students or that may be more appropriate for projects which are not candidates for long-term preservation/sustainability.

Conclusion: Liaison librarians as "champions of engagement"

I want to conclude by highlighting some of the unexpected ways in which I was able to contribute to *Style Revolution* as a liaison librarian. The 2017 Working Group Paper published by the Educause Center for Analysis and Research, "*Building Capacity for Digital Humanities: A Framework for Institutional Planning*", describes three complementary categories for the roles and responsibilities of DH team members: "technical experts, champions of engagement, and content innovators."[16] I already identify as a 'champion of engagement' to the students, faculty and scholars in the academic programs and departments for whom I build collections and offer research support: they know me and they actively seek me out for research assistance and for a range of questions. Whether or not I can answer their questions directly, they are confident that I can connect them to the tools or experts or spaces that will address those needs. This type of trust can be invaluable in the case of a course-based digital humanities project, where students and faculty are experimenting with tools and methods that may be completely new to everyone. In terms of *Style Revolution*, aside from exposing Professor Higonnet's students to French historical and cultural resources for their research, I regularly proffered design suggestions for the site, anecdotes about my own challenging experiences with GitHub and coding on the command line, and general advice

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[14] Nyrop, Marii. "Wax | What Is Wax?" 2019. Accessed April 26, 2019. https://minicomp.github.io/wax/about/.

[15] Agüero, AnaKaren. "Mapping the *Journal des dames et des modes*." 2017. Accessed April 26, 2019. https://stylerevolution.github.io/map/.

[16] Anne, Kirk M., et al. "Building Capacity for Digital Humanities: A Framework for Institutional Planning." *ECAR working group paper*. Louisville, CO: ECAR, May 31, 2017: 31.

about time management/communicating expectations between project partners. I was by no means the most technically proficient team member on the project (so all the other liaisons who feel tentative about engaging in this kind of work, please be reassured that there is a place for you, whether or not your web skills are extensive) but I am a recognized authority to students and faculty because of the relationships I've built as a liaison. My input was thus highly valued on all fronts and made for a richer, more thoughtful project experience for all of us.

I was also able to contribute my own scholarship to *Style Revolution* by researching the provenance of The Morgan's set of *JDM* plates. The Morgan acquired the plates around 1907 from a Parisian bookseller named Ludovic Badin from whom J.P. Morgan bought a number of items for his private collection. Just one year earlier, J.P. Morgan had hired a young, relatively inexperienced librarian, Belle da Costa Greene, who had briefly worked at Princeton University. Belle is a remarkable figure: a woman of African American descent who passed as white; never married but known for her glamorous style and numerous love affairs, including a long-term relationship with the noted art historian, Bernard Berenson; and astonishingly successful as Morgan's librarian and the first director of The Morgan Library & Museum when it transitioned to its current state as a public institution in 1924. Though I can't say for certain whether or not Belle specifically advised J.P. Morgan to purchase the *JDM* plates, I did discover a September 1907 bill of sale, annotated in her hand, acknowledging the purchase of Directoire-era costume plates. Since the *JDM* set is The Morgan's only known Directoire-era collection of fashion plates, one can reasonably connect Belle, a fashion icon in her own right, with Morgan's decision to acquire the *JDM* plates from Badin. I published some of my findings as an Instagram issue in March 2019 and am working on a lengthier essay to add to the *Style Revolution* site. I have shared my research with The Morgan, which is planning an upcoming exhibition celebrating Belle da Costa Greene's life and career, and I am looking forward to contributing to the exhibition.

We are excited about *Style Revolution*'s next steps and about future applications of mincomp and Wax as digital exhibits proliferate at academic and cultural heritage institutions around the world. Designmuseum Denmark completed the digitization of the *JDM* issues in April 2019 and our team is working on the ingest and display of the articles on the site. We cannot wait for students, scholars, and costume enthusiasts to recreate the 18th-century reading experience as they examine the plates in context, next to the original articles with which they were published. Professor Higonnet is also planning to teach another round of courses that will engage students in new ways with the tools and histories that have made *Style Revolution* a reality, thanks to additional support from the new Digital Humanities Center at Barnard College. For my part, I look forward to my continued association with this project and to further opportunities to work as a liaison 'champion of engagement' on other course-based digital humanities projects.

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