LPF 2023 Session – Going Wayback: Digitally Preserving a Defunct Student Journal

Introduction – Kristin

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Hello and welcome to our presentation today, where we are going to talk about Going Wayback and Digitally Preserving a Defunct Student Journal.

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I'm Kristin Hoffmann, a Research and Scholarly Communication Librarian at the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, Canada. Presenting with me are Noah Churchill-Baird, an MLIS student who worked with us from September to April this past year on a co-op work placement, and Emily Carlisle-Johnston, also a Research and Scholarly Communication Librarian.

We're going to tell you about one of the projects we worked on this past year and what we learned from it.

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Before we get into that project specifically, I'm going to share some background and context.

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Western Libraries has been publishing journals since 2008, and with more focus since 2018. Emily & I both support our open journal publishing program.

We currently publish 38 active journals, 23 of which are student-run journals.

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Student-run journals can be rewarding and fun to work with; they also face several challenges, including instability and sustainability because of frequent turnover among the student population. At Western Libraries, we have seen several student-run journals cease or go through several years of inactivity.

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One such journal was the *NeoAmericanist*. It was run by students with the Centre for American Studies, which was an interdisciplinary research centre within the faculty of social sciences; the Centre closed around 2014. The *NeoAmericanist* was published from 2005 to 2014. However, it was published without support from the libraries, and we were actually not aware of the journal until spring of 2022.

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Here's how we learned about the *NeoAmericanist*.

The journal had an ISSN, and someone at ISSN Canada noticed that the URL was broken.

That person wrote to the contact email they had on file asking for an updated URL.

That email was received by a faculty member in the history department who used to be affiliated with the Centre for American Studies. She didn't know what to do about maintaining the ISSN; she knew the journal had ceased, but she didn't know what else to do. So she reached out to a librarian she knew, who then got in touch with me.

I told the faculty member that if she had files for the journal content, we could set up a basic OJS site, which would then give a new URL to send to ISSN Canada AND would enable us to preserve the content with the Scholars Portal Trusted Digital Repository that we have access to through our provincial consortium.

We thought this would be straightforward, but as Noah will now tell you, that wasn't quite the case.

A Case Study in Journal Preservation – Noah

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Though Kristin and Emily initially conceptualized this project as an exercise in better understanding the back end of the Open Journals System platform, we soon realized that this project had the potential to be a case study in journal preservation. As we launched this project, I began the work of migrating journal content over from the file folder to the newly created OJS site for the journal.

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We thought this would be a relatively straightforward process: create an OJS site, copy some policies and branding, and upload the content.

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However, we quickly encountered a few challenges relevant to defunct student journals along the way.

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The first hurdle was that there is no longer a currently available website or active web domain for the *NeoAmericanist*. Though, at the same time, the lack of a current site gave me a greater level of control over the new OJS site for the journal.

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The second hurdle was a lack of contacts or advisors that were involved with the journal while it was active. We only had the article files that were provided to us by the contact from the former Centre for American Studies.

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A third hurdle was that we were never previously involved in the operations of the *NeoAmericanist*.

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A fourth and surprise hurdle for this project was the discovery of missing content. Early on, we realized that we did not receive all the journal's content.

We decided to see if the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine could help us retrieve the missing content – which it could, and in that process, we discovered that the Wayback Machine could do a lot more for us, which I will talk about as I describe the project more.

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Our initial use of the Wayback Machine was intended to grab journal policies and journal branding from the defunct website to populate our new OJS site for the *NeoAmericanist*.

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When I began to use the Wayback Machine to collect general information about the *NeoAmericanist*, I quickly realized that there was an opportunity to add more elements of the defunct journal site including the journal's colours, logo, policies, and other information about the journal from captures collected by the Wayback Machine.

I was quite successful in being able to retrieve this data along with the journal's policies or author information pages.

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Then I was able to transfer those policies over to the new OJS site with disclaimers that the policy content was mined from the former *NeoAmericanist* website. I extracted the journal's colour combination and logo from the Wayback Machine and added them to the OJS site.

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In digging for policy and author information, I noticed that over the years the section titles of their issues did not match. Without the Wayback Machine, I would have had to impose an arbitrary order on the articles as the files we were given lacked a table of contents or indicators of the journal's organization of published content.

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I was able to replicate these section titles for the relevant back issues as they were uploaded to OJS. This also enabled me to establish the order of the content for each issue and better understand how they were organized.

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While digging through the Wayback Machine captures, I was able to add additional content not found in the files provided to us. Such as several articles and book reviews from the *NeoAmericanist* Volume 6, number 2.

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The challenge that we faced when using the Wayback Machine to support this project was that it did not hold everything that we needed.

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Content was missing due to captures that the Wayback Machine never grabbed. This included missing document files or PDFs for articles or book reviews. We know that the content existed – we can identify titles and authors, and we know what the URLs were, but the URLs for those pieces were never captured by the Wayback Machine. As a consequence, some issues only have 2 articles in them, because we just weren't able to retrieve the rest.

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This also was related to the obsolescence of technology. Some of that missing content was lost because of the reliance and use of Adobe Flash Player to display their journal's content.

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An obvious advantage of using the Wayback Machine was discovering the missing content that I was able to add.

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I was excited about discovering the accompanying cover images for the book reviews published in the later years of the journal. These images could then be carried over to our new OJS site for the *NeoAmericanist*.

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I even discovered that the journal had published photographic collages as part of its artwork section. Something that we would not have found without the captures of their former site on the Wayback Machine.

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Another advantage of using the Wayback Machine was that we were able to take a step back and see the evolution of the journal over time. We otherwise would not have seen this

evolution as our focus would have been on recreating the latest iteration of their website on the OJS platform.

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Throughout the project, we had to make several decisions as a team about how to implement and apply the journal content from the defunct website to OJS.

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One of the key decisions that we had to make was how we would present the recovered content from the Wayback Machine on OJS.

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We decided that we would include a description of the journal's defunct status and we marked the migrated content with language that it had been "Copied from the inactive *NeoAmericanist* website." We also provided explanatory text elsewhere as needed.

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The next key decision that we had to make was what to do with the inconsistent section titles that the journal used like "Undergrad" and "Grad" in earlier issues and "Undergraduate" and "Graduate" in later issues.

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We decided to maintain these distinct section titles rather than impose an arbitrary selection of preferred titles across all the back issues.

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Finally, we were faced with another key decision about where to include editorial credits for the journal.

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We decided to move the editorial credits to each individual issue rather than have all of them on the editorial page on OJS. We included text on the editorial page that some of the editorial credits were absent.

Making these decisions and reflecting on this project led to important discussions about what lessons could be learned from this experience in journal preservation. Now that I have shared what the project looked like, Emily will share what we learned from it and where we are headed next.

Conclusion – Emily

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As Noah has shared with these examples, this project highlighted for us, in a very visible way, the reality of turnover within student journal teams and the impact that turnover can have on student journal sustainability. With the *NeoAmericanist*, in particular, it seems to us that new decisions and ideas were introduced by each new editorial team, and with that came some inconsistencies.

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At the conclusion of the project, then, the question for us became: how can we apply what we've learned to our journal publishing program going forward?

Namely, how can we support student journals to minimize their learning curve and any other disruptions from editorial turnover? Here's what that looks like so far.

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This past fall, we requested a meeting with each student journal team to introduce ourselves, help them learn their role, and answer questions about things that may not have been passed on by previous editorial teams.

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We also created a transition document that we've shared with student journal teams. We talked about it in our session on Monday, but in short, it provides space for teams to record key details about their journal that future teams will need to know. Things like their peer review process, shared passwords, dates and processes for key communications, and more.

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While some student journal teams prefer to host their journals on websites that are more aesthetic, this project has provided us with yet another reason to strongly encourage that they use a publishing platform like OJS instead. After all, the system's settings take care of a lot of institutional memory.

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And finally, we've established key recommendations that any new student journal will be required to follow before their journal site is made live. This includes determining and sharing with us things like the Creative Commons license they'll use, and what their submission requirements and peer review processes will look like, so that at the very least, we have that key knowledge going forward, should it not get passed on to their predecessors.

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To conclude then, while we can't be there every step of the way for each journal's editorial transition, this preservation project, which became much bigger than we'd initially thought, has given us cause to reconsider our role in supporting transitions and sustainability for student journals. And maybe now it has for you, too.

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Thank you, and we look forward to learning what questions you have for us.